My Heart Burns for You

by alwaysZutarian

Summary

Four years have passed since the end of the war, but as they meet again and encounter many obstacles, Zuko and Katara realize that whom their hearts truly burn for is one another. Can they love each other knowing they will hurt those that love them? What will become of them when a new enemy appears with a vengeful plot to destroy everything they had worked for to bring peace?

Notes

This story is rated MA for violence and sexual references. However, the smutty scenes will occur much later in the story, so have patience! I also want to warn you that this story will be very long and the romance might be slow. If you like those fast paced ones, then I suggest you look elsewhere. This story is also written almost like a romance novel.
Opening sharp, golden eyes, Zuko blinked at the minimal amount of light that entered his expansive room as the early rays of the dawning sun struck his pale skin. He always woke with the sun. That was just the way with firebenders.

Stifling a tired yawn, the young man sat up in his large bed and ran a hand through his short, loose hair as he surveyed his royal bedchamber. The bed was high and massive, almost covering one wall of the room, while large, comfortable cushions were spread on the other side of the impressive accommodations. Gold and red were the prominent colors that decorated the room with a glossy, black marble floor. On one wall hung a large tapestry of the Fire Nation emblem while extraordinary illustrations of Fire Nation scenery and resplendent dragons covered the other three. On the western side of his room was a large balcony, which oversaw the Capital. From there he could see where the sun touched the ocean as it began to set in the horizon. It was a beautiful, breathtaking sight, and he always tried to find time to see it.

His royal suite consisted of two large sections: the first being the bedchamber and the other being the antechamber, which must be passed in order to enter his sleeping quarters—though not many were privileged to do so, seeing as he enjoyed his privacy. In the antechamber was where he usually took all of his meals either alone or with those close to him. The royal chambers were now simpler than when Ozai lived there. As soon as he became Fire Lord, Zuko ordered for all of the gaudy decoration his sire preferred to be torn down and the rooms remodeled.

Zuko smiled to himself as he finished scanning his sleeping quarters. He still had trouble getting accustomed to his new room and new life. After spending so many years in a small cabin on his small metal ship, sleeping on the hard ground as a fugitive, and then living in a small, filthy apartment in the lower district of Ba Sing Se, it seemed unbelievable. However, it was not only his room that amazed him but the fact that he was now Fire Lord, ruler of the great Fire Nation. He had once lost hope of ever regaining his throne or even his home.

Pulling the covers away from his body, Zuko stood and stretched for a moment before moving to his meditation area. Sitting on an elaborate cushion placed before a small altar with candles, Zuko lit them with a flick of his wrist as he closed his eyes and cleansed his mind. He never missed his morning meditation as it gave him the patience required for the oncoming day of tedious work as Fire Lord.

It was nearly an hour later when Zuko opened his eyes and snuffed the candles out. He made his way toward his private bathing chamber that adjoined the room on the eastern side. The bathing room was as magnificent as the rest of his royal suite, a spacious area with the same dark, marble floor as the rest of the suite. But what he liked most about the bathroom was the large marble bathtub that was placed near the wall facing the door which he used quite frequently.
“Who ever said firebenders don’t like water?” Zuko remarked aloud, smirking.

He waited for the tub to be filled before dipping his hand into the water and warming it with his firebending. Once the water was at the temperature he preferred and steam floated in the air, Zuko quickly removed his sleeping pants and climbed into the tub. He sighed as the warm water touched his skin, soaking up the soothing feeling for a moment before he started scrubbing himself with a soapy sponge.

As he scrubbed his chest, Zuko paused and a small frown settled on his impassive features, the large scar on the left side of his face becoming more noticeable. With tentative fingers, he touched the scar on his chest that marred his otherwise perfect skin; the scar Azula had inflicted upon him as he flung himself in front of Katarə to protect her. It had healed nicely thanks to the lovely waterbender’s healing abilities and it was barely noticeable, at least not as noticeable as the one on his face that was inflicted upon him by his own father. But even if it had not healed and was as visible as the one on his face, he would not have cared. He received that scar saving Katarə’s life, and he was willing to receive more if it meant keeping her safe.

Katarə…

Memories of her tear-streaked face flashed before his eyes as she knelt beside him on that terrible day, her hands covered in glowing water as she desperately tried to heal his wound and save his life.

Her soft, gentle hands sliding down my chest… Zuko thought with a smile before he shook his head.

There he went again. Every time he recalled that memory, his thoughts would wander into something far less innocent than it was. Katarə was just healing him at the time, and he would always be grateful for her help and for her concern for his wellbeing and his life. However, that still did not explain why, after all these years, he kept seeing Katarə in his mind everywhere he went.

A soft knock outside his royal bedchamber roused him from his thoughts. Reality greeted him with the announcement of breakfast by his most trusted maidservant.

Zuko answered that he would be ready in a moment and took another few seconds to bask in the soothing, warm water. He sighed as he finally got out, lest his breakfast went cold, and dried himself with a plush, red towel. It was going to be another wearisome day reviewing long documents, signing petitions, hearing his people’s requests, and then the dreadful meetings with his advisors. But he should not be complaining. He wanted to become Fire Lord in order to help his nation and his
people, so he had to deal with all of the duties and problems that came with that title.

It had not been easy. Hatred and mistrust ruled everyone. A few of the Fire Nation people had even risen in rebellion against him a year after the war ended, but they had been swiftly defeated. The hardest part of all, however, was trying to regain the trust of the other countries, especially the Earth Kingdom. Many people still did not trust him, afraid he would become as power-hungry as his father and grandfathers before him, but Zuko was determined to show them that he wanted peace among all nations, all elements, just as much as they did. Thanks to Aang’s peace seeking and Zuko’s leadership, it seemed a likely possibility.

Dressed and with his fire crown glinting on his head, Zuko exited his room and entered his antechamber where the food was already set up on the low table. He nodded at the maidservants as they stepped away from the table. Jiao, his most trusted servant, and the other short-haired maid bowed and retreated from the room.

He picked up his chopsticks and began the silent routine of consuming his breakfast meal. It was moments like these that he wished he were still traveling with the gang; watching Aang and Toph bickered with one another while Suki reprimanded Sokka for stuffing his face with food without leaving some for the rest.

Though he was confused as to why, Zuko most of all missed the way Katara would hand his bowl—full of her simple but delicious cooking—to him while she gave him a radiant smile.

Brown locks danced in the frosty breeze as Katara watched her young waterbending students with care and pride as they completed their training for the day. She smiled at the looks of concentration on their cute, little faces, and laughed softly to herself.

“Good job everyone. Remember to keep the water flowing gracefully around your form,” she instructed as she demonstrated the technique to the children by bending a small stream of water around her.

She waited until they got the move before she congratulated them, “Great! That was awesome! Well, I think that’s enough for today. See you tomorrow, and remember to practice whenever you have a chance.”

“Yes, Master Katara!” the children chorused as they ran to go play. Katara watched them leave and smiled.
“Katara!” she heard Sokka call from a distance.

The waterbender turned at the sound of his voice and watched as her older brother came up to her, walking with an air of self-importance.

“Don’t you mean Master Katara?” she replied with a teasing grin.

“Nope, Katara, that’s what I meant ‘cause you’re still my little sister and I’m the Mighty Warrior of the Southern Water Tribe,” Sokka replied seriously as he pointed a finger at himself. “Thus, you are the one who should show some respect to the Mighty Warrior Sokka,” he finished with a large grin on his face.

“Oh, huh,” Katara uttered as she returned his grin. “Well, Mighty Warrior Sokka, perhaps we should see who’s the one to show respect by having a little competition,” she challenged as she summoned a rather large water whip and twirled it around him. “What do you say?”

Sokka’s eyes widened as he stared at the water whip, but he straightened himself out comically as he coolly replied.

“Nah, I’m too tired because of all the new, great inventions I have to work on. Maybe some other time, Sis,” he said and yawned.

Katara laughed as she replaced the water into her waterskin while she rolled her eyes at her brother.

Four years had passed since the end of the war and many things had changed. Waterbenders from the Northern Water Tribe came to help reconstruct their southern sister. Once a small village with a few igloos and huts scattered here and there, the Southern Water Tribe was now a large city that continued to grow. When the men came back from the war, many families sprang up and many children came into the world, especially when many warriors from the Northern Tribe married and settled in the South.

Much like its sister, the Southern Water Tribe now was made of beautifully carved ice buildings that were placed in an elaborate pattern—thanks to Sokka. Not only did he help plan the formation of the village with its leaders and their father, the chief of the tribe, but he also made suggestions on how to make the canals run through the city and how to build a stronger defensive wall that would keep any invaders out, which she hoped would never be needed.
Katara thought that the best idea that Sokka came up with was how to illuminate the city at night. Candles were placed inside light-blue glass lamps that had been placed along the streets, bridges, and house walls, making the city glow in a heavenly light and causing it to become a winter wonderland.

Katara’s thoughts were interrupted when Sokka spoke up again.

“I just got another letter from Suki!” he exclaimed, briefly showing his sister the letter he had pulled out from his parka before he brought it back to his face and stared down at it lovingly.

“Suki says that Kyoshi Island has grown larger and stronger. And she says that the Kyoshi Warrior membership has grown so much they had to open another school! Can you believe it? More warrior women! Women are starting to gain control of the world!” he commented with a laugh.

“Who ever said women didn’t already have control? I can recall you doing anything I said in order to fill your big belly,” Katara countered playfully as she poked his stomach. She grinned when he rubbed his stomach with a huff. “And Toph always bosses you around. Not to mention that she’s younger than you!” She laughed loudly.

“She doesn’t boss me around! I agree with whatever she wants because I’m a nice guy,” he countered as he looked back down at the letter before muttering, “Besides, I don’t want to end up crushed between two boulders. What would happen to my handsome face?”

Katara giggled.

“It’s not like it’s not already messed up,” she teased.

Sokka looked up from the letter to glare at her.

“Besides not all faces have to be flawless to be handsome,” she said with a shrug.

The image of Zuko’s scarred face emerged in her mind as she said this and she remembered touching his scar that day under Ba Sing Se. It was rough, but at the same time, it was smooth and velvety. Even though the scar covered almost half of the left side of his face she never thought of him as ugly, maybe a bit intimidating at first, but never repulsive. The scar actually added to his complex character, giving him a bad-boy look, making him look mysterious…handsome.
She blushed as these thoughts entered her mind; though she admitted that she thought about the firebender more than she thought was actually proper. Every time she would stare at a glowing flame—be it a candle, a torch, or a bonfire—she would be reminded of Zuko when he would firebend, as well as that horrible day he had almost died while the Fire Nation Palace courtyard burned as a result of his fight with Azula. Katara winced and lightly shook her head.

That memory always made her stomach twist painfully as she recalled the way Zuko lay in pain on the cold floor, electricity sparking from his body, after taking a bolt of lightning to his chest in order to save her life. She had never felt as scared as when she screamed his name and ran to him. Not even when Aang had been struck by Azula. She was confused as to why it was so, but either way she was extremely grateful to Zuko for risking his life for her after the harsh way she had treated him when he had first joined their group.

Sokka’s deep sigh snapped Katara out of her thoughts and she looked up with a sheepish expression on her face.

Sokka, oblivious to what his sister was thinking, cried out dramatically, “If it wasn’t because they need me here I would’ve gone to Kyoshi Island a long time ago!”

“Aww! How cute,” Katara cooed teasingly.

Sokka’s tanned cheeks reddened before he scowled at her.

“What?” she asked innocently as she tried to hide her smile when he grumbled under his breath.

She knew that, even though Sokka acted all tough and macho-like, he would do almost anything Suki asked because he was madly in love with the Kyoshi Warrior. Who would have thought that such a terrible fighter and a sexist like Sokka would end up becoming, well…less of a sexist, a very skilled warrior, and a genius—the ‘idea guy’?

Her mental praise was interrupted at the sound of Sokka's stomach growling noisily.

“I’m hungry!” Sokka complained as he clutched at his protesting stomach. “What does a great warrior have to do in order to get some food around here? Why can’t dinner be earlier?”
Katara rolled her eyes. It seemed some things would never change.

Sitting silently on his throne set behind his flames, Zuko listened carefully and somewhat impatiently as the members of his Court Council argued amongst themselves about the welfare of the Fire Nation. Hours passed since Zuko had stepped into the meeting room and he could feel a headache coming on.

“More soldiers should be sent to protect and gain more control of our colonies in the Earth Kingdom!” one old and rather obese advisor yelled. “If we do not show more control, the Earth Kingdom residents will surely start a rebellion and will seek to overthrow our rule!”

Some of the older advisors agreed with him with low grumbles and nodding heads. Zuko resisted the urge to rub at his temples.

“But we cannot spend more money on recruiting more soldiers. Besides, as much as you hate it, we are not at war anymore. We have to use our funds to keep manufacturing goods so we could export them to the other nations. If we spend more money on the military we won’t have enough for our resources,” another elder explained calmly, which gained the support of most of the other advisors.

Zuko nodded in agreement. Opening up trade with the other countries was what helped his nation regain its feet, and not to mention a bit more trust from the Water Tribes and the Earth Kingdom. In order to keep manufacturing goods they needed the funds. Once, Zuko almost laughed when he read the monthly report that stated that what the other nations demanded the most was not their famous steel, but their red wine.

“But most of our products come from our colonies and if we do not keep control of these colonies, then guess what will happen…if you are smart enough,” the first advisor sneered, his large belly jiggling as he moved. “We would not only lose the colonies we fought so hard to gain, but we will also lose your precious goods, you fool!”

Zuko narrowed his eyes as he glared at the obese man. His name was Wei. He was rather old, but had a sharp mind and a sharp tongue. He was one of Ozai’s former advisors and was one of the few who still favored world domination. He constantly tried to argue that the war was for the betterment of the Fire Nation, but Zuko knew Wei only wanted power and wealth for himself.

Zuko hated the man. Wei was the first one on his list of the advisors he wanted to dismiss as he ascended the throne, but Iroh convinced him it was best if he kept the most influential and most wealthy around him in order to gain their trust and their support. Unfortunately, Wei was the wealthiest and most influential of them all. Even though some still sided with Wei, many of the...
others started to see the foolishness of the war and longed for peace to settle among all nations once again.

Chao, the other man who was arguing with Wei, glared at the fat nobleman. Not only was he one of Iroh’s friends, but he was also wise, patient and among his fellow advisors, he had the best arguments against the war. Zuko had personally appointed Chao to his Council because he always asked for Zuko’s views and opinions and backed him in every decision he made. Something Zuko noticed that Wei never did.

The young Fire Lord always had to calm himself down every time Wei disregarded him because the old advisor thought he was too young to rule and not intelligent enough to comprehend how to be Fire Lord. He especially hated every time Wei called him ‘the Young One’. He was not a child, for Agni’s sake! Zuko had to breathe several times so as not to act on his urge to burn the ever-present stupid smirk off Wei’s face.

“Well, I think we should ask Fire Lord Zuko to give us his opinion on this matter,” Chao replied, looking confidently up at the twenty-year-old ruler.

All the advisors turned to look up at him, sitting behind the orange flames. Zuko could feel Wei wishing to see him make a fool of himself, but thanks to Uncle Iroh and Chao, Zuko had quickly learned how to handle politics.

“Yes, let us see what the Young One has to say,” Wei simpered as he leaned back in his spot.

Zuko clenched his hands as he growled in his head. *That stupid imbecile! I'll burn that stupid smirk...*

While he cursed in his head, his facial expression remained placid and neutral.

Zuko regarded the men in front of him calmly as he carefully thought over what to say. He needed them to side with him and see that ruling over the whole world was not the best thing for the Fire Nation. If there were anyone that could give out inspirational speeches that would make them all see reason, he would undoubtedly name Katara. But unfortunately the waterbender was all the way in the Southern Water Tribe, and so, not only could he not hear her voice, but he could not see her beautiful face or find comfort in her presence either.

A small cough brought him out of his thoughts. He inwardly shook his head before he straightened himself out so he could begin.
“I believe that what you have said is correct, Wei. Our colonies are a very important source for the production of our trading goods,” Zuko began. He could see Wei's smug grin broaden.

“But…” he continued and he inwardly smirked as Wei’s expression changed, “I don’t think sending more soldiers would be a good idea. Our colonies are well protected as they are and the governors I personally appointed are running the cities with justice and a fair amount of control. I have received reports stating that both Fire Nation citizens and Earth Kingdom residents are living well together. There may be some tension now, but I am sure that with time trust will win out.”

Many of the men in the meeting room chamber nodded in agreement, but he knew some were still skeptical.

“Besides, if we send more soldiers to the colonies, we might give the wrong impression. The Fire Nation citizens might believe they are being protected because they are in danger and might begin to distrust their neighbors, while the Earth Kingdom residents might think we are trying to control and oppress them,” he glanced at Wei for a second, “which might actually start a rebellion.”

Zuko paused and looked around the room behind the glow of flames.

“I really believe that in order for the Fire Nation to regain its honor and glory we need harmony among those living in our colonies. And if there is harmony between the elements in the colonies, then there will finally be peace and harmony among all nations and all elements. Then, hopefully, that harmony would never be broken ever again.”

The young Fire Lord stared at the men before him as the room went silent before he settled back on his throne cushion with a small sigh.

After removing his Fire Lord attire and putting on a comfortable tunic and a pair of pants, Zuko sat at the table in his anteroom reading over some documents he had not finished in his study. After giving his opinion in the meeting room, Zuko was actually surprised when most of the men smiled and even applauded him. He thought that maybe he sounded too idealistic, but that is just the way he felt the world should come to be. Peaceful. No more war, hatred, suffering, and death.

‘No more children being ripped from their parents,’ was what Katara had told him once when she was healing his chest a few days after the Agni Kai with Azula.
His thoughts were interrupted as a monotonous voice commented, “I hope this time they make a better soup.”

Mai sat across from him, her hands neatly folded on her lap under the table. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he had not noticed his thin, dark-haired girlfriend enter the room.

Zuko smiled slightly at her.

“Mai, I didn’t hear you come in. I’m sure the soup will taste fine. The Palace Cook always makes delicious plates,” he replied passively.

Mai just nodded.

“So, how was your day?” Zuko asked as he placed his papers to the side, hoping to be distracted from his work and thoughts, if only for a bit.

“Nothing interesting, just the same old routine, practicing with my daggers and reading,” she replied without emotion. “But I did receive a letter from Ty Lee. She seems to be enjoying herself on Kyoshi Island and informed me that they have opened a new school for incoming Kyoshi Warriors,” Mai said evenly as she watched him with her dark eyes.

“Well, Ty Lee always enjoys herself no matter where she is. I’m glad Kyoshi Island is doing well,” Zuko replied, hoping she would asked him about his day. He wanted to have a conversation with someone who was not always judging him or was intimidated by him.

A few of his advisors were frightened by him, not only because of his temper—which as he grew older he was gaining more control of—but because he had proven himself to be a great leader despite his young age. This made them uneasy because he had proven to be hard to manipulate, and thus, it made it hard for them to advance in their own interests.

Mai only nodded and sat there without moving. Zuko frowned as the silence became a bit uncomfortable. He was never good at initiating conversations...that was his uncle’s job. He missed Iroh terribly. He missed his uncle’s wisdom and his annoying hints. Hell, he even missed Uncle’s hot leaf juice!

Zuko wished Iroh was there helping him with his rule, but the old man had decided to go back to his
teashop in Ba Sing Se once he realized that his nephew had learned how to handle the Fire Nation. As the silence grew longer, Zuko let out an inaudible sigh.

“Well, I certainly endured an exhausting meeting today,” he began.

She yawned lightly.

“Yes, I’m sure it must have been awful. Just like every other meeting,” she replied.

Zuko did not know whether to think she yawned because she was tired or she just did not want to listen to him talk about his dreary day, though he was slightly surprised that he was unaffected by it. As the years passed by, his relationship with Mai became unexciting. Not that it had been that wonderful after they became a couple when he returned with Azula from Ba Sing Se.

A few months ago, Mai asked him if she could move into the palace and he had accepted, not seeing any problem with it. Though he had to wonder what the point was since they hardly spent time together. Sometimes he wondered if he asked Mai to be his girlfriend because he hoped for their relationship to become something meaningful, or because back then he had been so lonely he just accepted her affections when she had approached him and confessed she had had a crush on him since they were children.

Just then dinner arrived and all thoughts of recounting his day were forgotten. They ate in silence as each dwelled in their own thoughts.

After they finished their meal, Mai looked up at him and glanced at the doors that led to his private rooms before she looked at him again. Zuko pretended he did not notice her request to enter his room and coolly looked away. He did not allow anyone into his sleeping quarters, except a few trusted servants to clean it, not even Mai.

When she realized that Zuko was not going to invite her in, like she had been hoping for ever since he became Fire Lord, Mai suppressed a huff as she gracefully stood up.

“Well, I’m sure you must be busy, so I think I’ll go to my room now if you don’t need anything. Good night,” she said almost coldly.

Zuko nodded and he, too, stood up to walk her out his door. He was a bit surprised, though he did
not show it, when Mai turned around and kissed him lightly before the servants entered the anteroom to clean it.

“We should go to Ember Island again one day, Zuko, at least for some change in this boring life,” she murmured as she ran her thin hand down his chest.

Zuko frowned. *Boring Life? Running this great country should be an honor.*

“I’ll think about it and I’ll see if I have time for a small vacation,” he answered impassively.

Mai frowned slightly, but quickly recovered her emotionless expression as she gave a small nod and walked out the door.

Zuko sighed as he went to his bedchamber while the servants cleared the dishes from the low table. He removed his clothing and changed for the night. Piling all of his paperwork on his lap as he sat on his bed, he began to recall the events that happened in the last four years.

Becoming Fire Lord of a nation that had been badly governed and caused a great deal of destruction to the other countries was difficult. He had to deal with national debt and on top of that, he had to regain the trust of the Water Tribes and the Earth Kingdom. But the worst part was the hatred of his own people, mostly the elders, and more accurately Wei. They had been outraged when he called for peace and the end of the war. They thought him unfit to be their Fire Lord, not only because back then he had been a seventeen-year-old, but because they thought him a traitor to his own country. That really hurt, but Zuko never gave up and was determined to keep his promise of peace and was even more determined to regain the honor and glory the Fire Nation had lost in the hands of the previous selfish rulers. Thanks to his determination and great leadership, his nation became more prosperous and all the countries began to trade with one another, and in a way began to accept each other.

Zuko rubbed his temples as his vision began to blur from concentrating too much on the documents. It seemed that every time he finished one pile, another would spring up in its place. Putting his papers aside, he settled into his bed.

With a wave of his hand, the candles extinguished, but the fire from the fireplace near one wall illuminated the room a bit—the light cast shadows around the large bedchamber as darkness settled in.
As Zuko lay in his bed, his thoughts wandered to Mai and their relationship. He had imagined that once he became Fire Lord everything he wanted and wished for would finally come true, but it was not so. Mai was still…Mai. She was still dull and monotonous and she rarely talked. Not to mention her physical appearance had not changed much except for the fact the she was now as tall as him. There were days when they did have great times together, but that was rare. And it did not help that he was busy running a nation.

But he could not deny the fact that he was thankful that Mai stood up to Azula in order to save him from his psychotic sister. And he was impressed since it was not an easy thing to do—she could have really gotten hurt if Ty Lee had not intervened in Azula’s wrath.

Zuko frowned. He often thought about this event and he always felt guilty for not going after Mai when he helped Sokka rescue his father and Suki from the Boiling Rock. He had completely forgotten about her, as he was occupied with finding an escape from the island.

He began to feel even guiltier by admitting that he forgot about her because he was too busy with other matters such as finding a better way to firebend, teaching Aang firebending, the whole Sozin’s Comet situation…

*Helping Katara find her mother’s killer in order to gain her forgiveness and friendship…*

Zuko frowned and scowled slightly at himself for his thoughts.

Of course he wanted Katara to forgive him after all he had done to her and the rest of his friends. He had wanted her to see that he had indeed changed and the only thing he wanted was for his father to be defeated and the war to end. Besides, he had not wanted any more tension among the group as Katara and he had their differences. It had nothing to do with him wanting the lovely waterbender to like him. Of course not! That was just ridiculous!

Somehow, he had this feeling as if his conscience was laughing at him.

Okay, so maybe he did want Katara to like him, at least a little. There was nothing wrong with that. Right?

Zuko rolled over in his bed. Moreover, he helped her find her mother’s murderer because it was the only way she could get closure. It was the only thing he knew he could do to help her, and it worked. Katara did forgive him and she gave him her friendship.
Not only did she give him her friendship and trust, but she had embraced him as well. The only other people who have ever hugged him were his mother, his uncle, and Mai. He could still recall the day when they returned from confronting Yon Rha. The sun had been setting over the horizon, turning the sky and the ocean a bright orange and rich red color as Katara sat at the small dock with her feet dangling into the water before she rose to greet them when he rejoined her with Aang. The young monk had tried to comfort her, but she refused his words of comfort and instead turned to him and a small blush had seeped onto her cheeks.

Before he could have pondered deeper about the blush, she had walked over to him and told him that she was ready to forgive. Then she had flung herself at him, circled her arms around his neck, and embraced him. He had frozen in shock for a second before he quickly encircled her waist and returned the embrace, but all too soon, she pulled back.

He had surprised himself when he had almost tightened his hold on her when he felt her start to move away, and even now, he still wished the embrace could have lasted a bit longer or perhaps be repeated again sometime in the near future. He liked the way her small and soft body felt against his, how her hair caressed the side of his face, and how her arms encircled his neck.

Zuko frowned at his sudden need to see the waterbender and berated himself for having such thoughts about Katara. With a sigh he wondered what was going on with him after what happened that day and why all of the sudden his thoughts switched from his reflection on his relationship with Mai to the master waterbender.

“Katara is just a very good friend,” he argued silently to his dark room. “And Mai is my…girlfriend. And she was there for me after my fight with Azula.”

But you didn’t even think about Mai until she showed up in your room—right before your coronation, a small voice in his head said.

He flinched in consequence of the fact that he could not deny it. He had actually been surprised when he heard Mai’s voice as she entered his room to help him into his robe, by reason that he was in so much pain after Azula’s attack.

But I was glad she was there and that she was well, Zuko told himself.

Though there was a part of him that wished it had not been Mai that entered the room to help him, that it had not been her that he kissed but…Katara.
Zuko closed his eyes and sighed deeply as he waited for sleep to claim him so he could find some peace from his confusing thoughts. The same thoughts he had for the past four years.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

After a quiet dinner, Katara's family made their way to their bedrooms to retire for the night. Since Hakoda had been appointed Chief of the Southern Water Tribe, their house was the largest in the entire tribe. It was not as grand as the Northern Tribe Palace, since it was not a palace in the first place, but it was still impressive nevertheless. It was made of smooth, thick ice and snow with many elegant carvings. It held the tribe meeting place as well as lodgings for guest and ambassadors. Their house actually had a stone floor given to them by Omashu’s eccentric ruler, King Bumi. It was the only building in the entire tribe that had a huge steel entrance door, a gift from Fire Lord Zuko himself.

Katara let out a soft sigh as she entered her room and closed the door softly behind her. She removed her clothes and put on her warm sleeping attire before she made her way to her small pinewood dresser. The young woman sat in front of the mirror before she picked up her brush and started to comb her long, curly brown hair.

Hanging on the walls of her small room were water paintings of scenes from beautiful lakes and oceans. There was an ice window on the western side of her room, and on the opposite side, sat one small bed piled with warm furs and blankets of various shades of white, silver, and blue. At the head of the bed was a large pile of fluffy pillows that Iroh had sent her over the past few years. Ever since she had spent time drinking tea with the lovable old man in his tea shop, Katara had come to care for him as her own uncle, and he had come to care for her as well. They even exchanged letters.

The best part of her new room, though, was that she had a private bathroom. Now she did not have to bathe with everybody in the same room, with only a blanket surrounding the tub for privacy. She enjoyed taking her time as she bathed, after all.

Katara was about to braid her hair when she heard someone knock on her door once before opening it. Her Gran-Gran entered the room with a small smile.

“My, my! You really have grown into quite a lovely young lady. Just like your mother,” Kanna exclaimed as she smiled at her granddaughter.

Katara smiled slightly at her grandmother’s words. She remembered her mother, always so beautiful and loving. Kya loved them so much she sacrificed herself to save them, to save her. Katara reached for the comfort of her mother’s necklace as she remembered the day her mother gave it to her.
Kanna noticed her granddaughter touching the blue necklace, and with a soft sigh, she walked toward her young granddaughter.

Reaching for Katara’s hand, the old woman added in a motherly tone, “Katara, I know how much this necklace means to you, but you must realize that one day you will have to part with it once you receive your own betrothal necklace. Then one day you will hand it down to your own daughter as I have to your mother when she married my son and she to you.”

Blushing, Katara replied, “But, Gran-Gran, I’m still too young to be thinking about marriage and having children!”

Kanna only chuckled and shook her graying head as she moved around so she could braid her granddaughter’s hair.

“But many girls in our culture marry at sixteen and begin to have children almost a few months or a year later,” the old woman reminded her. “You are already nineteen, my dear. You’re not that young.”

Katara remembered Yue being engaged at sixteen before she turned into the Moon Spirit. When she turned sixteen-years-old herself, many of the young men from both tribes had tried to court her, especially since she was one of the heroes of the war and daughter to the Southern Water Tribe Chief. But of course, she always declined their offers since she was Aang’s girlfriend, but this did not seem to stop the suitors.

And Kanna knew this.

“I am getting older by the minute, Katara,” she sighed as she finished braiding Katara’s long hair. “And your silly brother still does not have the courage to propose to that lovely Kyoshi girl. So I ask you this, when am I going to have great-grandchildren?”

Katara frowned at the question since she really did not know. She did not think she was ready for marriage, much less begin to have children.

Quickly changing the subject, Katara asked, “So how are things going with you and Master Pakku?”

After the war, Master Pakku and Kanna had married. And to Katara’s relief, Gran-Gran began to
rant about how loudly Pakku snored at night.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The moon’s soft light spilled into the quiet room from the ice window. Gran-Gran’s words filled Katara’s head as she tried to sleep among her warm furs. Marriage had not entered her mind recently since she was too busy rebuilding her home and teaching the children waterbending.

She remembered the day, almost four years ago, outside Uncle Iroh’s teashop when she accepted Aang’s declaration of love. At that moment, she thought she was ready for a relationship, she thought she was sure of her feelings, and everything seemed fine at first. Aang was so sweet and lovable and they always had fun, but that was it. Their relationship seemed only based on having a great time, mostly on Aang’s part. He was always running around trying every new and exciting thing, sometimes even neglecting his duties. Sometimes it was just…childish.

Katara longed for a mature conversation, something more serious, something deeper. Not to mention how clingy Aang sometimes got, making her try all his newfound amusements. But it wasn’t Aang’s fault. He was a child at heart.

Katara sighed. It was even harder since Aang was absent most of the time doing his Avatar duties, bringing peace to the world. She could not blame him since he did not only belong to her, but to the whole world. Even though they spent a lot of time together when he came back to visit, it was hard for them to communicate when he was away. He did try to send her letters whenever he could, though they mostly consisted of things he did and saw.

Toph had also taken the trouble of writing to her and Suki had also written to her, even if most of her letters were addressed to Sokka. And Iroh—Uncle Iroh as he had so many times corrected her—wrote to her quite often, writing about his teashop and all the interesting customers.

Katara laughed quietly, touching the fluffy pillows that surrounded her as she remembered when the old man wrote about the time he was so busy flirting with a pretty lady that he almost burned the pastries. It was sometimes amusing to know that such a cheerful and charismatic person like Iroh could be related to Zuko, who was the complete opposite.

Even Zuko took the time out of his busy schedule as Fire Lord to write her a letter. It was short, but it was touching, nevertheless. It was a congratulating letter for her nineteenth birthday. He had apologized for being unable to attend her party and wished her the best, but the letter was not the only thing he sent. Zuko sent her a present...a beautiful, silver hairpin. It was shaped like a rose and embedded on its petals were small sapphires and rubies.

Upon opening the package to reveal the pretty jewel, everybody had gasped with admiration. Aang only scoffed saying Zuko was trying too hard to impress them all, and with a confident smile he gave her his bouquet of panda-lilies, hoping she forget the hairpin.
But she couldn’t. Katara tried to refuse Zuko’s gift, saying it was probably very expensive and did not deserve it, but Gran-Gran advised her against such an idea since it would be rude to return such a gift.

‘Besides,’ Kanna had reasoned, ‘Fire Lord Zuko sent it to you as an apology for not being able to come to your party.’

As Katara lay in her bed, she reached for her hairpin on the nightstand. It was too beautiful to keep hidden in a box and too precious to wear, at the risk of her losing it or damaging it, especially since she was always busy. She touched the lovely stones as they glistened from the moonlight that entered her room from the window. She loved the way the red and blue stones sparkled, and when she held it in a certain way, both stones seemed to fuse, creating a beautiful violet color. All her previous thoughts of her relationship with Aang were forgotten as she thought about Zuko.

She smiled. Zuko, the angry and arrogant former Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, now one of her friends and the new Fire Lord. She laughed. She could not believe how much they had changed.

“I wonder how much more he has changed since the last time we have all seen each other,” Katara thought to herself, stroking the hairpin as if she expected it to reveal something to her.

Right after the war, the gang had spent two weeks in Ba Sing Se at Uncle Iroh’s teashop before Zuko was called back to the Fire Nation. After that, the group hardly spent time together anymore. Toph was helping Aang around the Earth Kingdom. Suki continued to teach the Kyoshi Warriors and Sokka and Katara were helping in the Southern Water Tribe. But despite this, Aang always came to visit, obviously for her, and even Toph sometimes came. She always complained because she could not see nor bend, but they all knew she enjoyed herself. And Suki visited a couple of times with her Kyoshi Warriors, especially to see Sokka.

But not only was Zuko the farthest away, he was also the busiest of them all. He was the one who had to deal with trying to build trust among the other nations and deal with all the postwar hassle. But the hardest part must have been trying to lead a country who still called for the war to continue.

But he can take it. Zuko never gives up. He would do the impossible for the well-being of those he cares about, she thought.

Katara found herself blushing.
Just like when he almost got himself killed when he placed himself in front of his crazy sister’s lightning in order to save my life.

Every time she recalled this memory, she could not help feeling guilty. If only she had listened to him and had stayed out of the way, he would not have been hurt. She had felt horrible as she saw him lying there in pain, his life slipping away. She remembered how her hands scanned his badly injured chest.

His warm, muscular chest…

“What am I thinking?!” she exclaimed with a shake of her head.

She should not be having such thoughts, especially since Zuko had been almost fatally injured. She had just touched his chest to heal him. Nothing more.

With another shake of her head, Katara set the hairpin back on the nightstand, settled herself in her warm blankets, and finally fell asleep with a sigh.
After his regular morning meditation, Zuko made his way to the training arena, the only place where he could vent his frustrations without breaking something or hurting someone. That someone being Wei.

“Good morning, my lord,” Chao greeted as Zuko entered the arena. “I trust you had a good night’s rest?”

“Yes, lovely,” Zuko murmured sarcastically as he shrugged off his tunic and threw it aside.

Chao was frequently present whenever Zuko practiced his firebending, a favor Iroh had asked of him before he returned to Ba Sing Se. Iroh and Chao had been friends since their childhood and Iroh trusted him with Zuko’s care above anybody else in the Fire Nation. Chao reported all of Zuko’s progress to Iroh, either in his firebending or his Fire Lord duties. Though sometimes it made Zuko feel as if he were a child and he hated that feeling.

Zuko made his way to the middle of the small arena. Off to one side were a few wooden logs placed in an organized horizontal line. Each log stood vertically from the floor. The young lord glanced at them briefly as he stretched for a few moments before gracefully moving into a fighting stance. Inhaling deeply, he began to send fire blasts through the air. He moved with great agility, punching out with fiery fists and leaping into the air, sending powerful flaming kicks. For some time he practiced the basic moves, getting his muscles warmed up. Then shifting rapidly into his more complex steps, he created fire whips. He circled them around his form in a series of complicated moves before whipping them down, creating a loud cracking sound that resounded through the arena. Zuko rounded on the logs and with great concentration, he began cutting the pieces of thick wood set up for him in halves. The half pieces of wood fell to the side, without any of them catching on fire.

Silently, Chao watched intently as the Fire Lord continued with his daily practice, admiration showing slightly on his face. Through the years, Zuko had indeed become even more powerful at firebending the more he practiced and the more determined he got. He had really gained control of his element, unlike when he was younger.

Zuko retracted his fire whips, and without missing a step, he continued to punch fire blasts into the empty air before him. Now he had to practice his firebending alone, since none of his trained men could keep up with his advanced skill. He could not deny that this made him proud since he was much younger than they were, but sometimes he wished he had someone to spar with to make things more interesting…or less lonesome. Mai had offered once, but he did not want her to get hurt.
Taking a few deep breaths, Zuko slowed his speed and wound down his steps.

“Great move with the fire whips, my lord,” Chao praised him as Zuko finished his last stance. “Your uncle would be very proud of your incredible skill and the way you have greatly improved these past years.”

Zuko offered him a slight smile as he wiped the sweat from his face with a small towel.

“I’m sure Uncle would be even more proud if I finally learned how to make tea,” he said wryly.

Chao began to chuckle quietly when they were interrupted as a guard came running toward them. Zuko frowned and placed the towel around his neck as he waited for the guard to near them.

“My Lord Zuko,” the guard got out between huffs as he bowed respectfully, “Your presence is requested urgently in the throne room.”

Zuko and Chao looked at each other with questioning frowns on their faces before the young Fire Lord returned his gaze to the awaiting soldier.

“Tell them I’m on my way,” he stated as he turned around and quickly made his way to his bedchambers so he could clean up and change.

He wondered what the urgency was as a frown settled on his features.

Katara watched the restless children as they practiced, amusement dancing in her blue eyes. It was so obvious they were itching for their lesson to be over already and she decided that she would end their suffering early.

“Great job, you guys! That’s enough for today. See you tomorrow,” Katara announced with a smile as she replaced her bending water back into her waterskin.

The children bounded out of the area quickly after they gave her small bows and large smiles, their joyful laughter trailing after them as they went. They had been impatient to leave and go play since practice had started late.
There had been a tribe meeting earlier that day concerning the exportation of their goods to the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom, and as the chief’s daughter and waterbending master, Katara had attended. The Water Tribesmen’s perspective on having a woman in the meetings changed when she proved herself capable of expressing her opinions, not to mention she argued better than anyone else. But that was not to say that they were all accepting or that it was always easy. There were some meetings that she was not allowed to attend, but she did not let that get to her.

*I used to be so impatient to prove myself,* she thought absentmindedly as she made her way toward her house, *that I got myself in trouble many times, especially that time when I stole that waterbending scroll.*

Katara laughed at her own foolishness.

*That ended with Zuko saving me from the pirates, then capturing me, and finally tying me to a tree.* She let out another giggle.

*Well, it was a good thing I was so impatient to learn since I came across Zuko again…*

Her cheeks heated up as she remembered Zuko grabbing her wrists and then tying her to that tree. She blushed more fiercely as she remembered his warm breath near her neck and his soft voice close to her ear. Back then she had been frustrated at the thought that she had been so easily caught, angry that Zuko had used her mother’s necklace against her, and afraid of what he would have done to her. But looking at it now, the experience was oddly erotic and the memory made her stomach flutter for some strange reason she did not fully comprehend.

She shook her head and shoved those thoughts away.

“He was just trying to make me tell him where Aang was,” she said, then smirking she added, “And it didn’t even work.”

“Hey there, Sugar Queen!” Toph’s voice cut through Katara’s musings.

“Toph!” Katara exclaimed in surprise as she turned toward the sound of the earthbender’s voice. “Aang!” she gasped as she saw them both standing there beside Appa.
Had she been so lost in her thoughts that she did not even notice the ten-ton, flying sky-bison?

“Hi, Katara!” Aang cried out joyfully as he bounded up to her, his youthful face lighting up in his happiness to see her again.

“I wasn’t expecting you so soon. Why didn’t you send a letter saying you were arriving?” Katara asked as she approached them.

“I’m sorry, Katara, but I was just so impatient to come,” Suki explained as she appeared and climbed down Appa’s saddle.

“Yeah, we were so excited when Aang brought up the idea to visit!” Ty Lee exclaimed as she jumped down after Suki, making a somersault in the process and landing neatly on the ground before her feet sunk a bit on the snow.

“Suki! Ty Lee! It’s so good to see you!” Katara exclaimed as she ran to hug them.

“Um, where’s Sokka?” Suki asked as she pulled away from Katara. The female warrior looked away as she tried not to blush.

“Hmm? I’m not sure…” Katara began as she tried to remember where she had seen her brother last.

“Aang, Toph! When did you guys get here?” they heard Sokka call out as he marched up to them. He paused and his blue eyes widened as he spotted his girlfriend standing among his other friends.

“Suki!” he shouted out gleefully as he quickened his pace. “You’re here, too! You didn’t tell me you were coming in your letter!”

Katara smiled as she saw her brother and Suki run for each other, embracing and kissing one another without even caring about who saw them. She looked away when Aang walked up to her, giving her a hug and a kiss on the lips. She tensed slightly before she relaxed.

“I missed you so much. I was so impatient to see you again,” he said softly as he gave her another kiss.
Katara gave him a small smile as he pulled her away at arm’s length to grin at her while Momo chattered excitedly on his shoulder. Aang had not changed much over the years, his tattooed head was still shaved and he still wore his monk garb. However, his face did seem a bit more angular and he was taller than she was

“Me too,” Katara replied quietly.

Momo jumped onto her shoulder and nuzzled her cheek. Katara giggled as his fur tickled her skin.

“I missed you, too, Momo,” she cooed and laughed when the little lemur purred at her.

“Oh, so I guess nobody missed me. The poor, blind girl,” Toph muttered sarcastically as she stood beside Appa with a deep scowl on her face. The others laughed as they turned to her.

“How can we not miss our favorite earthbender?” Sokka said as he and Katara both squeezed the short earthbender in a fierce hug.

“Okay, okay! I feel the love already! Let go!” Toph squeaked as she struggled against them.

“Group hug!” Ty Lee exclaimed as she wrapped her arms around the three of them.

“Great,” Toph grumbled as they all hugged with her in the middle as if they were a bunch of kids.

Appa groaned and swished his large tail, causing a cold gust of wind to ruffle the group’s hair and clothing.

“We missed you too Appa, buddy,” Sokka told him as he turned and hugged the hairy beast. Appa responded by licking Sokka’s whole head. “Yep, missed that, too.”

“Hey, Snoozles, love the hair,” Toph piped up with a grin.
“Really?” Sokka began as he touched his slobbered hair. “Well, I wasn’t sure if I should let it grow more or…Hey!”

“Never gets old!” Toph chortled as she pointed at her sightless eyes.

The group laughed as they made their way in the snow and to the house.

Zuko walked quickly, a dark aura surrounding him, as he made his way to the prison tower.

A weary-looking messenger had arrived with an urgent message a few hours ago. News of raids caused by a large group of thieves was reported to have struck some of the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom. They not only plundered the houses and stores, but they destroyed the factories that held their manufactured goods, and worst of all, raped the women and killed anyone who came in their path. They were said to be both firebenders and earthbenders causing the trouble. This definitely was not what Zuko meant when he wanted ‘the nations to work together’. And the worst part was that nobody seemed able to find them.

Zuko sighed. It seemed that problems were increasing faster than he could solve them.

With silent steps, the irritated Fire Lord made his way to the farthest and most secured prison cell with his two personal guards following behind him. The stuffy air and dim light of the halls only added to his already dark mood. As he approached the guards positioned outside the cell, they straightened and bowed to him. He nodded at them before he pulled out a key from within his armor. He opened the heavy door and stepped inside before closing the door firmly behind him. The guards stood attentively outside in case their lord needed help.

With a flick of his hand, he lit up the torch that rested beside the door. Zuko blinked as he adjusted his vision to the oppressing darkness of the cell.

“Hello, Zuko. Come to pay your father a visit?” Ozai sneered as his son entered the small room. “I feel so loved,” he mocked as he leaned back against the far wall, rubbing his bearded chin with the back of his hand.

_He sounds more like Azula every day_, Zuko thought distastefully as he eyed his father across the divided prison cell.
“You know very well why I’m here,” Zuko responded darkly as he crossed his arms over his chest. “I am here to ask you once more to tell me where my mother is. And if you do, maybe I’ll be more lenient on you.”

“Oh, Zuzu.”

Zuko flinched at the nickname. Ozai laughed sinisterly at his son’s reaction.

“Unless you give me my freedom, I won’t tell you where your precious mother is,” he said evilly as he lifted his hand and casually inspected his nails.

“Never,” Zuko answered firmly. He was losing his patience, but he decided to make one more effort. “But I can make your miserable life a little easier, if you just tell me where to find her.”

“If I cannot have what I want, then you will not get what you want,” Ozai sneered nastily as he flicked his dark, golden eyes at Zuko, “Which does not seem that important to you since you don’t want to compromise.”

Zuko clenched his hands. It was always the same thing. He had tried many ways in order to get information on his mother’s whereabouts, but Ozai always refused to tell him. Even though he was impatient and desperate to find his mother, he could not give into his demand, seeing Ozai would probably try to regain the throne from him and restart the war if he were ever released. Even though this man was his father, Zuko despised him greatly.

Not only did he have to deal with his despicable father, he also had a handful with his crazed sister. Azula’s state was even worse than before; she cursed loudly and thrashed around wildly, and had even started biting people.

“One way or the other, I will find a way to make you to tell me where she is,” Zuko said between clenched teeth.

“Well, then, let’s hope you find out how before one of us ends up dead,” Ozai replied with a sinister smile.

Leaning close toward the cell bars, Zuko narrowed his eyes.
Zuko left the prison tower after one last glare at his malevolent sire and made his way back to the palace. As he passed the entrance to the Royal Palace Garden, he turned his head and briefly glanced at the pond that rested in the middle of the luscious green grass. Memories of happy moments with his mother passed through his head. Sighing, he made his way toward his bedchamber, but since he passed Mai’s room, he decided to stop in to see her.

“Who is it?” Mai’s monotone voice sounded as Zuko knocked on her door.

“It’s me,” he replied, hoping they could talk.

He never thought he would become so desperate to share his feelings and troubles with someone else, and since his uncle was in Ba Sing Se, the only other option was Mai.

“Oh. You can come in, Zuko,” she called back.

Zuko opened the door and went inside. He looked around the slightly illuminated room before he turned his gaze to the young woman that was staring silently at him.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt you if you were sleeping,” he said as he closed the door behind him, walking towards her bed where she was reclining. There was a thick book in her hands.

“No, I was just reading,” Mai replied as she closed her book, putting it aside.

“Oh, so what’s it about?” he asked as he sat on her bed.

“The history of shuriken.”

“Oh, how…interesting,” he muttered as he looked away to stare at a blank spot in front of him.
“Yes. So what brings you to my room?” she asked, smiling.

“I just wanted to spend some time with my girlfriend,” he replied.

Mai’s smile widened a little, something Zuko never seemed to get used to. It was not as bright as one of Katara’s smiles. Mentally shaking his head of such thoughts, Zuko glanced sideways at the dark-haired woman beside him.

“I went to see Ozai again today,” he commented quietly.

Mai’s smile faded and she turned away.

“Oh, I see,” she replied distantly. “And what happened?” she asked, sounding almost bored as she folded her hands placidly on her lap.

“The same as usual, he still won’t tell me where my mother is,” Zuko said angrily. “And that’s not the only problem. We received news of raids going on in the colonies.” He sighed as he lay back on the bed. “Things are getting more complicated.”

Mai eyed him for a moment before she moved closer toward him, placing a thin hand on his chest, stroking it as she looked into his eyes. He stared back at her. They had been intimate a few times, but it was not what Zuko had expected. Their first time together—although it had not been the first sexual experience for either of them—was awkward for both of them. He understood that. However, the next couples of times were just…disappointing. In all honesty, it was terrible, completely lacking in passion. She did not do anything to please him, and admittedly, he did not reciprocate either. Not to mention that it never lasted long, so that is why he had not gone to her for the past year. Such moments only made him feel...empty.

“I think I know how to make you forget about you troubles. How to get things off your mind,” she whispered seductively as her hand traveled lower down his chest.

Forget about them? Zuko thought.

Forget about the people who were being hurt? Forget about his mother? Zuko frowned. He should be ecstatic about the offer like any man would, but that was not what he needed from Mai at that moment and that realization made him feel even more depressed and lonely.
‘I just asked you if you were cold. I didn’t ask for your whole life story.’

He frowned at the memory. It seemed she still did not care about his feelings or his problems. Every time he tried to confide in her, she would ignore him or change the subject. Sometimes, he wondered how she could say she loved him. For this reason and others, he had tried to end their relationship a few times over the years. But she either talked him out of it or he changed his mind because he found it easier just to stay with her. He did not think another woman could come to care for him nor did he think he would be able to care for one of the other women of the nobility.

“Zuko?” he heard Mai call out impatiently.

Mai paused as he pushed her hand away and moved away from her. A small frown appeared on her pale features as he stood up and walked toward the door.

“It’s been a hard day. I think I’m going to bed. Good night, Mai,” he stated impassively as he walked out the door without glancing back at her.

With a sigh, he moved away from Mai’s room and silently made his way toward his bedchamber. He greeted his guards that were posted outside his doors as they bowed before he entered his rooms.

In his private bathroom, Zuko quickly submerged himself into the tub filled with hot water. He felt miserable. His muscles relaxed a bit as the water soothed the knots in his body. Water always did calm him down, whether it was when he was at sea or just taking a bath.

Large, cerulean eyes sprang into his mind as he drowsily thought about the soothing water.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“And then after we helped with their crops, Toph and I decided to visit Kyoshi Island before we arrived here. Then we all decided to come!” Aang smiled broadly as he finished his story of the past few weeks.

“Yeah, we were supposed to have stayed longer, but Twinkletoes here was all impatient to see you again, Sweetness,” Toph snorted as she finished her food.

“I hadn’t seen her for weeks,” Aang replied with a pout, trying to defend himself. He scrunched up
his nose at the sea prunes that were passed his way before he turned to smile at Katara. “I just needed to see you,” he said softly as he placed his arm around her shoulders.

Kanna, who sat near the fire, frowned as she listened to the young people. She shook her head as she continued knitting.

“I’m glad to know you wanted to see me, Aang, but you have responsibilities and you can’t just decide to abandoned them when you have a whim,” Katara chided him gently.

Kanna nodded. It seemed the young monk still needed a few more years to grow up. She smiled wryly.

“Yeah, it’s not fair that you should be the only one to do whatever you want. I mean look at Sparky. He’s so determined in his campaign to bring peace and help his country that you don’t see him running off to have a vacation whenever he wants to,” Toph remarked as she picked at her teeth.

“Speaking of that hot-tempered guy, I wonder how he’s doing. I haven’t seen him since four years ago,” Sokka spoke up, talking with his mouth full of food.

Katara’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of Zuko’s name, as it always seemed to do. She could not explain why it happened, but she had begun to notice it ever since they returned from confronting Yon Rha and she began to spend more time with Zuko.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s doing fine. I mean nobody is complaining about his temper,” she laughed lamely as she tried to calm herself down by taking a few more bites of her food.

Toph grinned. “Well, Zuko has changed a lot since the last time you saw him. I mean a lot. At least, that’s what I hear from the giggling servant girls.”

Her grin grew larger as she felt Katara’s heart race even faster before she felt Katara’s annoyance, probably at the mention of the girls.

“I haven’t seen Zuko and Mai for so long I want to cry,” Ty Lee exclaimed as she tried to balance her cup on her head.
Katara paused as she was about to sip her tea and became silent when Ty Lee brought up Mai.

“It would be nice to have a group reunion one of these days,” Suki spoke up. She paused and her cheeks reddened when she felt Sokka’s hand on her knee. He smiled at her innocently when she looked up to narrow her eyes at him.

“Yeah! We should have one when Zuko’s not that busy,” Aang said excitedly.

“I want to see Uncle Iroh, too. I would do anything for a cup of his delicious tea,” Katara said as she looked down at her own bland tea.

“Anything?” Aang asked almost inaudibly.

Nobody seemed to have noticed, but Kanna heard and she hoped she misunderstood.

“Huh?” Katara said as she turned to frown at the young airbender.

“Nothing!” he exclaimed. He blushed in embarrassment as he popped a slice of an apple into his mouth. Such thoughts were unbecoming of a monk! But he was also a hormonal teenager and he could not help it.

“I sure miss the old man. He wasn’t at the Fire Nation Palace the several times me and Aang have gone,” Toph commented.

Just then, Chief Hakoda and Master Pakku arrived at the dining room.

“Oh, I’m glad we ate at Bato’s house or else we would’ve had to go to bed hungry,” Hakoda remarked cheerfully, obviously having drunk red wine, as he noticed the empty plates of food scattered all over the table.

“Yes, it looks like a group of tiger-seals invaded the place,” Pakku remarked dryly, snorting.

“Oh, Gran Pakku, always so funny,” Sokka laughed.
Pakku crossed his arms over his chest and snorted louder.

“But, dear, I recall how much you ate when we were young,” Kanna piped in with a tiny grin.

Pakku uncrossed his arms and cleared his throat.

“Well, you should see the way your son drinks wine! It seems as if he was dying of thirst,” Pakku replied, trying to hide his discomfort.

“It’s not my fault Fire Nation red wine is so good,” Hakoda replied defensively. It had taken him a while to finally accept Pakku as his mother’s new husband, but he respected the old waterbender nevertheless. Hakoda frowned as he added, “By the way, we are running low and the men are anxious for the next ship to come with more supplies.”

“You wouldn’t be running low if you men didn’t drink it like it was water,” Katara stated with a roll of her eyes. “You’re just going to have to slow down until the next Fire Nation cargo ship arrives in a couple of weeks.”

The men complained under their breaths.

“So, what were you young ones talking about before we arrived?” Hakoda asked as he and Pakku sat near the fire with Kanna.

Pakku planted a kiss on her head as he sat beside his wife, but he straightened himself and looked coldly around the room when the others giggled at him.

“We were talking about how great General Iroh’s tea is!” Ty Lee exclaimed as she now balanced a plate on her head.

“I wonder how Iroh is doing,” Pakku mused as he stroked the small beard on his chin. “I have not heard from him since our last White Lotus meeting a year ago.”
“Uncle Iroh wrote me a letter saying he went back to Ba Sing Se after seeing that Zuko could handle himself without him,” Katara informed them as she took a sip from her tea.

“Oh, so that’s the real reason,” Toph said as leaned back in her seat with a grin. “I knew Sparky was lying when he said Iroh went back because he couldn’t stand another day away from his precious teashop. That Sparky, so modest.”

“Yes, Fire Lord Zuko did seem like a formidable young man when I first met him,” Hakoda remarked. “Not to mention he risked his life to save my daughter’s own,” he said as he smiled fondly at Katara who smiled back.

“I sure would like to meet that young man again,” Gran-Gran spoke up. She looked up from her knitting to look at Katara, who blushed lightly just like she knew she would. “Of course, this time on better terms,” she added with a chuckle.

“Zuko wasn’t always that modest or heroic, you know. He used to be very arrogant, not to mention he always lost his temper,” Aang muttered with a hint of jealousy over Zuko’s praise. Why did everyone start loving Zuko all of the sudden? It all started ever since Zuko became Fire Lord.

“Yes, but Miss Toph said he has changed greatly,” Kanna replied as she tried to defend the young ruler she had heard so much about despite the way he had invaded their home once years ago. After all, he had rescued her son from that horrible prison and saved her granddaughter’s life.

“Well, he changed when he joined our side. And he didn’t lose his temper that much, now that I think about it,” Suki commented as she tapped her chin with a finger.

The younger people seemed to ponder over her words before they nodded in agreement.

“Yes, but Miss Toph said he has changed greatly,” Kanna replied as she tried to defend the young ruler she had heard so much about despite the way he had invaded their home once years ago. After all, he had rescued her son from that horrible prison and saved her granddaughter’s life.

“Yep, he sure learned a couple of things about being modest and honorable by spending some time with me,” Sokka spoke up playfully as he wiped his mouth almost gingerly.

“Oh, yes. I’m sure he learned how to be honorable because of you and not because of Uncle Iroh, and because you are such a good example, ‘Oh Mighty Warrior Sokka,’” Katara teased.

“Hey!” Sokka exclaimed indignantly as the rest laughed.
Katara smiled as her family and friends continued to banter back and forth.

*Beside*, *it’s not like Zuko ever needed to learn about honor*, she mused in her head as she turned to stare at the glowing fire. *He was just a bit lost, but he always had it with him.*

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“It is said that once the raiders finish causing trouble they disappear without a trace,” the messenger explained as he bowed before the Fire Lord, the advisors sitting in their respective places behind him.

“How can that be?” one advisor asked. “Surely the people are so frightened that they started making things up.”

“I don’t believe so,” Chao reasoned. “It is said that there are some earthbenders among them, maybe they just go underground.”

“But when the guards go after them they lose them easily, and they never hear or feel the earth shake, which is common when earthbenders use their element,” replied the solemn messenger. “Besides, it would take a great amount of effort, time, and a lot of noise for such a large group to be submerged underground in a couple of seconds.”

Zuko furrowed his brow in confusion as he listened to what was being said. How can a large group of people disappear out of nowhere?

“I tried to tell you, you idiots, we need to send more troops to the colonies,” Wei spoke up gruffly. “It’s probably the neighboring Earth Kingdom villages, helped by the Earth Kingdom residents in the colonies, and they probably bribed some Fire Nation deserters to side with them. I’m telling you we need to control the rebellious Earth Kingdom residents.”

“No, we are not sending more troops,” Zuko responded firmly, causing the men to look up at him. “We are not going to war, so there is no point on drafting men away from their families to fight something we cannot even trace.”

“Well, we wouldn’t be having this problem, Young One, if you had not made the stupid mistake of calling off the war in the first place,” Wei sneered.
“Say that again and you will regret it, Advisor Wei!” Zuko snapped, narrowing his eyes irritably. He let out a breath to control his temper when the entire room became deadly silent.

Once he was sure he was calm enough, the young lord continued.

“I did make many mistakes in the past, such as siding with Ozai and Azula in capturing and bringing down the Avatar. But fortunately, I caught my mistake just in time and I made up my mind to set everything right when I joined the Avatar and his friends—now my friends also—in defeating my own cruel father and crazed sister. Calling off the war was not a mistake.”

The advisors nodded in approval at the way he defended himself against Wei’s taunting, who only sneered even more, though he remained silent after being chastised in front of the entire Council. The advisors had to admit they were impressed on how much the young Fire Lord had progress over the past four years.

With one final glare, Zuko turned away from Wei and addressed the other men that were patiently waiting for his orders.

“We do need to protect our colonies from these...barbarians, but instead of sending more soldiers we need to set up a stronger protection for the factories and for my people’s homes and safety. We will send more weapons and double the guard duty. We need to set up walls around the cities and whoever enters them shall be inspected carefully. I also think that in order to grow stronger, the people themselves should learn how to protect one another, so we shall set up a training school for benders and non-benders, Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom alike. Should these raiders come again they will see that we are not a weak people and we will defend and protect each other.”

While the attacks are horrific, I will try to make something good out of it, Zuko thought pensively. Now both Fire Nation people and those from the Earth Kingdom can finally come together in order to protect their homes.

The men were silent as they thought about what their lord had said before they turned to each other to discuss the possibilities. Sometime later—after a few heated discussions—they turned their attention back to their Fire Lord in excited agreement.

“We will send architects and engineers to build the walls and we will also send instructors to teach firebending, sword fighting, and hand-to-hand combat. I will see if I can find an earthbender instructor as well,” Zuko continued and nodded when they all agreed.
“The meeting has concluded,” the young Fire Lord announced coolly.

Standing from his throne, Zuko swiftly descended from the dais and parted the fire wall before him. His advisors bowed as he passed them, but he did not pay them much heed as he made his way towards his study a few corridors away.

As he entered the room, Zuko glanced around, taking in the large bookcase filled with scrolls and tomes that covered the entire left wall, a large map of the entire Fire Nation and its colonies on the other, before his eyes landed on his large, dark wood desk resting before a great glass window. Closing the door behind him, Zuko made his way across the room and sat down at his large chair with a sigh before he began to rummage through the pile of scrolls on his desk. A few minutes later, he heard a knock at the door, and with a strained command, he waited to see who was disturbing him.

“You handled yourself very well back there, my nephew,” Iroh praised from the doorway. “I knew I could trust your judgment. I’m so proud of you.” He beamed as he entered the room.

“Uncle!” Zuko exclaimed as he stood up and rushed to clasp the old man’s arm, but Iroh ignored the outstretched arm and hugged his nephew instead.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” Zuko continued after his uncle let him go. “Why didn’t you send me a letter? I apologize for not receiving you at the docks. I didn’t even prepare a welcoming reception.”

Iroh chuckled at his nephew’s uncharacteristic chatter.

“Don’t worry, Prince Zu…I mean, Fire Lord Zuko. I wanted to surprise you. And by the looks of it, I succeeded!” he exclaimed. He seemed proud of himself.

“You have no idea how glad I am you are here, Uncle,” Zuko confessed with a small smile.

“Ah, you don’t know how happy it makes me to know that someone still cares for this old man,” Iroh said with a mock sad look.

“You know there are many who are fond of you, Uncle,” Zuko replied, and then added teasingly, “And I’m sure there are plenty of ladies at Ba Sing Se missing you already.”
The old man sighed dramatically.

“Oh, yes. I feel so horrible leaving them behind. But making sure my nephew is doing well is more important,” Iroh said warmly.

Zuko smiled. He knew he did not have to say much for his uncle to understand how glad he was that he had arrived.

“Come. I’m sure you must be desperate to have some tea after not having any for a few minutes,” Zuko said lightly.

“A few minutes? It has been hours! Not to mention I ran out of ginseng tea on the ship on my way here!” Iroh complained as they made their way out of the study and toward Zuko’s private quarters.

The snow glistened as the sun’s soft rays struck it. Standing silently to the side, Katara watched as Aang played with the Water Tribe children. If it were not for the fact that he was taller, he sometimes could be mistaken for a child. Katara sighed.

“Katara?” she heard her grandmother call from behind her. “Is something wrong, dear?”

“No, Gran-Gran,” Katara answered without turning to look at the older woman as she stopped beside her.

Kanna’s wrinkled brow furrowed in concern at her granddaughter’s quiet reply. She followed Katara’s gaze and frowned when she saw the young airbender. Then her face darkened as she remembered Aang’s subtle remark at dinner the other day.

“Katara?” the old woman began softly, “I know you uphold our rules and traditions concerning young maidens guarding their virtue before marriage, but I am not too sure about Aang.”

Katara turned to face her grandmother with a confused expression. Why was her grandmother talking to her about this?
“Katara?” Kanna looked into her eyes solemnly as she asked, “Has…has Aang made you do anything you shouldn’t or didn’t want?”

Katara’s ears burned as comprehension dawned on her as she stared at her grandmother with a horrified expression.

“Gran-Gran!” she exclaimed in mortification. “How can you say that? Aang’s a monk!”

“Yes, but he is also a hormone-driven, seventeen-year-old boy. I am not saying that he is a bad young man, but I am advising you to be careful. Do not do anything you will regret later and do not let anybody make you do something you do not want,” Kanna advised.

“Don’t worry, Gran-Gran,” Katara replied, slightly embarrassed. “I respect our traditions and I know Aang does too. Everything is fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“You can’t lie to me, young lady. I know you have something in your mind. So out with it,” the old water tribeswoman ordered firmly as she placed her hands on her hips.

Katara suppressed a sigh as she returned her gaze to the playing Avatar and the children.

“It’s just that…well, I know I should feel flattered that Aang was so impatient to see me,” Katara began, “but I can’t stop feeling that what he does is wrong, irresponsible.”

“I see,” Kanna said with a nod.

“Gran-Gran? Am I wrong for feeling this way?” the young woman asked as she turned to look at her grandmother with confused eyes.

Kanna was silent for a moment as she regarded her granddaughter.

“No, dear. It just shows how mature you have grown. It shows that you put the well-being of the world over your own selfish needs concerning Aang. But you must also try to understand him, he’s still so young,” she said.
Aang is a good young boy, but what Katara needs is a man, and she needs one now! Or how else will I get great-grandchildren? Kanna thought.

A small grin appeared on her face, causing the wrinkles on her brown skin to seem more profound.

“Yes, but he has to learn that he has responsibilities that can’t just be put on hold,” Katara stated and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Just like Fire Lord Zuko,” Kanna added, eyeing her granddaughter closely.

“Yes, just like Zuko,” Katara agreed with a nod. “Determined, responsible, honorable, dutiful, and…”

“Handsome,” Kanna helpfully slipped in.

“And handsome, yes,” Katara agreed before she blushed as she clamped her mouth with a hand. “No, that’s not what I—”

“So you are saying that the Fire Lord is not handsome?” Kanna taunted innocently.

“No, of course he’s handsome…well, actually the last time I saw him I thought he was, but I haven’t seen him in years, so I don’t know anymore, but from what I’ve heard he is…” Katara rambled on nervously before she clamped her mouth close again.

Kanna only grinned bigger and she held back a giggle. For some time, she had been suspecting that her granddaughter thought more about the young Fire Lord than she realized.

“But that is not the point,” Katara continued as she waved her hand in the air. “The point is that Zuko’s an example of responsibility, that’s all I see,” she finished as she looked back at Aang.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Kanna replied with a smile.
Growing concerned again she said, “Katara, I’m very proud that you care for the well-being of others before your own, but I want you to know that there are times when we must also think of ourselves, of our own happiness. Even if it goes against the wishes of others, because in the end you will only live with regrets and sorrows that can never be fixed.”

Katara did not know what to say to her Gran-Gran’s words, so she only nodded as they made their way back home.

“I never thought I would say this, but I sure did miss your tea, Uncle,” Zuko remarked coolly as he sipped the soothing tea his uncle had brewed.

Across from him, sitting on a cushion beside the low table in his anteroom, his uncle beamed at him.

“Oh, Nephew, it makes me so happy to hear you say that,” Iroh responded with a wide smile. “Chao informed me you have kept up with your training.”

“Yes, I promised myself that I would learn everything there is about firebending,” Zuko responded with a nod.

“Well, it’s not like you have much to learn. You became a master when you trained the Avatar,” Iroh commented as he took a sip from his teacup.

Zuko gave him a small smile.

Iroh’s face then grew serious as he looked down at his tea.

“Has he talked?” he asked quietly.

“No, he hasn’t,” Zuko said darkly, suppressing a growl as his hands clenched around his teacup.

Iroh sighed. His brother was as selfish and cruel as ever.

“And Azula? How is she?”
Zuko let out a long breath.

“The same, she hasn’t changed much. I received the monthly report that she’s very aggressive and curses at everyone that comes her way,” he recounted solemnly.

Seeing Zuko grow into a dark mood, Iroh decided to change the topic.

“Tell me about these raids I heard at the meeting room. It sounds serious,” he said as he poured more tea into his cup.

As Zuko recounted the news, Iroh again frowned into his cup. His nephew was so young and he already had so many things to deal with. If only there was a way for him to help Zuko. Before Iroh had time to open his mouth, a quiet knock was heard at the door.

“Come in,” Zuko ordered as he took another sip of his tea, knowing full well who it was that stood on the other side of the door.

“Hello, General Iroh. I just heard you were here,” Mai greeted in a dispassionate tone as she stepped into the room and sat on the other side of the table.

“Yes, I just arrived a few hours ago, and I could not wait to share tea with my nephew,” Iroh told the young noblewoman.

“I’m sure you would be happy to drink with anybody and anywhere as long as it’s tea,” Mai replied without really looking at him.

Iroh countered smoothly with, “Perhaps you are right about drinking tea anywhere.”

But I sure won’t drink with just anybody, he continued mentally.

The old firebender eyed the noblewoman impassively as she declined some tea when Zuko asked her if she wanted any. It had surprised him when his nephew had sent him a letter a few months ago
saying that Mai had moved into the palace, and he was not sure he liked the idea of her living with Zuko.

“So, Uncle, how is the Jasmine Dragon coming along?” Zuko asked. He pointedly ignored the way Mai rolled her eyes.

Iroh smiled mischievously as he turned to his nephew.

“Oh, it’s going great! I have so many customers that I now have to take reservations. Sometimes the waiting list is so long people have to wait for days, even weeks, to get a seat!” He hid a grin when he saw Mai trying to hide a yawn. “One time I was so enchanted by a lovely lady that I almost burned the pastries! It was very amusing, I tell you. I wrote about it to Lady Katara on my last letter,” he added almost casually.

Iroh noticed Zuko perk up at the mention of the waterbending maiden just like he knew he would.

“Does Katara correspond with you often, Uncle?” Zuko asked, trying to sound uninterested as he drank more tea.

“Quite often! She writes the loveliest letters. And her calligraphy is so adorable. I’ll show you one of her letters later,” Iroh replied. “But her writing is not the only virtue she has. She was always a pretty girl. I’m sure that now she has grown into an even lovelier young woman, her birthday was about a month ago, if I recall. What do you think, Nephew?” Iroh asked innocently.

For some reason he could not explain, Zuko felt his body warm slightly as he thought of Katara becoming a woman.

“Uh…I’m sure she has, Uncle,” he replied as he placed his teacup down on the table and looked out the window.

Iroh had to hide his growing grin behind his teacup as he noticed Mai’s irritation over Katara’s praise. It was just so easy to rile her since he knew Mai disliked Katara—even though she tried to hide it—and so he made it a point to remind his nephew of the waterbender every so often. It may be petty, but he did not like Mai that much. She was a cold woman and she was too serious for Zuko, who was already taciturn in his own right. Iroh thought Zuko could do so much better.
“If you would excuse me, I had a long day and I think I will go relax in my room,” Mai excused herself coldly, then in a whisper she addressed Zuko, “If you need anything, I will be waiting.”

Zuko nodded, half listening to her as he turned his attention to his uncle as she exited.

“So, it seems Mai hasn’t changed much during these years,” Iroh remarked nonchalantly as he sipped his tea.

“She has grown taller,” Zuko offered lamely.

“Yes, I can see that, but she is still so…serious,” Iroh put in politely.

Zuko didn’t reply since he could not argue with that.

“So how is your relationship going, by the way?” Iroh asked curiously.

“It’s going fine,” Zuko replied stiffly, returning to his old withdrawn self.

“Have you seen any of your other friends?” the old firebender asked. This seemed to pick his nephew up.

“Well, I saw Aang a few weeks ago for a meeting between some Earth Kingdom governors and me. And Toph visited a couple of months ago, since she sometimes travels with Aang in the Earth Kingdom,” Zuko replied.

“Ah, Miss Bei Fong. I haven’t seen the lovely lady for a long time,” Iroh mused with a smile.

Zuko inwardly grinned as he remembered the little rough earthbender who enjoyed teasing and irritating him. He knew that was just her way for being friendly and it was actually…fun. He sometimes even joined in her little games, though very rarely, mostly so she would leave him alone. That would make her laugh and punch him in the arm as she would say, ‘Not too shabby, Sparky, not too shabby.’
“What about the young Water Tribe Warrior and his Kyoshi girlfriend?” Iroh asked again.

“I haven’t seen either of them since the time we were last in Ba Sing Se,” Zuko replied. “They are also busy reconstructing their homes.”

“I see. So…” Iroh began, trying not to make his curiosity too obvious, “that means you also have not seen the lovely Miss Katara?” The old man could barely hide his amusement as he noticed Zuko flush faintly.

“No, I haven’t seen her either,” Zuko responded, quickly recovering his placid facial expression. “Besides, we are all too busy to be having reunions.”

*I was too busy to even attend her birthday party,* he added mentally.

Iroh frowned. He began to worry for his nephew. Zuko was still a young man, and instead of having a great time and enjoying his youth, he was burying himself in so much work that even an older man would not be able to handle.

One thing was very obvious: Zuko was not happy.

*Well, I shall fix that soon enough,* Iroh mused with a twinkle in his eye as a plan began to form in his head.

“So, Nephew, has Lieutenant Jee left to the Southern Water Tribe with the new supplies yet?”

“I promoted Jee to Admiral now. He has proved himself worthy of it. But, no, he is departing tomorrow morning. Why?” Zuko asked suspiciously.

“Oh, I just wanted to have a cup of tea with him before he left. Well, Nephew, I must be getting old since I can barely keep my eyes open,” Iroh said and yawned loudly. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning for practice. Good night.”

*Now I need to plan a surprise!* he thought excitedly as stood up and made his way to the door.
“Good night, Uncle,” Zuko answered as Iroh left.

He was a bit puzzled that his uncle had not begged him for a game of Pai Sho.

*Maybe it's just the long trip that got to him.*

But considering it was his witty uncle, Zuko had a feeling he was up to something.

Iroh made his way to the room his nephew had remodeled and had given to him for whenever he visited. There was a huge grin on his face. He told a servant who passed by to ask Admiral Jee to see him. Iroh then entered his room and sat down to write a letter, smiling smugly to himself as he finished and sealed it.

There was a knock on the door and Iroh invited whoever was outside to enter. He looked up as the door opened.

“General Iroh, it is good to see you again,” Jee greeted as he bowed before he crossed the room to grasp the retired general’s arm.

“Jee! You look better than ever,” Iroh chuckled amiably as he squeezed the admiral’s arm. “So I heard Zuko promoted you to Admiral. Congratulations.”

He motioned for the admiral to take a seat on the small table and he immediately poured them both a cup of tea.

“Thank you. I will always be grateful to Fire Lord Zuko for entrusting me with such an honor,” Jee responded respectfully before he smiled, “and I am very proud to serve him.”

*Nothing like that haughty imbecile Zhao,* Iroh mused.

“I’m glad Fire Lord Zuko has proven himself worthy of such praise,” the retired general said, sipping his tea.
“May I ask why you have called for me?” Jee asked as he took up his own cup and sipped the hot and sweet liquid.

“I heard you also export the Fire Nation’s goods to the Southern Water Tribe,” Iroh began before he saw Jee nod. “So how were you received?”

“Well, there was some tension the first day as we disembarked, but Lady Katara stepped in and helped settle the whole situation,” Jee recounted with a smile. “Now she is the one in charge of the Fire Nation imports in her tribe.”

“Oh, Miss Katara is such a wonderful young lady. Zuko informed me you are leaving to the Southern Water Tribe tomorrow morning,” Iroh said before retrieving the letter that he had finished writing from his pocket.

“Yes, sir, we leave a little after dawn. Do you need anything?” Jee asked as he eyed the letter in the older man’s hand.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I do, Admiral Jee,” Iroh replied with a smile. “You see, I was thinking that since my nephew is working so hard, he needs a little distraction. Therefore, I wrote this letter to Miss Katara hoping that she—that they all come to pay a little visit to Zuko. And I was hoping that you give it to her since you were going over there. It will save this poor old man some time.”

“Of course, General Iroh, it will be my pleasure. And it will make Fire Lord Zuko happy to be around people his own age, around his friends,” Jee said, almost as cheerful as Iroh, except his facial expression remained calm.

“Why, thank you so very much,” Iroh said as he handed the letter to the admiral. “If they accept, I was wondering if you could bring them back with you as soon as possible on your ship since it will be faster.”

Jee readily agreed as he tucked the letter into his armor.

“Good, but I beg you not to say a word of this to my nephew. I want it to be a surprise.” Iroh grinned.
Jee promised not to tell a soul and Iroh nodded with a pleased smile.

“Well, now that that’s settled…how about a game of Pai Sho?”

“Look! The Fire Nation cargo ship has arrived!” one of the Southern Water Tribe lookouts exclaimed.

The women sighed with relief at the prospect of more coal for the cooking fires and more fruit and vegetables. The men cheered at the prospect of more wine and metal.

“Man, I never thought that wine would make the Fire Nation so loved,” Toph joked sarcastically as she heard the commotion while she leaned on Katara’s arm as they made their way to the docks.

“The Fire Nation isn’t loved!” Sokka exclaimed with a sniff. “They’re just appreciated.”

“Oh, Sokka, please,” Katara muttered as she rolled her eyes as they arrived at the frozen pier.

She stood there eagerly, waiting. She watched as Admiral Jee emerged from the ship, but when nobody else seemed to be coming down after him, Katara was again slightly disappointed, which confused her.

Toph, who was hanging onto Katara for support, noticed how the waterbender’s heartbeat, which was previously racing, slowed down dramatically.

“It seems it’s only Jee we’ll be entertaining today,” she heard Sokka say. “Good, that won’t be hard.”

Toph grinned. So, Sugar Queen was expecting someone else, huh?

Katara smiled as the firebender finally spotted them.

“Admiral Jee,” she said, bowing respectfully as he approached them. “I’m glad you have arrived. I hope you and your crew had a safe trip.”
Jee smiled warmly as he returned the bow.

“Yes, thank you, Lady Katara. We brought more of the usual supplies as well as some new things.”

“You did bring new weapons to trade, didn’t you, Jee?” Sokka asked as if he were in charge.

Jee smiled and nodded at the young warrior.

“Well, I’m sure you must be exhausted. I will see that your men are taken care of while we go inside the house,” Katara spoke up.

Jee nodded his gratitude before he ordered his men to unload the cargo.

Zuko watched his uncle as the old man smiled to himself while they ate breakfast. For the past few weeks Iroh had been acting strange, such as going shopping more often (which was saying something) and making sure all the rooms were clean and tidy. Not to mention he kept on chuckling and smiling to himself every time an irritated Zuko retired to his room.

“Uncle? What are you up to?” Zuko asked as he regarded the old man carefully.

“Whatever do you mean, Nephew? I’m just drinking my jasmine tea,” Iroh answered innocently as he raised his cup to show he was speaking the truth.

“He means you’ve been acting strange, General Iroh,” Mai spoke up coldly.

Iroh stiffened at the hard way Mai always said his name.

Well, I guess I had that coming for every time I mentioned Miss Katara, the old man mused with a mental chuckle.

“Oh, it’s nothing to worry about. Don’t mind this old man,” Iroh replied and grinned into his cup
when Mai snorted softly.

“Uncle, tell me what you’re up to,” Zuko said again.

But as before Iroh evaded the question by replying, “Patience is a virtue, my nephew. You will find out soon enough.”

“Ah, Admiral Jee, you have no idea how glad we are that you have arrived. We were almost running out of wine. Soon there would have been a riot!” Hakoda exclaimed humorously as they all finished lunch.

Jee only grinned at him.

“So, Admiral Jee,” Katara spoke up, embarrassed by her father’s dumb joke. “How long are you planning to stay?”

“I am planning on leaving tomorrow morning,” Jee answered simply.

“Tomorrow morning?! But you barely arrived from weeks out at sea,” Katara exclaimed, concerned.

“Yes, but I have urgent business to attend to,” Jee responded, though he was grateful for the young water tribeswoman’s concern.

“What business is that?” Aang asked as he played with Momo’s tail while the lemur chattered loudly.

“General Iroh has asked me to take something important to the Fire Nation Palace as soon as possible,” Jee answered, grinning slightly.

“Iroh’s back in the Fire Nation Palace?” Toph piped in as she sat up straight from her previous slouched position.

“Yes, and he asked me to give this letter to you personally, Lady Katara,” the admiral said, finally producing the letter from inside of his chest armor and handing it to her. He eagerly waited for her
reaction as well as for the others’.

Katara took the letter eagerly.

*What has Uncle Iroh written to me now?* she thought as she quickly broke the seal, opening it and reading it out loud.

*My Dear Miss Katara,*

*I hope you find yourself lovely and well as always. As Jee might have informed you, I am visiting the Fire Nation—or more precisely, my nephew. I found out that a few of your other friends are currently visiting the Southern Water Tribe, and so, I also address this letter to them.*

“How did he know you guys were here?” Sokka interrupted.

“Shut it, Snoozles, let Sugar Queen finish!” Toph hissed and punched his arm, smirking when he yelped.

*As you all know the postwar events have left us all busy, but I believe it has come harder upon my nephew, Fire Lord Zuko. It has a nice ring to it, does it not?*

They laughed.

*And so seeing that he needs a little break, and that he would probably rather play the tsungi horn than admit it, I want to ask you if you could pay a little visit to cheer him up. Besides, you all need a little break yourselves. You may be wondering why Zuko did not send you an official letter and that is because he does not know, and because it’s not an official visit, it’s a surprise reunion! I hope you will consider it, and if you do accept, Jee will gladly escort you to the Fire Nation on his ship. Well, then, I hope to drink tea and play Pai Sho with you soon.*

*General Iroh (Dragon of the West)*

“Sweet,” Toph said as soon as Katara finished reading.
“I haven’t been to the Fire Nation since forever! I can almost taste the fireflakes!” Sokka exclaimed excitedly while drool practically fell from his mouth.

“I want to go! I do miss home. I can’t wait!” Ty Lee cried out enthusiastically.

Excited chatter resounded throughout the room at the idea of a reunion and a visit to the Fire Nation. But Katara was not listening to what the others were saying.

Go back to the Fire Nation? Meet Zuko again? Katara’s heart raced at the thought of seeing Zuko once more. Why am I even reacting like this?

“Well, I have to see that the ship is ready to depart. We are leaving early in the morning,” Jee told them as he exited with Hakoda, Kanna and Pakku.

“Hurry! We must go pack right now,” Suki instructed.

They all jumped from their seats and started to run towards their rooms to pack, all except for Katara, who was still holding the letter in her hands.

“Katara? Are you all right?” Aang asked as he noticed her sitting there as if in a trance.

“Huh? Oh, yes. I’m fine.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to go. I’ll tell the others that we—”

“No!” she shouted before she cleared her throat and continued more quietly, “No, I do want to go. I mean…it’s just that I’m excited to see Zu—the Fire Nation Palace again after spending so much time here,” she said, quickly catching her slip.

“Oh. Okay then. We should pack now. Jee said they were embarking early. Do you need any help packing?” Aang smiled mischievously as he leaned forward to kiss her.
Katara pulled back quickly.

“Um…No, I can do it myself,” she said with a small smile as she left the dining room, leaving Aang frowning after her.

Katara quickly made her way through the icy corridors of her home in a daze as she tried to figure out what her reaction to the news meant.

“So, Sweetness,” Toph piped in as Katara reached her room, making the waterbender jump. “Are you excited to see the Fire Nation Palace again or excited to see something else?”

_or someone else?_ the blind earthbender added mentally.

“I’m also looking forward to seeing Uncle Iroh and Zuko again,” Katara answered as she opened her door.

“Me too…me too,” Toph said, grinning widely as she left.

Katara stared after the grinning earthbender with a confused look, but she shrugged as she entered her room and immediately started to look through her clothes and frowned. Most of her clothes were too warm for the Fire Nation weather.

Oh, well. She sighed as she held up a warm parka before she shook her head and placed it back in her drawer.

In a few minutes, she had everything packed. She looked around her room just in case she missed something.

Then her eye caught the silver rose hairpin resting innocently on the nightstand. She walked over to it and picked it up. Chuckling, she remembered the faces of all the other girls as they saw the hairpin. She could not help feeling smug at the other girls’ envious stares, wishing the Fire Lord would give them such a beautiful and expensive gift.

For her previous birthdays, Zuko had always sent a letter and a real rose. She had never seen such
beautiful roses before, but she loved them. The dark red flower would always stand out in her white and blue room as it rested in a small vase in her nightstand. But for her nineteenth birthday, he had sent her this rose, one that would not wither away as time went by. One that shone brightly with the sunshine and the moonlight. She did not know why, but after her mother’s necklace, the rose hairpin was her favorite possession.

Katara placed it carefully among her other belongings in her pack. She could not leave it behind.

Zuko could not take it anymore. He hated not knowing what was going on, especially in his own palace.

“Uncle! I demand you tell me what is going on right this instant!” Zuko bellowed as he stormed into his uncle’s room without even knocking.

“What do you mean, Nephew? I told you that it is nothing,” Iroh replied calmly, unaffected by his nephew’s outburst.

“Nothing? You are cleaning the guest rooms and polishing the halls! The servants do not need more work piled on them. Not to mention that I found out you ordered more food for the kitchen than necessary. Don’t tell me it’s so I can eat healthier because I won’t buy that!” Zuko barked.

Then, lowering his head to face Iroh’s own, he added coolly, “Uncle. Tell me. What are you brewing?”

Iroh laughed as he placed down the scroll he had been reading.

“Zuko, you make it sound like I’m planning the end of the world! So what if I ordered the rooms and halls to be cleaned, there is nothing wrong with cleanliness. And the food is just in case something unexpected happens. But as I told you before there is nothing wrong, quite the contrary. Now, calm yourself and tell me about your day.”

Zuko let out a long breath and ran a hand down his face as his uncle poured him some tea.

“I think Azula has gotten worse than she already was. In a way it pains me to see her like that,” he said with a sigh as he sat heavily next to the little table.
Iroh nodded sympathetically, Azula was his niece after all, and Zuko’s only sister.

Putting his head in his hands, Zuko added dejectedly, “I went to see Ozai again today.”

Iroh lifted his eyebrow expectantly.

“He still won’t say anything,” the young man growled out.

Iroh let out a long sigh.

“I feel like I’m running out of time. I don’t know what to do,” Zuko whispered anxiously.

“We knew it wouldn’t be easy, Zuko,” Iroh responded comfortingly. “But Ozai will break one of these days. Just have hope and patience.”

“Hope?! Patience?!?” Zuko roared, slamming his hand on the table, causing the tea to spill. “Dammit! Years have passed, and Agni knows how many more will come and go, before I know where she is! And that…bastard won’t touch his heart to tell his own son where his mother is! His own wife!” Zuko looked down at his uncle, trying to calm himself down, “I don’t know how long I can take not knowing where she is. Without knowing if she is well. Without knowing if she is even…alive.”

Iroh saddened at his nephew’s desperation.

“Zuko,” he said calmly as he placed a comforting hand on his nephew’s tensed shoulder, “I know how hard it is to lose someone. When I lost my wife and my son, Lu Ten, I felt like my world had stopped. But if I had not kept my hopes and spirits up, I probably would have fallen to despair, and I probably would not be here today, with you. Fire Lord Zuko, do not lose hope. You will find a means that will help you find Ursa when you least expect it. Trust me.”

Zuko was silent for a few minutes before he let out another sigh and his shoulders relaxed.

“Thank you, Uncle,” Zuko said in a low, sad voice before he straightened himself.
Iroh patted his shoulder.

“Everything will come out fine in the end, Zuko, you’ll see.”
The sun was bright in the sky as the Fire Nation ship sailed over the blue ocean. Weeks had passed since they left the Southern Water Tribe. Getting to the Fire Nation would have taken longer if they had ridden on Appa all the way, since a ship did not need rest.

Leaning against the ship’s railing, Katara inhaled the salty ocean breeze.

Frantically, the gang had rushed to get their things packed and ready before the ship departed. Sokka left instructions for the production of his inventions and Master Pakku had agreed to substitute Katara’s waterbending class.

Looking at the sea, Katara remembered saying their goodbyes to the tribe. Kanna had approached her grandchildren and said, ‘Have fun, enjoy yourselves, and remember to cover up when it gets chilly.’

‘Gran-Gran, it’s the Fire Nation! We won’t suffer from frostbite. Don’t worry your pretty, white head,’ Sokka had said and laughed when Kanna scowled at him.

Then turning towards Katara, she had continued, ‘Say hello to the Fire Lord for me, Katara. And do whatever you can to cheer him up.’

Katara looked over the calm sea as she puzzled over this. Why was Gran-Gran all of the sudden interested in Zuko? And why will she tell her to cheer him up?

Appa groaned contently as he lay on a big pile of hay on the ship’s deck as it made its way. Apparently, riding on a ship without having to fly for days made him happy.

“Yes, I know, buddy, but don’t get too used to it,” Aang said as he rubbed his large friend’s nose. Appa only grunted in reply before he let out a wide yawn.

“How much longer are we gonna take?” Katara heard her brother complain. “It’s been weeks. I want some food!”
“Sokka, you’re already getting fed well,” Suki told him, putting an arm around his so she could lean on him. Her face looked a little pale.

“Yeah, but I want some real food not ship food!” Sokka explained as he wrapped his arm around her.

Katara rolled her eyes at his words just like the others did.

“I feel sorry for the palace cooks. They will probably quit their jobs in a few weeks,” Aang quipped.

“I say a few days,” Toph drawled and grinned, making them all burst into laughter.

Sokka only scowled and raised his chin.

Ty Lee sighed as she added, “No, but seriously, you guys, I can’t wait to see my home again. And Mai, too!”

“Oh, yeah. Mai, the dull, dagger-throwing girl. Hope she doesn’t mind us coming because we are going to have a blast!” Sokka exclaimed as he began to count all the activities that they could do once they arrived.

Jee appeared as Sokka counted activity number nine.

“We will be arriving at the Fire Nation capital tomorrow. I advise you to get your things ready,” Jee told them, then smiling, he added, “I’m glad you accepted to visit Fire Lord Zuko. He has been working too hard for such a young man.”

“Well, glad you called! We’re the best at having fun!” Sokka said as he began to recount his list while the rest groaned.

Tomorrow? We will arrive at the Fire Nation Palace tomorrow? Katara thought to her herself. In just one day I will see Zuko again. Her heart raced before she frowned once more at her reaction.
“Aang! You want to practice waterbending? I haven’t practiced since we left the Southern Water Tribe,” Katara called out in order to avoid her confusing thoughts—thoughts that seemed to be recurring a lot lately.

“Well, Suki, let me help you pack,” Sokka spoke up. Both of them were grinning as they made their way to her room.

“Sure thing, Katara,” Aang answered happily as he wrapped his arms around her and leaned down to kiss her.

“She said waterbending practice not kissing practice, Twinkletoes,” Toph called out, a bit annoyed.

Katara thanked her silently as Aang moved away with a sheepish grin.

Zuko looked at himself in the mirror as he finished shaving, checking to see if he had missed any spots and pushing his short hair out of his eyes. Then his gaze settled on his scar, the only place where he did not have to worry about shaving.

He used to always get upset every time he would see his scarred face in a mirror, but now he had learned to accept it—well, at least a little bit. It was a part of who he was and where his destiny began. Besides, it appeared that not everyone was disgusted by it. At least one person in particular—one with blue eyes—was not.

He had never let anyone touch his scar, pulling back like when Song tried to, or more often, nobody wanted to touch it, like Mai. However, it was different with Katara, he allowed her to touch it and she wanted to.

Zuko’s fingers traced the edge of the rough skin. He remembered the way she had softly touched it, her thumb resting on his lips, when they were under Ba Sing Se. She did not seem repulsed by it. She actually had kept her fingers there for a few moments before they were interrupted.

‘Maybe you could be free of it. I have healing abilities,’ she had said. Even if not literally, she did in a way heal him.
Zuko sighed as he lowered his hand. Her touch had felt good…comforting.

*Why am I thinking about her? Again,* he asked himself with a shake of his head.

He left the grand bathroom, put on his training pants, and then a light tunic, he usually practiced shirtless since it got very hot while he trained. Once he was ready, he headed out of his bedchamber and passed his anteroom just as one of the doors to his chambers opened.

“Zuko, where are you going?” Iroh asked as he closed the large door behind him.

“To train, Uncle,” Zuko replied as he made his way towards the door.

“But you can’t go! You will get all exhausted and sweaty!” Iroh exclaimed, pushing Zuko back into his antechamber.

“That’s what happens when you are training hard,” Zuko answered in an annoyed tone. Sometimes he doubted his uncle’s sanity.

“But you can’t greet your guests like that! Go change,” Iroh persisted.

“Guests? What are you talking about, Uncle?” Zuko asked, moving towards the door again, now confused and irritated.

“Well, the Avatar and his friends, of course,” Iroh said as if stating the obvious.

“What?!” Zuko exclaimed as he whirled around to face his uncle, a gleam of hope in his eyes.

“Oh, did I forget to tell you?” Iroh asked innocently. “Jee sent me a message stating they will arrive today.”

*Today? And you tell me now?* Zuko fumed, but deep down he could feel excitement building, something he had not felt for a long time.
I’m going to see Katara again! At least I hope she’s come too, he mentally exclaimed before he frowned and shook his head.

“I wanted it to be a surprise. And as usual, it worked. Surprise!” Iroh said as he beamed, rather proud of himself.

“So, this is what you’ve been hiding and making a bustle over, isn’t it?” Zuko asked as he quickly returned to his bedchamber.

“Ah, Nephew, always so perceptive,” Iroh said with an amused chuckle.

Zuko resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he search for something to wear.

“Well, enough chitchat and put on some clothes,” Iroh ordered. “You surely cannot greet them in just your training pants. I’m sure some ladies will be very uncomfortable. And distracted.”

The old firebender laughed as Zuko’s good ear reddened.

“There it is! I see it!” Ty Lee cried out as she jumped around the deck of the ship.

“Wow, I never actually looked at it before. It’s amazing,” Suki breathed out as they neared the Fire Nation Capital port.

“I’ve heard it’s even more amazing since Zuko ordered for the restoration of the cities’ old buildings,” Toph informed them proudly.

Katara’s pulse quickened as they drew closer. This is it. We are finally here.

At the dock, Zuko calmly gazed at the approaching ship, even though inwardly he felt somewhat nervous.
This is it. They’re finally here. After almost four years, he was going to finally see his friends again.

“Why are they taking so long to get here?” he demanded irritably.

“The ship is actually going at normal speed, Zuko,” Mai said as she looked at the ship without interest.

“Things seem to always go slow when one is impatient,” Iroh said to Zuko, “Especially since you are so impatient to see Kat—your friends again.” He grinned as Zuko flushed slightly at his ‘slip’.

Mai only yawned and checked the small daggers up her sleeves. Iroh looked at his nephew in alarm, but Zuko only shrugged.

“Look there’s Mai! And Iroh!” Ty Lee exclaimed as she leaned against the side of the ship, her long hair whipping around her.

“Wow, look at Zuko!” Suki exclaimed as she pointed ahead. Sokka grumbled at her enthusiasm.

Katara followed Suki’s arm pointing at the three figures standing on the dock along with some guards and curious citizens standing a few feet behind them.

She stared in amazement as her eyes settled on Zuko. He had grown much, much taller. His black hair was pulled back by his fire crown and he was wearing a slightly formal black and red robe and armor. He had really changed into quite a young man, she mused. His shaved, chiseled jaw had a fine structure. His nose and his one good eyebrow were even more defined and his scar only added to his complexion. He looked so regal; the very picture of a true Fire Lord.

Katara’s heart skipped a beat as she noticed his smile. It was not a wide one, but it was genuine… warm.

Oh, he is so very handsome, she thought before she blushed as she remembered her conversation with Gran-Gran.

She was brought back to reality as she noticed Mai put her arms through Zuko’s before he turned to
look at the tall woman. Katara backed away from the railing, ashamed of herself for thinking in such a way. She raised her hand to clasp her necklace only to meet her skin. She panicked when she felt that it was not there. She looked around herself, hoping it had fallen near her, then remembering she left it on her bed as she bathed and changed. She ran to the room she had occupied on the ship.

“Mai!” Ty Lee yelled as she jumped off the ship before the crew even lowered the ramp.

“Ty Lee? I didn’t know you were coming.” Mai said in her usual voice, but with a soft smile on her face. She calmly returned the hug the enthusiastic acrobat gave her as soon as she had approached her. They talked with each other while the rest greeted the young Fire Lord.

“Zuko! How are you?” Aang exclaimed as he jumped off and floated toward the young man with Momo chatting excitedly behind him.

Sokka, Suki, and Toph walked down the ramp and quickly made their way toward the group.

“Iroh!” Toph exclaimed as she stomped towards the kind old man, giving him a bear hug, and then whispering, she said, “What took you so long?”

Iroh only chuckled as he patted her head.

Finding her necklace, Katara raced back toward the deck and then the ramp, stopping below it. She looked at the group and noticed that Aang barely came up to Zuko’s shoulder and would probably stay that way.

“I am glad that you have agreed to visit us,” Zuko said, bowing towards Sokka and Suki, trying to contain his sudden excitement.

“Oh, come now, Zuko, enough with the formal crap!” Sokka exclaimed, then grinning he yelled, “Group hug!”

Zuko stiffened slightly as Aang, Toph, Sokka, Suki, and even Iroh, surrounded him. Finally catching up, Katara smiled in amusement as she saw Zuko stiffen the same way he did when they shared a group hug back at the royal beach house on Ember Island before the war ended. The crowd laughed quietly behind their hands as they watched what was happening.
“Uh…thanks?” Zuko said uncomfortably as he resisted the urge to throw them all away from him. He had never been comfortable with such displays of affection.

*Wait. Something is missing,* he thought with a frown.

Iroh pulled back and watched with amused eyes as Zuko looked above the heads of the others.

*Where is Katara?* Zuko mentally asked as a pang began to form in his chest. *Is she even here? Did she come? I shouldn’t have gotten excited. I shouldn’t have—*

Zuko’s golden eyes widened as he finally saw her. Katara was standing behind the others, her hands clasped placidly before her. She had grown taller, her brown hair in a loose bun, her trademark hair loops framed her face. She was wearing light blue clothes just like the one she wore at the end of the war, but these clothes defined the curves of her body even more.

Her height was not the only thing that had grown during these years, he observed with heated eyes. She had lovely, wide hips, a thin waist, and defined breasts. Zuko blinked.

*Oh, yes, definitely a lovely, young woman,* he mused, but then berated himself for such ungentlemanly thoughts.

His heart raced faster as his eyes settled on her face. She had dark, long eyelashes, a petite nose, and plump lips. Oh, but her lovely smile and her beautiful, blue eyes were what really caught his attention and took his breath away.

*Oh, she’s beautiful,* he sighed wistfully.

He was brought out of his reverie as the group finally let him go to talk to Iroh and he mentally shook his head to clear his thoughts. He had never been rendered speechless by a beautiful woman before so what made Katara different? Clearing his throat, he walked over to her a bit nervously, though he hid it well. It would not do for the Fire Lord to act foolishly in front of his subjects.

Toph touched Iroh’s arm and both grinned.
Calm yourself. Don’t do anything stupid. You are the Fire Lord, Zuko commanded himself as he stepped regally up to her.

“Hello, Katara…I’m glad you’re here.”

Zuko cursed his lame greeting.

“I’m glad to be here, too, Zuko,” Katara replied as she smiled at him.

Zuko stifled a sigh of relief.

“So, I—” Zuko started but stopped when Katara suddenly wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

“Um…I…hm…”

“Well, everybody got to hug you, so it’s my turn,” the Water Tribe woman replied with a giggle.

Don’t just stand there, you idiot! Hug her back! Zuko heard a voice in his head that sounded so much like Toph yell.

You don’t have to tell me twice! Zuko argued back.

Zuko felt his pulse race as he placed his arms around her feminine waist, amazed at how great it felt to have her body pressed against his. Katara blushed despite herself as Zuko returned the embrace, his strong, muscular arms surrounding her. Both remembered the first time they had hug like this, when they had returned from searching for the murderer of Katara’s mother. When Katara had finally forgiven Zuko.

As they stood there for a while, the crowd began to murmur, speculating about the reasons why the Fire Lord and the master waterbender were embracing so long. Could it be that something had happened between them during their time together during the war? Many were intrigued at the scandalous possibilities. Zuko and Katara did not notice the commotion they were eliciting until Mai stepped in and interrupted them. The dark-haired noblewoman quickly pulled Zuko back, ignoring the way he glared indignantly at her.
“It sure is a surprise to see you again, Katara,” she said, her voice cool and emotionless.

Katara only smiled. “It’s great to see you, too, Mai.”

“So, Sparky, did you miss me?” Toph asked as she stepped between Zuko and Mai, ignoring the way Mai huffed at her. “Be honest now.”

Zuko smiled down at her. “You have no idea how much, Toph. I was depressed for weeks.”

Toph punched his arm.

“Oh, shut it, you,” she snorted with a silly smile on her face.

Katara smiled. She could see that they really got along well.

“By the way, I like the color of your clothes. It brings out the color of your eyes,” Toph remarked.

Zuko snorted amusedly.

“I’m sure you do, Toph,” he responded casually.

Katara grinned, too.

*Zuko isn’t that stupid,* she thought.

“Damn. I’ll get you next time!” Toph said, chuckling. “I shouldn’t be comparing you to Snoozles, here.”

“Hey!” Sokka protested as he turned around to glare at the blind earthbender.
They laughed while Zuko gave him a small sympathetic look.

“Don’t you guys get tired of making fun of me all the time?” the Water Tribesman groused.

“Hmm? Nope!” Toph replied with a chortle just as everybody else, except Zuko, laughed.

Sokka scowled at them all and crossed his arms over his chest.

Just then, the crowd gasped when they saw the ten-ton, flying sky-bison land beside their young lord. The guards stood nervously by, but Appa only poked his tongue out of his mouth and licked Zuko’s face, causing the spectators to relax and laugh lightly.

“Great,” Zuko grumbled as he wiped the drool from his face, then rubbing Appa’s nose he said, “Missed me already, huh?”

Appa groaned in reply.

Not wanting to be left behind, Momo landed on Zuko’s right shoulder and nuzzled him. Zuko stroked the lemur’s large ears.

“Well, all I need is for the Unagi to come and give me a pat on the back,” the firebender said impassively.

The rest laughed and Zuko frowned since he had not meant to be funny.

“Now I understand why you ordered so much food, Uncle,” Zuko whispered to Iroh as they all sat for dinner. Zuko grinned mentally as he watched the other two boys eat.

Sokka and Aang devoured everything in sight with Aang mostly getting the vegetable plates—of course he ate a bit more carefully than the blue-eyed warrior did.
Yes, just like old times.

“Ooh, this is good…I like this…Ah, I missed this…Ahh, too hot…Spicy chicken!” Sokka kept exclaiming as he stuffed food into his mouth.

Katara and Suki’s faces were red with embarrassment. Mai had a look of pure disgust on her face.

“You guys…slow down,” Katara told them with a scowl.

“It’s alright, Miss Katara. It makes me glad to know that our food is greatly appreciated,” Iroh reassured the girls.

Aang and Sokka grinned broadly at him with mouths still full of food and kept on eating.

“Yeah, girls, calm down. We can’t help it,” Sokka said as he refilled his cup with more red wine, “Missed this, too.”

Zuko smiled as he surveyed the people around him. They were eating in the royal family dining room, which he had not used since his mother’s disappearance and his banishment. It felt nice to use it again, especially with his friends.

Katara stared at her plate, having lost her appetite at the sight of the two stuffing their faces like they had not seen food for ages. She glanced to where Zuko sat at the head of the table. Unlike Aang and her brother, Zuko ate slowly. He actually took the time to chew his food before he swallowed. And he always took small bites, not like the other two who stuffed their mouths so full they looked like weasel-chipmunks. She did not know why, but Zuko’s eating habits pleased her.

Sensing someone looking at him, Zuko looked up to see Katara staring at him. She smiled before quickly looking away. He frowned in confusion as he watched her push her food around in her plate.

“So, Miss Katara,” Iroh spoke up as he saw her blush. “How are your students coming along?”

Katara smiled proudly as she turned to face the retired general.
“They’re progressing very well and they learn very fast. I wonder how they’re doing with Master Pakku,” she mused with a giggle.

Aang smiled at her and Iroh laughed as he exclaimed, “Those poor children! They will be worked so hard they will be waterbending in their sleep!”

They laughed loudly while Zuko smiled as he silently sipped from his wine cup.

“Well, now, I am sure you young people must be tired, so off to bed now!” Iroh proclaimed, clapping his hands. It was indeed very late. The sun had set a long time ago.

Zuko smiled as they all complained.

“But, Iroh we are not—” Aang began as he tried not to yawn.

“Now, now, you have all day tomorrow to enjoy yourselves. You all need a goodnight’s rest so you will be up early fresh and energized,” Iroh told them.

They all stood up reluctantly. Sokka stuffed more food in his mouth as he moved away from his chair.

“Let me escort you to your rooms,” Iroh continued with a grin.

He ignored the way Zuko eyed him suspiciously.

The old firebender led the way to the western side of the palace. Turning to one of the guest wings, he stopped at the first door.

“Here is your usual room, my dear Miss Toph,” he said, opening the door for the earthbender.

“Yeah, well, good night everybody,” Toph yawned loudly and stepped inside, slamming the door
behind her.

“This is your room, Miss Suki,” Iroh announced as they approached the second room.

He opened it for her. Sokka peered inside and smiled mischievously as he turned to his girlfriend. Suki kissed him good night and went inside. As the rest walked on further down the hall, Ty Lee entered the next room happily.

“Your room, Miss Katara, is between Ty Lee’s and Mai’s. And if you keep going straight all the way to the end of this hall, and then make a right turn to the next corridor you will find my room and then, finally, Zuko’s royal bedchamber,” Iroh said with a twinkle in his eye.

Zuko felt his ears burn at his uncle’s words. Why was his uncle telling Katara where his room was located?

“Oh, uh…thank you,” Katara said with a small smile.

Aang frowned.

“Why will Katara need to know that?” he asked.

Iroh only shrugged innocently. “Oh, you know, just in case you need any help or something.”

“Where will Aang and I sleep?” Sokka asked, looking down the hall, hoping to see another room.

“Ah, well you boys will sleep in the previous corridor.” Iroh grinned when Sokka frowned. He led Aang and Sokka back the way they came from after they all bid each other good night.

The waterbender stood uneasily with Zuko and Mai outside her room. Mai seemed to be ignoring her, but Katara noticed that Zuko had an intense look as he stared at her. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately and Katara wondered why that was. Thought she had to admit she could not stop her eyes from glancing at him whenever she thought no one was looking.
“Well, then, good night,” she told them before she turned to smile at Zuko. “And thanks again for receiving us,” she said as she opened her door.

“You’re welcome. Good night, Katara,” Zuko answered as he stared after the young waterbender, smiling when she turned back to smile at him again before she closed the door.

He tensed when Mai grabbed his arm and pulled him towards her room.

“You must be cold, Zuko,” she murmured as she began to pull on his robe.

Zuko’s one eyebrow lifted as she began to kiss his neck. He frowned. She had never done such a thing before. She knew he hated to show any physical contact in public. Besides, all he could think about was that Katara was next door.

“I’m not cold at all, thanks. Good night, Mai.” He pulled away quickly, trying to hide his discomfort so as not to hurt her feelings.

“But, Zuko—” Mai began as a small frown appeared on her pale face.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Zuko told her as he briefly kissed her cheek.

Then he quickly turned to go to his bedchamber. All the way thinking, She’s here. Katara is finally here. They are all here.

As Katara entered her room, she surveyed her surroundings. The room was mostly a soft red and cream colored, with a marble floor, and she had a bathroom, which was a nice perk. It was impressive.

Noticing her bag next to the bed, she moved towards it. Unpacking her clothes which, she noted irritably, were too warm for this weather, she began to place them in the dresser. After she finished, she looked around the room again and noticed that there was a wooden closet on one side of the wall and walked toward it. She opened one door and peered inside, as expected, it was empty. She guessed it was for her clothes as well. A small laugh escaped her since she barely filled the top part of the dresser with the clothes she brought!
Changing into her too warm sleeping clothes, she reached her hand inside her bag to retrieve her hairbrush. As she pulled it out something fell to the floor with a soft ‘clink’. Looking down with a frown, she gasped and quickly grabbed the hairpin. She examined it carefully to see if it was damaged.

“Stupid. How could you have forgotten about it?” she berated herself. “I would never have forgiven myself if I lost it.”

What would Zuko say if he found out she lost the gift he gave her?

Sighing with relief after seeing it was not damaged, she headed for her bed. She pushed the blanket aside and settled herself on it. It was soft and comfortable, and slightly bigger than her bed back home.

Looking at the rose hairpin in her hand, she thought about the day’s event. They were finally in the Fire Nation after four years, after finally defeating the ruthless Fire Lord Ozai. She never would have thought that she would feel this pleased just being here, especially after being afraid for so many years of the country that had harmed her family and so many people.

Glancing at the small window in the room, she smiled. Iroh was still wise, jolly, and silly. And as for Mai…she was still tall, thin, and serious.

And Zuko.

Zuko…

She felt herself blush. Toph was right. He had really changed in every sense of the word. Well, at least physically. She was sure that as the years went by he would still be a very handsome man. Perhaps even more.

I wonder how he will look years from now, she mused before she shook her head.

Katara set the hairpin gently down next to her nightstand before she covered herself with the soft blanket as she prepared to sleep. But her thoughts would not let her go that easily. She felt her cheeks flush as she remembered Zuko’s warm, muscular arms around her waist as they embraced earlier that day. It had felt nice and…right.
“No! Stop! I can’t be having these thoughts! We’re just friends,” she told herself firmly. “Besides, I’m with Aang and…Zuko’s with Mai… Just like it’s supposed to be…”

Warm light fell on Katara’s face. She frowned as sleep began to leave her. She let out a small yawn as she slowly opened her eyes and startled herself fully awake. With a frown, she looked around the unfamiliar room that greeted her. She took in the red and cream colors and the decorations on the walls. Then noticing her half-unpacked things next to the dresser, everything that happened the previous day came back to her. They were back in the Fire Nation Palace after many years. They had come to visit Zuko.

“Zuko,” she said with a smile as she pulled the warm covers away and quickly got out of bed.

She glanced toward the light that poured into the room from the window and gasped once she noticed the brightness of the day. She had overslept!

“Great. Now everybody will think I can’t handle a long journey,” she muttered as she turned away from the window.

Katara ran to her dresser, rummaged through it for a minute, and pulled out her clothes before she raced to the bathroom. It took her a moment to figure how to work the unfamiliar bathtub, but once she got it she quickly took a bath, using her waterbending to hurry things along.

A few minutes later, the waterbender left her room and walked toward the guest room Suki had been given. With a smile, she raised her hand and knocked, but her smile turned into a frown when she received no answer. With a small shrug, she walked further down the corridor to Toph’s room. Considering the rough earthbender, Katara was sure Toph would still be in bed. She knocked and the same result followed. She frowned. Where was everybody?

“If they had gone off without me, there will be hell to pay,” the waterbender grumbled as she made her way down the hall. She glanced back over her shoulder.

I could always check Zuko’s room…

No. He probably had been awake since dawn, being a firebender and all.
She kept on walking down the golden corridor for a while as something dawned upon her that made her pause. She had no clue where to go or where she was since it had been almost four years since she had been in the palace.

“Come on, Katara, where is your head?” she scolded herself.

Katara wandered for some time hoping to find the others or at least a servant that could direct her to where her friends were, but she did not encounter one single person. It almost felt like she was the only one there.

*I forgot how big the palace really is, she thought, And impressive, too.*

She admired the beautiful vases on golden pedestals and the magnificent decorations on the walls. Such grandeur overwhelmed her since her home was much simpler, albeit still beautiful and elegant. Stopping to admire a stunning golden vase with crimson and black swirls that resembled dragons, Katara gazed at it in wonder for a moment before she noticed a rather chubby, old man huffing his way towards her. She smiled at him, about to ask him where the others were when the man scowled menacingly and started to yell at her.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? If you came to steal something, you are doing a terrible job!” he barked, his large belly shaking as he waved his hands in the air.

Katara stared at the man in disbelief.

“What? I’m not a thief!” she defended herself as she placed her hands on her hips. *Who does this jerk think he is?*

“Guards! Guards! Throw this wench into the prison tower!” he yelled as he looked frantically around them.


She backed away a step from the man and whirled around, although she hated to run away. *I have to find Zuko or maybe Iroh!*
But the old man grabbed her arm before she could advance and stopped her. Katara glared at him as she tried to pull away.

“Let me go!” she hissed as her other hand reached for her waterskin.

The old man sneered as he said, “You will not escape, you little—”

“Wei, you fool! Let the girl go!”

Katara turned at the new voice and saw an old man with long, white hair approaching them quickly, a deep frown on his wrinkled face.

“This woman was trying—” the fat, old man began as he dug his fingers into her arm, making her wince.

“She was trying nothing!” the other man interrupted. “Do you even know who this woman is? She is a master waterbender, daughter of Chief Hakoda from the Southern Water Tribe,” he continued, then with a small grin he added, “Not to mention one of Fire Lord Zuko’s closest friends, whom I’m sure will be most displeased when he finds out you have disrespected his guest.”

Katara wrenched her arm away from the man that still had a hold on her arm before she moved closer to the other one—who apparently was on her side—and smirked.

The large, old man eyed her for a moment before he snorted dismissively as he turned around and left without another word.

Well, so much for an apology, Katara thought angrily as she rubbed her arm.

“I apologize for that,” the white-haired man began, “Wei has always been a…”

“Jerk,” she filled in before she turned to smile at him. “Thank you for helping me.” She bowed. “I’m most grateful.”
The old man smiled and bowed as well as he said, “You’re welcome, Lady Katara. I am Chao, one of Fire Lord Zuko’s advisors and friend of General Iroh. May I ask what are you doing here in this part of the palace?”

Katara reddened in embarrassment.

“Well, you see I…I kind of…got lost,” she admitted sheepishly.

Chao chuckled deeply, reminding her of Iroh.

“I figured as much,” he admitted. “The palace is very immense. Come, I will take you to the royal family dining room where everyone is waiting for you to join them for breakfast.”

Katara smiled at the kind, old man. “Thank you.”

Zuko looked anxiously at the entrance door to the dining room.

_Is Katara all right? I should have sent someone for her_, he thought.

He tapped his fingers on the smooth table. Breakfast was supposed to have started an hour ago and there was still no sign of the waterbender.

Sitting on the young Fire Lord’s right side, Iroh glanced at Zuko’s face and then at his hands. He smiled as he noticed his nephew’s restlessness as he also waited for the young lady to make an appearance.

From the end of the long table, Toph reclined in her chair lazily while a grin appeared on her face. She could feel the firebender’s anxiety from her spot! She had felt the way Zuko and Katara’s hearts had raced wildly as they embraced each other at the docks the previous day. As much as she cared for Aang and did not want to see him hurt, Toph knew, since a long time ago, that Katara and Zuko had started to develop feelings for one another, even if they did not know it yet or did not want to admit to it.

_Well, I’ll guide them through the right path. They just need a little boost._ She grinned even more
“Where’s Katara? She’s never this late,” Aang said with a frown as he stood up. “I’m going to look for her.”

“Relax, Twinkletoes. It’s Katara you’re talking about. She’s fine…See, I told you,” Toph said as the door opened to reveal the one in question talking to an old man.

“Katara, where were you? We’re starving,” Sokka teased, but deep down he sighed with relief.

“I’m sorry, you guys, I was just a bit…sidetracked,” Katara told them with a small shrug as she walked to the table and sat down.

“I’m sorry, you guys, I was just a bit…sidetracked,” Katara told them with a small shrug as she walked to the table and sat down.

“Sidetracked? What happened? Are you okay?” Aang began to bombard her with questions as he grabbed her hand in worry.

_La! I can take care of myself!_ Katara thought with an annoyed huff while she gave the young monk a light pat on his hand to calm him down.

Standing at the entrance, Chao spoke up as he looked at Zuko.

“She was a bit detained by Advisor Wei, my lord.”

“Wei?” Zuko said with narrowed eyes. If Wei was involved then that meant nothing good. Then looking at Katara he asked, “Are you alright? Did he bother you?”

Mai raised her thin eyebrows as she heard the concern in Zuko’s voice before she glared across the table at Katara. Iroh and Toph inwardly smiled.

“No, it’s fine. I’m all right. Chao here, helped me,” Katara answered, annoyed and at the same time glad for their concern. “Let’s eat. Hmm, this looks delicious,” she said with a large smile, hoping to change the subject.
Zuko looked away from the waterbender to raise an eyebrow at Chao and give him a look that said ‘You will tell me everything later’. Chao bowed and retreated.

“Well, Sugar Queen, for a minute there I thought you just overslept.” Toph grinned as she popped a piece of fruit into her mouth.

Katara glowered at her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After breakfast, the young men made their way toward the komodo rhinoceros’ stables.

“What’s that guy doing?” Sokka asked as he pointed at a man riding what looked to be a crazed komodo rhino.

Zuko turned to see where the warrior was pointing to.

“Oh, that’s called komodo bull riding,” he explained. “It’s basically riding an unbroken komodo rhino and trying to hold on without being thrown or trampled on.”

“Why would you do that?” Aang asked him excitedly as another man tried after the first one flew off the animal’s back.

“Well, it’s a way to train the animals in order for them to get used to being ridden. But it’s more of a game, a way for men to test their skills and their bravery,” Zuko informed them as they watched the second man get thrown off.

“That’s awesome!” Sokka exclaimed as he began to make his way toward the ring with Aang trailing after him with excited steps. Zuko and his two personal guards followed at a more sedate pace.

Seeing the Fire Lord approaching, the stablemen stopped what they were doing and bowed before him. Zuko nodded at them in acknowledgement and asked how the new komodo rhinos were progressing.

“We have broken all of them in, my lord. This one is the last one,” an older man answered as he
jerked his thumb toward the rhino pacing agitatedly in the ring.

Zuko nodded at him as he looked over at the angry beast. He remembered the old man as being the one in charge of the komodo rhinos on his ship when he had been the banished Fire Prince.

They watched as man after man tried to ride it, but the animal would not even give them the chance to settle down on its back. One man was unfortunate enough to be slashed with one of its sharp horns before he was rushed to the infirmary.

“He’s very stubborn,” the stableman said, then with a smile, he addressed Zuko, “My Lord, I’ve seen you komodo bull ride before and you were great at it. Maybe you could do it?”

“You have komodo bull ridden before?” Aang asked excitedly as he looked up at the frowning Fire Lord.

“Well… I did when I turned sixteen. You could say it was like… an initiation rite,” Zuko answered with a passive look on his face.

“Cool. It’s just like ice-dodging,” Sokka piped in before he turned to grin at Zuko who narrowed his eyes warily at him. “Well, then, let’s see your super skills.”

“I don’t know. It’s been so long since I’ve ridden an unbroken komodo rhino,” Zuko told them with a small frown.

“Ah, come on, Zuko! Show us how it’s done,” Aang encouraged him, almost jumping with enthusiasm.

Zuko frowned at the young monk, but sighed mentally when Aang looked at him with large, hopeful eyes. He could still see the twelve-year-old boy he first met when Aang did that.

“Fine,” Zuko relented quietly as he stepped inside the ring. It had been a long time since he had had a bit of fun, anyway.

“My lord, are you sure?” one of his personal guards asked him.
Zuko gave them another reassuring nod as he waved their concern away.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. Get the komodo rhino out here,” he ordered.

Katara and Suki tried to stifle their yawns as they, along with Toph, Mai, and Ty Lee, drank tea in one of the sitting rooms. They have been in the same room for about an hour, listening to Ty Lee gossip with Mai who only answered in one-word sentences.

When Mai and Ty Lee were not looking, Toph turned to the other two women.

“Miss Gloom sure isn’t a good hostess, huh?” she mumbled under her breath.

Suki and Katara smirked behind their cups of tea.

“Hey, not that this isn’t great,” the blind earthbender spoke up sarcastically, “but can we go outside?”

“Yeah, Mai! We’re near the komodo rhino stables, let’s show them!” Ty Lee told her tall friend as she jumped excitedly. Even though Mai was her friend, she could not stand being so serious.

Mai glared at them coldly before she conceded with a raised chin. They left the sitting room and made their way outside towards the stables and Toph let out a sigh when her feet touched the soil. They looked up when Iroh and Chao approached them and greeted them all cheerfully.

“I hope your day has been…interesting so far,” Iroh said with a grin.

“You have no idea just how fun it was.” Toph grinned back.

“What are they doing over there?” Suki asked as she pointed her finger ahead of them.

The group turned to see a small group of men bringing a wild komodo rhino toward a ring. Iroh smiled proudly and explained what they were doing, though Katara thought it was a little silly. Why
would they risk their lives just to prove who was the bravest?

“Hey, isn’t that Zuko getting ready to ride it?” Ty Lee exclaimed as she pointed at the ring.

They all immediately looked closer.

“What’s going on?” Toph asked with a huff since she couldn’t see. Iroh leaned down slightly and filled her in on what was happening.

Well, if Zuko’s doing it, then it is not that silly, Katara thought as she saw him climb onto the back of the agitated animal.

Lowering himself onto the rhino’s back as a few men held it in place, Zuko grabbed the reins tightly, adrenaline running through his veins. He remembered the first time he did this on the third year of his banishment, when he had turned sixteen, ready to prove to all his men his worth and bravery. He glanced sideways and noticed his uncle, Chao, and the women watching from a distance. He had a strange urge to impress Katara as he noticed her blue eyes fixated on him.

As the men released the animal, Zuko braced himself. The rhino launched forward, roaring and grunting as it tried to shake off the strange weight on its back. It thrashed wildly around the ring, bucking, jumping, and occasionally stopping abruptly. However, as much as the komodo rhino fought and raged, it could not throw this man off.

Zuko held himself upright magnificently. His face was devoid of any expression or emotion, but excitement showed in his golden eyes. He moved with the animal, one arm raised above his head to balance himself while with the other he held the reins firmly.

All those around the ring stared in complete admiration as they observed the amazing scene before them. Zuko looked so grand and majestic, betraying no sign of fear or fatigue as the rhino kept on bucking and ravaging. As she saw all this, Katara could not help but stare in awe, something that made Iroh very happy as he glanced at her.

After what seemed like hours, the rhino began to slow down. The stablemen were preparing to grab the tiring beast when all of the sudden the komodo rhino reared on its hind legs, ready to throw itself onto its back.
Katara watched in horror as the animal came down and gasped loudly.

*Oh, no! Zuko’s going to be crushed!* she screamed in her head.

But quick as lightning, Zuko released the reins and jumped sideways, landing gracefully on his hands and feet off to the side as the sound of the saddle breaking under the animal’s weight was heard. Standing up casually, he dusted himself off as the stable hands rapidly grabbed the exhausted animal and led it away. The guards, who had ran towards him at the sign of trouble, stopped and glanced at each other with relieved looks.

Katara let go of the breath she did not know she was holding with a loud sigh and relaxed.

Iroh beamed.

“Just like old times,” he chuckled.

“Old times?” Toph asked after she was told of what had occurred. All the girls looked at him curiously. Iroh smiled as he readied himself for another story.

“Wow, Zuko! That was amazing!” Aang cried out as Zuko approached his two friends who had been leaning over the edge of the ring.

“Yeah, not bad,” Sokka said with a shrug as he stroked his chin. Zuko smirked at him.

“I wanna try it!” Aang piped in excitedly as he jumped over the fence and began to leave them behind.

Zuko furrowed his eyebrows in concern.

“Aang, I don’t think that’s a good idea. It’s too dangerous. You could get hurt if you don’t know how to ride a wild rhino. Maybe you could ride a tamed one,” Zuko told him, hoping to convince him.
“I’m not a baby! I can do it! I’m the Avatar, aren’t I?” Aang replied, lifting his chin up. “I’ve ridden dangerous animals before. Don’t worry. Trust me. Besides, you did it when you turned sixteen. I turned seventeen a few months ago!”

Zuko knew Aang was not a small preteen any longer and could handle it, but he was still worried. He had been around komodo rhinos all his life. Aang had not. After a few more arguments, Zuko relented reluctantly.

“Alright, but if anything goes wrong, we will stop,” Zuko said, hoping nothing went wrong.

He looked at Sokka who looked back at him with a slightly less worried face since he knew Aang always liked to ride on any weird or fascinating animals he came across.

Iroh finished recounting Zuko’s story to the girls and was about to start in another one when Mai interrupted with her usual dull tone.

“Isn’t that the Avatar in the ring?”

“What is he doing?” Katara asked as she started to walk towards the other group when they saw Aang settle himself on the rhino.

“Don’t worry, Miss Katara—” Iroh began to reassure her when he was cut off short as they saw Aang’s body being thrown off roughly to the ground.

“Aang!” Katara yelled in alarm as she started to run while she struggled to get her waterskin open as the rhino began to descend its feet upon Aang.

Just when it seemed that Aang was about to be crushed, Zuko stepped in between. Creating a fire whip, he smacked it on the animal’s chest, without actually burning it. The komodo rhino bellowed in anger, but it began to move back as Zuko cracked his whip again and again.

Katara slowed down unconsciously as she saw how well Zuko handled the whip. The guards quickly surrounded Zuko while the stablemen grabbed the defeated beast and led it away again.
“Aang, are you all right?” Zuko asked worriedly.

He helped the young boy stand up who shook his head to clear it. Aang coughed since the air had been knocked out of his lungs at the sudden impact of hitting the ground. He had been too sure of himself that he had not been careful enough of the danger. Well, he learned his lesson.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for—”

“Aang!” Katara called out as she ran towards them. “Are you hurt? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” Aang nearly yelled, feeling humiliated.

Katara frowned before she angrily whirled on Zuko.

“What were you thinking letting him ride that thing? You knew he didn’t know how! He could’ve gotten hurt!”

Zuko only stared as she yelled at him. She was blaming him for what just happened?

“Believe me, if I had known this would’ve happened, I wouldn’t had let him—”

“You did know!” Katara interrupted harshly. “And you still let him do it! You didn’t try to stop him!”

“Katara, wait—” Aang tried to cut in, but he was ignored. The rest of the people near the ring only stood there awkwardly as the two benders stared each other down.

“He could’ve been hurt, or worse, killed!” Katara kept on arguing.

Zuko was beginning to lose his temper. Nobody accused him of doing something he did not do. Nobody. But he just could not bring himself to yell at her. He knew she was just upset because she cared for Aang’s safety.
“Katara. Aang is not a child anymore. Stop mothering him and let him grow up,” Zuko ground out.

With that, he turned back to the palace, his guards trailing after him. He had work anyway.

Iroh shook his head at Katara, and looking at the rest of the group, he followed his nephew with Chao walking beside him.

Katara just stood there, dumbstruck. *Mothering? I do not baby Aang!*

“You really overdid it, Sugar Queen,” Toph said as she ‘stared’ after Zuko. “Poor guy.”

*Great. One step forward and now two steps back,* the small earthbender grumbled mentally.

“Aang could have gotten hurt,” Katara argued again.

“Katara, I was trying to explain. Zuko tried to stop me. It was my idea. I wanted to ride the komodo rhino, he tried to warn me, but I didn’t listen to him. It wasn’t his fault,” Aang admitted, looking down at his feet.

“Yep, it’s true. Zuko tried to stop Aang,” Sokka added, giving his sister a disapproving look.

“Not to mention he saved Twinkletoes here,” Toph added also.

As she listened to them Katara began to feel horrible, but she still had her pride.

Crossing her arms she said, “Yeah, well, he should’ve persuaded Aang better.”

They all sighed at her stubbornness.
Zuko decided to eat his dinner in his antechamber in order to finish some of his paperwork. He had asked Toph for help in finding an earthbending instructor for the colonies and she had promised to send letters to those she knew. He had received news that the walls were being built, the additional guard duty was effective, and that the firebending instructors were doing well. All he needed was a teacher for the earthbending residents.

A knock was heard at the door before it opened once Zuko called out for whoever it was to enter.

“Nephew, I was waiting for you to eat dinner with us. Why didn’t you show up?” Iroh asked as he entered the room, immediately pouring himself a cup of tea he had a servant bring.

Still keeping to his papers, Zuko answered, “I thought that I should finish these documents for the next meeting.”

“Or was it because of what happened at the stables with Miss Katara this morning?” Iroh asked, raising his white, bushy eyebrow.

“I’m not hiding if that is what you’re implying. No, that has nothing to do with me excusing myself from dinner,” the young lord told him as he looked up.

“Zuko, would you mind me asking why you act differently with Katara?”

“What do you mean?” Zuko asked, furrowing his eyebrows as he lowered the papers in his hands.

“Well, you know, Nephew, you really surprised me when you didn’t blow up in anger at her. I remember you would lose your temper quite often when I would want to go shopping,” Iroh chuckled, but Zuko remained silent with a blank expression on his face.

“Not to mention you seem nervous around her, especially when she smiles. You never act like that with other girls, not even with Mai. Is something going on?” he asked slyly.

“I do not act nervous! And I don’t know what you are trying to get at. The reason I may…act differently is because Katara is different from other women,” Zuko replied as he looked outside the window, as the sun began to set.
“She has gained my admiration and respect because she is an excellent waterbender and always puts up a good fight. She is kind and caring and always tries to help those around her. And she saved my life when Azula struck me with her lightning. She is just a very special friend,” Zuko explained before he let out a small sigh. “Not to mention both of us have one thing in common.”

“And what is that? If I may ask,” Iroh said curiously.

“We both had our mothers taken away from us at a very young age,” Zuko responded in a low voice.

He remembered their conversation in the Catacombs of Ba Sing Se. The way Katara had cried when she told him she lost her mother because of the Fire Nation. Hearing her sobbing voice touched his heart, and before he knew what he was doing, he confessed to her that he had lost his mother as well. He had never told anyone that he missed his mother before her.

Iroh watched as his nephew got lost in his thoughts and nodded.

“I see…Well then, I’ll leave you to your work,” he said as he stood up and left the room.

Zuko looked back down at his papers, but after a while, he set them aside as he ran a hand down his face. Did he really act differently around Katara? And if so…why?

A few minutes later, a knock sounded at his door and he called for the person to enter. Looking up, Zuko saw Chao open the door and he motioned for the advisor to take a seat on one of the cushions around the low table.

“You called for me, my lord?” bowing, Chao asked as he sat down.

“Yes. I want to thank you for helping Lady Katara, but I know something else happened with Wei that Lady Katara did not want to mention,” Zuko began, putting down his paperwork. “Tell me what that fool did to her.”

Even though she acted as if nothing happened, he had noticed she was a bit affected by it.
Chao nodded. He hoped Wei got what he deserved.

“That stupid idiot!” Zuko fumed as he entered his bedchamber after talking to Chao and closed the doors loudly behind him.

“How dare Wei say such things to Katara? Not to mention dared to handle her so roughly. Well, it won’t happen again,” Zuko growled under his breath.

The young man removed his robes and sat down on the cushion in front of his meditation candles. He lit the candles with a flick of his wrist, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He really wished he could dismiss Wei, but he needed to keep that imbecile on his side, at least for a while. He wished the rest of his people did not act like Wei with his other friends, but he was not that oblivious. People were still wary of each other even after the war.

After he finished meditating—after a few tries of trying to get his temper under control—Zuko walked a bit more calmly into his bathroom and heated the marble tub after it was filled with water. He divested himself of his clothes quickly before he climbed into the tub, the warm water making him heave a tired sigh.

As he washed himself, he frowned.

“Why am I even bothering to help her? She won’t even appreciate it,” he said with a scowl as he sat in the hot tub for a while, remembering the insults she had hurled at him.

Nevertheless, he could not blame Katara for what happened that morning. She was just worried for what could have happened to Aang. He used to easily lose his temper for everything—even his uncle pointed that out—so he had no right to be angry at her for her words. Zuko sighed.

She really does care for Aang, he thought as he remembered the worried look on her face.

He strangely felt saddened a bit at this thought.

I wish Katara would care for me like that…Wait. What am I thinking? Shaking his head, he submerged himself into the water before he could hear the knock sounding from outside his room.
When Zuko did not show up for dinner, Katara felt terrible. As she sat at her dresser in her guest room, she recalled the way she treated Zuko earlier that day and she felt miserable. Was he mad at her? Well, she would not blame him if he was after the way she had yelled at him. She felt a bit guilty, but she had been so scared of what could have happened to Aang.

Then a thought formed in her head. She had yelled and accused him in front of everybody and he did not even yell back to defend himself. Zuko, the hot-tempered guy, not to mention the Fire Lord had not done anything to rebuke her behavior. Now that she thought about it, he had never lost his temper at her; not even when she threatened him badly in the Western Air Temple. She felt even worse.

“Well, I’m going to set things right and apologize,” she said determinedly as she stood up.

Katara quickly checked herself in the mirror to make sure she looked fine and paused when she realized what she was doing before she shook her head.

The waterbender left her room and followed the directions Iroh had given her the previous night. As she turned to the next corridor, she realized that it was longer more decorated, and opulent than the other ones, and she could not help but be impressed. As she walked further, she passed the only other door visible, and assumed it belonged to Iroh. As she finally approached the end of the golden corridor after what seemed like forever, she was even more surprised by what she saw.

The entrance to Zuko’s bedchamber was two massive doors that almost reached to the high ceiling. The doors were wide, made of pure gold with intricate designs of Fire Nation symbols as well as dragons masterfully carved on them. Katara stood there, admiring the impressive doors for a while, before she remembered what she had come for.

She let out a long breath as she raised her hand to knock on one of the doors.

Calm yourself. You have to do this. He’s not going to bite, she told herself before an uninvited image of Zuko gently biting her earlobe crossed her mind, causing her eyebrows to rise high on her forehead. Where in the world had that come from?

With a mental shake, Katara quickly knocked on the door, feeling the surface with her hand as she waited. But no one answered. She knocked a few times a bit harder. Still no one answered. Was he avoiding her?
Well, he’s going to hear my apology, like it or not, the Water Tribe woman mentally huffed.

Katara opened the heavy door slowly, surprised that it was unlocked and that no guards were posted outside, before she peeked inside. She was even more surprised as she saw the elegant room with a low table, couches and cushions all around, but there was no bed. Was she in the right room?

Katara looked ahead and noticed another set of doors, exact replicas of the previous ones. She quietly crossed the empty room, walked toward the second entrance, and knocked gently, but as before, nobody answered. She frowned. Iroh told her Zuko was in here with his paperwork.

*What if something happened to him? What if he’s hurt?* she thought worriedly.

Katara quickly opened one of the doors a crack, peeked inside and gasped. This room was even bigger and more elegant than the other one, putting her guest room and the others to shame. She guessed the room she saw first was the antechamber and this room was Zuko’s bedchamber.

Without thinking, she went inside and marveled at the decorations on the walls and the black marble floor under her feet. She noticed a big fireplace crackling on one wall and off to one side near another wall was a small cushion on the floor and some candles. Then she noticed the window.

*Wait. That window is huge!* She moved closer and peered through the curtain. *It’s a balcony!* She had to resist the urge to open the doors.

*Maybe Zuko’s sleeping,* Katara thought after a while, a bit embarrassed for disturbing him.

The young woman turned slowly to look at the bed. She sighed with relief when she saw that no one was on it, but, as she looked closely, her eyes widened in shock.

*That is the biggest bed I have ever seen!* she mentally exclaimed.

She slowly moved closer to it, almost afraid something would jump at her from it, and noticed it had many pillows on its surface and was covered by silk sheets of different shades of red. She leaned closer, and reaching a hand out, she touched the top sheet. It was silky, smooth, and very inviting.
Grinning, she thought, *I wonder how it would feel to be under these silky sheet covers with Zuko.*

She slapped herself for her thoughts and quickly turned around to leave, but she froze when she heard another door open.

Katara gasped softly. It was Zuko. His short raven-black hair was wet and occasionally a drop of water would fall down his muscular shoulders. He was only wearing a red towel around his lean waist, which he was too busy tying at the moment to notice her dumbly standing there with huge, blue eyes.

*Oh, my gods!* Katara’s mind screamed as her eyes traveled along Zuko’s well-built, pale upper body. She knew she should look away, but it seemed she just couldn’t. His body was just so impressive, so…masculine.

She almost jumped out of her skin when Zuko finally looked up. Then it was his turn to widen his eyes as he stopped mid step.

“Katara? What are you doing here?” Zuko asked incredulously.

“I…I…w-was…” Katara stammered, her face turning even redder. At that moment, she wished she were an earthbender so the ground could swallow her up.

Zuko smirked as he realized her embarrassment.

“Yes?” he asked with an amused raised eyebrow.

“I just came to apologize for earlier…I’m sorry, but I did knock, but you didn’t answer, I got worried and I was about to leave when you came in,” she rambled on looking at the wall behind him.

“Slow down,” Zuko instructed as he held up a hand and smirked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you knock. As you can see, I was busy.”

Katara blushed even deeper as she fidgeted with her fingers.
“Chao told me what Wei did,” Zuko said, his expression turning serious.

Katara looked away. “It was nothing, really.”

“Nothing? He disrespected you! You, my guest and friend. I promise you that fool won’t do it again,” Zuko said in a severe tone.

Katara smiled.

“Thanks. Anyway, that’s all I wanted to say. Aang and Sokka explained to me that you did try to stop Aang and I thank you for that. I’m really sorry for blaming you for what happened.”

Zuko only nodded.

“It’s okay. I understand why you reacted like that.”

“You do?” she asked as she glanced up at him.

“Yes. You were just worried for Aang’s safety,” he said, looking away.

“I was worried for you, too, when that animal almost fell on you,” Katara quickly added. She wondered why she admitted that. Maybe it was the dejected tone in his voice. But that was ridiculous. Why would Zuko feel sad?

“Really?” Zuko looked back at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah. You know, I was really impressed at how well you rode that wild komodo rhino,” Katara confessed with a smile.

Zuko felt his heart expand at her compliment.
“I am glad to know that you liked it,” he said, smiling slightly.

Katara blushed and looked down. She frowned when she noticed the scar on the middle of his chest.

Zuko saw her frown and he wondered at it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“The scar…It…it didn’t heal right,” she said softly. “I’m sorry.”

Zuko’s hand came up to his chest as if he were trying to hide it.

Does she feel disgusted that I have another horrible scar? he thought darkly.

“Don’t worry about it. At least nobody can see this one all the time,” he said dryly as he removed his hand from his chest and clenched it at his side.

Katara looked up as she heard the hard tone of his voice. She noticed his face had darkened, there was a hint of hurt in his golden eyes, and she realized what he was thinking.

“Zuko, it’s not the actual scar I feel so guilty about. Scars are not what make people ugly, you know that. It’s the fact that you got it because of me…that you could have…died…because of me. Because I didn’t listen to you and stay away. I felt so horrible when I saw you hurting so badly,” Katara softly said, her eyes filling with tears at the memory. “I was so scared.”

Zuko finally understood what she meant and he felt his heart warm at her words.

She was scared…for me?

As he noticed her cerulean eyes fill with tears, he quickly walked over to her.
Placing a gentle hand on her shoulder he said, “Katara, it wasn’t your fault. You tried to stop me, but I did not heed your words. You didn’t know Azula was going to disregard the Agni Kai rules. And if I had known, I wouldn’t have accepted the Agni Kai or I would have fought somewhere else. Besides, you saved me by healing the wound.

“Katara,” Zuko softly continued, “I would gladly receive many more scars if it meant I could keep you from getting hurt…to keep you safe.”

Katara looked up to see Zuko’s eyes. His beautiful, golden eyes, that seemed to be engulfing her.

*He would really do that?* Her heart fluttered. She looked down towards his scarred flesh.

“Thank you, Zuko,” Katara said as she reached to touch his new scar.

Both jumped slightly as they felt like an electric shock went through them both. They looked at each other wonderingly.

“No. Thank you, Katara,” Zuko warmly said as he placed his hand over hers.

Katara suppressed a shiver. She looked up and held his steady gaze. She could faintly feel Zuko’s heartbeat as her hand rested on his chest. Neither one of them moved for a while, it was as if time had stopped.

“What is going on here?” Mai’s cold voice sounded throughout the room.

Katara and Zuko quickly moved away from each other and turned. Mai was standing stiffly at the door, the twitching of her lip the only visible sign of her annoyance. Iroh stood beside her with a grin on his face.

*I knew it! They can’t fool me!* Iroh beamed.

He had always suspected his nephew had feelings for the waterbender even way back when Zuko
was chasing the Avatar, even if he never admitted to it. He had noticed the way Zuko would seem to perk up every time he would see “the little Water Tribe peasant girl” and how eager he would be to fight her. Iroh would always muse to himself, believing that Zuko liked fighting with the girl to get close to her. As much as Zuko tried to justify his actions to himself, Iroh knew better. The retired general had tried many times to get his nephew interested in a girl, like that Earth Kingdom girl, Song, that healed his rash. Or Jin, from Ba Sing Se he made Zuko go on a date with. However, none were able to capture his attention.

Iroh then turned to see Mai’s irritated face as she glared at Katara. At first, he had thought that maybe Mai had succeeded where the other did not, but as Iroh got to know her better and her relationship with his nephew, he was gladly mistaken.

He turned back to see Zuko’s embarrassed face even though he tried to hide it. His suspicions were correct. He was, after all, the Dragon of the West. The lovely Water Tribe woman had captured his nephew’s attention and possibly even his heart. He knew Katara was the perfect woman for Zuko, the perfect one to make him happy.

“Um…I…” Katara blushed as Iroh gave them a silly grin.

*I what? I was touching Zuko’s muscular, naked chest?*

“Katara was just checking to see if my wound had healed completely,” Zuko quickly covered, keeping his expression unreadable, but his right cheek was red with embarrassment.

“Yes. And it’s fine. So I will be leaving now,” Katara said with a nervous laugh as she quickly exited the room. She noticed Mai’s hard glare as she passed her.

Iroh smiled as Katara left then he turned to his nephew.

“Well, that’s good,” he said, smiling broadly.

Zuko frowned at his uncle before he looked at Mai.

“Wait outside in the anteroom,” he ordered firmly.
The noblewoman seemed reluctant, but she left. She had never entered Zuko’s room before and that woman had. And he did not seem bothered by it. Mai silently seethed as she sat in the sitting room.

Before his uncle could say anything, Zuko raised his hand and said, “Nothing happened.”

He quickly returned to his bathroom to change and calm himself down. The last thing he wanted was for Iroh to get ideas, but what he did not know was that it was already too late.

Chapter End Notes

I know the plot is slow right now, but please be patient.

I don’t want this story to be like the other ones where Zuko and Katara meet, then next scene they fight, then they make up and realize they’re in love, then they have sex, then Katara ends up pregnant, blah blah blah...I want this story to be at least more realistic, where the characters actually have to go through many things to realize their true feelings...
Rare Laughter

The next couple of days were awkward for Katara. She could not stop herself from blushing every time she saw Zuko, especially when he would look at her intensely. So she tried to avoid being alone with him. She berated herself since there was no reason why she should act like they had not done anything wrong; nothing happened.

Though she did wonder what that little shock she felt when she touched him meant…

_That didn’t mean anything!_ she told herself, though she almost felt like she was hiding from him—which she was.

_That’s because I’m embarrassed! I mean I was touching a handsome, young man! I was alone in Zuko’s room and he was half-naked! What does that say? I hope Iroh and Mai don’t think wrong of me._

Katara sighed loudly as she fanned her face with her hand. The weather was hot, especially since she was wearing her Water Tribe clothes.

“Well, at least I won’t die of frostbite,” she muttered dryly as she bent the sweat from her forehead with a flick of her wrist.

She should buy some Fire Nation clothes for her and Sokka. Maybe she could ask Iroh which tailor shop would suit their needs best, after all, she was sure he knew every shop the city had to offer. She grinned.

Sitting under the shade of a tree in one of the palace gardens, Katara admired the view. There were many trees and flowers around, perfectly arranged in patterns. She had been told that this was a public garden for the noble ladies of the Fire Nation. She had seen many of them pass by as they gingerly walked on the stone paths, giggling and gossiping. Some of them had smiled or stared at her curiously, while others looked down at her with contempt. Katara paid them no mind as long as they kept to themselves.

“Lady Katara?” a gentle, feminine voice called out.

Katara turned around to see a young servant woman, her head slightly inclined, addressing her. She
was pretty and probably around her mid-twenties, with the usual pale skin and dark hair all Fire Nation women had.

“Yes? Is there something you need?” Katara asked kindly.

The young woman lifted her eyes slightly and shook her head slowly.

“Actually, that is what I was going to ask you. Do you need a cool drink? Would you like some treats?” the woman asked as she humbly looked down.

“What? Oh, no, I’m fine. You don’t have to,” Katara began as she smiled uncertainly at the servant’s enthusiasm.

“The Fire Lord has ordered that his guests are to be treated well. It is my duty to provide you with whatever you need, Lady Katara,” the maidservant continued.

“Well, thank you, but I’m okay right now. Maybe later,” Katara replied politely.

The young servant looked up in disbelief. This woman was actually being nice to a mere servant! Katara gave her a friendly smile, which the older woman gladly returned before she bowed again and retreated.

“Katara!” Suki called as she and Toph came up to her. “Do you want to spar a little with us?”

The waterbender looked up and smiled at her friends as she stood up and brushed off her clothes.

“Actually, I was thinking of asking Uncle Iroh to recommend a tailor shop where I can buy some clothes,” she said as she again wiped at her forehead.

“It is pretty hot,” Suki commented as she shaded her eyes to look up at the sunny sky.

“Yeah, that’s why I wanted to ask Uncle Iroh,” Katara replied.
“Ask me what, my dear Miss Katara?” they heard Iroh ask.

The three young women turned to see the old man walk up to them with a serene smile.

“Oh?” Iroh uttered curiously with a quirked eyebrow.

“I need to buy some clothes, and I was wondering if you could recommend a place,” the blue-eyed waterbender informed him.

“Ah, I see,” Iroh said as he smiled at her, “Zuko did mention that you might need Fire Nation clothes for this weather, Miss Katara.”

He grinned broadly when the waterbender’s cheeks tinted slightly before she cleared her throat.

“I am free at the moment, so, if you’d like, I can escort you young ladies to one of my favorite shops,” he enthused as he smiled at them all.

“Well, what’re we waiting for? Let’s go already,” Toph piped in, stomping her feet and causing the ground to tremble.

Chuckling, Iroh motioned them to follow him back into the palace. He assured them he would wait for them in the courtyard with a carriage while they went to their rooms to collect their money. After leaving her room, Katara came across Sokka and explained where they were going. With a relieved exclamation, he quickly gave her money so she could also buy him Fire Nation clothes. Then he sternly told her to be careful. She rolled her eyes but promised she would.

Katara smiled when she spotted Iroh waiting for the carriage as she walked down the long flight of stairs that led to the palace front courtyard. She wondered how much longer Suki and Toph would take.
“Ah, there you are,” Iroh said when he saw her approach, “I hope you like the shop we will be visiting. They have many varieties of textiles and colors!”

“I’m sure I will,” the brunette assured him with a smile.

“I hope you also buy some red clothes too, my dear,” Iroh comment with a grin.

“Oh, uh, I was just planning on buying a few simple, blue outfits,” Katara muttered.

“Nonsense! You need a variety. You cannot always wear blue,” Iroh continued as he gave her a definitive nod before he was distracted by the arrival of the carriage.

Katara shook her head at his enthusiasm and smiled. Then with a small blush as she remembered the previous day, she hesitantly asked, “Uncle Iroh?”

“Yes, my dear?” Iroh answered as he turned to her.

“Um…about the other day…in Zuko’s room…I promise you that nothing inappropriate happened…I hope you don’t have a bad impression about me,” she told him quietly.

Iroh kindly smiled at her.

“Do not worry about it, Miss Katara. I know you are a decent young lady. Besides, Zuko already assured me of it, making sure your virtue was not questioned. I was just surprised to find someone else in his room, that’s all.”

“Why?” Katara asked curiously as she looked up at him.

“Well, you see…Zuko does not allow anyone to enter his bedchamber, except for his most trusted servants to clean his room and dress him in his formal clothes, and of course, me. Not even Mai had entered his room before that day,” Iroh replied.

“I’m sorry,” she quickly said. “I didn’t know, I just wanted to apolo—”
“Don’t worry. Zuko did not even seem bothered. So I guess it is fine,” Iroh quickly interrupted her with a reassuring smile before exclaiming, “Ah, here come Miss Toph and Miss Suki!”

Katara turned to see her friends approach them quickly. Soon they were sitting in the carriage and heading out the palace gates with a few guards mounted on komodo rhinos following them. Iroh told the girls they were the Royal Palace Guards and they were for protection. And for carrying their packages, he added with a chuckle. Settling comfortably in the gently swaying carriage, they chatted happily as they went.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Zuko and Aang practiced their firebending for a while after they had finished breakfast. Aang was very impressed at how much better a firebender Zuko had become since the war, but he did not admit that he had not practiced his firebending much since he still was a little wary of it.

“Where are the girls?” Aang asked as he and Zuko took a break. A few servants rushed forward and handed them towels and drinks.

“I think Uncle took them shopping,” Zuko answered as he wrapped the small towel around his neck. A servant had given him a message from his old uncle as Zuko was making his way to the arena.

“Shopping? For what?” Aang asked as he drank from his glass.

“Fire Nation clothes,” Sokka spoke up from where he had been sitting watching them spar.

“Clothes? Why?” the young monk asked, scratching Momo’s head as the flying lemur rested on his shoulder.

“Well, they need Fire Nation clothing in order to handle this heat,” Zuko said as he wiped his forehead.

“They were hot? I didn’t hear them say so,” the seventeen-year-old said with a frown.

Zuko looked at the young monk in disbelief. He’s even blinder than a badger-mole.
“Yeah, I forgot how damn hot the Fire Nation is,” Sokka grumbled as he wiped his sweaty forehead. He had stripped down to just his thick pants and an undershirt.

Zuko smirked, but he put on his blank expression when he noticed Wei making his way toward them.

“Well, well. Is the Young One taking a break from all the hard work?” Wei taunted from a few feet before them.

Zuko glared hard at the old advisor, Aang rolled his eyes, and Sokka regarded the old man carefully.

“I thought you were impatient to ‘bring honor and glory’ to the Fire Nation. And here you are, having a play day,” Wei sneered.

Sokka narrowed his eyes; he did not like this man. He had a bad feeling just like he had with Jet and Long Feng.

“We were just practicing and doing some exercises,” Sokka spoke up as he rotated one of his shoulders dramatically. “Something you clearly know nothing about,” he said nonchalantly.

Zuko held back a smirk and Aang stifled his laughter as the older man’s face turned red with anger.

“Well, that is not helping the Fire Nation, now is it, you Water Tribe peasant?” the old man snapped.

Momo screeched and perched himself on Zuko’s shoulder, higher away from the scary old man. Zuko narrowed his eyes.

“You shall show some respect to my guests, Wei,” the young Fire Lord growled out, remembering his conversation with Chao. “And if I hear any more reports about your insolence, I will have to dismiss you from several meetings.”

Wei only huffed and hobbled away. Zuko resisted the urge to send a fireball at him.
“Don’t like him,” Sokka confessed, narrowing his eyes.

“Who does?” Aang said.

The three young men smirked before they resumed their training.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

A few hours later, Iroh and the three women returned to the palace. Katara smiled as she remembered their outing. Her eyes had widened when they entered the tailor’s shop. There were rows and rows of clothes and fabrics of different colors and designs. She had thought she would have only seen red and gold. As if reading her mind Iroh told them that Fire Nation women sometimes did wear different colored clothing for special events.

Iroh had moved around the shop like a child in a candy store, picking out different outfits for them. Toph chose, with the help of Katara, green robes of different shades, while Suki picked green ones as well as a few pink and brown. Katara had at first chosen two plain blue outfits, but Iroh shoved more clothes at her with different shades of blue and others of red with intricate designs.

Katara had no choice but to comply with the eager, old man. After they finished, they all left the tailor shop happily, except for the poor guards who were carrying their heavy packages behind them.

Coming out of her thoughts, Katara shook her head and grinned. They piled out of the carriage and headed back into the palace while the servants and guards rushed to unload their purchases by Iroh’s order.

Iroh and the women passed the training arena as Aang and Zuko finished their firebending exercises, and they stood aside for a few minutes to observe. Katara watched as Zuko wiped the sweat from his neck with a towel. She had never thought of a sweaty man as being attractive, but as she saw Zuko’s muscular body glisten under the sun she could not help but think so. She blushed at her thoughts.

“Alright, you had your fun bending and all. Now it’s my turn,” Sokka grinned as he unsheathed his black sword. “What do you say, Zuko? Are you up for a little sword spar? Or have you forgotten how to use real weapons?” He smirked.

Zuko smirked back and called for one of his servants to bring him his dual broadswords. He had
never stopped practicing with his swords and he always carried them with him when he was outside the palace walls. Especially when he would occasionally sneak out at night to inspect his city in order to see what some people were truly like and what they did behind his back. He had resurrected the Blue Spirit. It was a part of him and he liked the freedom it sometimes brought.

After a few minutes, the servant returned and handed the swords to his lord.

Unsheathing his dual broadswords, Zuko faced Sokka and smirked.

“I’m sure I still remember some moves,” he drawled.

Sokka laughed and then rushed at Zuko, drawing his sword forward. Zuko blocked with one sword and attacked with the other, but Sokka quickly dodged it.

“Not bad, Fire Lord, let’s see if you can block this!”

Sokka began to slash and slice repeatedly at the firebender. Zuko parried each slash skillfully as he was driven backwards. Sokka then jumped forward and brought his sword downward, but Zuko blocked the attack by crossing both his swords in front of his face.

“Not bad yourself, Master Sokka,” Zuko remarked coolly as he smirked behind his swords.

Then he pushed forward and attacked Sokka, swirling, dodging, and slashing at the Water Tribe man. Both of their weapons clashed smoothly and gleamed brightly in the sunlight.

“Wow, they’re so great!” Suki exclaimed as one of her hands wandered to the golden fans at her waist belt.

Katara watched with pride as her brother attacked and defended himself with his dark space sword. They had thought he had lost it at the final battle, but somehow it had landed back in his hands when they had been visiting Iroh at his tea shop months later. The gang had gone shopping around Ba Sing Se and found the sword on the cart of a traveling merchant. Sokka lost all his money haggling over it, but was happy to have it back. Her attention shifted back to Zuko. Again, she was impressed by how great a warrior Zuko was, both in firebending and in sword fighting.
“Well, I’m sure we will see more of this later on, so let’s put your things in your rooms,” Iroh said, bringing them out of their trance. They reluctantly moved away and went inside the palace.

Entering her room, Katara watched as the guards settled the packages on the floor just as a few servants entered to help.

“Do you want us to unpack and hang your clothes right now?” the same young maidservant from before asked.

“No, it’s fine. I can do it myself. I don’t want to trouble you. Besides, you probably have more important things to do. If I do need your assistance, I’ll ask you for your help. What is your name, by the way?” Katara asked.

The young woman bowed, grateful that the waterbender actually wanted to know her name.

“My name is Jiao, Lady Katara,” she replied, “And I would be glad to assist you in whatever you need.”

“Well, Jiao, thank you,” Katara said, and then turning to the others she said, “Thank you all for everything.” She gave them all a friendly smile.

The guards and the servants smiled back and bowed as they headed out the door. As they left Katara caught part of a comment one of the servants made, “I like her. She’s nicer than Lady Mai…”

For the next couple of hours, Katara placed her clothes in her dresser, but since she had so many clothes thanks to Iroh’s enthusiasm she had to also use the wardrobe.

*Iroh sure overdid it,* she thought with a laughed. She could not wait to try them on.

She had almost finished putting everything away when she heard a knock on her opened door.

“Come in,” she called without looking up.
“Wow. I bet this was Uncle’s idea,” Zuko lightly joked as he entered her room and saw all of her clothes. He had been passing by on his way to his chambers and noticed her busy at work.

Katara blushed as she put away the shirt she had been folding.

“I tried to ignore him, but he kept insisting,” she told him with a giggle before she more softly added, “Thank you for asking your servants to help us, but I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“It is no trouble at all. It’s my servants’ job to accommodate my guests. Did Jiao displease you?” he asked, slightly worried.

“What? No, no. She’s very nice and always asks if I need any help. It’s just that I can do things myself. I don’t need others to do things for me,” she told him as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Zuko smirked. That was another thing he liked about the waterbender. She was independent and not at all spoiled.

“Well, I asked Jiao to be your assistant because she is one of my most trusted servants. And I’m sure she will do her best.”

“Thanks,” Katara said with a smile.

“You’re welcome. And I’m glad you purchased Fire Nation outfits. It was very noticeable that you were terribly uncomfortable in your clothes,” Zuko told her. He had seen how uncomfortable she had looked, especially during noon.

“Was it that obvious?” she asked and laughed.

Zuko nodded and felt slightly smug for making her laugh. Then she stopped and he noticed her blush.

“Listen. About the other night…I’m sorry…for embarrassing you,” Katara said, playing nervously with her braid. “And I am also sorry for entering your room without permission. I didn’t mean to invade your privacy or anything.”
Zuko’s face flushed slightly and he cleared his throat. He could not forget the feeling of her fingers resting gently on his chest, the way it had cause a shot of heat to go throughout his body. To some lower regions of his body…

Composing himself, he responded, “You don’t have to apologize for entering my room, you didn’t know. It’s not like it’s a law or anything. It’s just that I find my room to be the only place where I can have some time to myself and have some peace and tranquility. And besides, nothing happened, right?”

“Yeah,” she answered.

Zuko smiled slightly and Katara laughed weakly.

“I hope your clothes fit in your wardrobe, Miss Katara,” they heard Iroh say as he entered her room with a silly smile on his face.

“Maybe you should have bought her a bigger wardrobe, Uncle,” Zuko said dryly.

“Hmm? That’s not a bad idea,” Iroh mused, stroking his chin.

Katara was about to object when everybody else entered her room and she sighed. Her sigh deepened when Mai and Ty Lee entered a few seconds later when they noticed everybody gathered in the room. So much for taking a rest.

“Well, it sure is hot,” Iroh commented casually before he snapped his fingers. “I know! Why don’t you young people go to the beach at Ember Island to cool off?”

“Ember Island? That place is so beautiful,” Suki said excitedly as she grabbed onto Sokka’s arm, who then smiled down at her.

“Yeah, remember when I did that sand sculpture of you? It was beautiful,” Sokka said, oblivious as the others snickered. “Before somebody destroyed it,” he said, pointedly raising his eyebrow at Zuko.
Zuko frowned at him before he shrugged. “I was just trying to get Aang to practice and—”

“You all have been to Ember Island?” Mai interrupted, looking at them coldly.

The others went silent at the way she was looking at them as if they had committed a crime. Toph snorted at the woman’s cold tone and crossed her arms.

“Yeah, I took them to the royal beach house when we were hiding during the war,” Zuko responded concisely.

He was slightly annoyed with her tone. Mai only looked away and raised her chin.

“Well, we can’t go anyway,” Katara replied carefully, not sure what to make of the hard frown on Zuko’s face. “We don’t have bathing suits.”

She was no longer fourteen so she could not wear her underclothes to swim in anymore. And she was sure Suki and Toph felt the same.

The young group turned at the sound of Iroh’s chuckles.

“You do not have to fret about that,” said he as he handed the guests a package each from the bag he had settled near his feet when he had entered the room.

*He must have gotten them at the tailor shop*, Katara thought as she peeked inside the package.

After Iroh reassured them that they did not need to repay him, their excitement resurfaced once again.

“We still won’t be able to go because Zuko is too busy,” Mai interrupted dully as she looked uninterestingly at her nails. She had tried to convince Zuko weeks ago and he had refused without hesitation.
They seemed to deflate at the noblewoman’s words.

“I’m sorry, I really would like to go, but I have—” Zuko began.

“Nonsense! You are all going!” Iroh cut in.

“But Uncle, I can’t leave. I have to—”

“Do not worry, Nephew. It is not that much work. And I can handle it. You need a vacation!” Iroh reassured him, but Zuko seemed reluctant.

“Yeah, Zuko, we came here to have fun,” Sokka said, “Not to sit around while you work. Don’t make us use the cactus juice!”

“Yes, we came here to cheer you up,” Katara piped in with a smile.

Zuko stared at her for a long moment as he debated with himself. He did not want to leave his responsibilities, but he also did not want to miss the chance of another trip with his friends. Who knew when he will have the chance again? Besides, he did need a vacation and his uncle was more than capable in handling the work in his absence. With an impassive expression he looked back at Iroh, who was smiling at him expectantly.

“If you think it is alright Uncle, I think we can go,” Zuko finally relented, “Of course, I can only be away for a few days.”

Iroh smiled broadly as the others immediately exclaimed their excitement. Mai’s eyes had widened in shock before she narrowed them in anger. Why did Zuko so easily relent to their request when he did not even consider hers for even a second? She clenched her hands tightly to her sides.

“Well, I’ll ask Admiral Jee to take you, since you can’t all ride Appa,” the old man spoke up over their chatter.

“But I can’t leave Appa alone,” Aang said, worried.
“It’ll be fine, Avatar Aang. He has plenty of space in the stables and food, and I promise you I’ll visit him every day,” Iroh promised the young monk.

After a few more reassurances, the young boy finally relented. They all excitedly began to talk about their vacation. Zuko frowned when Mai strode out of the room without another word.

“Yes! I can practice my Sandbending,” Toph said, pulling onto Zuko’s arm as Mai left.

Distracted, Zuko grinned down at her.

“Are you going to build a sand sculpture of me?”

Toph lightly punched him on his arm

“As if you don’t have enough monuments of you around the city,” she muttered sarcastically.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After settling their things in the royal beach house, the rest of the gang quickly made their way towards the beach while Zuko made sure everything was in order. The young man realized that everything had been set for their arrival already.

Uncle sure overdid it, he thought with a shake of his head.

As he walked around the beach house, he could not help remembering the times he had spent there with his mother. How they would wade in the water and sit under the stars at night.

I hope we could do all those things again...someday, Zuko thought sullenly before he shook his head and continued on his way.

A few minutes later, surrounded by his personal guards, Zuko arrived at the beach that was opened to the public and spotted his friends. He noticed the Fire Nation tourists bowing at the Avatar and at him and he nodded in return. They could have spent the day at his private beach at the back of the royal beach house, but the gang wanted to be around other people. He did not understand why.
He had his guards set up a spacious perimeter for him and his friends so they would not be disturbed by the crowd. He could see the excited people craning their necks to get a glimpse of the Fire Lord, the Avatar, and the war heroes. Zuko frowned at the attention, but decided to ignore it for the moment. He observed his friends for a minute before his eyes immediately started searching for Katara, but he frowned when he could not see her. He relaxed when he spotted her swimming in the water before he looked away. He did not want to seem too obvious he was looking at the waterbender. He saw Mai sitting on a blanket and beneath an umbrella to ward of the gleaming sun. He could not help but think that the shade made her look even gloomier. He slowly made his way over to her.

“You, there, fetch me a cold drink, now,” Mai—not having seen Zuko—ordered one of the servants she noticed pass her by.

Stopping, Jiao bowed stiffly before she went to collect the noblewoman’s drink. Mai watched the group of friends playing on the shore with a dispassionate look before she glanced to the side when Zuko sat down next to her. She smiled at him, but he did not seem to notice as he frowned at her.

“You have to treat my servants so coldly?” Zuko asked as he looked at her disapprovingly.

“They are servants,” she replied as if that answered it all.

Zuko frowned deeply before he looked away with a scowl. Even though he was Fire Lord, he did not like to be pampered too much and give extra work to his servants. And although he was not exactly an amicable lord to his servants, he always tried to treat them well. Yet, he knew Mai’s thoughts regarding servants were the same as the rest of the nobility.

Katara was the complete opposite. She treated them all with kindness. At the thought of the waterbender, his attention once again turned to her. He did not know why his thoughts kept turning to her, but it kept happening more and more. He admired the graceful way Katara swam and dove under the soft waves. He quickly looked away and cleared his throat when Mai spoke to him. Not having heard what she said, he turned to her before he paused.

“Mai, aren’t you hot in that thing?” Zuko asked as he looked at her.

She was wearing a black one-piece bathing suit under a light, transparent black cloak.
“No,” she answered listlessly.

Zuko shrugged before he looked over at the others who seemed to be clearing the sand for something. He noticed Toph wearing green shorts that came down to her thighs and a sleeveless shirt that covered down to her stomach. Suki was wearing a light brown bathing suit and Ty Lee her usual pink. He looked back at Mai’s lifeless outfit and frowned.

Suddenly, there was an explosion of water coming from the ocean. Zuko turned to see a large wave part in half as Katara emerged from the sea. She was surfing upon the large waves on a long piece of ice. She moved gracefully on the water as she bent the waves, twisting and swerving. The tourists on the beach turned to look at the waterbender with wonder. Coming towards the shore, Katara dissolved the ice surfboard, flipping her wet hair over her shoulder as she walked towards the others on the sandy beach.

*Oh, Agni!* Zuko could not help but think as he looked at the waterbender with wide golden eyes.

Her long, brown hair was pulled high into a ponytail. She was wearing a two-piece navy blue bikini, the top part crisscrossed at her chest, covering down to her ribcage while the bottom piece came down to her mid-thighs with small slits on either side of her thighs. And her bronzed skin seemed to glow even more under the sun’s rays as droplets of seawater clung enticingly to her smooth skin. Something stirred deep within him and he shifted in his spot. He had never been affected so much by a woman in a bikini before.

Mai did not like the look on Zuko’s face as he continued to stare at the waterbender and she narrowed her eyes. He had never looked at her that way.

“Zuko! Do you want to play ‘Catch Momo’?” he heard Katara call out.

Snapping out of his trance, Zuko mentally shook his head. He looked over to where the others were waiting and his eyes widened slightly as he saw Katara smiling at him as she waited for his answer. He felt his heart expand before he mentally shook himself as he tried to remember the game. He remembered them playing “Catch Momo” when they were on Ember Island during the war. Momo would fly and jump around to invade being caught while everybody gave chase and whoever caught him won. However, all the players also tried to stop each other from winning by using their bending or other skills. Even though Toph could not see well on the same she liked the challenge as she tried to make it difficult for the others. Zuko had come up with this idea in order to get Aang interested in practicing more as Sozin’s Comet approached.

“Well? Yes or no?” Katara asked and grinned.
“Sure,” Zuko finally managed to say before he turned to Mai when she cleared her throat.

“Do you want to join, Mai?” he asked casually.

“No,” she said dryly, “I don’t want to play such a childish game.”

Zuko frowned before he shrugged as he stood up and he walked over to the others. He was barely aware of how the young women standing outside the perimeter batted their eyelashes at him so he would notice them. But he paid them no heed, it was always the same. The women at Court did the impossible to get his attention—some of their ploys were extremely ridiculous—but he knew they only wanted the privilege of being married to the most powerful and wealthiest man in the world. Zuko took off his light tunic and tossed it to the side, wearing only gold and dark red swimming trunks. All the female tourists turn to stare at him, giggling and whispering to one another, but he ignored the commotion he had caused.

The color on Katara’s cheeks rose up as she saw Zuko flexing his muscles as he stretched and the sun’s rays shone upon his exposed skin. She quickly looked away as she remembered the previous embarrassing moment in his room.

*But this is the beach. All the men are shirtless,* a wicked part of her brain said logically, *So it’s okay*

With that being said, Katara discreetly looked back to admire the young Fire Lord’s body since the other situation had been too awkward to really take a good look. He had a well-sculpted body, lean and full of hard muscle. Not too lanky—she could not help but compare him to Aang—or too muscular. His alabaster skin was similar to the color of cool cream. She briefly glanced at the new scar on his chest and realized that it resembled a bursting star.

“Don’t get distracted now, Sugar Queen,” Toph piped in with a grin.

The Water Tribeswoman looked away in embarrassment as she threw a glare at Toph, who of course, could not see it and wouldn’t have cared if she could.

*Focus Katara. You are a Waterbending Master. Nobody is going to distract me,* Katara told herself.
Just don’t look at her body, at her caramel-colored skin, and perfect, slim legs, and perky breasts… Stop Zuko! Focus, Zuko scolded himself. No way am I losing.

“Alright whoever catches Momo wins!” Sokka reminded them excitedly as he glanced around at everybody. Now that the war was over, none of them had to feel guilty or worried about having fun.

Momo, oblivious to what was happening, sat on the sand grooming his tail. They took positions around him and slowly approached the furry animal. Large ears flicking on his head, Momo froze and looked up to see he was surrounded. With an excited shriek, he shot up and flew over Sokka’s head who jumped up to grab him. He cursed when Momo was pushed higher up by a burst of air Aang threw his way.

With a loud chip, the lemur landed on the sand before screeching when Suki pounced at him. He was saved, however, when Toph blocked the female warrior’s path with a wall of sand. Cursing, Suki jumped back in time to avoid colliding into it and scowled at the short earthbender who was grinning madly. Momo excitedly flew away.

Feeling heat close to his tail, Momo glanced back and shrieked when he saw a small ball of fire following close behind. He swerved sharply to the side to avoid it only to collide against something hard. His large, green eyes widen when he saw the tall male reach for him.

“Got you,” Zuko said triumphantly, only to curse when two water tendrils suddenly wrapped around his wrists and stopped him.

Seeing the opportunity, Momo chirped triumphantly as he again flew away.

“Good try, but not good enough,” Katara teased the young Fire Lord when he looked up and quirked an eyebrow at her.

Zuko raised his body temperature to evaporate the water ribbons and steam rose around him. When he looked up again, he saw Katara chasing after Momo with the others. Smirking, he sprinted forward. Again, they all tried to catch Momo only to have the small lemur deftly evade them or their attempts were thwarted by each other. A crowd had gathered outside the perimeter made up of intimidating guards, awed at the spectacle.

Katara grinned when she caught up to Momo. Gathering the water tendril wrapped around her arm, she flung it forward and wrapped it around the lemur’s middle. She skidded to a stop and pulled back
her water and the small animal only to gasp when a fire whip sliced through the water whip, effectively breaking her hold. Chattering wildly, Momo again escaped. Katara turned around to see Zuko smirking at her.

“Not bad,” Zuko countered as he raced past the waterbender.

Grinning, Katara chased after him and Momo. A few seconds later, both the waterbender and the firebender were again blocking each other as they pursued Momo. They even pushed the others out of the way as they prevented each other from catching the lemur.

The firebender and the waterbender were too engrossed in their own game that they did not notice the annoyed faces of the other players as they came to a stop and stood to the side. Zuko and Katara’s attempts to win over each other seemed to take all day, neither one willing to lose. The crowd waited impatiently to see who would be the victor.

Feeling left out, Aang could no longer hold in his irritation as he watched his girlfriend and his friend too absorbed in playing with each other, ignoring him and the rest. Toph frowned as she felt the young Avatar’s pulse quicken and the ground around him shake a bit. Although it was more difficult for her to ‘see’ in the sand, Aang’s vibrations were beating so strongly that she could not help but pick them up.

“That’s enough!” Aang shouted just as Zuko was about to catch Momo, causing him to miss.

“What the hell!” Zuko growled out, annoyed at being interrupted and distracted.

Momo, sensing his master’s anger, headed toward the airbender before landing slowly on his shoulder. His ears drooped.

Katara frowned, a bit disappointed the game was broken up. She was having fun and she did not get the chance to beat Zuko properly.

“Do you have to take all the glory for yourself?!” Aang snapped, his whole face turning red.

Zuko looked at him with a raised eyebrow and then at the rest, confused.
“Yeah, we wanted to play, too,” Sokka spoke up.

Zuko frowned when he finally understood.

“I’m sorry, I guess I got carried away,” he responded. He honestly did not notice he was upsetting them.

“Yeah, well, I thought you were excellent at keeping focus,” Aang bit out, making Zuko clench his jaw.

Katara noticed Zuko was getting angry and she quickly tried to calm Aang down.

“Aang, please, I got carried away too. We didn’t mean to be rude. Besides, it was just a game.”

“Yeah, well, some game,” he grumbled.

“Well, it was still fun!” Ty Lee piped in as she somersaulted next to Katara, trying to lighten the mood. “How about we have a bonfire tonight?”

Zuko glared at Aang for a moment before he turned away and walked back to sit next to Mai.

“What?” he irritably asked as he saw her cold stare.

He noticed that Jiao was now fanning Mai and he glared at his girlfriend.

“Jiao, take a break,” he ordered firmly.

Jiao bowed at him gratefully as she retreated.

“Well, it seemed you really enjoyed…that game,” Mai said dryly.
Zuko looked at the young woman next to him with a hard frown. He was about to ask her what she meant by that when out of the corner of his eye he noticed Katara walking angrily away from an irritated Aang.

Katara stormed into the beach house and almost crashed into Jiao, who was carrying the laundry.

“I am so sorry, Lady Katara, I was not looking at where I was going,” the young servant explained.

“Don’t worry about it. I was the one who was not paying attention,” Katara reassured her, as she kept on walking.

Jiao frowned after her before she resumed in her duties.

Katara headed toward the room she shared with Toph and sat down with a huff on her bed after she wrenched the door open.

“What’s wrong, Sugar Queen?” Toph asked as she entered the room behind her.

“Ugh! Why does Aang have to be so irritating sometimes?” Katara exclaimed as she began to furiously bend the water from the basin on the wardrobe. “I let him have his fun, why can’t I?”

“Well, it’s normal for him to have acted like that. You and Sparky did ignore the others,” Toph said with a shrug.

“I apologized already! I just got carried away. He didn’t have to speak to Zuko and me like that,” Katara growled.

“I know, I’m not saying you guys are at fault,” the earthbender responded. “It’s just a game and both you guys were playing by the rules. It wasn’t right for him to go off at your guys like that.”

“Exactly!” Katara exclaimed.
“Maybe he just got jealous,” Toph said with a small smirk on her lips.

“Jealous? Of what?” Katara asked, confused. It was just a game. Nothing else…

“Oh, I don’t know,” Toph said casually and grinned.

The waterbender was about to ask what she was talking about, but she was interrupted when Aang knocked on the opened door.

“Katara, can I talk to you?” he asked quietly.

Toph patted Katara’s arm as she left the room. Aang watched her go before he turned back to the silent waterbender.

“I’m sorry I acted that way. I was just a bit mad that you were ignoring me and the rest of the group,” he said as he entered the room

Katara sighed and her rigid body relaxed slightly.

“I’m sorry I made you feel that way, but I told you it was unintentional. I promise I won’t do it again. But I felt hurt that you started yelling at Zuko and me. We were just playing,” she told him.

“Yeah, well, it didn’t seem like it,” Aang muttered.

“What was that?” Katara asked as she looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Nothing...I hope Appa is okay,” he said instead, hoping the change of topic would dispel the tension between them.

Katara frowned. Why did he always try to avoid any issue that sprang up? The waterbender sighed. She was not in the mood to argue with him at the moment. She stood up and walked over to him.
“Don’t worry, Aang, he’s with Iroh. He’s fine. Besides, I bet he’s enjoying his rest.”

She could not help but remember the time when Appa was stolen in the desert and how devastated Aang became. Sometimes it seemed he cared more for his animals than for her. She quickly brushed the thought away.

“I guess…Well, let’s go to that bonfire then,” Aang said as he leaned down to kiss her. But Katara held up her hand, stopping him.

“Aang, don’t you think you should apologize to someone else?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sighing, he answered, “You’re right. I will go apologize to Zuko right now. See you outside?”

She nodded before she sighed again when he turned around to head out the door. Why did it seem like she was becoming less patient with Aang lately?

“Ah, isn’t the night beautiful?” Ty Lee asked with a sigh as she looked up at the stars.

Mai snorted softly as she sat next to the acrobat with a cold look on her face. Katara did not reply as she waited worriedly for Zuko and Aang to show up. She hoped everything was well.

“Yeah, very beautiful,” Sokka said as he caressed Suki’s cheek, making the warrior blush.

Katara smiled as she watched her brother and her friend hug one another. They really loved each other deeply. Just like how she loved Aang?

Katara looked over at her brother and Suki cuddled against a log. It was the same question she kept asking herself ever since she had agreed to be Aang’s girlfriend. Then looking at the fire she frowned.

I don’t know…I’m confused.

No. She shook her head. Of course she loved him. Why else would she still be together with Aang if
it wasn’t because she loved him?

She was interrupted from her thoughts as she noticed Aang and Zuko walking toward them. The Avatar was laughing and the Fire Lord was smirking. Katara sighed with relief and smiled as they sat down near the fire, shoving her thoughts far from her mind.

“Hey there, what took you guys so long?” Sokka asked. “We were about to send a search party for you.” He laughed.

*Everything is back to normal again,* Katara thought as they all sat under the night sky. At least, she hoped it was.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was their last day in Ember Island. They would be leaving the following morning, heading back to the Fire Nation Palace.

*Finally we can leave this place,* Mai thought glumly as she sat outside a tea shop, ignoring the noisy people around her. *But first I have to get something straightened out.*

Someone stood up from behind her and accidentally bumped into her, causing her to spill her tea across her table.

“Oops, sorry,” she heard someone say.

Mai only snorted in reply, irritated. She looked up to see who the idiot was that bumped into her and she wished she had not. It was that guy from the last time they visited with Azula, from that house party. What was his name? Ruon-Jian?

“Hey there, I remember you,” he said, grinning arrogantly.

“Oh,” Mai said simply. She had to admit that he was attractive.

Just then, she noticed Zuko coming toward them with the earthbender walking beside him. She smiled inwardly. It was a good thing Ruon-Jian appeared.
“Mai, there you are. We have been looking for you,” Zuko told her as he stood in front of her table.

He looked uninterestedly at the other young man also standing who had a look of terror on his pretty-boy face.

_He looks familiar_, Zuko thought absently.

“Oh, I was just here, talking to…Ruon-Jian. You do remember him, don’t you? From last time we were here?” Mai said in her usual flat voice.

This time she would not mind if Zuko got extremely jealous. She wanted him to confirm to everybody else that she belonged to him. Ruon-Jian looked about ready to die as he awkwardly bowed to the Fire Lord.

“Oh, yes I remember. Excuse my behavior from last time. I overreacted,” Zuko simply said as he stared at the other man passively.

Ruon-Jian only gawked.

“Oh, i-it’s f-fine!” he stammered.

Mai held back a frown. Did Zuko really mean that?

“We were just talking right now, that’s it,” she added, hoping to spark something within him.

Toph narrowed her sightless eyes. _Is the insipid woman trying to get Sparky jealous?_

Zuko nodded distantly, ruining Mai’s hopes.

“Anyway,” he continued casually, “I just wanted to tell you that we’re packing already. So if you want to buy anything, you should do it now. We will spend the rest of the day at the beach.”
Toph grabbed Zuko’s sleeve before Mai tried something else and said in an almost whining voice, “Come on, Zuko. Katara and the others are waiting for us.”

Zuko looked down at the short earthbender.

“Alright, alright. Let’s go. We’ll see you later, Mai. Nice seeing you again,” Zuko told the still gaping young man as he left with a grinning Toph.

Mai clenched the teacup in her thin hands, glaring daggers at Toph’s back as they left.

Ruon-Jian, sensing it was a bad time said, “Well, it was great seeing you again. I wish we could have talked some more.” And he quickly retreated without waiting for a reply.

As Toph and Zuko walked through the small island to find the others in the gift shops, Toph spoke up.

“So, Sparky, what’s the story between you and that guy? He practically had a heart attack!” She chortled.

“What guy? Oh, you mean Ruon-Jian? Well, last time Mai, Ty Lee, and I visited Ember Island was with…Azula.” He paused for a second before he cleared his throat.

“She made us go to this stupid house party that some pompous ass threw. Well, Ruon-Jian was trying to hit on Mai and I kind of got jealous and picked a fight with him. Mai got angry and we almost broke up, but we got it settled.” Zuko then frowned. “Now that I think about it, it was stupid of me for having acted like that.”

“So you are saying that you are not the jealous type anymore?” Toph asked smiling.

Or maybe not the jealous type of guy for Mai, she mused.

“Hm…I guess,” Zuko answered with a shrug, not really interested in the topic.
They noticed the others waving at them from one of the countless shops.

Well, we’ll see about that, Toph grinned wickedly.

“Hey, you guys! What took you two so long?” Sokka asked. When they tried to explain, he only waved his hand impatiently. “Never mind, let’s go. I can’t wait to buy some souvenirs!”

The group walked around the shops, looking at the many objects the shops offered with Zuko’s guards nearby. Everybody else marveled at the trinkets, but Zuko was not really interested in buying more unnecessary things.

As they entered another shop, Toph waited behind a tall vase for the others since she could not see the stupid things. She was starting to doze off when she heard a group of men chuckle amongst themselves.

“Hey, look at that one. She has a nice smile that goes with her pink outfit,” one of them said.

Toph yawned when the next comment stopped her.

“Well, look at the Water Tribe girl. She sure has a great body. Look at those legs.”

Toph furrowed her forehead.

Those perverts! She was seriously considering hurling some huge stones at them when she felt Zuko’s footsteps come close to where she was. She grinned. Time to test my theory.

“Hey, Sparky, find anything interesting?” she called out.

“No,” he answered as he walked towards her. “There is just a bunch of junk and—” Zuko stopped short at the comment that reached his ears.
“I wonder how that Water Tribe girl kisses. I bet her lips would feel good on my skin,” Zuko heard a man say.

“Yeah, bet that brown hair is soft. I wonder how that would feel,” another man commented with a deep laugh. They kept on making lewd comments as they stared at the unsuspecting young woman walking around the shop.

Toph grinned as she felt Zuko’s pulse quicken and the air grow a bit hotter around them.

_This is gonna be good_, she thought as she crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Zuko set his jaw and clenched his hands.

Those bastards were talking about Katara! How dare they say such things about her? He hated the leering looks they were giving her. Well, he was going to put an end to it! He marched towards them with so much poise, dignity, and outrage that the men’s attention fell on him immediately.

“I hope you men are not talking about my friend over there in such a disrespectful manner,” Zuko growled out dangerously while his two personal guards stood behind him with threatening looks. “Imprisonment could be an option for such lack of respect to the Fire Lord’s friends,” he drawled as he lifted one hand and lit a hot, bright flame.

The men noticed the fire crown on his head and the distinct scar on the left side of his face and immediately backed away, apologizing and bowing as they scrambled away with Zuko staring hard after them.

_Not a jealous type, huh?_ Toph mused.

“What was that about?” Katara asked as she came up to them, concerned.

“Nothing,” Zuko replied tranquilly. She did not need to know about those disgusting comments. Then smiling down at her he asked, “Find anything interesting?”

Katara swam gracefully beneath the ocean water, enjoying the refreshing sensation against her skin.
She stayed underwater for a while as she admired the fish swimming around her while the sun’s rays shone from above the surface. With a graceful flick of her wrist, she created an air bubble around her head and swam further down into the cool depths. She watched in admiration as colorful fish danced along the coral reefs while crabs scurried along the sand. A shadow fell over her and she looked up to see a pair of sea turtle-seals swim slowly above her. She enjoyed the peaceful silence and the breathtaking view for a moment longer before she decided to swim up. As she surfaced her element, Katara looked ahead toward the beach. Sokka and Suki were nowhere to be seen, probably walking in the city. Mai was—as usual—sitting under her umbrella, a servant bringing her a cool drink. Aang and Toph were playing around, trying to build the best sand impression of Momo.

Now that she thought about it, Sokka made a sand impression of Suki—even if it was not that great— but Aang never did one of her. He had only done one of Appa and now Momo. She was a bit sad by that, but she quickly shook the thought out of her mind. She should not make a big deal out of it.

She looked at the shore and noticed Zuko resting on his back near the water, the foamy waves gently lapping his ankles. Momo was curled up in a ball next to his head. Katara looked around once more, but nobody else was there since they were on Zuko’s private beach and he had dismissed his guards for their break.

A wide grin spread on Katara’s tanned face. Lifting her hands up, she summoned a large wave and, with a flick of her hands, sent it straight at an unsuspecting Zuko. Momo opened his eyes, and with a shriek, flew upwards as he, too, watched the wave go after the firebender.

“Argh! What the hell!” Zuko cursed as he shot up straight and shook the salty water from his hair, wiping the liquid from his eyes with a growl.

He looked across to the offending blue ocean and saw Katara clasping her mouth with her hands as she tried to hold her laughter.

“What was that for?” he growled lowly, narrowing his eyes.

Katara could not contain her mirth any longer and burst out into laughter as she waded toward him, bending the water from her body.

“Oh, Zuko! You should’ve seen your face! It was priceless!” She laughed. She paused to imitate his surprised face when he was doused before she continued with her giggle fit.
“That was not funny,” he grumbled, keeping his facial expression stony.

“Oh, yes it was!” Katara countered and she was seized by another fit of uncontrollable laughter. Momo landed beside them, making sure no more strange waves came his way before he started to groom his fur.

Zuko looked at the waterbender as she laughed uncontrollably. A small smile began to tug the corner of his lips, softening the sharp features of his face. He was not mad at all for what she had done, quite the contrary, he was amused. No one else would have dared do what Katara just did. The small smile then turned into a mischievous grin.

Since Katara was still laughing hard with her eyes closed while she held her aching stomach, she did not notice as Zuko moved toward the water’s edge. With a large smirk on his face, Zuko entered the cool water and with great force splashed the water at the Water Tribe woman.

Katara sputtered loudly since she had been laughing with her mouth opened.

“Hey!” she complained as she swept the seawater from her face before she glared at the firebender.

Then Zuko chuckled.

“You’re right,” he said, “It is priceless!”

And he began to laugh.

Katara looked at his handsome face as his golden eyes squinted shut and his smiling mouth opened for him to emit his laughter. He was pointing his index finger at her while with his other hand he clutched his side. Laughing still, he moved deeper into the ocean. Katara stared at him wide-eyed. She had never seen or heard him laugh before. She smiled. He had a nice smile and now she knew he had a wonderful laugh. She began to laugh with him.

Mai—who had been watching them like a hawk—was expecting Zuko to angrily shout at the woman and storm off fuming. But her black eyes widened in disbelief as she not only saw that Zuko remained calm, but he began to laugh! He was laughing because of that Water Tribe woman! Mai had never seen Zuko laugh, not even when they were children! She narrowed her eyes as she glared at the waterbender’s back.
I have to do something to stop this, Mai thought irritably. She did not like that Katara had been able to make Zuko do things he had never done before, not even when she had tried very hard.

“Oh, yeah?” Katara grinned at Zuko as she sent another wave aimed for his back, but he quickly diverted it with a fireball. While he was distracted by that, Katara jumped into the water, splashing him again.

“Hey,” Zuko said as she surfaced and splashed her face.

“Hey, yourself!” she countered as she sent splash after splash at him, making him laugh more deeply.

Zuko began to splash the water at her in return, each one determined to out splash the other. Zuko smirked widely and Katara shrieked with laughter as they began to move closer towards one another in order to splash even harder, the water now up to their necks.

No way is he going to beat me in my own element, Katara thought as she began to move her hands in order to summon another wave.

Zuko noticed and grabbed her wrists, making them both freeze as they stared at each other.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Zuko said coolly and smirked at her, but faltered slightly as she smirked mischievously back at him.

“Watch me,” she replied half in defiance and half in amusement. She lowered half her face into the water.

Zuko raised his eyebrow in confusion and wariness. Katara raised her head, her cheeks full of water, and without warning, squirted it straight at Zuko’s face. His eyes widened in shock as he just stood there. He had not expected that, and even though it was a simple act, he felt his heart skip a beat. Katara started to laugh again at his surprised face and Zuko could only smile down at her.

“What’s so funny, Sweetness?” they heard Toph ask.
They turned to see the earthbender standing at the edge of the shore, Aang beside her with a confused look and Mai next to them with a dark expression.

Zuko realized he was still holding onto Katara’s wrists and released them immediately, his face burning up, before he quickly recovered his normal demeanor. But Katara did not notice as she continued to laugh.

“Oh you guys! You should’ve seen Zuko’s face when I drenched him with a wave! It was hilarious!”

Toph grinned. “Bet it was priceless.”

“It was!” Katara giggled.

“Well, yours was pretty priceless as well.” Zuko smirked as he stepped onto the shore with Katara right behind him.

“You beat Sugar Queen in her own game? Wow, Sparky,” Toph whistled as she patted his back.

“He did not beat me! I was just caught off guard,” Katara protested as she crossed her arms and huffed.

Zuko smirked. “Come on, Katara, just admit it.”

Katara was about to reply defiantly when Mai cut in sharply, “Zuko, don’t you have to answer the letter Iroh sent you?”

Zuko’s unusual cheerful face returned to his regular stoic expression and Katara’s good mood fell as well.

“I forgot. I’ll see you all later,” he told them as he quickly walked back to the beach house, a few servants handing him a towel and his robe.
Mai coldly glanced at Katara and turned to follow after him.

Katara sighed. “Even though he’s supposed to be in vacation, he’s still working.”

Aang and Toph nodded.

Katara unthinkingly moved away as Aang tried to wrap his arms around her.

“I’m going to take a bath,” she said before she walked away.

Although not as grand as his royal bedchamber at the palace, the room Zuko occupied in the beach house was just as impressive after the entire building had been remodeled at his order. Sitting at the desk that rested against one wall, Zuko looked over the letter he had received that morning. He had asked Iroh to send him any information while he was away. Things seem to be actually going great, but he had a feeling something was wrong. Zuko looked out the window and noticed the moon. It was small, but it shone brightly.

He smiled as he remembered what happened with Katara that day. He had never played like that before, not even as a child. He always thought it was stupid and childish, but it had not felt like that with her.

His smile grew a bit larger. He had laughed, something he had not done since his mother disappeared and especially after the Agni Kai with Ozai. But now he had truly laughed and it was all thanks to Katara and her silly games.

After thinking about it for a long time, Mai decided she needed to do something. She did not like the way Zuko and Katara acted around each other and she was determined to keep things the way they were. She searched the beach house for the waterbender, but when she found no sign of her she stepped outside. She immediately found Katara and Aang sitting on the steps that led to the beach and she sneered.

“Good, now she won't be ‘confused’ any longer,” she thought. The young noblewoman did not care if she was making a big deal out of nothing, but it would give the waterbender a clear message in case she got any ideas about Zuko.

“Hello,” she said in her monotone voice, making Aang and Katara jump. “I think something is
wrong with Zuko, he hasn’t been himself lately. I was wondering if you could…talk to him.”

Katara quickly got up as her face showed her concern. “Is he sick? Is he hurt? I can heal him—”

“No!” Mai yelled in order to stop her. Both looked at her in surprise at her uncharacteristic outburst. She cleared her throat. “I mean, it is not physical, maybe it’s too much stress. Can you talk to him… he won’t tell me what is wrong. He’s in his room.” With that, she left as silently as she appeared.

Aang and Katara looked after her with very confused looks.

“Do you think maybe she’s the one who needs a talk about her strange behavior?” Aang asked.

Zuko was getting ready for bed when Mai opened the door and closed it behind her, making sure it was unlocked.

“Mai, is something wrong?” he asked with an annoyed frown as he looked around for a tunic. He hated when people did not respect his privacy. Why did she enter his room when she knew that, especially when it was already late?

She walked over to him and surprised him as she placed her thin arms around his neck.

“No, Zuko,” she said.

Frowning, Zuko tried to pull her arms away from him, but she refused to move.

“If it is nothing, then you can leave,” he told her coolly. “I am tired and wish to rest.”

Mai narrowed her eyes at his dismissive tone, but before he could try to move away, she kissed him, drawing her thin body close to him.

Just then, the door opened.
“Zuko, are you okay? We—” Katara’s mouth flew opened as she saw them and Aang’s gray eyes widened behind her.

Zuko quickly pulled away.

“Katara!” he exclaimed.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt you guys,” Katara said as she quickly whirled around and bolted outside.

Uncaring of the reason for the sudden anxiety he felt, Zuko was about to follow her, but Mai pulled him back.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone,” Aang said with a silly grin as he closed the door behind him.

“Zuko, what’s wrong?” Mai asked innocently as she stroked his arm.

Zuko only stared at the door, his hands clenching at his side.

“Zuko?”

“I’m sorry Mai, I’m tired. We’re leaving early tomorrow, so get some rest,” Zuko answered tersely as he moved away from her.

The noblewoman frowned before she reluctantly made her way to the door.

“Alright, good night,” Mai said and closed the door behind her.

With silent steps, the dark-haired woman walked down the lightly lit corridor and made her way to her room. She had enjoyed the look on Katara’s face.
She hoped the waterbender finally got it in her head that Zuko would never be hers.

“Katara? What happened?” Toph asked as she heard the young woman slam the door close and throw herself on her bed.

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing,” Katara replied. She buried her face in her pillow as she tried to erase what she just saw.

“You’re lying. Tell me, Sugar Queen,” Toph ordered from her bed.

Katara sighed before she finally recounted what she saw to the blind earthbender. Toph raised her eyebrow as she listened to her friend.

“I mean, I should not be upset, right? They are a couple…They could do whatever they want,” Katara said, but she could not help feeling upset and she wondered why that was.

Jealous? Toph grinned.

“Did you actually see them…you know?” she asked with a shrug.

Katara looked up from her pillow.

“Well…no…” Now that she thought about it, they were just hugging and kissing.

“Then stop acting so embarrassed about it! Now go to sleep,” Toph yawned as she flopped herself back onto her bed.

“You’re right,” Katara mumbled.
Somehow, that comforted her and she did not understand why she should feel comforted. Katara stroked her necklace and then reached for the hairpin that she had placed on the nightstand near her bed as she waited for sleep to come to her.

“Katara?” she heard Toph ask on the bed next to her.

“Yes, Toph?”

“Was that Sparky laughing with you at the beach?”

Katara blushed as she remembered what happened earlier that day.

“Yeah, it was Zuko.”

“He has a nice laugh,” Toph said, loudly yawning again before she rolled over to her side.

Katara smiled as she looked down at the rose hairpin.

“Yes. He does.”

As the sun began to rise the next day, Zuko rose from his bed. After meditating, he made his way outside. He gazed toward the clear, blue ocean as the sun peeked over it, creating a light orange and pink color in the sky. The young lord inhaled the salty air, the breeze ruffling his black hair. Then he looked at the spot where he had been laying when Katara doused him. He smiled. He would never forget that. Then his face heated up as he remembered Katara’s shocked expression when she entered his room the previous night.

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“What must she think of me?”

Though he did not know why he was so worried about what she thought about him. He was a man, not to mention the Fire Lord. He could do whatever he wanted, even have concubines if he so
desired. He had a girlfriend, so such things were normal…

*But I don’t want Katara to know that I…*

Zuko sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. Why didn’t he? Why did it affect him what Katara thought anyway?

He looked up and noticed Jee approaching the royal beach house. The ship had arrived. Zuko sighed with relief.

*Good. Now things can return to normal.*

Jee bowed as he came up to the younger firebender.

“Fire Lord Zuko, we have arrived and are waiting for you and your friends,” he greeted with a small smile.

“Thank you, Admiral Jee,” Zuko replied with a nod, “We will be ready in a couple of hours. Care to join us for breakfast?”

Jee only stared. The Fire Lord was asking him to join His Highness and his friends for breakfast?

“I do not want to impose…” he said, not sure how to react.

“Zuko. Admiral Jee! Good morning!”

Both men turned to see Katara smiling cheerfully at them.

*Damn! Why does she have to smile like that?* Zuko thought as his heart clenched in his chest.

Jee bowed and smiled at her. “Good morning, Lady Katara.”
“Good morning, Katara. I asked Admiral Jee if he would join us for breakfast,” Zuko told her as the admiral seemed ready to leave.

Jee froze.

“Why that’s a great idea! I’ll tell the servants we have another guest and ask them to set up another plate.” Katara paused before she turned to Zuko. “If you don’t mind me asking them, that is…”

Zuko smiled and nodded, and she rushed off. Typical Katara, always making sure everybody ate their meals, just like when they were in the Western Air Temple.

“She sure is different from other women,” Jee commented quietly.

Zuko turned to look at him. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, she treats everybody equally and is friendly to everyone. It seems she does not mind being friends with lower subjects,” Jee observed.

“Yes…I guess you’re right,” Zuko said thoughtfully before he focused again. “By the way, how are the productions going at the colonies? Have there been any more raids?”

*Since Uncle won’t tell me*, he added dryly to himself.

Jee sighed as he straightened himself out.

“Well, a couple more incidents have occurred. But since the doubling of the guard duty and the construction of the walls they have not been able to inflict much damage,” the admiral informed him. “I also heard that some of the Earth Kingdom residents are a bit nervous that the firebenders are getting better trained.”

Zuko held back a sigh. He knew there was something else.
“Well, let’s go eat,” he said as he turned back inside the beach house with Jee following close behind. He would deal with this when he returned to the Palace. And Iroh will have to hear from him.
As soon as they arrived at the Fire Nation Palace, Aang ran to take Appa for a ride and the rest retreated to their rooms—Toph very much happy to be on solid ground again.

Zuko quickly made his way to his study, his guards and servants bowing to him as he passed them by. He opened the door once he arrived, and just as he suspected, found Iroh and Chao drinking tea and playing Pai Sho at a small table set up on one side of the large room.

“Zuko! You’re back!” Iroh called out cheerfully as he looked up from staring with a contemplative frown at the game board.

Chao turned on his cushion and greeted the Fire Lord with a respectful bow as the young man passed them and made his way to his large desk.

“Care to join us for some delicious jasmine tea?” Iroh asked. “And while we are at it, you can tell us all about the exciting things that happened during your vacation on Ember Island.” The retired general beamed.

A few servants quickly brought more tea and pastries before they quietly left the room.

“Why didn’t you send me information about the colonies, Uncle? I told you to send me a message if something came up,” Zuko said gruffly, not bothering to answer his uncle’s suggestion. He sat at his large work desk and began to look through his papers.

Iroh turned to Chao with a twinkle in his eyes, and as he stretched out a hand, he whispered, “Pay up, my friend.”

Chao rolled his eyes, and producing a gold coin from his pocket, gave it to the grinning old man.

“I guess nothing interesting happened,” he whispered back.

Iroh chuckled as he took the coin and tucked it into his sleeve. Zuko would never admit he had fun out loud.
“What are you two doing?” Zuko asked as he lowered the papers and raised a suspicious eyebrow at them.

“Oh, nothing.” Iroh replied airily as he nonchalantly waved his hand before him. “To answer your first question, the news was not urgent since the situation has been the same since you left. Moreover, I knew that if I wrote to you about it, you would not have hesitated to cancel your vacation. And we could not have that,” the old man finished.

He turned to his old friend and Chao nodded in agreement.

Zuko muttered darkly under his breath. He should have figured that out before.

“Have any letters arrived from the earthbenders Toph sought out?” he decided to ask instead.

“Yes, a few, my lord,” Chao answered as he walked over to the large desk and handed Zuko the letters.

“I’ll ask Toph about them later,” Zuko commented. She would know better.

After Chao and the servants were dismissed a few minutes later, Iroh got up from the low table after picking up his steaming teacup and sat in front of Zuko’s desk with a gleam in his eye that made the younger man look at him warily.

“Now you can tell me how it went on Ember Island,” Iroh said excitedly.

*Or how it went with Miss Katara,* he added mentally.

Zuko had to keep from rolling his eyes, and instead, settled on leveling his uncle with a blank stare. Though he knew he would not get out of this one until he had satisfied the old firebender’s curiosity.

“It went fine,” Zuko replied curtly as he returned his attention to the papers before him.
“How fine?” asked the eager old man.

“How fine?” asked the eager old man.

“How fine,” Zuko answered impassively as he picked up his ink brush and with graceful strokes of the thin writing instrument, began to write.

Iroh stroked his chin in silent contemplation as he watched his nephew immerse his full attention on what he was doing.

I need another way to make Zuko tell me how it went, even without full sentences, Iroh mused. A thought crossed his mind and a small grin curled his lips as he picked up his teacup and inhaled the sweet aroma.

“So...did you like the bathing suit I chose for Miss Katara, Zuko?” Iroh asked innocently as he took a sip from his tea.

Zuko jumped slightly at the sudden question, causing a smudge to appear on the paper he had been writing on with the ink brush.

Did I like it? Oh, how I liked it! Zuko answered quickly in his mind before he mentally shook his head as images of Katara wearing the mentioned bikini—as well as the sight of her wet skin—flashed before his eyes.

He cleared his throat and shifted slightly in his seat as a heat spread through his body.

“It was...nice,” he replied coolly as he tried to keep his face placid, but it did not work for his flushed right cheek.

Iroh did not miss it and he grinned into his cup.

“So what else did you do at the beach?” he asked.

Besides gawk at Miss Katara, he again added mentally. Iroh raised his teacup in order to hide his ever-growing grin.
Zuko shrugged as he returned his attention to the papers.

“We played a game,” was his short answer.

“I bet it was a fast and easy game,” Iroh said innocently, knowing his nephew hated to be considered a man who enjoyed something that was no challenge to him.

“Fast and easy?” Zuko snorted. “You should have seen how challenging it was.”

“So I take it that Miss Katara beat you.”

“She did not beat me!” Zuko defended himself as he looked up to glare at his uncle.

“Well, who won then?”

Zuko looked back down at his paperwork with a scowl.

“No one,” he muttered.

Iroh threw his head back and laughed.

“It is not that amusing!” Zuko growled irritably, yet Iroh was the only one he allowed to make him feel silly. “I just got…distracted.”

Iroh raised his eyebrow in curiosity, but his nephew did not go into details. The retired general was silent for a moment before he decided to try another tactic in order to get what he wanted to know.

“I bet you stayed away from the water,” he teased as he again took up his teacup.

“Well, you bet poorly because I did go into the water,” Zuko said absentmindedly as he placed his royal seal on a document. “Especially since Katara splashed me with a wave, but I sure got her back, and then I grabbed her—” He trailed off and shut his mouth quickly as he noticed his uncle’s gigantic smile. “What?”
“So you went into the water with Miss Katara and grabbed her, huh?” Iroh grinned as he wiggled his eyebrows before sipping again from his cup.

Zuko flushed slightly as he fought from gaping at his uncle.

“I grabbed her wrists! Because she was going to crush me with a wave!” he growled lowly.

“I see…” Iroh stroked his white and gray beard. To Zuko’s chagrin, the old man grinned even more widely.

“Uncle, don’t start getting any ideas,” Zuko warned as he leaned forward to level a mildly threatening glare at his beloved yet irritating relative.

“Me? Ideas? Oh, Nephew, you wound me!” Iroh exclaimed as he dramatically touched the left side of his chest.

Zuko rolled his eyes just as Toph barged in, throwing the doors aside loudly, before walking confidently in as if she owned the place.

“Hey there, Fire Lord Sparky and Iroh! Chao told me you received some replies,” the blind earthbender said as she stomped her way towards them.

Zuko silently thanked the gods for the interruption. Considering his persuasive uncle, Zuko did not want to divulge the fact that he had laughed. He would never live it down.

“Ah, Miss Bei Fong,” Iroh exclaimed as he saw Toph make her way into his room after she had firmly knocked once on his door.

He had left her finishing her discussion with Zuko hours ago. He frowned slightly. Something seemed to be worrying the small woman.

“Care to join me for a cup of tea before dinner?”
“Why, thank you,” Toph said with a grin.

She followed him to the low table in the middle of his room and sat herself on a cushion. There was a teapot already resting on the table and a few cookies on a porcelain plate.

Iroh handed a teacup to her outstretched hand before he picked up the decorative teapot he had bought in Ba Sing Se and patiently waited for her to speak.

“Iroh, I wanted to talk to you about something important,” the young girl began, “It’s about Sugar Queen and Sparky.”

“What about them, my dear?” Iroh asked as he poured himself more of the hot tea.

“Well, we both have suspicions that they might like each other. I know because I can…well…feel their…feelings, you get me?” Toph said with a frown as she tried to explain.

“Yes, I suspect that they may emit some big vibrations,” Iroh mused. They both laughed loudly.

“Yeah, I felt their feelings for each other change drastically after they returned from searching for the bastard that killed Katara’s mom and after their fight with that psycho Azula,” Toph huffed.

“I was so sure of it and I was so confused when Sparky showed up with Mai. And then imagine my surprise when Twinkletoes announced that Katara and he were together! I never would’ve expected it! His feelings were so obvious, but Sweetness never gave any indication of sharing his feelings. She always seemed like a big sister to him, you could even say like a mother. But when she’s around Zuko…I don’t know, she acts…differently.”

“Yes, I see. Well, I know because I know my nephew better than anyone. He may be calm and controlled in front of everyone else, but I notice how that girl affects him. He can’t hide it from me,” Iroh said and chuckled.

Toph smiled. She could only imagine.

“Well, you see, I kind of feel bad for the others,” Toph began, looking ahead to where Iroh’s voice
was coming from.

“What do you mean, my dear?” Iroh asked as he calmly sipped his tea.

“I mean they don’t suspect anything because, as you said, Sparky can be unreadable and Sugar Queen can sometimes...well...be good at hiding things for the wellbeing of others. Besides the fact that they were former enemies, Katara acted indifferent...actually hostile is the right word, when Zuko first joined the gang so it’d be hard to believe they can have feelings for each other. Not to mention the whole crap about them being from opposing elements, and different cultures, and different social status. Everybody is positive that Katara is in love with Aang, and they won’t suspect her having feelings for another, especially because Katara is a very caring and proper person,” she explained rapidly.

“Yes, I understand. It seems we are the only ones willing to see the truth. However, they will have to face it one day. All of them,” he said with a determined nod.

“But that’s the problem.” The earthbender sighed. “Twinkletoes has had a crush on her for a long time and now he’s very happy that Sugar Queen finally accepted him. It kinda makes me feel sad to think how crushed he’ll be when he finds out that the girl he loves doesn’t love him back.

“I mean, Snoozles told me Aang went on an Avatar rampage when he thought she was buried alive! I don’t know what’ll happen to him or what he would do if he finds out. He’ll be devastated,” Toph confessed, lowering her head, her bangs covering her light green eyes.

Iroh regarded the young earthbender with kind eyes before he reached out to pat her small hand.

“My dear Toph, I know how you feel. I care for Avatar Aang as well because he is Zuko’s friend and because he is a good person. Do not think that I am only looking after my own nephew’s happiness—even though he really deserves it. I have thought about Aang’s feelings and, believe it or not, even Mai’s,” Iroh began.

“But let me ask you this, would it not be worse to let them all live a lie?” he continued, “To let Aang and Mai think they are loved, when in reality, the ones they love may be in love with someone else? Is it not be worse that while they are with their loved ones, the loves ones are thinking of someone else?” Iroh placed his hand on Toph’s shoulder. “And what about Zuko and Katara? Would you like them to be in relationships knowing they are not truly in love?”
Toph raised her head. “But, Iroh, I don’t think they are in love with each other yet.”

“Yes, that may be true, but with the way things are going, it seems a likely possibility. I have not lived many years for nothing. Believe me, I know,” he said before he added, “And what if they do fall in love and it is too late?”

Toph sat for a few minutes thinking about what Iroh had said before she straightened in her seat.

“I guess you’re right, Iroh. And all they need is a little help.” She grinned as she cracked her knuckles.

Iroh chuckled. “Yes, they do, for both are very stubborn and headstrong.”

Then with a smile he added, “Do not worry about Aang. He is young and good-looking, not to mention he is the Avatar. I am sure he will have plenty of girls to choose from.”

Toph lowered her head again.

“I guess,” she muttered.

“And I am positive he will find a great woman worthy of him. He will find a woman that will love him as he deserves and that he will love in return. You just wait.” He grinned as he patted her hand again.

Katara entered her room to take a quick bath and change for dinner. As she opened her wardrobe, she could not help but chuckle at Iroh’s enthusiasm. The clothes did help keep her cool in the hot weather, better than the ones she had brought from home. She was not sure she would get the chance to wear all of her clothing before she returned to the Southern Water Tribe, though. A twinge of sadness tugged at her heart as she thought about them leaving the Fire Nation, Iroh and...Zuko.

But perhaps it’s for the best. I would be able to get rid of all these confusing thoughts that have bothered me for the last couple of weeks, Katara thought as she bit her lip.

With a sigh and a mental shake of her head, the young woman looked through her newly acquired
clothes to choose an outfit. She began to go for her familiar blue, but she remembered Iroh telling her she needed variety. Going through the clothes again, she chose a red sleeveless tunic with a high collar. It was trimmed in black lace with a sash that went around her waist in the same dark color. Then she put on a skirt of the same dark red that came down to her knees also trimmed in black. Finally, she slipped on a pair of black slippers. Katara went over to the mirror above her dresser and grinned at herself.

Not that bad, she thought with a smirk.

She brushed her brown hair, put it in a bun and made her usual hair loops. She then glanced at her rose hairpin that rested innocently on the surface of the nightstand.

“Katara, are you ready?” she heard Suki called from outside her door, snatching her gaze away from the jewel.

“Yeah, I’ll be there in a minute,” Katara called out.

She checked herself one last time in the mirror before she opened the door. Suki was waiting for her with a smile on her face. The young Kyoshi warrior was wearing a casual brown and pink dress.

“Whoa, Katara! You look wonderful!” Suki exclaimed as she elbowed the younger woman.

“So do you, Suki,” Katara replied and they laughed as they made their way down the hall.

“So when are you and my brother going to finally marry?” Katara asked, nudging the other young woman on her arm.

A dark blush stained the pale skin of Suki’s cheeks as she glanced at Katara before looking away.

“Well, I…Sokka hasn’t…asked me yet,” she replied sadly.

Katara patted her arm in comfort.
“Don’t worry, Suki. Sokka’s crazy about you! Maybe he’s just scared of being rejected,” she teased as they walked down the red and gold halls.

Suki smiled as she raised her head up and straightened her shoulders.

“Well, he shouldn’t because I’m crazy about him too,” she admitted with a grin.

The female warrior eyed her boyfriend’s sister curiously for a moment before she decided to ask the question that had been on her mind for a while.

“And what about you and Aang?” Suki asked as she watched the waterbender closely.

It was Katara’s turn to stammer for an answer as she played nervously with the sash around her waist.

“I…think it’s too early for that,” Katara finally replied with a small shrug.

“Katara,” Suki said seriously as she laid a comforting hand on the younger woman’s shoulder, “You know you can tell me anything. We’re like sisters. Are you…having doubts about your relationship?”

“What? Of course not…” Katara replied, avoiding the other woman’s eyes.

Suki frowned, unconvinced. She pressed her lips together as she removed her hand from the waterbender’s shoulder. She decided not to press the issue as they continued to walk toward the dining room.

Zuko sat at the head of the dining table with Aang on his right and Iroh on his left as they all waited for the young women to arrive.

“What is it with women and being late?” Sokka complained as he hungrily eyed the many plates full of delicious food that sat before him, tantalizing him with their delightful aroma.
Toph snorted and crossed her arms over her chest as she slouched on her seat. Mai rolled her eyes and Ty Lee grinned at the pouting warrior that was sending longing looks at the food.

“Be patient, Sokka, they’ll be here soon,” Aang reassured him as he grinned at his friend, who only frowned back at him.

“Women are such lovely, complicated creatures,” Iroh commented from his spot.

Zuko ignored the other’s talk as he thought back to the conversation he had earlier with Toph. They had gone over the earthbending candidates the Fire Nation had sought out, but Toph had told him none of them were good enough to be instructors and they all asked too much in return. He needed to find a capable earthbender teacher before chaos erupted between the firebenders and the earthbender in his colonies. But who could he ask? Who would be willing to help him and help the Fire Nation?

The young lord was brought out of his thoughts when the guards opened the dining room doors and the waterbender and the Kyoshi Warrior entered. All thoughts on finding an instructor vanished as he stared ahead with an awed expression.

“Wow, Suki! You look amazing!” Sokka exclaimed as he stood up from his seat, forgetting his hungry stomach for a moment, and walked his blushing girlfriend over to the table.

Suki giggled as Sokka gave her a lopsided grin.

“Oh, Sokka, stop,” she said, but he only kissed her hand in response.

Aang watched as Katara turned to look at him and he gave her a small smile. He could not deny that she looked lovely, but he really did not like her in red clothes, he would much prefer if she wore his native colors of yellows and oranges.

Katara frowned at Aang’s lack of reaction. She wanted to be fawned over like Sokka had Suki. She was seriously thinking of changing out of her outfit out of disappointment, but at that moment she glanced at Zuko and she was startled at the expression on his usually cool demeanor. His eyes were wide and he was staring at her with the most enthralled look on his face. She felt herself blush at the intensity of his stare.
“My, my, Miss Katara, you look great. Does she not, Zuko?” Iroh asked, poking Zuko’s arm while he ignored an irritated Mai that was sitting next to him.

“Um…yes, Uncle,” Zuko answered, quickly recovering his composure and glancing away from the lovely waterbender.

Mai raised a thin eyebrow at Zuko before she narrowed her eyes at the Water Tribe woman.

Her blush deepening, Katara muttered a shy word of thanks as she sat down at her spot.

*Well, at least some people noticed,* she thought as she sat down between Suki and Aang, the latter immediately turning a radiant smile at her. She was puzzled, however, when she noticed Mai’s cold stare from across the table.

“Yeah, you look great, Katara!” Ty Lee spoke up, not noticing Mai’s vexation as she sat next to her.

“Hey, nobody has said how great I look. What am I? Invisible?” Toph snorted next to the smiling Ty Lee.

Aang smiled at the grumbling earthbender.

“You always look great, Toph,” he answered sincerely. “Nobody has to keep telling you that!”

The others immediately agreed. Now seventeen, Toph had really changed into quite a young woman. Despite her rough behavior, she was petite, with a lady-like face and long black hair that she usually wore in a bun with her bangs almost covering her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Toph grumbled as she tried to hide a blush at their compliments.

“And I know I look great,” Sokka said as he wrapped his arm around Suki while with the other hand he stuffed a rice ball in his mouth.

“And so do I,” Iroh laughed as he caressed his slightly bald head.
“So, Sweetness, you sure know how to make an impression,” Toph began with a grin.

*very big impression,* she thought mentally.

“What do you mean?” Katara asked as she sat at the edge of Toph’s bed. “Sokka was too captivated by Suki and Aang didn’t even say anything.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest and frowned.

“Well, you can’t say the same thing about Sparky,” Toph piped in and grinned as she felt Katara’s heart skip a beat just like every other time the young Fire Lord was mentioned.

“What about Zuko?” Katara asked curiously.

“His heart was racing like crazy! I really wish I could’ve seen his face.” Toph laughed loudly.

Katara felt herself blush lightly before she shook her head at the possibility.

“Maybe it’s because he had never really seen me in red before,” she said with a shrug.

However, that was not true since he had during the war. She really did not have another explanation. Zuko would only ever look at her as his waterbending friend.

What do I have to do to make these people see?! Toph yelled in her head.

The shorter woman paused as the sound of footsteps reached her senses and she cocked her head sideways as she felt someone came down the hall. She grinned when she recognized the familiar footsteps.

“Wait here, Sweetness. I have to…go look for something…” Toph trailed off as she exited the room.

“Okay?” Katara muttered, confused.
First she wants to talk and now she leaves, the waterbender grumbled mentally.

As she walked out of her room, Toph quickly hid behind one of the great, golden pillars. She had to clasp a hand over her mouth to smother her amused chuckles. She felt like a mischievous kid. She grinned even wider as she heard Zuko’s light, but secure footsteps get closer until he was in her room.

“Toph? You wanted to talk to me?” Zuko asked as he walked through the opened door and entered the room.

He closed his mouth and stopped in his tracks as he spotted Katara sitting on the bed. He watched as she quickly stood up and smiled at him.

“Toph just left. Sorry, it’s just me,” she said jokingly as she placed one hand on her hip.

“Oh,” Zuko replied as he returned her smile before he cleared his throat as the opportunity to talk to her alone finally presented itself. He had been waiting to do so ever since the awkward incident in his room. “Um…Katara? About what happened on Ember Island the last night we were there…well…I…Mai and I…didn’t…uh…”

_Dammit! Since when do I stammer? _he groaned in his head.

Blushing deeply, Katara looked away with a shrug.

“You don’t have to explain anything to me. I…I understand…” she said quietly, though she could not stop from feeling embarrassed.

“Well, then…okay…” Zuko said uneasily.

And an awkward silence followed.

_Oh, for the love of everything that is earthbending! _Toph thought irritably as she could not help
herself from eavesdropping on the two clueless benders.

“So…what does Toph want to talk to you about?” Katara finally broke the silence as she smiled at the frowning firebender.

Zuko stifled a sigh of relief that the awkward tension had been broken.

“We are trying to find an earthbending instructor for the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom,” he replied.

“An earthbending instructor?” Katara asked curiously.

That’s right, she doesn’t know, Zuko thought to himself as Katara gave him a curious stare.

“It’s a long story. I’m sure you won’t be interested in it,” he replied with a small shrug.

“Try me,” Katara said flippantly as she smirked. “I go to meetings at my tribe.”

“Hm…Okay then,” Zuko said with another shrug of his strong shoulders.

He told her about the raids, the damage to the factories and property and about the people who have been killed. He told her of the firebending and earthbending raiders that seemed to be working together and about the strange way they escaped. He also told her of his plan to protect his cities and the people, and finally told her about his dilemma with finding an earthbending teacher.

“That’s horrible! I can’t believe there are still some people doing such awful things. Aang defeated Ozai already and you called the war off. There should be peace!” Katara stated and she sat back down heavily on the bed, rubbing at her temples. After four years, there was still trouble.

Zuko turned to look at her with wide eyes.

“You were actually listening to what I was saying?” he asked.
Katara looked up at him. He sounded surprised and that in turn surprised her.

“Of course, Zuko, why wouldn’t I? And I think it’s so great of you for protecting your people,” she told him sincerely as she smiled at him.

Zuko felt his heart warm at her words. Somebody else besides Iroh had listened to him and was interested in what he said and thought.

Leaning behind the cold pillar, Toph grinned as she listened in on their conversation. When they had seen that terrible play on Ember Island four years ago, she was telling the truth. Everything they had seen was the truth, even if the others did not want to acknowledge it. And that included the feelings these two had for each other. Now if only Zuko and Katara weren’t so afraid to see it, she wouldn’t have to resort to such methods.

The blind earthbender decided it was time to cut in since she felt the others making their way back to their rooms.

“Sparky, there you are! I was looking for you,” Toph called out as she entered the room, acting annoyed.

Zuko turned away from Katara to look suspiciously at the irritated earthbender as she made her way to stand before him.

“Well, here I am,” he replied coolly. “Have you figured out who could be a good instructor?”

“Well, not yet,” Toph said, scratching her head pensively. “I know I would be great, you know, being the Avatar’s former earthbending sifu and all.” She smirked arrogantly. “But I’m busy with the Earth Kingdom’s problems.”

Katara continued to sit on the bed as she silently watched them try to figure the problem out. She rose to her feet and approached them. She cleared her throat and smiled when they turned to look at her.

“Um…you guys? Why don’t you ask Haru? I’m sure he would accept gladly,” she suggested.
Zuko stared at her for a moment before he pinched the bridge of his nose and Toph smacked her forehead.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Toph yelled as she flung her hands in the air with a disgusted snort.

“I’ll send him a request tomorrow,” Zuko stated pensively, then looking admirably at Katara he remarked, “You’ve barely been here a few weeks and have solved a problem in a few minutes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Katara replied with a laugh. How could they have missed that?

“Well, now that that’s settled, I’m going to sleep. Good night, you two,” Toph remarked and yawned loudly. Without waiting for either to respond, she pushed them out the door and slammed it behind them.

*She has a lot of nerve to slam the door in the Fire Lord’s face,* Zuko thought irritably as he glared at the door.

But he could not stay mad at her. Toph was like the little sister he wished he had—one that did not stab him in the back or tried to kill him in his sleep.

“Okay?” Katara said as she stared at the closed door with a frown.

They stood in the corridor uncomfortably for a few moments as they stole glances at each other.

“I’m sure you must be tired. I’ll…walk you to your room,” Zuko said, rubbing the back of his neck briefly, before he straightened himself.

Katara smiled at him.

“Okay, thanks,” she replied happily. It was not as if her room was far or dangerous to walk to, but who was she to complain?
They walked side by side, as they headed down the hall to her room. Zuko could not stop himself from glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes every so often. He still could not get over how fantastic she looked. Red really added favorably to her rich, dark skin.

_I wonder how more favorably her brown skin would look on top of my red bed cover, _Zuko _thought, his eyes becoming hooded. He mentally slapped himself. _I can’t be having such indecent thoughts about Katara!_ 

Katara turned her head as she caught a glimpse of him looking at her before he quickly looked away.

“What is it?” she asked.

_Do I have something in my hair? Something in my teeth? Oh, how embarrassing! _she thought as she discreetly touched her hair.

“Oh, it’s just that…you look wonderful in red,” Zuko commented softly, trying to hide his embarrassment by intensely looking straight in front of him.

Katara blushed.

“Really? You think so?” she asked, looking down at herself. Her heart did a little somersault.

“Yes, you look great,” Zuko again admitted before he smiled down at her, making her cheeks grow a deeper shade of red.

_She looks so cute when she blushes_, he thought. He frowned at himself. Since when did he use the word cute?

“T-thank you,” Katara said as they finally arrived at her room. “Well, good night, Zuko,” she told him as she opened her door.

“Good night, Katara,” Zuko replied as she closed the door softly behind her after she gave him a
smile. He stood there for a few moments before he finally moved away.

He needed to go see Ozai the next day and send Haru his request.

“Why didn’t I think about asking him before?” he berated himself as he made his way to his chambers. “I’m glad Katara is here. I don’t know how long we would’ve gone before we finally realized.” Then smiling he said, “She actually listened to me and didn’t even seem bored.”

He slowed as he neared Mai’s room, debating for a brief moment if to go in, but he continued on his way toward his own chamber, smiling to himself all the way, glad no one was there to see his once in a lifetime silly grin.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After sending an official letter to Haru with his request and explaining the situation to his advisors, Zuko made his way toward the prison tower once again with the hope of finding some answers from his father, but as always, he returned with no more information than before.

Iroh watched his nephew sadly as he once again buried himself in work. Being a Grand Master of the Order of the White Lotus gave Iroh the advantage of being able to find information on anything —example being the gang’s whereabouts—but finding information about Princess Ursa’s location proved to be hard. Ozai seemed to be the only one who knew what happened to her or where she could be, and being the cruel person that his brother was, Iroh was sure only a miracle could help them.

Iroh decided it was time he paid a visit to his younger brother for the sake of his nephew.

Once Iroh stood before the large steel door, the captain of the prison guards quickly opened it for the Dragon of the West. Without any hesitation, the retired general stepped into the dark room and bid the guards to close the door behind him. As his old eyes became adjusted to the darkness, the only light coming from a small torch resting high on the wall beside the door, Iroh noticed the hunched form of his brother leaning against one of the cold walls. The old prince found it unbelievable to see his once condescending brother in such a state and place.

“Hello, Ozai. I see you are still alive,” Iroh said in a jovial voice as he made his way to the bars separating the room.

“Well, well. I’m glad to see you again…Older Brother,” Ozai hissed, the last words filled with hatred.
Iroh did not let it bother him as he took a moment to look around the dirty cell before he returned his gaze to the man behind the steel bars glaring at him with dark, yellow eyes.

“You know I did not come here for a family reunion, Ozai,” Iroh stated solemnly as he placed his hands inside his sleeves.

“I know why you’re here, but you’re just wasting what is left of your pathetic life…old man,” the former Fire Lord sneered.

Iroh sighed irritably. He and Ozai were born a good twenty years apart and such great difference of age did not allow them to become close. While Ozai was barely beginning to learn the art of firebending, Iroh was already beginning to climb the military ladder to becoming a great general.

“Ozai, please tell me where Ursa is,” Iroh began as he coolly observed his younger brother.

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told that sorry excuse of a son I have…not until I am freed from this place,” the disgraced Fire Lord retorted.

Iroh felt his anger rise at the insult inflicted at Zuko, but he kept his temper in check as he narrowed his eyes at his brother.

“Zuko has turned out to be a great man, many times better than you could ever be. And I am proud of what he has become,” Iroh rejoined sharply. “He should have been my son not yours.”

Ozai snorted in reply and flicked a dirty strand of hair behind his shoulder as he looked away.

The retired general continued.

“You will never leave this place because of all the atrocities you have committed against the world. This is where you belong. But you could at least do one good thing in your selfish life and let your son know where to find his mother,” Iroh said in a grave and serious tone.
“Never,” was Ozai’s cruel reply as his eyes flicked toward his older brother. “It is best she stays where she is for her own good.”

“Why do you say that?” Iroh asked warily.

A sinister smile spread across Ozai’s face.

“Let’s just say she would suffer even more if all of the sudden her reunion with her precious son is cut short,” he responded vaguely with a shrug of his thin shoulder.

“What are you talking about?” Iroh exclaimed in alarm. He felt a chill in his heart.

Ozai only stared at him with eyes filled with cruel amusement.

“Oh, you never know what life can bring. Death is always knocking when you least expect it.”

After a few more unsuccessful minutes, Iroh left the prison tower, worry etched in his wrinkled face. He prayed to the gods that Ozai was just bluffing.

After all, what can he do in a secured, enclosed prison cell?

A few days later, the gang sat at the large dining table eating their delicious Fire Nation breakfast. Iroh watched them eat with a small smile on his face before he winked at the short-haired servant who was placing another plate on the large table. He grinned when the young woman blushed before he turned worried eyes to his nephew who was currently talking to the young Avatar. He hoped that what Ozai had said was just a way for his younger brother to try to intimidate him.

Once it seemed the gang was finishing their meal, Iroh asked the young people what they planned to do for the rest of the day.

“I’m not going to be able to keep you company since I have some business to attend to with two elder noblemen,” Zuko told them with a long sigh.
“It’s alright, Zuko. You’re the Fire Lord and have a nation to look after,” Katara told him with an understanding smile.

“I know!” Ty Lee exclaimed. “How about we have a girls’ day out and we go to the spa? It’ll be fun!”

“Oh, no,” Mai grumbled lowly as she pushed her plate away from her.

“A spa? I haven’t been to one in such a long time!” Katara exclaimed excitedly before she turned to grin at the short earthbender. “Remember the one in Ba Sing Se, Toph? How exciting!”

“I guess I do need some pampering.” Toph grinned as she picked at her teeth with her fingernail.

“Well, I was going to take Suki for a romantic walk around the city,” Sokka announced as he embraced his girlfriend. “Do you want to go to the spa with them instead?”

“I already said I was going out with you,” Suki told him, tapping his nose, and earning a radiant smile from him. She turned away to smile apologetically at the others. “I’m sorry.”

“We understand,” Ty Lee said as she grinned at them.

Not wanting to be left out, Aang grabbed Katara’s hand and smiled brightly when she turned to look at him.

“Katara, I was hoping we could go out together, too. We haven’t gone out alone for a very long time,” he piped in with his usual cheery smile.

Katara frowned since it was true.

“But I wanted to go with the girls to the spa,” she told him softly.

“Come on, Katara. It’ll be fun,” Aang pouted before he added, “We are a couple and that means we have to do things together.”
Zuko frowned at the young airbender’s insistence. Katara did not want to go, could Aang not see that?

Sokka spoke up for his little sister as he turned to frown at the young monk.

“Aang, you can’t make someone do whatever you want. You have to consider what they would like, too,” he said, which earned him a few surprised looks at his words.

Toph snorted from her seat.

“Yeah, Twinkletoes. Katara wants to go with us. She has been working too hard, she needs some pampering,” she said.

Zuko nodded in agreement. At their words, Aang looked down and began to push his food around his plate. He didn’t think his request was enough to be chastised for. Could he not spend time alone with his girlfriend? He had missed her. He glanced briefly at Katara before he looked back down at his plate. Couldn’t she see that?

Katara saw the dejection on the airbender’s face and she felt a little guilty. That same feeling of wanting to shield him from the harsh world that she had felt since she rescued him from the ice berg once again surfaced within her.

“It’s okay, you guys. Aang’s right. We could go to the spa some other time,” Katara relented as she turned to smile at Aang.

Aang smiled broadly at her and again reached out to gratefully squeeze her hand.

Zuko frowned even more while Iroh sighed and shook his head.

Sokka’s usual grinning face held a frown and a scowl. He sometimes hated when his sister would always comply to Aang’s whims in order to calm him down. He had to agree with Zuko. Katara mothered Aang too much.
Toph pouted her lips and blew air out, causing her long bangs to lift over her head.

“Great. I’m stuck with Happy and Depressed,” Toph mumbled under her breath to Suki as she tilted her head in Ty Lee and Mai’s direction.

As Zuko went to deal with business, the girls headed to the spa, and Sokka and Suki went on their date, Katara walked around the city with Aang, who as usual, was excited by everything in sight, jumping from place to place. She had to admit she got caught up in his excitement as they walked around, but after a while, she was beginning to get exhausted.

“Aaang! Aaang!” they heard a man call out.

They turned at the sound of the voice and they watched as a man with a colorful outfit waved his hands at them as he swiftly approached them. He bowed deeply as he reached them before he quickly straightened up, his thin mustache twitching as he smiled at them.

“Hello, I am the Ring Master of the circus over there,” the man pointed to a group of more colorful tents off to one side. “Some of my best performers had food poisoning last night and cannot perform, so without any entertainment the people will be very disappointed and the circus will lose money. I was wondering, you being the Avatar and all, if you could help put on a show with some of your bending moves that will surely fascinate everyone,” the man gushed out.

Aang’s gray eyes sparkled with excitement as he turned to stare at the colorful tents where a large crowd was gathering. Joining a circus sounded like fun. It’s funny that a few years ago he would have been killed on the spot instead of being asked to join in a circus act. He looked over at Katara with a smile, but it faded and he frowned.

“I’m sorry. I would like to help, but I’m busy right now,” Aang said as he turned to smile apologetically at the circus man.

The man sank his shoulders in disappointment.

“It’s alright, Aang. I don’t mind. I know you’ll enjoy it and the children will too, so I say you should go,” Katara told him encouragingly. “I’ll meet you at the palace later.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to leave you by yourself,” Aang said with concern as he reached out a
hand to clasp hers.

Katara smiled since she knew he was impatient to go even though he was also worried for her. She laughed as she patted his hand.

“I’m a waterbending master. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” she reassured him.

Aang frowned for a few more seconds before he smiled and hugged her gratefully. She was always so considerate of him. How could he not love her?

“We’ll finish our date later, okay?” Aang said as he kissed her cheek.

She only nodded and gave him a small smile. Then almost bouncing with excitement, the young airbender followed the circus man. Katara watched the two walked away until they vanished among the crowd.

“Alright, now where do I go from here?” she said as she looked around, glad for some alone and quiet time, since Aang could sometimes be exhausting.

Katara walked along the clean and pretty streets. The last time she was in the Fire Nation, she was too busy with the war hanging over her head to really appreciate her surroundings. She watched as the people hurried along on the pavement, walking through the various stores and stalls that decorated one side of the street. She liked how the whitewashed houses seemed to reflect the late summer sunlight and how well they looked with the red roofs. She had to admit that she liked the Fire Nation architecture much better than the rough, block-like buildings of the Earth Kingdom. The Fire Nation had a certain elegance in the way the edges of the roofs curled upwards and the patterns and designs that decorated the red pillars and columns.

_of course nothing could compare with the beautiful carvings and designs on the Water Tribe buildings_, she boasted mentally.

_I wonder how Dad and Gran-Gran are doing_, she thought as she searched among the things in the stalls. She grinned. _I hope my waterbending students are treating Master Pakku well._

As she continued to walk through the city, she noticed the people staring at her with wide eyes as she passed them by. Her blue clothes, her dark skin, and her blue eyes set her apart as a Water Tribe
woman. Some of the citizens returned her smile, while others only looked away haughtily and with disdain. It saddened her a bit, but she did not let it bother her much, she understood that there was still resentment and mistrust.

She stopped at a store that held interesting trinkets and peeked in through the large window that held the displays. She noticed a crystal tiger-armadillo in a lunging position with red stones as eyes. She smiled and could not help thinking of Iroh, the shopaholic. She was positive that if the cheerful compulsive shopper were there, he would have probably bought the whole store already.

Shifting her eyes to get a better look inside the store through the clean window, she caught the reflection of two men looking at her from behind the darkness of an alley. She turned her head slightly, pretending to fix her dress, and sure enough, they were still there, staring at her with dark eyes. They did not look like pitiable thieves for their clothes were those worn by the upper-middle class, so she had a feeling that they were not going to steal from her. Katara moved away quickly, but not too fast as to alert them that she had seen them. She shifted her waterskin closer to her hip so she could have better access just in case. She looked over her shoulder again and noticed the men were gone.

_Maybe I’m just being paranoid._ She shook her head and laughed lightly at her silliness.

After walking for a few more hours without any more incidents, she decided it was time to head back to the palace. She turned around and immediately stopped in her tracks. The two men she had seen earlier were now waiting ahead of her. She quickly turned back and took another street. She cursed mentally when the men followed closely.

Katara did not like the looks they were giving her. She resisted the urge to turn around and water whip them, she did not want to be the first to cause a scene that could make the Fire Nation citizens mistrust her more. As she kept on walking, she realized that there were less people around. She cursed herself for not paying closer attention to where she was going. She turned her head back and noticed they were closing in on her.

With quick steps, Katara turned sharply at a corner and ran into someone’s broad chest, eliciting a shocked gasp from her lips. At the sudden impact, she stumbled backwards and lost her balance. A pair of strong, familiar hands grasped her small wrists to catch her from falling, pulling her close against a hard chest.

“Katara!” she heard Zuko exclaim in surprise.

_‘I’ll save you from the pirates.’_
Katara shook her head as the memory surfaced in her mind before she looked up to see Zuko’s concerned face looking down at her anxiously. About six of his guards were standing attentively behind him as they watched their lord and the waterbender curiously. Katara averted her gaze when she realized she had been staring at Zuko’s face and she tried to keep from blushing at the proximity between their bodies.

“Katara, are you all right? I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there,” Zuko told her with a frown as he steadied her.

“It’s okay, I’m fine,” she reassured him and laughed nervously as she backed away a step before looking curiously behind her.

Zuko looked over her head to see what she was looking at and noticed the two men who had immediately stopped in their tracks. Realizing they were in the presence of the Fire Lord, the men tried to retreat quickly.

“Get them!” Zuko ordered fiercely as he pulled Katara to his side.

Two pairs of guards sprang forward at the command and quickly apprehended the men who were trying to escape. After bringing the struggling and protesting men toward their lord, the guards roughly pushed them to their knees.

“Why were you two following the lady?” Zuko questioned heatedly as he narrowed his golden eyes at them.

“We w-weren’t following her, y-your Majesty…We were just going the same way,” the oldest one spoke up innocently, trying to sound courageous. The younger man beside him bobbed his head rapidly in agreement.

“Don’t lie to me!” Zuko barked, causing the kneeling men to cringe in fear as he loomed over them.

Katara stared wide-eyed at the irate Fire Lord. She had almost forgotten how fierce-looking Zuko could be.
The young Fire Lord turned his head toward the silent waterbender, his expression softening for a brief moment before it turned dark again.

“Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” he asked, his voice turning hard as he looked back at the trembling men before him.

“No, I’m fine, really,” Katara reassured him. Then looking at the two frightened men she said, “Zu—Fire Lord Zuko, I’m sure they meant no harm,” she told him softly before she smiled at the men.

The two men only stared in disbelief. She was defending them?

“They better not have,” Zuko sharply replied.

Then in a calmer and stern voice, he addressed the men, who gulped at the glare he aimed at them.

“Gentlemen. I hope you were not trying to intimidate her because she is a Water Tribeswoman. We are at peace now and we must respect each other. You may leave now and let this never occur again,” Zuko ordered, his tone implying that there will be punishment if he were to be disobeyed.

The two men readily nodded and reverently retreated. They stole apologetic glances at Katara before they disappeared from sight.

“Why were you alone in the first place? Where’s Aang?” Zuko asked Katara as he looked her over in order to reassure himself that she was indeed okay.

Katara explained to him what had happened in the morning with Aang and shrugged nonchalantly.

“Don’t make such a big deal about it. I had everything under control. I can defend myself, you know,” Katara huffed and narrowed her eyes, placing her hand on her hips.

Zuko smirked.

“I never said you couldn’t,” he responded, “You have shown that many times over.”
Katara smiled at him for the compliment.

“Thanks, anyway,” she added.

Zuko nodded at her as he gave her a small smile that Katara would not have seen it if she had not been looking intently at his face.

“It’s a few hours past noon. I bet you must be hungry,” he remarked.

Tilting her head back to look at the cloudless blue sky, Katara was impressed at how well firebenders could tell time by simply feeling the sun’s energy. Zuko did not even bother to lift his golden eyes upward in order to judge the position of the sun. She then realized she had not eaten since the morning, had skipped lunch, and would have to wait for dinner. But she was not about to complain in front of the Fire Lord and his guards.

“No, I’m not hungry at all,” she lied and plastered a smile on her face.

But it seemed the world decided to cause her trouble for the day, because her stomach growled loudly just as she spoke. Katara clutched her stomach and blushed in embarrassment.

“Well, sure does not seem like it,” Zuko replied and chuckled quietly.

His guards stared in disbelief at their lord. They rarely ever saw the young Fire Lord smile and now he was chuckling!

“Great. I’m turning into Sokka. Now your cooks are going to have to work overtime!” Katara teased.

Zuko let out a low laugh. Katara smiled. Zuko’s laughter was nice to listen to since it was so rare.

*I like to make you laugh*, she thought as she watched him before she shook away her sudden daze.
The guards looked amongst themselves and smiled minutely. Maybe the Water Tribe woman was not that bad.

“Come. I have missed lunch also and dinner is still some hours away. Let’s go get something light to eat,” Zuko said as soon as he stopped laughing.

He walked ahead, motioning for her to follow him when he noticed her staring at him. His guards followed behind them at a close yet respectful distance so their lord could converse with the waterbending woman privately.

They were walking in what seemed to be the wealthy part of the city—not that the other parts were run-down like the lower district of Ba Sing Se, Katara amended. The waterbender observed how the citizens reverently bowed before Zuko, who would politely nod back in acknowledgment. However, she noticed with some confusion how some of them bowed rigidly as if they hated to do it. She became slightly annoyed at the cold stares they would give him and she wondered why they acted like that towards him and if Zuko even noticed.

As they kept on walking, Katara noticed that there were many noblemen and women riding on elegant palanquins. Some of their servants were carrying them while other servants trailed after them.

“Zuko? May I ask you a question?” Katara asked as she lifted her head to look at him.

“Yes, of course,” he answered as he kept walking straight ahead.

“Why aren’t you riding a palanquin? I mean, you’re the Fire Lord, shouldn’t you be carried everywhere?” she asked curiously.

Zuko chuckled again and the guards smiled beneath their serious expressions.

“You’re right, but I do not want to be pampered just because I am the Fire Lord. I like to walk around my city. But I do use the palanquin or a carriage when I go far or for special occasions,” he explained before he looked down at her. “Why? Do you want me to call for my palanquin?” he asked. He berated himself for not asking her if she was tired before since she had been walking around the city for hours.

“No. I can walk, too, you know. I’m used to it,” she said smiling before she shrugged. “I was just
wondering.” She was glad to know Zuko had not become spoiled royalty.

Zuko led them to an elegant restaurant, where the short, bald owner and his customers greeted him superfluously.

“My lord, it is an honor to have you here! I will immediately set a single table for you,” the stout, old man said excitedly as he bowed a few more times, almost tripping over his feet in his excitement.

Before the man could turn to leave, Zuko spoke up coolly.

“I want a table for two. For the young lady and me,” he announced and nodded at Katara.

The bald man turned to look at her as if he barely realized she was there. Katara resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him.

Looking her over critically, the man finally spoke.

“Uh…yes, my lord, as you wish,” he agreed, though it was easy to detect the distaste in his tone. He then turned around and left to prepare their table.

The restaurant was a large, two story building with tall red wooden pillars and golden paper lanterns running along the ceilings and edges of the roof. It was considered one of the best restaurants in the city and so it was very crowded, much to Zuko’s annoyance. He did not like to eat out where there were so many irritating people, who were either trying to get his attention or were simply judging his every move. However, he decided to brush it all off since he could not let Katara go hungry.

As they were led to a more prestigious part of the restaurant, Katara noticed the glares she received from everyone and she wondered if it was because she was a Water Tribe member. Zuko noticed this as well and he was greatly displeased.

“I hope you are not being rude to the lady,” Zuko said sharply at the owner who seemed reluctant to acknowledge the waterbender.

“Of course not, your majesty,” the short man replied before he turned to look at the young woman.
“What would the young…lady like?” he asked curtly.

Instead of showing fear or anger, Katara simply smiled at him and answered politely. She tried to be cordial with the owner and his waiters and even to the customers that were closest to their table. She wanted to show them that she wanted no more resentment and hatred between all of them. They were taken aback by the waterbender and murmured quietly amongst themselves.

When the food was finally served to them, Katara looked over to Zuko, who was slowly and properly eating his food with his chopsticks, before she returned her attention to her own meal. They ate in silence for a while as they enjoyed the food. Finally remembering that Zuko was not really a good conversationalist, Katara decided to break the unbearable silence.

“So…how did it go with those bickering, rich men?” she asked as she took a small bite of a dumpling.

“The usual, tiring,” he simply answered.

“Come on, tell me how it went,” she insisted. When she realized he was not going to say anything she added, “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Zuko looked up at her from his plate.

“It’s just political things,” he responded impassively. “I’m sure it’s not interesting.”

Slightly annoyed, Katara sighed loudly as she played with her food.

“Are we going to have this discussion again? I am not stupid! I know politics,” she told him as she pointed her chopsticks indignantly at him.

Zuko was unable to stop from rolling his eyes at her insistence.

“Okay, fine,” he relented with an inaudible sigh. “I had to go settle this dispute between two wealthy men. Their families have been neighbors for many generations, but the current owners now are fighting each other for a patch of land both claim as theirs. They have gone as far as inflicting
damage to each other’s properties. I told them I’ll figure out a way to settle it,” Zuko explained. He was seriously considering seizing the piece of land away from them both and not giving them anything for wasting his time with such a foolish dispute.

“Well, that’s a silly thing to be arguing about,” Katara said with a frown as she chewed on a piece of vegetable. “You should take that patch of land so neither one of them loses or wins. If neither one has it, then they can’t fight each other for it.”

Zuko stared at her. It looked like he was not the only one who thought it was a good idea.

“Well, I’m just saying since you are the Fire Lord and all,” Katara quickly added as she continued to eat, hoping she had not stepped over the line.

“I think that is a great idea, Katara. But what will I do with it? I don’t need more land for myself,” Zuko said after the waiter set down their desserts.

“Well, why don’t you make it into a park or…a playground?” Katara suggested. She tasted the chocolate strawberry pastry and her blue eyes widened in pleasure at the delicious taste. “Mmm, this is good.”

Zuko smiled at the delighted expression on her face before he continued speaking, “That sounds great. The children will like that. Thank you for the advice.”

“No problem.” Katara smiled as she continued to savor the sweet dessert.

She would make a good advisor, Zuko thought as he watched her enjoy her pastry. If only the elder advisors allowed women to participate in the meetings.

They continued eating and talking pleasantly for a few hours, catching up on things that had happened to them for the past four years. As they finished their meal, Zuko thanked the owner passively as he turned to leave. Katara smiled and kindly thanked the stout man and those who worked for him for their service. They thanked her in return and bowed to her and Zuko.

“So has Haru responded to you yet?” Katara asked as they walked down the street again, a light breeze passing them by.
“Yes. I received a letter this morning where he said he was arriving in a few weeks,” Zuko informed her.

“Haru is visiting? How exciting to see him again! I hope he agrees to help you with the earthbenders in your colonies,” Katara said as they rounded a corner.

The universe seemed set to torture her on that day as she again bumped into someone. It was a small boy, who was carrying a rather large barrel of water with difficulty. As soon as they crashed into each other, the water spilled onto the floor and onto Katara’s short, blue dress.

Zuko again caught her in his arms before she fell backwards and held her to him. He felt Katara tense and he immediately placed her on her own feet before he glared at the one responsible. His eyes softened when he realized it was just a small boy, probably eight-years-old.

The boy had fallen to the ground on his rear and as soon as he recognized the people he was looking up at, he immediately went on his knees and hands, fear evident in his big eyes.

“Please forgive my clumsiness. I didn’t mean any disrespect. I’m sorry,” the child apologized on the brink of tears.

Zuko was faintly reminded of himself on that dreadful day when he had received the scar on his face from his own father as he watched the boy cower before them. Zuko, his guards, and the crowd that had gathered turned to look at Katara. Zuko knew it was just an accident, obviously the boy could not see over the large barrel.

“It’s okay. It wasn’t your fault. Are you hurt?” Katara asked softly as she lifted the small child to his feet and dusted him off, checking to see if he got hurt. She kneeled in front of him so they were eye-level and offered him a sweet smile.

“You aren’t going to punish me?” the boy asked as he looked up at the pretty lady.

“Punish you? Of course not! It was an accident,” Katara replied and she smiled gently at him. “Besides, no harm done.”
She stood up, and with a graceful sweep of her arms, she bent the water from her clothes and placed it back into the barrel. Then she did the same thing to the water on the ground, making sure the water was clean. Seeing the boy’s awed expression, Katara decided to use more of her waterbending for the boy’s amusement, to show she was not angry with him.

Smiling mysteriously, Katara gathered a tendril of water from the barrel and wound it around one of her arms, up around her neck, and back down her other arm until it collected into a ball of water between her hands. Watching the boy looking at her movements with curiosity, Katara gracefully twisted her hands and the liquid ball shifted and quivered into two shapes. Gracefully shifting her fingers and wrists, the two shapes transformed into a pair of koi fish with long flowing tails and fins.

The boy gasped in amazement as he stared at the floating shapes circling each other and Zuko smiled at the interaction between the waterbender and the boy. He heard the gathering crowd murmur in admiration.

Grinning, Katara again moved her hands and the two koi fish combined to make another round shape. Pulling her hands aside, she stretched the water into a long horizontal shape until it took on the form of a dragon with long streaming whiskers and tail. The boy’s eyes widened in delight. The liquid dragon twisted and weaved around itself in the space between the waterbender’s hands before it slowly floated toward the boy. It flew gracefully around his body and head. The boy laughed when the dragon’s tail brushed against his cheek before it returned into the bucket of water. Laughing enthusiastically, forgetting the incident from a few minutes ago, the boy looked up to smile widely at kind waterbender.

Zuko hid a smile as a few people in the crowd clapped delightedly at the show. He was sure if the incident had been with a Fire Nation noblewoman, the poor child would have had it bad. He smiled at how well Katara handled the situation, with kindness and gentleness. It touched his hardened heart.

“Tell me, boy, why were you carrying such a heavy thing in the first place?” Zuko addressed the child with a small smile.

Katara stared wide-eyed at Zuko. She was surprised at how softly Zuko asked the question.

The boy smiled and inclined his small head respectfully in the presence of the Fire Lord as he nervously played with the bottom of his shirt.

“My mother needed water and I was the only one who could bring it to her since my father got sick and he can’t stand yet,” he explained.
Katara noticed Zuko furrow his forehead in displeasure before he turned to one of his guards.

“Help the boy take the barrel to his home,” he ordered.

The guard bowed before he stepped forward and lifted the barrel. The boy looked at them gratefully and bowed with a huge smile on his young face as he followed the guard. The crowd murmured in approval. Without another word, Zuko turned away and continued walking down the street, away from the commotion.

“That was really nice of you, Zuko,” Katara praised as she fell in step with his long strides.

“It was the least I could do. Children are not supposed to carry such heavy things,” he replied.

*Children are not supposed to be burned by their own father and banished from their homes,* he thought bitterly.

Katara smiled at him.

“I’m glad you think so, too. Children are meant to play and have fun, not work hard in order to support their families.” She sighed.

She knew how that felt. She felt Zuko place his strong hand on her shoulder as he gave her a small smile. Her heart skipped a beat. Zuko sure had a nice smile.

They walked leisurely around the city as Zuko made sure everything was in order. He showed her around, both stopping to admire one thing or another, smiling or nodding in return to the citizens that passed them by in order to see the pretty and kind waterbender others were already talking about since the incident.

They did not realize it was getting late until the street lamps were lit, casting a warm, orangey color onto the city streets. They reminded Katara of the ones back home.
“It’s getting dark. We should head back to the palace,” Zuko commented as he held back a sigh.

“Yeah,” Katara agreed quietly.

They reluctantly headed back, each saddened to see their outing coming to an end. As they entered the palace, Zuko dismissed his guards, who bowed and smiled at them as they retreated.

“Um…Zuko?” Katara asked shyly.

“Yes, Katara?”

“Thank you…for giving me a tour of your city,” the waterbender said softly.

Zuko smiled. No, thank you for accepting.

“You’re welcome,” he responded.

Under the lamps and torches in the corridors, Katara noticed how the light reflected on Zuko’s fire crown and his black, red, and golden armor as well as on the scabbard of his broadswords on his right hip.

“Zuko, why are you wearing armor and why do you carry your swords?” Katara asked.

“My, my, you sure are full of questions today,” Zuko mused and chuckled.

“I can go back to ignoring you if you want,” Katara retorted playfully.

Zuko chuckled again before he shook his head and became serious once more.

“Well, I carry my swords and wear my armor when I leave the palace walls to protect myself. Even though we aren’t at war anymore, many people still wish me dead,” he said emotionlessly.
Katara gasped silently before she lightly touched his arm.

“That is only a handful of people, Zuko. But the rest of the world respects you and is grateful for what you have done to bring peace back to a chaotic environment. I know I am,” she said softly.

Zuko’s heart warmed at her words. He was about to clasp her hand in his when Aang appeared ahead of them.

“Katara! Where were you?” Aang called out as he approached them, the rest of the gang following behind him.

Katara pulled her hand away and Zuko resumed his usual unreadable demeanor.


“You said you were going to be here when I got back,” Aang said with a hurt frown. “I was waiting and you—”

“Aang, stop,” Zuko interrupted. “Katara has no fault that she forgot. She was with me.”

Iroh lifted his eyebrows at his nephew’s words and Toph smirked.

“And what were you two doing?” Mai asked icily. Aang waited for the same answer.

“We…bumped into each other, went to eat, and then walked around the city. We lost track of time. That is it,” Zuko said firmly, his voice hinting that there would be no more questions.

With that, the Fire Lord turned and walked toward his study room. Mai gave Katara one last glare before she went after Zuko.

Katara turned her attention away from the retreating form of Zuko and glared at Aang.
“I’m tired,” she said before he could talk and walked to her room.

Aang stared after her with a confused and hurt expression.

“So…anyone want to play Pai Sho?” Iroh asked the others that were left behind as he smiled sympathetically at the young airbender.

Zuko opened the door to his study and went over to his desk to finish some of his paperwork. He sighed angrily when he heard his door open and he looked up to see Mai’s irritated face.

“What is it, Mai?” he asked tersely as he looked back down to his papers.

“I want to know why is it that every time I ask you to spend some time with me you say that you have too much work,” Mai said, trying to keep her tone indifferent.

Zuko looked up.

“Well, because it’s true,” he replied calmly.

“But you took the Water Tribe woman out into the city!” Mai hissed.

Zuko frowned.

“Her name is Katara. And I told you we just met each other accidentally. And we were hungry, so I took her to eat. What’s the problem?” he asked irritably as his brow furrowed deeply.

Mai sighed angrily before she took a breath to calm her emotions down before she gave him a smile. She moved behind his desk, ignoring the wary look he sent her way.

“Well, how about we spend some time alone right now? You could put off your work for a few more hours,” she said as she leaned in to kiss him.
Zuko held up his hand to stop her.

“I don’t have time right now. I lost track of time already and I’m behind on my paperwork. But I promise I’ll take you wherever you want next time,” he told her so he could be left alone.

Mai frowned at first, but then smiled.

“Okay then,” she said before she kissed his right cheek and left the room.

Zuko sighed again and continued with his paperwork, but he was unable to stop thinking about his day with Katara. He just felt so relaxed and at ease around her. He replayed in his mind what Katara had told him earlier.

‘But the rest of the world respects you and is grateful for what you have done to bring peace back to a chaotic environment. I know I am.’

He was relieved to know that not everybody wanted him dead.
Sitting high on his throne, Zuko listened semi-patiently as several representatives of various Earth Kingdom villages and cities gave their speeches. Some asked for his aid in reconstructing their homes and others searched for a better trade agreement for both countries. Some were respectful—even cordial—when they addressed him, but others were stiff and impolite, making it clear they still did not trust him or the Fire Nation. And he had to deal with more in the next meeting.

As the last representative left the throne room, Zuko let out an inaudible sigh as he allowed his tensed muscles to relax. He had been prepared to step down the dais, but was surprised and a bit annoyed to hear that someone else was asking for an impromptu audience with him. Nodding his approval rigidly to his guard, he waited for the individual to make an appearance. The large golden doors were opened again and a tall young man with long, brown hair and green robes strode into the throne room. As soon as he saw the man’s face—or more accurately, his thin mustache—Zuko’s lips twitch into a small smile.

“Haru, I didn’t expect you so soon. Welcome,” he greeted genially.

Parting the wall of fire, the young Fire Lord walked down the smooth, marble steps from his throne to stand in front of the young man. Haru had grown taller since the last time they had seen each other, they were almost the same height, but he still had that affable face of his.

“Thank you,” Haru replied amiably.

He bowed and with a small smile he continued, “I heard some Earth Kingdom representatives were coming to the Fire Nation, so I boarded their ship. So in what way can I help you? Your message sounded urgent. I have to admit I was a bit surprised to know you needed my help.”

“Katara was the one who actually advised me to ask for your assistance,” Zuko admitted.

The young Fire Lord then briefly explained to the earthbender the situation in the colonies and the reason he had requested his presence. Haru regarded the young lord carefully as he listened attentively. He was glad he had helped Zuko claim the Fire Nation throne from Ozai. Zuko did seem interested in helping not only his nation, but the others as well.

“They’re just a few colonies and you will go from one to the other after the benders have been taught. I will pay you for your services, of course, and it will only be temporary until the
earthbenders are able to protect themselves,” Zuko continued.

“I understand and will be glad to help you,” Haru agreed readily.

Haru’s own village had been full of mistrust between both cultures at first, but things had settled down and he would be glad if he could do the same for the other villages.

“Come, the rest of the gang is here, too,” Zuko announced as he turned toward the doors.

He motioned for Haru to follow him as he walked out the large throne room. As they talked about more details, Zuko smirked inwardly at the astounded expression the other young man wore as he stared at all the magnificent things they passed.

“Haru!” they heard Aang exclaimed.

Haru turned his attention to the voice and smiled as he saw Aang and Sokka walking over to greet him. He noticed the others sitting in what seemed like a very large sitting room off to the side of the corridor. There were sofas, divans, and cushions spread around the place. A large tea table rested in the middle where the women were currently sitting. Toph, Katara and Suki turned around and smiled.

“Is that your friend Haru?” Ty Lee asked. “He’s so cute,” she said barely above a whisper.

Mai rolled her eyes as she took a slow sip of her tea while Suki and Katara smiled and giggled at the moonstruck look on the acrobat’s face. Toph grinned as she scratched her chin.

“Hey, Haru!” the small earthbender called out as she reclined on the large cushion she was sitting on. “Long time no see.” She grinned widely at her words.

Haru smiled under his thin mustache.

“Hello, girls,” he said as he and Zuko walked towards them.
They stood up to give him friendly hugs as they chatted excitedly about what they all have been up to since the end of the war. Watching the reunited group of friends silently, Zuko noticed that Haru did not actually mind being hugged, unlike him who would stiffen at the idea. Not that he minded being embraced by a certain waterbender…

Frowning, Zuko quickly brushed the thought out of his head.

“This is Ty Lee. She’s an awesome acrobat, very bendy,” Toph spoke up with a grin as she pushed Haru toward the lively Fire Nation girl who had a large smile on her pretty face.

“Yes, I saw you before, at Zuko’s coronation,” Haru smiled shyly. “But you were wearing the Kyoshi armor.”

Ty Lee giggled. She was now wearing a typical Fire Nation outfit, only it was pink.

“I saw you, too,” she cooed as she twirled so she could show off her attire. “Anyway, since I’m in the Fire Nation I decided to change into my old style for a while. Do I look nice?”

She batted her eyelashes as she looked up at the handsome earthbender. Mai rolled her eyes again at Ty Lee’s obvious flirtation before she was distracted by the sight of Zuko staring at the waterbender before he looked away. She clenched her hands around her teacup tightly.

“Uh…y-yes,” Haru stammered and cleared his throat as he felt his cheeks burn.

His blush deepened when Toph elbowed his side and Suki and Katara stifled their giggles.

“So is everything settled?” Sokka asked, turning away from the slightly awkward display to look at Zuko.

“Yes. Haru has agreed to help. He will leave to the first colony in a few weeks after I give him more information,” Zuko answered.

“In a few weeks? That’s too bad,” Ty Lee pouted as she grabbed onto Haru’s arm, whose entire face turned red at the sudden attention.
The following day found Katara resting on her bed, bored. Zuko and Iroh were in a meeting. Aang, Toph and Haru were practicing earthbending with Ty Lee watching excitedly, and Sokka and Suki went out into the city again. They asked her if she wanted to go with them, but she did not want to be a bother, so she had declined their offer. And she sure did not want to spend her time with Mai.

She did not understand why Mai acted so coldly toward her. Had she done something to upset her? She brushed the question out of her mind. Mai never seemed like the friendly type. It was probably normal. Rolling onto her side, Katara looked at Momo sitting on one of her pillows, licking his paws clean.

“At least I have you to keep me company, right, Momo?” she said with a yawn.

The green-eyed lemur lifted his face from his task and chirped at her in response before returning to groom himself. Katara smiled at the cute little animal before she raised her head when a knock sounded on the partially opened door of her room. She noticed it was Jiao standing outside and she quickly sat up on the bed.

“Hello, Jiao,” she called out with a smile.

“Lady Katara, is there something you need? Some refreshments?” the maidservant asked as she entered the room with a small smile.

“No, I’m fine,” Katara replied with a shake of her head before she smiled again. “Well, I would like it if we could talk. You know, as friends.”

Jiao stared at the young Water Tribe woman with wide, confused eyes.

“You want to be friends with me? A servant?” she asked incredulously.

“Of course. I don’t agree with all that social status nonsense or whatever. You’re really nice to me. And Fire Lord Zuko and General Iroh trust you. So what do you say?” she asked, leaning back against the wall. Momo took the opportunity to sit on her lap to be petted.

The young servant woman shifted uncertainly for a moment before she broke out into a large smile.
This woman was different from the haughty and cold Fire Nation noblewomen—like Lady Mai. Now she understood why the Fire Lord appreciated the waterbender and had ordered her to personally attend to the water tribeswoman.

“It would be an honor, Lady Katara,” Jiao replied softly as she bowed.

After a few attempts, Katara finally managed to get Jiao to open up to her. They talked lightly about their interests and shared childhood memories. Katara found out Jiao was in charge of the Fire Lord’s accommodations, the only one allowed to enter his bedchamber to ensure that his room and clothes were clean and tidy. Zuko trusted her because she was an honorable servant and because her mother used to serve under Princess Ursa. Jiao was alone now, however. Her father died a few years after Ozai became Fire Lord and her mother died a few years ago. And Jiao had no brothers or sisters.

“Oh, Jiao, I’m so sorry,” Katara told her sadly. At least she had Sokka when their mother died and their father went away to fight in the war.

“You do not need to feel bad, Lady Katara. Fire Lord Zuko has been kind to me and I am glad to serve him,” Jiao assured her.

Katara noticed that Jiao held a fondness and respect for Zuko just as she had seen in Admiral Jee.

As they continued talking while Jiao tidied up the room, they noticed Mai walk quickly past Katara’s doors. Jiao held her breath until the young noblewoman was out of sight.

“Jiao, what’s wrong?” Katara asked as she noticed the servant’s reaction. She bit her lip before hesitantly asking, “Is Mai…mistreating you?”

She had heard of the nobility abusing their servants and nobody seemed bothered by that, but it bothered her. Jiao looked down and remained silent and Katara became alarmed.

“Please, tell me, Jiao. I’ll try to help you,” Katara encouraged her softly. “You can’t take that from anybody. Please, trust me.”

The young servant looked up and seeing Katara’s concerned face she quickly tried to reassure her.
“No, do not fret Lady Katara,” Jiao said with a shake of her head and a small smile. “Lady Mai does not mistreat me. I am not trying to complain or be ungrateful but...it’s just...she is very rude and cold, not to mention overbearing, acting as if she is the lady of the house.”

Upon hearing this, Katara looked away with a small shrug.

“Well, she will be someday,” she said, almost in a whisper. She did not know why the idea depressed her so much.

Jiao regarded her pensively for a moment before she walked over to stand before the young woman who was now sitting dejectedly on the bed.

“Well, I have to continue with my duties, Lady Katara. If you need to talk to me again, I will be glad to listen,” she informed her and bowed. Then smiling she said, “You know, Lady Katara, many things can change in a short amount of time.”

Katara stared after the young woman as she retreated out of the room and closed the door softly behind her. With a small sigh, Katara reached for her rose hairpin and began to caress the colorful stones. Feeling that she was settling into a confusing dark mood, Katara decided to go to the public garden. Maybe the fresh air would lift her spirits. Picking Momo from her lap, she made her way to the door.

As she walked to her destination, Katara held back an irritated groan as she came across the same rude, old man from before. Advisor Wei, she believed was his name. She tried to avoid the infuriating advisor, but he stepped right in front of her, cutting off her path—which was easy to do since he was so large. Momo chattered loudly, mistrustful of the man and climbed behind Katara’s back, his large ears and eyes peeking over her shoulder.

“And where are you going in such a hurry, girl?” Wei sneered.

“To the garden,” she simply replied. She glared at him as she tried to go around him again.

“But you can’t go there,” he mocked as he blocked her path again.

“And why not?” she asked defiantly as she crossed her arms. “No one has told me otherwise.”
“The garden is only for the Fire Nation nobility,” Wei sneered again. “And the last time I checked you are neither from the Fire Nation nor a noblewoman. You are but a simple tribeswoman.”

Katara opened her mouth to retort, but she stopped herself, letting her arms fall at her sides.

*Maybe he’s right and I’m not supposed to be there,* she thought with a frown.

“Advisor Wei!” Katara heard Zuko growl out.

Surprised, Katara and the old advisor turned at the sound of the young lord’s angry voice and they watched as he approached them in quick, irate strides. Katara felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of his tall frame.

“I thought I warned you not to bother Lady Katara again,” Zuko growled out as he stood beside the unusually quiet waterbender and glared at the man.

“I was merely telling her the truth,” Wei replied with a shrug. “She is just a Water Tribe peasant. She does not belong here.”

Katara looked down at the floor at his words, though it was more to keep from water whipping the advisor than anything else. Zuko, on the other hand, was unable to curb his anger, for he wanted Wei to know how greatly displeased he was.

“I’ll have you know, her father is Chief of the Southern Water Tribe. Lady Katara is a War hero and has proven to be a great healer and a skillful warrior. She could put many of my soldiers to shame with her waterbending. I will not tolerate any more of your insults, Wei,” Zuko told him in a harsh tone. Narrowing his eyes, he added, “You are dismissed from the next five meetings.”

Wei sputtered angrily for a moment before he opened his mouth to protest, but Zuko cut him off sharply.

“Leave my presence now,” he snapped and waved his hand dismissively.
Wei glared at them as he looked from one to the other, his chubby hands clenched at his sides in indignity and rage. A strange emotion flashed across his face before a smirk curled his lips. Without another word, the old man turned around and lumbered down the corridor.

Katara let out a sigh of relief as she turned to smile at Zuko.

“Thanks,” she said.

Zuko nodded at her as he glared after Wei, watching as he rounded the corner. Momo emerged from behind Katara’s shoulder and perched on it with a relieved chirp.

“The meeting is already over?” Katara asked in order to lighten up the mood.

“Yes,” Zuko answered with a slight nod before he looked down at her. “You were going to the public garden?” he asked.

“Uh…yeah,” she answered with a shrug.

Zuko turned so he could be facing her and he found that he did not like the way her shoulders drooped. He cursed Wei for distressing her. If only there was a way he could cheer her up. Jiao had told him that Katara liked to go into the public garden, but he was sure it was not good enough for her to enjoy. He smiled as a thought came to his mind.

“Come. I want to show you something better,” he said quietly.

Katara raised her eyebrow at him, but she followed him when he just smiled and began to walk away. Momo clutched her hair and chattered curiously. They walked the opposite way, going to where their rooms were located in the western wing of the palace. A moment later, they stepped outside, the bright sun enhancing the serene place before them. Zuko glanced at Katara and smiled as he watched her reaction to what she saw.

Katara gasped softly in surprise and her eyes widened as she took in the sight before her. It was another garden, but this one was much grander, surrounded by high walls lined with small golden lamps. From where she stood, she could spot white and purple orchids, firelilies, violets, hydrangeas, peonies and many other types of flowers beautifully and carefully arranged in patterns around the garden. There were also different varieties of trees from large oaks to weeping willows, and the vivid
green grass was lush and carefully groomed. She had never seen such a beautiful garden before, and if they had still been at war, she would not have believed that the Fire Nation could hold such a lovely place.

She found it hard to believe that Ozai and Azula enjoyed spending time here. Maybe Zuko ordered it to be cultivated after he became Fire Lord.

“It’s so beautiful,” she breathed in awe.

Momo took off from her shoulder and flew around the quiet garden, chirping and chattering happily from tree to tree, occasionally snatching insects from the air as he went.

Zuko extended his arm courteously. Surprised but pleased, Katara gave him a low, playful curtsey before hooking her arm under his with a grin. Zuko smiled before he led her down the few marble steps to step onto one of the stone paths.

“This is the Royal Palace Garden, my private garden. Only members of the royal family and their close friends are allowed here,” Zuko explained. “Uncle and I come here often, and you can come here as often as you like. I was sure you’d like it as well.”

“Thanks. I like it very much,” she said softly.

A small blush blossomed across Katara’s cheeks as she gave him a pleased smile, which he returned immediately. Looking around the magnificent garden, the waterbender spotted a group of red rose bushes and an elated squeal escaped her lips.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Are those roses?” she asked as she paused to point at them.

Zuko nodded, and when her smile brightened, he led her to them, still holding onto her arm.

“The roses I sent you for your past birthdays came from this garden,” he told her.

“They were so beautiful, thank you.”
“I’m just sorry I was unable to be there for your birthdays, but I was…” he trailed off.

“It’s okay, Zuko. I understand,” she said. Then turning her attention back to the crimson-colored roses she added, “They look so much like the silver rose hairpin you sent me.” Katara smiled at him.

“Yes. I decided to send you a rose that will not die. I’m sure you look nice when you wear it,” he told her with a small grin.

Katara flushed and looked down at her feet.

“Well. I have not…actually worn it,” she admitted sheepishly.

Zuko’s heart sank painfully at her words. He remembered trying to give a pretty conch to Mai years ago, only to have her disregard it. It really did not bother him that much back then, but hearing this from Katara saddened him deeply.

He cleared his throat.

“Well, if you don’t like it, I could always give you something else.”

“What? No, no! I really do like it!” Katara was quick to reassure him. “I just haven’t worn it yet because there hasn’t been an occasion where I could show it off. Being busy teaching waterbending and reconstructing my home, I didn’t want my hairpin to get damaged or lost. And you know what? I always keep it on my nightstand where I can touch and see it.”

She gently touched his arm with her free hand, hoping he did not think her ungrateful. Zuko looked down into her ocean-blue eyes and smiled. He felt pleased that she liked it. And he liked how she called it her hairpin.

“You know, I never had a favorite flower before, since not many flowers grow in the Southern Water Tribe,” Katara confessed after a moment. “Guess what my favorite flower is now.” She grinned.
“Panda-lily,” Zuko answered as if stating the obvious. He was puzzled when Katara began to laugh.

“Why? Because Aang always gives them to me?” Katara asked after she had calmed down. “He was told they were the best gift for a woman.” She laughed softly again. “I mean, they are pretty, but the panda-lily seems too…childish. No. My favorite flower is the rose.”

Zuko’s heart skipped a beat and he held onto her arm tighter.

“The rose? Why?” he asked, trying to keep his voice in check, lest he showed his excitement.

“Well, because they are beautiful and elegant,” she told him with a pensive look.

She reluctantly disengaged her arm from Zuko’s, who seemed almost as reluctant to let her go. Zuko watched as Katara walked over to one of the prettiest roses and, bending slightly, she brought her petite nose to it and inhaled.

“And they have such a wonderful fragrance,” she breathed out.

Zuko felt his heat race as he looked at her among the flowers, like a magical creature surrounded by a sea of roses.

_I wonder how great her body would look laying on a pile of rose petals,_ Zuko thought with a groan. He felt his groin tighten at the fantasy and he turned away from her, cursing his dirty thoughts.

_This is the second time! How can I be having such thoughts about her?_ he thought, scolding himself.

He reasoned it was just that he had been too busy lately to relieve his sexual tension. Yes, that must be it. But then he never had such fantasies about Mai and she was his girlfriend.

_That’s because Mai is just like the other Fire Nation women,_ Zuko mused in his head with a frown. _Katara…well…she’s different. Maybe I’m just having such thoughts because she’s…exotic looking. But I can’t be thinking about her like that. It’s disrespectful._
After he felt like he had cooled down, Zuko turned back to gaze at her with a placid look on his face.

Katara was wearing a short red dress, outlined with gold and black, the sleeves falling down her arms. Zuko could not get over the fact that her caramel-colored skin looked so exquisite in red, not that she looked bad in blue. She looked wonderful in blue, too. His heart skipped a beat as he took notice of the style of her hair. Her brown, wavy hair was down with a small bun on her head, reminding him so much of his mother.

“You know,” he finally said, “this was my mother’s rose bush.”

His golden eyes looked deeply into Katara’s cerulean ones when she turned to look at him.

“The rose is her favorite flower. As well as mine,” he said softly.

“Really?” Katara asked quietly, unable to break away from his piercing gaze, her heart racing in her chest for some strange reason she could not understand.

“Really,” he replied.

After what seemed like an eternity, but was actually a few seconds, Katara looked away, embarrassed and confused.

Clearing his throat, Zuko continued.

“There is something else I’m sure will please you,” he told her. He offered his arm to her again and was glad when she quickly accepted it.

“What is it?” she asked excitedly. She liked the feeling of his warm arm against her own, it felt… right. Katara had to keep herself from leaning her head on his shoulder.

“It’s a surprise,” he replied coolly and smirked.

She mock pouted, causing him to chuckle quietly.
They walked along a different stone path, passing even more beautiful and exotic flowers and trees, their arms intertwined in each other’s while Momo flew ahead of them.

Soon enough, Katara spotted a single cherry blossom tree in the middle of a grassy patch. It was covered with young blossoms, white and pink, and little bright, green leaves. And on all these blossoms and leaves the sunlight glistened brightly. After admiring the cherry blossom tree for a moment, Katara looked beyond it and gasped.

“A pond!” she exclaimed in surprise.

Zuko again smiled at her reaction and quickly walked her over to it.

“It’s so pretty,” she whispered as she stared down at the lily pad covered surface of the pond. The other garden did not have one; it was made up of only grass and trees.

“I knew you were going to like it,” Zuko smiled warmly, seeming proud of himself.

“Yes.” Katara giggled as a few turtle-ducks came over to them, begging for crumbs. “How cute!”

Zuko sat down near the pond under the cherry blossom tree and watched Katara play with the turtle-ducks with some waterbending. Momo, tired for the moment, rested on his lap. Zuko smiled at the little creature. Absentmindedly, he began to pet him around his large ears. Momo purred in appreciation while Zuko began to remember all the times he had spent in the same spot with his mother when he had been a boy.

Katara turned around to call to Zuko when she noticed his face had a faraway look, one that seemed…sad. She quietly stood up from the pond’s edge and walked over to the tree, sitting down next to him on his right side.

“Zuko? Are you all right?” she asked, concerned.

Zuko blinked before he glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. How had she noticed his real mood when he always made sure to keep an impassive mask on? It was like second nature to him, not to show his weaknesses, ever since his father banished him from his home.
“Yes. I’m fine,” he uttered coolly. He looked over at the pond to where the turtle-ducks were frolicking around.

“Zuko, don’t lie to me. Tell me, what’s wrong?” she said softly as she gently placed her hand on his arm. “I’m your friend, you can tell me anything. Please?”

The Fire Lord looked at the young woman’s concerned face, again surprised at her perceptiveness and worry.

*She wants to listen to me?* he asked himself. *Does she really want to know?* Her large, blue eyes confirmed it.

Summoning up his courage, he said softly, “I was just remembering the times I spent with my mother in this garden when I was younger.”

Katara pressed his arm lightly, silently encouraging him to continue.

“We used to sit under this tree and would feed the turtle-ducks or talk or simply just sit quietly as we watched the sun go down.”

“Have you gotten any information on where she is?” Katara asked when he did not continue. She saw his face darkened.

“No. I have tried everything, but Ozai won’t tell me,” he growled out angrily before he let out a sigh. “I…really miss her,” he confessed quietly.

Zuko inhaled sharply and his heart skipped another beat as he felt Katara’s small hand slide down his arm to hold his hand. He looked down at their hands, pale and brown, a great contrast. He slowly looked up to see her concerned and understanding face.

“Zuko, I know how you feel. I also remember the times I spent with my mother. I remember when she used to cook, he wonderful aroma of her meals would waft around our hut. I also remember how beautiful she was and how she’d smile at us, making us feel very happy and special. When she’d tuck us to sleep, she would sing us lullabies until we would close our eyes, feeling safe and loved.
And I remember the day she gave me her necklace.”

Katara reached for her necklace with her other hand and let out a shaky breath.

“And then she was taken from me…I miss her a lot,” she said quietly as she clasped her necklace tighter, trying to keep her tears from spilling.

Zuko squeezed her hand lightly.

“Your mother was a brave woman, Katara. Just like you,” he said.

Katara blushed and released his hand after giving it a squeeze.

“I’m sure you will find your mother, Zuko. I’m positive,” she said, looking back up at him.

“I hope so, Katara,” he said solemnly as he again gazed over to the quiet pond.

Katara felt her heart go out to the young man. She had never seen him so down before.

Momo, feeling the mood change, began to chirp before flying off to catch some bugs.

They sat next to each other in comfortable silence as the sun began its descent. They watched as one of the turtle-ducklings tried to leave the pond, but was driven away from the edge by its parents.

Katara giggled. “Early curfew?”

Zuko’s lips curled into a small smile. He wondered why he found it so easy to smile with Katara.

“Some parents are very protective of their young. I had to learn that the hard way,” he commented with a small chuckle.
“What do you mean?” she asked as she turned to look at him in curiosity.

“Never mind,” Zuko evaded with a shrug.

“Ah, come on!” Katara huffed. “You can’t just say something like that and then decide not to continue! Tell me!”

After a few more insistences, Zuko finally relented and he told her about the time he was bitten by an angry turtle-duck mother when he was a young boy.

Katara placed a hand over her mouth and laughed. Zuko glanced at her, and instead of feeling insulted, he smiled. He liked to hear her laugh. It was like a sweet tune and he liked it even more that it was he who had caused her to utter such a joyous sound. He did not know why but he felt… happy. Even if that happiness lasted only for a moment, since his friends would be leaving the Fire Nation soon, he would enjoy it while he had the chance.

“I wish I could have seen that!” Katara giggled as she wiped that tears that had appeared from laughing too hard.

Zuko grinned.

“Well, it hurt more than I thought it would, and I asked Mother why the turtle-duck did that.” Then smiling softly he continued, “She told me ‘That’s what moms are like. If you mess with their babies, they’ll bite.’” He then snapped his teeth, imitating a turtle-duck bite.

Katara burst into a giggle fit. It was nice to see Zuko being playful, for it was very rare. She liked it.

“That’s true,” she agreed amusedly as she let out a sigh after calming down.

They did not notice that far off to the side, a very pleased Iroh and a very amused Toph stood by.

Iroh chuckled.
“Well, my dear, how about a cup of jasmine tea?”

“That sounds great.” Toph grinned as they walked back inside the palace.

A few days had passed since that day in the Royal Palace Garden and it seemed like it had somehow changed something between the Fire Lord and the waterbender. What it was, Katara could not really say.

Her long braid blew wildly in the air as Appa flew among the fluffy clouds and she got lost in her thoughts. She had missed flying and going on adventures like they all had four years ago. She turned to look at Aang sitting on Appa’s great head, holding the reins as the sky-bison flew in the sky. Aang had asked her if she wanted to ride on Appa with him and she agreed since she felt a bit guilty for having neglected him for the past few days. For some reason she kept bumping into Zuko which would lead to them spending time in the garden or talking about anything and everything before they went their separate ways.

The waterbender was brought out of her thoughts when she noticed the young monk stand up. Creating a small current of air, Aang landed softly beside her on the huge saddle. He placed his tattooed arm around her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Katara smiled, but when he moved to kiss her lips, she pulled away. Aang frowned, but he kept his arm around her.

“Isn’t the scenery beautiful?” Katara said, smiling gently.

She leaned over the side of the saddle where she could see the mountains, the vast trees, and a river snaking its way toward the ocean. She could make out the capital city inside the hull shell of the dormant volcano from afar. She had to admit it looked amazing.

“Yeah…” Aang said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously with his other hand. “Katara, I… well…”

“What is it?” Katara asked, finally noticing Aang’s nervous state. “Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong! It’s just that I…wanted to ask you something,” said the young Avatar, his cheeks turning pink.
Katara turned to face him and raised her eyebrow, waiting for him to go on.

“Well, you see…I…want to ask you…” he began before he trailed off.

She noticed him swallow loudly.

“Katara, will you…uh…”

“Aang, spit it out already! What is it?” Katara almost yelled irritably. Sometimes his timidity and hesitation annoyed her. It was fine when he was twelve-years-old and needed some reassurance, but he was seventeen now and practically a man!

“Will you…will you…take Appa’s reins?” Aang sighed loudly, his whole face red like a tomato.

Katara furrowed her eyebrows as she stared at him strangely.

“Sure…okay,” she muttered uncertainly. She tried to move away from him to rest on Appa’s head, but Aang held onto her.

“What is it?” she asked him, puzzled.

He hesitated, but then he smiled.

“I love you,” he said before releasing her.

“Uh…me too,” she replied, giving him a small smile.

Walking carefully forward, Katara sat on Appa’s fluffy head. Once settled, she turned around to look back at the seventeen-year-old who was mumbling angrily at himself. Shrugging, Katara lifted the reins and guided Appa back to the Fire Nation Palace.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
Since the men were busy in a meeting later that evening, Ty Lee, Mai, and a complaining Toph decided to go to the city again. Katara stayed behind with Suki, who had been feeling ill for the past few days.

“Maybe I should go ask for the Palace Physician to check you and see what’s wrong,” Katara told the Kyoshi Warrior as she stood to leave.

“No, there’s no need. It’s nothing, really. I probably ate something that unsettled my stomach. I just need some rest,” Suki reassured her as she lay back on her bed. She gave out a small yawn. “So tell me what you and Zuko did the other day outside in the city. We haven’t had a chance to talk.”

This seemed to perk the waterbender up. For the next few minutes, she excitedly recounted everything from when she bumped into Zuko, to when he took her to that fancy restaurant, and to the incident with the small boy with the barrel of water.

“And then we noticed it was getting late and we returned to the palace,” she finished with a large smile.

“That was nice of Zuko, helping the small boy. I never imagined Zuko liking children,” Suki said as she moved into a more comfortable position.

“I was surprised too, but I guess we don’t really know that much about him. But it was really cute! You should’ve seen how the little boy smiled at him as if Zuko was his hero,” Katara exclaimed with a giggle and smiled at the memory.

Suki regarded the waterbender carefully, but sleep soon came to her before she could question the waterbender more. As Suki fell into a welcome nap, Katara decided to go to the Royal Palace Garden since Zuko told her she could go whenever she liked. She smirked smugly. Wei would probably have a heart attack when he discovered that a Water Tribe ‘peasant’ was allowed in the private garden by the Fire Lord himself.

Passing by the rosebush, the waterbender gingerly caressed the beautiful red roses, glad no noblewomen were around to throw unsubtle glares at her. They would probably envy her if they saw her. She made her way toward the pond and sat at its edge. Extracting a loaf of bread she took from the lunch table, she called for the turtle-ducks who waddled to her in order to be fed.

Katara giggled as the small animals begged for more, looking at her with black, beady eyes. She
watched as the mother turtle-duck kept her young in check and she laughed softly when she remembered that Zuko, the Mighty Fire Lord, was actually bitten by one.

As she sat by the water’s edge, Katara thought back to the conversation she had with Zuko. She had really enjoyed their time together and their talk. It concerned something important and serious not just how fun it was to ride the elephant-koi or how exciting the circus was. Katara could not help but feel glad that Zuko had opened up to her since it was obvious he was not accustomed to that. And she had opened up to him as well. She also tried to retain her emotions in order not to worry the others, and instead she listened to their problems. Just like how she comforted Aang when he was unsure on what to do to end Ozai or when she comforted Toph about her parents.

But Zuko listened to her and even gave her some encouragement. She had never talked about the memories she had about her mother with anyone before, but she had with Zuko. Twice. First in the Crystal Catacombs of Ba Sing Se, and then in the garden. Perhaps it was easy because they both shared the same feelings regarding their mothers and knew how the other felt.

In was endearing to know that the serious, tough former Prince Zuko longed to see his mother. It was further proof that he had a caring heart despite what he had done in the past and how much he tried to hide it.

*It must be hard to know that the person you once thought lost forever is actually not and harder still not to be able to be reunited with that loved one,* Katara thought with a sad frown.

The young woman sighed sadly as she bent a thin, long ribbon from the pond water, twirling it around with her finger. She would like to help Zuko find his mother, but how? What could she do?

She paused in her waterbending and smiled as she noticed Iroh making his way toward her with a broad smile on his cheery, old face.

“Now, what is a lovely, young lady doing all by herself?” Iroh said graciously as he gave her an extravagant bow.

Standing up, Katara giggled as she brushed the grass from her blue pants.

“Oh, Uncle Iroh, so charming as always. Is the meeting over?”
Emitting his familiar chuckle, Iroh replied jovially.

“No. I just decided to take a break. I am not as young as before and I’m afraid I’d fall asleep and snore.” He laughed. “Besides, I know my nephew can handle himself. How about joining me for a cup of ginseng tea in the veranda?”

Katara smiled and nodded. With a grin, she accepted Iroh’s arm, and they made their way over to the veranda overlooking the magnificent garden. As the servants set up a small table with tea and pastries, Katara listened with amusement as Iroh recounted stories from his travels.

“One time while we were still in exile, I beat Zuko on a game of Pai Sho and made him play the tsunghi horn on music night. Oh, how angry he got!” Iroh laughed, the wrinkles near his eyes growing more profound.

“I can imagine his irritated expression,” Katara said and giggled. “He always had it the next couple of times we crossed paths.”

“Yes, that’s true, but he was not always like that. Zuko used to be a very happy and cheerful child,” Iroh replied before he sighed and took a sip from his cup.

He was silent for a moment as sadness settled on his aged face.

“After his banishment, Zuko was filled with so much pain and rage.” He paused and he smiled again. “But that was in the past, and luckily, he was able to overcome his anger.”

“Yes, you’re right, he has changed,” Katara agreed as she looked over to the cherry blossom tree where she had sat with Zuko a few days ago. “Uncle Iroh? How...how did Zuko...get the scar on his face?”

Iroh raised his eyebrow at her and she quickly added, “I mean it’s just that I would like to know how he got it. I know it has something to do with his banishment, but what?”

“That is not for me to say. You should ask Zuko yourself,” Iroh told her softly.
He knew Katara was just curious not because the scar itself was something of interest, but because she wanted to know what had caused him so much pain. He was sure it would do his nephew some good to have somebody listen to him, but the problem was whether or not Zuko was willing to open up.

Sokka stifled a yawn as one of the Earth Kingdom representatives rambled on and on about why his village was a good trade opportunity for the Fire Nation. Sokka stopped listening after a few hours of the old man’s endless talk. Now if the meeting had anything to do with battles, he would have been completely attentive. He was a man of action, after all.

He looked over to see how the other men were holding up. Some of the council members seemed to be listening, even Aang seemed interested.

Well, he is the Avatar and all, the warrior thought.

Sokka looked up at the dais behind the wall of flames to see how the Fire Lord was faring. He was not even surprised at all. Zuko regarded the man with a stoic expression as he sat in a straight and regal posture. Only when the man finished, did Zuko speak.

The Water Tribe Warrior suppressed another yawn as the next Earth Kingdom representative stood up before the Fire Lord.

Maybe I should have said no when Zuko and Aang invited me to come. This is boring! Sokka complained mentally, tuning out what the man was saying completely. I wonder what’s for dinner. Maybe some cow-chicken dumplings covered in sweet sauce or some rice pudding. His mind floated away.

I wonder what Suki will be wearing. He grinned.

An indignant exclamation from the men snapped him out of his precious thoughts.

“This is an outrage! How can you demand Fire Lord Zuko do such a thing?” Chao exclaimed indignantly. The other Fire Nation Council members agreed angrily.

Great. I just had to miss the good part! Sokka mentally groused.
“Aang, what’s going on?” he whispered to the exasperated-looking airbender.

The young Avatar looked at him with a frown.

“Don’t tell me you fell asleep, Sokka,” Aang whispered back, annoyed.

“No…I was just letting my brain take a break,” the warrior countered back.

Aang rolled his gray eyes at him before he pointed at a man standing before the Fire Lord.

“That man just told Zuko to return all Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom continent back to them.”

“What?!” Sokka exclaimed. A few of the men sitting near them shushed him. Sokka scowled at them.

“I have ended the war that had raged for generations and had caused countless atrocities to all nations. We are at peace now,” Zuko answered in a hard tone.

“Well, yes, but your colonies are in Earth Kingdom soil, and so, belong to us,” the large, old man said as he crossed his arms in front of his broad chest arrogantly.

“I have returned all newly conquered Earth Kingdom villages and cities such as Omashu and Ba Sing Se back to their rightful rulers. The Fire Nation colonies we have kept are the ones that have been under Fire Nation rule for decades. My people have made their lives there. I cannot just order them to leave their homes,” Zuko replied in a calm, firm tone.

“Well, you did not think of that when you invaded the villages in the first place!” the man snapped.

Uproar erupted between some Earth Kingdom representatives and the Fire Nation members. Sokka could not believe it. Was the man blaming Zuko for what his ancestors did in the past?
Zuko sighed in frustration, a stream of smoke coming out from his nostrils. He looked at Aang, who nodded in understanding.

“Noblemen, please!” Aang called out as he stood up.

The Earth Kingdom men reluctantly quieted for the Avatar, but the Fire Nation men still bickered until Zuko gave them a stern look. As the room quieted down once again, Aang turned to look at the man who caused the outbreak.

Breathing deeply to control his nerves, the young airbender began.

“The Fire Nation did wrong by invading the rest of the world, but that was because of Sozin’s greed and then the Fire Lords that continued his legacy. But that was in the beginning, many decades ago! You cannot blame Fire Lord Zuko for something he did not start. You should be glad he did not succumb to his father’s wishes, but instead followed his own destiny and ended the war. He has proved himself to be a great man.”

Aang regarded the men and took another steadying breath.

“You Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom men alike need to end that hatred and wariness you have for each other and move on with your lives!”

He returned his gaze back to the highly, irritated Earth Kingdom man.

“The Fire Nation colonies Zuko possesses and protects are much more Fire Nation than Earth Kingdom, so it would be the same thing all over again. Families will lose their homes as well as the lives their ancestors have built. Do you really want to start another war? Do you really want to continue making people suffer? Besides, the colonies are not hurting anybody.”

“How do we know that the Fire Nation won’t decide to take more colonies to increase their power? It happened before, it can happen again,” the man retorted. Then glaring, he addressed the tall figure behind the firewall, “Ozai’s blood runs through your veins! He left his mark evident on your face!”

The whole room broke out in chaos again. A few guards readied themselves to jump in defense of their lord just in case.
“You went too far!” Sokka yelled above the upheaval. Even the carefree Aang looked furious.

So that’s it, Zuko thought angrily. He gritted his teeth, the fire wall growing higher with his temer.

They still believe I’m like my father! Zuko clenched his hands, smoke coming out between his fingers.

What do I have to do to make these people see that I’m not like him? The room began to grow hotter.

Sokka and Aang looked at each other in alarm, but Zuko willed himself to calm down. He needed to show them he was different, that he will not make the same mistakes his ancestors before him did.

“I understand your concern,” Zuko finally spoke in a composed tone.

The men’s attention shifted to the Fire Lord as he parted the wall of fire and descended from the dais. Sokka noticed that some Earth Kingdom men gaped when they realized how young the new Fire Lord really was. Because of the way he argued, they expected to see someone older.

“I saw what my own country was doing during my exile, and I was ashamed. I assure you that all I seek is for all nations to live peacefully. I have opened trade with many of you and my colonies are the ones that provide you what you need. The colonies not only hold my people, but Earth Kingdom families as well and I arranged up for them all to be protected,” Zuko began in a stately voice.

“Believe me when I say that I do not want to start another power-hungry reign. I only wish to regain the Fire Nation’s former glory and honor along with trust from both Water Tribes and the Earth Kingdom,” Zuko firmly stated. “But that can only be accomplished if you let go of your prejudices and hatred. We can overcome our differences if only you are willing to meet me halfway.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After finishing all his meetings with the rest of the Earth Kingdom representatives and then his Court Council, Zuko made his way to his royal bedchamber to rest, but after what happened that day, rest did not seem possible. At the entrance of his antechamber, he dismissed his personal guards before returning to his room.

Removing his formal robes, Zuko opened his large, dark mahogany wardrobe and extracted a steel
chest that rested at the bottom. Inserting a key, he opened the chest and took out its contents. He pulled on a black suit, black boots and a pair of black gloves. Zuko then reached back inside and pulled out a white and blue mask, an exact replica of the original. He ran his strong fingers along the mask’s fangs before he tugged it into his waist belt and then strapped his dual broadswords on the right side of his hip.

Donning a black and dark red robe outlined with gold, Zuko opened the large balcony doors and looked at the dark sky. Making sure no one was watching, he swiftly and stealthily climbed down the balcony and landed gracefully on the palace garden. Moving along the shadows, he came upon the palace walls. Allowing his sharp eyes to scan the garden to see if anybody was around, he removed and hid his robe among some thick bushes before he climbed over the tall wall. He strapped his swords behind his back so they were crisscrossing and then he extracted the blue and white mask from his waist belt and tied it to his face.

For most of the night, the Blue Spirit roamed through the city. Swiftly running and jumping along the rooftops, he made sure the guards were performing their duties and no trouble sprang up during the night. He was able to foil a burglary, but for the most part everything seemed well.

Zuko looked at his beloved city behind the hollow eyes of the Blue Spirit before he decided to return to the palace. After a few more minutes of much needed freedom, Zuko climbed over the palace wall again. He waited a few minutes before removing his mask and gloves. He pulled the robe back on and then readjusted his swords to his hip.

As he made his way back to his balcony, Zuko looked up toward the starry, night sky and noticed the moon was bright and full before he glanced over at the pond that seemed to glow with the moon’s silver light. Zuko moved away from the balcony and made his way toward the pond.

He leaned over the pond’s surface and regarded his reflection. Did people only see him as the son of Ozai, as the evil former Fire Lord’s spawn? Or was it because of his scar that they mistrusted him?

He sighed. Although he had thought he had finally moved on, the scar and the past still haunted him.

Katara tossed and turned on her bed. It was a night with a full moon, and so she could not sleep. She could feel the moon pulling and calling to her. Lifting the bed covers, she climbed out of bed and put on her clothes. Maybe a midnight walk in the garden and some waterbending would help her insomnia.

Katara walked quietly down the palace hall, being careful not to alert anybody. Stepping onto the private garden, she inhaled the cool night air and the flowers’ fragrance before she made her way
deeper into the garden. She looked up at the bright moon fondly. She wondered how Yue was doing. Katara looked back down and stopped short as she noticed the lone, tall figure standing at the pond’s edge. She was about to turn back, but upon a closer look she realized it was Zuko.

Quietly making her way to him, she noticed how intently he seemed to be staring at the water’s surface and she wondered why that would be.

“Zuko? Can’t sleep?” she asked quietly as she stood beside him.

Zuko stiffened slightly, but upon realizing it was Katara, he relaxed. The young firebender glanced at her and noticed that Katara was wearing midnight blue pants and shirt with a white collar. She looked beautiful in blue, too.

*Who am I kidding? Katara looks good in any color,* Zuko admitted to himself before he mentally shook his head.

“Yeah, you could say that,” he finally answered. He discreetly moved his hand to make sure the Blue Spirit mask was well hidden under his robe. “What about you?”

Katara smiled and shrugged.

“It’s difficult for me to sleep on nights with a full moon.”

“Oh,” was his short answer. He remembered that the Northern Water Tribe Princess Yue gave up her life to be the Moon Spirit.

Seeing his dejected mood, Katara frowned.

“Sokka told me what happened in the meeting today,” she quietly said as she looked at his impassive face.

Zuko remained silent and so she continued.
“Zuko, I hope you ignored what that man said. You’re not responsible for what your ancestors have done in the past.”

“But there are many who believe so,” he replied without looking up. “They only see me as the heir of a line of ruthless dictators. They only see a second Ozai.”

“Well, you don’t look like Ozai at all,” Katara replied.

Zuko scoffed at her.

“And I don’t mean because of the scar, Zuko,” she said as placed her hands on her hips and scowled.

Zuko smiled faintly, but it faded as he remembered the meeting again.

“I have done many things in order to show how regretful we are for what the Fire Nation has done to the other nations in the past and I have sent out aid for the Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom reconstructions. But they don’t seem to take that into consideration,” he said bitterly.

“But, Zuko, there’s only a few people who still think like that. They just need more time to heal their wounds. Trust me,” Katara told him and looked up at the stars.

“I hope you’re right,” Zuko said as he kept his gaze on his reflection. “I just wish I could say the same thing about my own people.”

Katara looked back down with a frown.

“What do you mean?”

The young firebender sighed.

“There are still some Fire Nation citizens, mostly those who supported Ozai, who see me as a traitor, someone without honor and who’s weak…a disgrace,” Zuko said passively. He moved his left hand to the scar on his face.
Katara looked down at their reflections in the pond and noticed Zuko touching his scarred skin. She also noticed the sorrowful look in his eyes.

*Weak? A disgrace? Why?* Katara thought. *Does the scar have something to do with it?*

“Why do you say that?” she asked him, staring at him from the pond’s surface.

Zuko blinked as if he were brought out of a memory.

“No reason,” he replied coolly, replacing his features into a blank expression. “Forget what I said.”

The waterbender then turned to him and placed her small hand on his arm.

“Please. Tell me what’s wrong. Is it something related to your scar?” she asked quietly. She felt him stiffen. “Zuko...? How...how did you get this scar?” she asked him softly.

Zuko stiffened even more. He looked up towards the night sky.

*Should I tell her? What if she thinks me foolish for having acted so rashly? Does she really want to know?* He did not detect any form of ridicule in her voice just curiosity and…concern?

Taking his silence as a sign that she had overstepped the line, Katara quickly pulled her hand away.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I understand if you don’t want to talk to me about it,” she said quietly.

She turned to walk away, but before he could think about it twice, Zuko quickly grabbed her wrist, stopping her from leaving. Katara turned to look at him with a puzzled expression.

“Please. Don’t leave. I would like…to tell you…” He sighed, running his pale fingers through his short, loose hair. “It’s just that it’s something…difficult to think about.”
Zuko released her wrist and clasped his hands behind his back, staring at the clear reflection on the calm pond. He was glad when Katara did not move away, but stayed by his side.

He took a long, deep breath.

“It all happened when I was thirteen years of age. I knew one day I would ascend the throne and rule the nation as Fire Lord, and so, I wanted to learn everything there was on how to become a great ruler. I asked Uncle to take me to one of the meetings the Court Council held. We both knew it was not really allowed, but I convinced him and he made me promise not to utter a word during the whole war meeting.”

Katara nodded for him to continue. She had never heard Zuko talk so much, but she found that she enjoyed listening to the sound of his deep, velvety voice.

“At first everything was well and I was fascinated by it,” Zuko continued then his voice grew hard, “But then a heartless general suggested sending the Forty-First Division, which was made up of mostly young and inexperienced recruits, to attack an Earth Kingdom city from the front while the real troops attacked from behind. I could not believe they were willing to sacrifice their own people as if they were mere cattle! Men and women who only wanted to show their love and loyalty for their country. I couldn’t believe it! I was outraged and disgusted by such injustice and I spoke out against such a dishonorable and despicable plan.”

He paused. He had never spoken this much before, but it seemed he could not stop himself from revealing everything to Katara just like he could not stop himself from smiling and laughing in her presence.

“It displeased my father since I spoke out of turn and disrespected him and the elders. So I had to fight in an Agni Kai for my transgression. I accepted without hesitation, ready to fight for what I believed in, thinking I would fight the general. But as I turned around in the arena I was stunned, for it was not the general that I faced, but…my father.”

Zuko paused as he heard Katara gasp softly beside him.

“As I faced him, my confidence wavered and I fell to my knees and hands. I did not want to fight him since he was stronger than I was and because I could not bring myself to fight my own father.
“To my shame I begged him for forgiveness as tears fell from my eyes, but it did not touch his heart. He told me that I was weak and a disgrace and that I would learn respect and suffering would be my teacher.” Zuko again paused as the horrible memory flashed before his eyes and he touched the scarred side of his face.

He let out a long, shaky breath.

“Then he lit his hand…and struck my face.”

Katara gasped loudly in horror, bringing the tips of her fingers up to her lips, her blue eyes widening in disbelief. How could a father do such a cruel thing?

“Your own father scarred you?!?” she asked incredulously, her voice lifting into a high pitch in her disbelief, “For standing up for those poor soldiers? How could he? You were just a young boy for Tui and La’s sake! That…that…monster!” Katara growled. She hated the man even more.

Zuko looked at her, slightly surprised at her strong reaction.

“He thought I deserved it for speaking out of turn and thus disrespecting him. He thought that by speaking out against their plan and by refusing to fight him, I was showing weakness. So he banished me, proclaiming me a disgrace and stripping me of my honor and my inheritance to the throne,” Zuko continued in an emotionless tone.

“When I found out, I was in the infirmary healing from the burn. I was devastated, but I could do nothing. Uncle was the only one who stood by my side during my whole exile, and put up with my volatile temper. He is the only one from my family, except my mother, who cares for me. He is more of a father to me than Ozai ever was or ever would be,” he continued. “The only way to regain my honor was to capture the Avatar, as you already know.”

Katara stared into his expressionless face.

“It was more than that wasn’t it? It wasn’t only your honor and throne you wanted, but…to return home and please your father,” she stated quietly.

Zuko noticed that her voice held no pity as he had feared but compassion. He only nodded to answer her question.
“And I judged you and treated you so badly. I’m so sorry,” she whispered sadly.

“That was in the past. You don’t have to apologize. Besides, I was always attacking all of you,” Zuko reassured her before he continued, “Many saw the Agni Kai between my father and me, and still see my disfigurement as a sign of my disobedience and weakness. And for years I believed that as well. That is why I closed myself away from others and fought hard to prove that I wasn’t weak.”

A gentle breeze blew by them, disrupting the images in the pond.

“Zuko, you’re only human, it’s okay to feel weak sometimes, you know. It’s alright to be afraid, but the important thing is that you faced your fears. And that’s what made you stronger,” she said softly.

She moved to stand in front of him and Zuko looked down into her face. Her sapphire eyes stared into his golden ones with determination.

“You never lost your honor, Zuko. What you did for those soldiers proves how great and honorable a person you are. You only had the best interest for your nation at heart.”

Zuko only stared at her in amazement. It was as if she had read his mind.

“Your scar is a symbol of your bravery and just heart,” Katara told him gently but firmly.

Zuko’s breath caught in his throat as Katara’s soft, brown fingers rested on his crimson, scarred eye. He slowly let out his breath and felt his heart skip a beat when he felt her begin to caress his scar gently. It felt so nice and comforting. He closed his eyes and leaned into her sweet touch as he lifted his left hand and placed it above hers.

Katara suppressed a shiver at his touch.

“Embrace it, Zuko. Be proud of it…just like I’m proud of you,” she whispered softly.

The Fire Lord’s tensed body relaxed as the young waterbender talked, her voice becoming soft and
musical, almost caressing him. He felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his soul. He felt like
a small flame had ignited his sad, lonely heart. And it burned strongly.

The firebender opened his eyes and stared at the young woman’s beautiful face that was illuminated
by the full moon’s heavenly light. Another soft breeze blew by, causing her blue clothes and hair to
ruffle gently. The rustle of leaves and grass were they only sounds in the night. The cherry blossom
tree, as if thrilled, quivered and glowed under the moonlight above them.

Zuko reached out his right hand to caress Katara’s own cheek, and this time she could not stop
herself from shivering under his warm touch.

*Her skin is so soft,* Zuko thought. He then moved his thumb down her cheek and began to lightly rub
it against her soft, plump lips.

Katara shivered again and closed her eyes at the sensation.

Zuko felt a strange urge to embrace her, to take her into his arms, to press his lips against hers. He
was becoming so enchanted with Katara’s desirable lips that he began to lower his head toward hers
until their noses were almost touching. Then Katara opened her eyes.

“Zuko?” she whispered.

He immediately pulled away as if he had awoken from a trance and straightened himself, his
expression again impassive.

“It’s very late. I’ll walk you to your room,” Zuko said, turning his eyes aside. Without waiting for a
reply, he turned and walked away.

Katara was a bit alarmed at his sudden change of mood. Did she say something wrong? Was he
upset with her? Why had he been so close to her? Had he been about to...kiss her? Shaking her head
at the last thought, she walked quickly to catch up to the now silent Zuko’s long strides.

Silence settled between them as they entered the quiet palace and it remained unbroken until they
stopped at her door.
“Um…well then, good night, Zuko,” Katara said uncertainly as she opened her door.

“Katara,” Zuko called out softly.

She paused at the sound of his quiet voice before she looked back over her shoulder.

“Thank you for…everything.” He gave her a small smile.

Katara’s smile returned to her face.

“You’re welcome, Zuko. Just remember that everything I said is true,” she told him.

She entered her room, and with one last glance, she closed the door behind her.

The young Fire Lord stood at the door for a while before he shook himself, ignoring the small voice in his head that insisted he follow after the waterbending woman. Just as he began to walk away, he heard another door open down the hall. He suspiciously turned toward the sound and was surprised to see Sokka walking out of Suki’s room.

The Water Tribe warrior’s whole face turned red when he realized he was not alone.

“Er…I…found out Suki wasn’t feeling well. I was…just checking on her to make sure she was okay,” he explained quickly before he cleared his throat. His clothes were wrinkled and disheveled and his hair was messy.

Zuko tried to change his surprised look into one of indifference.

“That’s nice. Well…good night, Sokka.”

“Yeah, you, too,” Sokka said, laughing weakly as he turned around to leave.
Zuko again shook himself as he finally made his way toward his bedchamber, thinking about his conversation with Katara the entirety of the way. Again he felt his chest lighten and warm. Then he remembered how he was about to kiss her.

What’s wrong with me? he asked himself. Never had he had such a powerful urge to kiss a woman before.

As he rested on his bed a few minutes later, waiting for sleep to take him, a new emotion he could not understand swelled and burned within his heart.
As the early rays of sunlight emerged the next day, Zuko immediately rose from his comfortable bed, threw on a light robe, and opened the balcony doors. The thick curtains shifted gently as the morning breeze blew in. Stepping outside, he breathed in the crisp morning air as he looked over to the ocean in the distance. He let out a contented sigh as a soft breeze caressed his features and ruffled his dark hair. The young Fire Lord leaned against the balcony ledge and looked down at his private garden, reveling in the fragrance of the flowers and trees.

When he had returned from his exile, the garden desperately needed repair. Ozai and Azula never enjoyed spending time in the garden, and so, it eventually began to die. The trees and flowers withered almost to dust and the grass had turned dry and brown. It had looked more like an abandoned graveyard than a garden.

However, as soon as he became Fire Lord, Zuko ordered the Royal Palace Garden to be restored to its original beauty by planting more trees and exotic flowers, and cleaning and expanding the turtle-duck pond. He especially had his mother’s rose bushes restored to their healthy and vibrant state.

He smiled, remembering Katara’s delighted face as she saw the garden and the pond a few days ago.

Returning inside his grand room, Zuko settled himself on his red cushion in front of the candles that rested on top a small altar-like table. An incense stick gently filled the room with its aroma. With a flicker of his hand, the candles immediately lit up, the small flames falling and rising steadily as he inhaled and exhaled in rhythm. He tried to banish all distracting and frustrating thoughts from his mind as he began to meditate, but the fresh memories of that day in the garden and the previous night occupied his mind.

He had never spoken to anyone about the times he had spent with his mother as a child before, not even Iroh. His uncle had tried to persuade him into talking and expressing his feelings, but he always refused. He had not wanted to seem weak speaking of such childish memories after what happened with Ozai. But he had somehow overcome that and told Katara, and she did not judge or ridicule him like he was sure Mai or anybody else would have. That was probably because Katara was a caring person and because she understood his sadness, for it mirrored her own.

And then the previous night, he had revealed his painful past to her and she listened to him with a compassionate heart. Her words about his scar surfaced in his mind again and they comforted him, the mark that was a constant reminder of his mistake. At least it was before, but now it was different. Katara was right, he should stop regarding his scar as such and embrace it as part of who he is, not
who he was. She even touched it again with no sign of disgust or revulsion. She just caressed it gently.

The strange new flame in his heart burned again.

Nobody has listened and understood me like Katara has. Why is it that I find it so easy to talk to her? Zuko thought pensively, the candles burning steadily before him. We really barely know each other, and yet, it feels like we have been friends for a very long time, he contemplated.

It seemed that both he and Katara had more things in common than he had thought. They would have been a great couple if they were not already in relationships.

More than just friends...? Zuko thought, the idea causing his heart to give a strange, thrilled leap.

The firebender tried to suppress the heat that threatened to invade his face. He hoped Katara had not notice that he had been leaning too close to her in order to kiss her the previous night. He recalled how close her face was to his, he could almost feel her soft lips. If she had not opened her eyes and spoken, he probably would have kissed her.

No. What I am thinking? He shook his head. That is a crazy idea! More than friends? Impossible!

But why should it be?

Why? Because they were just friends and could only be friends! Katara had said that they were friends so many times already. And he could not betray Mai. Besides, Katara loved...Aang who, by the way, was also his friend!

Zuko groaned as he pushed his hair out of his face.

I can't be thinking like this and I have to stop having strange and disgraceful thoughts about her! And Aang has been a good friend. I can't hurt him in such a way. It'd be dishonorable. Katara and I are just friends.

With that, Zuko extinguished the candles and made his way toward his bathroom to get ready for
another meeting. His last statement painfully echoed in his thoughts.

*Just friends…just friends…*

That afternoon Katara, Suki and Toph had a little spar in one of the many training grounds that the Fire Nation Palace possessed. Toph used her incredible earthbending talents, while Katara summoned her waterbending. Suki brought out her metal fans and used the Kyoshi fighting skills she had mastered years ago.

After a few hours of exercise, they decided to take a rest and, after bragging about her victory, Toph reluctantly followed her friends inside the palace. As soon as she entered her room, Katara quickly got ready to take a bath before dinner. After removing her clothes, breast bindings, and her undergarments she stepped into the tub and sat down, the warm water reaching over her chest.

The young waterbender submerged herself in her calming element with a contented sigh. She was rather impressed at the Fire Nation Palace water system. She just had to turn a knob and water would spring forth from a pipe at the head of the tub, filling the bathtub quickly. Non-firebenders just had to light the pieces of wood under the tubs with a candle and wait for the water to heat up. Then the servants would just remove the burned pieces of wood and replace them with new ones, unlike back home in the Southern Water Tribe where they had to drag the buckets with hot water to fill their small tubs.

Using her waterbending, Katara washed her body and long hair until she was completely clean and fresh smelling. Setting the soap aside, she thought back about what happened the previous morning. Aang had acted so strange. She knew he had wanted to tell her something, but as always, he ran away from it and played it safe. She wondered what he really wanted to ask her. Shrugging it off, she rested her head against the cool edge of the tub, letting the soothing water relax her tired muscles.

In a few more days, their stay in the Fire Nation would come to an end. Iroh would probably be returning to his teashop in Ba Sing Se. Aang and Toph were needed in the Earth Kingdom, and Suki and Ty Lee back in Kyoshi Island. And she needed to return to her waterbending students. She wondered how many more years would pass before they saw Iroh and Zuko again.

*Zuko.* Katara saddened, remembering what Zuko had revealed to her the previous night.

How could someone so young suffer so many hardships? How could he endure so much pain? And the worst part was that it was his own father that had caused him so much sorrow.
He had looked so tormented by his scar that she had wanted to comfort him so badly, to make him see it was not horrible. And so, she had touched his scar again. It felt like it did before in Ba Sing Se, rough and dry yet soft and warm.

Katara closed her eyes, revisiting the moment from the previous night, the way his tortured, amber eyes stared into hers while he caressed her own cheek. Katara absentmindedly touched her lips, remembering the way his thumb had touched them. His large hand, the same one she had seen him use to firebend powerful bursts of fire and handle his lethal broadswords, was so warm and gentle that she could not help but enjoy it. His touch had felt so nice and comforting that she had closed her eyes to relish in it.

And when she opened them...his striking face was so close to hers that she could almost feel his warm breath tickling her lips...

Katara snapped her eyes open and dropped her hand from her lips, feeling a blush creep onto her cheeks.

*Why was he so close?* she asked herself for the hundredth time. *It looked like he wanted to...*

Katara quickly placed her hands on her burning cheeks to cool them down. *He wasn’t going to...kiss me, was he?*

Katara felt her heart do a somersault and butterflies fluttered in her stomach at the idea of Zuko kissing her before she angrily berated herself for thinking in such a way.

*Of course he wasn’t! Don’t be stupid! We’re just friends. Why would he want...to kiss me?* she told herself.

She sighed. But deep down inside she wondered what it would have been like if Zuko had kissed her...

A knock sounded outside her bathroom door, relieving her of her confusing thoughts.

“Who is it?” Katara called, sitting up in the tub.
“It’s Jiao, Lady Katara. Dinner is almost served. Do you need any help?” the young servant called out from behind the closed door.

“No, thank you. I’m almost finished,” Katara told her.

Darn. Did I really take that long bathing?

She quickly got out of the tub, flushing the dirty water down the drain. She dried herself with a soft towel and started getting ready. *It would be very embarrassing if I were to be late again!*

And even more embarrassing if her cheeks did not return to their normal color. She quickly dressed and entered the room that Jiao was tidying at the moment. The young servant woman turned and smiled.

“A letter has been sent to you this morning, Lady Katara,” Jiao told her as she extracted a letter from her pocket and handed it to the waterbender.

Katara took the letter, looked at the blue string attached to it, and smiled.

“Thank you, Jiao.”

“If you’d like I could come back later to clean your room,” Jiao said. She smiled and bowed before she exited the room.

_Not only is she nice, helpful, and loyal, she’s also respectful of other people’s privacy, not like the other gossiping young maids. No wonder Zuko trusts her_, Katara thought. Thinking about Zuko made her blush again.

Shaking her head, she opened the letter and smiled as she recognized her grandmother’s writing.

*My dear granddaughter,*

*I hope you are doing well in the Fire Nation heat. Remember to drink lots of water. I hope you are*
having lots of fun in the capital and I hope your silly brother is not making a fool of himself in front of royalty. I can’t wait for you to return and tell me all about your visit. Don’t forget to bring some souvenirs. Your father, Pakku, and I miss you and your brother very much. Your students are doing extremely well, but my poor Pakku is having some difficulty disciplining the smaller children who, instead of making water whips, make ice cubes to build miniature towers.

By the way, how are things with the young Fire Lord? I heard there is some trouble in his colonies. I hope it’s nothing serious. So young and having to deal with so many problems, what a shame. Have you been able to cheer him up? I am sure he is treating you well. Send him and his uncle our regards. Hope to see you soon.

Your Gran-Gran,

Kanna

Katara folded the letter and placed it inside her nightstand drawer. Picturing Master Pakku’s eye twitching with irritation made Katara giggle. And she could not wait to bring some Fire Nation souvenirs to her family. She missed them and her home with its white, peaceful surroundings.

Looking out the window, she noticed that the sun was setting. Katara forgot about her homesickness as she practically ran from her room to the royal dining hall.

During dinner, Mai kept showing off the new bracelet Zuko had bought her. Ty Lee—who kept on making Haru flush every time she caught his eye—exclaimed it was wonderful. Everybody else said it was nice except for Toph who found Mai’s constant bragging irritating.

Zuko had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. When Mai had asked him to spend the morning with her in the city because he had promised before, he expected it to have been a normal date where the couple walked around the city and had a picnic or something. Instead, she practically dragged him to a jewelry shop where she chose the bracelet.

“Isn’t it nice, Katara?” Mai asked innocently, almost shoving the golden jewel in the waterbender’s face.

“Yes, lovely,” Katara replied tersely.
What’s her problem? What does she want, for me to worship it? Well, she has another thing coming. Besides, it’s not as beautiful as my rose hairpin, Katara thought smugly.

As dinner continued, and Katara noticed the way her brother ate, she thought back to her grandmother’s letter.

‘I hope it’s nothing serious. So young and having to deal with so many problems, what a shame.’

Katara sighed. Her Gran-Gran had no idea.

‘Have you been able to cheer him up?’

Katara pondered. Well, she did make Zuko laugh, so that must count.

‘I am sure he is treating you well.’

Well, he had taken her out to eat and shown her around the Fire Nation capital. He defended her against those two men and his own advisor. He had shown her his private garden and his mother’s rose bushes. He had listened to her when she talked about her own mother.

And he had caressed her cheek and lips.

Oh, yes, he has definitely treated me well, she sighed dreamily.

Her heart skipped a beat and she felt another blush creeping into her cheeks. It seemed she had been blushing a lot more lately than she had ever had in her life. She peeked at Zuko and quickly lowered her face. She looked around at everybody else, but nobody noticed anything. She did find a grinning Toph unusual, though. She glanced at Aang—who was having a conversation with Zuko about the jewelry shop—from the corner of her eye and felt ashamed of herself. She ate silently for the rest of the meal except when Mai bragged about the bracelet again.

Placing his cup of wine down, Zuko pressed his lips tightly together. He was a bit annoyed by Mai’s strange behavior as he half-listened to what Aang was talking to him about. He tried to avoid looking at Katara, for whenever he did, that strange feeling engulfed his heart again. He felt his right cheek
beginning to burn as he remembered her words and her touch. He discreetly touched his scarred face and stole a glance at the lovely waterbender who seemed a bit quieter than usual.

*Maybe after she returns to the Southern Water Tribe everything would return to normal,* he mused. But for some reason, that thought caused his heart to clench painfully.

He was glad when the meal was finally over. Excusing himself from the table, Zuko quickly retreated to his study to finish some paperwork and calm his confusing feelings. As he opened the door, he heard Sokka call to him.

“Hey, Zuko! Wait up!” the blue-eyed warrior called behind him.

Zuko turned around, and with a raised eyebrow, waited for the young man to catch up to him.

“What is it, Sokka?” he asked. He noticed that the warrior seemed a bit nervous and agitated.

“I just wanted to talk to you, you know, man to man, because you see I have this small problem… actually a big problem and I don’t know what to do and…I need your advice,” Sokka rambled rapidly on as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Zuko raised his eyebrow again as both of them stood outside his study room.

“Advice? On what?”

Sokka opened his mouth, but he closed it sharply when they heard the women’s voices coming down the corridor. Sokka seemed to panic and he whipped his head back and forth as if he was looking for a place to hide.

“Would you like to talk in my study?” Zuko asked him.

He was slightly amused at the way the confident and sometimes cocky Water Tribe warrior now seemed like a frightened moose-deer caught in the torchlight. He had a feeling that Sokka wanted to talk about something he did not want the girls to find out about.
“Yeah, sure,” Sokka answered smoothly, trying to compose himself, but when the women’s laughter became louder, he quickly jumped into the room.

Zuko smirked as he entered his study after the jumpy warrior, closing the door behind him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Wow! This place is amazing!” Suki exclaimed, turning her head to look everywhere around her.

“Yeah, and it’s huge! Ah, and the grass feels so good.” Toph sighed as she wiggled her toes on the green grass.

Katara smiled at her friends.

“I told you guys it was great,” she said as she looked around the Royal Palace Garden once again. She liked it more every time she visited.

She glanced over to where the cherry blossom tree stood near the pond, where she and Zuko had stood the night before with the bright moon in the night sky, the cool breeze, and Zuko’s warm touch...she flushed and brushed the last thought away.

“Are you sure we’re allowed to be here? You know how these Fire Nation people are about social class and all that stuff,” Suki asked uncomfortably. Her fingers rested rigidly against the metal fans tucked into her waist belt.

“Yes, Zuko told me we could visit the garden whenever we want,” Katara reassured her friends.

“Sparky told you that?” Toph grinned. It sounded more like a statement than a question. “Well, I’d still be allowed here since I come from the prestigious Bei Fong family, who is like royalty, by the way.”

She grinned broadly as she straightened herself and lifted her chin up in a mockingly haughty manner.
“I’ll just say you two are my ladies-in-waiting.” The blind earthbender smirked.

After the end of the war, Toph had returned to her worried parents. After explaining (rather irritably) to them that she was able to care of herself and in the process had helped the Avatar defeat the old Fire Lord, her parents forgave her for running away and accepted her decision to continue helping the Avatar by traveling around the Earth Kingdom, albeit reluctantly.

The three of them broke out into laughter at the thought since Toph was hardly the picture of a noblewoman and Katara and Suki were anything but meek servants. After taking a break from the fun, Katara spotted Iroh sitting in the veranda.

“I’ll be back, you guys. I need to talk to Uncle Iroh. You should check the pond. There are some cute turtle-ducks,” she told them hurriedly before she walked away.

“Okay?” Suki said as she replaced her fans. “What was that about?”

Shrugging her small shoulders, Toph replied, “Well, what are you waiting for? Take me to the pond now, servant.”

Suki rolled eyes.

“Now you’re just pushing it,” she said, causing Toph to cross her arms over her chest and grin.

Katara reached the little veranda where a pot of tea and pastries sat on the table. The sweet aroma of ginseng tea tickled her senses and she sighed contentedly.

“Ah, Miss Katara, care to join me for a cup of hot tea?” the jolly, old man asked, handing her a cup before she could respond.

Katara gave him a smile as she settled down and took the teacup.

“Actually Iroh—” she began, but paused when the old general raised his eyebrow at her. “Er…I mean, Uncle Iroh. I wanted to talk to you about something important. It’s about Zuko.”
Iroh grinned. *Finally!*

Katara fidgeted in her seat.

“I…I asked him about the scar,” she began quietly.

Iroh felt a bit disappointed.

“He…he told me…what happened,” she said almost in a whisper.

Iroh’s grin faded into a grim expression for he knew very well what had happened almost six years ago. He was a witness to everything that had caused his beloved nephew pain. But then, Iroh smiled softly.

“And he told you about it? That is incredible,” responded the retired general softly as he sipped from his porcelain cup.

“Incredible? Why?” Katara looked at the smiling man with confusion. *Is he losing it?*

“Zuko has never told anyone the story behind his scar, and not many people know the truth about it. I do not blame him for never wanting to talk to anyone about it. It is too painful a memory, especially because he believed the scar only represented his mistake and weakness.” Iroh sighed sadly, sipping from his cup again.

“While we were still in exile on his ship, I was the one who had to recount the tragic event to the crew, who were ready to participate in mutiny because of my nephew’s temper. Zuko barely even talked to me about it.” Iroh smiled warmly at her.

Katara gave him a small smile in return. She could not help feeling happy that Zuko had confided in her.

“I still find it very hard to believe what he had to bear. How could a father do so much damage to his
own son?” Katara asked angrily.

Iroh detected loathing and sadness in her voice and smiled gently before he frowned.

“Ozai has always been a selfish and cruel person, and the worst father in history,” he stated.

Katara remembered Zuko saying that once, the first time they were on Ember Island, and agreed completely.

Iroh continued.

“Ozai was always hard on his children, expecting the best of them. He was especially hard on Zuko, for not only was he the heir, but also because he did not become what Ozai wanted him to be. Zuko was more like his mother, kind and compassionate, two things that my brother saw as weaknesses. Not to mention Zuko had a difficult time learning firebending as a child.”

“Zuko, as in former Prince Zuko and the new Fire Lord Zuko? He had trouble firebending?” Katara asked skeptically. By the way she had seen him fight, or by the way she had fought him, it seemed impossible.

“Yes, he did, and Ozai never ceased to point it out by favoring Azula. Not only because she was an excellent firebender, but because she was just like her father…cruel, heartless, ruthless, and cunning.”

Katara gripped her teacup tighter. The crazy fallen princess was all those horrible things and more. Not only did Azula try to kill Aang and Zuko, her own brother, she tried to kill Katara as well. And Azula would have succeeded if Zuko had not risked his own life to save her.

“Zuko was tormented by his father’s indifference, especially when Ozai kept saying that Azula was born lucky while he was lucky to be born.” Iroh sighed sadly again, looking at the steam rising from his cup.

“He would say that?!” Katara asked incredulously.
She could not imagine Zuko’s pain. Her father always treated his children equally and Hakoda would never stop loving them if they made mistakes. It must have been so horrible for a child to know his own father disliked and disapproved of him.

The more she found out about Zuko’s past, the guiltier she felt for judging and mistreating him, and the more she felt the need to be his friend. Katara felt her heart reach out for Zuko once again, for the lost, neglected boy and the hardened, lonely man.

“Azula was a child prodigy,” Iroh continued, “She would learn a new move instantly, while it took Zuko weeks and even months to perfect it. It infuriated him.”

“I don’t blame him,” Katara replied with a small smile. “I became angry and jealous with Aang when I first started to teach him waterbending. He got the bending moves in a few tries while it took me months to master them.”

Even as she thought about it, she was still a bit jealous.

“Well, you and Zuko have more in common than you think,” the wise general said with a grin before he sighed and took another sip of his tea.

“My nephew would practice so much and worked himself so hard that sometimes I worried for his health. But nothing deterred Zuko. All of his burdens just made him stronger. But those same burdens also made him angry and resentful for years. Of course, after he joined the Avatar and all of you, he changed. But he still is tormented by his past and by his father.”

Iroh sighed and shook his bald, white head sadly.

“My nephew is not happy. Not happy at all.”

Katara was silent for a moment as she stared at her cup of untouched tea. Everyone used to call Zuko the ‘angry spoiled Fire Nation Prince’, and she was no exception. But he never contradicted them. He never explained why he was forced to change into that angry person. He never complained; he kept it all inside.

Now she understood why Zuko had acted so cold and harsh when she first met him and all times they encountered each other after. She also understood why he barely smiled, and even more
obvious, why he rarely played around and laughed. His past had hardened him.

Katara remembered the solemn look on his face under the moonlight the previous night. His expression had been unreadable, but she had seen his eyes filled with so much anger, hatred, pain, and sadness.

*I’ll find a way for him to forget such horrible things. And I will find a way to make Zuko happy,* Katara promised herself as she looked over at the cherry blossom tree in the garden.

---

Zuko waited impatiently behind his mahogany study desk for the Water Tribe warrior, who was fidgeting in his chair, to commence. After the Boiling Rock incident both had become good friends, though they sometimes got on each other’s nerves. Zuko looked out the window. The daylight was fading.

“Oh, right, right. Well, you see…Suki and I have been together for years now and we never been happier,” Sokka began with a happy look on his face.

Zuko cocked his one eyebrow. What did that have to do with him?

“You see, I think the time has come for me to stand up and make a serious decision.” Sokka paused, running his hand over his pulled back hair.

“And what decision is that?” Zuko asked as he waited for the response.

Sokka moved his hand from his head to rub the back of his neck.

“Well, I…I want to…propose to Suki,” the young warrior stammered, trying very hard not to blush.

Zuko smiled.
“Well, that’s great news Sokka. Congratulations,” he said sincerely before he frowned. “But I still don’t see why you need my advice.”

“I wanted to ask you how I should do it. How should I propose to Suki and make it memorable to her?”

Zuko’s dark eyebrow lifted even higher on his forehead.

“Do you even know who you’re asking? I’m not exactly the right person to ask for advice on romance,” he said dryly.

“You have a point there,” Sokka agreed. He chuckled when Zuko sniffed.

“I just don’t have another guy friend I could ask,” Sokka continued with a shrug. “I don’t think Aang can help me with…uh…this serious decision. I mean I can’t even talk to him about…intimate issues, if you know what I mean. He’s a monk I don’t think he knows about that stuff! And—"

“Okay, Sokka, you’re going off topic now,” Zuko interrupted since he really did not want to know about Aang’s…private life. “What makes you think I can help you?”

Sokka chuckled and winked his eye.

“Oh, come on, Zuko. You know probably more than me, and especially Aang, about…women.”

Zuko coughed as he tried to hide his flushed face. He had known a few women, though not as many as Sokka thought. It was expected of him since he was a prince, and when he turned fifteen his crew took him to a brothel for his first ‘initiation’ in becoming a man. Music night was not the only form of entertainment for the crew members on his ship. And as Fire Lord he could have all the concubines he desired, if only he liked that custom.

“I still don’t see your point in asking me for advice on how to make a proposal,” Zuko said instead.

“But surely you know how you’re going to propose to Mai. Come on, tell me how the Fire Lord is gonna go on with it,” Sokka said, leaning closer on his chair as if to take notes.
Zuko started. Propose to Mai? The idea had not entered his mind recently. Of course, he had thought about it since she was his girlfriend and it was expected of him, but with all the work and problems that came with running a nation, he had not thought much about it.

“Uh…I…well…” Now it was Zuko’s turn to stumble upon his words.

Sokka only raised an eyebrow at him.

Clearing his throat, Zuko answered instead, “I’m sure it doesn’t matter how you ask Suki just as long as you do. So why are you so insecure?”

Sokka laughed weakly.

“Me? Insecure? Please, I’m the Mighty Warrior Sokka. I’m not nervous at all…”

Zuko tapped his fingers on the desk and raised his eyebrow at him.

“Okay, okay!” Sokka surrendered as he flung his hands in the air. “Maybe I’m a bit nervous. It’s just that…I’m afraid.” He sighed.


“No!” Sokka exclaimed in a high-pitched voice. “I always wanted to get married and start a family. You know, have little Sokkas running around the place.”

Zuko cringed slightly at that thought.

“I even considered asking Suki after the final battle was won. But I’m afraid that if I ask her to marry me…she’ll reject me…I’m afraid of losing her,” Sokka confessed with a sigh, drooping his shoulders.
Zuko regarded the young man in front of him. His fear did seem reasonable.

“Sokka. Do you love her?” Zuko asked the warrior in a serious tone.

Sokka looked up, and raising his chin, he answered in a strong voice, “With all my heart.”

“Then ask her. Take a risk for you may never know if she is waiting for you to do it. If you keep hesitating any longer maybe you will lose her,” Zuko firmly stated.

Sokka sat silently on the chair as he thought about what his friend had said.

“You know what? You’re absolutely right. You even sounded like Iroh for a second. Thanks Fire Lord Hotman. This advice was even better than that silver lining in the horizon or whatever it was,” he said before he laughed hysterically, slapping his knee with his hand.

Zuko scowled at him at the reminder of that talk they had in the Boiling Rock.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your work,” Sokka said after wiping his eyes, looking at the pile of paperwork with disgust as he stood up.

Just as he opened the door, Iroh stepped in.

“Iroh, good to see you again, old man. How about a game of Pai Sho later on?” Sokka asked enthusiastically as he exited the room without waiting for a reply.

Iroh watched the tribesman leave before he turned to look quizzically at his nephew.

“Now, what was that about?”

Zuko smiled and shrugged as he sat back against his large chair.
“He’s going to propose to Suki.”

“Is he now? That’s wonderful!” Iroh cried out cheerfully. “I love weddings!”

Zuko almost rolled his eyes. Iroh loved every form of celebration.

“Don’t tell anyone, Uncle. He has only told me and I think he wants it to be a surprise,” Zuko warned him as he looked through the papers worthy enough of his attention.

“My lips are sealed,” Iroh promised gleefully, pressing his lips together with his thumb and index finger.

Regarding his nephew, who was busy with the scrolls piled on the desk, Iroh sat down heavily on the chair Sokka had occupied.

“Zuko, when will it be your turn to…” Iroh coughed, “propose to…Mai?” The old general swallowed distastefully.

Zuko looked up from his paperwork, again lost for words.

“I…um…I’m not planning to any time soon,” he managed to say.

“And why not?” Iroh asked curiously as he raised his white, bushy eyebrows.

“Well, because…I’m too busy running a country to be thinking about marriage right now,” Zuko answered, making a wide gesture at the enormous piles of paperwork for emphasis.

Zuko looked away and sighed.

*And because I’m not sure I love her anymore...*
Mai was the perfect example of a noblewoman. She was poised, calm and collected, knew Court life and etiquette. She was perfect for the role of Fire Lady…but not perfect for the role as his wife.

Zuko could not deny that he would always be grateful that she went against Azula to save him because she loved him, but Mai had never been there for him when he needed someone the most. He was fond of her, yes, but not in love with her.

He had thought he loved her when he returned from his exile the first time because she welcomed him and treated him fondly. The first time they became intimate he was nervous for he had only had sex before but had never made love. But he was sadly disappointed not only at her ‘performance,’ but because it did not feel special, like he had thought it would. The few times he had sex with her since was only to please her and so he would not have to use the local brothel to relieve his sexual frustrations. But that had been almost a year ago.

He soon realized that what he felt for Mai was just an attraction or affection because he had never had a girlfriend before. He was not even sure he was capable of loving someone in that unconditional way Sokka seemed to love Suki.

But if he had to marry someone it would be her since he knew her since childhood and she loved him. And if they did end up married he would try to make her happy even if he could not love her. Besides, he did not want to go through an arranged marriage and deal with an unfamiliar noblewoman.

His uncle’s voice brought him back from his wandering thoughts.

“Zuko, you are going to turn twenty-one in a few months and you are still unmarried! And seeing that you have not made a decision with Mai, the Royal Court has been pressing on you to choose a wife among the nobility,” Iroh reminded him seriously.

Zuko sighed irritably. The noblemen had been pressing their single female relatives on him. But he knew that they just wanted to rise in power and prestige by marrying into his family. That was not the kind of marriage he wanted. There had to be something special in a marriage. At least with Mai, he would know she was loyal to him and cared for him before he came into power.

“And the Court Council has called out for you to sire an heir immediately, Nephew,” Iroh continued, placing his hands inside his sleeves.
The Fire Lord stood abruptly from his large, cushioned chair and paced around the room angrily.

“An heir! I’m not even married yet and they already want an heir?!” Zuko thundered.

“You know the reason an heir is important. In case, spirits forbid, you…die.” Iroh shuddered as the cruel image of Ozai appeared in his mind. “The royal bloodline needs to continue to rule the Fire Nation. Otherwise, there would be chaos as the noblemen jockey for power.”

Zuko sighed again and ran his hand over his head. He knew that very well, but was he ready to be a father? Could he even be a good father?

“Perhaps you’re worried for Mai bearing children at the moment. She is still young and well…very thin and…frail. Maybe you could have an heir with a concubine,” Iroh suggested, waiting for his nephew’s reaction.

It was normal for the Fire Lords to sire an heir with a concubine if their wives were unable to bear children.

“No. You know I dislike the idea of concubinage,” Zuko replied harshly.

The women of the brothels got paid for their services and they were free to choose which man they would like to bed (at least most of the time), but concubines on the other hand were nothing more than sex slaves. The noblemen's concubines were mostly women whose own families had sold them to their new master because of debts or to raise themselves in status.

Zuko thought concubinage was wrong and he felt bad for the poor women, but he could not stop it, having concubines was a part of Fire Nation culture. If he banned it, the noblemen would surely be more outraged than they were at him for calling off the war.

The other reason he disliked this custom was because he remembered his father having many of them and it had hurt his mother deeply.

“The woman I marry will be the only mother of my children,” Zuko stated firmly.
An image of Katara holding a child lovingly in her arms appeared in his mind unbidden. He quickly brushed it aside and turned around so his uncle would not notice his flushed face. What was wrong with him? How could he think of Katara in such a way?

Iroh smiled and nodded in approval at his nephew’s declaration.

“Well, I just hope you find this woman soon because time does not wait for anybody and if you do not act fast you will regret it,” Iroh said cryptically. “And I’m getting older by the minute.”

The old prince then asked with a sparkle in his aging, wise eyes, “So Zuko? When are you going to give me grandnephews and nieces?”

After visiting the royal garden for a while, the girls decided to spend the rest of the day in Katara’s room. The sun had set over the horizon a long time ago and the small candles cast dancing shadows around the room.

“Well, it would be more believable if you acted more like a lady instead of a hog-monkey,” Suki teased, setting herself comfortably among Katara’s fluffy pillows.


Katara sat in front of her dresser, looking at her reflection in the clear mirror above it, half-listening to the other two young women. She could not shake off what Zuko and Iroh had told her these past few days.

Zuko had suffered so much and some people—like some of the stupid Earth Kingdom representatives—did not even consider that he had suffered just like everybody else and perhaps even more. And Ozai prolonged Zuko’s suffering by refusing to tell his own son where his mother was. There had to be a way to find out.

“Earth to Sugar Queen. Hello?” Toph called out loudly, snapping Katara out of her thoughts.

“Huh? Sorry, what were you saying?” Katara turned around to face them.
“Gees, Katara, which part of the Spirit World were you in?” Toph snorted, staring in the waterbender’s direction with her pale, lime-colored eyes.

“Is something wrong?” Suki asked as she walked over to Katara in concern. “It seems as if something is troubling you.”

What Katara had come to find out did trouble her, but she could not betray Zuko’s trust by babbling about his troubled past to everybody. She gave them a small smile.

“Don’t worry. I’m fine,” she told them. Toph snorted again, but Katara ignored her. “Anyway, what were you talking about?”

“I was telling Warrior Princess here that Snoozles has been acting weird, even more than he already does,” Toph said and grinned.

“Yeah, did you notice that right after dinner he ran from the dining room to talk to Zuko? He has become a bit distant, like he is hiding something from me,” Suki said dejectedly.

“Don’t worry about it, Suki. I’m sure it’s nothing. It’s probably just one of his ‘genius’ phases. He’ll come around,” Katara reassured her friend. She again began to ponder on Aang’s strange behavior from before. She needed to talk to him about it.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Perhaps I’m overreacting over nothing,” Suki agreed with a small laugh. She sat back down on the bed, her eyes lighting up when she spotted Katara’s rose hairpin.

“Hey, isn’t this the gift Zuko sent you for your birthday?” she asked as she picked it up and inspected it.

Katara walked over to her and nodded with a smile.

“It’s very beautiful. Even more beautiful than Mai’s bracelet,” Suki stated as she stroked the blue and red gems and smiled.

“I bet it is,” Toph commented with a grin.
Katara blushed. It seemed she wasn’t being biased at all.

Toph tipped her head sideways and smiled.

“Sparky’s heading down the hall. I wonder where he’s going so late at night.”

Suki placed the hairpin back on the nightstand, and they watched as Zuko’s tall form hurriedly passed the room.

“Hey, Sparky! Where you going in such a hurry? Are you going for a midnight snack or more damn paperwork?” Toph called out loudly.

The women heard his footsteps stop and then head to the room. Zuko appeared and stood outside the door, leaning casually on the doorframe. He tried to avoid eye contact with Katara as well as tried to control his heartbeat.

“I didn’t know you were still awake. Anyway, I’m going out to some business,” he said coolly before he turned to leave, but Toph’s voice stopped him again.

“What kind of business?” the earthbender asked with a grin. She could feel Zuko’s uneasiness turn to irritation, but that did not bother her one bit. “And don’t lie to me. I want the truth.”

“Toph!” Katara chided her as if she were a nosy child.

Zuko was silent for a moment before he sighed as he turned around to face them.

“I’m going to the prison tower,” he said in a grave voice.

Toph’s grin fell from her face and Suki’s smile faded.

“The prison tower? Are you going to see…Ozai?” Katara asked quietly.
Zuko nodded. His face was unreadable.

“I’m going,” Toph announced, crossing her arms, the grin back on her face.

Zuko opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off.

“I want to make sure that bastard is having a really bad time in prison.”

Katara placed her hand on the blind earthbender’s shoulder. Zuko suppressed a sigh of relief. He just knew Katara would make Toph see reason.

“I’m coming, too,” Katara stated.

Zuko’s mouth fell open before he clenched his jaw.

“What? You can’t go to the prison tower!” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Why not? Just because we’re women or something?” Katara scoffed. “Like we’ve never been in prison before, right, Toph? We’ve been in more dangerous situations,” she retorted.

“Yeah, besides Ozai can’t do anything to us since Aang took away his bending. He’s a loser,” Toph added with another grin.

Zuko sighed. He knew he would not be able to change their minds. He turned to look at Suki, expecting her to join also. Suki just smiled and told them she had a headache and was going to sleep.

“Come on, Sparky! Lead the way,” Toph demanded as she stomped out of the room and into the hallway.

“Um…after you,” Zuko told Katara, stepping aside to let her pass.
Katara noticed that he had been avoiding looking at her in the eye. She frowned. Was he upset about
the previous night?

Zuko usually rode on a komodo rhino with guards surrounding him when he visited the prison
tower. This time he ordered a carriage to be brought for the two young women. Toph protested at
first until Zuko told her he would not forgive himself if something happened to her like it almost did
Aang. She relented with a grumble, but Katara was sure Toph was secretly glad Zuko cared about
her.

They rode in silence toward the prison tower. A few guards rode in front of the carriage, Zuko rode
behind it with his two personal guards while the rest of his guards brought up the rear. The rhinos’
pounding feet and the carriage wheels strolling along the path were the only sounds they could hear.
The streets were deserted and dark, but the guards held flames in their hands to illuminate their way.
The moon was still big, even if not full, and gave them more light to see by.

After a while, Katara noticed that the carriage had slowed down and she peeked outside the window.
The prison tower loomed before them like a dark specter, shadowy mountains lined behind it at a
distance. She craned her neck around to look at Zuko. He was staring straight ahead with a stoic
expression, the moon reflecting on his sharp features, his eyes dark and hard. He rode the komodo
rhino magnificently, his posture straight with one hand on the reins and the other resting on his thigh.
Katara could not help but think that Zuko looked very regal and striking.

Zuko turned and caught her eye. She blushed at being caught staring at him but smiled nonetheless.
Zuko gave her a small smile before looking away. Katara frowned and sat back down inside the
carriage.

A few minutes later, they came to a stop, and before the carriage driver could jump down to open the
carriage door, Toph threw it open and jumped outside. Katara smiled at the driver’s surprised face
before she accepted his hand to step down.

“I feel somebody else’s footsteps,” Toph said as they neared the prison.

They watched as a man came out from the building and walked off in another direction.

“That looked like Wei. I wonder what he was doing here,” Zuko said, eyeing the retreating advisor
suspiciously.
“Maybe he was visiting a family member,” Katara suggested, but Zuko had a feeling it was something else. He just did not know what.

They entered the dark prison tower where the captain of the prison guard greeted the Fire Lord and led them to their destination. They went up many flights of stairs, passing many cells on their way. Upon hearing that there were visitors, the prisoners poked their dirty heads through the bars. They whistled as the women passed them, making so many disgusting and appalling comments that Katara wished she had stayed in her room. Toph kept her head up and once in a while retorted back hotly.

The prisoners were harshly silenced when Zuko threatened them ferociously, flames growing on his hands for emphasis. The inmates quickly disappeared back into their dark holes. Being locked up in prison was bad enough and being in prison with severe burns was worse.

Katara noticed that the farther they went, the darker and stuffier it got. There were no small windows on the dark halls any longer and only the torches along the walls shone the way. There were fewer and fewer cells until they came to one particular door. It was made of strong steel and had several heavy bolts securing it. Two guards stood on either side of the door and bowed to their Fire Lord before stealing surprised looks at the women.

“Are you sure you want to go in?” Zuko asked them about the tenth time.

“Just open the damn door.” Toph snorted, rolling her eyes impatiently.

Frowning, Zuko pulled out a key from his pocket and opened the door. The guards stood upright and waited in attention. Zuko held the door open and the women walked in before Zuko closed the door behind them, cutting off the light.

The waterbender could not see very well in the darkness, but as her eyes became adjusted, she noticed that they were in a room divided in half by iron bars. Zuko produced a small flame in his hand and lit the torch near the door.

Katara had to bite her tongue from screaming in fright. As soon as the room was illuminated, a very frightening face appeared behind the cell bars. His hair was dirty, messy, and long. He was sitting with his back to the wall, his thin form covered with red, raggedy clothes. But what frightened Katara was the look on his face. He had such an evil smile, his eyes radiating so much hatred it chilled Katara’s bones. She glanced at Toph who was grinning.
Only because she can’t see his face! she thought.

“Ah, Zuko, you came to visit me. I was beginning to think you forgot about me,” Ozai began, letting out a sinister chuckle.

He looked away and noticed the women standing beside Zuko and grinned.

“You really must be desperate to know where your mother is. You brought me prostitutes to bribe me. Spirits know how long it’s been since I’ve bedded a woman,” he commented leeringly. He licked his lips as he eyed them slowly. “I didn’t know you had it in you, but perhaps they could persuade me.” Ozai chuckled again, casting lustful stares at the women.

Katara and Toph snorted in disdain and revulsion.

“Shut up!” Zuko snapped. “These are my friends, the ones who helped me defeat you during the war and they just came to see your miserable state.”

Ozai sneered at them, his evil eyes piercing right through them.

“And why didn’t you bring Mai with you as well?” he said instead, “How is she by the way? Is she still striving to be Fire Lady? Has she stripped you of your wealth yet?”

Katara could see Zuko frown in confusion. She looked at Toph who was nodding and grinning.

Ozai continued after Zuko’s silence.

“Tell me, Zuko, is she as dull and boring in bed as she is in public?”

Katara cringed at the crude remark.

“You sick bastard!” Toph yelled in disgust.
Ozai only laughed.

“I’m not here to talk of such things, Ozai. Mai has nothing to do with this. Tell me where my mother is,” Zuko replied coolly, placing his hands behind his back.

But Ozai ignored him and turned his attention on Katara. She felt as if her blood had frozen as he looked her over and leered at her. Zuko narrowed his eyes and stood in front of Katara protectively.

“Tell me, Zuko. Is this the water wench my daughter Azula shot lightning at and you risked your pathetic life for? Now I can see why you did, she’s quite a lovely creature. She must be very rough and feisty when you ravage her.” He again chuckled licentiously.

Katara felt her whole face heat up in embarrassment and anger. Even Toph was speechless.

Ozai’s jeering laughter was cut short when a huge fire blast hit the wall an inch above his head. His eyes widened in surprise and fright. They all turned to look at an outraged young Fire Lord.

“Shut the hell up!” Zuko growled fiercely, his deep voice rumbling in the cell room. “Don’t you dare speak of Katara in such a way again! You will show her some respect or next time I will burn off your tongue!” he snapped menacingly.

Katara was surprised at the intensity in Zuko’s eyes and words, and could not help but smile at the way he defended her.

Ozai was silent for a moment, but then he began to chuckle.

“Are you sure you want to do that? Then how will you find out where Ursa is?” he snickered.

Zuko growled. Damn!

“Prince Zuko,” Ozai began mockingly, “you know your mother is alive, right? Have you ever thought about why she hasn’t shown up? You have been…Fire Lord for what, four years? And she
hasn’t come to see you. Perhaps she doesn’t want to see the disgrace of a son you are,” he bit out.

Zuko winced.

“Look here you worthless piece of shit!” Toph addressed the older man sharply. “If you don’t start spitting out information, then we’ll make you.” She punched one of her fists into her palm and then she cracked her knuckles roughly.

Ozai laughed again. His cruel laughter was getting on their nerves.

“Oh, really?” Ozai said, standing up to walk closer to the cell bars. “You’re not the only one who has threatened me, you little runt. Zuko here has tried so many times, but he just doesn’t have the guts to act on those threats. He’s weak.”

Katara glanced over to Zuko. His posture was straight and his face was emotionless, but his eyes were full of anger and hurt.

Ozai continued on with his insults.

“How do you expect me to respect someone who is a weakling? He doesn’t have the backbone to use torture to extract information. And so nobody is going to get information about Úrsa from me.”

That’s not true, Katara thought.

She knew the reason that Zuko couldn’t use torture on him was because Ozai was still his father, no matter how much Zuko hated him. She was somewhat glad Zuko had not used torture because then he would become like his cruel father.

Ozai then turned his mad gaze towards his son.

“You’re a traitor to your nation, siding with the enemy, with that stupid child-Avatar and these whores,” he spat vehemently.
Zuko growled at the insult.

“You’re weak,” Ozai continued, “You always were since you were a little snooty kid clinging to your mother’s skirts.”

“Hey!” Toph yelled indignantly. “Shut your damn mouth!” She balled her fist in the air. She could feel Zuko’s distress and she hated it because she cared for him as a brother. “Don’t listen to him, Zuko.”

Katara felt her hands clench beside her as she listened to the loathsome man continue insulting his own son.

_How could he be so cruel? Zuko doesn’t deserve to have such a father. He doesn’t deserve to have suffered so much. And he certainly doesn’t deserve to have his mother kept away from him._

Katara felt her blood boil with so much hate and anger. She despised Ozai more than ever, even more than she despised her mother’s killer because he at least seemed a bit regretful while Ozai seemed to be enjoying the pain he was inflicting. Katara could feel the power of the moon calling to her, pulling her, making all forms of liquid evident around her, the small moisture in the room, the cup of water in Ozai’s cell, sweat…blood.

“You’ve been a disgrace to our family since the day you were born! I should have gotten rid of you when you began to show signs of failure,” Ozai growled out angrily. “And then you decide to go against me in my decision concerning my army, unable to handle the idea of sacrifice. And at the Agni Kai you backed down! You began to cry and beg for mercy instead of taking it like a man!”

“Shut up!” Katara screamed furiously, lifting her arms in front of her, her fingers spread apart.

Ozai’s body suddenly bent down in an awkward position, one arm painfully bent behind his back. His eyes became wide with pain and confusion.

“Shut up! That’s enough!” Katara repeated furiously. “Of course he did not fight you, you bastard! He was just a child! A child who only wanted what was best for his country. He only wanted his father’s approval to show his worth.”

Ozai’s arm bent more awkwardly behind his back and he cried out. Toph crossed her arms and
grinned, rather enjoying hearing Ozai’s suffering.

Zuko’s eyes widened in surprise as he stared at the outraged waterbender. Her sapphire eyes were ablaze like blue fire and her concentrated face was contorted in anger and frustration. He could see her fingers and arms contract as she bent his father’s blood, reminding him of the first time he saw her bloodbend and of how terrified and impressed he was. Again, his heart warmed at her words. For a brief moment, he thought of how beautiful she looked even in her rage.

“Zuko showed how brave he is by standing up for what he believed in, by speaking out against such a horrible plan. Let me tell you something,” Katara continued heatedly, “Zuko is worth more than you and he has more honor than you will ever have!”

Katara then shifted her stance and brought her hands closer together. Ozai’s body went rigid and he began to choke. She was starting to feel exhausted since she had never practiced her bloodbending and it was not a full moon yet, but her anger gave her the energy to hold her death grip on the veins in Ozai’s throat. She had sworn never bloodbend again, but Ozai deserved it.

“Now you will tell Zuko this instant where his mother is before I kill you!” Katara commanded, tightening her hold.

The older man began to breathe harshly as his airway began to burn, but he answered with a strained, “Never!”

“Then you leave me no choice!” Katara yelled again.

“Do it, Sugar Queen! What’s taking so long?” Toph yawned and then smirked.

Ozai’s dirty face twisted into wide terror. He turned his gaze from the waterbender to Zuko. The young Fire Lord stared back emotionlessly and shrugged.

“Maybe it’s for the best. Katara, please end his misery. I could always find another way to find my mother,” Zuko drawled.

But deep down he was hoping Ozai broke down because he had no idea how else to look for her. Besides, he knew Katara was bluffing as well. She would never be able to kill someone. And he was aware that Katara could not hold on any longer, she looked so tired.
Ozai made a strangled cry when he heard him say that and choked when Katara shrugged and said, “If that’s what you want.”

“S-stop!” Ozai wheezed. “I’ll…I’ll tell you!”

“Are you sure?” Zuko asked, piercing him with his own glare.

“You better not lie,” Toph warned.

Ozai managed to squeak out a yes. He was thrown into a coughing fit when the grip on his throat was relinquished and he fell on his hands and knees.

Zuko walked closer to the cell bars, his strong footsteps echoing in the room. He bent down to glare at his defeated father who was panting roughly.

“Tell me where she is. Now,” Zuko demanded.

Ozai grabbed his throat as he took large gulps of air, then lifting his hateful gaze through the bars, he answered.

“She’s in…the Abandoned Fort.”

End of Part One

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
“The Abandoned Fort,” Zuko repeated with a dark frown.

He turned to Toph for confirmation of Ozai’s confession. When the earthbender nodded, Zuko sighed and returned to glare at his father.

“Your life has been spared again. How does it feel to know you owe your life to your enemies?” Zuko asked coolly.

Toph snickered and Katara grinned.

Ozai growled and lunged himself at Zuko, but the cell bars impeded his attack. Zuko didn’t even flinch at the sound of Ozai’s body smacking into the iron bars or his loud curses. He stared, unaffected.

“This isn’t over, boy!” Ozai yelled as he tried to grab Zuko’s throat.

“I think it is,” Katara said, but she paused when a wave of dizziness overcame her. She brushed it aside and looked over at Zuko.

“I got what I wanted. No need for us to remain here,” Zuko told the young women as he walked away from the cell bars and his raging father and opened the steel door.

Toph and Katara glared one last time at the older man and walked through the door. Just as Zuko was about to close the door behind him he heard Ozai laugh again.

“No. It has just begun,” he said between laughter.

Zuko frowned as the door finally closed. It seemed Azula inherited her insanity from their father. The young Fire Lord locked the prison door and bid farewell to the prison guards who bowed deeply in return.
What did he mean by ‘It has just begun’? Zuko pondered as he walked away.

He rounded the corner and noticed Katara leaning heavily on the cold wall with one hand pressed against her temple. Toph was holding onto the waterbender’s other arm with a worried frown creasing her forehead.

“Katara!” Zuko called out in alarm as he rushed toward the two women.

“She almost fell,” Toph said, turning in his direction as she continued to hold onto Katara’s arm.

Zuko walked closer and looked at Katara’s closed eyes.

“Katara, what’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m just a bit tired and dizzy. I haven’t gotten so angry and used bloodbending in years.” Katara laughed, trying to reassure her worried friends. She opened her eyes and saw Zuko’s concerned face before her.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked with a frown.

“Yes,” she assured. She smiled and removed her hand from her temple. “There, much better.” She brushed Toph’s hand aside and moved away from the wall.

As soon as she stood on her own feet the hall began to spin horribly, making her feel sick, and she began to fall forward toward the floor, unable to stop herself.

“Katara!” she heard Zuko yell.

She closed her eyes for the impact. Katara felt her body hit something hard, flat and warm. Warm? She furrowed her forehead. Then she felt arms surrounding her back, supporting her weight.

“Katara?” Zuko’s concerned voice sounded above her head.
When he saw her falling, Zuko had caught her instinctively, not wanting her to get hurt from falling hard on the stone floor.

*Oh, spirits!* Katara felt her cheeks heat up and her heart began to beat faster. She pulled away from Zuko’s broad chest, but the sudden motion only caused her to feel dizzier. She leaned her forehead on his chest with a pained groan.

“Whoa there, Sugar Queen! Maybe you should wait a few minutes before moving,” Toph giggled.

*Toph, giggling?* Katara thought unbelievably.

“I’m fine!” she yelled, a scowl on her face. She felt Zuko’s chest tremble as he chuckled.

“Well, it doesn’t seem like it” he said with a grin.

“I said I’m fine!”

Katara scowled again as she looked up to glare at a grinning Zuko, who raised his eyebrow and looked down at his right arm. Katara looked down as well and her eyes widened. Her hands were gripping his upper arms tightly.

*His very warm and muscular upper arms,* she thought and blushed.

“Well, maybe you *are* fine,” Toph piped in and grinned. “Hey, Sparky, maybe you should carry Sweetness to the carriage,” she said in an innocent tone. She grinned widely when she felt both benders’ hearts jump and beat faster at the suggestion.

“No, it’s…it’s…okay. I’m just dizzy,” Katara stammered, hoping the dim light in the prison hall could cover her blushing cheeks.

“I…won’t mind,” Zuko said slowly before he shrugged casually as he tried to calm his own heart.
I won’t mind at all, he continued mentally. Katara pressed against him did not seem like a bad idea. He quickly brushed the thought away.

For a second Katara debated whether to accept his offer, but decorum won. What would people think if they saw her in Zuko’s arms?

“No, I’m fine really. It’s not like I broke an ankle or something,” she said firmly.

Zuko’s face remained impassive, but he felt his heart sink.

“Oh…alright then.” He cleared his throat and began to move away from her.

As soon as she felt his strong, warm arms leave her, Katara panicked and, without thinking, latched onto his upper arms even tighter. Zuko cocked his eyebrow at her.

“Um…I still feel a bit dizzy…Maybe I could…lean on you for support?” she asked, trying to keep from stuttering too much.

Zuko could not stop himself from smiling.

“Sure,” he quickly responded.

He removed his hands from her back and steadied her. Katara grabbed onto one of his arms, but again she resisted the urge to lean her head on his shoulder, just like when they were walking in the garden.

Toph placed her hand over her mouth to hide her huge grin as the pair moved away.

The three walked the same way they came in with Zuko’s personal guards behind them, only this time they took longer since Katara felt ill. The two guards said nothing as they watched their Fire Lord helping the young Water Tribe woman.

Zuko tried to concentrate on where he was going, but all he could focus on was the feeling of
Katara’s hands holding his arm. He tried to calm himself and hoped she did not notice the smile that was plastered on his face.

He looked down at the waterbender from the corner of his eye and noticed that she looked exhausted and her tanned skin was a bit pale. He frowned and berated himself for his thoughtlessness. There he was, enjoying himself, while Katara was feeling ill because she bloodbended. She had resorted to what she hated the most and used it to help him. He was extremely grateful, though.

Zuko felt relieved and overjoyed. Now he knew where his mother was. He was finally going to see her again and bring her back home. He needed to set off to the Abandoned Fort at once. He needed to get his mother away from there and back to the palace where she belonged with him.

“Hey, Sparky,” Toph’s voice interrupted his thoughts. “Your mom’s living in an abandoned fort? That sucks!”

“Yeah,” Katara agreed. She tightened her hold as another wave of dizziness hit her. Zuko noticed and slowed down. “It must be terrible living all by yourself in a deserted place.”

“It would seem like it, but I assure you that it is not at all deserted,” Zuko replied as he led them through the prison halls.

He did not need to see their faces to know they were confused.

“The Abandoned Fort is actually a village. It used to be a great fort for the Fire Nation Army many centuries ago, but when Sozin sought out to conquer the rest of the world the soldiers were needed to conquer other lands and the fort was abandoned, thus gaining the name. The Abandoned Fort is actually in the middle of the Earth Kingdom and is neither controlled by the Earth Kingdom or the Fire Nation. Since there is no form of authority in that place it has become a refuge for thieves, beggars, and deserters from both countries.

“And now I need to go there and fast,” Zuko added as he tried to quicken his pace, but when Katara gripped his arm he slowed down again.

“Is it really that bad a place?” Toph asked as she moved forward on bare feet.

“How could a place full of criminals be a good place to live?” Zuko answered tersely. He sighed.
“Don’t worry, Zuko,” Katara assured him as she patted his arm. “I’m sure Lady Ursa is all right.”

Zuko looked down at her sadly.

“I sure hope so.”

Katara looked up at him.

“I want you to know I’m very glad you finally know where your mother is,” she told him sincerely and smiled.

Zuko’s heart warmed at her earnest words once again.

“Thank you, Katara.”

Iroh stood atop the long flight of stairs that led into the palace with a cup of steaming jasmine tea in his hands. He looked up at the night sky and yawned.

Jiao had told him that the Fire Lord had gone to the prison tower with the two young female Bending Masters. Iroh shook his head as he sipped from his cup. What was his nephew thinking in taking two young ladies to such a place and so late at night? He knew they could take care of themselves after being in worse situations, but he was old fashioned that way. He was glad Sokka and Aang had retired to their rooms early. Who knew what they would have done if they knew?

Just then, the huge entrance doors leading into the palace grounds opened and guards on komodo rhinos surrounding a carriage entered. The retired general notice Zuko riding on his own black rhino behind the carriage, which he presumed, held the two young women.

The carriage stopped at the base of the many steps leading into the palace, the rhinos huffing and pawing the ground. The young Fire Lord gracefully dismounted his komodo rhino and handed the reins to the stable hands. Zuko quickly walked over to the carriage and opened the door himself before the driver had a chance to move.
“As soon as you helped Katara into the carriage she knocked out,” Toph commented with a yawn. “Luckily, she doesn’t snore like Snoozles.”

The young man offered his hand to her, but the girl scowled and swatted his hand away before she jumped out. Zuko smirked before he returned his gaze back inside the carriage.

Katara sat on one side fast asleep with her hands tucked between one side of her face and the wall of the carriage. Zuko smiled as he watched the waterbender breathe softly. He considered stepping inside and carrying her to her room, but decided against it. By the way she refused at the prison tower, it seemed she disliked the idea. Shaking his head, Zuko sighed.

“Katara?” he called softly. “Katara, wake up. We’re here.”

Katara opened her eyes sleepily and gave a soft yawn.

“What?” she mumbled crossly. She rubbed an eye with her hand.

Zuko grinned at her annoyed face.

“I didn’t mean to disrupt your dream. Maybe I should tell the stable hands to take the carriage back to the stables so you can sleep.”

Katara yawned again and grinned back.

“Who knew a carriage could be a nice place to sleep in? Maybe you should stay with me and find out how nice it is.”

Zuko gulped and cleared his throat. He knew what she meant, but still…

“I’m sure it would be, but your brother would probably kill me if I let you sleep around…I mean rest in the stables,” he quickly corrected and rubbed his neck.

Katara laughed, too sleepy to catch the slip.
“Well, I guess I should get to bed now. I’m still a bit dizzy.” She moved to step outside and was so tired she yawned again.

“Here, let me help you,” Zuko quickly offered, taking one of her hands.

Katara opened her mouth to protest and argue that she was capable of doing it herself, but when she began to wobble, she closed it quickly. Besides, Zuko’s hand felt nice. Very, very nice.

Toph grinned as she walked up the long stairs and yawned loudly.

“Hey there, Iroh!” she greeted.

“Miss Toph, a young lady such as you should not be running around in a prison tower in the middle of the night,” Iroh chided gently.

Toph rolled her eyes.

“I’m a Master Earthbender, created Metalbending, and am an Earth Rumble Champion! I can take care of myself, thank you very much,” she snorted and crossed her arms.

Iroh chuckled.

“Where is Miss Katara, by the way?” he asked.

Toph grinned and jerked her thumb behind her. Iroh looked over her head and saw Zuko helping Katara out of the carriage.

*When did my nephew become such a gentleman?* Iroh mused.

When Katara stepped onto the ground she staggered forward, but Zuko caught her quickly. Iroh’s smile then turned into a frown.
“What happened? Katara looks so pale!” he said as he started to walk down the steps.

“Eh, nothing serious, don’t worry,” Toph answered with a shrug as she followed the old man.

“Sorry,” Katara mumbled in embarrassment as she tried to straighten herself.

Zuko smiled as he held onto her arms.

“It’s okay. As long as you are here, I promise that nothing will harm you,” he assured her, “You don’t expect me to let you get hurt, now do you?”

Katara was strangely reminded of the time Zuko pushed her out of the way from the falling rocks in the Western Air Temple. She smiled.

“I guess not. Thanks, Zuko.”

“Miss Katara?” Iroh called out as he stepped closer to them. “Are you feeling unwell, my dear?”

Katara and Zuko turned away from each other to look at Iroh. The young woman smiled.

“I’m fine,” she said as she tried to move away, but Zuko held onto her arms. She frowned and looked up at him. “What is it?”

“Where do you think you’re going?” Zuko asked with a raised brow.

Katara frowned even more in confusion.

“To my room, obviously,” she responded.
“Not by yourself you’re not. What if you collapse on your way up the stairs or in the corridors?” Zuko frowned.

Katara narrowed her eyes.

“I am not some frail little girl! I can—”

“I never said you were frail or weak!” Zuko interrupted, exasperated. “I’m just saying you need help since you can barely stand on your own!”

Katara opened her mouth to retort, but Toph piped in.

“He’s right, you know. Stop being so stubborn and let him help you! Some people want to sleep, jeez!” the blind seventeen-year-old exclaimed, flailing her arms in the air.

“Yes, Miss Katara, we wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself. Let my nephew help you,” Iroh said gently with a smile.

Katara was about to protest, but another yawn escaped her mouth. Blushing, Katara sighed.

“Okay, fine,” she grumbled.

She held onto Zuko’s arm and began to walk, but Zuko didn’t budge. Katara turned to ask him what was wrong when she felt him slip his arm away from hers.

Before Katara could react, Zuko bent down slightly and scooped her up in his arms, one hand supporting her back and the other under her knees. He straightened and shifted her so she would be comfortable. He knew she needed help and would just have to deal with him carrying her.

Katara squeaked in surprise.

“W-what are you doing?” she stammered, her heart racing wildly in her chest.
“You’ll be resting in your room faster if I carry you,” he responded calmly. He looked down at her, expecting her to object.

Katara found herself feeling comfortable in Zuko’s strong arms. She blushed and looked away. Being carried did not seem too bad.

“Um…okay…” she relented.

Zuko smiled happily and began to ascend the stairs toward the palace.

“Well, that wasn’t so hard,” Iroh whispered to Toph who grinned. They both walked up behind the pair.

“Uncle, meet me in my study. I need to talk to you about something important,” Zuko addressed his uncle as they entered into the golden palace halls.

Iroh raised his eyebrow but agreed. He bid the women goodnight and left the opposite way.

“Toph?” Zuko asked, “Er…um…come with me to Katara’s room.” He cleared his throat nervously.

Toph grinned and followed the tall young man and the young woman in his arms.

Katara could feel her face heating up and her heart racing even faster as they made their way through the long, elaborate halls.

*Calm down. There’s no need to react like this. He’s just helping me…because that’s what friends do, right?*

She could feel Zuko’s strong, warm arms supporting her rather chilly body and his warm breath tickled her head as he turned to speak to Toph.
Zuko is so warm, she thought.

Despite herself, she began to enjoy being held and rather lamented not letting him carry her in the prison tower. She could feel Zuko’s chest rise and fall as he breathed, setting up a relaxing rhythm. She was glad he was not wearing his chest armor. She still felt dizzy, her eyes were heavy with sleep, and so she found herself relaxing. Blushing, Katara settled her head at the crook of Zuko’s neck. She rested her hand a little below his chest where the scar he received to save her life lay and felt his heartbeat, strong and soothing.

She closed her eyes and could not help but feel comforted, warm and...safe. With these thoughts, she fell into a restful sleep.

As soon as he took her in his arms, Zuko realized how light and petite Katara was. He had not noticed it before because she had such a strong personality. A strange urge to protect her and keep her safe engulfed his being. Shaking his head, he walked down the corridor and looked down at the silent waterbender. She had her gaze averted and her cheeks had a hint of pink tint. He grinned smugly.

Then it was his turn to flush when he felt Katara place her head on his neck and her hand on his chest.

*Breath Zuko, breath,* he told himself. A few moments later, he heard her soft, even breathing and he realized she had fallen asleep.

He could feel her cool breath on his throat, sending a tingling sensation throughout his body. He was aware of her hand clutching his shirt, her hair tickling his neck and her breasts pressed against his chest. Zuko flushed brightly and began to feel extremely hot. He was sure his heart was racing a mile a minute, but if Toph noticed, she didn’t say anything. He was relieved she couldn’t see his face.

Zuko finally realized they had arrived at Katara’s room in the guest wing when Toph cleared her throat. Toph walked ahead of him and opened the door. She entered the room and rolled her eyes when Zuko stood uneasily outside.

“Don’t just stand there, Sparky. Take her to bed!” Toph exclaimed. She grinned when she felt Zuko’s heartbeat jolt at her choice of words.

Zuko gaped and flushed even more.
“I…um…will take her to bed. I mean I will take her to her bed. I will lay her—in her bed! So she could rest!” he stammered and swallowed.

Toph chuckled as she moved the bed cover to the side. Awkward Zuko was just too funny.

“Well, good night, Sparky. Have a great night.” She yawned and started to leave.

Zuko started.

“Wait!” he whispered so as not to wake the woman in his arms. “Where are you going? You can’t leave me here alone! What…do I do?”

“I thought a man like you would know,” Toph said with a smirk.

“Toph!” Zuko whispered harshly. He quickly looked down to make sure Katara was asleep.

The earthbender chuckled.

“Just place her on her bed and let her rest. I’m sure she’ll make it through the night with her day clothes on. Unless you want to help her into her nightgown…”

“Toph! You little…” the firebender muttered.

Toph grinned and yawned.

“Well, night, Lord Sparky,” she called and left the room with a farewell wave of her hand.

“Toph, get back here!” Zuko ordered uneasily, but the blind girl did not respond.
Zuko swallowed nervously. What would Uncle say if he saw him alone in a young lady’s room in the middle of the night? Especially if that young lady was Katara, whom Iroh adored?

Hoping nobody passed by the room, Zuko stepped next to the bed and gently deposited the sleeping Water Tribe woman on it, removing her clenched hand from his tunic. As soon as he let her go, Zuko felt cold and empty and he resisted the impulse to gather her in his arms again. Katara frowned and mumbled in her sleep as the warmth left her. Zuko held his breath and hoped she did not wake up, but the young woman relaxed and remained asleep.

Deciding it would be more comfortable for her, Zuko removed Katara’s slippers and set them beside the bed. As he straightened, he noticed the rose hairpin he had given her resting on her nightstand and he smiled.

He made to leave but remained standing near the bed. He looked down at the sleeping young woman and noticed how peaceful and beautiful she looked. He knew he should leave her room immediately before someone saw him and started spreading rumors, but he just couldn’t. He was too mesmerized by the lovely woman who had changed his life in so many ways.

Before he could stop himself, Zuko reached a hand and lightly touched Katara’s cheek. When she did not awaken, he moved his fingers down her cheek to her soft lips. Those full, plump lips that had enchanted him the night before and that kept enchanting him even more as time went by.

Katara leaned into his touch with a soft sigh. At the movement, her shirt slipped and exposed her bare neck and shoulder. Zuko gulped and continued to stroke her lips. His breathing became ragged as he tried to control his desire. He watched as a smile graced her face and he wondered what she was dreaming about. What would she say if she knew what he was doing? If she knew what he wanted to do?

Zuko brought his head down to hers and licked his lips. Just one kiss and he would be satisfied, he would stop thinking of her. She would never know. This was his only chance. Zuko again brought his hand to her soft cheek and lowered his head closer to her face. He could feel her breath on his lips, they were so close he could almost feel those soft lips of hers. Just one more inch and his lips would be pressed against hers.

He closed his eyes.

‘You never lost your honor, Zuko…. ’ Katara’s voice surfaced in his mind.
Zuko pulled away and clenched his fist and shook his head in disgust.

What is wrong with me? Stealing a kiss from an unsuspecting, sleeping woman! How dishonorable!

Zuko closed his eyes tightly. Gods, how he wanted her! How he wanted to kiss her! But he couldn’t do it, not only because he was not that kind of man or because he would dishonor her, but because he would betray her trust, as well as Sokka and Aang’s friendships.

Besides, what’s the point in kissing her if she couldn’t respond back? he thought.

Sighing miserably, Zuko covered her shoulder with her shirt and lifted the bedcovers over her body, tucking her in gently. He heard her sigh in contentment and he smiled.

“Good night, Katara, and thank you,” he whispered in her ear.

He walked to the door and took one last look at the sleeping waterbender’s form. He exited the room and closed the door softly behind him.

Resting a hand on the door, Zuko sighed again and bit his lip before shaking his head and heading down the lonely corridor toward his study.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Iroh was nodding off to sleep when he heard Zuko enter the study room. Stifling a yawn, Iroh stretched and straightened in his chair.

“You know, Zuko, it was not a good idea to take the two ladies into a prison, especially so late at night. Imagine what Master Sokka and Avatar Aang would say or try to do?” He chuckled before he frowned when he found his teacup was empty.

Zuko sighed as he moved toward his study desk and sat down heavily on his chair.

“They wanted to go and I couldn’t stop them,” he stated flatly before he added, “It’s a good thing they went, though.”
Iroh looked over at his nephew and noticed his face was flushed.

“Zuko, did something happen with—?”

“Katara is sleeping safely in her room,” Zuko cut in as he ran his hand over his hair.

Iroh felt a bit of disappointment go through him before he nodded in approval.

“So what do you want to talk to me about, Nephew?”

The Fire Lord remained silent for a moment before he looked up to stare intensely into his uncle’s eyes.

“I know where my mother is,” Zuko revealed quietly.

Iroh’s mouth flew open.

“What?! Where is she? How did you find out?” he asked rapidly.

Zuko held up his hand to calm the old man.

“I owe it all to Katara. She’s the one who made Ozai talk,” he said and then grinned.

Iroh lifted his eyebrow in curiosity.

“She used her bloodbending,” Zuko confessed.

Iroh frowned.
“She told me about it in a letter but she swore never to use it again.”

Zuko frowned and sighed guiltily.

“I know.”

“Well, tell me what happened, Nephew,” Iroh prompted. He set his empty teacup on the table and wished he had brought his teapot.

Zuko explained what happened in their visit with Ozai that led to Katara’s wrath and her resort to bloodbending.

“You should have seen his face. He looked so scared I was afraid he would soil his pants.” Zuko smirked.

Iroh could not help his chuckle at the thought of his arrogant brother reduced to such a state.

“Katara used her bloodbending to help you, Nephew. Did I not tell you that you would find some way to find your mother? Katara was that miracle.”

Zuko did not stop smiling.

“Yes, she’s a great woman and a good…friend.” He frowned as his words cause his heart to clench in a most uncomfortable way and closed his eyes.

“Zuko, is there something you would like to tell me?” Iroh asked hopefully.

“Like what, Uncle?” Zuko asked tersely as he looked away.

“Oh, I don’t know…something regarding Miss Katara?” Iroh asked innocently, staring at his nephew carefully.
Zuko felt himself flush despite himself.

Does he know what I was doing and thinking of in Katara’s room?

“Uncle, please send a messenger to tell my advisors that there will be an urgent meeting tomorrow morning,” he said instead, his tone once again business-like and serious. “I’m leaving tomorrow for the Abandoned Fort and I want to place the rule of the Fire Nation temporarily on you while I’m gone.”

Iroh smiled and shifted in his seat.

“Ah, well, you see, Nephew, I was thinking of returning to Ba Sing Se to check on my teashop. And I will be waiting for you there when you find Ursa.”

“What? But then who am I going to leave in charge of the Fire Nation?” Zuko exclaimed curtly.

Iroh smiled again.

“I’m sure Chao could handle it.”

Zuko thought about it for a moment before he nodded.

“Yes, you’re right. Very well then, thanks and good night, Uncle,” he said dismissively, examining some of the paperwork on his desk.

Iroh opened his mouth to ask about Katara again, but he closed it and nodded instead. He stood up and bowed.

“Good night, Fire Lord Zuko,” he said and moved toward the door.

“Uncle,” Zuko called out.
Iroh turned around and raised a brow.

“Uh…tell Jiao to take Katara’s breakfast to her room tomorrow. She should stay in bed and rest,” he said softly, keeping his face turned down on his papers.

Iroh smiled widely, agreed, and left the room.

First things first, I need some tea, the old man hummed to himself as he walked down the hall.

The young Fire Lord decided to stay in his study for longer than he needed to, afraid of what he would do if he went to sleep. Afraid of what he would start to think about…

After Zuko finished going through his pile of paperwork, he finally made his way to his bedchamber with reluctant steps. He needed to rest for his journey the following day, after all. As he exited his study, he found Mai waiting for him outside his office with a bored expression. Zuko stopped himself from jumping in surprise as he saw the tall, silent noblewoman. Regaining his composure, he looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I thought you would be asleep by now,” he remarked as he turned and began to walk down the hall.

Mai sighed heavily and moved away from the wall to follow after him.

“I was waiting so I could talk to you about your visit to the prison tower,” she told him quietly.

Zuko started, surprised that she knew where he had been. He opened his mouth to ask her how she found out.

“I asked a guard and he told me,” she explained with a shrug, her thin shoulder rising a tiny bit. She paused as she glanced at him from the corner of his eye. “And I kind of overheard you tell Iroh you found your mother.”

Zuko glared at her in mild annoyance, but she only stared at him, unaffected. Zuko looked away and furrowed his brow. Mai never wanted to listen to him when he tried to talk about his problems with Ozai and his missing mother before. So why did she want to talk about it all of sudden?
“I never would’ve thought you would take Toph and…Katara to the prison tower. It didn’t seem like a place you’d show them as a host,” Mai spoke seemingly uninterested.

“I did not take them. I didn’t even want them to set a foot in that place. They were the ones who wanted to go,” Zuko explained passively.

“You never showed any interest in going,” he continued blandly. *Or never cared enough to go,* he added mentally.

Mai lowered her eyes and looked away. They continued walking down the corridor in silence. Zuko was lost in his own thoughts as he let his mind wander back to Katara and how he almost kissed her. Again.

Shaking the thoughts and the strange, warm feeling away, he wondered instead of the moment he would finally be reunited with his mother. Was she all right? Was she still in the Abandoned Fort or had she moved somewhere else? Or more importantly…did she still love him? Zuko frowned as new fears surfaced in his mind.

Mai placed her thin arm around his and leaned her head on his shoulder. Zuko suppressed the urge to jump at the contact. He had forgotten Mai was walking next to him and he looked away guiltily.

“Zuko, I’m glad you finally know where Princess Ursa is and I hope you find her soon,” Mai said in her usual monotone voice, but with a thin smile on her face.

Zuko nodded, but he was confused to realize that her words of comfort did not affect him as Katara’s words did.

“And I have to thank Katara for that,” he said and smiled, looking straight ahead of him.

He felt Mai tighten her grip on his arm. He could not help but compare Mai’s bony, thin hands to Katara’s soft and comforting ones. He heard Mai scoff.

“Well, who wouldn’t divulge anything if all of the sudden some strange, crazy woman controls their body and is ready to kill them?” she almost hissed.
Zuko narrowed his eyes.

“Katara used her bloodbending to help me and she is not the kind of person who kills to get her way!” he snapped.

Mai fell silent again. She knew very well what he meant. The young noblewoman had killed while she was at Azula’s side. The reason she was not in prison at the moment was because of Zuko. Mai moved away from him and schooled her face into its usual expressionless look.

“Yeah, I guess she has a good heart and a pure soul unlike the rest of us,” she said flatly, but it was hard to miss the hint of bitterness and sarcasm in her words.

Zuko sighed guiltily and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He did not mean to snap at her, but every time somebody criticized or hurt Katara, he felt the need to defend her. And what confused him the most was that he did not understand why he felt compelled to do that. It was the same when he had protected Katara from the falling rocks with his own body when they were attacked in the Western Air Temple and when Azula shot lightning at her in the Agni Kai. He just had an…urge to keep her safe.

“I didn’t mean to yell at you. It’s just that it bothers me when you talk about Katara that way. She’s my friend and she has done nothing to earn your dislike,” he told her firmly.

Mai snorted and crossed her arms over her slightly flat chest.

“Oh, I have a reason,” she muttered.

“What was that?” Zuko asked with a frown.

“Nothing.”

They passed the waterbender’s door and Zuko glanced at it briefly before moving away. Mai noticed the almost imperceptible motion and narrowed her eyes. They finally arrived at her room in silence and Mai opened her door.
“Well, good night, Mai.” Zuko gave her a small smile as he stepped away, but Mai grabbed his arm before he could advance. He turned around and raised his eyebrow.

Mai stepped closer to him and stroked his chest with one thin hand.

“Well, good night, Mai.” Zuko gave her a small smile as he stepped away, but Mai grabbed his arm before he could advance. He turned around and raised his eyebrow.

“Why don’t you come in? It’s been so long since we have…spent some time together,” she whispered.

She placed her long, slender arms around his neck, leaned her face close to his, and kissed him. She was as tall as he was so she did not need to reach for him nor did he need to pull her to him. She pressed her thin lips against his, trying to elicit a response from him.

Without breaking away, Mai backed into her room, pulling him with her. She closed the door as soon as both were inside and began to untie his shirt, but Zuko broke the kiss and gently removed her arm from his neck. Mai looked at him and frowned.

“I’m sorry, Mai, but I’ve had a rather stressing day, especially after having to deal with my father. I’m very tired,” he said placatingly as he moved away from her.

The dark-haired woman grabbed his arm again before he could turn away.

“Zuko, what’s going on?” she asked, her voice a bit higher than usual. “We haven’t had sex for a very long time! Surely you must want it,” she hissed before she again kissed him.

Zuko slowly returned the kiss. It was true, he was like any other hot-blooded male, and he had not released his tension for a long time, almost a year to be exact. But it was not Mai he wanted but a certain water tribe maiden…

He felt himself flush at the thought and quickly pulled away.

“Not now, Mai. I’m sorry—”
“Is there someone else, Zuko?” she asked, her low tone angry, as her thin fingers tightened their grip on his arm.

Zuko’s eyes widened slightly.

“No…” he replied smoothly.

You’re lying, a voice inside his head that sounded so much like Toph said in a sing song tone.

“Then why are you refusing me? Answer me! Do you have some whore that’s making you happy somewhere around here?” the noblewoman asked bitterly, her grip tightening painfully causing Zuko to wince.

“Of course not!” Zuko growled as he roughly ripped his arm away from her grasp. “You know I’m not that kind of man! I thought you knew me better!”

And Katara is no whore! he mentally added as he soothed the skin on his arm. His eyes widened when the thought came to his mind.

Mai looked away, her cold expression turning sad.

“Then that means you’re tired of me? You don’t want to be with me? You don’t love me anymore?” she asked dejectedly as her arms fell to her sides.

Zuko felt disgusted with himself, guilty, and confused.

“No…don’t say that,” he said quietly. “I do…care for you. It’s just that I’ve been…distracted lately.” He touched her hand.

“Prove it,” she replied as she raised her head to look him in the eye.

Zuko furrowed his forehead.
“Prove that you still care for me by staying with me tonight,” Mai clarified, her black eyes hard.

Zuko opened his mouth to decline but the angry and despondent look in Mai’s eyes made him pause. He sighed and closed his eyes. If that would make her happy…

“Allright,” he replied with resignation. He grasped her arms, and before he could think more about it, he kissed her.

Mai smiled inwardly in triumph as she moved her arms from his grasp and wound them around his neck.

Zuko moved them to her bed, untying the sash around her thin waist with one hand as he did. He continued to kiss her as he guided her onto her back. And just as he expected, Mai remained still while she stroked his neck with one thin hand and allowed him to continue kissing her. He waited for that spark to go through his body like he had heard so many of his crewmembers boast about, but when it did not appear, he shoved the thought aside.

Finally opening her tunic, Zuko pulled away from the kiss to take a breath and he opened his eyes. He froze. Instead of the small, black eyes he was expecting, he saw big, blue ones staring at him. Instead of thin lips, it was pink plump ones. Instead of pale skin against his, it was brown skin touching him.

Zuko jumped away from the bed as if he had been scalded, and with his back toward the bed, he closed his eyes again. His breath was shallow and his heart was beating wildly in his chest, much faster than it had been a few minutes ago.

_Oh, Agni!_ What just happened? Was he still in Katara’s room? Did he just force himself on her? He cringed when he heard somebody move behind him.

“Zuko, what’s wrong?” Mai’s confused voice reached his ears.

Slowly turning around, Zuko opened his eyes and released a long breath of relief. He was in Mai’s dark room and Mai was the one he was looking at.
“Zuko, come back to bed,” Mai called out huskily as she stood before him with her top bare.

Zuko looked away and felt even more disgusted with himself, guiltier, and even more confused.

“I’m sorry, Mai. I can’t. I need to rest since I have an important meeting tomorrow morning concerning my mother. Good night,” he said quickly as he strode toward the door.

Without waiting for a reply, he opened the door and closed it behind him without looking back.

Zuko quickly made his way to his bedchamber, nodded to the guards posted outside his doors, and passed his anteroom. Opening and closing his bedchamber door, Zuko removed his boots and his fire crown. He walked over to his bathroom and filled the basin with water. He stared at his reflection on the clear liquid before he submerged his entire head into the cold water.

A few moments later, Zuko brought his head up, gasping for air. His wet hair plastered on his forehead and soaked his tunic. He slapped himself and then ran his hand down his face.

“What just happened? How could I have thought of Katara when Mai and I were about to...?” Zuko groaned in frustration and pulled on his hair. “What the hell is wrong with me? How could I be so disrespectful to Mai? And to Katara who has only helped me in so many things? How can I be having such indecent thoughts about her?”

He left his private bath and returned to his grand room. The fireplace gave out a cheerful glow, but he ignored it. He removed his clothes and put on his dark sleeping pants. Looking at his cushion and candles, he debated whether to meditate, but decided against it, knowing he would not be able to concentrate at all.

The young man moved toward his large, red bed and settled on it with a tired sigh. Tomorrow he would speak to his advisors and then leave to search for his mother.

Extinguishing the candles that illuminated his room with a flick of his wrist, Zuko turned on his side and closed his eyes. He replayed what just happened in Mai’s room, what he saw.

As he thought about it, he knew what he had felt was lust. Any man would feel the same since Katara was a beautiful woman, after all. He remembered the looks the men gave her when they were at Ember Island. That thought angered him. He frowned.
Yes, it was lust, but it wasn’t just that…There was something else…Something he did not know and did not understand.

He brought his hand to the scar on his abdomen and touched it lightly. Maybe the reason Katara appeared in his head was because he was extremely grateful for her help. Perhaps it was because it had been so long since he had been with a woman. Maybe it was because Katara had been so kind and understanding to him, something no other woman had been before. Or maybe it was because he was falling for her…

Zuko frowned and shook his head. Nonsense, he couldn’t fall for Katara. She was his friend, perhaps the best friend he had ever had in all his life. And he did not want to ruin that friendship.

Zuko rolled over onto his other side and closed his eyes. He willed his mind to be blank and he called for sleep to claim him in order to escape his confusing thoughts.

Zuko woke up abruptly with a sharp gasp. He was sweating and breathing in loud ragged breaths. Trying to calm his racing heart, Zuko glanced over at his balcony where the rays of the early sun were peeking around the edges of the curtains. He looked around and noticed his bed looked like it went through a fight. The bed sheets were in disarray and his bedcover was on the floor. Zuko frowned in confusion. Did he have a nightmare? Then his dream came back to him and he flushed…

He was kissing someone, a woman, but he could not see who it was since it was so dark. He did not care, though, for he was enjoying it immensely. The kiss grew more passionate and it consumed him. With a low growl, he ripped the woman’s shirt off and began to kiss her neck hungrily. He could feel her hands running down his back, causing him to let out another lustful growl. He was becoming more and more aroused by the minute. He wanted her badly. He needed to see her, needed to see her body. Pulling away, he raised one hand and lit a small flame. He gasped at the smiling face of the waterbender, of Katara…

That was when he woke up.

Shaking his head, Zuko got out of his bed and quickly made his way to his bathroom and filled the bathtub with water. Not bothering to heat it once it was full, he jumped into the cold water and submerged his heated body under it. He remained underwater until his lungs screamed for air.

He surfaced and coughed violently, taking large gulps of air for his burning lungs. He leaned his head against the edge of the marble tub and closed his eyes.
Something was seriously wrong with him. He had not had such dreams since his first years of adolescence and they were never that…arousing. Zuko groaned. It had felt so real, so good…

“Stop it!” Zuko growled at his treacherous thoughts and body.

What would Sokka do if he knew about the thoughts that he had been having about his little sister? The overprotective brother would probably castrate him and then chop his head off. And Aang? Zuko cringed. What would his young friend say?

And Katara...? Zuko swallowed.

Would she be disgusted and hate him for the rest of her life? Zuko winced as his heart clenched painfully. He would not be able to bear her hatred, especially not now that they were such good friends.

He shook his head. Maybe he was exaggerating a bit.

He ignored the cold water surrounding him as he closed his eyes. He was leaving that same day for the Earth Kingdom to look for his mother and the gang was leaving in two days. Again, Zuko felt saddened at the thought of them leaving, but perhaps it was for the best. Once they separated, everything would return to normal.

Katara woke up feeling strangely cold. She burrowed herself deeper into the blankets, but they did not provide the warmth she wanted. Opening her eyes, the waterbender looked around her room and then at her window. She guessed it was a few hours after dawn and so she had plenty of time before she needed to head to the dining room for breakfast. She turned over to her side and groaned. She had a terrible headache.

The events that occurred the night before came to her—Ozai’s taunting and scornful face, Zuko’s anger and hurt, and using her bloodbending, which almost caused her to collapse. She remembered the insinuations Ozai said about Zuko and her, and she blushed. Then she remembered Zuko helping her to the carriage and when they made their way to the palace, she fell asleep. The next thing she remembered was hearing Zuko’s voice telling her to wake up. Groggy and dizzy, she had stumbled out of the carriage, but how did she end up in her room?

Katara felt herself flush. Zuko had carried her in his arms, in his strong, warm arms. And he carried
her so gently. Is that why she felt so cold now? When she was in his arms, she had felt so warm and protected, and so she found it easy to fall asleep. But what happened next?

Her eyes widened and she slowly lifted her blanket. She was wearing the blue clothes from the previous day and they were intact. She blushed deeply and berated herself for thinking otherwise. Zuko was not that kind of man, he was too honorable for that.

She sighed. She couldn’t lie to herself. She liked having Zuko’s warm body pressed against hers, but for the reason why she rather not acknowledge to herself. Aang had hugged her many times even if he had never carried her, but she had never felt so…good.

Katara touched her lips gently. They felt strange, but in a good way. They were tingling just like when Zuko had touched them at the garden. Did that mean that...? A knock outside her door made her jump. She blushed furiously and shook her head.

“Um…come in,” she called out. She combed her hair with her fingers and smoothed her clothes.

The door opened and Jiao entered, carrying a silver tray in her hands. Katara’s face fell in disappointment.

Well, why did I even expect him to come? She frowned at herself.

“Good morning, Lady Katara,” Jiao greeted warmly and smiled as she made her way closer to the bed.

Katara smiled back.

“Good morning, Jiao. What are you carrying?” she asked as she curiously eyed the tray.

“Your breakfast,” Jiao replied and laid the silver tray on Katara’s lap.

Katara raised her eyebrow.
“My breakfast?” she repeated as she stared down at the tray.

“Yes. General Iroh asked me to bring you your breakfast to your room. He told me Fire Lord Zuko said that you needed to rest since you had a tiring day yesterday,” Jiao explained. She smiled and removed the top that covered the plate.

Katara’s heart skipped a beat.

“Fire Lord Zuko said that?” she asked softly.

She felt happy that he cared for her health. Usually she was the one that looked after everybody else. She looked down at the exquisite food and her mouth watered. She inhaled the appetizing aroma and her stomach growled loudly.

“Excuse me,” she muttered and blushed.

Jiao giggled. “I’m also here to help bathe you, help you get ready for the day, and—”

“What?!” Katara choked on her fruit juice. “You don’t have to! I can bathe and do everything else myself.”

Jiao raised her eyebrow and placed her hands on her hips.

“Are you sure?” she asked uncertainly.

“Of course,” Katara replied and raised her head, but she cringed when her head throbbed even worse. “Okay, maybe some help is fine,” she mumbled.

Jiao nodded and smiled. She began to tidy up the room while Katara ate in silence. The servant moved to the closet to look for clothes for the young woman.

“Would you like me to help you pack your things?” Jiao asked as she turned back to look at the waterbender.
Katara wiped her mouth and frowned. “What for?”

“Well, are you not returning to the Southern Water Tribe in two days?” Jiao asked as she looked down.

Katara closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall.

“That’s right. I forgot,” she said. Sadness filled her heart.

Jiao regarded the silent young woman as she continued to pull out clothes.

“I also heard Fire Lord Zuko would be leaving today.”

Katara sat up quickly and almost knocked over the tray on her lap. She set it aside on her bed.

“He’s leaving? Where to?” she asked curiously.

“I do not know, Lady Katara,” the young servant replied as she pulled out an outfit from the closet.

*His mother. He’s probably leaving to look for Princess Ursa,* Katara thought.

She had made a promise that she would help him be happy and she was going to achieve it by helping him search for his mother. The waterbender shoved the blankets away from her and got out of the bed quickly, but she had to sit back down when she almost fell forward when a wave of dizziness hit her.

*Stupid headache! Stupid bloodbending! Stupid Ozai!* Katara cursed in her head. Once the room stopped spinning, she stood up.

“Lady Katara, what are you doing? You’re supposed to be resting!” Jiao rushed to her side.
Katara waved her away.

“I need to speak to Zuko. Where is he?” Katara asked, forgetting to add an honorific to his name as she made her way to the bathroom.

“Let me help you, Lady Katara,” Jiao said as she rushed to fill the tub with water and light the wood pieces. “Fire Lord Zuko is in his royal bedchamber preparing for an urgent meeting with his advisors.”

Katara nodded and after convincing Jiao that she could take a bath alone without drowning herself, she washed her body and her hair quickly. Jiao helped her get dressed and then she brushed and braided her hair. Katara had to admit it felt nice to be pampered once in a while.

Exiting the room, Katara and Jiao walked down the hall and made a right turn into the next more elaborate corridor. As they drew near the golden doors, Katara began to get nervous. The feeling of being in Zuko’s arms was still fresh in her mind.

They approached Zuko’s two personal guards and Katara swallowed uneasily.

*Maybe they won’t let me go in. What was I thinking coming into the Fire Lord’s bedchamber so early in the morning?* She resisted the urge to turn around and run back to her room.

The guards looked at the two women in surprise. They glanced at each other before the older of the two addressed Katara.

“Good morning, Lady Katara. Is there something you need?” he asked as he inclined his head, his dark, gray eyes curious.

Katara blushed.

“I…well…” she stammered. She turned to Jiao with wide eyes.
“Lady Katara needs to speak to Fire Lord Zuko urgently,” the woman replied.

Katara nodded. She watched as the younger guard stared intensely at Jiao while the older one raised an eyebrow.

“But I guess I could talk to him later,” Katara spoke up, “I don’t want to bother him—”

“Do not worry, Lady Katara,” the other younger guard interrupted with an amiable smile as he looked away from the servant. “Fire Lord Zuko always wakes up early to meditate. And you being his friend, we’re sure he won’t mind you entering.”

Both guards gave her small yet kindly smiles.

Katara realized the two guards were the same ones that were with Zuko when they walked around Ember Island and the capital city, and the same ones who followed them into the prison tower. She smiled back.

“Thank you,” she said.

They nodded and opened one of the doors for them.

Jiao took Katara’s arm and led her into the antechamber.

“Please wait here, Lady Katara. Let me announce you to the Fire Lord.”

The servant walked across the room and knocked on the other set of golden doors. Katara heard Zuko’s muffled reply before Jiao opened the door and closed it behind her.

Taking a deep breath, Katara sat at the table and waited for Zuko to come out.

After he had controlled his body and his thoughts, Zuko got out of the tub and dried himself off. He went back to his room and opened his mahogany wardrobe. Taking out his black pants, he put them on and searched for a robe. He glanced down at the floor and noticed the tunic he threw to the side.
the previous night.

He moved towards it and picked it up, holding it with both hands in front of him. It was the same tunic that had been pressed against Katara, the same one she had been clutching to as he carried her to her room. He rubbed his thumbs on it and wondered if it held her scent.

A knock at his door made him jump and he dropped the tunic. He narrowed his eyes in irritation. Who the hell was disturbing him this early in the morning?

“Come in,” he called curtly. He turned away from the door and picked up his robe and boots.

“Good morning, my lord,” Jiao greeted respectfully and bowed. “Please forgive my interruption.”

Zuko sighed.

“What is it, Jiao? Did you take Lady Katara her breakfast?”

“Yes, my lord, but she would like to speak to you.” Jiao smiled. “She is waiting in your antechamber.”

Zuko choked and then cleared his throat.

“She what?” he croaked.

Oh, crap! He was not ready to face her after that dream! Was she awake last night? Did she know what he was doing? Was she going to kill him? He paused and frowned at himself for his thoughts.

“Lord Zuko? Are you feeling well?” Jiao asked worriedly since his face was turning bright red.

“Er…yes, I’m fine. I’ll be ready in a minute. Fix my bed and…and tidy up the room a bit and then let Lady Katara in,” Zuko ordered.
Ignoring his servant’s bewildered look, he grabbed his clothes and bolted to his bathroom to finish getting ready.

Sitting in the silent antechamber, Katara played with her long braid nervously as minutes passed by with no sign of Zuko. What was taking so long? Did Zuko not want to speak to her? Maybe he was still asleep.

She finally decided to get up to leave when the door opened and Jiao came out.

“His majesty will be out in a second. He said that you should wait for him inside.” Jiao motioned for the bedchamber.

“I-inside?” Katara stuttered. “I thought nobody was allowed to enter his room.”

Jiao blinked before she shrugged lightly.

“Not without Fire Lord Zuko’s permission, but he seems not to mind if you enter,” she said. She noticed the waterbender’s hesitation and smiled.

“Do not worry, Lady Katara. He won’t bite.” She giggled softly.

Katara blushed as another image of Zuko nibbling her ear surfaced in her mind.

“I’m not worried,” the waterbender argued with a huff as she stood up.

Katara entered the opulent room and again looked around with admiration. It looked the same as the last time she accidently entered Zuko’s room. She looked over at the long, thick curtains and wondered what view lay beyond the balcony.

She heard another door open and she whirled around excitedly, half expecting Zuko to be wrapped in only a red towel again with his wet hair and muscular, bare upper body. But he emerged fully clothed and Katara had to hold back a cry of disappointment.
She blushed. *What am I thinking?*

“Good morning, Katara,” Zuko greeted, but he averted his eyes from hers. “Jiao, please wait in the anteroom.”

Jiao bowed and retreated, closing the door softly behind her.

“You are supposed to be resting,” Zuko told the waterbender. He frowned as he noticed that her skin still looked pale. “Is there something wrong?”

Katara blushed and fidgeted with her fingers.

“No. I just… wanted to thank you for taking the trouble of… carrying me to my room.”

Zuko felt his face flush before he cleared his throat and straightened himself.

“It was no trouble at all. I told you I wasn’t going to let you get hurt.”

Katara smiled brilliantly, causing Zuko’s breath to hitch at the sight.

“I’m so glad to have such a good friend like you, Zuko. I did need Jiao for a bit, thanks for being concerned for my health, by the way.”

Zuko smiled.

“Of course I’m concerned for your health since it seems you are more concerned for the others’ than your own,” he told her almost chidingly.

Katara looked at her hands and smiled. It was as if he was the only one that noticed.

Zuko sighed.
“It was because of me you fell ill in the first place,” he said grimly.

Katara looked up and saw the guilt written on his face.

“Your fault? How is it your fault that I felt dizzy?” she asked him incredulously.

“Because you used your bloodbending to stop my father,” he replied. He frowned again. “And I feel even guiltier because you used your bloodbending at all. I know how much you dislike to bloodbend, Katara, that you swore never to use it again. And because of me, you had to do what you hate the most. Please forgive me.”

“Oh, Zuko,” Katara sighed with a smile. “Don’t you go blaming yourself. It’s not like you ordered me to bloodbend, I made the choice. Yes, it’s true, I hate using bloodbending because it robs people of their free will. It’s too much power for me to handle over a person. But I don’t regret using it on Ozai. He deserved it for everything he did and for the hurtful things he was saying about you. It just made me so…furious!”

Zuko finally met her gaze and smiled.

“I did hurt a bit, but thanks to what you told me that night in the garden, it didn’t hurt as much as it used to. But I’m grateful and glad that you care enough for my…” Zuko cleared his throat, “uh…feelings since nobody but Uncle seems to care.”

Katara wondered why he did not mention Mai.

“And I am especially grateful that because of you I finally know where my mother is,” he continued as he smiled warmly at her. He reached for her hand, but he pulled it back.

Katara returned the smile, mesmerized by the warmth he was allowing her to see in his eyes.

“I’m sure you would have done the same if our roles were reversed, well, maybe except for the bloodbending part,” she said with a laugh.
Zuko chuckled. “Yeah.”

*That and much more,* he added mentally.

“I heard that you’re leaving today. Are you going to look for Lady Ursa?” Katara asked.

“Yes, the sooner the better,” Zuko said with a nod.

He turned away and moved to the fireplace.

“Have you…started packing yet?” he asked casually. He clenched his eyes shut against the sadness that assaulted him.

“No, not yet, but I guess I have to start packing immediately…” she began with a mischievous smile, “if I’m leaving with you today.”

Zuko whirled around to face her and he noticed the twinkle in her blue eyes. For a moment he got lost in those cobalt orbs of hers before he yelled, “*What?*”

Katara sighed.

“I said I’m going with you to help search for Lady Ursa. Are you deaf or something?”

Zuko scowled.

“I heard what you said. But you can’t go,” he said firmly.

This was not supposed to happen! They were supposed to part ways so he could stop thinking about her!

“And why not?” Katara retorted as she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes.
“Because…you have to return to your waterbending students,” Zuko quickly said. He smirked and crossed his own arms.

Katara smirked back.

“I got that covered. I can just ask Gran-Gran to convince Master Pakku, her husband, to continue substituting for me. And he will in order to please her.”

Zuko frowned.

“Hm…What about Sokka? He won’t like the idea of having his little sister running around in the Earth Kingdom.”

Katara rolled her eyes and laughed.

“Well, he’ll have to get it into his big head that I’m not a little girl anymore.”

*Definitely not a little girl,* Zuko mused with a silent groan. He mentally slapped himself for straying off.

“What about Aang?” he asked slowly.

Katara smiled. “I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“Well, I don’t want you to come with me!” Zuko snapped, harsher than he intended.

Katara’s eyes widened at his outburst and she cast her eyes away, but not before Zuko caught the hurt in her beautiful blue eyes. He felt miserable. He had promised never to let anything hurt her and there he was breaking his own promise.

He sighed.
Thank you, Katara, but I don’t need your help. I can do it alone,” he said more quietly.

Katara looked up and saw Zuko staring into the fire. She was transfixed by the way the light danced upon his handsome features. She frowned. Was he trying to push people away from him again? Was he refusing help from those who cared for him? No, she couldn’t let him retreat into his old, solitary self after he was beginning to open up to her.

“Zuko, please let me help you,” she said softly.

She reached out a hand and gently touched his arm. Zuko suppressed a shiver at the touch.

“It’s the least I could do to repay you for what you have done for me,” she continued quietly.

The young Fire Lord turned to the woman beside him and frowned.

“What do you mean? You have already done enough.”

Katara shook her head.

“No. You helped me find closure with my mother’s murderer. You helped me move on and finally live my life without her. You were the only one who understood me and the only one who did not judge me for the hatred I felt for… that horrible man. You supported me, unlike Aang who tried to impose his teachings on forgiveness on me,” she said with a sigh. “You’re the only one who respected me enough to let me make my own choices.”

Zuko could not help but smile inwardly.

Katara looked up at him with a sad smile.

“I want to help you find your mother, Zuko, because I know I will never find mine,” she explained quietly.
Zuko turned away from her sincere, beautiful face and hesitated. If he were in her place he would want to help her too, but still…His thoughts returned to his dream but he brushed it away. It was just a dream, right? It was not like she would actually let him do those things.

“Please let me help you, Zuko,” Katara whispered again and gripped his arm. Let me help you be happy.

The golden-eyed male returned his gaze toward her and they stared at each other for a moment.

“Thank you, Katara,” he said with a sigh before he turned to face her fully. “Well…if that’s what you want…”

His eyes widened when Katara jumped with a happy squeal and hugged him. He stiffened, more out of shock than discomfort, and resisted the urge to hug her closer to him.

Katara pulled away and blushed, but she looked up to smile at him.

“Great! I should go pack. I’ll ask Jiao to help me,” she said excitedly.

Zuko smiled back. Well, at least he would not be bored in his journey.

“Okay then, we should go. I have to let my advisors know my plans,” Zuko chuckled. “Wei is going to die of happiness because I’m leaving.”

Katara giggled. “Not if Advisor Chao stays behind to keep him in check.”

Jiao smiled when she noticed the pair coming out of the room, laughing. She had never seen the Fire Lord laugh before. Jiao followed them as they exited the Fire Lord’s royal quarters. She looked at the guards who smiled at the young benders without much surprise on their faces. She figured it was not the first time they had seen their young lord laugh around the waterbender.

“Jiao, please pack my travelling things as well as Lady Katara’s,” Zuko addressed the young servant as they continued walking.
“Yes, my lord.” Jiao bowed.

The three stopped short when they heard a shout down the hall.

“Katara! There you are!” Sokka yelled angrily as he marched up to them with an embarrassed-looking Suki and a concerned Avatar following behind him. “I can’t believe you went to the prison tower! What were you thinking going to such a place and in the middle of the night?”

Katara sighed irritably and crossed her arms.

“I went with Zuko and Toph to see Ozai. I have a headache so stop shouting! How did you find out anyway?”

“Mai told us at breakfast,” Suki answered.

Zuko blew steam from his nostrils and Katara narrowed her eyes.

“Why did you let my baby sister go to such a place?” Sokka yelled at Zuko and jabbed his chest with a finger.

Zuko rolled his eyes and sighed. If Sokka reacted this way about such a thing, Zuko was sure the water tribesman would kill him if he knew what he dreamed about doing to his sister.

“Sokka, you idiot!” Suki grabbed him and pulled him away. “It’s not smart to disrespect the Fire Lord in his own home! Besides, I was there when he tried to stop Katara and Toph from going.”

“Sokka, calm down. Toph and I wanted to go, and even if Zuko tried to stop us, we would’ve gone either way!” Katara exclaimed. She pressed her temples with her fingers and groaned. “You’re making my headache worse.”

Zuko reached out to help her, but Aang stepped in and grabbed her arms. Zuko clenched his jaw.
“Are you okay?” the airbender asked worriedly.

“I’m fine, Aang,” Katara sighed.

“Because of Katara I finally know where my mother is,” Zuko explained calmly when it seemed Sokka and Aang were about to ask more questions.

Everybody went silent and stared at Zuko with wide eyes before they started firing question after question at him. He raised a hand up to quiet them down before he explained what happened, skipping the parts of Ozai’s insults on Katara and himself. Aang frowned when he heard that Katara had used her bloodbending, but decided not to argue about it.

“And thanks to Katara’s bloodbending, Ozai had no choice but to comply,” Zuko finished as he gave Katara a small smile.

“That’s my sister for ya,” Sokka said smugly as he beamed and hugged Katara with one arm around her shoulders.

The waterbender rolled her eyes. First, he was screaming angrily all over the palace and now he was praising her.

“I’m leaving today to the Earth Kingdom to look for her,” Zuko announced.

“And I’m going with him,” Katara added. Before they could protest she said, “Zuko helped me with my mother and now I will help him with his. It’s the least I can do.”

She looked up at Zuko and smiled.

Zuko’s heart skipped a beat and he smiled back in gratitude. He just hoped nothing bad happened during their journey. He returned his attention to the others.

“The Abandoned Fort is in the Earth Kingdom continent, but neither under Earth Kingdom or Fire Nation rule. It will take some weeks to get there, so I’m planning on us leaving today,” Zuko continued and turned to look at Katara who nodded at him.
“Hey! Why wasn’t I told there was a secret meeting?” Toph shouted as she stomped toward them, making all of them turn to look at her. “If it’s anything with loud noises and bloody noses I’m in!”

“Oh, Toph! What am I going to do with you?” Katara sighed in exasperation.

Toph just scratched her chin and grinned.

“I was actually filling them in on what happened in the prison tower,” Zuko responded.

Both Katara and he hoped the earthbender did not say more than she should about what really happened at the prison, but instead she grinned as she recounted the weak state Ozai was in. Sokka was also grinning at her description, while Aang frowned in disapproval for their enjoyment.

“Anyway,” Zuko interrupted with an impatient wave of his hand, “We have to prepare for our trip, so if you’ll excuse us—”


“Zuko and Katara are going to look for Princess Ursa,” Suki replied to the unaware earthbender.

“Really?” Toph grinned as she turned in the direction she knew the two benders were. “Well, what the hell are you waiting for? Have fun!”

Zuko frowned while Katara glared at the short earthbender.

“It’s not a vacation, Toph,” Zuko said gruffly.

“Yeah, whatever. Anyways, get going you two.” Toph smiled and waved her hand at them as if she were shooing a pair of puppies.

Aang looked at Toph and then between Katara and Zuko, and a crease appeared on his forehead that caused his tattooed skin to furrow.
“I would like to go as well…and help,” he said and placed his arm around Katara, giving her a cheery smile.

Zuko clenched his hands, resisting the urge to remove the Avatar’s arm from the waterbender. Toph tilted her head in Zuko’s general direction and smirked.

*Calm down, Zuko* told himself, *There is no reason for me to react this way.*

“You can’t go!” Toph yelled. All of them turned to stare at her for her outburst.

“Why not?” Aang asked, narrowing his eyes at his former earthbending teacher.

“Because…because…” Toph crossed her arms and looked away. Damn. She couldn’t say she wanted Zuko and Katara to go alone!

“I don’t know, Aang,” Katara began as she frowned when she saw Aang smirk at Toph, “Don’t you have to go back to Omashu?”

Aang turned away from the scowling earthbender to smile at her.

“I’m sure Bumi will understand.”

“Well, then I’m in, too!” Sokka announced. Before Zuko could protest Sokka continued, “I want to help, too. The more people searching the better. Besides, it would be a way to repay you for your hospitality, right, Suki?”

He turned to his girlfriend and smiled. Suki nodded and smiled as well, earning a kiss from the warrior.

Toph snorted in annoyance.
Great. Not only is Aang going, but the whole gang! How’re Sugar Queen and Sparky supposed to get closer with everybody around?

“Well, if the whole bunch of you are going, then count me in,” Toph announced as she crossed her arms over her chest.

*Maybe I can figure something out during the trip,* she mused.

The others did not notice the mischievous grin plastered on her small face.

Zuko looked at the people around him and gave them all a small smile. He could not help feeling glad and relieved. Glad because his friends wanted to help him and relieved because he would not have to travel alone with the woman that had begun to take over his thoughts.

Katara, on the other hand, pouted and frowned. She could not help feeling disappointed. She wanted it to be just Zuko and her like when they went after her mother’s murderer. Just two people who understood what the other felt about their mothers. But when the excited chatter of the others began, Katara became excited as well. They would be going on an adventure just like they used to four years ago.

Zuko turned to Jiao who was standing silently behind him and Katara.

“Jiao, please make sure everybody’s things are packed and loaded onto the flagship as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Fire Lord Zuko,” she obeyed immediately.

She bowed to him and then gave Katara a smile. The young servant left to get everything ready.

“We will travel light. I was expecting only two ostrich horses with supplies for Katara and me,” Zuko informed them as he frowned in thought. “So now I guess we’ll take more ostrich horses and ___”

“Zuko?” Aang interrupted in a cheery voice, “Why not just ride on Appa?”
Zuko smiled. “Just like old times.”

“Just like old times,” they all agreed.

“Why did you plan on travelling alone, Zuko?” Suki asked. “Shouldn’t you be taking a carriage and komodo rhinos with supplies and tents as well as an entourage of servants and guards since you are the Fire Lord?”

Katara turned to Zuko for she was curious, too.

“I can’t take a group of soldiers into the Earth Kingdom. It will give the people the wrong impression and I do not wish for the peace and trust we have gained to be lost. Since there are still some who mistrust the Fire Nation and…me it is best that they don’t know the Fire Lord is passing by so trouble can be avoided,” Zuko explained emotionlessly, but Katara could see the discontent in his eyes.

The others nodded and then made their way to their rooms to make sure they packed what they needed. Zuko watched as Katara gave him one last smile as she disappeared down the hall before he continued on his way to the throne room.

Sitting behind the wall of fire, Zuko spoke to his advisors about his discovery about his mother’s whereabouts and about his plan on leaving that same day with the gang, though he made sure not to tell them where exactly he was going. He still mistrusted some of them.

“Advisor Chao, I will leave the Fire Nation into your temporary charge while I’m away,” Zuko addressed the old advisor. “Advisors Enlai and Jian will assist you as well.”

Chao bowed and promised to do his best. The other two advisors nodded their understanding. Zuko inwardly smirked as Wei turned to glare at them.

“I will take all the documents that need my signature with me to the flagship. I will inform Admiral Jee to bring them back as soon as he leaves us in the colony port,” Zuko continued.

“Fire Lord Zuko, if I may be so bold as to ask you a question?” Chao spoke up.
Zuko looked at his most trusted advisor and nodded his consent.

“How is it that Ozai finally decided to reveal where Lady Ursa is?” Chao asked curiously.

Zuko looked around the meeting room as the other advisors mumbled amongst themselves the same question. He saw no reason why he should not tell them part of the truth. He wanted them to see how incredible Katara was.

“Lady Katara of the Southern Water Tribe used a special technique that made even Ozai cry out in fear. This technique is so powerful and dangerous that only a few waterbenders know how to use it,” Zuko began in a low voice.

He paused and looked around the room, smirking inwardly as some of the men leaned forward to hear what he was going to say next.

“Bloodbending,” he said.

“Bloodbending?” the men murmured among themselves. They had heard of such a thing, of how people lose their will over their bodies and are controlled like puppets.

“But I thought bloodbending could only happen during a night of a full moon,” Wei spoke up with a sneer. “And there was no full moon last night.”

Zuko let a smirk appear on his face as he responded.

“Yes, but Lady Katara is a powerful waterbending master and she was able to bloodbend without the full moon,” he said proudly.

“Is that why Lady Katara was feeling ill this morning?” Chao asked with concern.

Zuko’s smirk fell from his face and was replaced by guilt.
“Lady Katara is a great waterbender, but she loathes bloodbending, so she has not had much practice with such a dangerous technique. But she used it, nevertheless, in order to help me. And I will always be grateful to her for that.”

The Court Council members could not help but feel fear as well as admiration for the Water Tribe woman.

“I really do hope she feels better,” Chao expressed. The other men nodded in agreement, except for Wei, who could care less.

Zuko graced them with a small smile.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After exiting the meeting room, the young Fire Lord left the palace and rode on his komodo rhino toward the docks where the others were waiting for him on his flagship. Only a small crowd who knew he was leaving gathered to see him off. Zuko dismounted and walked up the ramp to the metal deck of the ship. He stopped mid-step upon reaching the deck when he noticed Mai and Ty Lee waiting with the others.

“Mai, you’re coming, too?” he asked in surprised before he forced a smile on his face. After what happened the night before, the silent noblewoman had been ignoring him.

“Ty Lee and I are going to Ba Sing Se with Iroh,” Mai replied flatly, looking at him with dispassionate eyes.

Zuko looked at Iroh who gave him a shrug. Zuko frowned. Since Mai was his girlfriend, shouldn’t she be willing to help him with something so important to him?

Zuko noticed Katara walk to his side with a bright smile. Well, at least someone wants to help me, he thought.

And he could not have picked anyone better.

“Yeah!” Ty Lee exclaimed excitedly as she hopped in her place beside Mai. “We haven’t been to Ba Sing Se for years!”
“Yeah, ‘cause last time they overthrew the king and took over,” Sokka mumbled under his breath. Suki elbowed his side and Toph snickered.

The energetic acrobat continued rambling on.

“Haru, are you going with us to Ba Sing Se?” The acrobat batted her eyelashes at the shy, young man.

Haru flushed.

“Um…I’m actually going to the first Fire Nation colony to start teaching,” he answered. When he saw her smile fade he quickly added, “But I really wish I was able to go. Maybe…some other time?” He rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

Ty Lee smiled and rested her head on his shoulder, causing him to blush even redder. The other men grinned while the girls—except Mai, of course—giggled.

Iroh chuckled.

_Ah, to be young again_, he thought and sighed wistfully before turning to his nephew.

“Remember to come to Ba Sing Se after you find Lady Ursa,” the old man reminded him. “You should visit the Earth King again in order to further strengthen the ties between the nations.”

Zuko nodded.

Iroh then turned to the others.

“It’s been a while since we’ve all been together at the Jasmine Dragon, has it not?” He smiled. The others agreed excitedly.

Admiral Jee appeared a few minutes later and bowed to Zuko.
“We are ready to depart, my lord,” he announced with a smile.

Zuko nodded.

“Make sure to find the best and fastest route, Admiral,” he commanded.

“Yes, sir,” Jee answered, and with another bow, he left to follow his orders.

“So…” Sokka began as he grinned and rubbed his hands, “Can we eat now?”

The others rolled their eyes, but Zuko did not pay them attention as he looked toward the horizon. Soon he would finally find his mother.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Almost two weeks had passed on the ship, during which Zuko spent most of his time in his large cabin finishing all the paperwork he ordered to be given to him before he left the Fire Nation. He wanted to make sure everything was well in his absence so he would not have to worry about his responsibilities during his search for his mother. However, that was not the only reason he had shut himself in his cabin all day except for meals.

No, the main reason was a certain blue-eyed waterbender. The first few days onboard the ship, he had experienced two more dreams regarding the lovely water tribe maiden. The first was sweet and innocent where both he and Katara sat under the cherry blossom tree in the garden gazing out into the pond. The second dream was so erotic that he was left breathless and painfully aroused. Now every time he would lay his eyes on Katara he would feel his blood heat up as the memories of those oh so inappropriate dreams resurfaced.

However, as the days passed he found out that his plan backfired. Not only could he not stop thinking of her, but he also found himself feeling lonely and depressed. Sure, the others were there, and Sokka and he spent time talking about war strategies, technological advances and other things. Iroh kept him company until he would go play Pai Sho with the crewmembers. However, Katara was the only one he could actually talk to. The only one he could really speak to about his problems without hesitation and the only one who seemed to understand him.

Zuko signed and sealed another document at his desk. Why was life so complicated? It was like the spirits wanted his life to be miserable. And to top it all off, Mai had been avoiding him. The only reason he found himself affected at all by it was because he knew it was due to his behavior the night
before they sailed away.

He felt guilty, not only because he was fantasizing about Katara, his friend, but because he felt
drawn like a moth to a flame by another woman that was not Mai, his girlfriend of four years. But
what could he say, really? He could not confess the real reason why he acted and left the way he did
to Mai. It would be like asking to be stabbed by a poisonous dagger in the gut. Yes, the spirits
seemed to hate him.

A knock outside the steel door brought him out of his depressing thoughts.

“Come in,” he called out absentmindedly as he returned to his papers.

Iroh opened the door and entered the large cabin carrying a tray with two cups of tea and a jolly
smile on his face.

“Nephew, I brought you some tea to help you keep awake. It’s ginseng!” he cried out joyfully.

Zuko did not bother to look up as he gave a small nod.

“Thank you, Uncle. Just set it on the table,” he said dismissively.

Iroh frowned as his dear nephew did not even glance his way. Really, what was wrong with the
young people these days? The retired general placed the steaming cup on the table as told and sat
himself on a chair to drink from his own. After a few minutes of silence—of being completely
ignored—Iroh gave out a dramatic sigh.

“My, I’m really getting too old to be travelling so much.”

“Mm,” Zuko gave as an answer and signed another paper.

“The weather is really holding up and it’s such a beautiful day.” Iroh tried again.

“Hm.”
Iroh rolled his eyes and sipped from his hot tea. What could he say to get a young man’s attention? Iroh grinned and inhaled the tea’s sweet aroma.

“I heard that you told the Court Council members about Katara’s amazing ability,” he commented casually.

“Yes, I wanted them to see that Katara is a powerful waterbender who has helped me a lot and deserves to be respected and admired,” Zuko responded.

*Oh, now he talks. Interesting...* Iroh mused.

“Zuko, we barely see you up on deck, and when you do show up for meals, you scurry down to your cabin as soon as it’s over. Why is that?”

“I do not *scurry*. I just have so many documents I must finish reviewing before the journey across the Earth Kingdom begins,” Zuko answered without removing his eyes from the paper he was currently reading.

“Hmm?” Iroh stroked his chin. “You know, Miss Katara is getting worried and she asked me if you were okay.” He smiled when Zuko looked up.

“She did?” Zuko asked, trying not to sound surprised and pleased. “Well, there’s nothing to worry about,” he continued gruffly. He cleared his throat and resumed his previous less interesting task. “I’m fine.”

Iroh sighed and shook his head.

“Now, if you’d excuse me, Uncle, I must finish these last documents.”

“You know, Nephew, it’s great that you are taking your responsibility and your duty to your people and your nation seriously. But remember this, sometimes we must think of our own happiness in order to make those around us happy,” Iroh said solemnly before a smile adorned his wrinkled face once again. “When am I going to see you married with little Zukos running around causing trouble? Others are already getting ahead of you, you know!” He chuckled.
Zuko looked up and furrowed his forehead at the statement, but before he could ask his uncle what he meant, Iroh changed the subject.

“I’m going up to make the helmsman pay up for our last Pai Sho game. Seriously, you would think by now that they would know they can’t beat a Master of Pai Sho!” The old man chuckled as he left the room.

Zuko stared at the door after the old man disappeared and he pondered his uncle’s words. He had just looked back at the scroll in his hand when another knock sounded on the other side of the door.

“Come in,” he called again as he continued to write.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” Jee greeted as he entered and bowed. “We will be arriving at the colony port in a few more days if the weather keeps holding up as it has until now.”

Zuko straightened in his chair and nodded.

“I’m glad. Excellent job, Admiral Jee.”

Jee straightened himself proudly before he bowed.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Tell me,” Zuko continued, “has there been any news about the raiders?”

Jee cleared his throat and slightly shifted in place before he straightened himself again.

“Well, they have been driven off by the newly guarded colonies. Your plan about having the firebending and earthbending villagers working together succeeded. But…the colonies that are mostly made up of earthbending residents have suffered greatly.”
Zuko clenched his hands and sighed heavily.

“I will have Haru sent to these colonies first. Also, I want you to take food, medical supplies and other necessities to the colonies that have come under attack as soon as possible. I will send a letter to the Court Council to have everything ready. Thank you, Admiral. You may leave.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Jee said and bowed again before turning to leave. The older man looked over his shoulder and noticed the dejected look in his lord’s eyes.

“Fire Lord Zuko, if I may say something?” he began carefully.

At Zuko’s nod, Jee smiled warmly.

“I am honored to serve such a generous and just ruler. You have done so much for the betterment of our great Fire Nation. The people have never been happier.”

Zuko felt his spirits lift and he smiled.

“Thank you, Admiral Jee.”

The admiral bowed once more and opened the door to find Sokka, Aang, and Haru. Jee smiled at them as he passed and left the room.

“Hey, Zuko, we’ve come to get you,” Sokka announced and grinned as he strode into the room.

“What for?” Zuko frowned as he put down his ink brush.

“You’ve been stuffed in here all day!” Sokka exclaimed and gestured around the semi-dark room to make a point.

“Yeah, Zuko! You need some fresh air!” Aang agreed with a cheery smile.
Zuko suppressed the urge to sigh. He knew they would not give up until they dragged him outside.

“Fine,” he relented. He was getting a headache anyway.

The four young men exited the room and walked up to the deck of the large flagship. Aang and Haru excitedly compared earthbending techniques on the way while the Fire Lord and the blue-eyed warrior walked silently behind them.

“So, Sokka,” Zuko began casually as he eyed the Water Tribe warrior beside him, “When are you proposing to Suki? I hope this journey is not the cause for the delay.” He frowned.

“Nah, don’t worry,” Sokka reassured him as he waved his dark hand dismissively. “I just haven’t come up with a good proposal yet, and I need to finish some stuff, and I need to—”

“Oh, okay, I get it,” Zuko interrupted. “But thanks by the way…for helping me.”

Sokka laughed heartily and patted his Fire Nation friend’s back.

“It’s what friends do! You helped me rescue my dad and Suki from the Boiling Rock, so I will help you look for your mother…even if I have no clue how…”

Zuko smirked as they emerged onto the deck, the sun slowly sinking on the horizon. The firebender breathed in the salty air and felt his headache lessen.

“Yeah, Zuko,” Aang piped in as he heard what Sokka said, “we’re friends and help each other out. I would’ve liked to have had help finding the people I love, too.”

Zuko cringed. He knew Aang was talking about the Air Nomads, his people, the airbenders that were wiped out by the Fire Nation.

Aang noticed Zuko’s reaction and smiled good-naturedly.

“Don’t worry, Zuko. I don’t blame you for what happened to my people. That’s in the past.”
Zuko nodded, but he still felt guilty nonetheless, and it was not only because of Aang’s people…

“Hey, Sokka. Help me feed Appa,” Aang called after a while. “He’s probably impatient right now.”

“Fine,” Sokka grumbled, though he loved the big fur ball. “But you have to give me your dessert at dinner,” the warrior compromised as the two walked away.

Zuko stared out into the ocean for a while and remembered what Jee had told him.

“Haru?” he called after the silent young man beside him.

“Yes?” the young earthbender turned toward him.

“Thank you again for aiding me with the colonies. As soon as we arrive at the port, you will be escorted to the first colony. I will give you a pass with my seal that you must present to the governor. There have been some problems, but hopefully everything can be settled. You will be provided with a room in the governor’s home in every colony you stay at as well as all the food and necessities you need. After you finish teaching, the governor will pay you for your services and send an escort with you to the next colony.”

Haru nodded and smiled. “I’m just glad to help.”

They talked about a few more details before pausing when they noticed Katara and Suki walk across the deck with an irritated Toph trailing behind them. Zuko’s stomach flipped as he watched the way Katara’s blue eyes sparkled when she laughed.

“Katara’s a great woman, huh?” Haru said after a while.

Zuko started and ripped his eyes away from the lovely waterbender.

“Uh…yes, she is,” he replied softly.
He turned to Haru and noticed that the young man was blushing. Zuko narrowed his eyes.

“You know,” Haru began, playing with his thin mustache, “I use to have a crush on Katara.”

Zuko found himself glaring at the oblivious young earthbender.

“But I let it go when I realized that she only saw me as a friend,” Haru continued and sighed.

Zuko sighed as well and looked back towards the darkening ocean.

“What made you feel for Katara that way?” he asked, trying to sound disinterested.

Haru smiled as he, too, looked over at the sea.

“Well, she visited my village with Aang and Sokka during the war. She found out that the Fire Nation soldiers were controlling my village and had prohibited us from earthbending. Those that were earthbenders were removed from their families and homes, and were thrown in prison where they couldn’t bend. My father was one of them.”

Zuko cringed again. Maybe having people come along with him on this journey was not such a great idea.

Haru smiled at the uncomfortable look on Zuko’s face.

“Just like Aang, I don’t blame you. You have done much to help us all. That was a long time ago and the Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation people in my village are living together peacefully now,” he said before he continued with his story, “Anyway, I was trying to hide my bending abilities, but I was caught and thrown in the prison ship as well. Katara and her friends went out to rescue me, but when Katara saw the broken spirits of my people she decided to stay.”

“She stayed? But she isn’t even an earthbender,” Zuko said as he stole a glance at Katara who gave out a small laugh as Toph pouted at her.
“Yeah. She tricked the soldiers into thinking she was an earthbender. I asked her to leave because it wasn’t safe, but she refused,” Haru continued.

Zuko smirked. *That sounds like Katara, alright.*

“She was outraged that the people were being ripped from their element, separating them from what makes up a bender’s soul. She gave encouragement to those broken prisoners. She gave us the strength and courage to rise against our oppressors and fight for our freedom. So we bent the coal that fueled the metal prison ship and broke out, finally returning to our families and homes once again.”

Zuko’s golden eyes widened.

*Metal prison ship?* He glanced back at the smiling waterbender near the railing and looked at the blue necklace around her delicate neck. *So she was helping prisoners escape and lost her necklace while she was at it.* He smiled. *And I found it.*

“Her bravery, kindness, and spirit attracted me to her as well as her beauty,” Haru admitted as his face flushed.

Zuko nodded since he understood very well.

“But as I said, we’re just friends and I could ask for nothing better,” Haru continued and smiled.

*Yes, just friends and nothing more,* Zuko thought with a frown.

“Haru!” Ty Lee’s bubbly voice reached their ears. Both men turned to see the pink clad acrobat bounce her way towards them.

“You wanna play Pai Sho with me?” she asked with a smile.

Zuko noticed Haru’s blush deepened as he stuttered an ‘okay’. Zuko smirked as he watched the pair walk away with Ty Lee leaning on Haru’s shoulder.
The young Fire Lord returned his gaze upon the waterbender. Katara seemed not to care for her own comfort as long as she was able to help those that needed her. She left her home in the Southern Water Tribe to help the young Avatar save the world. She stayed in a prison to help those earthbending prisoners. She offered to heal his Uncle Iroh when Azula struck him with lightning in that abandoned village, and she also offered to heal his scar under Ba Sing Se, even though he was her enemy. She had risked her life to defeat a crazed Azula in order to save him from his severe wound. She had used her bloodbending, the thing she hated the most, to help him once more. And now she was giving up her time to help him search for his banished mother.

Zuko looked at Katara fondly, his heart burning with that strange feeling once more.

No. It was not just lust he felt for this beautiful young woman but something else…something deeper.

He frowned.

*It’s only friendship, a very strong friendship.*

She was special, yes, and he cared for her a lot, but that was it. That was all he *could* feel toward her.

Zuko continued to gaze at Katara, the way her chocolate-brown hair glistened in the setting sun, the way her sapphire eyes sparkled, the way her tan skin seemed to glow, the way her smile warmed his heart…

“If you stare any longer, you might set something on fire,” Toph spoke loudly next to him, her voice full of humor.

Zuko jumped and cursed.

“Dammit, Toph! Don’t do that!” he growled. How was it he did not sense her coming? “And I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, Sparky,” Toph snorted. She lifted her hand to her mouth and yawned. “You’re gonna have to face the truth one day, and it better be fast or you may regret it for the rest of your life.”
Zuko stared at her in confusion.

“Face what truth?”

Toph rolled her creamy, lime-colored eyes.

“Really, Sparky, I thought Snoozles was the dumb one of the group,” she drawled.

Zuko opened his mouth to ask her what she meant by that when she punched his arm.

“Hey, take me to my room. I hate being on ships, even if they are made of metal! I’ll find a way to sleep my way through ‘till we arrive in good ol’ land!” she vowed.

Seriously, did people not understand she was blind?

“Do you want me to carry you and tuck you in?” Zuko asked and grinned.

Toph snorted and crossed her arms over her small chest.

“Only if you want to eat metal,” she retorted.

Zuko smirked as he grabbed a hold of her arm and led her down into the ship.

Katara played with the waves as she and Suki stood next to the ship’s railing. They had just noticed that Toph had disappeared while the two of them were talking. Katara inhaled the fresh, salty air and smiled. She had missed the ocean.

She looked down at her necklace and sighed. She wanted to talk to Zuko more about his mother, or at least just keep each other company, but he had not so much as glanced her way. After spending time with him, Katara had actually come to look forward to the next time both could share things about each other, or talk about any other thing, or just simply sit together in comfortable silence. And
now she could not help but feel sad and lonely.

Touching her necklace gently, Katara wondered if perhaps she had somehow offended him for she could not find any other reason why it looked like he was trying to avoid her. And the thought of him trying to evade her saddened her so much it confused her at how painful it felt.

“Katara?” Suki called out softly after they were silent for a few minutes, the setting sun casting orange and purple colors across the sky. “There’s something I want to tell you, but…I’m scared of what you might say or think of me.” The Kyoshi woman let out a shaky breath.

Katara let go of the water she was bending and faced her nervous friend.

“What is it, Suki?” she asked with a worried frown. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Suki looked down and played with her short auburn hair for a moment before she exhaled deeply.

“Well, you see…I’m…” she whispered and her eyes filled with tears, “I’m pregnant.”

“You’re pregnant?” Katara breathed out quietly. “Are you sure?”

Suki swallowed visibly and nodded.

“Well, that’s wonderful! You’re going to be a mom!” Katara exclaimed excitedly.

Suki looked up, surprised.

“Y-you’re okay with it?”

“Of course I am! Why wouldn’t I be?” Katara asked with a frown.

“Well, I know in your tribe a woman is only supposed to have…sexual relations once she’s married. And I also know that she could be exiled if it is found out she did not keep her virtue or if she
becomes pregnant before marriage,” Suki choked out a sob.

Katara embraced her troubled friend tightly and patted her back soothingly.

“That’s true, but that only counts for women of my tribe. And I know Kyoshi Island is different. Don’t worry, I don’t judge you. Besides, I know you and Sokka love each other so much that you could practically see hearts in both your eyes! It is Sokka’s, right?” Katara teased with a mocking dangerous tone.

Suki gave out a watery laugh and nodded as she clung to her understanding friend. Katara patted Suki’s back until her sobs quieted and then she giggled.

“I’m going to be an aunt! Aunt Katara…sounds nice,” she said and laughed happily. “I wonder if he or she will be a waterbender. So how did Sokka take the news?”

Katara moved away and held Suki at arm’s length. Suki looked away and sighed.

“I haven’t…told him yet,” she admitted softly, “I’m…afraid.”

Katara furrowed her eyebrows.

“Afraid? Why?”

“What if Sokka doesn’t want any children at the moment? What if he’s not ready to settle down and have a family? We’re not married, not even engaged!” Suki said rapidly, her eyes wet with more tears. “But I’m keeping my baby, and if he doesn’t want us, I’ll move back to Kyoshi Island and I’ll ___”

“Suki!” Katara interrupted loudly and grabbed the rambling woman’s hands. “How can you even say such a thing? Sokka loves you! He’s always wanted to start a family. He’s always wanted little Sokkas. Suki, you have to tell him. He has to know that he’s going to be a father. So what if you’re not married? I’m sure you will be soon. A child is always a blessing, no matter what. I’m sure Sokka will be ecstatic with the news.”
Suki sniffled and after a while she smiled.

“You’re right. Sokka loves me as much as I love him and I’m sure he will love our baby, too. Thanks, Katara.” She wiped her tears with her sleeve. “Sorry about that. I’ve been so emotional lately.”

Katara laughed and hugged her friend before she clapped her hands excitedly.

“So when did you find out you were carrying a little Sokka or Suki? How far along are you?” she asked.

Katara looked down toward Suki’s stomach and finally noticed that there was a small bulge. How did she not notice that before?

Suki smiled lovingly and patted her stomach gently. “Well…I’m actually four months pregnant—”

“Four months!” Katara squeaked. “And you’re barely speaking of it now?”

Suki again played with her hair.

“You see, I didn’t realize until a few weeks ago. My monthly bleeding stopped while I was in Kyoshi Island, but I didn’t make such a big deal about it. I was too busy with the new Kyoshi Warrior School and helping around my village. And I never got any morning sickness or cravings or anything that happens when you’re pregnant. But then when the third month came around and my monthly bleeding still had not come I began to notice that I was gaining weight when we arrived at the Fire Nation. Then I began to get nauseous weeks later and was getting tired easily.”

“Oh, yes, I remember.” Katara laughed quietly.

“So I asked the Fire Nation Palace Physician to give me a check up so I could know what was happening. I was delighted and scared when he told me I was with child.” Suki sighed. “I tried to tell Sokka many times, really, but the more I waited I guess the more nervous I got. And then he started to become distant and so I kept silent.”
“Well, you’re going to have to tell him eventually because you won’t be able to keep it a secret any longer,” Katara advised her. Then she giggled as she poked the small bulge on Suki’s stomach.

“I know,” Suki agreed with a small smile. “I’ll tell him when the right time comes.”

Zuko glanced at Sokka as they all ate lunch the following day. The two men had noticed that Katara and Suki had been acting strange lately. The two women would huddle together and whisper between themselves and then they would start giggling and sighing wistfully. Just like they were at the moment.

Zuko stared at the two women curiously. There was nothing to giggle about! The entire meal had been silent since Iroh was not present because he was playing Pai Sho with the crew and Toph was sleeping in her room.

Aang was sitting at Zuko’s right side, but the young monk was too busy eating steamed rice and vegetables and playing with Momo to notice. Ty Lee and Haru were sitting together while stealing glances at each other. The chair next to him where Iroh usually sat was empty, but next to that was Mai who refused to look his way. The only sound heard during the meal was the clicking of chopsticks, Momo’s chatter, and the quiet whispers and giggles from Katara and Suki.

Zuko again turned to Sokka, who was sitting at the end of the table next to Suki, and raised his eyebrow. Sokka glanced at the two girls and shrugged.

“Here, Suki, you should eat more,” Katara said as she piled more rice and meat on Suki’s plate. “It will give you more energy.”

“Alright, if you insist,” Suki relented easily with a laugh and began pecking her plate.

“Suki?” Sokka asked as he eyed his very hungry girlfriend. “Are you okay?”

Suki swallowed a big chunk of rice and laughed nervously.

“Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?” She gave him a sweet smile.
Sokka forgot all the questions he had on his mind about her strange behavior when she flashed her smile at him.

“Uh…” he practically drooled.

Katara giggled behind her hand while Zuko shook his head from his end of the table. Before Sokka could recover, Suki rose from her seat and grabbed Katara’s hand that was halfway to her mouth with food.

“Katara and I are going to check on Toph. We’ll see you later,” the female warrior said. She gave a still dazed Sokka a kiss on his cheek.

Everybody stared at the women in confusion as Suki dragged the waterbender to the door.

“Okay?” Aang said after the door was shut closed after them.

The rest finished their meal in silence and after a while Aang spoke up.

“I’m going to check on Appa and make sure he has enough hay to munch on. Come on, Momo,” he said.

Aang stood up and walked to the door. Momo grabbed one last piece of fruit and flew to perch on the airbender’s shoulder.

“Haru and I are going for a walk,” Ty Lee announced gleefully and dragged a blushing and dazed earthbender outside before he could say anything.

The remaining three sat in silence as the servants waited for the Fire Lord to leave the table so they could clean it up.

“So…” Sokka began before he cleared his throat. “I think I should go and—” He stopped talking when Mai stood up abruptly and left the room hastily. “Uh…Was it something I said?”
Zuko sighed.

“Don’t worry about it. She’s mad at me,” he said, waving his hand dismissively.

“Why? Did you accidentally burn her while you were making out?” Sokka teased and laughed.

Zuko scoffed.

“It’s not like she instills enough passion for that, a voice inside his head said. Zuko for once agreed.

“Okay, so what really happened? If you don’t mind telling me,” the blue-eyed warrior added quickly.

Zuko let out a long breath. He couldn’t confessed the real reason to Sokka—which was that he imagined Katara while he was about to have sex with Mai. The warrior would surely go ballistic and decapitate him on the spot with his sword. But he would like to have someone to talk about guy stuff. He sure as hell did not want to discuss his sex life with his witty uncle.

Zuko motioned for his servants to retreat. Once they bowed and quickly left the room, he returned his attention to Sokka.

“Mai’s mad at me because…well, I…left her room suddenly while we were about to…have sex,” Zuko explained impassively.

“You what?!” Sokka exclaimed. “Dude, you seriously don’t do that to a woman unless you want an early death!”

Zuko sighed and drank from his wine cup.

“I know, but it’s just…I don’t know how to explain this, but…it’s like when I’m with her I feel…nothing. No stir. No heat. No passion. Nothing.”
Sokka stroked his chin and nodded.

“I see.”

“You do?” Zuko cocked his eyebrow at him.

The water tribesman rubbed the back of his neck and smiled sheepishly.

“It’s not that hard to believe, I mean no offense, but well…she’s not the liveliest or most passionate person I know,” he said.

“Yeah, I understand what you’re saying.” Zuko nodded. “But I feel horrible for doing that to her.”

“Why? It’s not your fault she can’t turn you on,” Sokka said, missing Zuko’s frown at the blunt manner in which he said that.

“Yes, but I mean, she loves me. She went against Azula to help me and has been by my side for all these years. And how do I repay her? By acting like a jerk,” Zuko replied. He narrowed his eyes and drank more of his wine.

Sokka regarded his friend carefully. For a man that was supposed to be in love, Zuko was taking Mai’s anger and avoidance rather well. If it were Suki and him, Sokka would have been practically begging for her forgiveness. But Suki and Mai were sure not the same. And hell would freeze over before Zuko begged for anything. Zuko shouldn’t be acting like this unless…

“Do you love Mai?” he asked cautiously.

Zuko started. But unlike Sokka quickly admitting it the first time he was asked almost the same question, he stammered.

“I…I…” He sighed and ran his hand through his pulled back hair.
“You don’t,” Sokka stated firmly before he added, “I’m not trying to dictate your life or anything, but I don’t think you should continue with this relationship. You’re my friend, Zuko, and you deserve to be happy. I’m pretty sure there’s someone out there that will make you happy…in every single way.” Sokka wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Zuko chuckled.

_Katara seems like that someone_, the same little voice said. Zuko flushed and mentally shook his head of such thoughts.

“I don’t know, Sokka. Most of the women who I meet either want me for my title or my wealth. Besides, I care for Mai and she doesn’t deserve my rejection.”

Sokka opened his mouth to say something, but Zuko continued.

“I don’t have time to be searching for my soul mate, my perfect woman, my other half or whatever you call it,” he added curtly.

Sokka rolled his blue eyes and sighed.

“Fine, do whatever you want, but don’t come crying to me when you realize it’s too late.”

“I do not cry,” Zuko protested.

“Whatever,” Sokka muttered as he stood up and grabbed an apple. “I’m going to look for Suki, _my_ soul mate.”

Zuko glared as Sokka exited the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts. He ran his hand down his face and let out a puff of smoke from his mouth before drinking the rest of his red wine.

Why did he always act like that when someone was trying to help him? And why did he feel like people were all of the sudden telling him he had a chance of finding someone who would truly make him happy?
Dismissing all confusing thoughts from his tired mind, the young Fire Lord stood from the table and made his way to his cabin to finish his paperwork. The only thing he needed to concentrate on was finding his mother, not the possibility of finding his future wife.
A couple of days later the setting sun shone on Katara as she leaned against the railing of the ship, absentmindedly bending the seawater into small tendrils, a huge smile on her face. Sokka and Suki were having a baby! She was going to be an aunty! She and Suki had been talking nonstop about the arrival of the baby. They would spend their time talking about what to get the child, such as clothes and toys, among many other things.

Katara had been too busy with everything that concerned Zuko that she only recently noticed that Suki now wore long and loose-fitted tunics and pants to hide her growing stomach. Katara giggled as the salty water sprayed her face. Gran-Gran would be so happy with the news. Now the nosy, wise woman won’t be bothering her anymore about her getting married and having children.

Katara sighed as the sound of waves crashing onto the ship’s side reached her ears.

‘I am getting older by the minute. So I ask you this, when am I going to get great-grandchildren?’ her Gran-Gran’s voice flowed through her mind.

Of course she wanted to get married, settle down, and have a family. She had a wonderful boyfriend who loved her immensely. Aang was kind, fun, cute, cheerful, and lovable. Not to mention he was the Avatar, the savior of the world. Everybody loved him.

So why did she feel unhappy? Why didn’t the thought of marrying Aang make her feel excited or feel like jumping with glee? She loved him, how could she not? But then why did she have this feeling that there was something more out there…something greater? What if there was someone better?

Katara shook her head and sighed again, looking over to the bright golden sun setting behind the blue horizon. Aang was the powerful bender that Aunt Wu predicted, the one she was to marry and have children and grandchildren with, right? So then why did a part of her doubt it?

The young waterbender closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingers. She had not been this confused until they had arrived in the Fire Nation Palace weeks ago.

What had happened to make her hesitate so?
Zuko came onto the deck for some fresh air. He had been sitting in his cabin all day, plagued with different kinds of thoughts. Why did Iroh, Toph, and Sokka kept insisting that he choose a woman to make him happy as soon as possible or else he would end up miserable for the rest of his life? Why did they think that? And why didn’t they think Mai could make him happy?

Perhaps they were aware that Mai was not the one for him? Zuko frowned.

His thoughts were immediately dismissed from his mind as his golden eyes settled upon Katara’s profile. She was leaning against the metal railing with a pensive look on her lovely features. He watched as she sighed, her expression turning into a small frown.

_I wonder what she’s thinking about that’s making her look so frustrated_, Zuko thought as he silently continued to stare at her.

Katara was wearing a dark red tunic and dark gray pants with a gray sash around her waist. He was sure her outfit was one of the ones she bought with Iroh. She had her usual long braid falling down her back with her hair loops near her forehead, her brown skin shining softly under the warm sun, a soft salty breeze ruffling her braid and her clothes. Zuko felt his stress dissolve as he gazed upon the woman that affected him in so many ways.

Zuko’s breath caught in his throat when Katara turned and their eyes locked. He swallowed hard when she seemed to brighten up and she smiled at him.

“Hey, Zuko! I see you’ve finally decided to grace us lowly peasants with your presence,” she teased merrily as she walked toward him.

Zuko smirked and turned his head away from her with a haughty tilt of his chin.

“Yes, well, I decided to be generous today and allow the common people bask in my glory,” he drawled with mocking superiority.

Katara laughed at Zuko’s playfulness, causing him to smile and her to forget about her previous problems.

“Well, I guess I should feel honored, huh?” she said, batting her eyelashes innocently.
“Yes, you should,” the Fire Lord snuffed arrogantly.

He watched smugly as Katara laughed again. He wondered why it was so easy to joke and play around when Katara was near. She just made it so easy to drop his stoic mask. Soon he, too, joined in her laughter with a deep chuckle of his own.

Katara watched as Zuko’s golden eyes sparkled with his amusement, but then she stopped laughing suddenly, her face changing into sadness.

Zuko stopped as well and raised his eyebrow in question.

“Katara, what’s wrong?”

The waterbender turned away from him to look towards the ocean.

“It’s nothing,” she said with a shrug.

Zuko knew she was lying and he frowned.

“Katara, tell me,” he insisted.

The waterbender continued to look at the sea and avoided looking at him. When she remained silent, Zuko stepped closer to her and gently turned her to look at him.

“Tell me,” he ordered softly.

“It’s just that…I was kind of thinking that you were upset with me or something,” she replied softly. She grabbed her braid and began to nervously play with it.

Frowning, Zuko asked, “Upset with you? What makes you say that?”
Katara shifted her eyes to the side before she looked at him with a frown.

“Well, I mean, since we boarded the ship we haven’t talked or anything. I only see you at meals and we don’t even talk then. It almost seems like…like you’re trying to avoid me.”

Zuko’s face flushed. He had hoped she hadn’t noticed and he thought she wouldn’t have.

Katara glanced away before looked back at him hesitantly.

“Did I do something to upset you? If I did, I’m sorry. I didn't mean to.”

Zuko winced at the sadness in her voice. He never thought Katara would feel this way, blaming herself for his actions. But if she felt sad because they had not talked, then it meant she liked to spend her time with him as much as he liked to spend time with her. He smiled.

“No, Katara, don’t think like that. You have done nothing but help me,” he said softly.

He needed to reassure her. Yes, she was part of the reason why he was avoiding everyone, but it was not because of anything she had done wrong. Of course, he would never tell her that it was so he could forget those dreams. Zuko mentally shook his head before it wandered off too much.

“I just have so much paperwork to go through before we arrive at the Earth Kingdom. I need to leave the Fire Nation well provided for before I set out on our trip. I’m the one that should be sorry for neglecting you—and the others,” he quickly added, “I just have been busy.”

Katara looked down in embarrassment. Well, now she felt stupid. Zuko was a busy man, the Fire Lord for La’s sake! And there she was whining like a little girl because she didn’t have his attention.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

“You’re right. This isn’t a vacation and you still have responsibilities to fulfill. And you don’t need me to add to your problems,” she said and smiled faintly.
Zuko smiled.

“You’re never a problem,” he reassured her.

*Except in my dreams*, he added mentally and cleared his throat.

Katara grinned at him.

“You say that now, but you’ll see,” she told him and laughed.

Zuko grinned as well and tapped his chin with a mocking pensive look.

“Yes, you are correct. Women do seem to cause many problems,” he commented coolly.

“Hey!” Katara protested, placing her hands on her hips. Her blue eyes narrowed as Zuko just smirked at her.

“You want problems?” she asked instead and smirked, “Then I’ll be honored to give you problems.” She removed one hand from her hip and swept it to her side.

Zuko cocked his black eyebrow at her statement and at the mischievous glint in her sapphire eyes. His eyes widened in realization, but before he could react, a water whip rose from the side of the ship and smacked him on the back of his head.

“What was that for?” he growled as he rubbed the stinging spot on his head.

Katara brought her hand to her mouth and laughed. Sometimes it was just too easy to mess with Zuko. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if she could be executed for smacking the Fire Lord.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, do please forgive me. It was an accident,” she said quietly and smiled
innocently.

She yelped and jumped to the side as a small fireball flew by her head.

“Hey!”

Zuko chuckled.

“Oh! It slipped.”

He coolly placed his hands behind his back and smirked.

“Why you…” Katara scowled.

She called forth two large tendrils of seawater to her, coiling them around her arms, taking a fighting stance. Zuko’s smirk grew larger and his blood pumped with anticipation.

“Perhaps you’re in need of a lesson on how to properly act around the Fire Lord,” the young firebender remarked as he lifted his palms towards his face and lit them up.

Katara smirked.

“We’ll see who’s in need of a lesson,” she said pleasantly.

Without warning, she threw her right arm forward, lashing the long coil of water toward the young man. Zuko quickly stepped to the side and threw a blazing fireball at Katara who extinguished it with the water tendril on her left arm.

The water hissed as it collided with the fire.

“Hm, not bad.” Zuko drawled as he circled the young woman calmly.
Katara remained in her fighting stance as she watched the firebender eyeing her like a predator would its prey. The look in his golden eyes made her shiver delightfully, which confused her. She noticed that he had his hair tied into a topknot where his golden fire crown rested, glinting brightly under the sun. He was wearing black boots and pants and he had on a dark crimson sleeveless tunic outlined with gold that showed off his muscular, pale arms. Katara felt herself beginning to blush before she mentally shook her head to keep it clear. She watched carefully for his next move.

Zuko finished circling his opponent to stand before Katara.

“Here’s what. I’ll forgive your offensive manners and let you walk away while you still can,” he said regally before he smirked. He knew Katara would never back away from a fight, but it was so fun to taunt her.

“Ha! Yeah, I’ll walk away.” Katara smirked mischievously. “After I defeat you, that is!”

The waterbender spun around, bringing both salty tendrils together and making a larger water whip. With a flick of her hands, she aimed it at her opponent.

Zuko grinned and brought up a wall of fire, instantly vaporizing the water with a hiss. Katara bent the steam and turned it back into water surrounding Zuko. Exhaling her cool breath, she froze the liquid on Zuko and smirked.

Zuko frowned before quickly raising his body temperature and melting the ice from his clothes and hair before he rolled to the side and shot two fireballs at Katara.

Katara squealed as she dodged one and deflected the other with a shield of ice she called from the sea. As soon as she brought the ice shield down, Katara rapidly bent the water into two whips to deflect the fire blast Zuko threw her way.

“I see life as royalty has not made you forget how to fight,” Katara teased as she bent one whip into sharp icicles and sent them towards Zuko’s body.

Zuko called forth his own fire whips and sliced the icicles easily, melting them into a puddle on the metal floor of his flagship.
“If I do not keep up with my training, then how will I be able to crush my enemies?” Zuko replied in a haughty tone.

He cracked his fiery whips at Katara who countered with her own liquid ones. As both elements met, a hissing sound was heard and steam surrounded them.

Katara grinned.

“You know, if I didn’t know you any better, I would think you just called me your enemy, and that would not be pretty,” she said.

Zuko’s stoic expression changed into a grin.

“You’re right,” Zuko agreed, “Besides, I like you as a friend better. That way I know I won’t get frozen to a wall or something.”

Katara laughed.

“Yeah, I feel the same way except I don’t want to get tied to a tree again!”

Zuko smirked at her. He had actually liked that.

“As for the being frozen to a wall…” Katara continued, “You never know!”

She dashed toward the firebender, bringing her water to her right arm and bending it into an ice sword.

Zuko grinned again as he skillfully dodged and evaded the waterbender-made weapon. He noticed that Katara left many openings with her attacks; if he had his dual swords at the moment he could have killed her by now. Of course, he was a sword master and Katara wasn’t trained. Besides, he would kill himself first before hurting her.

Zuko flipped over Katara’s head and landed behind her. Katara spun around to face him and barely
had enough time to raise her ice sword to block the fire dagger Zuko brought to her shoulder.

Now it was Zuko’s turn to drive Katara back as he stabbed and sliced at the waterbender with the hot fire daggers in each of his hands.

Katara’s blood raced with excitement as she deflected and attacked Zuko. She had almost forgotten how much fun it was to have a real spar. Waterbending students didn’t count, especially if they were eight-year-olds. She loved to spar with Zuko because he never held back. He treated her like an equal and never went easy on her just because she was female. She appreciated and was grateful for that.

*And he really looks stunning when he firebends,* Katara thought.

Zuko thrilled in the spar as his blood pumped wildly in his veins. He had not had such a worthy opponent since he became a firebending master, only practicing at the palace by himself. His wish of having someone to really spar with became true thanks to Katara. He admired her strength and her prowess in battle. And he could not help but admit that she always looked beautiful when she used waterbending, whether in a fight or to just have fun.

Katara spread her arms, weaving through a series of movements, commanding her element to follow her guidance. Shifting her weight slightly, Katara rose to the balls of her small feet and created a sharp ice wave, flicking it forward with a small yell.

Zuko smirked and at the last minute, when it seemed he was going to be hit and thrown overboard, he dodged it with an impressive somersault and landed a few feet away in a crouch. Standing upright casually, Zuko gave her a pleased expression and a nod of approval before he sprinted toward her, bright fire engulfing his strong hands as he shot blast after blast of fire which Katara deflected with large water tendrils.

As the firebender and the waterbender continued their intense match both remembered their first great battle in the Northern Water Tribe. But unlike that day in the Spirit Oasis, both fought for fun and to spend some time together.

After a while, both separated to catch their breath, eyeing each other both warily and appreciatively.

Katara was never that good at hand-to-hand combat, and Zuko was much faster than her, so when she took a punch at Zuko’s face, she quickly regretted it because he ducked before she could make
Katara yelped as she lost her balance and pitched forward. She flailed her arms in front of her to grab onto something, which turned out to be Zuko, and brought them both tumbling down.

Zuko winced as he fell onto his back on the hard metal deck. As he tried to sit up, he realized he was being held down by something soft and warm. Zuko’s golden eyes widened as his eyes landed on Katara’s face that was inches from his own flushed one. They were both panting hard from their exercise.

Katara blushed before she broke out into laughter.

“Ha! I win!” she exclaimed victoriously.

She leaned back and sat on Zuko’s stomach with a triumphant grin on her flushed face. The waterbender squeaked as Zuko flipped them over easily, and found herself pinned down by the Fire Lord’s muscular body. Zuko held onto Katara’s wrists beside her head and straddled her stomach.

“I beg to differ,” Zuko whispered, his hot breath fanning across Katara’s face, causing her to shiver. Zuko smirked as he looked down upon his worthy adversary.


Having Zuko so close was making her body feel warm and strange. She tried to break away from Zuko’s grasp, but he refused to let go.

“Hm. Actually, I feel quite comfortable,” Zuko replied smoothly. He grinned as he looked down at her.

Katara huffed and glared at the arrogant firebender above her.

Zuko just smiled at her, taking in her flushed features, a fine sheen of sweat glistening on her tanned skin. A few strands of hair had come undone from her perfect braid, her chest was heaving up and down from their spar, and her cobalt eyes sparkling under the setting sun. And even through all this, she was still beautiful. Perhaps, more so. Zuko’s smirk fell from his face as he was hit by images from his dreams, those heated dreams where Katara’s face was flushed from a different kind of activity.
Zuko stiffened as his active imagination brought forth another problem. Katara furrowed her eyebrows as she felt something hard poking her stomach. Zuko held his breath as Katara looked at him with confusion written in her blue eyes.

“Zuko, are you okay? Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

She squirmed since she was getting uncomfortable, making Zuko close his eyes and hiss.

“Zuko! Are you hurt?” Katara asked in alarm.

_Oh, no! Did I accidently cut him with an icicle?_ She tried to sit up, but Zuko held her down, biting back a groan.

“Katara, stop, please! Don’t…move,” Zuko breathed shallowly as he tried to hide his erection.

It seemed so far Katara was oblivious to what was happening to him and he wanted to keep it that way. But it was so difficult while her small but lush body was touching his.

Katara stopped moving and looked into Zuko’s closed eyes. His face looked like he was trying to control himself, as if he was in pain. Katara began to worry.

“Zuko, are you sure you’re okay—?” She gasped when Zuko snapped his eyes open to gaze at her and she gulped as she noticed that his bright golden eyes were now a molten ambered hue.

“Katara,” Zuko breathed huskily as he leaned his face closer to hers. He could not stop himself. He wanted her.

“Katara!” a voice shouted out.

Freezing, both turned to see Aang glaring at them with Momo on his shoulder. Katara blushed in embarrassment and gave him a small smile. Zuko cursed under his breath because of the situation he was in and because they were interrupted. The young firebender quickly pulled them upright before
he swiftly turned his back towards them and pretended to dust himself off, hoping that neither had noticed his still present erection.

Aang seemed to fly as he ran toward Katara before taking her in his arms and looking her over. Momo jumped to the side and landed on the railing of the ship as his master fussled over the female.

“Katara, are you okay?” the young monk asked hastily.

Before Katara could answer, Aang whirled on Zuko with an angry expression marring his usual cheerful face.

“What the hell were you doing to my girlfriend, Zuko?” he bit out.

The other two on the deck gaped at hearing the young monk curse.

“Aang, calm down,” Katara told him gently. “Zuko and I were just—” she tried to say, but was cut off.

“Answer me, Zuko!” Aang yelled, narrowing his eyes as Zuko continued to face away from them.

Zuko looked over his shoulder and gave the young boy a hard glare.

“I don’t see why you’re making such a big deal. Katara and I were just sparring and I happened to pin her down, thus winning our little match,” he said impassively.

Before Katara could protest about his self-proclaimed victory, Aang took a step toward Zuko and narrowed his gray eyes even more.

“If I didn’t know any better, and by the way you were looking at her, I would say you were enjoying that position rather well,” he growled lowly.

“Aang!” Katara gasped and looked at Zuko in embarrassment.
Zuko turned away and swallowed hard.

_You have no idea just how much_, he thought. His throbbing manhood made it hard for him to deny his enjoyment, at least to himself. He mentally shook his head.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Zuko snapped, “I will never look at Katara in such a way. She’s…not my type.” He inwardly flinched at the harsh tone of his voice.

_Liar! Liar! Liar!_ his conscience taunted him loudly.

Since his back was turned to her, Zuko missed the hurt and angry look on Katara’s face before she quickly hid it with a smile.

“Yeah, Aang. Zuko and I are just friends and we were just having a little competition to see who was best.” She smiled at Aang and held his tattooed hand in hers in order to calm him down.

Aang relaxed and let out shaky laugh.

“You guys are right. I never should’ve doubted you. You would never betray me.” He smiled and rubbed the back of his bald head sheepishly. “I’m sorry.”

Momo’s big, green eyes looked among the three humans with confusion before he flew away to find Appa.

Zuko nodded at Aang’s apology.

“You’re my friend and I will never do such a dishonorable thing. Thanks for the workout, Katara,” he added softly. Without turning around to look at them, Zuko walked swiftly back into the ship.

Katara looked after the firebender and sighed. She had begun to break through his closed walls, but it seemed he had returned to his old melancholy self.
“I didn’t mean to jump to conclusions,” Aang said softly as he pulled Katara into his arms. “It’s just that when I saw him just staring at you like that I couldn’t help but feel jealous and angry.”

Katara sighed again and wrapped her arms around Aang’s middle, giving him a small kiss on the cheek.

“It’s okay, Aang, but it hurt that you would think of us like that. You know I would never hurt you. Besides, you heard what he said. He would never see me more than a friend,” she said softly, though it was hard to keep the hurt from her voice.

Katara stiffened as she felt Aang glide one hand from her back to rest on her hip.

“Aang?” she called hesitantly.

“Yeah?” Aang mumbled as he placed a kiss on her neck. He slid his hand further down and gave her butt a gentle squeeze.

Katara quickly pulled away and looked anywhere but at him as her grandmother’s warning swam in her head.

“We should get ready for dinner,” she said nervously.

She turned away and started to walk back to her room to bathe, but Aang grasped her wrist and pulled her back, narrowing his eyes into irritated slits.

“Why do you keep acting like this?” he hissed angrily. “Why do I get the feeling that you try to avoid me every time I touch you? You never let me do anything but kiss and hug you!”

Katara wrenched her arm away and glared indignantly at Aang, placing her hands on her hips.

“Well, excuse me for being so inexperienced! You’re my first boyfriend, dammit! I don’t really know how to react, so stop pressuring me!” she yelled, feeling frustrated tears pricking at the back of her eyes. She had never done anything beyond hugs and kisses and everything else made her uncomfortable.
Aang flinched at her outburst and gently grabbed her hand.

“I’m sorry. The last thing I want is for you to be uncomfortable around me. I’ll wait until you’re ready for a more intimate relationship. I can be patient, you know, being the Avatar and all,” he joked. He smiled, trying to lighten up the mood.

Katara nodded and squeezed his hand in appreciation. How could she not love him, he was so sweet and kind. But then why was it that every time he tried to go a bit further she felt so uncomfortable that she felt like running away? She did not know why, but now when she kissed and hugged Aang, she felt wrong. Guilty.

“The others are probably waiting for us for dinner,” she said tiredly.

She gave him a smile that did not reach her eyes, but Aang missed it as he looped her arm in his and began to chatter about his day while they walked below deck.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Zuko wrenched his door open and slammed it closed behind him, thankful that he met no one on his way to his cabin, knowing that if anybody saw his current situation he would never hear the end of it.

He closed his eyes and breathed in and out evenly to calm himself down. Opening his eyes again, he looked down at himself and groaned, banging his head on the hard door behind him. Why? Why did the spirits have to do this to him?

The young Fire Lord staggered to his bed and threw himself onto his back. Covering his eyes with one arm, he again tried to erase the image of a flushed and panting Katara underneath him from his mind.

He tried to forget how her tanned skin was tinted pink, or how her lush lips were parted so she could catch her breath, or how her soft body felt so perfect beneath his…

Zuko groaned loudly as his member throbbed.

“Stop torturing yourself!” he snarled and threw one of his pillows across the room where it bumped
into the wall. “Katara is the best friend I have never had! She is not meant to be mine! She…she
loves Aang.”

He closed his eyes tightly as his heart clenched painfully at his last words. He had seen how she had
hugged and kissed Aang as he sneaked one last glance at them, causing his temper to flare before he
had chastised himself.

Zuko sighed loudly and ran his hand down his face. He felt lucky that Katara had not noticed his
arousal. He was afraid that if she had, she would have felt disgusted or angry. He would not be able
to bear to have her hate him ever again. To have those blue eyes of hers burning with anger. Those
beautiful sapphire eyes that had shined brilliantly up at him with such innocence and concern a few
moments ago.

He felt disgusted with himself. While he had depraved and indecent thoughts about her she had only
been worried for any injury he could had suffered. Katara, an innocent maiden with a huge loving
heart.

And what about Aang? Zuko felt his once heated blood turn cold. Aang trusted him. He was the one
who had asked to be friends that day the Blue Spirit helped him escape from Zhao. He was the one
who gave him a chance to prove he changed and regretted his actions when he approached them at
the Western Air Temple.

And how do I repay his friendship? By fantasizing about his girlfriend. Zuko groaned miserably and
pulled at his hair that had come undone by the little exercise.

Perhaps if he started listening and actually began to look for someone else like everybody had been
insisting lately, then he would finally be freed of all thoughts about Katara. Maybe all he needed was
someone to capture his attention and interest, since Mai seemed not to bother to anymore, and then
he won’t be so aroused by the interesting and exotic Water Tribe maiden.

But then why did it feel like he would never be able to find such a woman?

Shaking his head and dismissing all thoughts, Zuko raised himself from his bed and sat down heavily
at his desk, hoping his paperwork would distract him.

Three hours passed in which Zuko finally finished his paperwork. Setting the stack to the side, Zuko
opened one of the drawers from his desk and brought out a small scroll. He opened it slowly, almost
reverently, as if afraid of damaging it. Zuko smiled wistfully as he gazed down at the small painting of him when he was about eight-years-old. He had found the scroll a few months after he was crowned Fire Lord. Standing next to him was a woman with a loving smile on her beautiful face.

Zuko placed the painting on the desk in front of him and sighed. What if his mother had forgotten about him? What if she never wanted to see him again?

A knock was heard outside his door.

“Enter,” Zuko ordered dispassionately, setting the ink painting aside.

The young man looked up to see Jee open the door and enter the room before standing before his desk and bowing. Zuko stifled a sigh of relief. He was beginning to depress himself. Again.

“What is it that you wish to tell me?” he asked.

Jee bowed again and cleared his throat.

“I’m here to inform you, my lord, that we will dock at the colony port tomorrow morning.”

“Good. I’m glad. Make sure everything is settled for our departure on Appa and inform the others about it,” Zuko directed.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Jee said with a sharp nod. “And if I may say so, I am glad that you finally know where to locate your mother. I really do hope you would be able to find Princess Ursa and bring her back to the Fire Nation.”

Zuko graced his admiral with a small smile. He knew Jee was being sincere unlike some of the Fire Nation Court members who had said the same thing.

“Thank you, Admiral Jee. I have finished all the documents I had brought with me.” Zuko motioned at the stack of papers on his desk. “Take them back to the Court Council as soon as you refuel the ship. I will send you a letter informing you when we will return to the Fire Nation after we spend some time with my uncle in Ba Sing Se.”
Jee opened his mouth to agree when a soft knock interrupted him. Zuko frowned before calling out.

“Come in.”

Both firebenders watched as the door opened to reveal a smiling waterbender carrying a tray loaded with food with Momo on her shoulder munching on a nut. Jee noticed from the corner of his eye how Zuko flushed and squirmed in his chair. The Fire Lord was… blushing? Jee immediately composed himself from gaping in surprise.

“Good evening, Admiral Jee,” Katara greeted and smiled as she looked at the older man.

Jee smiled as he gave her a small bow.

“Good evening, Lady Katara. Here, let me help you,” the admiral said as he took the tray from her hands and set it down on an empty spot on the Fire Lord’s desk.

Momo flew away from his perch on the female and landed on the soft bed.

Zuko looked at the tray and then at Katara. Raising an eyebrow he asked, “Is there something you need, Katara?”

Katara laughed daintily, causing Zuko’s heart to skip a beat.

“Isn’t it obvious, silly?” she asked.

Jee discreetly looked at the Fire Lord for his reaction on being called silly. Apparently, he did not mind the young lady calling him that since Zuko remained calm. Jee remembered the young lord clenching his jaw and narrowing his eyes for being called silly by one of the elder advisors. Interesting.

When Zuko just stared at her, Katara rolled her eyes and sighed.
“We missed you at dinner and I figured you closed yourself in your room to burrow yourself in your work. Again. So I decided to bring you your dinner. What good does a leader do to his country if he’s starving to death?”

Zuko smiled at her. Katara, always the motherly one. It felt nice to know someone cared for him.

“Thanks. Now that you mention it, I am a bit hungry.”

“Of course you would be after I kicked your butt today,” Katara replied with a smirk.

Jee raised a gray, bushy eyebrow at the playfulness in the young woman’s tone. He had never heard anyone dare to tease his solemn lord before.

“Excuse me? If I recall correctly I was the one who held you down until I decided to help you up,” Zuko retorted and then chuckled.

This time Jee actually gaped as he watched and heard his stoic Fire Lord not only have a playful banter with someone, but he chuckled as well!

Katara crossed her arms over her chest and ‘humph’, causing Zuko to chuckle even louder. Jee smiled as he looked from one young person to the other. If both of them were not already in relationships, Jee was sure they would have made a great couple. And perhaps this young woman would have made his lord happy.

Clearing his throat, Jee interrupted the sweet scene. He watched as both young benders turn to him as if remembering they were not alone.

“I will place the documents in a safe right now and hand them over to the Council members once I return to the Fire Nation. Good night, Fire Lord Zuko.” He grabbed the stack of papers and bowed. Then with a warm smile he bowed to Katara. “And good night to you as well, Lady Katara.”

Katara blushed again at being shown such respect.

“Good night, Admiral Jee,” she said as he left the room.
Zuko now felt uncomfortable being alone with Katara after trying to suppress his desire for her a few moments ago.

“Uh…Katara?” he croaked. He cleared his throat. “I just want to say that I meant no disrespect this evening and—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Katara interrupted. She waved her hand and looked away. “You made it pretty clear you would never show such…desire for someone like me.” She turned back and gave him a small smile. “I understand, you know. I am a peasant after all.” She laughed, though inwardly she still felt hurt.

Zuko looked at the young woman standing before him and frowned at her words.

“Katara, I didn’t mean it that way. Besides, being the daughter of the ruler of a country does not make you a peasant, now does it? You could even be called a princess.” He smiled.

Katara felt her cheeks warm and she giggled.

“Peasant or not, you’re a very desirable woman,” he continued.

Very desirable, he mentally groaned.

He noticed Katara blush and even though he found her modesty endearing he knew he needed to say more.

“But you’re my friend, and as such, I would never try to disrespect you.”

Katara smiled warmly at his words.

“Thanks. There are not many men as honorable as you. I also want to thank you for…standing up for my honor against your fath—Ozai,” Katara told him softly.
Zuko felt his face flush before he narrowed his golden eyes.

“I could not allow such a sick person to insinuate such things about you. You are the most kindhearted person I know and I could not sit back while you get insulted. I swear I will cut off the dirty tongue of anyone who dares disrespect you or question your virtue,” Zuko promised fervently.

Iroh had explained to him how a maiden’s virtue was of great importance in the Water Tribes and he did not want Katara to be looked down upon.

Katara found herself blushing for the hundredth time that day and she felt her heart do a somersault. Nobody had ever said such wonderful things to her, not even Aang.

“T-thank you, Zuko. Um…you should eat your food before it gets cold,” she said, returning to her caring, motherly mode.

Zuko smirked and crossed his arms.

“I’m a firebender, my food never gets cold. As well as my tea, my bath and…my bed,” he could not help but to add with a grin.

Katara’s eyes widened before dismissing his words with a laugh.


“Jeez, not even I order people around that much,” Zuko muttered playfully, earning a glare from the waterbender.

Zuko pretended not to notice the glare as he picked up his chopsticks and began to eat. On the outside, he ate with a calm and expressionless face, but in the inside, he was rejoicing for finally tasting food and filling his complaining stomach.

Momo jumped from the bed to land beside Zuko’s tray of mouthwatering food, quickly grabbing a piece of fruit. Zuko glared at the little thief before chuckling.
After making sure Zuko was eating, Katara let her eyes wander around the Fire Lord’s cabin. Not surprisingly, it was larger and more elegant than the other rooms the gang and she occupied. It was smaller than his royal bedchamber in the Fire Nation Palace, but nonetheless, it was impressive. On the left side there was a large tapestry with the Fire Nation emblem and under it a cushion and a small altar with candles. On the right side was Zuko’s large desk where he was sitting and eating at the moment, a chattering lemur beside him. Katara was impressed that Zuko kept his room nice and tidy.

There was a porthole, a ship’s circular window, at the opposite end of the entrance door where a large bed was positioned. Katara noted that it was smaller than the very, very large bed at the palace.

*I wonder if he gets lonely in that huge thing called a bed,* Katara thought as she remembered the silky feeling of the red coversheet. *Perhaps he needs someone to keep him company.*

*And that somebody would be you?* a voice said in her head suggestively.

Katara felt her face heat up.

*Bad, Katara, bad!* she chastised herself.

Zuko watched Katara look around his room as he continued to eat. He noticed that she stared at his bed far longer than she had on anything else. He cocked his eyebrow when he noticed a blush stain her cheeks. Zuko choked on a piece of fish as a thought of showing her his bed more personally entered his head. Momo chattered worriedly as the firebender began to cough loudly.

Katara turned around and frowned. She walked rapidly around Zuko’s desk to pat him on the back as he began to cough uncontrollably.

“Are you okay?” she asked worriedly.

“Yeah,” Zuko rasped, “Didn’t chew properly.” He drank some red wine and cleared his throat as he shifted in his seat to hide his lie from her.

Katara laughed quietly at him before her eyes settled on the small painting placed on the desk. The
scenery seemed to be a garden with many trees, flowers, and a pond. Katara smiled as she recognized the Royal Palace Garden she had come to love. There was a little boy with a huge smile on his cute little face, holding a turtle-duckling in both hands. Katara guessed it was a younger Zuko before...his father changed everything. Yes, it was Zuko with the same hair color, the same eyebrows, the same smile she had seen only occasionally, and the same eyes. Katara’s gaze moved to the woman standing beside him with one hand placed on the young boy’s shoulder.

The woman had beautiful, long black hair, pale skin, and an elegant and delicate face. She was tall and stood gracefully, wearing long royal Fire Nation robes. The lady was also smiling, but unlike the child Zuko’s wide, cheery grin the woman’s smile was small and gentle. She looked similar to Azula, and even though the ink painting was in black and white. Katara had a feeling the woman’s eyes were a soft gold, not cold like the fallen princess’, because they were so similar to Zuko’s own.

“Is this Princess Ursa, your mother?” Katara asked softly as she gently touched the painting.

Zuko stopped hiding to look back at the small scroll Katara was gazing at. His features softened as he replied.

“Yes, that’s her.”

“She’s beautiful,” Katara whispered in awe.

Zuko smiled.

“Yes, but her physical beauty was not the only thing wonderful about her. She was fun, loving, caring, and a great friend.”

*Just like you,* he added warmly.

Katara smiled, but then she saddened.

“I don’t have any paintings that show how my mother looked. I only have memories and...her necklace,” she said sadly and touched the cool, blue pendant on her neck.
Zuko frowned as her eyes began to shine with tears. He grabbed her hand—both jumping slightly at the little shock that went through them—and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m sure your mother was a very beautiful and caring woman as well,” he said softly. He wondered when he felt like being the one to actually comfort someone. Or better yet, why he only felt like that for Katara.

Katara sniffled and turned to look at his warm, golden eyes.

“How can you be so sure?” she asked quietly.

Zuko smiled and touched her cheek.

“Because I’m looking at her daughter,” he replied softly.

Katara blinked and blushed shyly. She was the one who usually consoled people and it felt nice to be the one to actually be comforted. Zuko let go of her and cleared his throat.

“Uh…w-why is Lady Ursa at the Abandoned Fort in the first place?” Katara asked in order to calm her racing heart, hoping she wasn’t crossing the line.

A frown marred his handsome features as Zuko remained silent a moment.

“I’m not entirely sure,” he admitted. “She left the Fire Nation Palace the night my grandfather Azulon died. Father told Azula and me that she had died and I believed him until I found out four years ago that she was actually alive.”

Zuko sighed and scratched Momo’s head as the lemur settled on the desk right in front of him.

“I just hope she’s still at the Abandoned Fort because I have no other leads on where to search for her.”

“We’ll find her. You’ll see,” Katara proclaimed determinedly. She frowned as she watched Zuko’s
eyes turn despondent as he continued to gaze at the painting while petting Momo. “Zuko, what’s wrong?”

Zuko looked away from the painting to stare at the wall ahead of him. How did she know something was bothering him? He always made sure his emotions stayed hidden, not even Iroh noticed sometimes.

When Zuko remained silent, Katara guessed he did not want to talk to her about it. In a way, it saddened her because she had thought he had liked to confide in her just as much as she had on him. She was startled when Zuko turned his piercing, golden eyes on her.

“I am…afraid,” he finally admitted softly.

When Katara looked at him expectantly, Zuko hesitated a moment before he continued.

“I didn’t decide to travel as an ordinary person, instead as Fire Lord Zuko, to keep the Earth Kingdom from reacting badly. I also did it because I was afraid of scaring my mother away if she knew I was looking for her.”

He again looked at the wall before him, ashamed of admitting such weakness.

“Scaring her away? Zuko, what in the world are you talking about?” Katara asked incredulously.

Zuko returned his gaze to her and Katara was shocked at the fear and sadness in his usually camouflaged eyes.

“What if she doesn’t want anything to do with me? What if she doesn’t want to see me anymore? What if Ozai was right and she’s ashamed of me?” he said quietly, unable to stop revealing his fears now that he had started talking. “I have done so many horrible things in my life and I’m afraid she’ll see me as a monster.” He unconsciously touched his scarred face. “What if…what if she doesn’t love me anymore?”

“Zuko! Don’t you say such things ever again!” Katara scolded him.
Her eyes softened as she gazed down upon the young man that had suffered so greatly since childhood.

“Zuko,” she said softly, “By everything you have told me about her it’s so obvious she loves you. A mother will never turn her back on her children, no matter what they do. You made many mistakes, yes, but you’ve worked so hard to right those wrongs. I forgave you, didn’t I? What makes you think your own mother won’t?”

She gently turned his face towards her and caressed his scarred cheek. Zuko immediately relaxed and sighed softly at her touch.

“Zuko, you are not a monster! I don’t ever want to hear you refer to yourself as such!” she told him firmly, “Ozai is the monster for tormenting his own son so much. It hurts me when you say such things.”

Katara blinked and a tear fell down her cheek. She was confused as to why having Zuko talk about himself in such a way affected her so much. She did not understand why she felt so compelled to take all his pain and suffering away.

Zuko felt as if his heart was burning as her words sank into his soul. And as she cried for him. Nobody had ever shed tears for him before. Perhaps only Iroh, but no one else, and it felt…nice.

He reached out to her face and gently wiped away her tear with his thumb.

“Thank you, Katara,” he said sincerely. “I don’t know what would become of me if I didn’t have such a great friend such as you in my life. You’re right, I should stop dwelling in the past and the what-ifs and look forward to the future.”

Katara gave a watery laughed as she wiped away another tear with her hand.

“Yeah, well, you’re welcome,” she sniffled.

She turned back to the painting and giggled.
“Aww! Tiny Zuko, you look so cute!” she cooed at the picture of the younger Zuko in a baby voice.

Zuko scowled and crossed his arms over his broad chest, making Katara laugh even more.

“But Big Zuko is cute too!” she chirped before clamping her hand over her mouth, her blue eyes widening.

She glanced at Zuko, who had a surprised look on his face before a grin spread on his lips, and she blushed.

“Why, thank you, Katara. I’m flattered.” Zuko chuckled as he grabbed his cup and took a sip of his tea.

Katara walked to her cabin to get some sleep. Momo glided silently beside her. The steel hall was silent and empty since everybody else had gone to sleep. Zuko told her they were arriving at the colony port the next morning and asked that she be rested for tomorrow. Katara blushed again in embarrassment.

_I can’t believe I actually admitted he was cute to his face! Well, I wouldn’t say cute...more like handsome and stunning..._ Katara thought dazedly before she shook her head.

She hummed softly as she walked silently to her room, already beginning to unbraid her hair. The bead on one of her hair loops fell on the metal floor with a soft ‘clink’. Momo landed beside it and looked up at the waterbender. Katara sighed and bent down to pick it up.

“Why are you avoiding Zuko?” Ty Lee’s voice sounded behind the slightly ajar door Katara was crouching in front of.

Katara quickly grabbed the bead and stood up to leave.

“He’s the one who has become so distant with me,” Mai’s monotone voice answered her acrobatic friend.

Katara frowned.
“What do you mean?” Ty Lee asked.

Katara bit her lip and looked at both ends of the empty hall. Eavesdropping was not right…

“Ever since his friends arrived, Zuko has less time with me. We barely even spend time together,” Mai’s dull voice continued.

*Well, maybe if she sounded more emotional about it, it would be more believable that she cares,* Katara sighed softly. She began to move away.

“It’s all that waterbender’s fault,” Mai accused coldly.

Katara stopped in her tracks and gaped.

*My fault?* She gritted her teeth.

“Katara?” Ty Lee asked. “What has she done? She’s a really nice person and friend. I remember one time at the South Pole she showed me how to snow fight and—”

Mai scoffed, completely cutting Ty Lee off.

“Ever since she came Zuko has spent a lot of time with her. You remember them saying they went to the city together? When they came back he seemed so…happy. But when he and I went out it seemed like his mind was somewhere else. He didn’t look around the jewelry shop we went to. He barely paid any attention to me! And then people would come up to him and ask after the ‘lovely Water Tribe maiden,’” Mai spat out.

Katara glared at the door and clenched her hands.

*Well, it’s not my fault they like me better than a haughty noblewoman!*
Mai continued, “I saw them walking in the Royal Palace Garden one day, talking and smiling like fools. And she had her arm around his!”

Katara rolled her eyes.

_It’s not my fault he likes to spend his time with me._

“So?” Ty Lee asked, her usual bubbly voice sounded annoyed. “You don’t like to go to the garden anyway!” she exclaimed, exasperated.

Katara imagined the acrobat flailing her flexible arms in the air.

“And you always complain when Zuko tries to do something nice for you,” she continued.

“You make it sound like it’s my fault,” Mai replied icily.

_Maybe because it is,_ Katara thought.

Something touched her shoulder. She jumped and turned her head slowly. She let out a relieved breath when she realized it was just Momo.

“Of course not, Mai!” Ty Lee exclaimed quickly. “I’m just saying that you shouldn’t blame Katara. She stood by him when they encountered Azula. She healed him when Azula struck him with lightning and now she’s helping him search for Princess Ursa. Zuko and Katara are really good friends and that’s it.”

_Yes, just friends,_ Katara thought with a frown as she felt her heart clench.

She heard Mai’s sigh as well as the sound of her feet as the dagger-thrower paced inside the room. Momo began to chirp as he pulled on Katara’s ear to get her attention. Katara quickly covered his mouth and shushed him softly.

“Did you hear something?” Mai asked suspiciously.
Katara closed her eyes and prayed to the spirits that the angry ex-assassin did not stab her with one of her sharp knives.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Ty Lee answered, “I think you need some sleep, Mai. Maybe a day at the spa in Ba Sing Se will help with your stress. Your aura is all muddy.”

Katara sighed and released her hold on Momo’s mouth.

“That’s not all, Ty Lee,” Mai said, ignoring Ty Lee’s concern, her voice turning hard, “Zuko has not been… intimate with me for a long time now.”

Katara blushed. Okay, now she really needed to leave. She did not want to know about Zuko’s sex life with other women.

Jealous? a voice asked in her head that sounded so much like Toph’s.

Of course not! It is none of my business what Zuko does, Katara huffed, surprised at the anger she felt.

“Really?” Ty Lee asked incredulously. “Zuko, whom the noblewomen claim is supposedly a sex god? How funny!” She laughed.

Sex god? Katara’s eyes widened and her cheeks flamed.

“This is serious, Ty Lee,” Mai’s cold voice cut in harshly. “The night he came from the prison tower with news about Ursa, I invited him to my room. Everything started out fine, but before we could actually do something he jumped away from my bed as if he did something wrong or saw something shocking. He told me he was sorry and that he was tired, and then he left without looking back.”

Katara could not suppress the smirk that appeared on her face.

Well, he was with me for a while…
“I think he has another woman somewhere. Probably a wild whore that knows how to please him,” Mai choked out.

Katara’s eyes widened in disbelief. How could Mai think like that of Zuko? He was the most honorable man she knew!

She heard Ty Lee gasp.

“How can you say that, Mai? Zuko would never betray you like that!”

“Well, he better not,” Mai’s gloomy voice threatened. “I love him too much to let him go…”

Katara quickly moved away from the door and walked down the empty steel corridor. The bright torches along the walls illuminated her path. She opened the door to her cabin and went inside, finally letting go of the squirming lemur. Momo chattered as he flew to the bed to groom his fur.

Katara removed her clothes and put on her nightgown. She opened the top drawer of the nightstand and retrieved her rose hairpin. Climbing into her comfortable cot beside Momo, she blew out the candle on her nightstand and lifted the blanket to her chest. Momo yawned and curled into a ball next to her pillow with a last chirp.

Stroking the hairpin, Katara narrowed her eyes. She could not help feeling angry with the Fire Nation noblewoman. And to think she wanted to be friends with her at one time.

*How can Mai claim she loves Zuko when she thinks so poorly of him that she accuses him of cheating?*

“No wonder he has grown distant. Not only is she cold and unemotional, she also has trust issues. And she’s blaming *me*! Ha!”

She turned to her side and watched the dark sky from the small window next to her bed.
If Zuko was becoming distant from Mai it was because she was not making him happy.

*Zuko deserves someone better. Someone that would do the impossible to make him happy,* Katara thought.

Yes, someone who would make him happy in everything. Katara blushed again at such a thought and looked down at her hairpin. So if Zuko had stopped sleeping with Mai then that meant Mai was not making him happy in bed either. Katara smirked and could not help feeling relieved.

*Why? Jealous that he could be with someone else?* again that voice that sounded so much like Toph taunted her.

*I am not jealous! Zuko could have any woman as long as she makes him happy,* Katara huffed.

Would it not be nice to be that woman? She was, after all, already trying to make him happy by helping him find his mother. Why not make him…happier?

Katara felt her face heat up even more and she pulled the covers over her head as if trying to drown out the voice. Katara shook her head violently and clenched the silver hairpin to her chest.

How could she even be having such thoughts? She certainly had never thought about such things before in her life! Besides, she was a virgin for Tui and La’s sake! She had no clue on how to… pleasure men, and Zuko was probably a very experienced man.

Zuko’s warm, muscular body covering hers surfaced in her mind. His hot breath tickling her face and making her body tingle. Katara blushed again and buried herself deeper into her blankets as strange and unfamiliar sensations surfaced in her body.

Such thoughts for a maiden were looked down upon in her tribe since their virtue was very important. Only married women were allowed to speak and think of such things. And there she was thinking such scandalous things about the Fire Lord of all people! Not Aang, her boyfriend of four years, but Zuko with the gloomy girlfriend. Katara frowned. What was wrong with her? Ever since she and Zuko had started spending time together and ever since he had caressed her face and her lips she could not stop thinking about him! Or was it way before that?

‘I’m sure your mother was a beautiful and caring woman as well,’ he had said softly.
‘How can you be so sure?’

‘Because I’m looking at her daughter.’

Touching her cheek where his warm hand had touched her skin, Katara smiled. Who would have thought the serious and sometimes cold Fire Lord could be so sweet and tender?

‘Peasant or not, you’re a very desirable woman,’ Zuko’s masculine voice surfaced in her head.

Katara smiled and caressed her hairpin softly. Did Zuko really think that men found her desirable? She was flattered by his compliment, and she was sure Aang did, but deep down she wished Zuko was the one who found her attractive. She mentally slapped herself.

Sighing, Katara placed her birthday gift on the nightstand and snuggled closer into her warm blanket. What was the point, really? Zuko had not only told her but Aang as well that he would never see her more than a friend. And that was how it was supposed to be. Right?

Katara clenched the blankets closer to herself. Maybe asking Zuko to allow her to come with him was not such a good idea.

Zuko closed his eyes as the cool wind ruffled his loose black hair. He had hid his fire crown in his travelling bag so he could journey without being recognized. Momo was curled up in a ball on his lap, seeking warmth. He wondered why the small little creature had become so attached to him.

The young firebender was half-listening to the chatter of the others as they flew on Appa above the lush land of the Earth Kingdom. They have been travelling for a few weeks after leaving the others in the colony. Haru was immediately sent to the first colony, Jee had departed to the Fire Nation with the documents Zuko had revised, and Iroh had left to Ba Sing Se with a tight smile as he shared a carriage with a very loud and enthusiastic young acrobat and a quiet and dull noblewoman.

The gang had picked up their old lifestyle from their days during the war, except this time they were not hiding from any Fire Nation soldiers with the weight of the world on their extremely young shoulders.
“Suki, are you feeling okay? You look a bit ill,” Sokka’s concerned voice made the others stop talking as Appa flew among the white clouds.

Zuko opened his eyes to look over at the couple that was sitting together. Suki’s skin had a green tint and she had her eyes squeezed shut. Frowning, Zuko sat up, making Momo stretch and yawn before settling back down.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Sokka.” Suki laughed weakly and rested her head on the warrior’s shoulder. “I think I ate something bad during lunch. Don’t worry, sweetie.”

Katara moved from her place beside Toph and sat down next to the Kyoshi Warrior. She placed the back of her hand on Suki’s forehead and frowned. Zuko noticed that Suki gave the waterbender a pleading look, which Katara seemed to understand.

“Aang,” Katara called to the Avatar sitting on Appa’s head, “I think we should find a place to settle in for the night.”

Aang turned around and gave her a bright smile.

“Sure thing, Katara,” he replied cheerfully and steered the flying bison to land.

As soon as Appa touched the ground, Katara helped Suki climb off the huge saddle before they quickly retreated behind the trees surrounding the clearing.

Zuko turned to Sokka, who had a worried expression on his face.

“Don’t worry, Sokka. I’m sure it’s nothing bad or your sister would have said something,” he said as he placed a reassuring hand on the Water Tribesman’s shoulder.

“Yeah, Snoozles.” Toph yawned, and summoning a small pillar of rock, she stepped onto it, lowering it down in order to stand firmly on the solid ground. “She just didn’t want to puke her guts out in front of her boyfriend.”

“Toph!” Aang chided, shaking his bald head.
“What? It’s true! And I don’t see why she should be embarrassed since Sokka does more disgusting stuff anyway,” Toph snickered.

“Hey!” Sokka protested and jumped from the saddle to pin a pointless glare at the blind earthbender.

Zuko suppressed a grin as he looked at the complaining warrior, a smirking earthbending master, and a concerned Avatar who was trying to stop them from insulting each other. Zuko knew Toph started it in order to get Sokka from worrying too much.

The young firebender glanced in the direction the two women had walked to. He hoped it was nothing serious.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sitting before the cold campfire, Katara waited to start on dinner. She glanced over to where Suki was napping, her head resting on Sokka’s lap, her hair being caressed by her boyfriend. Katara was able to convince —with some difficulty—her overly concerned brother that Suki was fine. Of course, the real reason why Suki got sick was that something had upset her stomach due to her pregnancy. She frowned when she noticed that Suki was unconsciously covering her abdomen with her hands.

Katara sighed and shook her head. Suki needed to tell Sokka one of these days and soon. And how could her brother not notice? Suki was getting larger every day that passed. Sometimes she wondered how Sokka could be so clever and astute one moment and the next he was as stupid and clueless as a cow-chicken.

Momo landed on her shoulder and began to nuzzle her cheek.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get fed soon enough.” Katara laughed and scratched the lemur’s huge ears.

Appa groaned behind her and continued to munch on the green grass. Katara frowned as she looked at the empty cooking pot. They were just waiting for Aang and Zuko to show up from collecting firewood.

“Where are those two?” Toph complained loudly beside her. The little earthbender was lazily sprawled on the grass. “I’m starving here!”
Katara made a disgusted face as Toph began to pick the dirt from her nails.

“I’m sure they’ll be here soon,” the waterbender reassured her calmly, but she was getting impatient as well.

Toph sat up abruptly and cracked her knuckles.

“Finally!” she yelled impatiently, “Hurry the hell up before Sokka goes insane with hunger and tries to eat Momo!”

The little lemur screeched and hid under Katara’s long braid.

“What took you guys so long? Did you get lost?” Toph asked with a sardonic chortle. “It’s okay to admit it, it happens to some people.”

Zuko walked over to where Toph had cleared a spot with earthbending for the campfire and dumped a large pile of wood before he turned to scowl at a cheery Aang.
“No, we just got sidetracked,” he muttered darkly.

“What?” Aang said innocently, pulling out his puppy eyes. “I haven’t eaten kiwis for a long time! I just had to get them!”

Katara finally noticed that instead of wood the young monk was carrying a big load of ripe kiwifruits.

“Yeah, and you just had to get the ones at the top of a cliff,” Zuko grumbled.

With a shake of his head, the firebender began to pile the wood, and after adding some dry leaves, he stood up. Brushing the dirt from his hands, Zuko shot a small flame toward the woodpile, which instantly grew into a warm campfire.

“Gosh, Twinkletoes, make us all starve so you could indulge in your craving,” Toph spoke up with a displeased snort.

Aang ignored her and turned to Katara with a smile, but when she gave him a disappointed look, he frowned.

“I brought enough for everybody,” he added with another bright smile as he brought his full arms up to show the small green fruits. “I’ll just go wash them in the stream.”

Katara gave him a small nod as she placed the cooking pot over the fire. Zuko watched as Aang left the campsite for the small stream they had landed close to with the pile of fruits in his arms. After a quick glance at a yawning Toph, the young Fire Lord sat cross-legged beside Katara, giving her a smile which Katara quickly returned before she resumed her task of preparing everybody their meal.

Zuko had come to realize that staying away from Katara did him more wrong than good. He really could not stand being away from her, even if her presence sometimes affected him too much. But he figured that if he became too distant from her everybody would notice that something was up. Besides, he did not want Katara to think he did not enjoy her company.

“Sorry for taking too long, but I couldn’t drag Aang back to camp,” Zuko explained to the
Katara laughed as she bent water into the pot.

“It’s really hard to get Aang moving once he finds something interesting,” she agreed with a small grin.

Zuko crossed his arms over his chest and nodded. Katara returned her attention to the pot and began to hum softly. After a moment of silence, the young firebender looked over to where the Water Tribe warrior and his sleeping girlfriend were resting. He had noticed that the Kyoshi warrior had grown larger, but since nobody had said anything, he dismissed it. Besides, he did not want to offend anyone.

He watched as Sokka gently caressed Suki’s short auburn hair, while the young woman’s head rested peacefully on his lap. Zuko looked away to stare at the red and orange flames of the small campfire. He somewhat wished he could share such innocent intimacy with someone such as his two friends did, but Mai would never behave so warmly with him and he was uncomfortable with public displays of affection.

Mentally shaking his head of such inane wishes, Zuko held back a sigh as he recalled the moment he bid farewell to his girlfriend as he prepared to leave with the gang. He had tried to talk to her before he left, but she only responded in clipped tones, not even bothering to look at him. He knew she was still upset about that night he suddenly left her room, but there was nothing he could do about it, so he said farewell and climbed on Appa with a guilty feeling. But once he settled on Appa’s saddle, Katara began to talk to him and he completely forgot his problems with his girlfriend and focused on the moment he would find his mother.

Zuko looked over to the waterbender who continued to hum softly. He watched Katara add the pieces of meat Sokka had hunted and Zuko had helped cut up into the boiling water. She sliced some vegetables and speared them on some sticks to grill over the fire for the vegetarian monk. Then she added the rest of the vegetables and some seasoning into the pot before stirring the hot stew. Zuko inhaled the delicious aroma and smiled. He remembered when Katara cooked the meals as they all traveled together at the end of the hundred-year war and now, after eating too much extravagant foods at the palace, Zuko appreciated Katara’s simple but appetizing cooking.

Not only was she a wonderful cook, but she also mended torn clothes, healed small wounds, and cured small colds. She was not like the women from the Fire Nation Court he was so accustomed to. While they were fragile and weak, cold and petty, Katara was strong, caring, and smart—albeit stubborn—all while still having feminine charm.
The young Fire Lord watched as the waterbender hummed a sweet tune while she brought out cheese and bread from the bag of food supplies. Katara sliced the bread and cheese into pieces and placed them on plates. Then she returned her attention to the stew and began to stir the pot once again. She picked up the wooden spoon, blew on it softly, and took a small sip. She frowned, dipped her fingers into the small bag of salt next to her and sprinkled some into the stew, stirring once more. She brought the spoon to her mouth and took another tiny sip.

Zuko watched as a pleased smile appeared on her face before she licked her lips. Mesmerized, Zuko swallowed as he watched her pink tongue glide over her moist, plump lower lip. Unconsciously, Zuko licked his own lips as he continued to stare at her mouth, wishing it were his lips her wet appendage was gliding over.

He blinked when Momo suddenly landed on his lap, looking up at him with his bulging-green eyes. Zuko felt himself flush for letting his thoughts wander off once more after he promised himself he wouldn’t do it again. He stared down at the small animal that had interrupted his small fantasy with a raised eyebrow.

Momo returned the stare for a minute before he yawned, stretched, and curled into a ball on the firebender’s lap. Zuko scowled before he looked up when he heard Katara giggle.

“He likes to sleep in warm places,” she said with a grin.

Zuko snorted and once again crossed his arms over his chest.

“I am not anybody’s bed-warmer,” he growled out lowly, but he scratched behind Momo’s bat-like ears.

Katara giggled again and resumed getting dinner ready. She noticed Toph sit up again with a mischievous grin and she frowned.

“Yeah, that’s because you’re the one with bed-warmer,” Toph commented slyly and grinned when she felt the waterbender’s annoyance.

Katara felt her temper flare at Toph’s innuendo before she quickly snuffed it out. Zuko’s eyes widened before he sneaked a panicked glance at the waterbender. But her expression was uncharacteristically blank, making Zuko wonder if he should be relieved or disappointed.
He turned to glare at the earthbender before replying lowly, “I do believe that is none of your business.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t wanna know how you keep warm at night,” Toph replied with a chortle.

Katara scowled down at the small knife in her hand and began to chop the cheese with more force than necessary.

Before Zuko could retort, Aang returned with freshly-washed kiwis. He dumped them all inside a bag except for one, and sat down next to Katara. He gave her a wide smile.

“Is dinner ready?” he asked, taking a huge bite of the kiwifruit.

“Yes,” Katara replied and smiled back at him, causing Zuko to look away.

“Is the food ready?” Sokka complained once Suki woke up.

Katara rolled her eyes before repeating the answer.

Dinner went well as they talked while they ate their small meal. They all enjoyed the cool night air as the moon’s soft glow illuminated the leaves on the various trees surrounding their little camp. That is, all except Zuko.

Said firebender sat brooding silently as he glared at Aang who had Katara’s attention all to himself. Zuko stabbed at his food angrily as he listened to Katara laugh at whatever the young boy was saying. He wanted to talk to Katara as well, but ever the incident on the ship it seemed like Aang was hogging her to himself even more than usual.

“What’s the matter, Sparky?” a grinning Toph inquired in a low, innocent voice for only him to hear.

“Nothing,” Zuko lied with a clenched jaw.

He glanced once more to them before he caught Katara’s eye. She smiled at him, but before she
could say something, Aang demanded her attention once again. Zuko suppressed a growl before he mentally slapped himself.

*Stop this nonsense at once!* he ordered himself. *You’re acting like a foolish child!* he continued to scold himself.

He needed a distraction. Setting aside his plate, Zuko retrieved his travelling bag, and after rummaging around for a moment, pulled out his map. Unrolling it, he scanned the map of the Earth Kingdom continent carefully. According to the map, they would be arriving in the Abandoned Fort in a few days. Riding on a flying sky-bison made the trip much shorter.

“How much farther is it?” Toph asked with a loud yawn.

“A few more days,” Zuko replied without looking up from the scroll.

A few more days and he will be reunited with his mother…or not.

*No. I have to stop thinking of the what-ifs just like I told Katara I would,* Zuko mentally reminded himself.

“Really?” Katara asked with a smile.

Finally disengaging herself from Aang’s interesting, but endless talk, she stood up and sat next to Zuko. She peered over at the unfurled map on Zuko’s lap with curiosity.

Zuko could not help feeling smug that he had finally gained Katara’s attention for himself.

“Yes,” he replied to her with a smile. He pointed to a spot in the middle of the map. “This is where we are at the moment and the Abandoned Fort is over here,” he explained to her, gliding a finger to another spot on the light brown-colored map.

Katara noticed that everywhere else on the map was colored green, except for a few red spots near the western coast, but the spot where Zuko’s long finger rested on was unmarked.
“We will arrive in a few more days,” Zuko repeated with a sigh.

He felt his heart skip a beat as Katara grabbed his hand and gave it a light squeeze. He gave her a small, grateful smile.

“Let me see,” Aang interrupted gruffly.

Katara quickly removed her hand and both looked away.

Aang grabbed the map and scanned it with a frown before a huge smile appeared on his young face.

“Oh look!” he shouted as he pointed to a place southwest of the unmarked spot. When the rest gave him puzzled stares, he smiled.

“It’s where the Cave of Two Lovers is!” he cried out gleefully.

Katara’s eyes widened in surprise and she blushed at the memory of what had happened there.

“Oh, don’t remind me of that horrible day!” Sokka cried out dramatically and raised his fists to the night sky above.

Zuko, Toph, and Suki gave him blank stares.

“Oh, yea, I guess the Ember Island Players forgot that part all those years ago, huh?” Sokka remarked with a grin.

Sokka and Aang spent the next few hours explaining how the three of them had no choice but to travel through the cave during the war.

“I was stuck with those annoying so-called musicians,” Sokka continued with a whine. “It’s also where I first saw a badger-mole,” he added randomly.
Aang turned to Katara with a knowing smile.

“It’s also where Katara and I first kissed,” he said with a soft sigh.

Everyone was startled when the campfire suddenly blazed up furiously, before it quickly settled down again. Momo screeched and jumped onto Appa’s massive head.

Zuko clenched his hands in order to calm his sudden anger. What was wrong with him?

Katara blushed again and sneaked a look at Zuko, whose face was more unreadable and colder than ever before. She frowned at herself. Why did she care what Zuko thought?

“You what?” Sokka croaked as he spit out a piece of meat he had been choking on. He turned angrily at Aang. “You kissed my baby sister in a dark cave while I was away? I thought I could trust you!”

“Sokka!” Katara yelled in embarrassment. “It was just one small kiss! And we only did it because it was the only thing we could think of to get us out of the cave!” she shouted.

She did not notice Aang’s hurt expression as she glared at her angry brother. Seriously, what was wrong with him? Aang had been a twelve-year old boy! What did Sokka think he could have done to her?

“How can a kiss help someone get out of a cave?” Zuko asked darkly as he glared at the fire.

Making sure the fire was normal again, Momo jumped onto the firebender’s lap and curled into a ball once more.

Suki raised an eyebrow at Zuko’s hard tone. Was it just her or was the young Fire Lord…jealous? She noticed the others did not seem to notice, but she did see Toph grinning.

“Uh…because it’s what it said in the Poem of Two Lovers,” Katara replied, suddenly feeling
nervous.

She did not understand why she needed to explain and justify her behavior. Maybe it was because she did not want them to think she went around kissing boys in dark, isolated places. Especially not Zuko. She wouldn’t be able to bear him thinking badly of her.

Zuko found himself sighing in relief.

“I understand now. Uncle told me the legend of the two lovers, Oma and Shu. And how the war raging between their villages separated them, and how supposedly love can lead you to the other side of the cave.”

Sokka relaxed as well, but he grumbled when he sat next to Suki. He would not be able to face his father if Katara’s honor was damaged, though he finally admitted to himself that Aang had been too young for that.

“What do you mean ‘supposedly’, huh?” Aang asked with a smirk as he wrapped an arm around Katara’s shoulders. “It’s true! When Katara and I kissed, the cave lit up with small glowing gems that led us outside. Right, Katara?” He gave her a small peck on the cheek.

“Um…well…actually,” Katara stuttered.

“Hey, Katara,” Suki spoke up. “Are there any seconds?” she asked innocently, holding up her empty plate.

Katara silently thanked her pregnant Kyoshi friend for the interruption.

“Of course, Suki,” she replied with a grateful smile, taking the plate and filling it with more stew.

Zuko forced his facial expression to remain impassive as Aang placed his arm around Katara again after she sat back down. Why did it affect him so much anyway? Why was it that every time the airbender kissed or hugged Katara he felt like breaking something? Mainly Aang. Or setting something on fire? Or gathering Katara into his arms for that matter? He knew they loved each other, or that’s what he thought, so why did he feel so angry?
Zuko’s eyes widened as a thought entered his head. What if…what if he was…jealous…?

Mentally shaking his head at what he thought was an absurdity, the young lord returned to study the Earth Kingdom map with a sleeping Momo on his lap and stubbornly refused to think about the strange feelings surfacing within him.
Surprising Findings

Katara gazed at the picturesque scenery below her as the gang flew over the mountains, countless trees, meadows, and rivers. She smiled as her half-pulled up hair whipped around her as the soft wind rushed by them. She noticed the changes that nature was bringing to indicate that summer had ended and fall had arrived. The trees’ leaves were now gold, red, and brown instead of their usual green. The Earth Kingdom forest floor was now painted with patches of the changed, colorful leaves. Katara looked up as the sound of honking duck-geese flying to a warmer climate resonated around them.

Katara’s smile widened. Soon it would be winter, her favorite time of the year. She looked at Sokka and Suki and wondered if they would be able to return to the Southern Water Tribe for the Winter Solstice Festival. She glanced at Suki’s stomach and shook her head softly. Sokka needed to know they were going to have a child and soon. She grimaced. She hoped her grandmother would be joyous when she heard the news.

The waterbender turned to look toward the back of Appa’s saddle where Zuko sat in a lotus position, breathing evenly with his eyes closed, his hands resting on his knees. According to the map, Zuko had informed them, they would be arriving at the Abandoned Fort around noon. Then he had proceeded in describing what his mother looked like. She wondered why he did not show the others the painting of his younger self with his mother, but she supposed it was something too personal for him.

Even though to everyone else Zuko seemed calm and collected, Katara knew he was far from it. She closed her eyes as she remembered her conversation with Zuko from the previous night...

She woke up in the middle of the night to drink some water from her water skin. When she turned to rest on her other side, she noticed someone sitting near the campfire. Even though the person was turned away from her, she knew it was Zuko by the way he sat, his back ramrod-straight, broad shoulders squared.

Katara stood up from her warm bedding and wrapped her blanket around herself to keep her warm from the fall chill. She quietly walked over to the campfire and sat down next to the silent firebender.

‘Sokka’s snores aren’t that loud, you know,’ she teased with a sleepy smile.

She saw Zuko’s lips twitch into a small smile before it disappeared. Katara frowned and scooted closer to inspect his solemn face.
'Zuko, what’s wrong? Don’t tell me you have a stomachache from what I made for dinner,’ she said in another attempt at a joke.

Zuko looked at her in alarm.

‘No! Of course not! I always enjoy what you cook.’

Katara blushed at his words before she gave a soft giggle so as not to wake the others up.

‘If you say so,’ she replied with a tiny shrug. ‘So, if it’s not Sokka’s snoring or my cooking, then what’s keeping you up this time of night?’

She saw his face darken for a moment before he coolly replied.

‘It’s nothing.’

She rolled her eyes at his stubbornness before she noticed a small scroll by his crossed legs and recognized it as the painting of his mother and him. Her eyes softened in understanding. He was still having doubts.

‘We’ll find Lady Ursa tomorrow, Zuko. And she will be happy to see you,’ she assured him. She placed her small hand in his warm, larger one. She felt him squeeze her hand as he gave her a nod.

‘And then you will have to admit that I’m always right,’ she added with a smirk, hoping to lighten his mood.

Zuko scoffed playfully and snorted.

‘Alright, you don’t have to admit it,’ she grumbled before she smiled, ‘But you will have to do something for me.’
Zuko seemed to think over what she said before he asked, ‘Like what?’

Katara tapped her chin with a finger pensively.

‘Not sure yet, but I’ll think of something eventually,’ she teased.

She was surprised when Zuko shrugged and said, ‘Alright.’

She couldn’t believe it! She was able to make the most powerful man in the world agree to do whatever she wanted! Even if just once.

‘Eh…um…okay then,’ Katara stammered. ‘Well, tomorrow’s a big day, so get some sleep.’

She smiled. She watched as he finally turned to fully look at her with a small smile.

‘Thanks, Katara…’

Katara opened her eyes as she came out of her memories and smiled as she glanced at Zuko once again.

“We’re almost there,” Aang called out from where he sat on Appa’s head.

Zuko opened his eyes and sat up straighter, anticipation and apprehension churning within him.

“Land low where Appa won’t be spotted. Remember this place is dangerous and who knows what could happen if they knew the Avatar and the Fire Lord were coming,” Zuko’s baritone voice commanded.

Aang nodded in understanding and began to search for a place to land far away from curious eyes. Zuko leaned against the side of the saddle and closed his eyes again as he tried to meditate and control his sudden anxiety.
A few minutes later, Appa landed among some trees as quietly as a ten-ton beast was capable. The passengers quickly dismounted and looked around the thick forest, while dried fall leaves crunched beneath their feet. Sokka yawned and stretched his muscles theatrically, rotating his arms over his head. Suki shook her head at him and smiled when he gave her a goofy grin.

“Okay, Appa, take a break. We’ll be back soon,” Aang said as he hugged his huge friend’s head.

Appa grunted and licked his young friend and master’s face. Aang laughed.

“You stay here, okay, Momo?”

Momo chirped from his shoulder and landed on Appa’s head.

“Let us go,” Zuko said as he turned around and led the way.

The gang walked silently along a path through the forest for a few minutes before the trees began to thin out. Zuko stopped and let out a shaky breath. What if his mother was not there? He noticed Katara stand beside him with a reassuring smile. He remembered everything she had told him and he felt his confidence rise. He lifted his chin and squared his shoulders.

Zuko pulled up his dark, red hood to hide his identifiable scar before he gave a small nod. Aang placed a straw hat on his tattooed head and grinned. The gang emerged from the trees and stopped at the entrance of the almost hidden village.

“What a dump,” Sokka remarked. His comment earned him two slaps on the back of his head by his girlfriend and his sister.

Zuko could not have agreed more. The village was spread in a large clearing. There were hundreds of houses and huts scattered randomly in every direction. They were old, dirty, and falling apart. Many looked like they were ready to collapse the second a butterfly landed on their roofs. They could hear shouts, curses, and screams coming from the place that caused unpleasant shivers to run through them. A foul stench permeated the air ahead of them, making them grimace and wrinkle their noses.

On top of a hill in the middle of the village stood the once glorious fort that now seemed to be just as ugly as the houses that surrounded it. The fort loomed ominously over the village while dark
shadows engulfed it from every angle, even though the sun was high in the sky.

“I think it’s best if we all split up and meet here before sunset,” Sokka suggested after the gang had remained silent for a while, taking in the distasteful sight before them.

“Remember not to say Fire Lord Zuko is looking for her. If you do find out where my mother is, return to the edge of the forest near the entrance,” Zuko spoke and nodded at the cluster of trees behind them, “and wait until the rest of us arrive. And then I will talk to her.”

Everyone nodded that they understood.

“Sokka, stay with Suki,” Katara spoke up as she turned to her older brother. “She…uh…feels a bit ill because of something she ate.” She did not want a pregnant Suki to walk all by herself in this village in her condition.

Sokka wrapped his arm around Suki and grinned. Who was he to complain?

When the others discussed which way each was to go, Zuko turned to Katara and gently took her hand.

“This place is dangerous. Be careful, Katara,” he said softly so only she could hear his concerned voice. He gently squeezed her hand.

Katara blushed at the touch of his hand and was grateful for his concern. She gave him a small squeeze in return.

“Don’t worry Zuko. I’ll be fine. Waterbending master, you know,” she reminded him and smiled.

Zuko nodded.

“I know,” he replied quietly before he released her hand. But he could not stop feeling anxious over finding his mother and concerned for her.
He turned back to the entrance.

“Let’s go then. Hopefully the spirits will be willing to aid us.”

The gang walked confidently forward and entered the Abandoned Fort.

Aang walked swiftly along the dirty, crooked streets, enduring rude passersby shoving him aside, not bothering to listen to his questions. Aang looked at every woman he came across, but not one fit the description of Zuko’s missing mother. He asked every person that passed him if they knew where a woman named Ursa lived, but they all gave him hard and confused glares. It seemed that nobody knew anyone with that name.

Aang watched as the corrupted city played before his gray eyes. There were fights at every turn, while drunks littered the streets even at the early time of day, and women with heavy makeup and extremely revealing clothes positioned themselves in very suggestive postures outside buildings with red lanterns hanging outside the doors.

The young Avatar frowned as he continued to walk down the streets. When he defeated Ozai, he thought everything would turn peaceful and nice. Cities and villages would be thriving and everybody would be happy and merry. But as he looked around himself he realized he was sadly mistaken and he felt guilty.

Sokka and Suki walked slowly through what seemed like the town marketplace. They could hear merchants shouting for customers while said customers argued for better bargains. There would be an occasional skirmish when a merchant would find a thief trying to weasel his way out of the crowds.

At first, Sokka went to see if he could buy something to eat at the food stalls for his girlfriend—and of course for himself—while he investigated on the whereabouts of his friend’s mother. He was utterly disappointed to find that not only was the food disgusting and barely edible, but nobody knew who Ursa was.

Suki clung onto Sokka’s arm as two men began to throw punches and curses at each other right in front of them. She instinctively shielded her body behind Sokka’s, protecting her swollen stomach. Sokka glared at the men as he led his beloved away from the brutes. He was feeling manly protecting her, which caused him to miss the strangeness of Suki hiding behind him instead of pulling out her iron fans in a defensive stance.
The people were rude and foul and Sokka had to resist the urge to gather Suki in his arms and run back to their meeting place in order to get away from the unpleasant village. But they had promised to help Zuko, and so, they continued on their exploration, hoping that the others were luckier in their search than they were.

Toph landed a heavy blow right on the man’s gut with a rock-covered fist. The man groaned painfully and fell into a heap on the floor. Toph turned her foggy eyes upon the other men who lay moaning in pain on the ground around her small frame.

“Next time I won’t be merciful you bastards!” Toph growled and purposefully stomped upon the injured men as she walked away.

The crown that had been watching the spectacle between half a dozen men and a small young woman quickly scattered away as the angry and obviously strong earthbender moved in their direction.

She just asked if they knew where Ursa was and those idiots acted as if she asked if they wanted to have a good time in an alley or something!

“Assholes,” she muttered.

Toph stomped around the place, demanding to know where Ursa lived. Some were so frightened by her that they peed in their pants, causing Toph to wrinkle her delicate nose in disgust. But by the vibrations everyone gave off, they all told the truth when they said they knew no one with that name.

Strange, Toph thought as she rubbed her chin.

She wondered if the others had better luck. She shoved another group of leering men from her path with two boulders. Zuko owed her big time.
“Excuse me, can you tell me where a woman by the name of Ursa lives?” Katara asked politely.

“Ursa?” the messy-looking woman with rotten teeth asked. She looked Katara over and scowled at the beautiful young stranger.

“I’ve heard no such name, so quit wasting my time, girl!” she snapped and roughly brushed past the offended waterbender.

“Well!” Katara groused as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I should have expected such rudeness from such a place!” She spun on her heel and stomped angrily away.

She looked around herself to see if she could spot Lady Ursa, but instead, she took in the unpleasant sight of the village. The small houses were falling apart, garbage was scattered on the streets, and people rushed or strolled the streets aimlessly. Katara frowned, unable to help feeling the urge to help these people, but then she remembered that these people were not being mistreated by a cruel governor or king. They were outcasts because they had decided to lead a life of crime and dishonor.

Shaking her head and straightening herself up, Katara continued on her search for Princess Ursa. She would not let anything stop her from reaching her goal. She promised to help make Zuko happy and finding his mother was the only thing that was going to make that happen. And even though it seemed that no one had any idea who Ursa was, thus making it seem hopeless, she was not going to give up that easily.

“Hey there, girlie,” a man’s rough voice broke through her thoughts. “Wat’s a purdy lil’ thing like ye doin’ walking all by ‘er lonesome?”

Katara looked up to see two dirty and disheveled men before her. The one she assumed had spoken to her was short, buff, and broad. He was wearing a bright red sleeveless shirt that showed his over exaggerated muscles that were covered with tattoos of disturbing images. He had coarse, black hair that reached his shoulders and a messy, black beard that looked more like a rat’s nest. The other one was tall and lanky with a bald spot reaching from his temples to the crown of his large head. When he snickered, Katara saw that he was missing his two front teeth.

Katara gave them an annoyed and disinterested look before she turned around and began to walk in a different direction.
“Hey now,” the bearded one chuckled darkly. “We only want ta get ta know ya better.” The other one laughed as both men followed after the young woman.

Katara clenched her hands and narrowed her blue eyes, but she continued on her way without giving them a second glance. She saw some of the people walking along the street scurry away, murmuring to each other while giving her sympathetic looks.

Suddenly, her path was blocked by the burly, tattooed man. Katara stopped herself from bumping into him and thus touching the rogue. She heard the other one snicker behind her. Katara stared at the man’s filthy face before her and pinned him with a hard glare. She discreetly moved her hand to her hip to uncork her water skin. She suppressed a shudder of disgust as the man eyed her up slowly. She wanted nothing more than to hide her body from their leering looks.

“Move away and leave me alone or else I will have to hurt you,” she threatened.

Both men barked out a laugh, amusement in their ugly, dark eyes.

“Will ya lookie here?” the gangly one said. “We got ourse’ve a fiery one. We don’t git those ‘round ’ere an’ more.”

Katara gasped and fear gripped her before she shook her head. No, she will not let these men touch her. Steeling her nerves, Katara growled lowly and seethed.

“I have more important things to do than to deal with you two. Get away from me. Now,” she gritted out.

The men stopped laughing at the death tone in the petite woman’s voice they were surrounding before the tattooed man began to chuckle again.

“Oh, we’ll enjoy this,” he laughed raucously towards his partner.

He reached out to grab Katara’s arm, but he was immediately stopped by a smack on the side of his face.
“Ow! Shit! Wat da fuck?” the man cursed and turned to the side, rubbing his face as he glared at whoever had dared to throw something at him, but instead found nothing. When he returned his attention to the woman, he gaped.

Katara had assumed her fighting stance, a water whip coiling around her, her eyes blazing with anger and revulsion.

“Touch me and you’ll regret it!” she threatened harshly. Now she understood why Zuko had been concerned.

She veered to the side and whipped the other man’s back who was trying to grab her by surprise. The man yelped as he crashed to the hard dirt floor, uttering a string of curses as he scrambled to his feet.

“I suggest you leave now before you’re even more humiliated.” She smirked. A small crowd had gathered and was cheering her on.

The short, bearded man growled and cursed. He pulled a knife from his pocket and charged at her. Katara sidestepped him, slashing the water whip across his back. The man stumbled before he turned to face her with angry eyes.

“Why ya little bitch! I was gonna try ta be gentle with ya, but now I’m gonna—”

“Let the girl be and depart immediately,” a soft feminine voice broke through the tension.

Katara saw both men stiffen visibly, the thin one gulped loudly. She turned in the direction she had heard the voice come from. A tall woman was standing to the side, silently and gracefully. She was wearing a long black cloak, the dark hood covering her face. Under her left arm she carried a basket filled with fruits and vegetables and a bow and a quiver of arrows were strapped on her right shoulder. Katara furrowed her eyebrows. There was something about this strange woman, but she could not put her finger on what.

“Y-yes, Lady Xiu!” both men stuttered as they scrambled to their feet and ran as if tiger-armadillos were chasing at their heels.

Katara’s tensed body relaxed.
“You are not from around here,” the woman addressed Katara matter-of-factly. “Most women tremble in fear when they encounter those two. I suggest you leave this place,” she said with a calm and gentle voice.

Katara just stared dumbly as the woman turned to leave, her black cloak swooshing behind her, before the waterbender snapped to her senses.

“Wait!” she called, but the woman was already out of sight.

“You’re lucky Lady Xiu came before something bad happened. Those men are bad,” a little girl with small pigtails on her head spoke beside Katara and peered worriedly at the older woman.

Katara looked down and smiled.

“Hello. And what’s your name, sweetie?” she asked gently, squatting down so she could be on eye level with the child.

The little girl beamed at being referred to as ‘sweetie’.

“My name is Li Ming,” she giggled joyfully and poked the shiny, blue necklace on the pretty woman’s neck.

“What a pretty name.” Katara smiled, making the little girl blush before grinning at her. “Are you here by yourself?” she asked, frowning.

Just then a woman with a long nose and black teeth approached them along with a limping old woman with a cane.

“Li Ming! How many times do I have to tell you not to run away from me?” the long nosed woman chided.

“You know how your grandma gets worried,” the stooped one scolded.
“I just wanted to see if the pretty lady was okay,” the little girl pouted.

Katara stood up and looked at the women.

“Um…who is Lady Xiu? Why does she have such power that she almost had those two dangerous men crying?” Katara asked curiously. Something about the way the woman carried herself intrigued her.

Both women squinted at her and frowned.

“Lady Xiu has been here for years and has gained the respect of many people, but she lives by herself on the outskirts of the village. Before she came many people died of diseases, illnesses, or wounds since nobody cared about the lives of others but their own. Lady Xiu was different. She helped cure many people by using different kinds of plants and herbs,” the one with the long nose said.

The older one with the cane nodded as she began to talk.

“Even though she is kind and gentle, she does not like cruelty shown before her and could be quite intimidating. She has threatened that her herbs can kill as well as heal, and nobody wants to get on the bad side of Lady Xiu or else find themselves poisoned with no one to help them.”

“Oh,” Katara simply said. It was hard imagining that woman as a killer.

A little boy holding his mother’s hand walked passed them and Katara remembered what she was there for in the first place.

“Can you please tell me where I can find a woman named Ursa?” Katara asked politely. She hoped they knew.

Li Ming frowned and scratched her small, dirty head.
“Ursa…Ursa?” the oldest one muttered as she stomped her cane on the ground as she thought. “No, I haven’t heard that name around here. You?” she asked the other one.

“No, sorry,” the little girl’s grandmother replied.

Katara’s shoulders slumped and her brow creased into a disappointed frown. She looked up at the sun and realized she only had a few hours left before she had to meet with the gang. She couldn’t go back empty handed. She wanted to be the one to bring news about Lady Ursa to Zuko.

“Thank you,” she sighed.

She smiled down at Li Ming who gave her a toothy grin before she skipped away with the old women following behind her at a slower pace. Katara sighed again as she continued with her zealous search.

After finding nothing, Katara decided to go back to the meeting place and wait for the others. Perhaps somebody else found out something.

She suddenly stopped in her tracks, hid behind the dirty wall of a house, and peered around. She spotted the same woman from before. The woman was kneeling before a little boy who was crying. The lady patted the boy’s head and Katara saw her smile beneath her hood. Katara watched as the young boy sniffled before he smiled back and took the apples the woman offered him. The woman stood up and the boy skipped back inside his home.

Katara watched as the boy’s mother came out of the house and bowed gratefully to the taller woman. Looking at the disheveled way the mother and child looked, Katara guessed Lady Xiu had helped them with a meal.

The mysterious woman nodded and moved away silently, walking to the edge of the village and into the forest. Katara bit her lip and looked around herself. She slid from the shadows and followed silently after the hooded woman. Lady Xiu seemed to be a healer, perhaps she knew who Ursa was and where she was living.

Katara watched as the woman disappeared into the foliage, the leaves rustling as the wind blew by. Katara ran to catch up with the woman, but upon entering the forest, she found herself completely alone.
Zuko narrowed his eyes and grasped the hilts of his broadswords on his right hip as another of the village women tried to cling onto him. The woman was short with a tousled, dull black bun on her head. She had heavy green eye shadow, dark pink blush on her chunky cheeks, and her lips were painted bright red. She was wearing a short, tight green dress. The top of her dress was partially opened, showing off her cleavage. Zuko turned away in disgust.

“Hey there, handsome,” the heavily perfumed woman cooed.

Zuko scrunched his nose as her cheap perfume assaulted his senses.

“How about we get out of here and go into my room?” she asked huskily as she pressed herself closer to the tall hooded man and smiled seductively.

Zuko frowned beneath his hood in revulsion. He had used brothels before during his search for the Avatar, but those brothels were prestigious, elegant, and for the wealthy. The women were respectful and clean—to a certain point.

But since he had stepped foot into the Abandoned Fort, the women that had been trying to get his attention, his money, and into his pants—just like the one rubbing herself on him was at the moment—were rude, vile, and they smelled too much of sweat and sex.

“I do not have time to waste on you,” Zuko said emotionlessly. He grabbed her arm with his free hand and pulled her away from his person.

The woman gasped in indignation at his cold tone before she smiled again. All the working girls in the village were vying for this mysterious man’s companionship and she was determined to be the one to seduce him and gloat about it afterwards, as well as enjoy the reward he would likely give her for her services.

“Playing hard to get, now are you?” She giggled and batted her long, fake eyelashes, causing Zuko to roll his eyes. “I’m sure I’ll make it worth your while,” she whispered throatily.

Zuko snorted and smirked.

“I highly doubt that,” he replied without glancing her way and turned around to continue on his search for his mother.
As soon as he walked a few steps, he was once again detained by another of the loose women. Unlike the other one, this one was very tall and thin, with long black hair that reached to her calves. She was wearing a long red dress with the same revealing top as the other prostitute. Her heavy makeup was red and black.

“Lan is not good enough for a man such as you,” the other woman crooned.

Zuko opened his mouth to snap at her when he felt his other arm being pulled.

“Oh, and I suppose you’re good enough, Mei?” the previous woman with the messy bun hissed and tightened her hold on Zuko’s arm.

“Of course,” Mei replied haughtily and tugged onto the young man’s other arm.

Lan narrowed her eyes and began to throw insults at Mei who returned them with equal fervor.

Zuko gritted his teeth and breathed hard in order to control his temper. He was not going to be caught in a catfight between two whores.

“Release me this instant and remove yourselves from my presence,” Zuko ordered harshly.

Both bickering women stopped arguing to look at the tall man whose hood hid his face in shadows. They looked at each other in surprise and confusion. Never had a man ever refused to spend their time and money on them, and almost all of them enjoyed being fought over. Narrowing their eyes at each other, both were determined to succeed in this…challenge.

“Why are you making this so difficult, handsome?” Mei teased and raked her sharp and long, black nails on his arm.

“Or will you prefer to spend your time with both of us?” Lan laughed and raised her very thin eyebrows suggestively.
“Did you not understand what I said? Both of your presences annoy me. Release me. Now,” Zuko growled lowly as his temper began to slip from his control.

He was supposed to be looking for his mother and these whores were wasting his time. Zuko roughly pulled away from their grasp and lifted his head high enough so his angry face could be seen.

Both women gasped in horror when they noticed the large scar marring the left side of the man’s face. Zuko watched as they backed away, their faces turning from shock to disgust in an instant. Unlike before where they were determined to get him to bed, both women now wanted nothing to do with the disfigured man. With one last look of revulsion, they turned around and quickly walked away.

Zuko understood their reaction since he had seen so many react the same way many times before, but that did not mean it did not hurt. The look of shock, horror, disgust, and worst of all, pity. He hated it.

‘Zuko you are not a monster! I don’t ever want to hear you refer to yourself as such!’

Katara did not see him like that, she treated him with friendship and kindness. She had even touched his scar gently, multiple times, more than anybody else had. Not that he would have allowed others to.

‘Big Zuko is cute too!’ Katara’s laughing but truthful voice sounded in his head. Zuko flushed at the memory. He could not believe that she thought him as…well…cute.

Zuko squared his shoulders, lifted his head high, and set his jaw in determination. Katara and Iroh, as well as his other friends, accepted him as he was and that was more than enough for him. Pulling his hood closer to his face, Zuko continued on his lonely way. Perhaps the women will leave him alone once Lan and Mei spread the news about their ‘shocking’ discovery.

The young Fire Lord scanned his surroundings carefully, but there was no sign of his mother anywhere. He did not know whether to feel disappointed that he had not found her or relieved that his mother did not live in such a place.

He walked over to a merchant who was bellowing loudly in order to attract customers. Zuko looked at the merchandise and resisted the urge to gag. The fish and vegetables were spoiling and flies were
everywhere, leaving no empty spots on the food. Taking shallow breaths so as not to inhale the stench too much, Zuko addressed the man firmly.

“Ursa?” the short, grimy man asked while poking his hairy ear. He pulled his finger out and flicked the earwax away.

Zuko grimaced and looked away in disgust.

“Oh, I know where she is!” the man exclaimed.

Zuko looked back and his heart raced in anticipation. Finally he was going to see her!

“Oh, no, wait. Her name is Urla and she’s sixty-years-old.” The merchant scratched his head.

Zuko balled his hands and felt his heart clench painfully at the disappointment. Nodding his head once at the man, Zuko moved away from the rotting food stall and made his way through the village. Judging by the energy of the sun, Zuko knew it was time to head back to the gang. Turning on his heels, Zuko made his return to the entrance of the village where the meeting place was to be held. Maybe the others had better news.

Two men, one tall and bald and the other short and covered in tattoos, were walking ahead of him. One had a nasty bruise on the side of his face and the other one was limping. He noticed that as the men passed the people quickly moved out of their way.

“Do ya think we would’ve gotten da gurl had Lady Xiu not interrupted us?” the lanky one asked and rubbed his back.

“I dunno,” the burly one growled. “But da gurl was a beauty, wasn’t she? Too bad we didn’t git ta enjoy ‘er.” The man laughed lewdly.

Zuko narrowed his eyes and wished he could teach these men a thing or two about honor.

Vile, dishonorable bastards, Zuko growled mentally. However, the next words that came out of the man’s filthy mouth caused Zuko to stop dead in his tracks.
“Did ya see those big, blue eyes? Oh, and dat long mass of brown hair! And what da ya say ‘bout those nice lips on ‘er pretty face?” Both men whistled and laughed.

Zuko felt his chest tightened as worry began to gnaw his stomach.

*No. Please don’t let it be Katara!* Zuko prayed to Agni.

The tattooed man continued, unaware of the danger behind him.

“A rare beauty that’s fer sure. Not like these ugly bitches,” he said as he grabbed a woman’s behind as she passed by, causing her to cry out in indignation. “Yup, a beautiful wa’erbender. Wish I could’ve—”

The burly man yelped as he was harshly yanked backwards. He faced a tall hooded man whose visible lips were curled in an angry snarl.

“What da fuck! What’s da big idea ya fuckin—” He was cut off when two strong hands grabbed him by the front of his shirt, hauling him off the ground, his feet dangling over the ground. He came face-to-face with the stranger and he gulped when he saw the rage brewing in his golden eyes.

People stopped to gawk at the scene and murmured amongst themselves, wondering who the tall stranger was that faced the most dangerous men of the village without fear.

The man raised his fist to punch the taller man on the face, but Zuko let go and ducted. The tattooed man then flipped out his knife and slashed at him. Again, Zuko dodged out of the way and raised an eyebrow at the burly man’s poor fighting stance. With a shout, the man charged forward, but Zuko flipped over his head, landing behind him. The man staggered forward before whirling around. Zuko kicked the man’s hand, sending the knife flying to the ground. He grabbed the man by the neck and pinned him to the wall of a house.

“Where is she?” Zuko demanded between clenched teeth.

When the man looked at him dumbly, Zuko growled dangerously, making the man quiver in terror. When he did not answer, Zuko tightened his grip on the man’s neck. The bearded man choked and
tried to pull his hand away, but with no success.

The other man yelled for Zuko to let go of his friend and rushed to pull the taller stranger away. Zuko quickly pulled out one of his dual broadswords with his unoccupied hand and pointed it at the advancing man’s neck, causing him to stop abruptly before the tip stabbed him. Zuko fixed his dangerous glare at the bald man who bailed out without a second thought. The crowd laughed as the gangly coward tripped over in his haste, falling flat on his face before scurrying back to his feet and out of sight.

“Where is the waterbending woman?” Zuko asked again. “What did you do to her?” he snarled. He was beginning to see red and he was fighting himself from slicing the man’s neck with his sword.

“N-nothin’!” the bearded man squeaked as he clawed Zuko’s hand. “Her wa’er whips didn’t even let us come near ‘er much less touch ‘er! I swear it by da spirits!” the man whimpered pitifully. “Me and the other one left when Lady Xiu approach’d! I dunno where she is!”

Zuko narrowed his eyes into livid slits and roughly dropped the man to the hard ground. The burly man began to cough roughly as he grabbed his neck.

“I should kill you for such dishonor you cause in this place, but you’re not worth my time,” Zuko drawled. When the man began to sob, Zuko sneered disdainfully. “Pathetic.”

Replacing his sword into its sheath, and without a second glance, Zuko strode away before he lost complete control of his anger and killed the man for daring to even look at Katara. Without even bothering to question why he felt so scared and angry, Zuko continued on his march.

He barely paid attention as the gathered crowd began to cheer for him. The only thought running through his worried head was Katara. Cursing himself, Zuko quickened his pace to the village entrance. He needed to see Katara’s face and hear her laughter to make sure she was indeed safe. He knew this place was dangerous and yet he allowed Katara to go by herself. He would never forgive himself if something terrible befell her.

Katara wandered through the thick forest, trying to find a trace of Lady Xiu. Red and brown leaves crunched softly under her feet in the eerily quiet forest. A small cool breeze blew by and Katara shivered as the chilly wind reminded her that the sun was soon to set and she needed to return to her friends. She wanted to talk to the mysterious woman, but she had no clue where the lady had gone and she had been searching for hours.
Turning around, the waterbender decided to make her way back to the village. Maybe she could tell the others and they could all return to look for the woman. Katara looked up from staring at the leaves under her feet and stopped. Frowning, she turned her head in every direction, but all she saw were identical bushes and shedding trees. Turning to her left, Katara continued to walk, but everything looked unfamiliar.

She was lost.

Katara raised her head to look at the sky, but the treetops obscured her view of the sun, making it difficult to know which direction it was positioned in. Cursing herself for not being more careful, she made her way to a huge rock that was ahead of her. Why did she always get herself into these situations? Sitting down heavily, she pulled her legs to her chest and rested her chin on her knees.

“Great. Now they will have to look for two missing women,” Katara grumbled and cursed herself a second time for causing Zuko more problems. How was she going to get out of here?

A grunting sound coming from behind her made her turn her head. Katara froze and closed her mouth before a frightened scream could escape. Right behind her, sniffing a berry bush, was a huge platypus-bear. It was quite large with dark russet fur covered in dirt and leaves, its bill-like maw crunching on berries.

Katara slowly and quietly got down from the rock and backed away. Feeling her heart pounding loudly, Katara sent a silent prayer to Yue to keep her safe. Platypus-bears were known to be extremely dangerous and vicious. When the animal began to walk away, she almost sighed in relief before her foot stepped on a twig, making a sharp snapping sound that echoed around them.

Holding her breath, Katara squeaked when the platypus-bear turned its head sharply in her direction. It sniffed the air before it growled. Katara gulped as the platypus-bear’s sharp fangs and claws gleamed in the small rays of light that were able to breach the treetops. She backed away slowly as the beast advanced menacingly toward her with a low snarl.

Without warning, the animal charged toward her, its bulky body shaking as its huge feet crushed the cold ground, its massive head swinging to the sides, its fanged mouth dripping with saliva and berry juice that Katara could not help but imagine as blood.

Moving her left arm to uncork the water skin at her left hip, Katara barely had time to raise a water whip before a sharp pain went through her arm, causing her to instantly drop her hold on the water. Dodging to the side, Katara pressed her right hand on her slashed arm and winced as warm blood soaked her sleeve and her fingers.
The platypus-bear roared, and raising to its feet, it slashed toward Katara’s face again with its sharp claws. Ducking the deadly paw, Katara summoned her element with her uninjured arm and slashed a sharp water whip across the animal’s chest, barely doing any damage because of its thick fur. It snarled in fury and again slashed its lethal claws towards the woman.

Katara evaded the blow, and without thinking about it twice, threw the water at her attacker’s face and froze it. The animal snarled angrily as the frozen water bit at its eyes and nose, but Katara did not wait to see if it freed itself as she tore through branches and bushes.

Cradling her bleeding arm, Katara ran frantically, her blood pounding hard in her head. Once a platypus-bear was angry, it did not stop from pursuing its prey until it was dead. Stumbling, she shoved branches and leaves to the side as she raced forward, occasionally flinching and crying out when her injured arm was hit. She wished one of her friends could help her, but she knew that somehow she had to get out of this alone. She dashed swiftly over the trodden path, twisting and twirling around the thick, large trees. Her only motive was to escape from the savage beast hot on her heels. Her sides hurt and her lungs screamed for more oxygen, her legs demanding she stop and rest.

Just when she thought she was safe, she heard the enraged platypus-bear thunder through the foliage, loud snapping and tearing sounds of trees could be heard resonating for miles. A flock of birds flew into the sky with loud squawks and screeches. When the beast broke through the trees, Katara sprinted straight ahead in order to escape, but she tripped on a rock and crashed down onto the hard forest floor, the wind knocked out of her.

Turning onto her back, Katara screamed in terror as the massive platypus-bear stood over her and roared. It opened its deadly jaws to crush the female, its white fangs glinting, when suddenly a whizzing sound ripped through the air.

The platypus-bear roared in pain and backed away a step as it pawed at its chest. Sitting up slowly, Katara noticed that an arrow protruded from the animal’s thick brown fur. The beast turned it small dark eyes over Katara’s head and growled. Katara turned her head over her shoulder and gasped.

Standing straight and magnificent amongst the trees was the mysterious hooded woman from the village. She was standing with a bow in her left hand, her right hand stretching the string taut with another arrow, aimed at its target.

Katara turned back around when the animal snarled and took a step forward. Katara gasped and backed away on her rear and elbows, but then a second arrow was shot and pierced through the beast’s fur on its chest. Snarling, it took another step forward before another arrow imbedded itself in its shoulder. It roared angrily before it backed away immediately with a pained and defeated whine.
before turning on its paws and limping away to heal its wounds and pride.

“I told you that you should have left,” the woman chided gently.

Replacing her bow over her right shoulder, she reinserted her arrow to the small quiver on her back. She quickly walked over to the young woman who was still sitting on the ground.

“It is dangerous to wander around the woods by yourself. Are you all right?” she asked softly as she helped Katara stand up.

“Uh…um…yes,” Katara muttered in embarrassment.

She was a master waterbender that had defeated many firebending soldiers and she was unable to defend herself from a platypus-bear! She dusted her blue pants and stared at the woman standing before her. It only took almost being killed to find the woman. The hood over the lady’s head was covering her face in shadows and Katara itched to know who was beneath the hood’s protection.

“Oh, spirits! You’re bleeding!” the woman exclaimed in alarm as she gently lifted Katara’s bleeding left arm. “I have bandages and medicine in my cabin. We must hurry so we could stop the flow before you bleed to death!”

“It’s okay. I can heal myself right now,” Katara reassured her.

She summoned the last of the remaining water in her pouch and covered her right hand with it. The woman gasped as the water began to glow. Katara pressed the healing water over her wounds and sighed with relief when her flesh healed and the blood and pain stopped. Removing her hand, she smiled as new skin appeared.

“See. All better,” she said with a small laugh.

“Amazing,” the lady whispered in awe, parting the torn pieces of Katara’s sleeve to look at the healed skin. “None of my herbs can heal that quickly. That is truly astonishing.”

“Yeah, well…it’s nothing remarkable,” Katara muttered as she blushed bashfully at the woman’s
“Nonsense, don’t be so modest. I wish I had such a gift,” the woman replied. Lifting her hand to her head, she pulled back her dark hood and revealed a gentle smile.

Katara gasped and brought her hand to her mouth.

“Princess Ursa!” she exclaimed in surprise.

There was no mistaking it. The same eyebrows, the same pale skin, the same smile, and the same eyes just like the woman in Zuko’s painting. The only difference was that this woman’s long, black hair had a few streaks of gray near her temples and she had a few wrinkles near her eyes, nothing that time wouldn’t do. But the former Fire Nation noblewoman was still beautiful, elegant, and graceful.

The woman narrowed her golden eyes warily.

“I’m sorry. My name is Xiu,” she replied, her warm tone from a few moments ago now cold and terse. She replaced her hood over her head and turned to walk away.

“No. You are Lady Ursa from the Fire Nation, once wife of Ozai, and mother of Fire Lord Zuko and Princess Azula,” Katara said confidently. “I know it’s you. We’ve been searching for you.”

The older woman paused and stood silently, her back turned toward the younger woman. Katara remained standing with a determined look on her face as she waited patiently for the woman to admit it. And once she did, Zuko would be happy.

Katara heard the woman sigh heavily before she turned around again, and pulling her hood down, she folded her delicate hands in front of her.

“How did you know?” she asked quietly.

Katara smiled and walked forward to stand before the older version of Ursa.
“I saw your picture once. And you have the same eyes as your son,” she replied softly.

Lady Ursa gasped.

“My…s-son? You…know my son?” she asked softly.

Katara saw as Ursa’s eyes shone with sadness and longing.

“Yes, we’re good friends actually,” Katara explained and smiled softly. She laughed. “Well, we were enemies when we first met, but now I can safely say that he’s one of my best friends.”

Ursa raised one dark eyebrow in curiosity, which reminded Katara so much of Zuko.

“Why are you looking for me?” the older woman asked suspiciously and backed away a few steps.

Katara thought about what to say for a moment. Zuko had told them he wanted to speak to Ursa first before she found out he was looking for her.

“It’s a surprise,” she replied.

When Ursa frowned, she added, “It’s nothing bad, quite the opposite. I promise.” She smiled reassuringly.

At that moment, her stomach growled loudly, reminding her that she had not eaten since breakfast. Katara blushed and clutched her stomach in embarrassment. Why did this always happen to her? First Zuko and now his mother!

Lady Ursa laughed softly, her uneasiness disappearing at the uncomfortable look on the young woman’s face.

“Come. I have some soup and fish in my cabin,” she beckoned softly as she walked away and
motioned for Katara to follow. “So you are a waterbender, and a very advanced one for being able to fight off those brutes from the village and heal a wound.”

Katara nodded as she tried to forget the leering looks she had received.

“So from which tribe to you hail from?” Ursa asked.

“Oh, please forgive me! How rude of me,” Katara gasped and blushed. “I am Katara of the Southern Water Tribe,” she said with a bow. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Princess Ursa.”

Ursa shifted uneasily at her former title before her eyes widened.

“Katara, as in Master Waterbender Katara of the Southern Water Tribe? Daughter of Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe? The Avatar’s waterbending teacher? The young lady who helped…my son claim the Fire Nation throne?” Ursa asked in surprise.

“Uh…yes,” Katara replied simply as they continued on their walk among the tall trees.

“Then perhaps you are here looking for me because of the Avatar,” Ursa guessed as she turned to her right.

Katara noticed that fear replaced her previous surprise in her golden eyes. Katara frowned and wondered what she feared.

“No,” Katara replied carefully. “I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you, at least not right now.”

Ursa nodded.

“Well…at least you can tell me about my son,” she asked quietly, hopefully.

Katara smiled. “I will tell you what I know.”
They left the thick forest and approached a circular clearing where a small wooden cabin stood in the middle. It had two windows and a porch in the front. A small line of smoke was finding its way up into the sky from the small hole on the roof.

As they neared, Katara noticed there was a small garden on the left side of the house where a few flowers and plants grew. She wondered how Lady Ursa would react if she knew Zuko had maintained her rosebushes and kept the palace garden thriving.

“Come inside from the chill and get warm. After you have eaten, you can tell me about your adventures,” Ursa said with a smile. She opened the wooden door and waited for the young Water Tribe woman.

Katara looked up to the setting sun briefly. A few minutes wouldn’t hurt and then she would get Zuko. Smiling, Katara walked up the few wooden steps and stepped inside.

Removing his dark red hood, Zuko relaxed as he spotted the gang just outside the entrance of the Abandoned Fort. Sokka had his arm around Suki, who looked exhausted, and Aang was smiling and shaking his head at something Toph was recounting as she punched a fist in the air. Zuko frowned as he scanned amongst his friends. Where was Katara?

Zuko quickened his pace, his stomach clenching with concern.

“Where is Katara?” he asked as soon as he was close by for them to hear him.

“Oh, hey, Sparky,” Toph said as she tipped her head in his direction. “She hasn’t arrived yet, but she still has a couple of hours left. Don’t worry.” She grinned.

Zuko nodded and suppressed any emotion from showing on his face when he noticed Aang staring at him. Katara knew how to take care of herself. She was a strong waterbender. Besides, he was sure Katara would not want him to worry the others.

_Especially Aang_, he grumbled mentally.

Sokka raised his head to look at Zuko with a defeated look.
“None of us were able to find anything about your mom. Some glares and insults we found, but nothing about Princess Ursa.”

Zuko’s shoulders drooped and he raked his fingers through his loose hair.

_How can this be? Nobody was able to find one lead? Did she perhaps leave the Abandoned Fort? Where could she be now?_

Zuko narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands. Perhaps Ozai lied to him and he was just wasting his time, searching somewhere else while his mother was in another part of the world.

“I take it by your depressed silence that you didn’t find anything either, huh?” Toph asked softly and crossed her arms over her small chest to ward off the chill.

“I’m sorry, Zuko,” Aang said and placed a hand on the taller man’s shoulder. “We can still search tomorrow,” he added optimistically.

Zuko sighed and nodded.

“Perhaps Katara found something,” Suki spoke up as she leaned on her boyfriend.

The young Fire Lord looked up into the evening sky. There were only a few more hours left before sunset.

“Hopefully,” he finally replied.

“Well, while we wait for my sister, let’s have something to eat,” Sokka piped in with a grin.

“We left the food supplies with Momo and Appa.” Aang frowned as he played with his straw hat, swooshing it around with some airbending as he wondered when Katara would return.

Sokka leaned forward with a grin and slid his hand into his shirt. Suki leaned away and shook her head.
“No worries. I got…this!” he exclaimed triumphantly. He pulled out a piece of moldy cheese from his pocket in front of him for everyone to see. Instantly a swarm of flies surrounded it.

Zuko blanched and Aang gagged.

“What the hell is that awful smell?!” Toph yelled and pinched her small nose.

“What? It’s aged cheese. The merchant said it was a delicacy,” Sokka defended himself and scowled.

“I don’t think aged cheese is supposed to look like that,” Zuko remarked with a frown.

“Or smell like garbage and sewage put together,” Toph groused.

Aang wrinkled his nose. “Or have a swarm of—”

“Okay, okay, I get it!” Sokka yelled and threw the bug infested cheese over his shoulder. “I was duped.”

“It’s okay, honey,” Suki patted her suddenly depressed boyfriend. “It happens to all of us.”

“But not quite as regularly as Snoozles here,” Toph whispered to Aang who only shook his head.

“We’ll wait for Katara to return with news and then we can eat,” Aang suggested.

The others nodded and sat down to wait for the waterbender.

The sun began to slowly move west as the hours passed, but there was no sign of the young Water Tribe woman anywhere. They began to get restless.
“Why’s Katara taking so long?” Sokka asked worriedly for the twentieth time. He nervously played with Suki’s short hair as her head rested on his shoulder.

“I don’t know,” Aang said softly as he paced back and forth, leaving a small dent on the ground as he continued to walk agitatedly.

The blind earthbender shifted on the small stump of rock she had erected to sit on.

“Maybe she found something,” she commented.

Standing straight and silent like he had been for a few hours, Zuko faced the village entrance from the small grove they were waiting in, never taking his eyes away from the spot. The sun was almost over the horizon. There was only a small amount of daylight left before night settled in.

Worry began to gnaw Zuko’s stomach as the despicable village men’s words endlessly floated in his mind. He fought the urge to rip the heads off those two who dared to think of touching Katara. What if Katara ran into trouble again and this time she was not able to get away? The firebender clenched his hands and cursed himself.

Without turning to look at the others, he narrowed his eyes.

“We will return to the village and look for Katara,” Zuko finally spoke in a firm voice, causing the others to jump. He heard Sokka and Aang sigh in relief.

“But what about Lady Ursa?” Suki asked as Sokka helped her to her feet. She discreetly made sure to hide her rounded belly.

Zuko closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

“First we find Katara and then we will continue with the search.” He pulled his hood over his face and led the way back into the Abandoned Fort.

The gang separated to different parts of the still restless village, but this time in search for their missing friend. Without a second glance at his companions, Zuko strode swiftly to the place he had
seen the two men he ran into last. Scrutinizing the streets and the people carefully, Zuko began to feel despair engulf his heart as time went by.

“I’m telling you, if Lady Xiu had not intervene that girl would have been in deep trouble,” an old woman croaked and shook her cane.

“And I’m telling you that the waterbender would’ve skinned their hides clean if she had the chance. Those two would’ve been half-way dead by now. Did you see how her blue eyes burned? I’m telling you she was a strong woman,” another elderly woman with a long, pointy nose squeaked out.

A little girl with pigtails smiled as she held the second woman’s hand.

“The pretty lady was nice, too.”

“Excuse me,” Zuko addressed the elderly village women courteously as he approached them.

The women turned to look at the tall, muscular man and smiled.

“Would you be so kind as to tell me where the waterbender has gone?” Zuko asked politely.

Both women narrowed their eyes and eyed him up suspiciously.

“Why do you want to know?” the first one asked and gripped her cane tightly.

“Listen here, young man,” the pointy-nosed one said in a high-pitched voice. “The poor girl already had to deal with two other perverted swine, so why don’t you find yourself a willing female to sate your needs and leave her alone.”

Zuko gaped and he felt his cheeks burn in embarrassment. The little girl looked up into the hooded man’s face and smiled at the color that covered his right cheek.

“I-I’m…not looking for her for such d-dishonorable i-intentions,” Zuko sputtered disconcertingly.
“Are you the pretty lady’s boyfriend?” the little girl asked excitedly.

Zuko’s eyes widened as his heart skipped a beat at the insinuation.

“Boyfriend?” the one with the cane asked. Squinting, she looked at the man again and nodded in approval. “In that case, she went that way.” The old woman pointed a knobby finger to her left. “Make haste before some other dog tries anything.”

Zuko narrowed his eyes.

“I will break the fingers of anyone who tries,” he threatened darkly.

He blinked when he felt a small tug on the pants of his right leg. Zuko looked down to see the little girl give him a toothy grin.

“You have a very nice and pretty girlfriend,” she said with a giggle.

Zuko’s face flushed again, but he decided to let the child believe whatever she wanted.

“Oh…thank you.” He smiled slightly and patted her head. The little girl flashed him a bright smile.

With a nod of his head to the older women, Zuko walked past them to follow the direction Katara was last seen to have taken.

A few minutes later, Zuko came upon a street that led into the forest. The people he had asked thus far had all pointed him into this direction. Zuko’s brow furrowed as he looked around for any sign of Katara or any sign that she had used her waterbending to defend herself. However, all he saw were dirty houses and people wandering the streets, either aimlessly or drunkenly. His features creased into a worried frown as he continued to walk. Maybe she went in another direction and the others found her.

Zuko looked upon the last house on the street. There was a woman sitting on a very old wooden
chair outside her door, sewing a pair of small trousers. A small boy sat at her feet, munching happily on an apple.

“Excuse me,” Zuko said as he approached the small family.

The woman looked up and quickly grabbed her child into her arms.

“Please, don’t be alarmed. I mean you no harm. I just want to ask you a question,” Zuko said gently as he held his palms up pacifically.

The woman looked at him for a while before she gave a nod.

“Okay. What’s your question?”

“I’m looking for a friend of mine. We just arrived here and I am afraid she has become lost. I want to know if you have seen her. She has tanned skin, brown hair half-pulled back into a bun, and large, blue eyes. She was wearing dark blue pants and a matching shirt with a gray sash around her waist and gray boots. She also has a Water Tribe necklace on her neck,” Zuko described. He half wondered how he knew what Katara was wearing. Oh, yeah, he was staring at her this morning. Mentally shaking his head, he silently prayed that the woman knew something.

The woman frowned.

“I’m sorry, but I haven’t seen anybody with such a description.”

Zuko closed his eyes and sighed.

“I saw a lady like that, Mamma,” the little boy piped in with a huge smile and disengaged himself from her protective embrace to stand before the mysterious man.

Zuko bent down on one knee and gave the boy an encouraging smile.

“Do you know which way she went?” he asked.
The little boy bobbed his head in reply.

“She went into the forest that way!” the boy informed proudly as he pointed straight ahead.

“Thank you,” the firebender said. Zuko took a few coins from the small pouch hidden in his sash and placed them on the boy’s little hands. “So you can help your mother, yes?” he encouraged.

“Yes, sir,” the boy beamed as the older man stood up.

Zuko frowned as he rapidly marched to the edge of the forest in the Earth Kingdom continent. Why would Katara walk into a dangerous and uninhabited forest without telling them, without any supplies, and when night was about to set in?

Quickening his already fast pace, Zuko scanned the forest floor carefully for any signs that Katara had passed through. His keen eyes noticed that some leaves were crushed, meaning someone had walked by and stepped on them. Crouching, Zuko brushed some leaves with his hand to look at the footprints on the dirt floor. The prints were small and light and he was positive they belonged to Katara. Keeping an eye on the trail, Zuko followed it. He squinted as the sunlight began to fade, casting long shadows across the forest floor.

He continued walking until the trail stopped near a large rock. Examining his surrounding for more signs as best as he could in the semi-darkness, Zuko blanched as he noticed platypus-bear paw prints mixed in with those of small footprints. By the size of the animal’s paw prints, Zuko knew it was large. He guessed that Katara tried to back away before the bear noticed and charged. Following the prints, Zuko’s chest tightened painfully as he noticed blood staining the forest floor.

“No,” Zuko breathed and clenched his jaw. “I swear I will kill that animal if I find it for hurting Katara,” he vowed between gritted teeth.

Frantically, Zuko followed the faint trail of blood and the far spaced footprints of Katara that indicated she had run to escape.

“Please be okay. Please be okay,” Zuko chanted loudly as he crashed into the foliage desperately.
He noticed more blood staining the broken leaves and branches and cursed. Zuko suppressed the pain and fear that sprang in his heart as he realized that Katara had tripped and fell before the platypus-bear came upon her. Dropping to his knees, Zuko clenched his eyes shut for a few seconds for the strange feelings to subside. Upon opening them again, he frowned in confusion when he did not see any other signs of blood or scratches on the ground that would indicate the animal had finished its kill, but rather the beast’s paw prints went away in another direction.

That was when he noticed a second pair of footprints near the other ones, and by the size of them, possibly another woman. He saw that both people had stood facing each other for a while before they both walked away in another direction together. Zuko narrowed his eyes. Did Katara follow the stranger willingly or was she forced to?

Standing upright once more, Zuko squared his shoulders.

“Just hang on. I’m coming, Katara,” he promised into the setting sun.

Keeping his eyes and ears trained to his surroundings, Zuko followed both sets of footprints deeper into the forest.

The sun was already setting, casting golden light above the treetops, when Zuko came upon a small cabin in a small clearing. He stopped to inspect the small wooden structure. Scanning the footsteps ahead of him, he saw that they led into the house.

Pulling his hood down over his head, he narrowed his eyes as he glared at the door.

“Katara!” he called loudly, and grasping the hilt of his broadswords with his right hand, Zuko braced himself for whatever was to come.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The bright sun was setting as Katara continued on her narrative in helping the Avatar and the former banished prince end the war and the events that followed after during the postwar. She was kneeling in front of the low table as she finished her meal. She was unsure if she should tell Lady Ursa about Zuko’s Agni Kai with Azula and decided it was best if Zuko was the one to tell her.

Lady Ursa listened with interest and occasionally asked questions about Zuko. Katara would give her a small amount of information that she knew about Zuko as Fire Lord, but she omitted the part where Zuko was at the village at that very moment looking for her.
Katara’s head swirled with question after question. Why did Ursa leave the Fire Nation in the first place? Why did she leave her children behind? Did she not care about Zuko’s tragic Agni Kai with his father and the banishment he suffered afterwards? And most importantly, why did she not seek her son after the war?

Katara itched to ask her all the questions she had had in her mind since Zuko began to open up to her about his mother, but she kept them in check and continued to relate her adventures. It was not her place to ask such things; it was Zuko’s, and she would be lucky if he decided to tell her one day.

“It was in an ink painting where I first saw you,” Katara said as she took a sip from the old teacup Lady Ursa had given her.

Katara grimaced slightly as the bitter tea slid down her throat. She wasn’t surprised the dirty village did not have decent tea. She wished she had accepted the teabags Iroh had offered her before they had departed. At least the food was pleasant.

“It was one with you and Zuko as a small boy. When I said that tiny Zuko was so cute, he crossed his arms over his chest and scowled.” Katara laughed as she remembered his annoyed face.

Ursa brought her elegant hand toward her small mouth and laughed daintily.

“He never liked it when he was fussed over and called ‘cute’,” she said, “He argued that being called cute was not manly.”

They laughed softly.

Folding her hands over her lap, the older woman sighed sadly.

“Tell me, Katara. Is…Zuko happy?” she asked quietly.

Katara’s eyes softened as Lady Ursa’s own eyes gleamed with unshed tears.

“I…I’m not sure, Lady Ursa,” she said truthfully.
But he will be after he sees you again, Katara thought hopefully.

Ursa sniffled as she nodded sadly.

“You still haven’t told me why you are here in the first place. Did you come alone or with someone else? Why are you looking for me if we have never met?” Ursa asked quietly, her voice hinting on demanding.

“Well…I…um…we…er…” Katara stammered for an answer.

“Katara!” a deep masculine voice sounded from outside the cabin.

Katara stiffened in her seat. That sounded like Zuko! Looking toward the small window, Katara gasped as she realized the sun was already setting and darkness was creeping onto the forest.

“Oh, Tui! I forgot!” Katara jumped up from the small cushion and raced to the door.

“Katara, what is going on?” Ursa asked in alarm as she raced to gather her bow and quiver of arrows in order to run after the younger woman whom she had gotten to like as a friend.

Zuko’s body tensed as the door of the cabin was swung open, the light from inside bathing the ground with a golden glow. He relaxed his grip on his hilt when Katara emerge from the house and ran down the few stairs. Zuko raced towards her as his heart gave a joyful leap.

“Zuko, I’m so sorry!” Katara exclaimed as she neared him. “I didn’t notice the sun was—”

Suddenly she was being surrounded by warm, strong arms. Katara’s eyes widened when she realized Zuko was embracing her— and tightly.

“Zu-Zuko?”
“Katara, please forgive me,” Zuko said softly. “I never should have let you go by yourself.”

He wrapped his arms around her back even tighter as if to make sure she was really there and all right. He could not explain it, but as soon as she appeared, he felt like gathering her in his protective arms so nothing else could harm her.

Katara blushed at the worried and guilty tone of the firebender that was still embracing her.

“It’s okay, Zuko,” she said softly as she gently patted his back to reassure him.

She felt him shake his head between her neck and shoulder as he continued to hold her. Katara sighed contently as his warmth surrounded her, making her feel safe. She shyly raised both her arms and hugged him as well. Zuko closed his eyes as his heart ignited at her innocent touch.

“Sorry, for not showing up, I lost track of time. But I’m fine,” Katara said.

Lady Ursa had barely walked out from the house, ready with her arrows, when she stopped in her tracks as she noticed her young friend in a tight embrace with a tall, young man, whose face was hidden in Katara’s hair. Ursa relaxed her grip on her bow and smiled at the protective way the man held the young woman. Was he Katara’s boyfriend or husband? With the smile still on her face, she approached them slowly.

“Fine?” Zuko scoffed severely. “I came upon your footprints with those of a platypus-bear and signs of blood! And because of me you got attack by those despicable bastards! I should have killed them,” he growled.

Zuko pulled Katara closer to his chest as he felt his anger and fear resurfacing. He buried his nose in her hair and breathed in her scent silently. Katara had a faint sweet scent, like fresh rain and gardenias. He felt himself immediately relax.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you,” he whispered.

Katara blushed before she laughed lightly.
“As if those two idiots could have harmed me,” she scoffed softly, “As for the platypus-bear…it’s gone. Thanks anyway…for worrying about me.”

Zuko smiled before he realized what he was doing. Flushing, he pulled away and cleared his throat, suppressing the urge to take her delicate body into his arms again. Katara frowned as the warmth and comfort left her.

Ursa froze as the young man’s face finally appeared. She gasped softly as tears threatened to spill from her golden eyes.

Could it be?

Oblivious to anything but Katara, Zuko noticed the tattered and bloodied sleeve on her left arm.

“That must have hurt,” he observed softly as he gently touched her arm, where the wound should have been.

“Yeah, but it’s all better now.” Katara smiled and shrugged. “I was able to heal it after I was saved by—” She gasped as she finally remembered Lady Ursa.

She felt so stupid! There she was babbling about herself instead of reuniting Zuko with his long lost mother and making him happy.

“Katara, what’s wrong?” Zuko asked worriedly.

He saw Katara look over her shoulder and he followed her gaze. Zuko’s eyes widened as they landed on the woman standing behind them with her own golden eyes wide in shock. The woman he had longed to see again. The one he had been searching for all this time.

“M-Mom?” he whispered.
“Mom?” Zuko repeated unsurely as if afraid she would suddenly disappear and the pain would crush him again. As if he was making sure what he was seeing was not an illusion, but reality. Happiness was spreading through his heart. He had finally found her.

“Zuko?” Ursa gasped and a few tears fell from her eyes. “My son.”

Zuko took a hesitant step toward her. He did not know what to do as he continued to stare at the woman before him. The woman that had left him many years ago as a small child without an explanation. The woman who had left him with his cruel father. Zuko took a step back as he felt his joy and relief turn into resentment and hurt.

Katara watched worriedly as Zuko’s face darkened.

“You left me,” Zuko quietly spoke, his voice and face expressionless, but inside he was churning with dark emotions. “Why?”

“Zuko, I—”

“Why did you not come to see me? Did you not think that I needed you? That I missed you?” he asked as he lowered his head.

Katara noticed that Lady Ursa looked confused for a while.

“But you didn’t want to see—”

“Why did you leave me with that monster?” Zuko interrupted as he balled his hands, a few wisps of smoke escaped from his clenched fists as he fought to control his hurt and anger. “Why did you let him hurt me?” he growled lowly as he touched his scar. “Are you ashamed of me as well?”

Ursa gasped and vehemently shook her head.
“Of course not! I love you and—”

“Then why didn’t you come back for me?” Zuko asked in a low voice and looked away.

He was so confused. So many emotions and questions were swirling in his head that almost made him dizzy and sick. The biggest question running through his head was...why? The horrible spinning stopped when Zuko felt a soft, small hand gently touch his clenched fist. He knew that touch and he immediately relaxed.

“Zuko, is this how you’re supposed to greet your mother, whom you’ve been searching for a long time?” Katara chided gently as she looked up at him. “You can ask questions later. I’m sure Lady Ursa would like to answer them later on. Don’t you think you should greet her properly after finally finding her? After so many years of being separated?”

Zuko closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

*She’s right. I’ve finally found my mother and she hasn’t run away from me, just as Katara predicted. And I’m the one pushing her away.*

He opened his eyes and looked up to the woman who had brought him into the world. The one who had encouraged and supported him even after Azulon and Ozai favored Azula. The woman who had comforted him when his father could not or would not. Zuko took in her tearful and sad eyes and he felt ashamed. Why did he always push people away?

“Mother,” Zuko said softly as he took a small step forward, afraid she would turn away from him, away from his life once again.

Ursa smiled gently through her tears and opened her arms. The next thing he knew he had raced toward her and was soon enveloped in a comforting, motherly embrace.

“Mom, forgive me,” he whispered against her hair.

Ursa shook her head as she hugged her much taller son tightly for the first time in what had felt like an eternity.
“There is nothing to forgive. I am the one who should ask you for forgiveness,” she said softly. She pulled back a few inches to look into his eyes. “Oh, Zuko, my son, I missed you so much.”

Zuko smiled and he gently hugged her.

“And I you, Mom.”

Joy and relief filled his heart once again as he finally realized his search for his mother had ended and now he had found her, now he could take her home, now they could be happy again.

A few feet away, Katara smiled as she sniffled gently at the scene and sighed wistfully. She may never be able to be reunited with her own mother, but at least she had helped Zuko find his—which he deserved—and through him she was able to have a glimpse of how it would have felt to see her mother once again.

She continued to watch silently as Zuko held his mother while Ursa patted her son’s back gently, tears of joy falling from her eyes. Katara brushed a few tears from her own eyes as her heart warmed at the scene, at Ursa’s maternal caress, at Zuko’s warm gaze.

After a few more long moments, Ursa finally released her son and wiped her tears with a watery laugh.

“Why, Zuko dear, look at how much you have grown.” She cupped his face and crooned, “Look at how handsome my baby boy is! I bet the young ladies can’t leave you alone.”

“Mom,” Zuko almost whined in embarrassment.

Katara placed her hand over her mouth to muffle her amused laughter, but her giggles escaped through her fingers and caused the reunited mother and son to turn to look at her.

“What’s so amusing?” Zuko asked and raised an eyebrow.

“N-nothing,” Katara gasped between her giggles.
Ursa smiled when Zuko scowled at the young woman.

“I do believe this was the surprise you were talking about, am I right, Katara dear?”

Katara stopped laughing and smiled.

“You are right, Lady Ursa.”

Zuko looked between his mother and Katara and raised his eyebrow again.

“So how did you two meet again?” he asked.

“Oh, right,” Katara said as she played with her hair. “Lady Ursa scared those two village jerks away and I kind of followed her into the forest…and she saved me from the platypus-bear before it could have eaten me.” She blushed in embarrassment.

“I’m sure you could have taken down that beast by yourself if you hadn’t been caught by surprise,” Ursa reassured her with a smile. “You did fight off those two brutes at the village by yourself.”

Katara smiled proudly and nodded. Ursa lifted her own eyebrow when she noticed Zuko narrow his eyes angrily before guilt replaced them.

“I’m sure you have many questions, my son, as do I. Come, let us talk and have some tea.” Ursa motioned for them to follow her inside the house.

“Um…I’ll just wait out here,” Katara spoke up softly and looked towards the tiny garden.

Zuko turned to look at her and frowned.

“You can’t stay out here. It’s getting cold and dark.”
“It’s so you two can talk privately,” Katara replied with a smile before she added, “I’m not afraid of the dark.”

“Nonsense,” Ursa exclaimed with a wave of her hand. “You will come in before you catch a cold and you can listen to what I have to say as well. I’m sure Zuko would tell you all about my revelations later since you are my son’s betrothed, after all.”

“He’s not my—”

“She’s not my—”

Katara and Zuko clamped their mouths shut and blushed, stealing quick glances at each other.

Ursa furrowed her eyebrows.

“Oh, I thought…I mean, you’re wearing a betrothal necklace and then…by the way you embraced each other…” Ursa trailed off uncertainly.

Zuko’s face flushed deeply before he cleared his throat.

“I was just really worried about her. Katara is my friend and I care for her a lot,” he stated, causing Katara to blush a darker shade of red. “And the necklace is an heirloom.”

“Oh,” Ursa said and frowned in disappointment. “But I heard the new Fire Lord had a girlfriend.”

Katara crossed her arms over her chest and looked away.

“Well, yes…” Zuko said and rubbed the back of his neck. “Mai’s my girlfriend.”

“Mai?” Ursa gasped unbelievingly. “A-Azula’s friend? The quiet, sullen girl? She’s your girlfriend?” she asked disbelievingly.
I know, huh? Katara thought.

Zuko frowned.

“Uh…yes. Mai has…always had a crush on me.”

Ursa remembered little Mai, Azula’s friend, who was always stealing glances at her son. But Zuko never acknowledged her before, always considering his sister’s friends as silly, and it puzzled her now. The Fire Nation woman composed herself and gave a small smile.

“I’m sure she’s a nice girl and I would like to see her again. Anyway, let us go inside.” She looked at Katara, her smile even larger. “Zuko cares for you and trusts you, so you will come as well.”

Katara looked at Zuko who gave her a reassuring smile and a nod.

“I am honored by your trust in me,” she said as she smiled at them both.

Ursa nodded and continued on her way to the small house.

Zuko and Katara glanced at each other one more time before they followed the older woman into the warm and illuminated house, wondering what they will find out next.

Sokka and Aang paced back and forth in front of Appa, occasionally glancing at the little path that led into the Abandoned Fort. They had retreated back to where they had left their things with Momo and Appa and had started a small fire to ward off the chill.

“Do you think Katara’s okay?” the warrior asked as he rubbed his face.

“I don’t know,” Toph spoke up. She frowned and crossed her arms. “Sparky’s still looking for her. Maybe he found her already.”
“What if Zuko’s in trouble too?” Suki asked worriedly as she gingerly sat on Appa’s huge tail. “Maybe someone found out he’s the Fire Lord and captured him.”

“Nah,” Sokka said and shook his head as he sat next to her. “Zuko’s not that stupid to let himself get caught.”

Aang sighed and rubbed Momo’s ears. The little lemur was cuddled inside his shirt. Night had set in and the temperature was dropping.

“Let’s wait a while longer and then we’ll look for Katara again,” he said somberly. He was desperately trying to control himself as horrible scenarios involving Katara in trouble ran rampant in his mind.

Suki sighed and squirmed uncomfortably until she rested her head on Sokka’s shoulder.

“I wonder which one of us will be next,” Sokka said ominously, earning a sigh from his Kyoshi girlfriend and a snort from Toph.

Aang frowned. His usual cheerful features were now set in a worried crease. What if something did happen to Katara? He would be all alone. He could feel himself losing his temper and he clenched his jaw. He felt a small hand touch his. Surprised, he turned to see Toph standing beside him.

“Calm down, Twinkletoes,” she said firmly. “If Katara’s with Zuko, she’ll be more than fine.”

Aang sighed and nodded, clenching his hands tight to keep his emotions under control.

Lady Ursa listened quietly as her son and his waterbending friend told her how they found out where she was currently living. She balled her hands when they told her what Ozai had said about her and now she understood why Zuko had reacted the way he did earlier. They told her of how they journeyed from the Fire Nation to the colony port through the Earth Kingdom and finally to the Abandoned Fort with the Avatar and their other companions.

“I must admit that I was afraid of meeting you again,” Zuko confessed quietly. “I was afraid that you didn’t want to see me and would run away if you knew I was looking for you.”
He looked at Katara, who was sitting beside him, and smiled.

“But Katara gave me the courage I needed to keep going,” he continued.

Ursa noticed the warmth in Zuko’s eyes as he looked over at the young woman, who returned his smile with one of her own. Lady Ursa was extremely grateful that the young Water Tribe woman had kept her son’s hopes up and had promised to help him.

“Mother?” Zuko spoke up after they were silent for a moment.

The fire crackled and cast shadows around the small room. The sun had set a long time ago and the moon was barely peeking out from the clouds in the dark blue sky.

Zuko swallowed before he continued with the question that had been plaguing him all these years.

“Why did you leave the palace?” he asked.

Ursa looked down at her hands and frowned.

“It seems that you do not know, which has me greatly perplexed,” she began as she raised her head again to look at him.

Zuko only frowned in confusion.

Sighing, Ursa closed her eyes for a moment before she looked at her son sadly and anxiously.

“I am afraid of telling you now and what you might think of me after I reveal to you what I have done in the past,” she said quietly.

Zuko took her hand and grasped it gently.
“I promise I will try to understand because I know you loved us too much to forsake us,” he vowed.

Katara glanced at Zuko and smiled.

“Please, tell me what happened all those years ago,” the firebender insisted quietly.

“It calms my soul to know that you think as such,” Ursa admitted. She let out a shaky breath and cleared her throat gently.

“It all started when you were about ten-years-old,” she began. “When news of your cousin Lu Ten’s death, Iroh’s defeat at Ba Sing Se, and his fall to despair reached us, your…father asked Azulon to name him heir to the Fire Nation throne since Iroh seemed incapable of ruling the country in the future.”

Zuko nodded since he had overheard that part accidentally.

“Azulon was furious at his youngest son’s indifference to his older brother’s great loss,” Ursa continued quietly. “So in order to teach him a lesson and make him understand the pain of losing a child, your grandfather wanted Ozai to know such sorrow by losing his own son…by killing you.”

Katara gasped at such cruelty and looked at Zuko’s hard expression.

*But he was just a child! First, that stupid Agni Kai and now this?* Katara thought bitterly.

It seemed that Zuko’s entire family except for his mother and uncle wanted to get rid of him for one reason or another. She felt such great sadness that Zuko did not know what a real loving family was. It must be so hard to know his own blood wanted him dead.

Zuko closed his eyes and clenched his jaw.

“I suspected such,” he admitted, “Azula tried to tell me, but I wanted to believe she was lying.”

Ursa was silent for a moment before she sighed heavily.
“When I found out that my own son was going to be used to teach a ‘lesson’ to Ozai, I pleaded with him not to follow his father’s orders and to ask him for forgiveness,” she continued quietly.

“Let me guess,” Zuko sneered bitterly, “He said such a thing would be showing weakness and shame, didn’t he?”

Ursa lowered her head and nodded gravely.

“Ozai asked me what I would do in order to stop Azulon. I told him I would do anything in order to save your life. He regarded me for a few minutes, and then with a smile, he told me that there was one way. I was overjoyed when he told me that and I asked him to tell me what it was and that I would do it. And what he told me shocked me greatly for I never would have thought that the man I married would say such a thing.”

She paused and took a shaky breath.

“He told me that if I wanted to keep my precious son alive I had to…murder Fire Lord Azulon and never return to the Fire Nation,” Ursa’s voice lowered to a small whisper.

Katara placed her hand over her mouth in disbelief. Zuko’s eyes widened in shock at his mother’s words before they narrowed in anger.

“That coward,” he growled lowly. “That’s just like him, to make someone else do his dirty work, have his wife murder his father and send his son to chase after a myth.” He looked over at his mother whose face was filled with sadness and shame.

“And did you…do it? You killed Grandfather Azulon,” he stated softly.

“Agni knows I didn’t want to!” Ursa exclaimed fervently, pleadingly, as she stared desperately into her son’s eyes. “I abhorred the idea of taking someone’s life. I was brought up to be a good wife and mother, not an assassin!” She looked away and tears fell from her eyes, her body trembled with quiet sobs.

Katara quickly got up from her seat and handed the distraught woman a handkerchief as she patted
her back gently. Ursa quietly thanked her. Katara looked over at Zuko with worried and terrified eyes.

Zuko gritted his teeth and blew smoke from his nostrils. He hated Ozai even more for causing his mother so much pain and for keeping her away from him. Frowning, he squeezed his mother’s hand.

“But…” Ursa’s voice quivered as she tried to continue, “I had no choice. I had to keep you alive. I was not going to sit back while the man I once loved killed our son!” She sniffled and wiped her tears with the handkerchief.

“So on that fateful night, I sneaked into my garden and gathered some herbs that grew in a corner. I crushed them into a fine powder, poison, that once placed in a drink it dissolves instantly without leaving a taste. I stole into Azulon’s bedchamber before he retired for the night and poured the poison into a pitcher of water that sat on his nightstand beside his bed and…left.”

Ursa took a deep breath.

“He died in his sleep without knowing his own son ordered his death and without knowing he was poisoned. I guess you could say that he died peacefully, even if he did not deserve it,” she continued softly. “Before his death was discovered, I raced to your room to see you one last time, hoping that perhaps one day you would understand and come looking for me.”

Zuko nodded. He remembered her parting words, but he had been young and did not understand what she meant. He never would have guessed what his mother was telling him now.

“Then I arrived at the back of the palace grounds where Ozai was waiting for me with a few simple clothes, a small amount of money, and a carriage. He ordered for me to be taken to the port where I was to take a ship to the Earth Kingdom and then to the Abandoned Fort. I was terrified for I did not know where I was going. I have never been outside the Fire Nation before,” she confessed and sniffled again.

“Before I left, he told me not to seek you or Azula out unless I wanted to be caught by the Fire Nation Council and thrown into prison, probably the Boiling Rock, for the rest of my life or perhaps be executed for treason. When he saw that I was reluctant to leave my children behind he promised me that he would keep me informed about you and your sister.”

She then explained how life in the Abandoned Fort had been difficult for her at first since she was
brought up as a noblewoman, then a princess, and was unaccustomed to such worldly atrocities. However, she endured it because her son’s life was more important than her own comfort. Soon she gained the people’s trust and respect with her healing medicines and devotion to the sick. With some threats about being able to use poisons that had no cure, she made the more dangerous inhabitants leave her alone. Of course, those threats were idle, but they did not need to know that.

“I longed to see my children,” Ursa continued as she took a small sip from the tea Katara had poured for her. “I would receive information here and there about your progress as you grew up. Then one day as I shopped in the marketplace I heard news about the Agni Kai between Fire Lord Ozai and his son, and having lost, the young prince was banished from the Fire Nation. Why would Ozai fight his thirteen-year-old son?”

Zuko narrowed his eyes and explained what had happened in the war meeting almost seven years ago that led to his pointless quest to find the Avatar for his lost honor and admittance to his own home.

Ursa clenched her small hands.

“I knew that there had to be a rational reason why you would be called a traitor and a disgrace,” she said angrily.

She breathed deeply to calm herself before continuing.

“Confused and outraged, I threatened Ozai with returning to the Fire Nation and revealing everything if he did not lift such a harsh and uncalled for punishment.”

“And why didn’t you?” Zuko asked and looked away. “Why didn’t you come for me?”

Ursa frowned before she looked down at her hands.

“That is what has me puzzled. He wrote to me saying that you found out about what I did. He…he told me that y-you…h-hated me for killing your grandfather. Hated having a murderer for a mother, and that you did not want anything to do with me.”

A few more tears fell from her eyes at the painful memory. Katara again rubbed soothing circles on the older woman’s back. Her blue eyes showed her sympathy. She could not imagine the suffering
Lady Ursa had to go through.

“I would never hate you! How dare he!” Zuko roared and slammed his hand down on the old wooden table, causing the teacups to rattle wildly.

He breathed deeply to regain his composure before he took his distraught mother’s hand and wiped her tears.

“He told me you were…dead,” he whispered and closed his eyes at the agonizing memory.

“D-dead?” Ursa gasped and covered her mouth with a trembling hand. “But he said…he…” she trailed off as her eyes widened.

“He lied to us all,” she whispered.

The firebender narrowed his eyes to infuriated slits and clenched his hands.

“He never cared for anybody but himself and possibly Azula,” he stated coldly.

“Azula…” Ursa whispered quietly and frowned sadly before she straightened in her seat. “I never heard much about you, once you were banished, since the Abandoned Fort is rarely interested in the outside world.”

Zuko looked away to stare out the dark window. His face darkened, the flames from the small fireplace casting shadows on his scarred face.

“I…have made many awful mistakes in order to regain what I thought was my lost honor, and I am ashamed,” he said quietly.

Katara looked between Zuko and his mother and kept silent, resisting the urge to comfort the young Fire Lord, her friend.

“All men make mistakes, Zuko, but only great men learn from them and try to correct them,” Ursa
told him gently since she could see her son was tormenting himself.

When Zuko lifted his head to look at her, she smiled at him before she turned to look at the silent waterbender with another gentle smile.

“Katara has told me of the many wonderful things you have done for your country and the other nations,” Ursa told him softly, “I am proud of you, my son, and I am glad that you did not forget who you are.”

Lady Ursa gently took her son’s face into her hands and tenderly touched his scar with the tip of her fingers. Zuko cringed and tensed. Would she be disturbed by his scarred face? From the corner of his eye, he glanced at Katara who gave him a gentle, encouraging smile.

“If I had known Ozai would cause you so much pain, I would have fought for you even more. Please forgive me, my son,” Ursa whispered remorsefully, her golden eyes reflecting her pain and guilt.

Zuko relaxed at seeing that his mother was not disgusted by his disfigurement. He took hold of one of her hands and shook his head.

“It’s not your fault. It’s true that my scar haunted me for years, reminding me of my weakness and failure, but...” he paused as he looked at Katara and smiled warmly at her, “I have come to accept it and, thanks to Katara, I have come to embrace it as a part of who I am.”

Katara beamed at him. Ursa looked between the two of them and smiled.

Zuko turned back to his mother and continued, “I understand why you did what you had to do and I don’t judge you. After all, a mother would do anything to protect her young, right?”

Ursa and Katara smiled at his words.

“This is all Ozai’s fault,” Zuko growled out, his anger once again resurfacing. “I should have him executed for all the damage he has done to us.”
“No, Zuko,” Ursa protested and shook her head. “Do not be like him. You are better than that, better than him.”

Zuko sighed and nodded reluctantly before another question emerged in his head.

“Why did you not return to the Fire Nation when the Avatar defeated Ozai and I ascended the Fire Nation throne?” he asked with a frown.

The dark-haired woman was silent a moment and a small frown settled on her delicate features.

“I was still afraid of what you thought of me, but I had planned to return and plea with you to understand. That is, until I received a letter that said that you would never welcome me back to the palace after what I did,” Ursa said softly. “And so, with a sad heart, I remained in this place.”

“What?” Zuko asked and frowned. “I never said such a thing. Who could have sent such a letter if Ozai is in prison? Who else knows about what really happened to Azulon?”

“I don’t know,” Ursa responded and frowned deeply as well.

She stood up and walked across the small room to a dark wooden chest near the corner. Opening it, she ruffled through the contents until she returned to the small table with a scroll.

“I received this a few months after your coronation as the new Fire Lord,” she said quietly and handed it over to her son.

Quickly grasping the scroll, Zuko unfurled it and examined the piece of paper carefully for any signs that could reveal who could have sent the letter. Nothing gave any clues. The paper was thin and simple and the black ink was of cheap quality which indicated that it could not have been a member of the Royal Court. Unless, of course that was what the person wanted them to believe. Reading the words carefully once again, Zuko suppressed his anger at the words before he furrowed his brow as something nagged at the back of his brain. Was it him or did the writing style seem familiar?

“Did you find anything?” Katara asked as she peered over his shoulder. She noticed something flicker in his eyes that looked like recognition before he shook his head.
“No,” he sighed as his frown deepened. “I thought I did, though.”

He closed the scroll and glared at it as he held it in his hand. This was very troubling. He needed to be even more careful now.

“Well, the only thing that matters now is that you found your mother,” the waterbender chirped, bringing the Fire Lord out of his racing thoughts.

Zuko looked at Katara who smiled at him. He smiled at her and returned his gaze to his mother who was watching them with a curious smile.

“We shall leave the painful past behind us from now on and look to the future,” Zuko spoke up firmly. Standing up, he gently pulled his mother to her feet. “Let us return to the Fire Nation. To our home.”

Ursa packed a small bag with her meager belongings, and with a final farewell to her home for the past few years, followed her son and the young waterbending woman into the forest. Zuko had frowned at the few, old clothes his mother had packed and promised himself that she would never lack for anything ever again.

The three were currently making their way through the dark forest, with Zuko leading the way, a small flame on his palm. The last golden rays of sunlight had disappeared a few hours ago and a small crescent of a moon barely shone its light through the thick treetops. The firebender looked over his shoulder at his mother, still unable to believe she was finally by his side. He had to keep looking at her every few seconds, as if afraid she would suddenly disappear. She looked a bit older, but she also looked the same, her gentle smile and warm eyes were the same.

Zuko listened silently as Katara and Ursa immediately struck up a conversation concerning—of all things—how cute he was as a little boy. Zuko mentally groaned. Seriously, did they not understand how embarrassing that was? He heard Katara giggle as his mother finished yet another story from his childhood that, in his opinion, all involved embarrassing moments. He sighed. At least they were happy.

“One time when Zuko was four,” Ursa continued with a soft laugh, “he refused to wear his formal clothes for a ceremony, so he ran from his room nake—”

“Mother!” Zuko yelled in mortification and spun around. His face flushed when Katara started to
“giggle. “I think that is enough about me. Why don’t you tell Katara about yourself?”

So I can at least salvage some of my male dignity, he mentally added.

Katara smiled brightly and clapped her hands enthusiastically.

“Oh, yes! Zuko told me that your favorite flower is the rose and it’s mine too!”

Ursa smiled and laughed daintily. “Why, that is wonderful, indeed!”

Zuko resumed walking and relaxed as the two women began to talk about flowers, chocolate pastries, cute little furry animals, and everything else that he categorized as female interests. He slowed his pace as he keenly scanned his surroundings for the path that would lead them to their campsite. Spotting a familiar cluster of trees and bushes, Zuko continued walking while he half-listened to his two companions.

“So, how did you learn to use the bow and arrows?” he heard Katara ask curiously.

Ursa looked over her shoulder to look at her bow and smiled.

“I actually learned in the Fire Nation Academy for Girls before…I married. All Fire Nation noblewomen are taught some form of self-defense, although many prefer to have their guards protect them. Since I am not a firebender, I chose the bow and arrows as my preferred weapon of choice. Of course, I never thought I would actually use it to protect myself as well as actually hit a living thing,” Ursa finished quietly as she lowered her head.

Zuko cursed Ozai for the millionth time for changing his mother into something she did not deserved or wanted to be.

Katara placed a hand on the older woman’s shoulder and gave her an understanding smile.

“My mother once said that not all of us are meant to be warriors because then who would be there to keep the peace?” she said with a small smile.
Ursa smiled and patted the girl’s hand. Now she understood why her son trusted this young woman so much.

“So you never told me how you two met,” Ursa called over to her silent son.

Zuko faltered in his steps before he straightened himself out.

“Uh…well…” He cleared his throat uneasily.

Katara laughed quietly at him.

“That was the first day we met he barged into my small village in the Southern Water Tribe with his ship, demanding we hand over the Avatar or else,” she explained. “And the next few encounters we had after that, he was always trying to capture us.”

Zuko’s shoulders slightly slumped.

“I told you I made a lot of stupid mistakes,” he said quietly to his mother.

“Yes, a lot of stupid mistakes,” Katara repeated, laughing teasingly. Now that they were very good friends, their hatred as enemies was long forgotten.

“Hey!” Zuko grumbled. “At least I didn’t kill you.”

Katara snorted and laughed.

“Not that you could if you tried,” she teased.

Zuko turned his head around and scowled at her, but his lips twitched upwards into a tiny smile.
Ursa smiled as she watched them banter.

“You made mistakes for understandable reasons, your honor and your home. In the end you joined the Avatar and stopped the war,” Ursa said.

“Yeah,” Zuko said and he smiled before he grinned. “But at first I wondered if I made the right choice.” He smirked. “I do recall somebody making my life a living hell when I joined the Avatar’s group.” He pointedly looked over at Katara.

Ursa looked over at the waterbender as well.

“I would not have thought you were like that,” she remarked lightly.

Katara blushed and ducked her head, causing Zuko’s smirk to widen a bit.

“Well… I mean… He betrayed me!” she accused weakly. “I was still a bit suspicious.” She looked away. Now it was her turn to feel remorseful for having treated Zuko so badly.

“Yes, and even though I confessed so many times that I was regretful and I really wanted to stop my father, she never stopped pestering me about my mistakes,” Zuko said with a loud mocking, sad sigh.

“I said I was sorry!” Katara cried out. She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. “Be grateful I forgave you.” She scowled.

Zuko chuckled, unaware of the twinkle in Ursa’s eyes as she looked at one young person to the other.

Zuko and Katara kept Ursa entertained as they continued walking through the forest, playfully teasing each other for their past mistakes all the way. A chilly breeze blew by, causing Katara to shiver and rub her arms with her hands since she was only wearing a light tunic.

“Katara dear,” Ursa said worriedly, “Are you cold?”
Zuko looked over his shoulder and frowned as he continued to hold the flame in his hand.

Katara shook her head and smiled.

“No, it’s okay. I’m kind of used to the cold weather,” she said with a light laughed.

“Even so, you could catch a cold.” Ursa frowned, unconvinced.

Katara smiled at the worried, motherly tone the Fire Nation noblewoman had addressed her with. Her soft voice reminded Katara of her own mother and how much she missed her.

‘Katara, honey, put on your mittens,’ Kya ordered gently, ‘I don’t want you to catch a cold.’

Katara cleared her throat to keep her tears away at the memory.

“I’m fine, really. Besides, I can’t actually pull a parka out of nowhere—” She halted when they were suddenly plunged into darkness.

Katara’s heart pounded in alarm. She strained her eyes and ears in order to locate her companions. Why did Zuko disperse his flame? Where they being followed or something? Katara reached for her waterskin as she tried to calm her thoughts and her nerves.


She jumped when she felt something touched her arm before she felt smooth and warm material being draped over her shoulders. She tensed when she felt warm breath near her head. A slight shiver racked her body.

“Here, this will keep you warm,” Zuko’s baritone voice sounded behind her before she felt him step away.

A small flame reappeared and Katara found herself standing before Zuko. Ursa was a few feet away from them with a puzzled expression on her face before she looked her over and smiled. Looking
down at herself, Katara realized that a dark red cloak was covering her shoulders and back.

*What…?*

Frowning, she looked over at Zuko and noticed he was just wearing his black tunic. Her eyes widened when she finally realized Zuko had taken off his cloak and placed it on her. It was still warm from his body heat, instantly shielding her from the chilly night.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

Blushing at his thoughtfulness and solicitousness, Katara wrapped the warm cloak tighter around herself and smiled at him.

Zuko gulped as a strange sensation coursed through his body at seeing Katara wearing his clothes. It pleased him. An unexpected and odd possessiveness took hold of him before he crushed it immediately. Clearing his throat, Zuko backed away and turned toward the path again.

“Your brother would probably try to kill me if I let you get sick,” he explained and shrugged, trying to hide his flushed features.

Katara laughed.

“Yeah, because then who would feed him?” She giggled again before she gasped. “Oh, no! They’re probably worried that I’m taking so long. Aang must be worried sick,” she whispered.

Zuko’s face hardened at the mention of the young monk’s name.

“Then we should hurry,” he said expressionlessly as the flame in his hand grew a bit hotter before he resumed his long strides with Katara following silently behind.

Lady Ursa stood in the same spot as a small frown marred her delicate face. She was puzzled at the sudden change her son’s mood took and wondered what had affected him.
Zuko looked behind him and saw that Ursa was not following.

“Mom, what is it?” he asked worriedly.

Did she not want to leave with him?

Ursa snapped out of her thoughts, and with a shake of her head, she smiled.

“Nothing, dear, I’m just glad to be returning to the Fire Nation with you,” she said instead and quickly walked to catch up to them.

Zuko smiled before he turned back around and led them into the silent night. Even though what his mother had said made him happy, he still felt a bit irritated at being reminded of his young airbending friend. Sokka and Toph had told him of instances where Aang would lose control and enter the Avatar State whenever something happened to Katara. Zuko did not blame him for being upset. He himself became upset and angry as well when Katara was in danger. But to lose complete control that he risked the lives of many innocent people?

Zuko mentally shook his head, reminding himself that Aang had been a young boy and maybe he had changed.

“Zuko dear,” Ursa’s soft voice brought him out of his thoughts, “How is Iroh doing?”

Zuko smiled fondly. “Uncle is doing well. We are actually on our way to Ba Sing Se to see him.”

“Ba Sing Se?” Ursa asked as she stepped over a tree root.

“Yeah, he owns a teashop called the Jasmine Dragon in the upper ring of the city,” Katara explained with a smile.


Katara listened silently as Zuko explained to his mother how the old prince had been by his side
since his banishment, how they became fugitives from their own nation, and how they arrived at Ba Sing Se to try and start a new life. Katara grinned when Zuko told them he had to become a waiter. He, the Crowned Fire Prince! She stifled a giggle when she remembered coming upon him at the teashop with him wearing an apron.

“But Ba Sing Se is also the place where I did something awful. Something that I will always regret,” Zuko’s low voice continued, guilt evident in his tone.

Katara knew what he was talking about; his betrayal under the ancient catacombs that almost caused Aang’s death by Azula. And where her trust had at first been shattered by his siding with his sister.

“Didn’t we say we were leaving the past behind us?” Katara spoke up, to lighten the mood.

Zuko glanced at her from the corner of his eyes and smiled gratefully.

“Yes, thanks for reminding me.”

Ursa was confused, but it was obvious they did not want to talk about it and she understood. Perhaps once she was reunited with Iroh he could enlighten her a bit more. She smiled as Zuko continued with his account of what Iroh had been doing for the past couple of years.

Katara smiled as she watched Zuko interact with his mother. Sometimes he would turn to look at Lady Ursa as if making sure she was really there with him, and then he would smile.

*Maybe he’s finally happy,* Katara thought, proud for being the one to have found Ursa.

Another chilly wind blew by and Katara wrapped Zuko’s cloak tighter around her. On Zuko, the cloak reached to mid thigh, and on her, it fell down below her knees. The sleeves were too long for her, falling below her waist, which she was grateful for since they hid her hands from the cold. It was made of fine material, which did not surprise her since Zuko was the Fire Lord and all.

She glanced at Zuko, who was still conversing with Ursa, and blushed as she remembered how he had put it on her, his breath near her head, his warmth surrounding her body. And then when he saw her in it she noticed that some kind of emotion flickered in his golden eyes before he backed away.
Katara brought her covered hand to her face and subtly took a small sniff of the sleeve. Unlike Aang’s scent that reminded her of fresh grass and fruit, Zuko’s cloak had a mixture of spice, smoke, and sandalwood, all with a pleasant masculine musk. She blushed when she admitted to herself that she liked his scent, it was so warm and comforting.

“We’re here,” Zuko’s strong baritone snapped Katara out of her musings.

They could see a small campfire where two people were huddled near it—Sokka and Suki. Aang was standing a couple of feet away with his back turned toward the newcomers. His hands were balled into tight fists while Toph stood at his side obviously trying to calm him down. His form was trembling and he was shaking his head. They saw Toph rub her temples while she exhaled deeply.

Zuko glanced at Katara before looking away. He knew why Aang was upset.

“Katara!” they heard the Water Tribe warrior exclaim, relief evident in his voice.

Sokka leapt to his feet and raced towards his sister, stopping at the last second before he barreled into her. He took her into his arms and sighed heavily.

“Thank La you’re okay!” he exclaimed. He pulled her back out at arm’s length, checking her for any obvious injuries, before he groused, “You just love to give me heart attacks, don’t you?”

Ursa stood quietly as the young man fussed over her young friend. With a raised eyebrow, she glanced at Zuko who was smirking.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Sokka, but come on! I’m not a baby! I can take care of myself!” Katara huffed, but she smiled at her older brother. “But guess what? Zuko and I found Lady Ur—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Aang had practically flown from his previous spot and almost crashed into her as he hugged her. Katara stiffened at the unexpected act.

Zuko instinctively took a step forward before he relaxed, mentally shaking his head.

“Katara, I’m so glad you’re okay!” Aang cried out. “I was so worried something happened to you!”
He pulled away a few inches to place a hard kiss on her lips.

Katara’s eyes widened before she forcefully shoved him away. Ursa gasped and looked at her son, who had turned away from the scene, his face was dark and his lips were pulled into a tight, thin line.

“Aang!” Katara exclaimed angrily as she touched her lips, soothing them from the painful kiss.

Zuko glanced back at them and inwardly smirked at Katara’s irritated reprimand toward the Avatar. But Aang did not notice her disapproving tone as he crushed her into another hug. Zuko clenched his hands into fists to keep himself from ripping them apart. He looked away when he caught Ursa’s questioning look. He did not want to answer any questions she might have because he himself did not know the answers to his behavior.

“Where were you? Why didn’t you meet us as planned?” Aang’s relieved tone now slightly scolding.

Toph stomped her way over to them and wedged herself between them.

“Jeez, Sugar Queen! I’m so relieved you’re back! Twinkletoes here was ready to barge into the village in all his Avatar glory to find you. I don’t know how you have the patience to calm him down!” The blind earthbender crossed her arms and snorted.

“I was just really worried,” Aang said as he frowned.

Katara uncrossed her arms and sighed, feeling guilty for scolding him when he had just been worried for her.

“Not that this isn’t fun or anything,” Toph spoke up sarcastically. “But who’d you bring?” she asked, tilting her head in the silent woman’s direction.

The other three who had been waiting the arrival of their friends finally noticed the tall, graceful woman standing beside Zuko.

“As I was trying to say,” Katara spoke up as she moved away from Aang and Toph to stand beside
Ursa, “Zuko and I found Lady Ursa.” She looked over at the woman and smiled.

Zuko nodded.

“That’s right. Sokka, Suki, Toph, Aang,” he called. He grabbed his mother’s hand and smiled. “I would like for you to meet my mother, Princess Ursa.”

Ursa smiled and gave them a small graceful bow in greeting.

“It is a pleasure to meet my son’s friends,” she said softly.

Toph grinned and bowed as well, elbowing both Sokka and Aang who were gaping. They blushed before they returned the bow. Suki finally stood up from her place to stand beside her boyfriend.

“Lady Ursa, this is my overprotective older brother, Sokka, and his girlfriend Suki, leader of the Kyoshi Warriors,” Katara introduced them and smiled fondly as she pointed at them.

“Uh, um, it’s nice to meet you, Princess Ursa,” Sokka finally said.

Suki smiled and gave a very awkward bow. Ursa looked the young couple over, especially the small bump on the young woman’s stomach and smiled.

“This is Toph Bei Fong,” Zuko said as he nodded toward his young friend. “She’s an Earthbending Master and Aang’s earthbending sifu.”

“Don’t forget Earth Rumble Champion and the first Metalbender in history,” Toph added and smirked, cracking her knuckles.

Katara rolled her eyes.

“Humble is one thing she’s not,” she muttered.
“I heard that,” Toph snorted before she addressed Ursa, “I’m glad to finally meet Sparky’s mom!”

“Sparky?” Ursa asked. Bemused, she looked over to her son who shook his head.

“And this is Aang, the Avatar,” Katara finished and pointed proudly at the young monk.

Ursa bowed deeply.

“It is an honor to meet the one who defeated Ozai,” she said.

Aang blushed and rubbed his neck.

“Uh…it’s an honor to meet you, too,” he replied. He laughed cheerfully as he returned the bow. “I’m also Katara’s boyfriend,” he added as he smiled at the waterbender.

“B-boyfriend?” Ursa stuttered, confused.

She looked at Katara who had found a sudden interest in her feet. Next she glanced at Zuko who again was looking away with an emotionless expression on his face. Ursa frowned in disappointment.

Before Aang could repeat himself joyfully, Zuko spoke up.

“We will rest here tonight and head to Ba Sing Se tomorrow morning,” he informed them. Turning to his mother, he continued, “Then toward the Fire Nation.”

Ursa smiled. She jumped in fright as something landed on her shoulder. Her eyes widened when she came face-to-face with a furry creature with bulging, green eyes and large ears.

“Z-Zuko?” she whispered uncertainly.
“It’s alright, Mother,” Zuko reassured her.

He smiled as he extended his arm. Momo did not hesitate to perch himself on the warm firebender’s shoulder with a content chirp.

“That’s Momo, a flying lemur,” Katara said as she smiled and patted the small animal’s head.

“From the Air Nomads,” Aang added.

Ursa relaxed and smiled slightly. Tentatively, she reached towards the small lemur and scratched his head. Momo closed his eyes and purred.

“He is adorable,” she cooed. A loud grunt made her jump again, she gasped slightly as a huge, white beast with horns and an arrow on his head yawned.

“Oh, and that’s Appa, my flying sky-bison,” Aang said proudly.

“How…furry,” Ursa said.

The others laughed quietly at her surprised expression.

“Let’s rest for the night,” Zuko spoke up again.

The others nodded and began to get ready for bedtime. Zuko made his way over to their belongings to grab an extra sleeping bag for his mother. He placed it near the campfire close to where he would rest. He smiled as Ursa struck up a conversation with Katara, Suki, and Toph. Katara placed her own sleeping bag on the opposite side of Ursa’s.

With a few yawns and good nights, they all settled in for the night, gaining warmth from the glowing campfire they surrounded. Zuko looked up at the starry night realizing that now—after four years—he would finally be able to go to sleep without wondering where his mother was or if he would ever see her again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
They were a day away from Ba Sing Se when the travelers had decided to take a break in a small clearing surrounded by trees full of red and golden leaves. Small clouds lazily moved across the blue sky as the pale sun tried to give more warmth to the Earth below.

Ursa sat quietly, watching her son’s friends with a smile as they set up camp. She had observed that Sokka, Katara’s brother, was a funny and silly fellow who was obsessed with meat and was overprotective of the ones he loved, but he also had a clever mind. He and Zuko were very good friends, almost like brothers. His girlfriend, Suki, was a strong woman who usually kept Sokka in check. The young female warrior and she easily held conversations on weapons since both were non-benders. And Ursa was positive Suki would be a great mother.

She was amazed to find out that, even though Toph was blind, she did not let that hinder her and bring her down. She was rough and loud, always speaking her mind, sometimes very bluntly. The earthbender barely lifted a finger to help the others with chores, but the young girl had a noble heart and she always made Ursa laugh with her remarks. Ursa noticed that Zuko and Toph were fond of each other.

Unlike Zuko and Azula, she sighed sadly.

Aang, the young Avatar, was a very friendly and cheerful young man with a respect of all life and a gentle heart. But she had noticed that he was a bit overbearing in his relationship with Katara, always hovering over her as if he were afraid of being left alone. Ursa wondered why someone as mature as the young waterbender chose him as her boyfriend.

And then there was Katara, whom she had come to be very fond of. She was sometimes stubborn and headstrong, but she had a kind and loving soul. She was the maternal one of the group—always making sure everybody was fine and comfortable. Ursa had heard of Chief Hakoda, but his wife was never mentioned. She wondered to whom the necklace Katara wore used to belong to.

Finally, her eyes rested on her beloved son whom she had been afraid she would never see again. Zuko had grown into a strong and fine young man. From what Katara had told her, and from what she had observed herself, Zuko was a strong and just leader who worked hard for the betterment of his country and the peace among all nations. She was so very proud of her son, but something worried her. He was not as jovial and expressive as he used to be as a child, but quiet, stoic, and quick to anger. She was sure her former husband was to blame for that.

The Fire Nation noblewoman had observed that her son spent most of his time with Katara when Aang was not attached to her side. She also noticed, with some delight, that when Zuko was with the others he was impassive and calm, but when he was around Katara, it seemed like a bright light would ignite in his eyes and he would become carefree and almost cheerful. And when around him, Katara’s smiles were brighter and her laughs were louder.
Ursa puzzled over Zuko and Katara’s behavior. If she did not know any better, she would have believed those two had feelings for each other. Why were they with other people?

“Dinner’s ready,” Katara’s voice brought Ursa out of her observations. Lady Ursa moved away from the tree she had been sitting under to sit near the waterbender, who, as usual, was serving the evening meal.

Sokka appeared with a tired Suki by his side. The young tribesman had a worried and confused expression on his face as he helped Suki sit down on Katara’s other side. He noticed that his girlfriend had been so tired lately.

Zuko appeared next, after finishing his meditation. He walked over to the campfire and smiled as the delicious aroma of Katara’s cooking reached his nose. He sat himself between his mother and Katara and smiled at them both. Ursa smiled when Katara returned Zuko’s smile with a soft blush.

Aang and Toph showed up later, both laughing and shoving each other after a good earthbending spar. Toph dropped herself ungracefully across the fire and impatiently waited for her portion. Aang looked around the small campfire and scowled when he saw that there were no empty spots next to Katara. He looked at Zuko and gave him a pointed glare. Zuko just stared at him, unmov- ing, and raised a dark eyebrow.

“Aang, don’t just stand there, sit down,” Katara said, oblivious, as she began to hand over the bowls of steaming stew.

Aang frowned as he said, “But I want to sit next to—”

“Just sit down, Twinkletoes, so we can start eating!” Toph ordered loudly.

Aang grumbled lowly as he took a seat next to her and across the fire from where Katara sat next to Zuko. Aang was reminded of the time when they went to see the Ember Island Players four years ago, where he had wanted to sit beside Katara, but the former Fire Prince had shoved his way between them and took his spot.

_I wonder if Zuko does it on purpose_, Aang muttered in his head.
“When are we arriving at Ba Sing Se, Zuko?” Ursa asked her son as she gingerly ate her stew before smiling at the waterbender. “I must compliment you on your great cooking, Katara dear.”

Katara felt herself flush with pleasure.

“Thanks,” she said with a pleased smile, “My mother and grandmother taught me how to cook.”

Zuko smiled as he set down his spoon to answer his mother.

“If we leave at dawn tomorrow, we will arrive sometime before noon.”

“At dawn?” Sokka groused.

Zuko smirked.

“I know some find it difficult to rise at dawn,” he began, “but it’s best that we get there as soon as possible so I can return to my duties in the Fire Nation.”

Sokka sighed. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I am eager to see the great city of Ba Sing Se,” Ursa said with composed excitement. “I have never been outside of the Fire Nation before…well, except to the Abandoned Fort.”

Zuko frowned and cursed his father again. With a small frown, Katara watched as Zuko’s jaw clenched before she looked at Ursa.

“Oh, you’ll like it,” she spoke up with a bright laugh, hoping to lighten their mood. “We could take you and Suki to the spa, right, Toph?”

The earthbender snorted in her bowl in agreement.
“That sounds lovely. How long are we staying in Ba Sing Se?” Ursa asked again, missing the inside joke.

“Well,” Zuko began and furrowed his forehead, “I was thinking a few weeks.” He smiled as he took her hand. “And then we can finally return to the Fire Nation Palace together.”

_Aww, Katara cooed in her head, that is so sweet._

Ursa smiled before she looked at Suki and Sokka.

“Are you returning to Kyoshi Island or the Southern Water Tribe soon?” she asked curiously. “It is unwise to travel in your condition.”

Katara gaped and Suki brought her hand to her lips and gasped.

“What condition?” Sokka asked as he took a mouthful of the stew.

Ursa frowned at him.

“It is dangerous for both Suki and the baby to be traveling,” she said before she smiled at the wide-eyed female warrior. “Suki, you must take it easy and rest.”

“Baby?” Sokka repeated as he frowned and scratched his head while Suki held her breath.

Sokka’s eyes widened as he finally understood what Lady Ursa was saying before he started to laugh.

“Suki’s not pregnant! Right, Suki? Isn’t that funny?” he guffawed.

Ursa gaped at him and Katara groaned into her hands.
Sokka stopped laughing when Suki did not join in his laughter.

“Suki?” he asked again as he turned to look at her.

Suki’s bottom lip was trembling and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. At her hurt expression, Sokka felt his heart clench. He slowly looked down at her stomach and finally, finally noticed the bump. Sokka’s mouth flew wide open as the truth dawned on him.

*Suki...is...pregnant? We’re having a baby?* He was in shock for a second before he realized something else. *I’m...I’m going to be a dad!* Great joy flooded his heart to the point where he felt it was going to explode.

“Suki…” he began softly.

He moved to embrace her, but Suki jerked away from him and stood up. He gasped when he noticed she was crying and her eyes were full of hurt and sadness. Without warning, Suki turned on her heels and ran towards the dark trees.

“Suki!” Sokka yelled and sprang to his feet before racing after her.

Lady Ursa brought her hand to her mouth.

“I...I am so sorry,” she said guiltily. “I didn’t mean to divulge anything. I thought he already knew.”

“It’s okay,” Katara reassured her. “Nobody knew. Suki only told me. She was trying to find the right time to tell him. I guess I must thank you, I was afraid she would have finally revealed the news to him while she was giving birth!”

“Well, I’m glad Snoozles finally got it,” Toph remarked as she yawned, unimpressed.

“Wait, you knew?” Katara asked and placed her forgotten bowl next to her.

“Yep, I can feel more than just her heartbeat,” Toph said as she licked her fingers.
Katara looked over at Zuko who had a small smile on his face, unsurprised.

“Did you know, too?” she asked.

Zuko looked at her and shook his head.

“No, but I am not surprised by the news,” he said.

Katara opened her mouth to question him about it, but Zuko immediately interrupted her.

“I believe this will be a good time for Sokka to finally ask her,” he said. He did not want to tell Katara he had seen Sokka sneak out of Suki’s room in the middle of the night.

“Ask her what?” Aang piped in.

Zuko wiped his mouth before replying coolly, “You’ll see.”

They waited for a while for Sokka and Suki to reappear, but after a few hours with no sign of the couple, they began to grow anxious. Ursa sat quietly while Aang and Toph began to doze off.

Katara bit her lip nervously as she braided and unbraided her long hair several times. What if Sokka said something stupid and Suki decided to return to her home and leave him? Just as she was about to unbraid her hair again she felt someone’s warm hand cover hers. Startled, Katara looked up to see Zuko’s amused gaze.

“Everything will be fine. Sokka has a strange skill in getting himself out of trouble,” he said with a small grin.

Katara nodded and left her poor hair alone.

“You’re right,” she agreed with a small laugh. “Thanks.”
Aang, who was still sitting across from them, narrowed his eyes. He stood up and stomped his way over to them, sitting down on the empty spot next to Katara. Zuko released her hand and looked away, resisting the urge to roll his eyes at Aang’s glare.

Toph yawned and sat up.

“They’re coming back,” she said.

The group watched as Sokka emerged from the trees with a huge, goofy grin, holding a blushing and smiling Suki by the hand. The others visibly relaxed and smiled as well.

“Guess what!” Sokka said with a twinkle in his blue eyes. “I’m going to be a dad!” he exclaimed exuberantly.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Toph muttered sarcastically and yawned.

Sokka scowled at the earthbender before he broke out into an ecstatic smile that almost reached to both his ears. He wrapped his arm around Suki’s waist while he placed a hand on her stomach.

“I proposed to Suki, and not only is she going to give me a child, she’s also going to be my wife!” he exclaimed happily. He placed a big kiss on his future bride’s cheek.

“Oh, my gods!” Katara squealed as she leapt to her feet and ran to her sister-in-law-to-be. They embraced each other and began to jump and laugh excitedly. “I’m so happy for you both!”

Katara pulled away and smiled at the betrothal necklace on Suki’s neck. It was a dark green leather strap with a smooth, light-blue stone in the middle.

“Thanks!” Suki laughed joyfully as she wiped a few tears from her eyes. “I’m so happy!”

Ursa stood up gracefully and gently hugged the pregnant woman.
“I wish you much happiness,” she said sincerely.

Suki smiled and thanked her.

Toph walked over to them and patted Suki’s back with a grin. A few years ago, Toph had been envious of the Kyoshi Warrior because she had gained the attention of the guy the blind earthbender had a crush on. But after realizing Sokka really loved Suki, Toph let go of her resentment and her silly crush. Unlike some people…

“Congrats, Warrior Princess. I hope the spirits give you lots of strength and patience to live with Snoozles,” Toph chortled.

“Hey!” Sokka complained indignantly.

Katara laughed and embraced her brother.

“I’m glad you finally stopped being stupid and asked Suki to marry you. Gran-Gran and Dad will be very happy,” she told him.

Sokka smiled and hugged his sister tighter.

“Thanks, little Sis.”

With a cheerful grin, Aang flew towards them with a small burst of airbending.

“Wow, guys, congrats!” he exclaimed.

Momo chattered excitedly on his shoulder.

Zuko, who had waited for everyone else to finish their felicitations, walked toward the newly engaged couple with a smile. He gently embraced Suki, mindful of her bulging stomach.
“Best wishes, Suki, on both your betrothal and your pregnancy.”

“Thank you, Zuko,” Suki said and smiled brightly.

Zuko moved next toward his Water Tribe friend and shook his arm while he patted his back.

“Congratulations, Sokka. This is indeed great news.”

“Thanks, man,” the warrior grinned broadly.

“Didn’t I tell you your fears were unnecessary?” Zuko reminded him with a smirk.

Sokka rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Yeah, I’ll admit you were right,” he admitted before he grinned. “We’re planning on having the wedding in the Southern Water Tribe in a few months, before the baby is born. And we’re hoping you all will be there!”

Aang and Toph immediately agreed.

Zuko looked at his mother and smiled.

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he said.

Suki yawned softly and Sokka immediately pulled her to him.

“Suki, you look tired!” he exclaimed. “Let’s go get you and the baby some rest!”

Before Suki could protest, Sokka was already leading her to the spot he had chosen for them to sleep on. The others smiled as Sokka fussed over his pregnant betrothed, making sure she was comfortable enough in her sleeping bag, all the while cooing at Suki’s rounded belly.
Night had settled in, and with it, bright stars and a full moon. Zuko lay in his sleeping bag as he
listened to the soft breathing of his sleeping companions and the occasional loud snore from Sokka.

‘Others are already getting ahead of you, you know!’ Iroh’s chuckling voice sounded in his head.

So…Uncle knew about Sokka and Suki’s child, huh? Clever, old man, Zuko mused and smirked.

‘When am I going to see you married and with little Zukos running around causing trouble?’

Zuko frowned. Sure, he saw himself married and with an heir since that was what was expected of
the Fire Lord. But he never actually craved it like Sokka seemed to since he did not have great
experiences with family.

‘You know, Nephew, it’s great that you are taking your responsibility in your duty for your people
and your Nation seriously. But remember this, sometimes we must think of our own happiness in
order to make those around us happy.’

Of course, he was happy. He had everything he wanted. He finally gained his rightful place on the
throne, he was a powerful and respected Fire Lord, he had managed to save his country and his
people from themselves and maintained peace with the other nations, he had a girlfriend who loved
him, and he had finally found his mother.

Zuko turned onto his back so he could see the bright moon resting on the dark sky as a frown settled
on his brow.

Then why did it seem like something else was missing in his life?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Midnight found Katara tossing and turning in her blue sleeping bag. It was a night with a full moon
and she was wide awake, unable to close her eyes and get some rest for the following day.

Huffing, Katara sat up and looked around the small campsite. Toph slept in her earth tent a few feet
behind her. With a sleeping Momo on his stomach, Aang slept on the other side of the still burning
fire, away from the waterbender, where Sokka made him sleep ever since the young boy had reached
puberty. Katara rolled her eyes. As if she would do anything ‘inappropriate’ while her brother slept a
few feet away. Gross. Besides, she never felt the inclination to do such things with Aang.

Suki and Sokka slept close together a few feet away on her left side. Sokka was snoring, as usual, with a smile on his face. He had a protective hand over Suki’s swollen stomach. Katara smiled, wondering if she would ever be held in such an adoring and protective way.

Lady Ursa slept quietly on her right side, Zuko a few feet away from her in his own space. Katara sighed and smiled sadly. How long have Zuko and she been kept away from sleeping peacefully with their mothers close by to comfort them? How long have they been denied snuggling into their mothers’ loving embrace? Zuko, no longer a child, was denied that comfort. And she no longer had a mother to seek that comfort.

Looking up at the bright sliver moon, Katara touched her necklace and exhaled deeply in order to shake her melancholy away. After a few minutes of peaceful silence, the waterbender removed herself from her warm sleeping bag and quietly stood up. They had discovered a small lake less than a mile or so away from their camp. Maybe a midnight bath and swim would tire her enough to get some sleep.

Gathering a bar of soap and a white towel, Katara silently made her way toward the edge of their clearing. She passed Lady Ursa and then froze when she came near Zuko who had let out a groan. Katara glanced at the covered form that was Zuko and frowned when she noticed that he was breathing hard.

Is he having a nightmare? Is he hurt?

She reached out a hand to wake him up, but she paused when Zuko let out a moan. Katara pulled back when he rolled over onto his side with a sigh before he became still and resumed a steady breathing rhythm. Shrugging, Katara stood up and continued on her quest for some relaxation, letting the call of her element guide her through the darkness.

After a few minutes of walking, Katara pushed through a cluster of thick bushes and smiled at the scenery. The small, blue lake was surrounded by countless trees and bushes, serving as a sort of private bath. The full moon peeked through the clear top, which caused the surface of the dark lake to sparkle as if it were made up of dozens of bright diamonds. A few leaves detached from the tall trees and gracefully danced their way onto the surface of the water, causing a few serene ripples to spread.

Scanning her surrounding to make sure no unwanted visitors lurked around, Katara walked nearer to the water. Almost feeling like a giddy little girl, Katara removed her boots and pants. Reaching to
remove her tunic, she stopped when her hands grazed soft, almost silky material. Looking down, she realized with some surprise that she was still wearing Zuko’s cloak. Taking it off, she held it in front of her before bringing it to her nose and taking a small sniff. Spicy smoke and sandalwood reached her senses.

Shaking her head, Katara carefully folded it and placed it on a neat pile with her belongings before removing her under-wrappings. Hanging the towel on a low tree branch, she grabbed the soap and gingerly walked to the edge of the small lake, careful of not stepping on a sharp stone or twig.

She dipped her right foot into the calm water and shivered at the cold contact. She rubbed her arms and blew warm breath into her hands. She vaguely wondered if bathing in cold water on a chilly night was a crazy idea before she took a big breath and dove into the clear water. She resurfaced and clutched her arms, her teeth chattering. Grabbing the slippery soap, Katara rubbed the small bar into a foamy lather and began to scrub her body. Next she scrubbed her scalp, and with some waterbending, washed her long, brown hair.

After she was finished, she placed the bar of soap on the edge of the small lake and dove under the water once more, swimming in a lazy pattern in her element. Resurfacing, she bent a few tendrils of water and made them dance around her as they glistened under the silver moonlight.

In a few weeks, they would leave Ba Sing Se and return to their homes and duties. She will resume her waterbending instructions with the children and help out with the upcoming wedding and festival. Aang and Toph will be heading to Omashu for a meeting with King Bumi before they joined them in the Southern Water Tribe to help with the upcoming events as well. Lady Ursa would finally return to the Fire Nation with her son after so many years of being away from her home country. Katara was a bit saddened by this for she had come to enjoy Ursa’s company, her soft voice and motherly concern made the young woman think of how her own mother would have been if she were still alive.

And then there was Zuko. He would be returning to his obligations to his country as Fire Lord. He would probably visit the Southern Water Tribe for Sokka and Suki’s wedding.

_Hopefully this time he won’t burst into our wall with his flagship_, Katara thought and giggled softly.

But then after the wedding…when would she see him again? In another four years? In a decade? When would they ever banter with each other? When would they have another spar? Would they spend time together talking pleasantly or just sitting in comfortable silence ever again?

Katara dropped the tendrils of water she was bending, surprised at the painful ache these questions
brought to her heart. She touched her chest lightly and frowned.

“What is wrong with me? I knew we would part ways eventually. We both have our duties to fulfill.” She let her arm drop to her side and it splashed into the water. “I have helped him find Lady Ursa and now he will be happy. He doesn’t need me.”

Tears began to sting the back of her eyes and she was startled at her strange reaction. Blinking fiercely, Katara shook her head before she submerged her whole body into the cold yet comforting shadows of her element.

Zuko groaned as Katara placed light kisses on his face before she trailed her lips down his neck. He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her closer to him before he kissed her plump lips. He caressed her arms and then her hips.

Pulling away, Katara giggled and ran her soft hands on his chest, gently running her fingers to his abdomen and back up again. Zuko moaned as her hands teased his navel a few inches from where he wanted her to touch him before he growled in disappointment when she pulled her hands away to rest them behind his neck.

She placed her lips on his and sensually began to lick his mouth. Zuko let out another groan as he felt his length harden even more than it was. He moved his hand to the hem of her skirt and slowly lifted it up as his breathing became more labored. He wanted her so badly. He was about to remove the wrappings that kept her from him before a loud snapping sound startled him.

Zuko sat up abruptly as his still cloudy mind tried to take in his surroundings, his ragged breathing the only sound in his ears. Another snapping and popping sound made him stiffen before he realized it was just the wood being consumed by the flames of the campfire. Feeling his face flush, he listened in panic for the sound of his companions voicing their disgust for his...dream. After realizing he was the only one awake, Zuko held back a groan as he noticed his erection making a tent in his sleeping bag.

Not again! He pulled on his hair, wanting to slap himself for his perverted mind and body. He became outraged when other men dared to even consider looking at Katara, and there he was, having such erotic dreams about her!

Shoving his too warm sleeping bag to the side, Zuko stood up, and without looking at the spot where the star of his dream was peacefully sleeping, he walked to the edge of the clearing. Maybe a swim in the cold lake they found earlier will help cool down his blood. Not bothering to light a flame in his hand since the full moon provided enough light, Zuko broke from the undergrowth that led to the
lake and held his breath.

The scene was indeed beautiful. The twin image of the bright, full moon rested tranquilly on the middle of the small, dark blue lake. The leaves of the trees danced elegantly as a soft breeze blew by. Zuko shook himself, and without another glance around the little sanctuary, he quickly made his way to the edge of the lake and dropped to his knees.

He scooped some water into his cupped hands and splashed it onto his head, shuddering as the cold water came in contact with his heated flesh, running down his head, face, and neck just like Katara’s kisses had done in his dream a moment ago. Shaking his head, Zuko splashed more water onto his face, deciding whether to throw himself into the lake with clothes on and all in order to cool down his heated blood.

Sitting on his hunches, Zuko took a deep breath and exhaled before something resting on the edge of the water near him caught his eye. He grabbed the object and realized it was a bar of soap.

Strange, he thought as he turned the wet soap over, Where did this come from?

A small movement in the calm lake caught his attention and Zuko looked over at the water, squinting. A person’s head had emerged from the lake, not realizing he was there. Zuko’s eyes widened and his mouth fell open once he recognized who it was.

“K-Katara…” he stammered in a low whisper.

Katara was playing with her hair that she had placed over her shoulder, covering her chest. She was in the middle of the small lake and in the center of the moon’s reflection. Her wet hair and skin gleamed under the moon’s soft light, making her look ethereally beautiful. She was humming a sweet melody as she caressed her wet hair.

He knew it was inappropriate from him to be there, staring. He knew he should return to camp before she saw him. He knew he should leave her alone, but he couldn’t. His body did not obey his command to leave the place. He was too mesmerized by the enchanting yet oblivious woman before him. He felt his loin twitch again and he dropped the soap. It fell into the water with a soft ‘plop’.

Katara froze at the sound, and looking up in the direction the sound had come from, she gasped.
“Zuko!” she shrieked and submerged herself into the water up to her chin, covering her chest with her arms, her cheeks burning.

Zuko opened and closed his mouth, but no sound came out as he continued to stare at her with wide eyes. Katara’s shock quickly turned to anger. Zuko gulped as he saw the fire in her eyes as she raised one arm from beneath the water.

“Ka-Katara…wait! I…I,” Zuko stuttered from the edge of the lake.

“Pervert!” she screamed and lashed out with a large water whip.

Zuko remained frozen as he tried to get his brain to function again before he jumped out of the way just in time before he was hit.

“Katara! Please, let me explain!” Zuko tried to say as he dodged another whip from smacking him.

But Katara wouldn’t have it as she continued to lash out in anger and embarrassment.

“I never thought you were this dishonorable!” she cried out.

“I am not dishonorable!” Zuko yelled indignantly as he finally dissolved her water whip with a fireball. “I’m trying to tell you it was an accident!”

Katara scoffed and raised another whip to show him what she thought about his accident, but she stopped it in midair when Zuko turned around, his back facing her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude upon your privacy. I didn’t know anybody was here,” Zuko’s calm and sincere voice reached her ears. “Please believe me when I say that I meant no disrespect.”

Katara regarded him for a long moment, her eyes narrowed in thought, before she sighed and dropped her weapon back to the lake.

“I believe you, but don’t turn around if you know what’s good for you,” she warned firmly.
Zuko heard Katara as she swam and pulled herself out of the water before her small footsteps reached his ears. His breathing sped up as he wondered what she was doing.

“You’re lucky you’re my friend or else I would’ve frozen you at the bottom of the lake,” he heard her grumble.

Zuko turned around to see Katara glaring at him with her hands on her hips. The young firebender was barely able to keep his facial expression neutral as his eyes roamed over the woman’s curvy body standing before him. Katara was only wearing a white towel that barely reached to her thighs and contrasted wonderfully with her dark skin. Little rivulets of water ran down her long hair, her caramel skin, her shoulders, her arms, down her long legs…Zuko swallowed as he fought from pitching a tent in his trousers at the delightful sight before him.

Katara raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms.

“It’s rude to stare, you know,” she said, hiding the shiver that ran down her body at Zuko’s intense gaze.

Zuko snapped his eyes away from her barely covered body to her blushing face. He smirked and walked closer to her, surprised that she did not back away. He circled around her to stand behind the young woman before he leaned close to her ear.

“I remember somebody had the same problem one day in my bedchamber,” he whispered.

Katara blushed. She had hoped he had not noticed her staring at his body when he was just wearing a red towel around his waist.

“Yeah…w-well…I was surprised, that’s all!” she stammered. “I was embarrassed and I didn’t know what to do!”

“Hm.” Zuko smirked. “Don’t you think I feel the same?” he murmured, his voice sounding soft and velvety, his hot breath caressing her ear.

Katara bit her lip softly has her stomach tightened in an unfamiliar way. Zuko moved his face from
her ear to her hair. He sniffed discreetly and sighed as her sweet gardenia aroma greeted his senses. His mind was getting hazy as he leaned down to place a kiss on the waterbender’s neck.

A cat-owl screeched as it flew away from a tree and up into the sky. Both benders jumped in surprise before Zuko turned around as he tried to control his body’s reaction.

Clearing his throat, Zuko placed his hands behind his back.

“IT’s very late,” he stated coolly, “You should dress before you catch a cold. I will wait for you behind the bushes so I could escort you back to camp.”

“I can take care of myself,” Katara argued and sighed.

“I know, but the fact that we are no longer at war doesn’t make this forest less dangerous. Who knows what could be lurking in the shadows,” the firebender said, his voice turning hard at the thought of somebody daring to sneak a peek at a bathing Katara.

The waterbender shuddered.

“I guess you’re right. Thanks,” she said with a blush.

She watched Zuko give her a nod before he walked away, disappearing silently behind the bushes and trees. Katara snapped out of her daze before she walked back to where she had placed her neat pile of clothes, knowing Zuko would not break his promise about her privacy.

What just happened?

She had always been protective of her modesty and Zuko had almost seen her naked and yet that did not bother her. She was embarrassed and shy, yes, but somehow she did not feel outraged or uncomfortable. Even after he gazed at her entire body and stood quite close to her. Katara shook her head. Maybe it was because she knew Zuko would not be interested in her that way. After all, he had said so before.

With a long sigh, Katara finished dressing, and with a final look at the lake, she emerged from the
secluded area. She noticed Zuko a few feet away, leaning casually on a tree, the soft moonlight making him look even more handsome. She moved toward him and lowered her gaze with a blush. Zuko moved away from the tree to hook a finger under her chin so he could look into her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” he asked with concern. He noticed her blush deepened in color.

“It…it’s just that…” she stammered. She was embarrassed to tell him that it would be scandalous if it were found out she was taking a bath while a man was near, even if nothing had happened.

It seemed he knew what she was thinking for he said, “There is no need for you to feel concerned. Your virtue and modesty have not been damaged.”

Zuko gave her a reassuring smile. Nobody needed to know. Katara smiled gratefully, the awkward tension disappearing. She lifted her hands and handed Zuko his cloak back.

“Here, I forgot to give it back to you. Sorry.”

Zuko reluctantly took it. He had noticed she went to sleep with it on and it had somehow pleased him.

“No worries. I don’t really need it anyway,” he said with a smirk and placed it over his shoulder. He grinned when Katara rolled her eyes. “It’s best we return before your brother…or Aang throws a fit.”

Katara laughed as she fell in step beside him. They walked in silence for a few minutes, the moon casting silvery light through the treetops, both lost in their own thoughts. Katara looked up as she heard the crackling of their small campfire before she felt Zuko grab her arm, stopping her before she reached the clearing.

“What is it, Zuko?” she asked quietly.

“I haven’t thank you for finding my mother and bringing her back into my life,” he whispered softly.

Zuko hesitated for a moment before he wrapped his arms around her body and pulled her into a hug. Instead of stiffening, Katara relaxed in his arms, smiling.
“Thank you,” he whispered against her head.

“Anything to make you happy, Zuko,” Katara said as she smiled and squeezed him.

_I have something in mind that will make me happy_, Zuko thought and mentally groaned before berating himself. He pulled away and turned her around so she wouldn’t see what needed to be made happy.

“You should go first and then I will follow a few minutes after so as not to raise any suspicions, just in case,” he said and gave her a light push.

Katara turned slightly to mouth the words ‘good night’ with a smile. Zuko nodded as she left and he waited for his turn to reappear. Judging that a reasonable amount of time had passed, Zuko made his way back into the clearing. Making sure not to look over to where Katara slept, Zuko crawled into his sleeping bag with a frustrated and inaudible sigh, willing his mind to forget his most recent dream and the lovely images of the lake.

No woman had ever affected him so much as this waterbender did. And now that he thought about it, it all started the moment he had first seen her when he invaded her small village. He turned in his sleeping bag, uncomfortable at the memory. He would always feel guilty for barging into the Water Tribe village and frightening Katara and her people.

He was not used to feeling such guilt, he was not used to feeling concern for anybody, and yet he always felt bad when he hurt Katara. He always felt the need to protect and comfort her. Why was it that he felt such things for her? Zuko rolled over onto his back and gazed at the bright stars and the large, full moon as if they could help him understand what was going on with him.

He closed his eyes after a moment of silence. Something told him he was getting himself into something deep, something that he had never encountered before, but the strange thing was that he did not know if he could or wanted to stop.
Enclosed City

The bright sun peeked over the tall mountaintops, warming the Earth below with soft pink, lavender, and golden hues, signifying the start of a new day. A chilly breeze blew by, reminding the world that the seasons were changing. A few birds rose from their warm nests and began to sing the coming of dawn.

Katara opened one blue eye and was greeted with the early colors of a bright new morning. Stifling a yawn, she blinked a few times to get rid of the sleep embedded in her eyes and frowned. Why did she wake up so early?

Sitting up with her warm sleeping bag still around her, Katara drowsily looked around their little campsite and noticed that everybody else was still asleep. A crackling sound drew her attention to the small campfire where the fire had died down during the night into a few glowing embers.

Suddenly, she remembered why she had woken up earlier than usual. They were to travel to Ba Sing Se at the break of dawn. But then why was everybody still sleeping? She looked over to where Zuko had laid out his sleeping bag the night before and saw that he was still asleep.

_That’s strange_, she thought, _Zuko’s always already awake by dawn._

She glanced at his sleeping face and noticed that he had a small smile on his lips. Smiling gently, Katara wondered if he was dreaming. A memory of what happened at the lake the previous night flashed before her eyes.

His intense golden eyes roaming her body, his warm breath caressing her ear…

Her cheeks began to burn and she was positive her face was turning red.

Oh, gods, I can’t believe Zuko almost saw me naked! How embarrassing! Mortified, Katara placed her hands over her cheeks and shut her eyes tight. Well, at least it was Zuko and not some old perverted stranger…She shuddered at the disturbing thought.

Another image from about a month ago surfaced in her mind. It was Zuko, almost nude with a crimson towel wrapped around his lean hips and droplets of water coursing down his muscular torso…
I guess we’re even now, Katara thought with a smirk before she blushed. Oh, La! I can’t believe I’m daydreaming about a half-naked Zuko!

Shaking her head, Katara decided to start on breakfast in order to keep her mind busy from confusing thoughts of glorious masculine bodies…namely Zuko’s.

Stop it! Katara yelled at her imaginative mind.

Blushing furiously, Katara opened the bag of food supplies and began to rummage inside. She had seen other men without shirts, especially in their trip to Ember Island. Aang tended to practice without shirts too. But then why didn’t the thought of Aang shirtless cause her face to burn like it did when she thought about Zuko?

Shaking her head with a frown, the waterbender pulled a pan from the bag. She again looked up at the morning sky and wondered if perhaps Zuko decided that they would leave for the great Earth Kingdom city later in the day. Shrugging, she added a few wood sticks and small logs to make the fire stronger and placed the pan over it.

Frowning, Zuko shifted in his resting place as the smell of roasting meat reached his nose. He rolled to his side, taking another sniff, and sighed as his dream resurfaced in his hazy mind…

He was sitting in the Royal Palace Garden under his favorite cherry blossom tree. Beside him sat his mother and they were smiling as they fed the turtle-ducks, who waddled away from the pond to nibble on the morsels they provided.

Suddenly, he felt someone come up from behind and sit next to him. Turning, he opened his mouth to greet Mai, but was mildly surprised when he realized it was not his black-haired girlfriend, but the blue-eyed waterbender that took a place by his side.

He smiled as she gracefully sat on the green grass, arranging her red dress around her feet. Zuko vaguely wondered why she was wearing red, but he found he was quite pleased. Katara returned his smile and thanked Ursa when the woman handed her a piece of bread and the two women laughed as they fed the little creatures. Zuko looked up to the sky and watched as clouds lazily passed them by. He felt so at ease.

A small weight on his shoulder brought his attention back to his surroundings. He looked over at
Ursa and noticed that his mother was smiling warmly with a twinkle in her golden eyes. He looked down to where his mother’s gaze shifted to and noticed a head of brown hair resting lightly on his shoulder. He gasped when Katara lifted her head to give him a bright smile that caused his heart to skip a beat…

Zuko’s amber eyes opened and blinked a few times as the clutches of sleep began to leave him.

*Whoa, that was strange,* he thought. *Where did that come from?* He frowned. *Well, at least it was not like the previous dreams that have begun to plague me constantly.*

But he had to admit he had not had such a peaceful and relaxing dream since his early years of childhood. He sighed quietly. It made him feel…content.

The young Fire Lord allowed his eyes to scan around and he saw that light was shining on the trees before him. He heard birds chirping somewhere overhead before he yawned and closed his eyes to doze off again.

He bolted up into a sitting position and cursed. It was dawn already and he overslept!

He threw his warm sleeping bag from his body and scrambled to his feet. He opened his mouth to order the others to wake up when he noticed that Katara was already awake and had started on breakfast.

*So that’s what I smelled in my dream,* he mused as he put on his black, pointed boots and quietly made his way to the campfire.

*Why am I having so many dreams about Katara?* he asked himself as he quietly made his way to the busy waterbender who had still to acknowledge that he was awake as well.

*Are these dreams trying to tell me something?* He frowned as he felt an ache in his chest before a thought formed in his head. *Am I really…falling for Katara?*

Zuko shook his head before frowning even deeper.
No. That can’t be it. I can’t fall in love with my friend. It has to be something else. Yes, that’s it. It must be something else… He stopped a few feet behind the waterbender and sighed inaudibly… Right?

“Good morning, Katara,” he called softly, but apparently not soft enough because she jumped and almost dropped the pan she was holding. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he apologized quietly.

He watched as a blush stained her cheeks, reminding him of what he had come across the night before.

Smooth shoulders and long legs the color of caramel, wet chocolate-brown hair, damp white towel…

He mentally shook his head before it wandered off too much.

“N-no, it’s fine!” Katara squeaked before clearing her throat. “I just didn’t hear you.” She smiled bashfully. “Oh, and good morning even though I thought I would’ve said that a couple of minutes ago,” she teased and giggled.

Zuko rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat.

“Yeah, I…kind of overslept,” he muttered.

“Yeah, I kind of figured that out,” Katara retorted playfully. She laughed softly when Zuko scowled.

She turned around and continued with her chore.

“How about you wake the others while I finish here? That way we can leave right away. Uncle Iroh must be impatient to see us,” she said as she turned to smile at him again.

Zuko nodded and walked to where the rest were peacefully sleeping.

The young lord smiled as he heard the fondness in Katara’s voice as she mentioned the tea-loving old man. He remembered how his uncle had insisted the waterbender call him ‘Uncle’ Iroh that time
they all helped the old firebender in his teashop after the war. He vaguely wondered why his uncle insisted Katara call him such and why only her. Iroh was fond of Toph too, but he never insisted that she call him ‘Uncle’ as well.

Dismissing the thought, Zuko first woke Aang, who rose with a loud yawn. Momo mimicked his master and stretched lazily on the airbender’s bald head.

After a few minutes, Zuko was able to wake a snoring and drooling Sokka, who immediately wrapped a protective arm around his betrothed and their unborn child while grabbing his boomerang. After realizing who had disturbed him, Sokka nodded groggily in understanding and gently shook Suki, placing a soft kiss to her temple to wake her up.

The young Fire Lord then knocked on the stone wall that housed Toph, calling to her that they were getting ready to depart. He then immediately left for he was smart enough not to insist too much unless he wanted to deal with a cranky earthbender early in the morning.

Zuko next moved to his mother and smiled at her peaceful face. Soon they would return home and she would have all the time she wanted to rest. He shook her shoulder gently and Ursa immediately stood up, greeting him with a warm smile. The young man helped her packed their things and handed their belongings to Aang who placed them on Appa’s saddle.

Zuko watched as the group dragged their feet around the clearing while rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Apparently, only firebenders were morning people.

After picking everything up, the little group settled around the small campfire and waited for the waterbender to serve them their breakfast. The sun was rising slowly, illuminating their small clearing and causing the dew resting on the tips of the green blades of grass to glisten.

A few minutes later, they heard a low rumble as Toph’s earth tent was lowered back to its original place in the ground and a grinning earthbender emerged, stomping her way to the circle of friends.

“Had a good night sleep, Toph?” Aang asked, smiling cheerfully as he munched on some berries Momo had given him. It was a bit unusual for the earthbender to wake up in such a good mood so early in the morning.

“Not really, what with all the vibrations last night,” Toph said as she yawned and smirked as if she knew something.
“What vibrations?” Sokka asked with a full mouth.

“Oh, I don’t know. I was sure I felt something…or someone walking in the middle of the night, possibly to the lake we found yesterday. Did you hear anything last night, Sugar Queen?” Toph asked innocently as her smile broadened before she tilted her head in Zuko’s direction. “How about you, Sparky? Did you have any trouble sleeping?”

Katara blushed lightly and averted her eyes to the plate in her lap. Zuko glared as Toph smirked.

“No, I actually slept well,” he answered impassively.

“Of course you did,” Toph replied.

She grinned and chuckled, making everybody look at each other in confusion and causing Zuko to inwardly cringe in horror at the possibility of her knowing what the first dream he had the night before consisted of.

Clearing his throat, Zuko looked around at the others.

“We should hurry if we are to arrive at Ba Sing Se today.”

The others nodded as they rushed to finish their small meal.

A few minutes later, Zuko waited patiently as all their supplies were piled on the sky-bison’s saddle. He looked around the small clearing they had made their stay in for the night to make sure they had not forgotten anything.

Zuko watched as Aang bent a small ball of air and propelled himself onto Appa’s massive head with a cheerful laugh. He then watched as Momo landed on Appa’s nose and the two animals began a conversation that consisted of grumbles and chirpings. Zuko frowned as Toph passed him by and gave him a huge grin while wiggling her eyebrows.
Okay…? he thought.

Smiling, he helped his mother stepped onto the large saddle, earning a loving pat on the cheek.

He then turned to look at the lovely and confusing waterbender whom it seemed he could not stop thinking about. Zuko watched as Katara bent down to grabbed her waterskin from the ground, unintentionally presenting to him her lush backside and causing his heart to race. He looked away and cleared his throat.

He smiled as Sokka helped his future wife settle comfortably on the saddle while cooing at her bulging stomach. Asking for an apple even though she had eaten breakfast a few minutes ago, Suki smiled lovingly as her betrothed readily agreed to give her one and searched through their food supplies.

Sokka turned around with the red apple in hand and went to give it to Suki, but cried out in indignation as Momo snatched it up. Sokka jumped after the lemur, but lost his balance and toppled over the saddle with a surprised cry.

It seemed they were ready to go.

“Look! We’re finally here!” Aang cried out excitedly before he called out, “Yip, yip!”

He flicked Appa’s reins, indicating to the sky-bison to fly faster. Appa let out a groan as he increased his speed.

The great city’s stone walls emerged before their eyes, casting shadows on the ground surrounding the borders.

“Oh, my! It is incredible,” Ursa awed as the small group flew over the tall walls of Ba Sing Se.

They leaned over the side of the saddle and watched as the people below looked up when the large animal’s shadow fell over them. The people began to cheer and point excitedly as they realized the Avatar had come to visit their grand city. Aang waved enthusiastically at them, earning a few more cheers.
“Your love for public adoration seems to never die, Twinkletoes,” Toph muttered sarcastically.

“I can’t help it if the people love me,” Aang replied and grinned cheerfully.

“Whatever,” Toph retorted with a scoff, rolling her eyes. She snorted and slouched deeper into the saddle.

Katara frowned as she looked over at Aang. She knew the people adored Aang for bringing down the terrible Fire Lord Ozai and she especially remembered a few girls who practically fell all over him. Koko from Kyoshi Island especially came to mind. She had felt slightly jealous in the beginning of their relationship, but now she felt almost nothing because she knew he was the Avatar and in a way belonged to everyone. The only thing that did bother her was that Aang seemed to enjoy the attention a bit too much to the point where it seemed he completely ignored her sometimes.

Is something wrong with me for feeling this way? Katara asked herself and frowned even deeper.

She returned her gaze to the ground below and noticed that a few people were now pointing and cheering for the young Fire Lord. She looked over to where Zuko sat perfectly straight with an almost bored expression, not acknowledging the cheers sent his way.

I guess he must be used to the attention since he is royalty and all, she mused.

Katara noticed that morning that he had changed into a more formal-type of travelling clothes. His short hair was now pulled back into a topknot with his royal fire crown resting proudly on his head. She guessed it was because Zuko was meeting the Earth King, and being the Fire Lord he had to present himself as such.

And he does look stunning, she admitted with a blush.

“Should we have sent a messenger ahead of us to prepare the Earth King of our arrival?” Katara asked, looking at Aang and then at Zuko.

“I believe it is unnecessary,” Zuko replied coolly as he looked over at her and nodded to the people below. “I’m sure King Kuei knows we’re here already.”
He turned his attention to his mother who was watching the extremely large Earth Kingdom City of Ba Sing Se rush below them. Ursa raised her head and looked over at her son with a confused expression.

“Why are there walls inside the city? It almost seems like the city is being divided into sections.”

“That’s because it is divided into sections,” Toph spoke up. She snorted again and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Ba Sing Se is divided into three rings,” Zuko elaborated. “The Upper Ring is where the rich and wealthy reside in elegant homes. The Middle Ring is the financial district, with shops and restaurants and the university. The Lower Ring is where merchants, artisans, the poor and refugees live in,” his voice sounded almost bitter. “This is where Uncle and I first lived when we came to Ba Sing Se during the time we were hiding from Ozai.”

Katara frowned as she remembered coming upon the Lower Ring of Ba Sing Se almost four years ago. She could not believe that she, along with her companions, were enjoying the pampered lifestyle of the wealthy when they had first arrived to the city of walls while others were barely able to enjoy a meal. If only there was something she could do about it just like that poor village where she appeared as the Painted Lady.

“That is horrible,” Lady Ursa gasped.

“Yeah, but it’s not as bad as it was four years ago,” Aang said and turned around a bit from his perch on Appa’s head. “Toph and I were able to convince King Kuei to send help to those from the lower district. It was small help since Ba Sing Se had lost much after the war, but at least the people are not as worse as they were during the war.”

“Perhaps I can do something about that,” Zuko spoke up, his face hinting no emotion, but his eyes glinting with determination. “Maybe I could promise King Kuei that I will aid the Lower Ring to prosper in exchange for something.” He frowned. “I just need to think of what.”

He remembered how hard it was to live by on what his uncle and he earned at the teashop in the dirty and poor district of Ba Sing Se. They had met a few people who were kind to them and so he wanted to help them. Ursa smiled proudly at him and patted his arm.

The ground below changed from the grand and elegant houses of the Upper Ring to a grand wall
with a massive gate, and beyond that stood the Earth King’s palace. A few guards approached and waved their hands to signal where the sky-bison should land. Appa groaned as he slowed his speed and landed softly on the stone floor, a few clouds of dirt swirled at the landing breeze Appa created.

And just like Zuko predicted, King Kuei stood on top the long flight of stairs that led into the palace with a large smile on his young face. Bosco, his brown bear, lay by his feet with a small green vest and a hat. A few servants were waiting patiently behind them.

They were surprised, however, to find Iroh grinning madly at them beside the young ruler of Ba Sing Se with Mai and Ty Lee at his side. Iroh’s grin was then replaced by disbelief and then delight as he spotted Lady Ursa before he quickly made his way down the stone stairs. Once he reached the bottom, he raced toward the new arrivals.

The gang dismounted Appa, who was then led away to rest in the stables, and approached the long flight of stairs. Iroh reached them and opened his arms wide to the young woman who was his good friend and had gone missing for years.

“Ursa!” Iroh exclaimed happily and a wide smile spread across his excited wrinkled face. “I see Zuko has found you. It is good to see your lovely face again. I am so happy that you are finally here with us.”

“It was actually Katara who found me first,” Lady Ursa replied with a smile before she embraced the old man warmly, her eyes shining with unshed, joyful tears. “Iroh, I am glad to see you once again. I was afraid I would never see you or Zuko again in my life.” She tightened her hold slightly and laughed. “I see you have not change. You still smell like jasmine tea,” she teased.

Iroh chuckled joyfully and patted her back soothingly. They slightly pulled away and Iroh held onto her hands.

“I still can’t believe that after all these years I have been fortunate enough to see you once again,” he confessed, causing Ursa to smile.

Iroh returned his attention to his nephew, who was smiling at them, although he tried to hide it.

“Did I not tell you,” Iroh began, “that you would find your mother with some hope and patience?” The retired general then glanced at Katara. “And some help?”
“Yes, Uncle.” Zuko nodded as he, too, looked at Katara who blushed under his gaze. “That you did.”

Iroh beamed before he looked at Katara who was smiling at them.

“Ah, my dear Katara,” he exclaimed as he walked over to her and gave her a warm, grateful hug. “I want to thank you for helping my nephew.”

Katara blushed again and sneaked a glance at Zuko.

“Um…you’re welcome…”

“Let’s go greet King Kuei and his beloved Bosco. I bet you all must be tired,” Iroh continued as he chuckled before he looped his arm around Ursa’s. “And then we will discuss your whole disappearing act, my dear Ursa, over some nice warm tea.”

Ursa smiled slightly and allowed herself to be led toward the flight of stairs by her good old friend, whom she sometimes saw as her older brother.

“Yes, we have much to discuss, Iroh dear,” she said and inclined her head towards her son who was talking to the young Water Tribe woman before the Avatar stepped in.

Iroh chuckled and nodded.

The group finally climbed the stairs and began to greet the Earth King and his furry friend. Bosco gave a friendly growl and licked Aang’s face, causing the young boy to laugh. Katara laughed at the scene before she caught Mai glaring at her. Katara smiled tightly, but Mai only narrowed her eyes coldly and looked away.

I guess a day at the spa didn’t help much, huh? Katara mused inwardly before she narrowed her own eyes and glared at the back of Mai’s head as the noblewoman made her way to Zuko. Katara crossed her arms and looked away.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” King Kuei greeted and bowed to the younger ruler. “Welcome back to Ba Sing
Se. Master Iroh has explained to me about your journey into the Earth Kingdom. It is a pleasure to have you here once again. I hope you enjoy your stay,” he said politely since this was the young man who had returned Ba Sing Se to him even though the new Fire Lord could have kept the city for himself.

Zuko returned the bow and gave a small nod.

“Yes, thank you for your hospitality, King Kuei, but I am only staying for a few weeks for I must return to my duties in the Fire Nation soon.”

“Ah, yes, I understand.” King Kuei smiled and pushed his thin glasses over his nose. After greeting Lady Ursa, the Earth King’s attention was then brought onto Aang, Bosco and Momo.

Zuko felt a pair of arms snaked their way around his own arm. He looked beside him and saw Mai smiling softly at him.

“Mai,” Zuko greeted with a frown. He had had a feeling that Mai would have still been angry with him for his behavior back in the Fire Nation Palace.

“I would like to speak to you once we are alone,” Mai responded lowly.

She waited until Zuko nodded before she moved her emotionless gaze towards the older noblewoman who was staring at them with a small frown.

“Princess Ursa,” Mai said as she bowed gracefully. “I am glad that Zuko found you. I hope you remember me. I am Mai, your son’s girlfriend.” She straightened her shoulders smugly and attempted a friendly smile.

“Ah, yes. I remember you. Little Mai, the governor's daughter,” Ursa replied as she gave a small smile before her gaze landed on the pink-clad young girl who was jumping excitedly in her place beside the tall, young noblewoman. “And I also remember you. Ty Lee, am I correct?”

“Yes, Princess Ursa,” the enthusiastic acrobat bowed deeply before giving off a radiant smile.
Ursa looked back to her son who was standing like a stone statue with an equally stony facial expression beside a bored-looking young woman. The older noblewoman looked Mai over, who was attached almost possessively onto Zuko’s arm. She saw that Mai was as tall as her son with long black hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. She stood gracefully, almost haughtily, with guarded features, the perfect example of a true Fire Nation noblewoman.

Ursa looked over to where Katara was laughing with the blind earthbender and the pregnant Kyoshi Warrior. She would have liked for the Water Tribe woman to be her son’s girlfriend. She was intelligent, loving, and caring and she made Zuko smile. Returning her scrutinizing gaze to Mai, Ursa frowned. She did not know Mai that well, but maybe she made her son happy.

Zuko furrowed his eyebrows as he noticed his mother looking Mai over with a frown before her gaze shifted to Katara.

_I wonder what she’s thinking_, he pondered.

“Come,” King Kuei’s soft voice brought everybody’s attention to him. “My servants will take you to your rooms so you could freshen up from your long journey. Bosco and I will be waiting for you in the dining hall with a grand banquet that has been prepared for such important guests such as yourselves.”

“Alright! I couldn’t have asked for a better trip,” Sokka cheered before planting a big kiss on Suki’s cheek. He grabbed her hand and shoved his way inside the palace with the others trailing after him.

Zuko allowed Mai to lead him away from the rest of the group after their meal was over. They all had spent a lot of time talking in the elaborate dining room. Well, the others had, while he listened and observed, occasionally offering his thoughts on things. He had noticed that even though the Earth King had learned many things as he traveled the Earth Kingdom he was still a bit naïve, especially since he considered his bear higher than anybody else.

_He sure is a bit strange_, Zuko thought absently. _I’m sure it will be easy to make a compromise with him about the Lower Ring…_

The others had gone to look around the palace, and to his annoyance, Katara had gone with Aang. Shaking his head, Zuko noticed they had stop walking and he shifted his gaze to the room they were in. It looked like a large sitting room where soft, green pillows and couches were placed in. There was a small table near a corner with a Pai Sho game board. He had a feeling his uncle had something to do about that. He returned his gaze back to Mai who was staring at him silently.
Zuko sighed and ran a hand over his hair.

“Mai, about the other night—”

“I’m sorry, Zuko,” Mai interrupted as she moved forward and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Zuko frowned before he slightly pulled her away.

“What?”

Mai stared at him before she let out a soft sigh.

“I’m sorry for trying to manipulate you, for accusing you of cheating, and for ignoring you. I have thought about what happened during these couple of weeks and I realized that I overreacted,” she said in her usual tone, void of any emotion. “It’s just that I got angry that you rejected me and I was scared that you didn’t want me anymore.”

Zuko closed his eyes before looking away.

“Mai, I…” He paused and frowned, as he could not think of anything to say.

“It’s okay,” the dark-haired woman said and smiled. “I understand.”

“You do?” Zuko asked skeptically and raised his eyebrow.

“Yes,” Mai replied with a nod. “You were just tired and wanted to rest. That doesn’t mean that you don’t love me anymore.”

Before Zuko could answer, Mai pressed her thin lips to his.
Zuko closed his eyes and waited for that spark...that heat to course through his veins that just one look from Katara seemed to install in him. But he was slightly disappointed when nothing happened. He felt Mai press herself closer to him while she tried to make him respond by nibbling on his lip.

Zuko cringe as a feeling of revulsion and guilt hit him. He jerked away and gently pulled her away from him. She looked at him with a questioning look.

“I need to speak with the Earth King about the problems with the Lower Ring,” Zuko said instead. He watched as annoyance briefly flashed across her face before she stared at him blankly.

“Oh, well, why don’t you go see to their needs before the world ends?” she said coldly.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at her.

*She will never understand,* he thought severely.

It was the same thing back in the Fire Nation. She never supported him on his decisions to help those in need and accused him of neglecting her in favor of strangers. Perhaps it was best they broke up.

“There are some things we have to discuss once we arrive at the Fire Nation,” he said harshly.

Mai’s eyes widened slightly at his tone of voice and she gasped.

“What are you saying?”

Zuko looked away and sighed deeply.

“Our relationship seems to be going nowhere. I believe it is for the best that we—” He was unable to finish as Mai clung onto his neck desperately.

“Please, Zuko, don’t,” she pleaded, a hint of nervousness and pain coating her once monotonous voice. “I’m sorry. I won’t question your decisions ever again.”
“Mai, I think it’s best—”

“You know what?” Mai interrupted and smiled. “You must be tired and that’s what is making you say such things. Maybe all we need is some time alone for the both of us to think. I think it’s time that I paid a visit to my family. I will leave to Omashu after you return to the Fire Nation and I will stay there for a few months.”

Instead of being the governor, Mai’s father was now the ambassador of the Fire Nation in Omashu. King Bumi was the one who proposed that the ex-governor of New Ozai stayed.

Before Zuko could argue, Mai gave him one last kiss before she hurriedly left the room. Zuko stared after her in bewilderment at her strange behavior and the obvious fear in her voice.

Perhaps he was being too brash about his decision to end his relationship with her. She loved him and she had been by his side for almost four years. Would he be able to break her heart?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Both the retired Fire Nation general and the Fire Lord’s mother were sitting in one of the many gardens that surrounded the Palace of Ba Sing Se. The gardens were beautiful, but Ursa noted that these gardens consisted of too much green colors with few rare flowers. The way the gardens were situated seemed too organized and rigid, not giving off the air of them being natural, something she made sure her garden possessed when she used to live in the Fire Nation Palace.

For the past few hours, Ursa had revealed her past to her trusted friend, who listened to her with an understanding and sympathetic ear. Mentally, Iroh cursed his brother for harming such a kind woman like Ursa and a young boy like Zuko.

“A-Azula?” Ursa whispered sadly, “Where is she? I have only heard rumors about her...Rumors that I am afraid could be true. Zuko has not spoken a single word about his sister. Is she...dead?” she asked in a strained voice and held her breath.

Iroh sighed and swirled his teacup, causing the steaming liquid to swoosh. It seemed Ursa had no idea that her daughter had become an insane ruthless warrior, one who almost tried to kill her older brother.

“No, Azula is alive, but I believe it is best that you ask Zuko what has become of her,” Iroh told her gently.
Ursa lowered her gaze and sighed sadly.

After being reacquainted again and falling into a comfortable setting, Ursa insisted that she be informed of everything concerning her son. And of course, being the caring mother that she was, Ursa wanted to know if Zuko was happy in his love life as well. She expressed her concern of the cold relationship between Zuko and Mai.

“It does not look like Zuko is happy, but perhaps that is just me. I have not been in his life for a long time,” Ursa said sadly before smiling when Iroh patted her hand. “Maybe I am not giving Mai a chance to prove herself.”

Iroh shook his head and sighed.

“Even if you give Mai a lifetime of chances she will never make Zuko happy. I fear that Mai is just like the other noblewomen who seek your son’s affection as well as the title of Fire Lady. She is too serious and depressing for him, something that Zuko seems to have too much of already.”

Ursa looked down at her teacup and frowned.

“What he needs is a lively young lady who would do almost anything to make him happy, a woman who complements the person he is. Preferably a beautiful waterbender with sparkling blue eyes, long brunette hair, and a lovely laugh,” Iroh said casually. He grinned and sip from his steaming cup of tea. His golden eyes glimmered with glee.

Ursa snapped her head up and gaped at her wise friend.

“So you have noticed the way Zuko and Katara interact with each other as well?” she asked and when Iroh grinned even wider, she smiled.

“To tell you the truth I am surprised you noticed also since it seems nobody else want to acknowledge the possibility that those two may have feelings for each other…especially the two stubborn ones concerned,” Iroh said and laughed.

“Then you would approve of Zuko pursuing a relationship with Katara, a Water Tribe woman and a
“waterbender?” Ursa asked hopefully.

“I should be the one to ask you that question, but it seems that there is no need for me to do so since you seem delighted with the idea already. My dear Ursa,” Iroh chuckled softly, “I am their number one supporter besides Miss Toph!”

“Lady Bei Fong is aware as well?” the Fire Nation noblewoman asked.

“Are you kidding me?” Iroh exclaimed incredulously before he laughed again. “You are talking about the one who can detect a heartbeat a yard away through the ground! She was the one who noticed their changing feelings and attitudes toward one another as the end of the war approached. We are trying to lead my nephew and Miss Katara in the right direction, but they are the ones who have to realize it and take the next big step. They are just being stubborn.”

Ursa smiled and took a small sip of the jasmine tea Iroh had poured for her. She sighed in contentment as the sweet flavor coated her throat. She not only missed the jolly old man, but his wonderful tea as well.

She really liked the idea of having Katara as her son’s girlfriend, and with any luck, as his future wife and Fire Lady, and her future daughter-in-law. Iroh and she approved, but would the Fire Nation Court approve of such a relationship? Would they allow their Fire Lord to marry a woman from a different nation?

And what about Mai? Zuko had told her that the dark-haired noblewoman loved him enough to go against Azula. Maybe she was being biased because she had spent more time with Katara than she had with Mai. Perhaps once she got to know Mai better she would be able to decide if the noblewoman was the right one.

And if Mai wasn’t…well then, the much better she would feel if Katara was the right woman for her son. Looking up at Iroh she gave him a small grin.

Then she would gladly join in the ranks of those supporting a relationship between Zuko and Katara.

Zuko sighed tiredly as he paced irritably in one of the palace gardens. The sun had set a few hours ago and he had a headache. His problems with Mai were making it difficult for him to come up with something to compromise with King Kuei in exchange for his help towards the Lower Ring.
Should he continue with their relationship? Could their small time apart from each other help at all? And if he did decide to break up with Mai, he was positive the Fire Nation Court members would not hesitate to parade their single female relatives in front of him. He did not need more problems than the ones he already had.

“Calm down, Sparky, or you’re gonna pop a vein,” he heard Toph’s amused voice behind him.

Suppressing a growl of annoyance, Zuko spun around to pin a glare at the irritating earthbender, ready to snap at her to leave him alone. He closed his mouth quickly, however, when he noticed that Toph was not alone, and because of this, the blind girl was smirking knowingly. Katara was beside her and she was looking at him with a concerned expression.

Zuko looked away and closed his eyes.

_Why must she do that?_ he yelled in his head. _Those looks she gives me is what’s making me so confused!_

“Zuko, what’s the matter?” Katara asked when Zuko turned away from them. “Did something happen to Lady Ursa?”

“No, she’s fine,” Zuko replied quickly, unable to stop himself from reassuring her. “Where’s Aang?” he asked tersely.

Toph smirked when she noticed his barely contained jealous tone.

“Oh, uh…” Katara frowned at the hard edge in Zuko’s voice. “He went to check on Appa before he retired for the night.”

“Hm.” Zuko nodded and continued on his previous task…pacing around in circles.

“What’s bugging you, Hotman?” Toph asked as she sat herself on a stone stump she summoned from the ground. Crossing her arms over her small chest, she tilted her head toward the agitated young man.
“And don’t tell me nothing’s wrong ‘cause I ain’t buying that,” Toph added when she felt the firebender about to retort.

Zuko closed his mouth and snorted, stopping in his pacing to glare at the unaffected earthbender.

“Is it something we can help with?” Katara asked quickly before some bruises and burns appeared.

Zuko looked over at her and sighed.

*If you can help me figure out what you’re doing to me, then be my guest,* he muttered in his head.

“No, it’s nothing serious,” he replied coolly. At least part of it wasn’t. “I’m just trying to figure out what to ask King Kuei in return for aiding the Lower Ring of Ba Sing Se.”

“Oh, that,” Toph huffed as she waved her hand dismissively. “By the way you were pacing like a caged tiger-armadillo I thought you were having a life crisis. So what’s the problem with this compromise thingy?”

“Well,” Zuko began and frowned, “I want to help these people, but I just can’t spend the Fire Nation’s treasury by sending relief to people from another country without getting something in return. The Court Council would not like that.”

“So the only thing you need to do is figure out what King Kuei can give you in exchange for your help?” Katara asked and tapped her finger on her chin pensively.

“Yes.” The young Fire Lord nodded. “The thing is that I don’t know what Ba Sing Se can offer for the betterment of the Fire Nation.”

The three young benders furrowed their foreheads as they tried to come up with a good idea. A chilly wind blew by, rustling the few trees in the garden. Katara shivered and unconsciously stepped closer to Zuko who absentmindedly raised his body temperature to warm her.

Toph noticed their positions and grinned widely. They were already finding comfort in each other without even realizing it.
“I know!” Katara exclaimed suddenly and snapped her fingers. “While we were in the Fire Nation I noticed that there were only a few vegetables and fruits grown in the Earth Kingdom that are used in the meals.”

“Well, yeah,” Zuko said and shrugged, “The Fire Nation is not exactly a good place to grow many types of vegetables or fruits. And the common Fire Nation citizens do not buy Earth Kingdom produce regularly since they are too expensive.”

“Ba Sing Se is known for its vegetables and fruits production. So why don’t you tell King Kuei that in exchange for helping him with the Lower Ring he exports fresh green produce to the Fire Nation at a low cost? That way the common people could afford to buy vegetables and other fruits for their meals.” Katara beamed at her idea.

“Hm?” Zuko frowned, rubbing his chin as he thought it over. “Well, that does sound like a good idea, but it may not be enough for the Court Council members.”

Katara’s smile fell from her face and she frowned in concentration. She wanted to be a part in Zuko’s plan for aiding the Lower Ring. She was unable to do anything for those at the Abandoned Fort, but maybe if she thought hard enough she could help those in need in the poor district of Ba Sing Se. If only she could don the Painted Lady’s identity once more and sneak into the rich homes and ‘borrow’ money that could help the people.

What does Ba Sing Se have that can benefit the Fire Nation? Katara racked her brain. Well, there’s the zoo and the earthbending-powered train system. And then there’s Lake Laogai.

“Hm? Ba Sing Se has been almost isolated from the rest of the world for many years,” Katara thought aloud as an idea began to form in her head.

“Yeah, so?” Toph asked as she wiggled her dirty toes.

“Well…” Katara furrowed her eyebrows as she looked up at Zuko. “What if you could help without actually having to use a lot of the Fire Nation’s treasury?”

“What do you mean?” Zuko asked her.
“You can ask the Earth King to promise to lower the cost to the vegetable imports to the Fire Nation in which you will send money as is appropriate by how much the vegetables make a profit to the Fire Nation,” Katara began slowly, “The other promise King Kuei could make is that Ba Sing Se will help itself by opening its walls to the rest of the world.”

Zuko tapped his chin with a long finger as understanding began to dawn in his head.

“Ba Sing Se has many interesting things to offer,” he mused, “It is very probable that many people would like to see the grand City of Ba Sing Se. And with many tourists swarming the city…”

“Money pours from their pockets which will help Ba Sing Se rise!” Toph finished, as she finally understood what the other two benders were getting at.

“It is time that all nations opened their doors to each other,” Zuko said seriously. “I will talk about this with King Kuei tomorrow morning.”

He smiled down at the waterbender.

“Once again you helped me with a problem. Thanks,” he said sincerely.

Katara looked up at him with a smile before his warm eyes caused her to lightly blush.

“I’m glad that you accept and appreciate my help,” she said softly. “And it makes me happy to help you, but I also want to help the people in the Lower Ring just as much as you do.”

Zuko smiled at the determination that shone in the waterbender’s face. Her love in offering her help to those that needed her was what also made him admire the great woman that she was.

_Not to mention that she’s a beautiful woman_, Zuko thought with a dazed look before snapping out of his thoughts when Toph coughed. He glanced at the short earthbender from the corner of his eye and noticed she was grinning at him.

Straightening his tall frame, Zuko cleared his throat.
“Okay then, so I guess I’ll see you two in the morning,” he said smoothly. He looked at Toph then at Katara and a small smile appeared on his face. “Maybe we can all look around Ba Sing Se tomorrow after I speak to King Kuei.”

Katara smiled brightly.

“Yeah! That sounds like fun! We could visit Uncle Iroh at the Jasmine Dragon! Maybe Toph and I can take Lady Ursa and Suki to the spa.”

Toph pretended to scowl in annoyance.

“Eh, fine, but I swear that if my feet get touched, someone will die,” she drawled.

“You didn’t complain about the mud bath last time,” Katara teased and laughed, making Zuko looked between the two in bewilderment.

*What the hell are they talking about?* he thought before shrugging his shoulders.

“Okay, I guess I’m going to bed now,” Katara said with a yawn. “Good night, Zuko.”

“Good night, Katara. Sleep well,” Zuko replied with a smile. “And thanks again.”

Katara smiled and nodded before she turned back to looked at Toph who had not moved from her perch on the stone stump.

“Toph, are you coming?”

“I want to stay out here for a minute,” Toph said. “I’ll talk to you later. Wait for me in your room.” She grinned mischievously.

*First, I’ll talk to Zuko about their little…outing last night.*
Katara shrugged before she again bid them good night.

“I’m not really surprise Sugar Queen came up with that plan,” Toph spoke up and yawned. “She always tries to find a way to help others even if it gets her into trouble just like when we were at the village of Jang Hui.”

“You were at Jang Hui?” Zuko asked as he watched Katara make her way across the garden until she disappeared inside the palace.

“Yup, like four years ago, and let me tell you that place smelled horrible,” Toph said and wrinkled her nose at the memory.

“To tell you the truth I had no idea it existed when I was still Prince Zuko,” the young man admitted guiltily. “It wasn’t until we were told that the factory was destroyed that I learned about the village and the dishonorable way the people were being treated. It’s prospering now, though,” he added.

Toph smiled as she swung her small legs.

“Did you ever find out who destroyed the factory?” she asked.

“No. We were told it was probably some rebels,” Zuko answered as he continued to watch the spot where Katara had been standing last. “But I heard some rumors that the people of Jang Hui attributed it to a spirit by the name of the Painted Lady.”

“I’m glad they held their promise of secrecy,” Toph said casually.

“What?”

Toph began to bend two small balls of dirt between her fingers.

“Were you told how the factory was destroyed?” she asked instead.
“Well…” Zuko began and glanced at her suspiciously, “The soldiers reported that it seemed the factory was flooded before it exploded…” he trailed off as a thought popped in his head, “Did you guys have anything to do with that?”

Toph smirked.

“We really didn’t do much. It was all Katara’s idea. She and Aang destroyed the factory. Sugar Queen couldn’t stand the way the villagers were forced to live so she helped them, healing their sick, too.”

Zuko smiled.

“The river spirit the villagers were talking about…it was Katara, right? She was the Painted Lady,” he stated.

“Yup,” Toph admitted with a grin.

The young Fire Lord returned his gaze toward the entrance of the palace where Katara had disappeared to.

*She was willing to help a town from the nation that had hurt her and her family. Will she ever cease to amaze me?* he thought.

“Sooo,” Toph began innocently before she started to grin, “What were you and Sugar Queen doing last night? Please, spare me the obscene details.” She threw her hands before her face and laughed sarcastically.

Zuko spun around to face his small friend and gaped at her before he composed himself.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said warily.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about,” Toph retorted and rolled her eyes. “I know it was you and Sweetness giving off those vibrations last night.” When Zuko did not respond, she smiled. “So are you gonna tell me what you two did?”
“No,” Zuko replied flatly. He had promised Katara that nobody would know, and even if Toph tortured him, he will keep his promise.

“Fine,” Toph huffed and jumped from her stone seat, lowering it to the ground.

_The best way to approach this is by making outrageous assumptions_, she thought wickedly.

“You both were lured by a mystical creature to an unknown land or perhaps both of you were sleepwalking?”

“Uh...no.” Zuko frowned and wondered what the hell Toph was talking about.

“I know! You got sick and started to vomit and Sweetness went to help you,” Toph continued and smirked.

“Of course not!” Zuko denied with a scowl.

Toph grasped her small hands behind her back and began to rock back and forth on the balls of her bare feet.

“Well, I guess the only thing left to think is…,” Toph leaned forward and whispered, “Katara and you sneaked away from camp in the middle of the night to have hot sex!”

Zuko backed a step with a shocked expression.

“N-no! We did no such thing! D-don’t be ridiculous!” he stuttered.

Toph grinned widely as Zuko’s heart skipped a beat before it began to race wildly.

“Katara and I doing that…” Zuko’s voice trailed off as he thought back on his dreams and on how much he really enjoyed the thought of such an experience from happening.
Mai and Aang’s betrayed faces surfaced in his mind and again he felt ashamed.

“…is impossible,” he finished and closed his eyes.

Toph sighed and crossed her arms over chest. *That’s what you keep telling yourself.*

“I was just messing with you, jeez. I’m going to sleep. See ya tomorrow,” she said with a grumble.

*I’m not going to get anything out of Lord Uptight here.* She grinned. But it would be so easy to make Katara divulge everything.

The scheming earthbender mischievously grinned inwardly as she passed by Zuko.

Stopping a few feet behind him, she spoke, “I hope you don’t get a heart attack with whatever dream you have tonight.”

She laughed loudly and ran towards the palace, leaving a gaping firebender standing in the middle of the garden.

Katara hummed softly as she passed the brush through her long, brown hair. She stifled a yawn as she looked over at the night sky through the window in her guest room. The room was a bit smaller than the one she was given in the Fire Nation Palace, but it was nice nonetheless. The soft, jade green bed was slightly raised from the ground with two stone steps leading up to it. The small dresser she was sitting at and a stone chest at one corner were the only other furniture in the room. The only thing the room lacked was a private bathroom. The palace actually had two separate public baths for men and women.

“Why is Toph taking so long?” she muttered. “I wonder what she wants to talk to me about. Knowing her, it’s probably something that will either irritate or embarrass me.”

At that moment, the door burst open and Toph emerged with a glint in her milky lime-colored eyes.
“Okay, what do you want?” the waterbender sighed in resignation. “I know you have something in your mind by that look on your face.”

The earthbender chuckled as she flopped herself onto the soft bed.

“Alright then,” Toph began. She grinned as she prepared herself to ask the same question, but this time, she was not leaving without getting any answers. “Why were you awake in the middle of the night yesterday?”

Katara turned around to face her friend and frown.

“There was a full moon and you know I can’t sleep on those nights,” she said.

“Well, what were you doing?” Toph asked innocently.

“I…uh…went for a midnight…walk,” Katara replied carefully as a small blush appeared on her cheeks.

“Really?” Toph smirked. “Then what were you and Lord Sparky doing together last night?”

“What?” Katara squeaked and slightly jumped in her seat. She felt the telltale signs that her face was imitating a tomato and she was glad Toph could not see it. “W-what…uh…we were…um…enjoying a midnight spar! Yeah, that’s right. We both couldn’t sleep and decided to do a little exercise, that’s all.”

“Riiight,” Toph stressed sarcastically before she scoffed. She snorted and lifted her eyebrow to show she did not fall for that lame excuse. “I thought you said you went for a midnight walk.”

Katara blushed even deeper as she tried to come up with something, but her mind was drawing blanks as her memories rushed before her eyes. She looked up when Toph began to chuckle.
“I get it,” Toph said as she sat up in the bed. “You and Zuko wanted some alone time, so you sneaked away to snuggle together under the romantic full moon.” She grinned as she waited for the waterbender’s usual outburst.

“That’s crazy!” Katara yelled frantically. “I was just swimming, minding my own business, when Zuko happens to come upon me while I was bathing and—” She gasped and clamped her hand over her mouth as she stared wide-eyed at Toph.

Toph’s mouth fell open before she started to chuckle.

“Woah, I never would’ve thought Zuko to be such a pervert!” Toph exclaimed. She grinned, knowing full well Zuko would never do anything to harm Katara.

“It was not like that!” Katara exclaimed and shook her head. “He didn’t know I was practically…” she trailed off as another blush stained her tan cheeks.

“Naked?” Toph finished for her.

She smiled as Katara’s heart practically had a marathon. Toph knew that if it had been any other guy, Katara would have raised hell for having her privacy intruded upon. Interesting.

“Well, yes…” Katara replied embarrassingly. “But Zuko apologized and was gentlemanly enough not to try anything. Then he looked away while I got out of the water to change and escorted me back to the campsite. It was like it almost didn’t affect him at all.” She frowned, wondering if perhaps she was not attractive enough.

“Oh, please,” Toph snickered. “He’s a guy! Any man with blood in his veins would be affected if he saw a girl bathing. Zuko just happens to know how to control himself.”

Katara frowned and wondered what Toph was trying to accomplish.

“Are you trying to say that Zuko was in some way affected by…um…seeing me almost n-naked?” she stuttered.
Toph rolled her eyes at her sometimes too innocent and naïve friend. Of course she will miss the signs a horny guy would give, but she guessed it was not the waterbender’s fault since Sparky was good at hiding his emotions.

“Did he really not do or say anything? He didn’t react at all?” Toph asked.

“Well, he was embarrassed for sure,” Katara replied and smirked at the horrified look he had on his face when she caught him staring at her. “He was also apologetic, and then…”

“And then?” Toph prompted.

Katara’s eyebrows furrowed and she placed a finger on her chin.

“When I got out of the water, I wrapped a towel to cover myself to face him. Then he…uh…well…he stared at me, almost as if he was looking me over.” Again she remembered the intense look he had in eyes and she shivered. “You don’t think that Zuko was…checking me out, do you?”

“Why not?” Toph asked and shrugged. “I’ve heard many comments from lots of guys who say you’re hot. I’m sure Sparky knows when to appreciate beauty. And stop being so embarrassed and shy about these things. It’s normal! Of course, if guys are being gross and perverted about it, then you can beat the crap out of them.”

Katara laughed, feeling a bit reassured about her physical appearance.

“Well, now that you got what you wanted, can I go to sleep? Oh, and uh…don’t tell anyone else, like Sokka and…Aang. They might get the wrong idea.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be silent as a tomb.” Toph grinned before she jumped down from the bed and made her way to the door. She opened it, but before she left she turned around a bit. “Katara?”

“Yeah, Toph?” Katara asked as she made her way to her bed.

“You should try to make yourself be happy for once and admit what you feel even if it might hurt those that love you,” Toph said in a serious tone.
Katara looked up at the uncharacteristic manner Toph spoke, but her friend had already exited the room and closed the door behind her. The waterbender went to the door to call Toph back, but stopped and instead went to her travelling bag placed at the foot of her bed. Rummaging inside, she pulled out the object she was looking for and climbed into her bed. The single light-green lamp on the dresser was the only light inside the room. Sighing quietly, Katara opened her closed hand and looked at the beautiful, silver rose hairpin.

*What was Toph talking about? What feelings am I supposed to admit?* She stroked the ruby and sapphire gems gently with one of her fingers. Why did Toph all of the sudden say those words when they were just talking about Zuko?

Katara’s eyes widened and she gasped.

“Yes, surely she doesn’t think I have feelings for Zuko!”

**Well, Toph is a smart and very perceptive person.**

“Well, this time she’s got it all wrong,” Katara said aloud and frowned as she clenched the little trinket in her palm. “I can’t have feelings for Zuko because I love Aang. Zuko’s just a very good friend whom I happened to enjoy spending my time with.”

She couldn’t have feelings for him. They were too different. He was a very powerful man who had a country depending on him, and she was just a simple Water Tribe woman. He is destined to marry a refined noblewoman.

*Probably Mai,* she sighed.

And she…well…Aang had not actually asked her to marry him yet, but by the way he kept telling her how much he loved her, then it was a likely possibility that they would settle down and start a family.

Katara frowned as an uneasy feeling settled in her stomach at the thought. She looked down at her rose hairpin and sighed.
Why does this piece of jewelry make me feel so confused and yet so comforted at the same time?

Shaking her head, Katara placed the rose pin under her fluffy pillow since the room did not contain a nightstand. Resting her head and covering her body with the blanket, the young woman looked over at the window before she fell into a restless sleep.

Katara smiled as she took in the sight before her. She was standing before a beautiful, clear lake. A few bright stars were winking at her from the inky sky. There was a light mist that surrounded the place, giving it a mysterious and peaceful feeling. She bent down and reached into the water with one hand. Strangely, the water was warm, and a grin spread across her face.

She stood up and reached for the sash around her waist, but a hand stopped her and covered her own small hand. She tensed when she felt warm breath near her ear. Her heart began to pound in her chest as fear made her immobile.

“Katara, don’t be scared. I won’t hurt you,” a low masculine voice whispered in her ear.

Katara’s eyes widen in surprise and a small gasp fell from her mouth.

“Z-Zuko?” she breathed uncertainly.

She heard him chuckle before he brought his other hand to her shoulder. Slowly he slid his warm hand down her arm and brought it to rest on her hip, causing her to shudder in a strange but delightful way. She felt his breath near her neck before Zuko placed a soft kiss on her warm skin. Katara closed her eyes as a rush of heat coursed through her body.

“Katara, you’re a very desirable woman,” Zuko continued in a whisper.

Katara was positive she had heard him say that before, but now having him so near caused her to shiver and believe him even more.

She felt Zuko tug her hand as he slowly turned her around to face him. Katara gasped once again as she saw his intense golden gaze. She had a feeling she had seen that smoldering stare before, but her mind went blank as he suddenly drew her body closer to his.
Another gasp escaped her lips at the swift move. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest at the close proximity and she felt hot.

What is happening to me? she thought.

Zuko brought a hand to her face and caressed her cheek gently as a soft smile graced his handsome features. Katara watched, mesmerized, as his face began to descend to her own. Zuko’s lips touched her forehead, causing her to gasp. He moved his lips to her cheek while his hands ran down her back, causing Katara to let out a soft moan. She shivered as a strange sensation burned in the pit of her stomach.

“Katara,” Zuko breathed as he leaned his head closer to hers, his lips a few inches from her own. Another shiver ran down her spine. Katara closed her eyes as she waited for their lips to meet...

Katara opened her eyes and blinked as the morning light fell on her face. She was breathing heavily. She bolted to a sitting position on the bed and gasped, clasping a hand over her racing heart.

“What was that?” she asked herself as she removed her blankets, which were suddenly too warm for comfort.

She barely ever had dreams and she had never experienced such a dream before. Most of the dreams she did have were well…nightmares. She shifted in her bed and gasped as she realized that her most private area was hot and slightly damp.

“Oh, spirits! What’s happening to me?” she almost yelled in alarm.

This had never happened to her before. Well, she had felt attraction to men before, but never anything like how she felt toward Zuko. This strange, burning feeling was new to her.

Katara dropped her hand from her chest and gaped.

“A-am I…a-aroused by…by Zuko?” she stuttered.

She jumped from her bed and began to pace around the small room with a blush on her cheeks.
“This is all Toph’s fault!” she accused into the silent room. “She filled me with all those thoughts about Zuko and reactions and all that stuff last night! Yeah, that’s it! That’s why I was having a dream about Zuko.”

A slightly dazed look covered her features as she stopped in her pacing.

“And how he was holding and looking at me and...how he almost kissed me...” She gasped as she felt another rush of warmth in her nether regions.

She blushed furiously before she shook her head.

“It’s nothing to worry about, right? This is normal. I’m nineteen for La’s sake and I think these kinds of feelings were long overdue.” She laughed self-consciously. “There’s no shame in this, right? I mean what woman would not be turned on by someone as stunning as Zuko?”

A few women’s faces that they had encountered during their stay in Ember Island surfaced in her mind. They were practically drooling when the young Fire Lord passed them by with slightly heated looks on their adoring faces.

Katara blinked when she realized she was grinding her teeth.

_Ooh, someone is jealous_, a voice that sounded so much like Toph teased.

_I am not jealous!_ Katara denied and huffed before another thought crossed her mind that made her uneasy.

Why was she having such dreams about another man that was not her boyfriend? Zuko had never held her like that and yet in her dream it almost made her melt. Aang had kissed her, he had embraced her, he had held her, but then why was she not having those kinds of dreams about him? Why did just a smile or a look from Zuko make her blush and feel things Aang’s kisses had never done?

Katara slumped onto the small seat in front of the dresser with a long sigh. What was going on with her? What was happening? Was she really beginning to have feelings for Zuko?
But that couldn’t be because she loved Aang and she would never betray him. She could never hurt him. He loved her.

The confused young woman groaned as a small headache began to appear. She stood up to get another set of clothes to replace her...dirty ones. As she exited her room with the clean clothes, Katara headed towards Toph’s room to ask her if she would accompany her to the public bathhouse in the palace. She needed a cold bath.
Past Encounters

Katara stared down dazedly at the water that she was absentmindedly swirling around her hands. Steam rose from the warm water and floated around her still form, twirling around the grand and elegant room and into the vents near the ceiling.

The bathhouse was a lovely area, with a series of bathtubs strategically placed around the chamber. Plants and flowers adorned the light-green marble walls and surrounded the large bathtubs as if they were natural springs. The bathtubs were wide enough to accommodate a small party of six. A pleasant fragrance of lilies filled the quiet atmosphere.

The waterbender heaved another sigh as she again relived her little dream. She still could not figure out why her mind had decided to play tricks on her with such thoughts about Zuko, who was just a friend. Friends did a lot for one another like cook for them, or help them with a problem, or play and laugh with them. But friends did not have dreams about each other were their actions spurred such heat and longing.

Nope. In dreams, friends did anything but touch intimately and kiss passionately. Right? Those dreams were only reserved for married pairs, lovers, couples, and for those who lusted over each other.

Katara frowned at the twirling water and chewed on her lower lip. Zuko and she did not fall into any of those categories. They were not married, nor did they have a romantic relationship. And they certainly were not lovers! Wait. Did that mean that she…was lusting over Zuko?

Katara felt her face heat up at the thought and shook her head, causing her wet hair to splatter onto her face. That is ridiculous! She couldn’t be lusting over Zuko—she did not even desire Aang that way. Who, by the way, was her boyfriend! And how could she yearn over somebody when she had never been sexually intimate with any man?

You don’t need to have had sex to want somebody, a voice in her head piped in almost cheerfully.

Shut up! she inwardly growled at the voice for she had no response to that.

In front of Katara, Toph was sitting lazily on the small bench that lined the inside of the tubs for the guests to sit on. Both female bending masters were wrapped in towels that the maids had offered them at the entrance of the bathhouse, and since it was early in the morning, they were currently the
only ones making use of the female bathing pools.

Toph crossed her arms and yawned loudly as they both continued to sit there in silence. Katara woke her up from a good dream so they could go take a bath! And so early in the morning, too! Toph had been ready to yell at her to leave her alone, but she noticed that her waterbending friend had been a bit more agitated than usual. So she had just sighed and stumbled her way out of bed, grumbling all the way to the public baths.

And now here she was, trying not to doze off and in the process find herself drowning. Katara, who sometimes found it hard not to talk, had been unusually quiet and pensive as they had made their way to the bathhouse and had not since changed. Toph could feel the gentle pull of the bath water as Katara manipulated it, but she could sense that the young woman was doing it without even realizing it. The earthbender did not need her sight to know something was bothering her friend for she could feel it.

“So, Sugar Queen, what’s eating you?” Toph asked with another yawn, shifting in her marbled seat so the water now reached her shoulders.

“Huh? Did you say something, Toph?” was her friend’s distracted response.

Toph sighed, pushing her wet bangs out of her eyes.

“What the hell is going on with you? You’re all quiet, which let me tell you is sometimes a relief, but just annoying right now. And you keep fidgeting in your spot, not to mention all those damn sighs you keep letting out are making me crazy!” Toph exclaimed. “Come on, spill it out!”

Katara forced a laugh.

“It’s nothing, really,” she replied quickly.

The blind young girl snorted and rolled her eyes.

“Even if we’re floating in water, I can still tell you’re lying,” she said dryly. “Seriously, Sweetness, I thought you would know me better by now.”
Katara sighed.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. But it’s nothing to worry about,” she said, hoping her sometimes too perceptive friend would leave it at that, but knowing Toph, Katara knew she would not stop until she got the truth out of her.

Toph raised an eyebrow with her arms still crossed over her towel-covered chest and stared in the direction of her friend without saying one word. The bathtub remained quiet for a few minutes as Toph remained perfectly still. The silence and Toph’s unnerving, unseeing stare became too uncomfortable for Katara that she had no choice but to relent.

“Fine!” Katara huffed. “I just have a lot on my mind because of some strange dream I had last night.”

Toph grinned triumphantly before Katara’s words peaked her interest.

“A strange dream, you say? What kind of dream?” she asked.

Katara squirmed in her place as she began to lightly tap the water with her fingers, desperately trying not to blush.

“It was just a silly dream,” she answered. Before the younger woman could demand her to say more she quickly continued, “Please, Toph, can we just leave it at that? I don’t really want to talk about it.”

She did not want to know what kind of amusement the earthbender would find in her embarrassing situation.

“Fine,” Toph snorted and frowned. “I bet it was a good dream that’s making you act all weird like this,” she teased with a grin.

*Oh, you have no idea,* Katara thought with another sigh before she scolded herself.

A fierce blush crept onto the waterbender’s tanned cheeks as once again her dream surface in her head, and she imagined Zuko’s hands roaming her body, his warm breath caressing her neck, and his lips so close to hers.
Katara shifted uneasily in her seat as she tried to calm her body’s reaction. Crossing one leg over the other, she cleared her throat and began to wash her hair.

Toph had a feeling that maybe Katara’s strange behavior had something to do with what they had talked about the previous night. At least, she hoped it did, for it meant that Katara was beginning to understand her feelings for a certain Fire Lord. The earthbender thought of making Katara tell her what it was that had her acting all strange, but decided it was best to leave her alone. She would be there if Katara wanted to talk to her, and apparently now was not the time.

After finishing their baths and exiting the bathing pools, both young women arrived at the grand dining hall of the palace and waited for the guards to open the doors. They entered the elegant room where their friends had already surrounded a long table filled different variety of dishes that made Sokka heave a dreamy sigh. King Kuei was sitting at the head of the table in a golden chair embedded with emeralds, and next to him, with a mouth full of honey, was Bosco, his brown bear.

Greeting everyone in the room, Katara hesitantly took her usual spot next to Aang, who was sitting on the Earth King’s left side. She smiled faintly when Aang helped her sit down. Iroh was seated at her left side and greeted her cheerfully, handing her a cup of tea, but not before the old firebender commented on how lovely she looked that morning.

Looking across the table, Katara noticed that Zuko was sitting regally on King Kuei’s right side. Both men were having a conversation and she could not stop herself from staring at the imposing way Zuko held himself with. Casting her eyes to the side, she saw his mother next to him. Katara smiled when Ursa looked at her with a bright smile before the older woman returned her attention to her plate. Katara’s eyes then shifted to the young noblewoman next to Lady Ursa. Mai was eating silently with her usual bored expression and both women seemed to be sitting stiffly.

Katara bashfully raised her head to look at Zuko again, but quickly glanced down when he turned to her.

“Oh, gods!” she thought as warmth reached her cheeks. She felt her heart begin to race before she scolded herself for her silly reaction.

“It was just a dream,” she told herself. “Just forget it and move on.”

She blinked when a hand rested on her knee. She turned to Aang who smiled widely at her. She forced a small smile before she gently pushed his hand away. She heard him sigh almost inaudibly
before the airbender returned his attention to Momo who was trying to steal Bosco’s food away.

She felt uncomfortable when Aang touched her, and yet, she allowed Zuko?

*Only because it was a dream, she reminded herself firmly. I had no control over my reactions!*

She glanced at Aang who was laughing as Momo snatched a piece of fruit from Bosco. Would she feel the same way with Aang one of these days?

After he finished talking with King Kuei, Zuko returned his attention to his breakfast plate. He had requested an audience with the mild-mannered king after the breakfast meal in order to discuss his plan for aiding the Lower Ring. After paying a visit to the poorest district of the Earth Kingdom capital, he seriously hoped the king would concede.

After biding good night to Katara and Toph the previous day, Zuko had made his way to his guest room to retire for the night. After lying awake for a few hours without much success in falling asleep, the firebender had decided to roam the city of Ba Sing Se alone in order to see for himself the condition in which the people of the Lower Ring were subjected to after the war.

He had don his Blue Spirit mask and black attire, which he had hidden at the bottom of his traveling pack. One never knew when the Blue Spirit would be needed. Zuko had sneaked away from the palace without much trouble since the Dai Li were no longer in service to the Earth King. Crossing over the Upper and Middle Rings, a disguised Zuko had arrived silently at the place where he had once lived as a refugee.

Zuko noticed that what Aang and Toph had said about the aid King Kuei had sent was true. The houses now stood in better conditions than they did four years ago, but from what he was able to observe in the darkness of night it seemed that that was the only change.

Lowering his cup of the Earth Kingdom’s white wine—which he noted was not as exquisite as Fire Nation red wine—Zuko suppressed the frown that threatened to appear on his face. The Blue Spirit needed to pay another visit to the Lower Ring one of these nights to be able to further assess the condition for the poorest citizens of Ba Sing Se.

Zuko looked to his side at his mother who was attempting to have a conversation with Mai. He listened for a while as both Fire Nation women began a casual conversation. It seemed Ursa was trying to get to know a little bit more about Mai’s life and personality and it made him glad to know
that his mother was trying.

It soon became rather obvious, however, that both women felt awkward around each other as they continued their awkward exchange before his mother gave a last polite nod and looked away to speak to his uncle across the long, narrow table. He was not sure if he should feel concerned about his mother’s reaction. What would he do if they didn’t get along?

What did concern him at the moment, though, was the behavior of a certain waterbender. Zuko glanced at Katara who, he noted, was once again eating in silence and had not even looked his way when she entered with Toph. She had greeted everybody else but him.

What did he do this time to make her angry?

*But I didn’t do anything!* Zuko mentally growled.

He smiled when Katara glanced at him, but she quickly looked away before he could even greet her. Zuko frowned as he felt a painful sting in his chest.

*Is she avoiding me? Why?* he asked himself, disgruntled. *She was talking to me last night. What happened to make her act like this?*

He did not like the strange, painful feeling in his chest and he especially did not like being ignored.

*I will find out what’s wrong, even if it kills me,* he vowed determinedly.

He was brought out of his thoughts when his mother began to speak to him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Suki sighed contently as the masseuse continued to massage her swollen feet. Katara had come up with the great idea that the women should spend a few hours being pampered at the spa, and Suki was mentally thanking her future sister-in-law every few seconds for bringing them here.

Her stomach was growing larger and heavier as the days passed by and her feet and back were killing her! Though pain was not something she shied away from, however. But what did frighten her about her condition were the horrible cravings she had been recently having. Odd combinations
of food that not even her glutton of a fiancé would dare eat! And how many times had she shoved Sokka out of her way as she stumbled out of their bed in order to reach the bathroom and relieve her morning sickness?

Giggling softly to herself, Suki started to rub her belly in soothing circles. But it would all be worth it once she had her baby in her arms.

Suki smiled when Katara appeared and took the empty seat next to her, but she frowned when her waterbending friend did not even look her way, instead Katara rested her elbow on the cushioned chair’s armrest, placing her cheek on her hand as a faraway look covered her eyes. Suki watched as Katara heaved a huge sigh before the Water Tribe woman’s face turned bright red.

Suki raised an eyebrow at this.

“Are you finished, Katara?” she asked. When she didn’t receive a reply, Suki began to wave her hand in front of her friend’s dazed eyes. “Katara? Katara!” she yelled.

Katara jumped and looked around as if wondering where she was before she finally noticed her future sister-in-law frowning at her. She flushed again and scolded herself for letting her dreams of Zuko distract her once again.

“Sorry, what were you saying?” the waterbender asked sheepishly.

Suki smiled as she finally gained her attention.

“I asked if you were finished.”

“Oh! Yes, I just wanted a simple treatment and now I’m waiting for you guys.” Katara smiled.

“So, how is Lady Ursa enjoying her royal treatment?” Suki asked and grinned.

Katara laughed as she watched Suki’s masseuse excuse herself while another employee of the Fancy Lady Day Spa placed a tray with fresh fruit between them.
“She’s enjoying herself quite a lot and I don’t blame her since she’s lived quite a hard life these past few years. She’s in the mud bath next to Toph right now.” She laughed before she grinned. She wondered if Toph was making faces for Ursa and scaring the employees the way she did during their first visit. “So how are you feeling?”

Suki grinned before she let out a relaxed breath.

“Spirits, Katara, you’ve no idea how much I love you right now for suggesting we visit the spa. Ah, I feel like I’m floating on a cloud.”

Katara laughed and reached over to gently rub the large bulge that was housing her future niece or nephew.

“I think you deserve it for all these years you have suffered with my older brother…and for all the years to come,” she added teasingly.

They both laughed until Suki let out a soft groan.

“Suki, are you alright?” Katara asked in alarm.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Suki reassured her as she let out a deep breath. “The baby just likes to remind me how cramped it must be in there.” She laughed as she rubbed the left side of her belly.

“So you can feel the baby moving already?” Katara asked softly as she stared at the way Suki lovingly caressed her stomach. Would she ever know what carrying a child would feel like?

The Kyoshi Warrior nodded and smiled.

“Yeah, it started a few weeks ago and it kind of freaked me out at first,” she admitted. “You should’ve seen the look on Sokka’s face when he felt the baby kicking for the first time. His eyes widened so much I was afraid they would pop out of his head before he started gaping like a fish out of water.”
She laughed softly before an affectionate smile adorned her face.

“Then he broke out into a grin so wide I thought it would’ve split his face in two before he started to shower me and my belly with kisses,” Suki sighed happily, “It was so adorable it almost made me cry.”

Katara smiled.

“Sokka always wanted a family since…” she paused before she continued more sadly, “our family only consisted of Gran-Gran, him, and me for years.”

Suki reached over and patted her arm in comfort.

Katara sniffled before she grinned.

“Anyway, I’m very happy for you both and I can’t wait to help you with the wedding!”

They laughed as they began to share ideas for the perfect wedding, sometimes going too extravagant, but a girl could dream, no?

“What about you, Katara?” Suki asked after a while of calmed silence. “How would you like your wedding to be like once Aang proposes to you?”

Katara started to choke on a grape before she swallowed it whole. She coughed for a while as Suki patted her back before she cleared her throat.

“I…uh…I haven’t really thought about that,” she muttered.

Suki frowned as she leaned back in her chair.

“About the wedding or…about marrying Aang?” she asked curiously.
Suki watched as Katara lowered her head before she started to play with her braid, a sign that she was either nervous or uncomfortable.

This had been the second time Katara had reacted with unease and anxiety when the topic of marriage with the airbender was brought up. That was not how Suki felt every time the thought of becoming Sokka’s wife entered her head. Instead the Kyoshi warrior became so excited and ecstatic that she had been afraid she would burst. But Katara acted like…well…like she disliked the idea of marrying Aang.

Maybe she was seeing it all wrong, but Katara was her friend and she wanted her to be happy, and right now she was not sure that Katara’s relationship with Aang was the right thing for her.

Suki grabbed her friend’s hand as she addressed her in a serious tone.

“Katara, maybe it’s none of my business, but I think you—”

She did not get to finish her thought as Ty Lee burst into the room with a joyful squeal, followed by a not-too-happy Mai. Suki scowled at them as she leaned back in her seat, watching as Ty Lee rushed toward Katara to gush about her spa treatment. She would talk to Katara another time.

Zuko waited impatiently in the same sitting room Mai had brought him in the day before. He had just finished going over the compromise with the Earth King a few minutes ago. And just as he had expected, the ruler of Ba Sing Se had agreed excitedly to a trade. The King had also enjoyed the idea of having tourists from around the world visiting his great metropolis since Ba Sing Se had become almost isolated from the rest of the world due to Long Feng and the Dai Li’s control.

While Zuko was busy with the King Kuei, everybody else had gone out into the city. After he had reassured them they could go out without him, Sokka and Aang had decided to explore the city of walls. Iroh had gone to his teashop where they would visit once everybody returned to the palace, and the women had decided to take his mother—who had never been to Ba Sing Se before—and Suki to the spa. Ty Lee had to practically drag Mai to go along with them.

Zuko sighed and ran a hand down his face. Mai had not bothered him about their little argument, and instead, she would stand beside him quietly, sometimes reaching to take his arm. He knew she was trying to please and support him, so he had decided that perhaps he could give their relationship another chance. Maybe when she returned from her visit to her parents, everything would return as it was before.
The sound of laughter reached his ears and he looked up to see Aang and Sokka entering the room. He nodded in acknowledgement when Aang waved at him with a cheerful smile.

“Did the meeting with the Earth King go well?” Sokka asked as he flopped down on one of the plush cushions lying around the room.

“Yes,” Zuko answered simply.

He half-listened as his friends recounted their adventure in the city, especially going over the strange animals the Earth King had placed in the zoo since their last visit, while they waited for the women to arrive from their outing. After a while, the airbender headed to the window at the other side of the room with Momo on his shoulder.

_The Fancy Lady Day Spa, they called it, _Zuko remembered what the girls had chatted about and rolled his eyes. _What kind of name is that?_

Frowning, Zuko again wondered what was wrong with Katara. He had tried to talk to her after they finished their meal, but she had just laughed nervously and said they were late for their appointment at the spa. She didn’t even look at him.

He was slightly angry with himself for letting someone affect him so much. Not even his father’s indifference or Mai’s earlier avoidance caused him to feel so slighted and hurt.

_It doesn’t matter, _he thought as he narrowed his eyes. _I will find a way to fix what’s wrong and then Katara will talk to me again._ He crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes glinting in determination.

“I miss Suki,” he heard Sokka complain with a heavy sigh over at the cushion he was sprawled on.

“But you just saw her a few hours ago,” Zuko stated with a raised eyebrow.

Sokka lifted his head to roll his eyes at his firebending friend.

“I know that!” he snapped before he let out another sigh. “I just can’t stand being away from her for too long, especially now that she’s carrying our child,” he said with a smile.
Sokka hauled himself up into a sitting position as he regarded his reserved friend sitting on the couch with a questioning look on his face.

“You know what I mean, right?” Sokka asked innocently as he carefully observed Zuko’s reaction. “You feel sad and depressed when you’re away from your loved one even for a few minutes that you feel that you’d die if you don’t see her face? You know what I’m talking about, right?”

Zuko frowned at the words the warrior had said. Had he ever felt such emotions whenever Mai was away from him?

*No, I haven’t,* he answered his own question.

Was something wrong with him because he never felt sad when he was not near Mai or felt like he was dying if he did not see her? But then again he wasn’t a romantic like Sokka and the water tribesmen did exaggerate a lot. And then there was the fact that he did not love Mai the way that Sokka loved Suki.

“Right, Zuko?” Sokka repeated after watching different kinds of emotions flash across Zuko’s face.

“I…” Zuko began before he turned away with a snort. “That’s just ridiculous.”

Sokka smirked.

“If you say so,” he said with a shrug.

Just then the women arrived, leading a blushing Suki into the room. The Kyoshi Warrior had her usual short hair styled into an elegant bun and pretty, light makeup adorned her face. The women had decided to give her a special treatment as a gift to celebrate her pregnancy and engagement.

Zuko found himself relaxing as his eyes settled on Katara without even bothering to figure out why that was.
“Wow, Suki, you look beautiful!” Sokka exclaimed and rushed over to embrace his betrothed. He leaned down to give her a kiss, but cried out when Suki lightly slapped him away.

“None of that now, you’ll ruin the makeup,” Suki scolded gently and laughed when her husband-to-be pouted.

Katara smiled at both their antics before she noticed that Zuko was making his way toward them and he was looking straight at her. Blushing, she quickly moved away from her brother and Suki to stand beside Aang and took his hand. Aang looked at her and smiled joyfully before he squeezed her hand.

Zuko stopped as he watched Katara reach for the Avatar and he frowned, gritting his teeth when Aang kissed her cheek. Zuko lightly jumped when Mai looped her arm around his. He gave her a small smile before glancing once more at the waterbender who again was avoiding his eyes.

“Okay then,” Katara spoke up almost too cheerfully. “Let’s go to the Jasmine Dragon before Uncle Iroh starts to think we forgot about him.”

They exited the palace walls and entered the city, making their way down the streets to the Jasmine Dragon where Iroh was waiting for them. The people strolling along the streets of the Upper Ring pointed and cheered as the war heroes passed them by. Sokka and Aang waved back at them enthusiastically.

Zuko smiled, content with the citizens’ change in attitude since he last visited the city. Back then, he was given hateful looks full of mistrust, but now they seemed to give him grateful smiles and bows, for he was the one who declared the war over and returned their city to them.

He glanced behind him where the waterbender was walking beside Aang and Toph. Katara had been right. Some people did see the good he had done, all they needed was some time in order to realize it and time to heal their wounds. He barely felt Mai let go of his arm to join Ty Lee before he returned his discreet observations of Katara.

Ursa watched as the young noblewoman finally detached herself from the Fire Lord and took that moment to walk beside her son. Zuko smiled down at his mother and offered his arm to her, which she accepted with a smile.

“How was your time at the spa?” Zuko asked her softly, noticing the way she seemed to be avoiding being near Mai. Again, he wondered if he should be concerned.
“It was lovely,” Ursa answered with a small laugh. “I had not been so pampered since I was living in the palace. It was so nice of Katara to suggest we spend our time there.” She smiled before a small frown appeared on her delicate face. “I noticed she seemed a bit distracted, though. I hope it is nothing serious.”

So his mother had noticed as well. But why did it look like Katara only seemed to be acting differently towards him?

They passed a small store that seemed to sell medicinal herbs. It had a small wooden door with two large vases with beautiful flowers beside it. Ursa stopped and looked at the little building.

“Is something the matter, Lady Ursa?” Katara asked as she noticed the older woman and Zuko had stopped. The rest of their group paused as well and looked at Ursa.

“Suki woke up with a small headache this morning. I would like to buy some herbs and ask Iroh if he could make it into tea for her,” Ursa said as she smiled at the pregnant woman.

Suki smiled back gratefully. The group followed after the older woman into the small shop.

It was a bit dim inside and the scent of plants and medicine permeated the air in the room. Herbs and glass medicine bottles rested in shelves behind a small counter. A young woman with a long braid had her back turned towards them as she restocked the shelves.

“Excuse me, miss,” Ursa called out as they walked up to the counter. “Do you have some evodia fruit to help with headaches?”

“Yes, of course,” the young woman replied pleasantly as she set down her supplies and moved down the shelves. She looked around for a while before reaching the top shelf, grabbing a small jar filled with the small rounded fruits before turning around.

Zuko watched as Katara walked around the room before a small gasp reached his ears. He turned around to see the young herbalist staring at him with wide, brown eyes.

“Li!” the young woman gasped, barely catching the jar that almost fell from her grasp.
Everybody in the room looked at her before adjusting their gazes toward the silent young Fire Lord.

Zuko frowned as he looked the young woman over. He had not been called Li since his time as a fugitive all those years ago. The young herbalist had soft, brown eyes and a lovely smile. She was wearing a long pink and white dress with a small white apron tied at her waist. She looked familiar.

“I’m sorry, but have we met?” he asked.

Mai narrowed her eyes as she glided across the room to stand beside Zuko, glaring at the woman who had still not taken her eyes off her boyfriend and held a blush on her cheeks.

Katara looked between Zuko and the young, pretty herbalist and frowned as she wondered if Zuko knew this woman. A strange, uneasy feeling settled in her stomach at the way the woman blushed.

Toph grinned as she noticed Katara’s annoyance, indicated by the tapping of her foot on the stone floor.

The young girl seemed to snap out of her trance and made a bow.

“Maybe you don’t remember me, but I remember you. I healed your Uncle Mushi’s rash from the white jade bush,” she said softly and smiled.

Zuko’s eyes widened a fraction as he finally recognized her.

“Song?” he asked quietly in disbelief.

_Song?_ Katara frowned as she glanced at Zuko’s slightly shocked expression. _So he does know her?_ Without even thinking about it, she made her way over to Zuko and stood at his other side, examining the graceful and pretty girl behind the counter.

Zuko noticed that Mai had inched closer to him and that Katara had moved away from Aang and was now standing at his side. Composing himself, he looked around the small building more
carefully than he had previously before returning his attention to the girl.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Song smiled as she approached the counter, placing the small jar on the smooth, wooden surface.

“My mother and I decided to move to Ba Sing Se two years ago since it seemed safer here than for two women living alone near the wilderness,” Song explained softly. “Thanks to some money we had saved from the infirmary we managed to open this shop three months ago.”

Unbeknownst to them, both Katara and Mai narrowed their eyes and glared at the smiling young woman with the pretty and delicate face.

“Zuko, who is she?” Mai asked in a low voice as she crossed her thin arms over her flat chest.

The young firebender finally looked away to glance at the irritated dark-haired woman.

“Uncle Iroh and I met Song and her mother when we were fugitives during the war,” he said.

A slightly guilty look crossed his features as he looked back at the brown-eyed girl. The two Earth Kingdom women had helped them, two complete strangers, and how did he repay their kindness?

“I apologize for taking your ostrich-horse after you and your mother welcomed us into your home,” he said sincerely.

“It’s alright,” Song replied with a small smile. “I was a bit saddened at first, but I figured that perhaps you needed it more than us. It seems our ostrich-horse did aid you. I can’t wait to tell my mother that we helped the Dragon of the West and none other than Prince Zuko, now the Fire Lord. She will be surprised.”

She paused as she looked over at his elegant clothes, to his fire crown, and then to his recognizable face. Both Mai and Katara subconsciously moved closer to the young man between them.
Zuko frowned, feeling a bit guilty.

“I am sorry for lying to you about who I really was, but it was necessary that both my uncle and I were not recognized,” he stated.

“I understand why you had to do that,” Song replied and smiled good-naturedly. “Even though you lied about your identity, I’m sure that the rest you told me about was the truth.”

What is she talking about? Katara asked, narrowing her eyes. She did not like how the young woman kept staring at Zuko. What truth did Zuko talked to her about?

Katara felt a bit troubled at the thought of Zuko sharing his thoughts with someone else. Even though it seemed silly, she wanted to be the only one Zuko went to in order to speak about his thoughts, ideas, problems and even feelings.

Song smiled when Zuko nodded. She then looked at Aang, who had a confused expression on his face.

“It is also an honor to meet the Avatar,” she said and bowed again. “I knew you would bring peace to our world again.”

“Uh, thanks,” Aang muttered. He blushed and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

Song returned her soft gaze to the young firebender, both unaware of the annoyed expressions on the two young women standing beside him. Toph smirked and Ursa smiled behind her hand. Suki looked over at Sokka who only shrugged.

“The people of Ba Sing Se are thankful for what you have done, even though you could have taken advantage of our weakened state,” Song said softly. “I am sure the rest of the world is grateful to you for calling off the war and for all the help you have given us.”

I told him that first! Katara hissed mentally and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I know,” Zuko replied with a nod. “A very great person has already told me that,” he said warmly.
Katara looked up at his words and noticed that Zuko was looking down at her. She blushed when she realized that the great person he was talking about was her.

Smiling, Song handed the jar to Ursa, who thanked her. Zuko reached inside his tunic for his bag of money and handed Song a few gold coins.

“This is too much!” Song gasped softly as she stared at the coins in her hand.

“It’s for helping my uncle’s embarrassing ailment, for your kind hospitality for two poor strangers, and for the ostrich-horse,” Zuko replied and moved away before she could return the coins.

The young herbalist closed her hand and bowed gratefully.

“Thank you, Fire Lord Zuko,” she said. She straightened and smiled radiantly.

Zuko inclined his head slightly.

“It was nice seeing you again. I wish you and your mother good luck in your new business,” he said before he headed out the door, taking his mother’s arm in his.

Mai pinned one last glare at the beaming woman before she, too, went out of the building to walk close to Zuko. Katara looked back at the girl named Song and smiled.

That was nice of Zuko, Katara thought as she followed the rest outside, not admitting to herself that she was glad Zuko and Song were just mere acquaintances.

“Mushi?” Sokka laughed once they returned to the streets. “What kind of name is that? I would’ve thought the Dragon of the West would’ve had a more impressive fugitive name!”

“It was the only thing that came to my mind at the moment,” Zuko replied. He smirked and shrugged lightly, remembering the irritated look on his uncle’s face when he had given the name to the young, pretty nurse.
It was midafternoon when the group arrived below the impressive building known as the Jasmine Dragon. They climbed the short stairs that lead up to the elegant teashop and passed a bubbling fountain in the middle of the courtyard. A long line of people waiting to enjoy a cup of the Jasmine Dragon’s famous tea greeted them.

“I see Uncle was not exaggerating about how popular the Jasmine Dragon has become,” Zuko remarked dryly.

As they approached the wide entrance of the teashop, the crowd became excited and bowed to them. Iroh appeared at the entrance as the commotion reached his ears.

“Ah, you have finally arrived!” Iroh exclaimed cheerfully. “I was beginning to think you forgot.”

“We could never forget about you…Uncle Mushi,” Toph replied and chuckled.

Iroh turned around to look at the grinning short girl and gaped in horror. Frowning, he turned an accusing glare at his nephew as if saying, ‘How could you betray me like that?’

Zuko laughed inwardly at his uncle.

“We ran into Song over at an herb shop and well...she brought it up,” he explained coolly with a shrug.

Iroh’s annoyed look turned into curiosity before he inwardly grinned mischievously.

“You mean that sweet young nurse we met almost four years ago?” he asked innocently. He glanced at Katara who had crossed her arms with a scowl on her face. “She was such a lovely girl and pretty, too. Isn’t that right, Nephew?”

“Uh…” Zuko frowned. Why did his uncle always put him in such awkward situations?

“You, will you look at the time?” Katara interrupted with a strained smile. “I’m sure Suki and the
baby are hungry, right, Suki? There, you see!” she said before the Kyoshi Warrior could respond.

Iroh mentally chuckled.

“You are right, my dear! Come in, come in! I have reserved your table already.” He motioned for them to follow.

Inside the opulent building, the group gaped at the amount of people sitting at the rounded tables, drinking their preferred blend of tea and nibbling on delicate pastries. It was obvious only those from high society occupied the room. Instead of its previous greenish glow from when it first opened to the public, a warm orangey light now cast its glow throughout the Jasmine Dragon. Iroh now proudly displayed his Fire Nation heritage.

They walked on a large red ochre carpet with a golden dragon curved along its length as they followed Iroh to their table. A few customers turned in their seats to look at the newcomers and began to chatter quietly about the young Fire Lord and the Avatar’s visit. Iroh led them to a large, cherry wood table almost at the far end of the grand teashop near an opened window.

“Sit, sit.” The teashop’s famous owner motioned for them to be seated with a smile. He waited as the group moved toward the rounded table to take their seats. “The waiters will come soon with tea and pastries.”

Being as subtle as possible, Iroh grinned as he gently pushed his nephew to sit next to the waterbender who, he noted, immediately tensed while a faint blush covered her cheeks. Unfortunately, he thought with a sigh, he was unable to prevent Mai from taking a seat on Zuko’s other side.

Zuko glared at his uncle for the treatment of his person, but the old man just gave him an innocent look. The young firebender adjusted his robes before unconsciously fixing his fire crown. Zuko watched as his mother passed the empty spot beside Mai and sat instead on the vacant chair beside Katara while his uncle sat between Ursa and Toph. He watched with veiled amusement when Aang pouted before reluctantly taking a seat next to Mai.

Zuko vaguely wondered why his mother had practically circled the table instead of taking the spot next to Mai before he returned his attention to the waterbender at his side who was fidgeting with the end of the blue sash that went around her waist. Again he wondered at her odd behavior towards him, but not before he wondered what he would see if he pulled on the sash wrapped around Katara’s trim waist...
After requesting one of his waitresses to bring a teapot to boil the evodia fruit for Suki, Iroh turned his gleeful face toward the expectant couple.

“So how far along are you, my dear?” Iroh asked Suki before he placed a mocked hurt look on his face. “I must say, I am bit hurt to be the last one to find out about your joyful news.”

Zuko rolled his eyes. “We all know you knew even before we did, Uncle.”

Iroh laughed as he stroked his small beard.

“Nothing can escape these wise eyes of mine,” he said proudly before he leveled his gaze on his nephew and at the young waterbending woman beside him. “Nothing.”

Both Katara and Zuko frowned at the mysterious tone in the old man’s voice and at the way he seemed to stare at them.

“Anyways,” Sokka interrupted as he placed a big, noisy kiss on Suki’s cheek, “We’re headed for our sixth month, right, Suki?”

“Sixth month, you say?” Ursa asked as a small frown appeared on her face. “I don’t remember being so…uh…large…at my sixth month when I was pregnant with Zuko and Azula. But having two warriors as parents, perhaps the child is growing big and strong.”

Sokka laughed as he rubbed Suki’s large belly.

“That’s right, my son will be big and strong just like his daddy,” he cooed at the bulging stomach.

“Oh, yeah?” Suki asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Who’s to say it won’t be a girl?” Katara asked with her own raised eyebrow.
Sokka grinned apologetically before he placed a kiss on Suki’s temple.

“Then my daughter will be beautiful and strong just like her mommy,” he added.

“Damn right,” Suki said with a chuckle as she ruffled her future husband’s hair.

The group laughed as they watched the playful display between the two.

“A boy or a girl, either one is a blessing,” Ursa said with a loving smile at her son.

“Whatever it turns out to be, I guarantee you all it’ll be a surprise,” Toph said with glint in her eyes that made the other’s wonder at her words.

“Yeah, but,” Sokka continued after he fixed his mussed hair, “I bet a bag of coins that it would be a boy.”

“I’ll take you on that bet,” Toph piped in with a grin.

“You’re on!” Sokka exclaimed enthusiastically as they both shook hands on it.

Iroh laughed with the rest as he watched a particular customer enter the building before being led to the table next to theirs just like he had ordered.

The Jasmine Dragon’s proprietor suppressed a mischievous grin from showing on his excited face. His young earthbending friend had informed him that morning about her ‘contribution’ to their ‘mission’, but Toph had been vague. It was something about a lake and dreams and he wondered what that meant. He hid his grin behind his teacup. Now it was his turn to ‘contribute’ and he was excited to know what the outcome would be.

Zuko smiled at the antics of his friends as he sat silently with clasped hands on the table. He had never seen anybody so excited about becoming a father as Sokka was. The guy was practically bursting at the seams with joy and excitement.
Frowning, Zuko wondered if he would feel such emotions whenever he learned he was to be a father before he mentally shook his head at the thought. It was not yet time for such thoughts since first he needed to find a wife, and right now, Mai did not seem to be it.

Zuko sighed inaudibly before he once again returned his attention to Katara who was currently gazing out the window.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve been here, huh?” Zuko asked casually for only the waterbender to hear. He watched as she tensed before she shifted nervously in her place.

Katara briefly looked up before nodding.

“Yeah, like four years,” she answered with a nervous laugh.

His closeness and warmth was making her remember her dream and the way her body had reacted. Not that she had been able to forget about it the whole day.

*Don’t even go there, Katara,* she warned herself.

Never before had she ever experienced such feelings nor had her body reacted in such a way. Since her village had been made up of only women and children during the war. When she had first met Jet she had felt small butterflies in her stomach and she had blushed constantly because of his roguishly handsome looks and bad boy attitude. Not to mention he was one of the few boys her age she had come across since she had left the Southern Water Tribe with Aang and her brother. However, once she learned of his true nature and intentions her silly crush ended almost as swiftly as it had first appeared.

Aang’s presence made her feel carefree. His cheerfulness and merry nature made her smile, but those same attributes were what sometimes drove her crazy. Aang was mature when it came to important decisions, but for the most part she could not help but feel as if he was an immature little boy who always wanted her attention. And besides all that, his hugs and kisses never seemed to inspire the passion she heard many people talk about. Maybe it would come later?

However, with just one glance of his amber eyes, Zuko made her feel intense powerful sensations that she did not know how to respond to nor was she able to understand.
Zuko racked his brain for something that would keep Katara talking to him before the corners of his mouth tilted slightly upwards.

“Remember when I had to keep the flames on the stove going while you bent hot tea into the teacups for hours? And we didn’t even get paid.” Zuko grinned down at the young waterbender.

Despite herself, Katara looked up at him and smiled at the memories.

“Yeah, I’ve never worked as hard in my life as I did during those weeks.” She laughed.

“I also remember when you accidentally poured salt in the fruit pastries instead of sugar,” Zuko smirked—though he knew it had not been her—and looked away as the waiters began to arrive. Katara was a great cook, after all.

Katara gaped at his words before she crossed her arms over her chest.

“That was not me! That was you!” she affirmed, dodging around a waiter who had placed their cups filled with aromatizing tea in front of them in order to give the arrogant firebender a small annoyed glare.

Zuko stroked his chin as if he was remembering the incident and carefully evaluating what the situation had been.

“No…I am pretty sure it was you,” he answered calmly as he raised the teacup to his lips.

Katara’s temper flared at the accusation and she opened her mouth to retort hotly when she saw Zuko glance at her from the corner of his eye with a small smirk.

Wait? Is he just joking with me? Is he…teasing me? Again? she mused disbelievingly.

Katara almost lost all coherent thought as she saw his golden eyes glint with amusement, something he never indulged in regularly. Katara’s heart raced as he turned his head to look down at her before a striking smile appeared on his face. Katara drew in a breath as his handsome face almost blew her away.
My gods! Why does he have to do that?! she yelled frustratingly in her head as she continued to stare at his barely concealed amused features.

She blinked when a waitress appeared between them and placed a tray with delicious sweets. She blushed in embarrassment at her reaction of having Zuko sitting so close to her, and for the strange feelings in her lower stomach and heart that his warm gaze caused her. She looked away, determined to keep her distance from him.

Zuko almost grinned when he saw Katara’s azure eyes flash with indignation and anger before realization dawned on her. A small smile began to spread on her face as he turned to look at her before it disappeared and she looked away from him. Again, he was surprised by the how much her reaction hurt him.

He sighed when he felt Mai touched his arm as she began to demand his attention.

Sokka had been watching Suki drink her evodia tea before he looked across the rounded table at his sister who was glaring at a smirking Zuko. He watched as her face lit up and a smile appeared on the young Fire Lord’s face. He was a bit confused, however, when his baby sister’s expression changed suddenly and she looked away. He was even more confused when Zuko frowned at her reaction. Was that hurt he saw in Zuko’s almost unreadable eyes? The Water Tribe warrior was distracted when he caught Suki reaching a hand to caress her growing stomach. He placed his own hand above hers and smiled down at her lovingly with excitement in his blue eyes.

Sipping from his teacup, Iroh glanced at Toph, who had a frown on her face, and then at his nephew, who kept stealing subtle glances at the blue-eyed young lady beside him, and then at Katara, who was rambling to Ursa as if she were trying to distract herself from something, and he sighed.

Katara took a break in explaining to Lady Ursa how to make sea prune stew as she tried to forget the handsome man beside her. Zuko’s proximity was enough to set her senses aflame and she was trying desperately to focus on Lady Ursa—who happened to be said handsome man’s mother.

Katara lifted her teacup to her lips to moisten her dry throat when someone bumped into her from behind, causing her to spill her hot tea onto her hand. Katara dropped the cup and hissed as the hot liquid burned her fingers.

She heard everybody call out her name in alarm, but before she could react, a pair of strong hands caught her own hand and began to wipe the tea with a silken handkerchief. Katara blushed when she
realized that those comforting hands belonged to Zuko as well as the cool, velvety handkerchief. Both shivered as their hands made contact.

“Katara, are you all right?” she heard Zuko ask with concern as his pair of hands continued to gently dab her skin with the smooth cloth.

She looked up shyly and nodded as her heart fluttered. The pain was easing, but a different burning sensation had spread throughout her body, much the same way his touch did in her dream.

“I’m so sorry,” the young female customer apologized hurriedly and bowed.

“It’s okay. Accidents happen,” Katara replied without much thought as she continued to watch Zuko gently and carefully checking her hand for worse injury. The burn was not that serious and she could have healed it in an instant if it was, but Zuko’s care was better.

*Much better,* she sighed dreamily, her stomach fluttering with butterflies.

Content that Katara was indeed fine, Zuko turned his head around to pin a glare at the clumsy customer.

“You should be more careful,” he reprimanded harshly.

Toph elbowed Iroh, who in return looked at Ursa, who smiled discreetly at the protective hold the young Fire Lord still had on the Water Tribe maiden’s small hand.

“Yes, I’m terribly sorry,” the young woman said with a deeper bow before she looked up with an apologetic look.

Her large brown eyes widened and a small grin appeared on her face.

“Li! It’s so good to see you again!” she exclaimed and immediately straightened, forgetting the incident.
Katara frowned at the way the young woman was smiling at Zuko.

*Does Zuko know this girl, too?* she thought irritably and pulled her hand away from Zuko’s grasp, placing her hands on her lap.

Zuko reluctantly allowed Katara to remove her hand from his before he returned his glare at the woman, who seemed to have forgotten she was in presence of royalty and had caused his closest friend pain, although small. The young woman was a bit short, with a small bushy ponytail on her dark-haired head. She was wearing a short green dress and had a bright and friendly smile on her face. There was something familiar about her.

“Wow, it seems you have really accomplished a lot these past few years. First a juggler for the circus, then a waiter in a small teashop, and now you’re the Fire Lord,” the woman teased and giggled.

*Ah, crap…* Zuko cursed as he frowned.

“Jin…what are you doing here?” he asked carefully.

He could practically feel Mai’s anger next to him. Jin was nice and all, but he really did not want to be reminded of that embarrassing date. A date his uncle had forced him to go on.

He knew Iroh had been worried about him, afraid that his nephew would never find a girlfriend—not that it would have been hard—but the fact was that he had never been a very social person, and even less after what happened with his sire. That is why he had used brothels. There was no need for good impressions or great social skills in order to form a relationship since the few women he had bedded were just there to release his sexual frustrations. He thought he was horrible on his date with Jin and he did not need the others to know it.

Iroh decided to speak as he suppressed a chuckle at his nephew’s uncomfortable expression.

“Is it not strange to see Miss Jin after so long, Nephew?” Iroh asked innocently. “We ran into each other about a year ago when she came for a cup of tea, and now she comes to the Jasmine Dragon once every week. And since you two knew each other, I give her discounts!”

“And how do you two know each other exactly?” Mai asked coldly with unveiled irritation as she looked the Earth Kingdom woman over with disdain.
Zuko suppressed the urge to sigh and rub the back of his neck.

“We met in the Lower Ring of Ba Sing Se and well, we…uh…”

“We went out on a date almost four years ago,” Jin replied eagerly and then she blushed.

Zuko sighed.

Great, he thought sarcastically. *I just hope she leaves out the part where Uncle did my hair and I humiliated myself by trying to juggle.*

Katara noticed the pink hue that appeared on the woman’s cheeks and she was surprised to find herself feeling anxious and uneasy to know what happened on this date.

*Zuko must have really liked her if he asked her out on date,* she thought sadly. *I wonder if he still likes her.*

“Date, huh?” Katara said neutrally as she nibbled on a cookie, clenching it so tightly that it almost crumbled in her hand.

“Yes, it was wonderful and so romantic,” Jin said with a dreamy sigh.

*Romantic?* Katara frowned, *Did Zuko give her flowers? Did they ride on a boat under the moon? Did Zuko tell her sweet things?* she thought even though she knew that Zuko would probably never do such things. *Why do I even care?* she asked herself with a scowl.

“And what happened on this date?” Iroh asked innocently. “You never did tell me when you came back *late* that night, Zuko.”

Zuko glared at his uncle, but before he could respond, Jin piped in with another dreamy sigh.
“At the end of the day we kissed.” She blushed even redder.

Iroh coughed in order to hide his amusement at the look of embarrassment on his nephew’s face.

Katara clenched the cookie in her hand so hard in crumbled into tiny pieces onto the table. *They what?*

“Oh, really?” Mai asked with an icy tone as she glared at Zuko who was currently sipping at his teacup as if nothing had happened.

“You kissed? So how was it?” Ty Lee excitedly asked with her usual bubbly persona.

“Ty Lee!” Zuko snapped at her as he tried to keep from flushing.

“It was such an amazing kiss,” Jin responded with a dreamy look on her face as another blush appeared on her cheeks.

Zuko stared at the young girl as if she were crazy.

*What the hell is she talking about?* he thought. The kiss was sweet, but it sure wasn’t amazing, definitely nothing close to be sighing over.

“Wow, Sparky,” Toph spoke up with a smirk. “I never thought you were such a ladies’ man.”

“It was nothing like that,” the firebender assured as he glared down at his teacup. “We just went to eat at a small food place and then we walked around. That was it.”

Jin giggled.

“Of course that wasn’t it. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about that date?” she asked softly as she placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder.
Katara glared heatedly at Jin’s hand resting on Zuko’s shoulder.

*How dare she touch him!* she growled in her head as she vaguely wondered if her friends would figure out who could have doused Jin with the tea from their table.

Zuko tensed as he felt Jin touch him and slowly reached to shrug off her hand. He resisted the urge to snap at her for daring to touch the Fire Lord in such a way. He was surprised, however, when it was someone else who removed the unwelcomed appendage from his person.

Without thinking about it, Katara’s arm shot out to grab Jin’s wrist.

“You two probably know each other and went on a date a few years ago, but things have changed. Fire Lord Zuko is not Li anymore and you will show him the proper respect his title as Fire Lord demands for. *Do not* touch him again,” Katara hissed out dangerously as she pulled Jin’s wrist almost roughly away from Zuko.

Those at the table fell silent as the group stared in shock at the seemingly angry waterbender. Aang hesitantly stood up from his chair, but then sat down again as a deep frown settled on his face. If he wasn’t mistaken—and he hoped he was—it seemed like Katara was jealous. But that couldn’t be because she loved him, not Zuko. Mai seethed silently as she glared between the waterbender and the Earth Kingdom woman. Suki turned to look at Sokka who had an equally puzzled expression on his face.

Toph openly grinned as she leaned back on her seat. Ursa look at her old friend beside her and smiled knowingly while Iroh returned the smile with one of his own as he took another sip from his tea. His plan turned out better than he thought it would.

Zuko stared at Katara with curiosity at the way she was glaring into Jin’s face. He was a bit surprised at the strong and rather harsh reaction Katara had displayed because of a simple touch from an unfamiliar woman. If he didn’t know any better, he would think that she was jealous. But that couldn’t be, because she only saw him as a friend. However, he had to admit that the thought of having Katara jealous because of him did please him a bit…okay maybe it pleased him a lot.

Jin jerked back a step at the reprimand she received from the beautiful Water Tribe woman sitting beside the Fire Lord. Blushing in embarrassment, Jin bowed again.

“You’re right,” she said. “Please, forgive my rude behavior, Fire Lord Zuko. I didn’t mean any
“Do not worry. All is forgiven,” Zuko replied coolly. “I’m just sorry you had to bear with me on that date,” he finished absentmindedly as he continued to stare at the irritated waterbender by his side.

She also looks beautiful when she’s mad, he thought with a smirk.

“You weren’t a bad date. It was the most wonderful night of my life, especially because of that kiss,” Jin said dreamily before she smiled. “Thank you, Master Iroh, for the tea. I’ll see you next week.”

Jin bowed again cheerfully as she left their table to exit the teashop with Katara and Mai glaring daggers at the back of her head.

“Well,” Iroh piped in, “That was interesting.”

He hid his grin behind his teacup when Katara turned back around and crossed her arms over her chest while she glowered at the innocent teacup in front of her.

Most interesting indeed, he mused.

Zuko sighed irritably, barely stopping himself from flopping onto the green couch in one of the palace sitting rooms. It was late at night and everybody else was getting ready to go to sleep after their busy day. Even though he was tired, he knew he would not be able to rest, much less sleep.

After the initial awkwardness from the encounter with Jin dissipated, they had finished drinking their delicious tea and eating their sweet pastries before the group had departed from the Jasmine Dragon with pleased smiles and satisfied stomachs. Iroh had stayed behind until the teahouse closed for the day before the old firebender made his way back to the palace.

The group had continued their trip as they walked around the prestigious Upper Ring of Ba Sing Se. They had stopped at a few shops along the way where, unsurprisingly—and to Ty Lee, Aang and Sokka’s delight—they were given free souvenirs.

They then had boarded an earthbending powered train to cross over to the Middle Ring of the city
while sightseeing along the ride. Grumbling that the train was being too slow, Toph had decided to help it move along much quicker with a small amount of earthbending. The sights became a blur as the train whizzed by while the passengers held onto each other for their lives.

Deciding it was best to walk after that incident, they arrived at the University of Ba Sing Se. The war heroes were welcomed exuberantly into the grand school while they were shown around the campus by the whole faculty and student body no less. As the sun began to set, the group had decided to return to the palace where the Earth King, Bosco, and Iroh were waiting for them with another splendid banquet.

Zuko sighed again as he ran a hand through his unbound dark hair. And during all that time he was unable to enjoy himself.

The reason? Katara.

Once they left the Jasmine Dragon, Katara had continued to ignore him. He had thought that with the incident with Jin, Katara would have returned to her normal self and would have begun to speak to him again, but he had been wrong. She didn’t talk to him but only for a few words. He had tried to start conversations with her, but she would just nod and move away from him. She did not walk by his side, but remained attached either to Aang or Ursa.

But what he hated the most was that she did not even look up to his face. He was unable to see her lovely blue eyes because she either had them cast down or averted to the side. He did not like it at all and her evasive behavior was making him displeased and angry.

‘What did you do to make Sugar Queen act this way?’ Toph had asked him as the group stepped inside a pottery shop.

‘I didn’t do anything—’ he had begun to argue before he stopped and frowned. ‘I don’t know…’

Had he done something? Zuko tried to think of everything he could have possibly done to make Katara behave the way she had, but he could not come up with anything. It was as if they were back in the Western Air Temple where he had to endure her indifference.

No, this was much worse because back then Katara acknowledged that he existed even if it was with hostility, and he knew he deserved her treatment. But now they have become great friends, he had shared with her some things he was unable and unwilling to tell anybody else, and her avoidance
saddened and pained him so much to the point that it scared him. Zuko closed his eyes as a dreadful thought came to his mind.

What if Katara was bored of him? What if she did not want anything to do with him anymore? Was she displeased and disappointed as his sire was once of him? Did she dislike him and hate him like his sister once did?

That is why he had a hard time trusting and befriending people. Every relationship he had had with someone ended badly. His mother was taken away from him when he was just a child because he had somehow displeased his grandfather and Ozai. He was scarred and banished from his home by his own father because he had stood up to him against a horrible plan. Azula, his own sister, had used him in order to save herself when their father believed the Avatar was dead and then she tried to kill him, her own brother. In the beginning of his relationship with Mai it had been nice and pleasant, but now it was cold, awkward, and…unexciting.

Was the same thing to happen with Katara? Was their friendship to end up like his past relationships did so many times before?

“No!” Zuko growled angrily as he slammed his clenched fist on the armrest of the couch he was sitting on. “I won’t allow it. I will find out what is wrong. Katara will tell me what is going on.”

He could not stand the thought of never speaking to Katara ever again, or listen to her laugh, or share his thoughts with her once more. He could not bear the thought of losing her.

Her friendship, that is, he clarified.

Zuko straightened in his seat and composed himself, resuming his stoic expression as the sound of light footsteps reached his ears. He was not about to show anybody how confused, irritated, and depressed he was feeling at the moment.

He narrowed his eyes into slits, but remained still, when Katara’s form emerged from the hall and entered the sitting room. She had a book in her hands and she appeared to be reading. Zuko watched silently as she made her way across the room without realizing she was not alone.

Katara turned the page from the small book she had borrowed from the palace library and yawned. Maybe reading a book was not such a good idea if she wanted to keep awake. She could not return to her room and go to sleep.
The reason? Zuko.

She did not want to fall asleep for she was afraid she would have another dream about a certain stunning firebender. It was difficult to forget the first one and she did not want to imagine what would become of her if she had another such dream. It was hard enough to keep her distance from Zuko that day as they walked around Ba Sing Se since she had come to enjoy his company a lot. She had to stop herself many times from reaching and taking his arm in order to show him one interesting thing or another in her excitement.

It had been difficult to stay away when Song appeared. The pretty and gentle herbalist had made her wary. But then she had wavered in her resolve to keep her distance from Zuko when Jin appeared next. The way the Earth Kingdom young woman had acted around Zuko did not sit well with her.

*And she even dared to touch him! I swear! The audacity of some women!* Katara narrowed her eyes as she continued her slow walk into the sitting room.

The overly friendly smile, blushes, and dreamy looks the big-hipped woman had thrown at Zuko had made Katara irritated. Even now she wished she could have frozen Jin right in her spot with all the tea in the teahouse.

Katara sighed. That was why she had to keep away from Zuko because his presence, his courteous actions, such as his care of her hand with the tea incident, combined with the dream from last night was making her think almost homicidal thoughts about other women. That wasn’t normal. What was happening to her? It was just making her so confused and frustrated!

Zuko watched as Katara made her way across the room with a frown on her face. She seemed to be deep in thought and he wondered what she was thinking about that was making her look so troubled. He watched as Katara finally looked up from her book and their eyes met. He saw her eyes widened and a small squeak escaped between her lips before she quickly turned around.

“Katara, wait!” Zuko shouted as he sprang up from the couch. He narrowed his eyes as he swiftly and determinedly strode towards the waterbender before standing directly behind her.

Katara stopped in her tracks at his hard tone and hesitantly turned back around without looking at him.
“Hey, Zuko,” she stuttered. “We sure had fun today, huh? Okay, then…it’s late, so I’ll just be heading to my room to go to sleep.” She laughed nervously as she took a step back. She gulped when Zuko took a step forward to match her own.

“Why are you avoiding me?” Zuko asked bluntly, suppressing the irritation he felt from showing in his voice.

“What? I-I’m not avoiding you. Don’t be silly,” Katara said as she took another step away from him, but again she was unable to keep the distance since he followed her.

“Do not lie to me, Katara!” Zuko hissed angrily as she continued to avoid looking at him.

Katara’s eyes widened at his outburst. He had never spoken to her with such an angry emotion before, not even when they were enemies. It pained her.

“I’m n-not l-lying,” she stammered.

Zuko’s eyes flashed dangerously at her statement.

“Yes, you are!” he growled. “Tell me what’s going on!”

“Nothing is going on! I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Katara yelled back, not understanding what his problem was.

“Oh, really?” Zuko asked sarcastically. “You’ve been ignoring me since breakfast this morning. You didn’t talk to me, but for just a few words. You avoided walking, sitting, or standing beside me, and when I tried to come close to you, you moved away from me as if I had some kind of disease!”

Was I really that obvious? Katara thought before she frowned at his words.

Zuko’s temper flared when Katara remained silent and still refused to look into his eyes.

“I demand to know what the hell is going on this instant, Katara!” he ordered heatedly.
“You can’t order me around, Zuko!” she yelled angrily. Her own temper surfaced at Zuko’s demanding tone and she raised her eyes to glare at him.

Zuko narrowed his golden eyes.

“That may be so,” he said between gritted teeth, “but I still want to know why you have been ignoring and avoiding me all day.”

Katara blanched and she looked away again as she clasped the small book in her hands. Zuko watched as Katara clenched the little book so tightly against her chest that her fingers turned almost white.

“Katara, tell me,” he demanded again.

Whirling on her heels, Katara tried to race to the door, but Zuko reacted quickly and grabbed her right arm, careful not to hurt her. He swiftly spun her around towards him, mentally groaning when the scent of gardenias hit his senses.

Katara gasped as she almost collided against Zuko’s broad chest if it wasn’t for her free hand that steadied her between their bodies. The small book fell between them, forgotten on the floor like the rest of the world around them.

Zuko frowned when Katara lowered her face, hiding her cobalt eyes from his sight.

“Katara?” Zuko called softly, his anger dissipating. He could never stay angry with her.

“Please, tell me why you’re ignoring me. Have I done something wrong again? Just tell me what I did and I swear I will fix it,” he told her as he still held onto her arm, pleading for her to help him understand. Pleading for her to reassure him that they were still friends and she did not hate him.

Katara frowned at what she just heard and at the sadness she detected in his voice. She looked up into his amber orbs and what she saw in them almost made tears fall from her own eyes. She saw anger, sadness, hurt, and…fear.
And then it dawned on her.

So many people—his own family—had hurt Zuko so much in the past. That was why he had a hard time opening up to others and letting people into his life. He was afraid of being hurt again as he had been repeatedly so many times before. She was trying to keep away from him in order to save some of her sanity, but it seemed Zuko saw her actions as a form of avoidance and rejection.

*Oh, La! What have I done?* she cried in her head.

“It’s not your fault, Zuko! You didn’t do anything wrong! I’m so sorry for making you think that I was avoiding you!” she cried out, reaching her hand, that was not being held by him, to touch his right cheek, hoping that he would believe her. “I’m sorry, Zuko. Please forgive me.”

Zuko searched her cerulean eyes for any form of deceit, but found none. He inwardly sighed in relief as he leaned into her touch before a small smile spread on his face. How could he have thought Katara would hurt him? How could he have thought she would be like all the others in his past?

“You don’t know how glad it makes me to know that,” he admitted softly, enjoying the feeling of her soft hand on his face. “Katara, I…” he paused.

When Katara looked at him expectantly, Zuko let out a small breath.

“I want you to know that I see you as a...very good friend, a friend that I have never had the privilege of having ever before, and well...I must admit I was a bit...worried that I had somehow...lost you,” he said carefully.

Katara felt her heart flutter at his words.

“Do you really see me as such a good friend? Am I really that important that you would be worried if you lost my friendship?” she asked quietly.

Zuko smiled.
“Of course. You have done much to help me and you are always there to listen to me when I have a problem.”

Katara looked away with a frown.

“There are others that do the same. Like Song for instance,” she replied tersely.

She inwardly cringed at her words. She had not intended to say that, but it had just slipped out because she had been brooding over it all day.

“Song?” Zuko asked, furrowing his forehead.

“Yeah, she said that even though you lied about your identity, the rest of what you told her about yourself was the truth,” Katara replied. “It seems that there are others who are willing to listen to you.”

“Well…” Zuko frowned. “When I met Song she told me she had been hurt by the Fire Nation and the only thing I revealed was that so had I, but that’s all I told her and did not go into much detail.”

“Oh, Katara thought, mentally slapping her herself.

“What you say may be true,” he continued, “but there are those who just ‘listen’ to you talk while there are those who listen and understand when you talk to them, just like you, Katara,” he emphasized. “You did not judge me when I revealed my past to you, but listened with a compassionate heart. And I must confess that you are the only person that I feel comfortable talking with and the only person alongside Uncle and my mother that I really enjoy spending my time with.”

Katara slightly gaped at his words.

“Really?” she asked him incredulously. Was that truly possible?

“Yes,” he replied simply, but that one simple word caused something in Katara’s heart to burn.
“But...what about...Mai?” she asked.

Zuko sighed before he slowly said, “She...is not the easiest person to talk to.”

“Oh,” the waterbender uttered. For some reason, his words made her happy.

Smiling gently, Katara looked back at him.

“I kind of find it hard to believe that I’m one of the few people you talk to, but...I enjoy your company a lot as well,” she admitted softly. “It makes me happy that you find me worthy enough to talk to and I want you to know that I will always be there if you need somebody to lend a sympathetic ear,” she stated truthfully.

Zuko smiled warmly at her words because he knew she would always be there for him as he would be there for her. They continued to gaze into each other’s eyes as both felt that there was something else they should admit, something much deeper, but they held their tongues, afraid of being rejected.

“Well, if I didn’t do anything wrong to deserve such disrespect,” Zuko said with a small grin, “then why were you acting so strangely?” he asked curiously after a few minutes of comfortable silence. He scolded himself when Katara quickly removed her hand from his face at his question.

Katara blushed and again looked away from him.

“Well, I...you see...uh...”

She couldn’t explain her odd behavior to Zuko! She could not tell him that last night she had a dream about him where he had been touching her and where he had almost kissed her that it had caused a fire to spread throughout her body. How embarrassing would that be?

Zuko watched as the waterbender’s cheeks turned bright red. He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“Katara?” he prompted, gently squeezing her arm which he finally noticed he was still holding.
Katara noticed as well and her heart began to race in her chest. He was touching her. Even if innocently, his touch caused her mind to be flooded with images from their spar on the flagship, the dream from the previous night, the lake that started it all, and the new feelings and sensation that were brought forth because of these events.

“I...I c-can’t tell you!” she uttered quickly and tried to pull her arm away from his grasp, but she was unable to make him budge.

Zuko frowned.

“What is it, Katara? What's wrong? You know you can tell me anything,” he told her reassuringly as he was filled with concerned at her anxiety.

“I know I can, Zuko.” Katara smiled at him before she quickly averted her eyes. “But it’s just that… it’s too…embarrassing,” she whispered and blushed scarlet.

The young man furrowed his forehead as he tried to come up with anything embarrassing that could have happened that concerned him and the way Katara had reacted around him that day.

His face flushed. Well, there were those interesting dreams he had had lately, but she couldn’t know about those. At least he hoped she didn’t. And then there were those times his body reacted whenever she did something to make his blood boil like on the ship or in the lake. But he was still alive and with no important body parts frozen, so she did not know about that either.

*Wait a minute. The lake!* She must still be embarrassed about what happened even though he had assured her everything was fine. Now he understood. She was probably uncomfortable being around him after their little encounter.

Zuko smiled as he hooked a finger under Katara’s chin so she could look into his eyes and see he was being honest.

“It’s alright, Katara. I understand.”

Katara’s eyes widen in horror and her face turned a darker shade of red.
“You do?” she squeaked. “Oh, no!” she moaned, mortified. What did he think of her now? Would he laugh at her? Would he be disgusted?

Zuko nodded as he continued to smile down at her.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed about what happened at the lake the other night. I promised that I wasn’t going to tell anybody, so don’t worry, because I intend to keep that promise. And I assure you that I didn’t see anything that I wasn’t supposed to see, I swear it,” he told her. Though, he would not have minded catching a glimpse…

Katara gaped at his words and at his misunderstanding.

“That’s not what I—I mean…yeah…that’s it! How silly of me, huh?” She laughed almost hysterically.

“I’ll say,” Zuko chuckled.

“Hey!” Katara complained halfheartedly.

Zuko continued to chuckle softly before he reluctantly released her arm with a faint blush. He cleared his throat before reaching down to retrieve her fallen book. He handed it to her with a smile.

“Thanks,” Katara said, smiling as she grabbed it, hugging it to her chest. “I didn’t even realize I dropped it.”

“It’s not your fault you’re sometimes clumsy,” Zuko teased.

*Again with the teasing!* Katara gasped before she grinned.

“You’re calling *me* clumsy after you poured salt instead of sugar into the fruit pastries?” she teased.

“Damn,” Zuko cursed as he crossed his arms over his chest. “I knew I shouldn’t have brought that up.”
This time Katara laughed genuinely as he playfully narrowed his eyes at her. She would never again allow something as silly as a dream affect her so strongly...because her reaction to a dream made her hurt Zuko and break her promise to help make him happy.

Because that was all it was, right? Just a dream...
After resolving their little misunderstanding, Katara and Zuko—much to Aang and Mai’s displeasure and much to the delight of Iroh, Toph, and Ursa—became almost inseparable for the next few days. Upon Zuko’s request, Katara had readily agreed to help Zuko with the compromise between the Fire Nation and Ba Sing Se. Both rulers had decided to open up a trade system between their countries.

After debating for a while, the gang, with the exception of Mai and Ty Lee, entered the neglected part of the city of Ba Sing Se. Just as he had seen before while he observed the Lower Ring in the shadows a few nights ago, Zuko’s earlier assessment became accurate as the gang looked around the slums. The houses were fixed much better, but the living conditions of the people were not much improved; they hardly had enough money to buy food for their families. Trash littered the dirty streets and desperate thieves lurked behind alleys.

Once they realized who had come to visit, the people had flocked towards them with hope in their eyes. They had practically begged for their help, in which the Fire Lord and the Avatar reassured them that they would do everything in their power to aid them.

Katara was appalled at the sickly and starving looking populace that they passed, especially the small children who sometimes approached her with their curious and hopeful little faces.

“I wish I had the money to help these people right now,” Katara said sadly as she watched the children scurry away after they received a few coins from the Fire Lord and Lady Toph Bei Fong.

“Don’t worry, Katara,” Aang reassured her.

He smiled at her, but she did not notice it as she looked around the place. Aang suppressed a sad frown from showing on his face at her lack of reaction.

“Once the compromise starts, they’ll receive all the help they need,” he added softly.

“I know, but that could take months and possibly years!” Katara exclaimed, exasperated.
“For now the only thing we can do is wait patiently a while longer,” Zuko reminded her. He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and Katara immediately relaxed.

She smiled up at him.

“I guess you’re right,” she consented and sighed.

Aang narrowed his eyes at Zuko who slowly removed his hand from the waterbender with a raised eyebrow.

“Why do they look so sick?” Suki asked what was on everybody else’s mind.

She grimaced at a slight pain in her lower abdomen, but assured her worried husband-to-be that she was fine when he moved to help her. Sokka had tried to convince her to stay at the palace and rest, but she refused to be sitting on her behind like a lazy noblewoman. She was a warrior for Kyoshi’s sake!

“Ohmm?” Zuko pondered as he scanned the area and the people around them. “The people didn’t look so unhealthy when Uncle and I lived here. I don’t understand.”

“Excuse me,” Aang said politely as he stopped an elderly couple who passed them by. “Why do the people look so sick?”

The bald, old man and his skinny wife looked up and squinted at the strangers with the nice, clean clothing. They immediately recognized the Avatar with his monk robes and arrow tattoos before they gaped at the tall, black-haired young man looking down at them. They saw the glinting fire crown, the fine red and black attire, and the infamous scar on his face.

“Fire Lord Zuko!” the aged couple exclaimed and began a series of bows.

Aang was a bit confused at the way they had basically looked past him. Since he was so used to adoring attention always being directed at him, being ignored irked him.

“Uh…please, you can stop that now,” Zuko said uncomfortably at the almost groveling people
before him. He looked around surreptitiously to make sure a crowd was not gathering at this unwanted attention.

“Yes, of course!” the man obeyed, but not before they gave one last deep bow.

The man looked up and smiled. His wife beamed up at the young Fire Lord.

“Uh…thank you,” Zuko said, uncertainly. Sure, he was used to being showed respect since he was the Fire Lord, but never to this extreme.

“Why, anything for the one who stopped the war and brought our soldiers back home,” the man bowed again, mirrored by his wife.

Zuko was unsure on how to react to the sudden adoration. He was used to the indifferent and scornful looks—which were now abating—and now he was just getting used to the grateful looks he had been recently receiving. But adoration? He was surprised by it.

He noticed the others were staring curiously between him and the beaming couple, and he shrugged. He smiled when Katara gave him a grin and a look that said, ‘Didn’t I tell you?’

“Wow, Sparky. Looks like you have another fan club that isn’t all made up of a bunch of salivating, love-struck girls,” Toph stage whispered before she chortled. She didn’t need her eyesight to know Katara was glaring at her.

Zuko ignored the annoying earthbender as he addressed the elderly couple.

“Could you tell us why the people look like they have some kind of illness?”

“Certainly, Fire Lord Zuko!” the old woman exclaimed before she exchanged a look with her husband. “Our water system was contaminated a few weeks ago when some kind of animal fell in the reservoir and drowned before rotting in the water.”

“Ew, gross,” Sokka gagged, earning himself a smack to the back of his head by his future bride.
“We didn’t know until the rotting animal was found a few days ago, and by that time, the entire
Lower Ring had used the water to drink, to cook, and to bathe,” the man continued after his wife.

“That’s horrible,” Katara said with a frown. “Is the reservoir still contaminated?” Maybe Aang and
she could clean the water.

“Oh, no!” the man exclaimed and shook his head. “It has been cleaned out already. People are sick
because we don’t have decent enough food to eat or medicine to take in order to help those who had
taken ill.”

“But luckily we’re doing much better,” the woman spoke up with optimism, “Though there are some
—mainly children—who are very ill in the local infirmary.”

“Where’s the infirmary?” the waterbender asked. “I would like to see what I can do for them right
now.”

When the old couple gave her confused looks, Zuko spoke up.

“Lady Katara is not only a master waterbender, but a great and talented healer as well,” he said with
an emotion that sounded so much like pride that it caused Katara to blush bashfully.

Aang glanced at them with narrowed eyes before he shook his head at himself for his reaction.

“Oh, why, that’s astonishing! In that case, just follow this street here, then on the seventh block make
a left, pass the marketplace, and then a right and there you will find the small infirmary,” the woman
replied as she made motions with her hands. “The children will be very happy to know they will be
healed.”

“Who cleaned the reservoir?” Suki asked.

“The Freedom Fighters,” the couple informed. After a while, they gave another series of bows and
left.
“Those kids are here again?” Sokka laughed after the elderly couple moved away.

Zuko frowned. Weren’t the Freedom Fighters that rebel group that had once been made up of a bunch of children and teens? The one led by that crazy guy, Jet?

“The Freedom Fighters are here?” Katara repeated. If they were here, then that meant…

“Ah, Sokka, I see that you’re still as stupid as ever. We’re no longer kids,” a smooth masculine voice sounded behind her, interrupting them.

Katara gasped as she turned around to face the owner of the voice.

“Jet!” she exclaimed in surprise.

Zuko tensed as he spotted the young man standing in front of Katara with a grin on his tanned face and a gleam in his dark eyes. Zuko instinctively grasped the hilt of his dual swords strapped to his right hip, but he remembered that his friends knew Jet and his motley crew after watching the horrible play at Ember Island. Did they know he was dangerous?

After the incident with Long Feng and the Dai Li under the Catacombs of Ba Sing Se, Katara had thought that Jet had been mercifully shot and died. She had mourned his death for he was so young and he had repented on his wrong ways, but she had moved on since she had the war hovering over her head as well as the responsibility of helping Aang become a full-fledged Avatar.

Low and behold her surprise when Jet appeared out of nowhere in one of the southern Earth Kingdom villages she had gone to help alongside Aang and Toph about two years ago. He had told them that he had insisted his friends put him out of his misery and kill him, but Smellerbee had vehemently refused and took him to a good healer she had heard about. He had been bedridden with excruciating pain for months after Smellerbee and Longshot managed to pull him out of the catacombs, and it was almost a year before he could start walking again.

“Nice to see ya again, Katara,” Jet greeted with a smooth smile, ignoring the rest of the group she was with. “You have grown even lovelier these past two years.”

Katara gave him a smile as a small blush reached her cheeks. Aang just rolled his eyes since he knew how Jet was with the ladies, but Zuko gritted his teeth and tightened his hold on one of his swords.
The Freedom Fighter leader had grown taller, but he still had his lean build, dressed in dark pants and a dark-green shirt beneath chest armor. His messy, dark-brown hair was a bit longer than it now fell to above his eyebrows and shoulders, and he had his usual cocky smirk on his handsome face, a wheat stalk between his lips. Behind him was Longshot who looked the same except for a small beard on his chin and Smellerbee who had longer hair that fell above her shoulders. A small group of unfamiliar people, possibly more Freedom Fighters, was standing behind them with curious expressions.

“What are you doing here?” Sokka asked in an annoyed tone, eyeing the rogue young man suspiciously.

Jet glanced at him briefly before he returned his intense stare to Katara who seemed unaffected by his appraisal.

“We were just around the area when we heard that the water was contaminated, so we decided to help,” he responded smoothly.

“That was nice of you,” Katara complimented and smiled.

Zuko narrowed his eyes as he felt a strange pinch in his chest.

Jet smiled at her. “It was because of you that I want to help others.”

Before they knew it, Jet had stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Katara’s waist and pulled her into a hug. Zuko growled lowly and started to unsheathe his swords while Sokka pulled out his boomerang, but it was Aang who beat them to it as he flew towards Katara and Jet.

Katara tensed before she began to struggle in Jet’s hold. She sighed in relief when Aang pulled Jet away from her.

“Don’t touch her, Jet,” Aang warned as he frowned at him, hoping the Freedom Fighters’ leader would understand.

Jet laughed and shrugged smoothly.
“Hello, Aang. Nice to know you’ve reached puberty,” he teased with a friendly smile.

“Don’t talk to him like that, you jerk,” Toph growled out, cracking her knuckles, since she did not know this Jet guy as well as the others.

_No one but me can talk to Twinkletoes that way!_ Toph barked in her head. She frowned at the thought before she shrugged it away.

“He was just teasing, Toph,” Aang reassured her, returning the smile at the young man.

Jet did not even spare the short girl a glance as he looked away from Aang to stare at Katara, giving her a charming smile.

“Did you miss me, Katara?” he asked her with a smug grin.

“Uh…” Katara backed a step when Jet reached for her hand to kiss it, but a strong hand gripping his shoulder almost painfully stopped him.

“I do believe Aang said not to lay a hand on her,” Zuko spoke with an authoritative voice, barely suppressing the urge to smash his fist into the other man’s face.

He did not like the heated looks Jet threw at Katara. Aang may not have noticed since Jet was his friend, but Zuko did, and he hated it.

Jet turned his head to glare at whoever dared to stop him before he roughly shrugged off Zuko’s hand as if he had actually been burned.

“You!” Jet hissed and jumped away from him.

“Jet! Calm down!” Smellerbee tried to tell him, but her leader ignored her advice.
“What the fuck are you doing here?” Jet growled, drawing his dual hook swords.

Zuko looked at him impassively, though he was seething inside.

“I do not have to answer to the likes of you,” he replied in a bored tone.

“You bastard!” Jet yelled angrily. “Answer me!”

Zuko narrowed his eyes dangerously.

“You are no one to order me around, much less tell me what to do,” he growled out.

The young Fire Lord started to unsheathe his broadswords, but a small hand stopped him. Zuko glanced down at Katara, who was giving him a pleading look, and he slightly relaxed his stance, though he did not remove his hand from the hilts of his swords and resumed glaring at Jet.

“Zuko, what the hell is going on?” Sokka asked. “You know who Jet is?” Even though his sister and Aang liked Jet after he showed he had changed, Sokka still hated his arrogant guts.

The firebender nodded without taking his eyes away from Jet.

“Unfortunately, yes,” he responded coolly.

Before they could ask him how he knew the Freedom Fighter, he continued.

“Uncle and I met Jet and his group when we boarded the ferry that brought us to Ba Sing Se after we became fugitives. He even asked me to join his merry little band,” he said humorlessly.

“That was before I knew what kind of scum you were!” Jet shouted. “I tried to warn everybody, but nobody believed me! It was his fault I was arrested by the Dai Li, was brainwashed, and was almost killed!”
“What?” the gang gasped and turned around to stare at Zuko.

“I did not get him arrested,” Zuko replied truthfully and frowned. “It was his own fault the Dai Li took him away. I was minding my own business, helping Uncle in the teashop when he draws his swords at me. Who in their right mind attacks a person in a teashop with innocent people around? And I was not about to let him kill me and get my uncle in trouble after all he had gone through so we could have a new start.”

“You attacked him?” Katara asked as she glared at Jet.

“They were firebenders!” Jet argued. “I just wanted to warn the people that they were being fooled by them!”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Aang piped in as he again began his usual task of settling arguments. He did not want to see his two friends fight.

“Of course it matters!” Jet yelled as he glared at Zuko. “I was right to mistrust him! Have you forgotten that it was because of him that Ba Sing Se was taken over, or better yet, that it was because of him that Aang was almost killed?”

Zuko flinched at the memory of his horrible mistake.

“What he did was inexcusable, but Zuko has changed for the better,” Katara said, defending him.

“How can you say that?” Jet exclaimed. “Why are you all with him? He’s a firebender!”

“I thought you changed your views,” Sokka said sarcastically.

“I changed my ways of dealing with the Fire Nation, but I have not stopped hating that damn country,” Jet gritted out. “I will never forget it was the Fire Nation that took everything from me! And this guy,” he growled as he pointed at Zuko with one of his hook swords, “is the spawn of those bastards. He’s the Fire Lord!”

“No duh,” Toph muttered sardonically.
“Zuko is the Fire Lord, but he’s different than the previous ones!” Katara exclaimed, as she placed her hand on Zuko’s arm. “He went against his own nation, his own father, and joined Aang for the good of the world. He has done much to help everyone, even when he was just shown hatred and hostility.”

“That’s right!” Sokka yelled in agreement.

Jet scoffed before he spat at the ground before Zuko’s feet.

“He could be the greatest saint in history, but that won’t change the fact that his country made a lot of people suffer,” he gritted out.

The gang opened their mouths to argue, but Zuko held up a hand to stop them.

“I understand how he feels and I don’t blame him,” he said coolly.

He looked at his friends as they all stared at him incredulously.

“It’s hard to forgive those who have caused so much pain and grief,” he continued. “And it’s almost impossible to get rid of the hatred, especially if that hate was fostered for years. I just hope that one day you would see that I have changed and am different,” he said as he looked at Jet.

“I guess we’ll see,” Jet said as he replaced his swords.

Both young men glared at each other a moment longer before a smirk appeared on Jet’s face.

“We have some things to take care of. It was nice bumping into you guys,” he said, looking at Aang and Sokka.

“And I hope to see you again,” he added, looking straight at Katara. He smirked when Zuko discreetly moved closer to the pretty waterbender with a clenched jaw.
With a nod at his group, Jet retreated into an alley with Smellerbee, Longshot, and the rest trailing after him.

“Spirits, he’s annoying,” Sokka groused as he pulled Suki to his side.

Zuko did not respond as he continued to glare at Jet’s back. He knew what kind of thoughts Jet had in mind as he looked at Katara. It made his blood boil in anger.

*If he tries to so much as touch a hair on Katara's head, I swear I will kill him,* he vowed as he clenched and unclenched his hands.

“Yes, let’s go!”

The Blue Spirit kept watch on top the roof of one of the old houses, hidden under the shadows of the night. There was a tiny crescent of a moon high above the sky and a few wispy clouds occasionally hid it away from the world. The vigilante raced swiftly along the roof and lunged himself at another house, landing as silently as a puma-cat on the roof tiles.

Zuko peered into the dark, empty street below behind the mask of his alter ego. Except for possibly his uncle, nobody knew of his night escapades into the Lower Ring, and except for Iroh and Aang, nobody knew the real identity of the Blue Spirit. He wanted to keep his identity concealed in fear of the Fire Nation Court Council’s reaction to knowing that their Fire Lord was the once wanted thief and criminal, the Blue Spirit.
Jumping down from the roof, Zuko landed in a crouch on the ground below, listening carefully for any sounds. He heard that ever since the Dai Li disappeared, peace and order had disappeared along with them. Thieves and other vile men had decided to cause turmoil as night settled in since there were few who could stop them. The Earth King had sent a few guards to keep watch and control, but they were not enough.

Zuko scarcely had time to hide behind a crate as a few drunken men burst out of a building. The Blue Spirit waited until the blundering men were out of sight, shoving each other and laughing boisterously all along their intoxicated merry way. Releasing a breath and berating himself angrily for not being careful, Zuko stood up and raced across the street, entering another dark alley.

That was the third time he had almost revealed his presence this night because his mind kept wandering off more times than he actually liked. And it all started after his unfortunate encounter with the leader of the Freedom Fighters. It had been a few days since the gang had seen Jet for the third time, and ever since then, Zuko had been unable to concentrate or relax.

His mind kept replaying the moment Jet had taken Katara into his arms when they first ran into him and he could not forget the lustful looks Jet kept throwing at her every time they came across the Freedom Fighters. Zuko had to forcefully calm himself down from slicing the man’s head off and burning him to a crisp. Which surprised him for he had never felt the urge to do such things ever before in his life, not even when Ruon-Jian had been flirting with Mai.

Zuko peered around the end of the passage before he dashed forward into the next empty alleyway, the moon making his blue and white mask and the hilts of his swords glint. A few rat-weasels scurried away as he ran, but he hardly noticed them.

But the thing that worried him the most was the thought that Katara would fall for Jet if he tried to make a move. During the play by the Ember Island Players, he remembered the scene where the plump Katara actress had been smitten with the crazy-haired Jet actor. Zuko was not sure how much of it had been true and he had never dared ask Katara, since at the time they were not sure if Jet was dead or not.

He also remembered how Toph hinted at a possible attraction when they had returned to the Royal Beach House, and thinking about the possibility of Katara having feelings for Jet was not improving his already sour mood.

But maybe he was making a big deal over nothing. Katara didn’t react like a girl with a crush when Jet had embraced her and she didn’t even notice or respond to the meaningful, hopeful looks he gave her. Yes, maybe he was just overreacting, though he wondered why he cared so much since it was
none of his business.

Then again, Katara was his friend and he vowed to protect her and never let any harm befall her. Either way he would just have to keep an eye on her until they left Ba Sing Se and Jet behind.

Another thing that had him worried was that Katara seemed to be more tired recently. She had small, dark circles under her eyes and she yawned quite frequently. But when they asked her if something was wrong, she had just reassured them that it was probably her work at the infirmary. The gang had gone along with her these past few days to visit the sick from the Lower Ring and watched as she went about the patients, using her healing abilities to cure the illness the polluted water had caused them.

The Blue Spirit stopped to rest behind a large barrel. The night was quiet and the streets were empty. Besides the drunken men, he had not seen any signs of trouble. Maybe he should head back to the palace and return in a few nights from now.

Aang had tried to persuade Katara to stop and rest for a few days since it was taking a toll on her, but she had refused such an idea vehemently. Zuko was positive there was something else involved, though he couldn’t quite put a finger on what it was. But he knew it was nothing too serious or Katara would have told him since they have started to confide in each other more and more as the days went by.

Katara wouldn’t keep something from me, would she? he asked himself with a deep frown.

Just like you’re keeping your Blue Spirit secret from her? a voice in his head piped in.

Hm. Zuko frowned at the thought before he dismissed it with a scowl. He didn’t need to tell her everything. She was his friend not his wife—though that thought did not seem as unpleasant as it should have.

He sighed, remembering the words he had told her the night when he had demanded she tell him why she was avoiding him. He still could not believe he had confessed his fear of losing her. He was not used to displays of emotions and sharing such feelings, and had he not known Katara would understand, he would have been so embarrassed and angry at his sudden vulnerability.

Though he realized that perhaps Katara had felt the same way he did when he had avoided her on his flagship those weeks at sea, and so he vowed never to hurt her again by evading her. Luckily, it
wasn’t too difficult since he had not had any erotic dreams of the waterbender recently, though a part of him did wish he still did…

Stop it, he told his imaginative brain as he tried to shove the images of Katara in his dreams away. Again, he berated himself for losing focus and frowned as his mind kept returning to thoughts about Katara.

What’s wrong with me? What’s going on?.

Again, he wondered at the possibility that perhaps he was falling for Katara. But could it be possible? Was love what he felt for her? Could he really love someone?

Shoving the confusing questions from his head, he decided to head to the palace, get some rest, and perhaps try to figure out what he really felt. Zuko was about to move away from his current hiding place, but quickly drew back into the shadows.

A lone, hooded figure emerged around the corner of the alleyway with careful steps, occasionally looking behind it, as if to see if there were any pursuers. Zuko watched as the mysterious person looked about almost uncertainly before continuing walking into the dark alley. The stranger silently passed by the barrel Zuko was hiding before disappearing into the street.

Unsure of what the person’s intentions were, Zuko decided to find out where the stranger was heading to and for what purpose. The Blue Spirit waited a few seconds before emerging from behind the barrel to follow behind the cloaked individual. He jumped onto a stack of old, wooden crates and landed on the roof of a house, quickly and silently pursuing the dark figure as he jumped from rooftop to rooftop without making a single sound.

The Blue Spirit observed the being below from his view on the roof as he was lead through streets and alleys, but as much as he tried, he could not figure out who was under the cloak since the person kept the hood down and it was dark. After a few more minutes, Zuko saw the lone figure stop before a building. The cloaked individual looked around for a bit—possibly, to make sure no one was around—before heading to the back and entering through a small door.

Zuko realized the building was the infirmary and he wondered what the hooded person intended to do since there were mostly children in the building. Narrowing his eyes, Zuko dropped from the roof and landed gracefully beside the back door, swords drawn. If the individual believed he could hurt those children, he had another thing coming to him.
The Blue Spirit carefully opened the door a crack and peeked inside, finding the hall empty. Sliding into the corridor with grace and ease, the masked man quietly and carefully walked down the passageway since the only light provided was from the moon’s light that poured from the small windows. Cautiously rounding the corner, Zuko just had time to catch a glimpse of the bottom tip of the being’s long, dark cloak as it disappeared into the next hall.

Swiftly and noiselessly, the Blue Spirit raced down the passageway before peering around the corner. Zuko watched as the mysterious individual opened a door before gracefully entering, leaving the door slightly ajar. Setting his jaw and gripping his broadswords firmly, the Blue Spirit silently strode toward the entrance and carefully peeked through the small crack of the wooden door.

At first, he did not see anything, but then the stranger stepped into his line of view. Zuko carefully opened the door a few more inches in order to see into the room better.

There were two rows of thin futons on either side of the walls and children laid on them, the room cold and dark. Zuko saw a few of the sick children lift their heads as the stranger walked towards them and he placed an arm on the door in order to burst into the room and protect the innocent children, but to his surprise they began to whisper and giggle. Confused, Zuko squinted behind his Blue Spirit mask and frowned as he saw that the children were smiling.

The mysterious person walked to one futon where the child seemed to be too sick to even lift his head. Zuko watched as the figure kneeled down beside the child and gently stroked the sick boy’s hair before reaching inside the dark cloak. A long stream of water followed the stranger’s hand movement and engulfed both of the person’s hands before the water began to glow in a soft blue light. Then the mysterious being placed both hands on the child’s small chest.

Zuko’s eyes widen in disbelief as the mysterious individual’s hood fell back and a lovely feminine face appeared. It couldn’t be? Katara? She was the one sneaking around in the middle of the night?

Well, that explains why she looks so tired lately, he thought.

He smiled and shook his head as he silently replaced his swords in their scabbards on his back.

Helping the sick during the day was not enough, and so she must have decided to come back during the night. Yeah, that’s just like Katara alright, he mentally chuckled before he shook his head with a sigh. Always thinking of others before herself.
He watched her quietly as she moved from child to child, healing them with her water and comforting them with her soothing whispers before he frowned. Why didn’t she tell them she was visiting the sick during the middle of the night? Didn’t she know it was dangerous to wander around alone in the dark, especially for a young woman? He knew she could defend herself, but still…

Zuko remembered the disgusting intentions the two vile men at the Abandoned Fort had towards Katara and he was not stupid to believe Katara would not come across the same type of bastards while she roamed alone in the dark in the Lower Ring. Zuko narrowed his eyes before he let out an inaudible sigh in order to calm down his temper.

Well, it seems like the Blue Spirit will just have to turn into a guardian as well, he thought with a small sigh, although he did not mind at all.

A few hours later, Zuko again was following the hooded figure through the dark streets of the Lower Ring, but this time he was making sure Katara made it to the palace safely. He ducked behind a wall when Katara turned in his direction and waited until she started walking again.

Frowning, Katara looked over her shoulder for the second time, but again found nothing. She could not shake the feeling that someone was following and watching her. Moving her hand to her waterskin at her hip, she continued to walk quietly and swiftly through the streets.

Smiling to herself, Katara remembered the grateful and adoring looks the little children had given her as she soothed their pain away. If she kept healing them during the day and then the night, soon there would be no more suffering patients.

Again, she looked over her shoulder before pulling the hood closer to her face. She wished she could have somebody there with her so they could keep her company and ward off the creepy feeling of walking completely alone in the middle of the night, but she knew if Sokka and Aang found out they would try to stop her. Maybe she should have asked Toph, but then the earthbender would complain that she was losing precious sleeping time.

Perhaps she should have asked Zuko. He would understand.

Katara blushed and smiled at the thought. Well, he did help her find Yon Rha and she was sure if she asked him to accompany her he would agree, but Zuko was already too busy with other things and he did not need sleepless nights to burden him even more. She thought back on what they had talked about the night they had come back from visiting Iroh’s teashop.
Katara vowed never to let her emotions get the best of her, so that they would not cause Zuko any more pain. He had endured enough hurt to last him a lifetime and more. She was still a bit confused that Zuko seemed to enjoy spending his time with her just as much as he did with his mother and Uncle Iroh, though she did not mind at all. Still, she had to wonder if he really enjoyed her company as much as she enjoyed his.

She was also bewildered about her strange reactions with their encounter with Song and Jin, but she dismissed it, thinking that perhaps she was just trying to protect her friend from gold-seeking, social climbing, women. But then she had to admit that neither Jin nor Song looked like that type of woman, which only served to confuse her even more.

Luckily, she had not been visited by any other dreams about a very amorous Zuko, because ever since the first one, her mind had become quite a mess and she still would heat up every time Zuko talked, sat, or even looked at her. However, she did not let that get to her because she was positive that such feelings would go away with time and she would feel normal around Zuko once again. At least, that was what part of her hoped. She was sure that Zuko would never look at her as more than just a friend. She frowned when that thought brought a pain to her chest.

She was brought out of her thoughts when a small noise from behind her reached her ears and she spun around only to see a shadow retreat into an alley. Narrowing her eyes, Katara uncorked her waterskin and summoned a small water tendril, which she coiled around her arm as her heart began to pound in alarm. Pretending that she saw nothing, Katara strolled along the street before rounding a corner.

Zuko mentally cursed as he glared at the box he had accidently stepped on before peeking from the dark alleyway. He barely had enough time to catch a glimpse of Katara’s cloak swirling behind her as she rounded a corner before he moved away from the shadows in order to keep following the waterbender.

The Blue Spirit barely had enough time to flip backwards as a sharp water whip came at him just as he was about to turn the corner. Zuko landed in a crouch before jumping away once again as the water whip came at him, slicing at a pile of barrels that were stacked behind him. Pieces of wood flew everywhere at the impact.

Katara cursed as the dark figure avoided her attack before he landed a few feet away from her. She spread her arms and exhaled a cool breath as the water whip changed into dozens of sharp ice discs, ready to attack. To her surprise, the man raised his hands in a pacifying way without making any other movements.

Frowning, Katara squinted in the dark since the moon hardly gave off any light. She noticed the man was wearing a black suit with black boots, two swords strapped at his back. Her eyes widened when,
instead of a face, she encountered a white and blue mask, resembling some kind of demon with sharp fangs.

“The Blue Spirit,” she whispered. She recognized him by the wanted posters she had seen during the war.

The man nodded and slowly lowered his hands back to his sides. Katara shifted and reshaped her ice discs back into a stream of water that coiled around her shoulders.

“You’re the one who saved Aang when he was captured by Zhao,” she said with a small smile.

Zuko inwardly cringed, but answered with a silent nod. What would Katara say if she found out that he was the Blue Spirit and the real reason he had helped Aang escape was because he wanted to capture the Avatar for himself?

“What are you doing here? I’ve heard rumors that you were in the Fire Nation,” he heard Katara ask curiously. “And why were you following me?”

He raised his masked head toward her and shrugged. Katara tilted her head to the side and frowned. She watched as the Blue Spirit tensed, but made no move to attack or run away. She did not know how to explain it, but she felt like she knew him, though she wondered why since she had never met him in person before. She also had a feeling that he would not harm her.

“Are you trying to hurt me?” she asked carefully, just to make sure.

She watched as the Blue Spirit shook his head before he pointed in the direction of the Upper Ring.

“What?” asked she as she quickly looked in the direction he was indicating, “You want to know if I come from the Upper Ring?”

The Blue Spirit again shook his head in the negative, placing a finger to his temple as if trying to think. When the young woman frowned at him in confusion, the masked man pointed at himself then at her and finally toward the Upper Ring.
“Uh…” Katara furrowed her eyebrows before she pointed at the same place he had. “You… want to escort me there?” she asked, though it was more of an outrageous guess.

To her surprise, the Blue Spirit nodded.

“Why?” she inquired suspiciously.

Zuko sighed inwardly and resisted the urge to run his hand over his head at her questions. Though it was understandable than she was cautious of a complete stranger and had every right to question his motives since she did not know who the Blue Spirit was. Had he not been the Blue Spirit himself, he would have been glad to know that she was being cautious. But he couldn’t just leave; he did not want to let her wander all by herself in the middle of the night when men with bad intentions were lurking around waiting for unsuspecting, pretty girls.

Zuko gritted his teeth at the thought before he realized that Katara was staring at him strangely. Clearing his throat lightly, he slowly made his way to her and again raised his hands pacifically when Katara reached for her waterskin.

Katara eyed the mysterious man warily as he came near her, but she blinked when he walked right past her. She watched in surprise as he continued to walk away before he turned his head and beckoned her with his right arm to follow before he resumed his silent stride down the empty street, not even bothering to wait for her.

Katara huffed softly, but she ran quickly in order to catch up to him as she vaguely wondered why she was following a complete stranger who could probably be leading her somewhere else more dangerous. He was the Blue Spirit who was still a wanted criminal, but if he risked his life to save Aang, then it must mean he was not that bad of a person. But what was he doing in Ba Sing Se?

She heard the rumors when they were in the Fire Nation. Jiao had told her that the Blue Spirit would sometimes appear, but instead of causing trouble, he was the one who stopped problems from arising. She wondered what Zuko thought about a masked vigilante running around in his city.

Katara mentally slapped herself. There she went again, thinking about Zuko once more. It seemed like it was the only thing her brain wanted to think about nowadays!

Deciding to distract herself with other things, Katara looked up at the Blue Spirit walking in front of her. He seemed to be checking for any suspicious lurkers while he occasionally looked back at her
from behind the blue and white mask. She tried to start a conversation with him, but he never uttered a single word. Instead he answered with a nod, a shake of his head, or a shrug. She supposed that he wanted to keep his identity a secret by hiding his voice, and again she wondered who the man behind the demon mask was. He had his back to her now and she could see his dual broadswords strapped there.

That’s weird. Those look oddly familiar, she thought with a frown.

She moved her eyes from the weapons and looked across his broad back, his upper arms, and then to his legs. Mesmerized, she could see the hard muscles flex from under the fitted black tunic and pants every time he took a step or moved his arms.

Katara blushed.

What’s wrong with you? she scolded herself. You barely know this guy and you’re ogling him?

But it was normal to mentally appreciate a person’s physical attributes, right?

Zuko glanced back over his shoulder to make sure Katara was okay and lifted an unseen eyebrow as he noticed the red tint on the woman’s cheeks.

Before long, Katara found herself safely at the entrance to the Upper Ring of Ba Sing Se. She turned around to face the Blue Spirit and bowed.

“Thank you for accompanying me, even though you don’t know me at all,” she said with a smile.

Of course, I know you. That’s why I escorted you here, Zuko voiced in his head, but answered instead with a small nod of his masked head.

“Are you going back to the Lower Ring?” she asked softly.

She watched as he hesitantly nodded before he turned around and walked away without another glance. She stood there silently until he disappeared into the shadows.
“Uh…okay…” she said, wondering what that was about. She also wondered if she would see him again.

Shaking her head, Katara entered the Upper Ring and headed towards the palace to get some much needed rest since there were still many sick children who needed her help the following day.

What she did not realize was that the Blue Spirit followed her until she was safely inside the palace and in her room before he slipped inside his own guest room to sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Katara yawned softly as she silently made her way to the infirmary. Keeping awake late at night was making her so tired and she felt so guilty for lying to her friends, but she knew that if she told them they would try to stop her, especially Aang and Sokka.

She sighed before a smile lit up her face. Four nights had passed since she had attacked the Blue Spirit, and since that fateful night, she had met the mysterious individual each night after. He now always met her outside the infirmary, and once she was finished, he accompanied her back to the gates leading into the Upper Ring without saying a single word.

She blushed as she remembered the strange dream she had the previous night where she was walking down a creepy, dark alleyway and every shadow made her jump. Suddenly, a group of dark figures emerged out of nowhere and began to chase her. When she could not ward them off with her waterbending, and right when she thought she was going to be caught, the Blue Spirit appeared before her. Without thinking, she had thrown herself at him, somehow knowing that he would protect her. But that was the part that had her confused.

When she looked up at him, she stared in astonishment because instead of the Blue Spirit looking down at her, it was Zuko who held her to him with a soft smile on his face before he lifted his head and glared at her pursuers who immediately withdrew. The dream ended with Zuko touching her cheek and asking if she was all right.

Katara bit her lip as her stomach fluttered with butterflies and her heart did a somersault. She frowned. Why was she dreaming of the Blue Spirit and why did Zuko make an appearance? She remembered the strange looks Zuko was giving her recently, as if he knew something she didn't. When she asked him what was going on, he had just smirked and chuckled and said ‘Why nothing, little night cat-owl.’

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Sighing again, Katara rounded another corner and
quickened her pace when the infirmary appeared. She smiled and waved her hand when she spotted her new friend leaning against the wall of the building. She grinned when he greeted her with a nod.

“How’s it going, Blue?” she asked with a friendly smile as she approached him.

Zuko nodded again and smiled behind his mask at the new nickname she had given him the second time they met. Without saying another word, they both walked to the back of the building before noiselessly entering the back door.

Zuko watched silently as Katara went from small patient to small patient, using her healing abilities, as well as her gentle words to calm and ease the sick children. He had followed her for four nights, silently making sure no harm came to her and watching as she tended to her sick patients without thinking of her own comfort. He felt guilty for keeping his identity from her, but he was afraid of how she would react if she knew the truth.

He watched as she stood up after retrieving her water before she lifted her head towards him. Zuko straightened himself and moved his gaze away from her when he realized he had been staring at her since they had entered the room. He heard her quietly walk in his direction until she was standing in front of him and then he turned his head to look at her.

“Thank you for keeping me company, Blue. I know you’re a good person for keeping watch over me and the small children,” Katara said sincerely with a bright smile on her face that made his heart skip a beat and made him wonder if she would continue smiling if she knew who the Blue Spirit really was.

He nodded once more and glanced around the room to make sure the children were safe before he moved toward the door with Katara following behind him. He listened for any noise on the other side of the door before he opened it a crack and peered outside. When he saw it was clear, Zuko opened the door wide, made an extravagant bow, and gestured for the lady to go ahead first. He smirked to himself behind his mask when Katara blushed.

“Why, thank you, Blue. That is so gentlemanly of you,” Katara said as she executed a little curtsy and batted her eyelashes exaggeratedly at him. Then with a soft laugh she passed through the door and into the empty corridor of the infirmary.

Zuko chuckled inwardly at her playful flirtation as he closed the door quietly behind him.
They exited the quiet building and stepped into the cool night air as they made their silent way back to the Upper Ring, a few clouds passed overhead, covering the moon and the stars above. Katara wrapped her dark cloak closer to herself as a cold wind blew by before looking ahead to where ‘Blue’ was walking.

*He’s wearing nothing but a thin black suit and he’s walking like he’s at the beach!* Katara complained as a small shiver ran down her back. *Seriously, what’s the deal? Is Blue a firebender or something?*

She pouted for a while before a silly smile painted her tanned face.

*If Zuko were here, I could be all warm and toasty as he wraps his strong and warm arms around me,* she sighed dreamily. A few seconds later, she realized what she had thought and she frowned at herself.

Zuko turned his head over his shoulder when he heard Katara sigh and noticed that the young woman was blushing again. Before he could ask himself what the cute blush meant, a group of drunken men rounded the corner ahead of them. Zuko quickly spun around and grabbed Katara by the waist, pulling her to him as he hid them behind a pile of empty crates.

Katara opened her mouth to scream, but he quickly placed his gloved hand over her mouth to silence her while he held her still with his other arm. She began to struggle as fear raced through her, but she quieted when he shook his head and gently squeezed her waist, making heat rush to her cheeks.

Her heart beating wildly in her chest, she watched as he slowly moved his hand away from her mouth and placed his index finger on the mask’s lips to indicate that she should be silent before he pointed in the direction they had been walking to. A few seconds later, Katara heard the drunken conversation of several men and her eyes widened at the disgusting things that were coming from their mouths.

Closing her eyes tightly, she pressed herself closer to the Blue Spirit’s hard chest and relaxed when she felt him wrap both his arms around her. A part of her insisted she should not let a stranger embrace her so intimately, but another part of her assured her that he would not hurt her. She was silently grateful he was there, and even though she could have defended herself, she did not want to have come across those disgusting men. She was once again confused when a sense of familiarity hit her as the masked man’s strong arms continued to hold her and the scent of smoky sandalwood reached her senses. She could have sworn she had been held like this before by the same type of arms. She blushed when she realized it reminded her of when Zuko found her at Ursa’s old cabin and the way she had felt instantly safe. And really good.
Zuko closed his eyes in contentment as he felt Katara lean into him as the inebriated men staggered away from where they were hiding. He noticed that she was grabbing the front of his black tunic with both her hands while her forehead touched his chest. He wrapped his arms tighter around her and held her protectively against him. To his surprise, Katara moved her hands away from his chest and circled him around his middle. He realized they were embracing each other, her petite body pressed so closed to his own, and he smiled.

The firebender held back a gasp as his body was suddenly filled with heat, with want. He drew her closer to him and was barely able to hold back a groan when her breasts pressed firmly against his chest. His desire for her came back tenfold, remembering all those erotic dreams he had had, all the moments he had spent with her, and he could not stop himself when his hands began to slowly slide up and down the beautiful woman’s small back.

Katara’s eyes shot open when she felt her back being caressed by warm, gloved hands. Her breath caught in her throat at the sensations his hands were causing to her body, but though her mind told her to run away, her body refused to give up the gentle touches. She was unable to hold back her gasp as his hand came quite close to skimming the side of her right breast.

When Zuko heard her small gasp, the urge to throw Katara to the ground and take her right then and there almost made him crazy with want. He wanted to see what other sounds he could elicit from her. Never before had he been so affected by any woman so easily and as fast as he seemed to be with Katara. Just a small touch from her made him as hard as steel!

“B-Blue?” Katara’s small whisper reached his hazy mind. He looked down to see the waterbender gazing at him with a blush and a confused expression. “What are you doing?”

Zuko stopped his hands from going any further and doing any more damage before he slowly released the young woman and took a step away from her, trying to calm down his boiling blood. And his raging erection. Luckily, it was dark enough for Katara not to notice since the clouds were blocking the moon’s light.

“I’m sorry, Katara,” Zuko apologized before he could stop himself. He closed his eyes and mentally cursed at his slip up.

“I-it’s okay. Thanks, by the way for—” Katara stopped talking as she realized the Blue Spirit had spoken before she gaped once she recognized his voice. “Z-Zuko! You’re…you’re the Blue Spirit?”

Zuko sighed and prepared himself for the worst. He reached behind his head and tugged at the ties before he slowly pulled off the Blue Spirit mask. Katara watched with wide eyes as the mask came
off and Zuko’s slightly guilty face appeared before he raised his golden eyes to look at her. They stared at each other in silence for a while as Katara tried to get over her shocking discovery. How could she have not realized before? It explained why she felt as comfortable around the Blue Spirit, as she did with Zuko.

“W-why didn’t you tell me?” she asked quietly, sadly. “Did you not trust me with your secret?”

Zuko’s eyes widened at her words. That was not what he had expected. He had imagined that she would have yelled at him angrily for deceiving her, but he did not expect her to feel like she was unworthy of his confidence.

“No! It’s not that,” Zuko tried to explained as he gently took her hand.

“Then why didn’t you tell me when we met four nights ago?” she asked.

“I didn’t know how you would react if you knew that the Blue Spirit you thought highly of was me,” he admitted. He sighed as he ran a hand through his short hair. “That the reason I rescued Aang from Zhao was not out of a sense of justice, but because back then I wanted to capture the Avatar for my father.”

Katara let out a sigh as she gently shook her head in disbelief.

“I think I understand your reasons for hiding your identity from me, and I know Aang forgave you, but how many times do I have to keep reminding you that that was in the past and now we’re in the present? Seriously, sometimes I wonder if you and Sokka are the ones who are related,” she said sarcastically.

Zuko chuckled lightly.

“So you’re not angry with me?” he asked.

“No, just annoyed,” she admitted with a smile. “But now I understand all those smirks and looks you’ve been giving me recently. Why didn’t you tell Sokka or Aang that I was sneaking out of the palace?”
“Because I knew that they would try to stop you, and even though I don’t like that you’re working too hard, I understand that all you want to do is help those who are unfortunate. Just like when you helped Jan Hui disguised as the Painted Lady,” Zuko said with a smile.

“You know about that?” Katara asked. She was grateful that he understood.

“Yeah, Toph told me, and I have to say that I wished I could’ve been there to see you.” Zuko smiled, causing Katara to blush. “And who am I to stop you? Besides, I kept a close eye on you to make sure you arrived at the infirmary and back to the palace safely.”

“Thank you, Zuko.” Katara smiled gratefully as she placed her other small hand over Zuko’s larger one. “Jeez, it seems like all I’ve been doing lately is thanking you, huh?”

Zuko smirked.

“I don’t mind the praise,” he joked lightly.

Katara laughed before she blushed as a yawn escaped her lips, causing Zuko to smile warmly.

“Come on, you need your rest. Let’s go back to the palace before you fall asleep standing.” Without a second thought, Zuko tugged at her hand and led her back to the Upper Ring, their hands clasped together all the way.

After biding Katara good night and making sure she had entered her room, Zuko laid wide-awake on the soft bed in his guest room as he replayed what had occurred a few hours ago. He was glad Katara took his being the Blue Spirit well, but that was the least of his worries. Laying with the blankets thrown off his body, Zuko was trying—unsuccessfully—to stop himself from groaning out loud as he remembered Katara’s soft body pressed so close to his and the heated thoughts that had raced through his head as well as that burning feeling in his heart growing even hotter.

Drinking tea under the shade of a large tree in one of the palace gardens one afternoon, Iroh and Ursa watched with pleasure as the young Fire Lord and the waterbending woman leaned over the many parchments that lay on a small table concerning the new compromise. Momo was once again curled up on the firebender’s lap.

“So was Mai able to convince you that she would be perfect for Zuko?” Iroh asked nonchalantly as
he moved a tile from their game of Pai Sho.

Ursa moved her piece before she answered.

“I am afraid that Mai has only been able to convinced me that she is not perfect for my son.”

She watched as her dear old friend moved his tile before she continued when he looked up at her expectantly.

“I am sure she would be a good candidate for Fire Lady,” she began, “Mai is calm, collected, refined, and cunning. There is no doubt that she could help run the Fire Nation.

“But that is the thing. She could do it, but it seems like she will not do it,” she continued as she placed her tile and took a sip from her green tea. “She gets bored too easily, almost to the point that she seems lethargic. She views the world in a dark light, so much so that she sees no point in helping to make it better,” she explained. “Though, Zuko seems to be too preoccupied with something else to notice.”

They looked at the young benders again before they shared a look, which said that they knew what, or better said who, was on Zuko’s mind.

Ursa sighed as Iroh made his move.

“I do not mean to belittle Mai, but it is just that she is not suitable to be with my son. Her dull and depressed character seems to transmit onto Zuko whenever she is around him. He rarely smiles and his eyes dim as if a light was snuffed out.”

Iroh nodded again as he took a sip from his ginseng tea.

“Yes, I had noticed that a very long time ago,” he said.

Ursa looked over at her beloved son as he stared at the waterbender’s lovely face—who was currently reading from a scroll—with such an intense emotion that it made her wonder if Katara could feel it.
“On the other hand, Katara is completely different,” the noblewoman continued. “She is not afraid to challenge Zuko, but she still maintains a sense of respect toward him. She is not materialistic at all, and whatever she is given, she accepts with the utmost gratitude. Though she is stubborn and has a temper to match Zuko’s, which may cause some conflicts, she is not the kind of person to hold a grudge for too long.”

Ursa had learned from her former brother-in-law all about the mistake Zuko said he had made in Ba Sing Se four years ago. Now she understood when Katara had said he betrayed her and so mistrusted him at first when he had joined the Avatar. And even though Zuko had done much to deserve her distrust, Katara forgave him and gave him something he needed…her friendship. And hopefully much more.

Iroh chuckled softly as he moved his gaze from the Pai Sho board to the two young benders who seemed to be arguing. Zuko had his arms crossed over his chest and was shaking his head while Katara had one hand on her hip while she used her other hand to point fiercely at him.

“You are right about the stubbornness and the temper part, my dear Ursa,” Iroh commented and smiled as he moved another tile.

Ursa laughed softly.

“But the thing I like the most about our young waterbending friend is that she makes Zuko smile,” she continued, “Whenever she is near he seems to perk up and his eyes seem to shine with a brilliant light, and when Zuko is near her, Katara smiles even more brightly than she does with anybody else. Zuko seems to trust her greatly, for he confides his thoughts to her, something that he won’t do with anyone else. Especially not with Mai.”

Both smiled as they gazed at the young benders, sitting under the warm sun. Zuko seemed to have relented in whatever Katara had been arguing about because he was frowning slightly while she beamed at him with those big, blue eyes of hers.

“I am positive that Katara makes Zuko happy. And I will swear to Agni that she will continue to make my son happy if they ever do end up together,” Ursa said and smiled.

Iroh grinned widely before a sound he had not heard in years reached his ears. Did he hear correctly or were his ears playing tricks on him? There! He heard it once more! That sound which he had feared he would never hear again was coming from the direction of the young benders. Zuko, his
The retired general shifted his aged golden eyes to Zuko who was sitting beside Katara. He watched as Katara said something with a huge smile on her face, which caused Zuko to tilt his head back as he let out a deep laugh. Not a humorless or even a cruel laugh…but a happy and amused laugh.

The Dragon of the West felt joyful tears pool at the corner of his eyes at the sight and he sniffled.

“Iroh dear, what is the matter?” Ursa asked with concern as she placed a hand on his arm.

“Zuko is…laughing.” Iroh’s voice shook with emotion and he wiped at his eyes.

“Of course he is laughing. You should have seen the way those two teased each other when the three of us left my old cabin in the Abandoned Fort.” Ursa frowned. “Why does it surprise you?”

Iroh continued to watch his nephew as he said something to make Katara playfully slap him on his arm with a mocking scowl on her face that only caused Zuko to laugh harder. Momo had moved from the firebender’s lap to perch on the female’s shoulder.

“Because, my dear Ursa, I was afraid Zuko would never be able to express such an emotion ever again,” Iroh responded softly.

When the noblewoman looked at him worriedly he continued.

“So, after the Agni Kai with his father and the announcement of his banishment, Zuko became cold, angry, hard, and distant towards the world around him. The only emotion he let himself express was anger. I tried everything to soften his view of his situation, but alas, nothing worked. Nothing made him relaxed or happy. Nothing made him smile, and especially, nothing made him laugh.”

Ursa wiped the tears that had fallen from her eyes.

“Oh, my poor son,” she said sadly, “He has suffered more than I thought and more than he let me believe. What kind of mother am I?”
Iroh patted her hand reassuringly.

“There, there Ursa. It was not your fault, but the man I have the misfortune of calling brother. Just remember what Zuko has told us, all that was in the past. And now look at him…laughing.”

Ursa nodded and smiled.

“And we have to thank Katara for that. That is just another reason why she is the perfect woman for Zuko.”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Iroh said and he grinned as he stroked his small beard. “Now if they only stopped being so stubborn and admitted their feelings, we could start planning their grand wedding!”

Ursa laughed as they resumed their game.

“Did I mention they make such a lovely couple? Imagine the beautiful grandchildren and grandnephews and nieces they would give us,” she said dreamily before they broke into giggles and laughter like a pair of teenage girls.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Katara sighed sadly as she made her lonely way back to the palace. A week had passed since she found out Zuko was the Blue Spirit and she still wondered how she did not realize it sooner. She remembered the dream she had and wondered if her subconscious somehow realized that the Blue Spirit was Zuko. He still kept close to her as she made her way to the infirmary in the Lower Ring and to the palace, always making sure she was safe, but on this night, he did not make an appearance.

He had not been waiting for her near the building as he always did and she had waited an hour to see if he showed up, but he didn’t and now here she was walking back all by herself after healing the last of the sick children. She wondered if he was all right since he had whispered to her after they all had finished their dinner that he would be waiting for her as usual before Aang interrupted them and led her away.

Katara frowned. She had noticed that Aang had been acting strangely lately, more irritated and clingy. He would not leave her out of his sight, and every time Zuko and she would spend time together, Aang would appear out of nowhere and settle himself beside her, taking her hand almost possessively, until Zuko left almost reluctantly. She could have sworn Aang was sending him death
glared. She did not know what had gotten into him, but his behavior was really getting on her nerves.

Again, her thoughts turned towards the firebender as she continued on her silent walk. She had also noticed that something had changed in Zuko ever since he confronted her about her behavior and they had embraced each other the other night. Katara raised a hand to cool down the heat that rushed to her cheeks as her feet stepped silently down the empty street. It was subtle, but she could sense it in the way he spoke to or looked at her. She did not understand what it was, but the way he acted made her heart race and her stomach twist, though not in an unpleasant way.

Shaking her head, Katara once again became concerned as she wondered what had detained Zuko from meeting her at the infirmary. She hoped it was nothing serious and that he was all right.

Katara slowed her steps as she realized someone was following her. When she stopped the sound of footsteps ceased as well. She continued walking casually and the footsteps followed. Her heart pounded in excitement and she smiled.

*So Zuko thinks he can fool me, huh? Well, he’s sorely mistaken. Either I have gotten more observant or he’s beginning to falter in his skills,* she thought with a mental smirk as she quickened her pace a bit.

When she was almost reaching the entrance to the Middle Ring of Ba Sing Se, Katara huffed irritably when Zuko continued to play his game and did not already show himself. Did he think she was stupid or what? Not being able to take his silence any longer, Katara spun around and placed her hand on her hips.

“Okay, you can stop that now and come out,” she called out as she waited for him to reveal himself. When he remained elusive, Katara huffed again. “Fine! Be that way.” She turned around and began to stomp away.

“Katara? Is that you?” a familiar, but unexpected masculine voice asked.

Katara froze in her tracks.

“Jet?” she asked curiously as she once again turned around.

She squinted at the dark alley she had passed, and sure enough, the Freedom Fighter emerged from
the shadows with a smirk on his face.

*Just great,* she sighed mentally. This was probably the fifth time they had run into each other—though never at night—and she was not in the mood to talk to him.

“Why, this sure is a pleasant surprise,” Jet said smoothly as he stalked toward her with a charming smile that would have made her swoon a few years ago. “What are you doing out at this time of night, especially here in the Lower Ring when you can be all cozy in the palace?”

“Oh…” Katara smiled uncertainly. “I was just…taking a walk.”

Jet let out a mirthful laugh, his white teeth gleaming against his tanned skin.

“You’re such a bad liar, Katara,” he said and chuckled as he continued to slowly approach her until he was standing right in front of her. “Now, why don’t you tell me the real reason you’re here, hm?” He gave her a cocky smile.

Katara glared at him and took a step back.

“It’s none of your business, now is it?” she told him with a scowl. “I don’t have to explain myself to you.” She spun around to leave his arrogant ass in the middle of the dark street and stomped away.

Jet’s eyes gleamed as the beautiful waterbender walked away with an annoyed huff. Oh, how he missed her fiery temper. Ever since she stood up to him with those blazing, blue eyes of hers, he could not stop thinking about her. When he realized she was in Ba Sing Se all those years ago he tried everything to get her forgiveness. Therefore, he changed his ways and tried to help Aang, and now he helped wherever he could—like cleaning the reservoir—in order to prove to her that he had changed and all for her. And once she finally realized that, he would have her affections.

Sure, she was Aang’s girlfriend and all, but he was not fooled into thinking that that relationship would work. He saw that it was a one-sided attraction, from when they first met during the war, two years ago when he ran into them in that village, and still was now when he came across them a few days ago. The only thing he needed to do was convince her to go with him, make her realize that she was meant for him, and then he would show her what true attraction was as well as what a real man was really like.
Licking his lips, Jet smoothly followed her and sauntered confidently until he was by her side.

“You do know it’s dangerous walking all by yourself in the middle of the night, right?” he told her softly, eyeing her beautiful face since that long cloak she was wearing hid her body from his hungry eyes.

Katara rolled her eyes since she had heard that same thing from Zuko many times and chose to remain silent. Why did it seem like the men in her life always forgot she was a master waterbender?

Jet pulled the wheat stalk from his mouth and let out a disapproving sigh.

“I can’t believe Aang and your brother allowed ya to roam the Lower Ring all by yourself. I would’ve thought that at least that stupid, scarred firebender would’ve stopped you,” he said casually as he twirled the stalk between his fingers, though there was a hint of irritation in his voice.

Katara stopped walking and gritted her teeth as her temper flared at both his first words and the insults flung at Zuko.

“Shut up, Jet!” she growled out. “What makes you think I need their permission to do anything? You better leave me alone before I freeze you to another tree.”

Jet cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Are ya angry that what I said about the firebender is true?” he asked with a smirk before he gruffly added, “I don’t know how you can stand being around him.”

“Zuko is not stupid!” Katara snapped with a raised chin before she smirked. “I happen to enjoy his company. Quite a lot actually, if you must know.”

The Freedom Fighter closed his mouth, the wheat stalk drooped as his teeth clenched, and he narrowed his eyes at her for a second before another smirk appeared on his thin lips.

“You enjoyed spending time with me too when we first met, gorgeous,” he reminded her smoothly. “You even made me a hat.”
Katara flushed, but refused to let him win as she lifted her nose in the air.

“That was because I was a naïve little girl and I didn’t know what kind of person you were back then,” she retorted.

Jet just smiled as he reached a hand to brush her cheek, but Katara batted his hand away and glared at him.

“Well, there’s nothing better than the present,” he said smoothly as he took a step toward her, making her back away. “How about we get to know each other better right now?” he whispered huskily.

Katara did not like the heated look Jet was aiming at her or the way he was walking closer to her, almost as if he was ready to pounce on her. She hadn’t missed the looks Jet had been throwing her way or his innuendos whenever they met. She didn’t enjoy them, but she had brushed them off, not wanting to make a big deal out of them and cause a ruckus with the rest of the group. Before she could reach for her waterskin, she found herself pinned to a cold wall by a hard body with her hands on either side of her head. Katara looked up in alarm to see Jet’s smirking face looming over hers.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Zuko cursed under his breath as he raced swiftly through the dark, empty streets of the Lower Ring. He turned sharply around a corner and jumped onto a rooftop without missing a step when he realized it was a dead end. Just as he had expected, Katara was not at the infirmary when he finally arrived and now she was walking all by herself in the dark!

Just as he was about to sneak out of the palace to meet up with Katara, a servant had knocked on his door with an urgent message from the Fire Nation. It was a message from Chao who was requesting his presence back at the palace before a riot sprang among the nobles of the Royal Court. Chao did not elaborate what the problem was, but asked that the young Fire Lord return home as soon as possible. Once he finished reading the missive and sent a message back to the Fire Nation in response, Zuko had hurried to the infirmary to explain to Katara that he was returning home with his mother the next day, but he was too late.

With another curse, Zuko leaped from roof to roof as he scanned the streets and alleys below for any sign of the waterbender. He had a strange feeling in his chest that was making him worried and anxious. He hoped Katara was all right or he would never forgive himself if something were to happen to her.

“Zuko is not stupid!” Katara’s angry voice sounded straight ahead. “I happen to enjoy his company.
Quite a lot actually, if you must know.”

Zuko slowed down in his frantic run as the sound of Katara’s voice reached his ears and he smirked at what she had said, wondering who she was speaking to. Letting out a sigh of relief, his heart leaped happily—something that he noticed was occurring a lot lately—as he approached her and peered over the edge of the roof just in time to see Katara get pinned to the wall by Jet, a look of alarm on her face. Zuko growled low in his throat as he unsheathed one of his broadswords.

_I am so going to kill him!_ he snarled as he prepared to lunged himself at Jet, ready to slit his throat open for daring to put his dirty hands on Katara, but he stopped momentarily when the tanned man began to speak.

Katara’s heart was racing in her chest in shock as she tried to struggle against Jet, but he was too strong for her and she could not reach her waterskin. How dare he treat her like this?! She was barely able to pay attention as Jet spoke since her mind was consumed by anger and indignation.

“Now, now, gorgeous,” Jet chided in a rough voice as he pressed himself closer to her, causing Katara to let out a sound of protest and making Zuko even angrier as he watched with fuming eyes above them. “There’s nothing to be scared of. I just want to get to know you better,” he cooed.

“Get away from me, Jet!” Katara managed to yell out angrily as she tried to stomp on his foot, but he quickly moved it out of the way.

“No. I finally found you again and I’m not letting you get away from me,” Jet replied huskily before he inched his face closer to the point where his lips almost touched hers.

Katara quickly moved her head aside. His breath caused her to cringe away instead of making her shiver pleasantly just like every time Zuko’s warm breath touched her skin. With an angry hiss, she swiftly brought up her knee and kneed him between the legs.

Zuko was about to launch himself from the rooftop in a rage, but he froze at Katara’s actions. His eyes widened before an amused smirk curled his lips. He knew Katara could handle this. Served the bastard right.

“Fuck!” Jet gasped in pain as he fell on one knee, his hands tenderly cupping his crotch. The wheat stalk in his mouth almost bent in half as he clenched his teeth.
“What the hell is your problem?” Katara fumed at him as she watched him moan in pain on the ground. Putting her hands on her hips, she angrily demanded, “Did you really think forcing yourself on me would make me like you?”

“I wasn’t going to do that,” Jet rasped, taking deep breaths to endure the pain. Damn, had she been trying to unman him? Once the pain subsided to a dull ache, he shakily got to his feet and frowned at the scowling waterbender.

“Oh, really? Did it look like I wanted you to kiss me?” Katara asked sarcastically.

Jet straightened himself and let out a relieved breath when the throbbing pain went away. He couldn’t well work on his seduction skills if he was hunched over in pain. But damn, she was a fiery one. All the more reason he wanted her.

“I was just trying to show you how much I missed and want you, gorgeous,” he told her, his tone was again smooth.

“Well, you have a strange way of showing it,” the waterbender retorted before she heatedly added, “I don’t appreciate being cornered.”

“Oh, come now, Katara,” Jet said huskily as he again approached her, though this time he made sure to do so slowly, trying not to seem menacing and trying to appeal to her feminine senses. With just a few sweet words, a charming smile, and smoldering eyes, he made women fall at his feet—and in his bed—all the time. Katara may resist him at first, but he was sure he would win her over and then she would be his.

“There’s no reason for you to be that way, gorgeous,” he cooed, “I promise that I’ll make you feel good.”

“Don’t make me freeze you to the wall, Jet,” Katara warned with narrowed eyes.

But the freedom fighter ignored her warning as he once again stepped close in front of her, invading her personal space.

“I’ve wanted you for so long and I’ll make you see that you’re supposed to be with me,” he said throatily as he quickly grasped onto her upper arms and bent his head toward hers.
With an angry hiss, not believing Jet had the audacity to try to kiss her against her will once again, Katara pulled her head back, ready to butt him in the face when Jet was suddenly thrown away from her and a loud punching sound echoed throughout the silent street.

“Touch her again and I swear that I will tear your filthy arms off your body!” she heard a deep masculine voice snarl.

Katara’s eyes widened in surprise, for standing in front of her with swords drawn in a fierce fighting stance was the Blue Spirit, err…Zuko.

“Zu—Blue!” she exclaimed as she moved forward to grab his tensed arm. Since when did he arrive?

“Katara, are you all right?” Zuko asked with a deep tone of voice as he quickly glanced down at her from behind his mask. He moved his arm from her grasp and instead pulled her to him, pressing her protectively against his side.

“Did this bastard hurt you?” he inquired in a hard and angry tone.

Katara was at first distracted by the fact that Zuko had pressed her body tightly against his harder frame that she didn’t immediately answer. When she heard Zuko call her name almost anxiously, she quickly shook her head.

“No, I’m fine,” she responded as she buried her face on his chest, reveling in his comforting and spicy scent, before she glared angrily at Jet who was barely starting to stand from where the Blue Spirit had flung him. “I wasn’t about to let him force himself on me.”

Jet touched his jaw and winced at the bump that was forming due to the hard punch he received. At her words, Jet looked at Katara with a shocked look on his face before it was replaced with a deep frown.

“I wasn’t trying to force myself on you!” he said, but when she raised a skeptical eyebrow at him, he exclaimed firmly, “I swear!”

“Really? Then what were you trying to do?” Katara asked.
They watched as a roguish smile curled the freedom fighter’s lips as his eyes stared intently into the waterbender’s blue eyes.

“Seduce you,” Jet responded huskily. “Make you go crazy with want of me.”

He ignored the way the masked man tensed as he continued to stare at Katara. He did not know who the stranger was, but he did not like the way he had Katara pressed against him. He watched as Katara’s eyes widened and a light flush surfaced on her cheeks. Smiling charmingly at her, he took a step toward her with a hand outstretched.

Angry, Zuko pushed the suddenly silent woman gently behind him and leveled his left sword at Jet’s advancing neck.

“Stay away from her or else!” Zuko threatened harshly.

If it wasn’t for his mask, Katara was sure his face would have been contorted into a frightening snarl. Though his harsh tone should have frightened her, it actually made her feel secure and comforted.

“This is none of your business, you masked freak!” Jet yelled as he glared at the masked man that was hiding Katara behind him.

“Everything that concerns Katara is my business!” Zuko growled with such intensity that it made Katara’s heart thump in her chest and caused a rush of warmth to rush to her cheeks.

Jet narrowed his eyes and unsheathed his dual hook swords from his back.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are to her, but I won’t let you get in my way!” he hissed.

Zuko pushed Katara farther behind himself and took in a fighting stance, accepting the challenge.

“Katara, go back to the palace,” he ordered.
“No!” Katara yelled defiantly as she tried to pull Zuko away. “Zu—I mean, Blue, let’s just go! Just ignore him. There’s no reason for both of you to fight.”

“Katara,” Zuko said between clenched teeth. “Please do as I say. I need to teach him a lesson about his despicable behavior.”

Jet snorted.

“You’re welcome to stay, Katara. That way you can witness the way I humiliate this guy as he loses to me.”

Katara narrowed her eyes at his arrogant proclamation.

“I can’t understand how I could’ve believed you changed,” she told him angrily before she looked up at Zuko.

“Let’s go...please,” she told him firmly, not noticing the way Jet frowned at her words. She squeezed Zuko’s arm once then she turned around and walked away.

Zuko watched her go before he glared once more at Jet and turned around to follow Katara. He wanted nothing more than to beat the freedom fighter to a pulp, but he didn’t want to upset Katara more than she already was.

Jet felt his temper rise as the mask man turned to look at him, believing the mysterious individual was laughing at him. The bastard! How dare that masked freak try to get between Katara and him?! With an indignant and angry yell, Jet lunged himself with his swords drawn and raised his right arm to attack the man’s back. He didn’t not notice that Katara had turned around to see if the man was following her.

“Zuko!” Katara shouted in alarm.

At the sound of Jet’s yell and Katara’s terrified scream, the firebender spun around and raised his right broadsword just in time to block Jet’s attack. The two metal weapons made a clashing sound as they met before Zuko slashed at Jet’s stomach with his other sword. Jet jumped out of the way just in time to avoid being sliced in half and once again brought his hook sword down in order to hack at the masked individual’s shoulder.
Zuko flipped backwards, and as he flew, he kicked Jet in the chest. Jet stumbled back with a curse, but managed to regain his balance. He rubbed his chest, positive he was going to get a bruise, before he raced toward Zuko with an angry yell, bringing both swords down. Zuko brought his broadswords up to block Jet’s attack and was pushed slightly backwards by Jet’s speed and strength. They held in this position for a while as both tried to push the other one off, muscles burning and straining at the effort.

“Zuko!” Katara called again in alarm as she uncorked her waterskin and bent the water into a whip, determined to help him.

“Stay away, Katara!” Zuko barked in an authoritative tone that made Katara stay still despite herself. “This is between him and me,” he said as he shifted in his stance and slowly drove Jet backwards.

Jet smirked.

“So, the great Fire Lord Zuko is the wanted Blue Spirit. How nice,” the young freedom fighter snickered as he tried to push Zuko to the side. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“The once wanted criminal,” Zuko corrected with a bored tone that only caused Jet to get even angrier.

Zuko managed to unbalance his opponent and took the opportunity to slash with his left sword, making a hit on Jet’s arm. With a pained cry, Jet backed a safe distance away as he looked down at his injured arm with a scowl. A thin cut was oozing a little bit of blood. Dammit, he didn’t think the other man was that good to be able to touch him.

He looked up to glare at the masked Fire Lord and he growled when he saw that Zuko’s stance was more relaxed, insinuating that he didn’t believe Jet was a worthy opponent.

“You asshole!” Jet growled as he lunged himself forward, swords held at his side.

Zuko easily evaded the attack before he swipe a leg forward, effectively knocking the other man onto his back. He could not help but smirk beneath his mask when the other man cursed as he quickly jumped back to his feet. Jet was a good fighter, he’ll give him that, but he was in no way in his level. Zuko was a sword master, thanks to the many years of training since childhood. He was also skilled in hand-to-hand combat and martial arts. And if he used his firebending he could easily
defeat Jet.

But he wanted to taunt the bastard for a while before he finally beat him. The arrogant man needed to be brought down a peg for daring to think of seducing Katara.

“What’s wrong, Jet? You look a little tired. Need a break? It’s understandable as it seems you are only used to attacking women,” the Fire Lord sneered.

Seeing red, the Freedom Fighter hastily charged forward, quickly swinging his right and then left hook swords at his opponent’s chest. Prepared for the attack, Zuko ducked under the blades and slammed his fist and hilt of his sword into his attacker’s stomach, causing him to hunch over in pain. The firebender then moved swiftly to the side and kneed Jet in the chest, causing him to fall back on his back. Zuko quickly sheathed his swords as he leaped into the air, intending to land on top of the other man so he could smash the cocky rebel’s face, something he had been itching to do every time he had run into the obnoxious man. But he was only met with cold concrete as Jet rolled away from him and into a crouching position a few feet away. They eyed each other warily as they slowly got to their feet. Zuko pulled out his dual swords. Both men stood facing each other as they panted slightly, eyeing each other warily, trying to regain their breaths and see what the other would do next.

Katara watched worriedly as she continued to watch them from a safe distance. She could tell Zuko was baiting Jet, which was making Jet more determined to fight him, despite the fact that he had several cuts on him and his face held several red marks that were sure to turn into bruises the next day.

Jet spat out the blood that had fallen into his mouth from the small cut on the corner of his lip. Damn the stupid scarred firebender. He was taunting him and it only made Jet angrier since he was trying to make him look like a fool in front of Katara. Well, two could play at this game.

“Why are you so angry?” Jet asked with a mocking grin.

The firebender snorted.

“Why do you ask me such a stupid question?” Zuko retorted, “I care for Katara, she is a great friend to me. I vowed to protect her, and you tried to hurt her.”

Jet let out a dark laugh.
“Stop lying to yourself, firebender,” he mocked and he smirked again. “The real reason you’re so fuckin’ pissed off is because you’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous…” Zuko tried to deny, but Jet continued to talk as if he had not spoken.

“Are you jealous that Katara would have liked to spend some time with me? Alone,” he taunted. He grinned lasciviously as he sneaked a glance at Katara, who was too far away to hear their conversation.

“Shut up!” Zuko growled loudly as he moved to the side in order to block Katara from Jet’s view. He tightened his hold around the hilts of his dual broadswords, smoke coming out through his fingers.

Jet chuckled again as he continued to casually chew on his wheat stalk. Yes, he was getting a rise out of the damn Fire Lord who thought he was better than him.

“I knew I was right. You are jealous. And here I thought that you were too honorable to lust over your friend’s girlfriend,” he sneered.

Zuko clenched his jaw tight as the other man’s words struck him.

“You know nothing,” he replied before he raced towards Jet, swords drawn at his sides, more serious now.

“You’re wrong,” Jet said as he parried Zuko’s strike.

He tried to push the firebender back, but Zuko did not budge and instead swung his arm sideways, effectively clipping Jet on the side of the face with his fist.

Jet let out a pained grunt as the impact threw him to the floor. He quickly rolled away when Zuko brought down his foot before Jet sprang to his feet. He ignored the way his cheek and ear throbbed in pain.

“I’ve noticed the way you look at Katara the few times we’ve run across each,” he growled, “And
the obvious way you hover over her protectively, almost possessively. I know you have feelings for her.”

Both young men’s weapons clashed loudly against each other as they once again continued to attack and evade one another.

Katara chewed on her lip uncertainly as she continued to watch them fight. She did not know what to do and even though she knew Zuko could take care of himself, she had to hold back a cry every time it seemed Jet could hurt him. She could see that something had changed and now they were both seriously trying to hurt each other. She saw them stop again, seeming to have a conversation and she wondered what they said to make Jet smirk like that and make Zuko tense up.

“I don’t know what feelings you’re talking about,” Zuko said guardedly as their weapons once again became locked together with another resounding clash of metal.

Jet laughed again and sneered.

“At first, I thought you just wanted to fuck her, and really, I can’t blame you,” he replied as he turned his head to leer at Katara.

“How dare you speak of her in such a way?!” Zuko roared angrily.

His rage caused his hands to light up in fire. With a pained cry, Jet flew back at the small explosion. He barely had enough time to defend himself when an enraged firebender sprang at him with flaming swords.

“Shit,” the freedom fighter cursed as he ducked to the side, narrowly avoiding having his head cut off. He moved a safe distance away and panted, wincing when all his injuries throbbed in pain, and yet he could not stop himself from taunting the scarred bastard.

“Don’t lie and tell me you’ve never dreamed of having her under you,” he sneered as he readied his hook swords as the firebender advanced on him, “Of what it’d feel like having her legs wrapped around you…”

“Shut up!” Zuko growled.
He again lunged himself at the freedom fighter, but Jet once again blocked him with his swords, causing their weapons to let out a loud booming clash. They glared at each other over their locked swords.

Sparks flew from Zuko’s clenched hands. How dare Jet utter such crude words?! How dare he refer to Zuko’s feelings for Katara as something as vulgar as that? Yes, he was attracted to Katara and he could not stop himself from looking at her body, but it wasn’t for such a base reason. No, his attraction for her ran more deeply than that. It wasn’t just her body and the pleasures he could derive from it that he thought off. She meant much more to him than just that.

“I knew it,” Jet hissed as another sneer appeared on his face. “It’s so damn obvious now…”

“What is?” the firebender growled as he readied himself to finish the bastard off.

Jet smirked before he narrowed his dark eyes.

“You’re in love with her,” he stated angrily.

Zuko froze in shock at his words, and Jet took the opportunity to disengage one of his hook swords and slashed it at the silent masked firebender. Zuko stumbled backwards as he clutched at his chest where a thin line of blood spilled forth from his ripped tunic. He was barely aware that Katara had cried out his name in fright before he noticed people suddenly approaching them. They must have probably woken up due to the noise, he thought absentmindedly.

Suddenly, he was surrounded by white mist and he could hear Jet’s angry yells as well as the confused voices of the people. A small hand grabbed his and began to pull him away through the fog. Though he could not see anything, he knew Katara was the one who was holding tightly onto his gloved hand.

Katara led them away from the commotion as she bent a thick blanket of cool mist around them as they made their way to the Upper Ring, parting the fog in front of her so she could see where she was going. She glanced back at Zuko with concern as he walked beside her without saying a word, almost as if in a daze, and she wondered what Jet had told him to make him lose focus.

Zuko remained quiet as he allowed Katara to lead him through the mist as Jet’s words kept repeating over and over in his head, and before he knew it, they were standing in front of the back wall of the
Earth King’s palace. With his help, they stealthily sneaked over the wall until they were standing in the garden near the guest rooms.

Zuko walked over to a stone bench and sat down heavily on it before he reached for his Blue Spirit mask. Untying it, he let the mask slip through his fingers until it landed with a soft ‘thud’ on the green grass, a look of utter shock on his face.

In love? He was in love with…Katara?

He had asked himself that question and denied it many times in the past several weeks, but now that Jet had said it in that voice, as if he was confirming something that was undeniable, Zuko found himself at a loss for words.

“Oh, La! Zuko, you’re bleeding!” he heard Katara exclaim in alarm before he felt her sit next to him on the cool stone bench.

Dazed, Zuko looked down at his chest and noticed a dark crimson wet spot on his shirt, finally realizing that Jet, that insufferable bastard, had actually inflicted a wound on him! His breath caught in his throat as he felt Katara’s soft hand on his chest. Snapping his head up, he watched as she summoned a ribbon of water from the grass since she had used all the water from her waterskin to create the fog. Covering one hand with the glowing healing glove, she pressed it to his injury.

Zuko watched as her shocked face shifted into one of concentration, her brows furrowed slightly and her eyes full of determination as she moved her glowing hand over his bleeding chest. He watched as the moon’s soft light and the radiance of her healing water illuminated her gorgeous features, making her beautiful brown skin glow, her lovely chocolate-colored tresses shine, and her exquisite sapphire eyes sparkle.

“I was scared there for a minute,” Katara confessed softly. “I was afraid you two would have seriously hurt one another.”

“I’m sorry for frightening you,” Zuko finally managed to say as he held his gaze on her lovely features, “but I just got so angry at what he was trying to do to you.”

Katara lowered her eyes with a blush at the intensity in Zuko’s golden orbs as he continued to gaze at her and she bit her lip. The firebender watched as she nibbled on her plump lower lip and he was once again consumed with the strong desire to press his lips to hers, to take her in his arms…to love
her for the rest of his life and never let go.

He closed his eyes in pleasure as the soothing cool liquid touched his flesh and sealed his wound. He loved the sensation of Katara’s small hands running across his chest just like they did when Azula struck him. He enjoyed the feeling of relaxation and ease that came over him for finally admitting what his true feelings for the wonderful and beautiful waterbender were.

*I'm in love with Katara,* he finally admitted to himself, and a small smile spread across his face.

“How do you feel?” Katara asked gently as the glowing of the water stopped and she slowly removed her hands from his broad chest.

Zuko opened his amber eyes and stared for a few seconds into Katara’s cerulean ones that were filled with concern. He raised his hand and tenderly caressed her cheek, making her gasp gently before she leaned into his hand, a questioning look in her soft eyes.

“Much better,” he whispered softly.

Chapter End Notes

I know Jet died in the series, but since his death was not actually mentioned, just alluded to, I decided to keep him alive in this story for plot purposes. Besides, I thought it cruel that he was killed even after he tried to reform his ways.
A comfortable silence followed after Zuko spoke last. Wispy clouds occasionally passed over the moon that rested on the dark night sky. The leaves rustling in the soft breeze and the crickets’ soft serenade were the only sounds that could be heard in the garden.

Zuko continued to caress Katara’s soft cheek as his heart seemed to burn even stronger after he admitted the truth of his feelings to himself. Why had he not admitted it before? Why had he tried to deny it for so long? He watched as a smile appeared on Katara’s face as she patted the hand he was touching her face with.

“It makes me so glad to hear that,” Katara replied with relief, oblivious to what was happening to the man that sat before her. Oblivious to the feelings she evoked in him. She touched his chest one more time before she looked up to smile at him. “I knew such a small wound wouldn’t have brought you down, but I was still worried.”

Zuko tenderly gazed down at the young woman whose face—which had been filled with concern a moment ago—showed the relief she felt for him. He felt that new feeling, which he now understood to be love, spread all over his body. He slowly moved his hand from her cheek, to her jaw, and then down her neck in order to touch the long braid that fell over her shoulder. Gently, he twirled the soft end with his long fingers.

Katara shivered at his caress on her cheek before blushing when he began to play with her hair. She looked down at his large hand curiously before she looked into his eyes, trying to understand what he was doing since it was rare for Zuko to behave so affectionately.

“Katara,” Zuko began softly. “There’s something that I have to tell you…” he whispered as he leaned a bit closer to her face.

“W-what is it?” the waterbender stuttered as she felt his warm breath touch the skin of her face.

Katara felt her heart begin to pound in her chest as Zuko’s face inched closer to hers in the same way it did in her dream. In that dream, his hands had been caressing her body, exactly like how his hand was touching her hair at the moment. Right before their lips almost touched. Her breathing sped up as she waited almost breathlessly for him to finish what her dream had started.

Zuko swallowed as he lowered his eyes from her bright, cobalt ones to quickly gaze at her lips,
which he noticed, dazedly, were slightly parted. Before his gaze went back up to her blue orbs again. He wanted to tell her, to confess to her the depth of his feelings, to make her realize what she had done to him and how much she had changed and affected him.

“Katara, I…” Zuko breathed heavily as he moved his hand from her hair back up to her cheek.

“Yes?” Katara whispered softly as she gazed into his blazing eyes, wondering why he was staring at her so intensely and wondering what he was going to do.

Zuko opened his mouth, ready to confess his love for her, but the words did not come out. He did not know what to do and how to tell her what he felt. What if she rejected him? He would not be able to bear that, to hear her telling him she could never return his feelings because she already loved Aang and could only see him as a friend. And most importantly, what if his confession ruined their friendship? What if she began to distance herself from him again?

He closed his mouth and moved away from her, removing his hand from where it had been touching her to rest it on his lap where he clenched it tightly.

Katara snapped out of her daze when she felt his warmth and touch leave her, and she was unable to stop the disappointment from showing on her face before she berated herself for thinking in such a way. How could she have thought Zuko was going to kiss her? How could she have wanted Zuko to kiss her? It would be cheating on Aang and she could never hurt him. Besides, Zuko and she were only friends and could be nothing more. That’s what she tried to tell her still racing heart.

Zuko looked away from Katara and instead fixed his gaze on the large tree that stood a few feet before them with its branches almost bare from the fall season. He closed his eyes briefly to compose himself before he returned his eyes to her face.

“I…want to apologize,” Zuko said. His voice back to his normal cool tone once again. Although inwardly, emotions he had never experienced before were swirling chaotically.

“Apologize? For what?” Katara asked quietly, a bit confused at the sudden change in his mood.

“For not meeting you at the infirmary as I said I would,” Zuko explained as he once again looked away from her.
“Oh,” Katara replied. The disappointed feeling came back before she mentally shook her head.

*What’s wrong with me? It’s not like I expected him to confess his love for me or something!* She mentally laughed at the thought before she quickly sobered up.

“Yeah, if I had arrived sooner Jet,” Zuko practically spat the Freedom Fighter’s name, “wouldn’t have tried imposed himself on you. He wouldn’t have approached you if I had been with you,” he growled lowly before he looked back at her. “For that I apologize.”

Katara sighed and waved his apology away.

“Don’t worry about it. I had everything under control, though now that I think about it, maybe he wouldn’t have actually harmed me. Jet may be many things, but I’m sure a rapist is not one of them.” She shuddered at the unpleasant thought.

Zuko snorted, but said nothing to argue with her about what type of man the rogue really was. Even if Jet did not continue to force himself on her, the point was that he tried to coerce Katara, so that, to Zuko, made Jet’s actions unforgivable. And if he ever came across Jet again, Zuko was not sure he would be able to stop himself from seriously harming the bastard.

Katara shifted uneasily as Zuko’s face darkened before she cleared her throat to get his attention.

“So what made you late in the first place? I’m curious to know,” Katara said with a smile in order to change the topic.

Zuko blinked as the sound of her voice brought him out of his thoughts of the many ways he could hurt the freedom fighter before he let out a sigh.

“I was about to jump down the window from my guest room to join you when a servant knocked at my door and gave me a message that had arrived from the Fire Nation. It was from Chao, and so I had to read it since I told him to only send me urgent messages while I was away.”

“Oh, no.” Katara frowned. “I hope it’s nothing serious.”
“I don’t think it is,” Zuko reassured her. “Chao did not really explain what the problem is, but he asked me to return to the Fire Nation immediately. I wrote him a reply to let him know I was returning as soon as possible. Once the servant left to send the letter, I sneaked out of the palace to meet with you.”

He paused before he reached for her hand and grasped in tenderly, loving the feeling of her soft skin on his and saddening at what he was about to say. He tightened his hold.

“I’m leaving and going back to the Fire Nation. I plan on departing with my mother tomorrow morning,” he informed her softly.

“What?” Katara exclaimed. “But I wanted to take you and Lady Ursa to the zoo tomorrow... You had planned to stay in Ba Sing Se for a few more weeks,” she said sadly as she grasped his hand tightly, as if with that she could keep him from leaving. A small ache appeared in her chest when she heard his plan.

“I know,” he replied. “But I have a responsibility to my country. I hope you understand.”

Katara chided herself for her childish behavior.

“Of course I understand. Your people need you, just like my waterbending students need me,” she said with a small smile.

I need you, Zuko thought dejectedly, before he tugged at her hand gently as the thought of leaving her began to depress him.

“We’ll see each other again, right?” he said with a smile.

“Right,” she replied and squeezed his hand.

King Kuei’s servants moved quickly down the long flight of stairs with the few belongings that the Fire Lord and his mother possessed and strapped them securely to the back of the carriage that was waiting in the courtyard. The dragon-moose that was attached to the front of the elegant carriage snorted and pawed at the ground as it waited for the driver to command it to move.
Katara gave a small smile as Ursa pulled her into a warm hug.

“Thank you, Katara, for helping my son find me and for everything else,” the older woman said as she pulled away to smile at the waterbender.

Katara blushed lightly as she gave out a small laugh.

“It was nothing, Lady Ursa. I was glad to help,” she said sincerely.

Ursa smiled before she patted Katara’s hand.

“I look forward in seeing you and meeting your family at your brother’s wedding. I am excited to see the Southern Water Tribe and especially try those sea prunes you told me about,” she said.

Katara grinned in anticipation of seeing the noblewoman and her son again, but this time it would be in her own home. She could not wait to show Zuko around her city just like he showed her his when they were in the Fire Nation.

Zuko had explained to King Kuei, his uncle, and his friends that morning that he was needed at the Fire Nation immediately and he was leaving with his mother that same day. He reassured them all that it was nothing too serious and that they should not worry. Aang and Toph then stated that they could not postpone their visit to Omashu any longer and decided to leave for King Bumi’s city in a few days. Iroh had decided to stay in Ba Sing Se for a few more months while Sokka, Suki, and Katara decided that it was time they return to the Southern Water Tribe and announce the upcoming wedding.

Mai had left to visit her parents in Omashu with Ty Lee right after the breakfast meal. The young noblewoman had refused—with her usual bland expression—to travel with Aang and Toph on Appa, even though they were heading the same way. After talking with Zuko privately for a few minutes, she mounted another carriage the Earth King had provided for her and left. Katara was curious as to why Mai had gone to Omashu instead of back to the Fire Nation with Zuko and Ursa, but shrugged it off since it was none of her business, though a part of her admitted she was glad. However, another part of her wished she could be the one to leave to the Fire Nation with Zuko and Ursa. The Fire Nation climate was a bit too hot for her, but Katara still enjoyed sitting under the shade of a tree during the warm, sunny weather. She wanted to see Ursa’s reaction as she gazed upon the garden her son had ordered to be cultivated and renovated after the war. She wanted to
smell the pleasant fragrance of the rosebushes as well as hear the quacking from the cute, little turtle-ducks in the beautiful Royal Palace Garden. But most of all, she wanted be near Zuko.

Katara frowned at her thoughts before she shook them away, thinking them as silly. The Southern Water Tribe was her home, not the Fire Nation.

When Ursa moved away from her to say her farewell to Iroh, Katara turn around to see Zuko thanking King Kuei for his hospitality. A strange ache in her heart appeared again as she stared at the firebender, at how he kept a stoic and reserved face when he was around everyone else but her.

After a few more minutes and promises to start the trade compromise as soon as possible, both leaders bowed to each other before Zuko turned away and made his way to his friends who were waiting by the carriage.

Katara watched with a sad smile as the gang said their goodbyes—Sokka roughly patting Zuko’s back with a grin and Toph punching Zuko on the arm—before she lowered her eyes to the ground. Just last night Zuko had come to help her, and while she had healed him he had looked at her with such a tender gaze that her heart stuttered and her skin warmed up. But now they were going their separate ways and she could not help the sadness and misery that had clung to her since he had first told her he was returning to the Fire Nation.

The tribeswoman was confused that she actually felt pain at the thought of Zuko leaving and not at the thought that Aang was departing. Sure, she felt sad that Aang was leaving since she cared for him, but it did not compare to the intense feelings she had at the thought of not seeing Zuko or hearing his voice again. She did not understand why she felt the way she did, but the only thing that mattered right then was that she did not want Zuko to leave.

*Don’t be selfish,* she chided herself. *Zuko has responsibilities and I can’t always be demanding his attention.* She frowned. *I wonder if my constant presence will annoy him one day.*

She did not like that thought either, for she had a feeling she would never get bored or tired of him. Zuko was such an interesting and complex person and there was always something new about him that never failed to surprise her. He being the Blue Spirit was one example.

With a small sigh, Katara continued to watch as her friends surrounded the young Fire Lord and she giggled softly at the uncomfortable expression Zuko tried to suppress when they began to hug him. He never was much for physical contact.
Zuko frowned when Aang only shook his hand and gave him a halfhearted smile before quickly moving away. He had noticed that the young monk had been acting strange lately, such as glaring and snapping at him more frequently, especially every time Zuko was talking to or sitting near Katara. Maybe Aang, like Jet, had sense Zuko’s feelings before he himself did and that was why he was treating him differently than the rest of the group? Zuko frowned.

Before Zuko could ponder deeper about Aang’s strange behavior, his uncle drew him into a crushing hug before babbling about the teabags he had packed for them and solemnly telling him to inform him about what Chao wanted. Iroh patted Zuko’s back and, with a huge smile, pushed his nephew none too gently in the direction where the waterbender was standing alone with a sad look on her pensive face.

Zuko glared at his uncle, but the old man had already turned his attention to Ursa and the other young people. Straightening his clothes, Zuko slowly lifted his eyes to where Katara was standing. He sighed inaudibly as his heart ignited once again at the sight of her before it clenched at the thought that he would not be seeing her face or be in her presence for the next few months.

Even though he had finally realized that he was in love with her, he did not know what to do with his newfound feelings, especially since there was no point in confessing it to her since she already loved another.

His jaw clenched at the thought.

He needed time to think, to become used to the idea that he was in love. Something he had been positive he never would have been able to experience or be capable of. He was unaccustomed to such an intense emotion and he was unsure on how to proceed, which did not sit well with him.

He relaxed when Katara approached him with a smile that made his breath hitch in his throat and sent his burning heart racing. Why did she have such a strong effect on him?

“It’s really unfortunate that our visit to Ba Sing Se had to be cut short,” Katara said. “But duty calls, right?” She grinned.

“Yes,” Zuko answered slowly and could not help the smile that appeared on his face even though the thought of separating from her made him miserable.

“But I promise we’ll see each other at Sokka and Suki’s wedding,” he assured her before he grinned,
unable to resist making her laugh once again. “Unless of course Sokka does something stupid to make Suki call off the wedding, which knowing your brother, is a likely possibility,” he jested.

His heart seemed to flip when Katara’s soft laughter reached his ears.

Katara smiled up at Zuko before a small sigh escaped her lips.

“Zuko…I-I’m going to miss you,” she whispered before she could stop herself. Blushing, Katara began to ramble due to her nervousness, “It’s silly, right? I mean it’s not like we’re never going to see each other again, and we are meeting at their wedding in a few months, and—”

Zuko placed one finger on her lips to stop her nervous prattling and suppressed a groan at the sensation of her soft lips against his finger tip. He wanted nothing more than to feel those soft petals on his own lips and all over his heated skin.

Surprised, Katara stopped talking as a shiver ran down her spine at his touch, and with wide eyes, she stared up at Zuko curiously.

“I’m going to miss you, too,” Zuko whispered with a soft smile.

He moved his hand away from her plump lips, and before he could think about it twice, he wound his arms around her waist, pulling her close to him. Not even a second passed before he felt Katara wrap her arms around him to return the embrace.

A lump formed in his throat and he swallowed hard in order to get rid of it. He did not want to let her go. Now that he knew that what he felt for her was love, and not just pure lust, he hated the thought of leaving her and not getting to see her face or talk to her the following day and the day after that. He tightened his hold on her as he fought with himself, from confessing his feelings to her. From shouting that he loved her for all to hear. From pulling her head back and kissing her senseless.

But then he felt someone wedge between them, forcing them to separate. The empty feeling that followed was felt by both, though neither Katara nor Zuko knew that the other felt the same. Aang appeared between them before the young airbender placed a protective arm around Katara’s shoulders.

Zuko inwardly flinched at the suspicious and hurtful glare Aang was throwing at him before the
firebender took another step back.

“Don’t you think it’s getting late, Zuko?” Aang said cheerfully, although his tone was too terse to be genuine. “I think that you should take advantage of the remaining daylight.”

Zuko composed himself as he gazed at the airbender coolly.

“Yes, you’re right,” he responded before he glanced sideways at the silent group that was staring at them curiously. “Mother, I think it’s best that we take our leave now. Admiral Jee and the crew will be waiting at the docks with nothing to do if we take too long.”

Ursa glanced one last time at Iroh, who gave her wink, before she stepped inside the carriage with one last farewell.

Zuko offered one last smile at his friends.

“Thank you again for coming on this journey with me and helping me find my mother,” he said sincerely. His golden eyes rested on Katara who was looking at him sadly.

Unwilling to look away and leave, his gaze lingered for a moment on her face before he continued.

“We shall see one another again soon.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sun was beginning to set over the horizon, casting a bright golden light on the smooth surface of the calm blue ocean. A few clouds were spread across the multicolored sky as a soft salty breeze blew by, indicating that no storm would appear to disturb the serene scene any time soon.

Zuko watched the setting sun quietly as he stood alone on deck at the front of his flagship. The sounds of his crew members working above deck as Admiral Jee gave them orders barely reached his ears as he let out a deep sigh.

They would be arriving at the Fire Nation the following day and he would finally find out why Chao asked him to return. He needed to be on guard for anyone who tried to do anything to his mother since he still did not know who had sent her that false letter and he did not know how the Court
Council would react to her reappearance. He needed to talk to Jee about his mother’s safety.

The ship rocked gently as he remembered the goodbyes and good wishes from his friends as he prepared to leave Ba Sing Se. Sighing, Zuko rubbed his right temple as he tried to recall the conversation he had with Mai before she left to Omashu. He had only nodded noncommittally when Mai told him she loved him and would see him again in spring for his birthday, because he was clueless as to what to do after realizing his true feelings for Katara. If he were honest with himself, he would say that he could not really recall their conversation since his mind had been occupied with a blue-eyed waterbender, which made him feel a little guilty.

Another breeze twirled around him and he inhaled the salty and fresh aroma of the clean ocean. The young Fire Lord smirked slightly at the thought that he would not be leaving Katara behind while Jet stilled lurked in Ba Sing Se since she was returning to the Southern Water Tribe. Another sigh escaped his lips as he touched the left side of his chest. The thought of not seeing or being near Katara made his heart ache.

He was in love.

_I am in love and with my best friend Katara no less_, he mused with a smile on his face.

As the days had passed by after his shocking epiphany, and the more he thought about it, he could not believe how stupid he was for not realizing his feelings for Katara much sooner. That insufferable Jet had to be the one to make him realize his true feelings for the waterbender! How irritating!

Perhaps if he had admitted his feelings earlier, if he had only acknowledged them at the first signs of his love for her, Katara would have been his by now. She could be travelling to the Fire Nation with him at the moment, wrapped up next to his side as they stared out into the setting sun together.

A wistful sigh escaped him before he shook his head sadly. He should not be thinking such thoughts now. Katara was with Aang and that was it. There was nothing he could do about it.

But that did not mean that he could stop his ardent feelings for the lovely Water Tribe maiden either.

Now he understood why he could not stop thinking about her ever since they went their separate ways after the war. Even then he must have had feelings for her. Why many things reminded him of her, and why even when he was asleep, innocent and not so innocent dreams about the waterbender
played in his mind, warming and teasing him. Now he understood why he felt so at ease laughing with her, joking with her, playing with her, and talking to her. Allowing her to see a side of him he refused to reveal to anyone else.

Sure, she was annoying the first few times they came across each other as the war still raged on, and she continued to foil his attempts in capturing the Avatar. But as they continued to run into each other he began to respect and admire her for her great waterbending skills and for her loyalty to the Avatar and her mission for peace.

She was not like most Fire Nation noblewomen he knew and was used to. The women were submissive, delicate, and frail—with the exception of Azula and her friends, of course—something that Fire Nation male nobility seemed to look for in a wife. These were the same type of women his Royal Court introduced him to in hopes that he choose one among them to become his bride.

Though she had a temper to match his, Katara was strong and powerful. That was something else he admired about her. Although his fellow countrymen favored the meek little woman, he much more preferred a woman who would not be afraid to challenge him and would be able to keep up with his passionate side.

*Of course, I would not mind making Katara be submissive once in a while,* he thought with a small smirk as a few naughty images appeared in his mind before he shook his head again with a frown.

He thought she was beautiful since the first time he laid eyes on her frightened face when he invaded her small village. What with her exotic dark skin, dark-brown hair, and especially those captivating azure eyes. But at that time, he was too busy trying to fight a lost cause with his father to really think much about her. But now, as her body matured from a teenage girl to a young woman, he could not stop himself from appreciating her form every chance he got.

However, her physical beauty was not her only attribute that had gained his interest and captured his heart, but her kind soul as well. Katara had the most generous and the most beautiful heart out of everyone he had ever known. She was always trying to help those in need, even if it risked the waterbender her health or her life. She had offered to help him when they were still enemies, even after she had suffered under the hands of the Fire Nation. Had suffered personally under his hands. There were just so many wonderful things about Katara of the Southern Water Tribe.

How could he *not* have fallen in love with her? How could he *not* have been enchanted by that wonderful woman? But most importantly, why did he not see it and acted upon it sooner?

Zuko sighed. But even after all this he knew he had to forget about her, he had to let her go. Not
only because she was Aang’s girlfriend, but because he was convinced she would never return his feelings. She was too good, too pure, for someone like him, whom life had scarred and hardened so much. He was not worthy of her.

That thought caused his heart to wrench painfully, and so he closed his eyes as another salty breeze swirled around his unmoving form.

Perhaps this separation would be best for him. By being away from her, perhaps his feelings could go away or at least be diminished a bit so that once they met again, he would be able to bear the sight of her being with Aang. He had to remind himself that she could never be his, that she could never love him in return, that they could never be…

“Zuko, are you all right, dear?” his mother’s soft voice broke through his thoughts.

The young man snapped his eyes open and turned his head to the side to see his mother frowning down at his hands. Zuko looked down and realized that his clenched fists were aflame with bright orange fire. Taking a deep breath, Zuko flexed his tensed fingers and dispersed his flames with an emotionless expression.

Zuko returned his golden eyes to his worried mother and gave her a small smile.

“Yes, Mom…I’m perfectly fine,” he replied impassively as he looked away to gaze at the horizon once more.

Ursa’s frown deepened at his attempt to assuage her concern, she knew something was wrong with her son. She had caught him on a few occasions as they sailed at sea with content smiles on his face, as he would stare out almost in a daze, before sadness would settle over him. She wondered what was going on, but she did not want to pry if he did not want to talk about it.

She turned her questioning gaze to the setting sun as she remained silent beside her firstborn child. The sky and the ocean had turned a soft orangey-yellow as the sun made its descent over the horizon. Soon they would arrive at the Fire Nation, both her birth place and the place she had thought she would never see again. Ursa glanced at her silent son from the corner of her eye as questions formed in her head.

The day they were ready to depart from Ba Sing Se and they were saying their farewells, she noticed that Zuko seemed unable to remove his gaze from Katara, almost as if he were afraid of never seeing
her ever again. He surprised her when he wrapped his arms around Katara, when he seemed uncomfortable doing that with anyone else. And when she encircled her arms around him, he not only drew her closer to himself, but held her to him for a while, almost like he did not want to let her go.

Ursa was extremely curious as to what was happening and she could not help the giddiness that wanted to escape at the thought that perhaps her son had realized his feelings for the waterbender she liked so much.

“Zuko?” Ursa asked quietly as she watched his eyes seem saddened even more.

He blinked a few times before he answered her.

“Yes?” he replied.

“Zuko…” she began before she trailed off. Not wanting to perhaps ruin their ‘progress’, she decided to ask something else that had been on her mind since they were reunited. “What…has become of Azula? Where is my daughter?”

Zuko closed his eyes as he tried to find a way to explain to his mother what had become of Azula, his little sister. How was he supposed to give his mother the news that her own daughter had become a horrible psychopathic monster and had lost her mind to insanity? Ursa had suffered so much ever since Ozai banished her from the Fire Nation Palace and he did not want to cause her more pain that the information would surely cause her.

“Let’s go inside,” he said as he waited for his mother to take his arm before he led her away from the darkening sky.

Mother and son were both sitting at the low table in the cabin Ursa occupied on the ship. A few candles flickered around the dark room since night had almost settled in. There was a teapot placed in the middle of the small table and two cups filled with the hot tea sat before them, but neither one acknowledged the tea as one waited and the other prepared himself in order to start the conversation.

“Zuko?” Ursa asked softly as she touched his hand. “Your silence is scaring me. Tell me what has become of your sister.”
The young firebender looked up and saw a worried expression marring her delicate face and he looked away.

“What have you heard about Azula when you were in the Abandoned Fort?” he asked instead.

Ursa frowned as she removed her hand and placed it on her lap.

“I heard that she was an amazing and ruthless warrior and was sent by her father to capture the young Avatar. I know that she infiltrated Ba Sing Se, and with the help of her once banished brother…” Ursa trailed off as she glanced at her son, “she almost killed the Avatar, the last hope for the world.”

Zuko closed his eyes and let out a shaky breath before he nodded for her to continue.

“What else did you hear?”

“Nothing besides the fact that she was almost crowned Fire Lord because Ozai wanted to proclaim himself the Phoenix King. That is basically all I know or have heard of her,” Ursa admitted with a sad frown.

Once more the young man gave a short nod before he interlaced his fingers together and placed them on the table. Zuko sighed and the candles flickered, casting dark shadows across his weary face.

“The little Azula you knew changed. She is no longer the daughter you remember and loved. You, yourself know that she was not a very good child, always taunting me, ordering the servants around, and causing trouble wherever she went. And as she grew up, she only got worse. After I decided to…side with her in Ba Sing Se, I finally saw the person she really was.”

The young Fire Lord’s face hardened and his hands clenched into tight fists.

“You have no idea the things I witnessed while I was at her side. She was a cruel and sadistic person, enjoying others’ pain and suffering. I could never stay to watch, but Mai told me the horrible things Azula would do to torture the war prisoners she captured, claiming it was to extract information on the whereabouts of the Avatar.”
Ursa let out a strangled gasp and covered her mouth with her hand at the words her son was recounting about her daughter. Zuko took hold of one of her hands and held it gently until his mother calmed down so he could continue.

“Azula always wanted to please Father and she was fiercely determined to be his heir and prove to him that she was the better child. She wanted to show him that she was not ‘weak’ like her older brother, and so she showed no mercy and no compassion.” Zuko subconsciously touched his fire crown. “And I must admit that Azula was a very skilled firebender and warrior, she was better than me back then, even as children, if you remember. She was always cool and calculating, almost perfect.

“But that same determination to prove that she was the best was what eventually caused her own downfall in the end,” Zuko continued as a frown appeared on his face. “While Aang fought Ozai, and the rest of the resistance fought Ozai’s soldiers on the day of Sozin’s Comet, I set out to confront Azula and claim my rightful place on the throne as Fire Lord.”

Ursa frowned slightly. This is what she had wanted to hear about ever since she heard that Ozai had been defeated and her son had called off the war. She had been curious to know how her son had claimed the throne, but she had no idea about Azula’s part in it. She worried at the fate of her daughter.

Zuko looked up and smiled despite the depressing topic of the conversation.

“Katara agreed to accompany me to the Fire Nation Palace and seek out Azula. So we both left the Order of the White Lotus’ campsite and rode on Appa until we reached the palace.”

Ursa smiled slightly at her son’s smile, but frowned when Zuko’s smile disappeared.

“When Katara and I arrived, I immediately noticed that something was off about the way Azula acted when she turned her attention to me. I’m not really sure what happened to make her like that, to look so unstable, because when I left Ozai and joined Aang and his group, Azula seemed her perfect and controlled self. But as we came face-to-face I knew she was not as focused as she usually was, she was wild and unpredictable, and so I accepted when she challenged me to an Agni Kai.”

Zuko looked away when Ursa gasped.

“Katara had tried to argue with me about fighting Azula alone, but I did not heed to her words and
reassured her that everything would be fine. We both fought fiercely, neither of us willing to lose. As we fought we were an even match, shooting fire at each other with the same strength and skill, which I believe, caught her off guard and made me confident that I would win.”

His hands tightened into fists once again.

“I should have listened to Katara. Azula was too far gone that she broke the Agni Kai rules. She saw that she found a match in me, that I had turned into a firebending master and I was not going to go down so easily, and so, she shifted her attention from me to Katara, who was watching a few feet behind me.”

A look of pain crossed his features so suddenly that it caused Ursa to become alarmed.

“Before I knew it, Azula shot a streak of lightning toward Katara and I knew she would not have been able to survive the sudden attack, even if she used her waterbending,” Zuko whispered lowly.

Ursa gasped again and her hand flew to her mouth.

Zuko closed his eyes, trying to escape the memory of Katara’s shocked and frightened face and the panic he felt at how close she had been to being killed. He was brought out of his thoughts when Ursa shifted nervously in her seat and he continued with his narrative.

“The thought of Katara getting struck frightened me so much that I jumped between her and the upcoming lightning attack, almost on instinct. My only concern was to protect her, but it was too fast and I was unable to redirect it properly, so I was hit on the chest and I fell on the floor in pain and unable to move as the lightning coursed through my body.

“Katara screamed my name and ran to help me, but Azula intervened before she could reach me and attacked her,” Zuko growled angrily and his eyes hardened. “I tried to stand up and help Katara, to save her, but my body was in too much pain.” A small chuckle escaped his lips. “My concern was futile of course, since Katara is a waterbending master. She was the one who actually defeated Azula, you know, she managed to restrain Azula without even harming her.”

Another smile came across his face as his eyes took on a faraway look, gleaming brighter due to the light from the candles’ flame.

“Then Katara ran as quickly as she could to where I laid twitching in pain, calling my name frantically before she knelt at my side. When she saw my wound she…she cried for me,” Zuko said
softly as he moved his hand to the covered scar, rubbing it gently. “Then she healed me with her soothing element and her soft hands while silent tears ran down her cheeks, smiling once she realized I was okay and I was going to live.”

Ursa smiled at her son’s gentle expression and was again convinced that her son and the waterbender were meant for each other before she looked down at her clasped hands.

“And Azula? What happened to her afterwards?” she asked quietly.

Zuko blinked and the contented expression disappeared before he looked away.

“I was right when I noticed that there was something wrong with her.”

Reaching out, Zuko grabbed one of his mother’s hands and sighed.

“Azula…lost her mind. She became insane and wild, attacking everybody that came near her, screaming and cursing at everyone. I had her locked away from where Ozai is currently imprisoned. Some place where she cannot hurt anybody or herself.” Zuko gently squeezed his mother’s hand. “That is all I have to say about her.”

Ursa closed her eyes and a few tears escaped down from the corner of her eyes.

“My poor Azula,” she whispered wretchedly. “If only I had been there for her. If only I could have helped her, maybe she would have turned out differently. Oh, I have caused both of my children so much pain!” she cried out as she tried to move her hand away from her son’s grasp, but Zuko refused to let her go.

“No, Mother!” Zuko exclaimed sternly as he kept a firm hold on Ursa’s hand. “It’s not your fault, but Ozai’s. Everything that has happened to us, to you, to me, to Azula, is his damned fault!”

Zuko embraced his sobbing mother as she cried into his chest and he wondered if perhaps he should have not told her the truth. He was glad he left out the part where Azula had cackled maniacally with triumph and glee when she thought he, her own brother, had died when he had fallen and Katara had cried.
The young man held his mother for a long time until she finally pulled away from him, dabbing her tears with the sleeve of her robe before she finally raised her head to look at her concerned son.

“Thank you, Zuko, for telling me everything. Even though this news is something I did not wish to hear and it pains me, it helps me to finally know the truth and stop wondering what has happened to Azula.”

Zuko nodded gravely as he looked away to stare at the melting candles. He closed his eyes and his hands once more clenched into tight fists.

Remembering his encounter with Azula brought back the panic and fear he had felt at the thought that Katara could have died, that he would not have been able to see her blue eyes looking at him ever again, that he could have lost her forever. The young Fire Lord’s eyes snapped open as understanding came to him, as insight settled in his mind.

Is it possible that I had feelings for Katara since back then? Was the reason I had been willing to sacrifice my life and die for her was because I was already falling in love with her?

Zuko touched his chest again where the evidence of his affection for her rested, where Katara had used her healing abilities on him while she cried for him, and where his heart continued to beat strongly.

His heart seemed to say yes.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Aang sighed as he bent a small ball of air between his hands before he threw it toward the darkening sky. He had left the training area a few hours ago where Bumi was showing Toph how to ride Flopsy, his frightening-looking but gentle beast. They had help Bumi with some disputes among his people a few days ago and now Aang was sitting cross-legged in a small garden that belonged to the grand palace of Omashu, feeling lonely and depressed.

The young monk remembered the times he had gone in search of Katara over at Ba Sing Se in order to spend time with her and maybe receive lots of hugs and kisses, but to his disappointment, he had always found her in Zuko’s company, discussing the compromise or other things. Ever since they had visited the Fire Nation it seemed that Katara had no more time for him, but instead spent all of it with the young Fire Lord, and he would be lying if he said he was not jealous. Even Momo seemed to prefer being with Zuko!
Aang frowned as he let out a puff of air from his mouth. He knew he had no reason to be feeling such things since Katara and Zuko were friends and he could not stop them from talking to each other. He was sure Katara would have gotten very angry if he told her to stop spending so much time with Zuko, but he could not cease the angry thoughts that their closeness could make them fall for each other as more than just friends.

Unless it’s too late…he thought before he shook his head angrily at the idea.

“Hey, Twinkletoes, what’s got you so depressed?” The voice of his former earthbending sifu reached his ears.

Aang lifted his head to watch Toph make her way toward him with her usual grin on her lovely, pale face. The young earthbending noblewoman was now clean after her training and was wearing a long-sleeved, dark-green dress that reached her knees with a black sash around her thin waist. Her small feet were lacking footwear as usual. Her dark hair was pulled up into a simple bun with her long bangs almost covering her cloudy, lime-colored eyes that were framed by long dark lashes.

Aang knew and admitted—at least to himself—that Toph had grown into a very beautiful young woman, though her rough and blunt attitude did not disappear as she matured. Perhaps to others her brash attitude might seem unattractive and offensive, but he found it endearing and amusing…most of the time. Especially when it was not directed at him. Of course he only had eyes for Katara and he loved her, so he only saw Toph as a great friend.

Blushing at his thoughts, he finally remembered she had asked him a question.

“What makes you think I’m depressed?” he asked her in a false cheery voice.

Toph sighed and rolled her eyes as she sat next to him.

“Come on, Twinkletoes,” she huffed. “After spending all these years with you, I think I know you well enough to notice that something’s wrong. You haven’t once begged me with that annoying, pleading voice of yours to ride the mail slides since we arrived in Omashu!”

Aang smiled at her words as he glanced at her before he lifted his eyes to the sky. It was true. Except for maybe Katara, Toph seemed to know him better than anyone else since they had traveled together through the Earth Kingdom these past few years. She probably knew him better than he knew himself.
“I’m waiting,” Toph said impatiently as she crossed her arms over her chest and began to tap her fingers on her arm.

Letting out a resigned breath, Aang frowned at her as he tried to say what was plaguing his mind and making him uneasy.

“It’s just that…” he trailed off and sighed. “I-I don’t understand what’s going on with Katara.”

Toph raised her eyebrows.

“What do you mean?” she asked in a casual tone as she dug her toes in the soft dirt.

“Well…Katara spent a lot of time with Zuko ever since we first got to the Fire Nation. I’d see them together all the time, either talking or just sitting by each other,” he said as he ran a hand down his bald head.

“So?” Toph snorted. “Sweetness can’t spend her time with other people now?”

“That’s not it!” Aang exclaimed, frustrated. “She’s my girlfriend, and instead of spending her time with me talking, going out, or just sitting quietly together, she’s always with Zuko! I’m the one who has to seek her out when I want to be in her company! She never comes to me anymore, she always goes to Zuko!”

Toph remained silent after the airbender’s outburst, wondering if perhaps he had figured out what was going on between the Fire Lord and waterbender. She could detect the hurt and jealousy in his voice as easily as the ground shaking due to his emotions.

“I sense there’s something else that’s bothering you besides the fact that Katara doesn’t spend a lot of time with you, as much time as you think a girlfriend should,” she said in a deadpanned tone. “Isn’t that right, Twinkletoes?”

She heard him heave a huge sigh before she felt him stand up.
“I…I don’t know why, but…” Aang trailed off again as another sigh escaped his lips. “I sometimes can’t stop myself from thinking that perhaps there’s something more going on between Katara and Zuko…or that at least Zuko has other intentions towards Katara besides friendship.”

“Oh? And what makes you think that?” the earthbender asked as she brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

The agitated airbender shifted uneasily as he hesitated in answering.

“I noticed while we were in Ba Sing Se that Zuko would stare at her a lot—you have no idea how much—and he would smile with her more than he would anyone else. And sometimes I’d see some kind of emotion behind his eyes that I’ve never seen him direct at anybody else.”

Aang gritted his teeth as he continued.

“Did you know that when we were on Zuko’s flagship, Katara and he sparred? You may ask what the problem with that is, and I’m telling you there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s the part where I came upon them and he had her pinned under him with a look so intense on his face, a look that showed…showed something other than friendship, that it made me so angry,” he said in an irritated tone as he clenched his tattooed hands.

Toph raised her eyebrow and smirked. Wow, seriously? Way to go, Sparky!

“But besides that,” Aang continued, “Zuko was always by her side and only her side. Sure he talked to everybody else, but it was only Katara that he wanted for company, more than you or Sokka or even Iroh. And then every time I asked Katara if she wanted to take a walk with me or something she would tell me that she couldn’t because Zuko needed her,” he growled angrily.

“So you’re mad because you see Zuko as the one who’s keeping Katara away from you?” Toph rolled her eyes at his childish whining.

Aang scowled at her even though she couldn’t see him.

“No, I just think that he shouldn’t be around Katara so much. She’s my girlfriend and if he wants somebody to keep him company or help him, he has Mai!” he bit out.
He closed his eyes and took a deep breath in order to calm himself down. Toph waited silently for him to continue.

“You know what?” he said in a calm voice after a few moments of silence. “Don’t pay attention to what I said. Zuko is a great friend and Katara loves me, so there’s no reason for my thinking this way. Katara would never hurt me.”

He turned away from Toph and began to make his way to the stables.

“I’m gonna go check on Appa and Momo,” he muttered.

“But what if your suspicions are right?” Toph asked quietly as she continued to play with the dirt with her toes. “What if they liked each other more than friends should?”

What if they love each other?

With his back to where the young girl sat, Aang stopped at her words and clenched his hands tightly.

“I rather not think about that because I don’t know what I’ll do if that ever happens,” he stated between gritted teeth before he continued on his way.

Toph lay back on the ground and sighed. Aang was her friend and she cared for him a lot. He was kind, funny, and gentle, and from what she had heard from many girls, he was a handsome young man. She felt herself flush at the thought before she let out a small snort.

Because of him, she was given the opportunity to leave her home, which felt more like a cage—a golden one, but still a cage—and travel around the world. Because of the lovable monk, she was able to master her earthbending and realize her metalbending abilities. Because of Aang she was able to find the person she really was and become the independent woman she always wanted to be.

But there were times he frustrated her beyond reason, times that made her want to bash her head on a stone wall—or better yet, bash his.
She knew Aang could see that there was something going on between the young Fire Lord and the waterbender, but he was deep in denial, refusing to give up his feelings for Katara and acknowledge the possibility that Katara may love another and not him. There was a part of her that wanted to point it out to him, but she knew that he would not believe her.

Toph only hoped that once Katara and Zuko finally stopped being so damn stupid and admit their damn feelings, Aang would peacefully step aside for their happiness and for his own damn good.

But somehow she had a feeling that it would not be so damn easy.
The darkness seemed to surround them as they solemnly walked down the cold stone passageway of the prison tower. The few torches that aligned the walls flickered as they passed, making both Zuko’s and his guards’ armor glint eerily. The only sounds that reached their ears were their footsteps and the low voices of the prisoners that had moved back into their cells when news that the Fire Lord had arrived spread.

Zuko’s face was set in a hard, grave expression as he and his small group followed behind the captain of the prison guard to the deepest part of the prison tower. Jee and Zuko’s two personal guards were walking silently behind him. He glanced down to his left and frowned at his mother who stared straight ahead with an unreadable expression on her face.

They had barely set foot on land and the first thing Ursa had wanted to do was confront Ozai. Zuko had refused such an idea vehemently and had almost ordered Jee to use force if necessary to take his mother into the safety of the palace, but when she insisted that she needed to see her former husband, he had no choice but to relent.

The young Fire Lord was a bit wary about how the people of the Fire Nation would react to Ursa’s reappearance. He still did not know who had sent his mother that strange letter and he was anxious at the thought that the same person might try something to prevent his mother from staying with him. He pondered over the idea that perhaps it could have been Ozai himself who sent the note, even if it seemed impossible. There was no way Ozai could have done it, being locked up in a secured prison and all. Still, he needed to be alert and cautious at all times.

Zuko had explained the situation about why Ursa disappeared as well as the strange letter to his trusted admiral, and so he appointed Jee as Ursa’s personal guard until he could find someone else that he could trust to fit the job of protecting his mother. Jee had readily agreed and appointed his second-in-command to be in charge of his ship for the time being.

Ursa had refused to be followed around everywhere and treated like a helpless child, arguing that she had lived and survived all by herself for almost more than ten years, but in the end she had reluctantly agreed in order to ease the mind of her son, whom she knew already had so many things to worry about.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed in the silent corridor as they continued on their walk even as the darkness oppressed them. Before long, they came to the large, steel door at the end of the deep corridor. Ursa watched quietly as her son nodded at the guards posted at either side of the cell before he inserted the key he produced from his pocket to unlock the thick door. Ursa squinted into the dark entrance before glancing at the grave face of her oldest child.
“I will go in first,” Zuko said as he briefly glanced at Jee who stepped closer to Lady Ursa with a solemn face.

Returning his attention to the prison cell, Zuko straightened himself even further as he took a few sure steps into the dark interior. He could hear the former Fire Lord shifting in the cell as he remained perfectly still in the dark cell room. After a few more minutes of silence, Zuko produced a small flame in his palm and lit the small torch that rested near the only door in the room.

As soon as the torch lit the small cell, Ozai’s dirty face became visible; a cruel smile on his lips as he sat casually against the wall. Zuko regarded his disgraced father with a cold expression as he clasped his hands behind his back.

“Why, Zuko,” Ozai began as he ran a hand through his long and tangled hair, “I thought you weren’t going to visit me anymore after I told you what you wanted. I am truly touched.” He sneered.

Zuko narrowed his eyes.

“Believe me, I would have preferred not to see your face again,” he replied coldly.

Ozai laughed as he moved from his sitting position to lie on his side on the stone floor with his head propped up by his hand. A picture of absolute tranquility. Zuko was not deceived.

“That only makes me assume that you failed in your search to find Ursa,” Ozai commented and chuckled cruelly. “Or perhaps you did find her, but she wanted nothing to do with you.”

“Quite the contrary, I waited years to see my son again,” a soft feminine voice interrupted.

Ozai’s laughter died in his throat as he looked to the door where the newcomer was making her way through, her long dark hair swishing behind her and her small hands clasped together before her. Ozai’s golden eyes widened and he quickly sat up straight.

“Ursa!” Ozai exclaimed before he jumped to his feet, his eyes softening as they landed on his former wife.
“Hello, Ozai,” Ursa greeted, her voice devoid of any emotion as she stepped up next to her son.

Jee appeared next and placed himself just behind his charge as he glared at the disgraced Fire Lord.

Zuko watched as Ozai’s eyes widened even more as some kind of emotion flickered across his face before it disappeared almost instantly. Zuko narrowed his eyes as his father continued to stare hard at Ursa before the prisoner looked away with a haughty lift of his chin as he returned his attention to Zuko.

“Well, I see that you’re not a complete failure then,” Ozai taunted as he began to stroll casually inside his prison cell. “So if you managed to bring her here, it means that—”

“That I know everything now,” Zuko interrupted angrily. “I know what happened on the night Azulon died and why. I know what you made Mother do and I know that it was you that took her away from Azula and me!” his voice rose in volume at the end as he glared angrily at his sire.

“I did what I had to do to gain the Fire Nation throne,” Ozai said with a sigh, flicking his greasy hair over his shoulder before he turned to glare at his son. “You should be grateful that because of me, you have the privilege of being Fire Lord!” he barked.

Zuko’s glare intensified.

“But not at the price of bringing harm to my mother,” he growled out lowly.

Ozai stiffened minutely before he turned away to continue strolling in his prison cell. Ursa placed a hand on her irate son’s arm and took a step forward. She shook her head when Jee tried to follow her before she turned her gaze to her former husband’s back.

“I am not here to argue with you about how you made me murder your father and leave the comfort of the palace in order to save my son’s life,” Ursa began as she took another step closer to the cell bars.

Ozai stopped in his pacing when she began to talk, but made no move to turn to face her or acknowledge her words.
“I’m here to tell you how... angry I am that you actually had the nerve to harm Zuko when he was just a young boy! I am irate at what you have done to make Azula what she is now!” Ursa yelled, her eyes narrowing as her slender shoulders began to shake due to her emotions.

Zuko stared at his mother in shock for he had never heard her shout before or seen her so livid in all his life. She had always been so calm and poised. He looked at the silent form of his father and noticed that Ozai had visibly stiffened at the resentment in Ursa’s voice. It seemed that his father had never seen her show her anger so strongly as well.

“I am furious that you lied to my children and told them I was dead! I’m enraged that you kept them away from me!” Ursa continued as she reached the cell bars and gripped them tightly with shaking hands. “But most of all I am livid that you made me believe my own son hated me!”

A sob escaped her lips as angry and sorrowful tears began to fall from her eyes and she pressed her forehead against the cold bars.

“How could you do this to us, your own family?” Ursa’s heated words turned into an anguished whisper. “Why? Why did you hurt us so? Why did you make me believe that you actually held some sort of affection for me? That you would never harm me?”

Zuko was about to move forward to reach his distressed mother, but he froze in surprise when Ozai spun around, raced to the cell bars, and fell to his knees before Ursa. Zuko actually gaped in shock when Ozai’s uncaring features melted into a pleading expression.

*Could it be that he still has feelings for her?* Zuko thought, reeling at the possibility of such a thing. *If he did, then why did he do such awful things to her? Why did he harm her so? His hands clenched at his sides. I would never harm Katara in such a way, even for all the power and riches in the world!*

“Ursa, please forgive me!” Ozai exclaimed as he looked up from where he was kneeling. “I never intended to go so far! I never intended to cause you so much pain!”

Zuko and Jee stepped forward when Ozai reached up to grasp the crying woman’s hands, but Ursa snatched them away before he could actually touch her. She took a few steps back as she quickly wiped the tears from her face, glaring at the man kneeling before her.

“But you did,” Ursa replied in a low voice as she straightened herself. “You did hurt me. And you
caused me even more pain by hurting my children. I cannot believe how stupid I was for believing you were a good man, for believing in your lies.”

“Ursa, please,” Ozai pleaded as he reached for her. “Just hear me out—”

“No!” Ursa snapped. “I do not want to hear any more of your lies! Any excuse you give me will not make me help you get out of this prison. I just came here to tell you how much anger I hold towards you and how much I despise you. This is the last time you will see me because I do not want to see you ever again.”

Ozai’s head dropped in defeat, his long dark hair covering his face from their view. Zuko glanced at his admiral and gave him a nod. Jee moved forward and touched Ursa’s arm in order to lead her away. The noblewoman spared one last glance at the man she had once loved before she slowly turned around and followed Jee out of the prison cell, wiping the last of her tears from her face. Zuko glared at the defeated form of his sire before he turned to follow his mother and Jee.

“This is not over, Ursa,” Ozai’s voice reached their ears before they left the cold, dark room.

They all looked back to see him stand up, his hair still hiding his face and his hands clenching the iron bars harshly. His head snapped up and he glared at Zuko and Jee with cold and furious amber eyes before they landed on Ursa.

“I will reclaim you and the throne, one way or the other, Ursa. Mark my words.”

The soldiers standing guard at the grand gate that lead to the magnificent Fire Nation Palace immediately opened the huge double doors as the Fire Lord’s carriage came into view. Servants and guards stood at attention as the carriage pulled up alongside the long flight of stairs before the entrance to the palace.

Coming to a stop a few feet behind the carriage, Admiral Jee dismounted from his komodo rhino, handed the reins to one of the stablemen, and waited for the Fire Lord and Lady Ursa to make their appearance.

The carriage driver jumped down to open the door and moved aside with a bow as the Fire Lord stepped down from the carriage. As soon as they saw their lord, the servants and guards bowed and greeted him, straightening when he acknowledged them with a brief word. A few servants had already walked over to grab their lord’s belongings, ready for his return since Zuko had sent a
messenger hawk with a note announcing his arrival that same morning.

Zuko turned from his guards and servants to help his silent mother step off the carriage before hooking her arm under his as he led her up the long flight of stairs that led into the Fire Nation Palace. After surveying the area carefully, Jee quickly fell in step behind the Fire Lord and Lady Ursa.

Zuko looked over at Jee and nodded at him as the older firebender walked a couple of feet away from Ursa before looking down at his mother worriedly. Ever since they had left the prison tower and Ozai behind, his mother had not said a word.

As soon as they reached the entrance to the palace, Zuko fixed his golden gaze on his servants as they formed a line in front of him before he addressed them firmly.

“This is Lady Ursa, my mother, and she has finally returned home. Make sure she is comfortable and I expect her to be respected,” he said without any further explanations.

“Yes, Fire Lord Zuko,” the servants answered as one before they bowed in respect and obedience.

They all quickly bowed to her since in deference to their lord’s wishes.

Zuko called Jiao to come forth as the servants moved away and resumed their tasks, speculating amongst themselves. The younger servants were confused since they had believed Lady Ursa was dead and they looked at the tall noblewoman curiously. The older servants began to whisper and murmur amongst themselves as they recognized Lady Ursa. They were amazed to know that she was alive and they remembered that she had always been a kind mistress.

“Jiao, you will be assisting my mother as you did with…Lady Katara,” Zuko said and a sigh escaped him before he mentally shook his head at the longing that arose once more as he said the waterbender’s name.

Jiao kept her eyes down as she bowed to the noblewoman.

“It will be my pleasure to assist the mother of my lord,” the young servant said sincerely.
“Thank you,” Ursa said in a tired voice before she added, “Wait. I remember you. You are Little Jiao who used to bring me flowers to my bedroom while your mother tended to me.” She smiled and both Zuko and Jee relaxed. “Where is your mother? I do wish to see her again.”

Zuko politely looked away and Jee looked down at his boots as Jiao lowered her head even further to hide her sad eyes.

“She passed away a few years ago, Lady Ursa,” the young maid answered softly.

“Oh, no. I am so sorry to hear that,” Ursa said sadly. “Your mother was a great woman and my best maidservant.”

“Thank you,” Jiao replied.

Zuko cleared his throat lightly as he addressed his mother.

“Let’s go to the royal family wing, so we can freshen up before dinner.”

They walked down the golden halls with Jee and Jiao trailing after them as they made their way to their rooms. Ursa looked around herself and smiled at the bittersweet memories that came to her of a time in her life when she once had been blissfully happy as well as blissfully ignorant of what kind of man she had married.

Zuko kept a close watch over his mother as she looked around the palace with a sad expression as they walked. He remembered the words his father had said and narrowed his eyes. Ozai was mad if he thought Zuko was going to allow him to harm his mother again and reclaim the throne. Though he wondered how Ozai intended to carry out his plan since he was securely locked away. His comments were most likely all bluster.

They watched as an elderly man rounded a corner, and when he saw them, he paused before he strode towards them with a smile on his face, his long white hair swaying behind him.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” Chao greeted as he made a bow. “I am glad to see you again. It is good that you have returned. I hope General Iroh is doing well,” he said sincerely. He smiled at Jee who gave a short nod in greeting.
“Thank you, Advisor Chao, and yes my uncle is quite happy in his teashop right now.” Zuko graced his advisor with a smile. “Were you able to handle things in my absence?”

“Yes, my lord, with the help of Enlai and Jian, the Fire Nation was taken care of while you were away,” the advisor reported.

Zuko nodded before he turned to Ursa and touched her arm.

“Advisor Chao, I would like you to meet my mother, Lady Ursa. Mother, this is Nobleman Chao, my most trusted advisor and one of Uncle Iroh’s closest friend.”

The advisor bowed again.

“It is an honor to finally meet you, Princess Ursa.”

Ursa smiled and gave him a small nod of her head in acknowledgment.

“I am glad to meet another friend of Iroh’s,” she said.

Chao smiled before his expression turned solemn as he returned his gaze to the young man before him.

“My lord, I do hate to interrupt your time with your mother, but a situation has come up that needs your immediate attention, thus the reason I had summoned you unexpectedly.”

Zuko’s face hardened before he gave a sharp nod.

“Assemble my advisors to the meeting room immediately,” he ordered.

Chao cleared his throat before he shifted in his place.
“The Court Council members know nothing, my lord. It has only come to my attention.”

Zuko frowned in confusion, but Chao gave him a look that said it was something that should be discussed privately.

“Hm, I see. Wait for me in my study then. I will be there shortly,” Zuko ordered.

“Yes, Fire Lord Zuko,” Chao obeyed as he gave one last bow to the royal members of the Fire Nation before striding away.

“I hope is nothing serious, dear,” Ursa said with a frown as they continued on their walk to the royal family wing.


As they entered the guest wing, Zuko discreetly glanced at the room where Katara had stayed on her last visit and he briefly closed his eyes as he remembered the way her small body felt when he had carried her into the room and how he had reacted to seeing her laying in her bed. Again, he wondered how he could not have noticed his real feelings for her at that moment.

The long corridor merged into the next hall—the royal family wing. Instead of turning right to where his bedchambers were located, Zuko made a left, hardly aware that Ursa, Jee, and Jiao were walking with him.

He had not been to this side of the wing since he left the palace to join the Avatar. His and Azula’s childhood bedchambers were in this part of the long corridor along with other rooms that were meant for any members of the royal family, but none of these rooms have been used for a very long time. Zuko slowed his steps as he passed his childhood bedroom before he looked away and continued in his long strides.

A couple of rooms down there was a door that was more elegantly decorated than the previous ones had been. Both mother and son did not spare a glance to the room that Ursa used to share with her husband before she had been forced to leave the palace and before Ozai had ascended the throne.
Zuko had not passed—much less entered—anywhere near that room since he was told his mother had died. Ursa was also silent as she gracefully walked down the familiar corridor beside her son to the private chambers that would have been hers had she stayed when Ozai became Fire Lord.

At the end of the elaborate hallway with the golden pillars and beautiful adornments, opposite to the Fire Lord’s grand royal suite, was the Fire Lady’s bedchamber. It was bigger than the other rooms on this side of the wing, but smaller and slightly less impressive than the Fire Lord’s royal bedchamber.

The Fire Lords and their wives have had separate rooms as long as anyone could remember. There were many different reasons for this; one being that most—if not all—of the marriages were for political reasons and some couples could not bear being close to each other since they were practically strangers.

Another reason was that the wives could not stand being anywhere near their husbands’ concubines. The harem was the room closest to the Fire Lord’s corridor and suite. The Fire Lord would be the one to visit his wife’s chamber if he felt like sleeping with her in order to take a respite from his concubines or if the need for an heir arose.

When Zuko became Fire Lord he gave Ozai’s concubines a choice of either returning to their homes or remaining in the palace and working as servants. Surprisingly, most pledged their loyalty to him and decided to stay, since it was their families who had given them to Ozai in the first place, often to advance to higher positions within the Royal Court.

Zuko had ordered the harem chamber to be remodeled and presented it to Iroh as his room for whenever the retired general visited so he did not have to sleep all alone in the dark and empty part of the royal family wing. It was also so they could be near each other like they had been during Zuko’s banishment.

Ursa grew uncomfortable as they neared the Fire Lady bedchamber. She had at first considered herself lucky because she shared a room with Ozai when they had first been married and he was always there every night. He had been such a wonderful husband in the beginning and she had fallen in love with him instantly.

But after she gave birth to Azula, Ozai’s true colors emerged. He became ambitious, selfish, and demanding and began to neglect her, returning to their room at night less and less. It had been Jiao’s mother who had confessed to her that Ozai had concubines of his own in Azulon’s harem, and when she confronted him about it, he heartlessly told her that he would not give them up for her.

She had been devastated. Her heart broken. The love she had felt for him began to diminish until she
only felt a small amount of affection for him. And then that affection disappeared when he forced her to murder his father then ordered her out of the palace and leave her children behind in order to save their son.

Ursa shook her head to rid herself of the painful memories and the words he had told her last in the prison tower.

“Zuko, where are we going?” she asked quietly.

Her son turned towards her with a confused expression.

“To your room, Mother,” he replied, stopping when Ursa shook her head.

“No, my son, I do not wish to live there. I would prefer one of the other rooms,” she said.

Zuko frowned as he turned to face her. “But Mom—”

“That room does not belong to me,” Lady Ursa began before he could say anything else and smiled as she added, “The Fire Lady’s royal bedchamber belongs to your future Fire Lady and wife, my son.”

Zuko closed his mouth, clenched his hands, and looked away.

“Very well,” he replied impassively before he nodded at Jiao. “Prepare the first room at the entrance of the royal family wing for Lady Ursa as well as the room next to it for Admiral Jee.”

“Yes, my lord.” Jiao bowed and left to do her lord’s bidding.

Zuko looked at his mother who had a questioning eyebrow raised at him.

Resisting the urge to look away again, Zuko said, “I have to talk with Chao. Admiral Jee will accompany me for a while, but he will return shortly…” He smiled at her. “Would you like to see the Royal Palace Garden afterwards?”
Sitting in his grand chair in his study, Zuko glared at the small scroll in his hand as he reread it a third time. Chao and Jee sat quietly before Zuko’s large desk with worried faces as they waited for the young Fire Lord to speak.

We demand that you release Ozai from prison immediately for he is the rightful heir to the throne. He is the one who is capable of ruling and guiding our great nation to the rise of power that will never be accomplish by your pathetic rule of justice and peace between the other lowly continents and elements.

If you do not heed our words and release Ozai, our future Phoenix King, then we will do it ourselves. Be careful, young Zuko, because you will never know when we will strike. It could be in a few days, a few months, or a few years. We will be watching.

Zuko crushed the thin paper with his left hand and set it on fire as he slammed his right fist on the wooden desk.

“Does anyone else know about this?” Zuko asked darkly as he looked up at Chao.

The old advisor shook his head.

“I don’t think so, my lord. A small boy came up to me with the sealed scroll as I made my way home. He told me he had been paid to deliver the letter to me, saying I was to read it and give it to the Fire Lord immediately. I asked him if he knew who had ordered him to give me the scroll, but he said that he did not know for the man wore a cloak on with the hood covering his face.” Chao continued, “I thought it was best that no one knew of this, thus why I sent you that message saying there was a problem in the Royal Court in case it was intercepted.”

Zuko nodded approvingly before he narrowed his eyes as he stood up from his seat. He walked over to the large window behind his desk and gazed outside where he could see his private garden from a distance.

He watched as leaves fell from the trees and twirled in the air before they landed on the ground, reminding those who watched that winter was close. Zuko sighed. How he wished life was not so complicated and that at that moment he could be enjoying his private garden with Katara in his arms. Shaking his head from such thoughts, the young man finally spoke.
They are foolish if they believe I would release one of the most dangerous men in the world just like that. Do they think I would cower in fear because of their little threat and fall into their wishes?” Zuko scoffed before turning around and taking his place at his chair again. “Double the guard duty on Ozai’s cell and corridor as well as the ground below where his cell is located. If whoever wrote this letter is serious they will not succeed easily.”

“Perhaps they are bluffing,” Jee spoke up as he rubbed his chin pensively. “There are not many who still support Ozai anymore, and besides, how would they be able to break him free with so many highly trained guards and soldiers around? It would be a suicide mission.”

“Hm, perhaps you’re right, Admiral Jee, but I will not take any chances. Even if their supposed attack is not real I want to be prepared,” Zuko stated as he began to look at some of the papers that had begun to accumulate on his desk, but decided to instead write a letter to Iroh to reassure him everything was fine.

“I will see that more guards are posted at once before I return to my duties in standing guard of Lady Ursa,” Jee said as he stood up and bowed.

Zuko nodded as both older men made to leave.

“Chao. Jee,” Zuko called without looking up. “I believe it is best that no one knows of this. I don’t want to cause any unnecessary panic if this turns out to be an idle threat.”

“Certainly, my lord,” they said as they bowed and exited the Fire Lord’s study.

Sighing heavily, Zuko dropped his head into his hands before picking up his ink brush to begin writing to his uncle.

Katara pulled the hood of her parka up as the fresh, frosty breeze danced around her, slightly stinging her face with the cold temperature, making her cheeks and nose turn a warm pink.

If only Zuko were here to warm me up, she thought with a grin before she blushed and shook her head.

Their ship glided lazily on the currents as it neared the retaining wall that separated the Southern Water Tribe from the wide ocean. She glanced to her right where Sokka was embracing Suki from
behind with both their hands on her swollen belly. Katara smiled when she caught Sokka’s eye and he grinned back. How they both missed their arctic homeland.

After leaving Ba Sing Se, Katara, her brother, and her future sister-in-law all agreed that it was time they returned home and give news of the upcoming wedding between the future Chief of the Southern Water Tribe and the Captain of the Kyoshi Island Warriors. As well as news of their baby. Aang had given them a ride on Appa to the nearest Earth Kingdom port not long after Zuko had departed. From there the trio boarded a ship that was heading to Kyoshi Island.

They had spent a few days at Suki’s home while the island celebrated the approaching marriage of their beloved captain and the water tribesman as well as the upcoming birth of their first child. Suki then had appointed a new captain to look after her warriors and her village since she had reluctantly agreed—after much begging from her future husband—to stay with Sokka in the Southern Water Tribe after they married.

A few days later, they boarded another ship, which was now currently making its way to the southernmost part of the globe.

The guards in watch of approaching ships waved from their positions on the small towers on top of the impressive wall and motioned for the ship to halt. Sokka stepped up to the front and called out to them to open the wall and allow them passage. Once they recognized Chief Hakoda’s children and the Kyoshi Captain, the waterbending guards split the solid, frozen wall into a vertical line moving it sideways before the small ship proceeded to enter, a few white waves trailing after it as it chugged along the dark blue sea.

Hakoda walked swiftly with his mother and her new husband following as they made their way through the crowd that had gathered beside the ship, watching as the passengers disembarked.

“Dad!” they heard Katara call out. “Gran-Gran, Master Pakku, over here!”

The three looked up to see Katara waving at them enthusiastically as she descended the ramp that had embedded itself on the soft snow.

“Katara!” Hakoda greeted excitedly as he took a few steps forward and enveloped his daughter in a big hug. “We’ve missed you so much.” He looked down at his youngest child that reminded him so much of his beloved wife and smiled.
Katara laughed as she moved away from him to embrace her grandmother who had her arms opened wide for her to receive a warm hug.

“I’ve missed all of you, too! And yes, that includes you, Gran Pakku!” she giggled at her former waterbending teacher.

Pakku crossed his arms over his chest and snorted, but Katara saw his thin lips turn up into a tiny smile.

“So how was your time in the Fire Nation?” her Gran-Gran asked.

“It was great!” Katara exclaimed happily.

“So were you able to help Fire Lord Zuko find his mother?” her father asked.

He had been curious ever since Katara had sent them a letter saying that the young Fire Lord had finally found out the whereabouts of his missing mother and the whole gang had decided to help the young man.

They watched as Katara’s smile grew even wider.

“Yes. Zuko has finally been reunited with Lady Ursa. He was very grateful for our help,” she said and looked down as her cheeks warmed at the memory of the way Zuko had thanked her the last night of a full moon where he had accidentally come across the lake while she bathed.

“Where’s your brother?” Hakoda asked, oblivious to his daughter’s thoughts.

“Huh? Oh...uh...he’s helping Suki get down the ramp,” Katara explained as she looked back at the vessel.

Her small family turned to the small ship and watched as Sokka led the young woman down the ramp with one arm around her waist and the other holding her hand. Katara grinned as she noticed Suki’s annoyed face at being handled like a fragile doll.
“Oh, my,” Gran-Gran whispered as she watched her grandson lead his girlfriend—a girlfriend with a rather large stomach—toward them.

“Hey!” Sokka greeted cheerfully as he approached his silent family.

Suki walked nervously beside him, afraid of what his family’s reaction would be when they heard the news that they were going to have a child out of wedlock. Katara gave her an encouraging smile and the pregnant warrior straightened herself.

“Sokka.” Hakoda smiled as his son gave him a hug. “I’m glad you’re back,” he said and grinned, “Now I can have a few days off while my future successor takes over a few problems that have come up.”

“Sorry, Dad,” Sokka said with a chuckle, “but you’re just going to have to wait for that vacation because Suki and I are going to be very busy.” The young tribesman wrapped his arm around Suki and brought her close to his side as he looked at each of his family members.

“Dad, Gran-Gran…Gran Pakku.” He grinned when the old waterbender snorted at the name. Sokka brought a hand down to Suki’s bulge. “Say hello to my future wife, the woman I love and the one who is currently carrying my son.”

“Or daughter,” Suki added with a small smile.

“Or daughter,” Sokka amended with a sheepish grin.

They waited nervously as the family remained silent for a while before Kanna stepped forward with a serious expression on her wrinkled face. She took Suki’s face between her hands and stared into her eyes. Suki shifted uneasily, but held the old woman’s unwavering gaze. Kanna pulled down the collar of the warm parka the female warrior had on and the shiny, green necklace around Suki’s pale neck glistened in the soft light of the sun.

“This goes against our marriage traditions,” the old woman began solemnly as she looked down at Suki’s large stomach, evidence of her pregnancy, before she turned her grave gaze to her grandson.
Both Suki and Sokka blushed, but the young man squared his shoulders and cleared his throat.

“I know, but I love Suki and I will marry her,” he said determinately. He tightened his hold on Suki as if making sure she would not be taken away from his side.

Hakoda and Pakku shared a look before they looked over at the silent and grim-faced older woman. Katara began to bite her lip and the expectant couple held their breaths as they waited for Gran-Gran to speak.

“Even though it may be viewed differently in your village, giving yourself before marriage could bring you great hardships,” Kanna began sternly as she stared at Suki.

The young couple stiffened at the hardness in the old woman’s voice and they both instinctively brought their hands toward their unborn child.

“But…” the woman continued and her voice softened a bit, “we all know that you are a great leader to your people and we know as well that you truly love my grandson.”

Kanna took another step forward and smiled as she enveloped them into a hug.

“Welcome to our family, Suki of Kyoshi Island.” She touched the swollen stomach. “Welcome, both of you.”

They all let out a sigh of relief. Hakoda gave out a joyous laugh as he drew his son into a bone-crushing hug before carefully embracing his future daughter-in-law who was carrying his first grandchild. Pakku smiled and congratulated them, but made no move to hug either. He did not like such mushy stuff. Katara clapped her gloved hands happily and grinned.

“Come,” Gran-Gran ordered as she began to usher them all in the direction of their home. “We have no time to waste! We have a wedding to plan!”

They laughed as they all made their way to their house with Sokka attached protectively beside Suki.

After his mother retired to her room for the night with Jee trailing after her, and the servants cleared
the table in the anteroom where the three had taken their meal, Zuko entered his bedchamber. He placed his fire crown in its box before entering his impressive bathroom.

He removed his clothing and his boots, setting them aside, as he filled the tub with water from the faucet. He dipped one hand into the cool water, heated it up with firebending, before he submerged himself into his large black marble tub. He sighed contentedly as the warm water relaxed his tensed muscles.

He had a hard time convincing Ursa that it was not a good idea to visit Azula after her visit with Ozai, explaining that if Azula saw her supposedly dead mother, it could make her condition worse. Of course he did not mention that the first and last time he had visited her, Azula had cursed him for taking their mother’s love and screamed her hatred for him, uttering so many vulgar expletives that even a seasoned sailor would have blushed.

He sighed. Gods, his family was so messed up.

Zuko grabbed the unscented bar of soap and rubbed the soft sponge on it, before replacing the soap on its spot.

He did not know what to make of the anonymous letter he had received and he seriously hoped it was not a real threat. He already had to deal with the problems he was presented daily from his country, as well as the troubles that the raiders were causing in his colonies, and now his concern for his mother’s safety and Ozai’s last words. He did not need another thing piled onto his long list of worries.

Muttering irritably about how unfair life was, Zuko scrubbed his body with the sponge to clean himself of the dust that had accumulated during his long journey.

He smiled as he remembered the awed and grateful look his mother had given him as he showed her the new and restored private garden before she patted his cheek happily when she spotted her rosebushes. She smiled as she became acquainted with the new turtle-ducks before commenting about how large and beautiful the pond was with a small knowing smile on her lips.

Zuko had to look away to hide the blush that threatened to invade his cheeks, knowing full well that he somehow subconsciously had the pond expanded because he had a feeling Katara would have loved it if she ever visited the palace one day—which she did, of course.
His mother’s previous words about giving up the Fire Lady royal bedchamber for the future Fire Lady surfaced in his mind and a long sigh made its way out of his mouth. Zuko closed his eyes and rested his head at the edge of the marble tub as the steam from the warm water danced around the grand bathroom.

How was he supposed to explain to his mother that he could no longer see himself with a wife because the only woman he ever truly wanted could never be his? What would she say if she knew that the woman he wanted as his future Fire Lady was Katara, the love of his life?

Yes, he wanted Katara as his wife. He wanted to marry her, to share his life with her. He knew he had said many times before that he was not ready to get married and did not need a wife any time soon. But now that he understood that he was truly in love with her, he admitted to himself that he would marry Katara in an instant without hesitation.

But if by some miracle Katara agreed to become his wife, he would certainly not need nor want Katara to sleep in the Fire Lady room. She could have the bedchamber as a recreation room for her to relax in or something if she wanted to, but Katara would only sleep by his side in his room every day and night, sharing with him the same room and the same bed...which will be used for many things besides sleep of course.

Zuko’s eyes became slightly glazed and his lips curled into a large grin before he shook his head and splashed water on his face.

But what was the point, really? Even though he wished for all this to come true with all his heart, he knew it was hopeless. Katara would never be his wife and all he was doing was torturing himself with such thoughts, fantasies, and hopes.

Sighing at the pain in his chest, Zuko finished bathing and dried himself off before he returned to his bedroom. Putting on a pair of dark sleeping pants, the young man sat at the edge of his massive but lonely bed and stared at the fireplace as the flames danced and the wood crackled.

Would he ever find happiness?

_~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The waves gently lapped at his ankles as he soaked in the warm rays of the sun high above the clear sky. Not one cloud obscured his view of the blue heavens, blue like the eyes of the woman he loved and desperately wanted.
Zuko breathed in the fresh, salty breeze that blew from the ocean and listened to the soft crashing of waves in the distance as he laid upon the white sand of Ember Island, which was unusually soft, not all at grainy or gritty.

He vaguely wondered when he had returned to Ember Island, but he found himself not caring how he did or why he was there since he liked where he was. There was an explosion of water coming from the ocean, and Zuko sat up on his elbows to see what was happening, but the sea was calm as ever, the waves still crashing gently on the shore.

He raised an eyebrow when something dark appeared on the surface of the water and he squinted to make out what it was. He frowned when he realized it was the top of a head and he wondered if perhaps it was an unfortunate person that had drowned.

Suddenly the figure sprang out from the water, flipping wet, long dark-brown hair back, which caused dozen of droplets of seawater to fly in every direction that sparkled brightly due to the strong sunlight, revealing a beautiful face with azure eyes and a bright smile.

Zuko gasped as Katara began to swim away from the ocean, smile still in place. He watched dazedly as Katara rose from the water as she neared the shore, her steps slow and graceful. Her throat appeared first and then her shoulders, her hair clinging to the side of her cheeks and her tanned shoulders.

His breath caught in his throat when her breasts surfaced from the water—disappointed to find out they were covered by a dark-blue piece of cloth—followed by her flat, lean stomach, then her curvy waist, rounded hips, which he also noticed with disappointment were covered as well, before her long, brown legs emerged. Water fell seductively slow down her arms, stomach, and legs and sparkled from the warm rays of the sun.

Zuko swallowed hard and he felt the front of his bathing shorts tighten as Katara began to make her way to where he was still resting on the sand propped up on his elbows. Her eyes never once left his gaze with that breathtaking smile still adorning her sweet face.

He opened his mouth to ask her what she was doing, but his throat felt dry when she dropped herself next to him, water splashing onto his heated skin.

“Zuko,” she whispered softly as she reached a wet hand to his face.
Relaxing back onto the soft sand, Zuko sighed and closed his eyes at her touch before they snapped open in surprise when he felt her straddle his hips. Eyes wide, he watched as she smiled at him again before she began to run her hands down his face, his shoulders, and down his chest. He groaned softly when she started to place light kisses on his chest as she continued to caress his skin with her soft hands. He gasped when she suddenly ground herself against his erection.

Oh Agni.

He growled her name when she began to move against him, alternating between fast swivels of her hips and hard, slow grinds. His breathing accelerated as pleasure erupted within him at her movements. Grabbing her hips, he lifted his own up and ground back against her. He watched with satisfaction as she moaned his name and threw her head back.

He pulled on her hair to bring down her head and kissed her warm lips, smirking when she let out a soft moan. Holding her hair with one hand, Zuko squeezed her hip once with the other, earning another soft noise from her, before he touched her firm bare thigh, as he continued to kiss her. Katara moaned again as he reached the hem of the small blue piece of swimwear as he sought to touch her warmth where he wished to bury himself in...

A loud knock at the door brought Zuko out of his fantasy and he bolted upright in his huge bed, sweat running down his forehead, heart pounding, and erection throbbing painfully. He cursed when the ocean scenery disappeared and he took in the familiar surroundings of his royal bedchamber.

Damn it! he yelled in his head. It was just another dream! Why couldn’t it be real?

Now that he was reassured that his erotic dreams were not only based on pure lust alone, but combined with the love he felt for Katara, Zuko no longer felt so ashamed of himself for dreaming such things about her. In fact, he even fantasized about different erotic scenarios with Katara during the day before he realized what he was doing.

Another loud knock resounded in his bedchamber, reminding him that it had been that sound which had so rudely interrupted him.

“What is it?” Zuko growled, glaring daggers at the door, wishing he could murder whoever was on the other side for disturbing his dream with Katara. And just when it was about to get good, too!

“Fire Lord Zuko?” the youngest of his personal guards asked uncertainly. “The meeting with your
“What?” Zuko growled. “The meeting is not until noon!”

He flopped back down onto his back with an irritated sigh and wondered if he could pick up where he had left off so he could take care of his morning erection.

“Um…it is noon already, my lord.”

Katara stared at her reflection as she brushed her long brown hair before the small mirror on her dresser. A month and a few weeks had passed since they had returned to the Southern Water Tribe and they had all been busy planning and setting up the upcoming wedding that had everyone in the Tribe excited.

However, she was still a bit miffed that the people did not care much that Sokka had impregnated a woman without them being married. But if one of the Water Tribe women was found out to be with child out of wedlock, she would be mistreated and possibly exiled. It was so unfair and she hated it, but there were just some things she could not change about her culture. She let it go though, because she was happy for her brother and his fiancée and glad that Suki wasn’t being looked down upon. Besides, there was nobody or nothing she could fight against to take a stand.

Aside from the wedding, the people were bustling about for the arrival of the Fire Lord, setting up rooms for him, his mother, and his uncle at Chief Hakoda’s large home. Some were excited at the thought of getting a glimpse of the new Fire Lord who was friends with their chieftain’s children and the one who had ended the war, but others were nervous and wary about having someone that used to be their enemy in their homeland. Both siblings tried to reassure them that Zuko was good and different than when he first came to the Southern Water Tribe, but old habits and prejudices die hard.

Sighing, Katara placed her brush down and lifted the silver rose hairpin that sat on the dresser. Months had passed since Zuko had given her the beautiful trinket and she had not even worn it once. Not only was she afraid of damaging it or losing it, but she had this strange feeling that she wanted to used it for the first time on a special occasion, to show Zuko how much she appreciated his gift.

The memory of their spar on his flagship began to play in her head and a silly smile appeared on her face. She remember how she had laughed at him when she fell on him before he rolled them over and he pinned her beneath him, his warm body pressed so close to hers, his breath caressing her face. Katara slowly ran one of her fingers over her bottom lip as her skin began to warm at the memory.
Why was Zuko looking at me with such an intense expression? I wonder what he would have done if Aang had not interrupted us, she thought hazily. Would...would he have kissed me? Would that kiss have led to something else...?

She blushed at her thoughts and shook her head. Stroking the silver pin gently, Katara gazed down at it as a small frown appeared on her brow.

She let her mind wander back to the last night they had stayed in the Earth King’s palace, the night where Jet had accosted her. She shuddered at what could have happened if Zuko had not arrived. Deep down she knew Jet would not have actually harmed her, but that still did make her forget the disappointment and anger she felt toward Jet for pushing himself on her the way he had.

But it was not Jet or what he did—or tried to do—that had her remembering that night. No. It was Zuko and the strange way he had acted when they had made their way to the palace garden as well as when she healed the small cut on his chest.

The way he looked at her with those golden eyes of his, the way he touched her cheek with that warm hand of his. It was just so tender, so caring, so...loving.

Loving? No, that couldn’t be it, Katara thought with another shake of her head as another sigh escaped her, Zuko said he only saw me as a friend.

Again, that sadness enveloped her as she once more thought about the firebender. She was startled and confused at how much she missed him, to the point where her heart ached and her eyes stung.

She missed his calm demeanor, his smiles, his rare laughs and small jokes. She missed their conversations and their silent companionship. She even missed their small arguments that ended in small spars.

She missed how he could make her laugh at the smallest things and then make her become serious and pensive in another instant. She missed how he could be cool and impassive one moment and then become tender and emotional the next—though she knew he tried to hide it.

But most of all she missed him. She missed his voice, his scent, his presence, his warmth, his comfort. She missed Zuko. She missed him terribly.
Could it be that what I really feel for Zuko is something stronger, something deeper than friendship? she asked herself as she chewed on her lip. Could it be that I am falling for him? That I may be in love with Zuko and not with Aang?

“Katara, honey, stop biting your lip or you are going to chew it right off,” her Gran-Gran’s soft yet scratchy voice made her jump.

“Oh, Gran-Gran,” Katara laughed nervously as she tried to subtly place the hairpin down before turning around in her seat. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Kanna muttered as she eyed her granddaughter carefully, she hadn’t missed her granddaughter’s attention on the hairpin. “We haven’t been able to talk much since you returned, but now is a good time as any.”

“Of course, Gran-Gran,” Katara said with a smile as she stood up and helped her grandmother sit on the chair she had been occupying.

Kanna sighed tiredly as she shifted in the small seat until she was comfortable. “So how is Aang? You have not mentioned him much since you returned.”

“Oh.” Katara frowned guiltily. “Um…he’s fine. The last time I saw him he was heading to Omashu with Toph. He tried to convince me to go with him, but I told him I was needed here.” She sighed. “I think he got upset.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Kanna asked.

“Yeah,” the younger tribeswoman nodded before she furrowed her eyebrows. “Now that I think about it Aang seemed more upset than normal ever since we arrived in Ba Sing Se.” She crossed her arms and huffed. “He would not leave me alone and was always demanding that I spend time with him. He was especially rude to Zuko, practically forcing him to leave every time I was talking to him. If Zuko noticed, he didn’t say anything, but I did and it annoyed me.”

“I see,” the old woman stated as she continued to watch her granddaughter ramble on as she paced around her small room. Kanna decided act on her growing suspicion about her granddaughter’s true feelings. “Tell me about your time in the Fire Nation. How did Fire Lord Zuko treat you? And what is Princess Ursa like?”
Kanna sat silently as a small smile appeared on her tanned and wrinkled face. She listened as her granddaughter, who reminded her so much of her departed daughter-in-law, began a nonstop narrative about her time in the Fire Nation as well as her travels into the Earth Kingdom.

Kanna was told of how the young Fire Lord took Katara on a walk around his city and treated her to one of the most famous restaurants in the capital. She listened as her granddaughter described the Royal Beach House on Ember Island and the Royal Palace Garden with the beautiful flowers and the large pond with a sparkle in her eye. She was told of how grateful Zuko had been when Katara found his mother and how kind and gentle Lady Ursa was.

And while Kanna sat and listened to the cheerful young woman, she learned what kind of person Zuko was and also that her granddaughter may actually love the young Fire Lord. Though she had her suspicious, Kanna did not want to jump to conclusions or plant any ideas in Katara’s head, at least not until she met this Zuko personally.

Katara wrapped up her long story with a sigh. She had told her Gran-Gran everything—except for the embarrassing and confusing parts—and flopped down on her bed.

Kanna smiled before she looked at the silver hairpin on her grandchild’s dresser. She remembered the wide-eyed expression Katara had as she opened her present and saw the rose hairpin for the first time. The old woman ran a finger on the smooth blue and red stones before she twirled the trinket in her hand.

“This Zuko you speak of sounds so different from the one who burst through our small defensive wall your brother kept vigil at,” Gran-Gran said and chuckled. “He seems like a very interesting person and a good man. I look forward to seeing him again.”

*I do, too,* Katara thought before she blushed.

“You’ll get to meet him next month at Sokka and Suki’s wedding as well as Lady Ursa, who by the way, would like to try your sea prunes. Oh, and Uncle Iroh is coming, too!” she said excitedly with a large smile.

Kanna smiled. It seemed her granddaughter was getting more and more comfortable with the young man’s family.

*How interesting,* she mused.
“Well, it seems there is much we have to do for the arrival of the Fire Nation’s Royal Family,” Gran-Gran stated as she stood up from her seat and made her way to where Katara was sitting on her bed. “And about your problems with Aang…” She frowned. “I hope you think really hard about how you truly feel about the young airbender. I know you care for him a lot, but that does not necessarily mean that you have to put up with his antics.”

Before Katara could argue, Kanna placed both her hands on either side of the young woman’s face.

“Katara, my dear, I love you very much and, just like your mother, all I want is for you to be happy. But I can’t help you because you are the one who has to fight for that happiness. I want you to promise me that you won’t make any major decisions until you are entirely sure it is want you truly want. Promise me that you won’t sacrifice your happiness because you are afraid that another person might be hurt.”

Katara frowned as she stared at her grandmother’s eyes that were full of wisdom. She did not understand why her Gran-Gran was telling her all this, but she had her suspicions. She knew she could trust her grandmother, however.

“Yes, Gran-Gran,” she said uncertainly as Kanna continued to hold her face. “I promise to try to fight for my own happiness.”

Kanna pursed her lips, but decided Katara’s answer was sufficient enough.

“Good. I just hope you don’t forget that.”
Two months. Two months had passed since the last time he had seen her. Since the last time he had spoken to her, since he had heard her voice, heard her laugh, since he had been in her calming presence.

Two months had passed since Zuko returned to the Fire Nation and during those two months he had been unable to forget about her…

Katara.

The woman he loved.

Zuko closed his eyes and let out a long sigh as the sound of the turtle-ducks quacking in the serene pond in the middle of his private garden reached his ears along with the sound of the rustling leaves from the various trees that surrounded the place. The last few cherry blossoms fell from the almost bare tree he was sitting under and danced their way to the ground, but he barely acknowledged them as they landed on the grass or on his lap.

The young Fire Lord had thought that by being away from the waterbender his feelings for her would stop or at least lessen as time went by, but it was not so. Instead his fervent feelings for her seemed to have increased the more time he spent away from her.

Again, he thought that perhaps he had always had feelings for Katara, maybe not love exactly, but feelings nonetheless. He spent a long time remembering every single moment he had had with Katara since the first day he had laid eyes on her face four years ago, including all the various times she had come across his path in his search for the Avatar.

He recalled suppressing the heat that had wanted to surface on his face when Jun, the bounty hunter, had insinuated that the beautiful, exotic-looking Water Tribe maiden was his girlfriend. He also remembered how he instinctively had steadied Katara when Jun’s shirshu had skidded to a stop, placing a hand on her back so she would not have fallen and hurt herself. He was sure he would not have done something like that for anyone else at that time.

He also remembered how he had ‘rescued’ her from the pirates, how surprised he was at receiving a
small shock when his hands had touched the soft skin of her small wrists. He remembered the sight of her tied up in that tree as he circled her, speaking to her in a smooth and almost seductive tone. He would be lying if he said he did not have some naughty dreams about the tree incident long after it happened.

Another thing he remembered was the thrill that went through him as she fought him in the Spirit Oasis in the Northern Water Tribe with her blazing, blue eyes and confident smirk. That was when he admitted he had found a match in his bending skills. He had felt a bit guilty when he had knocked her out and left her all alone after grabbing the unresponsive Avatar. Something he had not felt for a long time.

Then there was the time under the Crystal Catacombs of Ba Sing Se where he had felt guilt, sorrow, and understanding when Katara had told him she had lost her mother because of the Fire Nation, which then resulted in his confession that he had also lost his own mother.

At that instant, Zuko now knew that he had to have developed some kind of connection or feelings for the waterbender in order for him to reveal such a personal thing, which also explained why he had gone through all the trouble of helping her deal with her mother’s murderer.

His feelings for her also explained why he jumped in front of Azula’s lightning bolt to save Katara without hesitation. Even though he hadn’t admitted to himself, he must have subconsciously known how he felt about her. Even then, he valued her safety over his own. Her life over his. It was a choice he never regretted, even as he was laying there, twitching and writhing in pain. He remembered clearly how his heart had beat so quickly when she put her soft healing hands over his wound. At the time he thought it was just adrenaline from the fight, but now he knew it was more, his heart had raced from her gentle touch.

And now he could not get Katara out of his head. Her image accompanied him everywhere, and as much as he tried to stop thinking about her, he just couldn’t.

She was there when he woke up, when he looked through his paperwork, when he attended his meetings, when he practiced his firebending, when he talked with his mother, Jee, or Chao, when he retired to his room and fell asleep. And she was also there when he dreamt. And oh, how wonderful was the dream he had the previous night! Even thinking about it made his blood boil and his loins burn! He had been so painfully aroused that he had to take care of his state himself. Again. Self-gratification was something he rarely ever indulged in, because he thought he had more control over his body than that, but it seemed it was becoming a frequent thing since Katara came back into his life.

Zuko opened his eyes and scowled halfheartedly at the pond and at the innocent, little turtle-ducks that swarm near him.
He did not know what to do and he honestly felt pathetic, sighing over a girl like a lovesick kitten-puppy! He did not like it one bit, but there was nothing he could do about it, and a part of him admitted that he would not change it for anything.

‘You know what I mean, right?’ Sokka’s question resurfaced in his mind once again, as it had ever since he had left Ba Sing Se. ‘You feel sad and depressed when you’re away from your loved one even for a few minutes, that you feel that you’d die if you don’t see her face? You know what I’m talking about, right?’

It seemed that Sokka was not exaggerating after all, because he felt just as the warrior had said. Well, maybe not the dying part, but Zuko did feel depressed, saddened, and miserable not being in Katara’s presence or looking upon her beautiful face, and there was this strange pain in his chest that would not go away.

The turtle-ducklings quacked at him and swam in circles near the edge of the pond as they waited for a treat, but after the man sitting under the cherry blossom tree presented no food, the little creatures swam away with disappointed quacks.

Unable to suppress the sigh that escaped him, Zuko rose from his place under the shade of the cherry blossom tree. With one last glance at the pond, the young lord began to walk morosely back inside the palace to finish on the paperwork he had been reading before his mind began to wander on Katara, causing him to leave his study. He hardly acknowledged the servants that bowed to him as he passed them by on his way to his study.

“Ah, I see that the Young One also needs his breaks,” Wei’s annoying voice reached Zuko’s ears just as he was about to enter his study. “What is the matter? Is your work too complicated?” Wei asked worriedly, though the smug tone in his voice belied his concerned question.

Zuko gritted his teeth as he resisted the urge to punch a hole on the door in front of him. He was in no mood to deal with the smug, old advisor. Wei had been even more irritating ever since Zuko came back to the Fire Nation that even the other advisors were getting annoyed.

Straightening his shoulders, Zuko turned around and regarded his hated advisor with an emotionless expression.

“Is there something you need, Wei? I have other important things to look into than listen to your taunting,” he said coolly.
Wei put on a hurtful expression as he raised a hand to the left side of his chest.

“Fire Lord Zuko, I do no such thing!” he exclaimed.

Zuko was unable to stop the unconvinced snort that escaped him.

A grin appeared on Wei’s wrinkled face.

“I met your mother a couple of weeks ago as we passed each other in the hallway. Princess Ursa is such a nice and wonderful woman. I wonder how it was that she was said to have been dead.”

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the curious look on Wei’s pasty face.

“It’s a long story that I have no time to recount at the moment,” he replied warily.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Wei responded and grinned again. “I do wonder why Admiral Jee seems to be hovering over her, though. Perhaps there is something going on between them?”

Zuko mentally frowned at the insinuation. He did not like having his mother used against him, even if it was just a taunt.

“Of course not,” the young lord replied imperturbably. “I placed Admiral Jee to keep her company and safe while I’m not around and until I find her another guard. I guess you could say I’m being overprotective since I have only recently been reunited with her,” he said with a shrug.

“Of course, that sounds reasonable,” Wei remarked with a nod.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the older man again.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me I have important documents to go through.” The young man went inside his study and closed the door behind him before Wei could respond.
Gods, how he disliked that man! He had a hard time enduring the irritating advisor’s presence without breaking his neck. Wei always gave him a bad feeling.

_Hmm…? Maybe I should keep a closer eye on Wei, Zuko thought, I will also tell Jee to keep him away from Mother._

Sitting heavily on his cushioned chair, Zuko began to sort the huge stack of papers on his large desk. Luckily, the Fire Nation was running smoothly and no problems had arisen since his return. The Fire Nation was doing well due to the new trade agreement with Ba Sing Se and he was pleased when King Kuei sent him word that his city, most importantly the Lower Ring, was thriving because of the trade and the tourists that had flooded to the city of walls.

Leaning back in his chair, Zuko looked up at the ceiling and frowned. He had begun to wonder if perhaps he overreacted to the anonymous letter he received two months ago. There had been no signs of an attempted breakout of Ozai, but it was best to always be on guard just in case.

He opened another letter and sighed when he realized it was from Mai, telling him that she was not going to attend Sokka and Suki’s wedding in the Southern Water Tribe because she wanted to spend more time with her family. Zuko had a strong feeling the truth was that she just did not want to go since she really did not like his friends and because she never liked the cold weather. He sighed guiltily when he read the part where she wrote that she missed him and loved him, anticipating the day they would see each other again for his birthday.

Placing the letter on another stack of papers, Zuko opened one of the drawers from his desk to retrieve his ink and brush when a rolled up scroll tied with a dark blue ribbon caught his attention. Forgetting the writing instruments for the moment, the firebender grabbed the scroll and unfurled it, placing another small paper that was inside to the side, and read once again.

It was the official invitation for Sokka and Suki’s wedding inviting the Fire Lord and his honored mother to celebrate the marriage ceremony in the Southern Water Tribe that was to take place a few months from now. Zuko picked up the other small piece of paper that came with the scroll, and inwardly chuckled at Sokka’s words.

_I placed this note without Suki noticing, but can you be a pal and bring me some of those addicting fire flakes with you? Thanks, Lord Hotman!_

There was a small picture at the bottom of the piece of paper that Zuko was half certain was Sokka’s
attempt of a face eating the spicy treats. Zuko grinned at the warrior’s drawing; he had always been a horrible artist. Setting both letters aside, Zuko reclined in his chair and looked out the window.

In just a few weeks, he and Ursa, along with Jee, Jiao, and his personal guards will leave the Fire Nation and travel to the Southern Water Tribe to attend his friends’ wedding. He had not been to the South Pole since almost six years ago and the circumstances of his first visit had not been pleasant at all. He was a bit uneasy at the thought of what the tribes people would feel at having the lord to the nation that had caused them so much suffering, and the one who had once invaded their home, step into their city.

He guessed it was time that he paid them a visit so they could see he had changed and was different. But most importantly, in just a few weeks he would see her again.

Katara...he sighed.

He was both excited and apprehensive at the thought. How would he react to her now that he knew what his true feelings for her were? He was unsure he would be able to handle seeing her with Aang and he did not know if he could even act like he did not love her. Act like he only saw her as his friend.

Gods! Why was life so damn difficult?

He wondered if perhaps he should send a letter to Sokka saying he could not attend the wedding with some excuse about problems within his country, but he quickly dismissed the thought. He was no coward and he promised Sokka and Suki he would be there when they took their vows.

Besides, a part of him wished—wanted, no needed to see Katara again. Nothing would stop him from seeing her once more. Not even the pain that appeared in his chest when he told himself that she could never be his.

Aang frowned and resisted the urge to blow a puff of air of annoyance when Katara did not respond to his question. She had been staring distractedly at the piece of blue fabric in her hands that was supposed to be a part of the decorations for the wedded couple’s table for a while. It was the fourth time it had happened that day and he was seriously getting tired of it.

He and Toph had arrived from Omashu a couple of weeks ago in order to help with the wedding preparations—well, he helped, while Toph stayed in the chief’s house and lounged around. Ty Lee
had hitched a ride with them because she wanted to attend her captain’s wedding and since Mai had refused to attend she was happy for the company.

Aang had been anxious to see his girlfriend again. Two months were two months too long. Katara had greeted him happily, but he was able to detect something was off by the way she acted around him. Even though they had spent a lot of time together, she seemed distant. He did not know what was going on, but he reasoned she was stressed with teaching the children waterbending and helping with the wedding arrangements that had her acting oddly. At least, he hoped that was the reason.

Katara’s eyes would become unfocused and dazed, then she would sigh loudly with a large smile on her face before a blush would stain her cheeks, and he again would wonder what was going on.

“Katara?” he called again, this time shaking her arm gently.

“Huh? What?” the waterbender said and blinked. Katara’s eyes refocused and she noticed that Aang was frowning at her.

Flushing guiltily, she smiled at him as she apologized.

“Sorry, Aang,” she said, “I was a bit distracted. What did you say?”

The airbender’s frown deepened as he repeated his previous question.

“I was asking if you need any help with setting up the canopy.”

Katara looked at the cloth in her hands and then at the ice poles above the table where the married couple was to sit for the feast after the wedding ceremony. The celebration was to be held outside under the blue sky and warm sun—that is if there were no clouds that day.

Four long ice poles rose from the frozen ground and converged in the center with a sparkling ice chandelier hanging in the middle. She had created it after seeing one in the Earth King’s palace. Two long pieces of jade-colored and one dark-blue cloth swung from the ice crystal chandelier, each piece twirling down three ice poles. One pole was still bare and she was currently holding the blue cloth that was supposed to decorate it.
“Oh, uh…yes, I guess I do need help with this one,” she answered with a smile as she passed the fabric to the young monk. “I’d appreciate it if you helped me.”

Aang readily returned the smile as he took the offered cloth and stepped up next to the unfurnished pole, unable to resist her beautiful smile.

As Aang propelled himself upwards with airbending, twirling the blue piece of fabric as he descended, Katara’s smile vanished and she looked away guiltily. She had not even noticed his presence or that he had been addressing her as she held the silky cloth in her hands.

Though the material was nothing compared to it, she could not help but be reminded of the silky, smooth feeling of the red covering on Zuko’s large bed at his palace, his handkerchief, and the warm cloak Zuko had draped over her shoulders to keep her safe from the chilly air.

A wistful sigh escaped her lips as she twirled a piece of her hair around her finger.

Everywhere she looked there was something or another that made her think about the golden-eyed firebender. Ever since they went their separate ways in Ba Sing Se, Zuko had been constantly on her mind and she would completely space out for minutes at a time, wondering what he was doing and if he missed her as much as she missed him. She was really getting annoyed at her brain for distracting her all the time, making her family and friends question her sanity.

When Aang came back, she tried to pay more attention to him and spend more time with him, taking walks around the city and going penguin sledding, wanting to reconnect with him. She tried to keep thoughts about Zuko and her confusing feelings for him away, honestly she did. But just when she thought she succeeded she would find herself thinking about him again without even realizing it until Aang would call out to her.

‘I hope you think really hard about what you truly feel for the young airbender…’ her Gran-Gran’s words floated in her mind.

Did her grandmother mean to imply that what she felt for her boyfriend of four years was not love? Was she trying to tell her that Aang and she were not meant to be?

Katara mentally shook her head. No, that couldn’t be. Aunt Wu predicted that Aang was the powerful bender she was to marry. It was her destiny, wasn’t it? They were supposed to be together, right?
Besides, Aang was sure to be good husband. He was so sweet, kind, and peaceful.

Yeah, those are nice qualities, but what about fierce and passionate? her subconscious decided to put in its two cents.

Yeah, those would be nice, too, Katara sighed dreamily.

I can think of someone who has those two qualities in abundance, the little voice continued.

Hm, me too, Katara thought dazedly as she became distracted with thoughts about a certain handsome firebender whose strong, pale body glistened with perspiration as his golden eyes burned with passionate intensity every time he used his firebending.

Her eyes becoming glassy, she replayed the dream she had two nights ago that woke her up with a racing heart, heavy breathing, and an unfamiliar throbbing between her legs...

Cool, soft snow descended from the heavens, dancing its way down to the white landscape below. Instead of being an ominous gray, the heavy clouds were blindingly white and glowed from the light the sun wanted to pass through. A soft wind blew by, but instead of being cold, it was warm.

Katara smiled as she twirled around in circles as the snowflakes danced around her form and embedded themselves in her hair. She had no clue why she was outside the city walls and alone, but it felt so peaceful that she found herself not caring.

She flopped down onto her back and was surprised to find that the snow was very soft and comfortable. Katara closed her eyes as the gentle snowflakes landed on her cheeks before she felt something heavy settle over her body.

Eyes flying open in alarm, Katara tried to sit up and figure out what was going on, but found herself pressed into the soft snow by a large, warm hand.

“Relax, Katara,” a familiar masculine voice whispered softly. “It’s just me.”
“Z-Zuko? Wha…?” was her intelligent reply as her eyes settled on his burning golden gaze that rendered her unable to move, much less think.

Zuko chuckled softly as he brought a hand up to her cheek before he lowered it to run it slowly down her arm, making Katara gasp softly. Lowering his head, Zuko touched her forehead with his lips and then he kissed both her cheeks before he pulled away with a gentle smile on his face that caused Katara’s heart to stutter.

Without another word, Zuko brought his hand up to her shoulder, down her side, sliding it painstaking slow to her waist before he settled it on her hip. Katara realized that the clothes she was wearing was not her usual winter wear since the fabric was thin, allowing her to feel Zuko’s warm caresses.

Katara shivered at his touch and she let out an almost inaudible moan before a loud gasp fell from her lips as she felt Zuko’s hand travel even further down her thigh then past her knee.

Her breath quickened, her skin began get hot, and a blush appeared on her face as Zuko’s hand did not stop and was now making its way back up her thigh as he once again pressed his lips to her cheek. She knew she should tell him to stop what he was doing and get off of her, but her mouth refused to say the words and her body refused to push him away from her.

“Katara,” she heard him whisper in a deep tone before she felt him place a kiss on the side of her neck, making her let out another soft moan.

She gasped when his hand did not take its previous path up to her hip to her shoulder, and instead, it lingered on her thigh before he began to trail his fingers inward…

The now familiar, but still strange feeling in her lower stomach brought Katara to an abrupt mental stop. A violent blush burned her cheeks that were once cold due to the wintry weather.

Stop it! Katara scolded herself harshly. I shouldn’t be thinking about that!

Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on how one looked at it—it was just a dream and ended where it did.

Katara looked up as Aang landed lightly on the ground and began to secure the ends of the cloth into
a bow. Guilt began to eat at her insides and she had to fight down the urge to run somewhere far away so she did not have to look at Aang’s loving and oblivious face.

*Aang loves me. Zuko...does not.*

That thought sent an unexpected shot of pain to her heart and she winced. The happy mood she had since the morning changed drastically and she had a hard time putting on a smile when Aang grinned at her as he made his way to where she was standing.

“How does it look?” Aang asked cheerfully as he gestured toward his decoration.

“It looks wonderful, Aang,” Katara replied, even though it looked the same as the other three pieces of cloth. She had to look away as the feeling of guilt intensified to the point that she actually cringed when he smiled happily at her.

Aang beamed at what he thought was her praising him before he blushed as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“Um… Katara? Can I ask you something?” he began and nervously shuffled his feet on the white snow.

“Sure, Aang,” she replied as she pretended to examine their work in order to avoid his eyes. “What is it?”

Aang cleared his throat as he nervously began to stammer.

“I-I just wanted to know…Katara, w-will you m-marry—”

“Katara!” Sokka’s anxious voice startled them and they both turned to see the waterbender’s brother waving frantically in their direction.

“Katara, hurry up!” Sokka yelled as he gestured for her to run. “Suki’s getting pains again and she wants you to help her with your creepy-magical-water-thingy!”
Katara sighed at her brother’s words, but let it slide since she knew he was just panicking because Suki was a few weeks away from giving birth. Turning back to Aang, she gave him a small smile.

“Sorry, Aang, but pregnant women get first priority.” She grinned. “We’ll talk later.”

The young Avatar forced a smile and nodded for her to go attend their friend. He watched as she flashed him one last smile before she raced to her distressed older brother who grabbed her hand and practically dragged her to their home where Suki was currently resting.

Aang sighed loudly and ran a hand over his shaved head. He reached one hand into the pocket of his parka and pulled out a necklace he had purchased in a jewelry shop while they were visiting the Fire Nation. It was a gold chain with a topaz gem hanging from a golden string at the center. He stared at the necklace as it glimmered softly under the weak sun for a moment before he closed his hand over it.

Zuko did not know why he woke up in the middle of the night, and he listened intently for any sign that could indicate why. The only sounds that reached his keen ears were the splashing of the waves against his flagship and the low howling of the wind. When he realized he was the only one in his cabin, his body relaxed and he turned onto his back, staring at the dark metal ceiling above his head.

Knowing he would not be able to return to sleep any time soon, the young man rose from his bed and put on a thick robe before making his way to the door. Zuko slowly walked down the silent metal corridors, passing his mother’s cabin, then Jee’s quarters, before he climbed the stairs that lead him up onto the deck of his flagship. A cold wind bit his face and he shivered slightly before he raised his body temperature slightly and blew warm air into his hands.

They were nearing the Southern Water Tribe and the temperature had dropped drastically. All the crewmembers—except for the navigator and a few guards—were below deck and away from the cold wind and freezing water. Though firebenders could use their inner fire to raise their body temperature, the cold climate was still uncomfortable and they preferred to avoid it.

Just a few more days and they would be entering the wintry southern nation. He wondered how much had changed since the last time he was there, though he had to admit he barely noticed it since he was too busy trying to capture Aang at that time. Katara had told him that Chief Arnook had sent some waterbenders to aid in the reconstruction of their sister tribe and now the city was flourishing. He remembered the way Katara’s sapphire eyes would sparkle as she described her beloved home to him and he found himself imagining the ice city with its soft, blue radiance and clean water canals as he listened to her sweet voice. He was curious to finally see the renewed place where Katara had been born and now lived.
But not as much as you wish to see her, right? a voice inside his head piped in.

Zuko sighed and looked up at the night sky dotted with millions of bright stars, admitting the truth with his silence.

Would this need of seeing Katara and being near her ever go away? He hoped it did for he did not know how he would be able to survive when they had to go their separate ways in life; when he had to return to his duties in the Fire Nation while she stayed in the Southern Water Tribe or married and left with Aang.

Jealousy began to spread through him and his hands clenched at his sides as the feeling clawed at his chest. Yes, he admitted it. He was jealous and he could not stop the ugly feeling even if he wanted to. The knowledge that one day Katara would want to start a family with her long-time boyfriend ate at him.

Zuko gritted his teeth so hard that his jaw hurt at the thought that one day Aang would be touching his Katara in an intimate way. Making love to his woman in the way he desired to do with his whole being! With a low growl, Zuko shot a ball of fire at the quiet night sky before it disappeared as it reached the colder air above.

Yes, his Katara! His, damn it!

Two more blasts of fire were shot toward the sea as Zuko raged, his face contorted into a ferocious snarl.

He wanted to be the one to bring Katara much pleasure in the ways of the flesh, to share with her their love and carnal lust as they lost themselves in passionate bliss! But more, he needed her, he wanted her by his side, and he wanted to make her happy! He loved her! And he was not going to lose her without a fight!

Zuko’s eyes widened at what he had just thought before his enraged face changed into a contemplative expression. Another chilly wind surrounded him, but he hardly noticed it as he became lost in thought.

He knew Aang loved her ever since he first saw her, but four years had passed since their relationship began and Aang had not made a move to propose to her. Sure, it was understandable
since Aang was still young, but he could at least have told her about his future intentions to marry her, right?

A small smile appeared on Zuko’s thoughtful face as he pivoted on his heels and began to make his way back to his warm cabin. His footsteps were light and silent even with his heavy boots on thanks to his time sneaking around as the Blue Spirit.

Since Aang had not made a claim on her, so to speak, then that meant Zuko had a chance with Katara. A chance to make her see that he loved her and wanted her as his wife. He was positive she would not agree to it at first, but he would not give up until she at least thought about it. If by some miracle she ever reciprocated his feelings and said yes then he would ask Chief Hakoda for her hand in marriage in that same instant.

A small frown marred Zuko’s features as he entered his room and closed the door behind him. He knew he should break up with Mai first and let her know that they could not be together any longer, but he had no choice but to tell her when they saw each other again in the Fire Nation.

Throwing his robe on the back of his chair, Zuko made his way to his bed and sat down with a sigh. Taking his boots off, he lay back and pulled his warm covers over his body.

A deeper feeling of guilt ate at him at the thought that he would be in a way stealing Katara from Aang, but it did not deter him from changing his mind. Aang was his friend and he really did not want to hurt him, but like they say:

All is fair in love and war.

Right?

The Southern Water Tribe was bustling with excitement as the last details for the wedding were finished. Everyone was busy greeting the people that had been invited and were arriving from different parts of the world. Chief Arnook arrived in a beautiful and graceful ship and was welcomed exuberantly into the city. At first, Sokka had felt awkward at having the father of Yue, his first love, attend his wedding, but the chieftain had been affable and Suki, the love of his life, had been understanding.

Another ship containing villagers and warriors of Kyoshi Island arrived two weeks earlier and Suki was immediately surrounded by her beloved warriors and friends. King Bumi had sent a letter
apologizing that he was unable to attend the wedding since the cold weather was not so good for his health, but he did send large amounts of sugar crystals as a gift for the couple. Haru had also sent a letter with congratulations, excusing himself from the event since he was still busy teaching earthbending in the Fire Nation colonies.

Chief Hakoda’s grand home was filled with endless chatter as the important visitors took residence in the guest rooms. Kanna, Katara, and a few other women were kept busy as they accommodated the guests and prepared the meals.

The tribes people had been surprised, and a bit wary, when the Dragon of the West arrived a week ago, but they were quickly won over by Iroh’s wise words and charming personality. Especially the women. They all had a laugh when the tea-loving old man began to flirt with Kanna and then he had to reassure Pakku that he was just teasing when the old waterbending master threatened to encase him in ice.

Making her way over to the defensive ice wall with quick and excited steps, Katara smiled and greeted the few people she passed by. Winter had arrived and the fresh patch of snow of the previous day made the city sparkle.

She stopped when she reached the dock and immediately began to scan the few ships that were docked. A disappointed sigh fell from her lips when she realized that no new ships had arrived and that none of the current ships was the one she was looking for in anticipation. With one last look at the docked vessels, Katara turned around and began to make her way back to her home, this time in a more sedate pace.

Her warm boots kept her from sinking into the soft snow that had fallen during the night as she strolled along the clean, white streets of the Southern Water Tribe. A few canoes floated leisurely up and down the wide canals with passengers from visiting cities taking in the sights with awe. Early risers crossed the bridges as they talked amongst themselves.

The waterbender lifted her head as her house appeared before her, but instead of walking straight to it, she turned to her right and made her way down another street until she came upon a small path where few people went. She climbed a small bridge, and with a heavy sigh, leaned against the frozen edge of the bridge carved with beautiful designs. Peering over the edge, Katara frowned into the calm water that flowed under her.

Every day for the past few months, she had made her way to the dock in order to be one of the first people to greet Zuko and Lady Ursa when they arrived, but every day she went back home with a sad and disappointed heart when she realized that they were not there.
What is taking them so long? she asked with a huff. The wedding is tomorrow and they haven’t arrived!

She stared at the blue water below her as if it would tell her what was going on before a thought popped into her head that caused her eyes to widen.

What if they’re not coming to the wedding? And if they’re not coming, then I won’t see Zuko!

Katara squeezed her eyes shut as her heart gave a painful clench at the thought. She shook her head.

No, they will come! Zuko promised, and being the honorable man that he is, he will keep that promise.

But that thought did not comfort her like she hoped it would. She had been waiting with eagerness to see him again, to be in Zuko’s company again. She had been thinking of him, dreaming of him ever since they left Ba Sing Se and she missed him so much that the possibility of him not attending the wedding upset her greatly.

Perhaps when she saw him again her feelings of longing would go away. She needed to see Zuko again so she could finally understand what it was that she really felt for him, as well as what she felt for Aang. What if what she felt for Zuko was just a physical attraction and nothing else? It would be foolish of her to jeopardize a good relationship just because of lust.

Another frown appeared between her eyebrows at the thought of Aang. The airbender had been constantly proclaiming his love for her while he showered her with small gifts, telling her that he was always happy at her side. She would thank him and blush at his comments and affections all the while ignoring the remarks others made about a second upcoming wedding. A few years ago, she probably would have been happy at the thought of marrying Aang, but now...now she was not so sure. Not until she was certain about her feelings regarding Zuko. It was unfair of her to keep thinking about another man while with Aang.

Katara sighed as her thoughts returned to the young Fire Lord. Folding her arms on the edge of the white bridge, she leaned against it and placed her head on her forearms. Again, she wondered why Zuko had not arrived yet and the uneasiness began to spread inside her.

“Katara, my dear, is something the matter?” Iroh’s calming voice floated to her restless mind. “Miss Toph has told me that you’ve been depressed lately.”
The young woman lifted her head when she felt a comforting hand on her back. Katara looked up into Iroh’s concerned but kind face.

“I’m fine, Uncle Iroh, really,” she replied as she straightened herself out. She tried to smile to reassure him, but the retired general just raised an unconvinced eyebrow.

“I’m just tired from my waterbending lessons and helping with the wedding,” she tried again.

“Yes, that must be it,” Iroh said, though by his tone he conveyed that he did not believe her.

When Katara did not respond, he decided to change the subject.

“May I ask why you left the house so early in the morning, my dear?” he asked curiously.

Katara looked up into the clear sky and smiled sheepishly when she realized that it indeed was a bit early in the morning to be out. Iroh smiled at her expression before he rubbed his hands together.

“My, it sure is cold here,” Iroh commented and chuckled cheerfully, sensing she did not want to answer the question. “I probably would have frozen to death if your lovely, wonderful grandmother had not given me this warm parka.” Smiling, he pointed at the red-colored winter wear he had been given when he had arrived.

Katara giggled, wondering if the jolly, old firebender liked to compliment her Gran-Gran so much because he liked to get Pakku riled up.

“Do you think Zuko would be able to stand the cold?” Katara asked with a smirk.

Iroh laughed.

“Of course he will! Zuko’s a strong young warrior, he could handle this weather.” A grin appeared on his face. “Besides, I’m sure that hot temper that resides just below the surface will keep him warm and cozy,” he said and chuckled affectionately.
Katara giggled again before she looked down at her hands.

“That’s if he’s even coming,” she said more to herself.

Iroh frowned.

“What are you talking about, Miss Katara? Of course Zuko’s coming, and Ursa as well!”

Katara looked away to stare at the ocean she could see at a distance.

“Then why haven’t they arrived yet? The wedding’s tomorrow!” she exclaimed in a tone full of exasperation and concern.

“It is unusual that Zuko is late in arriving, but I’m sure there is an reason for his delay,” Iroh reassured her.

“You think so?” Katara asked hopefully.

Iroh managed to turn his giddy grin into a small smile at the happy expression that came over the young woman’s face.

“I know so.” Iroh nodded as he patted her shoulder. “Just you wait.” A gleam appeared in his eyes as he smiled at her. “There is something here that I’m sure Zuko is anxious to see again.”

And that something is standing before me, the wise Dragon of the West added mentally with a grin.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” Jee bowed as he addressed his lord. “We will arrive in the Southern Water Tribe in about an hour.”

Zuko looked up from his tea to acknowledge his admiral while Ursa turn around to smile at him. They had been sitting in Ursa’s room, enjoying some calming tea when Jee had knocked on the door.
and entered to give them the news. Jiao sat quietly near Lady Ursa and waited for her lord to speak.

“I’m glad to hear that, Admiral Jee. Thank you,” Zuko said sincerely as he placed his teacup down on the low table. “Make sure the crew is ready for arrival.”

“Yes, my lord,” the admiral answered as he turned to make his way back on deck before Zuko’s voice stopped him.

“Oh, and Jee?” Zuko called out coolly as he took another sip from his teacup, “Remind the crew once more that they are to behave properly and civilly when we enter the Southern Water Tribe. Any complaints about their improper behavior will not be tolerated. We are guests, and as such, we will be respectful to our Southern hosts. Understood?”

“Yes, Fire Lord Zuko. I will remind them immediately,” Jee agreed as he bowed and left the room. When he did not need to keep an eye on Lady Ursa, which was whenever she was with her son, Jee commanded his crew like he always did as admiral of the Fire Lord’s flagship.

“I am so glad that we have finally arrived,” Ursa said with a smile as she looked away from the door to where her son sat across from her. “I was beginning to worry that we would not make it to the wedding.”

“Indeed,” Zuko agreed with a nod.

They would have arrived at the South Water Tribe a week ago had it not been for the wild storm that had appeared out of nowhere and without warning. The storm had lasted for a long time and the wind and sea had been so fierce that when the storm passed the passengers on the ship found themselves off course, thus making their journey to the Southern Water Tribe longer.

“I am excited to see the renovated great nation of the Southern Water Tribe,” Ursa commented as she picked up her teacup. “Katara always talked about it with much fondness.”

Zuko smiled since he had been thinking the same thing days ago before he looked out the small window with an inaudible longing sigh.

Ursa turned her head to the side where Jiao sat quietly with a smile on her face.
“You helped Lady Katara while she stayed in the Fire Nation Palace, didn’t you, Jiao?” she asked.

“Yes, Lady Ursa,” Jiao replied with a nod and her smile widened a bit. “Lady Katara is a very kind, friendly, and nice young woman.” She inclined her head at them as she continued, “I must thank you, my lord and Lady Ursa, for bringing me with you since I’ve always wanted to see the Water Tribes, and I do wish to see Lady Katara again.”

Zuko smiled kindly at her and acknowledged her gratefulness with a nod.

Ursa patted the young servant’s arm and smiled.

“Of course, Jiao,” she said as she turned to her son. “But you are not the only one who wishes to see Katara again. Am I not right, my son?”

Zuko suppressed the grin that wanted to appear on his lips and instead answered with a simple, “Yes.”

When his mother smiled at him with what seemed like a knowing look, Zuko turned his attention to the young servant girl.

“Jiao, please prepare our belongings for our arrival,” he said as he stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, Mother, I have some things I need to look after before we arrive.”

“Of course, dear,” Ursa said with the same knowing smile on her face as Jiao walked across the cabin and opened the steel chest to pack the noblewoman’s clothes.

An hour later, the mid-morning sun found Zuko standing upon the front of his flagship as it neared the impressive protective wall of the Southern Water Tribe. A small smirk appeared on Zuko’s lips as he remembered the pathetic little wall Sokka had kept vigil at…which had been easily destroyed by his small metal ship.

He glanced at his mother, who was standing beside him with Jiao at her side, and frowned deeply. The heavy robe his mother was wearing was still not warm enough since she kept shivering and sniffing. He knew he should have made her wear another robe over the one she was currently
A cold wind blew by and he shivered under the robe and armor he was wearing. If he was cold, then he couldn’t imagine how his mother and Jiao felt in this weather since both women were non-firebenders. Maybe he could purchase one of those parkas the Water Tribes were famous for once they were finally permitted entrance.

He watched as a lookout spotted them before the man made a signal, which then alerted the other guards to take up posts on the edge of the wall in order to make sure this Fire Nation ship was friendly. Zuko nodded at Jee who then signaled to his men to stop the ship in front of the wall.

“Who goes there?” a deep voice spoke from one of the watchtowers. “State your business.”

Jee followed a step behind his lord when Zuko moved forward. The older firebender noticed that a few of the guards recognized who he was since he sometimes brought them goods from the Fire Nation. The admiral glanced at the two women who stood a few feet behind them and frowned at the uncomfortable look on their faces before he returned his attention to his lord.

Zuko held up a hand in greeting as he looked up at the man who had spoken, assuming he was the one in charge of the guards.

“I am Fire Lord Zuko and I have come to attend my friends’ wedding ceremony,” he stated regally. “I would appreciate it if we were allowed entrance into your great city.”

He hid a smile when the man’s eyes widened and he gaped as the rest of the guards gasped and began to murmur.

“R-right away, Fire Lord Zuko!” the man croaked before he turned around and shouted, “Open the wall and let them through!”

Those who had not visited the Southern Water Tribe recently stared in awe as the thick frozen wall was split in half by waterbenders before the divided pieces were moved aside to reveal the entrance into the southern nation. With another signal from the Water Tribe guards, the ship started again and made its way through before the frozen wall was pulled back to its original solid state as soon as the ship passed.
Zuko barely noticed the other ships that aligned the dock as his eyes widened in astonishment and admiration as he took in the sight of the city before him.

*This sure isn’t the same little village I remember,* Zuko thought as his eyes darted in every direction.

Instead of a few huts and igloos, there were actual structural buildings, stretching for miles in every direction. They were neatly placed beside each other in a symmetrical pattern, which Zuko remembered Katara had told him had been Sokka’s idea, along with the canals and the defensive wall. The frozen walls and roofs of the white homes sparkled under the sun as well as the clean blue water that flowed through the canals. Zuko could see bridges that connected one street to the next. It was just the way Katara had described to him so many times before.

The city was forgotten the moment Katara entered his head, as she took all his focus and attention. Zuko’s heart began to pound in his chest in anticipation and he had to clench his hands in order to keep himself from jumping off the slow moving flagship and swim to shore so he could see her already. He wanted to see her so badly, to take her in his arms, to kiss her until her lungs burned for air!

Okay, maybe he was getting a little ahead of himself with the kissing, but that still did not stop him from wishing these things could happen.

“It is beautiful,” Ursa whispered softly, making Zuko come back to reality.

“Yes, it is;” he responded in agreement.

He glanced to his other side and noticed that Jee was looking over the side of the ship. Zuko followed his admiral’s gaze and finally noticed the people standing by the docks. A few of them were actually cheering and waving at them, but most stood stiffly to the side with wary expressions on their faces.

Perhaps they remembered the way he had arrived the last time? The young Fire Lord grimaced slightly.

Zuko scanned the docks in order to get a glimpse of Katara smiling at him with those big, blue shining eyes of hers looking up at him, but as much as he strained his eyes, he could not spot her. He watched curiously as the crowd parted with hushed murmurs before he straightened when Chief Hakoda stepped through the crowd with Sokka and Aang walking beside him.
Hakoda stopped near the edge of the crowd, watching patiently as the large steel Fire Nation ship glided through the water until it stopped near the dock and the crew moved back and forth to secure it. He could hear Admiral Jee’s voice barking orders to the crewmembers. He had not seen the young man who had helped his son rescue him from the Boiling Rock since he was crowned Fire Lord and he was curious to again meet the man who was spoken so highly of by his son and daughter… especially his daughter...

*Hm...* he mentally mused with a small frown. Actually, he had wondered a couple of times if his daughter might like the Fire Lord as more than a friend, but that couldn’t be it. Could it?

The chief was brought out of his thoughts when the crowd’s hushed murmurs became a bit louder and he looked up just in time to see the steel ramp of the ship being lowered to the snowy ground, a puff of white snow flying to the sides at the impact. His people waited with bated breath for the occupants of the ship to come down for they were all curious to see the leader of the nation that once had been their enemy.

A tall figure emerged at the top of the ramp along with whom they recognized as Admiral Jee along with two unknown women as well as a pair of guards. They watched as the tall man stopped for a moment to take in his surroundings before he began to descend the ramp in a dignified way. A collective murmur escaped from the large crowd at the dock.

The man was wearing shiny, black armor etched in red with black pointed boots. On his right hip was a sword sheath holding two sword hilts glinting under the sun’s rays. His raven-colored hair, which contrasted with his pale skin, was pulled into a short topknot where the fire crown rested, glinting brightly to all who saw it.

The Fire Lord arrived at the bottom of the ramp, his booted feet sinking a bit in the snow, but he stood perfectly straight with a stoic expression on his young face on which they could see his distinctive scar on the left side. There was something about him that immediately commanded their attention and respect. Another murmur sounded throughout the crowd at the tall man’s slanted golden eyes that seemed to pierce right through them.

Hakoda smiled when he looked around at the shocked expressions of his people and was positive the young Fire Lord had unknowingly stolen a few hearts among the young women. He grinned when said women sighed wistfully with big, adoring eyes and he could have sworn he saw small little hearts floating in the air above their heads. He chuckled to himself at his thoughts before looking back to the Fire Lord who now stood with Jee and two women, and the two guards a few feet behind them. Hakoda smiled as he made his way over to them with an excited Sokka and a silent Avatar at his side.
Zuko scanned the crowd again for any signs of Katara and sighed inwardly in disappointment before he returned his gaze before him as Chief Hakoda began to walk toward them. He smiled when Sokka grinned at him, but quickly averted his eyes from Aang who was also smiling at him, but with less enthusiasm. Zuko moved his eyes back to the chieftain as Hakoda stopped a few feet in front of him. The crowd became silent as their leader began to address the Fire Nation ruler.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” Hakoda greeted as he made a bow. “We, the people of the Southern Water Tribe, welcome you to our home.”

Zuko returned the bow respectfully as he responded sincerely.

“Thank you, Chief Hakoda. It is an honor to have been invited into the Southern Water Tribe.”

Both men straightened and smiled. Hakoda noticed—a bit in displeasure—that the younger man was slightly taller than him before he dismissed the thought as he greeted Jee, who smiled and nodded at him.

“Damn, Zuko!” Sokka exclaimed as he stepped up to clap Zuko’s back. “We were beginning to worry that you decided not to come!”

Zuko grinned slightly.

“I forgot that the Water Tribes’ weather could be unpredictable at times,” he said amicably.

Sokka laughed as he once more clapped Zuko’s back. The crowd murmured at the comfortable friendship between their future chief and the young Fire Lord. Aang just smiled and said a quick greeting, but made no move to approach the firebender, causing Zuko to frown, though he understood.

Hakoda watched the interaction between his son and Zuko with interest and was reminded of the time when they had escaped the Boiling Rock on the war airship. Then he looked to Zuko’s left where a tall, elegant lady stood as well as a younger woman he was sure was a maidservant. He noticed that both their noses and cheeks were pink from the cold.

“Chief Hakoda,” Zuko said as he noticed the man’s stare, “this is my mother, Lady Ursa.”
“Ah, yes,” Hakoda said with a smile and bowed. “My daughter has told me so much about you, Lady Ursa. It is an honor to have you here as well.”

Ursa smiled, trying to return the bow under the heavy robe she was wearing.

“Thank you, Chief Hakoda,” she replied gracefully when a small sneeze interrupted her. She blushed. “Excuse me.”

Hakoda laughed softly and waved her apology aside.

“Ah, please forgive me! What kind of host am I, letting my guests freeze to death?” He laughed again before he motioned for them to follow him. “Let’s go to my home so you can all warm up.”

“So did you bring what I asked you to, buddy?” Sokka whispered to Zuko when his dad turned around.

Zuko smirked again as he replied in a whisper as well.

“Yes, though I wonder if I should have since fire flakes always give you stomachaches, and with the wedding being tomorrow and all…” He chuckled inwardly when the young warrior scowled at him.

The crowd parted once again as they let the group pass through, their murmurs continued even as they disappeared. Different reactions and feelings—some good and some not so good—were expressed amongst themselves at the appearance of the young Fire Lord.

As he followed Chief Hakoda, Zuko admitted that the buildings were even more beautiful up close since he could see the elegant designs carved masterfully on the surface of the walls and doors as well as on the edges of the bridges.

*It's pretty, but nothing can be compared to the magnificence of the Fire Nation's architecture,* he thought with a small smirk.
They walked in silence down streets and over bridges, passing more people who stopped to stare or glare at him, but Zuko barely paid attention as he again wondered where Katara could be and when he would be able to gaze upon her face again. He turned to see his mother in a conversation with Jee before he looked at Sokka who was talking to Aang. He wanted to ask Sokka where his sister was, but he kept his mouth shut since Aang kept throwing strange looks at him.

No matter. He would see Katara soon enough when they arrived at Hakoda’s home. He just had to be patient…something he still needed a bit of work on…

He watched as Aang left in a hurry after telling them he was going to look for Katara, and Zuko tried to suppress the jealousy that once again rose within him before he was thankfully distracted by Sokka who asked him about the Fire Nation treats again.

Katara laughed when Iroh began to sing some kind of song about love and the seasons as they made their way back to the large house. His voice was not that of a great singer, but his cheerful demeanor made up for it.

They crossed another of the lovely bridges when they noticed a group of people talking excitedly in low murmurs. After looking at each other curiously, both made their way to the small crowd and asked what the commotion was about.

“Why, Lady Katara, don’t you know?” a short woman with a baby in her arms asked. “Fire Lord Zuko has arrived.”

“He arrived already?” Katara gasped before she looked at Iroh who was smiling at her. She broke into a huge, happy grin.

“Zuko’s here, Uncle Iroh! Hurry, we have to meet up with him!” she exclaimed as she took hold of Iroh’s hand and began to race toward the grand house, dragging a puffing retired general behind her.

I can’t believe it! I was just at the docks a few hours ago and I missed his arrival! Katara huffed mentally as she continued to run on the soft snow with Iroh hurrying behind her as they raced through streets and crossed over bridges.

Her heart began to pound in her chest and it had nothing to do with the running exercise. Zuko had finally arrived and she wanted to see him so badly, to look into his radiant golden eyes, to hear his rare laughs, to feel his warmth.
“Katara, slow down!” Iroh exclaimed as they rounded a corner sharply, almost crashing into the wall of the building. “We will surely fall to our deaths in this frozen ground!”

Katara only laughed.

“Don’t be silly, Uncle Iroh. I won’t let that happen. I have my waterbending, remember?” she said as she turned her head to smile at him before she tugged at his arm more insistently. “Now come on! I have to see Zuko! I missed him so much!”

Iroh grinned hugely at her confession, although he had a feeling Katara did not even realize what she had said. He smiled at the excited and eager expression on the waterbender’s face. Though he still believed that they could crash and he could break some bones with the speed she was forcing them to take.

They arrived just in time to see Hakoda leading the group toward the grand house and Iroh was forced to let go of Katara’s hand when her speed increased since he could not keep up with her youthful energy.

Katara’s heart raced even faster and her smile widened as her eyes rested on the dark armored-clad firebender, who was talking with her dad.

“Zuko!” she shouted happily.

At the sound of his name, Zuko stopped in his conversation with Hakoda and looked up just in time to see Katara lunge herself at him, the hood of her parka falling back as she wrapped her arms around his middle. Zuko instinctively caught her and was barely able to keep them from stumbling onto the snowy ground as she barreled into him.

“Zuko! I’m so glad you finally came!” Katara exclaimed, squeezing him as she buried her face on his armored chest—a bit disappointed that she could not hear his heartbeat through the armor—and smiled when his smoky sandalwood scent reached her senses.

Her heart slowed down a few beats from the frantic rhythm of before as she relaxed in Zuko’s strong arms and comforting presence. The ache that had been present in her chest for the past months disappeared instantly, and instead, a warm feeling replaced it.
Zuko could not understand Katara’s sudden reaction and attention and why she seemed so happy to see him, but he sure had nothing to complain about her warm reception. Quite the contrary, he was enjoying having her in his arms immensely, having her petite body pressed to his own larger one just like he had wished every day for the past few months…or maybe even for the past few years.

He pulled her a bit closer to himself and took a small whiff of her unique gardenia scent—made sharper by the frosty, minty smell of the snow—and smiled happily. Gods, how he missed her! His heart seemed to burn at the feeling of having her in his arms once again, of her scent floating to his nose, of her lovely face pressed to his chest.

Sokka had turned just in time to see his sister flying through the air toward Zuko only to be caught by the young Fire Lord. Seeing nothing unusual, Sokka just shrugged and waited for his sister to calm down from her emotional display so they could enter the house so Zuko could give him the delicious fire flakes—which he would have to hide from his pregnant bride if he wanted to even eat one flake. He rubbed his chin as ideas began to form in his head of where he could hide his spicy stash.

Hakoda, on the other hand, stared at his daughter and the young man who was holding her with wide eyes and an opened mouth. He looked between the two and then at his son—who did not seem affected by the scene or was fantasizing about food as usual—with a gaping mouth before he composed himself, a frown appearing on his tanned brow. The Southern Chief stared intently at the smiling Zuko suspiciously, almost as if he was trying to discover the true intentions of the young man currently embracing his beloved daughter, before he shook his head at his overprotectiveness. The young Fire Lord was an honorable man and he trusted Katara to behave herself and look out for men with bad intentions. Yet, this helped him confirm some of his recent suspicions regarding their actual feelings.

Iroh huffed as he finally reached the group, and seeing that his dear nephew was occupied at the moment, the winded man walked over to Ursa who had a hand to her mouth in order to hide her pleased smile. They exchanged a knowing look, and hope and joy gleamed in their eyes.

As for Jiao, Jee, and Zuko’s personal guards, they stared at their usually reserved and stoic Fire Lord and the waterbending young woman in his arms with disbelieving looks, but kept their comments to themselves since it was none of their business.

Chuckling lowly, Zuko gently patted Katara’s back.

“If I had known I was going to receive such a warm welcome, I would’ve visited the Southern Water Tribe much sooner,” he said with a small smirk.
As if finally realizing what she was doing and how it must look to everybody else, Katara stepped quickly away from him and laughed sheepishly. Her face turned bright red as she tried to avoid looking at anyone, especially her dad.

Zuko scolded himself mentally for opening his mouth since it made Katara move away from him, making him feel empty.

“Heh, sorry about that,” Katara muttered as she began to play with the end of her braid.

“No harm done,” Zuko reassured her with what Katara thought was an indulgent smile that caused her to blush even redder.

“Why, Nephew, you are such a lucky man!” Iroh exclaimed with a mocking sorrowful sigh, “I wish a pretty, young lady would have received me with such a wonderful greeting. But alas, it was not so.”

Realizing that his uncle was there as well, Zuko glanced at Iroh and gave him a warning glare which, as usual, the old man ignored by addressing his former sister-in-law.

“I tell you, my dear Ursa, the world is so unjust,” Iroh continued and shook his head sadly.

“Don’t let it bring you down, Iroh dear,” Ursa replied with a smile as she patted his arm in a playful gesture of comfort.

Zuko rolled his eyes while the men chuckled and the women giggled.

“I’m sad you’ve already forgotten the hug I gave you on your arrival, Uncle Iroh,” Katara teased with a grin.

The old man grinned back even as he let out a fake sad sigh.

“Yes, that was nice, but that was nothing compared to the one you just gave Zuko,” Iroh pouted. “So
Katara abruptly stopped laughing and flushed, not noticing Zuko’s smug expression and her father’s scrutinizing stare. She finally realized that she had completely ignored the other arrivals because she had been completely preoccupied with seeing Zuko again.

“Lady Ursa!” Katara smiled as she stepped around Zuko—who was a bit annoyed to be ignored for the moment—to hug the older woman. “I’m so glad you made it.”

“I am too, Katara dear,” Ursa responded with a gentle smile that painfully reminded Hakoda of his beloved Kya.

Smiling, Katara turned to where Jee was standing a few feet behind Ursa.

“It’s wonderful that you’ve come as well, Admiral Jee.”

Jee bowed as he returned her smile.

“Thank you, Lady Katara. It is always a pleasure to see you.”

“Jiao? Is that you?” Katara asked as she moved her head to the side to see the other person standing silently a few feet behind the admiral. “It’s so nice to see you again.”

“Thank you, Lady Katara. I am happy to see you as well.” Jiao bowed and smiled happily at the knowledge that the young Water Tribe woman had not forgotten about her and still looked at her as a friend and not just another servant.

“Katara,” Hakoda spoke up and raised an eyebrow at his youngest child who had also greeted the guards and was now turning to talk to Zuko again. “Since we got the reunion out of the way, why don’t we let our guests go to their rooms so they could get out of the cold and rest, hm?”

“You’re right, Dad,” she answered, blushing once more at her rude behavior as she followed behind her father who again led the group to his home.
Her heart started beating faster when Zuko disengaged himself from Hakoda’s side to walk beside her. Now that he was here, she did not know what to say to him. Ever since those dreams, the thought of the possibility that she could like Zuko more than a friend, that she could be in love with him, was making her feel nervous and unsure.

But even if she did feel such a thing for him, Zuko would never see her more than a friend since he was in love with Mai. She mentally shook her head at the thought and at the feeling that suspiciously resembled jealousy that settled itself in her chest.

Zuko cleared his throat lightly as he glanced down at Katara from the corner of his eye. He noticed that she was wearing thick, light-blue pants with a parka of the same color that reached below her waist. Her long braid swished gently as a cold breeze swept by. He wished he could tell her his feelings that instant, but again the fear of rejection took hold of him. How should he go about declaring his love for her? Such displays of emotion were strange and unfamiliar to him, and he did not want to make a fool of himself—especially not in front of her.

“Well, here is our humble home,” Hakoda’s voice caught both their attention.

Zuko looked up to see the largest house he had seen since he had arrived at the Southern Water Tribe. Two guards posted at either side of the entrance grasped the large steel door handles and opened them for the group to enter. Zuko smiled when he recognized the steel doors he had sent as a present to the Southern Chief almost four years ago.

Looking around the wintry corridor as they entered, the young Fire Lord admired the carvings and designs that decorated the walls. Lines swirled in intricate patterns from the arched ceiling to the bottom of the ice walls. They were even more magnificent and more beautiful than the ones on the other houses and on the bridges. Instead of the ground being made of frozen snow, marble floor greeted their feet. He remembered Katara telling him it had been a gift from King Bumi and that was the reason why Toph spent most of her time inside the grand house rather than outside in the fresh outdoors.

“What a beautiful place,” Ursa marveled as she, too, gazed at what could be considered the Southern Water Tribe Palace.

“Thank you, Lady Ursa,” Hakoda replied and beamed as he looked around his new home proudly before he turned to address his children, “Why don’t you show our guests to their rooms?”
Before both siblings could move, Toph rounded a corner and stomped her way toward them, followed several feet behind in a slower pace by Kanna supporting Suki.

“There you are, Sparky!” Toph shouted with a huge grin on her face as she approached him. “Did you get lost or something?” she asked and punched his arm.

Zuko grinned slightly, discreetly rubbing the place where the small earthbender had hit him. Some things never changed, like the strength of her punch and the fact that she was the only one who could get away with treating him like that.

“No, we just ran into some difficulties on our way.”

“Uh-huh,” Toph said before she walked to Katara and placed an arm around her shoulders. “See, Sugar Queen. I told you Lord Sparky here was going to make it, so all that mopping of yours was for nothing.” She sighed deeply as if she felt some sympathy for the waterbender.

Katara blushed when Zuko turned to stare at her with gleaming eyes.

“I, um…uh…” she stuttered as she turned to glare at the grinning Toph.

She was saved from further embarrassment when her grandmother finally reached them with Suki, who greeted Zuko and Ursa happily, expressing how glad she was they had made it to her wedding.

Kanna stood silently to the side with a pensive look on her old and wise face. As soon as she spotted the tall young man, who was obviously Fire Nation, she never took her calculating eyes off him. She regarded him carefully, from the way he held himself, to how he kept his mother close to him, to the friendly yet aloof way he interacted with his friends. But most importantly, she observed, with great interest, the way the young man seemed to hover around her granddaughter in a discreet way.

After his future bride finished welcoming their friends, Sokka stepped forward and wound an arm around Suki’s waist to support her since her lower back had been hurting recently. Suki turned to smile at him gratefully.

Zuko watched with veiled interest as Sokka fuzzed over his pregnant, future wife. He subtly glanced at Katara—who was still standing beside him, rolling her eyes at her brother—and he could not stop the image of himself in Sokka’s place fussing over a rounded belly Katara, her blue eyes shining.
brightly. He had to admit that he enjoyed the idea and wished that such a scene could become true.

Catching the adoring and longing look the firebender quickly threw at Katara, Kanna immediately knew that the young Fire Lord—whose cold and reserved personality preceded him—was indeed in love with her granddaughter. Not infatuated, but truly in love. Even so, that did not automatically gain her trust and acceptance, nor even her blessing. No, first he had to prove himself the honorable, great man everybody seemed to make him out as.

“Gran-Gran!” Katara exclaimed as she finally noticed her grandmother was still standing in the same spot and had not said a word. What she did notice was the scrutinizing look she was throwing at Zuko and she wondered what the canny old woman was up to.

Zuko watched as Katara moved away from his side and made her way to a short, plump elderly woman with deep wrinkles on her tanned face, a grayish braid over one shoulder, and thin lips on a blank face, staring at him with intense light-blue eyes.

Swallowing lightly, he stood as stoically as ever, though he was shaking nervously on the inside as Katara grabbed the woman’s hand and began to lead her to where he was standing.

This was Katara’s grandmother, her Gran-Gran, the old woman he had roughly grabbed by the collar of her parka almost four years ago, without considering that he was frightening her since all he wanted to know was the location of the Avatar. And right in front of Katara to top it all off!

Well, he knew Katara had forgiven him for all his past transgressions, but he was positive that the old Water Tribe woman had not forgotten that he had invaded their home and, in a way, held her hostage. And the strange look she was giving him was not reassuring in the least. If this woman did not approve of or like him, then he had a very small chance of winning Katara over.

“Gran-Gran, I would like you to meet Fire Lord Zuko,” Katara said with a smile before she directed a grin at the solemn faced Zuko, “And this is my Gran-Gran, Kanna.”

Zuko gave a respectful bow as he said, “Lady Kanna, I am glad to finally meet you.”

*Properly,* he added mentally.

Kanna returned the bow before she straightened and she eyed him carefully.
“And I you, young Fire Lord, and in much better circumstances, don’t you think?” she asked with a raised gray brow.

Both Katara and Sokka looked at each other worriedly while their father just stood back with a barely concealed smirk on his face. He wondered how the young firebender was going to get out of this one. Ursa frowned slightly and raised a questioning eyebrow when she turned to Iroh only to see him smiling, before he lightly shrugged his shoulders. Toph crossed her arms over her chest and openly grinned since she knew Kanna was not really upset. She vaguely wondered where Aang had wandered to, but shrugged the thought away. It wasn’t like she missed him or anything.

Zuko suppressed the urge to shift uneasily and glance away from Kanna’s piercing light-blue eyes and instead he straightened himself a bit and slightly inclined his head in agreement to her words.

“I assure you, Lady Kanna, that is what I believe as well,” he responded before he gave another small bow at her and Chief Hakoda. “I ask that you find it in yourself to forgive the rude manner in which I behaved toward you and your people the last time I was here.”

Both Kanna and Hakoda noticed he had the decency to look ashamed and both approved of his words. Deciding that she had tortured the poor young man long enough, Kanna allowed a warm smile to reach her lips. She inwardly chuckled when the firebender relaxed slightly when she dropped her cold demeanor.

“I never actually held that incident against you,” she admitted and smiled wider when her granddaughter visibly relaxed beside her. “You left as soon as Aang allowed you to capture him without plundering and destroying a village made up of only women and children as I’m sure other men would have done. I knew you were a man of honor since you kept your promise not to harm us if we told you the whereabouts of the Avatar.”

Waving her wrinkly hands in the air as if to chase away the past, Kanna smiled at the rest of the people who had arrived with the young Fire Lord.

“Oh, my, but where is my head? You all must be cold, tired, and hungry!” Gran-Gran exclaimed, “We will continue with any more conversation during dinner.”

She turned to her granddaughter who was again staring at the Fire Lord.
“Katara, you and Toph take Lady Ursa and the young maidservant to their rooms,” she directed.

“Yes, Gran-Gran,” Katara obeyed dutifully as she motioned for Ursa and Jiao to follow her. Turning back to Zuko, she smiled widely at him.

“Talk to you later?” she asked hopefully.

“Of course,” Zuko responded immediately, returning her smile with a more subdued one.

Gran-Gran lightly smacked the back of her grandson’s head to get his attention as well as his pregnant fiancée’s.

“Sokka, take Fire Lord Zuko and Admiral Jee to their rooms,” she told him, “Suki, come with me, the seamstress still needs to put the finishing touches to your wedding dress.”

Suki giggled when Sokka sighed almost mournfully before he placed a kiss on her forehead.

“Right this way, gentlemen,” Sokka said with a playful extravagant bow that made Jee grin and Zuko roll his eyes.

Kanna stayed behind with Suki and Iroh as the group began to move to their respective rooms. She watched with growing interest when Zuko strained his neck—as discreetly as possible—to follow Katara’s retreating form until she disappeared around a corner.

_I approve of him_, Kanna thought as she grabbed her chin with her fingers. _He is honorable, refined, and seems courteous, intelligent, courageous, and respectful. Quite handsome to top it all off! And he is in love with my granddaughter. It seems that this Zuko knows what’s good. _She smirked smugly. _Now, if only Katara would admit her feelings and let Aang down gently…_

“By that look on your face, my dear Kanna, I assume that you have noticed something going on between both youngsters?” Iroh observed with a huge grin on his face.

“Hm, yes I have,” Kanna confessed as she dropped her hand from her chin to her side. “And I approve if they should take their relationship to the next level.”
The old firebender and the old woman chuckled as they began to make their way to another part of the grand house, betting on how long it would take for the young ones to confess their feelings to one another.

Suki followed them with a puzzled expression on her tired face.

*What in the world are these two babbling about?* she thought.

Her eyes widened. No, they couldn’t be talking about Katara and Zuko. They were both in relationships after all...although, admittedly, she wondered at the possibilities as well. She mused for a moment before she finally realized something.

*And the seamstress is not in this part of the house!*

With a soft glow, the dawning sun made its appearance known to the residents of the Southern Water Tribe, chasing away the dark shadows that lurked around the snow and ice buildings. The light-blue sky was clear and, surprisingly, there were no gray clouds anywhere in sight. It looked as if the Spirits themselves were blessing the event that was to happen on that day.

The energy of the rising sun—though not as strong as it was in the Fire Nation—raised Zuko from his light slumber. Light spilled softly into the room from the frozen ice window as the young man stirred among the many soft, fur blankets he was encased in.

Opening his eyes languidly, Zuko scanned the room he had been given for the remainder of his stay in the southern nation before he sat up on the comfy bed, shivering slightly when the fur blankets fell from around his shoulders and the chilly temperature hit him despite the warm sleeping wear he had been given.

The blue covered bed stood neatly in the middle of the medium sized room, topped with many blankets and furs of varying tones and shades of blue, black, and silver. A low table was placed before the elegant frozen window surrounded with cushions in case he wanted to enjoy a light snack or tea. There was a large pinewood closet off to the side of the entrance that he was sure was placed there recently for his use. Jiao had unpacked his belongings the previous day while he dined with his family and friends.

Lifting the covers from the lower half of his body, the firebender swung his legs over the edge of the
bed and stood up only to sit back down when his feet came in contact with cold marble, and a shiver ran up his spine. Reaching down, he quickly picked up and placed the warm fur boots Kanna had gifted him with on his chilly feet before putting on the parka that was hanging from the back of the chair near his bed.

He smiled slightly when he looked down at his parka that was dark red color with black fur on the inside and edges of the hood and sleeves, before he lifted his foot to see black fur boots that reached his mid-calves. His mother, Uncle, Jee, Jiao, and his guards were also given the same type of red winter wear, except that the fur on the women’s clothing was white. Kanna had told them that giving them red to wear instead of the normal blue was a way of showing that their Fire Nation heritage was acknowledged and accepted.

It still made him swallow nervously every time he thought about Katara and Sokka’s Gran-Gran and the way her piercing light-blue eyes made him feel like a child again. Luckily, the old Water Tribe woman had forgiven him for his past mistakes and welcomed him and his family warmly.

하지만, 너무 기뻐하기도 했습니다.

Kanna had asked him question after question about the Fire Nation and himself ever since they all sat down to a typical Southern Water Tribe dinner—which was not what he was used to, but was very pleasant nonetheless—with a large smile on her wrinkly face and a twinkle in her eye. The same twinkle his uncle and his mother had as well, he noted. Iroh had joined in answering Kanna’s questions, adding and talking about other things that the woman had not even asked.

Zuko did not understand what those two were up to, but he disregarded such thoughts as unimportant for the moment. What he was concerned about, though, was the way Aang had clung to Katara during the whole meal, even after she tried to tell the young monk to stop. The Fire Lord had almost broken and set the table on fire as he had been clenching it with both hands as the jealousy spread through him. Luckily, Toph had shoved her way between the Katara and Aang without giving an explanation as to why before she threw a smirk in his direction.

Walking over to the thick window that was shining softly due to the morning sun, Zuko gazed down to the clean streets below where shadows still lingered. He noticed that the streets were empty and he assumed that the people were still sleeping, but he knew the city would be bustling with energy very soon since the wedding was being held later that day.

A sigh escaped him and he pressed his forehead against the cold surface of the window. He was finally in the Southern Water Tribe, the small village that he had once invaded, but was now thriving quickly. It became quite apparent the previous day that many still mistrusted him as he followed Hakoda through the ice city, even though both the Fire Nation and the Southern Water Tribe were in peace and trading with each other.
It was not like the people made it their purpose to show their negative feelings toward him with cruel words or actions, quite the contrary, they were respectful and hospitable, but he could sense their apprehension and uneasiness. Hopefully, during the few weeks that he stayed, they would be able to forget and dissolve such wariness toward himself as well as the Fire Nation.

However, there was a reason he had visited the Southern Water Tribe that was far more important than gaining the tribe people’s trust or to attend his friends’ wedding.

“Katara,” he said longingly and closed his eyes.

She was the reason he had travelled through a freezing and raging sea, the reason he endured the cold climate, the reason he was willing to humble himself before Chief Hakoda and Kanna, and the reason he was willing to confront Aang if necessary.

Katara was the reason he was there, she was the woman he loved, the one he wanted. He needed to tell her how he felt, tell her what she meant to him. But how was he supposed to go about it? Should he spend a few more days with her in order to learn more about her family and culture so she could see that he was really interested in her? Or should he tell her immediately?

The sun had finally risen, fully illuminating the blue morning sky, making the ice and snow buildings glisten brightly. A few minutes later, Zuko moved away from the window when he noticed that the citizens were moving about in the streets to get ready for the upcoming wedding.

Perhaps he would find the courage during the festivities to tell Katara what she meant to him. And hopefully, she would not break his heart…
Tribal Festivities

The city was bursting with excitement as the people began to get ready for the wedding ceremony. The flowers that were imported from the Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation were placed in their respective vases, tables and areas, and the women were already preparing the delicious food that was to be served after the wedding ceremony. Already a few people were making their way to their seats so they could see the wedding take place.

“So how does it look?” Suki asked anxiously as she twirled in a circle in order for her friends to see the wedding dress she was to appear in a just a few moments. Kanna and an old seamstress moved around her as they adjusted a few last details.

The dress was dyed in Suki’s favorite dark green color, made of light warm fur, reaching down to her calves. It was slightly loose so it covered her large, rounded belly. Under her dress she wore warm white pants that were tucked into white fur boots with shiny beads on the top edges decorating her feet. Her short auburn hair was tied in a high, tight bun embedded with smaller beads and tiny white flowers. Her wrists were adorned with many shiny bracelets that tinkled against each other when she moved. Around her neck she wore many long necklaces made of beads and feathers as was tradition in the Southern Water Tribe. A light amount of makeup was placed on her eyelids and cheeks, and her lips were rouged.

“You look wonderful, Suki,” Katara exclaimed, reaching out to touch one of the soft, fur-lined sleeves. Three of Suki’s warriors agreed and gushed over the dress.

“Yeah, Suki!” Ty Lee exclaimed as she clasped her hands against her cheek and sighed. “Sokka won’t know what hit him!”

“I think it looks awful,” Toph commented casually from the chair she was sitting on in one of the corners of the room, waiting impatiently for the primping and preening to be over.

All the women stopped in mid-praise and stared at the earthbender with shocked and hurt expressions.

“But I could say the same thing about what I’m wearing right now, since I have no freaking idea what it looks like,” Toph said as she lifted her bangs to show her sightless eyes and began to chuckle.
They all unfroze and laughed uncertainly with the short blind girl, while Kanna and the seamstress shook their heads.

“So today is the big day,” Kanna said as she looked up at Suki’s glowing face. “Are you ready for the beginning of your new life?”

Suki squared her shoulders—her large stomach protruding farther in the process—and smiled softly.

“More than ever,” she replied.

Kanna nodded in approval and smiled as she helped the seamstress place a thin veil on Suki’s head that would hide the bride’s face until her bridegroom removed it during one part of the ceremony. Suki grimaced and hissed at a sharp pain on the right side of her round belly, but reassured the women that she was fine when they all rushed to her side. She had been having small pains since she woke up, but she assumed it was due to her nerves.

“Alright, girls,” Kanna spoke up as she opened the door to the room and motioned for them to leave so they could take their places among the crowd. Turning around, the old woman smiled. “We will be waiting for your entrance, Suki. And once again, I congratulate you.”

Suki thanked her as Gran-Gran and the rest left the room with only Katara and Toph staying behind. Suki squealed as she whirled around and embraced her soon-to-be sister-in-law. As both giggled and embraced each other, Toph just crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes at their girlish antics.

“Oh, Spirits!” Suki exclaimed joyfully. “It’s my wedding day! I’m finally going to be Sokka’s wife! I’m so happy!”

“I’m so happy for both you guys!” Katara laughed as she pulled away from Suki whose eyes were threatening to spill tears of joy. “Don’t you dare cry, Suki! You’ll ruin the makeup and then Sokka will have to wait a few more hours so we could fix it,” she teased.

Suki sniffled and smiled as she took a few breaths to calm down. It seemed her pregnancy was making her overemotional again. She normally did not react like this or cry over every little thing like she had been recently.
“I never would’ve thought I’d marry and bear a child with the chauvinistic idiot that stumbled into my home in Kyoshi Island. But now I am eager to marry that idiot,” Suki said with a laugh before she sighed happily. “Can you believe how much has changed since we all first met?” she asked softly as she patted her stomach.

“Yeah,” Katara agreed with a smile as she watched her soon-to-be-sister-in-law coo at her pregnant belly.

Suki looked up to regard the waterbender questioningly.

“Did you ever think you’d end up as the Avatar’s girlfriend when you first met Aang?” she asked carefully.

Katara fiddled with her fingers as she looked away from Suki’s intense gaze.

“Uh, well…no,” she admitted after a while. “I really only saw him as a friend back then and I still find it kind of…strange. I can’t explain why, but I do.”

“Maybe that’s because you were never meant to be together,” Toph spoke up with a shrug while she still sat on the same spot she had been since she was shoved into the room. It’s not like she could ‘see’ anything since she had to wear stupid boots to walk in the snow anyway.

“What?” Katara asked in surprise as her eyes widened at Toph’s words. That thought had never actually crossed her mind.

“Of course we’re meant to be together,” she argued. “I mean…Aang and I…We…”

Frowning deeply, Katara paused since she did not know what to say as the words the earthbender had said began to make her think. What if Toph was right? What if she had just forced their relationship to mean something?

“Katara,” Suki spoke up carefully. “I think I’m with Toph on this one.”

“You’re what?!” both Katara and Toph exclaimed at the same time in disbelief.
Suki reached a hand to her obviously confused friend, squeezing her hand lightly when Katara grabbed hers.

“I’ve wanted to talk to you about your relationship with Aang for a while now, but every time I tried, something would come up to interrupt me.”

“Talk to me about what?” Katara asked with a frown.

“I’ve noticed that every time we talk about your relationship you seemed more confused and uneasy about it than happy or excited. And every time I mention the possibility of you two getting married, you immediately shy away from the topic, like you’re uncomfortable about it,” Suki said softly.

“Yup, I noticed that, too,” Toph piped in as she shifted in her uncomfortable dress.

Katara looked at them both and her frown only deepened at their words. Did she really do that?

“Katara,” Suki spoke again as she continued slowly, “I… I think you and Aang should take a break from each other.”

She quickly squeezed the waterbender’s hand, silencing her when it looked like she was going to protest the idea.

“Katara, you’re my friend, and now we’ll be family, and all I want is for you to be happy, to be happy on your wedding day just like I am on mine. I think that if you and Aang separated for a while it would do you both good. Maybe it would help make your feelings and relationship stronger… or maybe… you’ll find someone better.”

*Like Zuko,* Toph thought with a grin that had nothing to do with the fact that Aang could be single again.

*Someone better?* Katara thought.
That’s what she had also thought a few months ago! Could it be that perhaps it was true? But where would that leave Aang? Could she destroy their long-term relationship just because she wished to experience something else? To know if maybe there was something more for her out there?

Before she could answer or say anything at all, her grandmother reappeared to usher her and Toph out.

“So how do I look?” Sokka asked as he looked down at himself before he sat down. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his thighs that were bouncing due to his nervousness before he stood up as quickly as he had sat down.

“Well, do I look good or what?” he asked in a panicked voice when he didn’t receive a response—or more preferably, a compliment.

Hakoda chuckled deeply, his blue eyes squinting in his mirth at his son’s obvious anxiety.

“Don’t worry, Sokka, you look fine,” he reassured with a pat on the bridegroom’s back.

Sokka looked over at Zuko and Aang, who were standing a few feet behind, and relaxed when his friends gave a nod to convey that Hakoda’s words were true. Indeed, the young tribesman looked magnificent in the warrior attire he wore on special occasions.

Simple words were used to ease the mind of a man about his outfit while gushing praises and squeals were expected from a woman’s female friends about hers.

“Good,” Sokka breathed in relief as he ran a hand over his pulled up ‘wolf-tail’ before he started to tap his foot on the floor.

“Pull yourself together, son,” Hakoda ordered softly. “It’s too late to back out now, you know, with Suki being pregnant and all.” He chuckled.

“I’m not planning to, Dad.” Sokka scowled. “It’s just that…I’m getting married, for La’s sake!”

“And you realized that now?” Aang chirped with a large grin.
Sokka huffed and crossed his arms with a grumble when his father chortled loudly and Zuko chuckled.

Momo flew away from Aang’s shoulder and circled around the warrior’s head as he prepared to land, but Sokka shooed him away with exaggerated waves of his arms before the lemur could ruin his hair. Momo chattered angrily, but contented himself by sitting on the warm shoulder of the tall firebender.

“Ah, I remember the day I married your mother,” Hakoda spoke up as his laughter calmed down.

Sokka stopped grousing and turned to look at the soft expression on his father’s face and he sighed sadly. Aang and Zuko glanced at each other and remained silent as both the father and son’s mood changed slightly.

“I was so nervous I was afraid I was going to be sick,” the chieftain chuckled quietly before a melancholy sigh escaped him. “But all that vanished when I looked upon my beloved Kya as she made her way to marry me, and all I knew was happiness.”

A faraway look came over his features and the three young men remained silent as the chief got lost in his thoughts. Zuko shifted uncomfortably since it had been his country that had caused this family—Katara’s family—so much pain.

Hakoda shook himself and blinked to get rid of the tears that seemed not to have vanished even after all these years since his wife’s untimely death. He frowned when he saw that his son’s eyes were misting over as well. Straightening himself, the older warrior walked up to his heir and placed both his hands on his son’s strong shoulders.

“Your mother would be smiling and crying happily that her baby boy was getting married, if she were here with us today,” Hakoda said with a sad smile before he clapped Sokka’s shoulders in a paternal way. “I want you to know that I am very proud of the man you have become, Sokka. I am proud to call you my son.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Sokka croaked before clearing his throat to compose himself as his father gave him a manly hug.

After hearing Hakoda’s words, Zuko watched Sokka sadly and slightly enviously. Why couldn’t his father be like Hakoda? Ozai would never tell him how proud he was to have him as a son. His sire
would never give him encouraging words on the day of his wedding or embrace him in a fatherly manner.

The firebender shook his head to rid himself of such thoughts. He had Iroh, who was like a father to him, and the old Dragon of the West was more than enough.

Hakoda stepped away from his son and gave him a hard pat on the back as he let out another loud laugh in order to dispel the sudden melancholy.

“Just try not to embarrass yourself by tripping or something, okay?” he joked lightly. He grinned as he made his way to stand between the amused Fire Lord and the Avatar.

“Jeez, thanks for boosting my confidence there, Dad,” Sokka grumbled, but returned the grin. He scowled again when Aang started to laugh. “Shut it, Aang!”

“Sorry,” Aang muttered, though a few chuckles escaped him.

“You laugh now,” Hakoda began as he turned to look at both young men on either side of himself, “but just you wait when your time comes to take a bride.”

He chuckled as he elbowed Zuko’s arm in a show of playfulness. It was also a way to show the young Fire Lord that he and his family held no resentment against the firebender over Kya’s death. Zuko seemed to understand and smiled.

“I do hope I’m an exception though,” Zuko drawled. “It would be embarrassing if the Fire Lord were to have a panic attack on his wedding day.”

Hakoda laughed harder as he also gave Zuko a pat on the back—though not that hard since he was the Fire Lord after all.

“Who knew firebenders had such sense of humor, eh?” he mused and chuckled as he smiled at Zuko to show he was joking.

“Indeed.” Zuko smirked.
“I think I’ll be too excited to be nervous on my wedding,” Aang piped in and sighed wistfully.

Zuko’s smirk instantly disappeared from his face and he gritted his teeth in jealousy and possessiveness since he knew who the bride in Aang’s dream wedding was. Hakoda stopped laughing immediately as well since he still found it hard thinking about having his little girl grown up and possibly married. Having to deal with one child getting married was enough for the day, he couldn’t handle even the possibility that his daughter could also be wed soon. Clearing his throat, Hakoda acknowledged Aang’s words with a small smile.

“Well, I think it’s time that I take my seat before Toph claims it,” Hakoda said with a grin. Clasping Sokka’s arm tightly, he said, “Congratulations, son. Today marks the first day of your new life.”

“Thanks again, Dad,” Sokka responded before he watched his father leave the room.

“I think I’ll get my spot next to Katara before someone takes it,” Aang muttered as he, too, made his exit. Momo jumped away from Zuko’s shoulder and flew away as he followed his master and friend outside the room.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the monk’s words and pressed his lips together in a hard line. Soon it would be him always taking the spot next to Katara…

“Have you noticed that something’s been off with Aang recently?” Sokka’s musing words broke through Zuko’s thoughts.

“What do you mean?” the raven-haired firebender asked, putting on a confused frown.

“I’m not sure…” Sokka said as he rubbed his chin. “He’s been acting more irritated than normal and he never leaves Katara alone. And then he’s been glaring and snapping at you more often. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

Zuko gave him a small nod.

“I have,” he responded coolly.
“Why do you think he’s acting like that?” the blue-eyed warrior asked as he continued to rub his chin.

Zuko glanced to the side and shrugged.

“I’m not really sure,” he confessed quietly.

He had suspicions, but he was not completely positive if they were true. Did Aang know what he really felt for Katara and what he planned to do in order to have her for himself?

“Well, there has to be a reason,” Sokka said as he flailed his arms in the air before he frowned at his stoic friend. “Maybe you should talk to him and see what’s wrong.”

“Maybe I should,” Zuko responded impassively.

Sokka stared at him for a moment before he shrugged. Clapping a brotherly hand on Zuko’s shoulder, Sokka smiled.

“Anyways, thanks for being here on my wedding day, Zuko.”

“You’re my friend, Sokka,” Zuko replied, “Of course I would attend your wedding.”

Sokka laughed and let out a mocking resigned sigh. “And since you’re my friend, I guess I’ll attend yours.”

*Even if it’s Mai you marry,* he added mentally.

Zuko smiled at his words and nodded again.

*Of course you’ll be there for my wedding, Sokka, since it’ll be your sister’s wedding too, if I have anything to say about it,* Zuko thought with a smirk.
The soft beating of drums reached their ears, indicating that the wedding ceremony was about to begin and signaling that the bridegroom was to present himself at once. Sokka rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

“Well, here I go,” Sokka said with a nervous chuckle as he placed his warrior helmet over his head.

The gray fur of the wolf’s head gleamed brightly as Sokka walked out the door with Zuko walking a few paces behind him.

Sokka smiled widely when Suki appeared and began to make her way towards him. Even though the veil she had on was covering her beautiful face, he knew she was smiling brightly beneath it. Finally, Suki was going to be his wife and he was going to make her and their child happy for the rest of their lives.

Suki blushed under the veil as she caught sight of her handsome soon-to-be husband and the way he was looking at her before she took his outstretched hand as they both faced the spiritual priest who began the wedding ceremony.

The crowd watched with smiles on their faces as the wedding took place, murmuring to themselves at how handsome the bridegroom looked and how lovely the bride was.

If only that could be Katara and me, Zuko thought longingly as the couple began to pledge their loyalty and undying love to each other. Oh, how he wished it were he that was finally taking Katara as his wife at that moment!

Zuko looked away from the couple to glance discreetly from the corner of his eye to where Katara was sitting one seat away from him, between Toph and Aang, and he inwardly sighed at the happy look she had on her face. He narrowed his eyes when Aang grabbed her hand before Zuko quickly looked away and glared at a random spot in front of him so he did not have to see the way Katara smiled at the Avatar. What he did not know was that Katara had smiled at Aang in order not to hurt his feelings when she slowly removed her hand from his since she knew he was thinking of their wedding.

Katara glanced at Zuko over Toph’s head and wondered at the annoyed look on his face before she looked back at the couple before them as she imagined her own wedding.
But…who was going to be the man she was going to marry?

She glanced at Aang sitting beside her before she looked back at Zuko. Angry and confused at her thoughts, she tried to focus on her brother and her friend’s wedding and not on her puzzling feelings that were making her head hurt.

The ceremony ended with the spiritual leader asking Sokka to remove the veil so he could kiss his new wife. The audience erupted into cheers and applause when Sokka quickly pulled Suki’s veil back from her face before he embraced her and kissed her deeply.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The entire Southern Water Tribe was alive with music and laughter as the wedding festivities continued throughout the evening. The sky had remained cloudless for the entire day, adding to the cheerful atmosphere thanks to the sun’s soft rays of light during the day and now the soft glow of the moon and the twinkling stars in the night sky.

The people were gathered in the large town square in the center of the ice city where many low tables where set up in rows. The guests sitting on cushions or furs chatted excitedly as they continued to eat the delicious banquet before them. Appa and Momo were off to one side with a table filled with food just for them.

Zuko watched with amusement and interest at the manner in which the tribe people celebrated, with long cheers and loud laughter. The Southern Water Tribe festivities were more entertaining and exciting than the stuffy and formal celebrations that were held for the Fire Nation Royal Court. The musicians used drums, flutes, and other instruments that were all made up from animal skins or bones, providing a thrilling and uplifting rhythm for the dancers. Some waterbenders trailed streams of water around their forms as they danced among the crowd, the clear water sparkling under the glow of the torches and the large bonfire that blazed merrily in the middle of the place. Even his crew had been invited by the people to join in the festivities and he had allowed those who were not on duty to go and enjoy themselves.

The young Fire Lord glanced to where Sokka and Suki sat on a small platform under a canopy made of ice with blue and green cloth hanging from what looked to be an ice chandelier. He had a feeling Katara had something to do with that. He watched as Sokka leaned down to place a small kiss on his wife’s cheek before Suki placed her head on her husband’s shoulder. Zuko smiled at the obvious happiness that was pouring out of them and was visible on both their faces for everyone to see.

Glancing around at the table that had been reserved from him, Zuko picked up his cup of wine and took a slow sip. His mother was sitting next to him deep in conversation with Jee and next to his admiral was Jiao. Normally, he would not have allowed a servant to join them for dinner since it went against Fire Nation protocol, but he made an exception this time since it had been Katara that had insisted that Jiao joined them in the celebration. Besides, Jiao was a nice young woman and a loyal, respectful servant.
Sitting on his other side with a grin on his face was Uncle Iroh—whom Zuko had discreetly taken a bottle of wine away from earlier. Already there were a few drunken men making their inebriated state known as they were either dancing wildly everywhere or passed out in the middle of the dance floor, adding to the cheerful atmosphere that was a Water Tribe party. While it was a party, he did not want to see what his beloved uncle would do if he got any tipsier.

Zuko’s attention was immediately drawn away from the amusing intoxicated men as he caught sight of Katara making her way to their table with Aang, Toph, and Ty Lee. Zuko’s breath caught in his throat as he once more became mesmerized by the waterbender’s beautiful formal tribal dress, even if it was simpler than the bride’s. The first time he saw her in her dress, he had felt his heart pound and his body warm at her beauty. However, it was the large smile on Katara’s face that made his heart skip a beat. He quickly composed himself as they all took a seat at the low table with laughs and giggles.

“Are you all enjoying yourselves?” Katara asked excitedly as she glanced around the table that was reserved for the Fire Lord and his family. She smiled widely when they all quickly answered that they were.

“I’ve never been to such a lively party before,” Ursa commented as she looked around at the partygoers.

Before Katara could answer her, one of the Water Tribe warriors stepped up to their table and offered his hand to Jiao.

“Would the lovely lady honor me with this dance?” the handsome warrior asked with a charming smile.

Jiao’s pale cheeks turned bright red as she looked at the offered hand before she looked up at her lord uneasily. Zuko caught Katara’s look that said ‘you better say yes or else’ before he gave Jiao a small nod.

“You may go if you wish, Jiao,” he conceded with a small smile.

He smirked smugly when Katara grinned at him. Those at the table smiled when the maidservant flashed them a huge smile before she shyly took the warrior’s hand with another blush as he led her away.
“Aww, how cute,” Ty Lee gushed as she watched them go. “I wish Haru was here,” she said with a sigh as she leaned her head on her hand.

The acrobat’s mood changed when a group of Kyoshi warriors approached the table with blushes on their faces as they tried to discreetly glance at the handsome Fire Lord and led her to the dance floor.

Just as the girls left, a Fire Nation soldier came up and bowed to Zuko before he walked over to Jee and whispered in the admiral’s ear. Jee nodded before he looked over at the young Fire Lord who was frowning at them.

“Something has come up at the flagship,” Jee explained as he stood up from the table. “I will look into it immediately if you wish, my lord.”

“Please do, Admiral Jee,” the young Fire Lord responded with a nod as the older man bowed and left with the soldier. What could that possibly be about?

“Is there a problem, Zuko?” Aang asked with a frown as he watched Jee and the soldier leave.

Zuko looked over at Aang, and at the concerned looked on the Avatar’s face, guilt once more twisted his insides.

“No, everything’s fine,” he replied.

_Hopefully_, he mentally added.

“So how do you like the food?” Katara asked after a while as she, too, became a little concerned that it could be more problems with the raiders in the colonies. She looked around the table as she voiced her question, though the person she really wanted to hear from was Zuko.

“It’s very delicious, Katara,” Zuko responded sincerely as he took another bite from his plate.

“Really?” Katara asked with a smile. She blushed lightly since his small compliment in a way made
her feel like he was praising her for cooking a meal for him.

“Even the sea prunes?” Aang asked with a raised brow, a small smirk on his lips.

“Yes, even the sea prunes,” Zuko said as he glanced at the young monk and then back to Katara. “I’ll admit it’s not what I’m used to, but its unique flavor is what makes it appetizing.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Katara said with another smile before she briefly glanced at Aang, who was scowling at the table.

“So Zuko...how’s Mai doing?” Aang asked suddenly as he casually grabbed a piece of fruit from the bowl at the center of the table. “You must be sad that she couldn’t be here. You must really miss her.”

Zuko glared angrily at the airbender before he quickly looked over at Katara with a pleading look, to tell her that it was not so, but Katara was not looking at him, her face was turned to the side with an unreadable expression. He wanted to reach over and grab her hand, but he was not sure if she even cared about what Aang had said, not knowing that Katara indeed was affected by the mention of the young noblewoman.

Katara had narrowed her eyes as soon as Aang asked Zuko about Mai and her hands clenched on her lap as that strange feeling that resembled jealously flared inside her. She mentally shook her head before she looked away as she was reminded that Zuko was Mai’s boyfriend and he was not available. She had no right to feel such a way. Besides, he would never see her more than just a friend.

Toph narrowed her eyes in annoyance at Aang’s smug words. She knew he was trying to stop any feelings from developing any further between Katara and Zuko and so he brought up the fact that both of them were already in relationships.

*Oh, hell no! He’s not going to ruin my hard work to get those two idiots to realize their damn feelings!* Toph yelled in her head.

Springing to her small feet, the blind earthbender reached down and grabbed Aang’s upper arm tightly, yanking him off his seat, smirking when he let out a yelp of surprise. The entire table gaped as the young girl began to pull the Avatar away.
“Come on, Twinkletoes!” she called gleefully as she started to drag him away. “I want to dance!”

“Since when do you like to dance?” Aang asked incredulously as he tried to dig his heels on the snowy ground to stop from being hauled around. “And why are you dragging *me* to the dance floor?”

“Because I don’t have to kill you for stepping on my toes since you’re light-footed,” she replied with a shrug.

“But Katar—” Aang began as he glanced back at the still gaping waterbender sitting at the table.

“I’m sure Sugar Queen would be okay if I borrow you for one stupid dance,” Toph cut him off with an annoyed huff before she tilted her head in Katara’s direction. “You don’t mind, do you, Sweetness?”

“O-of course not, Toph…” Katara stammered.

“There, you see?” The earthbender grinned as she once again began to drag the young monk away. “Now shut up and lead me to the dance floor since I can’t see with these damn boots on!”

The people at the table were brought out of their shock when Iroh began to chuckle loudly.

“Well, there’s something you don’t see every day,” the retired general mused as he continued to laugh. He eyed the cup of wine in front of his nephew and sighed since he was stuck with only fruit juice. Really, it wasn’t like he was a bad drunk.

Katara smiled as she turned away from a grinning Toph dragging an annoyed and protesting Aang, and blushed when she caught Zuko’s stare. His golden eyes were gleaming brightly with their intensity, making her heart beat a bit faster than normal. She looked briefly away from his gaze and shifted nervously when she realized that she was the only one sitting with Zuko and his family and they were all looking at her with large smiles on their faces. Well, Iroh and Ursa were, while Zuko just stared at her with what seemed like a soft yet intense expression. What could it mean?

“So…um…how do you like the Southern Water Tribe?” she asked awkwardly as she began to chew on her lip.
“I like it so far, but I can’t give you a definite answer since I’ve not had the chance to really see it. We just got here yesterday,” Zuko responded distractedly as his eyes were drawn from her eyes to her lips that were being abused by her teeth. Those lips that he so wished to kiss.

“Oh…right,” Katara said as she gave an awkward chuckle. “I forgot about that.”

“Perhaps you can give me a tour of your city one of these days?” Zuko asked hopefully. He smirked when her face lit up with a large smile.

“Yeah! I was thinking of showing you around even before we left Ba Sing Se. Thanks for reminding me,” Katara exclaimed excitedly as she practically bounced on her cushion.

Iroh and Ursa shared a look and grinned.

“The Southern Water Tribe is very beautiful,” Ursa spoke up with a soft smile. “And the people are so nice, especially Chief Hakoda and your grandmother, though I have not met your mother yet. I would really like to meet her.”

Zuko and Iroh held their breaths as they silently glanced at Katara with sad expressions as the waterbender’s smile vanished from her face. Ursa became alarmed that she might have said something wrong when the young woman looked down. Ursa turned wide and concerned eyes toward her son.

“Mom…” Zuko began before he cleared his throat lightly as he shifted uneasily on his seat, “I don’t think Katara would like to—”

“No, it’s okay, Zuko,” Katara spoke up quietly as she lifted her head to smile sadly at the older woman. “I’m afraid you won’t be able to meet her any time soon, Lady Ursa. My mother was… killed when I was about eight years old.”

“By the Southern Raiders,” Zuko added lowly. He glanced anxiously at Katara and inwardly sighed in relief when she only gave him a smile to reassure him she still did not blame him anymore.

Horrified, Ursa gasped inaudibly before her face was quickly replaced by sadness and sympathy.
“Oh, Katara…I’m so sorry. I did not mean to bring up such sorrowful memories.”

“It’s okay, Lady Ursa,” Katara assured her as she touched her necklace. “I miss her and her absence still does make me sad, but…” she paused as she looked up at Zuko, her smile big once again as she continued, “Zuko helped me confront my mother’s killer, and thanks to him, I was able to move on.”

Zuko returned her smile, his eyes softening as he slowly reached over to grab her hand. Katara looked down at their hands with a blush before she squeezed his hand as she looked at him with a grateful smile. Zuko swallowed as his heart ignited at her touch and he knew that he needed to tell her that he loved her immediately. He wanted her—all of her—so badly.

“That is one of the reasons why you and my nephew are really good friends,” Iroh said wisely as he smiled at them both, making both young benders flush before Katara retracted her hand, which Zuko reluctantly let go of, and placed it back on her lap.

“Why do you say that, Uncle Iroh?” Katara asked as she looked away from Zuko’s handsome face to question the older man, but instead looked over at Ursa who responded for him as she touched her son’s arm.

“Because both of you have known the pain of being unjustly and cruelly separated from your mothers at a very young age,” the Fire Lord’s mother responded softly.

At the woman’s words, the waterbender once again looked at the Fire Lord. Zuko continued to gaze intensely into Katara’s eyes, willing her to see that what his mother had just said was one thing of so many that made them perfect for one another, that they were meant to be together. He watched as something began to enlighten in Katara’s eyes, but they were suddenly pulled away from each other’s gazes when Jee appeared suddenly in a hurried pace along with Zuko’s youngest personal guard.

“My lord,” Jee began as he bowed quickly, “A messenger hawk has arrived at the flagship with a missive from the Fire Nation. It was sent by Advisor Chao.”

Zuko stiffened slightly before he ordered himself to relax so he did not worry his mother or Katara.

“Thank you, Admiral Jee,” he said stoically as he stood up from his cushion, “I will look at it right now.”
He gave his uncle a discreet look since the older firebender was aware of everything that was going on in the Fire Nation.

“I’m going with you, Nephew,” Iroh spoke up, placing a cheerful smile on his face as he, too, stood up from his seat. “I think I need a walk since I can barely sit with all the food I ate!” He winked at the women. “Maybe after I walk I can continue to gorge myself with more of this scrumptious Water Tribe cuisine!”

Ursa and Katara giggled as they watched the men excuse themselves with a bow and walk away. Katara watched curiously as Zuko’s personal guard stopped abruptly in his tracks as he whipped his head toward the dance floor. She saw his eyes widen briefly before they narrowed and his nostrils flared. Then he turned away and quickly followed after his lord and the admiral. Katara wondered what it was that he saw before she shrugged the thought away as another more important thought caught her attention.

“Zuko’s always working,” Katara remarked sadly as she looked at the older woman with a concerned look.

“I know,” Ursa responded as she looked at the waterbender with the same expression. “Being Fire Lord is a big responsibility and Zuko takes that responsibility very seriously.”

Both were silent for a moment before Ursa cleared her throat delicately as she looked down at Katara’s blue necklace that wound around her neck.

“So, then the necklace you are wearing belonged to you mother? I remembered Zuko saying it was an heirloom when I assumed it was a betrothal necklace he had given you,” Ursa said casually, though she brought the last part up intentionally. She smiled when Katara blushed as she touched the blue pendant.

“Y-yes, it belonged to my mother and before that it used to be my Gran-Gran’s,” Katara stuttered. “Gran-Gran gave it to her as a gift when my mother married my father. When my mother died, my father gave me her necklace as a memento.”

“Oh, I see. So does that mean you will do the same? Give this necklace to your own daughter, I mean,” Ursa asked curiously.
Blushing once again, Katara nodded slowly.

“I…guess I will…When the time comes, of course.”

Ursa smiled at her as she raised her cup of wine and took a delicate sip. She looked over at the people having a great time on the dance floor and raised her eyebrow slightly as she caught sight of Aang and Toph dancing in the middle of a cheering crowd. Both young benders were laughing loudly at the attention they were getting.

“They seem to be having fun,” Ursa observed as she pointed at them.

Katara turned in her seat to look at the dancing crowd and smiled.

“Yeah, they are,” she agreed.

The Fire Nation noblewoman observed the young waterbender intently as Katara laughed and continued to smile as she watched Aang and Toph show off their dancing skills—though it looked like it was the small earthbender who was actually doing the leading instead of the young monk.

Ursa knew that Katara had feelings for Zuko, it was so obvious by the way Katara acted around him and especially the way she looked at him. She had a feeling that Katara was falling in love with her son just like he was falling in love with her, unless of course they were already in love with one another. But if this were true, then why have they not confessed their true feelings?

The chemistry between the firebender and the waterbender was so painfully obvious that she just could not get it into her head why both of them as well as some other people—specifically Aang — had not noticed or kept denying that there was anything going on between them!

Ursa glanced back at the Avatar on the dance floor with a pensive frown. From what she had heard and seen she knew that Katara held a great affection for the young boy, always worrying that nothing harmed him, always making sure that he was always happy. Perhaps the reason why Katara did not admit her feelings to Zuko and why she continued in her relationship with the airbender was because she thought that she loved Aang and did not want to hurt him.

Ursa remembered when they both had talked in her former home in the Abandoned Fort before Zuko found them. Katara had told her about her adventures ever since she found the young Avatar in the
frozen iceberg, then when Zuko ‘arrived’ at her village, until the time they had all spent a few days in Ba Sing Se after the war. One thing that she kept remembering was the story Katara told her about the time they had encountered Aunt Wu and how the fortuneteller had predicted that her future husband would be a powerful bender.

“Katara dear,” Ursa began as she brought herself out of her thoughts and waited for Katara to turn back around and look at her. “I know this question will sound strange, but I would like it if you gave me an answer.”

Katara frowned as she settled on the cushion and placed her hands on the table.

“Okay, what’s your question, Lady Ursa?”

“Do you truly love Aang?” the noblewoman asked quietly.

Katara’s eyes widened at the unexpected question, the same question that her grandmother had posed to her as well. She shifted in her seat as she tried to gather her thoughts.

“I…I…” Katara paused as she frowned in thought.

She would have immediately said yes before, but now…now she was not so sure. What had changed to make her hesitate so? Could it be that she truly was not in love with Aang? Could it be that she was in love with someone else…with Zuko?

The confused young woman looked up as she felt someone tap her hand lightly and frowned when Ursa smiled at her.

“You don’t love Aang, dear,” Ursa stated softly, but with a convinced tone.

“No!” Katara exclaimed before she slumped down a bit. “I mean yes! I mean…I don’t know,” she whispered as she lowered her head to her hands.

She felt horrible for being unable to answer such a simple question concerning Aang because she had thoughts about another. She removed her hands from her face when she felt Ursa tug at them.
“Katara, have you ever thought that maybe, that perhaps you accepted Aang as your boyfriend because you thought you were obligated to love him because he saved the world…and because he loves you?” Ursa asked her gently.

“Of course not!” Katara argued with a shake of her head. Why was everybody now telling her that Aang and she were not meant to be together? First her Gran-Gran, and then Suki and Toph, and now Lady Ursa?

“I love him because we’ve been through so much together during the war. He’s so sweet and wonderful and he loves me deeply.”

The older woman sighed softly as she grasped Katara’s hands lightly.

“What you feel for Aang is not love, but affection, friendship, and gratitude,” she stated.

“No,” the waterbender denied again, but this time her voice was less convincing as things started to clear up. She looked down as a frown appeared on her face. “I mean, Aang and I…”

“Katara dear,” Ursa said as she gave the younger woman a smile at her stubbornness, “Aang is not the only powerful bender in the world, you know.”

Katara was stunned at the older woman’s words and remained silent for she did not know what to say. She knew that was true, she knew there were many powerful benders out there, but she had never actually given much thought about it. Perhaps she never gave it much thought was that she believed Aang to be ‘the powerful bender’ Aunt Wu had predicted she marry, and so truly believed that she loved him, that he was the one for her, and that they were meant to be together.

Katara raised her head and saw Ursa look at something over her shoulder before the older woman looked at her with a large smile. Katara turned around to see what the noblewoman had seen and gasped softly when she saw Zuko making his way toward them with Iroh and Admiral Jee a few paces behind him. The words Lady Ursa said rang in her head, her heart pounded, and her stomach seemed to flip as a thought entered her head.

Could it be that Zuko was the one, the powerful bender she was to marry? Could it be that the one she really and truly loved was Zuko? She touched the left side of her chest as a blush appeared on her face as she watched the firebender make his way to them.
Zuko was deep in thought as he continued towards his table, a deep frown on his face. The missive that had arrived at his flagship was indeed from Chao, informing him about an anonymous letter he had received in his home. Though Chao had not gone into great detail for fear of the missive being intercepted, Zuko knew the letter was another threat demanding he released Ozai from prison. Will he never get a moment of peace?

With a mental sigh, Zuko composed himself as they neared the table and looked up, only to see Katara staring at him with wide, blue eyes and a blush on her lovely face. He wondered briefly why she was looking at him in such a way before he trailed his own eyes over her features and his lips curled upward slightly.

Katara shifted on her cushion as she caught Zuko staring at her with that strange look in his eyes again and that small smile on his lips. Her heart seemed to burn and raced wildly in her chest as another blush began to form on her cheeks, but she could not bring herself to look away from him.

Finally reaching the low table, Zuko sat down gracefully and waited for his uncle and Admiral Jee to take their seats before he looked between Katara and his mother with a smile.

“So…what did I miss?” he asked lightly.

“Uh…w-well…” Katara stuttered as she began to fiddle with the hem of her sleeve, her mind was still reeling with so many questions and uncertainties.

She let out a relieved breath, as well as a disappointed sigh, when the Water Tribe warrior from before returned with Jiao, who was blushing so much due to the dancing, and of course, the fact that the handsome warrior was still holding her hand. The entire table watched as Jiao turned even redder when the young man raised her hand to his lips and thanked her for the dance.

Jiao sat down slowly with a dazed look on her face as she looked around at the people around her.

“Dancing is so much fun,” she said wistfully with a small smile on her flushed features.

Iroh chuckled merrily as he nudged his nephew’s arm with his elbow.
“Zuko, why don’t you go and dance? Show the ladies your impressive dance moves,” he piped in with a wiggled of his eyebrow.

Zuko glanced away from Katara to glare halfheartedly at his uncle.

“Uncle, you know I don’t dance if I don’t have to,” he reminded him coldly and scowled.

“Come now, Zuko,” Iroh insisted as he waved away his nephew’s statement. “It’s just dancing! It’s not like I’m not asking you to play the tsunghi horn in front of this whole crowd for Agni’s sake!”

“No,” Zuko persisted.

“Just this once?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on, dear,” Ursa piped in. “Listen to your uncle. Go dance and have some fun.”

Zuko turned to look at his mother as if she had just betrayed him.

“I am having fun,” he muttered darkly as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Katara could not help the giggles that escaped her as Zuko brooded in his spot. Though it could be seen as childish, Zuko was too regal and serious to be thought as anything remotely close to being childish.

“Don’t be a killjoy, Zuko,” Katara said and laughed when Zuko turned to glare at her.

The young Fire Lord’s glare intensified when his uncle and his mother started to laugh while Jiao and Jee tried to hide their amused smiles. Didn’t these people get it that he did not want to dance, damn it? Just because he knew how to—because of all those long hours of torturous dance lessons when he was a child—did not mean he wanted to. There was nothing that would make him get up and dance like an idiot on the dance floor.
Nothing!

He raised an eyebrow when Katara got up from her seat, walked around the table to stand beside him, and grabbed his hand with a large smile, which instantly dissolved his bad mood.

“Dance with me, Zuko,” she said with large pleading eyes. “Please?”

Zuko sighed at her tone of voice that sounded as if she would be devastated if he said no. Damn. There was nothing that would make him dance except Katara and her pleading blue eyes.

“Fine,” he relented and sighed again as he stood up reluctantly, still holding her hand.

When Katara’s eyes sparkled with glee as she gave him a large smile he found that he was not angry or displeased at all for having to dance. He allowed Katara to lead him away as she let out an excited squeal while he ignored his mother’s giggles and his uncle’s snickers for caving in so rapidly.

Besides, there was nothing for him to be complaining about since it was Katara that he was going to dance with, he was going to be able to be close to her and hold her. His grip on her hand tightened.

Both ignored the surprised whispers that surrounded them as they made their way to the dance floor as each was lost in their thoughts. Once they finally reached their destination both young benders turned to face each other, their hands still clasp together.

*Oh, Spirit, what have I gotten myself into?* Katara thought nervously as she stood before the man that she was now unable to stop thinking about, the man that was making her doubt her feelings for Aang, the man that she had…fallen for?

She jumped slightly when Zuko squeezed her hand lightly as he leaned down to whisper in her ear, his warm breath making her shiver.

“I do believe you brought me out here to dance, or am I mistaken?” he asked her in a low, husky tone as he placed his other hand on her back and pulled her a bit closer to him.
Zuko inhaled her sweet scent and sighed contently, loving the way her small body was close to his but displeased with the fact that it was not nearly as close as he wished. It was fine though, he wanted to show her how much he loved her, not frighten her away with his eager advances.

Katara felt as if her heart was about to jump out of her chest for it was beating so fast, and she was afraid that the entire crowd could hear the loud way her heart was beating. Her face was beginning to burn at Zuko’s close proximity and the husky tone of his voice. If she didn’t know any better, she would think that he was trying to flirt with her.

What’s wrong with me? she yelled in her head, This is Zuko! The one who only sees me as a friend! The one who…who loves another woman…

Katara reached for the hand that was at her back and pull it away as she stepped away from him. Looking at his face, she gave him a small smile when he looked down at her with a confused and hurt expression. He smiled at her when she did not let go of his hands but held them both with each of her own. Their hearts raced and their skin warmed at the contact of the other’s hands.

“That’s not how you dance to Water Tribe music,” she whispered with a small grin.

This was no time to be thinking of such things, to be saddened by such thoughts. It was her brother’s wedding and they were supposed to be having fun.

Zuko looked up to observed the way the other participants of the festivities were dancing and frowned at what he saw. The dancing partners were barely touching each other—with the exception of their hands—and they were spinning, jumping, and twirling this way and that, following the beat of the drums. It was nothing like the way he had been taught in the Fire Nation Palace.

What have I gotten myself into? He mentally sighed. Now he was positive he would make a fool of himself.

“I just remembered that it’s bad to do any form of exercise with a full stomach,” Zuko casually stated as he tried to slowly leave the dance floor.

“Ah, come on, Zuko!” Katara laughed as she grabbed onto his hands even tighter to stop him from leaving. Then with a mischievous grin she said, “Don’t be a coward.”
“I’m not a coward,” Zuko growled out lowly just like she knew he would.

“Oh, yeah?” Katara teased. “Then prove it.”

Smirking, Zuko locked eyes with her and tightened his hold on her hands.

“Alright. You asked for it,” he said.

Katara squealed with glee when Zuko spun them around, their hands never leaving each other, never breaking contact. Their laughter reached the ears of those around them and a few stopped to stare and cheer at the laughing Fire Lord and their master waterbender as they danced to the rhythm of the beating drums and the lively notes of the flutes.

“What’s going on?” Aang asked, stopping briefly from twirling Toph when he noticed that they were losing a few of their audience, who were moving away to watch something else. Once he spotted what was capturing the attention of the crowd, he felt his temper flare in anger and hurt.

Zuko was dancing with his girlfriend! Narrowing his gray eyes, the young Avatar made to stomp over to them and break them apart, but he was roughly pulled back by the hood of his parka.

“Ow! Toph!” he yelled as he turned his head to glare at the aggravating earthbender while he tried to pull free from her grasp.

“You’re my dancing partner for now, Twinkletoes,” Toph growled since she knew what he was trying to do. “Ditch me and die.”

Aang looked between the threatening earthbender and the dancing couple for a while as he tried to figure out what to do before he sighed and turned back to Toph, grabbing her hands once again. Katara and Zuko were just dancing and nothing more.

He glanced back at Toph. Besides, he did not have a death wish.

Jumping and spinning one more time, Zuko smiled when Katara let out another squeal of delight before she started giggling. He always tried to avoid dancing as much as possible when he was
forced to attend Royal Court formal events, but he found that he was rather enjoying himself dancing with Katara, which was nothing surprising since he seemed to enjoy anything he did with her. He was positive that Katara was the only woman that would make him feel that way, the only one that would make him happy.

“That was so much fun!” Katara exclaimed with another laugh as the music stopped and they paused to catch their breaths.

“Yes, it was,” Zuko agreed as he stared at her, at the way her eyes sparkled and her cheeks flushed from their dance.

“And you said you didn’t know how to dance,” Katara teased as she poked him on the arm. “You lied to me, you liar!”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” she sang teasingly before she grinned and added, “Get it, fire?”

Zuko shook his head and chuckled.

“You are definitely Sokka’s sister,” he said.

“Hey!”

“I did not lie,” he repeated more seriously. Smiling he reached up to touch her cheek which immediately made her pause in her giggles and lift her head to look up at him. “It seems that you brings out the best in me.”

“W-what…?” Katara asked, her eyebrows furrowing as she tried to understand what he meant by that, but his touch was distracting her.

*Now, Zuko thought. Now was the time for him to confess his feelings for her, to tell her that he loved*
her, to make her understand that they were meant to be together, that he wanted to marry her.

“Katara,” he whispered softly as he continued to stroke her soft cheek. “Do you remember when we would sneak out of King Kuei’s palace so we could go to the infirmary?”

“Yeah…” Katara responded slowly.

“Remember when we returned to the palace after my fight with Jet?” he asked, though he was unable to stop the hard tone at the mention of the Freedom Fighter. “After you healed the wound on my chest…do you remember when I said that I needed to tell you something?”

“Yeah, you apologized,” Katara answered as a frown appeared on her face.

What was he trying to tell her? Both were unaware that there were people around them and some were staring at them curiously, as they continued to look into each other’s eyes.

“Well…” Zuko paused as he reached out his other hand to touch her other cheek, “There was something else that I wanted to tell you, but at that time I was unsure of how to say it…Something that I have known for a very long time, but was too stubborn to realize any sooner. Now I hope it’s not too late.”

Katara’s heart started to beat faster once more as she watched Zuko lean a bit closer to her just as he did so many times before. She shivered slightly when his warm breath touched her face.

Zuko swallowed thickly as he glanced down at Katara’s lips before he looked back at her brilliant cerulean orbs.

“I…I lo—”

“Suki!” Sokka’s terrified scream made them both jump and instinctively take up fighting stances, but once they realized they were not under attack they whirled around to where Sokka’s voice had come from, they were both still sitting in their place of honor.

Sokka was hovering over his new wife as he frantically asked her what was wrong. Suki was
hunched over, her hands clutching at her rounded belly, pain etched all over her face, tears spilling from her eyes.

“Oh, La! I think Suki’s going into labor!” Katara exclaimed in alarm since it was a few weeks early. She started to make her way to her brother and his crying wife, but she stopped as she turned to Zuko with an apologetic as well as a worried expression. “Zuko… I’m sorry, but…”

“It’s okay, Katara,” Zuko reassured her as he gave her a small smile. “Suki needs you right now.”

Katara gave him a smile before she quickly dashed to the couple’s table where she asked Sokka to carefully pick Suki up and carry her into the house. Hakoda stepped up to reassure the alarmed and concerned crowd that everything was fine and that they should now celebrate the coming birth of a new member of the tribe before he rushed after his children and his daughter-in-law that was about to give birth to his first grandchild.

Zuko watched them go as he continued to stand where he had been since Katara left, before a deep sigh left him. He had been so close! It seemed that he would just have to wait a bit longer to confess his love to Katara, so he could finally have her as his, so that they could be happy together.

He glanced down as Toph appeared next to him. He vaguely wondered how she found him since she was wearing boots to walk in the snow. He watched as the short earthbender scratched her chin and tilted her head to the side.

“So much for the wedding night,” she remarked with a grin.

“Ah! This is torture! I can’t take it any longer!” Sokka exclaimed, failing his arms in the air agitatedly as he continued to pace along the corridor outside his and Suki’s bedroom where she was currently giving birth to their first child.

“You can’t take it any longer?” Toph scoffed as she rolled her eyes. “Suki’s the one who’s pushing something the size of a watermelon from her—”

“I am curious to know if the baby is a boy or a girl,” Ursa interrupted quickly as she turned slightly in her chair to look at her old friend. “What about you, Iroh dear?”

“Oh, yes.” Iroh nodded as he stroked his chin.
“Would you like a grandson or a granddaughter, Chief Hakoda?” Ursa asked as she looked to where the chieftain was standing, watching his frantic son with slight amusement in his eyes.

Hakoda looked away to smile at the Fire Lord’s mother.

“It doesn’t matter as long as I get a grandchild to dote upon,” he said with a tender twinkle in his blue eyes.

Ursa smiled from her spot between her son and Iroh. Jee was standing a few feet away from them. Aang, Toph, and Ty Lee were sitting on the floor playing what looked like a card game as they waited.

After he had deposited Suki on their bed, Sokka had tried to stay with her even after his sister, Toph, and Aang had warned him not to. He was dragged out by Katara and Jiao a few minutes later since he had fainted at the sight of Suki giving birth. A few hours had passed, and once he had regained consciousness, Sokka had been pacing nonstop in his worry, anxiety, and anticipation as he heard Suki’s screams of pain.

Sokka froze, and those waiting stared at him in shock, when Suki’s painful screams turn into curses hurled at him, screaming that everything was his fault and that she will never let him touch her again. The young warrior’s expression turn into hurt and his shoulders drooped.

“Do not worry, Sokka,” Ursa reassured the young man with a kind smile. “Some women react like that when they are in labor due to the excruciating pain, but they don’t really mean it.”

Sokka gave her a grateful smile as he continued in his pacing, wincing every time his beloved screamed in agony.

A few hours later, they all heard Kanna order Suki to give one more push before Suki gave out one last scream, which was followed by a soft and piercing cry—a baby’s wail.

Sokka stopped in his pacing as he heard his son’s cry and he was filled with so many emotions his eyes teared up. Zuko watched as Sokka’s face lit up with so much joy and pride, and he wondered if perhaps one day he would feel the same way.
To their surprise, there came a second piercing cry a few seconds later and Sokka’s mouth flew open.

“Two babies? I’m father of twins!” he exclaimed in shock as he raced to the door and waited impatiently for it to open so he could gaze upon his lovely wife and their newborn children.

“I told you guys you would be surprised,” Toph chuckled from her spot on the floor.

A few minutes later, but that seemed like hours to Sokka, the door opened and Kanna stepped out with a large smile on her face.

“You can all come in now and greet the new additions to our family,” she told them.

She looked at her impatient and excited grandson as she addressed him in particular. She nodded at the Fire Nation family as well when they looked at each other, uncertain if they were considered part of the family. They all stood up from their places as they made their way into the room.

As soon as he entered, Sokka rushed to Suki’s side. She was freshly dressed and resting on the bed, propped up into a sitting position by some pillows, with two small bundles wrapped in warm fur in each arm, and a loving smile on her tired face. Her smile grew wider when Sokka appeared next to her.

Sokka looked down at the bundles in his wife’s arms and once again was consumed with warm and tender emotions as he gazed down at the small faces of his two children. Both had light-tanned skin, but one had darker hair like him and the other lighter in color like Suki. Sokka turned loving eyes at his wife, kissing her sweaty forehead tenderly.

Katara watched as her brother cooed to his wife and their children, and a smile spread on her face. She, along with Jiao, had helped Kanna deliver the babies and she was glad it was finally over so that Suki could get some rest. She felt someone stand next to her, and by the warmth that reached her, she knew who it was. She looked up to see Zuko smiling at her with bright golden eyes. She gave him a small smile before she quickly looked away so she could hide the blush that his look had caused. Could her reaction mean that everyone was right? That she wasn’t in love with Aang, but with…?

She was distracted when Aang appeared between them and wrapped his arm around her. She watched as Zuko narrowed his eyes before he looked away to watch Sokka and his new family. That
same guilty feeling twisted her insides when Aang smiled at her with shiny gray eyes and she looked away since it made her uncomfortable.

Sokka picked up the one with the darker hair gently so as not to scare the baby. His son opened his little eyes and blinked at him with bright, blue eyes.

“Hey, little guy. I’m your dad,” he cooed as he rocked the baby gently in his arms. The baby scrunched up his small nose.

“Um…sweetie?” Suki said as she giggled at her husband. “I think you mean little girl.”

“Oh, a daughter!” Sokka exclaimed happily before he glanced down at the other sleeping baby in his wife’s arms and crooned again, “Hello there, son.”

“Daughter,” Suki corrected again as she lightly rocked the sleeping child in her arms.

They all watched as Sokka’s face turned blank and they wondered if perhaps he was upset, it was no secret he was anticipating a son he could teach to become a warrior. All of the sudden, Sokka smiled so big that they were afraid his face was going to split in two.

“They’ll be the most pampered little girls in the whole Southern Water Tribe!” Sokka laughed softly as he continued to sway his daughter in his arms which immediately made her fall asleep.

“Hey, Snoozles,” Toph spoke up, though not as loud as she normally would, “Looks like I won our bet since you were wrong about it being a boy, but now it’s double since they’re two girls.”

The group laughed quietly when Sokka let out a defeated groan.

A new patch of white snow covered the roads and houses of the ice city, left from the snowstorm that passed the Southern Water Tribe the night prior. A few waterbenders were working under the weak morning light to remove the snow from the streets, sidewalks, and bridges so the citizens could go about their day.

Katara watched as her young waterbending students continued their lessons, honing their skills of
their element. Though she was going through the basic moves, her mind was not really paying close attention. The small group of about a dozen little girls and boys, ranging from five to ten years old, held deep expressions of concentration on their cute little faces as they tried to mimic what their waterbending sifu was showing them.

Two weeks had passed since Suki gave birth to her and Sokka’s twin daughters. Both girls were big and healthy even though they had been born a few weeks early. Jing was the eldest one by a few minutes with a dark shade of hair like her father. Her younger twin sister with the lighter tuft of brown hair on her head was named Ting. Both baby girls had soft, light-tanned skin and large eyes of blue, just like both their proud and happy parents.

The chief’s house was filled with laughter and joy from having the new additions to the family and no one was able to escape the adorableness of the two little baby girls, not even the stoic young Fire Lord. However, there were mixed feelings when night came, bringing with it piercing wails that came from strong, healthy lungs that woke the whole household up. Poor Sokka and Suki had bags under their eyes, but they endured the sleepless nights when they would witness the joyful giggles and smiles of their baby girls.

Katara had been busy helping Suki recuperate after giving birth to two large babies and making sure that Jing and Ting were healthy, that she barely had any time for anything else. But now that everything had settled down a little, confusing thoughts and feelings had resurfaced in her mind, and with nothing to distract her, she could not hide from them any longer.

Lady Ursa’s words kept replaying in her head over and over again. Could it be true that she was not in love with Aang? Could it be true that perhaps she had never been in love with him in the first place? And then there was the thought that perhaps it was Zuko who she really had such feelings for. That he was the powerful bender that she was destined to be with.

Swirling the water whip around absentmindedly, Katara sighed as she relived the moment during Sokka and Suki’s wedding where she had shared a wonderful dance with Zuko. She thought back to the way he had been looking at her after the music had stopped and how his intense golden eyes had gazed into hers while he cradled her face in his warm hands. She wondered what it was that he had wanted to tell her before they were interrupted.

“Master Katara? Can we take a break now?” a little boy’s tired voice brought her out of her thoughts.

Katara blinked and stopped in her bending move, bringing the water whip down. She refocused her eyes on the children and smiled sheepishly when she noticed their weary little faces as they tried to keep up with her. She mentally blamed Zuko for distracting her for the millionth time.
“Oh, uh…yes! You all did excellent today! Now go on and have some fun. Class is dismissed,” she said.

She grinned and shook her head when the children bounded out of the small open arena with excited shouts before she had even finished the sentence.

Replacing the water back into the pouch on her hip, Katara quickly replaced her warm mittens over her chilly hands as she began to make her way back home. She absently acknowledged the people that greeted her as she passed them by as thoughts of the handsome firebender resurfaced in her mind again.

She had not spoken to Zuko much for the past few weeks, only seeing him at meals or an occasional break, and it was not just because she was the only one that had been busy. Zuko had been attending long meetings with both her father and Chief Arnook about strengthening the ties between the Fire Nation and both Water Tribes.

Quickening her pace a bit, she hoped that Zuko was not in another meeting at the moment for she wished to spend some time in his calming presence, even though the feelings he produced in her still confused her.

With an unreadable expression on his face, Zuko ignored the suspicious looks the people he passed threw at him as he walked through one busy street. His meeting with the chiefs from both Water Tribes finished a while ago and now he hoped he could spend a moment with Katara before either of their attentions was needed again. Sokka had given him directions to the place where Katara had her waterbending lessons and he was eager to see her. As he neared the edge of the city, the fewer people he came across. He hoped he was going in the right direction because many of the organized streets looked identical to him.

“Hey, Zuko! Wait up!” Ty Lee’s bubbly voice sounded from a few feet behind him.

Zuko paused before he turned around. He watched Ty Lee bound up to him with a scowling Toph grabbing onto the back of the acrobat’s parka. Once they reached him, Toph immediately released the enthusiastic girl and latched herself onto his arm with a deep scowl. The earthbender blew her bangs out of her eyes. She felt much safer having either Katara or Zuko lead her around since both benders were calmer and did not jostle her like Ty Lee did.

“Where are you heading, Sparky?” Toph asked him with a grin.
“I, uh, was just walking around,” Zuko muttered and cleared his throat.

“Uh-huh,” Toph uttered with a raised eyebrow before she cheekily added, “You were on your way to see Sugar Queen, huh?”

The young lord suppressed the urge to shift self-consciously.

“Maybe…” he hedged.

“You are. Admit it,” she said with a chuckle.

“Anyway,” the firebender stressed, “Where are you heading?”

“The same place as you,” the short girl replied with another grin.

“We were bored!” Ty Lee piped in. “We wanted to see if Katara wanted to hang out with us.”

“Yeah,” Toph said as they resumed their walk to the small arena where Katara taught her students. “Snoozles and Warrior Princess are with their little brats, Twinkletoes is busy, and your mom is having tea with the old folks.”

Zuko smirked slightly, wondering what Iroh would say if he heard Toph labeling him in with the old people that were made up by Katara’s Gran-Gran, Pakku, and their friends.

“Help! Help!” they heard a boy called out frantically.

The Fire Lord and the two women looked up to see a young teenage boy run down the lane with fearful eyes. A few people who were walking on the street turn to see what was happening. The boy stumbled a few feet from Zuko and the firebender strode forward to help him up. The boy’s eyes widened when he realized the Fire Lord stood before him and he gaped up at him.

“What’s wrong?” Zuko asked with a raised eyebrow.
The boy shook himself out of his stupor, fear once again etched on his young face.

“I-I spotted…arctic panther-wolves…a-at…the eastern edge of the city…” the boy panted as he tried to catch his breath and calm his frightened voice, “the kids…are playing there!”

“Oh, no!” a woman gasped as she grasped her throat.

“Go get the warriors!” an old man ordered the frightened youth.

The old man and two more men, who happened to be near by, raced toward the edge of the city where the small children sometimes played. Those that heard what the boy had said cried out and followed them, fearful that it could be one of their children that could be in danger. Arctic panther-wolves rarely caused any trouble since the tribe warriors kept them at bay, but the harsh condition of winter brought down the animals’ food supply, and so, they were sometimes forced to approach the human settlement in hopes of catching a meal.

Frowning deeply, Zuko swiftly followed them, thinking that the children could come to harm before the warriors arrived in time to save them. Ty Lee grabbed Toph’s hand and started to follow the grim-faced firebender and the small group of tribespeople.

Walking in a leisurely pace, Katara made her way to the grand house as she lost herself in her thoughts. She had come across one of the women who told her Aang was looking for her. Katara had thanked the woman for letting her know, but inwardly the waterbender hoped she could avoid him a bit longer, just so she could straighten out her thoughts.

Katara sighed once again. What should she do?

The sound of frightened shouts distracted her and she looked up to see a young boy racing down the street, calling for the warriors. She frowned, wondering what was going on. A group of women ran past her and she gasped at what they said.

Oh, no! she thought in alarm.

Katara removed her mittens and shoved them in the front pocket of her parka as she followed the
Meanwhile, Zuko and the other villagers crested the small hill that was considered the border between the city and the arctic wilderness and peered down anxiously at the ground below. Zuko’s eyes widened at what he saw. The children were running as fast as they could toward the cliff so they could escape the beasts that had suddenly appeared, but the animals were much faster and were gaining ground.

The two arctic panther-wolves howled and snarled as they chased after their small prey. Their fur was pure white, dotted with dark spots from their heads all the way to their long, bushy tails. Dark, pointy canine ears sat on top of their feline heads, their sharp white fangs glinting brightly in the minimal light of the morning sun. Sharp black claws embellished huge paws that were attached to long, powerful legs, supporting their heavy, but slick bodies.

The crowd gasped as one little girl in particular was being left behind, she was younger than all the other children and unable to keep up with them. The old man shouted and began to make his way over the cliff as the animals started to close in on the little girl, but instead he had to hold back the child’s mother who was screaming hysterically as she tried to reach her daughter.

“Lien! Lien!” the woman screamed as she tried to wrench herself from the old man’s grasp.

They blinked in surprised when something streaked past them in a blur of black and red.

The small crowd became silent when they realized it was the Fire Lord that had dashed past them and was now skidding down the snowy cliff as he tried to reach the base quickly. Zuko jumped to the bottom and began to run without missing a beat, his strides long and fast. He ordered the children to climb the hill as he continued on his sprint to reach the little girl who had tears running down her cheeks as she tried to make it to safety.

Snapping out of her trance, Toph turned to glare unseeingly at the few people that were frozen in shock and fear around her.

“Don’t just stand there! Help the children climb up!” she ordered.

Ty Lee and a few others started to climb the edge of the cliff, gathering children onto their backs so they could reach the top quickly. Toph scowled and shifted from foot to foot since she could not see and had no dirt or stone that could allow her to help. She hoped Zuko didn’t get hurt. The old man was still trying to keep the frantic mother from running after her daughter and endangering both their lives.
They all gasped and the mother shrieked as the little girl tripped and fell to the snowy ground with a cry. The little girl turned onto her back and screamed in terror as one of the beasts lunged at her.

With a loud shout, Zuko jumped over the little girl, and with a spin, sent a fiery kick at the arctic panther-wolf’s head, sending it crashing back onto the second one. Both animals yelped as they stumbled onto the hard ground.

Landing in a crouch, the firebender swiftly stood up and sent two fireballs at the panther-wolves as they recuperated and threatened him with loud growls. Both animals snarled as they jumped to the side in order to avoid being scorched, but had to retreat even further when a wall of fire was erected before them. Zuko whirled around and quickly scooped the little girl up in his arms before he started racing back toward the cliff.

The little girl was sobbing and trembling in fear and Zuko tightened his hold on her as he continued on his run.

“It’s okay. You’re safe,” he said softly as he tried to comfort her.

The little girl buried her face in the crook of his neck and wrapped her small arms around her savior’s neck.

At that moment, Katara, along with more frantic people, arrived at the scene. The waterbender pushed her way through and looked down the cliff.

“Zuko!” she cried as she watched him running toward them with a little girl in his arms. She briefly noticed that a wall of fire held the panther-wolves at bay before she returned her attention to the firebender. “Zuko!” she called out more loudly.

Zuko’s heart jumped in his chest at the sound of Katara calling his name. He glanced up at the cliff and saw her standing at the edge.

*Katara!* he thought and he forced himself to run faster.

“Come on, come on, come on!” Katara prayed fervently as she watched Zuko approach them.
Twin howls of rage pierced the air and Katara shifted her attention to the panther-wolves who had begun to chase them with even more determination after the fire wall had extinguished.

“No!” she cried out.

Zuko began to run faster as the sound of pounding feet reached his ears. He was almost to the bottom of the snowy cliff! He would not let the little girl come to harm! He felt the girl lift her head a bit from his neck before she tensed.

“Watch out!” she screamed as she wrapped her small arms tightly around his neck.

Zuko glanced back and threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the swipe to his back by one of the panther-wolves’ deadly claws. He twisted around in the air and landed on his back so he would not crush and hurt the girl. His eyes widened when he realized that the beasts were upon them, and without a second thought, he placed the girl to the ground and jumped up to put himself between them. He manage to send a large fireball at the closest one, sending it flying backwards with a painful howl, but was not quick enough as the other one crashed into him with an angry snarl.

“Zuko!” Katara screamed as she watched in horror as he tried to rise, but the panther-wolf was swifter and sprang at him.

Her heart wrenched painfully in her chest before she instinctively brought her arm up and an ice spike appeared before the lunging animal. The panther-wolf crashed into it, but the other one avoided it easily and snarled as it lunged at Zuko’s throat with its deadly opened maw.

With an anguished cry, Katara brought her arm up and a torrent of snow crashed against the animal’s side, sending it flying a few feet away. Meanwhile, the first panther-wolf had recuperated and sprang at Zuko again, but a boomerang sang through the air from behind Katara before she could react. It headed straight at the animal before it could injure Zuko, and it hit the beast right on the face. The panther-wolf stumbled backward at the impact with a loud yelp as the boomerang made a turn and headed the way it came from. Katara spun around to watch the weapon make its return and cried out in relief when she saw Sokka grab it with Aang and Master Pakku running towards them with a few warriors rushing to their aid. More citizens were running after them with worried cries. The warriors wasted no time as they ran down the cliff with loud yells as they threw long spears and arrows at the huge panther-wolves who tried to attack again.

Regaining his feet in a bit of pain from the impact, Zuko summoned his fire whip and cracked it at
the first panther-wolf’s chest as it sprang at him again before it jumped further back when another ice spike sprang from the ground in front of it thanks to Katara. The second one readied itself to launch again, but a large gust of wind from Aang barreled into it and sent the animal flying back.

The crowd standing at the cliff cheered. A second later, the panic-stricken woman’s husband arrived and grabbed her from the old man’s grasp, holding her consolingly as he, too, looked over at his daughter in anguish. Ty Lee and Toph quickly approached Katara and told her what happened since they ran into Zuko. After a moment, Katara tuned them out as she gave her full attention to the firebender. She felt her body slump in relief that she had made it in time to help him before tears pricked her eyes at the thought that Zuko could have been killed if she had been one moment later.

Once the warriors began to drive the arctic panther-wolves away, Zuko bent down to pick up the little girl. He smiled when the child immediately jumped into his arms before he began to quickly make his way to the others. Once he finally climbed over the small cliff, he froze in surprise when he was received with loud cheers as the crowd, grown larger since he had arrived, swarmed him. The little girl clung onto him in fright and anxiety and he patted her back reassuringly as people surrounded them from all sides.

“Lien! Lien!” a couple shouted with large smiles and tearful eyes as they shoved people aside so they could get to their daughter.

“Mama! Papa!” the little girl yelled happily as soon as she spotted her parents.

Zuko smiled as he handed the small child over to the open arms of her parents who immediately began to fuss over her, placing small kisses all over her small face.

“Zuko!” he heard Katara yell.

He spun around at the sound of her voice and once again was surprised when she lunged herself at him with a joyful cry. He caught her just in time, steadying her before they stumbled onto the ground. Smiling, he wrapped his arms around her and brought her closer to him, but not too close as to make it scandalous.

“Thank you for saving me,” he told her sincerely in a soft tone.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Katara whispered as she buried her face on his chest.
He looked down at her, his eyes widening when she lifted her head to look at him with teary eyes. He opened his mouth to ask her why she was crying, but she let him go when the little girl’s parents approached them.

“Thank you, Fire Lord Zuko, for rescuing our daughter,” the man said gratefully as he gave him a deep bow.

“You’re welcome,” Zuko responded as he inclined his head.

“We are forever in your debt,” the woman said as she gave him a small bow, she couldn’t bend any lower since she was holding onto her daughter. She then turned to Katara and thanked her as well.

The little girl squirmed in her mother’s arms and the woman reluctantly set her down on her feet. Before the young Fire Lord could respond, the four-year-old ran up to him and hugged his leg. Katara watched with a tender smile as Zuko looked down at the little girl with shocked, wide eyes before he gave her a hesitant smile.

“Thank you for saving me from the big, bad panther-wolves,” the small child said with something akin to awe in her voice as she looked up at him and gave him a large toothy grin.

_Aww, how cute!_ Katara gushed in her head as she looked at the little girl with adoring eyes and then at Zuko. Her heart warmed at the touching sight.

“You’re very welcome,” Zuko responded as he gave her a small pat on her head.

The little girl flashed him another bright smile before her parents led her away after thanking him several more times. A few seconds later, Zuko was surrounded with people praising him loudly for his heroic act. Frowning, Zuko nodded at their words as he tried to find a way to leave without insulting anybody since his ears were starting to hurt and his personal space was being invaded. The only one allowed to enter his personal space was Katara.

Sensing his irritation and uneasiness, Katara stepped up to him and touched his arm. She smiled when he relaxed at her touch before she turned to the excited crowd.

“I think Fire Lord Zuko needs to rest after his amazing rescue.” She grinned when Zuko glared at her. “Now if you’ll excuse us…” she trailed off as she grabbed his hand and led him away. The
people quickly parted to let them through.

Zuko squeezed Katara’s hand, and when she looked up at him, he gave her a grateful smile that she returned with a light blush.

Ty Lee’s eyes widened in surprise as she watched her two friends leave.

“I can’t believe it,” she muttered in astonishment.

“Can’t believe what?” Toph asked. She was now holding onto the stupefied acrobat since Katara and Zuko had left her.

“Zuko and Katara…were holding hands,” Ty Lee said in wonder.

“Yeah? So?” the small earthbender asked. She winced when the crowd started cheering again when the warriors and the Avatar returned.

“Zuko is not one to allow such displays. He barely tolerates Mai grabbing onto his arm in public.”

Toph grinned. “Is that so?”

“But there’s something even more amazing,” Ty Lee continued in the same stunned tone, “I don’t know what to make of it.”

“What?” Toph asked.

“When Zuko and Katara were together, I decided to check Zuko’s aura to see if he was okay and it was a combination of clear red and…bright pink, the colors of sexual passion and…love,” the acrobat said in disbelief, “It’s never been pink with Mai, barely even red.”

“I’m sure if you’d checked months before you would’ve realized his feelings for Katara sooner,” the earthbender stated with a chuckle.
“Wow,” was all Ty Lee could say and she shook her head in awe before she sadly added, “Mai will be devastated.”

Toph shrugged her shoulders since she honestly could not say she cared what the cold noblewoman felt.

“Will you tell her?” she asked the pensive acrobat.

“I don’t know,” Ty Lee said truthfully yet guiltily, “Even if I can see people’s auras and understand what they are feeling, I try not to get involved too much. They have reasons why they want to keep things hidden and I try to respect that. I really don’t want to lose Zuko’s trust or have him mad at me.”

“I see your point,” Toph replied with a nod before she curiously asked, “Did you see Katara’s aura?”

Ty Lee frowned before she shook her head.

“No, I was too shocked by Zuko’s to pay attention to hers,” she admitted.

Toph frowned. Sokka and Aang disengaged themselves from the crowd and made their way to the two girls. Toph and Ty Lee immediately dropped the subject.

“Hey, what happened to Zuko?” Sokka asked as he looked around for his firebending friend. “He’s not hurt, is he?”

“Nah, he’s fine,” the earthbender replied as she waved her hand in the air, “As if some stupid animals could bring Sparky down.”

Aang scanned the crowd that was still praising the warriors and frowned when he did not spot the person he was looking for.

“Where’s Katara?” he asked.
Ty Lee answered absentmindedly, “Oh, she and Zuko went—”

“—back to the house!” Toph cut in and dug her nails into Ty Lee’s arm so she would stay quiet. “Yeah, you know how Sugar Queen is. She probably dragged him there so he could get some rest or something.”

Aang’s frown deepened before he narrowed his gray eyes as he clutched his staff tightly in his hands.

“I’m gonna go check on them, eh…I mean I’m gonna check on Zuko and make sure he’s okay,” he muttered as he started to make his way to the grand house.

“Wait! I’m coming with you!” Sokka called out as he ran to catch up to the young boy.

Ty Lee’s smile faded from her face once they were out of sight and she snatched her arm back, rubbing it to soothe the pain away.

“Ow, that hurt!” she groused before she added disapprovingly, “Aang is going to be upset when he finds out you lied to him.”

Toph just shrugged.

“It’s for the greater good,” she said simply.

Katara and Zuko walked through the snow in comfortable silence, their hands still clasped together, as they returned to the ice city. It was now noon and the sun was able to peek out from the clouds once in a while, making the soft snow glisten on the ground and on the frozen ice buildings. A few people were going about their business, but would occasionally stop and gawk as they watched their master waterbender with the young Fire Lord.

Zuko was not sure why Katara still held onto his hand and wondered if she was even aware of it, but he did not say anything so as not to make her move away from him. He was enjoying having her hand in his, their skin touching innocently.
Katara was well aware that they were still holding hands and she also noticed the looks they were receiving, but she could just not bring herself to care. She had been so scared when that arctic panther-wolf had almost wounded Zuko and touching him was enough to reassure her that he was indeed fine. She could not explain it, but she felt like she could not let Zuko leave her side at the moment.

Glancing up from the corner of her eye, Katara smiled when she noticed that he was content with their current situation and decided to break the peaceful silence.

“How did you know about the arctic panther-wolves?” she asked curiously.

Zuko glanced down at her and smiled.

“I was actually looking for you once I finished speaking to your father and Chief Arnook,” he began as he saw another group of people had stopped to look at them, “I asked Sokka if he knew where you were and he told me that you were in the training area. I was heading there with Toph and Ty Lee when the young boy brought the news about the attack.”

“Oh,” Katara said. “That was very brave of you, Zuko, risking your life to save the little girl against those two huge arctic panther-wolves all by yourself.”

“Well, you don’t expect me to just stand there and watch, right?” the firebender responded with a raised eyebrow. “I’m just glad I arrived in time, I don’t want to imagine what could’ve happened if I didn’t.”

Katara shuddered.

“I’m glad you did, too. Lien is such a sweet little girl and she doesn’t deserve to have her life ended in such a way.”

“Is she one of your waterbending students?”

“No,” Katara replied and shook her head. “Lien’s not a waterbender, but she usually comes to the training classes to watch her friends.” She laughed softly. “She’s more observant and interested than
my actual students.” Pausing for a moment, Katara glanced back up at him again and smiled. “Thanks, Zuko, for saving her.”

“There’s no need for you to thank me. Anyone would have done the same,” Zuko said as he looked around the street they were walking on before he decided to change the topic. “So…where are we going?”

The waterbender laughed as she gave one last squeeze of his hand before she reluctantly let go. It wouldn’t do for their reputations to be tarnished. She missed the disappointed frown that crossed Zuko’s features as she skipped ahead.

“Well, you did ask me if I could give you a tour of the Southern Water Tribe,” Katara chirped. “We’ve been so busy lately, so I think now is a good time as any!”

Zuko gazed down at the young woman by his side, at her lively blue eyes and the playful curve of her lips, and smiled.

“I say it is,” he agreed.

The young Fire Lord was very attentive to everything Katara showed him as she guided him through the snowy streets and over frozen bridges of her white ice city. Again, he was impressed by the houses and buildings with their graceful carvings along their walls and by the well-organized paths of the crystal clear canals. He watched as merchants carried their things on tall buffalo-deer while children ran around as they played, weaving around warriors who passed by while polar bear-dogs playfully barked and chased after them.

People greeted them wherever they went, and to Katara’s annoyance, many young women would gather together to gawk at the handsome Fire Lord with loud giggles and excited squeals, drool threatening to fall from the corner of their mouths.

*How pathetic can they be?* Katara huffed mentally as she sent a glare to another group of squealing girls.

Katara looked up at Zuko’s striking face with his mesmerizing golden eyes and sighed inaudibly.

*Though I can’t blame them since Zuko is quite stunning,* she thought in a haze. She had to quickly
look away before she started drooling like those silly girls.

They visited the infirmary where they watched young women learn how to use their waterbending for healing. Zuko learned that in the Northern Water Tribe female waterbenders were only supposed to use their ability for healing while fighting was typically for the men. He listened as Katara told him of how she was told to take healing lessons and was banned from learning how to fight while at the Northern Water Tribe by Pakku himself. He chuckled when she proudly told him how she went against the old master waterbender’s orders and actually picked a fight with him.

“Though I didn’t win, Master Pakku consented in teaching me how to use my waterbending to fight,” Katara told him with a grin.

Zuko smirked.

If she hadn’t been so stubborn and set on proving that she could be a warrior despite being a female, we’d never have been able to continue on our journey to end the war, he thought as he deliberately brushed against her arm and smiled when she blushed. And I would never have fallen in love with her and known that I could actually be happy.

Leaving the infirmary, Katara led him to another part of the city where many shops lined the streets. To their surprise, Zuko was given a gift in every store they stopped in, they eventually had to send a few young boys to deliver the things back to the grand house so they did not have to keep carrying the stuff around.

“Is it customary for the shop owners to give away gifts to visiting rulers?” Zuko asked curiously after they walked out from another small store with a bag of frozen candy.

They were small little balls that were cold in your hand, but melted instantly in your mouth with an explosion of sweet chocolate flavor. He had never come across such treats before, but he enjoyed them nonetheless.

Katara happily popped another frozen candy into her mouth and frowned.

“Oh…actually it’s not, which is weird,” she looked at him with a pensive expression. “So why are they giving you all this?”

“I don’t know,” Zuko answered with a shrug as he placed another piece of candy into his mouth.
Katara shrugged as well as she ate another frozen treat. She found nothing to complain about since she was getting free stuff too for just being with Zuko.

They later found out that Zuko was being treated much better now than since his arrival was because news about his heroic deed that morning had spread throughout the entire Southern Water Tribe. The people were now showing him their gratitude and that they harbored no ill feelings toward him anymore.

“Well, what do you know,” Katara piped in after another group of praising people had left them alone. “You’re touching the hearts of so many,” she teased and batted her eyelashes with a sigh.

“Hm,” Zuko muttered with a snort and scowled when Katara laughed at him.

Zuko sighed quietly when she looked away.

*But have I touched your heart, Katara?*

The more he found out about the Southern Water Tribe, about Katara and about her culture, the harder he fell for her. He found it difficult not to scoop her in his arms and confess to her what it was that he truly felt for her, that he saw her more than just a friend, and that it was becoming harder for him to keep his hands away from her.

Soon, he promised, soon she would finally know the real reason why he had visited the Southern Water Tribe. Soon she would know that he had all those meetings with both tribe chieftains so the three countries could have a friendly and comfortable relationship with no problems if they were ever to be married. Hopefully everything would go has he wished.

“Wow. It’s getting late,” the brunette woman stated as she frowned at the darkening sky before she turned to grin at him. “Are you hungry?”

Zuko opened his mouth to tell her he was fine, but instead he cleared his throat and flushed when his stomach growled.

“I think some food would be nice,” he said stoically.
Katara rolled her eyes and laughed.

“I know!” she exclaimed as she snapped her fingers. “Follow me!” she said as she grabbed his arm and quickly led him away through another street.

“Are we going back to the house?” Zuko asked as he allowed her to guide him.

“Nope,” Katara replied with a grin. “You took me to a restaurant when you showed me around the Fire Nation capital and I will do the same…well, not really since where I’m taking you is a far cry from a restaurant,” she mumbled before she chirped again, “Anyway, I want you to try something.”

“Alright,” Zuko responded as he eyed her with a raised eyebrow.

The sun was now sinking over the horizon and the large clouds that moved across the sky were making the afternoon become darker more quickly. They passed several streets and crossed many bridges until they came upon the center of the Southern Water Tribe where the wedding had taken place a few weeks ago, but now instead of rows of tables and flower decorations, the circular place was filled with stalls of varying merchandise. Vendors called for customers, while the citizens mingled amongst themselves and children played. And just like before, the people cheered once they spotted the Fire Lord.

Katara almost jumped with giddiness as she led the silent young man to one of the stalls, but she restrained herself so she wouldn’t look like a silly little girl. Zuko sniffed the air and raised his eyebrow as the smell of fried meat reached his nose, though the scent was not like anything he had ever smelled before. Once they drew near, Zuko noticed an old man placing some kind of dark red meat on sticks and coating them with some kind of batter before he dumped them in a frying pan.

The man looked up from what he was doing before he quickly set everything aside as he gave them a short bow.

“Master Katara, Fire Lord Zuko, how may I help you on this lovely afternoon?”

“I’ll have one, please,” Katara said with a smile before she looked over at Zuko who was still eyeing the fried sticks. “What about you, Zuko?”
Zuko glanced at her briefly before he looked back at the smiling old man.

“I’ll take one as well, please,” he said impassively, though there was a tone of curiosity in his voice.

“Of course, right away!” the vendor exclaimed happily.

He skewered two pieces of meat and coated them in the batter before he placed them in the frying oil. A few minutes later, he pulled them out, dabbed the excess oil away, sprinkled some salt, and then handed the two skewers to his young customers.

“Thank you,” both Katara and Zuko said as they grabbed their sticks and paid him. They turned around from the stall and began to walk away.

“I know this isn’t as fancy as the food from the restaurant you took us to, but I really like it,” Katara explained as she took a bite from the fried meat.

“This is fine, Katara,” Zuko said as he looked at her eat before he glanced down at his own food, “Though I wonder what kind of meat this is.”


“T-tiger-seal…?” Zuko stuttered as he gaped at the piece of meat in his hand.

Well, this sure was not what he was used to, but if it was what Katara ate and liked then he would try it and eat it. Katara never complained about any of his native dishes while she visited the Fire Nation and neither would he.

Katara paused midway from taking another bite as she looked at him almost gaping at his food.

“You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want to,” she said kindly softly. “We can get something else.”

“No!” Zuko exclaimed as he snapped himself from his stupor to look at her. “I’m sorry if I made you think I didn’t want to eat it. It’s just that, well…I never actually thought tiger-seals were edible, but
like Uncle always says, ‘you learn something new every day’, right?’ He grinned at her.

Before she could say anything else, Zuko took a bite from the skewer and began to chew. The meat was a bit tough and it had a strange taste to it at first, but after taking two more bites, Zuko began to enjoy the unique flavors that assaulted his taste buds.

Katara chewed her lip as she waited for Zuko to say whether he liked it or hated it. She should have considered that perhaps Zuko would not like such food. Aang certainly didn’t, being a vegetarian and all. She would understand if Zuko did not like it and she knew he would try to tell her in polite words if that were the case. She watched as he took one last bite from the now bare stick, chewed on it a bit, and then swallowed.

“Well?” she asked after a few seconds of silence. She watched as Zuko stared at her for a moment before he looked down at the skewer in her hand.

“Are you going to eat that?” he asked as he indicted the stick with a nod of his head.

Katara gaped at him, then at the fried-meat-on-a-stick in her hand, back up at Zuko who had a hopeful look in his eyes, then at the stick again, then back at him before she burst out into loud laughter.

Zuko frowned as he watched her have a giggle fit. What was so funny?

The young woman clutched her side as she tried to breathe and control her laughter.

“S-sure, Zuko, you can have it,” she said between a few giggles. “I’m not that hungry anyway.” She grinned when she handed the tiger-seal meat stick to the still frowning young man.

“Hm, thanks,” Zuko muttered as he raised a quizzical eyebrow at her. He grabbed it and immediately took another bite.

The sun had completely disappeared from the sky when they began to head back to the grand house. The light-blue lanterns that aligned the streets and the walls of the buildings were lit and the ice city turned into a breathtaking, sparkly winter wonderland. They stepped onto one of the many beautifully carved bridges and leaned on it as a soft breeze swirled snow around their forms. They stared down at their reflections on the serene water below them before their eyes locked together.
They gazed into each other’s eyes for a moment, neither of them able to utter a single word before Katara looked away.

“Katara?” Zuko spoke up after another silent second.

“Yeah?” she responded as she looked back at him through the surface of the water.

“There’s something that has been on my mind ever since this morning,” he began as he held her gaze. “I have something to ask you, will you answer my question?”

“Sure, Zuko, what is it?”

“Why were you crying?” he asked softly.

“What?” Katara said as she furrowed her forehead and looked away from the water to stare at him. When was she crying?

“After I returned with Lien and handed her to her parents you…um…embraced me,” he said with a smile.

Katara looked away as a blush surfaced on her cheeks. “Y-yeah?”

“Well, when you looked up at me you had tears in your eyes. Why was that?” he asked again.

“Well, that’s a dumb question since the answer is so obvious,” Katara answered with a small giggle.

“Is it?” Zuko asked and frowned.

When she saw that he was indeed clueless, Katara let out a sigh before her cheeks heated again.

“When I saw the arctic panther-wolves attack you, I felt so...afraid. I knew that you wouldn’t have
had a chance if both animals got you while you had Lien to worry about. And then when that one panther-wolf was about to b-bite your throat…the thought that you could’ve…died scared me so much,” she whispered.

“Really? Would my death affect you that much?” he asked quietly.

“Of course it would, Zuko!” Katara exclaimed as if that was a stupid question. “I…care for you a lot and I…don’t ever want to think about you…not being there.”

*With me,* she mentally added.

Zuko looked back down at their reflections that were illuminated by the glowing lanterns and a large smile appeared on his face before he could stop it. His heart skipped a beat before it started to beat faster as a warm feeling ran throughout his body. He still found it hard to believe that anyone aside from his mother and his uncle cared whether he was dead or alive and it really made him happy to know that it was her, Katara, the woman he loved. Katara really did care for him and he knew she liked him a lot, making his plan to woo her and gain her heart that much easier. Perhaps now was the time to confess his feelings for her. The moment was perfect.

Zuko cleared his throat.

“Katara have you ever…given thought about your future?”

“My future?” Katara said as she smiled sheepishly since she had asked Aunt Wu what her future held…well more accurately, what her future husband would be like. “Yeah, I guess. Why?”

Zuko clasped his hands behind his back as he looked up at the cloudy sky.

“Do you ever see yourself married and with children?” he asked quietly.

“Uh…” Katara uttered in surprise.

*I so did not expect him to ask me that question!* She pulled her braid over her shoulder and began to play with it.
“Y-yes, I do,” she stuttered with a blush.

Inwardly, Zuko smiled happily before he sobered up and clenched his hands tightly as he prepared himself for her answer to his following question.

“With Aang?” he almost choked out the question.

Katara’s eyes widened and she froze.

“I…” she paused before she exhaled deeply. “I don’t know,” she admitted guiltily.

The young lord mentally let out a sigh of relief that she had not said yes immediately.

“Really?” he commented casually.

The heavy clouds that had hung all day in the sky opened up and a few snowflakes made their descent to the illuminated city below.

Zuko extended a hand to catch a few of the fluffy snowflakes and watched as they melted in his palm. He looked around at the ice city before him with an awed look before he glanced back at Katara who was also trying to catch a few snowflakes with her gloved hands. Now he understood why Katara loved the Southern Water Tribe so much, since the more he saw of it the more he began to love it too. It was almost as beautiful as the woman who had captured his heart.

He moved away from the ledge of the bridge and straightened. He stepped a bit closer to her and turned all the way so he could be able to see her.

“Have you ever thought about the possibility that maybe the relationship between Aang and you would…one day cease to be? Have you ever thought about allowing another man court you?” he asked softly.

_What?_ Katara exclaimed in her mind. _Now Zuko’s telling me that Aang and I are not meant to be_?
And what’s with the last question?

“I…I don’t know what to say to that,” she confessed.

“Katara,” Zuko began as he gazed intently into her eyes as he had many time before. “Would you allow another man to court you if he were to tell you he was in love with you?”

Katara felt like her heart was about to leap out of her chest for it was beating so fast. Zuko’s amber orbs held her captive and his comforting warmth touched her even through the thick parkas they were wearing. What were these feelings that surged up in her every time she was with Zuko? She watched as he smiled at her and she averted her eyes with a light blush.

“I don’t know,” she said as she chewed on her lip, once again capturing Zuko’s attention. “Why are you asking me these kinds of questions, Zuko?”

Taking a deep breath, Zuko reached for her hand resting on the bridge’s edge and hoped that everything would go well, but he pulled back when they heard someone call the waterbender’s name. He cursed when Katara turned away from him to see who had called her. It was a young woman who was asking for her assistance in healing her husband who had slipped on ice and broke his arm and a leg.

“I’m sorry, Zuko. We’ll talk later, okay?” Katara said as she turned to him with an apologetic smile as she touched his arm.

“Alright,” the firebender muttered.

Zuko again cursed mentally as he watched the waterbender walk away with the worried woman. Why was it that every time he was going to tell Katara how he felt about her, something would interrupt him? It was as if the spirits were trying to intervene between them. He narrowed his eyes. It did not matter. He would tell her soon and nothing would stop him from having and loving her.

Nothing.
“Noooo!” Katara woke up with a scream, her hand flying to the left side of her chest right above her frantically beating heart.

Cold sweat beaded on her forehead as she looked around her surroundings with shallow breaths before she let out a small cry of relief. Sitting up on her bed, she grabbed the silver rose hairpin that rested on her nightstand and grasped it tightly in her shaking hands as she brought it close to her heart.

“It was just a horrible nightmare,” she whispered into the darkness of her silent room. She wrapped her warm furs around her shivering form and brought the hairpin closer to her chest as she tried to calm her nerves.

The dream began to repeat over and over in her head. Katara closed her eyes as if to stop seeing the dreadful images, but they kept playing in her head even behind the darkness of her closed eyes.

It started like any other harmless dream, and she knew it was a dream, because her mother was with her with that same beautiful smile Katara remembered her mother always had. They were both in the kitchen of the new grand house and they were talking, though Katara could not remember what they had been talking about or why she had blushed when Kya nudged her arm with an elbow and laughed softly.

Fear had crept into her when her mother’s face turned into a terrified expression just like the one she had that day she was killed, before the older woman grabbed Katara’s arm and started to push her out of the room, urging her to run to him before it was too late.

*Him? Him who?* Those were the questions Katara thought before the scene changed and disappeared, and with it, her mother’s voice and form.

Katara had frowned when she found herself outside in the snow, looking down at the cliff at the edge of the city. What she saw made her let out a loud gasp. Zuko was running towards her, sporting shredded clothes, blood covering his entire body. She had called to him and sighed in relief when he looked up and called her name, but what she saw next made her scream in fright and her heart wrenched painfully in her chest. Chasing after Zuko with earsplitting growls and snarls, were impossibly gigantic arctic panther-wolves, not two, but half a dozen of them with large, glowing red eyes.
She had screamed his name again as she started to make her way down the cliff that now seemed higher than normal in order to help him. But she gasped when she found herself unable to move, frozen in place as she watched helplessly as Zuko tried to run to her while he sent fire blasts behind him when the monstrous beasts got too close.

Then the worst happened. Zuko had tripped and crashed onto the unforgiving hard ground. He tried to get up, but another terrified scream tore itself from her throat as the rabid animals pounced on him and began to rip him apart. His crimson blood quickly began to stain the once pure white snow as his cries of painful agony resonated in her head.

Shuddering in her blankets, Katara shook her head in order to erase the horrible dream and she clutched the hairpin tighter, bringing it even closer to her heart as she sought the comfort the silver piece of jewelry always brought ever since Zuko had given it to her. She clenched her eyes shut again as she tried to will the images of Zuko being killed in such a brutal manner away from her mind.

“It was just a nightmare. It wasn’t real. Zuko’s not dead. Zuko’s alive,” she chanted quietly to herself as she lay back down on her bed with the hairpin still in her hands.

She knew the dream came to be because of what happened hours ago and how scared she had felt, though she did not know what her mother had to do with it. Seeing Zuko almost be hurt had made her feel so terrified, but watching him be gruesomely killed caused an unbearable pain to spread in her chest and tears to accumulate in her eyes. The pain was so great that it left her gasping for air.

She had never felt such an intense painful feeling before. Her mother’s death had hurt her, but never to such an extent as she was experiencing now. When Aang had almost died when Azula stuck him with lightning, she had been so frightened and worried, but it did not cause her so much pain like just the image of Zuko being killed in such a terrible way did in her dream.

Why? Why was she having such feelings? And it was not just the terrified feelings she felt at the moment, but the ones that had begun to confuse her ever since Zuko had joined them four years ago. What did it all mean?

Why did the simple thought of Zuko dying make her gasped out painfully? Why did she feel so compelled to ease Zuko’s suffering and help him be happy ever since he confided in her about his painful past? Why did she miss him so much when they separated those few months ago? Why did her heart always start to race wildly in her chest every time she was near Zuko, every time she caught his eye, or every time he touched her? Why did the thought that Zuko could be the powerful bender Aunt Wu predicted to be her husband made her so happy? Why did every time Zuko leaned so close to her did she hope it was so he could kiss her? She blushed. Why did she desperately wish Zuko would do what he had done to her in those erotic dreams she had had recently?
But most importantly why did she want to be with him always?

“Because I’m in love with him,” she confessed, sighing softly.

She bolted upright again and grasped her silver hairpin even tighter in her hands.

“Oh, my spirits, I’m in love with Zuko!” she gasped. She opened her clenched palm and gazed down at the trinket, a warm smile appearing on her shocked face.

There was no denying it now that she had confessed it out loud, now that she had admitted it to herself. The reason why she felt so many confusing yet wonderful feelings was because Zuko was the one that she was in love with, not Aang. Even though Zuko had done many mistakes in the past, and despite the fact that he had hurt her by betraying her on that day under the Crystal Catacombs of Ba Sing Se, she had fallen deeply in love with him.

Now she understood why her Gran-Gran kept on lecturing her about her relationship ever since she had told her that Aang was her boyfriend. Now she understood what Toph, Suki, and Lady Ursa were trying to tell her. What she felt for Aang was not true love, but a very strong affection, an affection that she had tried to force into being romantic love for his sake in order to make him happy. That was why she felt so awkward, so wrong when Aang hugged her too close or kissed her too eagerly. It was not him whom she loved. It was not Aang who was destined for her.

It was Zuko.

It was his company that she enjoyed looking forward to all day. He was the one who made her heart stutter and her stomach flutter with butterflies just by his commanding and warm presence and even just by the sound of his deep, masculine voice. Zuko was the one whom she dreamed and thought about, the one who occupied most of her thoughts. She blushed again. It was Zuko whom her body desired and yearned for.

He was just so very handsome despite the scar that covered most of the left side of his face. In fact, she loved it as much as she loved Zuko. His hair was the darkest shade of black and there had been many times where she had to stop herself from reaching up to touch his short hair. His voice, though impassive most of the time, could make her melt when he would lower it into a deep timbre. Regardless of his cold features, his almond-shaped golden eyes burned so fiercely, and every time she caught his eyes, she could not look away. Not to mention the lean muscles of his upper body that made her mouth water.
But it was not just his physical attributes that she loved. Zuko was so attentive to her, he protected her, though he acknowledged that she could defend herself and did not treat her like a helpless and weak woman. He helped her overcome her sorrow and anger about her mother’s death and he had shared his pain with her as well. He listened to her when she had a problem and gave her comfort when the others did not notice.

She loved his steady golden gaze, his warm hands, his honorable person and his reserved nature, and she loved his stunning smiles and his rare and wonderful laughter.

There were just so many things that she loved about Zuko, but what she loved the most was him. He was the one whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Zuko was the one who held her heart.

Her fingers gently, lovingly, caressed the beautiful ruby and sapphire gems as another sigh escaped her lips. How come she did not see it before? How stupid could she have been for not realizing such things, for not realizing the depth of her feelings for Zuko much sooner? Or maybe she did all along, but she must have been so deep in denial that she just did not want to acknowledge it.

“Well, enough stupidity,” Katara told herself as a large grin settled on her lips.

With her heart hammering in her chest and her cheeks burning red, she threw her covers away from her body as she swiftly sprang from her bed. She excitedly pulled on her fur boots before she went to her dresser to pull out a long parka.

She could not wait to tell Zuko what it was that she truly felt for him! She was sure that he would be so surprised. The young woman giggled as she combed through her slightly mussed hair before she spared a quick glance at her window. She frowned as she finally noticed that it was still the middle of the night, dawn was still a few hours away, and everybody was still asleep.

Huffing, she placed the hairbrush down, took off the parka and boots, and settled back down on the bed with the rose pin still in her hands. She would have to wait until Zuko woke up at dawn to tell him. It was okay. She could wait a few more hours.

As the night progressed, her eyes began to droop and a small yawn escaped her. The darkness and silence surrounded her, and she replaced the blankets back on her body as the chilly air made her shiver, before a thought made her frown sadly.
Maybe she should talk to Aang first and tell him that they could not be together any longer before she sought Zuko out. It would be the proper thing to do. She sighed sadly and a guilty frown marred her features. Aang had been her friend for years now and she really did love him, just not in a romantic way, and she did not want to cause him any pain, she did not want to hurt him. He would be so devastated. She bit her lip. What should she do?

The more time went by, the happiness she had felt at her discovery began to drain away. She curled into herself with the trinket pinned between her hands and her chest as depression began to settle within her.

What was she thinking? She could not tell Zuko what she felt since he did not feel the same way she did for him. He had said that he did not look at her as more than a friend. Katara closed her eyes tightly. She…was not his type.

Besides, Zuko was not single. He was in a long-term relationship with Mai and she had heard rumors in the Fire Nation Palace that it was a likely possibility that they could become engaged soon. She gritted her teeth as the jealousy spread through her once again and she did not care to stop it even though she knew it was foolish of her to feel such a thing. Zuko and Mai loved each other. There was no place for her in Zuko’s heart.

Her heart clenched painfully in her chest and a small sob escaped her lips. She wrapped her fure blankets tighter around herself as she begged for sleep to take her.

No. She could not tell Zuko that she was in love with him. She would just have to act the same as she always did around him, even if all she wanted to do was jump into his arms and never let go. It would ruin their friendship, and she was afraid he would start to distance himself from her if she were to tell him.

She would rather keep being his friend instead of his girlfriend. It was better than being nothing at all.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Momo spread his winged arms with a chirp before he did a triple loop in the air. Chattering proudly at his achievement, the small lemur turned large, green eyes toward his human friend before he gave a sad chirp as unresponsive gray eyes looked in a different direction where a few young human females were babbling. Momo slowed in his flight as he made a wide turn before he settled back on the unusually silent man’s slender shoulder.
Aang blinked as he felt the small weight on his shoulder and a cold nose on his cheek. He turned his head to see his small friend nuzzle him while looking at him with questioning eyes and a concerned chirp. Aang smiled slightly as he petted Momo on his head.

“Sorry, Momo,” the airbender apologized. “I don’t feel like playing today.”

Momo tilted his head at the dejected tone in his friend’s voice and his large ears drooped. Aang sighed as he patted the lemur’s head again before he walked away from the gossiping women he had come across. What had reached his ears had him mad and hurt.

While he had been searching for Katara for hours the previous day, she had been with Zuko again. And it seemed the whole tribe was aware of it, though the thought of both benders being so close to each other did not seem to bother the people that much. But it bothered him, and it bothered him greatly.

Why was Katara spending so much time with Zuko instead of him? What was so great about Zuko anyway? The guy obviously had a temper problem, he was so serious and uptight all the time, and he had a scar on his face!

Aang frowned at his thoughts.

Okay, maybe the scar was uncalled for, but still!

What was so great about Zuko except for the fact that he was the Fire Lord, he worked so hard to right the wrongs his country had done to the world, he was honest and loyal, and had helped him in his firebending so he could confront Ozai?

Aang sighed.

Okay, so there are a few things that make Zuko interesting and a great person to be around with, but that still doesn’t make up for the fact that Katara’s spending so much time with him than she is with me like she’s supposed to!

Gripping his wooden staff tightly in his hands, Aang made a frustrated noise at the back of his throat.
Once they had visited the Fire Nation—or more accurately Zuko—Katara’s behavior changed even more drastically as more time passed by. Though he had told Toph to forget what he had said while they had been in Omashu, he still had that feeling that perhaps Zuko was after Katara, and he was afraid, very afraid, that she would leave him one day for Zuko. He would not be able to bear the pain, the betrayal if that were to happen.

He loved Katara so much and Zuko was his friend, he did not want either relationship to end, but he just could not seem to stop the little voice in his head that kept telling him that Zuko saw Katara more than just a friend and that if he did not do something fast, he would lose Katara to the firebender forever.

Spinning around, Aang made his way back to the grand house. He needed to speak to Katara without another moment to lose! Hopefully once he gave her his news she would become excited and accept his proposal and Zuko would back off, and then everything would return to the way it was supposed to. But perhaps he was just seeing things and being paranoid.

At least, that was what he hoped.

Katara forced a smile as the guards at the entrance of the grand house opened one of the large, steel doors for her, letting the smile vanish from her face once she passed through the doorway. She quickly moved away from the warm grand house and made her way to the training area for her class. It was a bit early in the morning, and her waterbending lessons did not start until a few more hours, but she felt like she needed to get away and be by herself for at least a few minutes.

After finally discovering and understanding her true feelings regarding Zuko, she felt like she was not ready to see or talk to anyone at the moment, especially Zuko. How was she supposed to act around him, knowing that she saw him more than just a friend? That she wanted to be more than just friends? That all she wanted to do was go up to him, wrap her arms around his neck, and kiss him?

And then there was Aang to think about. In some way she felt as if she was betraying him, and perhaps she was, but what was she supposed to do? Break up with him and in the process break his heart?

But the most difficult question was how was she to deal with her feelings toward Zuko when she knew that they could never be together? That he would only see her as Katara, his waterbending friend? That he would never…love her?

Katara winced and lightly touched the left side of her chest before she let out a low, sorrowful sigh. She needed time to get her emotions together before she faced her friends and family, before she
faced him. Nobody had to know. It would be her secret to bear.

‘Have you ever thought about allowing another man to court you…? Would you allow another man to court you if he were to tell you he was in love with you?’ he had said to her.

She wondered again why Zuko had asked her such a question. Perhaps if it was some other man who was trying to woo her, then she would have said no, but if it was Zuko that wanted to court her, if it was he that told her he wanted to marry her because he loved her, then she would definitely say yes without thinking it twice.

But it would never be so and I have to stop wishing it, she told herself bitterly as her eyes began to sting with unshed tears.

“Katara! There you are!” the sound of Aang’s voice made her stop and cringe with guilt.

Katara slowly turned around, plastering another smile on her face as she waved at him. She frowned when she saw that Aang’s usually cheerful face was marred with an irritated look as he stomped up to her with a chirping lemur flying next to him. She felt a bit of panic swell in her chest. Had he figured it out?

“Oh, h-hey, Aang!” she greeted as she shifted slightly in her spot. Momo landed on her shoulder and she scratched his chin and cooed at him in order to avoid looking into Aang’s eyes. “I didn’t know you’d be out this early in the morning.”

Aang finally reached her and frowned when she looked way when he stared into her face.

“That’s the same thing I was going to tell you,” he said as he crossed his arms over his chest. When Katara just shrugged he let out a sigh. “Katara, are you avoiding me or something?”

“What?” the young woman said as she glanced at him briefly before she looked away. “Of course not…”

The airbender snorted and narrowed his eyes slightly.
“I was looking for you all day yesterday after what happened with the arctic panther-wolves,” he told her, “I wanted to make sure you were okay, but when I didn’t find you I became worried.”

“I’m sorry, Aang, but I was—”

“With Zuko, I know,” the airbender interrupted darkly before he added angrily, “The entire Southern Water Tribe knows.”

Katara’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of the Fire Lord’s name and she turned her head away in order to hide her blush as well as her guilt and sadness. She petted Momo’s head and scowled.

“Yeah, so?” she said defensively. “Zuko showed me around his city and I just returned the favor. What’s the big deal?”

“The ‘big deal’, Katara,” Aang hissed lowly, clenching his hands, “is that you spend too much time with Zuko when you’re supposed to be with me, your boyfriend! Do you know how hurt it makes me feel when I look for you only to find out you’re with him!”

Katara felt her stomach twist in more guilt.

“Aang, I—”

“Do you know how angry it makes me to see my girlfriend hanging all over another man all the time?” Aang yelled out as he swung his staff to the side, causing a gust of air to rise and blow the snow away from the ground.

Katara gasped before she glared angrily at him.

“You make it sound like I’m some deceitful…whore!” she said between gritted teeth before she spun around and began to walk away. Momo screeched and latched onto Katara’s shoulder at the sudden movement.

“No! Katara, wait! That’s not what I meant! I’m sorry!” the young monk cried out as he ran after her.
He grabbed hold of one of her hands to stop her before he walked around her so he could look into her face, but she turned her head away.

“I’m sorry, but it’s just that…” he trailed off as he ran a hand over his bare head. “You have to understand how weird it is to see your loved one spending more time with someone other than you.”

“You spend a lot of time with Toph and I don’t mind, nor do I find it weird,” Katara replied as she pulled her hand away from his grasp and sighed.

“Well, that’s because Toph and I are just friends,” Aang muttered before he frowned when he felt a small blush appear on his face.

“And Zuko and I are…just friends, too,” Katara responded quietly as the same pain made itself known in her chest before she let out a sigh. “Look, Aang, I’m sorry if you feel like I neglected or ignored you, but I swear I didn’t mean to or was aware of it. Besides, there’s nothing for you to worry about. Zuko and I have done nothing wrong, but he is my friend and you can’t tell me that I can’t spend time with him.”

Aang sighed and crossed his arms over his chest with an annoyed expression. That was something Toph had told him before. If he told Katara to stop talking to Zuko, it would make her mad and would only push her farther away from him, and that was the last thing he wanted. Even if Zuko started to come onto Katara, he was positive that she would turn his advances down because she loved only him and not the firebender. But that still did not mean that he liked seeing the woman he loved being so close to someone else.

Perhaps now was the time to finally find the courage to tell her what he had been striving for since the day he turned fifteen. And maybe she would stop paying attention to other people—namely Zuko—and finally be around only him all the time.

“Katara,” he said as he reached for her hand, ignoring the way she tensed as he stepped closer to her, “I’ll let you go to your students now, but would you make some time for me this evening? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

Katara felt uncomfortable by the look Aang was giving her, but she gave in and nodded.

“Okay, Aang.”
“I heard that you went up against two arctic panther-wolves to save a little girl yesterday morning, Fire Lord Zuko,” Hakoda began as he exited the meeting room beside the young Fire Lord with his personal guards walking a respectful distance behind them.

“I did,” Zuko replied simply with a nod of his head.

Hakoda glanced at the younger man with a pensive look.

“I also heard that my people welcome you into the Southern Water Tribe much more openly now,” he said casually.

Zuko frowned as he looked over to see the chieftain’s suspicious expression.

“If you are implying, Chief Hakoda, that the reason I did what I did was so I could gain the people of the Southern Water Tribe’s respect or approval I assure you that it was not so,” he stated with a hard look.

The older man was silent for a while as he evaluated what the young Fire Lord had said before he chuckled and patted Zuko’s back good-naturedly.

“Yeah, I thought so!” he exclaimed and he grinned when the firebender just frowned at him. “So now that Chief Arnook and I have agreed to your terms for trade, what will you do now that he has returned home and there won’t be any more meetings?”

Zuko smiled slightly.

“Well, I was planning on watching Katara teach her waterbending students today,” he replied coolly.

Hakoda wondered what that smile on the usually stoic Fire Lord could mean and he crossed his arms over his chest with a frown.

“I have noticed that my daughter spends a lot of time with you,” he observed warily.
Zuko knew Hakoda was just worried about what Katara and he spending a lot of time together could imply and he was careful to keep his expression neutral.

“Yes, your daughter and I are very good friends, and Katara is one of few people that I enjoy having as company,” he replied seriously.

The Southern Water Tribe Chief stared at the younger man for a few more moments before he looked away with a pleased expression. Once again, he was convinced that the young Fire Lord was not after Katara to hurt her and was indeed respectful of her. Though it still made him curious as to why it was that his daughter was always mentioning the young firebender and what those quick looks they would steal at each other at meals when they thought neither was looking meant.

The long, bright corridor ended and both men stepped outside once the guards opened the large steel doors. There were no clouds like there had been for the past weeks and the sun shone brightly in the clear blue sky.

“What a nice morning,” Hakoda commented as he took in a large breath of the cool, wintry air. “Well, then you should hurry if you want to see Katara teach her students. I'll see you all for the evening meal.” He smiled when Zuko gave him a nod before he walked away.

Zuko stared after Katara's father and raised an eyebrow. Was it just him or was Hakoda trying to get something out of him? Shrugging the thought away, the young man motioned for his personal guards to remain inside when they made a move to follow him. They hesitated for a moment before they bowed respectfully at his wish. The young Fire Lord pulled the collar of his parka closer around his neck and made his way to the open arena Sokka had indicated to him the day before.

Katara had not been at the breakfast table that morning and he really wished to see her. Zuko frowned slightly. Now that he thought about it, Aang had not been present either. An uneasy feeling overcame him before he quickly brushed it away as he continued on his walk to where the training area was located.

Hopefully Katara would not mind his presence while she taught the children, and if everything went well, perhaps they could go walk around the city again, and while they were alone, he could finally tell her his secret that he had been hiding for months. He hoped that this time there would be no more interruptions. He was so sick and tired of them.

“Zuko!” his mother’s gentle voice brought him out of his thoughts and he turned around toward the
He smiled as he noticed his mother and Iroh walking carefully toward him since they were still unused to the snow. Ursa was leaning on Jee’s arm and Jiao was following a few paces behind the royal members. Zuko waited patiently for them to reach him.

“Did your meeting with Chiefs Hakoda and Arnook finish?” Iroh asked cheerfully.

“Yes,” the young firebender replied as he stared at the way Jee placed a hand on his mother’s back to steady her when her feet sank a bit deeper in the snow.

The admiral seemed to have noticed his lord’s attention on him for he swiftly removed his hand and bowed his head apologetically. Zuko frowned slightly.

“Where are you headed, dear?” Ursa asked as she smiled thankfully at her bodyguard, oblivious to her son’s scrutinizing gaze.

“I’m going to watch Katara teach her waterbending students,” Zuko replied as he tried to suppress the smile that wanted to appear on his face.

“Oh, are you now?” Iroh mused as he stroked his chin with a glint in his eyes that made Zuko instantly suspicious. “We understand, Nephew.”

“Understand what, Uncle?” Zuko asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“You must be anxious to see Miss Katara since she was not at breakfast,” the old man teased with a grin.

“Hm…perhaps,” Zuko responded with a small smirk before he turned around. “I’ll see you later,” he said over his shoulder.

Iroh and Ursa watched Zuko’s retreating back with surprised expressions on both their shocked faces for a long moment before they looked at each other with pleased smiles. Jee and Jiao looked at each other questionably as the Fire Lord’s mother and uncle grinned widely at each other.
“You don’t suppose he finally figured it out, do you?” Ursa asked her old friend.

Iroh looked back to see Zuko walking at a distance and he once again stroked his chin.

“I say that he had finally realized his feelings a long time ago, my dear Ursu,” he replied before he looked back toward the smiling noblewoman. “I just hope that he does something about it soon before it’s too late.”

A cool breeze blew by, picking up snow from the ground as the young firebender continued on his way to his destination. Zuko smirked inwardly at the surprised looks he had received from his uncle and his mother for his answer, though he had a feeling that they already suspected something about his true feelings regarding Katara.

He then remembered the way Jee had held his mother when she stumbled and he wondered back to what Wei had said a while back. Was there something between his mother and his loyal admiral? Zuko frowned since he did not know how to feel if that were the case before he brushed that thought from his mind as well. He nodded politely at the people who greeted him as he passed, still amazed at their changed behavior toward him.

His black boots crunched the soft snow below him as he finally arrived at the small circular arena less than a mile from the western edge of the ice city. The ground was made of a flat white stone and the snow had been cleared from it. A few large jars stood off to the side and he was certain they were filled with water for training. There were about twelve children spread out in a half circle and each one had a quivering ball of water suspended between their small hands. Their faces were in deep concentration as they tried to shape the water into a perfect round ball.

After taking in the almost silent place, Zuko’s eyes softened as they landed on Katara’s form. She had her back turned toward him as she faced her young pupils. She lifted her own ball of water—a perfectly round one—in the air and waited for her students to follow her lead before she spread her arms and bent the water into a perfect long line. Zuko watched with avid interest at how gracefully Katara moved as she shifted, coiling the ribbon of water around her lithe form. He could hear her gently instructing the children on how to feel their element call to them and use it as guidance as she watched them, occasionally helping them when they were having some trouble.

Zuko continued to watch silently off to the side for a while longer as Katara interacted with the small children and a feeling of admiration and warmth spread through him. He had known for a while now that Katara was great with children and that she loved them very much. He wished with all his heart that Katara could be the mother of his children. He would especially enjoy the making part of said children that would hopefully take many, many tries.
Katara was too busy helping one of the children to notice the young man that was staring at and fantasizing about her. She wondered what Aang wanted to talk to her about, but honestly, she really was not looking forward to it. Perhaps it was for that best, that way she could finally tell him what her real feelings for him were—that being that she was not in love with him.

*Because I’m in love with someone else...with Zuko,* she sighed sadly as she tried to ignore the pang in her chest.

She frowned when she spotted Lien scrambling to her feet from where she had been sitting to watch the session and ran past her with a large smile on her young face. Curious, Katara turned around and tensed as she saw Lien make her way to Zuko, who was standing perfectly straight off to the side with a faraway look on his face.

*Oh, La! Since when has he been there?* she asked herself as her heart skipped a beat. Now that she knew she was in love with Zuko, she was no longer confused with the strange feelings that she experience at the sight of him.

*Wow. Doesn’t he look good today?* a little voice in her head piped in.

*Mm, I’ll say more than good,* she responded in a daze as she felt her cheeks beginning to burn and her heart pound in her chest. Happiness settled on her as she was reassured that Zuko was indeed alive and her nightmare was just pure lies before she was overcome by sadness once again.

Zuko’s pleasant thoughts on the ways of procreation were interrupted when his leg was attacked by a small body. Zuko blinked and looked down to find the little girl he had saved the previous day hugging his leg again with another large toothy smile.

Katara watched as Lien clung onto Zuko’s long leg and craned her neck up to smile in innocent child delight at the tall man. She saw Zuko return the smile—though more reservedly—and pat the girl’s head gently. Her heart warmed at the adorable sight and she sighed longingly. With a shake of her head, she began to make her way toward them with the other children trailing excitedly behind her. She had to face him sooner or later, though she had hoped it would have been later rather than sooner.

“Hi, Fire Lord Zuko!” the little girl cried out enthusiastically.
“Hello…Lien,” Zuko said, smiling that he remembered her name as he placed his hand on her head to give her a small pat. 

“Hey! You know my name!” Lien exclaimed happily, as she stepped away from him to clap her small gloved hands.

“Indeed I do,” he said with a nod. He looked up as he noticed Katara walking towards him with sparkly eyes and a gentle smile and he smirked mentally. “Lady Katara told me.”

“G-good morning, Fire Lord Zuko,” Katara greeted as she finally stopped a few feet from him. “Have you been standing there for long?”

“I seriously can’t remember since I was entranced by your graceful lesson,” Zuko responded smoothly. He suppressed a grin when she blushed. “I hope you don’t mind me watching.”

“Not at all!” Katara responded with a squeak before she cleared her throat. “I mean, you’re welcome to stay.”

“Thank you,” he said with a smile. “We missed you at breakfast.”

“Oh yeah, I…uh…had some stuff to do,” Katara mumbled as she looked away.

Before Zuko could questioned her about Aang’s whereabouts he was surrounded by curious children from all sides as they all gaped at him.

“Did you really fight two arctic panther-wolves yesterday?” one small boy asked.

“It wasn’t two, it was five!” another boy said above the commotion the others were making while another exclaimed, “That’s such a cool scar!”

“Yeah, he did!” Lien piped in cheerfully. “He saved me from the scary animals!”

“I was there, too!” a few others exclaimed.
“Wow! That is so cool!” others said.

Katara placed her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles as Zuko shifted uneasily in his spot at the awed looks the children were giving him as he tried to respond to the many questions that were flying his way.

“Can we see you firebend?” one little girl asked.

“I’m not sure about that,” Zuko responded coolly. “Why don’t you ask Avatar Aang?”

“But Avatar Aang doesn’t want to show us firebending and we have seen airbending so many times it’s getting boring!” Lien slightly whined.

“Lien!” Katara chided.

“But it’s true!” another boy exclaimed.

“I don’t know…” Zuko began.

“Please, Fire Lord Zuko! Please, please, please!” the whole group of children begged with wide eyes.

“Well…” The young man looked up toward the grinning waterbender and raised an eyebrow before he smirked back down at the pleading youngsters. “Alright, I will show you some basic firebending moves.”

“Yay!” the children cheered.

Zuko raised a finger up to gain their attention.

“But…” he continued.
“Aww…” the kids whined.

“Only if you promise me to finish your lessons with Master Katara, hm?” he finished with a small grin.

“We promise!” they all quickly agreed as they raced back to their original spots.

Katara watched them go in amazement and could not help feeling impressed. Zuko had handled that situation rather well and again her heart burned in her chest as she glanced back at him.

‘Do you ever see yourself married and with children?’ he had asked her.

It would have been nice if Zuko could have been the father of her children…No. She had to stop thinking like that! She would only hurt herself since she knew it could never be.

Zuko had been watching Katara’s face for a while and frowned when her cheerful mood changed. He noticed there was sadness in her large, blue eyes and he immediately became concerned.

“Katara, what’s the matter?” he asked worriedly as he took hold of one of her hands.

Katara tensed slightly at his touch and briefly closed her eyes at the pleasing feeling it caused her before she placed a smile on her face.

“Oh, it’s nothing!” she said as she slowly pulled her hand away and went back to her lessons.

Zuko watched her go with a frown and took a step to follow her, but he stopped and looked down when something tugged the sleeve of his dark red parka.

“You can sit with me while they practice waterbending!” Lien said with a large toothy grin as she led him to her previous spot.
“Alright,” Zuko said as he followed the little girl.

He wondered what it was that was bothering Katara and he hoped she would tell him so he could find a way to help her. He hated to see sadness in her eyes, and if they did end up together, he would make sure it would never reflect in her eyes again. He focused his attention on the children when Katara began to give out instructions.

Surprisingly, the children worked extra hard in their training so they could see the famous Fire Lord do some firebending. As soon as their teacher told them lessons were over, they bounded over to the silent young man with excited squeals.

“Can we see you firebend now?”

“Please, please!” they yelled.

Zuko winced mentally at the volume of their excited pleas. Though he really did not have much experience with young children, and he knew that they sometimes were a handful, he found that they were not that bad and could be pleasant to have around. Jing and Ting were an example. He held up a hand and gave them a pleased smile when they immediately quieted down.

“Since you kept your promise, I will honor mine,” Zuko told them as he stood up before his expression turned serious. “Firebending is dangerous so you must stay back and sit still until I finish. Understood?”

“Yes, Fire Lord Zuko!” the children chorused as they scrambled to find a good spot so they could watch.

Zuko smirked slightly at Katara when he passed her to stand in the middle of the arena. Katara rolled her eyes, but was unable to hold back the smile that appeared on her face as she sat down in his previous spot next to Lien. She watched as he rolled his sleeves up to his elbows before he spread his feet apart and took a few deep breaths. She was a bit disappointed that the cold weather did not allow Zuko to firebend shirtless, so she could see his muscular, pale chest.

*Bad, Katara! Not in front of the children!* she chided herself, though not as harshly as she should have.
Zuko glanced at the children who were squirming in their seats in excitement around Katara and Lien before he rested his gaze on Katara’s lovely face. Maybe with this she would see that he was not that bad with kids and could perhaps one day be a good father? A good father to their future children?

Taking another deep breath, Zuko unexpectedly spun around and punched his fist in the air, sending a bright fireball to the side so his profile was to his audience. Since he was wearing the winter wear Kanna had given him, he would only be able to use his hands. He spun around again and sent two fire blasts in the opposite direction. He made sure to keep his fireballs small enough not to hurt the children, but big enough to impress them. The gasps and cheers that reached his ears told him his plan was working.

Shifting in his stance, Zuko spread his arms and called forth his fire whips. He twisted the hot fire whips around his tall form before he lashed with his right hand and cracked the whip in the air, doing the same with the other a second later.

“Ooohhh!” Katara and the children gasped as the arena was filled with the loud cracks from the fiery whips.

Katara fixatedly stared as Zuko moved gracefully on his feet, fire springing forth with controlled bursts from his hands, and she wondered back to Lady Ursa’s words. She was right. Aang was not the only powerful bender out there because Zuko was one of them.

After a few more magnificent moves with the fire whips, Zuko extinguished them before he began to spin in place, sending fire blast after fire blast up in the air. He did a backward somersault and punched the ground with a fist as he landed in a crouch, fire shooting from his fist and springing upward around his form.

“Whoa! Did you see that?”

“That was so awesome!”

“The air feels so warm!”

Katara smiled as she listened to the children’s excited chatter before she stood up and made her way to where Zuko was currently crouching. She watched as he stood up and casually smoothed his clothing. Her heart began to race wildly in her chest the closer she walked toward him and her breath
caught in her throat when he looked up and their eyes met.

Zuko smiled at her when she finally approached him slowly. He frowned as he wondered what the hesitation in her step meant, but he was unable to ask her for all of the sudden they were surrounded by enthusiastic and squealing children.

“So what do you think?” Zuko asked her with a small smirk after the children had settled down a bit from their boisterous fuss.

Katara quickly composed herself and shrugged.

“Eh, it was okay,” she said dismissively, grinning when the children gasped in shock.

“Are you sure you were paying attention? That was way more than okay,” Zuko responded with a wider smirk.

Oh, I’ll say it was, Katara thought and sighed mentally.

“Yeah, Lady Katara!” Lien piped in agreement with her new hero, idolization in her bright eyes.

“Fire Lord Zuko was awesome!” another little boy exclaimed.

“See?” Zuko said with a smug look. “You should listen to what they say. Children never lie.”

“Okay, fine!” Katara exclaimed and sighed huffily. “I’ll admit it was awesome.”

She pointedly ignored Zuko’s arrogant smirk before an idea popped into her head. She grinned mischievously, causing Zuko to narrow his eyes warily at her. Katara looked down at the children and smiled.

“Who wants to go penguin sledding?” she chirped cheerfully.
“I do!” the children cheered as they dashed away from the training arena toward the tall hill at the western edge of the city.

“Come on!” Katara urged as she turned around to grin at the firebender.

She chuckled at Zuko’s cautious look as she grabbed his hand and raced after the screaming children. She ignored the rational side of her brain that told her she would keep hurting herself if she continued touching him.

A few minutes later, they all arrived at a tall snowy hill where the penguins were shuffling around. The children wasted no time as they made a beeline for the chirping flightless creatures and climbed onto their backs. Zuko watched with an amused smile as the children cornered the poor penguins and flew down the hill at a high speed, loud laughter trailing after them.

“Okay, Zuko,” Katara called out with the same impish grin, “Grab your penguin.”

Zuko stared at her as if she were crazy.

“Are you serious?” he asked incredulously. “I am not going to climb onto one of those things’ back.”

“Ah, come on, Zuko, lightened up!” Katara huffed. “It’s one of the joys of childhood!”

“Yeah, well, we both know my childhood was not full of joy,” he muttered and crossed his arms over his chest stubbornly.

“Well, the much better then! Just try it,” she insisted.

“No,” he repeated. “I already consented to dance in your brother’s wedding and I will not go penguin sledding.”

He sighed when she turned her huge, pleading eyes on him.

“Besides, I’m too heavy and big to be able to climb onto the penguin’s back. I’ll probably kill it and
that will surely traumatize the children.”

Katara pouted since he was probably right. She had not thought of that since Aang always went penguin sledding, but Zuko was taller and much more muscular than the shorter and lighter airbender. Darn. She really wanted Zuko to participate in one of the pastimes she had enjoyed since she was a child. Now what?

Zuko watched as Katara’s excited expression fell and he cursed himself for making her sad, but even though he refused to be seen riding one of those animals, he also knew it was impossible since he was a grown man and not a small child. He was startled when Katara snapped her fingers and cried out in triumph.

“I got it!” she exclaimed, her excitement once more returning to her. “We don’t have to go penguin sledding to have fun!” She bent down and began to grab some of the soft snow from the white ground.

I know of some fun activities we could do…Zuko mused in a daze before he was snapped out of his thoughts when something cold hit his face. He stiffened before he wiped the melting pieces of snow from his skin and looked up in shock to glare at the laughing woman before him.

“O-oh, my gods! Y-your face was even more p-priceless that the one you made in Ember Island!” Katara laughed loudly as she pointed a finger at him.

“So this is your idea of fun, hm?” Zuko responded emotionlessly as he flicked his hand to the side to get rid of the snow from his fingers.

The waterbender stopped in her giggle fit at the blank tone of his voice, wondering if perhaps she went too far. She opened her mouth to apologize, but froze when she caught the mischievous glint in those amber orbs before Zuko’s lips curved at one side into a dangerous smirk. With a squeak, Katara turned on her heel and began to run away just as Zuko bent down to grab a large handful of snow.

Zuko grinned as he chased after the laughing waterbender before he took aim and let the snowball fly toward his target—though he made sure not to throw it too hard and hurt her. He laughed quietly when Katara yelped when the cold ball hit her on her back and she stumbled before regaining her balance. He watched amusedly as she whirled around to glare incredulously at him.
“You…hit me! You actually d*ared to hit me!” she yelled with a raised fist.

“Though it is the first time I have participated in such a game, I do believe that is the point of a snow fight, right?” Zuko responded calmly as he quirked a haughty eyebrow at her. “Or am I mistaken?”

“Ah! This means war!” Katara screamed before she burst out into laughter as she gathered more snow in her hands and hurled it at the smirking firebender.

Zuko easily dodged one ball as he threw another that hit Katara on the shoulder, but he was not quick enough when Katara retaliated and caught him square on the chest. He glanced down at his chest as the melting snow made the red color of the parka turn even darker before he smirked and gathered another handful of white snow, but Katara was already collecting her own frozen weapons.

Their loud laughter and Katara’s squeals immediately caught the children’s attention and they gaped as they watched the serious Fire Lord and their kind waterbending teacher having a snow fight. The kids quickly lost interest in the penguins at the prospect of a new exciting game and they ran to where the two laughing adults were throwing snowballs at each other. Soon the group was running and chasing each other while they threw snow at anybody that came within distance.

Zuko did not know when was the last time he had so much fun before meeting Katara. He evaded one of the children’s snowballs that was aimed at his face, getting even by throwing his own snowball at the child, making sure not to cause him harm, but he was still hit on the face by somebody else’s ball of snow.

He glared when he realized it was Katara that had caught him on the face a second time that day. She bat*ted her eyelashes innocently at him and he smirked. Her eyes widened and she spun around, racing away from them. With a low growl, he ran after her.

“Get her, Fire Lord Zuko!” the children cheered him on.

Katara looked back over her shoulder and let out a shout when she realized Zuko was closing in on her. She veered to the right, but faked to the left and ran even faster, but Zuko was quicker and was close on her heels. With a victorious yell, Zuko grabbed her around the waist, causing Katara to let out a cry, but he lost his balance since they were at the edge of the snowy hill and they toppled over. Zuko spun onto his back, bringing her safely down with him, as they stumbled onto the soft white snow. They rolled down the hill for a good few feet before they finally came to a stop with Katara facing the cold ground while being pinned down by Zuko from above. Zuko lifted himself a bit as Katara coughed and he turned her around so she rested on her back.
“Katara, are you okay? You didn’t get hurt, did you?” he asked with concern as he smoothed her hair out of her face.

“No, I’m fine,” Katara reassured him before she began to giggle again. “That was so much fun!”

Zuko let out a relieved breath after she said that and chuckled quietly. He had been afraid that he had accidently hurt her as they tumbled down the hill and he had been ready to carry her back to the grand house if necessary. He relaxed with a contented sigh and placed his head near her neck, her soft hair caressing his face. He breathed in her gardenia scent before he stiffened when her sweet smell and the softness of her body brought back all of his previous dreams he had had of her for the past months. Her nearness was causing his blood to heat up and it was becoming a bit hard to breathe.

Katara froze when Zuko leaned down and his breath tickled the side of her neck while his warm body covered hers. She was reminded of the dream she had and she almost expected Zuko to start roaming her body with his hands. A small shiver ran down her spine and her heart started to pound loudly in her chest while that almost familiar feeling burned in her lower stomach. She felt him tensed up a few seconds later and she became rigid as well as she repeatedly asked herself what she should do. The situation was even more complicated for her now that she knew her real feelings for Zuko. On one hand, she wanted to push him off, but on the other she wanted to hug him closer to her.

Though he found that their position was a bit distracting—although pleasing—Zuko began to wonder if the time was right for his confession. He did not want Katara to think that he was just saying such things just so that he could take advantage of her and their current situation. Lifting his head slightly, he gazed down at her to see what her reaction to their position was. He was relieved to find that she was not angry or indignant, instead she looked embarrassed and her cheeks were a deep shade of red.

Before he could tell her anything, the sight of her flushed features brought another memory of one of his many erotic dreams and his breath caught in his throat while his body began to get extremely hot. Before he knew it, the snow where his hands were resting began to melt with a soft hiss and steam floated around them. His arms sank deep in the melted snow, and without the support of the frozen ground, Zuko fell back on top of her, causing both of them to let out a gasp before they stared at each other with flushed features.

“Lady Katara! Fire Lord Zuko! Are you okay?” the children’s voices made them jump and snapped them out of their thoughts.
Both scrambled away from each other and turned around to smile innocently at the children. Zuko quickly jumped to his feet and helped Katara up before they both brushed the snow from their clothes with nervous laughs.

“Yeah, we’re fine!” Katara said with too much cheer in her voice as she gave then a shaky smile before she threw a mocking glare at Zuko who was looking off into the distance as if nothing had happened, “Though if I had broken a bone or something, it would have been his fault.”

Zuko turned around and raised an eyebrow at her.

“It’s not my fault that you’re sometimes clumsy,” he countered with a smirk.

“Oh, I’m clumsy? You’re the one who lost his balance when you tackled me!” Katara yelled and flailed her arms in the air.

“I don’t remember it like that,” he replied with a shrug, his eyes glinting in amusement.

Katara huffed, crossed her arms over her chest, and playfully turned her nose up in the air with a ‘humph’. Zuko chuckled quietly since he knew she was just playing around, but it seemed the children did not get that it was just their way of teasing each other since their expressions became worried.

“Uh-oh,” Lien said. “I think Lady Katara got angry.” She clapped her hands excitedly as she looked up at the tall man. “You should kiss her, Fire Lord Zuko!”

“W-wha…?” Katara choked out as she snapped her head around to gape at the girl.

Zuko’s eyes widened and he blinked down at the little girl looking up at him with an innocent smile.

“Excuse me?”

“I said you should kiss her so she won’t be mad at you anymore,” Lien continued in her innocent thoughts. “My papa says that’s what couples do. He does that when my mama gets angry with him.”
Katara felt her face burn in embarrassment at the little girl’s words and she hoped Zuko would not get offended by being told that they were viewed as a couple. Though a kiss would be nice…

“They’re not together!” another girl a few years older than Lien said. “Avatar Aang is Master Katara’s boyfriend!”

“But Fire Lord Zuko would be a better boyfriend for Lady Katara!” Lien gushed excitedly.

Both older benders stared at the little girl in shock before they stole a look at each from under their eyelashes, both flushing when they were caught staring at the other. Zuko crouched down to be eye-level with the child so she did not have to crane her thin neck to look up at him. He raised an eyebrow at her.

“You think Lady Katara and I are a couple?” he asked curiously while he kept his unwavering gaze trained on Katara’s wide blue eyes.

“Yup,” Lien chirped happily. “You both look so good together!”

“It’s true!” some of the other children piped in.

“Is that so?” Zuko mused as he stood up, his golden eyes never leaving the woman’s blue orbs standing before him with a furious blush on her face. “Well, what do you say, Katara? Children never lie.”

Katara stared at him in shock, startled that Zuko had not denied what the children thought about them both. Why was that? Oh, how she wished that she could happily confirm the children’s image of Zuko and her being a loving couple! But she couldn’t because it was not true and it would never be.

“I…uh…” she stuttered as she tried to avoid Zuko’s intense gaze. Was she missing something here?

“Hey, Sugar Queen! Finally we found you!” Toph’s loud voice rang out into the silent air.
They all turned to see Aang walking towards them in a quick pace with Toph holding onto his arm. Zuko’s mood darkened at yet another interruption and he cursed at Toph and Aang’s bad timing. He scowled when he found that Katara was already making her way towards them and he clenched his fists tightly when Aang let go of Toph so he could embrace Katara. He smirked slightly when some of the children made gagging sounds.

Katara stiffened in Aang’s arms and immediately broke away from his grasp. Aang frowned and his heart sank as she pulled away from him and avoided his gaze as she turned her attention to the short earthbender.

“What is it, guys?” Katara asked.

“Suki and Sokka think Jing and Ting got a cold and they want you to check on them,” Aang responded to her question before Toph could open her mouth.

Katara frowned slightly.

“I’ll go check on them now,” she said before she turned back around to smile at the children. “I think it’s time for you all to go home and eat.”

The children let out small whines and complaints, but began to head back home, nonetheless, after they said their goodbyes to the Fire Lord. Aang frowned again when the children just smiled at him as they passed him by. What was going on? First Zuko gets Katara’s attention and now the children’s too! He crossed his arms over his chest and sent a small glare of resentment at the unsuspecting firebender.

“I’ll see you guys at dinner,” Katara said to both young men as she followed after the children with Toph grabbing onto her arm.

Zuko and Aang watched her walk away before they turned to look at each other once she was out of sight. A long, uncomfortable and tension-filled silence appeared as they continued to stare at one another, both unsure of what to say. Their friendship used to be easy and secure, but now both could feel that it was changing, and not for the better.

Deciding to break the silence, Aang shot Zuko what he hoped was a cheerful smile.
“I’ve something to show you and I’d like to know what you think about it,” he said as he walked closer to the taller man and reached his hand into the pocket of his parka.

“Okay,” Zuko responded as he, too, tried to smile as if everything was fine.

He watched as Aang pulled out a golden chain with a topaz stone and held it in front of him with a genuine wide smile.

“That’s a nice necklace. What’s it for?” Zuko asked as he stared at it.

“It’s Katara’s betrothal necklace,” Aang responded as he eyed the young Fire Lord carefully.

Zuko stiffened at the Avatar’s words and he fought to remain unaffected by the news. He looked away from the glinting golden necklace and stared down at the silent monk.

“Her…betrothal necklace?” he practically choked on the words.

“Yes, I’m finally going to ask Katara to marry me,” Aang said as he returned the necklace to his pocket.

Zuko began to feel panic swell inside him and he unconsciously took a few steps towards Aang until he was towering over him.

“Are you sure about this, Aang? I mean…marriage is such a big step,” he said a bit too rapidly.

“Of course I’m sure about this,” Aang replied with a frown. “Katara is the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. We’ve been together for four years now and I think it’s time.”

“Yes, but you’re both so young to be married so soon,” Zuko argued again, though he knew that was a lame excuse, since he wanted to marry Katara now. “You should think more about it before you ask her,” he advised, this time sounding more normal.

“There’s nothing to think about, Zuko,” the younger man stated as he glared at him. “Shouldn’t you
be congratulating me? I thought you were my friend,” he paused for a second before he continued, “or is there a reason why you don’t want me to marry Katara?”

Zuko looked away guiltily as he swallowed the lump in his throat.

“You’re right…”

He was running out of time! He needed to tell Katara about his feelings immediately before Aang got to her! He looked back at Aang and nodded.

“…Congratulations,” he muttered quietly.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Jing and Ting gave out small yawns as they huddled close together in the wooden crib near their parents’ bed. The lighter haired baby rolled over and covered her snoozing older twin with an arm and a leg. Sokka, Suki, and Katara chuckled quietly at the scene before the young father reached down and moved his younger daughter’s limbs away from her frowning sister. After making sure the baby girls were sleeping soundly, they moved away so they would not disturb them.

“Thanks for looking them over, Katara,” Sokka whispered as he smiled gratefully at his sister.

Suki nodded as she squeezed her sister-in-law’s hand.

“We were afraid that they could be really sick,” she said.

“They’re fine as long as you keep them warm,” Katara responded. “It’s normal for babies to catch colds during winter, and it’s only fatal if nothing is done to stop the illness in the beginning.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re here to help,” Sokka said.

“Yeah,” Suki agreed before she nudged the younger woman’s arm, “Now we’re sure that you’ll know what to do once you have your own kids.”

Katara blushed, but decided to change the topic.
“Just tell me if something happens with the twins during the night, but I’m sure they’ll be fine.” She gathered her supplies and smiled at them as she made her way to the door. “I’ll see you guys at breakfast tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night,” they responded as she exited the room and closed the door behind her.

She had not even taken a step away from the door when Aang suddenly appeared before her as he moved away from the wall he had been leaning on. Katara jumped slightly in surprise before she scowled at him.

“Aang, don’t do that!” she cried out as she moved away from him and began to make her way down the corridor. “Why were you standing there anyway?”

The young monk frowned as he walked beside the waterbender.

“Remember you promised to spend some time with me today?”

“Oh, you’re right,” Katara responded lowly. “I’m sorry. I-I forgot.”

“I figured as much after I realized you were with Zuko again today,” Aang replied irritably as he crossed his arms.

“Please, Aang, don’t start,” she said with a sigh. “I have so many things on my mind and I’m tired.”

“Fine,” he said as he uncrossed his arms and took her hand.

“What is it you wanted to talk to me about?” Katara asked as she allowed him to lead her by holding her hand, though a small voice in her head kept telling her to pull away. She was a bit curious to know what he wanted. She glanced away guiltily when Aang smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

Though she knew that she would never be in a romantic relationship with Zuko, Katara had decided that perhaps now was the time to tell Aang that she could no longer be with him because she did not
feel for him like he felt for her. Hopefully he would understand and accept just her friendship. It was late and all she wanted to do was go to her room and sleep so she did not have to keep thinking about her unrequited love for Zuko.

“It’s something that I’m sure would make you very happy,” the airbender replied with a cheery smile.

Aang glanced at Katara’s face and frowned at her unenthusiastic expression. He was not pleased at all by the change in attitude she had towards him. Since that day when he had emerged from the frozen iceberg, he had been the one who had all her attention, he was the one she worried and fussed over the most. But ever since the war ended and they spent those weeks in Ba Sing Se with Iroh, she had begun to distance herself from him and he hated it.

They arrived at one of the rooms were the residents and guests of the grand house could relax and socialize. Aang led her to one of the wooden benches covered in thick furs and sat down next to her, grabbing both of her hands in his. He swallowed nervously as he looked up to her face.

Katara looked down at their hands with a frown, but stopped herself from pulling away at the strange look on Aang’s face. She had a strange feeling and she was not sure she wanted to hear what Aang had to say anymore.

“Katara,” he began slowly, “I’ve wanted to tell you this for a while now, but I just couldn’t seem to gather enough courage to come out and say it.” He squeezed her hands once before he let go of one so he could pull the golden necklace from his pocket. “K-Katara...would you m-marry me?”

Katara gasped at his words and immediately pulled away from him. She stood up abruptly as she gaped at him.

“Aang...I...”

Aang stood up as well and quickly made his way to her, clasping her hands in his again.

“Katara, I can’t live without you! I love you so much! Please say yes and marry me!”

“Aang, I d-don’t know. I mean it’s so sudden and...” she trailed off as she avoided looking into his pleading, gray eyes again. This was not supposed to happen! How was she going to break up with
“We’ve been together for four years. I think that’s enough time to be able to ask you to marry me!” Aang exclaimed as he desperately held onto her. “We love each other, so what’s the point in waiting much longer? Please say yes. It would devastate me if you reject me. I won’t be able to handle it,” he whispered as he stared pleadingly into her eyes.

Katara bit her lip at the anxious and fearful look Aang was sending her. She could not bear the thought of hurting him, but she also knew that she could not accept his proposal now that she knew she was in love with another, even if that love was impossible. She knew she would only hurt Aang more if they ever got married, and she did not want a marriage based on lies and false hopes.

“I’m sorry, Aang...” she began quietly as she gently extracted her hands from his, “but I can’t marry you.”

Aang flinched at her words.

“What? Why not?” he asked anxiously.

When Katara did not respond, Aang turned away from her so she would not see the tears that had gathered in his large, gray eyes. Taking a couple of shaky breaths, he tried to figure out what to do. He had not expected her to deny him and he was barely able to keep standing and not curl up into a ball and cry his eyes out, begging her to reconsider and agree to be his wife. Why was she doing this? Why was she denying him?

“It’s because of Zuko, isn’t it?!” he growled bitterly as he spun around to face her, his face red with anger.

Katara took a step back and gasped. Did he know the reason she denied him was because she loved Zuko? Would he hate her now?

“I knew the reason why he spent so much time with you was because he wanted to take you away from me!” he yelled angrily. “He seduced you and filled your head with things so you won’t marry me!”

“What?” Katara gasped before she shook her head. “Zuko didn’t do that! How could you even think...
so ill of him? My decision has nothing to do with anything he has said or done!”

Aang let out a shaky breath as he tried to control his temper.

“Then why are you denying me?” he whispered brokenly.

Katara looked away from his hurt features and sighed.

“Aang…there’s something I have to tell you. I have known this for a long time, but I ignored it because I wanted you to be happy. But now I know I can no longer deny it.” She lifted her head and looked at him sadly as she continued, “I have come to realize that I love you…but not in the way you want me to or the way you deserve.”

Aang frowned as he stared at her, a feeling of dread forming in his stomach.

“Katara…w-what do you mean?”

“I love you as a friend, Aang,” she confessed quietly, “A friend and nothing more.”

Aang reeled back as if he had been slapped across the face. He felt as if his heart had been wrenched from his chest as he gaped into her sincere eyes.

No, this can’t be! Katara loves me! We are meant to be together!

“I’m so sorry, Aang, but I can’t marry you,” Katara repeated quietly.

The airbender winced again at her words as he looked away from her.

This has to be a mistake! Maybe Katara is just confused, he thought desperately. Yes, that must be it! She’s just confused and all she needs is some time to remember her feelings for me!
He still had hope. Katara had not accepted his proposal, but she had not broken up with him...yet. He just needed to find a way to make her realize she was making a horrible mistake so she could come back to his side like it was before. Gazing down at the golden chain in his hand, Aang turned back around to face her. She was looking away from him again and he hated the look of sadness in her pretty features. He walked up to her again, and grabbing her hand, he pressed the necklace into her palm.

Katara looked down at the necklace with wide eyes before she snapped her head up to frown at him.

“Aang, I said—”

“I know what you said, Katara,” he interrupted as he gazed into her eyes. “I will accept your answer for now, but in the meantime I want you to keep it as you think it over. I know that in the end you will see that we are meant for each other.” He closed her hand over the golden necklace and squeezed it gently.

“Oh, Aang,” she sniffled softly.

She had not expected him to do this. She had thought he was going to become way more upset than he currently was and throw a tantrum or something. She looked to his wide, pleading eyes, unsure of what to do. Maybe she should think about it some more? He was after all a very nice and caring man and he really loved her.

“I…I-I’ll try,” she said, but held a hand up when the airbender smiled happily. “But I can’t promise you that my mind...or my feelings will change.”

“All I’m asking is that you don’t dismiss the thought so easily,” Aang replied as he smiled at her. He pulled her closer to him and wrapped his arms around her.

*I’ll make you see that you do love me, Katara. I won’t give up until you become my wife*, he thought.

Katara stiffened at the contact since it was not Aang’s arms that she wanted to surrender to but Zuko’s. She shook her head. She had to find a way to forget about the Fire Lord and move on. Hesitantly, she brought her rigid arms to return the embrace, unaware at the pair of amber eyes that were staring at them in shock and hurt.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
Zuko hurried down one of the corridors of the grand house and turned sharply at the corner. He could not find Katara anywhere and he was becoming anxious. His stomach twisted as a foreboding feeling touched him with cold fingers and he did not like it one bit. He needed to find her immediately and confess his feelings before Aang had a chance to sway her mind toward him. He briefly glanced into one of the sitting rooms as he passed, but froze mid step in shock.

\[\text{Oh, Agni, let it not be true! Please tell me my eyes are deceiving me! he pleaded in his head.}\]

Zuko slowly stepped back until he stood at the entrance to the slightly illuminated room. What he saw before him made his heart stop in his chest and a cold sensation to run throughout his body.

Aang and Katara stood in the middle of the room, wrapped in each other’s arms. But what caught his attention was the golden necklace that Aang had shown him earlier, the one Katara was currently holding in her hand, and he knew what it symbolized. Aang had already proposed to her…and Katara had accepted to marry him.

‘Have you ever thought about the possibility that maybe the relationship between Aang and you would…one day cease to be?’

‘I…I don’t know what to say to that.’

Zuko clenched his hands so hard that his blunt nails left marks on the inside of his palms as he tried to control his breathing. He was having a hard time not going on a rampage as his rage escalated to high proportions.

Had she lied? Had she always seen her relationship with Aang going this far, going into marriage? He had allowed himself to believe that he had a chance with Katara and he had truly believed that she really could have come to love him.

His anger began to dissipate, and in its place, a sorrowful pain began to fester in his cold heart. He had lost the woman he loved, and with it, his one chance at happiness.

With one last glance at the embracing couple, the devastated young man silently backed away from the scene before he turned around slowly and began his silent and lonely way back to his silent and lonely room.
He had been too late. He had lost her.

End of Part Two
Guilt was the first thing Katara felt when she woke up the next day, followed by sadness. She should have told Aang that there was nothing to think over, that she would not change her mind and marry him. She felt horrible for leading him on and letting him continue to think that she had feelings for him. But she did not want to hurt him. That fearful look in his eyes had twisted her insides in guilt and she had been unable to repeat herself to him that she did not love him—never had. She was afraid of what his reaction would be if she were to deny him. She remembered that hurt and frustrated look he had given her when he had unexpectedly kissed her the first time they were at Ember Island almost four years ago and how mad he had gotten when she had chastised him for it. She was not sure what he would do now. What if he hurt himself or accidently hurt others?

Pulling the blankets away, Katara slowly got off her bed and sighed. The young woman absently pushed her slightly mussed hair over her shoulder as she looked at the nightstand where she had placed the golden necklace Aang had given her the night before. She picked it up, frowning at it. The topaz gem that dangled from the center glinted softly from the small amount of sunlight that came through the window, and she closed her eyes when the color of the yellow stone made her think about the warm color of Zuko’s eyes.

With a shake of her head, Katara opened the nightstand’s small drawer and quickly placed the necklace inside, gently shutting the drawer firmly closed. Her eyes lifted again and immediately caught the shine of the silver rose hairpin that also rested on the nightstand. She stared at it for a while as the trinket brought images of Zuko to her mind. She reached for it, but stopped midway, retracting her arm back to her side. She instead stood up, made her way to the small frozen window in her room, and splayed her fingers against the smooth and cold surface of the ice.

How was she to tell Aang that the reason she could not accept his proposal, the real reason why she could never return his feelings, was due to the undeniable fact that she was deeply in love with Zuko?

Moving away from the window, Katara made her way to her dresser so she could get ready for the day. She wondered if perhaps she could ask her Gran-Gran for advice or even Lady Ursa, but she had no idea on how to begin telling them everything that was bothering her. She was afraid of what they would think of her, being in a relationship with Aang while she was in love with Zuko.

Katara touched the smooth blue pendant of her necklace and sighed. If only her mother still lived, if only she were there to comfort her. Her beloved mother would have listened to her with no judgment in her eyes and with a sympathetic smile on her beautiful face. Even though she loved a firebender, the Fire Lord no less, Katara was positive Kya would have supported her, even though it had been a firebender who had ended her life. She was sure her mother would have adored Zuko—despite his taciturn personality.
“Zuko,” she sighed.

A sad smile appeared on her lips as she remembered the time they had spent together the previous day with the tribe children. She closed her eyes and touched the left side of her chest. The more she learned about Zuko, the more time she was around him, and the more she got to see of him, the more her love for him grew. But it did not matter. Zuko would never return her affections. A sharp pain went through her.

The waterbender opened her eyes and caught the longing expression on her face in the mirror’s reflection. What should she do?

“You're leaving? Why?” Katara asked with a frown as she turned in her seat to stare at the unreadable expression on the silent Fire Lord’s face.

“I received an urgent letter from the Fire Nation and I must return immediately,” Zuko responded coolly without raising his gaze from his plate to look at her. He was afraid of what he would do if he looked at her.

They were eating in the grand house dining room and the morning laughter had died when Zuko had announced that he was leaving the Southern Water Tribe with Lady Ursa, Iroh, and the rest that had come with him. They had tried to persuade him to stay for a while longer, but he had been firm in his decision to leave.

Hakoda and Pakku glanced at each other, both wondering if the young ruler was having even more problems with his country and why had he not asked for their help. Kanna stared at the young Fire Lord with a raised gray eyebrow as she tried to figure out the sudden change in his behavior. Sokka and Suki looked at one another with frowns at the unexpected news before they gazed down at their sleeping twins, carrying one in each of their arms.

Toph crossed her arms over her small chest and scowled deeply since what Zuko had said was true, but she could also sense that he was lying.

What does that mean? Is there another reason why he's leaving? Toph grumbled in her head.

Iroh, Ursa, and Jee looked down at their breakfast plates with confused expressions. They had been informed the previous night about the change of plans by a morose-looking Zuko and they all
wondered what was really going on.

Aang sat quietly in his spot with a calm Momo on his shoulder. He had mixed feelings about Zuko’s departure, and so he had remained silent during the entire meal. On one hand, he felt like he should talk to Zuko about his suspicions and perhaps they could resolve their problems and return to the friendship they shared before, but another part was glad that Zuko was leaving so Katara could pay more attention to him—attention that she had recently been giving Zuko.

However, the one that was most affected by the thought of Zuko’s departure and resulting absence was Katara. Her heart had almost stopped when Zuko announced that he was leaving and she pushed her plate away, no longer hungry as sadness settled in her chest. Why was he leaving all of the sudden and why had he not told her before? Though his presence caused her some pain since she knew they could never be, she did not want him to leave.

“But the Winter Solstice Festival is next week,” Katara said quietly.

Zuko clenched his hands at the sound of Katara’s sweet voice laced with sadness and hurt, and he resisted the urge to go to her and comfort her. It was not his place, but her...future husband’s. His insides twisted painfully at that and he took a quick drink from his cup of wine before he replied to her.

“I know,” he responded with the same impassive tone. “I was really looking forward to it and I apologize for being unable to attend the Winter Solstice Festival.”

*With you,* he added forlornly, still unable to look into those cobalt eyes of hers that he had come to love immensely.

He just couldn’t, afraid he would break down if he were to see the happiness in her eyes due to her...engagement. He wondered why Katara and Aang had not announced the news to everybody, but he was glad they had not said anything yet. That was the reason why he was desperate to leave as soon as possible. He would not be able to bear hearing the news of her upcoming marriage to another, especially coming from the mouth of the woman he was irrevocably in love with.

“We understand. Duty comes first, after all,” Hakoda spoke up since it seemed his daughter would not—or could not—say anything else. “We just hope that you could solve whatever problems that are troubling you.”
“Thank you,” Zuko responded simply as he resumed his breakfast, all except Katara doing the same.

A few hours later, the entire tribe gathered along the docks to bid farewell to the young Fire Lord they had come to respect. The crewmembers ran about the deck of the Fire Nation flagship as they followed the orders Jee was directing to them. A few gray clouds were spread in the morning sky, indicating that snow would descend upon the city soon.

Iroh watched his nephew carefully as he grasped Chief Hakoda’s forearm in farewell while the two exchanged some words. He shifted his eyes to the side and frowned when he saw Katara’s saddened look on her face as she continued to stare at Zuko with a confused expression.

“Iroh,” Ursa’s voice made him looked away so he could glance at her. “Is it true about the urgent message?”

The retired general sighed as he glanced back at his nephew who was now being embraced by Kanna. He would have chuckled when Zuko tensed and awkwardly hugged the old woman back had the situation been different.

“The message was important, but I do not believe it was that urgent that we need to return to the Fire Nation so soon,” he told her.

Ursa frowned as she looked away from her friend’s face as she, too, stared at her son.

“Then why are we leaving?” she asked softly.

“That I do not know, my dear Ursa,” Iroh responded with a deep frown. “Zuko won’t say.”

Katara watched as Zuko said his goodbyes to everybody else and she felt her anxiety grow when he began to near her. There was something off about Zuko and she wondered what it was that had caused him to be acting so strange, so distant, so…cold. Everything had been fine the previous day—he had even played with her and the children—but now he seemed more reserved than usual and he had not smiled once since the morning. She did not like what she was seeing and she was afraid that he was reverting to the way he used to be before.

Zuko moved away from Toph—who had punched his arm when he refused to give her his real reason for leaving—and hesitantly made his way to where Katara was standing. He made sure to
avoid looking into her eyes as he approached her. Some part of him was telling him he was making a
mistake and that he should have a talk with Katara, but another part kept replaying what he had seen
the night before, which made him determined in his decision to leave the Southern Water Tribe,
return to the Fire Nation, and forget everything.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” he stated emotionlessly as he stared at a point over her head.

“Zuko, what’s going on? Why are you acting like this?” Katara hissed quietly as she narrowed her
eyes at him when he kept avoiding looking at her.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Zuko replied in a low tone as his own eyes narrowed. “This is the
way I always am.”

“No, it’s not!” Katara exclaimed low enough for only him to hear. “You’re even more uptight and
colder than ever! That’s not you!”

She sighed when Zuko did not respond.

“Why are you leaving all of a sudden? What happened?” she asked more softly.

Zuko closed his eyes briefly as another flash of Katara and Aang embracing appeared in his mind.

“Nothing happened,” he said dispassionately. “I’m leaving because I am needed in the Fire Nation.”
It was not the whole truth, but he could not tell her the real reason.

“I understand that…” Katara began as she continued to search Zuko’s face for any possible hints as
to why he was acting so strangely toward her.

His behavior was hurting her and she wanted to know why he was behaving in such a way. She had
finally realized that she was in love with him and now it seemed that something was pulling him
away from her. She would never get to tell him what he meant to her.

“Zuko…I…I—”
“I’m sorry I won’t be able to participate in the Winter Solstice Festival,” Zuko interrupted as he glanced back at his flagship that was ready for departure. He briefly glanced at her face and frowned slightly at the look of sadness that he found there before he looked away again. No, he will not raise his hopes up and misinterpret the look to be something it was not.

“Perhaps we’ll see each other soon,” he said.

“Uh, I…” Katara began again and frowned.

“Goodbye, Katara.” Zuko smiled sadly and then in an even more emotionless tone he said, “I wish you much happiness.”

“Huh?” was Katara’s reply as she stared at him, confused. What was that supposed to mean?

Zuko lingered for a second before he turned around and began to quickly make his way to the awaiting ship, motioning for Ursa, Iroh, and the rest to follow him. He had almost reached his arms out to embrace her, but he had been able to stop himself before he caused himself more pain.

Katara watched as the large Fire Nation vessel began to move away from the docks while the people waved and cheered. She stood there unmoving until her brother’s voice reached her ears.

“Did you guys notice that something seemed off about Zuko?” Sokka asked as he turned to look quizzically at his family who was watching the ship sail away as well.

“Zuko, wait!” Katara called out after she came out of her stupor, making all those around her turn their heads in her direction.

Without another thought, she ran forward with her heart racing in her chest as she tried to reach him. She needed to tell him about her true feelings. She needed him to stay. But he had already boarded his flagship and it was almost at the great frozen wall that led to the outside ocean.

“Zuko!” she yelled as she came to a stop at the edge of the dock.
“Wait,” she whispered.

Zuko turned around on deck and moved to the edge of the ship. He noticed Katara standing all alone as she stared after them, though he could barely make out her features he admired the way her hair swirled around her as the wind picked up. He raised an arm and waved sadly as the noon sun made the city before him sparkle. He stood there with the chilly wind blowing around him until the protective ice walls closed after them and Katara’s form disappeared from his view as they moved away from the Southern Water Tribe where he had left the woman he loved and his heart behind.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Toph sighed irritably as she led Katara to her room. They had finished a silent dinner and Toph was worried since Katara had been unusually quiet all day after Zuko left. First Sparky was acting weird and now Sugar Queen, too? What the hell was happening? The small earthbender wrenched the door open and almost shoved the waterbender inside. She was even more concerned when Katara did not start yelling at her for treating her like that, but instead she just made her way to her bed and sat down.

“Okay, Sweetness, spill it,” Toph order as she crossed her arms over her small chest. “What in the hell is going on with you?”

Katara snapped her head up at the demanding tone Toph directed at her and she crossed her own arms as she scowled at her friend.

“It’s nothing, okay? Just leave me alone.”

“The hell I will!” Toph shouted as she stomped her way over to where Katara sat. “I want to know what’s making you act like this.”

When Katara remained silent, the blind young girl sighed loudly and plopped herself next to the waterbender.

“It has something to do with Sparky, huh?” Toph deadpanned.

Katara bit her lip as she tried to maintain her silence, but everything was too much, she needed to confide in someone.

“Toph…I’m in love with Zuko!” she blurted before she could stop herself. She groaned and she
dropped her head onto her hands.

Toph gaped at her for a moment before a huge grin appeared on her face. She laughed and patted Katara’s back almost painfully in her delight.

“It’s about time you finally admit to it!” she exclaimed. “I was seriously beginning to question your intelligence.”

“What? How did you know?” Katara asked as she looked up at her friend with wide eyes.

“Oh, please,” Toph stressed, waving her hand in the hair as she rolled her eyes. “It’s so obvious that it’s making others suspicious! I mean come on! I’m blind and I know!”

The young tribeswoman frowned as she watched her sometimes annoying friend continue to laugh. She looked away and sighed. She tuned out Toph’s laughter as her thoughts returned to Zuko. Why did he act so distant from her? Did she do something wrong?

Toph stopped in her mirth when Katara became quiet again and did not argue back. Her dark eyebrows furrowed on her small face as she tried to figure what had Katara in such a mood.

“Okay, so you love Zuko,” Toph pointed out as she leaned back on the bed with one hand while she cracked the other to get the kinks out. “Why’s that making you all depressed and stuff?”

Katara pursed her lips.

“My love for Zuko is not what’s making me sad, Toph.” She sighed. “It’s the way he was behaving towards me. I just don’t understand what happened to make him act like that. I mean, he was laughing and joking with me yesterday, everything was fine. He…he seemed so…happy.”

“Oh,” Toph said. “I wish I could tell you what happened, but even I don’t know what was going on in Sparky’s head this morning.”

They were silent for a moment before something dawned on Toph that made her frown deeply. What if Katara confessed her feelings to Zuko and he rejected her? That could be the reason he was acting
all weird. Maybe it made him feel uncomfortable.

*Nah, that can’t be it,* Toph dismissed the idea. *I’m pretty sure Sparky would’ve been smiling like a lucky fool if Sugar Queen told him she loved him.*

“Did you tell him what you feel for him?” the short girl asked.

“Of course not!” Katara exclaimed as she shook her head and blushed.

“Well, why not?” Toph demanded. “Don’t tell me you were all scared or whatever that he’d throw your feelings back to your face. I thought you had more guts than that.”

Katara growled irritably as she jumped away from the bed and began to pace the length of the room. She paused for a minute as something else came to her mind and she cringed.

“Does that make me a horrible person?” Katara asked almost in a whisper.

Toph stopped scowling and frowned at the waterbender’s dejected tone.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“I mean…I’m in love with Zuko, but…Aang is my boyfriend. I can’t stop feeling so guilty, and though I know I should break up with Aang, I can’t find it in myself to do it and hurt him. But I also can’t find it in myself to forget Zuko,” Katara said so softly that Toph almost missed what she said even with her great sense of hearing.

“I think the answer is so obvious,” Toph responded with a snort. “You should tell Aang what you really feel for him and let him down gently and then you should tell Zuko that you love him. See? It’s so simple.”

*No, it’s not!* Katara closed her eyes and clenched her hands.

What did Toph think? That she was a heartless woman who was willing to hurt the man that had
loved her for years just so she could run into the arms of another? That she was so strong that she did not feel fear of being rejected? That she had the strength to pour her heart out without caring if her feelings were not reciprocated?

“Toph…please leave. I want to be alone for a while,” she said quietly and sighed.

Toph opened her mouth to retort, but decided against it and snapped her mouth close with a huff.

“Fine, I’ll leave you alone…for now,” she said as she stood up and stomped her way to the door.

Katara sighed once Toph closed the door and left. She sat back down on her bed and glanced at the rose hairpin resting innocently on the surface of her small nightstand. She looked away from it and lay back on her bed, hugging one of the pillows Iroh had given her close to her chest. She laid still like that for a few minutes as she went over her conversation with Toph before one part in particular made her heart ache.

‘Oh, please. It’s so obvious that it’s making others suspicious!’

If what Toph said was true, if she had really been making her feelings for Zuko so obvious, then that meant that Zuko also knew or had noticed. But since he did not say anything, since he did not acknowledge it, then it was just as she had suspected. He did not reciprocate her feelings, he did not love her.

Katara clutched the pillow closer to her as quiet sobs escaped her lips.

Two weeks later found the Fire Nation flagship sailing smoothly over the surface of the clean, wide ocean while the bright sun shone warmly and fresh salty winds blew by. The crew moved around and below deck as they worked to keep the ship going and made sure no unexpected attacks were thrown their way. Though the war no longer raged, pirates continued to roam the seas in hopes of looting a ship for treasures. But aside from that, it was an enjoyable day and the Fire Nation natives were enjoying the weather as it began to get warmer the farther they headed northwest. The only one who seemed unaffected by it was the Fire Lord.

Sitting alone in his lavish cabin behind his large desk, Zuko tried to read the document he held in his hand, but to his aggravation, he was unable to concentrate on the words. As much as he tried, he could not stop replaying what he had seen back in the Southern Water Tribe. Though he had not been able to see Katara and Aang’s expressions since the lighting of the room had been poor, he had no
doubt that their expressions had been joyous. He kept seeing the way Aang had held Katara to him while she had her arms wrapped around him with the golden necklace in her hand.

Enraged, Zuko snarled and he jumped from his seat, throwing a fireball at the steel wall to his left. He breathed hard as he tried to rein in his temper and emotions before he slumped back down in his chair. He shoved the piece of parchment aside and laid his head on the desk as he let out a sigh.

He was angry, but his anger was not directed at either of them, not even Aang, and certainly not Katara. No, he was mad at himself for not acting sooner upon his feelings for Katara, for not confessing his love for her sooner, and for not having the courage to remain in the Southern Water Tribe to be witness to her happiness with another.

‘Oh, Sparky. You’re going to have to face the truth one day and it better be fast because then you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.’

Zuko chuckled humorlessly. Toph had been right. He had not admitted his feelings or acted upon them faster and he regretted it immensely. He had been so foolish to believe that Katara would have waited for him until he finally came up to her and confessed his feelings and wishes for a future together. He had been arrogant in his belief that Katara would immediately jump into his arms and forget about Aang. But most of all, it was stupid of him to believe he actually had a chance with her.

He should have listened to his earthbending friend. Toph was always right. And now he had set himself up for a life of loneliness and misery for his mistake and arrogance.

A knock at his door brought him out of his glum thoughts and he straightened in his chair.

“Enter,” he called out somberly as he picked up the document he previously discarded and began to scan through it.

He looked up to see his uncle close the door behind him and walk into the cabin with a worried expression on his aged face.

“Zuko, I heard a small explosion a while ago and I came to see what happened,” Iroh said as he glanced around the room until he noticed the scorch mark on the wall. “I’ll need to get someone to fix that,” he mused silently.
Iroh looked back toward Zuko before his eyes widened in concern at the dejected look on his nephew’s face.

“Nephew, what is the matter? Are you all right?” he asked in alarm as he rushed to his silent nephew’s side.

“No, I’m not all right,” Zuko replied emotionlessly. “I will never be.”

“What do you mean by that, Zuko?” Iroh asked while his bushy eyebrows furrowed in concern.

When the young man did not reply, Iroh’s unease grew. Zuko had closed himself in his room ever since they left the southern city and the only time he emerged was to check on the crew. He had been unable to make Zuko leave his room to enjoy the fresh air, and not even Ursa was able to sway his mind. It reminded Iroh of the journey they had taken to the Earth Kingdom to arrive at the Abandoned Fort all the months ago and the only ones that had been able to draw him out had been his friends and...Katara.

“Zuko...what is the real reason we left the Southern Water Tribe so suddenly?” Iroh asked curiously.

He watched as his nephew let out a sigh before Zuko closed his eyes and turned away.

“I would only hurt if I stayed.”

Suki smiled as she watched her sister-in-law play with her twin daughters. They were currently in her and Sokka’s room and the baby girls were giggling and gurgling as their aunt cooed at them and gently tickled their cute little faces. Jing cried out joyously and raised her small fists in the air while her younger twin giggled and stuck a fist in her mouth, her hand immediately getting drenched with baby drool. Katara laughed as she pulled Ting’s hand away from her mouth before rubbing Jing’s belly, but the lighter-haired baby just place her wet fist where it had been before.

The young mother smiled wider as she watched her daughters and Katara have their fun before a small frown appeared between her eyebrows. A few weeks had passed since Zuko and his family had left to the Fire Nation, and during that time, Katara had been stuck to her and the twins whenever she did not have waterbending training or meetings with her father and the elders concerning trade with the Fire Nation. Suki had also noticed that there seemed to be this sort of sadness and pain behind Katara’s eyes despite her efforts to hide them with smiles and laughter, and she wondered what was causing it.
“Katara?” Suki called out as she moved away from the bed and walked closer to the crib her children were laying in.

“Yeah?” Katara replied without looking up as she giggled when Jing grabbed her finger and tugged at it.

“What’s wrong?” the female warrior asked.

Katara finally pulled her finger free and looked up to frown at her brother’s wife with confusion written on her face.

“What do you mean?”

Suki let out an exasperated sigh before she replaced Katara’s finger with her own when Jing began to whimper in sadness.

“Come one, Katara! You’ve been acting so quiet and depressed ever since Zuko, Lady Ursa, and Iroh left.”

Katara’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of Zuko’s name and she blushed before she shrugged.

“It’s nothing that serious. I just miss…them,” she replied lowly, but what she had really wanted to say was ‘him’. She missed Zuko badly and she could not stop herself from longing for him.

“Oh,” Suki said as she eyed the waterbender whose mood had darkened again. “Anyway…So… Aang…”

“What about him?” Katara asked warily as she looked back at the twins who were giggling so they could receive attention again.

Suki frowned slightly as she placed a finger on her chin in thought.
“Well…I noticed that Aang seems to be very happy and excited about something.”

Katara shrugged again and looked guiltily down at her mother’s necklace. She had been unable to tell Aang the truth about her feelings since he was preparing his things for his return to the Earth Kingdom while he kept trying to regain her favor the times she consented in spending time with him.

Both young women were interrupted from their conversation when loud voices sounded from outside the room. They looked up when the door was thrown open and Toph marched in with her usual smirk on her porcelain face with a bubbly Ty Lee trailing after her, her long ponytail swishing from side to side as she bounced into the room.

“Toph! Don’t be so loud! You could’ve upset the babies if they had been asleep, and then I’d be the one to have to calm them down from their crying!” Suki exclaimed as she darkly scowled at the unabashed earthbender.

“Eh,” Toph grunted as she shrugged and waved her hand in the air. “I’m not the one who got myself knocked up, so deal with it.”

“Toph!” Katara chided and placed a restraining hand on the Kyoshi warrior, who had taken a menacing step toward the unwavering young girl. Suki sighed and muttered under her breath.

“Aww, they are so adorable!” Ty Lee crooned, unaffected by the actions of the others as she hovered over the giggling babies that had taken a hold of her long hair in their small hands.

“Of course they are,” Suki spoke up smugly.

Katara laughed and Toph snickered as she plopped herself down on the bed since she couldn’t see the little brats anyway.

“Just hope that they don’t inherit Snoozles’s stupidity,” Toph remarked and chuckled as she placed her hands beneath her head. She grinned when the door burst open again.

“Hey! I resent that!” Sokka groused loudly as he entered the room.
“I don’t see why, since it’s the truth,” Toph replied, pretending to examine her nails.

“Why you…” Sokka began before his daughters’ laughter caught his full attention.

He ignored the annoying earthbender as he made his way to his baby girls who laughed and wiggled in their crib as their funny father came into view. Sokka began to coo and make gibberish sounds as he tickled his daughters’ chins.

“See,” Toph piped in as Sokka had a conversation with the babies in unintelligible words, “I rest my case.”

The three other young women giggled when Sokka looked up to glare at Toph, who of course was unable to see or be affected by it.

“I wonder if my babies will be this cute,” Ty Lee mused as a sparkle appeared in her bright, brownish-gray eyes.

“I wonder how your and Haru’s babies would come out with you being all bouncy and stuff and him being all calm and shy,” Toph remarked from her comfortable place on the bed.

The others laughed as the usually talkative acrobat was rendered speechless while a deep blush surfaced on her cheeks as she gaped at the blunt, blind girl. Her momentary lapse of silence was forgotten as the normal smile on her face reappeared and she began to talk rapidly of a possible future with the young earthbending man.

Ty Lee clapped her hands as she enthusiastically said, “Well, then I want dozens of cute babies with my eyes and his hair, or his green eyes and my hair, or with his—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. We get it,” Sokka interrupted as he picked both babies into his arms.

Ty Lee was unfazed as she continued dreaming with a smile on her lips before she turned a bit serious.

“Of course I will pay attention to every one of my children unlike how my parents treated my sisters
and me. And I will love them all, unlike Mai who doesn’t want kids since she can’t stand them.” The acrobat’s large eyes widened. “Oops. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.”

The young tribesman shrugged as he let his daughters pulled at his small beard.

“It’s not like it’s surprising or anything considering how she is,” he stated.

Ty Lee opened her mouth to defend her friend, but was interrupted when Suki spoke up as she grabbed Ting from her father’s arm.

“What’s Mai going to do if she marries Zuko then?” the auburn-haired woman asked curiously.

Toph perked up at this and swiveled her head in Katara’s direction. The waterbender stiffened as her heart clenched painfully in her chest.

“Well…” Ty Lee responded, placing a hand on her cheek as she tried to remember what the noblewoman had told her. She glanced at Katara hesitantly as she continued, “Mai said that she’ll just have the heir. She said that she is sure Zuko doesn’t want too many kids either.”

Katara looked away as she frowned.

I don’t think that’s true. Zuko got along well with the children a few weeks ago. I’m sure he would like more than just one child. She mentally shook her head. I shouldn’t assume things. After all, Zuko had never voiced his opinion about having children to me.

“Is it official, then?” Katara spoke up quietly that it made everybody turn around to look at her.

When Ty Lee asked what she meant, Katara forced herself to say it.

“Is it official that Mai and…Zuko are getting married?” she asked and swallowed thickly. She was afraid of knowing the answer.

Ty Lee shifted from foot to foot as she debated what to say. She had noticed weeks ago that Katara’s
aura had been the same color as Zuko’s had been after the incident with the arctic panther-wolves. But now it was tainted with black just like Zuko’s had been when he had left the Southern Water Tribe. She was confused as to what was going on. She did not want to hurt Katara, but Mai had been her friend for years and she was loyal to her.

“They haven’t made it public,” the young Fire Nation woman replied softly, “but Mai told me that they will very soon.”

Katara felt as if something had stabbed her chest and a cold sensation overcame her body. It became difficult to breathe at the pain she was feeling. They all jumped, startled, when Katara abruptly stood from the chair she had been sitting on before she quickly walked away and left the room.

“What was that about?” Sokka asked as he stared after his sister.

Ty Lee looked down and sighed guiltily. Sokka and Suki looked at each other with confused frowns, but Toph just sighed and left the room as well without giving an answer.

Meanwhile, Katara had raced to her room. Once she had firmly closed the door behind her, she threw herself on her bed and unleashed her anguish in sorrowful tears. She knew she should not have been surprised, after all, Mai already lived in the palace and she had heard Mai talking about them being intimate when they had been heading to the Abandoned Fort. She clenched her eyes tight at the thought of Zuko being with Mai in such a way. It hurt too much. But it just stood to reason that they were ready for marriage.

Tears fell down her cheeks as she clutched her pillow. She harshly scolded herself for thinking that Zuko would leave Mai, for hoping that she had a chance with Zuko, for even wishing that Zuko would love her in return.

“We have received news from the governors in the colonies that reside in the Earth Kingdom, my lord,” Chao addressed the Fire Lord as soon as the other advisor had finished recounting the agricultural procedures in the Fire Nation.

“Proceed,” Zuko responded passively as he sat on the dais behind the fire wall.

Though he really did not want to be sitting all day in the stuffy meeting room listening to some of his advisors babbling, he endured it since he knew he had an obligation to his country. Besides, it would distract him from his depressing thoughts concerning a certain blue-eyed waterbending woman.
“They have reported that Master Haru has done a great job teaching the earthbending residents in the colonies,” Chao continued while a small frown appeared on his aged face at the cold tone of the young Fire Lord. “They are most pleased with the way the people of both races seemed to be getting along.”

There was a snort among the Council members and Zuko’s glare immediately landed on Wei who was pretending to be reading from a scroll he held in his chubby hands. The other advisors shifted uncomfortably in their spots at the irritated and angry look on their lord’s face that seemed to be intensified due to the light and shadows that the wall of fire created.

After a while, Zuko returned his steely gaze to his most trusted advisor and nodded.

“You may continue.”

“Yes, my lord,” Chao responded with a small bow of his head as he picked up one of the letters in his hands. “The governors have also reported that the raiders continued to attack the villages, causing a few damages to crops and buildings outside the protective walls. However, thanks to the training of both firebenders and earthbenders, the raiders have been driven off before any more damage or loss of lives could begin.”

Zuko was silent for a moment before he let out an inaudible sigh.

“I am glad to know my people are no longer in too much danger,” he said.

Though his usual tone was even more emotionless and stoic than normal, the men could see that he was indeed glad.

“Is there anything else, Advisor Chao?” Zuko asked.

“That is all, my lord,” Chao responded as he bowed again before he sat back down on his cushion among the other advisors who sat in two lines facing across from each other.

Zuko nodded again before he looked around the room with cold, amber eyes.
“If there is nothing else to discuss, then the meeting is over,” he said dispassionately as he prepared to stand up from his elaborate cushion so he could descend the few step from the dais and leave the room.

“There is one more thing to discuss, Young One,” Wei’s grating voice irritated Zuko’s ears.

Zuko resisted the urge to hurl a fireball at the old advisor for the name, but instead he clenched his hands as he sat back down. The young Fire Lord glared at Wei and raised an eyebrow to command him to continue.

“As we all very well know, your twenty-first birthday is in a couple of months,” Wei began as he stood up from his spot to walk leisurely in front of the fire wall.

When the Fire Lord remained silent, Wei hid a smirk as he stood directly in front of the young man.

“And yet you have not chosen a wife and produced an heir. Is it not about time that you do? I am sure we do not need to remind you that if you do not marry soon we will have to choose a Fire Lady for you.”

The men jumped when Zuko snarled as he rose to his feet and seemed to loom over them due to his height and from standing on the raised platform.

“I’ll choose a Fire Lady when the time comes, and I will not allow anyone to pressure me into choosing my own wife!” Zuko growled angrily, the flames before him almost rising to the ceiling in his fury.

The advisors gaped in surprise at his fierce reaction as the young Fire Lord parted the blazing fire wall and strode down the dais before marching away from the suddenly silent meeting room. Wei smirked and Chao glared at him before he worriedly looked after the angry young man.

Zuko ignored everybody he passed as he made his way to his royal bedchambers in swift strides. One of his personal guards opened one door quickly as they noticed the murderous look on their lord’s face. Once he passed through and the door was shut, the guards looked at each other and silently prayed that they would not suffer their lord’s wrath for whatever had caused his dark mood this time.
Opening the other set of identical golden doors, Zuko slammed it shut before he took off his robe and threw it to the side, uncaring of where it landed. He walked angrily toward the fireplace on one wall and leaned his arm on the mantelpiece as he stared at the flames with glowing, golden eyes filled with outrage.

“How dare that fool try to force me into marriage?” Zuko growled. “I’ll choose a wife when I’m good and ready, dammit!”

The flames in the fireplace rose and a few embers floated in the air. Zuko noticed and took a deep breath to rein in his temper. Pulling away from the mantelpiece, he made his way to his bed and sat down heavily on it. Maybe he should not have reacted so heatedly in front of his advisors since he knew it was inevitable. As Fire Lord, it was expected of him to find a Fire Lady so they could produce an heir that will continue to rule the Fire Nation after his death.

But he could not stop himself from becoming angry when they brought up the subject. He did not want to marry and tie himself to any of the flimsy women the noblemen presented him or wanted to choose for him. What was he going to do? Maybe Mai would be the only possible solution to his problem. She was the perfect example of a true noblewoman and what the Fire Lady should be, and she loved him. He sighed guiltily since he had not thought about his ‘girlfriend’ ever since they had taken a small break from their relationship.

Maybe when she came back, he could try to work in their relationship and perhaps one day announced her as the future Fire Lady? Zuko shook his head and dropped his head on his hands. No. He just couldn’t. He did not want Mai.

He wanted, needed, and longed for Katara. She was the only woman he wanted by his side, the only one he wanted as his wife and Fire Lady, the only woman who had his love and held his heart. Ever since he left the Southern Water Tribe and returned to the Fire Nation, Katara was the only one who was in his mind all day. He could not stop thinking about her even though he had ordered himself to. By day in his silent study and at night in his lonely bedchamber, her image would come between him and the papers he strove to read or the sleep he tried to gain. The syllables of her beautiful name would call to him through the silence in which his soul relished and it would cast a sort of melancholic enchantment over him.

He had not visited the Royal Palace Garden ever since he returned, for it brought too many memories of her. He was sure that if he saw the many flowers that decorated the garden, especially the rosebushes, he would only see the way she had bent down to delicately sniff the sweet fragrance of the elegant, red roses…
If he gazed down into the clear and peaceful pond, he would remember the night they had stood under the full moon while petals from the cherry blossom tree fell around them as she sought to comfort him from his fear while she gently caressed his scarred cheek with her soft hand…

Zuko blinked and shook his head. No. He was only hurting himself. He had to stop thinking. He had to stop remembering. He had to stop…loving her.

He looked over at the closed curtains that blocked the balcony from view to where his private garden rested below it. Zuko sighed again.

If only it was so easy, he thought.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Most of the grand house was silent since everybody had either gone outside or retired early to their rooms. Sokka and Suki had decided to finally take the twins into the city so they could be greeted and lavished upon by the tribe people and the few guests that remained. Katara had decided to go along with them.

Toph’s bare feet carried her down the corridors of the frozen structure and, though the marble floor was chilly to the soles of her feet, it was better than going outside in the cold snow where she had to wear boots, which impeded her from ‘seeing’ where she was going or what was happening around her.

Toph was on a mission to find a certain airbender. She was not sleepy so she refused to just lay there in her room and she did not want to go outside only to become disoriented as somebody led her around like a helpless child while her face became numb from the cold. It was not that she disliked the Southern Water Tribe, quite the contrary, she like the amiable people she encountered, the unique and delicious food she was given, and the fresh and clean scent that reached her sensitive nose. The problem was that the freezing climate irritated her and her feet longed to bury themselves in warm soil while her senses became restored.

Where in the world is Twinkletoes? Toph grumbled mentally as she continued on her march.

After Katara had left with the young parents and their daughters, Aang had disappeared for a few hours, and the blind earthbender was getting really irritated since she had told him that they needed to talk about heading to some of the villages in the southwestern part of the Earth Kingdom that seemed to need their help. Aang had received a message two days ago about a problem in a village, and even though he had been determined to go offer some aid, the young monk would avoid her when she brought it up, almost as if he did not want to leave the South Pole.
The young girl grinned as she neared one of the sitting rooms and her senses picked up the familiar rhythm of Aang’s energetic heartbeat. Toph stomped her way inside the room, and by the vibrations she picked up from the stone floor, she was able to ‘see’ that Aang was sitting crossed-legged in the middle of the room, as if in meditation. She wondered if perhaps she should let him be for a while, but when she caught the unsteady beat of his heart and heard low grumbles come from him, she knew without a doubt that he was sulking.

“What’s wrong now, Twinkletoes?” Toph exclaimed loudly as she came up behind him to stand with crossed arms beside his sitting form. It was her way of showing her concern.

Aang jumped and yelped in surprise before he turned to scowl at the girl that had a raised eyebrow aimed at him.

“It’s none of your business!” he snapped at her as he crossed his own arms over his chest.

“Hey, don’t you talk to me like that!” Toph barked as she raised a fist at him. “I just wanted to help, but you can just forget it!”

She turned around to stalk angrily away from the room and away from the jerk, but she froze when Aang’s hand shot out and grabbed her wrist.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you,” Aang apologized quietly. The young airbender marveled at how thin and delicate Toph’s wrist was despite her rough and strong attitude.

Toph felt heat rise on her cheeks at the contact, but she quickly wrenched her arm away with a snort before she crossed her arms over her chest, resisting the urge to touch the skin where Aang had grabbed her. What the hell?

“Whatever. Are you gonna tell me what’s wrong with you or what?” she asked as she pretended to find an interest on the floor in order to hide the blush she knew was there. Did she hit her head or something?

Aang pressed his lips together as he debated whether to tell Toph what was bothering him or not. Finally, he sighed.
“I’m just frustrated with Katara because she’s avoiding me again and I don’t know why.”

Toph let out a sigh of her own as she ungracefully dropped herself on the floor to sit opposite the pouting Avatar. Seriously, sometimes Aang could be very wise for someone as young as him that it never failed to amaze her, but other times he was so clueless that it caused her to want to throttle him! Or was it perhaps that he pretended he did not understand and instead chose to believe whatever he wanted? Did Aang not see that Katara did not return his feelings and was avoiding him because she felt guilty being near him while she pined for another?

“I asked Katara to marry me,” Aang said softly after a few minutes of silence.

Toph stiffened at his words and her mouth flew open.

_What? When? Why didn’t Sugar Queen tell me?_ she thought. _Was this perhaps the reason why Sparky left? Did he somehow found out and was unable to bear the news? But that couldn’t be because then Katara would’ve said something about accepting Aang’s proposal._

“What did Sweetness say?” Toph asked with a frown.

She heard Aang sighed sadly before he replied.

“Katara rejected me.”

“What? Really?” the young woman asked as both her eyebrows rose on her forehead and a smile broke on her face.

She was puzzled at the happiness she felt at the news before her smile quickly vanished, and she scowled. Of course, she was glad because it meant that Katara and Zuko still had a chance to be together and be happy. Again, it had nothing to do with Aang finally being single.

“She said that she was not ready and then…and then she…and then she told me that she didn’t…love me,” Aang stammered brokenly that it even made Toph wince at the sorrowful tone to it.

The earthbender sighed.
“Oh, Aang—” she began, but was interrupted when the young man jumped lightly to his feet.

“But I know that she didn’t mean it!” Aang reassured.

Toph wondered if he was reassuring her or himself.

“She just needs some time to gather her thoughts and realize that she’s just confused and that she does love me!” Aang continued.

Toph opened her mouth to argue, but scowled when Aang just moved away from her and began to pace the room frantically, muttering quietly to himself.

“And then I’ll propose to her again and this time she’ll accept!” Aang continued with a wistful smile on his young face. “I mean what’s there to wait for? We love each other and we’re meant to be together.”

Toph stood up from her spot on the floor and placed a hand on Aang’s shoulders, effectively making him pause in his pacing. Aang looked down at Toph in surprise and gaped at the serious expression on her porcelain face.

“Have you ever thought that maybe that’s what you keep telling yourself?” Toph stated casually as she squeezed his shoulder.

Aang pulled away from her with an annoyed growl and, turning away, he began to walk to the entrance of the room.

“I know what I said is right. Katara loves me and we will get married one day,” he repeated himself stubbornly before he disappeared.

Toph stood silently in the middle of the room as she listened to Aang’s footsteps until they faded from her senses. With a huge sigh, Toph shook her head as she, too, exited the room.
They still needed to talk about heading to the Earth Kingdom, though.

Guards stiffened in their posts and servants scurried away with haste as the Fire Lord exited the throne room and made his way down the golden corridor toward the western wing of the Fire Nation Palace. Everybody seemed to be walking on eggshells around the young lord ever since his return. It seemed that he had little patience for anything nowadays and nobody wanted to bring on the wrath of their temperamental lord. No one knew what could have happened in the Southern Water Tribe to make him change so. They all wondered if he would ever revert back to the cool and impassive way he was before or if his current angry and volatile behavior would be permanent.

Zuko strode down the hallway with a dark scowl on his face, his amber eyes blazing in hardly controlled anger. He barely noticed the frightened servants he passed, trying to give him a wide berth while cowering as if trying to escape his notice. He occupied his thoughts with what he had learned in the meeting with his advisors as he continued on his way to his royal bedchambers. Trade with both the Water Tribes and the Earth Kingdom seemed to be going well, much better than it had years before when he had recently ascended the throne, and he was glad it had to do with his meeting with the Earth King and both Chiefs of the Water Tribes. His scowl deepened, however, for the thought of the Water Tribes always brought pain as well as warmth to his heart despite the fact that he had tried very hard to numb his feelings and shove them away.

His pace slowed slightly when he came upon the guest wing like it always did when he passed it in order to reach his room. Every time he walked on this part of the palace he always tried to keep his gaze ahead of himself when he came near the room a certain waterbender had slept in a few months ago. And every time he did, he failed miserably and ended up looking at the door to the room anyway as memories resurfaced in his mind.

Memories of how he had stared at the sleeping waterbender while he fought himself from leaning down to capture her lips with his.

And just like always he would shake his head from his thoughts as his gaze landed on the closed door while he resisted the urge to walked up to it and enter the empty room where he knew the woman he loved would not be sleeping soundly or waiting for him in. And at the same thought he always had, he turned away from the door and continued on his silent march with a stony expression on his face.

He nodded at his personal guards once he reached his rooms and entered without a word when they hastily opened the golden door. His gaze softened slightly when he saw his mother and uncle in the antechamber, sitting at a low table in the center of the room as they waited to dine with him. He had taken up eating in his rooms again since more memories would surface if he used the family dining hall. Besides, the table was too large for just three people to have dinner.
“Mother. Uncle,” Zuko greeted them dispassionately as he gracefully sank down on the cushion at what could be called the head of the table.

As soon as the Fire Lord sat down, Jiao and a short-haired servant moved forward, opened the lids to the food dishes and plates, and quickly began to serve the small royal family. Once finished, the two women bowed and excused themselves when Zuko absentmindedly nodded at them. They stepped outside the room and waited with the guards for the meal to finish so they could clean everything up. Jiao exchanged a knowing look with the two soldiers at the doors and the three frowned at the change in their respected and admired lord.

Zuko picked up his chopsticks when the servants left and the door was closed, and he stared blankly at the food placed in his plate before him. Without another word, he began to eat, occasionally picking up his cup of wine to take a drink of the burning, red liquid. Iroh and Ursa shared a worried look at the lifelessness in the young man’s eyes and how he seemed to be eating automatically.

Iroh cleared his throat loudly, and when his nephew looked up, the old man spoke.

“Nephew, is everything all right?”

Zuko stared at him for a brief moment before he gazed down uninterestingly at his plate.

“Yes,” he replied passively.

Ursa slammed her teacup down on the smooth, wooden table, causing the plates and utensils to rattle and the soup and tea to swoosh in their containers. Iroh calmly took a bite of the food from his chopsticks while Zuko snapped his head up and his eyes widened at his usually gentle and quiet mother who had her eyes narrowed down at him.

“I finally have had enough, Zuko!” she exclaimed angrily as she scolded her son with a glare. “I hate seeing you like…like…” she paused as she waved a hand at him, trying to find the words to describe his current state, “this. Please, my son. Tell us what is happening to you.”

Zuko looked away from the worried look on his mother’s irritated face. He felt slightly guilty for making her and his uncle worry, and he really wish he could tell them how horrible and miserable he was feeling at the moment, but he just could not find it in himself to speak. He still found it hard to talk about his feelings and open himself up to others, and the one person that he was willing to reveal so much about himself was the one person who was making him feel so depressed and the one
whom he was currently trying to forget.

Looking back down at the table, Zuko gazed at his reflection on the surface of his cup of wine and glared at himself.

“It’s nothing, Mother,” he finally answered her and looked away from the red liquid. “It’s nothing for either of you to worry about.”

Ursa looked back at her old friend, who had been silent during the entire time, and silently pleaded for him to help her. Iroh returned her concerned look before he took a sip of his tea, and once he swallowed the soothing liquid, he placed the cup gently down on the table.

“Zuko,” he finally spoke in a calm and soft tone. “Does your behavior have anything to do with Miss Katara?” he asked.

Zuko stiffened visibly and looked away, unknowingly answering Iroh’s question by his reaction and silence.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Zuko muttered as he stood up from his spot, “I’m going to retire for the night.” He stood up, turned around, and began to make his way to the other set of doors that led to his bedroom.

“You’re in love with Katara, are you not, Fire Lord Zuko?” Iroh stated calmly. He smiled when Zuko tensed and stopped in his tracks with his back turned toward them. “Your feelings for her have been obvious for a long time, Nephew.”

Zuko closed his eyes before he let out a soft sigh.

“Yes…I am,” he confessed softly without glancing back.

Iroh and Ursa glanced at each other with pleased smiles at the fact that he had finally admitted his feelings for the Water Tribe woman both had come to care for.

“Then why are you so…sad?” Ursa asked gently as she looked at her son’s back with a concerned
frown. “Did…did Katara…reject you?”

Zuko let out a humorless chuckle and shrugged lightly.

“Katara doesn’t even know how I feel about her,” he answered truthfully. “And she never will since she’s…marrying Aang,” he added bitterly.

“What?” Ursa gasped. “How can that be? Are you sure?”

“I saw them embracing and Katara had the betrothal necklace Aang had showed me before in her hand!” Zuko almost growled out. “What other explanation is there?”

“Zuko, maybe what you saw wasn’t what you think it was,” Iroh reasoned as he mentally willed his nephew to turn around and look at them. “We would have known by now if they were engaged. Besides, we’re sure Katara loves—”

“I don’t know why they haven’t announced their engagement yet,” Zuko interrupted, vaguely listening to what his uncle was about to say. He did not want to be reminded that Katara loved Aang. “But I’m sure they will eventually.”

Before either his mother or his uncle could say anything else, Zuko made his way to his room again where he opened one door and sighed.

“Please…I don’t want to talk about it,” he said quietly before he entered and silently closed the door behind him.

Silence permeated the antechamber for a moment before the only ones left in the room looked at each other with bewildered and concerned expressions.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sitting among a pile of papers and different types of elaborate cloths in a large sitting room, Iroh and Ursa tried to determine what would be best for Zuko’s upcoming twenty-first birthday the following month. Iroh furrowed his eyebrows in concentration as he wrote down everything he thought was needed—as well as what was not—on the piles of scrolls that surrounded him on the table they were sitting at.
I wonder if Zuko would like the singing nomads Aang had told me about once to be the musical entertainment for the night, Iroh mused with a small grin before he shook his head. Zuko would probably throw them out.

“Iroh dear,” Ursa called out from her end of the table. She critically looked at the different kinds of fabrics made of various designs and shades of red and gold that the servants would hold out for her or move away if she did not like them.

When Iroh looked up from his paper, Ursa held out piece of material made of a dark wine color with intricate patterns woven in gold and black thread.

“Do you think this would look nice as the tablecloths?” she asked.

Iroh examined the material and nodded with a bright smile on his face.

“I think it would look wonderful,” he exclaimed.

Servants scurried back and forth, as they went about doing their lord’s family members’ biding. Invitations were sent, the cooks were told ahead of time of the menu that was to be served, florists were called, and musicians were searched for.

Four months had passed since they left the Southern Water Tribe and returned to the Fire Nation. Iroh and Ursa were busy as they strove to have everything ready and perfect for Zuko’s celebration. The entire nation was excited since their young Fire Lord had never had a celebration for his birth ever since he took up the throne and they all looked forward to the festivities. Zuko had refused to have a celebration this year just like he did in the past, claiming that his country’s economy and wellbeing was much more important than a lavish party, but Iroh argued that the Fire Nation was doing extremely well and the economy would not suffer if they gave him a party. Ursa then had told him that they had been separated from each other for so many years and it would make her happy if he allowed them to throw a celebration for him to make up all those years of her absence in his life, and with that, Zuko had relented.

The real reason, though, why they were insistent on giving Zuko a party was so that perhaps he could relax and enjoy himself for a change. Ever since they had returned and they had learned of what Zuko saw—or thought he saw—back in the Southern Water Tribe he had become more withdrawn and angrier than ever. The Royal advisors, courtiers, and servants were almost afraid of him due to his sudden terrible temper. He had almost fired a couple of servants and advisors if it had not been for Iroh’s intervention, and he had made a few of the young noblewomen cry or storm away in outrage when they had tried to flirt with him. He refused to eat in the royal family dining
room, avoided visiting his private garden, buried himself in paperwork, and trained all the time when he had no political business to attend to in the throne room. Overall, it was not good and everybody was worried for him.

“Iroh?” Ursa called out again in a soft tone as she dismissed the servants with the pieces of cloth she did not like.

“Yes?”

“Did you send the invitation to Zuko’s celebration to the Southern Water Tribe already?” she asked as she looked at her old friend meaningfully.

Iroh, too, looked up and nodded.

“It was the first invitation I sent out,” he replied with a small glint in his golden eyes.

Both smiled at each other with significant looks before they continued in their task to make the party as perfect as it could be for the young man they worried for and loved so much. They were convinced that the only one that could bring Zuko back was Katara and they were looking forward to the day both young benders would meet again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The Fire Nation sun began to make its descent towards the west. The bright sun was getting a bit warmer and stronger since winter was over and spring was approaching, but the warm weather seemed not to be acknowledged by the Fire Lord as he continued to practice his fiery element, despite the fact that he was perspiring profusely and his muscles screamed for him to take a break. He also ignored the obvious weary grimace his admiral wore on his face as he tried to keep up sparring with him.

Standing to the side of the large training arena, Iroh and Chao watched with frowns on their faces as Zuko hurled attack after attack toward Jee and easily evaded the ones the older man sent his way. Though they had to admit that the young Fire Lord was firebending magnificently and his control on his element was admirable, both old men were not pleased that he seemed to be driving himself too hard and they were afraid he would collapse at any moment.

Zuko dove to one side when Jee tried to punch his jaw and quickly righted himself before he sent a powerful kick to Jee’s torso when the older firebender pivoted around. The admiral barely had time to cross his arms in front of himself in order to protect his chest, but was unprepared for the force of
the kick and he was sent flying backwards. He landed on his back on the stone ground and skidded on the smooth yet grainy surface for a few seconds because of the blow. He panted heavily from the exertion and groaned in pain when he sat up.

“Admiral Jee, are you all right?” Zuko asked with a frown as he reached a hand down to pull the older man up.

Jee winced as his back protested at the movement, positive he was going to have a bruise the following day, but he refused to cry out in front of his lord.

“I am fine, my lord,” he answered as he tried to straightened out. “I just can’t keep up with you anymore.” He smiled slightly.

Zuko nodded as he stepped back to give the winded man some space.

“Thank you for the training, Admiral Jee. I think you deserve some rest for the moment before you stand guard of my mother again.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Jee responded.

He bowed briefly before he walked away to his room to get some rest before he resumed his task as Lady Ursa’s personal guard. A few servants rushed to his side and handed him a towel and a cup of water, both of which he gratefully took before he stepped into the palace.

Iroh and Chao frowned even deeper when Zuko picked up his dual broadswords that he had placed to the side before he stepped back into the middle of the arena and resumed his vigorous training by himself since nobody else was able to keep up with him.

Chao glanced over at his old friend as he stroked his chin.

“Iroh, what is wrong with Fire Lord Zuko? Everyone in the palace is worried for our young lord since he has been acting so strange lately,” he stated curiously.

Iroh slid his hands inside his long sleeves and sighed heavily.
“I wish I really knew, my friend,” he replied with a low tone. What really happened in the Southern Water Tribe?

“Perhaps it is the news about the new attacks from the raiders in the colonies?” Chao pondered.

“No, it’s not that,” Iroh said with a shake of his head. “It’s something much graver than that.”

Both men looked back to the lone figure training in the arena without pausing in any of his vigorous moves. They were silent for a moment before Iroh huffed and narrowed his eyes. He was tired of seeing his nephew like this.

“Chao, I need to talk to Fire Lord Zuko in private,” the retired general said solemnly.

Chao looked over at the somber look on his old friend’s face and nodded before he walked back inside the palace. Iroh watched a minute longer as his nephew kept slicing the air while he channeled fire from his hands and into his swords. The Dragon of the West squared his shoulders and approached his young nephew with determined steps.

Zuko spun around, slashing the air with his flaming sword, but he paused when he caught sight of his uncle walking toward him. He did not want to stop, for when he did, thoughts, memories, and images about her would start playing in his head. But, nonetheless, he lowered his swords and straightened himself out as he waited to see what his uncle wanted to make him pause in his training.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” Iroh began and Zuko knew it had to be something serious if his uncle addressed him formally, “We need to talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” the younger firebender growled and turned away since he knew what it was his uncle wanted to discuss.

“Yes, there is, Zuko,” Iroh insisted firmly.

Zuko briefly glanced at his uncle who had narrowed eyes trained on him before he looked away to dismiss his servants and guards. Once the training arena was empty except for the two of them, Zuko looked back at his aged uncle and raised a dark eyebrow.
“Nephew,” Iroh began with a concerned frown, “Please. Tell me what is really going on. You are worrying everybody.”

Zuko shrugged.

“It’s none of their concern,” he responded stoically.

Iroh took a deep breath in order to calm himself down and not slap his stubborn nephew upside his head.

“Of course it’s our concern! We are all worried for you, especially your mother and me. Zuko… when will you return to the way you were before? When will you stop being so…sullen?”

Zuko looked away and glared at the darkening sky above.

_I will never return to the way I was before. Not until I have Katara at my side_, he thought before he closed his eyes, _Which will never happen._

“You must overcome whatever happened in the Southern Water Tribe with Katara and find a way to live your life again, Nephew. Perhaps the best way is by admitting to Katara your love for her,” the older firebender said, exasperated.

When the young man refused to talk, Iroh cried out, “You are destroying yourself, Zuko!”

Zuko snarled as he spun around and released a fire blast that exploded against the wall on the opposite side of the training arena before he threw his swords aside and slumped to the floor with his head in his hands. Iroh ran to him with a small cry and knelt next to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“Why?” Zuko whispered brokenly. “Why is love so incurable? Why does it have to hurt so much? Why is love so painful?”
Zuko raised his head from his hands and looked up at his uncle desperately, making the old man gasp at what he saw. Iroh frowned sadly as he realized that the anger Zuko had in his eyes disappeared and was replaced by incredible pain and sadness. He realized Zuko had hid behind his mask so he could conceal his hurt as anger just like he had done all those years ago.

“Nephew,” Iroh spoke softly as he squeezed the desolate young firebender’s shoulder. “Love is never easy, and most of the time, it will bring heartaches and anguish. But I want you to know that if you fight for it and never give up, all that pain, all that suffering, will be worth it in the end,” he said as he gazed carefully into the austere young man’s eyes. “Or would you have preferred to have lived your life without knowing what love is? Would you have preferred never to have fallen in love with Katara?”

Zuko looked away from his uncle’s wise eyes and looked down at his clenched hands. He was silent for a long moment as he tried to think over what his mentor and father figure had said. Would he have preferred never to have known what love is in order not to feel pain? Would he prefer not to love Katara?

“No,” Zuko finally replied in a low tone as he glanced back at his uncle who was now sitting by his side. “I don’t prefer to have never known Katara or never have fallen in love with her. I don’t regret my feelings for her and I will always love her despite the pain it causes me.”

With a groan, Zuko dropped his head back into his hands and sighed deeply.

“I don’t know what to do anymore, Uncle.”

He tilted his head back to gaze at the sky, which was a combination of golden and red hues and dark purples and blues.

“I can’t get her out of my head,” Zuko almost whispered and Iroh noticed that his nephew was thinking to himself by the faraway look in his eyes and the soft manner in which he spoke.

“What would I give just to kiss her? Just to hold her in my arms one more time? I don’t want to lose her. She’s everything to me…” Zuko trailed off before he blinked and looked back down to glare at the ground. “Yet there’s nothing I can do. She’s not mine to have.”

Iroh placed his hands inside his sleeves and stayed silent for a moment as he watched the way his nephew seemed to keep torturing himself. He was not surprised that Zuko had misinterpreted what
had happened that day in the Southern Water Tribe, and yes, Iroh was positive Zuko had misunderstood because he would bet on his life that Katara loved Zuko. His nephew had endured hate and abhorrence from many people like Ozai and Azula since a young age, and Iroh had a feeling that the young man somehow felt that someone like Katara could never love someone like him.

He cleared his throat and sighed.

“Zuko, I know you think that you have lost Katara forever, but trust me when I say that you have not…at least not yet.”

“Why do you say that, Uncle?” the Fire Lord asked with a frown.

“I can’t tell you why because it is something between Katara and you,” Iroh began before he continued with a serious frown, “Zuko, you will never find peace and happiness if you don’t tell Katara you love her and find out what her response truly is.”

Katara watched with a proud smile on her face as her young waterbending students strove to complete the bending moves she had instructed them into doing before a melancholy sigh escaped between her lips. In a few years, the children would no longer be her students as they either decided to make their livings as normal citizens with jobs or become warriors for the tribe. If they decided to be Water Tribe warriors, then the older warriors, and occasionally her brother and Pakku, would take up their lessons. Her job was to ensure that the children learned the basics of waterbending and learned how to control their elements, encouraging them to embrace what they were.

Katara sighed at the memory of that time in the Fire Nation garden where she had told the same thing to Zuko. A small tear fell from her eyes and trailed down her cheek, but she angrily wiped it away before the children could notice it and become worried.

Why? Why could she not stop thinking about Zuko even after all the times she had told herself he was not meant for her? Why did she keep hurting herself by dreaming about him and the life and children they could have if only he were able to love her back?

Spirits, how much more pitiful can she be?

The children’s excited laughter reached her ears as they succeeded in accomplishing the most difficult part of their training for the week. She shoved her previous thoughts from her mind as she smiled down at the children with an approving smile.
“You all did excellent today! I’m so proud of you,” Katara told them sincerely and grinned when some of the boys puffed out their chest in pride while some of the girls blushed bashfully at the praise. “Class is dismissed. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Master Katara!” the children chorused enthusiastically as they raced away from the training area to either go play or go home and eat.

For the past few months, the curious children had constantly asked her why the Fire Lord had left so early. Her heart had warmed at the saddened and disappointed looks they gave her when she told them he had a responsibility to the Fire Nation and did not know if he was coming back for a visit soon. The truth was that it was the same thing that she asked herself every day since Zuko had left with that strange and cold behavior.

A small tug on her sleeve snapped Katara out of her thoughts and she looked down to see Lien looking up at her with a small frown on her young face.

“Lady Katara, are you okay?” Lien asked quietly as she tilted her head to the side.

Katara smiled down at the child and nodded.

“Yes, I’m fine, Lien. Why do you ask?”

The small girl’s thin eyebrows furrowed as she tried to explain to the young woman what she had in mind before she raised her head again and frowned.

“You aren’t the same Lady Katara since Fire Lord Zuko left,” she replied simply.

Katara’s eyes widened and she gaped lightly in surprise at the young child staring up at her before she looked away and sighed. Had she been that obvious? It only made her sadder. Looking back down at Lien, Katara opened her mouth to respond, but closed it again since she did not know what to say. She watched as Lien’s serious expression changed and turned into the delight and enthusiasm of a normal child.

“Are you…uh…” Lien began as she scrunched up her small nose as she tried to remember the word she was looking for before she smiled again, “breaking up with Avatar Aang to marry Fire Lord Zuko?” The small girl excitedly clapped her gloved hands.
“W-What?” Katara stuttered as she stared wide-eyed at the grinning girl in shock. “What makes you think that?”

Lien giggled at the funny look on the waterbending woman’s face as she gushed out, “You were staring at Fire Lord Zuko with big goo-goo eyes!”

“No I wasn’t!” Katara denied, horrified.

“Yes, you were, Lady Katara!” Lien argued back with another giggle.

Katara was about to retort before she rolled her eyes at herself for arguing with a child as if she were a little girl, too. She had to admit she was amazed at how children could be so intuitive at times as she stared at Lien who stared at her back with a large smile on her face.

“It would be nice if you married him,” Lien said suddenly.

“Why?” Katara asked, though she thought it would be wonderful to be Zuko’s wife, too.

The little girl looked up at her as if there was something wrong with the older woman’s head before she smiled with large, adoring eyes.

“Because you’ll marry a handsome and brave man who’s very nice and a strong warrior, too! And then you will live happily ever after!” she exclaimed dreamily at the thought. It would be like the stories about the handsome prince who saved the princess her mama told her when she went to sleep.

Katara smiled ruefully at the idolization in Lien’s eyes. If only everything could be as simple as children saw it. If only life could be so easy and she could have everything she desired, but she couldn’t because she was not that selfish and because life did not work that way.

“That sounds very nice, Lien,” Katara began quietly. “But it can’t be that way.”

“Why not?” Lien asked with a small pout.
Katara looked up at the bright sun in the sky before it was hidden from view by dark clouds.

“Because Fire Lord Zuko doesn’t have feelings for me like I…have for him.”

“Yes he does!” the small girl disagreed, making Katara blink down at her in surprise. “He wouldn’t stop staring at you! And then when you fell down he looked so worried! And then when you were both staring at each other it looked like he was gonna kiss you!”

Katara gasped and blushed deeply at the blunt manner in which the little girl had spoken. It vaguely reminded her of Toph before her thoughts wandered off. Katara touched her lips as she looked in the direction where the penguins lived and where Zuko and she had spent a day with the children. And how it had looked like Zuko wanted to kiss her when they had fallen on the soft snow.

Katara blushed again at her thoughts as she continued to touch her lips. It reminded her of the other times she had been with Zuko, such as when they were in the Royal Palace Garden or after their spar on his flagship where it seemed as if he had almost leaned over to kiss her. Would he have kissed her this time if the children had not interrupted them?

No, he wouldn’t have because he had to like me more than just a friend to do that, Katara thought with a sad frown. Even if I would’ve liked it, loved it really, if he had kissed me. I have to stop thinking and wishing things like this. I can’t let myself hope only to set up myself for more hurt and pain in the end.

“Lady Katara?” Lien called out worriedly when she noticed the older woman’s eyes begin to get watery.

“Lien, can I ask you to do something for me?” Katara asked instead as she composed herself.

“Okay!” the small child enthused happily.

“Don’t tell anybody about anything we said today, okay?” she asked softly.

“But Lady—’’
“Please, Lien? Promise?” Katara insisted gently.

Lien frowned deeply, her young face looking a lot older when she did that.

“I promise,” she replied in a low tone.

“Thanks,” the waterbender said with a small smile. “I think it’s time you go home and eat.”

“Okay,” Lien grumbled before another grin found its way to her lips. “But I know what I said about you and Fire Lord Zuko is true!” she exclaimed before she raced back toward the city.

Katara stared after the little girl and sighed heavily. If Lien had noticed that something was wrong with her, then that meant that her family and friends had noticed it as well and were probably worried about her. She had to get a hold of herself and her emotions so she could stop worrying them, she needed to toughen up and continue with her life. Maybe she could give Aang another chance and give their relationship another shot. He loved and needed her.

She closed her eyes and touched the left side of her chest over her heavy heart. But she knew that she would be miserable in the inside and she knew she would never be able to stop loving Zuko.

Shaking her head, the waterbender left the arena and aimlessly roamed the city for a few hours before she finally made her way to her home when dinnertime approached. After taking a few bites of her dinner, she excused herself and headed to her room, oblivious to the concerned looks her family threw after her.

Once she entered her room, Katara sat quietly on the edge of her bed in the semi-dark room, the only light coming from the full moon from the frozen window. She thought about the past weeks and sighed. Aang and Toph had left a few months ago and during the time they had been in the Southern Water Tribe, Aang had been nonstop trying to win her over again. Katara reached into her nightstand’s drawer, pulled out the golden necklace, and frowned at it. She had tried to return it to him and tell him their relationship was over, but every time she even made a hint about it, Aang would start talking rapidly about something else before he would make a hasty retreat.

She touched the yellow topaz stone and frowned even more at it. She had to admit it was a very beautiful necklace, but she just could not bring herself to accept and like it. She let out a wistful sigh. If only it could be Zuko’s necklace that she was holding and it was he that was asking for her hand.
in marriage. Shaking her head from such thoughts, she dropped the piece of jewelry back into the drawer and shut it closed. She glanced at the silver hairpin on top of the nightstand and finally picked it up since the last time she had done so months ago. She cradled it lovingly to her chest, blinking back the tears that wanted to escape her eyes.

Katara stood up from her bed and made her way to the frozen window in her room. Large, cerulean eyes stared unwaveringly at the bright full moon high up in the dark sky where not a single gray cloud marred the sight above her. Once again, the waterbender had been unable to find sleep due to the energy the full moon emitted.

*But this time there is no Zuko that I could talk to. Zuko is not here to keep me warm and safe in the lonely and quiet night just like that time he accidentally came upon me while I bathed,* she mused with a sad smile as she stared out from the frozen window in her room.

Katara blinked and looked down at her clasped hands that she had placed over her heart. She did not know what she would do once she saw him next month to attend his birthday celebration. She had tried to find a way to forget Zuko since she knew that he and Mai would be married sometime in the future, but as much as she tried, she just couldn’t. Instead, her love for him kept growing almost to the point that it felt like her heart would burst from her chest from the intensity of it. She longed to be by his side, to be wrapped securely in his warm and strong arms, to have his lips touch hers. But most of all she longed to show him her love for him and have his in return.

Katara moved her hands away from her chest and opened them slowly, revealing the silver rose hairpin with the precious ruby and sapphire gems that sparkled in the soft moonlight. She would wear the hairpin at the party to show Zuko her gratitude for the gift and to show her love for him as well...even if he would not know it.

“I can’t forget about you,” Katara whispered softly to the small trinket in her hand as she caressed it gently with her fingers, “Just like I can’t forget about Zuko.”

Zuko stormed into his room and slammed one of the golden doors shut. Removing his fire crown from his topknot, he placed it carefully in its designated elegant box before he ran his fingers agitatedly through his dark hair. He stepped into his private bathroom and let the marble bathtub fill with water while he fumed silently. He was furious that his courtiers and advisors—that mostly being Wei—were constantly harassing him into choosing a Fire Lady and producing an heir. How many times would he have to endure their badgering?

Once the tub was filled, the angry Fire Lord reached a heated hand into the water and warmed it until he was satisfied with the temperature. He disrobed, threw his clothes and boots to the side, and then climbed into the bathtub. Zuko sat down and let out a contented sigh as the warm water soothed his tensed muscles. He relaxed for a moment before proceeding to clean himself, but then he
remembered how his day had been and he scowled darkly at the innocent sponge in his hand.

He was also irritated since everywhere he went he had been pestered about his birthday celebration that was to occur the following day—having to listen to whether he liked this food to be served or that, or if the banquet hall should be arranged this way or that, and other annoying questions that he really did not give a damn about. Did they not realize he was in no mood to celebrate? His life was miserable and the only person who was able to make him happy was probably already planning her own celebration…her wedding celebration.

Zuko threw the soapy sponge into the water, and with a heavy sigh, he reclined his head on the edge of the cold marble bathtub. His heart hurt at that thought and he sank deeper into the water until it reached his neck.

He remained in the tepid water for a few more minutes before he finally made himself get out. Once he was dried and dressed in dark red sleeping pants, the young man laid down on his bed with a tired sigh. He closed his eyes and attempted to fall asleep only to open them again with an irritated growl when sleep eluded him. Zuko stared at the dark ceiling above him for a few minutes before he rolled on his side and stared at the closed curtains that led to the balcony as well as the empty space on his large bed.

He reached a hand out and ran it down on the cold spot next to him. He had never given much thought about being the only one on his bed before since he had always liked his space and privacy. He had always avoided the subtle hints Mai would give him about letting her into it and he never even entertained the thought of having a concubine in it either.

Now, however, as he looked at the empty spot beside him on the rather large bed, a cold, empty, and lonely feeling assaulted him so greatly that he felt like he was suffocating due to the intensity of it. He no longer cared for his space or privacy because now he wanted, he longed, to have the woman he loved filling that empty space in his bed, in his life, and in his heart. What would he give to have that spot occupied by Katara while he watched her sleep peacefully next to him? To have her by his side, wrapped in his arms, as they reached passionate bliss together or were lulled to sleep in the comfort of each other’s warmth and presence? How he wished Katara were his to kiss, his to touch, his to make love to, his to enfold her petite body within the safety of his arms, his to love.

With a deep sigh and a shake of his head, Zuko looked away from the cold and vacant spot and sat up, running his hand through his short and loose hair.

He heard his uncle’s words echo in his head for the hundredth time since he had left the training arena a few weeks ago.
Could it be true that maybe I misunderstood what happened that day in the Southern Water Tribe? But then what could it have meant if not that Aang had proposed to Katara and she had accepted? At this thought, Zuko felt his stomach twist and he cringed.

But if what Uncle said was true then perhaps...maybe...I still have a chance with Katara? he asked himself with a pensive frown.

He felt pathetic, but he just could not bring himself to care. He could not stop thinking about Katara, and even though he had told himself countless of times for his own sake, he could not stop loving her either. Instead his heart yearned for her, for her presence, her smiles, her laughs, her touch. It seemed his love for her kept growing even to the point that he loved her more than life itself.

The only consolation he had about his birthday celebration the following day was that he would be able to see her again. Though it would probably only bring him more pain.
Imperial Celebration

The entire Fire Nation, from the western coast to the east and from the north to the south, was abuzz as the day had arrived for the Fire Lord’s birthday. In every remote village, island, and small city, the common people scrambled about with excitement as they set up their own festivities in their Fire Lord’s honor. They were grateful that they had a day off from their labor for the event. All those of nobility were swarming the palace with expensive gifts and greedy smiles, hoping that their single daughters or sisters would catch the lord’s eye. The women themselves preened their looks since the early hours of dawn in order to gain the Fire Lord’s attention for the evening—and hopefully night as well—and perhaps the title as his Fire Lady.

Inside the Fire Lord’s royal bedchamber, Zuko stood completely still in the middle of his room as he waited patiently for Jiao and another old maidservant to finish dressing him in his formal robes. The older servant placed the final layer of his attire and fixed the golden material that curled upward on his shoulders while Jiao reverently nestled his fire crown on the perfect topknot she had created. Jiao then handed him his sheathed dual swords, which Zuko took silently and placed them on his right hip. The servant women took a step back to admire their work and make sure everything was in its respective place before they moved the full-length mirror they had brought in and placed it before him.

“Thank you,” Zuko uttered coolly and dismissed them with a nod as he turned to look himself in the mirror.

Both servants bowed and quickly left the room, closing the door behind them gently.

Zuko took a moment to examine his formal attire before he frowned darkly. He knew he looked good—as arrogant as that might sound—but he really did not care for his appearance for that meant he would have to keep warding off the hordes of noblewoman that he knew were already flooding his home. He really did not want to go out into the banquet and ‘have fun’ as his uncle had kept telling him for weeks, but he was willing to endure the annoying noblemen and the noblewoman with their irritating giggles and not so subtle flirting for his mother, uncle, and his people’s sake. This day was proclaimed a holiday and many villages were hosting their own celebrations.

With one final look in the mirror, Zuko turned and made his way toward the doors of his balcony. He lifted a section of one of the thick curtains and sighed at the sight of the sun already making its way toward the western horizon. It would soon be time for him to make his ‘grand appearance’, as his uncle had gleefully put it, and he was actually dreading the moment.

Though his expression did not show it, Zuko was a bit tired since he had been out all night, running as the Blue Spirit around the edge of his city as he tried to tire himself out enough for him to be able to sleep as he had done for the past months. Unfortunately, it did not work. He had returned
undetected into his room a few hours before dawn, dozed off for a while before he got up to get ready for the day.

The reason he had been unable to find sleep was due to another erotic dream he had about Katara that had left him breathless and disappointed when he realized it was just a dream produced by his desires and wants. The things they were doing—gods, the things she was doing to him—felt so real that it left him so painfully aroused when he woke up that he had no choice but to reacquaint himself with his right hand in order to relieve himself while he pictured Katara’s heated face beneath him. Even thinking about that dream was stirring his blood—not to mention certain lower areas—so hot that Zuko had to squeeze his eyes shut and think of something disgusting so that he did not have a repeat of what happened the night before and thus ruin the work Jiao and the other servant had done.

_I wonder when Katara is arriving. Is she already here? What would she be wearing today?_ Zuko mused for a moment before his eyes became hooded for a moment, _Though I would also like to see what’s underneath what she will be wearing..._

He snapped out of his thoughts and berated himself for breaking his promise to stop thinking about Katara in such a sexual way, though it seemed that this promise was regularly broken much more now that he knew he loved her.

Zuko dropped the curtain back into its place, and with a few breaths to regain his control, left his bedroom. He walked glumly across his antechamber and toward the outer double golden doors of his royal suite. He took another deep breath as he stepped outside and nodded silently at his personal guards who then took positions behind him as they made their way from the royal wing toward the banquet hall.

“Zuko! There you are!” his uncle’s cheerful voice made him heave a sigh.

Zuko watched as the old man approached him with a large grin on his face.

“I just came to make sure you didn’t climb out the window and run away!” Iroh exclaimed teasingly.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Uncle,” Zuko answered coolly.

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the cheeky smile his uncle directed at him.
Iroh placed a hand on his chin and gave a small hum as he looked his nephew up and down before he gave a nod of approval.

“Why, look at you, Zuko!” Iroh exclaimed. “You will need a stick to keep all the salivating women away from you!”

“Uncle, please,” Zuko groaned as he pinched the bridge of his nose when he heard his guards chuckle quietly under their breaths. A glare from him had them bowing their heads apologetically.

“What?” Iroh said with a shrug. “You know you won’t be left alone for a minute once you enter the banquet hall.” He chuckled when his nephew remained silent before he smiled wickedly. “Though I’m sure there is one particular young lady you would not mind being at your side for the entire celebration.”

“Uncle,” Zuko warned darkly, though the same thought had crossed his mind more than once during the whole week.

Iroh sighed and his expression turned serious as he leveled his gaze up at his glaring young nephew.

“I want you to remember what I told you about finding peace once you have really talked to her, Zuko,” Iroh reminded sternly. When Zuko just gave him a small nod, Iroh shook his head.

“I’ll see you at the banquet later, Nephew,” he added quietly before he turned away and walked in a different direction toward the room where the party was being held.

Zuko silently watched his uncle leave before he nodded at his guards to keep following him down the corridor. The sound of people talking and laughing reached their ears and Zuko ordered himself to keep walking instead of turning back around. He paused outside the large and elaborate set of doors that would lead to the raised dais where he was to make a speech about his gratitude for their attendance while asking Agni to bless the Fire Nation before he was to go and socialize with the crowd.

That thought actually made him shudder.

Both of his guards stepped before him and opened the heavy doors. The room became silent as the people inside stared at the doors that had been opened behind the dais surrounded by another fire
They waited anxiously for the appearance of the one whose birthday they were celebrating.

“Presenting our great and honorable Fire Lord Zuko!” the oldest of his personal guards bellowed.

Zuko took another breath to steady his nerves and told himself he just needed to go through this day, endure whatever came his way, and hopefully they would all leave at the time he requested so he could be left in peace.

Both of his guards bowed as he passed through the doors before he made his way to the edge of the dais. From behind the wall of fire, Zuko looked around at the gathered crowd bowing at him. He spotted Iroh and his mother with Admiral Jee at her side smiling brightly at the front of the gathered crowd, but he frowned when he was unable to spot the one person he had been wishing to see all day.

*Where is Katara? Is she not coming?* he asked himself and growled mentally at the feeling of a sharp pang of grief.

He was brought back to reality when he heard his uncle cough twice, a signal for him to stop standing there like an idiot and get on with the long and boring speech his uncle had made him memorize.

Zuko sighed inwardly as he raised his arms to the side to gain the crowd’s attention.

Zuko reluctantly greeted another of the noble families that approached him with sugarcoated words and large fake smiles. As soon as he had finished his speech and stepped down the dais after parting the wall of fire, he had been swarmed with enthusiastic people congratulating him and wishing he had many more years left of life. He wondered if they even noticed that he was not enthusiastic about the whole thing at all. He made it apparent by avoiding the hints the noblemen gave him when they would present their single female relatives to him, proclaiming all the good qualities the young women possessed while the girls themselves bowed delicately before him and batted their eyelashes at him with shy or daring smiles.

One set of doors that led into the banquet hall at the southern wall would occasionally be opened as more guests poured in while the guard posted outside would step into the room and announce the new arrivals. Every time Zuko heard it was not who he was waiting to see, his heart would sink at the thought that perhaps she was not attending his celebration.
Zuko tuned out what the old nobleman before him was rambling about and ignored the lusty look the man’s daughter was aiming at him. He discreetly began to look around the banquet hall while making sure to nod here and there so the man and his daughter would think they still had his undivided attention.

The guests seemed to be enjoying themselves rather well. Many were dancing in the center of the large banquet hall as the musicians played and others were talking and laughing amongst themselves while they ate and drank from the banquet table that he had already sampled from. He was impressed by how delicious the food tasted, the tasteful way the room was decorated, and the soft music that reached his ears. Although he appreciated what his uncle and mother did for him, he just could not find it in himself to really enjoy it.

“Thank you. Please enjoy the rest of the evening,” Zuko said as soon as the man made a pause in his drawn out speech.

He raised a dark eyebrow when the nobleman frowned and opened his mouth to say something before the man snapped it shut and dragged his daughter—who was oblivious as she continued to stare at the Fire Lord—away.

“That wasn’t very nice, Sparky.” Toph’s snicker made Zuko relax slightly before he shrugged as he turned around to see her.

The small earthbender was wearing a formal dress that typical Earth Kingdom noblewomen wore. The dress was made of a soft green material with gold thread embroidered at the hem and edges of the long sleeves. It had a high collar and it reached down to her small bare feet. Her dark hair was swept up into an elegant bun with golden flower pins holding it in place. Zuko still found it strange seeing Toph dressed up, but he knew that although she looked like a delicate noblewoman, she was the same blunt and rough master earthbender.

“I want to rip this stupid dress off! It itches, dammit!” Toph growled under her breath as she stretched the high collar away from her neck with a finger.

Ah, there was the Toph they all knew and loved.

Zuko tensed when he saw Aang step up beside Toph with his usual wide grin on his young face. Aang wore a formal type of Air Nomad garb of different shades of orange and yellow with the necklace symbolizing his high rank as a monk falling around his neck. His usual staff was at his hand with Momo, who gave a happy chirp, perched on his shoulder.
“Toph. Aang. I’m glad you decided to come,” Zuko said, recovering his composure quickly.

Momo flew away from the Avatar and landed on the tall Fire Lord’s shoulder. Zuko reached up to pat Momo’s furry head and smiled slightly as the small lemur began to purr.

“Of course we came!” Aang piped in excitedly. “You finally decided to have a birthday party!”

Zuko stared at Aang, and for a moment, he was reminded of the good times they used to have when their friendship was strong and everything was simple. He missed it. But Zuko looked away at the thought that Aang’s current happy mood was probably due to his…engagement. Why did that word always made a lump get stuck in his throat?

“I didn’t hear you guys being announced,” Zuko commented as he pretended to take interest in the crowd while Momo chirped on his shoulder.

“We arrived early even before you gave that boring as hell speech,” Toph responded with a shrug.

“Hm,” Zuko muttered with a frown.

“Happy Birthday, Zuko,” someone said and the three turned at the sound of the new voice.

Aang and Toph grinned and enthusiastically greeted Haru as the young man made his way toward them, his thin mustache sitting upon his smiling lips as he bowed respectfully before the Fire Lord. Haru was dressed in dark green and brown formal attire and his usual long, loose hair was tied in a long braid that fell down his back.

Zuko bowed his head.

“Thank you, Haru,” he responded sincerely. “I’m glad you were able to make it to my celebration.”

Haru nodded and smiled as he placed his hands inside his long sleeves.
“And I’m grateful you trusted me enough to teach earthbending in your colonies. I just finished teaching in the last village a few weeks ago, and luckily, I made it to your party in time,” the young earthbender said as he looked around the decorated room in awe.

“Well…I’m gonna go check if Katara arrived already,” Aang piped in. He glanced briefly at Zuko before he walked away with Momo trailing after him.

Zuko watched him go with a small glare before he shook his head and squared his shoulders. He glanced at Toph who had her head tilted in the direction the young monk had left.

“Uh…well, I’m going to look for Ty Lee,” Haru said quietly as he felt the sudden tension emitting from the tall and slightly intimidating Fire Lord. He blushed lightly when Toph elbowed him and wiggled her eyebrows at him before he bowed again and hastily retreated.

“You were right, Toph,” Zuko commented quietly after a few seconds of silence.

Toph straightened and crossed her arms.

“I always am,” Toph said with a smug grin before she frowned. “But why are you saying that now, Hotman?”

“I was…too late,” Zuko said simply as he tried to keep his voice even.

Toph was silent for a moment before she elbowed him on the ribs. Zuko winced and scowled.

“Don’t give up so easily,” was Toph’s reply before she turned away. “I’m gonna look for your old uncle.”

Before Zuko could asked her what she meant by that, he felt a pair of arms snake around him from behind. For a brief second he thought it was Katara, and his heart skipped a beat, before he noticed that whoever was holding him had thinner and longer arms than the waterbender. Zuko tensed and quickly stepped away, turning around with narrowed eyes to reprimand the person for the imprudent act, but instead his eyes widened in surprise.
“Mai,” he said.

The tall aristocratic woman smiled slightly and Zuko took notice that she was dressed up as well. Though her formal dress was all black with no intricate designs on it, it was made of the finest silks that reached well below her feet and fell down to cover her pale hands. Her long black hair sat atop her head in an elaborate hairdo with two crisscrossing golden sticks keeping the style together. Her pale cheeks had a hint of rouge and dark kohl made her eyes bigger than they were. Zuko had never seen her outside her usual style and he had to admit she looked nice. He felt a bit guilty that he had almost forgotten about her since he had a different woman on his mind recently.

“Hello, Zuko. I’ve missed you,” she finally said. Secretly pleased that it seemed he was appreciating her form, Mai stepped toward him to embrace him again.

Zuko held up a hand to stop her and gave her a stern look to remind her of her behavior in public. Mai took a step back and folded her hands before her and nodded that she understood, though inwardly she was annoyed that he had not changed his idea of keeping her at a distance while he allowed his friends to hug him—especially the insufferable Water Tribe woman.

“Mai, I’m glad you have come to my celebration,” Zuko repeated what he had told everybody else.

“My family and I arrived last night from Omashu. I would not have missed such an important day, Zuko,” she replied back as she looked into his eyes.

Zuko’s lips turned into a hard line and he looked away from her with rising guilt. Why could he not return her feelings? Everything would have been so much simpler. He thanked Agni for saving him from responding when Mai’s family approached them. Zuko glanced briefly at Mai’s face as she moved beside him and he frowned at the almost veiled irritated look she gave her family.

“Happy birthday, Fire Lord Zuko,” Mai’s father said with a smile as both he and his wife bowed to him while the older noblewoman held onto their young son’s hand. The now five-year-old Tom-Tom stared with unblinking eyes up at the tall man.

“Thank you,” Zuko said simply. He braced himself when Mai’s parents gave him calculating and expectant smiles.

Zuko spent the next few hours greeting and talking—or more precisely, half listening—to the people that came up to him while Mai remained fixed at his side. Her parents had tried to suck up to him and
even hinted on a future wedding, suggesting that it was long overdue. Zuko had cleverly evaded the subject, though he knew that perhaps one day it would eventually happen since political marriages were common. Besides, it was not as if he was going to be able to marry the woman he really loved and wanted.

Mai smirked inwardly when she caught the conversation of another group of people remarking on how good they looked together and how she would make a fine Fire Lady someday. She raised her head higher than she already normally did and she sent blank stares at the single women who were watching her with pouts on their faces as she held onto Zuko’s arm. She glanced at Zuko who was talking with one of his advisors that had attended the event and she was filled with a smug and satisfied feeling that he was all hers.

A frown marred her stony features for one second before it disappeared as fast as it had appeared. She had to admit, though, that Zuko had been more distant with her as the years went by and it became even more obvious ever since his friends visited the Fire Nation in the late summer. The knowledge of his changed behavior regarding her did not sit well with her at all. She hoped this phase of his would pass soon and she had no doubt that after they married he would focus solely on her.

Zuko suppressed the undignified urge to roll his eyes as he once again caught a comment about his ‘future marriage’ with Mai. He dismissed what the people were saying since he was more preoccupied in keeping an eye for Katara’s arrival. The celebration had started hours ago and there was still no sign of the lovely waterbender and her family. It was getting late and he was beginning to get anxious, wondering where she was.

What if she isn’t coming? he thought with a frown as he once again scanned the crowd.

One part of him felt relieved, but a bigger part felt saddened at the thought. He had been looking forward to seeing her again, and the thought that perhaps she was not arriving had not crossed his mind before now.

Just then, the doors to the banquet hall were opened, and the guard stepped in.

“Presenting Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe and his family!” he bellowed.

The loud chattering in the grand banquet hall paused for a moment as the people turned to watch the Southern Water Tribe family enter the room before they resumed their talk while they eyed the newcomers with curious or resentful stares.
Zuko spun around to the entrance so fast he thought he actually heard his neck crack, but it was just a vague thought as he stared ahead with relieved and eager eyes—much to Mai’s displeasure.

_She’s here!_ he mentally sighed in relief, apprehension, and longing.

Zuko watched as his uncle and his mother, with Jee following close behind, walked up to them in welcome as Chief Hakoda and Master Pakku stepped forward while Kanna, Ty Lee, Sokka, Suki and their twins crowded around them.

And that’s when he saw her. Katara.

Zuko’s heart leapt and he swallowed hard. She was breathtaking.

Adorning the curves of her body was a long dress that fell down to her small feet enclosed in black slippers. Her dress was made of a silky material of a deep turquoise shade and black lace was wrought onto the edges of the hem and long sleeves. Zuko was astounded, though not displeased, to see that it was cut below her smooth shoulders that he wished to kiss. It was snug around her bounteous breasts that he longed to latch onto with his lips, as well as around her flat stomach that he dreamed of being made round with his child. A thick black sash tied her waist with its long ends falling to one side before the dress fell loosely at her wide hips. Those hips that he had dreamed so many times before of grabbing tightly in his hands while he thrust himself into her…

The young Fire Lord was enthralled by how gorgeous the waterbender looked and he was surprised at himself that he was able to resist the urge to dash up to her, scoop her in his arms, kiss her senseless, and take her passionately in the privacy of his room. Zuko felt his groin tighten and he was barely able to suppress the groan that formed in his throat. He was glad that he was wearing his formal robes or else his whole court would have seen his arousal through his trousers.

He wrenched his eyes away from Katara’s appetizing body so he could take in the rest of her, willing his body to calm down. He was surprised and confused to see that what was adorning her lovely neck was her mother’s necklace and not the one that Aang gave her, but he quickly dismissed the thought as he moved his eyes to observe her face next. She had kohl on her eyelashes and the rims of her eyes so that her bright, blue orbs stood out even more. A soft rouge dusted her cheeks while her perfect lips were glossed, making them even more kissable than ever. Her long and gleaming chocolate tresses were down from her usual braid and it tumbled down her back in soft brown waves and curls. But what pleased him the most was the fact that one side of her hair was swept away from her face by the silver rose hairpin he had given her on her own birthday. He could not explain how great he felt by seeing Katara wearing something from him.
Standing next to the silent firebender, Mai narrowed her eyes, getting tired of Zuko continuing to ogle the waterbender.

“Zuko, I’m thirsty. Let’s go get some punch,” she said as she tried to pull him in the opposite direction where the banquet table was situated.

“You go, Mai. I have to greet my guests,” was Zuko’s distracted reply as he disentangled her arms from his arm and walked away without removing his eyes from the vision before him. He did not notice the glare she threw after him.

“Katara dear! Welcome back! We are so glad that you have come,” Ursa announced to Katara after she had greeted the rest of the group.

Katara smiled as the older woman embraced her.

“Especially Zuko,” Lady Ursa whispered in her ear before she pulled back with a smile.

Katara blushed and fidgeted nervously with her fingers. How would Zuko act toward her now? Would he be distant like the day he left the Southern Water Tribe or would he smile at her warmly like so many times before?

She was so nervous at the thought of seeing him again that her stomach kept twisting and her heart kept pounding frantically in her chest. On one hand she dreaded seeing him again, seeing him act cold towards her, and seeing him with Mai on his arm, but on the other she was impatient to see his scarred yet handsome face, his warm golden eyes, and his small half smiles. She longed to be near him, to talk and spend time with him, and hear his low chuckles or the laughs that he sometimes allowed to escape him.

She looked up when she felt someone staring at her. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched Zuko making his way toward them…and he was looking straight at her, his golden gaze almost scorching her all the way to her toes.

Zuko was wearing a similar style of formal robes as the one he had donned when he had been crowned Fire Lord, except that his scabbard was secured at his side this time. She could see his black boots with their golden pointed tips as his long legs carried him to where she was standing frozen in place with the rest of her family. His sleek, raven hair was pulled back into his usual formal topknot.
with the glinting fire crown. Her fingers itched to remove it so that his hair hung loose in order for her to run her fingers through it like she had daydreamed ever since he came upon them in the Western Air Temple. Katara really liked what he wore just like how she liked when he wore his armor or comfortable shirts and pants.

*Though I like it better when he’s shirtless,* Katara hummed silently as she stared intensely at every step he took.

She was awestruck at how striking he looked and blushed at her thoughts, though she could not find it in herself to chastise herself since it was true. She was once again unable to break away from the heated look in his amber eyes, the same look she had caught him directing towards her many times before.

Zuko finally crossed the large room and reached them, bowing politely to the Southern Water Tribe Chieftain, a sign for his people to see that he respected and welcomed those from the southern country.

“I welcome you back to the Fire Nation, Chief Hakoda,” he said as he reluctantly looked away from Katara’s mesmerizing form to acknowledge the chieftain.

“Thank you, Fire Lord Zuko,” Hakoda responded with a smile as he returned the bow. “We would have arrived sooner if it wasn’t for a sudden storm that detained us for a while. Anyway, I wish you good things on this day.”

“Thank you,” Zuko replied before he turned to greet the rest of the family.

He smiled slightly when Kanna embraced him and wished him a happy birthday while Pakku just gave a respectful bow and good wishes. Gran-Gran, Iroh, and Ursa noticed happily that Zuko kept glancing at Katara who would also sneak peeks at him.

Zuko then returned his gaze to Katara and turned to her. Katara flushed slightly and took a step forward, mentally telling herself not to trip on her dress and make a fool out of herself in front of Zuko, his family, and his courtiers.

“Happy Birthday, Zuko,” Katara greeted with a tentative smile.
“Thank you, Katara,” Zuko replied with a warm smile that made Katara’s heart melt.

The waterbender hesitated for a moment since she did not know if it was proper to hug the Fire Lord with all the nobility hanging around, but she gave a mental shrug, and before her courage failed, Katara took another step forward and wrapped her arms around him. If Zuko was surprised, he did not show it as he returned her embraced by winding his arms around her. But to his disappointment, she quickly ended it and stepped away with a blush on her cheeks.

Sokka stepped forward with a large grin as he gave Zuko a one-armed hug while he carried his oldest daughter in the other just as Suki did while carrying their youngest.

“Say hello to your Uncle Zuko!” Sokka exclaimed as he held up Jing so she could be in Zuko’s eyelevel.

Zuko was startled at Sokka’s words as he stared at the little girl who was staring back at him with huge, blue eyes. It warmed his heart to know that Sokka saw him as part of his family despite all the hardships their countries had suffered. He glanced at Katara, who had wide eyes focused on him and her brother.

Smiling slightly, Zuko slowly reached out and gave the little girl a soft pat on her dark head. Jing squealed in delight and clapped her small, chubby hands before her attention was quickly drawn to the shiny metal crown on the tall man’s head. The group chuckled quietly as Zuko dodged the slimy fingers that were aimed at his hair.

“Wow, Zuko, you sure know how to throw one heck of party!” Sokka exclaimed as his blue eyes darted excitedly around the bright and lively room.

“Believe me, Sokka, if it was my doing, there would not have been a party at all,” Zuko commented dryly.

He noticed the young tribesman was half-listening to him, so with a mental roll of his eyes, Zuko motioned to the back of the room.

“The banquet table is that way.”

“Thanks, man,” Sokka said with a grin as he led Suki and their twins toward the food table.
“I can’t wait to see Mai again! I’ll see you guys later!” Ty Lee exclaimed as she bounced away after she said over her shoulder, “I hope Haru is here!”

The mention of the noblewoman’s name snapped Katara out of her reverie about Zuko carrying light-skinned, blue-eyed or dark-skinned and golden-eyed babies and back to reality. She quickly looked away as she pretended to scan the room, which she noted was beautifully decorated. It reminded her of a horrible nightmare she had months ago where she had come upon Zuko marrying Mai. She winced at the painful image before she mentally shook her head.

“Are Aang and Toph here already?” she asked.

When Katara mentioned the airbender, Zuko reverted into his distant self and looked away as well to glare at a random spot.

“They’re around somewhere,” he replied coldly.

Except for Ursa, Iroh, and Jee, they all turned to gape at the iciness in the usually stoic young Fire Lord’s voice. Katara frowned deeply and she was afraid that Zuko would start acting aloof towards her again.

“Zuko…?” Katara began, but was interrupted from saying anything else by the appearance of the mentioned young benders.

“Katara! You’re here!” Aang exclaimed gleefully as he made his way towards them with a bright smile lighting up his face.

“Thanks for stating the obvious, Twinkletoes,” Toph remarked snidely as she strolled in her insufferable dress beside him.

Aang ignored her as he briefly greeted Katara’s father and grandparents before he clasped Katara’s hand, both unaware at the death glare Zuko was sending him.

“Come on, Katara! Let’s go dance!” Aang cried out.
“Uh…” Katara uttered as Aang started to drag her away.

She looked back at Zuko, but he was looking somewhere else. A sad frown appeared on her brow before she turned back to Aang and plastered a smile on her face.

“Okay,” she relented.

Zuko watched them go from the corner of his eye. He turned his attention to the others, who had been silent for most of the time, and gave them a slight bow.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to attend to my other guests. Please enjoy your time here,” he told them politely.

“Yes, thank you, young Fire Lord,” Kanna responded for them as she eyed him curiously after he had turned and left.

Zuko ignored the slight ache in his chest as he made his way among the crowd while his hands clenched and unclenched as he walked.

“Wait up, Sparky!” Toph called out as she followed him. She growled when he continued walking. “I said wait, dammit!”

Zuko spun around and pinned a glare at the irritating earthbender.

“Toph, you’re supposed to call me by me title and not ‘Sparky’ in front of my subjects!” he hissed lowly.

“Oh, right, right. I forgot,” Toph consented and pretended to lock her lips together. “Anyway,” she continued as she once again followed after him when he began to walk away. “Stop being a coward and tell Sugar Queen you love her already,” she said, low enough for only him to hear her.

Zuko paused in mild surprise for a moment at her words before he continued on his way.
“Mind you own business, Toph,” he growled as his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

Toph scowled, but before she could argue back, she shut her mouth as her scowl deepened.

“Gloom and Doom is heading this way,” she said before she whispered rapidly, “You better tell Katara!”

Zuko watched as the small blind girl stomped away just as Mai reached him. He glanced sideways as Mai took hold of his arm again.

“How about we get that punch now?” Mai asked.

Zuko did not say anything as he led her away to the banquet table. Though he tried really hard, he could not stop himself from searching for Katara’s form every chance he got. And although he was discreet about the way he stared at the laughing waterbender, he was unable to fool the young noblewoman that kept at his side.

Though she did not show it outwardly, Mai was seething as she once again caught Zuko glancing in the direction the annoying Water Tribe woman was. Mai snorted inwardly as she watched Katara giggle at something Iroh said while Lady Ursa laughed daintily behind her hand. She noticed Zuko glance their way, and to her surprise, she saw his lips twitch into a smile. Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

Mai was angry, for she had actually listened to her mother for once and allowed the servants to dress her up, place makeup on her face, and arrange her hair in a beautiful style just for Zuko. But it seemed he did not even notice her efforts for he only had eyes for the waterbender—who at times would also glance his way—while he greeted and talked to the people and ignored the infuriating women that were presented to him and tried to flirt with him.

Though she had only had very small suspicions about the relationship between Zuko and the waterbender back when they had visited Ember Island in the summer, now those small suspicions were growing into full-fledged certainty. Mai moved closer to Zuko when she caught Katara looking at them without making it seem too obvious. Well, it was just too bad because she rather die than allow the waterbender have Zuko.

Mai was brought out of her thoughts when a large, old man huffed his way toward them with a large
smirk on his face. She knew he was one of the Court advisors, but she could not remember his name, and if she had listened to Zuko on the rare occasions that he wished to talk to her about his day, then she would have known that it was the one advisor that Zuko despised.

“I wish you a happy birthday, Fire Lord Zuko,” Wei greeted exaggeratedly as he pushed aside the nobleman that had currently been talking to the Fire Lord with his wife and two daughters standing beside him.

Wei made a mocking, flourishing bow before he looked over at the silent young woman standing indifferently beside Zuko.

“Lady Mai,” he greeted with a smirk.

Zuko stiffened and his eyes narrowed at the sound of the aggravating, old advisor.

“Advisor Wei,” he responded impassively and reluctantly returned Wei’s bow with a nod of his head since he did not want the family that was still standing there to think he was rude.

Wei straightened and smoothed his robe over his large middle and smirked, but before he could speak an older couple approached the small group.

“We wish a happy birthday, my lord,” the old man with cropped white hair said with a smile as he and the gray-haired woman bowed.

“Thank you, Physician Toshiro,” Zuko responded genuinely as he graced the physician and his wife with a small smile.

The old couple had always been kind to him ever since he became Fire Lord.

“Your celebration is going exceptionally well, Young One,” Wei interrupted rudely, ignoring the small glares the old couple sent him. “Everybody seems to be having a great time.”

“Oh, yes, Fire Lord Zuko!” the rather short nobleman enthused, not wanting to be outdone or ignored. “The celebration is magnificent! So wonderful!”
Zuko mentally sighed as he looked over at the crowd.

“I know,” he said coolly.

He glanced back at Wei and frowned. Why was Wei trying to have a conversation with him? One that did not result in Wei throwing subtle insults at him.

“Are you not enjoying your own party, Young One?” the old advisor asked with the smirk still in place.

Zuko’s frown deepened as the nobleman’s daughters gasped and he glared at the smirking advisor.

“I am,” he answered imperviously.

“Then why have you not danced? There are many beautiful, young ladies that would enjoy being your dance partner,” Wei remarked as he took a sip from the wine cup in his hand.

Wei grinned into his cup when the nobleman’s young daughters squealed and pushed each other aside so they could get the Fire Lord’s attention focused solely on them. Wei ignored the way the physician shook his head and his wife threw a glare at him.

*Maybe that is the reason why I don’t want to dance*, Zuko thought darkly as he ignored the obvious looks the young women were throwing his way.

“I am not for dancing tonight,” Zuko replied tersely. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes when the women gasped and almost whimpered in disappointment.

“Is that so?” the old advisor said as he twirled the cup while he pretended to scan the crowd without interest before he glanced sideways at Mai. “Or is it that you have just not found a woman worthy enough to get your attention?”

He ignored the three young noblewomen’s glares as he focused on Zuko’s expression. To his
satisfaction, he watched as the young Fire Lord’s eyes briefly flicked toward one side of the large room. Wei looked in the same direction with a smirk and took another drink from his cup of wine as he stared over at the table where the Southern Water Tribe family was sitting near the banquet table. Where the beautiful, but rather irritating waterbender the young Fire Lord seemed to care for was laughing.

“Or perhaps you do have such a woman in mind?” Wei taunted with a sneer as he tilted his head toward the table.

Zuko fought to remain unaffected at Wei’s remark, not wanting to give too much to the mistrustful old advisor about his feelings for the waterbender, even though what Wei had indicated was true. Zuko again quickly glanced to where Katara was sitting. If he were to dance in front of this crowd, then he would have wanted it to be with Katara, but it seemed everything was set against him for the noblemen would not leave him alone even for a second. Besides that, Katara kept being asked to dance by different men, though her father, Sokka, and Aang cut the dances short. Especially Aang.

How he wished it were him she was dancing with as he watched her body sway to the sound of the music like one of her smooth water whips while she tossed her gleaming hair about. Oh, the thoughts that would run rampant in his head as he watched her dance to the music!

“Fire Lord Zuko, you must dance with one of my daughters!” the short nobleman exclaimed as he motioned for his daughters to move forward while he ignored the indignant glare Mai was sending them. “They were the best dancers at the Royal Academy for Girls! I’m sure my lord will be pleased to have one of them as his dance partner!”

Zuko eyed the man warily as the man’s wife practically shoved their daughters forward onto him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the physician and his wife give him sympathetic looks before he was forced to look back the young women eagerly waiting his response.

*I’m positive that he would even say it would please me to have either one, or even both, as my bed partners as long as they get the title as my Fire Lady,* he thought with distaste. He cursed Wei for bringing up the subject of dancing even though it was obvious he did not want to dance.

“I thank you for the offer, and I’m sure your daughters are excellent dancers,” Zuko responded dispassionately, “but I’m afraid that—”

“Fire Lord Zuko has already asked me for the next dance,” Mai cut in as she moved closer to him.
Zuko frowned at her, but said nothing to dispute what she had said. He would rather dance with Mai than some woman he did not know. Besides, it was only expected since Mai was technically still his girlfriend and all.

“Is this true, Fire Lord Zuko?” the nobleman’s wife asked as she eyed Mai.

The previous song the musicians were playing finished, and was immediately followed by another piece. Zuko squared his shoulders, pressed his lips into a tight line, and nodded to the woman’s question before he excused himself from the group. Impassively, he led Mai to the dance floor by the arm. He was unaware of the triumphant smirk that crossed Mai’s face as they moved toward the dance floor.

Katara happily chewed on a piece of chocolate covered strawberry pastry as she listened to her friends and family banter. She smiled slightly when Aang took hold of her hand before she pulled it away, missing the sad frown the young monk gave her.

She was currently trying to hide from all the young—and not so young—men that kept trying to dance with her. She would admit that she was a bit flattered at the attention the men were giving her, but it was not them that she wanted to ask her to dance, to hold her hand and hold her close as they glided down the dance floor. No, it was Zuko she wanted to dance with just like at her brother and Suki’s wedding.

With a doleful sigh, Katara popped the rest of the sweet dessert into her mouth. She was a bit surprised that such a simple dessert made its way into all the other exquisite pastries, but she was glad since it was one of her favorites, especially since it reminded her of that time when Zuko took her to that one famous restaurant all those months ago.

“Oh, my gods!” she heard one of the snobby noblewomen shriek, “Fire Lord Zuko is going to dance!”

Katara spun around on her seat to stare out onto the dance floor and her heart sank at the sight. She watched as Zuko regally made his way to the dance floor while Mai held onto his arm with her head held high. Katara’s stomach twisted as Zuko brought Mai to stand in front of him before he took the aristocratic woman’s hand in his while he brought his other hand to her back before he began to lead her into a dance as the music played. It hurt to watch them, to watch Zuko hold another woman, but Katara could not look away.

Zuko led Mai into one of the dance steps he had learned when he was a young prince. Though this particular dance was supposed to be soft and relaxing, Zuko moved stiffly as he held Mai, who was
smiling at him in barely concealed glee. Zuko glanced away from her and began to scan the crowd until he spotted Katara staring at them with an unreadable expression on her face before she looked away and began to talk to her grandmother. Did she not care?

Ty Lee bounced onto the dance floor, holding onto a blushing Haru, and with a bright smile, she wrapped her arms around his neck while he wrapped his around her waist as they began to dance with the music. More couples stepped onto the dance floor while the young women without dancing partners seethed quietly at the edge.

Zuko watched as Admiral Jee bowed before his mother, who smiled and nodded as she allowed him to lead her to dance. His uncle moved along the dancing crowd with a blushing woman at his side. Iroh caught his eye and grinned, which Zuko responded with a roll of his eyes. The old man’s face became serious and he gestured at something behind him. Zuko slowly moved Mai around to see what his uncle was looking at and he scowled. He watched as Aang and Katara made their way toward the dance floor as well before they faced each other. He looked away when Aang placed his arms around Katara since it reminded him of what he saw in the Southern Water Tribe and how much the sight had pained him.

Katara again stiffened slightly as Aang held her before they began to dance. She smiled a bit uncomfortably when Aang smiled lovingly at her as he spun her around. Looking away, Katara peeked toward Zuko and raised an eyebrow since he was staring blankly at a spot over Mai’s head even though she was as tall as him.

Katara let her mind wander into much more pleasing thoughts. She imagined that it was Zuko she was dancing with at the moment and it was his warm and strong arms that were holding her and not Aang’s lean ones. She was unaware of how long the song lasted or that it was Aang she was dancing with until the musicians stopped playing. Blinking, she turned to see where Zuko was. She watched as Zuko moved away from Mai and quickly left the dance floor with the noblewoman following quickly behind him.

“Katara? Are you okay?” Aang’s voice made her jump.

“Uh…I don’t know,” was her soft response as her eyes followed Zuko’s tall form.

The evening progressed as the guests continued to enjoy themselves—and continued to try to gain the Fire Lord’s favor.

Katara let out a long, relieved breath as she took a seat at their table. Her feet were killing her from all the dancing that she had been subjected to because of Aang. He would not hear it when she
protested that she was done dancing and would then tell her that it was to make up for the time he had been away in the Earth Kingdom. Luckily, Sokka, Toph, Haru, and a few young men had dragged him off to get some drinks even though he tried to protest that it was not proper for a monk as himself to partake in such things. Toph ignored his complaints as she grabbed the back of his robe and hauled him away, but not before giving Katara a wink and whispering to her that she deserved a break.

Katara fidgeted with a lock of her hair as she again looked for Zuko’s regal form among the large crowd. She sighed when she caught sight of him, though she hated that Mai was still hanging onto Zuko while he exchanged words with the families that came up to him. Katara did not like the look Mai would throw at every woman—especially at her—almost as if she was arrogantly telling them all she was Zuko’s girlfriend and for them to keep away.

As if she could keep me way from Zuko, Katara huffed as she narrowed her blue eyes at the pale noblewoman before she looked back at Zuko and sighed. That’s if Zuko still wants me around.

After he had greeted them when they had arrived a few hours ago, Zuko had not spoken to her or come near her at all during the celebration. Again, she wondered if he was avoiding her and if that avoidance had something to do with the way he had strangely acted when he left the Southern Water Tribe. She wished she knew what was going on with him so she could find some way to make things go back the way they used to be before. But then that was not what she really wanted. No. She wanted things to change, she wanted their relationship to go beyond friendship, she wanted to stay by his side, she wanted him to love her as she loved him.

She looked away when Mai leaned over to whisper in Zuko’s ear, missing the frown that appeared on Zuko’s face at what Mai had said before he gave her a disapproving look that made Mai look away with a raised chin.

A tug at her long sleeve startled Katara and she jumped in her seat before she looked to her side only to find a small boy with dark hair and big eyes staring up at her silently while he continued to hold onto her sleeve.

“Hi,” Katara greeted with a smile as she looked up to see if the boy’s parents were around, but found that no one was even looking their way. She looked back down at the boy and patted his dark head. “Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know,” the boy answered with a small shrug. “I lost them somewhere.”

“You lost them?” Katara asked with a small grin as the boy blushed while he shuffled one foot on the
“Well…I got away from them because they were just talking to some old people and I got bored,” the young boy admitted. “But now I can’t find them or my sister and I’m tired and I wanna go home!”

Katara smiled and patted the seat next to her.

“Well don’t we wait for your parents or you sister to find you here? My family and friends are all having fun and I was getting somewhat lonely. Do you want to keep me company?”

“Okay!” the boy exclaimed as he let go of her sleeve and scrambled onto the empty chair with a large smile. “What’s your name?” he asked curiously as he tugged at the stuffy clothing he had been made to wear.

“Katara. What’s yours?”

“Tom-Tom,” the boy answered.

“Oh, that’s nice…Wait. Tom-Tom?” Katara asked slowly as she took a closer look at the boy who was also staring at her with a questioning expression. “Do you happened to be related to Ma…er…Lady Mai?”

“Yeah,” the boy huffed as he crossed his small arms over his small chest. “She’s my older sister.”

“Oh.”

Katara gaped slightly. Even though the dark-haired boy did have a resemblance to Mai it seemed they had completely different personalities. Katara leaned back onto her chair as she studied the boy who was now laughing at some of the clumsier dancers and she smiled since she could remember the baby she had taken care of back in Omashu almost four years ago.

Her smile widened when her family approached the table, looking at the boy sitting next to her with raised eyebrows as they took their seats before they continued in their conversations. Hakoda and
Pakku were each carrying a sleeping twin in their arms while Suki and Sokka slumped in their seats in fatigue. Katara grinned at them before she returned her attention to the five-year-old boy.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sighing intolerantly in his head once again, Zuko tuned out what the heavily perfumed young women that had surrounded him were babbling about and ignored the way Mai was sending them death glares while she opened and closed the dark fan she had pulled out from the sash around her thin waist. After a moment, the women moved away when they realized he was not paying them any attention. He did not even notice them leave nor did he notice Mai glaring at him. He focused instead on the time when the celebration would end and everybody would leave him in peace while he retired to his royal quarters.

Too bad I can’t have a bit more entertainment in my private room with a certain waterbender, Zuko mused with a silent groan. Now that would make my birthday much better.

“This!" Ty Lee’s bubbly voice made them turned to see the young acrobat in her pink attire making her way toward them while she tugged a weary-looking Haru after her. “Let’s go get some punch and hang out for a while!”

Mai glanced back at Zuko who was already talking to Haru, and with an upturned nose, she followed her over energized friend. She had to find a way to make Zuko more agreeable with her.

“There ya are, L-Lord Jerkbender!”

Zuko paused in mid-sentence as he felt someone pat him almost roughly on the back and he saw Haru gaped. With a sharp remark on his tongue, Zuko turned around with a raised eyebrow only to sigh when he realized it was Sokka, and by the red color on his tanned cheeks and the small sway of his legs, he was most likely drunk or getting there.

Sokka wound an arm around Zuko’s shoulders and patted his cheek.

“Great p-party! The food’s awesome and…and the wine! Oh, Spirits, the wine!” Sokka exclaimed while Zuko tried to pry him off without causing too much of a scene.

Sokka trailed off as his eyes became unfocused before he shook his head and slurred out some more words that neither Zuko nor Haru could understand before the young warrior took another swig of his cup of wine.
“I think that’s enough wine for today, Sokka,” Zuko admonished with a grimace as he wrenched the wine cup out of Sokka’s hands and handed it to a wide-eyed Haru who quickly took it.

“Ah, b-but I’m not ev…even drunk yet!” Sokka whined as he flailed one arm into the air while he continued to hold onto Zuko’s shoulder.

A hiccup interrupted him and he staggered. Sokka grinned sheepishly.

“Okay, maybe I’m a little drunk.”

“A little?” Haru muttered.

“Maybe you should get Suki,” Zuko whispered to the amused earthbender who nodded and quickly made his way to find the drunken warrior’s wife.

“H-heeey, w-where’s Haru-u go-ing?” Sokka hiccupped again.

“I see our dear friend enjoyed our wine immensely,” Iroh’s amused chuckle reached their ears.

“Iroh!” Sokka exclaimed as he moved away from Zuko and stumbled onto the shorter man. “Zu-u-ko took away my…my wine!” he cried out with a pout.

Zuko rolled his eyes as Iroh laughed and patted the poor desolate drunk’s back.

“There, there, Sokka. I’m sure Zuko did it for your own good,” he said before he grinned over at his nephew who just tiredly shook his head at them.

Iroh cleared his throat and his expression became serious.

“It seems Tom-Tom got lost. His parents are worried.”
Zuko sighed and looked around for one of his guards so he could give them orders to search for the young boy, but Sokka grabbed his shoulder and laughed.

“Oh, n-no! Quick! Before they think we kid-napped h-him again!” Sokka guffawed between hiccups.

“What are you talking about, Sokka?” Zuko asked as he steadied his friend when he swayed backwards.

“The uh…kid’s with…with Katara!” the young man explained drunkenly.

“Really?” Zuko asked quietly.

He turned toward the table he knew the Southern Water Tribe family had taken. He immediately spotted Katara, and to his surprise, Tom-Tom was indeed with her and they were both laughing.

“Yup. You know what he said? He…he told Katara that he l-likes her ‘cause she…she’s nice and pretty.” Sokka chuckled. “Seems like he keeps…finding a way…to…to her,” he slurred.

Zuko looked back at his uncle and raised a dark eyebrow which the old man responded to with his own raised brow. Before either could ask Sokka to explain—at least the best he could in his inebriated state—the warrior continued without any prompting and told them about how they accidentally came across baby Tom-Tom and were accused of kidnapping him in order to use him against the governor in exchange for King Bumi’s release, which he admitted they took advantage of.

“But the p-plan didn’t work ‘cause…Azula…your crazy sister, you know,” Sokka said and patted Zuko’s arm sympathetically. “She told…she told…damn…what’s her name?” He cursed as he snapped his fingers. “The tall, scary-looking dagger-thrower?”

“Mai?” Iroh offered with a grin and shrugged when Zuko frowned at him.

“Yeah! Her!” Sokka exclaimed with a nod. “Az-zula told her King Bumi was more…im-important a trade than a mere baby so…what’s her name again? Oh, yeah, Mai! She called off…the deal and…and attacked us!” He finished by telling them how Aang returned the baby without anybody finding out.
Zuko looked at his uncle in shock. He knew Mai was not a person to show much affection and care, but he could not believe that she would do such a thing to her own brother, to an innocent child!

“Katara took care of him while he stayed with us,” Sokka continued to explain, this time a bit more seriously as he looked at his sister with an affection smile. “Though the group we were staying with told us to get rid of the baby, Katara refused to leave him to fend for himself just because he was Fire Nation.”

The three men were silent for a moment before they saw Suki quickly making her way to them with a deep scowl on her face.

“Oh, shit!” Sokka cursed as he tried to move away. “Suki’s gonna kill me for drinking too much!”

Zuko smirked and Iroh chuckled quietly as Suki grabbed Sokka by the back of his shirt as he tried to escape and dragged him outside the banquet hall after sending them a quick apology.

Sobering up, Zuko scanned the partying crowd to look for Mai. He spotted her talking to Ty Lee and he frowned deeply before he looked away and his eyes focused on Katara’s form. His expression softened as he watched her tilt her head back and laughed softly at something Tom-Tom said. He was amazed that Katara took care of a child from the enemy side, but then again perhaps he was not that surprised since Katara helped anyone who needed it despite who they were. Just like when she was willing to heal his scar even though she still saw him as the enemy.

“Katara will make a wonderful mother someday, don’t you agree, Nephew?” Iroh spoke up as he watched Zuko watching Katara.

“Yes, she will, Uncle,” Zuko agreed instantly.

Iroh smiled and lightly nudged his nephew’s arm with his elbow, tilting his head in the waterbender’s direction when Zuko looked down at him.

“Don’t just stand there! Make a move already!” Iroh enthused. “Seriously, what is wrong with you young people?”
“I don’t know, Uncle,” he began slowly and sighed. “I feel a bit guilty…for both Mai and Aang. Mai loves me and Aang loves…Katara. I just…don’t know what to do.”

“You want my advice?” Iroh asked quietly. When Zuko nodded, he placed his hands inside his sleeves. “Break up with Mai.”

“W-what?” Zuko stuttered at his uncle’s blunt response.

Iroh turned a serious eye toward his nephew.

“Tell me, Zuko, are you going anywhere in your relationship with Mai? Do you see her as your future wife? Do you even want her as your wife? Or is Katara the woman you wish to marry and have at your side for the rest of your life?”

Zuko opened his mouth to respond and snapped it closed a second later since he knew he did not need to give his uncle an answer. They both knew what it would be. They remained silent for a few moments as they glanced back at the table where the blue-eyed young woman was sitting. They watched as Mai’s parents stomped up to the table to demand their son’s return, and to their amusement, they saw Tom-Tom latch onto Katara and begin to scream that he did not want to go back to listening to their boring talks. It was a while later that Katara was able to convince the young boy to go back with his parents, which he did reluctantly.

Iroh gave his nephew a slight push, and if Zuko had not been training for all of his life, he would have stumbled onto the floor and made a fool of himself in front of his subjects. Zuko turned to his uncle and glared at him, but the retired general just gave him a cheeky grin.

“Hurry up and make a move on Miss Katara already,” Iroh insisted as his grin grew even larger. “I do want many grandnephews and nieces before I die, you know.”

Zuko’s face flushed and he quickly turned away when his uncle began to chuckle loudly at his reaction. Squaring his shoulders and smoothing his impeccable formal robes, Zuko determinedly made his way to Katara, his eyes never leaving her enticing form.

Kanna spotted the young Fire Lord making his way to them and she smiled broadly at her
“I hope you are all having a great time,” Zuko said as soon as he came upon the table and smiled at the group before he looked down at Katara.

Katara jumped at the sound of his voice and blushed while the rest of her family enthusiastically answered the young Fire Lord. She caught her grandmother’s eye again and her blush deepened when Kanna winked at her.

“Katara?” Zuko asked softly.

“Yes?” she answered as she ordered herself to look at him. Her heart stuttered when he smiled down at her.

“Would you honor me with this dance?” Zuko asked as he reached out his right hand toward her.

Katara forgot how to breathe for a second as she stared in shock at Zuko’s outstretched hand. He was asking her to dance! Just like she had been hoping all night since she arrived in the Fire Nation!

“I would love to,” Katara accepted with a pleased smile that made Zuko’s breath hitch.

Katara placed her hand on Zuko’s larger one with a deep, red blush on her cheeks as he pulled her up from the seat. They looked at each other with wide eyes as their hands touched. It was as if their hands knew each other. There was no way to explain the emotions that such a simple touch evoked.

They both tensed when they heard Kanna clear her throat while Hakoda eyed them with a frown on his face. Zuko gave them a small bow before he entwined Katara’s arm around his and led her away toward the dance floor while her blush deepened. The loud chatter that had been resonating throughout the room died down to a low murmur as the nobility stared at them making their way arm in arm. Everybody was astounded and the young women were livid for the Fire Lord had refused to dance with anybody else much less asked another woman to dance, and here he was, leading a Water Tribe woman to the dance floor.

Zuko ignored the whispers that reached them since he was already used to it and Katara tried not to let the whispers and dark looks she was receiving ruin her chance to dance with Zuko. The crowd parted for them as they passed and soon they stood in the middle of the dance floor. Zuko brought
her before him and they both stood nervously in front of the other as they waited for the musicians to pick up another song. Would this be the right time to confess their feelings for each other?

Once the song began to be played in soft melodies, Zuko took hold of one of Katara’s hands while she lightly placed the other on his shoulder as their eyes locked. He brought his other hand to her lower back and moved her closer to him, causing her to blush and let out a small gasp, almost making him groan aloud. Arms about each other, their bodies pressed together, the young Fire Lord and the waterbender moved and began to gracefully sail across the marble floor with the soft music guiding them.

They remained silent for a moment, both caught up in their thoughts, insecurities, and longings, but basking in the moment they had in each other’s arms.

Zuko admired the way Katara’s long, brown hair swirled around her, how her blue eyes sparkled in the warm light, and he felt his heart constrict in his chest. He cleared his throat as he tried to get rid of the lump that seemed to have gotten stuck there.

“Katara…you look very beautiful,” he whispered sincerely.

Katara was sure the blush on her face would not go away anytime soon as she briefly glanced away.


Zuko briefly closed his eyes. Why did it feel so good when it was Katara who said that?

“Zuko? Can I ask you something?” Katara asked slightly hesitantly as they spun around.

“Of course. What is it?” Zuko said as he looked at her worriedly when she looked away.

Please, let it not be about her engagement to Aang, he prayed in his head. I wouldn’t be able to take it!

“Why did you leave the Southern Water Tribe so suddenly?”
Zuko let out a mental sigh of relief and relaxed.

“There were…some things I needed to take care of,” he replied vaguely.

“Oh,” she muttered. “I thought there was something wrong. You acted so weird…so distant and cold. Were you…angry with me?”

“Angry with you?” Zuko asked incredulously as he tried to think back to the way he had behaved and was ashamed to realize that he had acted a bit indifferent toward her.

“I wasn’t angry with you, Katara,” Zuko told her.

Disappointed and hurt, yes, but not angry, he thought mentally.

“I’m sorry for acting like that. I just…had so many things on my mind,” he apologized as he continued to lead her in the dance while trying to forget the pain he had felt that night. “Forgive me?”

Katara pretended to think it over.

“I don’t know. Maybe we need to go on another secret mission so I could find it in myself to forgive your rude behavior,” she teased before she gave out a mocking sigh, “But since it is your birthday and all, I’ll forgive you.”

She grinned at him and he chuckled softly. Those that had been watching them closely were shocked to see their usually expressionless Fire Lord smile so broadly and they began to whisper amongst themselves, wondering what Lady Katara really meant to their young lord.

“How do you like the banquet food?” Zuko asked Katara with a small smirk, oblivious to the looks being thrown their way.

“La, the food is delicious! Especially the chocolate strawberry pastries!” Katara exclaimed enthusiastically.
Zuko smiled down at her as his hold on her hand tightened.

“I had a feeling you would say that, so that’s why it was the only request I had for my mother to serve for dessert,” he told her quietly.

“What do you mean?” Katara asked as she slightly tilted her head to one side with a confused expression that Zuko found quite endearing.

“You really liked that dessert when I took you out to eat at that restaurant in the middle of summer,” Zuko replied with another smirk.

Katara gasped.

“You remembered!” she exclaimed as she smiled up at him.

“Of course I remember,” Zuko said as he returned her smile, “It was one of the most enjoyable days I spent with you.”

Katara blushed at his words and she glanced away shyly.

“It was one of mine, too,” she confessed softly.

Zuko’s small smile broadened. He twirled her around and then pulled her closer to him before they resumed their dance. He was pleased that she did not protest his actions.

Kanna grinned into her cup of wine while her son and her husband looked at the dancing couple with confused frowns on their faces. Standing along the wall of the room with a slightly drunk Ty Lee, Mai gripped her fan so tightly it almost broke from the pressure as she watched the Water Tribe wench dance with her boyfriend with a sweet smile on her face.

Aang gaped at them with large eyes from the table he was sitting at with Toph, Haru, and a few other people. Toph smirked at the whispers that reached her ears and the vibrations that Katara and
Zuko were sending as they danced. She quickly grabbed the collar of Aang’s tunic as he tried to make his way over to them.

“Sit your butt back down, Twinkletoes!” she ordered.

Aang glowered at her, but he remained on his seat while he crossed his arms over his chest.

Zuko and Katara were unaware of what was happening around them as they continued with the slow dance. Since Katara was smaller than Mai, Zuko had no trouble as he lifted Katara up with a small grin and twirled her around, her long hair and dress swirling around them. Katara giggled happily and smiled brightly once he settled her back down on her feet and he returned the smile with a small smirk, both unaware that the song had ended and the musicians were playing another one.

With a blush, Katara laid her head on Zuko’s chest and smiled when he did not move her away. She sighed happily and closed her eyes as his spicy sandalwood scent reached her nose.

*Let me be happy at least for this night,* she thought as she pressed her face closer to his strong chest where she could feel his heartbeat.

Zuko felt warmth spread through his body at her action, and without thinking it twice, he rested his chin on her head, inhaling her sweet gardenia scent with a soft sigh. How many times had he wished to hold Katara like this? To have her in his arms? Katara had her head on his chest and he knew his heart was beating like crazy, but if she noticed, she did not say anything.

He moved his head, but pulled back slightly when something cold touched his skin. He glanced down and smiled when he saw it was the rose hairpin. He admired the red and blue gems and raised a hand to touch them with his fingers.

“It pleases me to see you wearing the hairpin I gave you for your birthday,” Zuko whispered softly.

Katara shivered as his warm breath caressed her ear before she looked up at him with a smile.

“I thought this day was a good time to wear it so you could see how much I appreciate and love it.”
How much I love you, she added mentally.

Zuko smiled at her, thinking that perhaps now was the time to follow his uncle’s wise words and confess his feelings for her, but a tap on his shoulder interrupted him before he could speak and he growled under his breath. They stopped dancing and slightly pulled away from each other as if they finally remembered where they were. They turned to see Aang glaring at them, his cheeks red with anger. Katara immediately dropped her arms from around Zuko and looked down at her feet with a blush. Zuko composed himself into his usual impassive mask, but narrowed his eyes at Aang for interrupting them. Again.

“I was wondering if I can have the chance to dance with my girlfriend now,” Aang said with a fake cheerfulness in his voice.

Zuko really much wanted to tell the young airbender no and tell him to leave them alone to dance in peace, but before he could say anything Katara stepped around him and grabbed Aang’s shaking hand.

“Aang, are you okay? Let’s go sit,” Katara said gently since she could see that Aang was upset. She was afraid that he might to do something drastic. She looked back at Zuko apologetically.

“Thank you for the dance, Zuko,” she said before she added softly, “I really enjoyed it.”

“I did, too,” he responded as he looked at her, resisting the urge to pull her back and plead with her to stay with him.

Katara smiled before she led Aang away while Zuko looked after her with a small frown on his face. He glowered when Wei made his way toward him with a large smirk on his lips.

“Lady Katara is quite a beautiful young woman,” Wei remarked with his smirk still in place.

Zuko did not respond as he took one last glance to where Katara had gone before he turned around and walked away.

The hours were long into the night, the celebration was coming to a close, the musicians were playing the last songs, and the guests were leaving to their homes—some with excitement still on their faces, while others sported disappointed looks on theirs since it seemed the young lord had
disappeared and thus they were unable to win him over.

Katara slipped away from the banquet hall and slowly made her way toward the silence of the private garden. She was tired. Tired of dancing with a way too cheery Aang, tired of seeing Iroh, Ursa and her Gran-Gran shooting grins at her, tired of seeing Zuko with Mai surrounded by a bunch of moon-eyed girls, but most of all, tired of feeling so sad and alone.

Now all she wanted at the moment was to find some peace and quiet in the Royal Palace Garden with its fresh-scented trees and beautiful flowers. She had really come to love the garden and its cute little turtle-ducks and had missed it when she had left the Fire Nation.

“Katara, wait up!” Aang’s jovial voice broke through her thoughts.

Katara groaned, but plastered a smile on her face as she waited for the young monk to catch up to her. Her fake smile disappeared, however, when she noticed that there was something strange with Aang since his cheeks were flushed and his steps were a bit wobbly.

“Where you going?” he asked a bit too cheerfully as he come up to her side and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Katara leaned away from him as the smell of alcohol assaulted her nose and she frowned at him, but he did not seem to notice since he was busy smiling broadly at her. Maybe she should not have allowed Toph to take the young monk to get some drinks. Gods knew how tolerable Toph’s blood was with alcoholic liquids, but Aang shied away from even taking a sip of wine.


Aang frowned at her before he started to chuckle.

“Nope. I’m just a little bit…how did Toph say it? Oh, yeah! Buzzed!” he said and laughed again. “I’m a bit dizzy, though.” He paused for a moment before he smiled at her again. “So were you going to the garden?” he asked as he squinted at the end of the bright corridor.

With a sigh, Katara nodded, but before she could say anything else, Aang grabbed her hand and began to lead her a bit unstably toward the large garden.
“I’ll go with you!” he exclaimed happily.

“Thanks, but—”

“I need some fresh air anyway,” Aang interrupted a bit more seriously than before.

Katara took a look at the green tint on the airbender’s face and sighed as she let Aang lead her outside in a hurried pace.

Zuko took a deep breath of fresh air as soon as he stepped into his private garden and leaned his tired back against the cool surface of the wall behind him. The banquet hall was getting too stifling and crowded and he needed some air and space from Mai and the people that seemed to have made it their goal for the day to suffocate him and bore him to the point he wished he could cut off his ears—or much preferably their tongues. He looked across the semi-illuminated garden with a fond smile, but did not venture further than the palace wall.

However, the main reason he escaped to his private garden was because of Katara. After their dance he was unable to stop staring at her, could not stop from admiring the way her hair would swirl around her as she danced, or stop from loving the way her cheeks flushed from dancing, and he was afraid that everybody would notice and would start to question his behavior. He could not stop remembering the way her small body had felt in his arms, how it was pressed close to his, how her sweet scent had washed over his senses.

Zuko shook his head as he felt his heart begin to throb in his chest as well as another part of him below his waist. He needed to leave the banquet hall for a moment because he did not know if he could control himself whenever he looked at Katara. He did not know if he could stop himself from going up to her, tilting her head back, planting a searing kiss to her lush lips, and carrying her to his room without caring what anybody else thought.

He ran a hand down his face, but froze when he heard voices coming from the hall. Zuko hoped for their sake it was not some nobleman and his annoying daughters. Deciding it was best that he did not let himself be seen, he hid behind the dark shadows of one of the pillars that stood beside the garden entrance and remained still.

He watched as two figures emerged from the palace and he tensed. His temper flared as he saw that it was Katara and Aang hand in hand and he quickly looked around to see if he could find some sort of escape. He did not want to stay around and see them get all…cuddly. He grimaced.
Katara watched as Aang shook his head and took a few gulps of fresh air. The green tint on his skin began to fade, but his cheeks were still flushed.

“Do you feel better now?” she asked as she patted his back.

“Yeah,” Aang responded as he took one more deep breath before he looked over at her and smiled.

Katara returned his smile, but was unprepared when Aang’s arms shot out and wrapped around her. He buried his face in her neck and the smell of liquor on his breath made her dizzy. She stiffened immediately, which only caused him to tighten his hold.

Zuko tensed when Aang pulled Katara to him in a tight hug. He pressed his lips tightly together to keep from growling, but frowned when Katara started to push Aang away with a scowl on her face.

“Aang, let go!” she demanded as she placed her hands on his chest to get him to back off, but he did not budge like she thought he would, instead he shook his head and tightened his embrace.

She realized it was the alcohol that was making him act this way and she sighed.

“You’re drunk. Maybe you should go lie down and sleep it off—”

Instead of answering her, Aang slightly pulled his head back before he sloppily kissed her.

Zuko gaped at them before he angrily glared at Aang. It surprised him, however, when Katara snapped her head away and roughly pushed Aang away from her with an angry expression on her face before she brought the back of her hand to vigorously wipe at her mouth.

“What the hell Aang!” she yelled irately as she gingerly touched her lips. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I wanted to!” Aang yelled back at her and flailed his arms in the air.
Katara stared at him in shock. She was expecting him to start apologizing like he always did when his actions went a bit too far, not for him to get angry and argue. She knew it was the alcohol that he consumed that was taking his inhibitions away and was making him be bolder.

“All you ever let me do is hug and kiss you!” Aang exclaimed angrily. “But I want more!”

“What?” Katara asked incredulously and Zuko narrowed his eyes from the shadows of the pillar.

“You know what I mean! I want us to go beyond hugs and kisses!” the airbender growled out as he ran a hand over his bald head.

“Well, I don’t—”

“I mean, Sokka has Suki and Zuko has Mai!” Aang interrupted. “You know they do those kind of things, so why can’t we?”

What the hell! Zuko growled in his head as he glared heatedly at Aang. Why does he have to bring Mai and me up?

Katara looked away from glaring daggers at Aang at the reminder of what Mai had said back in the flagship about…her and Zuko. She felt her heart ache at that thought and what Aang had said, but she pushed it to the back of her mind as she raised an eyebrow at Aang.

“How do you even know Zuko and Mai…do those kinds of things?” Katara asked.

Aang gave a careless shrug.

“Ty Lee got drunk and she told me that…” he trailed off with a blush and shuffled his foot, “Mai wasn’t…getting any from Zuko anymore so that’s why she was in such a…uh…bitchy mood.”

Zuko gaped at the young monk before he clenched his jaw at the thought that what happened in his private life was being shared around. He glanced at Katara, afraid of what she must think of him now that she knew about what Mai and he had done. He saw his chances for Katara to return his feelings begin to diminish in front of his eyes.
Katara looked away again as her stomach gave a painful twist at the truth before she turned away from Aang and looked across the garden.

“W-whatever Mai and…Zuko do is none of my business,” Katara said quietly. “You know my culture’s view of such things. Besides, I won’t do something that I will later regret just because everybody else is doing them!”

“But Katara I don’t want to be with you like that just because everybody else is doing it!” Aang exclaimed in exasperation as he grasped her shoulder and turned her around so she could see him. “I just want our relationship to go to the next level! I love you!”

Zuko resisted the urge to cover his ears. He did not want to be there at the moment, he did not want to see them anymore, and he did not want to hear what Katara’s response would be. He squeezed his eyes shut at the turmoil that began to fester inside him.

Before Katara could say anything, Aang forcefully slammed his lips to hers. Katara’s eyes widened and she grimaced at the foul taste of alcohol on his breath and mouth. She felt her temper surface when Aang tried to pry her mouth opened with his tongue.

Zuko stared at them wide-eyed and clenched his hands so tightly that his blunt nails almost broke the pale skin on his palms. He felt as if his heart was being wrenched from his chest and he flinched at the pain the scene of the woman he loved being kissed by another man caused him. He clenched his jaw. They were engaged, so it would only be natural for them to be more intimately close, though the thought still angered him beyond reason. He should not have listened to his uncle. He should not have raised his hopes up about there being a misunderstanding back in the Southern Water Tribe because it seemed that what he had seen back then was what it was…Katara had accepted to marry Aang.

Before he could find a way to escape, Zuko noticed that Katara began to struggle viciously in Aang’s hold, pushing at his chest with her small hands and trying to pull her head away. He realized that Katara did not want the young monk’s affections and he became enraged that Aang ignored her wish for him to release her. Zuko took a step to intervene, but froze when Katara freed one of her hands and slapped Aang across the face.

Aang immediately backed away in shock. When he looked at Katara’s hurt and angry face, he came back to reality. He was so shocked at what he did. Guilt and shame quickly began to eat his insides at what he tried to do to her. He was supposed to bring her back to him not scare her away and make her hate him.
He touched his stinging cheek where she had slapped him and he looked at her with horror in his eyes as he tried to apologize.

“Katara…I…I didn’t mean…I’m…”

“Just leave me alone!” Katara screamed at him as she spun around and fled deeper into the dark garden.

Zuko watched her go, her hair and dress whipping behind her as she fled, before he looked back at Aang and glared at him heatedly. He sighed quietly and shook his head when tears began to form in Aang’s large gray eyes while his shoulders slumped.

“I’m so sorry,” Aang whispered into the quiet night, but Zuko was the only one to hear his apology before the young boy turned around and went back inside the palace since he knew Katara would not want to see him at the moment.

Zuko watched Aang leave before he returned his gaze toward the garden where the young woman had run to. He hesitated for a moment as he stepped away from the shadows and approached the grassy edge of the garden. He wondered if he should leave since he wasn’t even supposed to hear their conversation in the first place, but he decided to go look for Katara since it was getting very late and the night was chilly. Even though he himself was hurting a bit, he loved Katara and he would be damned if he was not there for her.

Zuko stepped onto one of the stone paths that wound around the Royal Palace Garden and quickly made his way among the many flowers and trees that he had not seen for months. He sighed quietly when he immediately spotted the young Water Tribe woman staring at the pond, sitting at their spot beneath the cherry blossom tree that was now in full bloom. Their spot. It sounded right.

For a few minutes, Zuko remained standing a few paces away and watched her staring at the serene pond with her arms wrapped around her knees that she had brought to her chest while her beautiful hair gleamed under the soft light of the crescent moon and the few lanterns that were lit around the garden wall. With another small sigh, Zuko straightened himself and approached her.

“Katara? Is something wrong?” he asked softly once he neared her. He decided not to say anything about what had happened.
Katara jumped slightly at the sound of his voice. She turned her face away when Zuko slightly adjusted his formal robes and sat next to her, and she quickly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. How long had Zuko been in the garden? Did he see what happened between her and Aang?

“I’m fine,” she replied, her tone emotionless.

She gasped softly when she felt Zuko’s fingers touch her chin before he lifted her face to his as he frowned down at her.

“No you’re not,” Zuko reprimanded gently as he touched her wet cheek with his other hand. “You were crying.”

Katara tried very hard to brush his concern aside and tell him there was nothing wrong, but his gentleness and his warm presence was too much for her that tears began to flow freely from her eyes. A soft sob escaped her lips before she lunged herself at him and buried her face on his chest.

Zuko instantly wrapped his arms around the crying woman and began to run soothing circles on her back just like when his mother used to do when he was small and had nightmares. He stroked her soft tresses as he allowed her to cry into his chest while she clung onto the back of his clothes as her small body shook with her sobs. He wished he could hurt Aang so bad that it would render him unconscious for weeks for making Katara cry. He could not help but wish that it were him she was crying for, to distress for, and not Aang—although he would rather not have her cry at all. His heart seemed to be breaking at every sob that escaped her lips, but he just could not push her away and let her suffer alone.

What Zuko did not realize, however, was that Katara was crying not because of what happened with Aang—her tears had nothing to with him. She cried because she could not hold her pain and sadness any longer because of what Aang had reminded her about Zuko and Mai and because Zuko did not love her. How she wished Zuko were holding her to him because he loved her, not because he wanted to soothe her tears away.

A cold breeze blew by, rustling the leaves of the tree above them, which caused the pink and white blossoms to dance their way down upon the pair sitting below wrapped in each other’s arms. It was a half an hour later when Katara’s tears stopped and her soft sobs subsided. Finally realizing what she had been doing, Katara slowly pulled away from Zuko’s warm embrace with a small blush, embarrassed beyond measure for her outburst.

Zuko was reluctant to let her move away from his hold, and so he gently pressed her back onto his chest. He smiled when she settled back down with a blush and watched as she tried to hide the tears.
that clung to her cheeks. With a small smile, he pulled a silky handkerchief from the inside of his sleeve and quietly handed it to her.

“Thanks,” Katara muttered as she grabbed the offered handkerchief.

She almost burst into tears again when she looked down at the silky piece of cloth, recognizing it as the one Zuko had used to dab the hot tea that Jin had accidentally spilled onto her hands in Ba Sing Se, but she took a deep breath and wiped the moisture from her cheeks.

“Sorry for crying on you like that. I didn’t mean to drench your robe with my tears,” she said shakily as she leaned back and tried to smile up at him. “I’m sorry for keeping you from your own party.”

“It’s okay,” Zuko reassured and smiled slightly as he ran his fingers through her hair and shrugged. “I’m actually glad I could escape from it for a while. Besides, you’ve always been there for me and I will always be there for you when you need me.”

Katara looked back down and bit her lip to keep from crying again. Though she knew that it would hurt later if she remained in Zuko’s embrace much longer, she buried her face in his warm chest and inhaled his spicy scent.

“Zuko?” she spoke up softly.

“Yeah?”

“Can we…stay like this…for a while longer?” she whispered almost timidly.

Zuko’s golden eyes widened and he looked down at the young woman with a blushing face in his arms. He wished he could tell her that she could stay like that forever, that he would be there for her and love her forever, but he refrained from telling her so because it seemed she was still shaken by what happened a few moments ago with Aang.

Katara felt her heart sink when Zuko did not respond right away, so she started to pull away, but she was surprised when Zuko tightened his hold on her and nodded.
“Of course,” he finally replied.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

They were silent after that as they sat together under the dark sky in the middle of the grand garden. Both wished they could reveal their true feelings for one another, but so many things had happened that they did not know if they should.

Katara let out a soft sigh as Zuko’s warmth surrounded her. She could feel his strong and steady heartbeat beneath her ear, and within a moment, she was lulled to sleep by the sound of his beating heart and by Zuko’s long fingers caressing her hair.

Zuko rested his chin on Katara’s head as he continued to touch her long tresses. He looked up at the small moon in the dark sky and realized it was getting late. He was not much concerned about his guests since he knew his uncle had probably come up with an excuse for his absence, but he knew Katara’s family was probably worried about her. He looked down to tell Katara it was best they went back inside, but stopped when he saw that she had fallen asleep.

With a small smile, he reached his hand to her face and gently caressed her soft skin and then her soft lips. With a sigh, he pulled his hand away before he did anything that would upset her even further. Zuko placed his arms underneath Katara and stood up carefully so he would not disrupt her sleep. He shifted her slightly in his arms so he could have a secure hold on her and her head rested against his neck before he walked away from the cherry blossom tree and the pond.

He cautiously entered the palace, and when he saw that it was empty, he quickly made his way toward the guest room Katara had stayed in before. Luckily, her room was close to the Royal Palace Garden and away from the banquet hall, so Zuko was able to make it there quickly and without any incidents.

Zuko hesitated for a moment once he reached his destination as he recalled the times he tried to avoid that particular room. He brought Katara closer to his chest with a sigh before he awkwardly got the door open while trying to keep Katara in his arms without waking her up. He closed the door behind him with his foot, and with a deep exhale, he willed a few candles to light up. He slowly crossed the empty room before he gently deposited the sleeping waterbender on the bed, remembering the first time he had done the same thing all those months ago.

Instead of leaving, Zuko sat down at the edge of the bed and gazed down upon the peaceful visage of the woman. Katara sighed softly in her sleep, rolled to her side, and pressed herself closer to his warm side. He touched one of her hands, and when she did not stir, Zuko grabbed it and lifted it to
his lips, relishing in the feeling of her soft skin.

How he wished he could stay with her, remain by her side and guard her sleep. But he knew such a thing was improper since she was engaged and all, though it still did not make him wish otherwise. He brought her hand to his cheek while he touched her own cheek with his right hand.

He would never be satisfied to be just her friend. As selfish as it sounded, he wanted all of her, all of what she could give for himself only. When she looked up at him, he wanted her to feel the same tightness in her chest that he felt when he looked at her, when he saw her smile, when he heard her laugh. He wanted her to long for him, and only him, when he was away as he had spent countless days longing for her.

Zuko reached for her hair and gently unclasped the silver rose hairpin. He looked down at it for a moment as he caressed the stones with his thumb. He could not even begin to express how pleased he was that she had decided to wear it for this day. After a few more strokes, he placed the hairpin down on the nightstand where he knew she would be able to see it when she woke up. Zuko then turned toward the sleeping Katara and sighed. He leaned down and pressed his lips to her forehead before he moved to her ear as he continued to caress her face.

“I would do anything for your love, Katara,” Zuko whispered quietly as he inhaled her scent deeply. “I don’t want just your friendship, but your love as well.”

He pulled away and held his breath when Katara stirred, but sighed sadly when she became still again as she continued to sleep. He closed his eyes as different kinds of emotions swirled within him.

He remained sitting beside her for an hour or two before he stood up and made his way to the door. With one last look at the sleeping form of the woman he loved but could not have, Zuko opened the door before he closed it quietly behind him.

Blue eyes snapped open and a quiet moan escaped Katara’s dry lips. Light was pouring from the window and she could hear a few birds singing outside. Looking around the semi-dark room, Katara brought a hand to her head and winced at the pain that she knew had to do with all the crying she had done the previous night. It seemed all she did was cry for the past several months.

She sat up and closed her eyes as the memories of what Aang did and said came rushing to her mind. She knew it was the amount of alcohol he had drunk that made him more daring than usual, but that still did not excuse the way he had treated her. She could not keep up with the way things were, she could not continue lying to herself and to Aang. She needed to have a talk with him. She would end their relationship, a relationship that was not even meant to be in the first place.
Having reached a decision, Katara opened her eyes and sighed as she felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She knew Aang would be angry and hurt at first, but she was positive that in the end he would realize it was for the best and hopefully he would be able to find happiness, for even though she was not in love with him, she did care for him and loved him as one of her best friends.

Katara looked at her nightstand and her eyes widened as she saw her rose hairpin resting neatly in the middle of the wooden surface of the furniture. She picked it up since she did not recall placing it there and then gasped as she then remembered that she had fallen asleep in Zuko’s embrace in the middle of the lovely garden after she had calmed down from her crying.

Katara covered her face and groaned.

*I can’t believe I bawled like that in front of Zuko! What must he think of me?*

She quickly shoved the depressing thoughts from her mind as they began to surface for she did not want to relive those moments where the realization of her horrible love life pierced her heart. Katara looked down at the hairpin in her hand and blushed at the memory of Zuko trying to comfort her. She felt a bit bad, though, that he had missed his party just to listen to her cry.

She looked about the room and she knew that Zuko had probably carried her to her room again. Too bad she had fallen asleep and could not enjoy being in his arms like that time when they returned from the prison tower. A soft knock at her door brought her out of her thoughts. The door opened and Jiao entered with a smile on her face.

“Good morning, Lady Katara,” the young maidservant greeted and bowed respectfully. “Fire Lord Zuko has asked me to come and see how you were this morning before the breakfast meal.”

“Oh…uh…I’m fine, thank you,” Katara replied softly as she pulled her covers away. She was shocked to find that she was not wearing her dress from last night but her nightgown.

Jiao turned away from the window she had opened when the young waterbender became quiet and did not move from the bed. The maidservant saw what the woman was looking at, and with an understanding giggle, she proceeded to help Katara stand up.

“I was finishing the last arrangements for your family’s stay in the guest rooms last night when I saw...
Lord Zuko come out from your room while I passed by,” Jiao began as she started to fix the bed. “He told me to retrieve your grandmother so she could change you into your more comfortable sleeping clothes.”

“Oh,” Katara giggled sheepishly as she moved away to let Jiao finish her job. She was amazed that she did not even notice.

Katara watched as Jiao smoothed the covers back onto the bed and fluffed the pillows before she blushed in mortification at what kind of woman Jiao must think she was when she saw Zuko leave her room so late at night. She liked Jiao and she did not want the young servant to think badly about her. What if someone else saw?

“Jiao, about last night…Fire Lord Zuko and I…we didn’t…uh,” Katara stuttered to explain.

Jiao looked at the blushing young woman and smiled.

“There’s no need for you to worry or even try to explain, Lady Katara. Besides, it is none of my business what Fire Lord Zuko or you do,” she said with a small shrug. “I understand that in the Water Tribes such things are viewed differently, but here in the Fire Nation, it’s not a big deal.”

Katara followed Jiao as she walked over to the bathroom and let the water fill the tub before she lit the wooden logs beneath it to heat the water up. Katara murmured quiet thanks as the young servant woman continued to talk.

“Especially among the nobility such things as sexual escapades or virginity do not matter as long as they are kept in secret. It is even expected for both partners to have lovers since most marriages are due to political reasons, not affection, and especially not love.”

Katara nodded silently, amazed at how different it was in her culture. She looked away sadly as Jiao smiled at her.

“I-it’s just like the…situation between…Lady Mai and Fire Lord Zuko,” she said quietly.

Jiao frowned slightly at the dejected tone of the young woman she had come to care for.
“Well…that could be an example. Lady Mai decided to move into the palace a few months ago since her home is so close, almost outside the palace gates,” Jiao said before she gave a small shrug.
“Though I don’t see why Lady Mai is still here since the Fire Lord rarely goes to her or even spends time with her anyway.”

Jiao gasped and she quickly covered her mouth as she turned to look at Katara with wide eyes.

“Yes forgive me for being so imprudent,” she hastily apologized and bowed.

Katara waved her apology away as a large smile broke out on her face.

“It’s alright, Jiao,” she reassured as she stepped closer to the tub and looked down at the steamy water.

“It actually makes me glad to know this,” she whispered softly to herself. She felt like her heart was beating easier now.

Jiao muttered another sheepish apology before she stepped out of the bathroom to lay out some clothes for the waterbender so she could get ready for the day.

Katara stepped out of her light-blue nightgown and entered the bathtub with a soft sigh, her smile still in place.

Those that were waiting in the dining room talked excitedly amongst themselves about the happenings from the party the previous night, making a groan or two come out from the Water Tribe warrior slouched at the end of the table as a result of the massive hangover he woke up to. Toph, Pakku, and his father laughed at him and his wife scowled at him gently while she fed their twins with the help from Gran-Gran and Lady Ursa. Ty Lee and Haru were whispering to each other while Mai sat beside the giggling acrobat with a cold look on her face.

Aang was oblivious to what the others were talking about as he fidgeted nervously in his seat while they waited for Zuko, Iroh, and Katara to show up. Jing began to squeal loudly as she tried to push away the food her mother was trying to feed her and Aang winced. He knew he should not have allowed the others to pressure him into drinking and now he had a painful headache. The young airbender leaned his elbows on the table and held his head in his hands.
He deserved the pain, though. He felt so horrible at the things he told Katara last night and what he tried to do and he was so ashamed of his actions. What would Monk Gyatso and Avatar Roku think? But he was more concerned about what Katara thought about him now. How was he going to regain her favor after what happened? He did not mean to have acted like that, and he knew part of the blame was the alcohol he had consumed, but he just could not help it. Katara had looked so beautiful in that dress, it just caused his brain to malfunction for a moment. But he knew his actions were wrong. He just hoped that Katara would find it in herself to forgive him.

Aang looked up when the guards opened the large doors and Katara came in with a maidservant walking a few paces behind her while she greeted everybody cheerfully. He smiled at her shakily, but Katara looked away from him and walked around the rectangular table to sit between Hakoda and Kanna. He felt his heart sink at her indifferent behavior and he looked down at the empty plate on the table in front of him.

“I see you had a good night’s rest, Katara,” Gran-Gran piped in and smiled knowingly at her granddaughter.

“Uh…yeah,” Katara said with a small blush.

“Katara,” Hakoda spoke up with a small frown, “why did you leave the party without telling us? Where did you go?”

Aang looked up at Katara with wide eyes, but she did not turn his way as she looked at her father.

“I…went for a walk in the Royal Palace Garden to get some fresh air,” she replied as she looked down at her hands.

“The room was getting a bit stuffy,” Ursa stated as she smiled at Katara. “Now that you mention it, Zuko left his own celebration a bit early as well. Was my son with you? He does like to go to the garden to relax, after all.”

Mai’s head snapped up at what Ursa had said and she narrowed her eyes at Katara.

“Uh…um…yes,” Katara stammered as her blush deepened in color. “Zuko came into the garden a bit later than I did and we…talked.”
Mai’s glare intensified and she clenched her thin hands tightly while Hakoda raised an eyebrow at his daughter.

Aang stared at her with a gaping mouth. Katara had been alone with Zuko in the garden? Did Katara tell Zuko what he tried to do? Maybe Zuko started to fill her head with things and that was the reason why Katara was avoiding him now more than ever.

The doors opened again and the people sitting at the table turned to see Zuko enter with Iroh grinning madly behind him. The old firebender caught Katara’s eye and winked, which almost caused Zuko to roll his eyes and sigh. He had not even said anything about what happened the previous night with Katara, but his old uncle had just looked at him for a moment before he guessed everything right.

Zuko walked to the head of the table while his uncle took his seat at his left.

“Good morning,” he greeted impassively as he looked around the table before his eyes settled on Katara and a slight smile curved his lips.

“Good morning, Katara,” he added.

Katara stuttered a reply along with the rest of her friends and family as she tried very hard not to blush at the sound of his voice, but failed miserably anyway. She avoided looking at her Gran-Gran when the old woman discreetly elbowed her arm. She ignored the death glare Mai was aiming at her. She could feel Aang staring at her face, but she could not bring herself to look at him.

As soon as the Fire Lord took a seat, the servants moved forward to uncover the plates and trays filled with the delicious breakfast meal while others moved around to pour juice for the Fire Lord and his family and guests.

The serene silence as they enjoyed their meal would occasionally be disrupted when Iroh would make a comment or when the twins would babble and giggle as they tortured their poor father. Nobody seemed to be aware of the tension that was coming from Zuko, Katara, and Aang as they tried to avoid each other’s eyes, or the light blushes that would appear on Katara’s cheeks when her eyes would meet with Zuko’s.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Zuko spoke up as soon as he finished eating and stood from his seat, “I have some important things that I need to look into. Please enjoy your stay in the Fire Nation.”
“We will, Fire Lord Zuko,” Hakoda replied with a small smile.

Zuko gave them a small nod, glanced at Katara one more time, and then left the large family dining room and made his way to his study.

“You have such a hardworking young man as a son, Lady Ursa. You must be so proud,” Kanna stated.

“Gran-Gran!” Sokka groused and then winced at the volume of his own voice. “Are you saying I’m not a hardworking son?”

Ursa laughed behind her hand as she smiled at the old Water Tribe woman.

“Yes, I’m so proud to have Zuko as my son,” she said contentedly. “Although I really wish he could settle down with a wonderful young woman already. I do want grandchildren to dote upon, after all.”

“Ah, yes, I know what you mean,” Kanna responded as she smiled meaningfully at the Fire Lord’s mother before she turned to Katara and patted her hand. “That’s what I keep telling Katara.”

Hakoda choked on his drink as he gaped at his mother who just grinned at him. Katara flushed deeply at the attention. She saw Aang give her a hopeful look, but she frowned and looked away.

Mai stood up abruptly from her seat and strode away without a single word.

“We should take a walk around the city,” Iroh piped in cheerfully as he turned to look at the silent old waterbending master. “What do you say about a game of Pai Sho after we return, my good old friend?”

Paku’s thin lips turned upwards into a smirk.

“Of course, though I must warn you that I have been practicing.”
Iroh chuckled as they all stood up from the table and left the room while the servants stayed behind to clean up.

A few minutes later, the group exited the palace gates and entered the city. Kanna’s eyes widened at the wealth of the Fire Nation capital, though Hakoda and Pakku were better at covering their awe. Ty Lee grabbed Haru’s hand and led him away in a different direction while he followed her with a red blush on his tanned cheeks. Iroh and Toph were walking a few feet in front of them all and were deep in conversation, while Suki took a break and handed her daughters over to Sokka, who groaned miserably when the twin girls began to pull at his small beard.

Katara was talking to Lady Ursa when she felt someone grab her arm. She tensed since she knew who it was and gently moved her arm away from his touch.

“What, Aang?” she asked quietly.

“Katara…I…I would like to talk to you…please,” Aang pleaded softly. He was a bit hurt that she had moved away from his slight touch.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” Katara said as she turned to smile at her family before she turned back to stare evenly at the young monk. “Aang and I need to talk.”

Toph was the last one to move away as the others continued walking while they gave each other confused frowns. Once they were out of sight, Katara crossed her arms and sighed.

“Katara…I’m so sorry,” Aang began as he ran a hand down his face. “I don’t really know what came over me last night and I’m sorry for…for acting like a jerk. I promise it won’t happen again,” he said as he looked at her with pleading eyes.

Katara nodded.

“Though I didn’t like what you did, I forgive you,” she said quietly.

She took a step back and held up a hand when Aang smiled happily and moved forward to hug her.
“And, I know you won’t do it again because there won’t be a next time,” she continued.

“K-Katara? What are you saying?” Aang asked apprehensively.

The young woman reached into the pocket of her dark blue pants and pulled out the golden necklace. She reached for Aang’s hand and gently placed the necklace onto his palm before she closed his hand over it. Aang gaped down at his hand and then back at her.

“It’s a lovely necklace, but I can’t accept it,” Katara began softly, “We can’t be together any longer, Aang. I’m sorry, but I won’t marry you.”

“No!” Aang exclaimed as he tried to press the necklace back onto Katara’s hand. “Please, don’t say that! I know what I did was inexcusable, but that’s not enough reason for you to break up with me!”

Katara shook her head as she pushed his hand away.

“That was just one of the many reasons why I can’t continue being with you,” she said with a sigh. She paused as she sadly looked away from him. “Aang, I…I don’t love you… Not in that way…I never had and I never will.”

Aang froze in shock at her words. He felt like he could not breathe, like the world had suddenly come crashing down on him, like his heart had been broken into a million pieces. He could not believe this was happening to him!

“No! This can’t be!” Aang whispered brokenly as tears began to form in his gray eyes.

Katara bit her lip to keep herself from taking back her words and comforting him like she always did. She hated to cause him pain, but she knew that what she was doing was for the best. She needed to do this for his sake and hers.

“I’m sorry, Aang,” Katara said gently. “I’m sorry for not telling you this sooner, for not telling you the truth before now, but you would only hurt more if I had continued leading you on and continued with such a lie. I hope one day you can find the person that will make you happy like you deserve.”
“Katara, please don’t! I don’t want someone else! We could work it out! Just give us some time and —”

“Stop it, Aang!” Katara interrupted a bit louder before she shook her head at him. “We’ve been together for four years and my feelings for you have still remained the same. I can only love you as a friend and nothing more.”

“Katara…please…” Aang pleaded desperately as he took hold of her hand, his tears beginning to pour down his face.

“I’m sorry,” Katara whispered as she pulled her hand away from him and quickly walked away.

Aang stood in the middle of the street with the golden necklace dangling from his hand, staring dejectedly after the woman he loved with tears falling freely from his gray eyes.

“No,” he whispered brokenly.
The young Fire Lord sighed as he read and signed another of the documents that were stacked atop his large desk before he placed it in one of the two piles with the paperwork that had been approved or rejected by him. No matter how long or how much he worked on his stack of important documents, it seemed that more kept pouring in the moment he looked away. Iroh had offered to help, as well as Advisor Chao, but Zuko preferred to do things himself; that way he could know what he was truly approving.

Zuko reached for another parchment to look over, but when the words began to blur together, he shoved it aside and leaned back on his chair with an exasperated growl as he raked his hand down his face. Although he had tried to keep his mind busy with other things, he just could not stop the thoughts about a certain woman that kept surfacing in his head—not that he had truly wanted to stop said thoughts.

The young firebender stood up from his seat and made his way to the large glass window behind his desk. The morning sun was bright in the sky and he could just make out the blossoming flowers in the trees in his private garden where he had sat under the moon the previous night with Katara sleeping in his arms, her hair tickling his chin and her soft body pressed against his. A sense of warmth engulfed his heart and he had to close his eyes for a moment at the intense feeling that he had not experienced since he had left the Southern Water Tribe…since he had left Katara. Now she was back, back in his home, and all the emotions that he had tried to keep sealed and caged inside him were breaking free of their confines.

Zuko opened his eyes only to narrow them as he remembered the way Aang had grabbed Katara; even though she had been protesting. If Katara had not shoved Aang away and slapped him, Zuko was not sure if he would have been able to stop himself from seriously harming the young airbender. His friendship with Aang may be a bit strained at the moment, but that did not mean he did not see Aang as his friend and wished him harm. However, if Aang hurt Katara, then Zuko would have no choice but to make the young boy see what he was doing was wrong.

Zuko wondered if perhaps with what happened, Katara would see that Aang was not the right choice for her husband, and maybe, she would start looking in his direction. However, he did not know how probable that was since Katara had always forgiven and accepted whatever the young airbender did. But then he would never know if he did not listen to what Iroh had told him and confess his true feelings for Katara.

The young Fire Lord watched as a few birds hopped from tree branch to tree branch before they took flight into the sky. He could not help but be relieved and thrilled at the fact that Katara had not been touched by Aang or any other man in any way yet. He wished with all his being that he could be her first in everything relating to carnal pleasure.
A knock at his door brought him out of his thoughts. Zuko frowned and wondered who it could be since Jee had told him that his mother and Iroh had gone into the capital with his Southern Water Tribe guests.

“Enter,” Zuko commanded loud enough for the person on the other side to hear him. He glanced over his shoulder when he heard the door open and firmly close.

“Mai,” he greeted as he straightened himself before he turned back around to stare out the window.

Mai remained silent as she looked at his back, her thin hands clenched tightly at her sides. When Zuko did not acknowledge her again, her dark eyes narrowed slightly. She moved away from the door and walked toward him until she stopped a few feet behind him.

“Now I know why I couldn’t find you at the end of the celebration last night,” Mai said in a dull tone. “I heard that you were in the garden with…Katara.”

Zuko glanced at her briefly and frowned at the iciness in which she had said Katara’s name.

“I was,” he replied truthfully.

Mai pressed her lips together until they turned white before she composed herself. She had been hoping that what she had heard at the breakfast table had only been a false rumor that the Water Tribe woman had tried to pass as truth in order to ensnare Zuko. But it seemed that it had been true and Zuko was not even bothered by it. She needed to win him back.

The thin noblewoman walked closer to him and placed a hand on his back before she slowly circled around him until she stood in front of him, effectively blocking whatever he had been looking at outside.

Zuko blinked and frowned down at her.

“Zuko, what is wrong with you?” she asked quietly.
His frown deepened.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” he uttered coolly.

“Of course you know what I mean!” Mai hissed in a low tone. “You’re becoming more and more distant with me. You don’t spend time with me and you push me away. We haven’t even had sex for over a year now!”

“I’m not in the mood for such things right now,” Zuko answered dismissively.

“Maybe not with me, but certainly you’re in the mood with someone else,” Mai sneered.

“What are you trying to say?” the young man asked in a low, dangerous growl.

Mai closed her eyes and schooled her features into her expressionless mask, taking a deep breath before reopening her eyes. This was not the way she had planned to act. She needed to act coolly so she could win his favor.

“Never mind, forget what I said,” she murmured as she took a step forward and wound her arms around his neck. She felt him tense, but she ignored it as she pressed her lips to the right side of his face.

Zuko grabbed her forearms to dislodge her hold on his neck, but scowled when she did not move away but instead tightened her hold.

“Mai…” he warned.

“How about we spend the day in my room?” she whispered, her breath crawling on his ear. “You’ve only stayed for a short moment the few times we’ve been together before.”

Zuko remained still as Mai continued to press her lips to his face. If only the same words had come out from the mouth of a certain waterbender, he would have immediately accepted the offer, not only that, he would be the one to bar the doors so they would not be disturbed.
He grabbed Mai’s arms tighter in his hands and pulled her away a bit more forcefully; effectively making her lose her hold on him. She grabbed his forearms as she frowned up at him while he held her at arm’s length. With an unreadable expression on his face, Zuko carefully examined Mai and was deeply saddened and dissatisfied at what he saw.

Mai’s skin was pale, not the rich caramel color of Katara’s skin that he wished to taste with his tongue. Her lips were thin and colorless not plump and pink. Her jet-black hair was too straight and plain, it was not the wavy chocolate cascades of tresses that he so desperately longed to run his long fingers through. And her black eyes were so dull, so cold and expressionless, not a beautiful and lively cerulean full of care, passion, and warmth.

That was when he finally realized that he never loved Mai....because he had always loved Katara.

He needed to break up with Mai. He needed to end their relationship because he would never be able to marry her even if everybody else thought it was a good match. It was not fair for Mai to be tied to a man who could not return her affections, always pushed her away, rarely thought of her, and avoided her. He would only hurt her, for he would only see and love Katara for the rest of his life. It would be cruel of him to ruin Mai’s life in such a way when she could find her happiness with someone else. Zuko removed Mai’s hands from his arms and took a step away from her as he looked solemnly into her eyes.

“Mai…it’s over,” he said decisively.

“What…do you mean?” Mai gasped out.

“Our relationship is over,” the firebender repeated seriously as he looked her in the eyes. “I can no longer be with you.”

“No!” Mai cried out, her indifferent mask falling in her despair as she took a step back. “You can’t mean that! You can’t break up with me! You’re supposed to marry me!”

“I’m sorry, Mai—”

“You have to reconsider your decision!” she interrupted before she insistently added, “You’re making a mistake!”
Zuko narrowed his eyes at her.

“I assure you that breaking our relationship is not a mistake. I know my decision is the right one. I’m sorry, but I won’t change my mind because there is nothing further to think about.”

Mai glared angrily at him as she clenched her hands.

“Even after all I sacrifice for you!” she hissed, “Going against Azula so she wouldn’t hurt you, allowing her to throw me into a dirty prison cell so you could escape, and you are dumping me? Again?”

“I will always appreciate what you did for me, Mai,” Zuko replied, his tone softening as he looked at her sincerely, “but I will not allow that to be the reason why I would marry you. I will always care for you—”

“Care for me?” Mai stressed angrily.

“Yes, care. Because all I have for you is affection. An affection between friends,” Zuko responded softly as he took a deep breath before he said, “I don’t love you, Mai.”

“No…don’t…” Mai whispered and looked away as she closed her eyes so she did not have to see the truth in his. “Why are you telling me this now? After four years, you’re finally telling me that you never loved me?”

“I’m sorry for not telling you this since the very beginning and I regret causing you pain,” Zuko told her earnestly as he reached for her hand, but she snatched it away angrily.

Zuko sighed guiltily as he continued.

“I admit that the thought of marriage between us did enter my mind and there was a time when I was even planning in asking for your hand…but it was just a thought and not something I truly wished,” he confessed softly, “It’s not just for my own selfish reasons, but because I don’t want to bring you into a loveless marriage. You deserve better than that.”
Mai was silent as his words sank in. This was not supposed to happen. Zuko was supposed to marry her, make her his Fire Lady! Perhaps their relationship was not that perfect, or the best one out there, but that was not reason enough for him to break up with her. Something must have changed his mind…or maybe someone.

“It’s because of Katara, isn’t it?” Mai hissed angrily as she fought to keep the tears from falling from her eyes.

Zuko was taken aback, but he quickly recovered himself.

“What do you mean?” he asked carefully.

“You’re breaking up with me because of her, aren’t you? I’ve seen the looks you throw at her! You were practically drooling at the party last night every time you glanced at her!” the usually monotonous noblewoman screamed. “She’s the one who is taking you away from me!”

“Nobody is taking me away from you! I don’t belong to you!” Zuko countered angrily.

“Katara seduced you, didn’t she?” Mai accused with narrowed eyes.

Zuko gaped at her before he shook his head.

“Katara didn’t—”

“Now I understand why you haven’t touched me in a year! She’s been welcoming you into her bed, and, like a typical male, you have happily jumped into it! I shouldn’t even be surprised that she’s a whore since she was traipsing around the world and using her talents to—”

“Enough!” Zuko thundered as he tightly grabbed hold of her upper arms and loomed over her furiously.

Mai’s mouth snapped shut and her eyes widened in fright.
“Don’t you dare talk about Katara’s honor like that! I won’t allow you to spew lies about her!” Zuko growled angrily. “Besides, you are no one to talk about her supposed actions since you weren’t a virgin the first time we had sex! So don’t be a hypocrite!”

Mai gasped and looked away from him since she did not know how to respond. Her embarrassment and anger were making it impossible for her to argue back.

Zuko released her arms and turned away from her. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply so he could regain his calm and composure once again, but it was just so difficult since every time someone insulted or hurt Katara his temper flared. When he knew that he was calm enough to talk without yelling angrily, Zuko turned back around to face Mai who was glaring at a spot on the wall. He let out another guilty sigh. He didn’t mean to keep hurting Mai in such a way. He felt like such a bastard, but he was not selfless enough to sacrifice himself for her.

“That is beside the point,” Zuko continued with a sigh as he placed his hands behind his back. “We are not talking about Katara, or if I did or did not change my mind, but about our failed relationship as a couple. We’ve had problems since the very beginning, and these problems would probably increase if we do marry. That is not the life I want for you and me, so that is why I’m ending our relationship.”

He sighed again before he looked at her guiltily.

“I know I haven’t been a good boyfriend, Mai,” he said, “I’ve been mean to you, I’ve neglected you, and I’m sorry.”

Mai’s jaw clenched as she watched Zuko look guiltily away from her to stare out the window. She wished she could scream at him and slash at him as well as plead for him not to leave her, but instead she straightened her thin figure and placed her hands placidly before her. She was hurt, she was humiliated, and she was angry, but she still had her dignity. She would not beg him to take her back, like some stupid and frail woman. She just had to wait for a while, let him adjust, and then he would realize he was wrong. And then it will be him begging her to take him back.

“I see you are adamant to this idea of severing our relationship,” Mai said, her tone once again passive. “My parents will not be happy with this. I’m not happy about this. But I will accept it.”

For now, she mentally added.
Zuko nodded and sighed.

“I’m glad you see that it’s for the best. I really did not wish to hurt you, Mai, and I hope that one day you can forgive me.”

“I will tell the servants to pack my things. I’m moving back with my parents in Omashu for a while,” Mai intoned instead. She gave Zuko a stiff bow. “Goodbye, Fire Lord Zuko.”

Zuko frowned at the cold tone of her voice, but understood that her anger was reasonable. He would not blame her if she were to hate him for the rest of her life.

“Goodbye.”

Mai lifted her head high, and with one last look at him, she turned around and made her way to the door. She opened it swiftly, paused, and then closed it a bit loudly behind her as she exited the room.

Zuko sighed again before he returned to his chair and leaned back. He felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. No longer did he feel suppressed or smothered, but he did feel bad for Mai. He wondered what she must be feeling at the moment, since she did love him and all, and she had hoped that they would have a life together. He did not want to hurt her, but he knew that he did the right thing by breaking off their relationship. It would only hurt both of them. He hoped Mai could find her happiness one day.

Feeling restless, Zuko once again stood up from his chair and walked to the large glass window. He wondered what he should do now; since he had no girlfriend or an intended. He was almost reluctant to announce that he was single again because he just knew that the Royal Court would start running up to him with a list of wives for him, and he did not want that to happen. He already had enough problems as it were. If only he could tell Katara what he felt for her, if only she could return his feelings. But then he would never know what her reaction would be if he never talked to her about it. Perhaps the prudent thing to do was wait, since he had just broken up with Mai only a few moments ago, but he could not miss another opportunity. He needed to tell Katara before it was too late.

A small smile crossed Zuko’s face as he watched a few butterflies flutter in the early spring air. Perhaps he could have another chance to tell her soon.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Jing and Ting babbled happily as they were carried down the shiny corridor by their mom and their
aunt. The women were heading to the Fire Lord’s study to ask him if they could use the carriages so they could take a short tour to the edge of the capital. Suki and Katara giggled when Ting began to tug Katara’s hair and tried to stuff it in her mouth, but huffed when her aunt pulled her hair away just in time before she chewed on it.

“Katara?” Suki called out as she shifted her eldest to her other arm.

“Yeah?” Katara chirped as she bounced the baby girl in her arms.

“Why are you so cheerful today?” Suki asked with a large smile. “Did something happen?”

“Oh,” Katara muttered quietly.

She was a bit happy since she felt much better now that she broke up with Aang. That guilty feeling that had kept growing and growing had now disappeared and she felt light as a feather, although she still felt sad that she had to hurt Aang in the process. She knew he was depressed since he had flown away after their talk and had not returned since. She was sure he just needed time to see her decision was the best for both of them.

“So are you going to tell me?” Suki insisted as she elbowed Katara while they continued down the empty hall.

Both women and baby girls were startled when the door to the Fire Lord’s study was flung opened, revealing a dark-looking noblewoman. Mai narrowed her eyes at them and she shut the door loudly behind her. Her aristocratic face was impassive as always as she stepped away from the door, but she glared angrily at Katara once her dark eyes landed on her. The twins began to squirm uncomfortably at the look on the tall woman’s pale face.

“Uh…hi, Mai,” Katara greeted unsurely as she glanced at Zuko’s door with a frown, “Is Zuko in his study? We wanted to—”

“Are you happy that Zuko’s now available?” Mai interrupted sharply.

Katara frowned at her with puzzled eyes.
“What?”

“What?”

“Zuko just dumped me! You must be so happy now,” Mai said bitterly.

Her glare intensified as she saw Katara’s hopeful expression.

“But I must warn you it won’t stay like this for long. I will take Zuko back,” Mai vowed before she moved away from them and glided down the corridor.

The female warrior and the waterbender watched the noblewoman in silence as she walked away, and once she rounded the corner, they turned to look at each other in bewilderment.

“What was that about?” Suki asked with wide eyes. She rocked Jing in her arms when the little girl began to fuss.

“I don’t know,” Katara responded, equally confused.

She looked back to where Mai had disappeared to before she glanced at Zuko’s door. Her heart started racing in her chest in excitement, delight, and hope as she went over what Mai had said.

So Zuko broke up with her? Katara mused as she stared at the closed door more intensely. Then that means that since Zuko and I are single I could…finally confess my love for him!

She smiled happily at the thought before another thought entered her head and she frowned.

Is it too sudden? I mean I just broke up with Aang and I’m already jumping to tell another man I love him!

“Katara? Did you hear me?” Suki called as she shook her sister-in-law’s shoulder, which made the twins girls laugh. “I said we need to talk to Zuko.”

“I-I…uh…talk to Zuko…um,” Katara stuttered distractedly.
They jumped when the door was opened again, revealing a frowning Fire Lord. The baby girls squealed happily while their aunt gasped. Zuko stepped out and froze when he caught sight of them.

“Katara,” he said softly.

“Z-Zuko! We were just going to knock! Isn’t that right, Suki?” Katara stuttered rapidly, a deep blush appearing on her cheeks.

“Uh…that’s right,” Suki responded as she looked at Katara with a puzzled expression.

Zuko smiled at them. He reached out to pat Jing’s head before he glanced at Katara with piercing, golden eyes.

“I would like to talk to you, Katara. Will you allow me?” he asked.

Katara glanced at Suki with a confused expression before she looked back up at Zuko with a smile.

“Sure!” she said.

Zuko felt his heart start to pound as he turned back and opened his study door, motioning for her to enter.

“I would like it if we talked in my study. It is something very important and...personal,” he told her quietly.

“Uh...okay,” Katara mumbled with another blush.

She handed Ting to Suki who smiled at them as she walked down the corridor in search of her husband with her daughters in each of her arms. Katara scolded herself for her reaction since it wasn’t as if it was the first time they talked alone. The night before was one example.
Zuko smiled at her reassuringly as he placed a hand on the small of her back to guide her into his study. Now was the time for him to have a talk with Katara. He had wasted enough time in hiding his feelings for her, but now he had nothing to hold him back—except for her engagement to Aang.

Katara felt her heart leap to her throat and a red blush appeared on her cheeks at the feeling of Zuko’s warm hand on her back. This was the time to finally tell Zuko what she truly felt for him and that she had broken up with Aang because it was Zuko whom she truly loved.

“My lord!” a distressed voice cried out from down the hall.

Zuko looked back just as he was about to close the door behind Katara and him, and he frowned as he watched one of his guards running up to him with a troubled expression.

“What is it?” Zuko asked tersely as he glanced back at Katara who had turned away from the study as the soldier bowed and huffed in exhaustion before them.

“An ur-urgent…letter has arrived from the e-colonies, my lord,” the young guard managed to say as he took deep breaths to regulate his breathing. “The messenger that brought it collapsed after he said that your help is needed immediately.”

The frown on Zuko’s brow deepened as he took the sealed scroll from the guard’s outstretched hand. Breaking the seal quickly, Zuko unfurled the paper scroll and immediately began to read the short message that was addressed to him. Katara watched in concern as Zuko’s golden eyes widened in alarm.

“Zuko, what’s wrong?” Katara asked as she took a step closer to him to touch his tensed arm.

Zuko read the letter a second time before he looked at Katara to answer her question. He opened his mouth to speak, but instead pressed his lips tightly together as he crushed the missive in his hand.

“Some kind of terrible disease has struck one of the colonies located further inland in the great continent a few days ago,” Zuko began and paused when Katara gasped. “Many of my people are getting infected by this disease while others are close to death. Many of them…especially the children have…died.”

“Oh, Zuko, that’s horrible!” Katara gasped in shock as she clutched his arm. “Has help been sent
“The governor of the colony is asking for my immediate presence,” Zuko replied as he turned to look down at Katara’s worried face. He patted her hand and sighed at yet another interruption. “I must depart with medical and food supplies immediately.”

Katara grabbed his hand, but before she could say anything, loud footsteps coming down the hall caught their attention. They and the soldier turned at the noise and watched as Aang and Toph ran hastily toward them, concerned expressions lining their faces as well.

“What’s going on?” Zuko asked apprehensively as both young benders reached them with a loud chirping Momo trailing after them.

Aang swallowed as he raised his hand to show a scroll with the Earth Kingdom seal already broken.

“I just got this message when I came back from…being outside,” Aang began as he glanced briefly at Katara with a hurt expression before he looked back at Toph. “We’re needed in a village in the northeastern part of the Earth Kingdom.”

“Why?” Katara asked as she looked between the two with growing distress.

“Seems like some kind of revolt has started at some village,” Toph explained. “The governor and his family have been killed and the bastards who started everything are now trying to make other villagers follow them and go against the aristocracy,” she growled. “The scared governors from the nearby villages have asked for the Avatar’s help in calming the crowd and I’ve decided to go to help Aang put a stop to their idiocy!”

Zuko cursed under his breath before he turned back to the still awaiting guard.

“Inform Admiral Jee to load medical supplies as well as food and water onto my flagship and have it ready to depart as soon as possible. Tell Advisor Chao I need to see him in my study immediately!” Zuko barked out.

The guard jumped at the command.
“Yes, my lord!” he answered as he bowed and hastily ran to get the Fire Lord’s orders done.

“Our stuff has already been loaded on Appa. It’ll take us a couple of weeks to reach the Earth Kingdom village. Hopefully we make it in time,” Aang said as he shifted agitatedly in his spot before he turned to look back at Katara. “You should get your things ready so we can leave right now.”

Zuko paused mid-step as he made his way back into his study. It seemed his chance to have a serious talk with Katara had flown away.

“I’m going with Zuko to the colony,” Katara responded firmly.

“What?” both Aang and Zuko asked at the same time as they looked at Katara incredulously while Toph smirked as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“The colony is suffering from an illness. I can probably use my healing abilities to help the people. I will never deny anyone my help if they need it,” Katara told them as she touched the waterskin at her hip.

Zuko again stepped away from the room to stand beside Katara as he looked down at her with a concerned face.

“I don’t know, Katara,” he began quietly, “What if you get sick as well?”

What if you die? he voiced anxiously in his head. That thought caused a pang of panic to course through his body.

“I’m made of stronger stuff than that!” Katara exclaimed with a huff. “Besides, if the Fire Lord can go, then so can I. My healing abilities will be of great help.”

Zuko pressed his lips closed as he frowned down at her before he sighed reluctantly since he knew she made a good point. Besides, once Katara got an idea it took a miracle to change her mind. He would just have to keep at her side during their entire stay in the colony to make sure nothing fatal happened to her.

“Okay!” Katara responded urgently as she made to turn away. “I need to tell my father that we’re leaving—”

“Wait! Katara, you can’t go!” Aang cried out as he stepped forward to block her way.

“Aang…” Katara sighed as she looked at him with a deep frown that made the young monk wince. “You and Toph are needed in the Earth Kingdom. Zuko and I are needed in the colony and I’m going. Goodbye, Aang.”

Aang cringed at her last words. They were almost exactly the same ones she had used when she broke up with him. He hesitated for a moment before he reluctantly stepped away to let Katara pass. She smiled at him gratefully before she dashed down the long corridor so she could locate her family.

Zuko raised a dark eyebrow as he watched Aang stare after the waterbender with hurt in his eyes. Was it just him or did Katara sound…distant toward Aang? They did not give each other farewell hugs—or worse…kisses. What did it all mean?

“I hope you are able to control the revolt in the Earth Kingdom,” Zuko spoke up. “Hopefully we can do something before many more people have to suffer and die.”

“Yeah,” Aang replied distantly before he turned around and walked in the opposite direction toward the stables where Appa was getting saddled.

“What’s wrong with him?” Zuko asked with a concerned frown. He had not seen Aang so down ever before, not even when he had been told he needed to end Ozai’s life.

“I don’t know,” Toph replied with a shrug as she tilted her head toward the young airbender’s vibrations. But I think I have a feeling.

A few days had passed since the two urgent letters had arrived in the Fire Nation. The Fire Lord’s flagship was currently making its way rapidly through the waves of the large ocean in order to reach the great continent.
The Fire Lord was eating dinner with Katara and his uncle in his large cabin. He had left his mother behind after he reassured her he would be fine. Though Jee had wanted to accompany him and offer his aid, Zuko had ordered the admiral to stay behind and swear to keep Lady Ursa protected while he helped Advisor Chao as well. Chief Hakoda had then made Zuko promise to keep Katara safe and never let her out of his sight, though Zuko had already swore that to himself way before he had talked with Katara’s family.

Though Katara and Zuko talked, spent time together drinking tea and playing Pai Sho with Iroh to pass the time, and sparred a few times on the deck of the large steel vessel, they evaded the subject of their relationships—or lack thereof.

The two young benders continued to eat their meal in silence while Iroh looked at them with an exasperated frown.

Zuko drank from his cup of wine as he glanced at Katara over the rim. He was not sure if he should confess his feelings to Katara now and tell her that he had broken up with Mai. It seemed that every time he tried, something came up to interrupt him. Was it perhaps a sign that he was never meant to tell her? Maybe he could talk to her after the illness at the village subsided since they would both be distracted by his confession.

Katara took another bite of the delicious meal and chewed thoughtfully. She could not stop feeling giddy at the thought that Zuko had dumped Mai. Now they were both single and had no obstacles in their way. Should she tell him that she knew about his breakup? Even though he had not brought it up all this time they have been sailing away from the Fire Nation? Should she tell him that she broke up with Aang? But then she did not want Zuko to think that she was ready to jump onto the next guy after breaking up with another a few days ago. But what if Zuko was sad because of his breakup and was not ready for a new relationship?

They were startled from their deep thoughts as a knock sounded outside the steel door.

“Enter,” Zuko called after he had cleared his throat.

The door opened and a soldier came in before he bowed at the small group sitting at the low table as he waited for his lord to speak.

“What is it?” Zuko asked as he placed his chopsticks down.
“My lord, a messenger hawk has been spotted heading this way,” the soldier informed.

“I’ll see what it is about,” Zuko told the other two at the table. “I’ll return shortly.”

Zuko wiped his mouth before he stood up and exited the room, the soldier following behind him. Katara watched him go before she returned her gaze to Iroh when the old man cleared his throat. She blushed when he grinned at her.

“I hope this disease is not too serious. Hopefully we will be able to make it in time to help the sick,” Katara said with a worried frown.

“I hope so too, my dear,” Iroh responded with a grave nod as he took a sip from his jasmine tea.

Iroh inwardly admired the caring heart of the young waterbender sitting opposite him. She was willing to risk her own safety in order to save those less fortunate, something that had not been seen in Fire Ladies for generations. He again wondered when his nephew and the young waterbender would confess their feelings to each other. Seriously, he would have thought that they would already be giving him grandnephews and nieces by now! How he wished he could slap some sense into them!

The retired general watched as Katara absentmindedly touched her blue necklace, and with a smile, he took another sip of his hot tea.

“Do you remember that time when you lost your necklace and Zuko tried to return it to you?” Iroh asked as he gave her a huge smile.

“Yeah, by tying me to a tree!” Katara replied with a grin.

Iroh chuckled deeply as he twirled his teacup.

“Did you know that ever since Zuko found your lovely necklace on the metal prison ship he never let it out of his sight?”
“Really?” Katara asked as she clutched her necklace tenderly.

“Yes,” Iroh responded with a nod and a smile. “Zuko took great care of it. He would have it tied around his wrist and sometimes he would rub the smooth pendant with his fingers and stare at it when he thought no one was looking.”

Speechless, Katara stared at the old firebender before she began to caress the pendant around her neck as a wide smile spread on her face. Her smile disappeared, however, when the door was thrown open and Zuko strode into the room with a distraught expression on his scarred face.

“Nephew, what is the matter?” Iroh asked in concern.

“It seems the disease is getting worse. Many more people have died,” Zuko told them in a grave tone as he sat back down before he ran his hand down his face.

“Don’t lose hope, Zuko,” Katara told him as she grasped his hand.

Zuko squeezed her hand as he looked at her.

“I think it will be best if you go home. That way you won’t catch the disease and get sick…or worse,” he whispered as he tightened his hold on her small hand.

“Do you really think I will do such a thing?” Katara asked with a huff. “I’m going, and you’re not changing my mind.”

Zuko gave her a small smile as he caressed the back of her hand with his thumb. He smirked slightly when Katara stopped mid rant to stare at their hands.

“I had a feeling you were going to say that,” he told her with a small chuckle.

Iroh watched as they bantered back and forth with a large grin on his wrinkled face that he hid behind his teacup. He wondered if perhaps this trip would be more productive than just helping the village. He prayed to Agni that it was so.
Zuko woke up with a start when the flagship suddenly lunged to the side. He was disoriented for a moment as he tried to move the bedcovers away, but a crack of lightning made him realize that there was a huge storm. Zuko sprang from his bed, throwing on some clothes and forcing his feet into his boots. He almost crashed onto the steel floor when the ship shifted to the side again.

Staggering toward the entrance of his room while avoiding the things that had fallen to the floor, Zuko threw open the door and ran toward Katara’s room. This time he crashed onto the wall as another wave swung the boat forward. He knocked on her door once he reached it, but when Katara did not answer, he quickly opened it and looked inside the dark room. He was alarmed when he noticed that the room was empty and Katara was nowhere in sight.

Zuko scrambled toward the deck in mounting panic only to pause at the chaos that greeted him. His crew ran about in fright as they tried to keep the ship floating. There were ominous dark clouds swirling above them in the equally dark sky, so dark it was almost pitch black. Cold wind bit their skin and harsh rain unmercifully pelted their faces, while large, frightening-looking waves crashed onto the sides of the flagship.

Zuko snapped into his role of Fire Lord and began to bark orders at his crew in order to keep the ship from sinking. He saw his uncle and he quickly made his way to him.

“Uncle!” Zuko shouted against the howling wind. “Uncle! Have you seen Katara?”

Iroh turned to him as he squinted to keep the rain from his eyes.

“She’s at the back of the ship trying to keep the bigger waves from hitting us!” he shouted.

Zuko nodded as he turned away to make his way to the back of the flagship. A large gust of wind knocked him down, but Zuko quickly sprang to his feet as he fought his way to Katara. He held onto the railing to keep himself upright before he finally spotted her at the very edge of the ship. She had her arms raised high above her head before she spread them aside as she tried to bend the waves away from the vessel. Zuko stood frozen for a moment, mesmerized, as he watched Katara’s long hair and clothing whipping around her form from the harsh wind and the rain while dark waves moved to the side as she bent the water to her will. Zuko shook his head from the incredible sight before he quickly made his way to her.

“Katara!” he shouted in relief as he grabbed hold of her arm to get her attention.
Katara turned at his touch and smiled tiredly at him. Zuko frowned as he saw that she was tiring out and she was breathing heavily.

“Katara, go back to your room and rest!” Zuko told her as he tried to pull her with him and toward the stairs that led below deck.

“No!” Katara shouted back as she removed his hand. “If I don’t bend the waves away then they will swallow up the ship! Go help your crew! I’ll be fine!”

Zuko clenched his hands, but allowed her to move back.

“Be careful,” he told her.

The waterbender nodded and smiled before she turned around to resume her task, her face setting in concentration as she forced the large waves away from the ship. Zuko pushed his wet hair out of his eyes as he lingered near her for a moment longer before he made his way toward his crew to keep giving out orders, but he paused when he saw his uncle make his way toward him. He reached out quickly to steady his old uncle when Iroh stumbled.

“I’ve never seen a storm quite like this before!” Iroh commented over the sound of the rushing wind as he held onto his nephew’s strong arm.

Zuko was about to agree when a bright flash illuminated the sky and suddenly a bolt of lightning struck a pile of crates near them with a deafening boom. The crates exploded into a million flaming pieces. Zuko and Iroh instinctively raised their arms as they were thrown back onto the metal deck, but they saw as one wooden piece hit Katara on her back with so much force that she was thrown overboard.

“Katara!” Zuko cried out in horror as he dashed to the edge of the ship where Katara had disappeared.

“Zuko!” Iroh shouted after him. Before Iroh or any of the crewmembers could stop him, Zuko dove overboard into the churning water.
The cold water rushed over him as he entered the raging sea before Zuko swam to the surface. A wave crashed down on him and pulled him back underwater, spinning him painfully for a moment. Zuko again fought his way through the cold water as panic seized his heart. He broke onto the surface once again and almost went deaf as another thunderclap resounded throughout the stormy night.

“Katara!” he shouted again as he frantically looked at the surface of the angry water for Katara’s body, but he could not see since it was so dark. Zuko raised one hand to summon up a flame, but just like he knew it would, the flame died before it even completely formed.

Zuko felt like his heart was being squeezed as fear began to spread throughout his body when he was unable to spot Katara. He swam a few feet further away and cried out in relief when he finally caught sight of Katara floating on her back a couple of feet away from where he was as lightning raced across the sky.

“Katara!” he yelled in alarm as she began to sink into the dark water.

Zuko swiftly swam to where she had been and dove down after her. He struggled to see in the dark water, and began to panic when he couldn’t spot her in the murk. As another flash of lighting appeared, though, it revealed her, hair swirling serenely around her still form. He swam toward her with an outstretched hand, and once he was able to grab her arm, he pulled her close to him before he raced back up for air.

Zuko gasped as he broke the surface and took large gulps of air as he laid Katara against his neck and shoulder while making sure that her face stayed above the water. The firebender looked down at the woman in his arms in relief when he realized that she was still breathing, though her unconsciousness worried him.

The harsh wind slapped his face and the freezing seawater stung his eyes as he looked wildly around the dark ocean in order to locate his flagship so he could take Katara to safety, but to his mounting anxiety, he realized that he could not see where the ship was. Scanning his surroundings in desperation, Zuko cursed, for all he could see in front of him was water and darkness.

His uncle, his crew, and his flagship were nowhere in sight.

A wave hit him from behind and brought them underwater without warning, ripping Katara from his arms. Zuko fought to straighten himself out and furiously swam after the still unresponsive Katara, grasping her waist and protectively bringing her to his chest as he once again swam up. Just as he brought them above water, another large wave crashed over them. The firebender closed his eyes.
and tightened his grasp on the woman as the wave sent them spinning wildly in the ocean water, large bubbles circling around them.

Burning lungs and tired limbs, Zuko once again swam to the surface where a bitter cold gust of wind greeted them, almost knocking them back underwater. Panting heavily from exhaustion, Zuko brought Katara’s head to his shoulder as he tried to find a way to get out of their situation. He did not know what to do and had no clue as to where they were.

Zuko looked down at Katara. Her dark chestnut hair was stuck to her face as the rain fell down on them and he turned her head closer to his neck to keep the cold rain from pelting her skin.

*Don’t worry, Katara. I’ll find a way to get us out of this. I’ll keep you safe no matter what,* he promised silently as he wrapped his arms around her waist even tighter.

The weary Fire Lord fought to stay above water for what seemed like hours as he prayed to Agni to keep them safe and help them find land. Just when Zuko thought that his energy was about to run out the angry storm stopped, almost as if it had never appeared. The dark clouds moved away and dawn broke through. Zuko allowed the current to take them and hoped that his flagship—or any other ship—would find them soon. His worry was increasing to the point of despair since Katara had still not woken up, even after he had called her name many times.

The sun was setting over the horizon again and the stars were appearing in the sky when Zuko finally spotted a thin dark line he was sure was land. Finding new determination, Zuko secured his hold on the waterbender’s waist as he used his free arm to swim toward land and safety. Once he got them to shore he would search for someone that could help Katara since he was not sure what was wrong with her.

A half-moon was high in the dark sky when gentle waves deposited Zuko and Katara onto the soft sands of the warm shore. Zuko dragged them out of the water as far as his tired limbs would allow him. He had just enough energy to make sure Katara was on her back so she could breathe more easily, before he dropped heavily onto the sand with a groan. He only rested a few seconds before he knelt next to Katara’s shoulders. He impatiently brushed the seawater out of his eyes as he stared worriedly down at her face.

“Katara?” he called out as he gently tapped her cheek.

When she did not reply, he felt his panic mount. What if she had inhaled too much water? He leaned his ear close to her lips before he pulled back with wide, anxious eyes when he could barely feel her breathe. He felt fear spread through his body as his mind scream at him to do something. He grasped
his hair agitatedly before he straightened when he recalled what he had seen the medic on his flagship do to one of the crewmembers when the man almost drowned. Placing the heel of one of his hands over the center of her chest, he placed his other one on top of it. Zuko kept his elbows straight as he positioned his shoulders directly above his hands. Using his upper body weight, he pushed straight down on her chest a couple of times. He paused for a moment as he looked for movement on her chest before he resumed his task more urgently when Katara remained motionless.

“Come on, Katara,” he urged desperately as he compressed her chest a few more times, feeling an overwhelming anguish begin to fester in his chest the longer she remained unresponsive.

He was thinking of breathing into her mouth as he has seen the medic do, but Katara suddenly coughed and water spewed from her mouth. Zuko cried out in relief as he placed a hand under her head. Katara coughed a few more times before she stilled. Zuko placed his cheek over her lips and let out a relieved breath when he felt her breathing normally. He leaned back and watched as her chest moved.

“Oh, thank Agni,” he breathed as he collapsed beside the waterbender.

He laid at the water’s edge for a few minutes before he made to stand up. His knees buckled underneath him and he fell onto his hands and knees with a loud curse before he tried again more carefully. Once he was steady on his feet, Zuko bent down and scooped the quiet waterbender into his arms as he slowly made his way away from the now calm sea. He reached the edge of what seemed like the beginning of a forest, though he could not make out much except for a few very tall trees since it was almost pitch black. Zuko eyed the dark forest before him warily since he did not know where they were and what dangers could be lurking in the darkness.

He spotted a tall palm tree that rested a few feet away from the forest and made his way to it. He knelt down under the shadow of its leaves to gently set down his precious cargo. A deep frown marred Zuko’s features since Katara did not make one sound as he moved her. He desperately wanted to see her blue eyes and hear her soft voice.

“Katara, please wake up soon,” Zuko whispered as he reached down to brush her wet hair out of her lovely face.

Fatigue finally catching up with him, Zuko sighed heavily as he lay down beside her. In an instant, his eyes closed and he fell into a deep slumber while the waves crashed softly against the shore.

The sound of seabirds calling and the warmth of the sun began to awaken the tired Fire Lord, but Zuko was too exhausted to open his eyes and start another tedious day. His usual comfortable and
soft bed seemed hard and cold. With a grunt, Zuko shifted slightly in search of a comfortable position only to have his arm bump onto something solid. He tensed as his foggy brain realized that there was somebody lying next to him. He frowned in irritation at the thought that Mai had dared to sneak into his room even after he had broken up with her. As the last threads of sleep began to leave him, memories of the urgent letter that made him leave his home surfaced in his mind. So, if it was not Mai, then who was curled up beside him?

Zuko allowed his arm to wander down the unknown person’s body, lightly and slowly so as not to wake up whoever was lying pressed up to him. His good eyebrow rose to his forehead as his hand traced a slim waist that ended up in wide hips.

That’s definitely not Mai, Zuko mused as he once again outlined the soft curves before he paused and berated himself for feeling up a stranger’s body while she slept.

He wondered whose luscious body was pressed to his, and unable to resist, Zuko opened his eyes only to meet thick, brown hair framing the serene face of a sleeping Katara. Zuko remained still as he gazed at the slumbering woman beside him, her olive skin seeming to glow in the early rays of dawn, and he wondered if perhaps this was just another dream.

Well, if it’s just a dream, then I will enjoy it while it lasts, Zuko sighed happily as he brought her closer to his chest.

He began to run his fingers through her tangled and damp hair when he realized that this dream seemed far more real than any he had ever had before. He could actually feel a misty breeze skimming his flesh, as well as hear the sound of birds and the crashing of waves, but most of all he could perfectly feel the warm and soft body of the waterbender that he had pressed closer to him. With a bewildered frown, Zuko looked away from the sleeping woman to stare at the sky above him only to have his view blocked by the leaves of a tall palm tree.

His eyes widened as memories of the wild storm that had come upon them and his struggle to find refuge for Katara and himself flashed before his eyes. Panic once again began to fill his chest as he remembered that Katara had been hurt and would have drowned if he had not jumped overboard after her. And while he had held her, she had not woken up even once.

Zuko hastily rose up to a sitting position as he stared down at Katara with a worried expression. He touched her cheek, but when she did not stir, he gently shook her shoulder.

“Katara?” he called out softly as he shakily brought his fingers to her neck so he could find a pulse.
His heart was pounding in his chest as his concern grew before he let out a deep sigh of relief when he found her pulse, though it was a bit weak.

Unsure of what to do, since he was no healer and had no knowledge of maladies except for small wounds and mild poisonings, Zuko lifted Katara from the ground and brought her to his lap, carefully guiding her head to his shoulder. He finally noticed that she was wearing a thin blue tunic, a pair of black pants, and dark boots that he was sure she had just thrown on when the storm hit and he hoped that she would not catch a cold as well. He hoped she would wake up soon on her own so they could start looking for a way to reach his uncle and his crew, but if she did not, then he would carry her to the nearest village he could find to get her some help, though he had not the slightest clue where they were.

Bringing her closer to him, Zuko enjoyed her softness and warmth as he prayed for Agni, and whatever spirits were listening, to bring her back to the waking world. He did not know what he would do if something terrible had happened to Katara to render her unconscious for such a long period of time.

He remained in the same sitting position with Katara on his lap as the sun rose higher in the horizon and chased away the mist from the dawn. He relished the feeling of having Katara so close to him, but he was unable to enjoy it as he would have wanted given the circumstances. His anxiety began to mount as morning turned to noon and Katara had not even stirred.

“Come on, Katara,” Zuko urged softly as he brushed her hair out of her face. “Please, wake up.”

He thought back on the night of the storm, about how a piece of wood had struck Katara on the back. What if she was wounded far worse and had broken bones or severe internal injuries? Reluctantly moving her away from his lap, Zuko once again brought her to lie back on the slightly grassy sand. He began to check her by starting with her head, and except for a lump on the lower part of her skull, he did not find anything else—no bruises, swelling, or blood. He moved away from her head to check the rest of her while studiously ignoring the temptation her soft body offered as he probed her bones beneath her clothing. He was relieved to find that there were no serious external injuries.

Running his hand through his loose hair, Zuko looked to the calm ocean in hopes of spotting his flagship, but not a ship was in sight. He hoped his uncle could find a way to find them soon. Not only did Katara need medical attention, but they were needed at the colony.

The young man looked away from the blue water and gazed down at the lovely face of the woman he cared for the most. He again reached for her face and gently began to stroke her soft cheek.
I wish I could touch you like this when you’re actually conscious, Katara, Zuko thought with a sad smile.

His stomach again growled in hunger, but Zuko ignored it as he continued with his vigil and his soft caresses of her face and hair. He remained that way for a few more minutes before his stomach began to complain more insistently. Deciding it was best that he find something to eat so he could gain more energy to help the both of them, Zuko stood up from his spot in search of something edible. He walked a short distance away closer to the edge of the forest where he could still keep an eye on Katara.

It was a few minutes later after he had glanced back at Katara’s prone form that he saw her begin to move. In a flash, he was at her side, taking her small hand in his.

“Katara?” he asked anxiously as he watched her grimace.

“Zuko?” Katara mumbled as she tried to sit upright only to groan as a painful throb began to form at the back of her head.

“Careful,” Zuko told her as he gently pushed her back onto the sandy ground. “You’ve been unconscious for almost two days.”

Katara frowned in confusion, though she relished at the gentleness in which Zuko was treating her. She opened her eyes only to hiss and screw them shut when the sun’s rays caused her headache to worsen.

“Are you okay?” Zuko asked anxiously as he placed a hand on her forehead.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just have this horrible ache on the back of my head,” Katara rasped before she began to cough uncontrollably. “And my throat feels like a desert! What happened?”

Katara once again opened her eyes, but this time she did it more cautiously so as not to make the headache worse. She blinked as her eyes landed on the leaves of a palm tree and her ears heard the sounds of crashing waves. She turned her head to the side where she had heard Zuko’s voice. He was kneeling beside her, holding her hand in his, looking at her with a grim and worried expression. She blushed lightly before she smiled at him as she squeezed his hand to make him answer her question.
“You fell overboard the night the storm hit,” Zuko explained simply.

Flashes of fierce wind, loud thunder, and giant waves passed through Katara’s mind. She remembered the streak of lightning that struck the pile of crates she was standing a few feet away from and then the pain that followed when something smacked her on the back. She remembered crashing into the cold water as she was sent flying over the side of the ship before everything went black.

“I remember that,” Katara said quietly as she tried to sit up again.

“Here, let me help you,” Zuko offered as he placed a hand behind her back and helped her sit up.

“Thanks.”

Katara winced and brought her hand to the back of head as the throbbing became almost unbearable. She flinched as her fingers pressed on the bump that had formed there. Wanting to think of something else other than the pain, Katara looked around at her surroundings and was surprised to find that they were close to the beach and no one else besides Zuko and her were in sight.

“Where are we?” she asked as she scanned the water only to find no sign of the flagship. “Where is Uncle Iroh? And the crew?”

Zuko sighed deeply as he, too, looked over at the tranquil ocean.

“I wish I knew,” he responded in a low voice.

Katara snapped her head to the side to stare at him in perplexity.

“What do you mean by that?” she whispered anxiously, “Uncle Iroh and the crew are okay, aren’t they? The storm didn’t…?”

Zuko took hold of her hand again and gently squeezed it to soothe her worries.
“They’re fine, Katara. Don’t worry. The flagship was built to withstand the worst weather. Uncle and the crew are safe.”

Katara let out a loud sigh of relief and smiled brightly at him before it disappeared and she frowned at him.

“Wait. I’m guessing this means that you jumped after me even with the storm going on, huh?”

“Of course,” Zuko responded immediately with a serious expression. “I promised to keep you safe and I wasn’t going to allow anything to harm you.”

Katara felt her heart expand at his words, at his soft touch, and concerned gaze. If only his worry could be because he was afraid to lose her because he loved her and would be devastated if she had died. It was the way she felt for him.

“Thank you, Zuko,” Katara told him sincerely before she cleared her throat when it wavered.

Slowly removing her hand from his larger one, the waterbender wrapped her arms around her knees as she gazed out into the horizon. Zuko frowned at her as he let his hand fall back to his side.

“So…what do we do now?” the Water Tribe woman asked softly.

Zuko stared at Katara silently for a few moments before he sat down crossed-legged beside her and sighed.

“I think it is best that we wait until Uncle and the crew find us.”

“But that could take days, even weeks!” Katara exclaimed before another groan escaped her as the pain in her head grew at her outburst.

“I know, but we don’t know where we are,” the firebender reasoned as he placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her. “It’d be safer to stay here and wait.”
“I guess,” Katara sighed.

She watched as Zuko smiled at her before he reached behind him and grabbed something round from the ground. She raised an eyebrow as she realized that the brown, round thing on Zuko’s hand was a coconut and that there were three more huddled together on the sand.

“Here,” Zuko offered as he placed a coconut with a small hole at the top that he had cracked opened in Katara’s hands, “I know it’s not much, but it’s the only thing I could find that will not make us sick. We could look for more fruits, or nuts and fish, once you feel better.”

“It’s fine. Thanks,” Katara reassured him as she brought the fuzzy coconut closer to her.

She tilted the hard fruit to her lips and drank her fill before sighing contently as the cool liquid soothed her parched throat. Zuko offered her another one and she took it gratefully before taking a few more sips. She bent the rest of the coconut water into her palm until it glowed before she brought it to the small lump on her head. She could have summoned some water from the ocean, but the coconut water was closer at hand. She smiled when the healing liquid made the bump disappear along with the painful throb.

“Do you feel better?” Zuko asked with a small smile once Katara removed her hand from her head.

“Yes.” Katara grinned as she dug inside for chunks of the white coconut flesh and began to eat.

Zuko watched her for a moment before he, too, started to eat the small meal he had gathered. They sat side by side, as the sun made its way across the sky while they waited for any sign of help.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A day had passed and there was still no sign of the Fire Nation flagship; or any other ship. The sun was bright in the cloudless sky so Zuko and Katara found refuge from the heat under the great palm tree. Their breakfast and lunch consisted of more coconuts and a few berries Katara was able to find growing in a cluster of bushes a few feet closer to the forest.

Katara felt her stomach give another growl even though she had eaten a few more of the bitter berries. She glanced at Zuko, who again was staring out into the sea, and she scowled. They could not just sit there doing nothing! They had to find a way to get help themselves!
Springing to her feet, the irritated waterbender stomped her way until she was standing right in front of Zuko, effectively blocking his view of the empty horizon. Placing her hands on her hips, Katara stared down at the frowning Fire Lord.

Zuko blinked as he found himself staring at Katara’s black-clad legs before he raised his head to look at her with a questioning frown.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?!” Katara yelled in exasperation, “We’ve been sitting here for two days, waiting! We have to venture into the forest and try to locate a village that could help us!”

“No,” was Zuko’s short response.

“No?!” Katara yelled. “The people at the colony are dying, they need our help, and we’re just here doing nothing but sit all day!”

Zuko growled as he sprang to his feet to tower over her. Katara felt her heart jump to her throat in surprise, but she held her ground as she glared at him.

“Do you think that I haven’t been thinking the same thing since we got here?” Zuko asked her with an angry glare before he added, “But we can’t just go traipsing through the forest! We have no supplies, no weapons, and no way of knowing where we are or what dangers could be lurking around!”

Katara huffed at him and crossed her arms.

“We’re both bending masters. We could take on anything that comes our way.”

“That may be true, but we don’t know that,” Zuko responded as he took a deep breath to prevent himself from yelling at Katara again.

But Katara flailed her hands in the air and continued yelling at him.
“You can stay here if you want, but I’m going to find help!”

“You can stay here if you want, but I’m going to find help!”

“Fine!” Zuko growled as he turned his head to look away from her.

“Fine!” Zuko growled as he turned his head to look away from her.

“Fine!” Katara hissed back as she lifted her head up and turned on her heel to walk away.

“Fine!” Katara hissed back as she lifted her head up and turned on her heel to walk away.

Zuko glanced at her retreating back from the corner of his eye. He watched as Katara paused at the edge of the beach and the beginning of the dark forest before she stepped into the trees and bushes without a second glance back at him.

Zuko glanced at her retreating back from the corner of his eye. He watched as Katara paused at the edge of the beach and the beginning of the dark forest before she stepped into the trees and bushes without a second glance back at him.

“Girls—no, women are crazy!” Zuko exclaimed as he sat back down on the sand with a low growl.

“Girls—no, women are crazy!” Zuko exclaimed as he sat back down on the sand with a low growl.

He crossed his arms over his broad chest and began to brood silently. A few seconds passed by before he ran his hand through his hair and let out a sigh.

He crossed his arms over his broad chest and began to brood silently. A few seconds passed by before he ran his hand through his hair and let out a sigh.

“I will go after her if she doesn’t come back in a few minutes,” he said.

“I will go after her if she doesn’t come back in a few minutes,” he said.

Grumbling lowly under her breath about stubborn Fire Lords, Katara parted frustrating branches and leaves as she made her way through the woods. The tall and thick trees were cutting off most of the sunlight and only occasionally would a ray of light find its way to the forest floor. Katara cursed mildly when another tree root almost made her trip as she tried to keep walking through the dark forest.

Grumbling lowly under her breath about stubborn Fire Lords, Katara parted frustrating branches and leaves as she made her way through the woods. The tall and thick trees were cutting off most of the sunlight and only occasionally would a ray of light find its way to the forest floor. Katara cursed mildly when another tree root almost made her trip as she tried to keep walking through the dark forest.

Katara yelped and jumped back as something sprang from the cluster of bushes she was about to pass through. With loud piercing cries, two large birds flew away from their disturbed resting place, and with a flutter of wings, they rose into the branches above. Katara placed a hand over her racing heart and laughed at herself. Once the forest grew quiet again, Katara continued to try to make some sense of the labyrinth of a forest she had found herself in. Pausing again, the waterbender took another look at her strange surroundings, unsure of where to go next.

Katara yelped and jumped back as something sprang from the cluster of bushes she was about to pass through. With loud piercing cries, two large birds flew away from their disturbed resting place, and with a flutter of wings, they rose into the branches above. Katara placed a hand over her racing heart and laughed at herself. Once the forest grew quiet again, Katara continued to try to make some sense of the labyrinth of a forest she had found herself in. Pausing again, the waterbender took another look at her strange surroundings, unsure of where to go next.

Maybe Zuko was right, Katara thought with a sigh before she grimaced slightly at the way she had yelled at him. I’ll beg for his forgiveness and hopefully he won’t bite my head off.

Maybe Zuko was right, Katara thought with a sigh before she grimaced slightly at the way she had yelled at him. I’ll beg for his forgiveness and hopefully he won’t bite my head off.

With a small sigh, Katara pivoted on her heels to walk back the way she had come from to go back
to Zuko and the beach. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a hot and bright flash of light heading her way, and with a gasp, Katara dodged to the side as a ball of fire shot past her.

“What the hell, Zuko!” Katara yelled angrily as she stood up from the ground to glare at the vindictive jerk; only to freeze when she realized it was not Zuko who was looking at her, but some stranger.

The unknown man was a few inches taller than she was, but he was bulky and full of muscle made visible by the sleeveless red shirt he was wearing. The man, obviously a firebender, smirked as he let his eyes wander—very slowly—from her head to her feet.

Katara instinctively reached for her waterskin at her side, but cursed inwardly when she remembered that she had left it at the flagship in her haste during the storm. Tilting her head up in defiance, Katara regarded the strange man before her warily.

“Who are you and what do you want?” Katara asked with narrowed eyes.

The hulking man chuckled darkly as he raised his eyes away from her legs to stare at her eyes.

“Well, ain’t ya a purdy lil’ thing?” he sneered at her.

Katara shuddered in disgust and glared at him due to his lusty tone. Her hand that was poised above her hip where her waterskin was supposed to be tied clenched tightly. She hated when Zuko was right.

Leaves and twigs snapped loudly from a few paces behind the man and Katara’s eyes immediately flew to the source of the sound. She tensed when two more men stepped out from the foliage with loud laughter as they shoved each other back and forth before they quieted when they noticed the woman standing before them. Katara guessed that these two strangers were from the Earth Kingdom continent by their green eyes and the earthy tones of their rugged clothes, though she was not sure if they were earthbenders or not.

“What ya got there, Xiao?” the tallest of the males whistled crudely at the firebender as he scratched the dark stubble on his squared chin.

“Looks like one o’ ‘em Wa’er Tribe women we’ve ‘eard ‘bout, don’t it, Ping?” the third man
observed with a leer. He had a bald head and a thin but deep scar running from his right temple all the way to his left lower lip, making him look like he had a permanent sneer on his face.

“Sure does, Feng. Look at those hips,” Ping remarked with a grin.

Katara took another step back as she leveled an icy glare at them so she would not appear like a helpless woman quaking in fear. She hoped they were just passing by and would leave her alone; but by the lustful looks they were throwing her way she had a feeling that they had much more… sinister ideas.

“I think it’s best you go on your way and leave me alone,” Katara warned. She may not have her waterskin, but that did not mean she was completely defenseless.

The three men glanced at each other before they burst into loud cackles, elbowing each other and pointing at the woman that dared to threaten them.

“Wat d’ya guys say we ‘ave ourselves some fun while we wait fo’ da rest ta catch up?” the bulky firebender chuckled darkly as he turned to grin at his comrades before he turned his attention on the woman, licking his lips.

“I says dat’s a great idea!” Ping exclaimed while the other one agreed with a vigorous nod of his bald head. With another nasty laugh, the trio spread out and began to advance on the weaponless woman.

Katara lifted her arms and spun round, bending the moisture from the large tree she was standing next to. The water twirled around her form as she spun while the tree dried up into a withered piece of wood, its once bright leaves falling to the ground. She inwardly apologized to the now weakened tree.

“She’s a wa’erbenda!” Feng exclaimed as they all paused in their advance in shock, which quickly passed since they were confident they could defeat one lone woman.

“All at once, the three men sprang at her from all sides with triumphant smirks, which then turned into stunned grimaces when a sharp water whip smacked into each of their backs. Katara smirked as she
easily countered them.

“Oops. Did I forget to mention that I’m a master waterbender?” Katara taunted as she willed the water whips to grab onto each of the men’s legs and lifted them up before throwing them against the trees.

They cursed loudly as they landed hard on the floor. They quickly jumped to their feet as they glared heatedly at the now smirking woman standing before them with a water ribbon curled around her shoulders and arms like a snake.

“Ya lil’ bitch!” they screamed angrily as they lunged at her again.

The scarred man withdrew a thin sword from his back and brandished it at Katara, but she easily flipped to her side and threw a ball of ice right at his face, sending him flying back into a thick cluster of bushes. Ping roared as he watched his friend fly through the air and he stomped on the hard ground, causing a large wave of stone and dirt to fly at Katara. She stumbled as the earth trembled, but managed to stop the stone wave by freezing it in ice. Gathering more water from a patch of green grass, the waterbender then turned to the earthbender and threw the large amount of water on him. The man was thrown onto his back with a loud yelp. Katara quickly exhaled and the water froze him to the floor. He thrashed and cursed, but was unable to break the thick ice.

Katara yelped when a ball of fire almost hit her on the chest, but her quick reflexes saved her as she gathered the water before her as a shield. The water evaporated as the fire touched it and the firebender chuckled triumphantly.

“Seems like ya met yer match, lil’ gurl,” Xiao taunted.

“Hardly,” Katara countered with a smirk. *Compared to Zuko this guy’s firebending seems like child’s play.*

Katara once again gathered water from a tree and wound the liquid down her arms. The man growled darkly at her mocking smirk, and without warning, he began to send attack after attack of fire toward her. Katara easily countered off his attacks, extinguishing the flames as if they were from mere candles. She was better acquainted with fighting against firebenders since she had spent a great deal sparing with Zuko. She made a mental note to thank him later.

The firebender was getting more furious by the second that, as the woman continued to deflect his
attacks, he forgot to keep his defenses up. Katara took advantage of this and, with a flick of her wrist, sent a torrent of water into his stomach that winded him and threw him to the ground a few feet away. The other two men groaned and continued to curse as he gasped for breath.

*Well…that was…disappointing,* Katara mused as she let her body relax slightly. She thought it best to freeze them so she could have time to find her way back to Zuko without them surprising her as she tried to figure out how to get out of the forest.

Katara raised her hands to let the water hover over the other two men when something flew from behind her and clenched onto her wrists, making a gasp fall from her lips as her hold on the water ceased and the water fell to her feet. Shocked, Katara brought her hands down to look at them and her eyes widened at what she saw. Encircling both her wrists were stone bracelets, thicker than two inches.

Lifting her arms again, Katara tried to summon her element, but the water that was seeping into the ground did not even ripple. She tried again, this time putting all her energy into the motion, but to no avail. A twig snapped somewhere close behind her and Katara spun wildly around in growing panic.

Out of the darkness of the trees stepped out a thin and tall man, almost as tall as Zuko, with a long, dark brown braid falling over his shoulder. His tanned face held a stern and dark expression as his piercing, dark green eyes stared at her blankly. He walked calmly away from the shadows of the forest with one arm held up with a clenched fist. Katara gasped as the bracelets tightened on her thin wrists.

*Impossible! He’s blocking my chi! Blocking my waterbending!*

Katara began to feel panic swell inside her at the realization as she desperately clawed at the stone bracelets while she took several steps back. Without her waterbending, she had no way of defending herself!

The tall earthbender stared at her without any emotion on his handsome face as the other men scrambled to their feet with groans and vicious curses. Xiao and Feng helped to break the ice from around the other man before they straightened. The silent newcomer finally looked away from the wide-eyed woman to glare sharply at the other men who seemed to cower at the intensity of his stare.

“Why are you three wasting time when you were supposed to be scouting ahead?” the tall man demanded in a cold tone. “Jianguo will be most displeased.”
The non-bender and the large jawed earthbender shrugged while the burly firebender stepped forward with a raised chin.

“We deserv’d some fun, ya know!”

When the dark green-eyed man turned his full attention to glare angrily at them, Katara did not waste any more time and spun around to escape only to gasp in pain when her legs were suddenly tightly encased in rock. She tried to struggle, but she could not break free from the hard stone with her slight frame.

The expressionless man calmly walked up her and stood before her with a raised eyebrow. Katara glared at him, but the man seemed not to be affected by it at all.

“What is a waterbender, a female waterbender, doing all by herself in the middle of the Earth Kingdom?” he asked tonelessly.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Katara retorted sarcastically with a raised chin.

The man narrowed his green eyes at her while the other, now silent, men snickered a few feet behind him.

“Tsk, tsk, waterbender,” the man admonished, “you are in no position to act defiant.”

To prove his point he willed the hard stone to tighten around her legs and the bracelets around her small wrists. Katara bit her lip to keep from crying out and instead she hissed angrily at him.

The tall earthbender let a small smirk appeared on his thin lips before he circled around her as if to examine her. Katara turned her head to continue glaring at him and make sure he did not do anything.

“Tell me, tribe woman,” he finally spoke up as he once again stood in front of her, “are you the Fire Lord’s waterbender?”

Katara felt her heart skip a beat at those words, but she refused to say anything and instead looked
away with a raised head. She had a feeling these men did not want to have a pleasant talk over tea with Zuko, so she refused to tell them where he was.

“Ma’be we shou’d take da woman ta Jianguo for questionin’, don’t ya think, Chang?” the bald man piped in with a large smirk.

“Yah, ma’be Jianguo cou’d have some fun wit makin’ ‘er talk,” Xiao said as he touched his bruised head. “Per’aps he’ll share ‘er wit us afta he finishes wit ‘er.”

Katara’s eyes widened as she stared at them in horror before she began to thrash wildly in her encasement. No, this could not be happening! She needed to escape! She needed to find Zuko!

The tall, green-eyed man turned to look at the other three with a look of pure disgust.

“You never cease to repulse me,” Chang scolded.

Katara felt her hope rise at his words and that hope flared higher when the restricting rock fell away from her legs and returned to the ground. The quiet earthbender turned around and began to walk away before he paused and turned to look at the men over his shoulder.

“Bring her,” he ordered passively.

Katara’s hopes fell and despair took over as the other three men chuckled evilly and began to advance on her. Katara whirled around, but one of them grabbed her hair and pulled her back, causing a pained cry to escape her lips. She elbowed the one who had hurt her and he released her with a yelp, but before she could run again another one grabbed hold of her arm while the third man grabbed onto the back of her shirt. She began to scream, punch, and kick at them as she tried to fight for her freedom.

Katara clawed at the firebender who was trying to throw her onto his shoulder. She managed to inflict deep scratches on his face and he howled in pain as he grabbed onto his injured skin. With an angry snarl, he reared his arm back and flung it forward, slapping Katara hard across her face. Tears sprang from her eyes at the pain as her head snapped to the side before she fell to the hard ground due to the force of the blow.

She laid there for a moment, a bit disoriented, and she shook her head as she tried to stand up again
to flee. Where was Zuko?

She gasped when she felt hands grabbing her, pulling her up. She felt her panic rise to extreme levels as her attackers chuckled lasciviously in her ear as they started to drag her after them.

“Zuko!” she shrieked desperately.

The almost setting sun found Zuko pacing impatiently back and forth at the edge of the forest. A while had passed since Katara had left angrily and she had not returned. He understood why she was angry, he himself was impatient to find a way to the disease-stricken colony, but he also knew that it would be worse if they ventured without supplies or weapons into an unknown area without knowing if they were in ally or enemy territory.

Zuko ran a hand through his loose hair as he glanced toward the dark and silent forest for the hundredth time since Katara had left his sight. He had this strange feeling that something was wrong and he could not shake that feeling of trepidation away. Pausing in his pacing, Zuko veered to his right and began to walk in the direction the waterbender had gone to—though he made sure to walk in a controlled pace so as not to seem too eager or anxious.

“Zuko!” the sound of Katara’s terrified scream broke through the foliage and made a cold shiver run down his spine.

“Katara!” Zuko called out in a panic as he dashed toward the sound of her frightened voice, all the while cursing himself for allowing her to venture off by herself. He increased his speed as he raced through the forest.

In the darkness of the trees, Katara continued to struggle to get free from the grasp the men had on her, but they were stronger and heavier than she was and she was not having much success, which was making her fear and anger escalate.

Chang turned around and walked back to where his men were struggling to subdue the woman.

“Zuko? So you are his waterbender then?” he asked as he looked at her as if he was seeing her for the first time, but instead of waiting for confirmation he spun around with quick strides. “So he must be somewhere close.”
Katara tried to scream for Zuko again, but the non-bender clamped a dirty hand over her mouth to silence her. She screamed against his hand before she fiercely bit down on it.

The man cursed and snatched his hand away as he glared at her heatedly.

“Ya fuckin’ bitch!” he cursed loudly before he slapped her with his uninjured hand.

Katara let out a yelp and tears sprang from her eyes from the pain, but she retaliated by kicking him hard right between his legs. The man let out a cry as he bent down from the blow before he fell to the floor on his side while holding onto his injured, sensitive area. The other men only laughed and jeered at their comrade who was rolling on the ground in pain, but quickly doubled their efforts when the woman tried to do the same to them.

“Enough!” bellowed Chang as he stormed up toward them.

The men jumped when an enraged roar reached their ears from behind the trees. They tensed but before they could gather in an offensive front, Zuko crashed down upon them from the thick foliage.

“Zuko!” Katara cried out in relief as she again elbowed the man who was grabbing onto her, but he only grunted and held onto her.

Zuko snatched his eyes away from the unknown men at the sound of Katara’s voice calling his name. His golden eyes widened as he took notice of the men holding onto Katara, the large, stone bracelets around her small wrists, and the red marks that were forming on her flawless cheeks. He felt his rage boil the blood in his veins at the unforgivable sight.

With a growl, Zuko sprinted toward them and blasted a large fireball at the tall man standing a few feet away, effectively knocking him into a tree. The other two men sprang toward him. One began to send large round boulders at Zuko, but he quickly pulverized them with more fire blasts. Zuko struck him hard on the jaw and sent him crashing to the ground. The other man cursed as he swung his sword at the angry firebender, but Zuko easily deflected the strike by grabbing the man’s arm and throwing him against another tree.

Xiao growled as he watched his comrades fall. He forcefully threw the woman he was still trying to control aside and rushed at Zuko with blast after blast of fire. Zuko almost wanted to laugh at the pitiful fighting skills these men had as he snuffed out the flames as they came near him before he sent his fire whip and cracked it against the man’s chest, throwing him onto his back.
“Katara!” Zuko called as he spun around to race to her and gather her in his arms, but he quickly took on a defensive stance as more men appeared out of nowhere and circled him.

Zuko felt his anger swell at the thought that they were keeping him away from Katara, who was injured and needed him, so he began to attack them to get them out of his way. The men fought back, with firebending, earthbending, or weapons. Zuko was thrown back as a boulder grazed his shoulder, but he quickly recovered and renewed his attacks with vigor. A few men lay unconscious at his feet.

A flash of fire caught their attention and Zuko spun around at the display with hands blazing only to come face-to-face with a muscular middle-aged man summoning a wall of fire on either side of him.

“Now, now, young Fire Lord,” the amber-eyed, older man chided with a small smirk, “Extinguish your fire or the waterbender gets hurt.”

Zuko turned away from him, but froze when he saw that Katara was being held by the tall earthbender with a sharp-looking dagger pressed against her delicate throat. He growled under his breath as he clenched his hands while his fire flared.

“No, Zuko! Don’t do it!” Katara yelled at him as she tried to pry the arm off her. She let out a gasp when the cold knife was pressed closer to her skin.

“Release her, this instant!” Zuko snarled at the earthbender.

“You may be Fire Lord, but none of us take orders from you,” the middle-aged firebender spoke in a deceptively calm tone, “Especially now that you are all alone with no guards and no help. Surrender now!”

Zuko narrowed his eyes at him as he clenched and unclenched his fiery hands. He was unsure of what to do. If he let go of the only form of attack he had, then how was he supposed to save Katara?

“Don’t you dare do it, Zuko! Run and find some help!” Katara screamed at him.

She knew if Zuko complied, they were both doomed. She was afraid and she did not want to think
about the things these men could do to her; but she would never forgive herself if something were to happen to Zuko because of her.

The older firebender narrowed his hot, amber eyes at the interfering woman.

“Chang?” he inquired calmly.

“Yes, Jianguo,” Chang uttered passively.

The earthbender frowned coldly as he pressed the dagger into the woman’s neck. The knife bit at her skin and drew a thin line of blood, making Katara gasped at the pain inflicted on her and the threat to her life.

“Katara!” Zuko cried out in fear and outrage as he saw the blood flow down her neck and, without another thought, extinguished his flames and brought his arms to his sides in surrender.

“I have done what you wanted! Release her now!” he demanded as he heatedly glared at the other firebender.

The man named Jianguo let out a cruel laugh that the rest of his gang, except Chang, joined in. Zuko growled under his breath as he flicked his eyes around to give them all deadly glares. The middle-aged man’s laughter turned into deep chuckles as he finally moved away from the spot he had been standing to walk around the angry young Fire Lord as if to evaluate him. Zuko’s eyes narrowed as he eyed the man warily before he stopped just a few feet before him.

“I’m glad we didn’t have to go through all the trouble of going to the colony to get you,” Jianguo finally spoke with what resembled a pleased sigh.

“What do you mean by that?” Zuko asked suspiciously.

A strange and cruel smile forced the older firebender’s face dangerously awry.

Zuko felt his muscles tense as dread took over him.
Silence hung in the air for a few long seconds before Jianguo finally spoke, lifting his hand to light and then extinguish a small flame in his palm.

“I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you what is going on, since we have you already,” he began as he glanced at the tensed Fire Lord. “We, my men and I, were actually on our way to get you from the small colony as we were expected to. But luckily for us, you came to us before we traveled there or fought our way to get you.”

“What do you want with me?” Zuko asked icily as he glared at the man before he flicked his eyes toward Katara who was staring back at him with large, petrified eyes. “Whatever you need me for can wait until the village has been helped.”

Zuko and Katara were startled when the large group of men burst into incredulous laughter. Zuko glared at them angrily as he took in their appearance. It looked like the band surrounding them consisted of both earthbenders and firebenders, though their clothing was dirty and ragged-looking, their hair was long and matted, and they looked like they had not bathed for years. Something clicked in Zuko’s brain as the men smirked evilly at him. He growled at the older firebender who seemed to be their leader.

“You! You’re the ones who have been raiding my colonies and wreaking havoc upon my people!” Zuko thundered as he clenched his hands. “Do you have any idea of all the damage you have caused?”

Katara gasped while the men sneered at the angry Fire Lord.

“As if we give a shit!” one of the men shouted out. His comment urged the others to give out remarks of their own.

_How can they say that? Katara thought angrily. Don’t they see the innocent lives they have destroyed?_

Their leader raised his hand and the men immediately quieted down after a few more curses. The middle-aged man smiled at them before he frowned at Zuko.
“How can you say this to us when it was you who have ruined us?” Jianguo said as he narrowed his eyes dangerously at the young firebender glaring at him.

“I don’t understand.” Zuko frowned at him.

Jianguo growled as he took a menacing step forward while his hands lit up for a brief moment.

“It’s because of you that we have lost everything and now live miserably!” he roared.

“What?” Katara cried out in disbelief as she tried to break the hold of the tall earthbender keeping her still. “You’re blaming Zuko? Why?”

Katara growled under her breath, angry at being intentionally ignored when Jianguo did not even turn her way as he kept his attention on Zuko.

“Your waterbender sure doesn’t know when to keep quiet, does she?” he commented as he raised an eyebrow at the silent young man before he glanced back at Katara with a lascivious grin, “Though I don’t blame you for keeping her around. She is quite a beauty.”

“My relationship with Katara is not as depraved as you think,” Zuko explained furiously. “She is only a very close friend of mine.”

“Well, that’s not what I’ve heard,” Jianguo said with a hum. “We know she means so much to you that you’d do anything to keep her safe, which is why we came up with the lie about the village being ravaged by an illness. We knew she would follow you in order to help them.”

“You…lied?” Zuko said in a cold voice. “So there never was a disease? The people, the children, never died then?”

“Yes,” Jianguo responded without remorse. “We tried many ways to make you heed our warnings —”

“By raiding my colonies and terrorizing my people,” Zuko interrupted harshly.
“Why yes,” Jianguo replied with a wicked smile, “It was so easy since many people let down their guard thinking that everything would be right in the world now that the war is over. They never saw us coming and so were unprepared when we came down upon them.”

Zuko glared at him, but a question that had been nagging him ever since he had heard of the raiding of the colonies stopped him from attacking the unremorseful man.

“How could such a large group be able to disappear undetected after every attack?” he asked.

“Ah, a good question, indeed,” Jianguo exclaimed.

He flicked his hand at Chang whose expression was as cold as a stone before a satisfied grin appeared on the firebender’s face.

“Chang here and a few of his earthbenders were gracious enough to show us a way to make a hasty retreat without giving any trace as to where we had gone,” Jianguo paused and slowly spun around to smile at his men. “Why don’t we give our guests a peek?”

The men snickered until Xiao and Ping stepped forward with large smirks on their faces. The earthbender went to stand behind Xiao and then he grabbed hold of both of his upper arms. Katara and Zuko’s eyes widened when the earth silently opened and they fell through before the ground sealed back up without any sign that it had been disturbed.

*Almost like when General Fong buried me in the ground to force Aang into the Avatar State,* Katara thought absently.

Everybody was silent, nobody moved, but Zuko and Katara never moved their eyes from the spot the men had disappeared through. To their shock, they watched as another hole appeared a few feet away and Xiao and Ping emerged. They stepped away from the opening, which closed just as silently as it had materialized, and gave an exaggerated bow when the other men erupted into hoots and cheers. Both men sneered at Zuko as they passed by him to stand among their comrades.

“Every firebender and non-bender has an earthbending partner,” Jianguo spoke up as he again turned his attention to Zuko. “We were able to escape with this little trick as we plundered your colonies, but you did not come to their aid yourself like we had hoped. Instead, you sent for the villages to be better protected and even had the people learn to defend themselves. I have to give you credit for...”
such a move, since it did detain us for a while,” he said, looking mildly impressed.

Zuko almost lost it right then.

“So, since that didn’t work very well, we began to send you a few messages, but you disregarded those as well,” Jianguo continued casually as he glanced down to nonchalantly inspect his nails.

“So it was you that sent me those threats!” Zuko accused angrily.

“Actually, you’re wrong about that,” Jianguo responded smugly. “It was someone else that was in charge of making sure you received those letters as well as keep an eye on you.”

“Who? Tell me who this traitor is!” Zuko demanded as he took a step closer, but paused when Chang moved the knife closer to Katara’s neck.

“I apologize, but I can’t reveal such a secret to you,” the older firebender said in mock regret. “But as I was saying, you ignored our request to release Lord Ozai and so we came up with this plan to lure you out in your courageous attempt to help save their lives.” He sneered. “But the only way that you would’ve complied to come with us without a fight was if your little waterbender was used against you. And as we can all see, it worked perfectly well.”

Another round of laughter resounded at his words.

Jianguo paced calmly on the dark forest floor as the men continued with their laughter. He smirked at his comrades.

“Quite pitiful, don’t you think?” he mocked.

Zuko’s jaw locked as he tried to keep himself composed.

“I still don’t see what you want with me or why you blame me for your misfortunes,” he said.

“Oh, I will tell you alright,” Jianguo replied with a smirk. “You ignored all the messages sent to you
ordering you to release Ozai, our true Fire Lord, so we had to take matters into our own hands. We will use the waterbender to get you to remain compliant with us while we exchange your freedom for that of Ozai’s—"

“Are you crazy?!” Katara interrupted loudly. “Ozai’s a monster who deserves to rot in prison for all the evil things he has done to the world!”

“Silence, wench!” Jianguo ordered sharply.

The dagger was pressed even closer to her neck and she gasped.

“Let her go!” Zuko growled out as he took another step toward the silent earthbender holding Katara in his grasp.

Jianguo laughed at him before he turned away and calmly strode toward the grimacing waterbender. Katara felt her heart beat faster as the firebender loomed closer to her and she tried to back away.

“You really need to learn to keep that pretty mouth of yours shut, waterbender,” Jianguo cooed mockingly as he briefly glanced at Zuko with a large grin. “Quite a beauty, like I said. Maybe I would like to see why you find her so good to have around.” He reached out a rough hand to touch her cheek.

Katara cringed at his unwanted touch and at the slight pain from Jianguo’s hand touching her bruises from the fight.

“Don’t touch me!” Katara yelled at him.

“Don’t touch her!” Zuko snarled wrathfully.

“Or what?” Jianguo taunted with a chuckle. “You have no way to stop me.”

Zuko gritted his teeth as sparks flared from his nostrils.
Jianguo smirked at him as he patted Katara’s cheek. He let out another chuckle when the woman snapped her teeth to bite his hand.

“Feisty, isn’t she?” he remarked and the men laughed along with him. “So, young Zuko, if you want your precious waterbender to be safe, you will be submissive and let us block your firebending. We can’t have you attacking us, now can we?”

“Don’t listen to him, Zuko!” Katara demanded.

Zuko growled under his breath, trying to stall, but he immediately made up his mind when the men started to whistle and lick their lips toward the struggling female. He relaxed his stance and gave a small, almost imperceptible nod of his head.

“Don’t be stupid!” Katara screamed at him.

“I won’t let them hurt you if I can help it, Katara!” Zuko growled at her loudly as he turned to glare at her.

Katara gasped and quieted down as Zuko looked away from her to turn his attention back to Jianguo. Zuko held out his arms and another slim earthbender, just like Chang, raised one of his hands to summon a stone manacle to wrap around each of Zuko’s wrists and ankles in order to block every possible way he could use his firebending. As soon as the restrictive bracelets encircled him, Zuko instantly felt his inner fire being snuffed out and a cold and empty feeling engulfed him.

“No,” Katara whispered in despair as Chang tightened his grip on her.

Jianguo chuckled evilly as he walked away from Katara to circle around the now silent young firebender.

“Look at the Mighty Fire Lord now,” he taunted cruelly, “Helpless like a child.”

After the other raiders gave their share of taunts and sneers, Jianguo stepped up to Zuko with a triumphant smirk.
“How about we make both sides of your face match, hmm?” he asked in a sugary tone.

Quick as lightning, Jianguo raised his fist and struck across the unblemished side of Zuko’s face.

“Zuko!” Katara cried out as Zuko’s head snapped to the side with the force of the blow.

Zuko winced at the pain, but he managed to stop himself from crying out. He could feel his cheek quiver, but he refused to touch it and give Jianguo the satisfaction of knowing that it hurt. He lifted his head high as he glared defiantly at the older firebender.

Jianguo narrowed his eyes in displeasure as he took aim at Zuko’s face again, this time with more strength. Blood spurted from Zuko’s lip as it split from the strike, but again he refused to cry out in pain while Katara cried out for him to be left alone. His eyes almost blazing in anger, Jianguo threw a brutal blow to Zuko’s stomach. Zuko doubled over in pain and coughed as the wind was ripped from his lungs, but he bit his bloody lip to continue with his silence.

“Trying to play tough in front of your waterbending wench, aren’t you?” Jianguo growled out angrily. “Let’s see how long you can keep up the act!”

With a flick of his hand, Jianguo stepped away as half a dozen of his men eagerly sprang forward and began to land blow after blow on Zuko. Unable to keep standing on his feet from the excruciating pain, Zuko fell to the ground and landed on his side. He brought his arms over his head to protect himself and bit his lip even harder to keep from screaming.

“No, stop! Please! Don’t hurt him!” Katara screamed at them as she renewed her struggles to free herself so she could run to Zuko.

“Let me go, damn it!” she commanded heatedly. She ignored the pain and the flow of her blood from the knife cutting deep into her skin as she thrashed in the earthbender’s iron hold.

Zuko focused his attention on Katara’s voice as he tried to block out the pain that was raining down on him from all sides. He would not give them the satisfaction of knowing that their blows were really taking a toll on him. He wished he could fight back, make them regret messing with him, but he endured the punches and kicks so they would leave Katara alone and not hurt her.

“Stop it, please!” Katara pleaded as tears began to run down her cheeks in torrents, her heart
A few more blows were inflicted before Jianguo raised his palm up. The men ceased their assault and backed away, panting and huffing. With measured steps, their leader walked over to the wounded man on the ground. Zuko groaned under his breath and spat the blood that had fallen into his mouth. With a push from his foot, Jianguo harshly pressed Zuko onto his back as he smirked down at his bruised and bloodied face.

“That was just too easy,” the rebel said.

Zuko grimaced as he tried to stand up, but his arms gave way under him and he collapsed to the floor once again. He felt like all his bones had been broken. His breathing was loud and shallow. After a few painful tries, Zuko managed to get to his knees before he forced himself to stand on his feet. He swayed and his legs shook at the pain the effort caused him, but he managed to stay standing and not fall back down. With shaky limbs, Zuko slowly raised his head to glare defiantly at Jianguo.

“That’s what you may think, but I assure you that our plan will succeed,” Jianguo countered, examining his hand uninterestingly as he continued.

“Please!”

Zuko again spat out more blood as it accumulated in his mouth. He wanted to get to his feet again, his pride demanded it, but his body was in too much pain so he remained on the floor as the throbbing from the current blow traveled from his cheek to his head.

“You may hurt me, you may kill me, but you won’t succeed in releasing Ozai from prison,” Zuko gritted out between clenched teeth as he raised his eyes to give Jianguo a hateful glare.

“‘There is no one that will help you. Hakoda and his warriors are at sea at this moment returning to
that primitive tribe of his. We made the Avatar go on a fool’s errand with no way for him to return soon. He and the blind earthbender will be surprised when they finally arrive and see that no revolt has erupted in the Earth Kingdom village, but once they realize that, it will be too late to save you. Iroh is perhaps searching for you right now, but he has no way of knowing where both of you are. And once news of your capture reaches him and the traitors that side with you in the Fire Nation, they will do anything to rescue you even if it means releasing Ozai from prison.”

Zuko remained silent at the realization that he and Katara were indeed all alone. It would take months before Aang and Toph heard news about their capture, since they were headed to almost the farthest village in the world. Jianguo and his men and whoever was his informant made sure to remove anyone that could come save them.

*Then I won’t wait for help to arrive. I will find a way for Katara and me to escape,* Zuko thought determinedly.

Jianguo dismissed him as if he were nothing as he turned to smirk at his men who had been watching the events silently and with twisted pleasure.

“There is no need for us to rush to the colony now that the ‘oh so Mighty Fire Lord’ has decided to drop by and stay with us,” he told them before he once again regarded the injured man lying on the ground below his feet. “We will stay here for the night. Set up camp now.”

Without another word, Jianguo lifted his booted foot and swiftly and forcefully kicked Zuko’s side. This time Zuko was unable to stop the painful cry that escaped his lips as he felt one of his ribs crack.

“Zuko!” Katara shrieked in anguish.

Mustering all the strength and all the will she had in order to run to Zuko’s side to comfort him, Katara pulled Chang’s arm away from her neck. The earthbender was so surprised that he did not fight to hold her still and doubled over when Katara elbowed him hard on his stomach and stomped on his foot. As soon as he backed away in pain, Katara wasted no time in racing toward Zuko.

“Zuko!” Katara shrieked in anguish.

She dropped to her knees as soon as she reached him and a soft sob escaped her as the bruises on his face became much more visible and grotesque. She reached a shaky hand and gently touched his arm, but immediately pulled back when he winced. Katara felt her ire flare in her heart as the man she loved above all else lay in pain before her just because he did not agree with the idea of world conquest like Ozai and these men did. She raised her head to glare with blazing, blue eyes at Jianguo who was staring at them with a cruel smirk on his face.
“You won’t get away with this,” Katara hissed at him.

Jianguo chuckled deeply as he ran a hand through his short graying hair.

“Oh, we will, waterbender,” he replied confidently. He remained standing before them for a moment before he smirked at her as he spun around and headed back to his men.

Katara continued to glare at the leader of the band of raiders until she lost sight of him. She did not pay attention as the other men ran around to get camp set up as tents were raised and a large fire was started, instead she focused her whole attention on Zuko who had his eyes screwed shut while a deep grimace marred his features. More tears gathering in her eyes, Katara again reached her hand to touch him, but this time more lightly.

“Zuko?” she softly called out. She scooted closer to him and gently raised his head to her lap where she began to smooth his hair back.

At the sound of Katara’s lovely voice and the tingling feeling of her soft touch, Zuko’s eyes flew open and darted around in search of her face. A small smile broke through his face once he spotted her hovering over him. He sighed contentedly at having his head cradled on her lap, but his smile vanished as he took in her own bruised cheeks, the thin line of blood on her neck, and the tears that wanted to fall from her beautiful, sapphire eyes.

“Katara?” he rasped as he painfully raised his arm to grab onto her small hand. “Did they…do anything else to hurt you?”

Katara let out a small sob and more tears began to fall down her face at the sound of Zuko’s concerned voice. He had been horribly beaten by half a dozen men and instead he worried about her?

“I’m fine, Zuko…” her voice trembled before she scowled at him as her tears continued to flow. “Stupid! Why did you let yourself be beaten up like that? You should’ve fought back! I know you would’ve been able to defeat all of them!”

Zuko frowned at her before he squeezed her hand to gain her attention. Katara sniffled as she looked into his burning, golden eyes.
“I would rather be beaten to an inch of my life than allow anyone or anything to harm you,” he told her fervently.

Katara let out a small cry before she lunged herself at him and crushed his head to her chest. Zuko hissed in pain.

“Careful, Katara! I had the living daylights beaten out of me. You have to handle me with care,” Zuko lightly teased as he tried to lighten up her mood.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Katara apologized profusely as the tears continued to fall.

Zuko sighed as his joke—a bad one, he admitted—failed.

“Don’t blame yourself. It’s not your fault,” Zuko told her firmly.

“It is,” Katara whispered. “It’s all my fault we’re in this mess. I was the one who ignored your warnings and decided to venture into the forest by myself.”

“Yeah, but you had no idea that the rebels were looking for us,” Zuko tried to reason with her.

Katara sniffled again as she ran her fingers through his dark hair. How many times had she wished she could be able to do this? Touch Zuko’s raven-black hair with her fingers and have him so close to her? Though she relished that she was doing it at the moment, it saddened her that it had to be in these circumstances.

“I’m sorry I can’t heal you,” Katara spoke up remorsefully as she saw Zuko wince when he tried to move. She glared hatefully at the stone bracelets circling her wrists, preventing her from healing Zuko’s pain away.

“It’s okay,” Zuko reassured her. “It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve been severely injured. I’ve been through worse.”
Katara’s brow furrowed in a deep frown at his words, but before she could say anything, Zuko again squeezed her hand.

“I would really like to get off from the ground,” Zuko interrupted, hoping to distract her and calm her down. “Can you help me lean on a tree or something?”

Katara nodded as she carefully moved Zuko’s head from her lap. It took a few painful minutes for Zuko to finally move away from the dirt floor and lean against the trunk of a large tree further away from the unruly men. Katara bit her lip to keep from crying again as she watched Zuko try to keep his face from showing his pain and weakness while his chest moved in shallow breaths. Oh, how she wished she had her waterbending back so she could heal his injuries and make Jianguo and his men regret what they had done. She did not have any medical supplies and she worried that Zuko’s health might worsen if he did not get immediate help.

Both tensed as they noticed Chang leave the crowd of men and walk toward them in a poised stride with a disinterested expression on his thin face. Zuko straightened, and although the movement caused his injured side to send a jolt of pain through his body, he placed a protective arm across Katara to keep her slightly behind him.

The tall earthbender ignored both the gesture and the glare both the firebender and waterbender were sending him as he finally approached them to stand silently a few feet before them. Without a word, he threw a bag at their feet. When they eyed the bag and him warily, Chang silently slid his hands into his long sleeves and frowned at them.

“There are bandages, salves, and other medicinal supplies in the bag,” he said dispassionately.

“Why would Jianguo help us after the trouble he went through to harm us?” Zuko asked suspiciously.

“Believe me, Jianguo would rather keep you suffering and would be even glad if an infection took hold of you,” was Chang’s passive reply, “But I think it’s best you get your injuries seen to so you won’t slow us down.”

Without any more explanations, Chang turned on his heel to walk away.

“You’re Dai Li,” Katara observed quietly. She glanced at Zuko who nodded at her that he had figured it out as well. “Your silent and refined movements are just like the Dai Li. Not to mention
you used the stone cuffs.”

The lean earthbender paused in his movements at the words the woman had said. There was silence for a moment before the man spoke.

“Yes, I was a Dai Li agent once,” he replied tonelessly.

“Then why are you going along with this stupid plot for Ozai to rule the world when you had been fighting to keep Ba Sing Se safe?” Katara asked exasperatedly.

“I would advise you to mind your own business, waterbender,” Chang told her tersely as he once again glided back to the group of rowdy men as silently as he had come.

Katara and Zuko watched him leave before they looked back at each other. Zuko moved his arm away from where it had been guarding Katara and groaned quietly, his whole body protesting at the movement as he tried to lean back on the tree. At the sound that came from Zuko, Katara was instantly at his side, helping him lean his back to the sturdy tree.

“Thanks,” he rasped out and swallowed another groan as the bruises on his back touched the rough surface of the tree.

Katara gave him a small smile, though her eyes were filled with concern. Once Zuko was settled, she hesitantly reached for the bag that was lying at their feet and brought it to her side. She eyed it suspiciously for a while, but when Zuko coughed and groaned, she immediately opened it and started to rummage through it. To her immense relief, she found everything she needed to take care of their bruises and wounds.

She took out the container that held healing ointment for bruises and burns, needles and thread to close deep wounds—though she was sure she would not need these—and laid out the bandages neatly in a clean spot on the grassy patch they were seating on.

She grabbed the lotion jar and opened it before she turned to Zuko. She knelt beside him and reached for his face, but she was startled when Zuko grabbed her shackled wrist and shook his head.

“What’s wrong? I have to dress your wounds before you get an infection or something.” Katara frowned at him.
Zuko again shook his head and grimaced.

“Not until you see to your own injuries first,” was his strained reply as he looked pointedly at her bloody neck and bruised face.

Katara huffed at him as she grabbed his hand and laid it gently at his side.

“I can handle a few bruises for a while longer, but you got it worse than I did and I won’t allow you to be in any more pain,” was her firm response. “Now, be a good boy and sit quietly as I take care of you.”

Zuko glowered at her halfheartedly, though her last words did warm his heart. He watched as she once again took hold of the lotion and turned to him with determined eyes. She reached into the container and scooped some of the strong smelling salve on her fingers before she pressed them to his cheek. Zuko winced at the cold contact and the slight pain the small touch brought to his skin, but after a moment, he let out a sigh as Katara began to spread the ointment gently to the bruises on his face. He tensed slightly when she moved to the scarred side of his face as it brought painful memories from his troubled past, but when he looked into her sympathetic eyes and she only smiled at him, he relaxed into her touch.

Katara pressed a cloth she found in the bag to the cut on Zuko’s lower lip and gently cleaned the blood away. She suppressed a blush as she stared at his lips for a moment to look at the cut. It was not that deep and luckily it did not need to be stitched. She wiped her fingers with the cloth once she finished with the bruises on Zuko’s face. It would have been much easier if she had her waterbending, but there was no point in crying over it. She needed to look at Zuko’s other wounds.

Sitting back on her heels, Katara eyed his shirt. She needed to take it off so she could start taking care of the rest of his injuries, but she found herself to be frozen in her spot at the thought of taking off Zuko’s shirt herself. Sure she had seen Zuko shirtless before, his muscular torso gleaming in the sunlight as he trained under it, but it was something different between looking at his chest and touching it. The few times she had done so when she tried to heal him after he was hit by Azula’s lightning always made her body tingle and feel warm.

“I…uh…I-I need to take off your shirt,” Katara stuttered before she rapidly added, “to look at the other wounds you have!”

This time she was unable to stop the blush from surfacing and she hoped that the small bruises on her
cheeks hid her embarrassment as well as fascination.

Zuko raised an amused eyebrow at her as he gave her a slight nod and leaned a bit forward. Katara helped him out of his shirt, slowing down when he gave out a painful groan, until finally she removed it from his head and laid it beside her. She looked at his chest, but her blush disappeared when she saw the reddening bruises that marred the skin of his once perfect torso.

There were many on his stomach and back where he had suffered most of the blows and kicks the despicable men had given him, and although there were no visible cuts, Katara feared that there could be some internal bleeding. She immediately dipped her fingers back into the ointment and began to spread it on all the bruises she saw on his back, arms, and torso. She lingered for a moment as she gently touched the scar that he had received while trying to save her life from Azula’s attack. She felt a bit guilty that every time Zuko tried to keep her safe he got injured. She felt love and gratitude swell in her heart.

She paused when Zuko jumped and hissed loudly as she pressed her fingers to his left side. Katara jumped over his legs to kneel at his left side to look at him and a loud gasp escaped her lips as she noticed the large, black and blue bruise that was forming there. She remembered that it was the place where Jianguo had brutally kicked him and she immediately knew why Zuko was having such difficult time breathing.

“I’m going to have to press to see how much damage there is,” Katara told him gently.

“I understand,” Zuko answered with a slight nod. It would not be the first time he had broken some bones.

Katara bit her lip as she gently touched his side. Zuko hissed again, but remained still as Katara continued to press and prod his ribs. She sat back after a moment of examination and she smiled at him in relief.

“It looks like only one rib took the force of the blow. It’s fractured, but not broken, though it will take a few days or weeks for it to heal completely,” Katara informed him as she reached for more healing lotion and the rough bandages.

“I’m glad,” was Zuko’s quiet response as he sat motionless while Katara spread the cold salve on his injured side before she wound the bandages snugly around his torso.
Night was approaching by the time Katara finished dressing Zuko’s wounds before she began to tend to her own cut and bruises. Though the cut on her neck stung and her cheeks were swollen and they felt like they were on fire, Katara strove to endure the pain as silently as Zuko did his as she smeared the salve on the bruises and bandaged her neck. She could feel Zuko’s concerned as well as enraged gaze as he watched her, but she fought to keep from hissing and wincing too much in order not to worry him.

Once she finished, Katara packed everything back into the bag and placed it at her side as she, too, leaned onto the tree to rest. Zuko took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly.

“I’m…sorry,” he said softly.

Katara turned to him with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Sorry for what?” she asked.

“I promised to keep you safe, to keep you protected. I promised you and your father that I would not let anything hurt you, and look what happened,” he explained dejectedly as he reached a hand to hover over her bruised cheek before he let it fall back down.

Katara grabbed his hand as she shook her head at him. When he turned away from her, Katara reached for his face and gently guided his head so he could look at her again. Though his face did not show what he was feeling, Katara could see the anger and remorse in his amber eyes.

“Don’t you go blaming yourself, Zuko,” Katara told him with a small smile. “None of this is your fault. You didn’t know that everything was a lie and that there was no disease rampaging through the colony.”

Zuko pressed his lips tightly together even though it hurt slightly due to the cut dealt by Jianguo. He looked away from Katara’s trusting blue orbs and stared at a blank spot over her head.

_It is my fault_, he thought somberly. _It was my affections and feelings for Katara that brought her into their plans, though I still don’t know who could have told them that._

“You’re still blaming yourself, aren’t you?” Katara’s accusing voice brought him out of his thoughts and he glanced at her to see her lightly scowl at him before she grinned. “If I’m not allowed to blame
myself, then you can’t either.”

Zuko frowned at her before he scowled playfully when she basically threw his previous words in his face. Katara grinned wider as he smiled at her, but she frowned when he again looked away and his smile disappeared. She knew he was worried about what Jianguo and his men could do to them—mainly what they could do to her—and concerned for the safety of his people and his country if Ozai was ever released from his prison.

“Don’t worry, Zuko, everything will be fine,” Katara reassured quietly. “The Fire Nation is safe because Uncle Iroh and Chao won’t allow these…men to succeed in releasing Ozai.”

The young Fire Lord did not reply to her words, but he nodded at her that he heard her. He hoped that what she said was true.

Both looked up as loud footsteps heading their way reached their ears and they tensed when they realized the three men from before were approaching them with plates in their hands and cruel smiles on their faces. Zuko again ignored the pain as he wrapped Katara protectively to his side while he heatedly glowered at them.

“Here’s da food fer ya,” the large-jawed earthbender spoke as he placed a plate with a few pieces of burnt meat on the ground while the other non-bender threw a small water canteen at them.

“Can’t ‘ave ya starvin’ and droppin’ like flies in da middle o’ da road,” Feng said.

The burly firebender squatted beside Katara and dropped a plate with overcooked rice. He smirked when the water tribeswoman scooted away from him and leaned closer to the captured Fire Lord who growled at him. He ignored them as he reached for a strand of hair that fell down the woman’s shoulder and twirled it in his dirty fingers.

“Yah, then ya’ll be all tired when we ‘ave fun wit ya later on,” he said huskily as he patted her cheek.

Katara’s eyes widened in horror at the man’s suggestive words before she slapped his hand away with an angry hiss. She gasped when she felt Zuko tightened his hold on her waist before he threw her to his other side and away from the rogue.
“I swear I’ll break your neck if you touch her again!” Zuko snarled angrily.

The three men laughed loudly before the bulky firebender stood to his feet to loom over them.

“Oh, yah? How ya gonna do dat if ya can’t even stand own yer feet?” he sneered tauntingly. “Ya won’t be able ta stop meh if I decide ta ‘ave me way wit the woman right now!”

As if to prove a point, the man reached down quickly and grabbed hold of the woman’s arm. Katara screamed as she latched onto Zuko’s neck with her other arm while she tried to keep the man away from her by kicking him. Zuko gritted his teeth as he tightened his hold on Katara’s waist before he swung his arm and struck the man’s nose. As soon as the man lost his hold on Katara with a painful howl, Zuko pulled her back to his side as he glared furiously at them all.

The older firebender cursed as he raised himself from the ground and gingerly touched his nose while the other two men laughed at him and mocked him that he had been beaten by an injured man. He cursed more loudly when he realized his large nose was broken and blood was pouring down his chin and onto his shirt.

“Ya bastard!” he cursed angrily. “Dat was a lucky shot, but ya won’t stop meh from takin’ ‘er now dat ya pissed me off!”

He lunged at them again, but a stone wall sprang between them and he crashed onto it before landing hard on his back. Katara looked up from burying her face in Zuko’s neck in fear while he pressed her closer to him despite his aching ribs. Both watched as Chang once again made his way toward them with a deep scowl on his face. He looked at them impassively and glared at the other two men, who bowed their heads, before he glared down at the firebender groaning on the floor while holding his nose that was bleeding profusely from smashing it on the wall.

“You were supposed to deliver the prisoners their food and then leave them alone. Can’t you even do that?” he told them icily. “Go make yourselves useful somewhere else.”

The other two men helped the whimpering man up from the ground and quickly retreated to the warmth of the campfire.

“Thank you,” Katara whispered as she continued to hold onto Zuko’s shirt.
Chang stared down at her and shrugged carelessly.

“I don’t condone the violation of women and try to intervene when I can, and though this time I was able to stop them, I can’t guarantee that I will always be able to.”

“Why do you say that?” Zuko asked as his hold on Katara tightened.

“My job is not to keep an eye on you all the time or keep you safe. I am always needed elsewhere,” the thin earthbender solemnly began stated. He looked down into Katara’s frightened eyes and added in a low tone, “I also won’t be able to do anything if Jianguo decides to have his way with you.”

At Katara’s horrified gasp, Zuko rubbed her arm soothingly and pressed her head back to his shoulder as he watched Chang leave them without another word. He could feel Katara shaking and her breathing quickening in fear while his own blood ran cold as Chang’s words echoed in his head. Dismissing the painful ache at his side, Zuko lifted Katara and placed her on his lap with her legs on one side and her head resting against his neck.

“Don’t worry, Katara,” he whispered soothingly as he caressed her hair. “Nobody will hurt you. I will find a way for us to escape. Please believe me.”

Katara nodded against him as she tried to calm her breathing and her nerves.

“I believe you,” she whispered back trustfully.

As long as she remained by Zuko’s side nothing would harm her. She felt Zuko run his fingers through her hair and she blushed when she finally realized where she was.

*Oh, my gods! I’m sitting on Zuko’s lap!* she squealed in her head before she sobered up as their situation once again hit her.

Though she knew she should probably move since Zuko was hurt and all, Katara could not find it in herself to give up her position. She relaxed in his hold as his smoky scent filled her senses and his strong heartbeat pulsed in her ear while his warmth surrounded her. Everything that had happened the past few days and hours caught up with her and soon Katara fell into a restless sleep as she snuggled closer to Zuko’s chest.
Zuko smiled as he felt Katara relax against him and heard her breathing even out into slumber. He held her to him tenderly as she slept, and even though he was bruised and wounded, he would not let her go and allow anything to hurt her again.

The sun had finally sunk into the horizon, plunging the dark forest into a black pitch. The only light visible was coming from the campfire where a few of the men still sat laughing and drinking. With the sun gone and his inner fire suppressed by the stone manacles, Zuko began to feel cold and helpless. He inwardly cursed Jianguo for their predicament.

He tried to figure out why Jianguo hated him so much. His name did sound a bit familiar, but Zuko could not remember why it did. He hoped that this plan for Ozai’s release failed and he prayed that he could find a way for him and Katara to escape so they could make sure the raiders’ plan never came to be. He worried that perhaps whoever seemed to have been watching him back in the Fire Nation was now targeting his mother as well and he hoped that Jee was keeping her safe. He also hoped that his uncle did not give up looking for Katara and him.

A cool, spring breeze blew by and Zuko shivered, frowning at the strange sensation of not having his inner fire in his immediate grasp. He looked down at the young woman in his arms and he sighed as he tightened his hold on her protectively while he tried to keep her warm.

I will find a way to get us free even if it kills me.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The following day, at the break of dawn, Zuko and Katara were rudely awaken with shouts, given a meager breakfast consisting of cold rice and a slice of bread, and then forced to walk the entire day until the large group stopped to make camp for the night, all the while ignoring the sneers and crude comments the men hurled their way. This was their routine for the next week and a half.

Zuko’s injuries were getting better as time passed and Katara dressed them, while Katara’s own bruises had already faded, but the constant walking long distances without being fed properly was taking a toll on them. Jianguo had told them that they were making their way to the village that supposedly had been affected by the disease to prove that they had indeed captured the Fire Lord and would not hesitate to kill him if their demands were not met.

Zuko tightened his grip on Katara’s arm as they jumped over a fallen log, making sure to keep her close to his side as the men glanced at her with licentious eyes. They were placed in the middle of the marching men in order to make sure they did not make a run for it. Zuko had tried many times to find some way to escape, but it was so difficult since there were so many of the rebels and they were always kept on watch. Zuko had taken into placing Katara on his lap every night as they settled to sleep so he could make sure she was not snatched away from him without him noticing as well as to
soothe her with his presence.

Katara wiped the sweat from her forehead with her arm as they continued on their gruesome pace toward the colony. She hoped that they could get a break soon because her legs felt like they weighed a ton and she was not sure she would be able to keep walking or even remain standing. All she wanted to do was to sleep in a warm and soft bed after taking a long and soothing bath. She had not taken a bath in days and she hated the feel and smell of her hair! But the raiders seemed not to mind the grime that stuck to their clothes and skin, or the stench that clung to them. It was not only that she wanted to get clean, but she missed the feeling of water on her skin, missed the familiar soothing calling of her element.

She had taken to sticking by Zuko’s side all the time even to go relieve herself—though she always went behind a bush and he turned his back to her—for fear that the men might try to force themselves on her if she was left alone. At the end of the day, Zuko would always lean against a tree and draw her to his lap while he kept watch. She was extremely grateful for what he did to keep her safe. She loved it when he did that and she wished that the circumstances were different and that he would be tender with her for other reasons.

At the head of the large group, Jianguo paused and held up a hand, signaling for the men to halt. His followers immediately stopped in their march as they looked at their leader for directions.

“Make camp, now,” he ordered them without even looking away from staring far ahead of him.

The mass of men scrambled about to obey his orders. Some started to raise tents and others built a campfire while others went to look for small game to eat. A few of the men had already started passing out liquor and were laughing boisterously around the fire. Katara and Zuko dragged themselves to the farthest possible tree away from the rowdy men to rest, and dropped down between its roots with tired groans. An hour later, their food was thrown at them and again they ignored the suggestive remarks that the men gave Katara.

“I’m starting to hate rice,” Katara muttered as she set down her empty plate. She scowled when her stomach growled for more food.

“Here,” Zuko said as he offered her his piece of bread. “Eat it.”

The waterbender shook her head and pushed his hand back.
“No, you need more food to sustain you than I do. Besides, it’s not the first time we’ve gone hungry, right?” She grinned at him as she let her eyes roam over his jaw dusted with light stubble.

Zuko gave her a small smile as he reluctantly took a bite of the stale bread.

“Yeah. Remember that one time after we came back from confronting Yon Rha when Sokka accidently lost the only bag of money we had left?”

“Oh, yeah!” Katara exclaimed. “We had to eat berries and fish for days only to find out that Momo had hid the bag under Appa’s saddle!”

She giggled and Zuko chuckled quietly as both tried to think of better times and forget their troubles and the fear for Katara’s safety for at least a moment, but their small bout of humor died when Jianguo walked up to them with a gleam in his eyes. Katara attached herself to Zuko’s side while he wrapped his arm around her as they eyed the older firebender guardedly.

A wide smirk appeared on Jianguo’s face as he stared down at them with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Now, what is it that has caused my precious prisoners to laugh?” he asked sweetly. He chuckled when they pressed their lips together and glared at him. “It doesn’t matter. In a couple of days, humor will cease to exist for you both.”

“What do you mean by that?” Zuko asked tersely.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you?” the middle-aged firebender asked in mock surprise before he let out another cruel chuckle. “We are a week away from the colony and the end of your miserable existence.”

“I thought you said that you would let us go in exchange for Ozai’s release,” Katara spoke up.

Jianguo threw his head back and laughed loudly. A few of his men turned their way and smirked at their leader’s amusement. Jianguo leaned down and grinned widely at Katara, who backed away with an angry glare.
“Ah, so astute of you to remember,” he cooed at her before he glanced at Zuko with a smirk. “I see you know how to choose your women, Fire Lord Zuko,” he mocked. “Not only does she have beauty, but she has a brain, too.”

Katara growled under her breath at his remark. Zuko did not reply to his taunt and only intensified his glare. Zuko had tried to tell them that Katara was only his friend and not his lover—though he wished that were true, too—but Jianguo refused to believe that his affection for Katara went beyond the sexual aspect.

“But I guess I forgot to mention that we don’t plan in releasing both of you, but of course General Iroh and the rest won’t know that,” Jianguo stated with a smile.

“Why do you hate me?” Zuko asked suddenly with narrowed eyes.

Jianguo started at the unexpected question as he stared at Zuko with surprised eyes before he composed himself and chuckled deeply.

“It doesn’t surprise me that you forgot who I am,” Jianguo began before he stood up and flicked his short graying hair over his shoulder.

“You know, I used to be a wealthy and respected nobleman a few years ago, four years ago to be precise. I had everything, riches, titles, friends, and women.” He sighed and a faraway look came over his face before it disappeared and he glared hatefully down at Zuko. “But then I lost it all when you became Fire Lord. You were the one that ruined me.”

“I still don’t see how,” Zuko told him.

“Still keeping with the innocent act, aren’t you?” Jianguo growled out. “When you called off the war, I lost everything along with my long-life career in the military!”

Zuko’s eyes widened as he stared at the angry older man.

“Meng Jianguo. You are General Meng!” he said.
“Ah, so you do remember me!” Jianguo said with a twisted smile. “I was one of the top generals in the Fire Lord’s army. But you stripped me of my station and banished me, a few of my comrades, and our soldiers from the Fire Nation! And now here we are living like rats in this foreign land!”

Zuko sat up straight as he stared at Jianguo incredulously.

“Of course you and the rest were banished! You did not accept that the useless war was over. I gave you a choice to keep your military careers, but only if you served under me and my new rule. Instead you and the other group of traitors tried to revolt against me and the Fire Nation!” Zuko exclaimed angrily.

“We are not traitors to the Fire Nation!” Jianguo shouted heatedly. “You are! You are the one who went against our great Lord Sozin’s wishes to gain power for our nation! What for? To play hero with a bunch of kids and then become Fire Lord? So you could also fuck this waterbending whore?”

“Leave Katara out of this! She is nothing you think or say she is, so don’t you dare insult her and my honor!” Zuko bellowed furiously. “You know perfectly well my reasons for stopping my so-called father from conquering the world, and I won’t repeat myself to you. The point is, the war is over and your previous plot to rebel against me failed just as your current plan will fail.”

Jianguo’s nostrils flared and his hands burst into flames as he glared down at the enraged young Fire Lord holding the Water Tribe wench to his side. The urge to snap the young man’s neck was so tempting that Jianguo’s hands twitched, but he could feel his men watching them and the way he was allowing Zuko to make him lose his control. With a few deep breaths, the older firebender relaxed his tensed stance as he once again smirked down at the couple huddled together against a tree.

“I may have not succeeded back then, but I assure you that I will now,” Jianguo assured confidently before he continued more casually, “Luckily, my situation and hatred toward you reached someone’s ears and they gave me the choice to enact my vengeance toward you. They promised me that I will regain all that I had and more once Ozai becomes Phoenix King.”

“I won’t let you win and destroy the peace I have worked so hard to gain all these years,” Zuko retorted just as confidently.

“I won’t either,” Katara joined in defiantly.

“Ah, such defiance!” Jianguo exclaimed as he let out another laugh before he snapped his hand
forward and grasped Katara’s chin between his thick fingers.

Katara yelped in surprise before she snatched her head away and slapped his hand while Zuko growled at him not to touch her. The firebender straightened as he smirked down at them with a raised brow.

“Do you really think you can order me around and tell me what I can and can’t do? You have no weapons, no bending abilities, and no way to escape,” he told them cruelly before his dark, golden eyes settled on Katara’s face. “If I wanted to take you now, there is nothing either of you could do to stop me,” he said huskily.

Zuko growled at him as he tucked Katara to his side, who had frozen up as the truth rang in her head. If Jianguo decided to force himself on her there was nothing she or Zuko would be able to do to stop him. Nobody would go against him to save her.

Jianguo looked back at Zuko and grinned evilly at him.

“The reason why your waterbender has not been taken yet by my men, who by the way, have not been with a woman in months, is only because of me. So if you don’t want me to change my mind, then both of you better sit still and obey me, or else I will be the one to take the waterbender to my tent for some…privacy.”

He laughed in cruel satisfaction at their horrified faces before he spun around and walked away, his laughter trailing after him like a plague.

Katara shuddered and buried her head in Zuko’s neck. She was terrified and repulsed! She did not want to be forced into having sex with a cruel man! She did not want her first time to be with someone she did not know or loved! She wanted, wished with all her heart, to give her virginity to Zuko and let only him take her body as well as her heart. But if they did not find a way to escape, then she would be defiled in the most brutal of ways!

She started to hyperventilate as her fear soared to great heights and she clung onto Zuko almost desperately. Zuko wrapped his arms around her as his panic began to grow as both Chang and Jianguo’s words rang in his head over and over. He felt Katara begin to heave dry sobs and he patted her back in soothing circles.

“Shh, Katara, calm down,” Zuko told her gently as he again lifted her and placed her on his lap
while he continued to rub her trembling back.

“Zuko, I’m so scared,” she whispered in a small voice “I don’t…I don’t want…to be…t-to be…”

“You won’t!” Zuko vowed fervently. “I won’t allow anyone to hurt you! I will kill any man who tries!”

Zuko held the frightened woman in his arms as he continued to whisper reassuring words to her. He had to find a way to keep Katara safe. He had to find a way for them to escape immediately.

Five days later found Zuko and Katara whispering quietly between them as they once again came up with plans to escape, but with no luck of finding one that would actually work and not be dangerous. They had both noticed that Jianguo would stare intently at Katara whenever he had the chance. The heated gleam in his eyes would make Katara quake in terror and caused fury to swell in Zuko’s chest. They had to find a way to escape, and soon.

They were all currently camped beside a small stream, which the men utilized to fill their canteens with water. Katara could hear the sound of the tinkling water and something inside her dimmed at the longing she felt of being reconnected to her cool and soothing element. Both she and Zuko had tried to break the stone bracelets and forced themselves to bend water or fire, but their chi was securely blocked. Katara briefly wondered if perhaps this was how Aang felt when his chakra had been blocked almost four years ago that now seemed like centuries ago. How she wished they could be back in that time where they had just been a group of friends trying to save the world. She missed her family and she hated the thought of how worried her family and Zuko’s would be when news reached them that she and Zuko were being held hostage.

The waterbender felt Zuko reach for her hand and she looked up to see his warm, golden eyes staring into her blue ones. He gave her an understanding smile, which she returned with a small one of her own.

“I miss my mother and Uncle Iroh,” he confessed quietly. “But we’ll see our family soon,” he promised her.

“I know,” Katara replied with another small smile. “I just wished we were with them now.”

Zuko nodded at her before he began to run his thumb on the back of her hand in gentle strokes. Katara looked at their hands with a blush before she glanced at him curiously.
“Once we escape Jianguo and his men and we return to our families, I will finally tell you something that I have kept inside me for a very long time,” he told her quietly as he looked away from their joined hands to stare intensely into Katara’s brilliant cobalt eyes.

Katara tilted her head to the side and frowned.

“Why can’t you tell me now?” she asked.

“I wish I could…you have no idea how many times I’ve tried, but…what I have to tell you is something important, something special that I want it to be said without the fear of not knowing what will happen to us if Jianguo wakes up in a foul mood,” Zuko replied quietly.

So I won’t have to deal with fear as well as disappointment and sadness if you reject my feelings for you, he added mentally.

“Okay, then I’ll wait to tell you something important, too,” Katara told him with another blush on her cheeks as she held his intense gaze.

Their attention to each other was interrupted when a shadow fell down on them. Both tensed as they looked up to see who it was, but relaxed slightly when they realized it was Chang carrying their meager meal. The former Dai Li agent placed their plates of food near their feet without even glancing their way before he stood to leave without saying one single word.

“Wait!” Katara called out.

She licked her lips nervously when Chang turned his head back to raise an eyebrow at her while Zuko looked at her with a frown.

“You were a Dai Li agent,” she began, “Why are you willing to help Jianguo and the others take over the world?”

Chang twisted around to face her fully as he looked down at her with a deep frown on his stony face. His long braid swished as he moved and settled over his shoulder as he remained silent, almost as if contemplating her question. It was some time before he finally opened his thin lips to speak.
“Some of us don’t care who wins as long as we get paid,” he said tonelessly.

“You’re getting paid for all of this?” Zuko asked incredulously.

Chang shrugged as he placed his hands inside his sleeves.

“Thanks to your sister, the Dai Li have no place to go. When she fell into insanity…” he paused when Zuko flinched, “we were already banished from Ba Sing Se for siding with the enemy and for lying to the Earth King about the war. He and everyone else did not trust us any longer, so we had no place to call home. But then Jianguo found us and gave us the choice of siding with him in exchange for money. Money that will double once Ozai rules again. Many of the earthbenders that are gathered here are also in for the money and don’t care who is the one who gives it to them.”

“How are you being paid if Jianguo was stripped from all of his wealth?” Zuko asked.

“I don’t know and I don’t really care,” Chang answered truthfully.

“How can you say that?!” Katara exclaimed. “The Earth Kingdom will be burn to the ground, people will die if Ozai came to power again!”

Chang pressed his thin lips together and his face seemed to harden into stone.

“Eat your food before it gets cold,” he ordered passively as he turned to leave, but not after leaving a few parting words, “If both Jianguo and I leave the group there will be nothing to restrain the men from doing what they want.”

Katara trembled and Zuko tensed at his warning. They glanced at each other for a moment before Zuko reached for their plates and quietly handed Katara her own. Katara muttered her thanks as she took the plate before they began to eat the food in slow bites. They were silent as they ate, each lost in their own thoughts.

The moon had risen in the sky and darkness had settled in as the men continued to throw jokes at each other while taking large gulps of liquor from their flasks. More wood was added to the campfire and sparks flew up into the dark night.
Zuko was leaning against a large rock with Katara once again sitting on his lap as she began to doze off. He once again scanned his surroundings and cursed inwardly when he found that another group of men had been posted to keep watch over them. If only he had his firebending, he would be able to create a wall of flames that would buy them enough time to make an escape into the thick forest.

He was brought out of his thoughts as his attention was caught when Jianguo stepped out of his tent and walked to the middle of the campsite with his wide chest facing the campfire. The loud commotion died down as everybody gathered to hear what their leader was going to say.

“As you all already know we are three days away from the Fire Nation colony where the supposed disease had been spreading,” he stated loudly with a large smirk. A few chortles resounded at his words.

“Tomorrow, I will take a few men to scout the area and see what is going on in the village and if any news has reached them to cause them to increase their guard. Once I see that everything is as it should be, we will return here and bring the Fire Lord back to the village.”

A few men sneered at the word Fire Lord and threw Zuko dirty looks.

“Once our demand for our true lord, Ozai, is met we will have our revenge and our fortunes restored!” Jianguo shouted and the rest shouted along with him, raising their fists into the air.

“In the meantime, the rest of you will stay here to make sure the young lord and his waterbender are kept completely safe,” he said mockingly and the men chuckled evilly. “So rest up, for tomorrow will bring our glory!”

More cries rang out as Jianguo moved away from the campfire. His dark eyes fixated on Zuko’s as he made his way to them in a smooth and confident stride. Zuko tensed and he brought Katara closer to his chest. Sensing Zuko’s unease, Katara’s eyes flew open in alarm. She stiffened as she saw Jianguo heading their way with his usual cruel smirk on his lips.

“I just came to warn you that there is no way of escape. If my men catch you trying to run away they have orders to...harm your pretty wench,” he informed Zuko in sadistic glee.

He bent down to their level and patted Katara’s leg. Katara immediately tensed at the unwanted touch and Zuko moved her away from his lap to sit beside him. Jianguo just chuckled before he
locked gazes with Katara.

“I will be back in a few days,” he said huskily. “And maybe I will finally see what you have that has
attracted the Fire Lord so much.”

Katara glared at him indignantly, though inwardly she was trembling in fear.

“You won’t get away with it,” Zuko growled at him.

“Oh, but I will,” Jianguo answered with a smirk. “And I will be looking forward with relish to the
occasion.”

He grinned at Katara as he licked his dry and chapped lips before he stood up and walked away.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Without another word, Jianguo left the campsite the following day in the early hours of dawn, with
Chang and most of his men following quickly behind him. The rest, about ten of them, stayed at the
camp to wait for their return and watch over their important prisoners. However, as the sun rose
higher in the sky, the men forgot the gravity of the situation and began to bring out their liquor and
exchange jokes and exaggerated stories of their triumphs and valor.

Though it seemed like their cheerfulness would make them forget their orders, Zuko was displeased
to find out that it was not so. A group of three men would occasionally stand guard of them while
they taunted them with roasted pieces of meat before they changed places with another group of
equally loud men. Zuko was angry to see that Jianguo had been right about there being no way to
escape. He was afraid that if they tried, the men will not hesitate to follow Jianguo’s orders to violate
Katara, but he was desperate to flee with her for the warning that Chang had given them would not
leave his mind and continued to torture him as the days went by.

Katara and Zuko ate the food that was thrown at them and silently ignored the men who made it their
entertainment to hurl insults at them. They were relieved when noon approached and the temperature
increased almost to the point that the forest felt like it was an oven for the men backed away to sit
lazily under the shade of some trees while others splashed water on their faces at the small stream.
Katara eyed them enviously for she longed to feel the clean water on her sweaty and grimy skin.

“Care ta join us fo’ a dip in da wa’er?” Xiao’s husky voice brought them out of their thoughts. “‘Tis
a hawt day afta all.”
Katara glared at him as she moved closer to Zuko.

“‘I think not,’ was her cold response.

Xiao shrugged while Feng and Ping snickered behind his back.

“‘Suit yerself then. I just wanted ta be nice and let ya cool off cuz of ‘tis awful wea’er.’”

“I’m sure that’s what was on your mind,” Zuko gritted out sarcastically as he laid an arm around Katara’s shoulders.

Xiao turned to glare at him as he touched his still sore nose before he grinned cruelly. He raised one palm and lit it before he juggled the flame to his other hand.

“So how das it feels ta see da fiyer, but not be able ta bend it?” he taunted sadistically.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at him, but remained silent. Katara glared at the chuckling firebender hatefully as she placed a comforting hand on Zuko’s arm.

“How can you be able to go along with Jianguo?” Katara asked in order to divert Xiao’s attention away from Zuko. “You’re all working for a wrong cause and are harming a lot of people!”

“Wat do we care ‘bout ‘em?” Feng spoke up and spat on the ground. “We ‘ave our own mis’ries ta look afta!”

“Yah! We ‘ave ta look afta ar own int’rests!” Ping piped in.

The three rebels turned their heads behind them when the others began to call for them to join them in a drinking round.

“If ya’ll excuz us,” Xiao said in a fake cordial tone as he gave them a mocking bow, “We’ll be back la’er!”
The trio snickered as they turned to leave. Once they disappeared among their other comrades after taking a few cups of liquor, Katara and Zuko breathed out a small sigh of relief as they leaned back against the tree.

“I can’t believe how cruel and selfish they are!” Katara exclaimed as she turned to look at Zuko with furrowed eyebrows.

Zuko pressed his lips together as he glared at the circle of the men who continued laughing and drinking while occasionally turning to throw sneers at them. He wrapped his arm around Katara and pressed her to his side so she could lean her head on his shoulder.

“They will get what they deserve,” was his quiet response as he gave her a tiny squeeze.

Katara returned his squeeze by pressing her head closer to his hard shoulder, but she did not say anything as she looked away from the merry men to stare at the small stream that she could barely make out from where she was sitting with Zuko.

The sun was a few hours away from setting when the men began to get restless and started to bicker loudly with each other. Zuko and Katara huddled closer together when fists started to fly and curses and insults were thrown around.

Zuko watched as the group that had been standing guard over them rushed over to see what the commotion was about and he felt his hope grow. He discreetly glanced around and was glad to see that nobody was paying any attention to them. This was it. It was time for them to make a run for freedom. He grabbed Katara’s hand and she turned away from frowning at the fighting men to look at him.

Katara opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but quickly closed it when Zuko pressed his index finger to his lips as a sign to tell her to be quiet. For a moment, Katara remembered the time Zuko had done the same thing back in Ba Sing Se, only that back then his finger had been pressed against the Blue Spirit’s demonic lips. She saw him motioned around them, and with a puzzled expression, she took a moment to examine their surroundings. A smile broke through her face once she realized what Zuko was trying to tell her. Zuko leaned down close to her ear and Katara shivered as his warm breath coasted along her skin.

“It’s not a well thought out plan, but it’s the only thing I got,” Zuko whispered in her ear. “We will try to sneak into the bushes as silently as possible and, once we are a few feet away where they can’t
hear us too well, we’ll run like the demons themselves are after us.”

Katara nodded that she understood and smiled at him once he pulled back. Zuko gave her a small nod and once again squeezed her hand. She squeezed it back before she made to rise to her feet. She had taken two steps forward when a silent gasp escaped her as Zuko suddenly pulled on her wrist so fast that she fell back down to the ground. She was about to scowl at him, but she did not get a chance to give him a piece of her mind for Zuko grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back onto his lap. She heard him curse under his breath and she looked around a bit disoriented. To her utter disappointment, she saw that the fight had stopped and the same men from before were returning to their spots.

Zuko pretended to be busy smoothing down Katara’s brown hair when the men gave them suspicious looks. He felt his anxiety grow at the thought that they realized Katara and he were about to escape, but he relaxed slightly when they sat back down a couple of feet away from them. He cursed their luck, for now he was not sure if another chance for escape would present itself.

“Shet up all o’ ya!” a large man, almost the size of a small platypus-bear, bellowed as a few men continued to squabble. “We’re all pissy and ya know why?”

“Yah, cuz we ‘aven’t been wit a woman since fo’eva!” another man shouted and the rest agreed with him with loud hoots.

Katara felt the blood drain from her face and she gasped, burying herself closer to Zuko.

“Those bastards!” Zuko growled angrily as he cradled Katara closer to him. He had a feeling he knew what the men were up to and he knew that Katara was aware since she had begun to tremble.

The group of men exchanged some whistles and more crude remarks before they all turned to stare at the only woman in their mists with devious intent in their eyes. They laughed when she huddled closer to the angry Fire Lord. Everything was quiet, even the rustling of the leaves was not heard, while the men licked their lips in anticipation. Feng was the one to approach first and he smirked when his comrades cheered him on.

Zuko lifted Katara from his lap and they scrambled to their feet to face the non-bender. Zuko protectively pushed Katara to stand behind him as he straightened himself to his full, intimidating height. He was satisfied to find that he dwarfed the non-bender by a full head.
“Keep away from her!” Zuko warned menacingly as his lips curled into a snarl that made his scarred side look more terrifying.

Feng’s stride faltered for a moment before his confidence flared back when the men continued to encourage him on.

“And wat are ya gonna do if I don’t?” he taunted with a large smirk. “I’m gonna enjoy meself wit da wa’erbenda while ya watch wat I do ta ‘er!”

Feng lunged forward with a raised fist in order to knock down his only obstacle to get to the woman, but Zuko easily grabbed the arm aimed at his face and threw his own fist forward to punch Feng’s stomach. The man doubled over and wheezed, but before he could straighten himself out, Zuko grabbed onto the back of his shirt and threw him to the side. The other men cursed and yelled at Feng to stand up and fight back.

“I may not have my firebending, but I can still fight,” Zuko growled as the man groaned on the hard floor. “I will not hesitate to kill anyone who tries to lay a hand on her.”

From her hiding place between Zuko and the tree, Katara peeked up at Zuko’s furious face at the words he uttered and she was convinced that he would keep his vow. She felt a small shiver run down her spine at the darkness in Zuko’s voice. She shifted on her feet anxiously, wishing there was something she could do to help Zuko, something she could do to defend herself. But she depended heavily on her waterbending to fight, so all she could do now was rely on Zuko’s protection, much to her frustration.

Feng hurled a few expletives as he staggered to his feet.

“Oh, shet up!” he yelled at the men who had begun to laugh and jeer at him for being so weak. He turned back to the glaring Fire Lord and smirked. “Why don’t ya prove it?” he shouted.

Katara tensed as Feng sprang at Zuko again. He threw a blow at Zuko’s jaw, but the firebender sidestepped his attack and struck him hard across the face. Feng stumbled back as he held onto his aching jaw. He turned his head to the side and spat out blood, only to cry out in anger when a few teeth flew out of his mouth and landed on the ground.

“I’ll kill ya fer dat!” he screamed as he pulled out his sword from its sheath on his back and swung at him.
“Zuko, watch out!” Katara shrieked in fright when Zuko leapt forward.

Feng sliced downward, but Zuko evaded the pathetic attack and managed to land a few more blows to the angry non-bender’s unprotected side. Feng yelped, but he turned around and slashed at Zuko again. Being a master swordsman, Zuko expected the attack, so he flipped over the non-bender’s head and kicked his back, causing the man to lose his balance and fall to the ground once again. Zuko landed lightly on his feet and quickly took his protective stance in front of the wide-eyed Katara.

“How pathetic,” Zuko commented impassively as he stared down at Feng. “No wonder you were all driven from my colonies with such terrible fighting skills. I’m surprised Jianguo still keeps you around.”

The group of men bristled at the insult while Feng jumped to his feet with an angry growl. He brandished his sword in the air, and with a cry, Feng rushed forward again.

Zuko smirked as he sprang forward to meet him, but his eyes widened in horror when Feng swerved around him and raced toward Katara with his sword raised high and a cruel smirk on his face. Zuko spun around, but he knew he would not make it in time.

“Katara! Move!” he shouted as he watched Feng swing at her.

Katara tore her eyes away from Zuko and gasped when she saw that Feng was coming toward her. She watched as he brought down his sword and she flung herself to the side, but she was not quick enough. A pained cry escaped her as the sword slashed across her stomach before she landed hard on her hands and knees.

A look of horror swept across Zuko’s face as he saw the sword rip Katara’s shirt in a clean, horizontal line before blood started to seep out.

“Katara! No!” he cried out as he raced forward to go to her.

An angry snarl escaped his throat when a few men leapt forward and held him back. He rounded on them with vicious strikes, but the massive man from before grabbed his arms and twisted them behind him until Zuko let out a pained hiss.
Zuko looked up to see Katara clutch her stomach before she raised her bloody hands to her eyes. Her hands began to tremble as she stared at them before she looked away to look at him with wide and shocked eyes. Zuko watched as her small hands dropped to the floor and her face paled before she fell to her side. He remained frozen in shock at the sight of Katara’s blue shirt turning a dark crimson while her blood pooled onto the ground beneath her. He heard the men laugh cruelly around him and he watched as Feng approached Katara and poked her leg with his foot.

“Ta bad we didn’t git ta enjoy ‘er,” Feng lamented before he laughed with the rest as he moved to joined them.

Something in Zuko snapped as he watched the manner in which they were disrespecting the woman he loved while she lay in pain, bleeding on the forest floor. His blood started to pound in his ears as his rage rose to dangerous levels. He could feel his fury boiling inside him until it began to grow into an intense inferno.

*I will make them pay! I will make their blood run for daring to spill Katara’s!* Zuko thundered in his head as the heat festered inside to the point that he saw red. The air around him began to grow extremely hot as steam began to rise from his body and swirled around his trembling form in a smoldering heat.

With an enraged roar, Zuko threw his head back and spewed a column of white fire from his mouth while the stone manacles encircling his wrists shattered and flew in every direction.

The unexpected burst of flame caught the large man holding him back right on the face. The man released him and he let out a scream of agony as his whole body caught on fire. The men scattered away as he ran towards them in search of help, but he crashed into a tree in his frantic search. He was dead before a firebender finally went to him to extinguish the fire.

The stunned men turned back toward the infuriated Fire Lord crouching protectively over the injured woman with blazing hands alight with white fire—the hottest part of a flame. He was panting heavily as he glared at them all with such malevolence that it made the hairs on the back of their necks stand on end.

“Git ‘im!” Xiao shouted and the nine remaining rushed forward to avenge their fallen comrade.

Zuko moved away from Katara and swiftly met them halfway. Katara watched from the ground as Zuko spun in the air, and with a fiery kick, he was able to slash the first two men that advanced on
him. The white arc of flame that erupted from his kick seared through clothes, flesh, and bones as if they were made of butter. The two men screamed in torment while blood and intestines spurted everywhere, staining the grass and the trees before the men lifelessly fell to the ground. Zuko uncaringly stepped over them as he then threw a large blast of white fire that consumed two more men instantly. Their charred corpses dropped to the floor like burning stones.

A sword was thrust to his chest, but Zuko flipped backwards, kicking the rusty sword out of a small man’s hands. The sword scattered to the floor and slid a few feet away, but before the stout man could scramble after it, Zuko wrapped his arm around his neck and twisted. A loud crack was heard before Zuko dropped the dead man unceremoniously to the hard ground.

A large rock struck him from the back and sent him crashing to the floor, but Zuko swiftly regained his feet and ignored the pain in his blinding rage. He turned to face the earthbender who had attacked him and he growled when he recognized Ping positioned in a horse stance a few feet away. Remembering the revolting comments Ping had also thrown at Katara, Zuko felt his fury flare to an almost unbearable level. With a snarl, Zuko spun around and a large tendril of white fire encircled him before he lashed it out toward Ping. The earthbender summoned a stone wall before him to block the attack, but the fire blast broke through the wall and struck Ping on his chest, hurling him through the air until he crashed into a tree.

Xiao and another firebender stepped forward and began to run around Zuko while shooting fire from their hands. Through her intense pain, Katara gasped in fear as Zuko disappeared inside a tornado of fire and she felt her eyes sting with tears, but a white explosion of fire dispelled the orange flames and engulfed the two men. Their screams rang into the dark forest as their flesh melted from their bodies and their blood burst from their veins, their unrecognizable forms falling to the floor in black heaps of charred carcasses.

Clutching her bleeding stomach and whimpering in pain, Katara watched as Zuko emerged from the fire with an enraged snarl still in place, staring down at the two dead men with fire still burning in his hands. She had seen Zuko fight many times before, but she had never seen him be so ruthless. The horror in her stare was mixed with admiration.

Being the last one standing, Feng gulped when the furious Fire Lord leveled his livid gaze on him. With a loud cry, Feng raced at him in an attempt to kill with his sword raised high in the air. He swung it horizontally, but Zuko crouched to the ground, and with a spin, kicked Feng’s legs right from under him. Feng cried out as he tumbled down.

Before the man could stand up, Zuko sprang at him, snatched the sword from his hands, and grabbed him by the neck. Zuko lifted the shorter man up by the throat and snarled in his face. Feng coughed and wheezed as the hand tightened around his throat and blocked his air supply. He clawed at Zuko’s hands, but Zuko held firm.
“Don’t kill meh! ‘Ave mercy on meh, please!” Feng pleaded in a choked gasp.

“You should have thought of that before harming what is mine!” Zuko growled at him. “None of you deserve any mercy from me!”

Zuko raised the sword with his left hand, and without a second thought, plunged it right through Feng’s stomach. Feng cried out before he let out a loud scream when the sword was twisted until it broke right through his back. Blood spilled from his mouth and a gurgling sound escaped his lips before Zuko dropped him to the floor where his blood continued to flow and his eyes glazed over in death. Zuko did not pay any attention to this, however, as he raced toward Ping who was trying to lift himself from the floor.

Ping cried out as he was pinned to the ground with his face to the dirt. He was lifted harshly from the ground and dragged a few paces to where the waterbender lay in pain. Ping was about to lift his hands to bend, but he tensed when he felt a sharp metal at the back of his neck.

“Release the stone bracelets around Katara’s wrists, now!” Zuko ordered harshly.

The earthbender nodded vigorously before he flicked his wrists and the stone cuffs around Katara’s wrists fell to the ground. With the hilt of the sword, Zuko drew a harsh blow at Ping’s head, rendering him unconscious. Zuko threw the sword away and dashed to Katara’s side, dropping himself heavily on his knees beside her.

His rage lowered down into a simmer as his worry and anxiety grew as his eyes landed on Katara’s silent form. Her once tanned skin was pallid, her cobalt eyes were closed with a few remaining tears gathered on her dark lashes, her now colorless lips were slightly parted, and the lower half of her blue shirt was drenched in her blood.

Zuko felt his breathing quicken and his heart pounding fast in his chest as panic and dread spread through his body. He reached a trembling hand to her cheek as fear seized his heart.

“Katara?” he called out softly as he caressed her skin. “Katara? Please…say something.”

He felt instant relief and he sighed heavily when Katara fluttered her eyes open and gave him a shaky smile when she saw him, which then turned into a grimace as the pain increased. A whimper escaped her and a few more tears ran down her face, leaving a trail down her cheeks.
“Katara!” Zuko exclaimed in alarm as he pressed his hand against her stomach in an attempt to stanch the flow of blood. “Please hold on! I’ll get you to water!”

He pressed her hands to her bleeding abdomen and told her to keep them there. Zuko gingerly picked her up, but froze when she let out loud whimper of pain.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Zuko chanted against her hair. “I need to get you to the stream so you can heal yourself.”

Katara moaned in pain, but nodded that she understood. Zuko secured his hold on her and quickly made his way away from the bloody scene and to the clean stream. He cringed when he felt her blood run down his arms. He swiftly and carefully made his way until he finally arrived at the edge of the calm brook. Without any hesitation, Zuko strode into the water, but the stream was small and shallow, so he had to sit on the smooth stones at the bottom. He shivered slightly when the chilly water touched him, but he ignored the discomfort as he placed Katara on his lap so that the water could reach her. The water around them instantly turned red before pink ribbons of blood floated down the current.

Zuko looked back down at Katara and his fear once again surfaced when he saw that her eyes were closed. He gently patted her cheek to get her to open her eyes again.

“Katara?” he said softly as he tried to keep his anguish under control. “We’re in the stream. You can heal yourself now.”

Katara heard what he said even though she knew they were in water. Once her bending was restored she could feel her element call out to her, but she was so tired…so sleepy.

“Come on, Katara!” Zuko called out a bit more loudly. He gathered water into one of his hands and let it trickle down her face to encourage her, but Katara did not stir.

“Katara, heal your wound!” he said forcefully.

Katara opened her eyes to look at him. She heard the desperation in his deep voice and saw the anxiety on his face, and it pained her to cause him such concern, knowing that it will cause him sorrow when she left him. She knew she had lost too much blood, she could feel herself weakening, her life slipping away. A small part of her wondered if perhaps she would be able to be reunited with
her mother.

She heard Zuko call out to her again, but his voice sounded so far away and she could barely keep her eyes open to stare into the face of the man she had come to love. It saddened her to know that she never had the chance to confess to him what he really meant to her, how much she loved him. She reached a trembling hand to cup his cheek, feeling the light stubble tickle her fingers, and she gave him another small smile.

Zuko grabbed her small hand and leaned into her touch, pressing her hand closer to his cheek.

“Start healing yourself, Katara! Please!” he pleaded desperately.

He saw her smile at him once more before she closed her beautiful, sapphire eyes and let out a soft sigh. Her hand slipped from his grasp, her head lolled to the side, and her breathing halted. Zuko’s breath hitched in his throat and he felt his heart stopped cold in his chest.

“Katara? Katara!” Zuko cried out in horror as he grasped onto her hand again.

_No, no, no, no!_

He pressed his ear to her mouth, but he did not feel her sweet breath coasting over his skin. He then pressed his ear to her chest, but he could not hear the beating of her heart.

“No!” he shouted as he clutched her body to him. “Katara, wake up! Don’t you dare die on me!”

Zuko pulled back and smoothed Katara’s hair out of her serene face as he waited for her to respond, but when she didn’t, he crushed her limp body to his once again as he began to rock back and forth in his anguish. Tears fell down unchecked from his good right eye and landed on her skin as Zuko buried his head on her neck.

Sobs threatened to fight their way out from the back of his dry throat, scorching him raw and leaving him gasping. He reared his head back.

“Katara!” he screamed into the night as he continued to hold onto her limp body.
A distressed, choking sound fell from his lips. A desperate sound that surfaced from his very soul as he struggled to realize it all. All that he had lost, all that he would never gain, and all that he would never have.

Tears still running down his face, Zuko cried quietly against her neck as he continued to hold Katara’s cold body close to his own.

“Katara, don’t leave me,” he whispered despairingly in her ear, “I can’t live without you! I don’t want to live without you! Please, come back to me…”

Gasping brokenly, he pressed his lips against her skin.

“Katara… I love you.”

End of Part Three
Heartfelt Confessions

The half-moon was high in the sky, but its glow seemed to be dimmer than usual. Nothing stirred and not a sound was heard throughout the entire dark forest, not even the buzz of an insect or the call of a night bird. Tears continued to fall from the distraught Fire Lord’s golden eye as he clutched the unresponsive body of the woman he loved close to him. Quiet sobs fell from his lips and his body shook as he cried out for his loss.

“Katara, don’t leave me,” Zuko breathed desperately in her ear. “I love you too much to let you go.”

When he did not receive a response, Zuko buried his face in Katara’s hair as he tried to muffle his cry of excruciating anguish. What was he going to do now? With Katara gone, he did not know if he could continue living. She was the one who gave meaning to his empty and lonely existence. He looked forward to her kindness, her laughter, her presence, and even her stubbornness and temper. Katara was the woman he wanted to be at his side for the rest of his life; she was the only woman that had captured and held his heart.

But now…she was dead.

Gone.

How was he supposed to move on when he never got the chance to tell her what he truly felt for her, what she truly meant to him?

Zuko pulled back slightly to plant a gentle kiss on Katara’s cold forehead while his tears continued to run unchecked down his face, landing on Katara’s colorless cheeks. Anger combined with his sorrow and the young man reared his head back as he glared at the dark sky above.

“It was not yet her time!” he roared angrily. “She didn’t deserve to die! You can’t take her! You can’t take her away from me!”

He growled when he was met with deafening silence, but his quick bout of fury dissolved, and in its place, agonizing grief consumed him. So great, it was unbearably painful. He once again buried his face in Katara’s tresses as quiet sobs escaped from deep within his throat.

Why? Why were the gods doing this to him? Right when it seemed like his miserable life was seeing
some light, right when it seemed like he could finally find some sort of happiness, they decided to rip it away from him before he could actually grasp it, before he could enjoy it.

“Please,” Zuko whispered distraughtly, “Bring her back to me.”

After a few more painful and silent minutes, Zuko pulled back slightly to stare down at Katara’s closed eyes with a desperate expression on his sorrowful face.

“Katara, don’t leave me! Please…come back to me,” he whispered brokenly. “I love you…”

His voice trailed off and he froze. His eyes widened when he noticed that the tiny droplets of water on the skin of Katara’s face, made up from the liquid of the small stream and his tears, began to glow in a bright bluish-green light. He looked down at the water that came up to his lap, and where Katara’s middle was submerged in, and he noticed that around them the water was glowing with that strange radiance. Zuko pulled Katara’s cold body protectively to his chest; his grieving mind could not comprehend what was happening.

“Zuko?” a soft voice called out to him.

The Fire Lord held his breath as the sweet sound reached his ears, the sound of Katara’s lovely voice caressing his troubled soul, and his heart pounded hard in his chest with hope. But a small part of him was afraid that it was just his imagination and that she was still cold and dead in his arms. He knew that if he saw her lifeless face again, he would not be able to take it.

“Zuko? What’s wrong?” the soft voice said again.

Unable to resist any longer, Zuko pulled back a bit and looked down. An inaudible gasp escaped him as his eyes beheld Katara’s bright-blue orbs staring up at him in concern.

“K-Katara?” he whispered in shock before he cried out, “Katara!”

He crushed her small body to his chest and held her there for a long moment. A few more tears trickled down from his good eye as he heard her soft breathing, her heart beating, and felt her small hands circle around him.
“You’re alive, you’re alive!” he chanted softly into her hair. “Thank Agni, you’re alive.”

He did not know how or what happened; all he knew was that Katara was again alive in his arms. He felt like his breath was once again restored to him, like his life was bright once again.

Katara frowned slightly at his words. Did she…die? That thought caused an unpleasant shiver to run through her, but her attention was caught by something much more shocking.

She felt something wet fall on her neck where Zuko had placed his face and it astounded her to realize that Zuko was crying. He was not sobbing uncontrollably or weeping loudly, but she knew he was crying by the slight shaking of his body. Even rarer than hearing the young Fire Lord laugh was to witness Zuko lower his impassive mask and cry. It touched her heart to know her death affected Zuko so much, but she did not like the fact that it caused him so much grief.

Katara felt him pull away after a few more moments of silence and she looked up to see his face. A gasp fell from her lips as she saw that Zuko’s golden eyes were wet and slightly red and she felt her heart go out to him. She smiled slightly when Zuko cleared his throat self-consciously and hastily wiped at his eyes.

“How do you feel?” Zuko asked in a concerned tone as he laid her back on his arm so he could take a look at her bloody shirt.

Katara looked down at her shirt as well and grimaced when she saw that it was ruined before she paled at the realization that she had lost so much blood, evident by the amount that was staining the blue clothing. Before she could open her mouth to tell him she felt fine, just tired, Zuko reached down and pulled the bottom of the shirt over her stomach.

“What are you doing?” Katara squeaked as she tried to push her shirt back down, but the awed look on Zuko’s face made her stop.

“Not even a thin scar,” Zuko breathed as he stared down at Katara’s lean stomach where instead of an open wound, his eyes met smooth and healed skin. He gently touched her soft flesh with his fingers.

Katara felt her blood rush to her cheeks and a shiver ran down her spine, only this time it was pleasant as Zuko’s warm fingers pressed her stomach, as if to make sure that the wound was completely gone. Finally realizing what he was doing, Zuko paused and pulled his hand away,
covering her stomach once again as he returned his gaze to her face—which was bright red—and cleared his throat a second time.

“How do you feel, Katara?” Zuko asked again after he realized that she had not answered his question and he brushed her hair out of her face.

Katara snapped out of her thoughts and she gave him a small smile.

“I’m fine. It seems like I managed to heal the wound, though I still don’t know how that happened. I feel tired and weak, but that’s because of all the blood I lost.”

Zuko closed his eyes tightly as the image of Katara bleeding on the forest floor flashed before him. For as long as he lived, he would never be able to get rid of that horrible picture of Katara bleeding to death or forget the pain he felt when she had died in his arms. Even though Katara was talking to him at the moment, fragile but alive, he was positive that she had died. Although the mystery of how she survived still perplexed him, he was grateful that she was back with him.

“I’m so sleepy,” Katara murmured as her eyes drooped while she gave out a soft yawn.

“First we need to find a place to rest somewhere far from Jianguo’s camp,” Zuko told her softly as he looked down at her weary face. “Once we are a safe distance away, you can sleep all you want.”

Zuko carefully stood up from his spot in the cold water with Katara still in his arms and he quickly made his way to the grassy edge of the shallow stream. Now that his senses had come back to him, he was anxious to put some distance between them, the bloody camp and Jianguo. He knew that if they were caught, they would not be shown any mercy; not after he had unremorsefully killed almost ten of Jianguo’s men. Perhaps the fact that he had ruthlessly killed those men should have repulsed or frightened him, but honestly, he felt nothing but satisfaction. He had enacted revenge on Katara’s part and now those men could no longer harm anyone else. Zuko felt elation at the thought of Jianguo’s shock once he realized what had happened when he met with the charred corpses of his men.

*Let him see what I’m capable of when they hurt what is mine,* Zuko hissed darkly in his head as his hold on the woman in his arms tightened. *I want him to realize that I won’t be merciful if we cross paths again.*

“Zuko, what’s wrong?” Katara’s soft voice broke through his sinister thoughts.
The young Fire Lord blinked and looked down at the worried expression on the waterbender’s face. He realized that he had not moved and was still standing near the stream, his boots and pants dripping water on the ground. Shaking his head, Zuko gave her a small smile to reassure her.

“It’s nothing,” he told her.

Wishing to change his dark thoughts, he said, “I think it would be better if I carried you on my back. That way we could travel faster and for much longer.”

“Okay,” Katara agreed with a small nod, though she had a feeling that he was hiding something from her.

Zuko placed her on her feet, but quickly reached out to steady her when she swayed. She gave him a grateful smile, which he instantly returned. Once he made sure she would not collapse, Zuko turned around and bent down, offering his back to her. Katara hesitated for a moment, but she eventually moved forward and climbed onto Zuko’s strong back, wrapping her arms around his neck to steady herself when he stood up and shifted her.

A silent gasp escaped her and she blushed deeply when she felt Zuko’s warm hands grab the back of her thighs, almost below her rear. She found herself wondering what it would feel like to have Zuko’s large hands on her bottom before she chastised herself for such a thought, especially with the dire situation they were in. Ignoring the thought for now, Katara wrapped her legs around him so she would not fall and so he could have a secure hold of her.

Zuko felt his face heat up as he felt Katara’s arms around his neck, her breasts pressed to his back, and her thighs wrapped around him. He would have preferred her to have been wrapped around him from the front instead…

*Now is not the time for such things,* Zuko chastised himself with a mental shake of his head.

“Hold on,” he told her quietly before he started to walk.

He hummed inwardly when he noticed that the ache on his side where his rib had been fractured no longer bothered him and he knew that somehow the glowing water had healed him as well. He found it interesting that he had not thought about his injury when he had fought the men in order to protect Katara.
The tall trees with their thick leaves blocked whatever light the moon would have provided and the forest floor was dark with unmoving shadows. Zuko picked his way through the darkness as he followed along the quiet stream, carefully scanning the ground to make sure nothing was in his path to cause him to stumble and drop Katara. He tried to go as fast as he could without jostling her too much, but he was more concerned with finding a safe place far away from the rebel’s camp. Once they found it, he would make sure Katara got all the rest she needed. The only good thing that came out from his fright of Katara’s near death was that it made him alert and it gave him an energy boost as he trudged along the uneven ground in the middle of the night. Luckily, Katara was small and did not weigh that much.

The hot temperature from the day had plummeted to a freezing chill when night settled in and they shivered when a cool breeze passed them by and stuck their wet clothes to their skin. Katara lifted a shaky hand and managed to bend the liquid from their clothing before she dropped her head onto Zuko’s shoulder with a tired groan. She felt happy to finally be able to waterbend, but at the moment she felt lightheaded and barely had enough energy to keep her hold on Zuko’s neck. The longer they walked, the harder it was for her to keep her eyes open, especially since Zuko’s warmth and his steady strides were soothing her to fall into welcome rest. She felt terrible that while she was hitching a ride on Zuko’s back and dozing off, he was doing all the walking.

Zuko did not know how long he had walked through the night, but he knew they needed to find shelter so they could rest. He could feel Katara fighting to stay awake. Her head would fall to his shoulder before she would jerk her head up and shake it.

“You can sleep while I carry you, Katara,” Zuko told her softly as he turned his head slightly to look at her when she had again quickly lifted her head from his shoulder when she had dozed off momentarily.

“No,” Katara murmured as she shook her head to clear the sleepiness from her mind. “I won’t let you walk alone in the dark.”

Zuko gave her an exasperated sigh, though deep down he was glad she remained awake. It still frightened him whenever she would close her eyes, as he feared that it would be the last time she would open them again. He was about to tell her that it was fine when his foot stepped on a thin, dried branch, causing a loud snapping sound to resound throughout the eerily silent forest. He jumped and Katara shrieked when a large moose-deer sprang directly into their path from a cluster of bushes at their left before it dashed away in the opposite direction and into thick foliage.

Zuko sighed and Katara breathed out heavily before the firebender took another step to continue walking. He paused mid-step when clanking sounds reached their ears before the same moose-deer emerged from where it disappeared, looked at them with large fearful eyes, before it crossed the
small stream and sprinted away.

“What in the world is wrong with that moose-deer?” Katara yawned as she laid her chin on Zuko’s shoulder.

“Hm,” Zuko uttered distractedly as he stared at the dark foliage the animal had at first run into.

Why did it return when it was obvious the animal was frightened of them? Either there was something more dangerous in that direction or there was no form of escape so it had to return to where it first came from. Curious, Zuko tightened his hold on Katara as he followed the moose-deer’s hoof prints from the small amount of moonlight that found its way through the trees. They passed through thick bushes and other undergrowth until they came upon a dark cave opening. It was hidden so well that Zuko would not have noticed it had the moose-deer not left tracks directly to it.

Not hearing anything that indicated there was something living inside, Zuko carefully stepped through the curtain of flora until they stood inside the dry and dark cave. Breathing a small stream of fire between his lips, Zuko saw that the cave was indeed uninhabited and it was small enough to fit half a dozen people. It was the perfect place for them to rest without Jianguo and his men finding them.

“Are we resting here?” Katara asked quietly as she lifted a hand to rub her tired eyes.

“Yes,” Zuko responded.

He slid Katara gently off his back while he kept a hand on her arm to keep her from falling to the ground. He lit a small flame on his other palm as he anxiously looked at Katara’s face to make sure she was fine. Katara blinked at the sudden light and she looked around the small cavern before she looked back at Zuko.

“We are safe for the moment. You can sleep now,” Zuko told her softly.

Katara was unable to curb her loud yawn and smiled sheepishly at him when his eyes lit up in amusement. She dropped herself to the hard ground with a sigh. She wished that they at least had a few blankets since it was chilly, but she wasn’t going to complain. The tired waterbender looked up at Zuko and she watched as he peeked through the curtain of plants.
“Zuko?” she called out softly.

Zuko moved away from the entrance of the cave and quickly made his way to her. He knelt beside her with a worried frown, reaching a hand out to touch her forehead.

“What is it?” he asked as his eyes flickered to her face while the flame in his other hand flared a bit.

“You need to sleep too,” Katara told him. “You practically walked the whole night!”

The young man gave her a small smile as he sat down cross-legged beside her.

“I will, don’t worry,” Zuko replied with a nod. “Now rest. I will be here.”

Katara smiled at him before she reached for his hand. Zuko felt his heart skip a beat at her touch and he squeezed her hand to reassure her. He watched as she let out a soft sigh before she closed her eyes. He felt his fear resurface once her blue eyes closed, but he relaxed when he noticed her soft breathing as she fell asleep.

The hour was late as Zuko kept watch over her, gazing at her sleeping face. He would occasionally reach out to brush his fingers over her cheek or through her hair, to reassure himself that she was indeed fine. He grabbed her small hand with his unoccupied one and brought it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to her warm skin. Warm, not cold, as it had been moments before she came back from Death’s icy grasp.

The flame in his palm flared for a second and Zuko’s attention shifted to the red fire he had summoned to provide some light. Flashes of blood, rage, and white fire surfaced in his mind and Zuko raised an eyebrow as he stared at the innocent flame in his palm. He wondered if he would be able to summon the white fire whenever he wanted or if it had just been a once in a lifetime thing. Zuko stared intensely at the red flame in his palm as he tried to change it to the hot white fire that he had bent a few hours ago.

The flame flickered but there was no change in its color or temperature. Zuko growled under his breath as he summoned all his will into the small flame in his hand. He was about to give up when the red flame flared and expanded before it turned blue and then white. Zuko smirked in satisfaction as he extinguished the flame on his left hand only to summon the white fire into his right palm. He could not wait to tell his uncle.
He had only heard of a few firebenders capable of bending extreme temperatures of fire, like Azula with her blue flames. Bending blue fire was almost like second nature to her, and despite how much training he went through, Zuko was never capable of achieving such a skill. Not only was Azula able to summon blue fire, but she could also bend lightning just like their father. Because of this, she was always the favored one while he was lucky to even get a small compliment from their sire. Bending white fire, however, was particularly rare and something even Azula was unable to accomplish. And here he was capable of such a feat.

Now his inner fire had strengthened. He was able to bend white fire because of the fury and fear he had felt when Katara had been injured. He had bent the white fire as if he had been doing it all his life, and with it, he killed all those bastards who tried to touch her. Zuko felt his anger rise and the white flame flared higher with his wrath before he took a deep breath to calm himself down. Even though he did not feel any remorse for getting rid of those men, he was a bit afraid that Katara would think him a ruthless monster.

*No, Katara would never see me like that,* Zuko thought with a shake of his head.

He looked away from staring at the flame and gazed down at Katara’s sleeping face. It was because of this amazing woman that many things had changed in him and for the better. But it was also because of her that he had experienced fear like no other.

Nothing could compare to the anguish he felt when Katara had almost left the living world, not even the pain dealt by his cruel father, the loss of his mother, and the hatred of his sister. Never in his life had he been so afraid, never had he felt so much sorrow and pain at the thought of losing someone, at the thought of never seeing the woman he loved ever again.

Zuko clenched his eyes tightly shut as he remembered the way her small body had gone limp in his arms and her breathing stopped. It felt like his own soul had been painfully wrenched out of his own body. He never wanted to go through such an experience ever again, for he would not be able to bear it. How could he go through life without her? The mere thought of losing her again chilled his heart and set his fear soaring.

Opening his eyes with a deep sigh, Zuko looked back down to Katara’s lovely face. He frowned when he noticed that her skin was still a bit pale and he made a mental note to look for food in the morning, since she had not eaten well and had lost a lot of blood. Zuko reached a hand to caress her soft cheek and smiled when Katara leaned into his touch.

He wondered what had happened since he was positive that Katara had died in his arms. Had the gods somehow listened to his prayers, took pity on his misery, and brought Katara back to him? It did not matter, and he would not question the will of the gods, for now that she was once again alive, he would not allow her to leave him ever again. He did not know if she had heard his confessing his
love for her, but he reasoned that maybe she had not since she had not mentioned it. But now that he
realized how short and fragile life really was, he would try, with everything in his power, to keep her
at his side. He will tell her how much she meant to him.

With one last caress to Katara’s face, Zuko extinguished the now red flame in his palm and lay down
beside her with a tired sigh. He wrapped his arm around her and smiled gently when Katara sighed
and unconsciously snuggled closer to him. With the sound of Katara’s soft breathing in his ear, Zuko
closed his eyes and allowed sleep to claim him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sound of chirping birds brought Katara out of her deep slumber. She groggily opened her eyes
and her hazy mind registered a dark wall. She frowned, a bit disoriented as she let her eyes wander
around what appeared to be a small cave with a small campfire in the center. Where was she? How
did she get here?

Katara closed her eyes as her head began to spin and she groaned at the dizziness it caused her
before brief images of pain, blood, and death bombarded her mind. She remembered how Feng tried
to force himself on her and how Zuko stood up to defend her, leading to the two of them to begin
fighting. And once he realized he was no match for Zuko, Feng had directed his attack toward her
and wounded her. There had been so much blood as she fell to the ground in pain and Zuko turned
to look at her with horror written across his face.

Then his horror turned to rage and he let out his fury by killing every single man that crossed his path
with an inferno of white flames. Another shiver of fear mixed with fascination ran down her spine.
Zuko had ended their lives without any hesitation or regret of his actions nor guilt on his face. He
had been so frightening, so deadly, so…unmerciful. Though she herself had not killed anyone—at
least not intentionally or that she knew of—she knew that it was not the same for others thanks to the
hundred year war. She really could not blame him, though, especially since he was trying to save
her.

The young woman opened her eyes and sat up with a groan, looking down at her bloody shirt with
the help of the small amount of light from the fire. She reached a hand to her stomach and let out a
relieved breath to find out that she was indeed healed. She remembered Zuko carrying her to the
stream where he cradled her on his lap, where he pleaded her to heal herself…where he actually
cried for her.

Feeling longing warmth in her heart, Katara struggled to her feet and leaned against the wall of the
cave to steady herself when her legs threatened to give out on her. She felt utterly weak and helpless,
but she had this strong wish to see Zuko, to hear his voice, and touch his face.

“Zuko?” she called out softly. “Zuko? Where are you?”
She squinted in the semi-darkness, it was a bit hard to see even by the low burning fire and the small rays of light that managed to pass through the thick foliage at the entrance of the cave. She frowned when she realized that he was not there. A cold emptiness filled her being as she realized that she was alone and a few tears threatened to fall from her eyes. A small sob escaped her as she wondered why Zuko had left her. Had he decided to leave her in the cave so she would not be a burden to him and so he could find some help faster, without having to wait for her?

She let out another sob before she slid down the wall and landed on the hard ground with a few tears falling from her eyes. She brought her knees close to her chest and wrapped her arms around them while she cried silently. Where was Zuko? Why was he not there? Katara buried her face on her knees and took a few calming breaths.

*What am I thinking? Zuko wouldn’t abandon me!* Katara reassured herself. *That just wouldn’t be like him.*

After a few more deep breaths, Katara sniffled and let out a long sigh. It was just waking up all alone and feeling weak that had caused her to react in such a way and feel so insecure. She raised her head and hastily wiped her cheeks, but paused when something on the ground next to her caught her eye. She leaned down and saw that it was some kind of writing, dark since the characters seemed to have been burned on the ground. Her eyes widened when she recognized Zuko’s neat writing. Excitement and dread filled her as she squinted to make out what the short message said.

*I left you some fruit. Please wait and don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.*

*Zuko*

Katara let out a relieved breath and she leaned against the wall again when her head started to pound when she tried to make out the words in the semi-dark cavern she was in. She looked about the small cave more carefully, and sure enough, she spotted a small pile of fruit a few feet away from her. Katara scooted over to her small meal since she could not find the strength in her to stand up and walk. She huffed tiredly once she reached it. She grabbed an apple and happily bit into it when her stomach began to bother her.

After eating the apple, a few berries, and a peach, the dizziness began to fade little by little and she began to feel a bit more strength come back to her. She knew she needed to eat more food, such as meat, and wait a few more days if not hours before she could go back to normal after losing so much blood. Katara slowly lifted herself up and leaned against the cold wall as she made her way to the entrance. She could see the sun’s rays through the small openings of the foliage, but she dared not venture out in case Jianguo’s men were searching for them. She wondered where Zuko had gone and
she prayed that he was safe.

With a tired sigh, Katara sat down against the wall and decided to wait for Zuko’s return. She still could not believe that they had escaped Jianguo’s clutches and she hoped that they would not be caught before they went in search of help. She wondered if Iroh was looking for them and she worried at the thought that her family had received the news that they had been captured.

Katara closed her eyes as a more nagging thought entered her head.

*Did I really…die?*

Again, the thought caused an unpleasant shiver to run down her back. Now that her head was clearer and she was more alert, Katara tried to think back on what had happened the previous night, to see if what Zuko said was true.

She remembered being cradled in Zuko’s arms as an overwhelming sense of sleep and fatigue engulfed her. She remembered Zuko pleading with her to heal her wounds and she remembered the fear and anxiety in his golden eyes as he stared down at her. That sight had almost broken her heart, but she had been so tired. The last thing she remembered was touching his cheek while regretting that she would never have the chance to tell him how much she loved him. But what happened after?

Katara’s brow furrowed as she tried to figure out what had occurred during the time Zuko had said she had died. Her head started to pound as she strained herself to remember something, anything. Many would rather avoid the thought of their near death experience, but she wanted to know why, if she had died, she had come back to the living world.

Suddenly it felt like a part of her mind had cleared, like the sun breaking through the fog, and she could see clearly. She had felt like her soul had left her body as she stared up at Zuko’s eyes before everything went black. Darkness was the only thing she was able see for a moment before a dim light appeared before her. She had begun to make her way towards it, but something had stopped her.

That something was Zuko’s voice calling to her, she had turned her back toward the light at the anguish in his voice and all she wanted to do was soothe his pain away. But there was something…Something he said specifically that had pulled her back…But what was it?

*Katara, don’t leave me! Please…come back to me…I love you…’*
Katara’s eyes flew wide open and she gasped. She felt her heart flutter in her chest and she grasped her shirt above her heart. Did Zuko really say such a thing? Did Zuko really say he loved her? Or perhaps it was just her wishful thinking, wanting to think that he loved her as she entered the Spirit World? She needed to ask him. She needed to hear him say it. But what if he denied it? She would not be able to bear it.

No. She had to stop being a coward and face things head on even if it caused her pain. Perhaps once she heard him say that he did not love her in a romantic way, she would be able to accept it and move on. Of course, she would never stop loving him, she would long for him until the end of her days.

Katara once again looked at the green flora that hid her view from the outside world. She knew she needed to confront him once he returned, but…would she really be able to?

The day was coming to a close, the birds were no longer singing, and the fruit was now gone. The small shafts of light that penetrated the foliage had long since vanished and the small fire she had been able to keep alive—with a few logs Zuko must have left—was burning low, but he still had not returned. Katara bit her lip and began to wring her hands together as she continued to wait near the entrance of the cave. Patience had turn to worry and that worry had now turned to anxiety and fear as she stared at the dark green curtain intently. She worried at the thought that perhaps something happened to Zuko to make him be absent for almost a whole day. What if he had been attacked by a wild animal, or worse, what if Jianguo had captured him again?

She had just decided to venture out in search of Zuko when a twig snapped somewhere outside. Katara stiffened, her muscles tensing as she prepared to take flight if it was something that wished her harm. She heard a couple of soft footsteps and she quietly stood up from her spot, retreating slowly to the shadows at the back of the cave. She held her breath and her heart began to pound as the flora curtain was pulled to the side and a tall figure stepped inside. Katara relaxed from the defensive stance she had moved into when she noticed that it was Zuko with a few things in his arms. She felt her heart leap in both joy and apprehensiveness, but the reassuring sight of him made her quickly make her way over to him.

Zuko sighed as he placed the things he was carrying down onto the ground before he straightened and looked expectedly about the cavern for the young waterbender. He felt his heart beat easier and his worry lessen as he spotted Katara swiftly making her way to him, but before he could open his mouth to greet her, he found himself being embraced tightly by her slender arms while she buried her face in his chest. Zuko stood frozen in surprise at the sudden affectionate act, but he quickly composed himself and returned her embrace, wrapping his arms around her back. He buried his own face in her hair and inhaled her scent in order to soothe away the fear and worry that had still not left him.
“I was afraid something happened to you when you didn’t return,” Katara whispered as she closed her eyes to relish in his warmth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think I was going to take so long to come back to you,” Zuko replied just as softly as he ran soothing circles on her back. “I went to check on the camp and see if anything had happened since…we left. I got some supplies we will need in our search for a nearby village and I also grabbed a sword…just in case.”

He paused for a moment to wonder why Katara had not moved away from him and continued to wrap her arms tightly around him, since whenever they had previously embraced it had been brief and she would quickly pull away. Though he was sure not complaining, quite the contrary, he was enjoying it very much. He cleared his throat to continue.

“While I looked around the camp…” he began again and decided to skip the parts where he had stepped uncaringly over the dead corpses strewn around the bloody, forest floor, “I realized that Ping was not where he had been last.”

He pulled back slightly and stared down at Katara when she looked up at him.

“I think he woke up and I have a feeling he has gone in search of Jianguo. We need to keep moving and reach a village and find some way to contact Uncle before Ping reaches Jianguo and they come upon us again.”

Katara felt a bit disappointed at his choice of topic, but what did she expect? For him to run into the cave, grasp her hands, and confess his undying love for her? How foolish.

“Yeah, I think that’d be best. Hopefully we find Uncle Iroh before Jianguo is able to do something to advance in his plans,” Katara said quietly.

She gave him a small smile as she moved away and started to turn away from him, but Zuko grabbed hold of her wrist and she looked back at him with a raised eyebrow. She watched as he inhaled deeply while his golden eyes stared into her blue ones with such intensity that it made a small tremor run down her spine.

“Zuko…?” she asked curiously.
“Katara, I…” Zuko began as he gently tugged at her wrist so she could turn to fully face him.

Once she was standing before him, Zuko ran a hand softly down her cheek as he continued to hold her wide gaze. He needed to tell her. He needed her to understand the pain he had gone through.

“Last night in the stream when you had…” he cleared his throat when it seemed it had closed on him at the remembrance, “when you had…died in my arms…I felt so tormented. I have never felt so anguished and afraid before in my entire life. Holding your cold and unresponsive body, my heart felt like it was being wrenched from my chest, like the world was crumbling before me. You have no idea how much the thought of your death affected me…how much pain it caused me.”

Katara felt her breath catch in her throat at the pain in his voice that was also visible in his eyes and she felt her heart constrict in her chest. She reached out to touch his cheek as her eyes began to mist.

“Oh Zuko, I—” she began, but she paused when Zuko shook his head and placed his thumb on her lips.

“No, let me finish. I need to say this…especially after the painful reminder that life is too short.” Zuko paused and licked his dry lips before he let out an almost inaudible sigh. “I need to tell you what it is that I feel for you…”

Zuko strove to put into words the powerful feelings, desires, and longings that had accumulated in his mind and in his heart during the long months and perhaps years of silence as he stared deep into the sapphire eyes of the woman that had changed him in so many ways. He again brought his hand to caress the side of Katara’s soft face as he continued to hold onto her arm.

“Since the first time I saw you…almost five years ago when I had invaded your tiny village in the Southern Water Tribe, there was something about you that caught my attention. Maybe it was the way your blue eyes glared at me despite your fear. I don’t know, but what I do know is that ever since then you’ve been in my head.”

Zuko paused again when Katara’s wide eyes stared at him with surprise and curiosity. He inwardly smiled as he remembered the events from all those years ago. How could he have been so blind not to see it back then?

“Though I’ll admit that every time you crossed my path and my mind during my exile, I would banish your image without another thought. Back then I was more concerned with capturing the
Avatar and winning the approval of my…father,” Zuko growled out the last part. Once again he found something that made him despise Ozai even more.

Katara gave a slow nod indicating that she understood about the time when he had made it his goal to chase Aang, capture him and bring him to the Fire Nation so that Zuko could be able to return home. Though she had no idea what he was trying to tell her by recounting the past. She felt her heart start to race in her chest when Zuko moved his hand from her cheek and began to run it through her hair. What was he doing?

Zuko mentally shook his head to rid himself of his dark thoughts about his cruel father and he once again focused on Katara’s bright ocean-hued orbs while he touched her soft hair with his long fingers.

“It was only after I began to know you when I joined the group, and the time we had spent together after the war, that I began to understand what my feelings were and why it was that I felt attracted and attached to you,” the young Fire Lord spoke softly as he tried to say what he had been trying to tell her for so long.

“Every time I see you, every time I’m near you, every time you grace me with a smile or a comforting touch I feel like my entire body tingles with joy…But at the same time…when I want to see you and I can’t, when I want to touch you knowing that I shouldn’t, when I long for you when I know you are not mine…it pains me,” he whispered.

He heard Katara gasp and he watched as her eyes widened, but he tightened his hold on her arm as he continued to reveal what it was that she made him feel.

“Katara…I know it may sound ridiculous, but…whenever I think of you…a fire blazes in my chest, so strong that it sometimes shocks me with the intensity. It feels as if…my heart burns for you,” he confessed quietly.

Shocked and buoyant, the waterbender stared intently into the glowing, golden depths that were Zuko’s eyes. She felt like butterflies were fluttering in her stomach as his sincere words reached her ears and what they implied, but she was afraid to get her hopes up. She did not want to misinterpret what he was trying to say to her and embarrass both herself and him. She brought her own hand up to grab onto his, which was again touching her cheek, as she stared hopefully and timidly into his eyes.

“Zuko…what are you…trying to say?” she asked softly. She could feel her heart pounding in anticipation in her chest.
Zuko pulled her to him, causing her to gasp, and he wrapped one arm around her waist to keep her from pulling away while he grabbed her chin with the other hand so they could maintain their eye contact. He could feel his body heating up again at her proximity and his hold on her tightened. He groaned under his breath when she placed her hands on his chest to steady herself.

“Katara, I love you,” he declared ardently.

Katara’s eyes widened in shock and a soft gasp escaped her lips. *He loves me?*

She stared deeply into his golden eyes in order to decipher if what he said was true and she had not just imagined it. But what she discovered shining in his amber eyes made her breath catch in her throat while her heart soared as happiness, relief, and warmth crashed into her being. How many times had she dreamed of him saying those words to her? How many times had she longed for him to say that to her? Words could not escape her and the only thing she could do was stare at him with bright and loving eyes. But before she could open her mouth, Zuko tightened his hold on her as his eyes seemed to blaze as he gazed down at her.

“I love you, Katara,” Zuko repeated fervently.

Without another word, Zuko crushed her small soft body to his tall muscular one. He placed a hand to the back of her head, threading his fingers through her hair, before he pulled her head back slightly as he stared at her with heated eyes before he leaned down and planted a soft kiss to her lips.

Katara’s eyes widened in surprise as an electric shock seem to run through her before she closed them to relish in the gentle kiss Zuko had bestowed upon her while her body melted into him. She could not believe it! After all this time of dreaming about it, Zuko was finally kissing her! His lips were so warm and firm. She loved them.

Zuko’s hold on her body tightened as he pressed his lips deeper to hers, loving the way it felt to finally be kissing Katara’s soft lips, having her body close to his. Just like he had longed to do ever since that night in his private garden when he had revealed his past to her. Her sweet and plump lips felt better than he ever dreamed or imagined and he wished he could go further, but he quickly pulled back to see her reaction to his sudden move, expecting her anger at his boldness.

Katara suppressed the disappointed moan that wanted to escape her when Zuko pulled away too fast, before she could fully respond, and she opened her eyes to see what was wrong. Zuko’s kiss had been sweet and short, yet at the same time passionate, and she was still reeling with the pleasure and
warmth it had created throughout her body. Dazed, she met Zuko’s golden gaze and she noticed that he seemed to be searching her face for something. She wondered what it was that he was looking and waiting for as part of her mind focused on the tingling on her lips.

“I will understand your anger for kissing you like that,” Zuko began huskily, “but I will not apologize for doing it. I’ve been longing to kiss you for such a long time and I will cherish it for as long as I live.”

He paused again and he turned his face slightly away before he closed his eyes.

“Even though I know that you love…Aang,” he swallowed the painful lump as he said that, “and you are…engaged to him, I will always love you, Katara. And though—”

Snapping out of her kiss-induced daze, Katara quickly pressed her fingers to his lips. Zuko paused as he turned to look down at her with resignation and sadness in his eyes. Once again Katara felt her heart constrict in her chest at the torment in Zuko’s amber eyes before she removed her fingers to touch his cheek and give him a small smile.

“I never agreed to marry Aang,” she told him quietly.

Zuko jerked back slightly at her words before he frowned down at her.

“What?” he asked.

“Aang did propose to me, but I never accepted,” Katara repeated before her brow furrowed. “I didn’t tell anybody that he asked me…How do you know he did?”

“I…I saw you with him in the Southern Water Tribe…” Zuko began as his frown deepened.

Reluctantly, he finally released his hold on her and Katara frowned in disappointment. Zuko turned away to stare at the dark foliage at the entrance of the cave.

“I was searching for you to finally confess my…feelings for you when I came across you and Aang…hugging…and the betrothal necklace he had shown me in your hand.”
Katara gaped slightly before she composed herself. Everything had just been a misunderstanding! Now she understood why Zuko had left so quickly. He must have been so hurt and angry. A soft smile appeared on Katara’s face as she walked forward and placed a gentle hand on his tensed back.

“If you had come across us sooner you wouldn’t have left so abruptly and you wouldn’t have waited all this time to tell me...how you feel about me,” Katara said as a blush spread on her cheeks.

Zuko looked down at her with a raised brow.

“What do you mean?” he asked quietly.

“Aang did propose to me, but I didn’t accept. But...well...I didn’t reject him either,” Katara began quietly before she hurriedly continued to explain herself when Zuko tensed and began to move away from her. “I told him it was too sudden for such a thing and I told him that I was not sure I wanted to marry him. But he was so devastated when I said that to him and he pleaded for me to reconsider. It made me so sad to see him like that, so I told him I would think about it, but I never told him yes and we were never engaged.”

When Zuko did not say anything, Katara moved to stand before him and she reached for his hand. Zuko looked down at their hands before he looked back up to the young woman’s face.

“The day after your birthday celebration, I told Aang that I made up my mind and would not marry him. I...broke up with him,” Katara told him quietly as she looked into his eyes.

Zuko’s amber eyes widened as he stared down at her in disbelief.

“You...broke up with Aang?” he asked. He could feel his heart beating easier and his hope flared. “Why?”

Katara briefly looked away from him and gazed down at their still joined hands before she raised her head to look at him again.

“Because I never loved Aang,” she confessed truthfully.
Zuko raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Really?”

Katara nodded.

“I agreed to be his girlfriend, hoping that maybe I’d grow to love him like he deserves, and at one point I thought I did,” she admitted. “But I soon realized that I could never love him in that way. So I broke up with him because I couldn’t continue living in a lie and continue to hurt Aang by leading him on.”

Zuko felt like something stabbed his chest and he quickly looked away in hurt and sadness. So it was all just to spare Aang’s feelings?

“I see,” he replied stoically, his unreadable mask once again falling into place.

Katara frowned at the dejected tone of his voice and she reached her hand to his cheek to gently turn his head so he could see her again. Now it was her turn to confess to him what it was she truly felt for him.

Zuko opened his eyes to gaze down at her and he noticed that a soft blush had spread to her cheeks before she looked down as the blush deepened in color, making him wonder what it was that had caused her to react in such a way.

“I…um…well…” she stammered. “The main reason I ended things with Aang was because…I love someone else.”

Zuko stiffened and he felt his temper flare. Who was it? Who was the one that took Katara away from him? His anger and jealousy was then replaced by misery before he once again focused on Katara’s soft voice.

“It was someone else’s hugs and kisses that I wanted. It was his love that I longed for,” Katara continued as her confidence grew. “I thought of him every day and dreamed of him every night, and whenever I wasn’t near him and whenever it seemed like he didn’t wish to see me…it pained me as well.”
Katara looked up again and noticed that Zuko was once again looking away from her with closed eyes and his jaw tightly clenched. With an understanding smile, Katara brought his hand close to her chest and placed it above her wildly beating heart. Zuko’s eyes snapped wide open as he looked back at her in surprise. He looked down to where she had placed his hand and then back up to her eyes as he tried to figure out what she was doing.

“That someone is you, Zuko. I couldn’t be with Aang anymore because the one I truly love is you,” Katara confessed warmly.

Zuko’s breath hitched in his throat and his golden eyes widened at her words.

“You…love me?” he asked softly, almost afraid that he had heard wrong and was just dreaming.

Katara gave him a bright smile as she pressed his hand closer to her chest where he could feel that her heart was pounding rapidly beneath his hand.

“I do, with all my heart. I love you, Zuko,” she told him tenderly.

The young Fire Lord felt like his heart had been engulfed in a bright fire and it was about to explode in happiness, as the words he had longed to hear for gods knew how long, caressed his ears and his soul. Before Katara could say anything else, Zuko removed his hand from beneath hers and placed both arms around her before he lifted her up to his chest and crashed his lips to her soft ones.

Katara was surprised at his fervent reaction, but she quickly melted into his warm embrace. She pressed herself closer to his strong chest and wound her arms around his neck as he continued to press hot kisses on her lips, which she returned with equal fervor. A soft moan escaped her when Zuko ran a hand down her back and she tugged at the hair on the lower part of his head.

Zuko let out a low groan as heat flared in his body at her reaction and he was afraid that if he did not stop he would be doing more than just kissing her lips as happiness and desire swelled within him. He pulled back slowly and he watched with a small smile as Katara opened her lovely eyes to look at him in wonder while they both panted hard as they stared into each other’s eyes. Zuko sighed and he leaned down to bury his face on her neck, placing a soft kiss there and causing her to shiver.

“You have no idea how happy you have made me, Katara,” he whispered in her ear before he nuzzled her hair. “You have no idea how long I have wished to hear you say those words to me.”
Katara giggled quietly as she tightened her grip around his neck.

“You’re the one who has made me so happy, Zuko,” she said softly, “I was beginning to accept the fact that you would never return my feelings.”

Zuko pulled slightly away from her and leaned down to place light kisses on her lips before he pulled back to gaze down into her beautiful face. Her eyes were sparkling and she was giving him a wide and bright smile. Zuko smiled at her before he lowered her back to her feet. He chuckled quietly when she swayed and he quickly wrapped an arm around her to steady her. Katara blushed since she still felt a bit weak and Zuko’s amazing kisses made her feel even more lightheaded than she did a few hours ago. Her blush deepened when Zuko reached out to touch her cheek, and with a soft sigh, she leaned closer to his warm touch.

“Come. I brought some food I found at the camp. You need to eat,” he told her gently.

Katara felt her heart flutter as Zuko clasped her hand and lead her to the fire he had created that morning, which was now diminishing. He released her hand and walked back to the pile of things he had dropped at the entrance of the cave before gathering everything in his arms. Katara waited patiently as he placed everything beside the campfire before he added more wood into the fire, and with a quick exhale, willed the flames to burn higher. With the extra light, Katara noticed that among the firewood Zuko had brought there were a few bags and a small sword sheathed in a dirty scabbard.

She watched as Zuko sat down on the hard ground and she gasped softly in surprise when he grabbed her wrist and gently pulled her to sit close to his side. She blushed as their thighs touched, but she happily leaned her head on his shoulder. Zuko smiled down at her and wrapped an arm around her to press her closer to his side as both dwelled in their happy thoughts, both amazed at the turn of events.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Zuko reached for one of the bags and began to rummage inside, while he kept one arm around Katara. A small smile appeared on his lips when he found what he needed. He pulled out a small cloth bundle followed by a water canteen. He handed the canteen to Katara who gratefully took it and tilted her head up to take large gulps of the refreshing water to moisten her dry throat. She did not notice how Zuko’s eyes smoldered as he watched her swallow the liquid nor did she know about the indecent thoughts that were running rampant in his head as a small trail of water escaped her lips and trickled down her chin and to her neck.

With a content sigh, Katara turned to smile at Zuko only to raise an eyebrow when she saw that he was staring intently at her mouth. She licked her lips self-consciously and was surprised to hear him let out a small groan.
“Zuko?” she questioned with a slight tilt to her head.

Zuko blinked away the haziness that his fantasy had produced before he cleared his throat and returned his attention to the bundle he had placed before them. Agni, hearing his drunken crewmembers’ boasts and talk in detail about their sexual escapades really provided fuel for his imagination.

“I found some dried meat,” he rasped.

He hoped that she did not hear the huskiness in his voice as he opened the bundle to reveal a few pieces of the dried meat. He reached for one and handed it to her before he took one for himself.

“You need to eat to regain your strength. You…lost so much blood,” he said quietly and cleared his throat to dislodge the painful lump that had formed there and this time for a different reason.

Katara squeezed his hand since she knew he was still shaken by her near death. She would be shaken too if their situations were reversed. Her eyes watered at the thought of Zuko dying and she quickly took a bite of the dried meat in order to distract herself from the horrible images. When that did not work too well, Katara looked up at Zuko and a thought entered her mind that caused her to smile.

“Zuko?”

“Hm?” was his response as he chewed on the dried meat.

He looked down to see her cobalt eyes shining up at him, and once again, he felt his heart flare with heat. But this time it was more intense now that he knew the depth of her affection for him.

“When did you realize you…loved me?” Katara asked shyly, though she liked to say that.

Zuko smiled at her and pressed a kiss to her head before he gazed down into her soft, blue eyes.
“It was the night I fought Jet…that sorry excuse for a man…” he trailed off as he eyes narrowed at the thought of the Freedom Fighter before he continued when Katara tugged at his hand. “It was then in Ba Sing Se when I realized it.”

“That long?” Katara exclaimed.

Zuko chuckled at her before he reached a hand out to caress her cheek.

“Actually, I was in love with you way before that, but I finally admitted it to myself when Jet pointed it out.”

Katara smiled happily at him as she snuggled closer to his warm side. She could not believe it! Zuko had loved her for that long?

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked with a frown.

“I…well…” Zuko sighed as he looked away from her to stare at the fire before them.

“I was not used to such a new emotion and I did not know how to proceed. But I was ready to confess my feelings for you when I traveled to the Southern Water Tribe for your brother and Suki’s wedding. Though a small part of me was apprehensive and afraid of your rejection since I didn’t know if you would be able to return my feelings. Especially because you were…Aang’s girlfriend.”

Zuko sighed as he continued to watch the flames in the campfire flicker.

“I tried to dismiss the thoughts about you that came to my mind all the time and I tried to stop the attraction I felt for you since I didn’t want to distress you or hurt Aang since he’s my friend, but I just couldn’t. I was in love with you and I wanted you, so I was ready to fight Aang if it meant I got your affections, but then after the wedding I…”

“You saw us and assumed I agreed to marry him,” Katara added gently when he paused.

“Yes,” Zuko admitted before he cleared his throat and shifted uneasily. “You have no idea how angry and hurt I felt when I came upon you and Aang. It probably seems cowardly but I had to
leave… I had to run away. I would not have been able to bear hearing about your… engagement to
him.”

Katara wrapped her arms around him and kissed his cheek softly as she saw the pain in his eyes from
the memory before she smiled gently when he looked away from the fire to look at her. Zuko saw
her give him a sympathetic smile and he took a deep breath to dispel his dark emotions.

“So when did you realize you were in love with me?” he asked with a smirk.

“The answer is not since the first time I saw you if that’s what you’re thinking,” Katara responded
with a grin.

Zuko crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at her.

“Hm,” he muttered.

Katara laughed at him, but quieted down when he turned to give her a small glare. She reached for
his arms and uncrossed them before placing his arm around her waist, where it had been resting
before and smiled.

“Well, actually I think I’ve been in love with you since a long time ago, but when I finally admitted it
to myself was after Suki and Sokka got married… When you were almost hurt by those arctic
panther-wolves when trying to save Lien,” Katara confessed quietly. “I had a nightmare where this
time you couldn’t escape them and they… killed you.”

Zuko gave her a small squeeze and then rubbed soothing circles down her back when he noticed
Katara’s happy mood change slightly.

“Just thinking about you dying… I couldn’t bear it,” Katara whispered as she wrapped her arms
around him. “It was so painful.”

The Fire Lord wrapped his own arms around the young woman’s body as a way to comfort her, for
he could not find another way since he did not know what to say. He knew what she meant for it
was the same way he had felt, only that now he knew how horrible it truly felt for Katara had indeed
died in his arms.
“And then what happened? After the nightmare?” Zuko asked as a way to distract her.

“I was confused that the thought of your death pained me so much, even more than my mother’s did, so I began to question myself as to why that was,” Katara began before a small smile appeared on her face before she pulled slightly away so she could look at him. “I wondered why you affected me so much. Why I always wanted to be with you, why a look from you made me blush, and why a simple touch from you made me tremble,” she continued as her cheeks turned red. “And next thing I knew I was confessing my love for you to myself.”

“Really?” Zuko asked with a large smile. “So I could have told you then and you would’ve accepted me?”

“Yeah,” Katara replied and giggled.

“Why didn’t you tell me then?” Zuko asked her with a frown. “We could’ve avoided the whole misunderstanding with…the proposal.”

“I was ready to tell you that same night, but…well, there were many reasons why I didn’t,” Katara responded with a small frown. “The first one being that I had not yet broken up with Aang. And then I was still getting used to my feelings for you. And another reason was…well…I guess I was also afraid of your rejection if I told you. I mean how could the mighty Fire Lord return my feelings? Me, a mere Water Tribe woman.”

“I know, huh?” Zuko teased while he tapped his chin and frowned deeply.

Katara playfully slapped his chest and scowled. “Shut up, you!”

Zuko chuckled at her and grabbed her offending hand before he brought it to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Katara blushed, but she gave him a loving smile.

“And here I was, the mighty Fire Lord, afraid of your rejection,” Zuko told her with a small smile while his golden eyes burned softly. “And you’re not a mere Water Tribe woman, Katara. You are much more than that. That’s why I fell in love with you.”
The soft blush on Katara’s cheeks deepened at his words and she gasped when he began to run his hand up and down her back before she nervously looked away when she saw the color of Zuko’s amber orbs darken. Zuko noticed her unease and slowly pulled back before he scared her away.

“I can’t believe how stupid we were for not noticing our feelings sooner,” the young firebender commented with another low chuckle.

Katara laughed along with him.

“I think Toph was beginning to question our intelligence,” she said before she scowled. “She knew about what we felt for each other and she didn’t tell me!”

“I think Uncle knew, too,” Zuko said with a fond sigh. “But knowing him he probably wanted us to figure it out for ourselves.”

Katara grumbled under her breath and scowled deeper. Zuko smiled down at her before he pressed his finger between her eyebrows to get rid of the scowl so her skin could be smooth again.

“So what was the other reason why you didn’t tell me about your feelings for me?” Zuko asked.

The waterbender’s blue eyes widened and she began to chew on her lip while she reached for her hair to twirl it around her fingers. Zuko’s attention was immediately drawn to her white teeth abusing her luscious lips. Unable to resist, he leaned down and pressed his lips against hers before he pulled back a moment later to hear her response.

“Well? Are you going to tell me?” Zuko asked her again and smirked when she looked at him dazedly.

“Because you already had a girlfriend,” she said quietly. “And I’m kind of glad I didn’t say anything back then, especially after what I heard.”

Zuko tightened his hold on her with one arm while he caressed her hair with the other. A small frown appeared on his face.
“Why do you say that?” he asked curiously.

“Because…well, I…” Katara began as she tried to forget the pain she had felt when she thought she would never have a chance with Zuko. “I felt like my heart had been broken and all my hopes and dreams were dashed when Ty Lee told Suki, Sokka, Toph, and me that…that Mai told her that she and you…were practically…engaged.”

Zuko growled under his breath.

“And you believed her?” he asked.

Katara pulled away and she glared at him.

“Well, what was I supposed to think? You’ve been together for years! And Mai lives in your palace and acts like the mistress of the house! What else was I supposed to believe?” she finished in a pained voice.

Zuko’s irritation melted when he heard her pain and saw it in her eyes and he felt his heart constrict in his chest. When she looked away, Zuko grabbed her chin and lifted it, pressing his lips to hers. He heard her give a small sigh and felt her relax against him before he pulled away slowly while keeping her head up so she could look at him.

“Katara,” he called out gently as he again touched her face, “What Mai said is a lie. I’ve never even spoken of marriage to her.”

“You haven’t?” Katara asked quietly.

“No,” Zuko told her. “I have to be truthful and tell you that marriage with her did cross my mind, but I never told her because it was a fleeting thought I had only as a way to placate my advisors and courtiers.”

He paused so he could press his lips to her temple when she frowned at him.

“Besides, you don’t need to worry because I broke up with Mai the day after my birthday
celebration,” he informed her.

Katara gave him a small smile.

“I know,” she said softly.

Zuko gaped at her before he lifted his dark eyebrow.

“How do you know?” he asked.

Katara’s smile faded and she began to fidget with her hair again, but sighed in defeat when Zuko grasped her hands and repeated the question.

“Suki and I were outside your study when the door was pulled opened and Mai stepped out with the coldest look I’ve ever seen on her face,” Katara began as she looked down at her hands. “I asked her if you were inside and she snapped at me.”

“What did she say?” Zuko asked with a frown.

“Well,” Katara began as she pulled at her sleeve, “she said that I must be so happy because you dumped her and you were now available.”

“And were you?” Zuko asked with a small smirk.

Katara rolled her eyes at him before she smiled.

“Yes, I was,” she confessed.

Zuko smiled smugly before he kissed her cheek.

“Good. I’m glad,” he said before he frowned again. “I have a feeling that that’s not all Mai said, is
“She warned me that it will not stay like that for long…She said she would take you back,” Katara told him quietly.

Zuko felt his temper flare and he growled under his breath as he turned to glare at the fire.

“I knew there was a reason why she accepted my rejection so easily,” he muttered.

Zuko paused as he looked away from the fire to stare at Katara’s brilliant sapphire eyes and he smiled at her. He leaned down and placed a soft kiss to her sweet lips before he pulled back slightly to look her sincerely in the eyes.

“I could never marry Mai because she is not the woman I want and love. That woman is you, Katara,” he told her affectionately.

The waterbender flushed before she frowned.

“I kind of find that hard to believe,” she said quietly.

A deep frown marred Zuko’s features. Why did she doubt his sincerity after all they have said to each other?

“Why do you say that?” he inquired.

“Well, you did say I was…not your type,” she reminded him.

Zuko winced at the hurt he detected in her tone. He berated himself harshly for being so foolish. In his attempt to defend himself against Aang’s accusations after sparring with Katara on his flagship, he had unintentionally hurt her.
“I lied,” he replied sincerely, firmly, as he reached out a hand to brush her cheek. “Back then I did not understand what it was I felt for you, so I tried to hide from it.”

He paused as he leaned his face closer to hers, his caress on her skin becoming tender.

“Katara,” he breathed out softly, “you are everything that I want and desire in a woman. If only you knew how much I want you.”

Katara’s cheeks took on a dark reddish hue. No one had ever spoken such passionate and loving words to her before. She shyly looked away from Zuko’s intense golden eyes, since they always made her shiver with delight, but Zuko would have none of that. Without giving a warning, Zuko pulled her onto his lap and held her against him, causing her to squeak in surprise. He immediately cut off the sound as he crashed his lips to her sweet ones.

Katara immediately surrendered herself into his warm embrace, the gentleness of his mouth against hers, and she wound her arms around his neck. Aang’s kisses could not compare to Zuko’s. She felt like lightning was running through her veins and she was getting very hot. She wanted more of his kisses.

Zuko could not get enough of Katara’s soft lips. He wanted more. He wanted to feel more. He pressed her soft body closer to him and tangled his fingers through her tresses before he gently pulled her head back so he could deepened the kiss. He groaned when Katara let out a soft moan and tangled her own fingers through his dark hair. He felt himself stiffen in arousal, but he stopped himself from grinding against Katara. He did not want to offend her with his advances, especially since they had just barely confessed their feelings for each other. Luckily, it seemed she was too distracted with his kisses to notice his predicament.

Katara could feel Zuko’s large hand running down her back, causing shivers to run down her spine, while his wonderful mouth continued to delight her. She had never been kissed like this before, she had never felt this wonderful before, and she was enjoying every second of feeling Zuko’s warm lips and having his strong arms wrapped around her so tightly.

Zuko felt like he was burning, like fire was spreading across his skin. He could feel his need for her growing the longer he kissed her and held her soft body against his. The need to rip her clothes off and take her right there on the cave floor was becoming more and more urgent that he felt he was going insane. He reluctantly started to pull away from her delicious lips and sighed mournfully when he no longer felt them, but he did not want to frighten her away with his eagerness. He smiled when Katara opened her eyes and gave him a dreamy look.
“Wow,” she breathed as they both panted against each other.

Zuko chuckled and leaned down to give her lips a brief peck.

“You haven’t seen the extent of my passion for you yet, Katara,” he told her huskily. He resisted the urge to press her against his erection to emphasize his point.

His chuckle deepened when her cobalt orbs widened before she gave him an eager look.

Katara was about to ask him to show her what he meant, but a yawn interrupted her and she blushed. Zuko smiled at her tenderly before he pulled her away from his lap and set her down next to him. He inhaled deeply and tried to calm himself down, which took longer than expected.

“Time for your nap,” Zuko teased as he got to his feet once he was sure the sight of him would not shock her.

Katara rose to her feet and, bringing her hands to her hips, scowled at him.

“I’m not a child!” she exclaimed and huffed.

Zuko’s eyes gleamed as he grinned at her. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her up to his chest before she could react.

“Believe me, Katara, I know,” he growled in a low tone as his other hand squeezed her hip.

“Um…uh…ok then,” Katara stuttered as she blushed ten shades of red.

The hand on Katara’s wide hip twitched to go lower and grabbed something rounder. Zuko felt his heart, as well as another area below throb, when he felt her breasts pressed tightly to his chest. As he stared at her blush, he knew it had been a bad idea to tease her. Calling forth all his self-control, Zuko released her with a deep sigh. He gave her a quick kiss before he moved completely away from her so he could search through the bags. He pulled out a few blankets and settled them near the
“You need to rest,” Zuko told her as he settled himself on the fortunately clean blankets he had spread out. “We will be leaving the cave tomorrow in search of a village.”

When Katara did not answer, he looked up and he frowned when she did not move.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her in concern.

“Um…” Katara began as another blush invaded her cheeks. “We can’t…uh…s-sleep so close together.”

Zuko quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Why not? You’ve been sleeping on my lap for the past couple of days,” he reminded her with a smirk.

Katara’s blush deepened.

“Well, yeah, but now it’s different. We…we know what each feels for the other and we have…kissed a lot,” she stuttered out.

Zuko smiled indulgently at her shyness and modesty.

“That’s true, but you don’t need to worry because I won’t do anything that you don’t want me to,” Zuko told her gently before he reached out a hand for her. “I just want to hold you and make sure you remain next to me.”

Anguish flickered through his eyes for a moment.

“I admit that I’m still afraid of losing you again after you almost…died,” he said quietly.
Katara felt her heart go out to him as she saw the lingering fear and sadness in his eyes and voice. Why was she hesitating? She knew Zuko would not force her into doing anything she was not ready for. Besides, she really wanted to sleep close to Zuko’s warm side.

With that in mind, Katara walked over to him with a small smile and lay down next to him on the blankets. She sighed happily when Zuko lay down beside her and wrapped his arm around her. She stiffened at first, but she immediately relaxed against his warmth and the feeling of protection his arms provided.

“Zuko?” she called out softly as the flames in the campfire dimmed a bit.

“Yes?” he responded as he gave her a squeeze.

“I love you,” Katara whispered warmly. It felt so right to say that.

Zuko briefly closed his eyes at the intense emotions her words caused within him. There was no way to describe how happy and content it made him feel to hear her say that to him. He tightened his hold on her and he kissed her hair.

“I love you, too, Katara,” he said amorously.

Katara felt her heart flutter before she smiled and pressed herself closer to him. Zuko held his breath for a second when she moved closer before he let out a deep exhale to calm himself and his rising desire. In a few minutes, he heard Katara’s soft breathing as she slept and he smiled. He wrapped his arms tighter around her and sighed softly.

Zuko found great satisfaction in finally holding the woman he loved in his arms while she slept and he was unable to curb the soft smile that came to his lips as warmth spread through him. She loved him and he loved her, and they were meant for each other. He would never let her go. Katara was his and he would be damned if he let anything or anyone take her away from him.

The fire continued to blaze as the couple, wrapped in each other’s arms, slept in the safety of the hidden cave.
Gradually Progressing

The warm energy of the dawning sun gently roused the young Fire Lord from his light slumber. The chirping of birds and the buzzing of insects reached his ears and he slowly opened his eyes to the new day. The firebender blinked a couple of times to get rid of the haziness from his eyes. As he moved to sit up, he paused when he felt a light weight on his chest and something solid and warm pressed to his side.

Raising his head slightly, Zuko noticed that Katara’s head was resting on his chest, her long hair falling around her shoulder and down onto his stomach. One of her slender hands was clutching his tunic while he had his arm wrapped protectively around her waist. Zuko smiled at the sight as a warm feeling spread from his chest and throughout his entire body. His already semi-erect manhood hardened further and he groaned softly. Ignoring his state for the moment, he pressed Katara’s curvy body closer to his and sighed contentedly as he ran his fingers gently through her chocolate tresses.

He remembered their confessions from the previous night and his smile broadened. He could not believe that Katara returned his feelings, that she loved him, loved him for such a long time. He also could not stop thinking about how stupid he had been for not noticing it before, for ignoring the many hints his uncle, his mother, and Toph had thrown his way. If he had not been such a coward, Katara and he could have been married by now! That thought brought warmth to his heart and he tightened his hold on her.

Katara sighed and rolled over to lie on her back. She moved closer to him before she settled back down with another soft sigh. Zuko smiled at her as he wrapped his arms around her and gently kissed her head.

Now that he had her, now that he knew she loved him as well, and after his fright at her…death, he would not wait any longer to tell her that he wished to take her as his wife. That he wanted her to be by his side for the rest of their lives. He knew that there might be some problems with the Court Council, but he did not give a damn about what they thought. His arms tightened protectively around the young woman sleeping next to him.

Zuko looked at her lovely face, a subtle sleepy smile on her lips, and he sighed softly. Thin rays of light spilled into the dark cave as the sun rose higher in the sky, effectively catching Zuko’s attention and causing him to look over at the curtain of flora at the entrance. He knew that they needed to head out soon and keep on walking before Jianguo learned of what he had done, but he could not wake Katara up yet. She needed all the rest she could get since she had lost so much blood when Feng wounded her.

A dark look settled across Zuko’s face as that thought caused him to remember seeing Katara’s blood spreading on the forest floor, her skin losing color as her body weakened, and her eyes closing.
before she stopped breathing…

Heart constricting in pain, Zuko squeezed his eyes shut to block out the images. He buried his face in Katara’s hair and wrapped his arms tightly around her to bring her even closer to him. He would never let her out of his sight for he never wanted to feel such pain ever again. He knew she could defend herself, she was, after all, a master waterbender, but he would feel less afraid if he were there by her side. He pulled back slightly and firmly pressed his lips to her soft, plump ones, to reassure himself, while his hand gently touched her cheek.

He froze when he felt soft fingers touch his own cheek while the lips beneath his pressed back and he pulled away slowly. Zuko watched as Katara eyelashes fluttered, revealing her sparkling blue eyes. She blushed slightly before she gave him radiant smile.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up,” he told her softly as he returned her smile.

“It’s alright. We need to leave anyway,” Katara responded as she ran her hand down his cheek before she touched his lips with the tip of her fingers. “Besides, with that kiss you gave me I can’t possibly go back to sleep now.”

Zuko chuckled and he pressed his lips to her fingers before he leaned down to give her a soft kiss on her lips. He meant to give her one kiss and then move away, but Katara weaved her fingers in his hair and moaned. He gave a low growl in response and began to kiss her more eagerly, pressing her to the ground beneath him. He heard Katara gasp and he immediately pulled away, but not before he pressed a quick kiss to her lips when she frowned at him. Katara sighed and smiled at him.

Zuko felt his heart begin to pound in his chest at the way she smiled up at him and he felt his erection throb with need, so he sat up and moved away before he did something to scare her. He stood up, willing his arousal to subside, and cleared his throat before he helped her to her feet.

“We should eat before we set out,” Zuko told her huskily. He cleared his throat again and smiled at her.

“Okay,” Katara agreed as she walked over to the bag of food Zuko had brought.

She pulled out the rest of the dried meat and a piece of bread she found at the bottom of the bag while Zuko added more wood to the fire and raised it higher with a deep exhale. With a smile, Katara handed him his share of food when he sat down beside her. He thanked her and they began to
eat quietly.

“Zuko?” Katara spoke up after a moment of comfortable silence.

“Yeah?” Zuko responded as he lowered the water canteen from which he was drinking from.

“How are we going to find a village?” she asked.

Zuko frowned pensively into the fire.

“I don’t know. We have no maps to tell us where we are or to guide us on where to go,” he began. “But we need to find a village soon and warn Uncle before Jianguo sets out with his plan. I have a feeling that he will send word to the Fire Nation that they have us as hostages while he continues to look for us.”

Katara saw the concern beneath his impassive expression and she laid a reassuring hand on his arm. She gave him a small smile when he turned to look at her inquisitively.

“Don’t worry, Zuko,” she told him. “Uncle Iroh and Chao will stop him and the Fire Nation will be safe.”

Zuko grabbed her hand and pulled her to his side so he could wrap his arm around her.

“I know that, Katara, but…” he paused and sighed as he gave her a small squeeze, “I’m also worried about what would happen if Jianguo catches us…what he would do to us.” He clenched his hand tightly as he looked away from her to stare at the fire before them.

“He would…hurt you to get to me,” he told her quietly.

He looked at Katara and saw her grow pale and her eyes widen. He swiftly pulled her onto his lap and wrapped his arms protectively around her while she buried her face on his neck.

“I swear to you that I will not allow anyone to hurt you ever again,” he whispered fervently in her
ear as he ran a hand up and down her back to soothe her.

Katara raised her head to kiss his cheek before she wrapped her arms around his neck and snuggled closer to him with a soft sigh.

“I know,” she told him sincerely before her voice grew hard, “and I will not let myself be caught off guard ever again.”

They remained in each other’s reassuring embrace for a while before Zuko pulled away. He looked into her eyes and ran a hand through her tangled hair.

“We need to leave,” he reminded her before a small frown settled on his face. “Do you feel well enough to walk?”

“Of course! I feel much better now,” Katara told him with a grin.

Zuko nodded and smiled at her. With another squeeze, he let her go. Katara climbed off his lap and they both stood up. He began to gather their meager supplies while the waterbender picked up the blankets and the rest of the food and stuffed them into the bag.

Once he extinguished the fire, Zuko turned to look at Katara as she finished tying the water canteen to her hip. He was about to call out to her when he caught sight of the dried blood on her blue shirt. The sight of it clinging to her slightly torn blouse disturbed him so much that he remained standing, frozen in shock.

“I’m ready to go,” Katara told him as she slung the small bag of food over her shoulder.

When Zuko did not reply to her, Katara looked up to see what he was doing. She saw that his face held a troubled expression as he gazed at her and she frowned in concern.

“Zuko? What’s wrong?”

Zuko snapped out of his daze at the sound of her voice. He quickly looked away from her bloody shirt, only to see her looking at him with worried eyes.
“If I had protected you better, you wouldn’t have been hurt,” he whispered sullenly.

Katara saw him look down at her stomach and she knew he was affected by the blood that had dried up on her clothing. She wished she had another shirt so Zuko would not be tormented every time he looked her way.

“It wasn’t your fault, Zuko,” she told him firmly. “You did everything you could to keep me safe, and besides, such things happen and you won’t always be able to stop them.”

“But because of my distraction and overconfidence you died! You died!” Zuko rasped chokingly.

Katara rushed over to him and embraced him tightly, running her hands soothingly along his back. Zuko hugged her firmly to him and buried his face in her neck. He squeezed his eyes shut to bear the pain, sorrow, and remorse that coursed through him.

“Everything’s fine now,” Katara soothed him gently, “I’m alive and I am fine.”

“The times we ran across each other during the war, I was afraid of getting to know you,” he admitted quietly, “When we were at the Western Air Temple, I was afraid of hurting you. And now that I love you, I’m very afraid of losing you.”

Zuko pulled back slightly to gaze intently into her eyes, his golden orbs almost burning in their intensity. Katara was surprised at the intense way he was looking at her while he held her tightly to him.

“But now that I have you, I won’t let you go. Not even death will take you away from me,” he told her in a fierce whisper.

Katara felt her heart skip a beat and a tingle ran down her spine at the power in his promise.

“I will stay at your side as long as you want me,” she whispered breathlessly at him as she stared into his deep, golden eyes.
“Then that means forever,” Zuko growled out.

He placed his hand at the back of her neck, curling his fingers in her hair, and tilted her head back before his mouth met hers in a deep and yet gentle kiss. Katara moaned at the sensation of his warm and firm lips touching hers and she wound her hands around his neck.

Zuko groaned at the sound she made and he pressed her closer to his chest. He wanted more, he wanted to taste more of her in order to calm his anxiety and fear, but more importantly, he wanted to be closer to her. He opened his mouth slightly and gently traced her lips with the tip of his tongue, while he ran a hand down her back.

A tremor went through Katara as she moaned in pleasure at the new sensations. She felt his warm tongue begin to probe at her lips, and through the fogginess in her mind, she knew he was silently asking her for permission to enter her mouth. She hesitantly opened her mouth to him, shyly granting his searching request.

Zuko groaned triumphantly when she parted her lips for him, and without hesitation, he plunged his tongue inside her hot oral cavern, touching her smooth teeth, prodding the inside of her cheeks, tasting every inch of her delicious mouth. She moaned softly into his mouth and he experienced an amazing sweetish sensation in the back of his throat. His hold on her became tight and his fingers became tangled in the mass of brown that was her hair. Lifting her up, he crushed her smaller body to his tall frame and moaned when her soft breasts pressed closely to his hard chest, heat and warmth surging through every nerve of his body.

Katara felt like her heart was about to jump out of her chest as an almost familiar yet still strange heat pooled in the pit of her stomach. She whimpered softly at his heated embrace, but she grabbed hold of his short, dark hair and held onto him for dear life as pleasant and powerful sensations assaulted her entire body, as his tongue continued to invade her mouth. She could barely breathe, but she felt like she was in heaven as Zuko skillfully explored her mouth without leaving anything uncharted. But when his tongue made contact with her own, she jumped as though she had been struck by a thunderbolt.

Zuko felt her jerk against him when their tongues met, and not wanting to overwhelm her too quickly, he reluctantly wound down their incredible kiss. He had lost his control for a bit and he hoped that he had not frightened her with his fervor since he knew she was not ready for such ardent displays of affection. He had never thought kissing could feel so good. The only other women he had kissed before were Jin and Mai, and those uninspiring kisses had never produced such powerful, amazing reactions from him as Katara’s innocent yet passionate kisses did. Pulling back slightly after licking Katara’s bottom lip, Zuko looked down at her with heated eyes as they both panted hard against each other. When Katara opened her eyes, they gazed at one another and Zuko was relieved to see no apprehension in those sapphire depths. He smirked smugly at her dazed look, flushed face, and swollen lips while her small hands continued to hold onto his hair as if to help keep her from
“As much as I would like to spend the day kissing you, we have to be on our way,” he told her with a small grin.

Katara wanted to pout and tell him that she was not feeling as well as she had said she was, so they could remain in the seclusion of the small cave and perhaps share more wonderful kisses. But she knew that was a selfish wish that could endanger their lives as well as the world if they did not stop Jianguo. Reluctantly, she slowly disentangled her fingers from their grip on his short, black hair and she smiled at him in what she hoped was an understanding smile.

“Okay,” she replied, though she was unable to curb the disappointment that came over her when Zuko lowered her down to her feet.

Zuko grinned at her pouting face and he placed a light kiss on her lips.

“Don’t look so sad, Katara,” he teased lightly. “I promise that we’ll find plenty of time to kiss each other until our lips fall off.”

Katara blushed at his words before she giggled at him, moving away so she could compose herself while Zuko gathered his things. Inwardly she was already eagerly waiting for such a time to arrive. She never thought kisses could feel so good and she had never been kissed so passionately before. The times Aang had kissed her, they had been light and mildly pleasing, but when he tried to go a bit further, she would panic and immediately pull away. His hurt and slightly irritated expression would make her feel guilty, but she just could not help it. It unnerved her to even think about it.

But now it seemed like she could not get enough of Zuko’s kisses. She could not describe the amazing sensations she felt at the feeling of his warm and firm lips on hers, the way his taller frame seemed to surround her smaller body in a protective way, and of his hands touching her in such a gentle manner despite his intensity. Katara was surprised to find herself craving more of what he had to offer, she wanted more, and although she did not know what that more was, she just knew that she wanted it from Zuko. She felt herself getting warm and her breathing became a bit erratic as she lightly touched her still tingling lips. She felt her cheeks burn when she noticed the wetness between her legs.

“Katara?” Zuko’s confused voice reached her ears.
The waterbender jumped slightly and a deep blush spread across her cheeks and the tip of her nose as she realized what kinds of thoughts she was having about Zuko, despite the fact they had just confessed their feelings the day before. But that was normal, wasn’t it?

“What is it?” she replied quickly.

She busied herself by tying the water canteen more securely to her hip so she did not have to look at his handsome features and so he would not notice her blushing face. But her efforts were in vain for she felt Zuko walk up to her and place a finger under her chin, lifting her head so she could look at him.

“Are you sure you feel okay?” Zuko asked with a worried frown. “Your face is a bit flushed. We could start searching for a village tomorrow so you could rest a bit more.”

“I told you that I am feeling better,” Katara sighed at him before she patted his hand. “But thanks for worrying about me.”

“Of course I worry about you,” Zuko responded to her as he released her chin so he could caress her face. “I love you, Katara, and your well-being and happiness is important to me.”

At his words, Katara’s stomach did a flip and she flashed him a bright smile as she wrapped her arms around his middle and snuggled into him. She felt him wrap his arms around her and she sighed contentedly.

“I love you too, Zuko,” Katara replied softly. “And I worry for your safety as well.”

Zuko smiled at her words. After his exile all those years ago, he had told himself that he needed no one, that he was fine being alone, and he had gotten used to the thought of having only his uncle worry for him. But knowing that Katara cared so much about him made him realize that he could no longer bear the thought of being alone, of not having her by his side, and that he needed her so much. He watched as Katara raised her head to look at him and he felt his heart skip a beat when her shiny, blue eyes stared sincerely into his golden ones. She cupped his cheek and he leaned into her gentle touch with a soft sigh. The way she smiled at him made him want to kiss her breathless again, but instead he settled for a light peck on her lips before he gently pulled away from her embrace.

“We should get going,” he reminded her. “As we find our way to a village, we need to be constantly alert for any sign of Jianguo and his men.”
Katara’s face hardened and she patted the water canteen at her hip with a fierce grin.

“If we do come across them again,” she began with a gleam in her eyes, “this time I won’t be so easily distracted. I will show them that they shouldn’t have mess with us.”

Zuko smirked at her approvingly.

“I’m sure you’ll make them regret it,” he told her with a deep chuckle.

“You got that right,” Katara responded with a large grin.

They smiled at each other for a moment longer before they adjusted their belongings over their shoulders. Once ready, they stepped out of the cave through the green curtain of flora with one last glance at the place where they had finally revealed their love for each other.

Small animals scurried away and birds flew up from their nests, as Katara and Zuko made their way through the thick forest. The day had progressed well into the afternoon and it was getting a bit more difficult to see in the darkness that the large trees produced. They came across a part of the forest where the trees and other flora grew so tightly together that it plunged them into near darkness despite the fact that the sun was still up in the sky. Zuko had summoned a small flame in his left palm to light their way while he slashed at the branches and leaves with the small sword he had acquired. Katara had offered to help and had slashed the vines and branches from their paths with a sharp water whip, but to her dismay, she was unable to keep it up for long as she began to get tired and a little dizzy. Zuko had reassured her that she just needed a bit more time to regain all her strength and not to let it bring her down. She had given him a small smile, but had remained silent as they continued walking.

Zuko hacked through another thick and thorny bush and paused to take a break, rotating his shoulder to ease the ache. He glanced back worriedly at Katara. She seemed to have sensed his stare and she looked up to give him a bright smile. Zuko returned her smile and resumed his task of clearing a path for them. He would occasionally ask her how she was feeling and if she wanted to take a rest, but she would stubbornly tell him she was fine and that she was not some weakling. He would just shake his head at her; he was concerned that he was pushing her too hard.

Katara sighed and realized that Zuko was worrying too much about her when she caught him looking back at her. She decided to reassure him by filling up the silence with idle talk which would sometimes shift into bringing up events of the past few months and what they went through when
they thought the other would never reciprocate their feelings.

Katara frowned as she looked ahead to stare at Zuko. She noticed his slightly torn clothes and could not help but be reminded of the beating he had to endure by Jianguo’s men in order to keep her safe.

“Back in Jianguo’s camp, when they…” Katara paused and swallowed hard, “when they h-hurt you… you said it was not the first time you’ve been severely injured and that you’ve been through worse. Were you referring to what happened with…Azula?”

Zuko looked back at her before he shook his head.

“Actually, I was referring to the time, before the siege of the Northern Water Tribe, when Zhao had some pirates blow up my ship so he could get rid of me,” Zuko explained. “I was barely able to escape. Uncle had thought I died.” He sighed.

“What?” Katara exclaimed in horror. “You were in a ship when it exploded? You really could have died!”

“But I managed to survive,” Zuko reminded her as he gave her a small smile before he let out a wry chuckle. “You know, the pirates that destroyed my ship were the same ones that I hired to try to capture you.”

“Hmm… then I can’t say I feel sorry for you now,” Katara mused before she let out a laugh when Zuko turned to give her a hurt look. “I’m just kidding. But Zhao was such a coward for having those pirates do his dirty work.”

“Yeah, but I was able to shock him when I appeared before him alive in the Northern Water Tribe.” He smirked. “He got what he deserved, though.”

Katara hummed before something dawn on her.

“Wait. So that’s why you had all those cuts and bruises when you arrived at the Spirit Oasis,” she stated before she narrowed her eyes at him. “And then you attacked me and carted Aang’s body away while he was in the Spirit World.”
Zuko turned to frown at her.

“I thought you said you have forgiven me for the wrong I did in the past,” he told her.

“I have forgiven you,” Katara reassured him with a smile. “I was just figuring out what happened, though you did knock me out pretty hard.”

“I apologize for that,” Zuko told her regrettably. “I didn’t actually mean to hurt you that badly, but back then I was more concerned with other things.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a nod before a grin spread to her face. “But I did knock you out pretty hard too when Sokka and I caught up with you.”

“You got lucky. I was injured when trying to escape from an exploding ship, after all,” Zuko replied nonchalantly.

“Oh, sure,” Katara said sarcastically and laughed, “You keep telling yourself that.”

She laughed harder when Zuko smirked and replied that he would.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Time passed as they continued in their search, but they only saw more vegetation and no signs of a village or any kind of civilization anywhere.

Katara was beginning to feel lightheaded, but she did not say anything about it for she did not want to worry Zuko more than he already was. She knew he was concerned for her and she was grateful that he tried to make the pace comfortable for her while helping her without making her feel like she was weak and useless. Now she could recall all those times Zuko had been there for her. How he had always tried to help her and save her, such as that time when he threw himself at her before she was crushed by falling rocks at the Western Air Temple. Or when he accompanied her to confront her mother’s killer. Or when he stepped in front of Azula’s lightning bolt. She could not believe how blind she had been for not recognizing the depth of his affection for her.

She still found it so surreal to think that Zuko loved her, had loved her for such a long time, and it made her heart grow warm at his confession that their separation had grieved him as much as it did her. But what was their new relationship called? Where was it going to lead? She wanted to marry him, she wanted to be his wife and be by his side forever, but what if that was not what he wanted?
Sure she knew he loved her, if by all the ways he had demonstrated it to her was any indication, but that did not necessarily mean he wanted to marry her. She knew the Fire Nation Council and his Royal Court wanted him to choose a Fire Nation noblewoman as his Fire Lady. She was just the daughter of a chief whose country had just recently begun to prosper. Zuko had told her that he was going to make sure she was going to be by his side forever, but did that mean as his mistress, or as his concubine? Katara felt anger, indignation, and pain at the thought.

Even though she loved him more than her own life, she would not become that for anybody. She was worth more than that.

Katara shook her head and frowned at herself as they continued to walk. Maybe the loss of blood had affected her brain. Zuko and she had barely confessed their love for each other and she was already thinking of marriage! She should not get ahead of herself, get herself worked up, or start imagining things. For now, she would just enjoy her time with Zuko while they walked through the fresh forest and then she would have a talk with him.

She was brought out of her thoughts when she felt Zuko’s warm hand grab hers tenderly and she looked up to see him gazing at her over his shoulder.

“What are you thinking about that’s making you frown like that?” Zuko asked her with a raised eyebrow.

Katara berated herself for thinking so poorly about Zuko for he would never hurt her or do anything that would reflect badly on her. She looked back at him when he squeezed her hand at her lack of response.

“It’s nothing. It’s just me, worrying needlessly,” Katara replied vaguely as she tried to give him a smile.

Zuko frowned at her and he found that he did not like how that smile she gave him did not quite reach her blue eyes. He brought them to a stop under a canopy of leaves and turned to fully face her, frowning deeply when he noticed the worry in her eyes that she could not hide.

“Katara, you know you can tell me anything,” he told her. “I will always try to help you.”

Katara felt her heart warm at his words and she squeezed his hand as she, this time, gave him a
genuine happy smile.

“I know that, Zuko and I thank you,” Katara replied warmly. “But it’s nothing, really.”

She could still see that Zuko was not convinced, but she did not know what else to say to him. She could not tell him about her insecurities and fears about what their new relationship meant, she did not want to cause him any more concern or upset him. She squeezed his larger hand again and smiled gently at him before she moved to continue on their walk only to gasp when Zuko pulled her back toward him and kissed her before she could wonder what was happening.

Again, that electrifying spark flared through her at the feeling of his firm yet soft lips on hers and Katara quickly returned his affections by opening her mouth to him and wrapping her arms around his neck. Katara felt her doubts scatter into the wind as she took comfort in Zuko’s gentle kiss.

When he felt Katara relax against him, Zuko pulled back slightly and stared at her soft eyes as he brought his hands up to cradle her face and stroke her cheeks with his thumbs.

“I don’t know why you don’t want to tell me, but I want you to know that I will always be there for you when you need me,” Zuko reassured her firmly.

Katara covered his hands, which were caressing her face, with hers and she nodded at him as a bright smile adorned her face.

“And I’ll always be there for you, too,” Katara told him softly.

They remained staring at each other for a moment before Zuko smiled at her. He gave her one chaste kiss before he moved away from her to resume their walk, but not before he grabbed her hand and gently pulled her after him. It felt so good to be able to express his feelings for her, now that they have confessed. It was especially amazing being able to kiss her whenever he wanted. The trees seemed to have spread out the farther they went so they had no difficulty picking their way through the forest, hand-in-hand.

Zuko glanced at Katara again and frowned. He knew that there was something that was worrying her and he wondered what it was that had her so pensive and quiet. He hoped that she would tell him soon, but he decided not to press the issue for the moment since they had more pressing matters.
They kept silent for a few hours as they made their way around trees and through bushes, but soon the silence became too oppressive and they once again resumed sharing memories. Sometimes those memories would make both laugh and other times they would open wounds that they would then work together to mend.

“*I just remembered our time in Ba Se Sing a few months ago,*” Zuko spoke up. “*Were you really avoiding me because of what happened when I came upon you at the lake?*”

Katara felt heat rush to her cheeks and she averted her eyes when Zuko gazed at her more intensely.

“No,” she muttered softly.

“Then why were you avoiding me?” the firebender asked as a deep frown settled on his face.

“I…I had an *e-erotic* dream about you…and I was embarrassed,” she admitted as her blush deepened.

Zuko stopped in his tracks to stare incredulously at her. Katara stopped as well and lifted her head bashfully to look at him. Zuko let out a small chuckle before he wrapped his arms tightly around hers.

“Oh, if only you knew about the many *erotic* dreams I had about you since you arrived at the Fire Nation, you would be shocked,” he growled out huskily.

Katara’s eyes widened before Zuko swooped down to kiss her. They moaned against each other’s lips as pleasure rippled through them. Zuko pulled away when he felt his groin twitch. It was too soon for him to give in to his desires. He kissed her softly one more time before he took her hand and continued on their walk with a change of subject.

There was a comfortable lull in their conversation and Katara took the time to try to untangle a twig from her hair that had gotten stuck there when they passed through a thick shrub. She growled when it did not budge and she glowered at Zuko when he started to chuckle, which he quickly covered up by coughing. Katara fought with the insufferable twig for a long moment and was contemplating asking Zuko to cut that piece of hair off with his sword, when Zuko finally took pity on her and moved her hands away so he could help her. He managed to easily disentangle it from her hair and with a smile, he gave her the twig. With a huff, Katara snatched it from his fingers, threw the stick far away from her, and rubbed at her aching scalp while she muttered a thanks to Zuko.
“I really want a bath!” Katara complained as she pushed her long hair away from her face.

Zuko chuckled under his breath at her pouting expression as he grabbed her hand again and began to walk once more.

“You’ll get to enjoy your bath once we are farther away and can find a lake or pond,” Zuko told her.

“I could just waterbend some water to make a small pool, but I guess you’re right about covering more distance,” the waterbender said and pouted. “It’s just that my clothes are all dirty and itchy and I can’t wait to get out of them!”

At her words, Zuko faltered in his steps, but he quickly recovered his composure before Katara noticed. He knew she did not mean anything by what she said, but Zuko could not stop the pictures her words created in his head. The images were more realistic because they were created from memories that had surfaced in his mind. Visions of a young woman with drenched brown hair clinging to her tanned body, graceful limbs glistening with moisture, clad in a small white towel that hugged her curves. Zuko could not stop thinking about the time he had accidentally come across Katara while she bathed and it was a while before he was able to calm himself sufficiently enough to be able to speak without sounding like he was growling.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sun was setting, and before they could be plunged into complete darkness, Zuko and Katara decided to settle down for the night. The Water Tribe woman took out the thin blankets and spread them on the cold ground before she rummaged around the bag for the remainder of the food Zuko had taken from the rebels’ camp, while the firebender looked for branches and leaves to start a campfire with. Once they had a strong and glowing fire going, they sat close together on the blankets and eagerly began to eat the salty dried meat and the last pieces of bread.

Katara was chewing thoughtfully for a moment before she turned to Zuko with a frown.

“How much longer do you think it will take before Jianguo realizes that we escaped and starts looking for us?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Zuko began as he paused in his eating to think it over as a solemn expression crossed his face. “Jianguo had only been gone for about a day when…when everything happened.” He cleared his throat and shook his head to keep the dark memories away. “Ping already had a head start before we set out, so perhaps he is getting close to them or maybe he has already caught up with them and has told Jianguo about what I did.”
A dark look settled on his face before he shook his head and frowned.

“If that is so, then we will need to travel faster and for as long as possible,” the young Fire Lord said. “We’ll need to be careful in case they catch up with us. They have more knowledge of this terrain than we do.”

Katara nodded and scooted closer to him. She hoped that they found help before they came across those men again. They were silent for a moment before Katara looked up at him with a worried frown.

“Zuko, we need to warn any villagers that we meet about the raiders. They need to be prepared for any attacks,” she told him firmly.

“Yeah, I was thinking of that, too,” Zuko agreed as he looked at the blazing flames before them. “I just hope that Jianguo doesn’t cause too much damage to any village he comes across in his pursuit of us.”

“But we’re no longer anywhere close to the Fire Nation colonies and any village we find now is going to be under the reign of the Earth Kingdom,” Katara spoke up. “From what you’ve told me before, Jianguo has only been attacking the Fire Nation’s colonies.”

Zuko nodded gravely.

“Yes, but there’s no saying that he won’t attack the Earth Kingdom villages in his quest to capture us,” he responded.

A deep frown appeared on Katara’s face as she thought over what Zuko had said. They needed to be as discreet as possible so they did not endanger any more innocent lives. Silence fell on them again as they each dwelled in their own thoughts.

Katara felt Zuko reach a hand up to touch her hair and she looked up at him curiously, but she noticed that he was caressing her hair absentmindedly as he stared intently at the campfire. His face was set in an impassive yet hard expression. The fire made shadows dance around his eyes, his nose, along his scar, causing his features to seem sharper and more severe than they actually were. He was lost in deep contemplation and she could detect that he was worried.
“Zuko, is something wrong?” she asked him quietly as she reached a hand out to touch his chest.

The young man blinked and looked away from the hypnotizing fire to stare down at the Water Tribe woman leaning against his side and gazing up at him in concern. He was only mildly surprised to know that she had sensed his disquiet. He continued to stroke her hair as he tried to gather his thoughts.

“I…I’m worried for my mother,” he finally admitted.

“Lady Ursa? Why?” Katara asked gently as she ran her hand on his chest in soothing circles.

“I don’t know…” Zuko trailed off uncertainly before a frown appeared on his forehead. “I have this feeling that the letter she received after my coronation was sent from the same person as the threatening letters that have been sent to me for the past few months.”

Katara gasped and her hand paused in her caress as she looked at Zuko with wide eyes.

“Do you think the same person would threaten Lady Ursa again?” she asked.

“I hope not,” Zuko responded in a harsh tone before he exhaled deeply. “But I’m confident that Admiral Jee, Advisor Chao, and my guards will keep her safe.”

Katara relaxed and leaned closer to him as Zuko wrapped his arm around her and sighed.

“Lady Ursa is well protected, Zuko,” Katara reassured him. “And besides, she can defend herself nicely. She has been living on her own for years, after all. Lady Ursa is a strong woman. Not fragile and helpless like the other women in your Royal Court,” she ended with a sniff.

Zuko smirked at her tone and reached his hand under her chin to pull her head up so he could look at her.

“Why, Katara, are you jealous?” he asked teasingly.
“No,” Katara huffed at him.

Zuko chuckled deeply at her obvious lie and grinned when she turned away from him with her nose in the air. He leaned down to kiss her cheek while he squeezed her waist as he continued to chuckle. Katara grumbled at him, but immediately relaxed in his hold.

“You’re right about my mother,” Zuko continued after he had calmed down and once again turned serious. “But I’d feel better if I was back in the Fire Nation to make sure she is all right. It will also make me feel less anxious if I have you in a safer place.”

Katara smiled at him and kissed his cheek before she snuggled closer to his chest. She was beginning to doze off when another disturbing thought crossed her mind and she tensed.

“You told me that it seemed Jianguo was being informed of everything about you, me, and the people closest to us,” Katara began.

Zuko frowned as he felt her tense and heard the worry in her voice.

“Yes, and once we return to the Fire Nation I will begin a search to find this traitor,” Zuko growled out in a low tone before he frowned at her. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“What if that same person you think could be threatening your mother is also keeping a watch on my family?” Katara began urgently before a thoughtful expression appeared on her face. “I need to return to the Southern Water Tribe and warn my father.”

Zuko felt fear creep into his heart at the thought of Katara leaving him to travel all alone, almost to the other end of the world, and his hold on her tightened so much that it made her stop speaking.

“Absolutely not!” he growled firmly. “I am not going to let you go!”

Katara gaped at him in surprise before that surprise turned into anger. She glared up at him menacingly.
“How dare you!” Katara shouted at him as she tried to get out of his hold. “You’re nobody to tell me what I can and cannot do! And if I want to visit my family, then I will! Now let me go, damn it!”

Zuko frowned at her angry words as he tried to ignore her struggling against his embrace. He knew he could not tell her what to do, especially since he was not her relative or her husband. Yet. But he was not about to let her get away from him and get herself hurt or worse. When Katara almost wrenched herself away from him, Zuko pinned her arms to her sides and pulled her so that her back was to his chest and again ignored her indignant shouts.

“How dare you!” he whispered gently in her ear. “It’s not like I want to force you or anything, but I just don’t want you to go on a trip to the Southern Water Tribe all by yourself.” He relaxed his hold slightly when Katara paused in her efforts to break away. “If we are being watched, they could capture you again, and this time they will succeed in their plan for I will give up everything for you.”

Katara’s eyes widened as his words sank in. She felt ashamed for how heatedly she reacted when she thought he challenged her independence and hurt her pride; without thinking about the consequences. She slumped against him with her head bowed.

“I’m sorry, Zuko,” she apologized softly. “I didn’t think about that.”

Zuko relaxed his hold completely and turned her around so she could look at him.

“I understand why you reacted like that,” Zuko reassured her as he swept her hair out of her face. “I know you just want to make sure your family is safe and so do I. Once we return to the Fire Nation, I’ll send Chief Hakoda and Sokka a warning.”

Katara wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed contentedly when he wound his arms around her and caressed her back.

“Thank you,” she told him as she nuzzled his neck.

A shiver ran down Zuko’s spine when Katara nuzzled into him, but he ignored it as he ran his fingers through her tresses.

“There’s nothing for you to thank me for,” he said softly. “I want your family to be safe as well.”
Since they will be my family very soon, he thought with a large smirk.

“I promise I won’t get myself caught,” Katara spoke up, oblivious to Zuko’s thoughts. “I won’t let them use me to hurt you or make you choose between the Fire Nation and me.”

“But there will not be much of a choice for I will always decide upon you,” Zuko told her ardently. “As much as I love the Fire Nation, and as much as it would pain me to hand it over to those bastards, I will sacrifice everything for you because I love you more.”

“Oh, Zuko,” Katara sighed at him as she reached up to place a quick kiss on his firm lips. “As much as it pleases me to hear you say that, I won’t let you do such a thing.”

She kissed him again when it seemed he was going to argue with her.

“Let’s just not get captured again and then you won’t have to make such a decision, okay?” Katara said and smiled when he sighed and gave her a curt nod.

“I’m as eager as you to send word to Uncle Iroh about Jianguo’s threat because I know how much you care for the Fire Nation,” Katara told him. “So that’s why I agree that we should travel faster and for as long as we can from now on.”

“I knew you’d understand how important my duties are to me,” Zuko told her as he attacked her neck with kisses, causing her to let out a few giggles. “That’s why I love you so much.”

“Why?” Katara asked in between more giggles as she tilted her head to allow Zuko to continue kissing her neck. “I know how important your duties are for you because I take my duties back in the Southern Water Tribe seriously, too.”

“That’s why,” Zuko told her as he gently nibbled on her earlobe. He smiled when she let out a small moan. “Most women would have been upset to know that their men consider their responsibilities more important than them.”

“Well, I’m not like most women,” Katara tried to reply with a huff, but instead her voice came out breathlessly.
Zuko pulled away from her soft skin and smirked at her.

“Oh, and don’t I know it,” Zuko told her huskily as he brushed his lips over hers.

Katara smiled as she basked in the wonderful sensation of Zuko’s kisses.

A chilly breeze blew by them, rustling the leaves and branches of the many trees surrounding them, and Katara shivered at the drop of temperature. She felt Zuko press her closer to him and she gasped softly into his mouth when he raised his body heat and made the campfire roar stronger, enfolding her in a warm and safe cocoon. They broke apart as Katara cuddled closer to Zuko in order to soak up his warmth, her gaze focusing on the glowing fire as a warm and happy feeling spread through her. She watched drowsily as the red and orange flames danced before her eyes, but then the fire turned scorching white and behind this white fire was an enraged Zuko. Her eyes widened at the memory.

“Katara? What’s wrong?” she heard Zuko ask and she felt him tense against her.

“It’s nothing. I was just remembering how…frightening you looked…when you attacked those men back in Jianguo’s camp,” she spoke up quietly.

Zuko stiffened and he stopped stroking her back. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

“The sight of you…bleeding and dying was more frightening,” he replied quietly.

Katara wondered at the change of his mood and shifted against him so she could look up at him.

“It just surprised me that you were able to kill so many men so easily,” she said.

Zuko tensed even further at her words as he looked down at her.

“What they tried to do to you and for causing your blood to be spilled was unforgivable. They deserved it for hurting you,” he replied darkly.
He looked away from her so he could stare out into the darkness beyond the trees.

“I don’t feel any remorse for killing them,” he confessed.

He returned his gaze toward her with a well-concealed apprehensive expression. He saw that she was looking at him with wide, blue eyes and his heart clenched in dread.

“Do…do you think less of me?” he asked her in an emotionless tone. “Do you see me as a monster now, Katara?”

Katara’s eyes softened at the slight anxiousness she could detect in his voice. When he looked away again, she reached for his face and turned his head so he could see her. Zuko looked into her eyes apprehensively, afraid that he might see her disgust or pity. Instead he was surprised to see her give him a compassionate and understanding smile.

“I would never think less of you for trying to protect me,” she told him sincerely. “I admit I was a bit shocked at your ruthlessness, but I understand that you did what you did to avenge me. And in a way, their deaths were for the best for now those men won’t be able to hurt anyone else.”

She ran her fingers along the scarred flesh on the left side of his face and she smiled gently when Zuko sighed and leaned into her touch.

“I will never see you as a monster, Zuko,” she reminded him firmly.

Zuko could not explain the relief and elation her heartfelt words of understanding caused him and he crushed her soft body to him and captured her lips in a fierce kiss that had them both panting in no time. Gods, he could not get enough of kissing Katara. He pulled away from her mouth with a soft groan after a moment and placed heated kisses on the skin of her face until he rested his head on her shoulder while she caressed his hair.

“I knew you would understand, Katara,” Zuko whispered into her ear.

Katara smiled before she decided to change the subject.
“I never knew you could bend white fire,” she told him in an amazed tone.

Zuko gave her a squeeze of gratitude at the change of topic before he moved slightly away so he could smirk at her.

“Neither did I,” he admitted with a quiet chuckle.

Katara looked at him with a confused expression. “What?”

“Most firebenders never reach the level of bending white fire,” the young man explained to her.

“Really? Why is that?” she asked as she tilted her head to the side curiously.

“Well…” Zuko began as he tried to remember what he had read about the technique during his studies as a child. “I’ve only heard of a few firebenders that were capable of achieving such high levels of firebending. I’m not sure how it comes to be, whether from intense years of training or… luck.”

“Luck?” asked the waterbender.

Zuko raised his head and gazed out into the trees again. He was silent for a moment before he finally replied to her question.

“Azula…she was able to bend blue fire since she began her first years of training, even though she was a very young girl,” Zuko began emotionlessly. “She did not need to try, it came naturally to her.”

Katara ran her hand soothingly along his arm since she knew Zuko was still hurt by the preference and praise Azula always received for her ability to master her bending so easily. She also knew that, despite what Azula had done to them, it still saddened Zuko to see his younger sister lost in insanity. Katara looked up at him to give him a large smile in order to cheer him up.
“So then that means that all your years of hard training paid off for you to be able to bend white fire,” Katara chirped.

Zuko tightened his hold on her as he looked away from staring into the distance so he could gaze into her bright cobalt eyes.

“Maybe my training was one cause,” he began as he gave her a small smile, “but the reason why I was able to achieve the level of bending white fire was because of you.”

“Me?” Katara asked skeptically.

“You don’t seem to comprehend how much you mean to me, Katara,” Zuko said and frowned at her, as his arms tightened around her. “I cannot stand it when you get hurt or are in danger and it always angers me when someone insults you.

“But back in Jianguo’s camp, you had been both disrespected and had been…fatally wounded. My usual anger turned into rage, a rage that had festered so intensely inside me that it exploded in white fire. All I thought at that moment was hurting those that had caused you pain and the need to get rid of them as soon as possible so that I could help you, but I…I was too late.”

“But I’m alive now,” Katara reminded him as she stared softly into his tormented golden eyes. “I’m all right. You need to put that in the past and forget it, Zuko.”

She was surprised when Zuko tightly clutched onto her, almost despairingly, his eyes seemed to blaze as he stared intensely into her eyes.

“I can’t, Katara! I can’t!” Zuko shouted heatedly. “I can’t forget the memory of you dying in my arms! Don’t you understand? I…I almost lost you…”

His voice trailed off brokenly and Katara quickly wrapped her arms around him to comfort him while he buried his face into her hair.

“You don’t need to worry anymore because I will never leave you,” Katara promised him fervently. “You don’t need to worry any longer because you will never lose me again.”
Zuko closed his eyes tightly as he took comfort in the words and loving embrace of the woman he loved above all else. They were silent for a moment as they clutched onto each other before Katara moved away slightly. Zuko wanted to pull her back to him, but he reluctantly let go of her. He watched as a faint blush spread across her cheeks and he raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

“Zuko? Did you really mean…what you said to Feng?” she asked almost shyly.

“What did I say?” he asked her with a frown.

“When the coward was begging for mercy, you told him that he should’ve thought about that before hurting what…what was yours,” she said, blushing more deeply.

Zuko quickly leaned down to press his lips to hers, reaching out a hand to brush the back of his fingers along her cheek.

“You are mine,” Zuko growled huskily against her plump lips as he stared intently into her shiny, blue orbs, “As much as I am yours.”

Katara felt elated at his fervent words and she allowed herself to get lost in the demanding kiss Zuko was bestowing upon her.

Zuko slowly pulled them down onto the blankets and settled his upper body lightly over hers as he continued to assault her mouth in languid kisses, while his hand gently stroked her side. He licked her lower lip and he smiled inwardly when she immediately opened her mouth to him. Without any hesitation, Zuko slipped his tongue inside her hot mouth, earning himself a low moan from deep within her throat while she gripped the hair at the nape of his neck. Their tongues touched and when she jumped against him, Zuko decided to slow down a bit, so she could get used to the sensations.

Their lips broke apart for a moment so they could catch their breaths before Zuko again leaned down to capture Katara’s sweet mouth. He slipped his tongue inside her moist mouth and lightly caressed her tongue, gently coaxing her into reciprocating his actions.

Katara experienced a strange and new level of pleasure as Zuko’s warm tongue continued to stroke hers in a soft yet firm caress. She moaned and breathed deeply through her nose as her whole body began to heat up. She tried to follow his lead as the weight from Zuko’s upper body touching hers delighted her in ways she had never known. Her tongue touched his a bit timidly and awkwardly at first, but when an encouraging moan sounded from his throat, her confidence flared. She began to
taste and explore his mouth just as he had done to hers before. A spicy and smoky flavor covered her taste buds and she found that she liked it very much.

Zuko grinned in his head as Katara learned quickly and picked up the pace as she eagerly explored his mouth. A low and pleased groan escaped him when she wrapped her soft tongue around his while she ran one of her hands down his back. He had never experienced such immense satisfaction from just a kiss and he could not help but wonder how much pleasure he would experience once he actually made love to Katara.

That delightful thought and Katara’s current caressing mouth made his blood heat up to such intense levels that it was almost painful. The leisurely pace in which he had started swiftly changed into a frantic and heated kiss. Katara tried to keep up with him, but Zuko quickly dominated her mouth and she surrendered willingly while she tangled her fingers into his short hair. Her leg brushed the inside of his thigh, almost touching the evidence of his arousal, and he growled. Zuko pressed himself closer to her while his hands began to roam over her soft body that lay beneath his hard frame. His desire to shred her clothes away from her body and take her grew to such an extreme level that it almost scared him.

Katara was lost in Zuko’s fiery embrace as she felt his large and warm hands caress her body. She gasped as a shot of pleasure went straight to her core when one of his hands cupped her breast and she immediately stiffened as she also noticed something hard poking her thigh.

Zuko noticed her body tense and he froze. He moved his twitching hand away from her breast and slowly released her mouth as he also moved his lower body away from her. He placed his head against her shoulder and breathed heavily as he tried to calm his racing heart, embarrassed that he had lost his control like that. It had never happened to him before. Of course, the few women he had been with before could not make his blood flare up with heat the way just a single caress from Katara did. He pulled back slightly to look into her eyes and he swallowed when he saw her flushed features and swollen lips.

“I’m sorry for being too forward. I didn’t mean to overwhelm you,” he apologized quietly to her. His voice came out husky and he cleared his throat a few times.

Katara was still trying to take air into her lungs and make her fuzzy brain start working again so she could reply to him.

“I-it’s f-fine,” Katara tried to reassure him before she looked away from his eyes a bit bashfully. “It’s just that I’m not used to such things yet, but I…I really enjoyed it.”
Zuko smiled at her shy admission and he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She looked back up to smile at him, but he stiffened when her leg accidentally brushed against him.

“I, uh…” Zuko swallowed as his shifted. “I think it’s best that we get some rest now so we can set out at dawn.”

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips before he moved away from her. He stood up with his back turned toward her and smoothed his hair back.

“Where are you going?” Katara asked him innocently as she sat up. She blushed as she tried to straighten out her shirt, though her wrappings covered her breasts.

Zuko froze at her innocent inquiry as he was making his way to the trees.

“Um…I…” he stammered before he cleared his throat. “I need to…uh…step behind a tree…for a moment.”

He groaned inwardly in mortification at what he said before he looked over his shoulder to see what Katara thought.

“Oh,” was her simple reply. “Okay, then. Don’t take too long.”

Zuko gave her a small smile as she smiled back at him innocently.

“I’ll be back shortly,” he muttered. He hoped that she did not notice he was blushing. Dammit, he never blushed.

“Okay, I’ll be waiting for you,” Katara told him before she grinned. “I’ll probably freeze without your body heat.”

Zuko gave her a quick nod as he strode away. He tried not to walk too stiffly due to his erection. He disappeared in the shadows of the trees, clenching his right hand while his left hand, the one that had cupped Katara’s soft breast, twitched.
He sighed.

He could not wait for that glorious day when it would be Katara that would take care of the not-so-little problem currently in his hand.
Heated Chase

Two days later found the young Fire Lord and the waterbender walking carefully along a narrow path, their left hands tightly grasping the rough rock wall to their side in order to keep them from falling over the precipice to their right. Katara took another glance, to the plunging deeps below, before she quickly directed her eyes forward when her stomach made a queasy flip. It wasn’t that she was afraid of heights. She had ridden on Appa’s back while he flew in the sky high above the earth, after all. It was just the knowledge that if her footing faltered there would be nothing to save her from plummeting to the many thick trees and sharp rocks below.

The young Water Tribeswoman glanced at Zuko’s tensed back as he walked before her and a soft smile spread across her face as she remembered what had happened a few minutes ago. They had been walking along the edge for a while and she had taken the time to admire the beautiful scenery to their right when her right foot stepped upon a crumbling piece of the path, sending her almost careening over the side. Before she could even let out a scream, Zuko had whirled around, grabbed her arm, and pulled her back. She had been about to thank him when he had crushed her to his tall frame and began to berate her for not being more careful and then demanded that she paid more attention. At first, she had been indignant at his words, but then she understood that he had just been frightened when he began to press kisses on her lips and face while muttering his thanks to Agni that he was able to get to her before she had fallen to her death. Katara had reassured him that she was going to be more careful and then they had resumed their walk, albeit a bit more slowly.

Katara’s eyes became soft and loving as she continued to stare at Zuko’s strong back as he continued picking his way on the narrow path. She did not like Zuko to worry so much, but she had to admit that it made her feel all warm and happy when he became so concerned for her safety and care. She wondered what she could do to show him how much she appreciated everything he did for her and to show him how much she loved him.

The memory of the heated kiss they had shared a few nights ago flitted across her mind as she recalled the way his tongue had caressed her mouth so thoroughly while his hand boldly explored her body. A shiver went through her as she remembered the feeling of his hand on her breast and a small blush appeared on her cheeks when she felt her body responding to the memory. A now familiar heat flared in her lower belly, her breasts tingled and warmed, and moisture gathered between her thighs. Such new feelings unnerved her and she didn’t know how to react to them properly.

Katara noticed Zuko turn to her and she resisted the urge to cross her arms over her breasts self-consciously as she returned his concerned look with a small smile.

Zuko glanced over his shoulder for the twentieth time since Katara had almost plummeted to the trees below and he let out a relieved breath when his eyes landed on her soft face. He caught her reassuring smile before he turned his head forward again. His heart had felt like it jumped to his
throat when he had heard the ground crumble behind him and heard Katara’s shocked gasp. He had
instinctively turned around to catch her. He could not describe the fear that had resurfaced within him
at the thought that he could have lost her again. She meant so much to him. He loved her so much.
And he would be damned before he allowed anything to take her away from him. He hoped that
they could return to the Fire Nation soon where he would be more reassured that she would be safe.

The cry of a bird drew Zuko’s attention away from his thoughts and his eyes followed the eagle-
hawk’s flight as it spread its long wings wide and soared across the orange-reddish sky. It reminded
Zuko that night would settle soon and it would not be good for them to be stuck where they were in
the darkness. Hopefully, the narrow path would end soon so they could find a place to rest.

In the last few days, they had been able to cover more ground since Katara had regained her strength
and had insisted that she was feeling better and could walk longer distances. They would head out as
soon as the first rays of the sun touched the sky, rest for an hour or two at noon, and continue late
into the night until they found a place to sleep and rest. They were running out of dried meat, but
fortunately, the forest had an abundance of fruits and nuts that would be able to sustain them for a
while. Zuko was sure that they were many miles ahead of Jianguo and his men, allowing him to
breathe a bit easier at the knowledge that they would not be caught and Katara would be safe until
they found help or his uncle somehow found them.

Zuko hoped that Iroh was all right and nothing had happened to him and his crew during the storm,
but he was confident his wise uncle had managed to evade any disaster. Zuko again found himself
worrying about what his mother was going through. He frowned at the thought that she might think
she had lost her son so soon after being reunited and after so many years of separation, but he vowed
that once he returned home he would find a way to make it up to her.

It was a couple of hours later when the narrow path began to make a deep slope and they breathed a
sigh of relief when they again found themselves on even ground. The trees were smaller in this area
and there were less of them clustered together, allowing both weary travelers to see the sky above
their heads. A few birds darted from tree branch to tree branch and did not seem to notice the two
humans that walked below as they continued to chirp and squawk, nor did they noticed the
calculating gleam the tall male sent their way.

Zuko looked away from the birds—or better said, the prospect of meat—and instead turned his
attention to Katara who was now walking beside him. Though she did not complain much, Zuko
saw that their continuous walk and the lack of food was taking a toll on her and he knew that he
needed to find a way to gather more food before they starved. He had never in his life hunted an
animal for food before, he was, after all, born a prince and had people who did that for him. Not
even when he had run across the Earth Kingdom with his uncle when they were fugitives years
before. And when he had joined the gang it had always been Sokka who hunted for meat and Zuko
had just helped him carry it back to the group for Katara to clean and cook it. He had never set up a
trap for an animal or hunted it down so he was not sure how he was going to go about it.
But then again, he was a skilled tracker, one of the reasons why he had always been able to come upon Aang and the group when he was hunting them, so maybe it would not be that hard to track one animal down so he could present it to Katara. There was this strange, almost primitive, urge inside him that demanded he provide for his woman, by feeding her and making sure she was taken care of, and it confounded him.

Shaking such thoughts and feelings away for the moment, Zuko reached out a hand to brush it tenderly along the small of Katara’s back. He felt her shiver against him and he smiled when she turned to look at him with bright blue eyes. Ever since they had kissed so passionately two nights ago, he found it hard to keep his hands away from her lovely body, and curb his desire to make love to her.

“We should start looking for a place to rest,” he told her in his usual cool tone.

Katara smiled and nodded at him. “Yeah, and then we could…”

Zuko raised an eyebrow when she paused mid-sentence before a large smile appeared on her lips and her eyes brightened.

“What is it?” he asked curiously.

“I can feel a large body of water calling to me,” Katara spoke up. “It’s probably a river or a lake.”

Katara closed her eyes for a moment as she savored the pull of her element after being blocked from her bending those two weeks they were held as hostages. She concentrated on the pull for a moment, letting it wash over her, before her eyes snapped opened to her right.

“I can feel it coming from that way,” Katara told him excitedly as she pointed through the trees. “Come on!”

Without waiting for Zuko to reply, Katara grabbed his hand and pulled him after her as she began to race toward the call of water. Zuko allowed the waterbender to drag him after her and he watched as her brown tresses flew behind her as they went around trees and through bushes at a fast run.

It was a few minutes later when the sound of rushing water reached their ears before they burst from the trees and skidded along the edge of a narrow river. Katara squealed happily, as she dropped her
bag to the ground before she let go of Zuko’s hand and raced toward the water, eagerly stepping into it with boots and all. She enjoyed the feeling of the cool liquid against her legs and a deep sigh left her lips.

Zuko watched as Katara wound a thin water whip around her form and happily twirled in the river, the water reaching to her knees. A fond smile spread across his face at the obvious joy he saw on her beautiful features. Zuko waited for a moment as his beloved was once again reacquainted with her element before he dropped his own bag to the ground, laying the small sword on top of it before he finally stepped forward so he could stand right on the edge of the river.

“It seems like your wish to take a bath just came true,” Zuko spoke up with amusement lacing his voice.

Katara turned to smile at him as she bent the water whip into a small ball that hovered above her hands before her eyes narrowed at the gleam that reached Zuko’s golden eyes. She dropped the ball of water until it rained back down into the river and she crossed her arms below her breasts as she narrowed her eyes at him.

“I’m not going to bathe in front of you,” she told him firmly.

Zuko just smirked at her as he crossed his own arms over his broad chest.

“It’s not like it will be the first time I saw you in a swimming suit or your underclothes, you know,” he replied in a casual tone.

Katara gaped at him for a moment as a blush spread on her cheeks.

“W-what?!” she shrieked.

“You used to practice your waterbending in them in our travels during the war,” Zuko reminded her, smirk still in place on his lips. “You used to prance around in them.”

“I did not prance around!” Katara gasped in indignation before she pointed an accusing finger at him. “You’re the one with the perverted mind!”
Zuko felt his face flush at her words since he could not deny that he had enjoyed the sight of her, he had been, after all, a teenage boy. He couldn’t help himself noticing and enjoying the view, he wasn’t blind, for Agni’s sake!

“You’re the one who came into my room when I finished bathing and gaped at me while I only had a towel wrapped around my waist,” Zuko said instead.

Katara blushed before she raised an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, yeah? Well, you’re the one who walked in on me while I bathed at the lake a few months ago!” Katara countered.

“How could I forget that…?” Zuko breathed out wistfully.

Katara sputtered at him for a second before she shook her fist at him. “Why you…”

“It’s not like I come across a beautiful woman in her bath every day,” Zuko interrupted her with a smile.

Katara lowered her hand and she looked down at her feet submerged in the water as she blushed deeply at his words before she looked back up to his face with a suspicious look in her eyes.

“You told me before that you hadn’t been spying on me,” Katara began in an even tone. “Did you lie?”

“No,” Zuko answered truthfully. “I was telling you the truth when I said I didn’t know you were there. But…when you surfaced above the water with your hair and skin gleaming with droplets under the moonlight…I just couldn’t look away,” he admitted softly. “I knew I should have left you alone as soon as I realized you were there, but it was like my body refused to obey me.”

The gold in his eyes darkened slightly as he let his eyes roam her body in a slow caress that caused Katara’s skin to heat up.

“I would be lying if I said that I had not wished that you would have stepped out of the water so I
could have seen all of you,” he told her, his voice turning deep.

He paused briefly when Katara’s eyes widened and her blush deepened. He loved it that he was able to bring the rich hue to her cheeks so easily.

“So perhaps you were right when you called me a pervert and attacked me,” he continued, “but it hurt me when you accused me of having dishonorable intentions towards you.”

Katara glanced away from his eyes before she again lifted her head to smile at him.

“I know you aren’t a dishonorable man, Zuko. It’s just that you startled me and I lashed out like any indignant woman would at having her privacy invaded,” Katara told him sincerely before she looked away from him shyly. “Besides, I can’t be mad at you for having such thoughts because…I…also wondered what you would have looked like without…the t-towel wrapped around your waist.”

Zuko chuckled at her blush and bashful admittance before he leaned forward a bit, his eyes gleaming under the setting sun.

“Very soon you will get your wish, Katara,” he promised in a whisper. “And I will also have my fondest wish to see you naked before me realized.”

He chuckled deeply at her shocked expression and he turned around before she could say a word.

“You should hurry up and bathe before the sun goes down,” he prompted her.

Katara closed her gaping mouth and huffed at him. Her lips lifted in a smirk, and with a flick of her hand, a small wave of water rose from the river and drenched the unsuspecting firebender’s back. Zuko jumped and hissed as the cold water met him and he whirled around with an angry glare.

“What was that for?” he demanded indignantly.

Katara laughed at him as the water clung to his hair and clothes, and it was a while before she calmed down enough to answer him.
“You need a bath too, after having such dirty thoughts,” she wheezed out before she broke out into giggles.

Zuko glowered at her through his wet bangs and he swiped his dark hair away from his eyes since it had grown longer during the past few weeks. He opened his mouth to shout at her to stop her laughter, but instead he closed it and his scowling lips were replaced by a devious smirk.

_Ah, if only you knew of the many ‘dirty’ things I have dreamed about doing to you and the many ‘dirty’ things we have done in my dreams, Katara_, he mused in his mind.

“You know what? You’re absolutely right,” he finally spoke up.

Katara stopped giggling to raise a questioning eyebrow at him.

“I am?” she asked suspiciously.

“Yes, I do need a bath,” the young lord said in a nonchalant tone.

He bent down to remove his black boots before tossing them to the side. He then raised his head to keep eye contact with Katara as he casually began to remove his red tunic, making sure to keep his face as smooth as a stone, though his eyes were burning with an intense fire. His tunic was tossed to the side and it landed right beside his dirty boots. Without a hint of emotion on his face, Zuko stepped into the water and made his way toward the frozen waterbender.

“What are you doing?!?” Katara shrieked as she took a step back.

Zuko stopped and cocked his head to side, giving her an innocent look, which did not fool her at all.

“Why, I am going to take a bath just like you said I should,” he replied with a small shrug.

Katara opened her mouth to scream at him to leave, but she found that she could not get any words out when her eyes landed on his muscular torso and stomach. Her brain seemed to have shut down
when Zuko reached down to cup some water from the fresh river before letting it run down his smooth, alabaster skin in slow trickles. Her cheeks burned and her breathing picked up a little more than normal as her eyes followed the path the water drops made down his upper body, down gleaming pale skin and hard muscles, until they disappeared on the hem of his dark pants. Realizing that she was staring, Katara snapped her eyes away to look back at Zuko and she scowled when she saw that he had a smug smirk on his face.

*Oh, yeah? Two can play at this game,* Katara thought with an inward smirk as she wadded her way toward the edge of the river and stepped onto the grassy ground.

When Zuko looked up to frown at her, Katara gave him a wide and innocent smile before she turned away from him. Once she knew she had his attention, Katara reached for the sash around her waist and pulled one of the ends until it slowly unraveled away from her. She dropped the black material to the floor at her feet.

Zuko froze in his movements as he stared at Katara with wide eyes as she slowly began to undress before him.

*What is she doing?* he groaned in his head. *She’s not really going to…Is she really going to…?*

He could not continue that thought as the idea of Katara willingly standing before him nude as the day she was born made his head a bit foggy. He had actually expected her to have run away or frozen him to a tree the moment he took off his tunic.

His heart almost jumped from his chest when she bent down in front of him to unlace her boots and his eyes swept appreciatively over her firm backside until she straightened once she had rolled the bottom hem of her dark pants above her knees. Zuko felt himself beginning to pant as her smooth and tanned legs were revealed and he swallowed when he imagined those wonderful appendages wrapped around his waist. His eyes darkened slightly when more of Katara’s skin was revealed to him as she finally reached for her blue tunic and he groaned inwardly when she dropped it to the floor beside her boots. He cursed under his breath at the white wrappings on her chest that were hiding what he had been dying to see for so long. He just knew Katara would not actually undress fully; it was still too early for that.

Once she had removed everything except her under wrappings and her pants to cover her most private areas, Katara slowly stepped back into the water without even looking at the silent firebender already in it. Katara turned away from him so she could hide her blushing face. She could not believe she was doing this! What in the world had seized control of her to make her be so bold? She felt embarrassed and self-conscience, but she wanted to tease Zuko as he had been doing to her recently. So she swallowed down her embarrassment and the urge to run back to shore to put her clothes back on while she water-whipped Zuko across his face for staring and teasing her in the first place.
Commanding her arms to stop trembling, Katara bent a ribbon of water above her head and allowed it to sprinkle down on her. A soft sigh escaped her at the feeling of the clean water caressing her skin like refreshing drops of rain.

Zuko’s eyes became slightly hooded and he licked his lips as he watched Katara bathe before him. His eyes followed her graceful movements as she bent the clean water around her tempting form, leaving a wet trail on her lovely, caramel skin while her long hair clung to her back. Zuko felt his cock straining against the confinement of his trousers as he saw Katara’s white wrappings become almost transparent as the water touched them, and he knew that if he continued watching her he would not be able to stop himself from taking her. It had been a bad idea teasing her, he should have known she was going to find a way to get back at him. Zuko turned away from the delicious sight and hastily finished bathing before he pounced on her.

Once his skin and hair were free of the dirt and grime that had accumulated on him, Zuko cleared his throat lightly and averted his eyes when the waterbending woman turned to him.

“I’m going to start a fire. You should hurry before the sun sets completely,” he began before he turned narrowed eyes at the distant dark trees. “I don’t want anyone to come upon you and see you…in such a state,” he growled out before he flicked his eyes toward her. “I don’t want anyone to see what only I am supposed to see.”

“Uh…o-okay,” Katara stuttered, her heart racing at the possessiveness in his voice.

Zuko nodded at her before he stepped onto the shore. He raised his body temperature, and steamed rose from his body until his hair, skin and pants were completely dry. Once he was completely dressed, he turned to smile briefly at Katara before he turned away to get the small camp ready.

Once he had placed the blankets on the ground and had a nice fire blazing, Zuko sat down to watch over Katara and make sure no one came around as she continued to waterbend in the small river. He looked briefly at the darkening sky before he returned his attention to his future bride; the thought brought a smile to his face.

He noticed that Katara was no longer bathing but was now playing with the water. He watched as she would send balls or ribbons of water into the air before freezing them until they plopped down back into the river where they dissolved, and he knew she was trying to get reacquainted with her graceful element after having their bending abilities suppressed for so long.

Zuko glanced at the burning fire before him and he propped his chin over his interlaced fingers as a deep frown appeared on his shadowed face. It brought up a new question about how easy it was for
someone’s chi to be blocked. He had hated the horrible feeling of not being able to feel his inner fire, and if he had not regained it so soon, Zuko was positive he would probably have gone mad. He wondered absently if that was how his father had felt when Aang had stripped him of his firebending. Is that why Ozai was the way he was now?

‘This is not over, Ursa…I will reclaim you and the throne one way or the other. Mark my words.’ Ozai’s words rebounded in his head.

Zuko narrowed his eyes and he began to wonder how Ozai could be so confident in his threat. Did his sire perhaps have a way to the outside world? Was he perhaps giving out orders? But how could that be? The disgraced Fire Lord was well guarded and Zuko had given his guards strict orders not to let anyone visit Ozai, orders that if not met were punishable by death.

He was brought out of his thoughts when he heard a splash and he looked up from staring at the red flames to see Katara waterbending waves from the bluish river until they reached great heights. Then she swirled them over her head in a small water tornado before letting them splash back into the running river, shiny droplets sprinkling her smooth skin and her chocolate tresses. Zuko watched as she lifted her lean arms before her and bent thin droplets of water into the air, and with a deep exhale, froze them into sharp icicles that she then, with a flick of her wrist, sent in fast succession toward some trees where they were embedded deeply into the thick bark.

A smile replaced his previous pensive frown and Zuko straightened in his spot so he could see his love better. He felt so proud and smug that it was he who was going to have the privilege of having such a strong woman as his wife. He marveled at how powerful yet graceful and beautiful she was, and she was all his.

*His* and no one else’s.

Zuko’s golden eyes widened slightly. He was a bit surprised at how possessive he felt over Katara, but he could not deny he would—as Sokka would say—‘beat the crap’ of any man that tried to take her away from him or so much as snuck a glance her way. She was all his and he would not share.

The amber in his eyes darkened as he once again took notice of Katara’s scantily clad form, though her back was still turned toward him. His eyes traced every dip and curve of her feminine body from her long legs, to her flared hips, to her narrow waist. His breathing became a bit labored, the hand that rested on his thigh twitched, as he watched droplets sliding down her smooth skin. He found himself envying them since he wanted it to be his tongue that took such a delightful voyage. Zuko wanted so much to spring to his feet, snatch the enticing woman in his arms, lay her on the grass and have his way with her in order to quench the fire that raged in his loins. After all, he had gone more than a year in abstinence; more than a year not knowing the touch of a woman. But the desire for intimacy had never been so strong until Katara once again came back into his life and he had realized
he was deeply in love with her.

Katara absentmindedly turned a bit in his direction and Zuko’s breath hitched roughly in his throat as he took noticed of her generous breasts. They were bounded tightly with the white wrapping—perhaps so she could fight better and would not be distracted—but he could just make out their peaks straining against the fabric, the sight making the blood rush to his loins. A low groan escaped him when he brought his hand down on the big bulge visible on the front of his pants, trying to find some relief from his torment. He was about to rise to his feet so he could go to her, but he was able to stop himself before he did something that disgraced them both. He had promised that he was not going to do anything to her that she was not ready for and dammit he was going to keep that promise even if it killed him!

Zuko bit his lip as his hand gave a last squeeze to his covered erection before he moved it away to lay it on the cool grass beside him. He took a couple of deep breaths in order to cool down his ardor and mentally willed the evidence of his arousal to disappear.

Katara had a large smile on her face as she finally relaxed in her waterbending stance as the last rays of the sun touched her skin. She made her way back to shore where she quickly bent the water off her. She glanced briefly in the direction where Zuko was sitting and she blushed when she realized he was staring at her, and so intensely, over the glow of the fire. Katara quickly put on her clothes and boots before she made her way toward Zuko and the small campfire he had created.

Zuko lifted his head to look at the darkening sky as he realized Katara was walking towards him and he felt a moment of panic since he had been unable to completely cool his heated blood. He conjured up a memory from when he had accidently stumbled upon his uncle submerged in a hot spring during their time in the Earth Kingdom and a shudder of disgust went through him. That image was enough to wilt his arousal and he breathed a mental sigh of relief. He smiled when Katara plopped down next to him with a large smile on her face and thanked him when he gave her the last of their dried meat.

“Even though we have no soap, I feel much better,” Katara told him with a soft sigh as she ran her fingers through her hair. Now, if only she had a brush and another set of clothes.

Zuko smiled at the happiness that surrounded her and he wondered if she would be just as happy or more so when he told her about his future plans for them. He cleared his throat softly and when she looked up from eating, he reached a hand to brush it tenderly against her cheek. Tenderness was not something he was used to feeling or displaying, but with Katara, he could not stop himself from showing such affectionate emotions and actions.

“There’s something important that we need to discuss,” he said coolly.
Katara brought down the piece of dried meat from her mouth as she frowned at him.

“Discuss? About what?” Katara asked quietly.

“About us,” he responded softly as his fingers touched her lips.

Katara stiffened slightly at his words.

“Us?” she whispered.

Zuko nodded as he moved his fingers away from her lips to trace them down her cheek and then down her neck.

“Ever since we confessed what we feel for each other we have not discussed anything about our new relationship and what it will lead to,” he explained slowly as if choosing his words carefully.

Katara fidgeted under his touch, not only because it made her skin feel like it was on fire, but because of the direction their conversation might lead to was making her uneasy.

“I…I have been thinking about talking to you about that,” she spoke up softly.

Zuko paused in his light caresses and frowned at her obvious discomfort. A small ache formed in his chest as fear gripped him at the thought that maybe he was the only one who was ready for their relationship to take such a serious step as marriage.

“Alright,” he began hesitantly. “What do you want to tell me?”

Katara looked down at her lap where her hands were fiddling together in worry. She needed to get her insecurities out in the open and Zuko had to hear what she had to say. She took a deep breath before she looked up to stare him in the eye.
“Zuko, I love you,” Katara began seriously. “I love you more than anything in the world, but I will not allow myself to be treated as anything less than what I am.”

Zuko leaned back in bewilderment and brought his hand down from her cheek to rest it on his knee as he wondered at her words. A light frown marked his brow, betraying his confusion.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Katara looked away from his hypnotizing, golden eyes for a second before she returned her gaze with a determined resolve.

“I won’t become…your mistress or concubine and live with you while you take a wealthy Fire Nation noblewoman as your wife and Fire Lady,” she told him firmly.

Zuko’s mouth fell open as he gaped at her in disbelief. Did she just say what he thought she just said? He felt his temper flare.

“Where the hell did you get such a ridiculous thought from, Katara?!” he exclaimed angrily.

“Ridiculous?!” Katara shouted resentfully.

“Yes, ridiculous!” Zuko shouted back as he practically loomed over her. “I do not want you as my concubine! I want you as my wife!”

Katara gasped and she reeled back in shock as she stared at Zuko for a few speechless seconds until she finally was able to stutter out, “W-wife?”

“Yes, wife,” Zuko repeated, this time more gently as he drew her to his side before he leaned down to place a soft kiss to her lips.

Katara did not immediately respond to the kiss as her mind was still whirling with different kinds of emotions raging from shock, confusion, to delight, but a second later she relaxed against him and returned his kiss with soft presses of her lips. Zuko pulled away a short moment later to frown at her as he once again continued to caress the side of her face.
“Do you really think I would disrespect you in such a way as to take you as a concubine?” he asked, slightly offended.

Katara blushed in mortification and looked away from his hurt expression. She felt guilty that she had again accused Zuko of something he would never do, even after she told herself that she would do anything to make him happy.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I didn’t really believe you’d do such a thing. I know you would never really hurt me, but I really had no idea that you wanted me as your wife.”

Another frown crossed Zuko’s features at her words. He placed a finger under her chin and lifted her face so he could see her blue eyes. He saw the swirl of emotions in their depths and he wondered at them.

“Why wouldn’t you think that?” he asked.

Katara removed herself from his grasp and stood up. She frowned at him for a moment before she began to frantically pace the ground before him with an agitated sigh.

“How could you want me as a wife?” she exclaimed. “I’m just the daughter of a chief from a country that just finished rebuilding! I am a waterbender, the exact opposite of a firebender! I am not a noblewoman, I’m not wealthy, nor was I brought up to know the proper etiquette of court life! And above all, I am not a demure and submissive woman!”

Zuko swiftly rose to his feet, and within two long strides, he was upon her before she could step back. Her eyes widened in surprise when Zuko grabbed hold of her arm and tugged, causing her to bump into his chest. She opened her mouth to yell at him, but he silenced her with a firm kiss that stole the air from her lungs. Katara immediately surrendered to his embrace and caressing mouth, and she wrapped her arms around his neck to bring him closer to her, but she groaned in disappointment when he pulled back. They stared into each other’s eyes for a moment as each tried to figure out the other’s thoughts. Zuko leaned down and brushed his lips against hers as he stared deeply into her bright, sapphire orbs.

“Those are some of the many reasons why I love you and why I want you as my wife,” Zuko told her truthfully.
“W-what?” Katara stuttered. Her heart was beating fast as she basked in the soft touch of Zuko’s lips and his warm breath that coasted along her skin.

“The fact that you are not like one of those noblewomen is why I want you,” he began. “I admire your ability to defend yourself and your determination and kind heart to help those in need even if perhaps they do not deserve it. I love your defiance and your fiery spirit,” Zuko continued huskily as he groaned against her plump lips as his breathing increased. “You are a great waterbender, a great fighter, and I love the fact that despite this, you still radiate a feminine aura that makes me want to protect and cherish you.”

The young Fire Lord pulled away from her soft and wonderful mouth only to slide his lips against her cheek, across her nose to the other side of her face, and then down her neck. He heard Katara’s breath hitch as he flicked the tip of his tongue out to taste the skin there and he groaned deep in his throat at the clean and fresh flavor of her. He could feel his own breathing quicken, so he retreated when he knew he still had control of himself. He still found it hard to believe that this slip of a woman could affect him so much that it caused him to falter in the tight control he had on his emotions.

Katara’s eyes had closed in bliss at his words and touch, but she fluttered them open when Zuko leaned back. As she focused her vision, she found herself staring at warm amber eyes gazing at her from such a handsome face, and she felt her heart swell at the thought that this man loved her, truly loved her as much as she did him. She wanted to tell him just that, but she stopped herself so she could listen to him when he continued to speak.

“I’m glad you aren’t the same as most of the haughty and snobbish noblewoman from my Royal Court because then I would be bored out of my mind.” He grinned at her.

“I can barely tolerate Court life and my courtiers, so why would I want be tied to one for the rest of my life? Besides, if I really wanted to tie myself to one of those silly noblewomen I would have done so by now. And if I was really looking for one of the women from my Court as wife I would not have hesitated to…marry Mai.”

Katara felt a flare of jealousy at the thought that Zuko could have married the regal and silent noblewoman, since she could not deny that Mai would have been one of the best candidates for Fire Lady. Katara remembered the hurt behind the determination in Mai’s eyes as the young noblewoman vowed to take Zuko back and, aside from the jealousy, Katara felt a bit bad for her.

“Even though the fact that you broke up with Mai makes me happy because it gave me the chance to be with you,” Katara began with a small frown, “I kind of feel bad for her.”
“Why?” Zuko asked with a confused expression as he raised an eyebrow at her.

“Because she loves you and she lost you,” Katara spoke up quietly.

“I did not mean for her to get hurt,” Zuko said. “But just like you did not want to continue lying and hurting Aang, I didn’t want to do the same to Mai.”

Katara frowned for a moment before she nodded at his logic. Zuko caressed her cheek as he smiled down at her.

“You’re the one who made me realize that I did not love Mai and was not happy,” he told her. “And because of you, I had the courage to end that relationship that was going nowhere. Nothing good would have come out of it in the end.

“But with you it’s different,” he continued softly. “Because of you I was able to see that life did not have to be full of strife and gloom, but that I could find fun and happiness in it too. You love me for who I am and for what I have become. You have shown me how to truly love and it is you that I want in my life.”

Katara smiled at him tenderly for his words brought a comfort to her heart. It was rare to hear Zuko talk so much and also hear him speak about his feelings with such sweet and fervent words. She brought her hand up to rest it over his hand that was caressing her cheek.

“And you are the man that has shown me what true love is,” she told him sincerely. “It was because of you that I realized that what I felt for Aang was not the love I sought in a partner, in a lover, in a husband. You are the only one who has shown me enough respect about my fighting skills despite the fact that I’m a woman.”

She paused and a small blush coated her cheeks as she flicked her eyes briefly away from his.

“You are the only man who has shown me the pleasures one can find in simple intimacy.”

Zuko smirked smugly at her confession, but his humor passed and his expression once again became serious and tender as he ran his fingers down her face. He wanted to reassure her of his feelings for her, wanted her to know how much she meant to him. He wanted her to know that she was the only woman he ever wanted and had ever loved.
“And you are such a wonderful and beautiful woman, Katara,” Zuko breathed out softly as his fingers left her skin in order to twirl them around a thick lock of her chocolate hair that had fallen across her breast.

Katara blushed deeply at his compliment and she felt as if at any moment her heart was about to explode at the happiness and relief she was feeling. She could not take her eyes away from his intense, golden ones, as he played with her hair while his voice turned softer, almost contemplative, as if he were speaking more to himself than to her.

“You are so beautiful, so gorgeous,” she heard him say, “that I still find it hard to believe you could love someone like me…a scarred man.”

Katara’s serene face turned into a frown at his last words. Why would he say such a thing about himself? Couldn’t he see he was such an attractive and striking man despite the scar? Didn’t he see all the adoring and hungry looks women drew at him when he walked past them? Didn’t he see how flustered she would get just by looking at him? She hated it when he talked about himself in such a way.

Zuko tensed slightly when he saw Katara reach for the left side of his face. He did not mean to, it was just a reflex after his father had burnt him all those years ago, but he immediately relaxed against her touch when her fingers rested over his injured eye. The skin had been damaged so much that he lost some sense of feeling, but not that much that he could not feel her fingers running along the creases of his scar in a soothing caress.

“What is there that I wouldn’t love about you, Zuko?” Katara asked gently. “You are so strong, and smart, and such a remarkable leader to your people. Your firebending skills are so great that you’re the only one who can pose a challenge to me. And then you are so attentive and caring toward me,” she sighed softly.

“You say that I am beautiful,” she continued, “and I say that you are handsome. To me, your scar does not detract from your splendor, but enhances it. Just like I told you before on that night in your garden, your scar is a symbol of how brave you are and the justice you hold in your heart, Zuko.” She paused as she let her eyes roam over his features in a caress, much like her fingers were to his rough skin, before she breathed out, “There’s just no way I could describe how stunning you are to me.”

Katara leaned up on her toes so she could reach his face and she touched her lips against the skin of his right cheek just as he had done to her a few moments before. She watched as Zuko stared intently into her eyes before she brushed her lips along his strong jaw. She felt him swallow, and with a tiny
inward smile, she again looked up at his eyes while her hand continued to run soothingly along the scarred skin of his face. She wound her arms around his neck and he immediately wrapped his arms around her.

“I have come to love this scar as much as I have come to love the man,” Katara whispered to him fervently.

Zuko drew in a ragged breath at her words since it caused him so much joy, but he was unable to stop the loud gasp that escaped him when Katara pressed a soft kiss to his scarred cheek. He felt an overwhelming stir of emotions inside him at the gesture that it almost brought him to his knees. Besides Katara, no one had ever touched his scar much less kissed it in such a loving manner, and for a moment he felt lightheaded. Ever since the age of thirteen, the mark on his face had haunted him until he learned to partially accept it as the war came to a close, and when Katara had touched it that night in his private garden the hurt had lessened further. And now he felt like the lingering piece of emotional wound had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders at Katara’s acceptance and tender gesture, and he knew that never again would he see his scar as a horrible mistake he had brought upon himself.

For a long moment, he reveled in something he could not remember any other woman offering to him before at any time of his life. Understanding, support, safety, comfort—given unfalteringly and without reserve. He felt like the immense love he held for Katara grew more than he thought was even possible.

When Katara pressed another soft kiss to his scarred eye and pulled back, Zuko smiled so affectionately at her that it completely stunned her. She had never seen such a look on his face, ever. The firebender wound his arms around her waist more tightly and drew her to his chest while he buried his face in the crook of her neck, breathing in the sweet scent of her skin, before he placed his lips close to her ear.

“Thank you, Katara,” he whispered sincerely in her ear and he knew that he did not need to elaborate in order for her to understand. “This is why I know you are the perfect woman for me. This is why I want you as my wife.”

Katara smiled radiantly at him when he pulled away before her smile turned small and sad.

“Your Royal Court will never accept me,” Katara told him sadly. “Some like me, others tolerate my presence, but most don’t bother to mask the aversion they hold for me.”

Zuko narrowed his eyes and he clenched his jaw as his hold on her tightened possessively.
“I dare anyone to take you away from me and defy my wishes,” he growled out, causing Katara’s heart to skip a beat at his declaration. “I have done everything in my power for my country, even sacrificing myself, but now is the time to do something that, for once, will finally bring me happiness. And I know I will find such happiness with you at my side.”

“Oh, Zuko,” Katara sighed softly.

She beamed at him, causing her beautiful features to become even more enthralling that it caused Zuko’s breath to hitch in his throat. He looked away from her to examine their surroundings for a brief moment before he returned his gaze to her shinning eyes.

“I know that the setting isn’t romantic or anything,” he began hesitantly. “And I don’t have a flowery speech or a betrothal necklace with me, but…” He swallowed nervously. “It would really make me happy if you agreed to marry me, Katara.”

Katara let out a joyful cry as she lunged herself at him so fast that it almost toppled them over had Zuko not reacted quickly enough and caught her. She could not believe it! Zuko had asked her to marry him! True, the proposal was not what she had visualized it was going to be like, but she wasn’t about to complain. All that mattered was that she was going to be Zuko’s wife and he her husband, and if the spirits allowed it, they would live happily together for the rest of their lives. The happiness she felt was almost too overwhelming to bear.

Zuko was taken aback at Katara’s reaction as he caught her before they tumbled to the forest floor, but the feeling of having her in his arms was gratifying. The kiss that she bestowed on him before he could say anything created a hazy and pleasant feeling in his head, having the same effect as several cups of red wine. Zuko’s amber eyes had widened in shock since it had always been him to initiate their kisses so far, but he was pleased to have Katara kiss him—and oh, so passionately.

His strong arms tightened around her narrow waist as he savored fully of her warmth and ardor. He was ecstatic that she had accepted! Mere words could not describe what he was feeling at the moment. He had experience so many emotions so quickly and in such a short time he was surprised he had not blacked out yet. Zuko could feel her soft breasts pressed tightly against his hard chest as his hand slid down her back and he groaned softly.

They finally pulled their lips apart and panted hard against each other’s mouths. A small smirk appeared on Zuko’s face as he stared down at her flushed features.
“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said smugly.

Katara grinned at him as she rubbed her hand on his chest.

“Actually, I was aiming for a definite maybe,” she teased.

She laughed softly when Zuko scowled at her before she gave him a small kiss and then a large smile.

“Of course it’s a yes, silly,” the waterbender laughed.

Another smirk curled Zuko’s lips before he crushed her small body to his hard frame.

“Good, otherwise I would have employed everything in my power to have made you accept,” he growled out.

Katara was about to asked him to elaborate, but Zuko had again claimed her lips in a fiery kiss that sent a current of electricity to her stomach and left her speechless. When he finally pulled away, Katara was sure her face was a deep red color since she had a feeling she knew what he had meant. But then she smirked.

“I’m curious to know what you would have done,” she said innocently.

“I think it would be best that you don’t know what I had in mind,” Zuko spoke up quickly.

Katara blushed again and opened her mouth to insist, but Zuko just shook his head at her.

“It’s getting late. We should sleep so we could set out at dawn,” the firebender interrupted.

Katara wanted to pout, but she shook the idea away, and with a sigh, nodded that she understood.
After another hot kiss, Zuko pulled away to fix their bedding as images passed through his head. A part of him wished that Katara had hesitated in accepting him, that way he could have done many varied and very interesting things to her to have changed her mind. With a mental shake of his head, Zuko glanced at Katara and he gulped when she flashed him a smile. He wondered if he would be able to end this new journey without going insane with his desire for the waterbender.

The couple continued to make their way through the forest a few days later. Their food supply had run out and they were living on fruits and a few wild vegetables they had come across, but after so many days without a proper meal, it was not enough. They had a run-in with an angry armadillo-lion, whom they later found out was just trying to protect its litter, but other than that, nothing eventful had happened.

The sun was bright and hot as its rays beat down upon their heads, but a cool breeze would occasionally pass by to give them comfort. They found shelter beneath the large shadows the trees provided with their large branches cradling many green leaves. A few insects would buzz by while birds took flight into the sky with gleeful chirps. Katara watched the peaceful nature that surrounded them and inhaled deeply in order to breathe in the flowery scent of spring. She could not help but compare the flourishing season to the blossoming relationship between Zuko and her.

Katara’s eyes again wandered to Zuko’s face as he strode calmly beside her and she was unable to stop the giddy grin that appeared on her face. She still could not believe Zuko had asked her to marry him after she told herself that maybe he never would. But now here she was, betrothed to Zuko, the Fire Lord no less! Who would have thought?

Suppressing a giggle, the young woman again looked forward to where they were walking. She felt much like a little girl since all she wanted to do was skip in happiness and sing with merriment, but she controlled herself lest Zuko began to think something was wrong with her and decided he had made a mistake in proposing to her. Katara chuckled mentally at that before she sobered up as another thought came to her mind.

Would it really be so easy for Zuko’s Royal Court to accept a Water Tribe woman as their new Fire Lady? Was she even ready for such a task as becoming a wife to a powerful lord? What would her family think? Would they accept her marriage to Zuko, a firebender and Fire Lord to the country that had brought so much hardship to their people?

And what about Aang? The news would surely devastate him since Aang considered Zuko his friend and Aang was in love with her. How would he take the news that she had agreed to become Zuko’s wife while she had rejected Aang’s proposal not that long ago? Guilt again formed in her stomach so strongly that it made her cringe.

Katara glanced at Zuko’s face again and the cool and tranquil expression on his features brought a
sense of calm to her emotions. She shouldn’t worry so much for all that mattered was that Zuko loved her enough to ask her to marry him and she loved him enough to wish to be by his side for her entire life. Lovingly, Katara reached for Zuko’s hand, lacing their fingers together, and she smiled when Zuko turned to look at her with warm eyes.

Zuko smiled when Katara squeezed his hand and he squeezed her smaller hand back before she grinned and returned her gaze to their path as they walked in comfortable silence. Zuko continued to watch her and a sense of warmth settled in him at the happiness he could clearly see on his betrothed’s face. Zuko looked away to stare at the peaceful scenery before them and a smile appeared on his lips.

His betrothed. He liked the sound of that, but not as much as he would love to finally call Katara his wife.

He was beyond pleased that Katara had accepted to marry him, to be his forever. He could not explain the sudden fear he had experience at the thought that she would reject him, but that negative emotion was swiftly replaced with immense relief and joy when she had accepted him, and in a very intense way. He could not wait to return to the Fire Nation and announce the news to everyone. He was positive that his mother and his uncle would be ecstatic with the news since he knew that they had been trying to push him to admit his feelings for the lovely waterbender.

The young lord again glanced at the young woman’s face when she began to hum a soft tune. He knew the way he had proposed was not that great, or romantic, or even memorable, and although Katara had not said anything, he just knew that deep down she would have wanted it to be something special, so he promised himself to make it up to her some way or another, because she deserved it and so much more.

Zuko almost chuckled at his thoughts. He was not the most romantic guy out there, but for Katara, he would try. He was brought out of his thoughts when Katara tugged at his hand.

“Let’s take a break over at those rocks, yeah?” Katara asked as she moved her shoulders to shift the bag she was carrying into a more comfortable position.

Zuko spotted the rocks she was pointing at and the shade that the trees provided over the large rocks did look inviting.

“Alright,” he agreed with a nod.
They quickly made their way toward the cool stones, and once they reached them, the two benders plopped themselves down with relieved sighs. Katara unceremoniously dropped her pack to the ground and arched her back to get rid of the crick on her lower back while she watched Zuko lower his bag more carefully before he began to rotate his left shoulder. The rusty sword he had found at Jianguo’s camp was still strapped to his back and it brought memories to Katara’s mind of Zuko standing regally before her with his dual broadswords drawn. The image brought a small smile to her lips since she could not deny how striking Zuko looked in such a way. Shaking her head, Katara brought the water canteen to her lips to take a long drink before she offered it to Zuko.

“Thanks,” Zuko murmured as he took the canteen to sedate his thirst.

“We’ve been walking for days now,” Katara began with a tired sigh, “and we haven’t come across one village! And what are we going to do once we find one?”

Zuko took another deep drink of the water before he let out a sigh.

“I had first planned for us to find a village and have someone send a message to the Fire Nation or to Uncle,” he began with a pensive frown, “But now I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Katara asked.

“Not only could there be a possibility that Jianguo could find out where we are, but there’s also the problem that there are still some people who mistrust the Fire Nation. And I’m sure they will not be hospitable if they find the Fire Lord among them,” Zuko responded with a morose sigh.

Katara laid a comforting hand on his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder. Zuko wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close to him.

“You’ll see that in a couple of years they will change their view of you, Zuko,” Katara reassure him.

“Perhaps,” Zuko replied quietly.

“So what are we going to do now?” she asked.
“I was thinking that it would be best if we made our way to Omashu,” he told her. “King Bumi will provide us some protection until we can contact the Fire Nation.”

“You’re right,” Katara acknowledge with a nod. “All we need to do is find a village and ask how we can get to Omashu. Of course, we’ll need to find some way to disguise ourselves so they won’t recognize us.”

Zuko smiled and kissed her temple before he lowered his head so he could whisper in her ear.

“I can’t wait for us to return home so I can finally announce to everyone that you are mine,” he growled out in a low tone.

Katara smiled as she raised her head so she could look at him, but whatever she was about to say was drowned out when Zuko swooped down to kiss her. A small moan escaped her when Zuko easily parted her lips with his tongue and wasted no time to plunge it into her hot mouth. Katara wrapped her arms around his neck to bring him closer to her while she brought out her own tongue to battle with his.

Zuko growled his approval at her fervent response while he pressed her closer to him that she was practically sitting on his lap. When the need for air became too great, they pulled apart, but Zuko did not move away from her and instead began to place hot kisses down her throat while his hand roamed down her back. He paused when his lips touched the silky material of the necklace that was always present around her neck and he pulled away to stare at it.

Breathing heavily, Katara opened her eyes to see why Zuko had stopped. She saw that he was staring with a frown at her neck and she wondered what he was thinking about.

“What is it?” she asked breathlessly.

Zuko raised his hand and gently touched the cool blue pendant before he raised his eyes to stare at the sapphire orbs of the woman in his arms.

“It shames me to remember that I used your mother’s necklace against you when I tied you to that tree in exchange for information of Aang’s whereabouts,” he confessed quietly.

Katara pressed her finger against his furrowed brow to smooth it as she gave him a gentle smile.
“That was a long time ago, Zuko,” Katara told him softly. “And back then you didn’t know it was my mother’s and that it meant so much to me.”

Zuko kissed her gratefully for her understanding and he gently stroked the smooth stone with his thumb. He mentally vowed that he would give her a necklace of her own, one to show her how much she meant to him, but that also showed that she belonged only to him.

Katara sighed blissfully when he pulled away, but she quirked an eyebrow when the corner of his lips lifted in a small smirk.

“I did enjoy the sight of you tied up against that tree and in my mercy, though,” he told her huskily. “And I hope that maybe one day you’ll let me do it again, but of course this time you will only gain your freedom by giving me something much more…pleasant.”

Katara stared at him with wide eyes while a blush began to creep to her cheeks since she found the thought to be so scandalous yet arousing at the same time. Her heart began to beat a bit faster in her chest as she tried to come up with something to say.

She looked over Zuko’s shoulder and a shocked expression settled across her face. She gasped loudly, causing him to tense.

“Zuko!” she cried out as she pointed somewhere behind him.

Zuko swiftly jumped to his feet to stand protectively in front of her with sword drawn and a snarl on his face as he waited for Jianguo’s attack, but instead, a confused frown appeared on his brow as he was met with nothing but trees. His bewilderment increased when Katara’s giggles reached his ears and he turned around just in time to see her running away while she threw a grin at him over her shoulder.

“I can’t believe you actually fell for that!” Katara laughed as she raced away.

“Katara!” Zuko growled out as he picked up his bag, as well as hers, and chased after her. “Just wait until I catch you!” he threatened after her as he increased his pace. He growled angrily when Katara’s laughter became louder.
“If you catch me, then I’ll let you kiss me,” Katara promised as she dodged a cluster of thorny bushes. “If not, then you’ll become my servant for a day!”

*As if I’ll become the servant of anyone, me, Fire Lord Zuko,* he thought with a huff before a large smirk appeared on his face. *Though, I wouldn’t mind servicing Katara. But for now, I will catch her and the kiss I will give her will teach her to mess around with me!*

Birds flew from their nests with protesting squawks while small animals scurried away as the two racing humans streaked past them. They ran for a while, and though Zuko knew he could have easily caught up to her since he had longer legs and was swifter, he allowed Katara to get away from him in order to build up the anticipation and the fun. However, she did not make it so easy either, for she would nimbly twist away from his grasp whenever he got too close. Katara’s delighted laughter surrounded them and Zuko again found himself enjoying something that he normally wouldn’t, such as when he played with her at the beach or had a snow fight with her and the children back in the Southern Water Tribe. He knew it was only because of Katara. He was grateful that she had brought such a change to his once miserable and lonely life.

The sun was descending closer to the horizon as they continued in the chase and Zuko began to get anxious, the playfulness was running its course. He wanted to catch her already, wanted to devour her as a hungry hunter would its delicious prey—only in a different sense. Such thoughts made his blood pump faster, and with a growl, Zuko increased his speed.

Katara ducked under a tree branch and panted as she continued running. She knew Zuko had been letting her get ahead of him, but now she could feel that something had change and that Zuko was getting more serious. She could feel him upon her heels and could almost feel his warm breath on the skin of her neck. Her heart started to pound faster at the thought of being caught like prey when it knew it had no chance to escape from its relentless persecutor. She just knew Zuko would make good in his threat and she almost stopped just so she could know what he would do to her.

Zuko cried out triumphantly when he reached out to grab Katara around her waist, but he growled out in frustration when she gracefully swerved out of the way and dived through a narrow gap between two trees whose lower trunks seemed to be infused together. Zuko slid to a stop and braced his hands against the trees before he crashed into them since he was too large to be able to pass through as Katara did. With an impressed smirk, Zuko went around the intertwined trees and picked up his speed. Besides powerful and beautiful, he had chosen a clever woman as his future bride.

Katara was starting to tire out. She had detained Zuko for a moment, but she knew that any second he would be upon her. Her legs were burning, her sides ached, and she knew she could not hold on any longer, but she refused to be caught and be bested. She spotted a cluster of thick bushes to her left and without wasting any time, she dove into them. The bushes were thick enough to hide her in their shadows and she waited for Zuko as she tried to catch her breath.
Zuko increased his speed as a worried frown began to appear on his face since he could not find Katara ahead of him. Did she perhaps change course to a different direction? He began to worry that he might have lost her and an ache formed in his chest at the thought.

He was about to turned back around when out of the corner of his eye he spotted Katara diving into some bushes, and he inwardly sighed in relief before a large smirk appeared on his face. He stopped running and watched from a distance as the bushes engulf her form and he knew that he would have passed those bushes without knowing she was there. He silently went around the area until he was standing in the opposite direction from where Katara would be watching out for him. Zuko carefully placed the bags and the sword on the ground. Bringing forth all his stealth skills as the Blue Spirit, Zuko climbed a tree, and without a sound, sat on a thick branch that was directly above the bushes where his beloved was hiding in. He waited anxiously for Katara to appear, like a predator waiting for its prey to think it was safe and come out from its hiding place.

Then he would pounce and claim his prize.

Katara resisted the urge to fidget as worry began to gnaw at her stomach when time passed by and Zuko did not race past the shrubs. What if he went another way? Fear began to creep in her heart at the thought that they could become separated and she began to wonder if it had been so smart to start this game of chase in the first place. She just wanted to make Zuko forget his problems for a little while, but now she had lost him.

*I have to find him!* she exclaimed in her head as she began to struggle her way out of the thick bushes.

A large smirk curled Zuko’s lips and his golden eyes gleamed brightly as he watched the bushes rustle before Katara slowly emerge from her hiding place. He remained silent as she dusted her clothes off before she looked around with a frown on her face. His muscles tensed in anticipation when Katara moved away from the shrubs and passed right beneath the branch he was sitting on.

Katara froze when something dropped behind her and she whirled around, her hand reaching for the water canteen at her hip. She gasped when she was pushed against the tree and her back met the rough bark of the thick trunk as strong hands grabbed hold of her wrists.

“I caught you,” Zuko’s deep masculine voice growled low in her ear.

A shiver raced down her spine at the heated look Zuko was directing at her. Her eyed widened when
Zuko pressed closer to her so that her breasts where crushed to his chest and he raised her hands beside her head. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest and she became a bit dazed as his strong sandalwood scent invaded her senses.

“I won and now I demand my prize,” Zuko demanded huskily at her.

Before Katara could say anything, Zuko’s firm lips had crashed down onto hers. She melted against him as Zuko devoured her mouth, capturing her lips with such passion that it took her breath away. This kiss was different—more wild than tender—from any they had shared so far. Never had she known such passion, such fire in a kiss. It was feral and deliciously unchaste and it stripped her of the innocence of virginal fantasies while it introduced her to sensual pleasure. Katara could feel her heart pounding a fast tempo against her ribcage and she gasped when her body began to warm up quickly and her breasts began to tingle again. Her nipples began to ache and she unconsciously rubbed them against Zuko’s hard chest in order to ease the ache, but instead the sensation caused a spark to flare right to her core. The feeling caused the wetness to increase in her nether regions as a searing heat began to grow in the depths of her body, arousing longings that were completely unfamiliar to her.

Zuko groaned when Katara’s tongue wrapped around his while she rubbed her soft breasts against him. He could hear his blood pounding hard in his head, the same blood that had quickly rushed to his groin. His erection was straining painfully against its confinement as he continued to devour Katara’s sweet mouth. He wanted more. He wanted to make her feel more. Bringing his right leg forward, he wedged his thigh between Katara’s legs and began to roughly rub against her warmth.

Katara gasped and moaned in delight at the new sensation that sent a pulse right through her. Her rationality left her and was replaced by a desire so great that it left her aching. Without her knowing it, she began to move her hips against Zuko’s hard thigh. She kissed him eagerly as she tried to get out of his grip so she could touch him while she continued to enjoy the incredible sensation she was experiencing in her untouched core. Her breasts began to beg to be touched and underneath her wrappings and beneath the firmness of his muscular chest her nipples hardened even more.

Zuko was panting hard and the fire in his veins increased at the soft moans and whimpers Katara made as he continued to press against her. He could feel her trying to wriggle her wrists from his grasp and he let go of her hands so he could grant her wish and so he could touch more of her. He tangled one hand in her hair as his golden eyes plunged to the depths of her cobalt orbs. He moved her head to the side so he could slant his mouth against hers, greedily taking what she had to offer, while his other hand moved up from her side to touch a breast, too far gone to stop himself and think about what he was doing. When Katara groaned at his touch, he cupped her covered breast more firmly and began to knead it, causing her to let out a moan into his hot mouth.

He wanted more. He was painfully aroused, he felt like his shaft was about to burst from his trousers, he needed to press it against something to relieve some of his torture. He wrapped his hands around
Katara’s thighs, and lifting her up slightly and wrapping her legs around him, he pressed his painfully erect cock against her warmth, eliciting a loud gasp from her. Zuko groaned at the pleasurable sensation as he continued to kiss her hungrily. He had never felt so much pleasure at such a simple act and he desperately began to grind himself against her.

Katara could not explain the incredible sensations and the immense heat that were going through her at the feeling of Zuko’s hardness grinding against her untouched core as he moved his hips. She could feel herself getting so wet and her stomach began to coil in a tight spring. Katara cried herself from his hot lips and arched her back with a loud moan, shoving her head against the rough bark of the tree behind her and grabbing tightly to Zuko’s muscular arms at the massive pleasure she was experiencing. She began to frantically move her hips to press herself closer to the hardness between Zuko’s strong thighs as she sought something she still did not understand.

She felt Zuko latch onto the skin below her ear and she hissed in pleasure as he began to kiss his way down her neck. She felt Zuko’s lips brush against her mother’s necklace and she froze as she came crashing back to reality. She remembered her Gran-Gran’s words of caution and she did not know what to do. She did not want to go against her culture’s laws and bring shame to her family, but she also did not want Zuko to stop—oh, gods, she didn’t want him to stop! The pleasure was too great, and she would not be able to bear the thought of Zuko looking at her in irritation and frustration if she told him to let her go, just like Aang always did. No, the thought of Zuko looking at her in such a way was worse. Tears of indecision escaped from the corner of her eyes as Zuko continued to grind himself against her.

Zuko was lost in his pleasure of being so close to Katara in such a way that he increased his pace. He could feel himself reaching his point of completion and he wanted so much for Katara to join him. He moved his lips away from where there were sucking on her delectable neck and he raised his head so he could see the pleasure written on her beautiful face, but instead he found her eyes screwed shut and her face contorted as if in pain while a few tears slid down her flushed cheeks. His movements immediately stopped and he froze in horror as he realized what he was doing. He had lost complete control over his lust and he had almost…

“Oh, gods, what have I done?” he whispered in abject horror.

His inflamed desire swiftly cooled in his shame and guilt. He eased away from her and gently placed her back on her feet. He cupped her face and he urgently wiped her wet cheeks with his thumbs.

“Katara, Katara, I’m sorry!” he apologized profusely, “I’m so sorry! I lost control, I didn’t mean to break my promise, please forgive me! I’m so sorry, Katara! Please say you’ll forgive me.”

Katara quickly opened her eyes at the anxiety she could hear in his voice and was shocked to see the heavy remorse, anguish, and fear on his face, almost as if he was expecting her to hate him. Katara
shook her head as she opened her mouth to speak, but her heart was still beating fast and her body was still trembling at the sensations Zuko had evoked in her. Her heart almost broke at the pain that rippled across Zuko’s face as he mistook her response to mean that she would not forgive him. She quickly reached for his face when he made to move away from her and she placed a reassuring kiss on his lips.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Zuko,” Katara assured him gently. “I’m not mad at you. I know you were caught up in the moment and I was too. If I really didn’t want your advances I would have fought you and frozen you to the ground.” She paused as she hesitantly tried to give voice to her reasons while she brought one hand to clutch at her necklace. “It’s just that I can’t…we can’t…”

Zuko finally understood what she was trying to say, and with some relief, he gathered her in his arms and gently shushed her.

“You don’t need to explain. I understand,” he told her softly.

Katara buried her face in his chest as she tried to calm herself down while she found comfort in his arms. Shyly, she leaned away from him a bit until he looked down at her.

“You’re… not angry with me…because I couldn’t…go further?” she asked tentatively.

“Of course not!” Zuko exclaimed with a deep frown. “I know that is what has been taught to you in the Southern Water Tribe and I respect that. I don’t want you to think that you have to do anything to please me when you aren’t ready for such intimacy.”

Katara wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and he immediately brought her closer to his chest.

“Thank you for understanding, Zuko,” she whispered to him gratefully.

Zuko pulled his head back slightly so they could see each other’s eyes. His expression was serious and his amber orbs shone with a heated golden fire.

“But you must understand that it will be difficult for me to keep my distance from you. I have wanted you for such a long time, Katara,” he told her, his voice becoming deep and husky as he brushed his lips lightly against hers. “It’s going to be hard not to touch you when all I want to do is to take you, to make love to you, to make you mine.”
A deep blush blossomed across Katara’s cheeks and her heart fluttered in her chest at his fervent words. She averted her eyes from his molten orbs, but Zuko gently grabbed hold of her chin and turned her head so she could look at him again.

“But I will try to be patient until that day comes when you will freely give yourself to me,” he promised.

The hesitancy in her blue depths dissipated and in its place was a firm resolve.

“And I will too,” she promised as well.

Zuko gave her a small smile before he tucked her comfortingly against his chest while Katara wound her arms around his middle. They embraced each other in silence for a moment before Zuko removed his arms and pulled away from her.

“We should continue before night settles in,” he said quietly as he turned away.

Katara nodded as she accepted the bag Zuko handed to her before she followed behind him in silence. A few tears pricked her eyes and threatened to fall down her cheeks as a feeling of anxiety and uncertainty gripped her heart. She could not help but feel like perhaps she had pushed Zuko away.

A soft gasp escaped her when Zuko turned to her and wrapped one arm around her waist, bringing her close to his side. She looked into his eyes for a moment and she let out a sigh of relief to see the same loving look in those amber eyes she treasured so much.

There had to be way to keep from pushing Zuko away from her that did not compromise her culture’s teachings and the way she was raised, a way she could show him how much he meant to her.

But what?
The afternoon sun was partially hidden by a multitude of white and fluffy clouds. Butterflies fluttered through trees, bees buzzed from flower to flower to collect honey for their hives, and birds rode the currents of the cool spring breeze. The day was bright and peaceful, with a sense of calm and serenity, but Katara was feeling anything but those things. Instead, what she felt was the complete opposite. Glancing up uncertainly under thick lashes, Katara watched silently as Zuko took a bite of another of the small fish she had caught from a small stream.

Their food had run out days ago, but luckily, they had come across the little stream where she had caught a few fish with her waterbending. After cleaning the fish, she had happily presented the new addition to their meal to Zuko. However, to her bewilderment, a deep frown had creased his forehead as he shifted his gaze to the fish and back to her before he pressed his lips together into a tight line. He had silently built a small campfire, and without saying a word, he took the fish and began to roast them on the fire. With a hurt frown on her face, Katara had stood near the edge of the quiet stream for a moment and only relaxed when Zuko turned to beckon her close with a smile. She had wanted to ask him what that was all about, but she decided not to say anything. They had not talked as much as they used to after the…incident against that tree and it was getting to her.

Katara glanced away from the firebender and returned her gaze to the half-eaten roasted fish she was holding with some large and clean leaves, her appetite leaving her quickly. Once again, the feeling of uncertainty and fear rose within her at the thought that maybe she had pushed Zuko away from her with her uncertainty, but she was still unsure and concerned about letting herself get closer to Zuko in the most intimate of ways. They had only confessed their feelings recently, after all!

But then again that did not stop her from agreeing to marry Zuko, now did it? Katara smiled wryly.

“What’s wrong?” Zuko’s concerned voice broke through her thoughts. “Is the fish not cooked well enough?”

Katara lifted her head to look at Zuko and she gave him a small smile to reassure him when he frowned at her.

“No, no, it’s fine! It’s just a bit hot,” she told him with a tiny shrug.

“Oh. Okay,” Zuko responded with a smile before he returned his attention to his own meal.
The waterbender let out a mental sigh as she glanced back down at her fish before letting her eyes travel toward Zuko's face again. Although Zuko had reassured her that he understood and accepted her reasons as to why she had been hesitant, she could not help but feel like she was the problem. She was grateful that he was being very understanding, but she could feel that holding back was affecting him.

She could see it in the way he looked at her, his golden eyes almost burning in their intensity, the way he touched her arm or the small of her back as if he could not get enough of touching her, and the way he would wrap his arm around her waist, as if he were laying a claim on her. She could now see that Zuko had been sincere when he said those fervent words about how much he desired her.

Since that day when they had almost lost their control, the day when she had found a pleasure she had never known with a man before, Zuko would only kiss her lightly and tenderly. Not wildly and passionately like he had before that just remembering it weakened her knees. Moreover, when they would rest for the night, Zuko no longer laid down beside her with his arms wrapped around her. He didn’t even touch her! It was as if he was afraid he would break her like some fragile piece of glass or she would run away from him at any moment, and she did not like it!

She was the one who should be afraid. Afraid that it would be him that would turn away from her. It frightened her to think that he would suddenly get tired of her and her uncertainty and he would eventually go in search of another woman that would not hesitate to please him, to give him what he wanted.

Katara gritted her teeth in jealousy at such a hurtful thought before she took a deep breath to calm herself down. Absentmindedly, she took a bite of the now cool fish and chewed thoughtfully.

It was not like she did not want to be with Zuko in such a way—quite the contrary, she craved it—but it was just so hard for her to do such a thing because she had no experience at all. She had no clue how to go about it, and admittedly, it embarrassed her. She was also afraid of what her family would think of her, sleeping with a man that was not her husband.

Then there was the fact that everybody thought she was still Aang’s girlfriend. She had been so concerned and distracted with the news that one of the colonies had been struck with a disease that she had not told anyone that she had ended her relationship of four years with Aang before she left the Fire Nation with Zuko and Iroh. What would people think of her when all of the sudden she came back with news that Zuko was not only her new boyfriend, but that she was now engaged to him?

How would Aang react to such news? She had a feeling that he had not told anyone that she had broken up with him because he still loved her. She knew he would not give her up so easily, and would try to find a way to convince her to get back with him and perhaps agree to marry him. He
would surely be angry and devastated once he found out that she was engaged to Zuko and it pained her to think that because of her he would be hurt. Her relationship with Aang may not have been great, and she may not be in love with him, but he was still her friend and they did have some good times together. She just hoped that once she had a talk with Aang he would understand that, even though she cared for him, she was in love with Zuko and he was the one she wanted to marry. But in her heart she just knew it would not be so easy.

And if she did decide to give herself to Zuko how would Aang feel if he found out that she had willingly given Zuko what she had adamantly refused to give him?

The young woman clasped the cool pendant of her necklace and let out a quiet sigh. All of her life she had been taught to save her virtue until marriage, and although she sometimes had questioned the fairness of such a rule, she had followed it diligently. She had even thought that she would have been able to keep such a promise until the day she did marry, since she had no feelings of doing otherwise when she and Aang were together.

Dropping her hand away from the necklace, Katara again stole a glance at Zuko, who was now staring pensively at the flames, and a deep blush appeared on her cheeks.

However, things had changed; her views were different. Now that she was with Zuko, now that she knew what she felt for him was a great love, she found that it was harder to keep such promises than she had thought. Having Zuko kiss her so passionately, having his muscular body pressed so close to hers, and enjoying the things he did to her…she loved it. It was just so tempting and it felt so good!

Katara wondered if this was what the women who had their ‘unchastely’ behavior discovered went through and she felt some sympathy for them.

Her eyes widened when she felt Zuko’s hard thigh touch the side of hers as he brought his hand down on it and she could not stop the memory of the pleasurable feeling of having Zuko’s thigh pressed hard between her legs. She bit her lip to stifle a moan as she looked up at him. Once their eyes locked, Zuko quickly removed his hand from her thigh and cleared his throat.

“We should get going soon,” the firebender announced, his voice a bit husky.

“You’re right,” Katara responded softly as she looked down at her uneaten fish.

She felt Zuko place his fingers beneath her chin before he lifted her head. She opened her mouth to
say something, but Zuko stopped her words as he leaned down to kiss her. This kiss was light and tender, and although Katara wished he could deepen it, she found pleasure in it too and immediately surrendered to his caressing mouth.

She did not know what to do. Should she uphold her culture’s ideals?

…Or should she succumb to her body’s desires?

The pleasant weather continued the next day while both benders climbed down a steep hill as they made their way through the thick forest. They stopped when they found a huge fallen tree blocking their path. There did not seem any other way around it, they had to go over it.

Without warning, Zuko swept Katara into his arms and smiled at her startled gasp. Before she could protest, he hopped onto the dry and thick log and then jumped over it. His deep chuckle resonated around them when Katara squealed and latched her arms around his neck before he landed lightly on the other side. Instead of placing the woman in his arms on her feet, Zuko held her to him tightly. Katara looked up into his eyes and a smile appeared on her face at the tender look he was directing at her. He inclined his head to place a small kiss to her lips before he buried his face on the crook of her neck and took a deep whiff of her scent. He heard her sigh and contentment filled his chest for a moment before he reluctantly settled her on her feet.

“Thanks,” she uttered softly as she stepped away from him.

Zuko nodded before a small smile appeared on his face. He took her hand lightly in his.

“You’re welcome,” he said as he began to walk, leading her after him.

He saw her open her mouth as if to say something, but it seemed she changed her mind for she shook her head and closed her mouth. A small frown appeared on his face. He had noticed she was being more quiet than usual and he was afraid it was because she was regretting what happened against that tree. Just remembering the incident, of having Katara wrapped around him while he pushed his clothed cock against her, made heat rush to his groin. Exhaling deeply, he mentally shook his head to dismiss the memory.

A few minutes later the ground even out again and they paused for a moment to get some rest before heading out again.
“Do you think we’ll find a village soon?” Katara asked as the silence stretched on. At least, it seemed like that to her. Zuko seemed not to notice. He was used to not talking much, after all.

“I hope so,” Zuko responded. “We’ve been walking for days. We’re bound to find something soon.”

“I miss civilization!” Katara exclaimed with a sigh. “It feels like we’re the only people in the world!”

“It seems like it, doesn’t it?” Zuko agreed with a small chuckle before he grinned at her. “Though I won’t mind roaming this earth with only you as my companion, finding comfort and pleasure in your arms every night and day with no one around to bother us.”

Katara blushed as a shy smile appeared on her face before Zuko leaned down to kiss her. She eagerly opened her mouth to him when his tongue probed at her lips and she moaned happily when he snaked his tongue into her willing mouth to deepen their kiss. But then it seemed he caught himself for he quickly pulled back and the gleam in his eyes dimmed a bit. He pecked her lips one last time before he continued to walk, tugging at her hand. Katara held back a frown as she looked at Zuko’s strong back with longing and remorse.

Zuko sighed quietly as he continued with his pace, even though he very much wanted to continue kissing Katara, he had to stop. Who was he kidding? He wanted to do more than just kiss her…so much more…

The firebender turned his golden eyes to the bright sun resting on the cloudy blue sky above them before he returned his gaze before him. He guessed that about less than a month had passed since that night of the devastating storm that had unfortunately led to Jianguo capturing them and now to this journey to find help. A month since he has been away from his mother, his home, and his duties to the Fire Nation. He hoped, for their sakes, that his Court Council was keeping their country well and safe in his absence. He had worked hard to raise the Fire Nation to the power it was now and if he found that all his hard work had been undone, heads would roll. He then wondered where the rebels were, what Jianguo was planning, and if they were causing destruction as they searched for him and Katara.

The young lord’s eyes strayed away from the trees before him and slanted to his left where Katara was walking by his side. His gaze roamed her body from her head to her toes, and although her clothes were bloody and dirty, he still found her enchanting. So much so, that he was unable to stop his desire from flaring. He quickly looked away from her before he pulled her to him, backed her against another tree, and continued what they had been doing days before after that delightful game of chase.
A tremor ran down his spine at the memory of having Katara pressed close to him while he kissed her hungrily, and his heart began to pick up its pace in his chest. Gods, how many nights had he dreamed of having Katara in such a way? Now that he almost did, he had to suppress his desires to respect her wishes. He did not want her to feel pressured. When the time came for them to join together, he wanted her to be willing, he wanted her to be craving him, he wanted her as his wife ready to love him for the rest of their lives.

However, his body wanted other things. It demanded that he forget his promises, that he take her as soon as possible, feel her soft skin beneath his, and claim her as his. His mind seemed to betray him as well for it would provide him with images of Katara stroking his hard cock with her hand, of Katara moaning as he suckled and fondled her breasts, of Katara screaming and writhing beneath him as he thrust himself into her…

Zuko suppressed the growl that seemed to want to erupt from his throat before he inwardly shook his head to shake off the tormenting yet delightful images from his mind.

He felt like such a bastard. Even though he understood why Katara was apprehensive about the act of lovemaking, he really wanted to ravage her all the time and everywhere. The smallest things like a tender kiss from her lips or a look from those deep, blue eyes of hers made his blood boil.

Therefore, he had to resort to kissing her lightly so he would not upset her and so he would not lose his control. He also had to force himself to sleep away from her so she would not noticed his body’s ardent reaction to her sweet scent and tempting form. He had promised her that he would not make her do anything that she was not ready for, but he was finding that it was becoming more and more difficult for him to keep that promise. He hoped they found his uncle or a way home soon before his resolve broke and he seduced her.

If it was already this difficult to keep his hands away from her, he did not think he would be able to survive not making love to her until they married! Why did the Water Tribes have to have such a ridiculous rule about chastity, anyway? Damn it! He shook his head at his thoughts.

“Zuko, look!” Katara’s excited voice made him focus his attention to their surroundings. “It’s a path!”

Zuko looked to where Katara was pointing, and sure enough, he spotted a track that seemed to have been worn down by the continual passage of human feet and animals of burden. It was not wide enough for wagons or carriages to drive upon it, but it was worn enough to mean that people used it regularly.
“There must be a village near here then,” Zuko stated as he squinted to see how far the path led, but the infernal trees cut off his gaze.

“There better be,” Katara muttered.

Amused, Zuko’s eyes flicked toward her before he returned his attention to the empty path.

“Come,” he beckoned her softly. “Let’s see what we find.”

Katara shouldered her now lighter bag as she followed beside him.

More than an hour passed as they followed the trail, and when they saw no sign of one single living being, they began to grow anxious and frustrated. What would they do if they never found a village?

A loud scream pierced though the calm silence of the forest, making both benders tense in alarm and awareness. They glanced at each other with serious expressions before they raced down the path toward the sound of the scream as more shouts reached their ears. Katara raced forward when she heard a pained cry, but she was stopped when Zuko grabbed her around the waist and to his chest, before pulling them toward the cover of the trees beside the road.

“Zuko!” she hissed as she glared at him while trying to get out of his hold.

“Don’t just rush forward without first knowing what is going on!” Zuko hissed back in a low voice as his eyes darted around them. “What if it’s a trap and Jianguo is patiently waiting for us to show up?”

“And what if it isn’t?” Katara whispered with a hard frown. “It could be someone that’s in danger and needs our help!”

A grim frown settled across Zuko’s face before he gave a curt nod.

“We’ll just have to find out, but we must be alert and careful,” he said as he slowly released her, though he continued to hold one of her arms. He looked intently into her eyes. “I won’t lose you again, Katara. Not after we have just found each other.”
Katara’s expression softened and she reached up to kiss his cheek to reassure him.

“You won’t,” she told him firmly.

Zuko gazed into her eyes for a moment until he finally let her go. He unsheathed the small sword at his back and nodded at her. Katara nodded back before she turned around and silently made her way to where they had heard the screams while Zuko strode protectively beside her, his senses on high alert. They paused behind the cover of some bushes as the sound of voices reached their ears, though the voices were too low for them to be able to distinguish if it was Jianguo and his men. They glanced at each other for a second before they cautiously peeked through the leaves.

In the middle of the trodden path was a woman with streaks of gray on her auburn hair kneeling beside a gray-haired man who had a nasty cut on one arm and across one cheek. The woman had her arms protectively around the injured man as they both glared defiantly at a young man who stood before them with a small dagger pointed threateningly at them. A small ostrich-horse with packs loaded on its back pranced nervously to the side, ruffling its feathers in agitation.

“Don’t play me for a fool, old man,” the younger one with raggedy clothes growled out. “Give me your money and I’ll let you and your old woman go.”

“Old woman?! Why you—” the woman shouted out angrily, but the injured man pulled her back when it seemed she was about to stand up.

“I’ve told you already we spent all our money in the village so we could stock up on our provisions!” the older man insisted as he returned his attention to the thief. “Take all our food from the ostrich-horse if you want, but leave my wife and me alone!”

“Don’t lie to me!” the dirty-looking man yelled as he flashed his knife. “Give your money or I’ll hurt your precious wife!”

“Don’t you touch her!” the gray-haired man roared as he quickly sprang to his feet as if he were a much younger man than he actually was, as he pushed his protesting wife behind him.

The thief raised his dagger as he moved to attack, but he froze when he felt the tip of a blade pressing dangerously on the skin of his neck. Turning slightly, he swallowed nervously at the golden eyes that glared ominously at him.
The elderly couple gawked at the tall, dark-haired young man with a frightening scar on his impassive face and they gulped when he pressed the sword further against the thief’s neck. They glanced briefly to the side when a blue-eyed young woman stepped from behind the imposing man with a small frown on her pretty features.

“Is there a problem here?” the scarred man asked in a deceptively cool tone.

“N-n-no!’ the young thief stammered out in fear and he flinched when the blade was pressed harder into his skin, causing a thin line of blood to appear.

“Good. Then I suggest you leave. Now,” the man ordered in a cold voice.

Without sparing another glance at the frozen older couple, the would-be-thief raced away as if he were being chased by a pack of hungry tiger-wolves until he disappeared among the shadows of the trees. The older couple returned their stunned gazes to the intimidating young man and they silently watched as he sheathed his sword at his back. The older man stepped closer to his wife who clung to his clothes from behind when the younger man turned piercing, golden eyes on them. They were surprised, however, when the young woman stepped forward and scowled at the dark-haired man.

“You didn’t have to scare that guy like that,” she berated him lightly as she placed her hands on her hips.

“He should be glad he only got a scare. Now he will think twice about stealing from others,” the scarred man replied impassively as he glanced down at her.

The silent couple looked at each other in surprise and slight amusement that such a petite woman was scolding such a frightening-looking man that was much bigger than she was. They tensed when the blue-eyed woman turned to them before she walked forward with a smile on her face. She opened the water canteen that was attached to her hip and they gasped when a thin string of water followed the movement of her hand. They watched as the water surrounded her hand like a glove and they jumped when the liquid began to glow.

“Here, let me heal those cuts,” she said in a kind tone.

Before the older couple could react, the young woman pressed her hand on the wounds on the gray-haired man’s arm and cheek. He let out an astounded gasp when he felt and saw them closing.
“There you go, all better,” the tan-skinned woman announced brightly as she returned the water to her pouch.

“Amazing,” the older man mused as he inspected the now healed skin on his arm. He snapped out of his thoughts when his wife elbowed him on his side. “Oh! I thank you both very much for coming to our rescue!” he exclaimed.

“Yes!” his short wife continued as she clutched at her heart. “What would’ve happened to us if you hadn’t scared that rogue away?” she cried out as she looked up at the tall man before quickly returning her attention to the blue-eyed woman. “And what would’ve become of me if my poor dear had bled to death?”

“Now, Pumpkin, we all know the cuts weren’t life-threatening,” her husband sighed affectionately.

“Nonsense, Sweet Potato!” his wife continued and waved her hand as if to chase away his silly comment. “You’re getting on in years, after all. Luckily these youngsters came just in time to help us.”

Katara and Zuko threw subtle and amused glances towards each other at the older couple’s banter and Katara held back a giggle at the endearing names they had for each other. Zuko cleared his throat and the badgering couple paused before they returned their attention to them with sheepish expressions on their faces.

“Oh, how rude of us!” the dark-eyed and robust man exclaimed as his wife blushed. “Please allow us to introduce ourselves. I am Zhuang Yu and this irritating yet enchanting lady is my wife, Satomi.”

Satomi huffed at her husband’s first description of her before she turned a large smile to the younger pair.

“Yes, and again we thank you for your help!” she continued as the older couple bowed.

“It was nothing,” Zuko spoke up as both he and Katara returned the small bow. “I am Li,” he continued before he placed his arm around Katara’s waist. “And this is Ka…uh…This is Tara, my betrothed.” He glanced down with a grin at Katara.
Katara blushed as a smile appeared on her face.

“Nice to meet you,” the waterbender said.

“Oh, you two are so adorable!” Satomi gushed before she turned to her husband. “It reminds me of us when we were younger and recently engaged. You used to be so handsome back then.”

“What are you talking about, woman?” Zhuang Yu grumbled. “I’m still handsome!”

“Of course you are, Sweet Potato!” his wife soothed. “But you used to be even more so when you were younger.”

Zhuang Yu rolled his eyes and mumbled under his breath as he crossed his arms over his broad chest. He opened his mouth as if to argue again, but his wife cut him off as she rushed forward to take Katara’s hands.

“Oh, my goodness! What happened to your clothes?” the old woman cried out as she looked down at Katara’s ripped and bloody shirt.

“Oh, uh, it was…just an accident,” Katara lied.

Katara took a peek at Zuko and she sighed mentally at the guilt that flashed across his face, though he was quick to recover his impassive expression when he noticed her frown.

“It seems like you two have gone through some rough times too,” Zhuang Yu stated as he eyed Zuko’s worn clothes.

“We became separated from our friends during an assault and became lost as we all tried to escape,” Zuko spoke up smoothly. “We are now trying to make our way to Omashu to reunite with them.”

Katara nodded.

“Could you point us in the right direction towards Omashu?” she asked sweetly.
“Of course!” Zhuang Yu exclaimed as he turned to his wife. “But first let us take you to our home for some dinner.”

“Thank you, but we do not wish to impose,” Zuko tried to politely decline.

“Nonsense!” Satomi cried out immediately, reminding Zuko so much of his uncle. “It’s the least we can do for you for helping us! Besides, I enjoy having company at our house! It’s been so lonely since our children moved away,” she sighed.

“And what am I? A rock?” her husband protested.

“You know I didn’t mean it that way, dear,” the short woman sighed dramatically. “You can be so sensitive sometimes.”

Zhuang Yu snorted at her comment.

“Uh…we really appreciate your kind offer,” Katara spoke up as she tried to hide a smile while Zuko nodded in acceptance.

“Wonderful!” Satomi exclaimed as her husband went to retrieve the ostrich-horse that was now lazily grazing under the shade of a tree.

“This way then,” Zhuang Yu instructed as he tugged at the protesting animal that finally moved after him with reluctant steps. Satomi automatically moved to her husband’s side with quick steps and a large smile.

Katara watched as the older man wound one arm around his wife and drew her snuggly to his side, kissing her graying head. He laughed happily when Satomi pulled his head down to give him a proper kiss on his mouth before she burrowed into him. Katara turned to Zuko who looked away from the loving couple to smile at her. Reaching her hand out to grasp his, Katara smiled at him as Zuko intertwined their fingers together before he leaned down to give her a quick kiss on her lips. He straightened himself and resumed his usual cool manner when the older couple looked over their shoulders to call out to them. Katara smiled as they hurried along after the now bickering pair and their lazy ostrich-horse as they walked through the pleasant forest.
“We had just come from the village when that man attacked us,” Satomi spoke up as she turned in her husband’s embrace to look at the younger couple walking behind them. “In all of our years walking on this path it’s the first time we’ve been assaulted!”

“Yes,” Zhuang Yu agreed. “And to think we built our home so we could live peacefully away from the village. Ah, here we are!”

Zuko and Katara looked up to see a modest sized house resting in the middle of a small clearing. It was made of wood and it had a porch that went all around the small building as well as what looked like a small stable at one side. It had a wooden and clay roof that slanted down and curled up at the edges. Zhuang Yu led the ostrich-horse to the stable while Satomi walked up the steps to the house, beckoning the younger couple to follow her. Taking off her sandals and placing them against the wall, she pulled the shoji door aside before stepping inside.

“Welcome to our home,” she said graciously as she turned to smile at them as they came in after her, taking off their boots and placing them next to her sandals.

“Thank you,” both Katara and Zuko sincerely replied.

“I will start on dinner immediately,” Satomi exclaimed as she bustled around the room, straightening things as she went. “Please make yourselves comfortable.”

“I would like to help you, if you don’t mind,” Katara spoke up. “We really don’t want to just sit around and do nothing.”

“Yes,” Zuko agreed. “I will help your husband unload your things from the ostrich-horse.”

“We really appreciate it, dears,” the green-eyed woman replied as she moved into the small kitchen with Katara following behind her.

Zuko walked outside toward the stable and helped Zhuang Yu carry their things into the house until only the task of feeding and brushing the ostrich-horse’s feathers remained. Zuko watched the older man tending to the animal as Zhuang Yu continued talking about the adventures he had had when he was younger. Zuko found the easy conversation refreshing since he did not have to worry about appearances or pretend as if he actually believed whatever story one of his courtiers was telling him. Here, he was just Li, an ordinary man.
“There you go,” Zhuang Yu cooed as he patted the ostrich-horse’s side as it began to eat. He pulled away and dusted his hands off before returning his attention to the silent young man that was standing casually to the side.

“How about we go see what our women are doing, eh?” Zhuang Yu said and grinned as he led the way back to the house.

They could hear the women laughing as they got closer and the robust man turned to wink at Zuko.

“You sure got yourself a fine woman for a future wife,” he congratulated the younger man.

A small smirk appeared on Zuko’s face.

“I know,” he responded smugly.

Zhuang Yu chuckled as he slid the shoji door aside before they entered after taking off their shoes. The sound of pans banging and a knife hitting a cutting board reached their ears while they inhaled deeply at the smell of cooking food. Both men approached the kitchen and they watched as the women moved around the room.

“Satomi, I’m going to see if there are any animals in the traps I set up the other day,” he spoke up when his wife turned to look at him. “We’ll be back soon. If anything happens just yell for us, alright, Pumpkin?”

“Alright, Sweet Potato,” Satomi called out as she returned to stirring the contents from the frying pan before her. “Hopefully you can remember where you set up the traps this time.”

“That was just one time!” her husband protested as he flung his hands in the air. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“I was just saying,” his wife said and shrugged as she turned to smile at him.

Katara smiled as she continued chopping the vegetables. The couple’s banter reminded her so much of Sokka and Suki. Her smile faded as she sadly wondered how they were doing. How were Jing
and Ting doing? Was her father, Gran-Gran, and Pakku worried about them?

“Tara?” Zuko’s soft voice reached her ears and she turned around to see concern in his eyes. “We’ll be back later, okay?”

Katara knew what he really wanted to say was that they would talk later and she smiled at him to reassure him she was fine.

“How do you—uh, Li,” she replied.

Zhuang Yu turned to Zuko after kissing his wife’s cheek to stop their silly argument.

“Come on, Li,” he said as he turned away from the kitchen. “Let’s check the traps.”

Katara smiled reassuringly when Zuko turned back to look at her before he followed Zhuang Yu out of the house. Once the men were gone, Satomi turned to smile at the young waterbender.

“We should finish here before they return,” she said.

Katara nodded and smiled. She raised her hand above a steaming pot and twirled her fingers to stir the water.

Satomi’s eyes sparkled with awe.

“I’ve never seen a waterbender around these parts before. It’s so exciting,” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, well… I like to travel,” Katara replied with a shrug.

They continued preparing dinner while Satomi asked Katara questions about waterbending and life in the Southern Water Tribe since she had never traveled away from the Earth Kingdom. It was some time later when the food was ready and the low dining table was set. All they had to do was wait for the men to show up so they could eat.
“I wanted to ask you if you would like a new tunic, dear,” Satomi spoke up as she eyed Katara’s bloody, blue shirt.

Katara looked down at herself before she looked back up to the waiting older woman with a small grimace.

“Yes,” she replied quietly. “It really bothers…my betrothed every time he looks at it.”

“He really loves you,” Satomi stated with a soft smile.

Katara blushed slightly as she returned the smile.

“And I love him,” she responded fervently.

The short woman chuckled as she moved into another room in search of a clean tunic while motioning for Katara to follow her.

“I understand, for I feel the same way about my husband,” Satomi said as she continued to chuckle, “Even if he’s a blockhead sometimes.”

The sun was just setting by the time Zuko and Zhuang Yu headed back to the house after finding a small boar-pig trapped in one of the snares. Zuko had marveled at how easy the older man made hunting seem. Zhuang Yu had easily sidestepped the angry and frightened animal as it stabbed its small tusks at him before he drew a blow at the back of the beast’s head to render it unconscious. He then pulled out his sharp knife and slit its throat to kill it without it having to suffer too much. Zuko had helped him bind the boar-pig’s feet before strapping it onto the ostrich-horse’s back, who was not at all happy to have its rest cut so short.

Zhuang Yu’s easy chatter reminded Zuko so much of Iroh that he found himself missing his uncle again. He then thought back to the saddened expression that had crossed Katara’s face a while ago and he wondered what it was that had caused her to look like that.

They paused when the ostrich-horse began to prance around nervously while it thrashed its head from side to side. Zhuang Yu tightened his hold on the reins as he tried to soothe the animal, but he
froze when a loud squeal reached their ears just before something burst through from the bushes ahead of them. It was a larger boar-pig with huge curved tusks that pointed sharply at them as it pawed angrily at the ground, dust flying below its hooves.

“Damn,” Zhuang Yu cursed as he renewed his efforts in trying to keep the ostrich-horse from ripping the reins from his hands in order to run away.

The larger boar-pig’s beady eyes flicked wildly around before they settled on the dead carcass that was strapped to the back of the panicking ostrich-horse. Nostrils flaring, the boar let out a bellow of rage before charging at an incredible speed despite its rounded size toward the old man.

Zhuang Yu gasped in shock as he watched the beast charging at him when his vision was blocked as Li stepped before him. The younger man flicked one wrist forward and Zhuang Yu gaped when a thin fire whip shot forward and beheaded the angry animal before it could realized it was being attacked. With a sickening gurgled sound, the boar-pig crashed to the forest floor where it laid unmoving as its head rolled a few feet away and blood spread beneath it.

The forest seemed to have gone completely silent as both men turned away from the dead animal to look at each other warily. Then a grin spread across Zhuang Yu’s slightly wrinkled face.

“Neat move,” he finally spoke as he made his way over to the dead boar-pig while tugging the now passive ostrich-horse behind him. “Now we have more meat for the next couple of weeks!”

Zuko stared at the older man in shock as he began to tie the boar’s feet. He was surprised that Zhuang Yu was calm after learning that he was a firebender, but Zuko decided to shrug it off for the moment as he went over to help him place the body of the boar-pig beside the smaller one on the ostrich-horse’s back. They left the head for scavengers. Once both animals were securely tied, the men and the slightly protesting ostrich-horse continued on their way to the house.

“It’s nice to meet another fellow Fire Nation citizen,” Zhuang Yu spoke up after a while with a smirk.

Zuko glanced sideways at the grinning old man, taking in his tanned skinned that once must have been pale—as well as the few dark strands of hair among the gray—before he returned his attention to the path before him.

“You are from the Fire Nation,” he stated rather than questioned.
“Yes,” the older man replied with a nod. “I was a young man when I moved to the Fire Nation colonies about thirty-five years ago before venturing to the village close by here. That’s where I met my lovely wife.” He grinned.

“It must have been difficult for you both, being from different countries and all,” Zuko commented.

“Yes it was, especially in those days when the hatred and mistrust between those from the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom was great,” Zhuang Yu admitted with a small frown before he smiled. “But we didn’t care what everybody else thought and we got married. We built our home and made a family away from the leeches of the village and have lived happily since. Satomi and I love each other more than anything and we didn’t let anybody get in the way of our happiness.”

Zhuang Yu turned to smile widely at the young man walking pensively beside him.

“Much like you and your waterbending woman,” he remarked.

Zuko smiled as he gave a brief nod.

_I will not let anyone get in our way of our happiness either, Katara_, he mentally vowed as he looked longingly ahead of him.

He was brought out of his thoughts when Zhuang Yu continued to speak as he looked over the dead animals strapped to his ostrich-horse.

“Poor beast,” the old man muttered as he patted the bigger animal’s thick hide. “I don’t blame the boar-pig for attacking us like that when it was obvious it was outnumbered. Any creature would be filled with fury after finding out its mate has been killed. Hell, I’d go insane with rage if anyone hurt my Satomi!”

“I know the feeling,” Zuko growled out in a low tone.

Zhuang Yu looked at him curiously, but Zuko did not elaborate. He did not want to remember the feeling of losing Katara again.
“You know,” Zhuang Yu continued with a small chuckle. “Satomi was just as beautiful as your Tara when she was her age,” he said as he turned to wink at Zuko. “But I think she’s more beautiful now than ever before, especially since she has put up with me for all these years!” He laughed affectionately. “I know she thinks the same about me, despite what she says.”

Zuko smiled. He hoped one day in the upcoming years he would be able to say the same thing about Katara.

Silence settled between them as the sun continued to set, causing long shadows to fall across the forest floor. A few animals scurried away as they passed while birds flew back to their nests to settle in for the night.

“Something incredible must have occurred for the Fire Lord to be wandering alone in the Earth Kingdom,” Zhuang Yu spoke up in a neutral tone.

Zuko stiffened and he stopped in his tracks. The gray-haired man paused as well and he turned around to face Zuko as they both eyed each other—Zuko with suspicion and Zhuang Yu with curiosity.

“How did you figure it out?” Zuko asked warily.

Zhuang Yu chuckled deeply as he resumed his walk, pulling the ostrich-horse behind him. Zuko watched him for a moment before he followed.

“It wasn’t that hard. You do stand out like a sore thumb,” the older man continued to chuckle as he threw Zuko an affable smile. “A young firebender with a large scar on the left side of his face just like the Fire Lord’s, walking and talking in such a sophisticated manner that no common peasant would be able to boast about.”

Zuko gave him an impressed hum that caused Zhuang Yu to chuckle loudly.

“I may not be firebender or a good fighter, but I am a very observant person,” he commented before he glanced sideways at the silent young man. “I also have a feeling that the pretty, young woman that accompanies you is none other than the respected Master Waterbender, the Lady Katara.”
“Yes,” Zuko admitted.

“And she’s really your betrothed?” the older man asked curiously

“Yes, Lady Katara is my intended bride,” Zuko replied as a smile appeared on his lips.

Zhuang Yu hummed as a small frown appeared between his thick eyebrows.

“I thought…uh…” he began tentatively. “The word is that Lady Katara is Avatar Aang’s uh… girlfriend.”

Zuko felt his temper flare as jealousy gripped his heart before he took a deep breath to dispel the feeling. Instead, it was replaced by guilt. How would Aang react when he came face-to-face with the airbender to tell him that he was going to marry Katara?

“It’s complicated,” Zuko responded with a small sigh.

Zhuang Yu shrugged lightly before he smiled widely at the now dejected young lord.

“Well, it’s obvious Lady Katara loves you by the way she looks at you,” he said as he again winked at Zuko. “It reminds me of the way Satomi looks at me when she thinks I’m not looking.”

Zuko smiled as the older man chuckled and he felt his mood lightened at Zhuang Yu’s words before his expression became serious.

“I would appreciate it if you and your wife do not tell anyone you have seen the Fire Lord and Lady Katara,” he said grimly.

“There must be some dangerous people looking for you both,” Zhuang Yu stated with a frown. “But I promise we will not say anything. You did help us, so it would only be fair we do the same for you.”

“Thank you,” Zuko told him sincerely.
“If these people did happen to show up maybe it would be best that we lead them in another direction,” Zhuang Yu mused as he rubbed at his bearded chin.

“You should only resort to that if it is necessary, but it’s best you say you haven’t seen us,” Zuko indicated.

They finally arrived at the house, and after putting the ostrich-horse away, both men carried the two boar-pigs into the house to the delight of Satomi, who said she would start skinning the animals and drying the meat the next day. While Satomi finished the last touches in the kitchen and Zhuang Yu went to clean up, Zuko pulled Katara into his arms and kissed her softly. Katara sighed happily as they pulled apart.

“You changed your tunic,” Zuko observed as he played with the hem of the dark green tunic Katara was now wearing.

“Yeah, Satomi was nice enough to give me one of her daughter’s old tunics,” Katara explained as she reached up to touch his cheek.

Zuko smiled as he gently grabbed her hand to place a soft kiss on her palm. As Satomi walked back into the room, Zuko quickly moved away and schooled his features into a cool expression. Katara wanted to giggle at his reaction, but decided not to. She understood Zuko was not a man who enjoyed showing his soft and affectionate side for people to witness. It was enough for her to know that he showed his love for her when they were alone.

Once Zhuang Yu returned they all sat down at the low table to begin eating the delicious food the women had cooked. Zuko looked down to gaze tenderly at Katara who smiled back just as affectionately.

Night had finally settled in as the four of them sat at the table enjoying a cup of tea. It was not as great as one of Iroh’s delicious brews, but it was good nonetheless. Zhuang Yu finally explained which was the fastest route to use to Omashu and Zuko and Katara paid close attention to his directions.

“You could stop at the village for some things,” Zhuang Yu advised as he took a sip from his teacup.

“Yes,” Satomi spoke up excitedly. “You can buy some provisions for your journey.”
“That would be nice, but…we don’t have any money,” Zuko responded uncomfortably as he glared down at his clenched hands holding his teacup.

“I have some things you can trade in for money,” Zhuang Yu spoke up evenly.

“I appreciate it, but I must decline your offer,” Zuko replied through gritted teeth. He did not want them to think he needed their charity.

Zhuang Yu seemed to understand for he waved his words aside.

“It’s a small way to repay you for saving my wife and me,” he said neutrally.

“You have already repaid us by welcoming us into your home,” the young lord insisted.

Katara frowned slightly at Zuko’s resistance, but remained silent as she sat by him.

“I’d really like it if you would accept my offer…Li,” the robust man persisted as he stared at the younger man straight in the eye. “If it would make you feel better you can always pay me back.”

This seemed to pacify Zuko for he relaxed in his spot before he took a small sip of the hot tea.

“Very well,” he agreed, sounding so much like the lord he was. “I will repay you as soon as we return home.”

“Great!” Zhuang Yu exclaimed, a happy smile stretching his thin lips.

Katara held back a smile when she caught Satomi’s gaze and the old woman rolled her eyes at the men’s antics. The small room was filled with small talk as the sounds of the night resounded around them.

“That weapon you have there doesn’t seem like something you would wield,” Zhuang Yu remarked
as he observed the small sword that rested beside Zuko.

“I…found this sword a couple of weeks ago,” Zuko said smoothly. “I am actually skilled at the dual broadswords.”

“Amazing,” the gray-haired man hummed as he stroked the small beard at his chin.

“That must be quite a sight,” Satomi commented with a grin as she turned to Katara.

“It is,” Katara agreed enthusiastically as she turned bright eyes to Zuko who looked at her with a smoldering gaze.

“Alright, let me show you the things you could trade at the village,” Zhuang Yu spoke up as he drank the last of his tea. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he stood up. “They’re in the stable somewhere. Most of them are weapons that I have no use for, but will surely bring you in some money,” he said as he motioned for Zuko to stand up and follow.

Zhuang Yu sure had some nerves ordering the Fire Lord around, but Zuko did not find it at all offensive, since the old man had been very helpful so far. Zuko stood up and both men again made their way outside.

Katara helped Satomi clear up the table, and with the help of her waterbending, they were able to finish washing the dirty dishes in no time. They returned to the low table to drink some more tea and make small talk as they waited for the men to reappear.

“Tell me, Tara,” Satomi spoke up with a mischievous smile on her face. “It must be great having such a man in your bed.”

Katara felt her face burned up and she looked down at her teacup.

“W-we…uh…haven’t done a-anything like that yet,” she stuttered.

“Really?” the older woman asked incredulously. “I don’t understand why not. You’re beautiful and he’s so handsome. So why hasn’t he bedded you already?” Satomi asked curiously.
Katara flushed crimson as her mind screamed, *I wish he had!*

“It ... it wouldn’t be proper,” she ended up saying instead.

“Proper? Hmph!” Satomi huffed as she pursed her lips and frowned at the blushing young woman. “Don’t try to deny that you don’t want to bed him! It’s as obvious as the blush on your face.”

“I...I just...couldn’t!” Katara exclaimed as she tried to cover her burning cheeks with her hands. “I wouldn’t be able to look at my father or my grandmother in the eye ever again!”

“They don’t have to know,” the green-eyed woman huffed again. “I forgot you Water Tribe people have this outdated idea about chastity before marriage and all that nonsense.”

Katara frowned and opened her mouth to defend her culture, but she could not deny that some of their laws did seem a bit unfair and silly. Her frown deepened as she looked down at her curled hands on her lap.

“I’m sorry,” Satomi apologized with a small sigh. “I shouldn’t be so disrespectful. Everybody has different views and opinions.”

Katara gave her a tentative smile.

“But you know...” Satomi continued gently as she twirled the teacup in her hands, “you don’t have to do the whole act. There are other ways to be intimate.”

“There are?” Katara asked curiously even though the conversation was making her embarrassed and slightly uncomfortable.

“Well, what have you done so far?” the older woman asked.

“Done?” Katara repeated incomprehensively.
“Uh, well…you know…” Satomi began before she trailed off at the blank look on the young woman’s face. “What I mean to ask is…What have you two done to pleasure each other physically?”

“Oh!” Katara exclaimed as her blue eyes widened in understanding. “Well, um, all we’ve done so far is kiss and hold each other,” she began before she blushed deeply as she remembered the delightful feelings Zuko had evoke in her has he pressed his hardness to her heat.

“I see,” Satomi chuckled softly. “Kissing and holding each other is nice. There are times I like to snuggle with my husband in our bed and just kiss him,” she said before a large grin appeared on her face. “But having a man between your legs can be even more pleasurable.”

Katara choked on her tea and spluttered at the blunt manner this woman was talking to her with. Never before had she had such a conversation with a person and so casually.

“But if you don’t feel comfortable going all the way with him then it’s fine. As I said, there are other ways to be intimate,” the older woman reassured her.

“No, it’s not that the idea of…making love to Zu…uh…my future husband that makes me uncomfortable,” Katara tried to explained as she blushed. “Quite the opposite…I-I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Then why are you hesitating?” Satomi asked with a huff.

“I promised my Gran-Gran that I would wait until marriage,” Katara explained before she again looked down at her hands. “And well…I don’t know how to approach him when it comes to such things,” she confessed quietly.

Satomi smiled softly as she reached across the table to pat Katara’s hand.

“I’m sure he’d understand and would probably be glad to teach you what he knows,” she said. “But that will only happen if you take the first step.” She pulled back to smile widely at Katara. “He must be waiting anxiously for you to encourage him.”

“Really? How do you know?” Katara asked curiously as she leaned forward eagerly.
“Why, it’s so plain to see he wants you!” Satomi exclaimed, ignoring the widening of the waterbender’s eyes. “It’s obvious by the intimate and possessive way he holds you to his side and the hungry look he has in his eyes when he stares at you, almost as if he wants to jump you right at the moment!” She sighed dreamily. “It reminds me of my dear Zhuang Yu. How romantic…”

Katara smiled happily at Satomi’s words since she had noticed Zuko’s behavior as well.

“Besides,” the short woman continued as she poured more tea into her cup, “no one has to know what goes on with you two. It will be a precious secret between you both.”

They paused when they heard the sound of the men’s voices and their footsteps nearing the house. Satomi turned away from the entrance to smile kindly at Katara.

“Just think about it, dear,” she said quietly so the men would not hear just in case. “Start thinking about you both and not what other people might say or think. You can’t always please them, anyway, so you might as well please him and yourself.”

“Thank you for your advice, Satomi,” Katara said sincerely. “I promise I’ll think about it.”

The sliding door opened and the men, carrying various things in their arms, entered before they placed their cargo in one corner of the room. Zhuang Yu nodded and dusted his hands before he turned to smile at his wife.

“So what were you two up to while we were gone, eh?” he asked with a chuckle as he sat down next to her.

“Oh, we were just talking about women things, you know, sewing and childbirth…” Satomi said as she threw a subtle wink at Katara before she turned large, green eyes at her husband. “Would you like to hear about it, Sweet Potato?”

“Uh…maybe some other time, Pumpkin,” Zhuang Yu replied with an uncomfortable look on his face.

Katara again held back a giggle as she stood up from the table to walk where Zuko was rummaging through the things they brought in. Zuko smiled and straightened as he saw her approaching him before he drew her close to him. Katara reached for his face and pulled him down to give him a deep
kiss. Zuko’s eyes widened in surprise at her bold move. As she pulled away, he looked at the older couple who were ignoring them as they whispered to each other. With a smile, Zuko brought Katara closer to his chest and swooped down to press a kiss to her lips. They pulled apart and Zuko brought his hand up to caress Katara’s blushing cheeks.

“There’s something different about you,” Zuko whispered musingly to her.

“I just had a small talk with Satomi,” she replied vaguely as she smiled at him.

“Hm,” Zuko uttered before he handed Katara a small water pouch in exchanged for the heavier water canteen.

“Thanks,” Katara said gratefully as she replaced the water pouch to her hip and placed the canteen with the other things on the floor. “Thank you, Zhuang Yu,” she repeated as she turned to smile at the older man.

“Anything for such a pretty lady,” he said with a wink. He laughed when his wife swatted at him with an annoyed huff.

Katara giggled behind her hand while Zuko smirked as he played with the large, straw hat Zhuang Yu had given him so he could hide his identity better. Zhuang Yu and Satomi stood up from the table and walked to a small storage space in another corner of the room. They began to bring out thin futons, pillows, and blankets before placing them down in the center of the matted room after moving the low table against one wall.

“Spend the night here and you can set out early tomorrow morning, alright?” Zhuang Yu demanded with a smile.

“We appreciate your offer,” Zuko responded with a small nod of his head.

“Good night, dears,” Satomi spoke up as she looped her arm through her husband’s. “I hope you have pleasant dreams.”

“Thank you,” Katara replied with a smile.
The older couple went through another shoji door and the younger pair was left alone in the small room.

“I’m looking forward to not sleeping on the hard forest floor for at least tonight,” Zuko commented seriously, as he moved to fix their futons.

Katara laughed as she went to help him.

“I noticed that you seemed sad earlier,” Zuko spoke up quietly. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Katara frowned as she tried to remember what he was talking about before she let out a sigh.

“I was just thinking about my family,” she replied softly. “I miss them.”

Zuko placed his arm around her waist and squeezed reassuringly. “We’ll see our family again. I promise.”

Turning to smile at him, Katara nodded before he released her. She noticed he had said ‘our family’ and not ‘our families’. Her heart warmed at the thought that he was already combining their two families into one big one.

Soon they were both lying on the thin futons beside each other, the room dark except for one candle that flickered on the table. Katara gripped the blanket closer to her as she tried to swallow the sadness and disappointment at the fact that Zuko once again did not pulled her into his arms as they fell asleep. She thought about scooting closer to him, but decided not to since she did not know if Zuko would welcome her advances. With a soft sigh, Katara rolled over to lie on her side, facing away from Zuko’s sleeping form.

Her ears perked up when she heard the rustling of Zuko’s blankets as he moved before a smile broke on her face when she felt him snake his arm around her waist. She let out a contented sigh when he pulled her to his chest.

“Katara?” she heard him speak up softly.
“Yes?” she responded just as soft.

“Will you grow gray and old with me?” he asked her in a whisper as he placed a soft kiss below her ear.

“Yes,” Katara breathed out gently as her heart warmed at his sweet words.

“Will you stay by my side even if I grow ugly with age?” he asked, amusement lacing his deep voice.

“That’s a very good question,” she mused teasingly as she placed her hand over the one that held her to him.

“Hey!” he protested quietly and he squeezed her in retaliation.

Katara giggled softly.

“Will you still love me even when I get wrinkles?” she asked.

“Of course,” he replied sincerely.

“Then of course I’ll stay by your side,” she responded back as she turned in his arms so they could be facing each other before she grinned at him, “Though I find it hard to imagine you growing ugly with age.”

Zuko chuckled quietly in her ear as he squeezed her.

“I sure hope you’re right,” he said before he let out a quiet sigh as he gazed affectionately at her, “Though I know you’ll still be beautiful even when your hair turns white.”

Katara smiled at him as she leaned forward to place a kiss on his lips. Zuko sighed against her mouth before he pulled away. Katara feared he was going to pull completely away from her, but she relaxed when he just settled beside her.
“I love you,” he whispered.

“And I love you,” she responded back.

The sound of night cat-owls and crickets began to lull them to sleep as they snuggled close to each other. As she fell asleep in Zuko’s warm and strong arms, the last thing that went through Katara’s mind was Satomi’s words.
Zuko slowly opened his eyes, blinking the haziness away as he tried to calm down his rapid breathing. He felt hot and the hardness between his legs ached as the last details of his very arousing dream left his mind. A dream where he had been doing very interesting things to Katara against a sturdy tree. A small groan escaped him as yet again he was tormented by images of what he could not have, but craved with all his being. At least, for a little while longer. Grumbling under his breath, the young firebender absentmindedly let his eyes wander around the unfamiliar dark room as he tried to sit up.

He gasped, his body stiffening, when he felt something brush lightly against his erection. Looking down, Zuko swallowed thickly when he saw Katara sleeping in his arms, her head resting on his upper arm and her leg thrown over his hip, dangerously close to his evident arousal. He very much wanted to roll them over until he was pinning Katara down beneath him so he could rub himself against her, but he fought vehemently to keep his control. He knew he should have kept his distance from her like he had been doing the past few nights, but the only thing he had wanted to do was have her in his arms after the vows they had made the previous night and the loving smile she had directed at him. Never before had he had the need, the desire, to say such tender and emotional words, but those were the kinds of feelings Katara evoked in him.

Taking a few calming breaths, Zuko tried to carefully extract himself from the waterbender wrapped so tightly around him, which was difficult since all he wanted to do was continue laying there with her in his arms. However, he knew if he remained he would want to do more than just cuddle with the beautiful waterbender.

Once he had gently moved Katara away from him and laid her comfortably back on her pillow, Zuko scooted away from the futon and stood up with a groan as he tried to adjust himself. This was really becoming a slightly embarrassing problem. With a sigh, Zuko turned his gaze to the window, noticing that small rays of light were peeking from the curtains. He knew that it was time for them to head out soon.

Turning back to the sleeping waterbender, an affectionate smile curled his lips as he watched her frown in her sleep at the lack of his body and warmth. She mumbled in her sleep, her brow furrowing softly, before she rolled onto her back, her lips slightly parted, and her breasts moving up and down as she breathed. The front of his pants tightened again.

Agni, how he wanted her.

Heaving a loud and self-pitying sigh, Zuko again turned away from Katara’s enticing body. He had to get it into his head that he had to be patient and wait until the day came when he would finally be able to make love to her. And when that day finally arrived, nothing would be able to stop him from
deriving pleasure from her body and returning the favor.

“Thank you, for your hospitality,” Zuko said coolly as both he and Katara gave a small bow to the older couple standing on the porch of their house.

Zhuang Yu and Satomi quickly returned the bow before they straightened up with smiles on their aged faces.

“You’re welcome. It’s the least we could do for helping us,” the gray-haired man replied.

“Have a safe journey, dears,” Satomi spoke up as she waved at them as they shouldered their packs. “And I hope you have a wonderful and pleasurable marriage.”

Katara blushed lightly when the older woman gave her subtle wink.

“Thank you,” Katara responded sincerely.

After bidding Zhuang Yu and Satomi another goodbye and promising to repay everything they had done for them, Zuko and Katara turned away from the small house and headed out toward the village where they would make one stop before making their way to Omashu.

“What was that wink that Satomi threw at you?” Zuko asked curiously as he looked down at the young woman walking beside him.

Another blush appeared on Katara’s cheek as she almost faltered in her steps.

“Oh, uh, it was nothing.” she replied with a nervous giggle.

Zuko eyed her suspiciously, but he shrugged and let it go. It was probably something between women that he probably would not be able to understand anyway. He felt Katara grab his hand and he smiled as he squeezed hers. Now that they were alone again, he felt no qualms in showing her his affectionate side. He knew that she understood that he was apprehensive in showing his tender side since he was not used to them—his father and sister were not the most affectionate people, after all—and he did not want to seem too soft in front of the eyes of those he was trying to show his fierce and
authoritative side to. He could just hear his advisors and courtiers chuckling under their breaths.

The morning sun was bright in the blue sky as both young benders walked along the path that would lead them to the village sometime in the late hours of the night. After their small talk from the previous night, their conversations began to flow as comfortably and as enjoyably as they had many times before. As more time passed by getting to know and understand each other better, the more their understanding and their love grew.

They paused for a few minutes to take a small break under the shades of some trees since the day had become hot. Katara replaced her water pouch to her hip after drinking some water before returning her attention to Zuko who was drinking from the water canteen she had been using before. She watched as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he let out a sigh. Katara allowed her eyes to roam Zuko’s tall frame even though his clothes were slightly impeding her view. She knew it was muscular and hard since his body had been pressed so close to hers a couple of times. Her eyes settled on the spot between his hard thighs as she recalled the feeling of another hard thing pressing into her.

A deep red hue surfaced on her cheeks and she quickly averted her eyes when he called out to her. She had been having such thoughts so many times recently that it slightly embarrassed her. Katara busied herself by retying the water pouch to her hip before she followed Zuko, taking his hand immediately when he held it out for her. He asked her if something was wrong, but she stuttered out that everything was fine. Not wanting for him to continue asking her, Katara pulled on his arm with a large smile and picked up their pace.

Ever since she had that talk with Satomi, Katara could not stop thinking about the older woman’s words. She agonized over the decision of what to do, of the repercussion that would follow if she were to surrender to her attraction to Zuko, of what her family would think if they ever found out. And Zuko wasn’t making it easier either, especially when he kissed her, or held her, or looked at her with smoldering eyes when he thought she wasn’t looking.

However, after her talk with Satomi, she had a new point of view that she had never considered before to help her make a decision. Satomi had said there were other ways to be intimate that would not compromise her virtue, but would be pleasant nonetheless. Katara did not know what these other methods of intimacy could be, but the more she thought about it, the more curious she got, and the more she wanted to find out. With Zuko.

But could she really do such a thing? Would she regret it later if she allowed herself to become intimate with Zuko in such a way before they married?

Katara looked up from frowning pensively at the ground beneath her feet and shifted her gaze toward Zuko as he walked silently beside her. As if he felt her intense gaze on him, the young Fire
Lord turned his head toward her and smiled as he brushed his fingers against her cheek. Katara let out a soft sigh and her heart stuttered in her chest at his affectionate gesture before she placed her hand over his.

Zuko paused at the adoring and soft look in her eyes before he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her gently into his strong chest. He was unable to stop himself from pressing a deep kiss to her lips, to express the same tender emotions he held for her that were difficult for him to expressed verbally. When Katara sighed delightfully into his mouth, he knew that she understood him just as she always did.

After a while of embracing and placing gentle kisses on each other’s mouths, they realized they were on a road where anybody could chance upon them and they pulled away. They smiled sheepishly at each other before they continued walking without saying a single word, they knew there was none to be said at the moment to emphasize what was in their hearts.

“Agni, Katara, it’s like you place a spell on me that makes me forget where I’m currently at and all I think about is kissing your lips,” the young firebender told her after a while with a playful frown.

Katara giggled as she flicked her hair over her shoulder with an equally playful glint in her eyes.

“Oh, yes, because I’m an amazing enchantress,” she said half sarcastically and half amusedly.

“Enchantress, indeed,” Zuko whispered to her with a slight growl before he cleared his throat and resumed his cool expression. “Come on then,” he urged as he tugged her along.

Katara smiled. That sweet kiss, Zuko’s words, and the way her body reacted to his mere presence had made the decision for her.

She would follow both her Gran-Gran and Satomi’s advice. She would keep her virginity until her marriage bed, but she would also allow her body the comfort and pleasure of being intimate with Zuko, however small that intimacy was. They did not have to make love and go through the whole act. No one needed to know what they did. It would be something special between Zuko and her. She felt so good when Zuko just kissed her and she burned to know what it would feel like if they went a bit further. She knew Zuko was an honorable man and he respected her wishes, even if it was obvious he had to hold himself back. That is why she trusted him, trusted him with her body and her heart. She loved him more than anything in the world and she was going to prove it to him by giving a bit more of herself to him than she had ever allowed any man before.
A small sigh escaped her as she flicked a glance toward her future husband’s face. The only problem was to find a way to make him understand what she wanted without embarrassing herself.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sound of a large group of people coming from behind made them tense, and they quickly veered off the path to hide behind the bushes and trees. They were apprehensive at the thought that it could be Jianguo and his group, so they peered warily behind the shadows of the trees. The group that passed them did not seem like they were from the rebels’ camp and Zuko assumed that they were just heading toward the village. Both young benders looked at each other and smiled in relief at the thought that they were indeed heading back to civilization, however small it was. Just to be safe, they decided to walk beside the path, hidden among the trees, in case they ran into anyone else.

It was midafternoon when they decided to take a small break and eat the small rice balls Satomi had given them. Just as they were about to head out again, Katara paused and tilted her head to the side.

“What is it?” Zuko asked as he turned around when he noticed she had stopped.

“I can feel another large body of water not far from here,” Katara spoke up as she looked at a point beyond the trees before she looked up at Zuko. “Maybe we can refill my water pouch and your water canteen.”

Zuko frowned as he looked back at the path before he gave a small nod. They had consumed most of their water since the day had been hot.

“Let’s check it out then,” he said.

A few minutes later, they were struggling their way through a thick cluster of bushes before they suddenly emerged into a small and beautiful clearing. The lush green grass had a few patches covered with small white flowers that from afar resembled spots of white snow, while tall trees with branches heavy with green leaves encircled the peaceful glade to give it a feeling of a private haven. However, what had Katara smiling in delight was the tranquil waterfall that cascaded down in large rivulets from a small hill and pooled at a crystal clear pond surrounded by a few small boulders.

Zuko watched as Katara’s blue eyes sparkled in fascination as she stared at the serene pool, and a small smile tugged at his lips at the way she lit up at the simplest of things. Of course, that did not mean he was not going to pamper her with exquisite gifts once they married. After all, she deserved everything he could give her.
“How about we spend the night here?” Zuko spoke up once she finally ripped her gaze from the trickling waterfall. “We can arrive at the village tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?” Katara asked as a small crease appeared on her smooth brow.

“Yes,” Zuko assured her with a smile. “You can even take a bath after we eat.”

“Alright!” Katara relented easily with a large smile brightening her face.

Zuko chuckled at her quick response before he walked over to the edge of the pond and dropped the heavy bag with the things he was going to trade in the village. Katara quickly followed him and placed her lighter pack next to his. The only things she was carrying were a few new blankets Satomi had given them to replace the ones they had taken from Jianguo’s camp.

“How about you collect firewood while I try to see if I can get something for us to eat?” Zuko spoke up when Katara turned to look at him.

“Okay, but be careful, alright? Try not to set the whole forest on fire,” Katara told him with a teasing smile.

“I’ll try,” Zuko responded with a dry chuckle.

Walking away from the charming clearing, the young lord stepped into the thick forest as he tried to find something that he could present to Katara for their meal. So far, Katara had been the one that had provided them with food when she had caught some fish for them, and though he knew it was ridiculous, it had upset him. It was just that he felt like it was his responsibility to bring in the food. He was the man. It was his duty. And he wanted to prove to Katara that he was a man capable of providing her with what she needed.

Shaking his head, Zuko brushed the thoughts aside as he looked at his surroundings. He remembered the hunting tips Zhuang Yu had given him after bringing the boar-pigs into the house and he immediately set out to look for animal tracks. Watching for tracks was something he could do and was used to, and he carefully examined the forest floor as he went. Once he found small paw prints, he followed them until the tracks disappeared into a small hole between the roots of a large tree. As quietly as possible, Zuko retreated, sat in the shadows of some low trees, and stared at the dark hole to wait for the creature to emerge. He remembered that Sokka would wait hours for his prey to come out and have that perfect chance to strike. If the sometimes-silly warrior could do it, then Zuko was
determined that he could as well. He just hoped it would not take that long so he could return to Katara.

As he waited, he was immediately brought back to the day when he and Katara had started that game of chase that led to a wonderful experience against the rough bark of a large tree. The taste of those plump lips of hers, the feeling of her soft breasts pressed so tightly against his chest, the feeling of her heat against his hard length as he moved against her...Zuko groaned quietly before he shook his head to clear his mind when it became evident that he was becoming aroused at the memory. Damn, never had he been so easily—and willingly—distracted by a woman before.

He snapped to attention when a movement caught his eye and he watched silently as a rabbit-squirrel stepped cautiously out of its hiding place. Its small nose twitched as it scented the air while its long bushy tail flicked behind it. It stayed at the entrance to its burrow for what seemed to Zuko like hours before it scurried away from the hole. It stopped a few feet away, flicked its large ears in every direction, and again darted away.

Zuko held his breath as the small animal froze a few feet in front of him, its long ears swirling wildly atop its head, before it moved again under the shade of a tree where many acorns were scattered around its roots. Standing noiselessly from his spot, Zuko took a small step forward as he prepared to flick his fire whip out and behead the rabbit-squirrel just as he did with the boar-pig.

The rabbit-squirrel, oblivious to the danger that was so close to it, continued to gather acorns into its puffy cheeks before it dropped one as a small twig snapped from behind. Zuko watched as the animal froze again before it spun in his direction with frightened eyes. They looked at each other, both unmoving. Without warning, the animal turned on its paws and sprinted away. Zuko took a few long strides as he raised his arm and flicked out his thin fire whip.

Katara finished refilling her water pouch and Zuko’s water canteen by bending the clean water from the waterfall into them before she returned to where their bags rested. She sat before the pile of wood she had erected for a campfire and chewed on her lip as she again debated whether she could go through with her decision. Every time she thought about bringing it up with Zuko, her face would heat up in embarrassment and uncertainty.

What if she was making a mistake? What if she made a fool of herself? What if she could not please Zuko?

Katara let out a calming sigh. She should not rush into things, but let it come naturally when the time was right. But when would she know when the time was right? She almost felt like laughing at how ironic her situation was now. When she had been with Aang, she had shied away from thoughts about intimacy, but with Zuko, it was all she could think about every waking moment of the day and in every dream at night.
The sound of someone approaching made her tense up and she reached her hand to the water pouch at her hip. She immediately relaxed when she saw Zuko stepping into the clearing and she raised a bemused eyebrow at the pleased grin that adorned his face, before a smile broke over her own face when he proudly raised the animal he had caught. She watched as he quickly approached her, and upon reaching her, he presented her with his kill with an extravagant bow.

“I hope this is good enough for my first kill,” he remarked with a smooth grin before he gave a little shrug of his broad shoulders. “I’ve never had the need to hunt down an animal before to eat it.”

Katara smiled widely as she took the beheaded rabbit-squirrel in her hands. She shivered slightly when he intentionally brushed his fingers against hers.

“It’s great. Thanks,” she said gratefully as she laid the animal in front of her before she raised her head to smile at Zuko who was grinning smugly to himself. “You know, there used to be a small tradition in our tribe, many, many years ago, where a man presented his kill to his chosen woman.”

“Really?” Zuko asked with interest as he watched Katara pull the small dagger he had given her from the pile of other weapons before she began to skin the small animal. “I thought that the man had to propose by giving the woman a necklace.”

“Actually that tradition was created in the Northern Water Tribe,” Katara explained absentmindedly.

“I see,” Zuko replied with a confused frown. “So your tribe doesn’t use it?”

“No, we do. After our sister tribe helped with the reconstruction of the Southern Water Tribe these past years, we have now adopted that tradition,” the waterbender explained as she continued to remove the animal’s fur. “It replaced the older one when the tribe began to expand, the living conditions became better, and of course after spending time with members of our sister tribe.”

“How interesting,” Zuko mused as he continued to watch her.

“I’ve always wondered if there’s a tradition in the Fire Nation for a man to propose to a woman,” Katara enthused as she looked up briefly to smile curiously at him.
“Well, I’m not sure about what the rest of the Fire Nation citizens do, but there is one tradition among the nobility,” Zuko informed her.

“Really? What is it?” Katara asked and tilted her head curiously.

A secretive smile appeared on Zuko’s face.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” he told her mysteriously.

Katara raised an eyebrow at him before she returned to her task. Skinning animals was nothing new to her, especially since the warm furs were a necessity in the cold climate of the tribes.

“So what did the earlier tradition of the Southern Water Tribe signify?” Zuko asked instead to redirect her thoughts from the subject.

“It was a way for the man to show the woman that he was a good hunter and that he would be able to provide for her and their future children,” Katara explained as she continued with her work.

“I see,” Zuko commented coolly as he eyed Katara’s concentrated face before he continued after a long moment of silence, “And how would the man know if his chosen woman had accepted him?”

Looking up from skinning the animal at the tone of his voice, Katara heard the undercurrent in his words and saw the uncertainty in his eyes. She placed the now bare animal beside her and washed her hands with some waterbending. She stood up before she looked at him to give him a reassuring smile.

“Why, the woman would accept his offering, of course,” she said softly as she reached a hand out to place it on his chest. She smiled when he shivered at her touch before she breathed out, “And she would also give him a small token of appreciation as her acceptance to his proposal.”

“What kind of token?” Zuko asked quietly as he stared down deeply into her eyes.

He held his breath when Katara rose on the tips of her toes and raised her face close to his until her breath tickled his lips. His breathing sped up as he waited anxiously for her to close the distance
between their lips, but instead she moved her head to the side and placed a quick kiss to his cheek before she pulled back with a grin.

“There. That’s the token of my appreciation,” she said flippantly.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at her before he grumbled under his breath about her being a tease. When Katara giggled at him and made to move away so she could start on their meal, Zuko grabbed her arm and pulled on it until she stumbled into his chest. Before she could protest indignantly, the young lord cupped the back of her head and kissed her until she was begging for air. Pulling back, Zuko smirked smugly at her dazed look.

“I think it unfair that the man would only get a kiss on the cheek after possibly risking his life to hunt an animal down,” Zuko remarked casually as he moved away to light up the pile of wood.

“And what do you think would’ve been a better token?” Katara asked as she stared at him dazedly as he shot a spark of flames that instantly created a campfire.

Zuko dusted his hands off before he glanced at her from the corner of his eye.

“Oh… I think it’s best that I keep that to myself,” he muttered before he cleared his throat as he indicated at the animal at their feet. “Don’t you have to wash that before we roast it?”

Katara pursed her lips since it was the second time he had said the same thing to her before he tried to avoid telling her what he had in mind. Although a part of her shied away in virginal embarrassment, another part of her—the more insisting part of her—wanted to know. However, she knew that if she wanted Zuko to open up to her, she had to be the one to take the first step, he would never do anything to pressure her.

Looking up to the setting sky, Katara brought her gaze back down to Zuko as he started to fix their bedding and she again began to chew on her lip anxiously.

The flames of a small crackling campfire was the only bright light visible in the little clearing surrounded by the darkened forest. Crickets chirped and night birds called out into the calm night as the young Fire Lord and the waterbender rested on their backs atop the luscious grass and stared at the millions of twinkling stars that speckled the midnight sky.
Resting on her side with her head pillowed on Zuko’s arm, Katara watched—completely enthralled—the soft expression on Zuko’s face as he related a short myth about the brightest star in the sky Lady Ursa had told him when he was a child. She listened with a pounding heart as his deep, velvety voice caressed her ears as he spoke, as his sandalwood scent tickled her senses, and as the heat of his body warmed her skin as he tucked her to his side. When his large hand accidentally brushed against the side of her breast, Katara almost let out a deep moan.

Zuko finished his story, and with a soft smile, he looked down at Katara as she lay quietly at his side. He paused at the strange way she was staring at him, and when she did not say anything, he began to worry.

“What?” he called out as he gave her a small squeeze.

“We should bathe,” she spoke up softly.

“But it’s the middle of the night,” Zuko said in bewilderment as he frowned at her.

“I know,” Katara continued in that same soft tone.

Before he could speak again, Katara moved away from him and stood up. Zuko sat up, and with a confused expression, watched as Katara made her way toward the quiet pond until she stood at the edge with her back turned toward him.

His eyes widened when he saw her tug the dark sash around her waist before she dropped it to the ground beside her, followed slowly by her dark green tunic. Zuko swallowed thickly as the smooth skin of her shoulders and her lower back gleamed under the half-moon’s light. He was surprised, however, when she began to lower her black pants down her hips and he quickly averted his eyes before the sight of her became his undoing. However, when he heard her toss her clothes aside, he was unable to stop his gaze from returning to her form. He gulped when more of her skin was revealed to him, her slender arms, her bare thighs, her exquisite long legs…

Breathing rapidly, Zuko again looked away from her and leapt to his feet before he reluctantly turned away. He closed his eyes for a moment in order to regain his composure, but the sight of Katara in only her under-wrappings was burned into his mind, making it hard for him to achieve his iron control. He needed to get away, put some distance between him and the bewitching woman that stood in front of the sparkling waterfall, before he broke his promise.
“I’m…” he rasped before he cleared his throat as he began to walk away, “I’m going to look for more firewood.”

“Zuko,” her sweet voice called out to him and he immediately paused.

Katara watched timorously as Zuko shifted in his place and his hands shook at his sides before he clenched them to cease their trembling. When he did not turn around, Katara resisted the urge to gather her clothes and cover herself up in mortification at the thought that she had somehow done something wrong or that perhaps Zuko was appalled at her brazenness. But she steeled her nerves and took a few calming breaths to stop her own trembling. She needed to take the first step. She wanted Zuko to know that she was ready for them to take one step further in their relationship.

Swallowing her uncertainty and insecurity, Katara called out to him again in a timid voice.

“Please don’t go, Zuko.”

Zuko’s brow furrowed at her words as he clenched and unclenched his hands. Did she not understand what she was doing to him? Did she not realize how much trouble and pain it caused him to hold himself back from her? Did she not know what he would probably do if she did not let him go?

He was brought out of his thoughts, and his curiosity escalated, when the sound of Katara stepping into the pool reached his ears. He heard the water lapping at her legs as she waded deeper into the water. Unable to resist the temptation, Zuko slowly turned around with bated breath.

His breath hitched in his throat as he watched her making her way deeper into the glistening pond, the white wrappings around her chest and her hips a great contrast against the darker color of her skin and hair. He watched with heated eyes as she paused for a second, the water now reaching to her waist, before she submerged herself. A few ripples spread across the surface of the clear pool as she disappeared. He waited, his body heating up rapidly, until Katara emerged from the surface of the water a few seconds later and flipped her long wet hair behind her, the act causing sparkling droplets to fly in every direction. She looked like an enchanting water nymph luring him toward her, calling to his very soul. Zuko licked his lips as his eyes traveled over her wet body as it glistened under the gentle moonlight before he brought his gaze back to her face.

Their eyes locked and it seemed like their surroundings and the sounds of the night disappeared, and the only thing they were aware of was the presence of the other. A diffident smile appeared on Katara’s lips as she raised one trembling hand to beckon him forward.
“Join me, Zuko,” she said softly. “Please.”

Incapable of resisting her quiet call, Zuko slowly began to rid himself of his clothes as he continued to stare unwaveringly into Katara’s deep, blue eyes. Once he removed his dark boots, Zuko reached for his trousers, but there was still a small part of his brain that told him it would be best if he kept them on. He still did not know what Katara truly meant in calling for him to join her in the pond and he did not wish to frighten her.

He stepped slowly into the water and shivered at the cool contact before he unconsciously raised his body temperature to ward off the chill as he waded into the water toward her, never breaking eye contact. Once he was standing before her, Zuko intently stared into her blue orbs as he tried not to let his eyes wander below her face, lest his control broke.

“Katara,” he breathed as he reached a hand out to caress the skin of her blushing cheek with his thumb.

Katara’s heart was pounding hard in her chest at the proximity of his warm body and she closed her eyes at the sound of his masculine voice and the feeling of his soft touch on her skin. Did he understand what she was trying to tell him?

Zuko watched as a small droplet of water trailed down her forehead, down her petite nose, and over her lovely lips, until it quivered on her chin. He watched intently as the sparkling bead trembled when a small shiver racked through her body and he followed its path as it dropped onto her chest until it slid down between the cleft of her covered breasts. He stared hungrily at the sight of her hard nipples straining against the wet cloth and he groaned softly when his cock hardened almost painfully in his trousers. He heard Katara let out a shuddering sigh and his eyes immediately settled on her slightly parted lips.

Before Katara could utter another word, she found herself crushed against the hard and unyielding body of the man she loved before her lips were caught in a passionate and fiery kiss that left her breathless and weak in the knees. Afraid she would collapse at the sudden intensity, Katara wrapped her arms around Zuko’s neck, one hand gripping the hair on the back of his head, before she returned the assault on her mouth with equal fervor.

Zuko growled low in his throat when Katara pressed herself against him and a tingle went down his spine when her teeth accidentally grazed his tongue, causing him to tighten his arms around her body and lift her closer to him. She tasted heavenly. Just the pure, supple feeling of her wet skin under his hands was driving him insane with desire. He needed more, he wanted more. His hot tongue traced the line of her bottom lip before he pulled the plump flesh into his mouth and sucked on it.
The sound of Katara’s sharp gasp brought him crashing down from his lust-induced haze and his eyes shot open in shock and guilt at his sudden fierce assault. He wrenched himself away from her delicious mouth, and placing her back on her feet, he held her at arm’s length as he tried to control his harsh breathing, and in the process, call forth his iron restraint before he ended up hurting her.

Breathing equally as hard, Katara watched anxiously as Zuko closed his eyes and shook his head as he held her away from him.

“Ka…Katara…” he panted in a strained voice. “I think we should get dressed.”

“No,” Katara pleaded between breaths. “Zuko…”

“Please, Katara!” Zuko insisted firmly as he gave her a pained look. “We have to stop before I break my promise and…I take you…here.”

“Would it be that bad if it’s here or anywhere else?” Katara asked quietly as she wrapped her arms around herself. “Don’t…you want me?” she whispered.

Zuko shook his head and his eyes softened at the dejected look on her face before he lifted her chin with one finger so she could see his sincerity.

“If I could, I would have my way with you anywhere and anytime. Believe me, it doesn’t matter where or when... the thought is always there,” he groaned.

“But I…I want,” Zuko swallowed as he tried to find the words that could help him express himself without sounding like a complete idiot. “Our first time…I want it to be with you as my wife. I want your first time to be in our bedchamber back in the Fire Nation with silky sheets beneath you and candles shining on your perfect skin, not in a random part of an Earth Kingdom forest.”

Katara felt elated tears prick her eyes as Zuko’s heartfelt words made her heart expand until she was afraid it would explode. With a watery smile, she gently placed her hand on his wrist.

“That’s what I want too,” she told him tenderly. “I want to give all of myself to you as your wife. I want to be your wife when you…make love to me for the first time.”
A small crease appeared on Zuko’s brow as he tried to understand what was going on.

“But just now… it seemed like you wanted…” he trailed off.

A deep blush blossomed across Katara’s cheeks and she averted her eyes from his questioning golden orbs.

“Satomi said there were other ways to be intimate without… doing the whole act,” she stuttered shyly.

“Oh. I see,” Zuko responded with wide eyes and a light blush surfaced along his unscarred cheek.

“I know how much holding yourself back is affecting you and it made me feel so horrible. Then, you became a bit distant after that game of chase and it saddened me. So I t-thought that—” Katara began hesitantly.

Zuko pressed his thumb to her lips to stop her words before he shook his head as he frowned at her.

“I didn’t mean to make you believe my… predicament was entirely your fault and that you had to do something about it,” he interrupted solemnly. “And I’m sorry for making you feel like I was pushing you away. But you don’t have to force yourself to do something that you’re not ready for. I said that I was not going to pressure you and I won’t. I just have to—”

This time it was Katara’s slender finger that stopped his words. Zuko furrowed his eyebrows as he looked at her inquiringly. He had said that he did not want Katara to do anything she was not ready for, but it was becoming more and more difficult to keep that promise. Damn it, he was a hot-blooded male! How could he stop his body from desiring her?

“It’s not just because I want to please you…” he heard Katara whisper gently, causing him to shudder at the breathless tone of her voice.

Zuko swallowed thickly at the intensity he saw in her blue depths as she removed her finger from his lips and again closed the distance between them, placing her small hand on his chest, provoking a low moan from his lips at her cool touch on his heated skin.
“I want it too,” she said in a breathless yet firm tone. “I don’t want to keep suppressing my feelings for you and the way you make my body react. I want to experience the pleasure of simple intimacy with you, Zuko. Only you.”

Zuko had never heard sweeter words. Everything he had felt for this beautiful woman suddenly exploded within him, and he could not have argued with her even if he had wanted to. Drawing her firmly against his chest, he tangled his fingers in her wet hair, and tilting her head, he captured her lips with his. He groaned when he realized that she had already parted her succulent lips in anticipation of his kiss.

They kissed slowly, tenderly, as they held onto each other as they stood in the middle of the pond. Zuko slowly backed her up against one of the slick boulders while droplets from the waterfall rained down on them. He kissed her with such tender restraint and thoroughness that it made her sigh happily. Pulling away slowly, Zuko gazed deeply into her eyes as they panted softly before he rested his forehead against hers with a low moan.

“Gods, Katara, you have no idea how much I want you,” he groaned against her lips.

“I think I have a pretty good idea,” she replied with a smile as she gently pressed her stomach closer to him until she felt the hard bulge between his legs, causing him to let out a hiss.

Zuko wanted to push back and press his arousal into her stomach, but instead he grasped her hips and gently pushed her away until she was pressed against the boulder behind her. When Katara looked away from him as if he had rejected her, Zuko leaned down to press soft kisses along her neck.

“I want you to know,” he began softly as he buried his face in her wet hair, taking a deep inhale of her fragrant scent, “that I just don’t solely want you because of your body and the pleasures it will bring me.”

He pulled away from her hair to brush his lips against her soft ones.

“I want all of you…your body, your mind, your heart…everything,” he told her ardently.

“I know,” Katara sighed happily against his lips. “And I willingly give them to you.”
“Just like I want to give you everything that I am to you,” he growled against her mouth before he caught her lips in another searing kiss.

The tender kiss from before changed into a frenzied dance of lips, tongues, and mouths. Zuko’s arms closed around Katara’s small body as he kissed her with a hunger as scorching as the flames he commanded, his hard edges melting until she fitted perfectly against him. Shaken by his impassioned heat and the demands of his wet tongue, Katara clung to him tightly with a small cry as she responded to him as she had never responded to any man before.

Without breaking away from her lips, Zuko lifted Katara into his arms and he smiled when she immediately wound her arms around his neck. He walked to the edge of the pond and stepped out of the water. After Katara removed the water off their clothes with her waterbending, he carried her closer to the campfire where their blankets had already been laid out a couple of hours before. He knelt down slowly before he pulled away from their kiss and carefully laid Katara atop the warm blankets, the light of the campfire making her skin glow and her eyes glisten as they panted hard against each other.

Katara gazed at Zuko’s muscular upper body, at the way his alabaster skin gleamed under the moonlight like marble, and she marveled, not for the first time, at his perfection despite the scar that rested on his abdomen. She moved her gaze away from his bare chest and blushed deeply at the intense yet loving way he was gazing at her. She gave him another shy smile. Apprehension made her stomach flutter and anticipation made her heart pound. Was she doing the right thing?

Zuko noticed the anxiety in her eyes and he brought a hand up to her cheek to soothe her worries. If only she knew, he was as nervous as she was. He knew there were other ways of intimacy, but the truth was that, besides the act of sex, he had never participated in such deeds. His only objective with the few women he had been with before was to find the quickest way to release his sexual frustration and, as soon as he achieved it, make his departure and forget the encounter. He had cared for Mai, but—as much as it embarrassed him to admit it—he had not been a good lover to her the few times they had been together.

However, the woman that lay before him was Katara, the woman he loved, and she deserved better than the way he had treated those women before, she deserved his full attention and devotion. Though he could not show his feelings for her by making love to her yet, he was determined to please her in other ways. He would just allow the little advice he had heard his drunken crewmembers boast about on music night as well as his male instincts to guide him in his actions. At the thought, his anxiety left him and he let out a calm sigh as he gazed down at her.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered as he ran his hand slowly, reverently, down from her cheek to her slender throat.
Katara smiled at him, but she tensed when his hand moved down between her covered breasts until it rested on her quivering stomach where he splayed his fingers over her skin. Zuko leaned down toward her, his body hovering over her smaller form, and touched his lips to her mouth in a light caress. He felt her tension ease at the contact and she willingly opened her mouth to him before she slowly let out her tongue to run it across his lip, causing him to let out a pleased groan.

Katara forgot her worries and fears as she allowed herself to get so lost in the soft passion of Zuko’s kiss that she was unable to stop the surprised gasp that left her when she felt Zuko’s large hand cup her breast over her wrappings. He squeezed it lightly and she moaned as a flare of heat raced down to her warm core. Unable to stop herself, Katara tightly wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer to her so that he was almost lying on top of her body.

Encouraged by her reaction, Zuko began to knead the soft, covered mound while he continued to make sweet love to her wonderful mouth. He was tempted to remove her under-wrappings, he very much wanted to feel her soft round flesh in his hand, but he did not know if she was ready for that yet. He was going to take this slow. He was going to please her unhurriedly and with tender care. This night was going to be about her, even though she had made this decision in order to please him and take away some of his torment in the first place.

They broke away from their kiss to catch their breaths, but Zuko did not detach his lips from her skin and instead trailed kisses to her ear. The young Fire Lord gently scraped his teeth against her earlobe, tugging at the soft flesh before engulfing it with a gentle suck. Katara’s breath hitched at the sensation and she moaned. She was immediately reminded of her thoughts about Zuko biting her ear the first time she entered his royal bedchambers, and she almost giggled.

Who would have thought that it would come true?

Zuko moved away from her ear before he attached his mouth to her throat. Katara sighed when Zuko kissed her neck and she moved her head to the side to give him more access, which he rewarded by trailing his hot tongue along the slender column. Katara moaned deeply when Zuko began to massage her breast more firmly and she let out a loud squeak when he pressed his thumb on her aching nipple.

“Zuko,” she breathed out as she pushed her breast closer to his warm hand.

Smiling against her skin, Zuko pinched the hard peak with his thumb and forefinger and grinned smugly when she let out a gasp and grabbed tightly onto his hair. He managed to loosen her grasp and again began to trail wet kisses along her neck before he moved to her collarbone where he dipped his tongue in the hollow of her throat. He pulled back slightly to see her and he watched,
mesmerized, as her breasts heaved up and down with her ragged breathing while he continued to knead her left breast.

Before Katara could wonder what he was doing, she saw him lean his head down toward her right breast before she felt his tongue run over her hardened nipple.

“Oh!” she exclaimed as a jolt of pleasure once again sprang to her aching heat.

She was unable to stop the whimper that escaped her lips when Zuko attached his mouth to her stiff peak and began to suckle her through the rough cloth that covered her chest. Again, she shoved her fingers into his dark hair and pushed his face closer to her aching nipple as she called out his name. Groaning, he continued to suck the peak until the cloth was entirely drenched. She could feel more wetness seeping out of her aching core. As Zuko continued to touch her all her moral precepts disappeared and there was only Zuko and the love and desire she had for him.

The ache between her legs was becoming more unrelenting than ever as Zuko continued to caress her, and Katara strained her hips in order to find some sort of relief from the sensations coursing through her. When she lifted her hips again, she briefly felt the same hardness between Zuko’s legs as she did that day against that tree, and when she recalled the incredible feeling of it pressed against her heat, she lifted her hips more firmly. She heard Zuko hiss against her breast and she moaned when he pressed back into her. Instinctively, she raised her legs to wrap them around his hips, but she was startled out of her haze when Zuko shifted away.

“Zuko?” she asked between pants, “What’s wro—”

Zuko silenced her words by pressing his lips against hers again and he groaned when she whimpered into his mouth. When he had felt her press against his erection he had almost lost all control and almost reached down to rip the cloth that hid her wet pussy from his aching cock. He had to remind himself that this was about her, not him. Just her.

The hand that had been massaging her breast wandered down her side, across her lean stomach, over her waist, until he rested it on her hip. Zuko’s fingers played with the hem of her under-wrappings for a moment before he trailed his fingers south. His fingers moved to her inner thigh and Katara gasped at the soft touch. She had never been touched there before, and though it embarrassed her a little, it was a sweet pleasure. Zuko just continued to expose her to new sensations she had never experienced before.

Zuko again bent down to suck on her other covered nipple as he drew his hand slowly up from her thigh to between her legs, placing his palm flat against her covered heat. He groaned at how hot and
damp she felt. He heard her breath hitch as she encouragingly pressed her hips against his hand.

A sharp gasp was ripped from Katara’s lips and she jolted when she felt Zuko’s hand cup her womanly heat more firmly. She felt him pause briefly before he again pressed his palm firmly against her damp core, eliciting a deep groan from her throat as she once again wrapped her arms around his neck when he raised his head to cover her lips with his. Zuko rubbed two knuckles against her covered sex and he immediately swallowed her loud whimper. She shifted beneath him and he gasped in pleasure when her thigh again pressed against his erection. Unable to help himself, he pressed his hard shaft tightly against her.

A heat flared deep in the pit of Katara’s stomach as Zuko continued to caress her, but it only intensified when she felt Zuko’s hardness pressing against her. Mewling, she lifted her hips at the intense sensations he was evoking in her and shifted her thigh against him. She moaned when she heard him groan deeply in pleasure as he increased the pressure against her core. A hot flare filled her in that instant, different from, but just as delicious, as the heat that had filled her when Zuko had pressed his thigh against her.

Zuko groaned against her mouth as the cloth that separated his fingers and her core became completely wet with her arousal and he began to rub more insistently. He watched as long dark lashes fluttered and closed over deep blue eyes with a soft moan, her long hair spread around her. Just watching her making such erotic sounds and expressions because of his ministrations was so pleasurable to him that it shocked him. Dazed with lust and satisfaction, Zuko began to grind his aching cock against her thigh.

“Oh, Katara,” he groaned long and loud.

Growling, he pressed his hand more tightly against her drenched sex and began to rub more furiously at the same time he ground his covered length against her thigh.

Katara broke away from his lips as she let out whimpers and moans while she thrashed her head from side to side. She felt something coiling inside her to the point that she thought she would pass out. It was overwhelming her and Katara felt like she was drowning. Then she felt Zuko tap his thumb on the nub above her entrance and the coil snapped.

“Zuko! Ooooh!” she screamed as she felt her core clench and convulse as stars appeared before her eyes and waves of ecstasy coursed throughout her body.

Hearing the cry of her sweet release, the pleasure he had given her, triggered Zuko’s own release. Growling, Zuko ground his erection against her a few more times before he cried out her name as he
felt his cock throb and his seed spurt hotly in his pants. Moaning incoherently, he slumped forward but managed to catch himself with one hand before he crushed her beneath him.

Agni, that was incredible. And he had only rubbed himself against her thigh!

Once coherent thought returned, the firebender roused himself from his pleasured haze. Panting roughly, Zuko slowly lifted his head to observe his waterbender. He watched with a pleased smile as Katara trembled and moaned as she slumped beneath him while her uneven breathing reached his ears. He pulled his hand away from her drenched center and watched her for a moment as she panted, her eyes closed tightly, while her body continued to give small shudders.

“Katara?” he called out softly as he touched her flushed cheek.

Katara opened her eyes with a stunned look before she gave him a languid smile. She reached up slowly and rested her hand on his cheek, smiling when he immediately leaned into her touch.

“That…that was…wow,” she breathed out with a soft sigh before she smiled at him. “Thank you.”

Zuko smiled as he grabbed her wrist and kissed her hand. He settled himself beside her and drew her closely to his side. Gods, he felt so satisfied. He could not wait for them to do that again.

“If that was pleasurable, then I can’t wait to find out how much more incredible it will feel when you make love to me,” Katara sighed as she snuggled closer to him.

“I thought the same thing, too,” Zuko responded with a light chuckle as he pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. “And I can’t wait to find out.”

“Did…you also…?” she asked tentatively as she glanced down at his crotch before she raised her head to look shyly up at him.

“Yes,” he replied with a smile as he ran his fingers through her hair. “You pleased me so well.”

“But I didn’t even do anything!” she stammered as her flushed cheeks reddened again.
“Believe me you didn’t have to,” he told her huskily. “Just your scent, presence, and touch were enough.”

“But—” The waterbender frowned as she tried to sit up.

Zuko shook his head as he pushed her back down gently beside him, wrapping an arm around her waist. He gave her a small smile before he kissed her mouth.

“I promise you that another night I’ll make it your duty to bring me to great pleasurable heights, okay?” he told her with a grin.

Katara blushed deeply at the heated glint in his eyes before she gave him a smile.

“Okay,” she agreed before a yawn escaped her.

“I’m so sleepy,” Katara whispered and yawned again as she snuggled against his warmth.

Zuko smiled again at her tranquil words and languorous movements. Her contentment made him happy. He allowed his blood and body to cool as he tugged her close to him after placing one of the blankets over them, while the heat from the campfire warmed them. He decided that once she fell asleep, he would clean up.

“Sleep, Katara,” he said gently as he caressed her damp hair. “I’ll always be here, every time you wake up.”

Large gray clouds gathered overhead, blocking the bright early sun and the blue sky. The wind swept by swiftly and rustled the tree branches wildly about. It seemed that it was going to rain and the lost benders quickened their pace so they could reach the village before they were caught in the storm.

Despite the chilly and gloomy morning, Zuko’s mood was blissful and content as he replayed in his mind waking up to a scantily clad Katara wrapped snuggly in his arms. The heat that went through him at the sight was indescribable. And the sounds and expressions she had made when he had pleased her! And the incredible pleasure he had gained just by rubbing against her without them
even being fully naked! He could not stop thinking about how amazing it would feel when they finally experienced true intimacy. He was very pleased and it pleased him that he was able to please her in such a simple way. At least, he hoped so since she had not said anything about it as they woke up, dressed themselves, and packed up their things. Did he do it right?

He had to admit that he was a bit worried that perhaps she regretted what they did. It would devastate him if she told him that she did, for he really wanted them to do much more, to know each other more intimately, to please her until she went insane with need of him, and he wanted to be able to find his own pleasure in Katara’s embrace over and over again.

A strong, chilly breeze rushed past them and Zuko looked up at the cloudy sky before he glanced at Katara walking silently beside him from the corner of his eye. He was just going to have to tread carefully so he would not scare her away like a nervous ostrich-horse, though he very much wanted to throw caution to the wind and continue with what they did the previous night.

Meanwhile, Katara felt like she was in a cloud of bliss as she remembered the wonderful things Zuko had done to her the night before. When she had woken up to Zuko’s warm gaze and their half-dressed state, she had waited for the feeling of shame and guilt to surface, but instead she had felt so wonderful, and an overwhelming feeling of love for Zuko had settled in her heart at the thought that he had been so tender and understanding. Though she had been unable to say anything to him since they woke up, for she had been a bit self-conscious and embarrassed at the loud scream she had let out when such an overpowering sense of ecstasy overcame her. She felt her cheeks warm at the thought before a small crease appeared on her brow. She was worried since she had no idea on how to return the favor to Zuko and please him. How should she go about it? If only she had asked someone for advice… but then again, she had never had to face this problem before.

*If only Suki were here*, Katara thought with a frown. *I’m sure she’d be understanding and would give me some tips…*

On second thought, perhaps that was not a good idea, since Suki probably did such things for Sokka, and that was just a bit disturbing. Katara shuddered before a pensive frown settled on her features. Satomi had told her to ask Zuko to teach her what he knew. Maybe that was the best way to go since he would be more experienced in that field, right? However, the thought of how Zuko would know such things made an ache appear in her chest. She shook the feeling aside. She would just have to think about Satomi’s advice when another wonderful occasion such as the previous night presented itself again. Oh, how she wished it would be sometime soon!

They were both interrupted from their thoughts when raindrops began to fall from the sky and land with big splashes on their heads. Katara tilted her head up and sighed as the cool droplets speckled the skin of her face. She loved the rain as much as she loved the snow. However, it was too cold in the Southern Water Tribe for there to be rain showers so she enjoyed it as much as she could when she visited the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom.
With a small grin on his face, Zuko watched the delighted smile that adorned Katara’s lovely features as she spread her arms to welcome the rain. She was indeed a water nymph and soon she would be all his. Though he would like to continue watching the enchanting scene, he thought it would be best if they found shelter as lightning streaked across the sky. They were currently walking through a clearing and it could be dangerous being in the open during a thunderstorm. He pushed his soaking hair out of his eyes as he touched her back.

“Come on, Katara,” he called out as the wind began to blow more strongly and the rain began to fall faster. “We should find a place to wait out the rain.”

Katara sighed as she dropped her arms back to her sides before she nodded at him.

“Fine.”

Zuko smirked at her pouting face before he turned away from her and started walking again. Katara started to follow him before a mischievous grin pulled at her lips. She gathered a small ribbon of rainwater that fell before her, formed it into a water whip, and before Zuko knew what she was planning, she playfully smacked the water whip across the firebender’s firm backside. Zuko yelped before he spun around to give her an astounded looked, which turned into an indignant glare when she began to laugh at him.

A loud thunderclap resounded throughout the forest, causing Katara to jump and let out a squeak. Then it was Zuko’s turn to laugh at her and she huffed.

“Are you afraid of thunderstorms, Katara?” he teased.

“No!” Katara retorted as she crossed her arms beneath her breasts, her wet hair sticking to her cheeks. “It just caught me by surprise.”

Zuko smirked at her, but Katara decided to ignore him, and with an upturned nose, she walked past him and away. Chuckling quietly, Zuko followed behind her, but his humor died when a flash of lightning streaked across the sky and headed straight toward the oblivious waterbender.

“Katara!” he shouted.
Katara watched in shock as the unexpected lightning bolt headed toward her, but her view was blocked when Zuko stepped before her. At that second, all Katara could think of was the first time the same thing had happened and how Zuko had been hit by Azula’s attack. She was frozen in place by fear, not for herself but for Zuko. She watched in horror as the lightning headed straight for Zuko, but he easily maneuvered the thunderbolt and shot it up to the sky.

Zuko breathed deeply as he waited for the remaining energy coursing through his body to dissipate before he lowered his arm. It was always such a rush to redirect lightning. His mind had been in a great state of turmoil for him to be able to produce and bend lightning before, but maybe once he returned to the Fire Nation, he would ask Uncle for some training. After all, his life was much better now that he was Fire Lord, had finally found his mother, and was engaged—unofficially for the moment—to the woman he loved.

Turning around to see if Katara was all right, Zuko became concerned at her frozen state and at the fear that was clearly written on her face. He pulled her gently to him and stroked her back in soothing caresses when she began to tremble. Thinking that she must still be in shock that she had almost been hit, he kissed her wet temple and twirled his fingers in her drenched hair.

“It’s okay, Katara,” he whispered to her gently. “You’re safe now.”

He was bewildered, however, when Katara shook her head frantically before she wound her arms around his middle so tightly that her strength shocked him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked anxiously as the rain continued to fall on them and thunder rumbled around them.

“Are you crazy?!” Katara screamed at him as she leaned away to give him a watery glare, her hands resting on his covered chest where the scar was etched on his skin. “You could’ve been struck, just like that time with Azula! And what if this time I wouldn’t have been able to heal you? You could have died!”

A small frown creased Zuko’s brow at her hysterical words and he ran his hands up and down her arms to try to calm her.

“I have had more training now, I’m not as untrained as I was when I faced Azula,” he stated before he sighed, his voice becoming softer. “Besides, you’re the one that could’ve been struck. I’m always going to protect you, no matter what.”
Katara again shook her head as she gripped his tunic tighter in her fists.

“Every time you save me, you get hurt!” she exclaimed chokingly. “Like when you jumped in front of Azula’s attack, or when you tried to protect me from Jianguo’s men! I…I can’t bear it any longer!”

Zuko opened his mouth to reassure her, but Katara’s grip on him tightened as she stared intensely into his eyes, her cobalt orbs shining brightly with her tears that combined with the raindrops, and he was rendered speechless at the sight.

“Promise me that you won’t risk your life for me ever again!” she demanded. “Promise me, Zuko!”

“I will make no such promise!” Zuko told her firmly as his grip on her arms tightened.

Katara glared at him as she opened her mouth to argue, but she paused when Zuko grabbed hold of her shoulders before he leaned down toward her, his warm breath coasting along the skin of her face, his golden eyes gazing intensely into her eyes. She could feel the warmth of his body despite the chill of the rain and she shuddered.

“I won’t be able to keep such a promise,” he told her, his voice was still firm but with a softer tone to it. “You’re too important to me, Katara. The thought of you being hurt, of you ever…dying again…is unbearable. It causes me pain to even think about it. I will always place your safety before my own.”

“And you don’t think it hurts me to think of you dying too?” Katara began with a deep frown. “Besides, you’re far more important than me. Many people count on your leadership, an entire nation depends on you, and—”

“You will never say such a thing to me ever again, do you hear me!” Zuko growled out angrily, causing Katara’s eyes to widen in shock. “Do not belittle your importance to me and the love I hold for you!”

Katara again opened her mouth to argue, but Zuko shook his head.

“Would you sit back and watch as someone you love gets hurt?” he asked her quietly.
Katara closed her mouth tightly before she glared at him halfheartedly, they both knew the answer. She would also risk her life if it meant she could save those she cared for the most. She looked away from him, but Zuko placed both of his hands on either side of her face and gently turned her head so she could see him. He stroked his thumbs softly against her wet cheeks as they stared silently at each other.

“Don’t be angry with me,” he told her softly. “I love you too much to let any harm befall you. I have vowed to protect you and I will gladly give up my life for you.”

“No…please don’t say that,” Katara whispered as she grabbed onto his hands while her eyes again began to sting with unshed tears.

“I am just stating the truth,” the young Fire Lord continued, “But I promise you that I will fight for my life and will not let myself die so easily. I plan for us to live together for a very long time. We did promise to grow old together, after all.”

His lips curled into a smile and Katara could not help but return his smile with one of her own.

“Zuko,” the waterbender breathed his name since she knew it was the best promise he would be willing to make.

She reached up to press her lips gently to his. Zuko removed his hands from her face and wrapped them around her curvy figure as he deepened their kiss. He groaned at the feeling of her wet body in his hands. Their kiss became more passionate as they recalled the events from the previous night, but another crash of thunder made their bones tremble and they pulled apart.

“We need to find shelter until the storm passes,” Zuko finally spoke.

Katara smiled inwardly at his breathless rasp before he cleared his throat as he grabbed hold of her hand.

They walked quickly through the rain, their boots squishing softly on the muddy ground, the rainwater running down over their eyes. As the dark clouds rumbled over their heads, they tried to keep the rustling branches from whipping them across their faces. When they almost stumbled over the roots of a tree, Katara raised one arm above her head and a sort of invisible barrier surrounded them, so that the water cascaded over them on every side, keeping them dry. Zuko gave her a
grateful smile since the heavy rain had made it almost impossible to see where they were going.

It was a few minutes later when they spotted a large protruding rock that sprouted from a high mound and they quickly made their way to it. Katara lowered her arms as they stepped below the rock and they sighed as they dropped their packs before they sat down side by side. The jutted rock made the rain that flowed down over it seemed like they were sitting behind a waterfall.

“I hope the rain stops soon so we can find the village,” Katara commented as she reached a hand out to touch the cascading water.

Zuko did not respond as his eyes trailed passionately down Katara’s body since her wet clothes were clinging tightly to her curves while a few strands of her chocolate hair curled against her cheeks. Katara turned to look at him when he did not say anything.

“What are you thinking?” she asked as she tilted her head to the side.

“You should get out of those wet clothes before you catch a cold,” he replied huskily as he looked away from her blue orbs to let his eyes wander to her chest.

Katara looked down at herself and noticed the hardened peaks that Zuko was staring unabashedly at as they strained against her wet clothes. A reddish hue blossomed across Katara’s cheeks at his suggestive implication and the gleam in his golden eyes. Her first instinct was to cover herself, but then she smirked inwardly as she turned to face him fully.

“You’re right,” she chirped innocently. “I should do something about my wet clothes.”

“Yes, you should,” Zuko growled in agreement as he watched her eagerly.

He stared at her intently as Katara slowly stood up, her drenched clothes barely covering the length of her thighs and legs and the contours of her breasts, waist, and hips. His heartbeat picked up its pace as he watched her move her hands over her body, but he frowned in disappointment when, with a flick of her hands, she removed the water from her clothes and her hair before throwing the liquid outside their little shelter.

With another innocent look, Katara turned to smile at him.
“There. Problem solved,” she quipped.

Zuko glowered at her as he again muttered under his breath about her being a tease that enjoyed torturing him. With a few giggles, Katara sat back down beside him. She let her own eyes roam over Zuko’s frame and she felt herself warm at the sight of his defined muscles visible due to the soaked tunic that was plastered over his chest and arms.

“You should take off your clothes before you catch a cold,” Katara teased as she returned his previous words. She planned on not helping to bend the water away from his clothing.

“It wouldn’t be good to catch a cold right now, would it?” Zuko told her as he threw her a small grin.

Katara nodded quickly as she leaned forward eagerly when he stood up, though he had to bend a little since his head bumped against the underside of the protruding rock. With the grin still on his face, Zuko raise his body temperature until the water began to evaporate from his clothes, steam rising almost lazily from his form. Katara frowned—she forgot he could do that—before she scowled when Zuko smirked at her as he sat back down.

Maybe I did deserve that, Katara mused with an inward pout.

A comfortable silence settled over them as the rain continued to fall, lightning flashed across the sky, and rumbling thunder resounded throughout the forest. Zuko glanced sideways at the waterbender and noticed that she was staring outside with a peaceful expression on her face. Reaching his hand out, he touched her now dry cheek and waited until she turned her head to look at him.

“I’ve been wanting to ask…” Zuko began hesitantly. “Are you upset about what we did last night?”

Blue eyes widened in surprise as Katara gaped at the absurdity of his words.

“Of course not!” she immediately reassured him as she grasped his hand and brought it closer to her face until he was cupping her cheek. “How could I be upset about it when I enjoyed what you did to me so much?”

Zuko let out a sigh of relief as he caressed her skin and he smiled when she blushed at her
“You have no idea how glad it makes me to hear you say that,” he told her with a grin before he leaned down to place a soft kiss to her lips. He pulled away to give her a small frown.

“Is something wrong? You’ve been so silent all morning and I was worried,” he told her quietly.

Katara blushed deeply as she averted her eyes.

“It’s just that…um…you pleased me and you made me feel things that I’ve never thought possible, but I…didn’t exactly do the same for you,” she said softly.

Zuko was delighted at her words. It made him happy to know that Katara wanted to please him so much.

“I told you not to worry about it,” he reminded her gently. “Yesterday was about you. I wanted you to see that I could make you happy in a physical way.” A large grin curled his lips. “But if you’re so insistent, then I’ll make sure you return the favor to me very soon,” he growled out huskily.

“AAlright,” Katara stuttered out an agreement as her blush turned a darker shade of red.

“But there’s something else on your mind, isn’t there?” Zuko continued as another frown settled on his brow.

Katara looked away from him in embarrassment as she tried to gather her thoughts and confessed her insecurities.

“I’m worried that I won’t be able to please you,” she confessed quietly after a moment.

Zuko frowned at her since he could not understand such an absurd thought. Just a soft touch from her caused heat to rush to his loins!

“Why do you think that?” he asked her incredulously.
Katara sighed exasperatedly as she moved away from his hand and crossed her arms over her chest. Was he really going to make her say it aloud?

“I have no experience, okay!” she exclaimed in frustration when he continued to look at her in confusion. “I have no clue on how to please a man or what he finds enjoyable!”

Zuko grinned at her embarrassed and annoyed expression before he scooted a bit closer to her.

“I know that and that’s what makes me so happy,” he confessed.

“What?” Katara asked with a confused frown.

“It makes me glad to know that you haven’t done such things with Aa—uh, with anyone else. It pleases me to know that I will be your first for everything relating to the act of physical intimacy,” he said with a smug smile.

Katara frowned at him for a moment before a smile broke across her face when she finally understood what he meant.

“I’m glad that it’s with you that I will learn such things,” she told him sincerely.

Zuko grinned and leaned down to kiss her again, but he frowned when she moved her head away before she peered uncertainly under her lashes at him.

“I’m afraid I won’t be as good as…the other women you’ve been with,” she confessed quietly. A lump formed in her throat.

Zuko felt like he had been punch in the gut and he gaped at her for a long moment before he uncomfortably cleared his throat. An anxious frown creased his forehead at her blank expression and he shifted uneasily in his spot.

“How is it that you know…about that?” he asked her carefully.
Katara glanced at him briefly before she looked away again as the sound of another thunderclap reached their ears. The thought of Zuko being with other women had always irritated her, although before she understood her feelings for him she had ignored the emotion. However, now the feeling was many times worse. The thought of him being intimate with another woman, of him doing the same things he had done to her with someone else, caused a painful ache in her chest.

“When we made our way to the Abandoned Fort on your flagship…” Katara began quietly, “I…I overheard…Mai and Ty Lee talking about it. Ty Lee even said the noblewomen called you a sex god.”

“A sex god?” Zuko repeated slowly before he began to laugh. Loudly.

Katara turned to frown at him.

“What’s so funny?” she demanded to know.

“Sex god,” Zuko repeated again as he continued to chuckle, but he noticed that Katara was serious so he calmed down and cleared his throat. “I would surely disappoint them if they really knew.”

“Knew what?” Katara asked.

“That I’m no sex god,” he stated.

Katara rolled her eyes at him. “Obviously you’re no god, but—”

“No, I’m no sex god,” he cut her off, stressing meaningfully on the word.

“What do you mean?” Katara asked as she frowned at him incomprehensively.

Zuko closed his mouth into a tight line at the inquisitiveness in her tone. He again shifted uncomfortably and rubbed the back of his neck before he cleared his throat as he looked at her.
“I don’t want our relationship to have any secrets so I will be truthful with you,” he began tentatively, “It’s true that I…have been with other women. Mai included.”

Katara winced. It was one thing to hear others talk about Zuko’s past actions, but it was something completely different hearing the truth from Zuko’s own lips. She felt sick and her stomach made a painful lurch. She thought that maybe she should tell Zuko to stop and not tell her anything. That he could keep that part of his life a secret, but she also wanted to know, despite the pain it might cause her. Was one of the women he had been with one she had come across in the Fire Nation Palace? And if she did marry Zuko and became Fire Lady would she have to socialize with the other women, them knowing that they had shared Zuko’s bed? She did not know if she would be able to handle their knowing looks.

She focused her attention on Zuko when he cleared his throat again.

“I’m really not as experienced as many want to believe. Since I turned fifteen, I think I’ve been with only five women,” he admitted awkwardly.

“Five? Seriously?” Katara asked skeptically.

“Yes,” Zuko told her with a firm nod.

“What do you mean by you ‘think’ only five?” she asked again. Though she hated the topic, she wanted to know.

Zuko gave a small shrug as he looked away to stare at the rain that was now slowing down to a light sprinkling. Why did they have to talk about this?

“Those women had no importance to me other than to satisfy a physical need, so I did not bother to remember how they looked or who they were,” he said truthfully.

Katara narrowed her eyes at him and pursed her lips.

“That’s so cruel,” she said coldly. “How could you treat them like that?”
At the icy tone of her voice, Zuko turned to look at her before a small frown appeared on his face at the icy glare she was also directing at him.

“They are paid to take care of a man’s needs and not for a relationship,” he stated impassively.

“What? Paid?” Katara said with wide eyes. “You mean the women you have been with were…”

Zuko nodded when she trailed off.

“They were women from brothels,” he said before he tried to explain carefully. “It was a sort of initiation rite to become a man among the crew of my ship. And the few times I had…employed their services was when my crew would demand time on land to have fun and find some distractions. So when the need rose, I followed after my men to the brothels. Of course, Uncle always made sure it was a place where discretion and cleanliness was most important.”

Katara sat back to contemplate what Zuko had told her. Though she still did not like the thought of Zuko being with other women, she was glad that he had sought their attention in order to satisfy a physical need and not for something more deep and serious. Again, a small ache appeared in her chest. That may have been the case with the women of those places. However, it did not count for his time with Mai. They had been in a serious relationship, after all. It must have meant something. The ache grew more painful, so that it made her eyes water and her nose sting.

Zuko reached for her hand and gently cradled it between both his palms. When Katara looked up at him, he tried to give her a reassuring smile.

“There is nothing for you to worry about, Katara. It was such a long time ago,” he told her before he grinned at her. “Think of it as a way for me to have gained some experience so I can be able to please you now.”

“As you pleased Mai?” Katara said in a small voice before she could stop herself.

“Katara,” Zuko began with a frown, but he paused when she removed her hand from his grasp.

“Please don’t,” she said quietly as she turned away from him. “I don’t want to know.”
Zuko was struck at the hurt he saw in her watery eyes and his heart constricted in his chest.

“Katara, let me explain…” he began anxiously.

“We should leave. The rain has stopped,” Katara interrupted with a quivering voice before she cleared her throat as she grabbed her bag, stood up, and quickly stepped out of the shadows of the jutted rock.

Zuko quickly shouldered his pack as he scrambled to his feet in order to go after her as she walked swiftly away from him. It had been foolish of him to make a joke about his past experiences and how they must have contributed to his present expertise, for now he had caused her to suffer. He hated it when he hurt her, even if it was unintentionally. Any encounter he had had with those few women and Mai he would gladly renounce if it meant that he would not see the hurt in Katara’s beautiful face.

Zuko quickened his strides so he could catch up to her, though it was not easy since the muddy ground was slippery.

He had to find a way to make Katara understand that what had happened with Mai and those other women had meant nothing to him. He had to make Katara understand that it was only she that mattered, that she was the only woman he had ever loved.

But how was he going to make her see that?
Ardent Reassurances

The dark clouds from that morning had dispersed and the noon sun was shining brightly by the time the two young benders finally arrived at the village Zhuang Yu and Satomi had directed them to. If the older couple had not told them which way to go, Zuko and Katara would have probably passed it without knowing it was there. There was nothing remarkable about it, but it was sufficient for what they needed. A few small houses and buildings surrounded a medium-sized town square where a few merchants were setting up their stalls in order to sell their wares now that the small storm had since passed. People had already left their homes and were beginning to mingle and go about their business.

“We should see about trading Zhuang Yu’s weapons,” Zuko spoke up coolly. He fixed the straw hat so his face could be completely covered in shadows before he turned his head to look at Katara, who was staring straight ahead at the small village.

Nodding her head, Katara began to walk forward without saying a word. Zuko gritted his teeth as he quickly caught up to her and walked protectively by her side, despite her evasive silence. He was getting annoyed and frustrated. A small part of him wondered why Katara was so upset about his past encounters with those women since it was not like Katara and he had been together then and he had cheated on her. They had shared something special the previous night, they'd had a heartfelt talk after that lightning incident a few hours ago, and now things had changed for the worst.

Zuko sighed. He should not be so harsh on her. He would probably also be upset if he found out Katara had shared such experiences with other men before him. Who was he kidding? He would probably be more than just upset, but either way, it would not change his feelings for her. He sighed again. It was just something that Katara was going to have to let go by herself and he would help her by reassuring her that the only woman that mattered to him was she.

They both tried to ignore the suspicious looks the village people were aiming at them for their torn and dirty clothing as they explored the small town. After inquiring around for a few minutes, they were finally directed to a place where they could probably trade the weapons for some money. Once they finally spotted the small store, they had to wait patiently as the short, balding man behind the counter inspected each weapon carefully and meticulously as if they were valuable jewels before he finally agreed to buy them. Zuko thanked him as he grabbed the small pouch with money, and left the small store with Katara, before making their way to the marketplace.

An oppressing silence had settled between them as they walked, so it was not hard for them to overhear the loud conversation being had by a small crowd surrounding one of the merchants. The mention of the Fire Lord made them pause.

“As I stocked on my supplies in the Fire Nation colony, I heard that the Fire Lord has been
“kidnapped,” the bearded merchant continued as he pointed at his fish. “At least, that’s one of the rumors that’s been spreading around.”

Katara looked up at Zuko as he turned to look at the merchant with a small frown. The small crowd did not notice the two benders as they turned and murmured amongst themselves.

“Yes?” an elderly woman gasped. “How did it happen?”

The merchant shrugged.

“I heard that Fire Lord Zuko’s flagship arrived at the colony, but the Fire Lord was not onboard. Another rumor is that he fell overboard during a storm. It is also said that General Iroh, the Fire Lord’s uncle, had the village searched high and low for him.” Then the merchant leaned closer as he lowered his voice, “I also heard that the Avatar’s girlfriend, the Lady Katara, went missing too.”

The murmurs became louder as the small group speculated the implications. Katara frowned at the crowd before she turned to look at Zuko who had a dark look on his face at the mention that she was still Aang’s girlfriend. She wanted to grab his hand to reassure him, but she held back since she was still feeling a bit hurt.

“Maybe the Fire Lord took the waterbender away with him and they eloped,” a young man piped in with a chuckle as he wiggled his eyebrows at the young women who blushed and giggled.

“How romantic,” one of them exclaimed with a sigh.

Zuko looked down at Katara as he wiggled his own eyebrows suggestively at her. Katara could not stop the amused grin the spread over her face before she dropped it and turned away. Zuko sighed inaudibly as he returned his attention to the crowd.

“But is it true that the Fire Lord was kidnapped?” another man asked.

“That’s what the rumors say,” the merchant replied with another shrug. “Though nobody knows why he’s been kidnapped. Many say it’s for a huge ransom.”
“Good. Maybe he’s being tortured,” a man, around his thirties, with a patch over his right eye and a wooden cane clenched in his left hand spoke up above the murmurs. “He deserves it.”

Zuko tensed at the hatred in the man’s voice. His jaw clenched tightly, but he relaxed when Katara touched his arm comfortingly. Even if she was angry with him, he was grateful that she still offered him her comfort and sympathy. But he was surprised when Katara turned to glare at the man as she took a step before Zuko as if to shield him protectively.

“How can you say that?” Katara exclaimed before Zuko could stop her. “Nobody deserves to be kidnapped and tortured.”

The small group turned at the sound of the new voice and their eyes widened at the fierce blue eyes of the woman that was glaring at them while a tall man stood behind her, the shadows of his face intimidating.

The one-eyed man snorted after he eyed the indignant young woman.

“It’ll be payback for what the Fire Nation has done to us. Look at me. I lost an eye, and my leg will never be the same thanks to them,” he said bitterly. “I think it fair if the Fire Lord loses both his eyes and hopefully his legs and arms too just so he could know how it feels.”

“Tara,” Zuko warned her, but Katara ignored him as she took another angry step forward.

“I’m sorry for your loss, but it’s not like you are the only one who has lost something,” Katara began. “I know it won’t be easy, but my advice would be to let go of that resentment, for it will do you no good. Believe me, I know.”

The man snorted again as he raised an incredulous eyebrow at her. The merchant and the other people stared at the young woman in wonder.

“Yes, the Fire Nation has done many horrible things, but that was in the past, we are now living in the present, and such things were done by men who are now dead or imprisoned,” Katara continued fervently. “You shouldn’t be blaming Fire Lord Zuko for their deeds and you should be thankful that he called off the war and be grateful for everything he has done.”

The small crowd was surprised at the fierceness in her voice and they mulled over her words. Zuko
watched silently as Katara continued to berate the man with a sense of pride and a small smirk on his face. It got him excited when Katara got so feisty like this and tried to defend him. However, he decided to intervene when the one-eyed man made a snide remark regarding Zuko’s parentage that angered Katara even more. Zuko pulled Katara to his side when it looked like she was about to scratch the man’s other eye out.

“My betrothed is right,” Zuko interjected smoothly as he held Katara tightly to his side when she tried to move forward again. “Fire Lord Zuko is not responsible for the sins of his ancestors. He made mistakes, but he has proven to be sincere in his goal to right the wrongs committed to the world.”

The small crowd was silent for a moment before they murmured in agreement. The new Fire Lord had not attacked them when they were at their weakest and the Earth King and King Bumi trusted him.

“Besides,” Zuko continued coolly, “if the rumors are true that Fire Lord Zuko has been kidnapped, then perhaps you should be worried about who would ascend the throne after him.”

“You’re right,” the young man from before spoke up before he looked around himself with a cheerful grin. “But hopefully it’s just a rumor and the Fire Lord and Lady Katara are okay!”

The crowd agreed with him while the one-eyed man huffed at them and angrily limped away. As the merchant began to weave another tale about sailing in the seas, Zuko gently led Katara away from the crowd. He was not surprised when she immediately began to rant angrily about the man’s prejudices.

“But most seem to be changing their views of me and the Fire Nation just like you said they would,” Zuko finally said when she paused in her tirade.

“That’s true,” she said after a while of thinking about his words.

He grinned at her when she gave him a bright smile, but he frowned when her expression turned to concern.

“If these people know what has happened to us, then it must mean that our families know that we’re missing too,” Katara told him sadly. “They must be so worried.”
Frown deepening in equal concern, Zuko tucked her close to his side before he placed a soft kiss to her head.

“Once we arrive at Omashu we will send a message to reassure them,” he promised softly.

Katara sighed as she leaned on him and nodded against his chest. A smirk replaced Zuko’s worried frown as he leaned down toward her ear, his arm wrapping possessively around her waist.

“Do you know that I like it when you get all defensive of me?” he asked huskily.

Katara huffed at him before she let out a sigh as she looked up at him.

“It’s just that I’m getting so tired of all their nonsense,” she confessed before she narrowed her eyes and turned around as if she could spot the one-eyed man. “I wish I could just pound it into their heads that you are a good man and don’t deserve their hatred and mistrust.”

“If I hadn’t intervened over there, you would’ve probably attacked that man,” Zuko teased lightly.

Katara again looked at him and frowned.

“You make it sound like I’m some crazy person who attacks people for the slightest thing,” she said before she smirked. “Maybe you have me confused with your younger self,” she teased.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at her before he let out a quiet chuckle. His humor passed and he quickly sobered up. He stopped them and gently turned Katara around until she stood facing him.

“You’re not angry with me anymore?” he asked her quietly.

A small frown appeared on Katara’s face before she looked away from him.

“I’m not angry with you, Zuko,” she told him sincerely, her voice quiet and soft. “I just need time to get adjusted with what happened between you and…Mai.”
With a frustrated frown, Zuko opened his mouth to say something, but instead, he shook his head at her as he ran his hands down her arms.

“We will have a talk about this later,” he told her firmly. When he saw Katara narrow her eyes at him, he tightened his grip on her arms slightly. “You need to hear me out, Katara. Please.”

Katara stared into his bright, golden eyes for a moment before she looked away.

“Fine,” she relented with a dejected sigh.

Zuko continued to hold onto her arms before he reluctantly let her go. He did not like this distance between them and he especially hated to see her so miserable. He would make things right if it was the last thing he did.

“We should see if we can buy an ostrich-horse with the money we got from the weapons,” Zuko finally spoke, his voice again impassive and collected.

“You could look into that while I purchase food for our journey,” Katara replied before Zuko could walk away.

Zuko pressed his lips together as he frowned at her.

“I don’t want to leave you by yourself in a strange place,” he told her firmly.

Katara resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him since she knew he was just worried for her safety.

“I’m not some fragile woman that needs to be protected at all times. I know you’re still worried that I might be easily attacked, like what happened with Jianguo’s men, but I swear I’m not going to let the same thing happen again,” Katara responded just as firmly. “I’m a waterbending master and I won’t be treated as if I’m weak and defenseless.”

Zuko narrowed his eyes at her as he clenched his hands at the reminder of Jianguo.
“I know you’re a master waterbender and I know you can defend yourself, but we are running from a group of mercenaries in the middle of an unknown territory,” he tried to explain reasonably before he let out a sigh as fear flashed in his eyes. “Anything could happen when we least expect it. I will never forgive myself if something happened to you when I could’ve prevented it.”

Katara’s expression softened at his concerned tone and she immediately placed a hand on his cheek to soothe him.

“It’s the same way I feel about you, Zuko,” Katara told him softly. “I am more worried for your safety than my own since it’s you that they want to hurt the most.”

“And they will if it’s you they hurt,” Zuko confessed, his tone dark.

Katara sighed as she ran her hand down his cheek before she pulled away.

“I promise that I’ll be very careful when I buy the food and I’ll be alert at all times,” she promised as she patted the water pouch at her hip. “And to reassure you further, I’ll stay where there are many people at the marketplace and I’ll wait for you there.”

Zuko hesitated for a moment, a crease appearing between his eyebrows. He didn’t want to let her out of his sight, but he knew that Katara would just get offended if he insisted, so he relented with a morose sigh and gave her some money from the small pouch the short man from the store had given them.

“I’ll be quick and I’ll meet you at the food stalls in an hour if not less,” he told her.

“I’ll be waiting,” Katara reassured him with a nod.

They hesitated for a moment as they stared at each other before they turned around and parted ways. Both had walked a couple of steps before they turned around to see how far the other had gone. They smiled when they realized that they had turned at the same time before they turned away again to do their separate tasks.

Katara smiled at the kindly old lady, who returned the smile as she took the few coins the young
woman gave her in exchange for bread. Placing the wrapped pieces of bread inside her bag, along with some cheese and vegetables as well as a pan and a pot she had purchased before, Katara thanked the woman before she weaved her way among the village people who were going about their day. Even though she had had a bad encounter with the bitter man who had insulted Zuko, Katara realized that the other people she met were friendly and helpful.

Making her way through the other stalls erected in the marketplace, Katara smiled since it brought memories of the days when she would do the same thing for the gang during the war, especially since Zuko and she were hiding and being chased down again. Her smile widened when she spotted one stand that sold various kinds of teas, and she eagerly bought two small clay cups, and a small bag of ginseng tea. The brew may not be as good as Uncle Iroh’s but having some tea along with their meals would be nice. Maybe it would help Zuko miss his uncle and mother a little less.

Zuko…

A sad sigh escaped her lips. Maybe it had been a bit too harsh of her to ignore him since they’d had that talk. She had promised him that she would never try to evade him again and she knew she was hurting him by keeping away from him. But she just could not help feeling so angered and hurt at the thought of Zuko being with those women…and Mai.

Looking through some fruit at the stall beside the one with the teas, Katara let out an inaudible sigh as she stared—without seeing—at the apple in her hand. She wondered what it was that Zuko wanted to talk to her about.

Frowning, Katara picked up another apple. Zuko had asked her if she was angry with him and she had told the truth when she said she was not. She was angry with herself for acting so hurt and for not trying to be understanding. She had no right to be angry with him for having been with those women since they had not been together and he had not been unfaithful to her. She should let it go. It was all in the past, after all. Yes, she would apologize to him for her behavior and she would tell him that he did not need to explain himself. She really did not want to know anything about his…time with Mai.

After all, it’s me Zuko has chosen for his wife, Katara thought with a smile. At that thought, it seemed she could breathe easier.

Letting out another sigh, this time more out of relief than dejection, Katara focused her attention on the fruit and began to pick several different kinds. Paying the man for the fruit, Katara shouldered the now heavier pack and turned around only to bump into someone. She staggered backwards for a moment before she caught her balance.
“I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there,” a soft masculine voice reached her ears and she was disappointed to realize it was not Zuko she had bumped into.

“It’s fine,” Katara replied absentmindedly as she shifted her bag behind her back before she looked up to see a smiling young man with tanned skin and bright green eyes.

“But still, I should’ve been looking…” the green-eyed young man began before he trailed off when he saw the woman’s lovely face and unique blue eyes. At least unique around these parts of the Earth Kingdom.

Katara frowned at the man when he continued gawking at her before she let out an irritated sigh when he did not move away.

“I’m in a hurry and must be on my way,” she told him tersely.

She stepped around him and quickly walked away, but to her consternation, the young man followed her. She whirled around, ready to use her waterbending if he so much as tried to attack her, but she faltered when he gave her a charming smile. Although he did not seem like he would belong to Jianguo’s group, she eyed him suspiciously.

“Do you need any help carrying your bag?” he asked smoothly, giving her another smile that Katara was sure he thought would make her swoon.

*Ha! Not a chance,* Katara thought with a mental smirk. Only one man’s smiles were able to affect her, being that they were so rare and were usually directed only at her.

“I don’t need help. I’m fine,” she replied curtly as she swiftly turned away.

When he continued to follow her, Katara planned on running to the edge of the village to get away from him, but she remembered that she had promised Zuko she would not wander away and would wait for him at the marketplace. Besides, if she was around a large group of people the man would not dare attack her and she would not have to reveal anything by using her waterbending to defend herself. She pretended to look around at the other stalls even though she had already finished buying what they needed and she only had one more coin left after purchasing the fruit. She hoped the annoying man would get the hint that she wanted him gone and away from her.
“You have such pretty eyes,” he flattered her as he followed alongside her. “It’s so unusual to see blue eyes around these parts.”

“I’ve noticed that,” Katara responded flatly, ignoring his attempts at flattery.

The charming smile fell from the green-eyed man’s handsome face and a small frown appeared on his tanned brow at the curt way this woman was acting toward him. Usually, he had but just to smile and women fell to his feet and practically begged to have a place in his bed.

“You must be new in the village,” he stated as he crossed his arms over his chest, his frown deepening.

“I’m just passing by,” Katara replied as she absently looked through a stand that sold cloth. Too bad they didn’t have enough money to buy new and, not to mention, clean clothes.

“Well, that’s just too bad,” the young man exclaimed arrogantly as he uncrossed his arms and not so subtly thrust out his chest. “I could’ve shown you many things.”

Katara rolled her eyes at his display. Compared to Zuko’s muscular yet lean body, this guy seemed like he had never spent a day in his life doing vigorous exercise.

“That is too bad indeed,” Katara quipped sarcastically as she picked up another piece of colorful cloth.

She tensed and her temper flared when she felt him place his hand on her lower back before he leaned toward her. Only Zuko was allowed to touch her so familiarly.

“Maybe I could show you one thing before you leave,” the young man whispered huskily.

Katara was about to spin around, slap him across his haughty face, and put him in his place, but she was startled when he was nearly thrown back away from her.

“Put your hands on my woman again and I’ll cut them off!” she heard Zuko’s deep voice growl out.
Uh oh. He’s angry, was the only thought that went through her mind as she turned around to see Zuko glaring murderously at the wide-eyed young man. However, she was not that surprised since Zuko had already shown just how protective and possessive he was over her. Maybe she should be annoyed at his reaction, but the truth was, it made her giddy with happiness to know Zuko cared for her that much.

She was brought of her thoughts when she noticed the man foolishly take a step forward to argue, but a fiery glare from the tall, ominous-looking golden-eyed male made him rethink his actions and he quickly retreated. A small crowd had gathered at the commotion, but Zuko ignored them as he grabbed Katara’s hand and led her away. Only when they were a distance away from the crowded marketplace did Zuko turned around to face her. Katara could still see the anger in his eyes before he took a deep breath to calm himself down, a frown appearing on his shadowed face.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he gave the hand he had not let go of a squeeze.

“I’m fine,” Katara reassured him. “He was just being an annoyance, nothing else.”

“That is another reason why I did not want to leave you alone,” Zuko ground out. “Every time I do, some bastard is trying to take you away from me.”

Katara could not help but giggle at his disgruntled look and she wrapped her arms around his middle, snuggling close to his chest. Zuko was a bit surprised since he thought she was still angry with him, but he immediately wound his arms around her to bring her closer to him.

“They could try, but no one is going to make me leave you,” Katara told him with a giggle.

She felt Zuko pull back and she raised her head curiously only to see the intense emotions burning in his golden eyes.

“You promise that?” he asked softly yet intensely.

“I promise,” she replied sincerely.

They stared heatedly at each other for a while before they realized they were standing in the middle
of the street and the people that passed them by were looking at them strangely. After giving Katara a peck on her forehead, Zuko pulled completely away and cleared his throat before removing the bag from her and placing it over his shoulder.

“Did you finish?” he inquired as he gave her a small smile.

“Yeah,” Katara replied with a bright smile as she looked around them. “Did you buy the ostrich-horse? Where is it?”

She was puzzled when Zuko narrowed his eyes and his jaw clenched.

“We will have to walk to Omashu,” he replied darkly. When he saw that she was about to ask why, he quickly interrupted, “It’s getting late. Since I didn’t buy the ostrich-horse, we have enough money to stay at the inn for tonight before we head out early tomorrow morning.”

Katara smiled and nodded at him, even though she was curious to know why Zuko had evaded the subject of the ostrich-horse.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was not that hard to locate the inn since it was the largest building in the village, although it was still small compared to any other inn they had come across. Zuko paid for one room for them both, which caused the matronly wife of the innkeeper to give them a disapproving look until Zuko reassured them Katara was his wife. It wasn’t much of a lie since she would be soon if he had anything to say about it.

As soon as they were shown to their room on the upper level of the inn, they both took turns taking a bath in the adjoining bathroom—Katara had a hard time convincing Zuko that there was no need for them to bathe together. She was still adjusting to this new intimate part of their relationship, not to mention she was also trying to come to terms with Zuko’s past…dalliances.

Katara let out a contented sigh as she tied the sash around her waist after taking a warm bath. The soap the inn provided was an extra bonus. Tying her hair back into a high ponytail, Katara exited the tiny bathroom and entered the small but comfortable room. The only furnishings were a low table near the window, two chairs, a wooden chest, and a small bed against one wall where Zuko was currently sitting, his face now smooth-shaven. When he turned those piercing amber eyes on her, Katara was unable to stop the blush that surfaced on her cheeks and she shifted nervously on her feet. She knew it was silly to feel embarrassed since Zuko and she had been sleeping close together for the past few weeks, but this just felt different because…it was a bed. And at the moment, she did not know if she would like to continue where they left off after Zuko told her whatever it was he wanted to tell her.
As if sensing her unease, Zuko rose from the bed and gave her a small smile before indicating the door that led out to the hall.

“I found out they have a small dining area below,” Zuko told her casually. “We still have a few more coins left. How about we have a nice hot meal?”

“Yeah, that sounds great!” Katara exclaimed as she threw him a small grateful smile.

They silently made their way down the stairs before the jolly innkeeper led them to a table. There were a few people already sitting at other tables enjoying their food and drinks while four young waitresses rushed back and forth with plates of hot food or mugs with liquor in their hands.

“Your server will be right with you,” the innkeeper announced as he pushed his thick glasses over his long nose before he walked away to greet a new arrival.

Zuko returned his attention to Katara who smiled before she turned her gaze to the other patrons of the inn. Zuko frowned. She was not ignoring him as she had been in the morning, but she was also not acting as she usually did around him, and again he found his frustration surface. If he did not like being ignored in Ba Sing Se, he certainly hated being ignored now.

“This reminds me of that time I took you to that restaurant in the Fire Nation capital,” Zuko spoke up, trying to lighten up the mood and make her remember the good times they did have together.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Katara replied with a laugh as she turned around to grin at him. “Although this time, the innkeeper didn’t grovel at your feet like the restaurant owner.”

“Don’t remind me,” Zuko grumbled as he pulled the straw hat down his head to hide his face better before he looked at her. “Though I did want to wring his neck for the way he treated you at first. Maybe I should have shut his business down.”

Katara laughed behind her hand.

“Then that would’ve given him more reason to dislike me,” she stated before she shrugged. “Besides, he changed his attitude later on.”
“Hm. I suppose he did,” he agreed.

Zuko ran a hand down his face before he reached for her small hand that was resting on the table.

“Katara, about this morning…I—”

“Hello there!” a sugary feminine voice interrupted. “What can I get for ya? Our special for today is beef noodles.”

Zuko frowned at the interruption as Katara and he pulled apart to stare at the waitress, who was smiling sweetly at Zuko. Noticing this, Katara glared at the dark-haired woman who seemed to be pointedly ignoring her.

“I’ll get the beef noodles,” Zuko replied impassively as he returned his gaze to Katara and deliberately asked, “What would you like, Tara?”

“Um, what else do you have?” Katara asked the waitress wearing a tight dress with a neckline so low that her ample bosom seemed to be in danger of toppling right out of it. Katara scrunched her nose in distaste.

The female server gave an irritated sigh before she listed more dishes and impatiently waited for the pretty woman sitting with the mysterious and intriguing young man to choose. Once the blue-eyed woman finally decided what to eat, the waitress again fixed her attention on the silent male.

“And what would you like to drink, handsome?” she asked, her voice turning deeper. “We have sake, wine, and—”

“Tea will be fine,” Zuko interjected stoically without once removing his eyes from Katara.

The waitress frowned before a slow smile spread on her face.

“I’ll be back with your order,” she purred as she flounced away, her hips swaying dramatically as
she went, though Zuko did not even bother to look her way.

Katara tried to control her temper as she glared after the flirtatious woman before she turned away and crossed her arms under her breasts.

“I can’t believe she had the nerve to flirt with you right in front of me,” she grumbled irritably.

“Just ignore her. I am,” Zuko responded with a shrug.

Feeling better at his words, Katara straightened in her chair as she tried to come up with something to say that would stall Zuko from mentioning what they had talked about that morning. A morning that had started out so wonderfully but was now ruined. And perhaps that was mostly her fault. Therefore, she launched an account of all the things she had bought in the marketplace including the clay cups and the ginseng tea.

She was interrupted when her food was practically dropped in front of her and Katara glared indignantly at the indecently dressed waitress, who had immediately turned her attention to Zuko, whose face was partially covered by the straw hat he wore.

“Here you go, handsome,” the woman said throatily as she lowered the bowl in front of him, and in the process exposed the top of her breasts above the hem of her shirt.

Keeping his gaze unwaveringly at Katara, Zuko nodded his thanks and asked her for their tea before she could say anything else. Huffing, the waitress spun around to retrieve their drinks.

Katara and Zuko ate their food in silence until the woman returned with their tea, but to Katara’s growing irritation, the woman did not leave and had the audacity to start a conversation with Zuko, while she tried to show off what the low shirt exposed. Clenching her chopstick so tightly that they creaked, Katara fought the urge to jump from her seat and rip the woman’s hair out of her scalp while screaming at her to back away from Zuko.

The woman’s flirtatious display made Katara think that she needed to get a little more serious about marking her claim on her man. She knew that women like her who made the commitment to remain chaste before marriage were uncommon in this part of the world. It had been easy to keep such a promise before because there had never been anyone who had moved her as much as Zuko did emotionally, or who aroused her as much as he did sexually. Now she truly understood why people made such a big deal about it. Yet, she was so afraid that she would not be enough for him. What
would she do when what she had to offer did not satisfy him at all? What if it made him search for someone who could? It was a terrifying thought to consider because she truly could not imagine not having Zuko in her life. It would break her heart if she lost him for any reason, but it was inconceivable to think it could be because she could not express her feelings for him through shared intimacies beyond kisses and hugs. And she was not making things better by avoiding him.

Zuko could feel his temper rising as the irritating woman ignored his silence and continued to prattle on and on while she tried to cruelly entice him with her lewd attire. He glanced again at Katara and frowned at the dejected and annoyed expression on her face as she pushed her food around. It was not until Zuko snapped at the waitress to leave them alone that the she gave up and decided to look for prey somewhere else.

“If she had stayed one more minute I would’ve frozen her to the ceiling,” Katara hissed out lowly as she stabbed at her food.

“Are you jealous?” Zuko asked amusedly as he took a sip from the tea and grimaced again at the bitter flavor. Perhaps his uncle’s tea had spoiled him.

“I don’t like them near you,” Katara confessed sheepishly.

Zuko smiled contentedly before he grinned at her.

“Now you know how I feel when men approach you,” he told her.

Katara huffed at him as she poked at her food. She glanced at the waitress who was now flirting at a table with three men before she looked back at her meal with a small frown.

“She kind of reminds me of that girl from Ba Sing Se. Jin,” she said quietly.

Zuko shrugged as he picked up his cup to take another sip of the horrible tasting tea, but he lowered it when he saw Katara fidgeting in her seat while she threw anxious glances at him.

“What is it?” he asked curiously.
“Was Jin one of those women…you’ve been with?” she asked in a quiet tone.

Zuko gaped at her incredulously before his brow furrowed in a deep frown.

“You make it sound as if I bed every woman I meet,” he said curtly.

When Katara did not reply, he let out a sigh before he reached for her hand and held it firmly in his. He waited until she looked up to continue.

“I only went on an innocent date with her and that is it,” he stated firmly. “And before you ask, I did not sleep with Song either.” He let out another sigh as he stroked her hand with his thumb. “Besides those few women from the brothels and Mai, there has been no one else.”

Katara removed her hand as she tried to give him a smile.

“Okay,” she said.

Zuko pressed his lips tightly together and frowned since he knew that Katara was still not alright with what he said. Pushing his chair back as he rose, Zuko dropped some coins on the table before he grabbed her hand and pulled her up onto her feet.

“What are you doing?” Katara asked as she dropped her chopstick on her plate when Zuko began to tug her after him.

“Now is the time for you to listen to me,” he said, his voice not hinting at one emotion just like his face.

Katara allowed him to lead her up the stairs until they entered their room where Zuko shut and locked the door firmly behind them. Katara walked to the small window and stared outside for a moment before she sighed and turned toward Zuko who was watching her silently after he threw the straw hat onto the low table.

“I’m sorry, Zuko,” Katara began as she clasped her hands tightly together in front of her before she averted her eyes from him. “I’m sorry for acting the way I did and I’m sorry for ignoring you.”
“You know it hurt me when you did that in Ba Sing Se,” Zuko told her quietly.

“I know, and that’s why I’m apologizing.” Katara looked up briefly before she looked away again. “I know I shouldn’t have acted so hurt with what happened between you and Mai, but I just needed a little time to adjust to it. But I understand that it was all in the past. You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

Zuko shook his head before he crossed the room to stand in front of her. She tried to turn away, but Zuko grabbed her shoulders to turn her toward him.

“No, Katara, you have to listen to what I have to say,” he insisted.

When she finally lifted her blue orbs to stare at him, Zuko moved one hand away from her shoulder to touch her cheek in a light caress.

“Katara,” he began and sighed, “While I do care for Mai, just like you care for Aang, whatever happened between her and I meant nothing. She was my girlfriend, so it only seemed logical that we would engage in…such activities.” He tightened his grip on her when she tensed slightly. “But I speak the truth when I say that I never truly enjoyed it, and during those four years I could probably count the times we…have been together with my fingers.”

Katara gave him a skeptical look, and though she really hated the topic, she could not stop herself from wondering on Zuko’s admission.

“Why is that?” she asked curiously.

Zuko cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Well…uh…Mai wasn’t exactly the best, uh…bed partner,” he confessed awkwardly. “And well… neither was I.”

“Oh,” the waterbender uttered.
Katara’s stomach churned uneasily as she tried to say what was on her mind that continued to bother her.

“But…it still must have meant something to you,” she told him quietly, though she was unable to keep the quiver from her voice.

Zuko again shook his head at her.

“No. It didn’t,” he repeated firmly.

When he saw that Katara was still unconvinced, he decided to continue.

“Sex for most men is something that is instinctual. Its importance is based solely on the physical, and most often, emotions do not form part of it,” he tried to explain. “Most men only care for the physical pleasure or release it brings, they don’t need to have any special feelings for their partners, which from what I have heard, is the complete opposite for most women.”

A pensive expression appeared on Katara’s face as she mused over his words, but Zuko could see that she was still unsure.

“I have been celibate for a year now,” he confessed and shrugged at her incredulous look. “Sex was just not that appealing to me. I suppose that was due to the fact that the few experiences I’ve had were not that great. Besides, I had so much work as Fire Lord that it didn’t even bother me.”

He again caressed her cheek, his touch light as a feather as he stared sincerely into her eyes.

“If I could turn back time and erase whatever happened between those women and Mai, I would, even if it costs me everything I have, because it has caused you pain.”

Katara gazed into his sincere eyes and the ache in her heart eased at his heartfelt words. She raised her own hand to gently caress the edges of his scarred cheek.

“I can see that now and I thank you,” she told him.
A sigh fell from Katara’s lips when Zuko wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her tightly to his chest while he tipped her chin up with the other. Again, her body warmed at the proximity and feeling of his hard frame. It seemed it was the same for Zuko for he groaned at the contact of her breasts pressed so closely to his chest.

“Gods, Katara,” he growled out huskily as his eyes fell to her lips before he looked into her wide eyes again. “Ever since you came back to the Fire Nation, staying celibate has become so damn difficult. When you appeared again, my libido emerged with a vengeance. All I could think about was making love to you.”

“W-what?” Katara sputtered.

“Remember when we sparred on my flagship as we made our way to the Abandoned Fort?” he asked as he leaned down toward her ear.

“Y-yes,” Katara replied as a tremor went through her at the feeling of his breath coasting her ear.

“Remember when I pinned you down? Did you feel anything?” he continued as he groaned in her ear at the memory. At her gasp, he knew she understood. “I wanted you then just like I wanted you at the lake where I accidentally came upon you bathing.” He brushed his lips against the skin on her ear and he sighed at her moan.

“Even though I tried to fight my attraction to you, I could not stop thinking about what it would feel like to have you naked in my arms,” he confessed, his voice deep and husky. “All I wanted to do was to carry you to my room and love you to my heart’s content.”

“Really?” Katara asked softly as she stared unwaveringly into his piercing, golden eyes.

Zuko nodded as he pressed her even closer to him.

“I have desired you almost as long as I have loved you, Katara,” he told her, this time his voice turning soft. “You say that you’re worried about Mai, but I’m telling you that there’s nothing for you to worry about. What I had with her is nothing compared to what I feel for you, Katara. You’re the woman that I desire, the one that I love.”
“Oh, Zuko,” Katara whispered breathlessly. She felt like her heart was about to burst.

She was unable to say anything else for Zuko captured her lips in a tender yet passionate kiss that almost brought tears to her eyes, and she moaned when he pressed a hand on her lower back to bring her closer to him. She let out a sigh when Zuko moved away from her mouth and she opened her eyes to see him staring warmly down at her.

“I find so much pleasure by simply kissing you,” he told her, placing a soft kiss to her lips, “touching you,” he sighed, running his hands down her back before wrapping both his arms around her, “holding you in my arms, that I know when we finally make love it will be amazing.”

He pulled away to brush kisses across her cheeks, to her ear, and back to her lips.

“I burn with the desire to sleep next to you each night, to wake up to your warm embrace each morning, with the desire to hold you, protect you, and love you like no other ever will,” he whispered fervently against her lips.

“Zuko,” Katara’s voice quivered with emotion, but she was unable to say anything since Zuko had again captured her lips.

Katara’s mind was in a blissful daze as Zuko continued to bestow searing kisses to her lips. Her heart felt lighter now that she knew that whatever had happened between Zuko and Mai did not compare to the feelings Katara knew Zuko had for her. Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, Katara poured all of her emotions of relief, gratitude, and love into their kiss that had them both panting in no time.

Zuko pulled away from her mouth so they could catch their breaths for a moment, but he continued to place hot little kisses along her cheek, her neck, and the skin below her ear, causing Katara to let out a little breathless moan.

“Let me show you how much I want you, Katara,” he groaned in her ear. “Let me please you tonight.”

Katara tensed at his words. “But—”

“Don’t worry,” Zuko soothed, running his hands caressingly down her back. “I just want to please
you like I did last night.”

A soft moan escaped her lips. Her body trembled as Katara remembered the sensation she had felt when Zuko had touched her so sweetly and erotically the previous night, and she could not deny him for she very much wanted to get close to Zuko again. Unable to form any words, Katara tightened her hold on him and nodded at him shyly.

At her consent, Zuko let out a groan before he smashed his lips to her soft ones, plunging his wet tongue into her hot mouth when she immediately opened it to let him in. Zuko traced his hand at the hem of her tunic before he drifted his fingers beneath the hem to stroke the skin of her back, causing a shiver to go through her body. Splaying his warm fingers possessively on her lower back, Zuko drew her even closer to him so that he knew Katara would not be able to ignore his reaction to her presence. By the groan she made, he knew she had felt it. Slowing down the kiss, Zuko reached for the sash around her waist, and with a firm pull, it came undone in his hands before he dropped it to the floor.

“Katara,” Zuko whispered against her mouth.

He pulled away from her lips to stare at the dark green tunic she wore which was now opened slightly down the middle. He looked up briefly at her wide blue eyes before he returned his gaze to her loosened tunic, reaching a hand out to part the edges further. His eyes smoldered as the white wrappings that covered Katara's heaving breasts appeared before him as well as the soft, tanned skin of her chest and her smooth stomach.

Katara trembled as she saw Zuko staring intently at her as he parted her tunic. She watched as he reached both his hands to her shoulders before brushing the tunic down her arms until it fell down from her and onto the floor. Reaching for the tie that had Katara’s hair pulled up, Zuko tugged it loose until her hair fell down her back and over her shoulders. Katara gasped when he touched her stomach, trailed his fingers up in a slow caress, before he cupped her right breast in his hand, eliciting a soft moan from her lips that he immediately swallowed into his mouth. So caught up in the sensations Zuko was instigating, Katara did not notice that he was backing her toward the small bed until the back of her knees hit the edge. She would have toppled over in surprise if Zuko had not caught her and gently laid her back across the bed.

“Zuko…” she uttered nervously as she tried to sit up.

“Sssh, it’s okay, Katara,” he reassured her softly as he pressed a small kiss to her blushing cheeks. “I won’t make love to you tonight, not until you’re proclaimed my wife before the whole world and the gods,” he promised. “I just want to show you how much you mean to me.”
“I already know,” she told him with a smile as she traced a finger down his cheek and along his jaw. “And by surrendering myself to you I’m showing you how strong my feelings for you are. I love you so much, Zuko.”

Zuko smiled at her, and grabbing her hand, he brought it up to his lips before he leaned down to capture her lips in a tender kiss that made Katara’s spine tingle. Her hands fisted on the fabric of his dark red tunic as he tightened his arms around her before Zuko pulled away and stood up beside the bed, his gaze heating at the sight of her flushed cheeks, closed eyes, and swollen lips.

Wondering why he had stopped, Katara opened her eyes and blushed at the intense manner he was staring at her with. Not knowing what to do, the waterbender gazed back at him. Not knowing what to do, the waterbender gazed back at him. She watched as he took off his black, pointy boots before her eyes widened when she saw Zuko reached for his tunic, discarded it swiftly from his body, and threw it somewhere behind him. Katara sat up on the lumpy bed as her eyes took in the incredible sight of his alabaster upper body. She had seen Zuko’s muscular torso many times, admiring the way his muscles flexed as he used his firebending or his broadswords, but she never got tired of gazing at it. The sight of his skin glistening with perspiration always made heat pool in the pit of her stomach just like at the moment.

“La, your body is so perfect,” Katara whispered softly.

Zuko felt his heart swell at her words and he smiled at her.

Biting her lip, Katara reached out a tentative hand to touch the smooth scar on his skin before she trailed them down to splay her fingers over his hard abs. His stomach quivered and Zuko groaned at her light touch. Unable to resist her, he pressed his lips to hers and pushed her gently down beneath him, making sure to keep his body away from crushing her.

“Zuko,” Katara moaned.

Zuko trailed one hand down her side, down her waist and hip, until he teased the hem of her dark pants. Sitting back on his knees, Zuko quickly pulled off Katara’s boots, throwing them to the side of the bed. He kept eye contact with Katara as he reached for her pants and slowly began to pull them off her legs. Katara blushed deeply as she raised her hips to assist him before looking briefly away once he had completely pulled them off her. Zuko was once again struck by the delicious sight of Katara clad only in her under wrappings that he had to take a moment to control the immense desire that flared within him.

Katara squirmed self-consciously when Zuko continued to stare down at her and her hands twitched as she resisted the urge to cover herself. As if sensing her unease, Zuko again leaned down to touch
her lips with his own.

“I have a confession to make,” Zuko rasped out quietly as he pressed his lips to her cheek to control his breathing.

“What sort of confession?” Katara whispered as she looked up at him in concern, her breath coming out equally as harsh.

“I…I’ve never taken the time to…pleasure a woman before,” he confessed a bit awkwardly. “I’ve never had a desire to do so until you. And, well…you’re the only virgin I’ve ever been with.”

“Really?” Katara asked before a large grin curled her lips. “So I’m your first?”

Zuko chuckled quietly as he kissed her smiling lips.

“Yes, and you’ll be my first and only in many things just like I’ll be yours,” he told her warmly.

Smiling, Katara’s hands curled around to cup his neck and urge his lips down to hers. Both exhaled out a groan as their mouths blended together, a combination of warm swollen lips and hot grazing tongues. Katara let out a moan as Zuko traced her lower lip with the tip of his tongue before driving it between her plump lips. He again reached for her tempting breasts and he gently caressed one while he tried to find a way to take off the wrappings before he ripped them away. He was sure Katara would not appreciate that.

“Show me how to take these off,” he whispered throatily as he trailed his fingers along the edges of the wrappings around her breasts.

Katara stared at him with wide, blue eyes and she swallowed nervously. Never before had she let anyone see her chest uncovered, but with Zuko, it was different. Katara pushed him back a little and he eased back from her when he realized she wanted to sit up. Reaching for the hand that was still cupping her breast, Katara guided it with shaking fingers to the hem of the wrappings on her right side until his fingers touched a small piece of cloth that stood out. He gave it a slight tug and the white wrappings loosened around her chest, and with another tug, they fell down to pool around her hips. However, before he could have his first look of her, Katara crossed her arms to cover her bare chest in an endearing display of shyness.
He smiled affectionately at her downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, but he did not like it when she continued to refuse to remove her arms so he could have a look at what he had been dying to see for such a long time. He frowned slightly in mild disapproval and placed his hands over her arms to gently urge her to lower them down beside her.

“Don’t hide from me, Katara,” he told her gently, tenderly. “I want to see you. Please?”

Blushing deeply, Katara stopped fighting his hands and slowly lowered her arms away from her chest, bashfully averting her eyes. Zuko’s breath hitched at the marvelous sight of Katara’s soft breasts and a flare of heat went straight to his loins. He had always thought that Katara’s breasts were full, but he found that without the bindings, her breasts were actually bigger than they seemed, and his hands twitched to have their weight and softness in his palms. He took in the sight of delicious caramel-colored skin that glowed under the few candles around the small room, the exquisite round breasts tipped with dusky nipples that had hardened into tight buds due to the cool air of the room and his heated gaze. His mouth watered at the tantalizing banquet bared before him and he felt his cock strain against the front of his trousers.

“Agni, Katara, you’re so beautiful,” he groaned out in awe.

Katara’s heart fluttered in her chest, unable to stop the happy feeling that went through her at the thought that Zuko found her so attractive. She looked at him and blushed as Zuko’s eyes continued to be absorbed on her breasts, the golden color of his eyes darkening into molten amber as he reached out a hand to lightly glide his fingers over the soft skin of her upper breasts, drawing a surprised moan from her throat.

“So lovely,” he whispered softly.

Becoming more daring, Zuko cupped both of Katara’s soft mounds tentatively, gently testing their weight and enjoying the feeling of finally having them in his hands. Then he squeezed with tender fascination. His waterbender, his enchanting water nymph, was utter perfection.

Katara’s heart picked up its pace once again and she moaned as Zuko pushed her breasts up before kneading them gently. His warm, calloused hands felt so, so good. She had no idea having someone touch her chest would feel so wonderful. Bending down for a deep kiss, Zuko gently coaxed Katara to open her lips for him, and once she did, he did not hesitate to slip his tongue into her mouth. As their kiss became more passionate, Zuko removed his hands from her amazing breasts and wrapped his arms around her, while she lifted her arms to wound them around his shoulders. He groaned and she gasped as the tips of her naked breasts brushed against his muscular chest.
Easing away from her lips, Zuko pushed her gently down onto the small bed so he could see her flushed features. The sight of her breasts moving rapidly up and down as she tried to breathe caught Zuko’s full attention. Leaning down toward Katara’s chest, Zuko again grasped the soft mounds before he gave them a gentle squeeze, causing her to moan loudly. Zuko then took one of her dark nipples between his thumb and forefinger and gave the hard peak a gentle pinch that made Katara squeal. He rolled it between his fingers a few times, watching Katara close her eyes and moan, before he stuck out his tongue and ran the wet muscle across the hard peak. Katara jolted again and gasped. Unable to resist any longer, Zuko latched his hot mouth to Katara’s lovely nipple and twirled it with his tongue until it became even harder.

“Zuko!” Katara mewled as his tongue on her nipple caused the ache between her thighs to become almost unbearable. “Please! Ohh!” she pleaded.

Zuko groaned at the sounds she made. The sensation of his mouth when he groaned, made Katara gasp and throw her head back onto the pillow beneath her. Zuko pulled away before he took the other neglected nipple into his mouth while he fondled the breast he had just left, the dark tip glistening with moisture. Damn, how he loved Katara’s breasts.

Panting rapidly, Katara grasped Zuko’s hair, and pushing her chest upward, she brought his face closer to her, almost as if she never wanted him to leave her breasts, which Zuko was reluctant to part from as well. Heat was pooling in her stomach again, Katara could feel the heat streaking down into her core, scorching and intense. Trying to find some relief to alleviate some of the pressure, she pressed her thighs together.

Releasing the hardened nipple with a nearly audible ‘pop’, Zuko lifted himself up to press his hungry mouth against hers. She gasped in surprise, and using her parted lips to his advantage, Zuko grasped her plump, lower lip between his teeth and ran his tongue along its soft edge. He lowered his bare upper body to her naked breasts and they both hissed at the pleasurable contact of more of their sensitive skin touching.

“Gods, Katara,” he growled out softly as he ran his hands down her shoulders, down her bare breasts, and down her sides. “I want to touch you so badly. I want to memorize every part of your lovely body, trace my tongue over every inch of your skin, and find every little spot that makes you sigh, moan, and scream my name.”

Moaning, Katara pressed herself closer to him, causing him to groan.

“Then touch me, Zuko,” she breathed out, pleadingly. “I want you to touch me. I want to feel every single pleasure I can find in your hands, Zuko. Please?”
Another groan escaped the young lord at her words and the breathless way she said his name before he captured her lips with his. Gods, he couldn’t get enough of the sweet taste of her. He wanted to ravish her, leave her senseless beneath him, stimulating her lovely body with pleasure until she sang to the heavens, his name falling from her lips in escalating ecstasy, pleading and crying for him. He wanted her to feel what she made him feel, but he knew that that would have to wait until their wedding night.

Zuko moved slightly away from her so that he was lying beside her as he continued to kiss her. The firebender’s hand found its way to the wrappings that covered the waterbender’s lower half, caressing her trembling thigh. His hand slid closer to the warmth between her legs, feeling her muscles tensing beneath his palm as he advanced. He pressed his palm onto her covered core, swallowing her deep moan, before he trailed his hand up until it played with the hem of her lower wrappings.

Katara tensed and gasped when she felt Zuko slide his hand beneath her wrappings and she had to fight the reaction of clamping her thighs together. Zuko pulled away from her mouth to watch his hidden hand. His fingers played with her soft curly hairs for a moment and he groaned when he realized they were damp before he pressed down, causing a sharp gasp to escape Katara at the tingle that went down her spine at the strange feeling of being touched there. Zuko froze and his eyes darted to her wide orbs with a worried frown.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked her with concern.

Katara quickly shook her head.

“No, the feeling just surprised me,” she reassured him before she blushed. “It…it felt really good.”

Smiling in relief, Zuko kissed her again until their hearts were racing and their minds were fuzzy with lust. Zuko again moved his hand and with his middle finger circled her swelling nub nestled between her moistening folds. Katara moaned and jumped at the bolt of pleasure that went through her, wrapping her arms behind Zuko’s back to steady herself. Zuko pressed his lips to her throat before darting his tongue out to lap at her flesh, ravenously savoring her pulse speeding beneath her skin as he continued to touch her most sacred area.

Slowly, carefully, so as not to scare her, Zuko parted her soft folds and slid a long digit up and down her wet slit. Again, Katara jolted at the strange, pleasurable sensation. He groaned. She was so wet and he had barely touched her. He coated his finger with her essence as he sought the warm darkness between her thighs before he poised it right at her quivering entrance. He bent down to take one of her nipples into his hot mouth to distract her for a bit before he gently eased his finger inside her. Katara cried out and winced slightly at the strange invasion to her untouched core. She trembled as she tried to figure what she felt. It was a sort of stretching sensation that was slightly uncomfortable
but not painful.

Zuko moved his finger slowly, allowing Katara to adjust to the foreign invasion, touching her gently, learning the intimate textures of her warm pussy. Gods, she was so tight and wet around his finger that he could not help but wonder how it would feel to bury his hard cock deep inside her. He began to pump his finger a bit more insistently as his desire flared, and Katara groaned loudly as pleasure sparked all over her body.

“Does that feel good, Katara?” Zuko growled out, his voice husky as he continued to ease his finger in and out of her wet warmth at a steady tempo.

“Y-yes!” was Katara’s strangled reply. “Please, don’t stop! Oh!”

She began to make nonsensical sounds that she had never known she was capable of creating as she raised her hips to the pacing of his finger. The tightness in her stomach that she now had an understanding of began to coil even tighter. Breathing rapidly, Katara opened her eyes and made them focused on the man that was giving her so much pleasure. She noticed that a fine sheen of sweat misted his alabaster skin, his body taut with restraint and desire, as he hovered above her looking directly into her deep, sapphire eyes, intensely watching her every reaction to his touch.

“Oooh!” Katara mewled when he picked up the rhythm of his finger and she felt a new rush of wetness surge forth. “Zuko! Ah!”

“Mmm, my lovely waterbender, you have no idea how great I feel to know that I’m the only man who has seen you in such a ravishing state. To know that I’m the only one to feel you this way,” Zuko groaned out before he added a second finger that caused Katara to wince and let out a sharp gasp before she arched her back.

“I want to watch you come undone in my hands, Katara! I want to hear you scream out your pleasure!” he growled.

He curled his fingers inside Katara’s tight heat in a way that generated sparks of electricity through her entire body before firmly pressing down with his thumb on the swollen nub above her entrance.

At his words, at the movement of his fingers, Katara felt like she had shattered into a million pieces as her back arched from the small bed, his name falling from her lips in a deep cry, before she collapsed back onto the sheets, her mind in a state of dazed bliss.
Zuko groaned as Katara’s wet walls convulsed around his fingers before he slowly slid his drenched fingers away from her dripping pussy, causing her to let out a weak cry. He stared at her flushed features for a moment as her body trembled in aftershocks while she tried to regulate her breathing. He couldn’t help feeling smug at the fact that it was he who had caused her to feel the way she did.

It was a long moment before Katara finally came back to her senses as she let out a satisfied sigh before she turned her head to the side to look at Zuko who was lying quietly beside her. His pleased smile and warm eyes made her hum softly before she smiled languorously at him.

“That was…amazing,” she breathed out.

Zuko smiled as he leaned down to press a kiss to her swollen lips.

“Are you sure you haven’t done this before?” Katara teased with a raised eyebrow.

“Positive.” He grinned back at her.

Her teasing smile turned soft and she sighed as she scooted closer to Zuko until she laid her head on his shoulder. He immediately wrapped one arm around her back and pulled her close. Katara blushed lightly when her naked breasts were pressed along his side, but mentally shook her shyness aside.

“I’m glad,” she admitted quietly as she looked up at him before another teasing smile spread across her face. “That’s too bad for those other women, but I can’t say that I’m not happy that they will never know your amazing skills.”

A quiet chuckle rumbled in Zuko’s chest and Katara shivered at the sensation, both of them glad that the day had turned out so well. Katara shifted her leg and she gasped softly when she brushed against Zuko’s hardness. He groaned and shifted away from her, but she held onto him when it seemed he was about to stand up.

“We should sleep now,” he said a bit huskily before he cleared his throat as he tried to force himself to leave her warm body. Maybe he could go into the bathroom and take care of his problem himself.

“But…you…I-I haven’t p-pleasured you yet,” Katara stammered as she felt her face heating up.
“Don’t worry about it.” Zuko tried to smile reassuringly as he patted her hand resting on his chest. “You can do that another time when you’re ready—”

“No!” Katara interrupted loudly. Her eyes widened at her outburst before she looked down to watch her fingers trace patterns on Zuko’s smooth chest. “I-I want to please you, Zuko! Just like you did to me.”

Zuko groaned at her words and his arm tightened around her. How could he reject her offer when it was what he craved? Katara pushed gently against his arm and he reluctantly let her go.

Katara sat up until she was looking down at the tensed body of her future husband. She could see that it was hard on him to keep his restraint and she felt guilty that she had not noticed it in all those instances before now. He had brought her so much pleasure and she was determined to do the same. She moved, hesitated for a moment, and then straddled his legs. She slowly traced her gaze from his face, down his muscular chest, and then to the visible bulge on his pants and she blushed. She looked up when he shifted and she watched as he rose a little off the bed, propping up on his elbows and looking at her with smoldering, golden eyes. Katara felt a bit of her courage falter. She had no idea how to go through with it. His touch had been so wonderful, so confident, and she did not have a single clue as to what she was doing or what she was supposed to do.

Averting her eyes from his face, Katara took a mental steadying breath before she lifted her hand and settled it on his muscular stomach, which quivered at her touch, before she gently lowered her hand and placed it down directly over his hard length.

“Averting her eyes from his face, Katara took a mental steadying breath before she lifted her hand and settled it on his muscular stomach, which quivered at her touch, before she gently lowered her hand and placed it down directly over his hard length.

“Katara,” Zuko groaned softly as he dropped back on the bed.

Encouraged by his reaction, Katara tentatively cupped her hand over the big bulge and gently began to rub her hand over his hard, covered flesh. She could feel the heat radiating through the fabric of his trousers and suddenly she wanted to feel him in her hand. Without pausing her hand’s movements, Katara laid back on her side beside him just as he had before and watched, mesmerized, as his chest heaved with his harsh breathing. She moved her hand away, smothering a smile when Zuko growled in disappointment, and trailed it over the edge of his dark trousers. Before her courage faltered again, Katara slowly dipped her hand into the waist of his pants until her hand touch something hard yet soft. Zuko jumped and hissed, and Katara pulled her hand away as if she had been burned.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked anxiously as she worriedly searched his eyes.
Zuko almost smiled since it was the same question he had asked her a couple of minutes before.

“No, no, it felt great,” he quickly reassured her as he grabbed her hand and gently but firmly guided her back into his pants. “Touch me again, Katara,” he urged. “Wrap your hand around me.”

Katara licked her lips as she hesitantly ventured further down until she grasped his hard length just like he wanted. Her eyes widened in amazement. He was so firm and warm, but most of all, he was huge! At least, that is what it felt like to her since she had nothing to compare him with. She could barely wrap her hand around him. An ache formed between her thighs again at the thought that Zuko would put such a large…thing inside her one day, and she stifled a moan of both apprehension and arousal.

“Ah, Katara!” Zuko groaned as he thrust his hips against her hand. Gods, just having Katara touch him with her soft hand was such an incredible feeling.

Katara watched his hips strain against her, but she froze self-consciously since she did not know what to do next and she was too embarrassed to ask Zuko what she should do. As if reading her thoughts, Zuko reached his hand down to cover Katara’s trembling hand before he curled her fingers more firmly around him.

“Squeeze a little tighter,” he instructed gently, though his words were coming out a bit ragged.

Katara breathed a mental sigh of relief before she did what he requested and squeezed his length. His hips jerked and she smiled. As if by some inner instinct, Katara wrapped her fingers around him more firmly and began to stroke his length in a steady rhythm.

“Yes, Katara! Just like that!” Zuko hissed as he dropped his head back against the pillow while the muscles in his neck became tense, his eyebrows bunched together, and his jaw clenched.

Gaining more confidence, Katara sped up the strokes of her hand a little and her eyes darted back to his face as Zuko growled and pushed his head back onto the bed.

“That feels so good, Katara,” he groaned. “So damn good!”

Katara let out a little moan.
“Don’t…” he panted, “stop!”

Even if he had made her, Katara would not have been able to stop. She was so captivated by what she was doing, with the feeling of Zuko straining beneath her fingers, but most of all, by the image of his face contorted with pleasure just by her touch. She wanted to bring him to release just as he had done for her. Her pace quickened and her strokes over his length became more firm.

Zuko’s hands twitched at his sides as his hips surged up to meet Katara’s stroking hand. Unable to resist, Katara reached up and kissed him deeply. Zuko shot his arms up, pressing one hand on the back of her head so they could continue devouring each other’s mouth while he wrapped his other arm around her to bring her body closer to his, both groaning when their naked chests touched. A delicious tingle went down his spine, his stomach tightened almost painfully, and Zuko knew he was close to finding his release. Katara gasped when she felt him throbbing in her hand as his movements became more agitated, the sound of his groans steadily becoming louder.

Zuko pulled away from her lips, but before he could warn her, he cried out her name, his entire body stiffening as his cock pulsed with his release, heavily spurting his semen into his pants. He felt like the air was knocked out of his lungs and he groaned deeply.

Katara’s eyes widened when she felt something hot and sticky coat her hand. She slowed her pace as she continued to stroke his pulsing shaft, watching as a moment later his face as well as the muscles of his body relaxed. Her brow furrowed in curious amazement as she felt him begin to soften in her hand and she slowly uncurled her wet fingers from around him, drawing her hand out from his dark trousers.

Panting, Zuko had his eyes closed as the last few tremors left his body. He hummed when he felt Katara lay down before she curled her lovely body against his side. He opened his eyes to stare dazedly at the ceiling before he turned his head toward Katara who was watching him with a bit of curiosity and nervousness. He grabbed one of the sheets from the bed and silently cleaned her hand of his seed. Once she was clean, he quickly reached out for her, wound his arms lovingly around her, and held her close to him.

“Agni, how I love you, Katara,” he groaned into her hair before he pressed a kiss to her temple.

Katara raised her head to smile shyly up at him.

“I guess that means I did okay,” she said happily.
Zuko’s eyebrow rose high on his forehead as he gave her an incredulous look.

“Okay? That was more than just okay!” he exclaimed as he gave her a squeeze. “That was…that was…I can’t even find the words to describe it!”

Katara smiled joyfully as she snuggled close to his warmth and sighed contently. Zuko stroked the smooth skin of her back and smiled. He had planned to leave the bed so he could clean up in the adjoining bathroom, but when Katara snuggled against him, he decided that he would do it in the morning. He smiled as he brushed her hair away from her face before he reached for the blanket that had been shoved to the foot of the bed. He lay back down beside Katara and gathered her into his arms until she was curled around him before he covered them with the blanket.

It was not long before both were lulled to a restful and sated sleep.
Possessively Protective

Chapter Summary

Things are heating up ;)

Soft light from the dawning sun spilled into the small room where two figures laid close together upon the bed resting against one wall. With a soft groan, Zuko opened his eyes and glanced at the small window where he could already see the night being chased away by the coming of day. He dropped his head back upon the slightly flat pillow with a tired sigh. They needed to head out soon and make their way to Omashu.

His gaze moved to his side and a pleased smile curled his lips when he saw Katara snuggled into him, her hand resting on his chest, her lips slightly parted as she slept. He had never, in his entire life, felt so relaxed and content. A warm tingle skittered down his spine at waking up with Katara wrapped in his arms. He never knew how amazing it would feel to wake up next to a woman, a woman he had intense feelings for. His hand began to caress the sleeping waterbender’s hair before he slid it down her smooth back to caress the skin there. He smiled when Katara let out a little moan.

Now, more than ever, did he want them to return to the Fire Nation, not only to exert his position as the true Fire Lord, but also so Katara and he could start preparing for their wedding. He wanted Katara to begin living with him as his wife, to be by his side forever. As soon as possible. He wanted everybody to know that she belonged to him, especially Aang.

A sigh escaped him. He was sure Aang would not only be hurt when he learned Zuko was going to marry the woman they both loved but angry as well. Perhaps Aang would come to hate him for a time, but Zuko hoped that the young monk could forgive him one day, because even though he still saw Aang as a friend, Zuko would not give up Katara. He would not lose his chance for a happiness that he had subconsciously longed for but did not acknowledge until Katara came back into his life. He just hoped the airbender would understand in time.

Katara, murmuring and snuggling closer to him, brought him out of his thoughts and his attention was immediately caught when he felt the soft sensation of her naked breasts pressed so close to him. The young lord stifled a groan and a flare of heat went through him as he remembered the things they had done the previous night. He was grateful that she had allowed him to enjoy her—at least in this manner—and he could not wait until he could finally take Katara as a man should his wife. He replayed in his head the delightful noises Katara had made as he pleasured her and the incredible sensations he had felt when she pleasured him in return.
Spirits, there were no words to describe them.

Zuko felt the stirrings of his cock in his trousers, so he tried to calm his thoughts. Though he loved this new physical side of their relationship—as limited as it was at the moment—he enjoyed the other aspects as well. Their playful banter, their serious talks, even the times they spent in comfortable silence, and he had a feeling Katara felt the same way. Never before had he had such a connection with a woman—with anyone, really—and he vowed that he would not lose Katara, for he knew he would never feel for another woman the way he felt for her.

The young Fire Lord’s eyes again shifted to the small, dusty window and sighed, reluctantly deciding that it was time for them to leave if they wanted to ever make it to Omashu so they could send for help to the Fire Nation. He was glad to know that Uncle and his crew survived that terrible storm and were indeed fine, if the rumors he and Katara had heard the other day were actually true. He wanted to find his uncle and return to his mother so they wouldn’t be worried anymore. Shifting on the bed until he was laying on his side, Zuko gazed down at the sleeping face of his waterbender.

His waterbender. A mixture of possessiveness, protectiveness, and love went through him at those words—words he had cherished in the privacy of his mind with equal love and anguish for months—and he tightened his hold on the sleeping woman as he continued to watch her.

She looked so peaceful, so beautiful, with her chocolate hair falling over her shoulder and her dark eyelashes fluttering against her cheeks, that he almost regretted waking her up. He gently nudged her a few times and he grinned when she rolled away from him with an irritated groan. He had become aware of how much Katara hated waking up early in the morning when they were traveling during the end of the war and it had sometimes amused him when she would walk around in a bad mood for a few hours. It seemed that she was still the same as the years passed by.

Zuko scooted close to Katara again as he wound his arm more firmly around her waist and placed soft kisses on her cheeks and down her neck. A small smile spread on his lips when she moaned before a soft yawn escaped her. He watched as she rubbed her eyes before she sleepily opened her blue orbs to look at him.

“Good morning,” he whispered softly as he brushed his nose against her hair while he gave her a gentle squeeze.

A small smile began to surface on Katara’s face before she realized that her chest was still bare, and she blushed, embarrassed because she was still not used to their new level of intimacy. Her blush deepened when she remembered the reasons why she was half naked.
“Good morning,” she muttered as she tried to discreetly cover her chest with her arms.

Zuko decided to spare her sensibilities, so after kissing her cheek, he got off the bed and stood up, stretching his muscles as he felt the early sun’s energy course through him. He had never felt so energized!

“You can rest for a moment longer while I take a bath first. Then we’ll head out,” he told her as he moved across the room, gathering his clothes as he went, before looking back at her.

“Okay,” Katara agreed as she sat up with another yawn, exposing her bare breasts as the blanket slid from her shoulders.

Zuko’s golden eyes darkened at the sight of such delectable flesh and he groaned when his body again reacted to the sight of her delicious form. He wondered why they had to leave again.

“Maybe you want to join me in my bath?” he teased her huskily.

Katara’s eyes widened when she saw where Zuko’s eyes were staring so intently and she quickly reached for the blanket before drawing it over her chest. Her blush deepened when Zuko chuckled at her.

“We’ve bathed together before, you know,” he continued, his tone still teasing. “The only difference now is that we won’t be wearing any clothing.”

“Just go take your shower,” Katara huffed as she threw a pillow at him.

She growled when he easily evaded it with a deep laugh before entering the bathroom and closing the door behind him. Katara scowled at the door before she clutched the sheets to her chest again when she realized she had let them go when she threw the pillow at Zuko. She slapped her forehead and groaned, berating herself for her reaction since Zuko had already seen her last night—and she had not minded one bit. With a contented sigh, she lay back on the bed and stared at the plain stone ceiling.

Though she was still getting used to this new side of their relationship, she could not deny that she enjoyed it, loved it, very much. But she knew that what they had was not just something physical because there were deep feelings involved—they loved each other.
There was nothing wrong with that, right? Nobody could judge her for feeling so happy, for wanting to be closer to the man she loved.

Images of what Zuko did to her the previous night slowly surfaced in her mind. The way he had touched and kissed her breasts, the way his fingers had touched her so intimately, the way he had looked at her. A small moan escaped her as she felt her body heat up and she closed her eyes to let the now familiar feelings Zuko aroused in her wash over her being. She opened her eyes again and a happy smile spread over her face when another thought came to her.

She was able to please Zuko, and by the sounds and expressions he had made, she must have done it pretty well for her first time.

But most of all she now felt reassured about Zuko’s past and what he felt for her. He may have known Mai physically, but Zuko loved her, Katara! She was the one he proposed to, the one he wanted as his wife, so that was what really mattered.

The waterbender was brought out of her thoughts a few minutes later when she heard the bathroom door open and she raised herself onto one elbow, her other hand clutching the bed sheet to her, and watched Zuko come out. He was shirtless, his powerful body only clad in pants and boots, and he was rubbing the moisture out of his hair with a thin towel. Her heart fluttered in her chest at the sight of him and she felt her core tighten in desire as she remembered the incredible sensations of his hot mouth on her nipples and his fingers inside her.

Zuko paused as he watched in fascination as Katara’s blue eyes darkened and her cheeks blossomed with a soft blush. He recalled that she had looked the same way the previous night when he had pleasured her and he groaned softly when he felt his cock swell with desire. His mind told him that he should leave her alone and not overwhelm her too soon, but his body demanded other selfish, naughtier, things. Now that they had shared some intimacy, he could not keep his hands off her. Before he could stop himself, he dropped the towel and strode across the room toward the bed, his eyes locked intensely onto hers.

Katara’s eyes widened and her breath quickened as she watched Zuko approach her like an avenging god, droplets of water running down his alabaster chest, his eyes passionate and determined. She could only look up at him wordlessly when he stopped next to the small bed and looked down at her. She could not mistake the desire she could see in his eyes and her heart raced wildly in her chest. She glanced down his body and felt herself flush at the prominent bulge in his pants. There certainly was no mistaking that he was definitely aroused. Her eyes darted back to his face when Zuko reached for the blanket she was clutching against her bare breasts. He gently tugged at it, silently asking for her permission and acceptance for what he desired. She only resisted a few seconds before the warm, passionate look in his eyes broke her resolve. She could not deny that she wanted to again
experience the pleasure she had only found in Zuko’s arms.

Zuko groaned in both relief and satisfaction when Katara allowed him to pull the blanket away from her. He had been prepared to accept her rejection, even if it killed him, but he was glad to know that she wanted this as much as he. He admired the sight of Katara’s breasts for a moment before he climbed onto the bed. Katara leaned back onto the pillow when he moved over her. He leaned down to capture her lips in a slow, tender kiss that had the waterbender melting in passion beneath him. He pulled away to catch their breaths and they stared dazedly at each other, studying the emotions they could see in each other’s eyes, reveling at the powerful current sweeping between them like it always seemed to do.

“Katara,” he murmured huskily against her lips, “I need to touch you again. Please.”

“Yes, Zuko, please touch me,” she whispered softly as she reached out to wrap her arms around his neck, “I want to touch you, too.”

A loud groan escaped the Fire Lord before he swooped down to kiss the blue-eyed waterbender beneath him. Their mouths opened eagerly and their tongues immediately tangled and caressed, alternating between being in each other’s mouths. Katara moaned softly and Zuko murmured as their hands danced up and down each other’s bodies. The waterbender let out a gasp when Zuko cupped her breasts and began to gently knead them. She moaned when his lips left her mouth and trailed hot kisses down the column of her throat and to her chest. When his wet mouth engulfed one of her nipples, her eyes fell close in pleasure at the incredible, still shocking feeling, as it caused wetness to pool in her core.

“Oh, mm,” she moaned as she grasped at his dark hair with one hand.

Zuko pulled away to latch onto her other nipple. The hand that was not holding him up moved down her side, her waist, her hip, sending delicious shivers racing down her spine. He nudged her legs apart with his knees and knelt between her thighs when she shyly consented to his silent request.

The sensation of his trousers against her bare thighs and his boots against her feet made Katara’s stomach clench in need. As her firebender’s hand went lower to caress her smooth stomach before sliding lower to press against her covered sex, Katara felt herself quivering with desire. He sucked at her aching nipple and grazed it gently with his teeth at the same time he began to gently rub his knuckles against her center. Katara could not stop herself from arcing her back with a loud cry. Her thigh pressed against his erection at her movement and her eyes flew open when Zuko hissed in pleasure. Panting slightly, Katara mused that she could not be the only one receiving pleasure, so before she lost her courage, she reached down between their bodies and grasped his covered shaft.
“Oh, Katara,” Zuko rasped against her breast as his hips bucked into her small hand.

With his mouth still covering her nipple and his hand still touching her, Zuko clenched his eyes shut as he relished in the sensation of Katara’s hand rubbing his erection through his pants for a few more seconds before he decided that it wasn’t enough. He needed her to touch his bare shaft just as much as he needed to touch her slick pussy. He pulled away from her slightly to retrieve the blanket before he settled it over them, leaning back down to capture her lips before she could protest his absence. He was glad Katara was allowing them to go this far, but he was not sure if she would be comfortable seeing his swollen cock yet.

Pulling back from the kiss, Zuko panted as he stared down at an equally breathless Katara. The sight of her half-lidded eyes, flushed cheeks, and thin tendrils of her chocolate hair plastered to her forehead with perspiration caused his stomach to clench in desire and he groaned as he bent down to kiss her again. He pulled away and smiled when Katara tried to follow his lips. When she opened her eyes to look at him, he brought his hand up to caress her cheek.

“Do you trust me?” he asked her huskily yet softly.

Her breath coming out in soft pants, her heart pounding in her chest, and her skin burning with desire, Katara stared into his warm, golden eyes and knew that he was feeling the same yet he was still conscious of her reservations. She felt her love for him swell in her chest.

“With my whole heart,” she responded confidently, if breathlessly, as she tightened her hold of his hard length.

Zuko closed his eyes and let out a low moan before he gazed back down at her. Holding her gaze, he removed his hand from where he had been caressing her and clasped it tightly around her hand that was still rubbing against him. He squeezed her hand a few times and groaned in pleasure before he lifted her hand and slowly dipped it into his trousers, giving her time to pull away if she did not want to continue.

Katara hesitated for a moment since this was still new to her, but she could not deny that she wanted to feel him again and bring him pleasure, so she gave him a shy smile and a nod of her head. Zuko let out a sigh of contentment as he firmly, eagerly, slipped her hand further inside his pants until her fingers touched his hot erection. He groaned when Katara quickly grasped him tightly in her hand without waiting for his prompting.

“Shit, Katara,” Zuko groaned and closed his eyes as his hips bucked into her hand once again.
Katara smiled, this time she knew her touch was not hurting him, but giving him pleasure, and she squeezed him a little like he had taught her the previous night. Her pussy quivered in desire when he again rasped out her name. Katara admired the strained yet pleasurable expression on his handsome face, the sweat that appeared on his forehead and neck, and the way his muscles quivered and shuddered. The feeling of his hard erection, and the contrasting soft skin, of the throbbing strength straining in her hand, fascinated her beyond measure.

Holding her gaze with a smoldering one of his own, Zuko tugged on her hand and his cock sprang free of its confinement. Katara’s eyes widened in both apprehension and curiosity, but even if she looked down, she would not be able to see him clearly since the blanket Zuko had draped over them created shadows. She was distracted from her thoughts when Zuko bent down to nibble on her lower lip before he dipped his tongue inside her mouth. She was so focused on the astounding kiss he was bestowing on her that she did not noticed Zuko slip his hand inside her now loose under-wrappings until his fingers touched her swollen bundle of nerves.

“Zuko, oh!” she gasped into his mouth as her hips bucked into his hand.

“Mmm,” Zuko groaned when her hand tightened on his cock as a reaction to her pleasure. “Touch me, Katara,” he commanded huskily.

With a wanton mewl she didn’t know she could make, Katara began to slowly stroke his large length.

“Yesss, just like that,” Zuko hissed against her lips.

The arm that was holding him up trembled with the desire to crush his body above hers so he could wildly grind against her, but the still functioning part of his brain warned him against being too rough with her so soon. He loved her and she deserved to be worshiped and pleasured completely.

Tangling his tongue with hers, he slowly circled her clit before sliding his fingers down her slit. Katara gasped and quivered in anticipation as he rubbed against her folds just above her clenching entrance. All traces of apprehension and shyness were gone as Katara strained her hips against his hand.

“Do you like that, Katara?” he rumbled amorously just as he did the previous night. He pulled his head back slightly to look at her.
“Yes,” the waterbender whimpered as the pace of her strokes on his erection increased with her need. “Please, Zuko.”

A loud moan escaped her when he cupped her firmly. His mouth found hers again just as one of his fingers slipped inside her quivering pussy.

“Ohhh,” Katara gasped as her back arched off the bed at the sudden invasion. Although Zuko had already touched her inside, her body was still getting accustomed to the strange sensation.

“Ahh, you’re so wet,” Zuko growled huskily as he slowly pumped his finger inside her slick heat.

Katara’s response was grasping and stroking his length more strongly, causing Zuko’s breath to hitch in immense pleasure. His stomach tightened and he knew he would not last long. His tongue curled around hers and he pressed slow, deep, passionate kisses on her mouth as he dipped another finger inside her. He slipped both fingers in and out of her before he curled them at the same time he pressed his thumb on her bundle of nerves.

Katara was lost. She could feel and think of nothing but Zuko and what he was doing to her as all her blood rushed to that incredible spot between her legs. She began to stroke Zuko’s throbbing flesh even faster just as she reached her climax with a scream, the pleasure blinding and powerful. Zuko bucked his hips erratically into her hand as he felt her wet walls spasm around his fingers before a tingle of pleasure shot down his spine and into his cock, his orgasm hard and scorching. He jerked his hips and groaned as he spilled himself onto her hand and stomach.

Katara gasped softly when she felt him throb in her hand and hot liquid touch her skin. Zuko shuddered above her as he leaned his forehead against the crook between her shoulder and neck. They panted hard against each other, their bodies still quivering in pleasure, their minds hazy with their release. When Zuko finally lifted his head, Katara let go of his softening member at the same time that he slipped his fingers out of her, causing her to moan softly.

“Are you okay?” he asked with a rasp as he stared down into her eyes, searching for any sign that she regretted what they did.

“I’m fine,” Katara assured him with a sated smile as she reached out a hand to caress his scarred cheek. “That was incredible. I can definitely get addicted to this.”
“Gods, I love you,” he croaked before he placed a languid kiss on her lips.

“I love you, too,” she breathed out between kisses.

With a contented sigh, Zuko pulled away a moment later. Once he had tucked himself back into his pants, he threw the blanket off them and lay down beside her, pulling her to him to kiss her once again. Katara shivered when her nipples brushed against his sweaty chest before the cooling sensation of his release caught her attention. She pulled away and looked down at herself.

Zuko followed her gaze and his eyes darkened in pleasure at the sight of his white semen coating her smooth stomach. Something primitive and possessive inside him reveled at such an unfamiliar and erotic sight—as if he had somehow marked Katara as his. Just as he wondered if he should probably apologize, he watched as Katara slowly swiped her fingers on her stomach and scooped some of the white substance before she held her fingers to her face in curiosity.

“So this is what a man’s seed looks like,” Katara mused as she inspected the sticky fluid. She had felt it last night, but she had been unable to see when Zuko had quickly cleaned her hand. She blushed and bashfully looked up at Zuko from beneath her eyelashes.

Zuko chuckled both amusedly and happily at the pure joy of her as he leaned down to kiss her again. They kissed each other for a moment, both enjoying the soft afterglow of their intimacy before they pulled away.

“I need to bathe,” Katara murmured as she again pulled the blanket to her chest.

“I need another bath, too. We can save time if you take up my offer of helping you bathe,” Zuko teased again as he leaned toward her so he could kiss her, but he stopped when Katara scrambled off the bed with the blanket twirled around her body.

“I can do it myself, thank you very much,” the Water Tribe maiden said huffily as she moved around the room to collect her clothes before heading toward the bathroom. She paused at the entrance and looked over her shoulder to grin at him.

“But I’ll take you up on that offer one day,” she teased.

She giggled at his stunned expression before slamming the door shut when Zuko made a move
toward her. Zuko scowled at the door before he shook his head as he fell back on the bed.

“Damn, that woman is going to be the death of me,” he muttered gruffly and affectionately into the empty room.

A few days later, a bright morning sun found the two benders walking once again. Three days ago they had noticed the land changing from green and lush forest to arid and mountainous land, and they knew they were heading in the right direction to the grand city of Omashu.

Katara brushed a lock of her hair away from her face and exhaled loudly. It was getting warmer the further they walked from the shade of the forest’s trees and into this barren land, and if they were not careful with their provisions they would probably find themselves in deep trouble.

“Why didn’t you buy the ostrich-horse?” she asked curiously as she looked up at Zuko who had been walking silently beside her for the past few hours. She had wanted to ask him that question a while ago, but it would always slip her mind whenever Zuko decided to become ‘affectionate’ with her.

“We could’ve arrived at King Bumi’s palace sooner,” she added. She frowned in bewilderment when she noticed Zuko stiffen and clench his hands. “What’s wrong? Was the price too high?”

“Yes,” Zuko responded in a strange, dark tone that sent a shiver down her spine. “The vendor asked for something that is too valuable for me to give up.”

Confused, Katara tilted her head to the side since she knew they did not have anything of value on them, so what could Zuko possibly mean?

“What did he want?” she asked curiously as she continued to stare at Zuko’s hardened features.

“Let’s just forget about it,” he answered instead as he glanced at her briefly before looking away.

Katara frowned at him and her curiosity rose at his evasive answer.

“Come on, Zuko. Just tell me,” she insisted as she narrowed her eyes at him.
She was startled when Zuko stopped and turned toward her with an intense stare. She was surprised by the anger she could see in his amber eyes.

“Zuko…?” she asked softly as she paused in front of him.

“You. It was you that man wanted in exchange for an ostrich-horse,” he ground out in barely concealed rage.

Katara gasped.

“What?” she cried out angrily, though she was not so surprised. After all, it was not an uncommon thing for women to be sold off and bought, especially in many of the cities and villages of the Earth Kingdom.

“He saw you when we were talking before we separated,” Zuko continued darkly. “Since he is the only one in that small village that sells ostrich-horses, he told me he would only give me one for the blue-eyed woman. I told him to forget it. You aren’t something that can be sold off,” he growled out.

Katara’s indignation melted and she smiled at his words before she laid a hand on his arm to soothe his temper. When she felt him relax beneath her touch, she asked him what else had happened.

Zuko looked away into the distance before he coolly replied, “Nothing. I left.”

“Uh-huh, sure you did,” Katara uttered skeptically as she raised an eyebrow at him. “Seriously. What happened?”

Zuko shrugged nonchalantly as he looked down at her from the corner of his eye.

“I may have punched him in the face before I threatened to set his place on fire if I ever saw him again,” he replied impassively as if what he had done was nothing of importance.

“You didn’t!” Katara exclaimed in disbelief, though she could not stop her lips from twitching in
amusement.

“The sick bastard deserved it,” Zuko responded before he looked back down at her, pulling her flushed against him. “Besides, you’re mine,” he growled out lowly.

Katara shook her head at him, but she smiled as her heart skipped a beat at his words.

“Is that the reason why you were so angry when you threatened that guy that approached me in the marketplace?” she asked with a wider smile.

Zuko tightened his hold on her as he bent his head down to place hot kisses down her throat, as if to brand her skin, before leaning away to stare into her bright, cobalt eyes.

“I didn’t like the way he was looking at you,” he admitted with a growl. “It made me want to burn his eyes out.”

“Wow. I never knew you were so violent,” she teased as she ran her hand down his chest.

Zuko chuckled deeply as he gave her a squeeze.

“I never thought of hurting people so much until you came into my life,” he shot back.

“Hey! Don’t blame me for your homicidal tendencies!” she quipped with a laugh.

“Oh, but I do,” he murmured against her ear as he pulled her closer to his tall frame. “As I also blame you for the way my body reacts to your mere presence, my little waterbender.”

Katara shivered as his warm breath washed over her, and her heart fluttered when he called her his waterbender because it was true. She was his as much as he was hers. She moaned when Zuko kissed her, but when he sought to deepen the kiss she nimbly moved away from his grasp.

“We should continue if we’re to arrive in Omashu sometime this year,” she said impishly.
She giggled when Zuko scowled at her as he tried to adjust himself.

“I also blame you for leaving me in a half-aroused state most of the time,” he muttered and Katara laughed even louder at his disgruntled tone.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Later that day, as the sun made its descent into the horizon and covered the ground in a golden light, Zuko returned from his hunt to the small campsite they had built for the night with two birds. He had to admit that he was not a bad hunter for being so inexperienced and he was sure that with some practice he would be just as good as Sokka, if not better. Of course once he returned to his duties as Fire Lord, he may not have a chance to find out.

His eyes lit up as he spotted Katara sitting near the fire and he quickly made his way to her. A smile touched Katara’s lips as she took the two small birds in her hands before she began to pull out their feathers.

“You’re getting better at this.” Katara smiled proudly at him as she lifted the second bird.

“I’m just glad we don’t have to starve,” Zuko responded with a small, indifferent shrug.

Katara bit back a giggle since she could see the smugness pouring out of him despite his nonchalant reply. Once she finished cleaning the birds and placing them to roast on the fire, she drew the small pot with steaming water from the flames while Zuko pulled out the fruit, cheese, the small pouch of tea leaves and teacups from the bag they were in. The last rays of sunlight had disappeared while a thin crescent moon took its place in the night sky by the time the couple was done eating their small meal and drinking the tea Katara had thoughtfully bought in the marketplace.

“Well, I’m going to sleep,” Katara got out through a yawn as she turned to smile sleepily at Zuko.

With an amused smile, Zuko nodded at her as he placed his empty cup of tea aside.

“Good night,” he told her as he leaned down to brush his lips on hers. He let out a small chuckle when she yawned into their kiss.

Blushing sheepishly, Katara muttered a good night. Exhausted from their tiresome walk through the
dry terrain, Katara made her way to their bedding and was soon asleep.

However, sleep could not find Zuko as pressing thoughts once again plagued him, thoughts that had not left him since they had fled from the rebels’ camp. The firebender turned away after watching Katara sleep for a moment and frowned darkly, the campfire’s light casting shadows on his face as he stared blankly at the dancing flames before him.

Where were Jianguo and his men? What if Jianguo was taking out his anger at their escape on the Fire Nation colonies? Did the Fire Nation think their lord was dead? Was his mother worried for him and Katara? Would Ozai’s wish of regaining the throne be realized?

Zuko’s frown deepened as another thought came to his mind. Who was the traitor living right under his nose? It had to be someone that had some sort of contact with him to be able to have given so much information about his affections for Katara to Jianguo. But who? Who could it be?

One of his personal guards or the soldiers he had placed to keep an eye on Ozai? A servant displeased with his or her lot in life? What if it was a vindictive nobleman or a noblewoman that felt he had scorned?

What if it was…Jee?

Zuko’s hands clenched as some sort of pained betrayal went through him at the thought before fear seized him since he had left the care of his mother to the admiral. But the feeling soon passed since he knew Jee was fiercely loyal to him and would never do anything to put both Katara and him in danger. Zuko trusted his admiral just as much as he trusted those he cared for—which admittedly were not many.

Dropping his head to his hands, Zuko let out a frustrated sigh. The only ones left in his list of suspects were his advisors, but why would they go against him when they were enjoying the privilege of being a member of the Royal Court Council? They knew that if they were caught in such traitorous acts they would be stripped of their status and wealth, and suffer a traitor’s death. But for the past four years they had come to respect him and accept him as Fire Lord. Well, all except Wei, that is…

Zuko’s head snapped up and he narrowed his eyes at the glowing campfire before him.

Wei! Of course! Why didn’t he realize it before? Wei had never pretended to hide his loathing for
him and his decision to end the war! If the old advisor had the opportunity to get rid of him, Zuko was positive Wei would immediately jump at the chance. And if he remembered correctly, they had seen Wei walking out of the prison tower where Ozai was imprisoned, probably scheming on how to usurp the throne! And now that he thought about it, Wei had been asking him many questions and suggesting many things about Katara during his birthday celebration to probably get a reaction from him that would indicate his feelings for the waterbender.

*That son of a b**tch!* Zuko cursed angrily in his head and the flames from the campfire rose at his temper.

Because of Wei they had been captured, Katara had been hurt, he had been beaten, and Katara had almost died! She had almost been lost to him forever! Though he had no proof of his suspicions, Zuko would make Wei pay for everything. He would make sure of it.

Taking a deep breath to regain his control, the young lord glanced at the sleeping woman cocooned in a blanket a few feet away before he lifted his gaze to the night sky. But first he would make sure to keep Katara and his mother safe before confronting the traitor amongst his advisors.

Sleep still eluded him now that he had come to his conclusions, and so, Zuko decided to practice his white fire since now there was less of a chance that he would cause a forest fire if something went wrong. Standing up, Zuko moved a few paces away from the small campsite so he could practice at ease and not disturb Katara.

Beginning with a few exercises he had mastered years ago to warm himself up, Zuko began a series of firebending moves that would help him in his breathing and the control he had on his inner fire. Again, he relished in the sensations of feeling the fire’s warmth licking at his hands as he practiced, and he promised himself that never again would he experience the cold emptiness of having his chi blocked.

Satisfied with his progress, the young firebender then decided to summon his white fire, but to his consternation, nothing but red and orange flames appeared. Bewildered, Zuko extinguished the flames on his palms before he again tried to call forth the powerful, hot white flames that had helped him get rid of those bastards that had harmed Katara.

A loud frustrated sigh escaped him as the fire that appeared on his palms was not the white flames he wanted. His exasperation grew dangerously high as he glared angrily at the normal-colored flames. *What the hell?*
Why couldn’t he summon the white fire as easily as it had come when he fought Jianguo’s men? Was it perhaps, that bending white fire had only been a onetime thing, just as he had thought?

Alarm replaced his anger as the thought festered in his mind before he shook his head. Maybe if he concentrated just as hard as when he did in the cave where he had taken shelter with Katara, then perhaps he could bend the white flames again.

New determination flaring in him, Zuko drew in a deep inhale before he let out a slow exhale to calm his erratic emotions and clear his mind. He concentrated on the steady flare of his inner fire that kept a constant rhythm with his heartbeat, with the flow of his blood. He thought on the pleasing heat of the white flames on his skin and the feeling of power that washed over him when bending such powerful fire.

The red flames hovering over his palms flared for a moment and then expanded before the color changed to pale blue and then bright white and the temperature increased to swelteringly hot. Zuko let out a relieved breath, a satisfied smile curling his lips, as he stared in amazement at the burning white flames in his palms. The knowledge that he was able to bend such flames still continued to astonish him.

But why could he not summon the white fire as easily as before? Was he only able to because of the immense rage he had been experiencing when Katara had been hurt? Zuko frowned. He did not want his anger to control his firebending as it once did when he had still been trying to win his sire’s favor and the chance to return home. He was different now, he had changed.

*I’ll just have to ask Uncle and perhaps he’ll be able to give me some answers*, he thought with a small frown.

Placing his questions aside for the moment, Zuko again concentrated on the white fire he had summoned and began to go through a series of firebending moves. The white flames flew ferociously from his hands or his feet as he punched his fists out or jumped and kicked at the air. Exhilaration raced through his veins as he quickened his movements and he forgot the time as he lost himself in his firebending.

Katara rolled onto her side and scooted back as she tried to snuggle into Zuko’s warm body, but she frowned when she was met with nothing. Concerned, Katara immediately awoke and sat up, looking around herself in alarm. A bright flash of light caught her attention and she gasped when she saw Zuko surrounded in white flames as he rigorously went through his firebending exercises. A trickle of fear went through her since seeing white fire reminded her of that day when she had been injured…the day she had died. But as she continued watching Zuko, her fear vanished and her
tensed muscles relaxed.

She watched in awe as Zuko leapt into the air, punched out a white fire blast that was immediately followed by a swiped sideways fiery kick, before he landed on the ground only to continue with more fighting stances. The more she watched him, the more fascinated she became, until she realized she was becoming aroused. She squirmed in her spot and blushed a bit as thoughts of Zuko touching her again with such powerful, slightly calloused hands surfaced in her mind.

Stopping at the last stance of his exercise, Zuko extinguished his flames before he relaxed and took a few deep breaths to regulate his breathing and the beat of his heart. He had tired more quickly than he normally did when he used the same set of exercise moves and he frowned. Did bending white fire require more energy perhaps? Another question he needed to asked Iroh about.

After he cooled off and stretched, he decided it was time to get some rest and quickly turned around so he could sleep next to Katara. With the anticipation of having her in his arms again, Zuko quickened his pace, but he frowned when he noticed that she was awake.

“I’m sorry if I woke you up,” he apologized softly once he had sat down next to her.

“Don’t worry about it. I quite enjoyed the show,” she told him with a grin. “You look so amazing when you firebend. It…it takes my breath away.”

Zuko chuckled at her words as he bent his head down to kiss her. Katara eagerly responded to the kiss and wrapped her arms around his neck to bring him closer. After a few more moments of just giving each other languid kisses, Zuko pulled away from her with a sigh and rested his forehead on her shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Katara asked in concern.

“Summoning white fire is not as easy as I had thought,” he responded with another sigh.

Katara soothingly ran her hand through his dark hair before placing a kiss on his head. Zuko’s heart warmed at the gesture and he gave her a small squeeze.

“Well, maybe with more practice and with Uncle Iroh’s guidance you’ll get better at it,” she told him sincerely.
“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too.”

Zuko gave her another squeeze before he again lifted his head and smiled at her. Katara returned the smile before she rested her head beneath his chin while he wrapped an arm around her.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Katara began as another small yawn escaped her, “Do you think we’ll be going through the Cave of Two Lovers on our way to Omashu?”

Zuko tensed and he pressed his lips tightly together as he shifted his gaze to the darkness beyond their small campfire. He remembered all the times Aang had brought up what happened in that cave and he felt his stomach clench in irritation.

“No, we won’t,” he responded curtly.

A frown creased Katara’s eyebrows at his terse answer and the way his body had stiffened, and she wondered what had caused such reactions.

“Is something wrong?” she asked curiously as she lifted her head to look into his eyes, but her frown deepened when she noticed that he had his eyes averted to the side.

“Nothing is wrong,” he replied stiffly.

“Come on, Zuko. I may not have Toph’s accurate ability to detect lies, but I can tell you’re lying,” Katara huffed as she pulled away to raise an eyebrow at him.

Zuko gave her a blank stare before he sighed when she narrowed her eyes at him. He knew she would not stop asking until he gave up and told her.

“I…don’t like to think about the Cave of Two Lovers,” he finally said after a few moments of tense silence.

“Why not?” Katara asked and tilted her head to the side in curiosity.
Zuko again shifted his gaze away from her before he let her go, placing his hands on his knees where he clung them when Katara frowned at him.

“Aang always boasts that it’s the place where he first kissed you and that because of the…affection you held for each other the crystals in the cave reacted. I hate the thought of it…of knowing he has kissed you,” he confessed darkly as he shot her a small glare.

Katara sat back and gave him an incredulous look. What right did Zuko have in getting mad at her? Kissing was the farthest she had gone with Aang while Zuko had…She shook her head. No, she will not think about that since that was in the past and best left forgotten. But still, why was Zuko so upset?

“Seriously?!” she exclaimed in disbelief. “That was such a long time ago and it was just one, innocent kiss!”

Zuko scowled at his hands before he sighed as he ran one of them through his growing hair. He returned his gaze to Katara who was frowning at him and he gave her a strained smile.

“I know that nothing serious happened,” he acknowledged her words. “And I know I have no right to react this way…especially with my brief history with those few women and Mai,” he muttered lowly.

When Katara winced before she again raised an eyebrow at him, Zuko reached for her hand and stroked it with his thumb before bringing it to his lips.

“I know my reaction is stupid, especially since you and Aang had never…” he trailed off before he continued with a frustrated sigh. “But I can’t help what I feel.”

Katara shook her head at him as she gave him a small smile. Now that she thought about it, Zuko had seemed upset when Aang first mentioned the Cave of Two Lovers as they all made their way in search of Lady Ursa, and she could not help feeling happy and slightly amused that Zuko had been jealous since then.

“Well, now you understand what I felt when you told me about your…past, don’t you?” she asked him softly.
“Yes, and I’m sorry for causing you pain,” he told her sincerely as he again brushed his lips against her hand.

“Let’s just forget about that and focus on our future, alright?” Katara told him as she lightly waved her other hand aside.

Zuko straightened, his dark expression lightened, and he gave her a nod of agreement before he smiled at her as he again brought her close to his chest.

“You know, I have a small confession to make,” Katara spoke up in a small voice after a short moment of silence where only the sounds of the nocturnal creatures could be heard.

Stiffening in anxiety at her words, Zuko cleared his throat as he replied.

“Well. What is it?”

“I…I never had the heart to tell Aang that the real reason the crystals lit up was because our light gave out,” Katara replied softly. “They glow in complete darkness.”

Zuko’s eyes widened in surprise before something like relief and elation washed over him. He placed his fingers beneath Katara’s chin to lift her head, and before she could react, he swooped down to kiss her passionately. Katara gasped in surprise at his ardor before a small moan escaped her when Zuko slipped his tongue inside her mouth and ran his hands down her back. When they pulled apart Katara was bewildered and dazed while Zuko looked smug and content.

“If it were true that the crystals glow because of the feeling of love, then I’m sure the cave would have lit up brighter if we kissed because the feelings we hold for each other is greater than anything else,” he growled out huskily against her lips.

“It sure would,” Katara immediately agreed with a grin before she tightened her arms around his neck and brought his lips to hers again.

*La, I can’t get enough of kissing Zuko!* Katara moaned in her head.
Zuko groaned against her mouth before he pulled away, nuzzling against her head as he let out a quiet sigh.

“I can’t wait for us to the return to the Fire Nation so we can announce our engagement,” he mumbled against her hair in an excited manner that was supposed to be subtle, but failed miserably.

He snapped back to awareness, however, when he noticed Katara shift uneasily against him.

“What’s the matter?” he asked anxiously. If she told him she did not want to marry him anymore, then he would use everything he had to convince her otherwise.

Katara felt a twinge in her heart at the anxious tone she heard in Zuko’s voice and she hoped he would not be too upset with what she wanted to tell him. She wiggled in his embrace and sat down beside him when he finally let her go. She watched as he turned his body to look at her, a frown appearing on his face, and she began to fidget at his intense stare.

“It’s just that…well…” she trailed off and looked down at her fidgeting fingers on her lap. “If we announce our engagement so soon after the two of us return…alone…people might think things…”

“We shouldn’t care what they think, after all, we know the truth,” Zuko responded with a displeased frown, although inwardly he let out a relieved breath that this was just a tiny concern compared to what he had thought Katara would have said.

“Maybe you’re right,” Katara consented with a nod before she took a deep breath as she stared right into his eyes. “But the other reason I think we should wait until we announce our engagement is because of…Aang.”

Zuko’s back stiffened almost painfully as he growled out, “What?!"

Katara quickly grabbed his hand when it seemed he was about to stand up and she brought it close to her chest.

“Please, hear me out,” she pleaded softly as Zuko turned his head away from her. “I want to talk to Aang first before he finds out about us, about our engagement.”
She paused when he didn’t say anything before she scooted closer to the now silent Zuko and touched his cheek so he could turn to her again. Once he reluctantly looked back at her, she continued.

“Aang is my friend, and I care for him, and I don’t want to hurt him by having him find out about us through other people,” she said softly. “He deserves an explanation and I want to be the one to tell him that I love you and that I’m going to marry you.”

Zuko could see her pleading with her eyes for him to understand, and he sighed since it was hard to deny her anything, and besides, he knew she was right.

“I understand,” he told her. “I also don’t want to hurt Aang and I would like to talk to him as well. I’d like him to understand my feelings for you and that I won’t let you go. But,” he paused and a frown appeared on his chest, “it could be a while before we see Aang again and I don’t want to wait so long to proclaim you as my future wife. I want everybody to now you are mine.”

“I know how you feel, but I still think it’s best if we wait a little to announce it,” Katara began, but when she felt Zuko about to protest again she placed a finger gently on his lips. “Please, Zuko. Remember on our way to the Abandoned Fort you promised me that you would do anything I asked of you one time?”

Zuko frowned deeply as she removed her finger from his lips since he had a feeling where she was going with this, but he nodded to show her he remembered.

“Then please do this. Wait a bit longer to announce our engagement,” Katara pleaded softly. “At least, until I talk to Aang and my family first.”

Zuko’s lips pressed together in a thin line as he debated with himself for a moment. If they waited until they told Katara’s family and Aang about them, then that meant that when they returned to the Fire Nation he would have to keep a distance between Katara and himself if he did not want nasty rumors to spread about her. Zuko frowned deeply at the thought since he did not want to be separated from her, but he eventually let out a resigned sigh and nodded reluctantly.

“Fine. I promise not to say anything about us until then,” he began before he looked seriously into her eyes. “But once you tell them, I will immediately announce our engagement. I will not prolong our wedding any longer than that, do you understand?”
Katara gave him a brilliant smile and she nodded. She let out a relieved sigh before she fell against him, wrapping her arms around his middle. Zuko rested his chin on her head as he ran his fingers through her long hair.

“Thank you, Zuko,” she told him gratefully as she placed a kiss on his covered chest.

Zuko did not respond to her for a while as he held her close to him since he still did not find the thought of waiting much longer than he had anticipated to take Katara as his wife agreeable, but he relented since he understood what she was saying and meant.

“What’s so amusing?” he asked her curiously.
“You also need to talk to my father first to get his consent to our marriage,” she told him with a grin.

“Then there won’t be a wedding after all,” Zuko responded as he let out a mock-defeated sigh.

Katara laughed as she snuggled closer to him, delighting in the teasing manner and the feeling of his arms wrapping possessively around her.

“Don’t worry,” she said as she giggled at him. “My father will grant you permission since he respects and admires you. Especially after helping Sokka rescue him from the Boiling Rock and for…risking your life for me when Azula attacked me.”

Zuko tightened his hold on the precious woman in his arms as he brought her protectively to his chest at the reminder that he could have lost her that day, but he quickly shoved the horrible memory away.

“Besides,” Katara continued as her voice became soft and tender, “my father will know I am happy for I have chosen you as my husband.”

“I sure hope you’re right,” he told her lightly as he tipped her chin up so he could claim her mouth.

Zuko groaned at the feeling of her soft, plump lips before he lowered his enticing water nymph onto the blankets while he lay at her side. Katara forgot everything but the feeling of being in Zuko’s strong arms, of his caressing mouth and hands, his sandalwood scent, and his soothing warmth. She gave herself to him without reservation or thought since she knew he would never hurt her if he could help it.

Zuko rolled over quickly until his body was covering Katara in one long embrace, and his hands moved over her clothes, molding her curvy body to him until she was a supple column of warmth beneath him. He slowly, carefully, slid his hands down her sides, over her flared hips, before he slipped his hands beneath her to cup her ass. He groaned at the feeling of having such firm orbs in his hands. He heard Katara gasp and he gave the perfect round cheeks a squeeze, eliciting a small moan from her.

“Mm, Zuko,” Katara moaned into his mouth. Before, she would have been shocked if her bottom was grabbed in such a way, but now she delighted in the feeling of having Zuko touch her.
She moved her hands from his shoulders, down his muscular back, kneading his hard flesh beneath the layers of his clothes, and she smiled mentally when he let out a tiny moan. She eagerly opened her mouth when he began to probe her lips and she sighed when he slid his wet tongue inside while she continued to run her hands down his back as he gave her butt a few more small squeezes with his large hands.

Slowly Zuko lifted his mouth from hers when the need for air became too great before he leaned his head down to her throat and placed hot kisses there. He paused and lifted his head so he could see his waterbender’s swollen lips and heaving chest.

“Katara,” he breathed out huskily as he leaned down to kiss her deeply once again, almost as if he wanted to devour her whole.

He gave her firm ass another squeeze before lifting her hips toward his own. Katara hesitated for a second before she slowly opened her legs so he could settle between them. They groaned when his covered aching erection settled firmly against her equally clothed wet warmth. The kiss grew more passionate as they began to rock frantically against each other as their pleasure rapidly increased. She gasped loudly when he shifted his hips and his hard erection pressed against that sensitive bud between her legs. His tongue was hot and firm as he took her mouth, flicking it against the inside of her cheeks, twining it with her own wet tongue, kissing her thoroughly as he strained against her center until she was crying out wordlessly against him. A few seconds later, Zuko gave out a loud groan before he slumped forward, barely catching himself before he crushed the quivering woman beneath him.

The firebender rolled onto his back and both lay there beneath the dark, twinkling night as they tried to catch their breaths. After a long moment, Zuko pulled her close to his side before he turned his head to gaze fondly at Katara, who was staring at him with dazed, sapphire eyes.

“Damn. Even with your clothes on you can excite me so, Katara,” he groaned out as sleep began to invade his mind. Practicing his white fire and now this passionate and pleasant moment with Katara had tired him out.

Katara felt her face heat up even as a smile came to her lips before she buried her face on his shoulder. Zuko chuckled at her bashful reaction before he nuzzled his face against her hair, taking in a deep breath of her gardenia scent.

Zuko smiled as he leaned his head down a bit so he could taste her lips again. They kissed each other softly and tenderly, but when their kisses were interrupted by simultaneous yawns they pulled apart to give each other sheepish smiles. Zuko reached for the blankets and brought them up to cover them both as they settled close to each other, the starry night sky their ceiling, the dry ground their bed, and the campfire their warmth.
Just as sleep was claiming them, Katara felt Zuko give her middle a small squeeze.

“I still wish we could tell everybody about us as soon as we arrive, though,” he muttered drowsily.

Katara giggled dreamily before they both fell to the clutches of sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The two young benders soon found themselves walking through an area where various rocky hills and rough terrain made their process slower than they would have wanted. There did not seem to be any water or animals near, so they had to carefully limit their intake of food and water.

“How much longer do you think it will take for us to arrive at Omashu?” Katara asked tiredly after they stepped over several large rocks.

“I don’t know,” Zuko responded as he shaded his eyes from the sun’s glare in order to see ahead of them, but all he saw were the sun’s rays reflecting off the ground. “The times I have visited King Bumi for treaties and meetings I used an airship and everything looks different walking there.”

“Oh, I see,” Katara responded quietly before she continued walking without saying anything else.

Zuko became concerned at her silence since he could tell something was on her mind and he reached out a hand to brush his fingers against her back.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s my family. I’m worried about them,” was her reply as she glanced at him briefly before returning her gaze to the rocky ground beneath her as she continued a bit hesitantly, “But most of all…I’m worried about Aang.”

Clenching his hands tightly, Zuko suppressed a growl as a twinge of jealousy went through him again. Why was Katara bringing Aang up so much recently? He did not like it one bit.

“Why?” he finally replied in a terse tone.
“It’s just that when it comes to me and my safety being threatened, Aang would sometimes react badly,” she told him softly since she could feel that Zuko was upset. “And I’m worried that he might do something drastic if news reaches him about my disappearance.”

Zuko’s jaw clenched and his nostrils flared. He understood what Katara was saying, but he still did not like that she always worried about the young airbender. Katara was his and she shouldn’t be so preoccupied with another!

His hand shot out and grabbed a hold of her arm, whirling her around until he had her pressed tightly against his chest, before his mouth descended on hers in a hard kiss. Katara’s eyes widened in surprise at his demanding kiss and the feeling of his fingers firmly clutching her arms, and she stood frozen in place since she did not know how to respond to his sudden fierceness. But just as suddenly as he had kiss her, Zuko pulled away, and she stared at him in equal amount of confusion and surprise.

“Aang is going to have to understand that it will be my duty to look after your wellbeing and happiness, not his,” he told her firmly.

Katara frowned deeply at him and his words as she slowly tried to pull her arms away from his grip. Zuko’s hands tightened at her movement before he let her go.

“There’s no reason for you to get jealous, Zuko,” she admonished him gently. “Have I not shown my love for you? Have I not allowed only you to know all of me?”

Zuko’s stiff shoulders slumped a little at her truthful words, but he refused to apologize for the way he felt, for the way he had reacted.

“Besides, Aang is my friend, as well as yours, so it’s normal for him to care and worry for me,” she continued.

“You know very well that Aang feels more than just affection for you,” Zuko retorted darkly before he pressed his lips tightly together.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about since it’s you whom I love and it’s you I’m going to marry,” Katara reminded him firmly as she placed her hands on her hips.
Sighing, she dropped her arms to her sides when that did not calm him as she had expected. She reached a hand out to run it along the edges of his scar and she smiled when he sighed and immediately relaxed at her touch. The young lord brought his hand up to cover hers as he looked down at her with serious, burning eyes.

“For his safety I hope Aang understands that as well,” Zuko responded in a grave tone that made the small threat sound more sinister. “Although I’m grateful to Aang for everything he has done, I won’t give you up, I won’t let you go. I will *not* lose you again, Katara.”

“I know,” was Katara’s breathless response as she lost herself in Zuko’s amber eyes and the feeling of his thumb caressing the skin of her hand.

Zuko wound his arms possessively around her small waist and brought her up to his chest before he pressed his lips against her plump ones. This time Katara responded to him, opening her mouth to his questing tongue and wrapping her hands around his neck to pull herself closer to him. He kissed her gently, carefully, as if silently asking her to forgive him for the harsh way he had kissed her earlier, and Katara accepted his silent apology by gently twirling her fingers in his hair and caressing his tongue soothingly with hers.

However, they were interrupted as the sound of something heavy running toward them from behind reached their ears. The two benders quickly pulled apart and, just as swiftly, took on fighting stances —Zuko summoning fire into his hands and Katara twining sharp-looking water tentacles around her form as they waited for an attack.

Their eyes widened as a huge beast appeared on top one of the stony hills and, without so much as a pause, it lunged itself downward, its dark-russet fur ruffling as the wind rushed by it on its descent, before it landed agilely on the ground before them with a grunt. Its eyeless, large head moved from side to side before it lifted its snout and sniffed wildly in their direction.

It was then that they noticed the figure sitting with ease on the large animal’s back, a small smirk curling painted lips and dark eyes glinting with both amusement and disinterest. Long fingers tipped with dark painted nails flicked a long tendril of black hair behind a shoulder where a large tattoo could be seen.

“Are you gonna attack me or just stand there like idiots?” a sultry feminine voice spoke and a thin eyebrow was raised on a smooth, pale face.
“Jun,” Katara exclaimed in surprise.

She relaxed a bit and returned her water to her water pouch, but Zuko did not relent on his rigid stance and instead moved protectively closer to Katara while he kept a wary eye on the bounty hunter. The last time they had seen her was when they had been searching for Aang when he disappeared from Ember Island just as Sozin’s Comet approached.

“Long time no see,” Jun replied as she leaned on her shirshu’s saddle and smirked mockingly down at them while the animal continued to sniff wildly about, a long thin tongue flicking out from a fanged mouth. The dark-attired woman continued to smirk at them as she patted her mount on its wolf-like head.

“Good job, Nyla,” she cooed, “I knew you’d find these two.”

Nyla made a soft growling sound as one of her ears was scratched by her master.

“What do you want, Jun?” Zuko finally spoke in a commanding tone.

“What? Can’t I just go on a ride and enjoy the scenery?” the woman replied as she placed one hand on her hip while with the other she kept a tight hold on the shirshu’s reins.

When both the Fire Lord and the waterbender looked at her skeptically, she shrugged a shoulder and laughed.

“Yeah, didn’t believe it myself either,” she drawled. Again, she flicked her hair behind her as she continued, “Actually, Uncle Lazy hired me to find you two. Promised me a big bag of gold if I could find you before the end of this week. Looks like I’ll be getting my money sooner than I expected.”

“Uncle Iroh is looking for us?” Zuko asked. He looked at Katara and they smiled at each other in relief.

Jun stared at them for a moment before another mocking smirk curled her wine-colored lips as she again leaned over Nyla’s saddle.
“So, Angry Boy,” she began with a taunting tone in her voice, “did your pretty girlfriend escape from you again?”

She chuckled deeply, but she paused in her amusement when she saw that they did not immediately start denying their relationship to each other like they had done in the past when she teased them about it. She raised a dark eyebrow in surprise at the quick glance they sent each other before she smirked at the blushing waterbender and the smug young Fire Lord. Another chuckle escaped the bounty hunter.

“Oh, I see how it is,” she teased as she winked at Katara who blushed even deeper at the suggestive gesture.

“Where is my uncle now?” Zuko decided to interrupt before Katara lost her temper at the way Jun kept on smirking and leering at them.

He frowned as he saw Jun slowly dragged her eyes over his entire form before a provocative smile appeared on her face. Noticing the way the older woman seemed to be eating Zuko with her eyes, Katara stepped before him and glared at Jun who raised an amused eyebrow at her.

They watched the bounty hunter warily as she swiftly dismounted from Nyla’s saddle before she led the shirshu over to a pile of large rocks where the woman fluidly sat and began to inspect her nails uninterestedly. Zuko felt his temper flare when she didn’t reply to his question, but before he could demand she answer him, Jun flicked her hand at them as she tilted her head to point in the direction she had come from.

“Uncle Lazy was following behind me, but when Nyla picked up your scent so close by I went ahead of him,” she informed them indifferently. “He’ll be here soon.”

Just as she finished talking they heard a thunderous sound come from the direction Jun had pointed, and both Zuko and Katara whirled around in anticipation. Instead of jumping from atop the hill just as Nyla did, four ostrich-horses raced down from it, loosening a few rocks below their clawed feet. Zuko felt his heart ease as he spotted his uncle riding ahead of two men—one of them leading a rider less ostrich-horse—and he smiled when Iroh’s face lit up and a large smile appeared on his aged face as he spotted them.

“Zuko! Miss Katara!” Iroh cried out joyfully as he reached them. He jumped from the ostrich-horse before the feathered animal had come to a complete stop.
“Uncle,” Zuko greeted warmly as he allowed his beloved uncle to hug him tightly. He had missed the old man.

He returned the embrace swiftly before his uncle let him go to bring the smiling waterbender, who had no qualms in hugging him back just as fiercely, into his arms. When the old firebender pulled away he had tears in his eyes as he smiled at them.

“Thank Agni, both of you are all right,” Iroh exclaimed shakily before he cleared his throat as he began to fuss over them, making sure both of them were indeed fine and had no injuries.

He patted Katara’s cheeks and he grinned when Zuko frowned at him when he ruffled his nephew’s hair, which was longer than his usual style. Iroh’s jubilant air diminished a bit and he gave them a watery smile.

“I was so worried,” he told them softly. A slight trembling could be heard in his kind voice. “I feared I had lost you both to the sea.”

“Oh, Uncle Iroh,” Katara said gently as she wound her arms around the older man while Zuko placed a comforting hand on his uncle’s shoulder.

“There’s no need for you to be worried anymore, Uncle,” Zuko spoke up as he gave Iroh’s shoulder a small, reassuring squeeze.

“Of course, of course!” Iroh exclaimed as he moved away from them to give them his usual cheerful smile. “You’re here, alive and well, so now we can return home.”

“Great!” the waterbender exclaimed as she threw a smile at Zuko who gave her a small grin before he schooled his features back to his stoic expression.

“My lord,” one of the men that had been standing silently to the side spoke up as both approached the three of them.

Zuko turned to look at them curiously before he gave them a small smile as he recognized his two personal guards. They were wearing plain Earth Kingdom clothes and not their usual uniforms, so he had not realized who they were before.
“We are glad both you and Lady Katara are safe,” the younger guard said as they bowed.

“Thank you,” Zuko replied sincerely and both guards straightened and smiled when Katara thanked them as well.

“Not to interrupt your little reunion,” Jun spoke up sardonically as she stood from the rock she had been sitting on where she had watched the mushy scene, “but we should head back to the colony. I do want my reward money, you know.”

“Why, of course, my dear Jun!” Iroh exclaimed with another large smile he directed at the female bounty hunter.

Zuko suppressed the urge to roll his eyes at his uncle and Katara giggled softly into her hand as Jun frowned at the old man. Jun sniffed before she turned to her shirshu and mounted without saying another word or looking at the grinning retired general.

One of Zuko’s personal guards handed the rider less ostrich-horse to him with a bow before he turned and mounted his ostrich-horse just like the other guard did. Silently, they waited for their lord’s orders.

Katara frowned when she saw Zuko settle onto the only other ostrich-horse available and she wondered where she was supposed to go, but before she could voice her concern, Iroh spoke up as he slapped a hand over his chest as if in shock.

“It seems we forgot to bring another ostrich-horse!” he exclaimed a bit too surprised to sound genuine. “Here, my dear. You can have mine.”

Iroh held out the reins to Katara as he moved his gaze toward Jun with a bright smile. Jun pressed her painted lips together as she glared at the scheming old firebender. Shrugging, Katara moved to take the reins from Iroh’s hand, but she gasped in surprise when she felt a strong arm go around her waist before she was lifted and settled on a saddle between two firm legs.

Iroh and the two guards stared in astonishment as the young Fire Lord pulled the waterbending woman toward him before setting her on the saddle in front of him with an impassive expression on his face, as if sweeping a woman from the ground was a normal occurrence.
“You can ride your ostrich-horse, Uncle,” Zuko spoke up coolly. “Katara will ride with me.”

A deep, red blush surfaced on Katara’s cheeks, which only deepened when she felt Zuko give her a small squeeze before subtly bringing her closer to his chest, but she did not protest since she knew that once they returned to the Fire Nation Palace they would not be able to be so close to each other like they have been, while wandering around in the Earth Kingdom.

“Oh…well, what a remarkable solution,” Iroh responded as he finally recovered from his shock.

He gave the pretty bounty hunter—who was smirking knowingly—a disappointed look before mounting his ostrich-horse. If Zuko’s personal guards found their lord’s behavior strange they did not comment on it as they took positions to guard the group, one before their lord and the woman he was holding against him, while the other rode behind the group.

When Katara shifted again before him, Zuko gave her another small squeeze until she relaxed against him. He smiled mentally before he turned to his uncle who had ridden beside them.

“What has happened since the storm?” he asked.

Iroh’s features turned solemn as he glanced at them before returning his gaze ahead of them.

“We will have a talk later over tea,” he responded lightly.

Zuko and Katara noticed his quick glance at Jun, who was riding ahead of them, before they nodded that they understood. They really could not trust Jun since she was only loyal to someone until another person came along with a bigger purse. So they waited and listened as Iroh began to tell them of their adventures as he and the guards followed Jun and her incredible shirshu in search for the missing Fire Lord and the master waterbender.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“After both of you fell into the sea I was afraid I would never see you ever again,” Iroh confessed in a shaky and quiet tone as he gave them a brief pained smile before he looked down at his teacup.

Zuko and Katara silently looked at each other and frowned. The three of them were sitting before a small campfire Zuko’s personal guards had set up a few hours ago, drinking jasmine tea Iroh had
brought with him. Katara prided herself in knowing she could cook amazingly well, but she could not deny Iroh was an expert when it came to any brew of tea. Jun had gone off somewhere without so much as a backward glance and the two guards had gone to patrol the area, so now was a good time for the three of them to talk in private.

Reaching a hand out, Katara laid it on Iroh’s arm and gave a reassuring squeeze. The old firebender smiled at her as he patted her hand gratefully before he returned his gaze to his silent nephew.

“What happened since the storm?” Zuko asked again, his tone soft as he waited for his uncle to compose himself.

Iroh let out a deep sigh before he took a sip of his soothing tea.

“After that horrible storm passed, I ordered for the flagship to return to the place both of you had disappeared from. We searched the area for a few days.” The retired general paused before another sigh escaped him. “I…feared that you had drowned and sunk to the bottom of the ocean,” he admitted softly before he looked up at his nephew to smile knowingly at him. “But I knew that you would not have given up so easily, especially if it came to the safety and welfare of Miss Katara.”

A small grin pulled at his lips when Katara blushed and Zuko nodded at him while one side of his mouth lifted as if he were suppressing a smile.

“And so I ordered for the crew to turn the ship to land,” Iroh continued with his story as he looked at the two young benders silently listening to him. “I figured that Zuko would make his way to the colony, especially since Miss Katara would have wanted to help the disease-stricken village, so we went to the colony first, prepared for the worst, but to my surprise I found the colony perfectly fine.

“Confused, I immediately sought out the governor and inquired about the disease, but he told me that no such illness had spread throughout the village, there were no great amounts of deaths, and he had not sent a message to the Fire Nation saying such,” Iroh told them with a frown that made the wrinkles on his face more profound. “That is when I became suspicious and concerned that something else was afoot, so I had the crew and the guards from both the flagship and the colony search the village and the surrounding areas for you both.”

Nodding, Zuko asked his uncle to go on while Katara again gave the old man’s arm a supportive squeeze. Iroh sighed tiredly, his frown deepening, and he took another sip of his tea before he continued as he gave them a look that shown both confusion and dread.
“After several weeks of anguish, I received a disturbing letter from Chao asking me if the Fire Lord was all right since all of the Royal Court Council members had received an anonymous message saying that the Fire Lord and his waterbending woman had been captured and would only be released if they set Ozai free.”

Pausing, Iroh stared at his nephew and the waterbender sitting next to him before raising an eyebrow at their unaffected looks.

“Chao’s letter alarmed me, but I sent him a reply telling him not to comply to the anonymous person’s demand since it could be a bluff. I told him to order the other advisors not to breathe a word of what was going on to anyone and to begin finding out as discreetly as possible who could have sent the messages while I remained in the colony searching for you. But a few days later I received an anonymous letter as well that said that they had you and if their demands were not met soon they would not hesitate to…kill you both.”

A ragged breath escaped Iroh at the reminder of such a threat before he cleared his throat when his nephew placed a hand on his shoulder. Iroh patted his hand as he turned to give Zuko a sad smile.

“I wanted what was happening to be kept from others, especially your mother, but Ursa…” Iroh trailed off with a frown.

Zuko stiffened, his stomach twisted and his heart clenched in worry as his golden eyes stared intently and commandingly at his solemn uncle.

“What about my mother?” Zuko growled out worriedly. What if she had been hurt because Katara and he had escaped? He would never forgive himself if that were the case. “Is she all right? Is she hurt? Why didn’t Jee protect her?” he demanded angrily.

“Calm yourself, Nephew,” Iroh interrupted him firmly before he continued when Zuko took a calming breath, “Ursa is fine and you know Jee will not fail in his duty to keep her safe.”

Iroh shook his head. “Anyway, what I was going to say was that your mother found out about both Miss Katara and your ‘capture’. She pleaded for me to tell her what was going on and if both of you were indeed in danger. I told her the truth about the storm and that you had disappeared, but I was not sure if you had indeed been taken. I asked her not to despair yet.”

Zuko dropped his head into his hands with a deep, painful sigh. Katara turned to look at him with
concerned eyes and she automatically placed her hand on his shoulder to soothe him.

“I promised myself I would keep my mother safe, that I would make sure she would not suffer anymore after what Ozai did to her…but I failed,” Zuko growled out darkly.

Iroh opened his mouth to reassure his nephew, but his words died in his throat when he saw Katara wrap her arms around Zuko. His eyes widened in surprise when, instead of shrugging her off, Zuko leaned into her to soak up her comfort.

“You didn’t fail, Zuko,” Katara responded gently as she ran her fingers through his dark hair. “Didn’t I tell you to stop blaming yourself for every little thing that goes wrong? The important thing is that you try.”

“You’re right,” Zuko responded quietly before he sat up straight and cleared his throat, his features once again cool and impassive. “Please continue, Uncle.”

A white, bushy eyebrow was raised in both bewilderment and curiosity as Iroh continued to stare at them, but when they frowned at his silence his shoulders slumped slightly in disappointment. He had begun to hope that both his nephew and Katara had finally confessed their true feelings to each other. If they continued to be so stubborn he was going to lock them in a room until they did…and perhaps let them out until Zuko got Katara with child.

“A white, bushy eyebrow was raised in both bewilderment and curiosity as Iroh continued to stare at them, but when they frowned at his silence his shoulders slumped slightly in disappointment. He had begun to hope that both his nephew and Katara had finally confessed their true feelings to each other. If they continued to be so stubborn he was going to lock them in a room until they did…and perhaps let them out until Zuko got Katara with child.

“Uncle Iroh?” Katara questioned softly and Iroh shook his head to clear his thoughts while his silly smile dropped.

“Hm? Where was I…?” he began before he nodded once he remembered, “Ah, yes, as more days passed with no sign of either of you, my despair grew and I began to believe that perhaps it was true that you had been captured. Desperately, I ordered the entire village and those close by searched more thoroughly for you. I wanted to rescue you because, even though I do love you both, I know we cannot allow Ozai’s freedom...even in exchange for your lives.”

Iroh pressed his thin lips together before he looked away from them to glare at the burning campfire, ashamed. He was surprised when Katara wound her arms around his middle and he looked up at his nephew who was looking at him with a fondness that only Iroh could detect after staying at his side for more than seven years.

“It would be the correct thing to do, Uncle,” Zuko reassured him quietly. “Ozai cannot be allowed to
regain his freedom and the Fire Nation throne.”

“Zuko’s right, so don’t feel bad, Uncle Iroh,” Katara spoke up as she gave Iroh’s broader middle a squeeze before she sat back to smile at him. “It’s what we would have wanted.”

“Thank you,” Iroh spoke up softly and sincerely as he gave them a small smile, even though he understood, it would not be an easy thing to do.

“What else happened?” Katara asked lightly in order to change the subject.

“Let’s see…Oh!” Iroh exclaimed and a wide smile appeared on his face that caused both young benders to relax a bit.

“When there continued to be no sign of you, I began to think of new ways to help me find you, and then I got an inspiration! I knew that if someone could find you it would be the lovely Jun. And so with the help of Zuko’s personals guards, we searched for Jun until we found her in a tavern in one of the Earth Kingdom villages not far from the colonies. And with the help of your fire crown, Jun’s shirshu was able to find you. And so here you both are!”

When Katara smiled at him and Zuko hummed pensively, Iroh’s exuberant smile faded into a confused frown and he crossed his arms over his chest, slipping his hands inside the long sleeves of his forest green shirt.

“Neither of you seem surprised at what I have told you,” he mused before his eyes widened in apprehension. “Were…were you really…captured?” he asked anxiously as his golden eyes darted from one to the other.

His alarm grew when Zuko turned away and Katara looked down at her hands which she had grasped tightly on her lap.

“Yes,” Katara finally responded and Iroh gasped in both shock and horror. Katara sighed and her shoulders slumped. “And it was because of me and my own stupidity—”

“No!” Zuko growled out as he snapped his head back toward her. He let out a deep breath to calm himself before he reached one arm out to bring Katara to his side as he more softly said, “No, it
wasn’t your fault either. The good thing is that we managed to escape.”

Katara nodded her head and she wrapped her arms around Zuko as she let herself be comforted by his arms, his strength, his words, and his warmth.

Iroh wanted to ask who the ones responsible for kidnapping them were, but he sensed that now was not the right time—if the way Zuko kept frowning darkly at him was any indication. However, Iroh was surprised by the comfortable way Zuko and Katara were with each other as he comforted Katara and she, in return, immediately relaxed into Zuko’s embrace. Never had the retired general seen his nephew give comfort to another person before—and in such a gentle manner—that he almost wanted to pinch himself to make sure he was not dreaming. He became excited as his hope for a niece-in-law and little grandnephews and nieces grew more and more, but he decided to wait to get some answers since he also did not want to make it awkward for them if he were wrong.

He discreetly cleared his throat, and he almost grinned, when they immediately pulled away from each other with flushed faces. Well, Katara was definitely blushing, but Zuko was rather scowling more than blushing. Iroh looked away from his nephew when he heard Katara gently clear her throat.

“Uncle Iroh, I wanted to ask you something,” Katara began.

“What is it, my dear?” Iroh responded as he smiled at her encouragingly.

*Of course you can marry my nephew and have his babies!* was what he wanted to say. Iroh had to lift his teacup to his lips to hide his amused grin.

“It’s about my family,” Katara began as she twisted the hem of her shirt with her fingers as her worry once again surfaced, “Have you heard about them? Do you know if the news about our kidnapping reached them? My father, Gran-Gran, Pakku and Suki will be so worried! I don’t even want to imagine how Sokka would react!”

She let out a sigh when she felt Zuko reach for her hand and squeeze it gently. She looked up and smiled softly at his reassuring gaze.

“Actually, Miss Katara,” Iroh immediately responded, “I indeed sent a message informing them about the events during the storm a few days after the first search for both of you was in vain. But with all the rumors of your kidnapping flying around they probably already know. However, I
haven’t heard from them since I followed after Jun.”

He took another sip of his tea as he subtly eyed their clasped hands. Why did they not say anything, for Agni’s sake? He had a feeling Zuko was not even aware of what they were doing, for Iroh was sure his nephew would balk at the thought of showing such affection. But perhaps Katara had changed him?

Katara frowned worriedly as Iroh finished talking, but she allowed herself to relax when Zuko again squeezed her hand before he slowly let go.

“So where were you heading before we found you?” Iroh piped in as he smiled at them both. “You were heading the opposite direction from the Fire Nation colonies.”

“We were actually on our way to Omashu and King Bumi…for help and protection,” Zuko spoke up with a blank expression, even though he was bristling inside at the reminder that they had been making haste in order to escape from Jianguo’s grasp.

“Oh, well, that sounds like a very good idea,” Iroh commented with a nod since he had a feeling he knew why they had been making their way to the Earth Kingdom city. “But I am so glad we were able to find you and that both of you were unharmed…”

He trailed off when he noticed their mood change darkly and he wondered at it.

“Both of you were not… harmed, right?” Iroh began before he trailed off again in alarm when Katara winced and Zuko sent him a dark look.

The sound of approaching feet from opposite sides of the campfire caught their attention and they all tensed, but when they realized it was just Jun and the two guards they relaxed their rigid postures. Zuko again glanced at his uncle, who was frowning anxiously, and he gave him a strained smile.

“I’ll tell you…everything later,” he said quietly.

Iroh gave a short nod before he stood up to greet Jun, who was now brushing Nyla’s dark brown fur, and he immediately began to flirt with her to the amusement of Zuko, Katara, and the guards, and to the annoyance of one bounty hunter.
“So how long have you and Angry Boy been together?” Jun asked nonchalantly with a smirk on her painted lips.

Katara jumped at the sudden question and almost dropped the blankets she was holding. She felt a blush coming to her cheeks when Jun’s smirk widened and she scowled at the older woman.

“It’s none of your business, Jun,” Katara responded dismissively as she returned her attention on her task of collecting things from around the now extinguished campfire.

Jun raised a thin eyebrow from her place against Nyla’s side where she was leaning casually as she watched the waterbender going about her duty. She raised her hand and looked at her nails disinterestedly.

“It must be fun playing around with both the Fire Lord and the Avatar. I like men with power too,” Jun commented suggestively as she looked away from her nails to glance at the Water Tribe woman.

A horrified gasp escaped Katara as she whirled around to glare indignantly at the smirking bounty hunter.

“I’m not playing around with both of them!” she hissed out, barely catching herself from screaming, which would have caused the men to hear and become attentive. “I broke up with Aang because I’m in love with Zuko and I didn’t want to hurt him! And Zuko and I just recently got together!”

Jun’s eyes widened at the waterbender’s outburst before her usual mocking smirk pulled at her lips. Katara groaned for spilling the truth out when it had been she that had insisted nobody found out, at least not yet.

“I see,” Jun remarked with a grin before she shrugged, her long dark hair spilling over her tattooed shoulder. “But I don’t see the problem if it was like that.”

“Only you would think that,” Katara muttered under her breath before she sighed as she looked Jun straight in the eye. “Please don’t tell anyone,” she forced herself to plead to the older woman.

“Hm, but this kind of news could bring me another large bag of gold,” Jun mused as she stroked her
At the blue-eyed woman’s gasp, Jun chuckled amusedly before she shrugged and waved her hand glibly in the air.

“But I don’t want the Fire Lord’s wrath to fall on me, so I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

Katara’s stiff shoulders relaxed and she let out a mental sigh of relief. She just hoped Jun would keep her word or else there will be trouble. Katara turned away from the smirking woman and continued stuffing the rest of their belongings into the bags while the men tended to the ostrich-horses and tied the bags that were ready to their saddles. They had been riding for a few weeks and the land had once again changed from rocky terrain to a thin forest now that they were close to the colony and the sea.

Discreetly shifting her eyes in Zuko’s direction, Katara watched as he saddled his own ostrich-horse, the muscles of his arms flexing as he worked, and a dreamy sigh full of longing escaped her. They had been sleeping separately every night for the past few weeks in order not to raise any suspicions, and other than riding together, they had not been close to each other. La, she missed him, missed being held by him, missed kissing him, sleeping close to his warm side, missed their small intimate moments…

“Have you slept with him already?” Jun’s whispered voice near her ear startled her out of her pleasant thoughts.

Katara jumped away from Jun—who had been leaning behind her and watching the Fire Lord as well—and blushed furiously as her heart began to pound rapidly in her chest as memories of what Zuko and she had done so far flashed before her eyes. When Jun crossed her arms over her chest with a raised eyebrow and a knowing smirk, Katara felt her face heat up even further.

“That…t-that’s not any of your b-business!” Katara sputtered as she tried to compose herself.

“By not denying it you’re making me think you have,” Jun responded with an amused chuckle.

Blushing darkly, Katara struggled to come up with a retort, but Jun leaned away from her with an unaffected shrug.
“I don’t see what’s so wrong if you had,” the female bounty hunter commented as she rolled her eyes at the blushing waterbender. Jun’s mood suddenly changed and a sultry smirk curled her painted lips as her eyes again traveled leeringly toward the Fire Lord who was now placing the bridle on his ostrich-horse.

“Maybe instead of Angry Boy I should say Angry Man, don’t you think?” Jun commented as her dark eyes raked the oblivious firebender’s tall form. “He sure grew into a fine male. I wonder if he’s good in bed as he is in firebending…”

Angry, narrowed blue eyes were aimed at the older woman as Katara’s embarrassed face suddenly turned cold and almost frightening as she stepped before Jun to block her view of Zuko. Her hands fist ed at her sides as she fought to control herself from scratching Jun’s leering eyes out.

“If you don’t want to find yourself in the bottom of the sea you better back off! Zuko is mine!” she hissed out through gritted teeth.

Katara brought a hand to her mouth and she stared wide-eyed at Jun who was gaping at her before her usual smirk replaced her shock.

“I was just saying. No need to bite my head off,” Jun remarked wryly before she smirked. “Besides, I always had a feeling that both of you were meant for each other since that day he handed me your necklace, we found you, and he captured you.”

Katara felt her heart skip a beat at Jun’s words, but before she could say anything the bounty hunter turned around and made her way to Nyla, who was patiently waiting for her master.

Still stunned at her outburst, Katara watched as Jun walked away before she resumed packing as a light blush flushed her cheeks. The jealous and possessive feeling continued to churn inside her and she took a few breaths to calm herself down. She had wanted to slap Jun for daring to stare at Zuko just like how she wanted to do to the women on Ember Island and the waitress at the inn from the village. Never before had she felt so possessive over someone and she did not know if she really liked the feeling. But now she understood what Zuko felt when other men approached her.

Straightening after closing the bag, Katara’s eyes again wandered toward Zuko and her heart once again fluttered at the sight of him. As if he felt her eyes on him, Zuko turned away from the ostrich-horse to look her way and they smiled at each other. Katara grabbed the bag into her arms and quickly made her way to him when she noticed that everybody else was almost ready to depart.
Either way, Zuko is mine and I am not going to let some other woman take him away from me! Katara vowed fervently in her head as Zuko smiled at her after taking the bag from her and tying it on the saddle.

“Are you ready?” Zuko asked.

“Yes,” Katara replied with her own smile.

Zuko moved closer to her before he grabbed her around her waist and lifted her onto the saddle so that she was sitting sideways facing him. Katara looked down into his amber eyes while he stared up into her cobalt orbs as he trailed his hands down from her waist, down her hips, and down her thighs until they rested on her knees. Katara bit her lip to stifle a moan at his touch while Zuko gazed at her with a smoldering expression.

“Nephew, do you really want to continue riding? The sun is almost setting, after all,” Iroh’s words broke their concentration from each other and brought them back to reality.

Zuko immediately moved his hands away from Katara and cleared his throat as he calmly climbed onto the saddle behind her, taking the reins in one hand while with the other he placed it lightly around Katara’s middle, before he turned to look impassively at his uncle who was too busy watching the bounty hunter to notice both agitated youths.

“I am impatient to return to the Fire Nation,” Zuko responded coolly as he moved his gaze to his awaiting guards, “And we are just a few miles away from the colony, aren’t we?”

The oldest of his personal guards pulled out a map from one of the bags tied to his mount, and after scanning it, he looked up to nod at his lord.

“If we continue riding we will arrive at the colony sometime late in the middle of the night or early at dawn, my lord,” he confirmed before he rolled up the map and replaced it in the bag.

“In the middle of the night would be best so that way we won’t attract attention from too many people and would be able to leave on the flagship the next day,” Zuko stated unemotionally.

“I believe that is a good idea, Nephew,” Iroh agreed from atop his ostrich-horse with a nod of his head.
The old firebender then turned around to smile at Jun who was also settled on her shirshu. Jun caught his smile and she gave him a bored look, which did not discourage him at all as he rode up next to her and began to talk charmingly to her. Although Jun replied to him in short, clipped words, Katara could tell that Jun was warming up to the charismatic man’s chatter. Katara looked up to smile at Zuko who only shook his head as he flicked his reins and set out on the grassy path with the rest following behind them.

Jun’s last words continued to bounce in her head and Katara leaned back against Zuko with a smile. ~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

As night settled, the small group found themselves riding through the dark since the small slip of a moon was being hidden by large, wispy clouds. Not wanting to draw attention to themselves and possibly risk being seen or attacked, the guard that was ahead of the group was the only one holding a small flame in his palm to lead him in the darkness while the rest followed after the small light. The younger guard was then ordered by Zuko to ride ahead of them into the village in order to prepare the governor for the Fire Lord’s arrival. As the hours passed late into the night, whatever conversation they made was low and almost in whispers.

Riding on the quiet ostrich-horse behind the rest of the group with Katara leaning against his chest in front of him, Zuko watched with slight amusement as Iroh continued to flirt with Jun despite the fact that she had snapped at him and told him she was leaving after she received her reward money. He glanced down at Katara, who had been silent since they set out, and his arm tightened subtly around her waist, smiling when she let out a small sigh before she leaned a bit closer to him. She was sitting astride and the feeling of her legs pressed against his made heat flare through him. He did not like that he was only able to hold her when they were riding on the ostrich-horse, he did not like that he was unable to embrace her, sleep next to her, kiss her lovely lips, and be intimate with her whenever he wanted.

He mentally shook his head to get rid of his annoyance before he cleared his throat slightly to gain Katara’s attention.

“What were you and Jun talking about earlier?” he asked her curiously as he bent his head down closer to hers.

Katara stiffened slightly at his words before she shrugged her shoulders in an indifferent manner.

“Oh, it was nothing that important,” she replied coolly as she waved one hand dismissively in the air.
“It can’t be ‘nothing’ since you were glaring at her quite menacingly,” Zuko chuckled next to her ear.

Katara crossed her arms beneath her breasts and pressed her lips tightly together as her anger once again resurfaced, but she refused to admit about the way she had reacted to Jun’s words and suggestive looks. But when Zuko insisted she tell him, Katara sighed reluctantly.

“She kept asking about my relationship with you and if we… had slept with each other already,” Katara muttered irritably. “Then she had the nerve to look at and think lustfully of you right in front of me!”

“Really?” Zuko commented with a raised eyebrow before he leaned closer to Katara. “And what did you tell her?” he asked her curiously.

His warm breath coasting along the skin of her ear and cheek made Katara shiver, but she shook her head to clear her thoughts. She glanced at the three riding ahead of them, and once she was sure that they could not hear their conversation she relaxed a bit.

“I-I kind of…threatened her to back off,” Katara began quietly as she shifted uneasily in the saddle before she straightened and her eyes narrowed, “And then I told her you were mine!”

Zuko’s golden eyes widened in surprise at her fervent words and he felt his heart thump in his chest, a warm tingle racing straight down to his groin at the possessiveness in her tone. Nobody had ever felt possessive of him before—well except for Mai recently, but it did not affect him much—and he would not have appreciated it. But with Katara he felt that he did not mind, in fact he relished in it for now he knew that he was not the only one who felt too possessive in their relationship.

“I like it when you get possessive of me,” Zuko told her in a low, husky voice.

“It…it doesn’t bother you?” Katara asked him hesitantly as a frown settled on her face.

“No,” Zuko admitted quietly as he gave her middle a squeeze, “because I know it means that you really love me and that you wish no one but you could have me. It’s the same way I feel about you.”

A soft sigh escaped him, his exhale ruffled Katara’s hair and warmed her skin, and he again gave her a squeeze but this time a bit more lightly, as if to soften his words.
“I know I have been acting very possessive with you, and perhaps it bothers you,” Zuko began before his hold on her tightened again, “but I can’t stop the possessive and protective feelings from surfacing when I’m around you, especially after what happened at…Jianguo’s camp. I just don’t want to lose you, Katara, either to another man or to…death.”

Katara blushed, and her heart fluttered in her chest. How did Zuko always manage to find the right words to soothe her, anger her, humor her, make her blush, happy, aroused, comforted, and protected? To make her fall in love with him more than she thought was possible? She smiled and she leaned back against him once again.

“It did kind of bothered me at first,” Katara confessed quietly as she settled her hand lightly over his hand that was holding her against him before she dropped it to her lap as she lifted her head to give him a small smile. “But not as much now since I’m being possessive myself, after all. Besides, I really like it when you get protective and possessive of me…as long as you don’t overdo it and lock me away somewhere so nobody can get near me.”

Zuko hummed as he stroked his chin with a pensive look on his face.

“Hm, locking you away sounds like a great idea,” he began in a contemplative tone before he continued huskily, “That way I can have you all to myself.”

“Zuko!” Katara hissed out quietly as she glared at him.

Zuko chuckled at her reaction before he calmed himself down and smiled at her.

“I’m kidding,” he replied coolly before his tone became soft, “Locking you up would not only make you hate me, but it will kill your spirit, and I don’t want that since it is one of the things that I love about you.”

Katara’s annoyed expression turn into a brilliant smile. Zuko’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of her, despite the fact that he could barely see her in the dark, and he remembered that he had been separated from her, that he had not enjoyed her company that way he wished for a long time. Katara raised an eyebrow when she noticed Zuko staring intently at her.

“You must be cold,” he suddenly spoke up.
Confused at his sudden words, Katara opened her mouth to say she was fine, but she was puzzled when Zuko unclasped and lifted both ends of the dark cloak that Iroh had given him and wrapped her in it before tying it again so that both were completely covered by it. Before Katara could figure out what was going on, she felt Zuko’s large hand on her left breast and she let out a quiet gasp.

“Z-Zuko! What are you d-doing?” she stammered in a whisper, but another gasp escaped her when she felt his other hand settle on her right thigh.

“I can’t help it, Katara,” Zuko growled lowly in her ear as he gave her breast a soft squeeze. “I missed touching you like this since Uncle found us. I want to touch you again, to please you again.”

“We can’t!” Katara exclaimed, scandalized. “We’re not alone!”

“The others aren’t paying attention to us at the moment, it’s dark and we are covered,” Zuko countered huskily.

“But—” Katara began but she had to bite her lip to keep from moaning when Zuko pinched her hardening nipple.

Zuko slightly pulled on the reins that he was holding on his right hand in order to slow the ostrich-horse down a bit so they could be away from the rest just in case they decided to turn their way, as well as for Katara’s comfort. Once he was satisfied they were a safe distance that they could not be heard and the others would not suspect what they were doing, Zuko wrapped the reins around his wrist and pulled Katara closer to him by pressing her breast until her back was against his chest.

“Zuko…stop,” Katara moaned out when Zuko began to knead her covered breast.

She held her breath when his other hand trailed up her thigh. Since she was sitting astride the ostrich-horse, Zuko was able to easily rest his hand on the warm spot between her parted legs. She jerked and gasped.

“No! We can’t—”

“Don’t worry,” Zuko soothed her quietly. “They can’t see us and as long as we keep quiet they
Katara again bit her lip and her eyes darted to where the others were riding ahead of them. That was when she realized that she could not really see them since they were a bit far ahead, and with the only light visible being from the guard’s small flame, she could hardly recognize their forms. But still, what Zuko wanted to do was just too embarrassing.

“Please, Katara,” Zuko’s persuasive voice reached her ears. “Let me touch you, let me be close to you like I’ve been craving for the past several nights.”

Biting her lip in indecision, Katara closed her eyes as she tried to sort through her feelings. A part of her recoiled at the thought of doing such things out in the open, but another part of her demanded she relent since she felt the same way Zuko did. Besides, they were covered, not only by Zuko’s long cloak but by the darkness as well. She felt Zuko’s heart beating rapidly against her back, his warm breath caressing the side of her face, his left hand cupping her breast lightly while his other hand touched her covered warmth.

Then her eyes flew open when she realized that Zuko’s hands were just resting on her, they were only touching her, not making any more advances, and she realized he was waiting for her consent, that despite how much he wanted to, he would immediately back away if she told him to. Her heart warmed at the realization and she relaxed against him as her body and heart surrendered to him. She placed her hand over the one that was holding onto her breast and she gave him a squeeze to silently encourage him to continue.

Zuko groaned in relief at Katara’s silent permission. He did not know what he would have done if she had refused him. Heart pounding, he again moved his hands to caress her. He slipped his hand beneath her tunic and began to knead Katara’s soft breast more vigorously, pinching her nipple that was hardening beneath her wrappings between his fingers, while his other hand pressed more firmly against her heat, earning a soft moan from her. Katara leaned her head back against his shoulder as her heart began to race in her chest, her skin tingled, and her breathing became more erratic the more Zuko touched her and the more she tried to keep from moaning too loudly.

“Zuko,” Katara moaned softly as she grabbed more tightly onto his hand that was squeezing her sensitive breast.

Zuko pressed his lips together to keep from groaning at her breathless call of his name, the sound of her voice sending another electric shock to his groin, bringing his cock quickly to attention. Katara’s eyes widened when she felt Zuko hardening against her, but she was distracted when he suddenly slipped his hand into her pants. A gasp fell from her lips when his fingers touched her damp core and she trembled in both surprise and anticipation.
Pausing at her gasp, Zuko’s eyes darted toward the group ahead of them, concerned that they might have heard, but he relaxed when it seemed they had not. But nonetheless, he decided to pull the ostrich-horse back until the three ahead of them were only specks of light and shadows before he continued where he had left off. Katara was panting slightly and he smirked in male pride that he already had her in such a state and he had barely touched her.

Grasping her breast more firmly in his hand, Zuko began to gently rub Katara’s sex with the other. It was the third time he had touched her in so intimate a place since that time at the inn and he moaned huskily at the feeling of her soft curls drenched with her arousal. He slid his fingers along her soft folds, coating them with her essence, before he tapped the tip of his middle finger onto the small nub above her entrance, earning a shocked gasp from her. He nudged her head to the side, and once she exposed her throat to him, he pressed his hot mouth to her skin just as his finger delved into her wet pussy. He tightened his hold on her when she jerked before he began to slowly pump his finger inside her in a leisurely rhythm, enjoying the way her wet and warm walls tightened around his finger.

Katara felt like she was going crazy as Zuko continued to move his finger inside her and her mouth opened in a silent gasp when he added another one and increased his speed. She let go of his hand that was rhythmically kneading her breast just as his fingers were caressing her before she brought both her hands down to grasp onto Zuko’s muscular thighs and pressed herself against his hardness. She suppressed a grin when she heard him groan before she began to instinctively move her hips back and forth in order to keep pace with his fingers as well as to stimulate his own pleasure.

Moving his mouth away from her neck, Zuko pressed the side of his face against Katara’s, his eyes shut tightly together, his jaw painfully clenched while he began to move his hips to her movements, pressing his hard cock against her firm ass while slamming his fingers inside her when she moved back and forth into each. He was so close, his pleasure was increasing almost painfully, and sweat was breaking onto his skin as he fought himself to hold on a bit longer. Gods, how he had missed having Katara in such a manner!

Katara pushed her head back onto Zuko’s shoulder, screwing her eyes shut, as that pleasurable feeling Zuko had evoke in her a few times before washed over her, making her stomach tightened and her heart pound. Her hips began to move more desperately and her grasp on Zuko’s thighs tightened as she sought her release, but when Zuko again pressed his thumb on that spot above her entrance, Katara’s mind shattered and her mouth opened in a silent scream as ecstasy raced to every nerve of her body. Just as she reached the peak she ground her bottom almost fiercely against Zuko’s hardness.

Zuko’s hips jerked at the impact, at the feeling of Katara’s drenched pussy convulsing around his fingers, and he bent forward, caging Katara in his arms and bringing her closer to his throbbing erection. His sight blackened for a moment as a sharp tingle went down his spine and straight to his erection before he released himself in thick, hot spurts inside his trousers with a silent growl, the
pleasure almost making him fall off the bewildered ostrich-horse.

He forced himself to sit back as both panted and tried to regain their breaths and their senses. Zuko sluggishly released his tight grip on Katara’s breast before he slowly removed his fingers from her tight warmth. Katara mewed softly at the sensation before she sighed and leaned against his heaving chest while Zuko wrapped his arms around her trembling form and dropped his head onto her shoulder with a soft groan.

They were silent for a moment before Zuko pulled one hand from beneath the cape and placed his fingers against Katara’s chin before gently lifting her head up to meet his lips. They kissed unhurriedly yet with no small amount of passion since they had not kissed each other in what they felt was a long time. A slightly cool breeze swept by them and they shivered as it touched their warm skin. They pulled apart to stare silently at each other before Zuko wrapped the dark cloak more securely around them and gently urged Katara to rest her head back onto his chest.

“Once we’re in the Fire Nation we won’t be able to this anymore,” Katara told him with a sigh.

A frown darkened Zuko’s features as his arms tightened around the woman’s body.

“We’ll see,” was his silent reply.

Before Katara could protest, Zuko again grabbed onto the reins and flicked them so the ostrich-horse could pick up its pace and join the others. They were relieved to realize that Iroh and Jun were too busy arguing about something to notice that they had disappeared for a moment. Katara frowned since now she could not argue with Zuko about why she thought it was best they kept their distance from each other once they reached the Fire Nation, though that thought made her sad.

“Sleep, Katara,” Zuko’s whispered baritone reached her ears. “I’ll wake you up once we arrive at the colony.”

Katara wanted to protest and argue that she could stay up, but she gave in when the warmth and comfort of Zuko’s body seeped into her tired and satisfied body, and she could no longer resist, especially since she knew she would not be able to be in this way with Zuko once they arrive at his palace. She snuggled against his firm chest, and sighed quietly when Zuko wound his unoccupied hand around her middle and brought her closer to him, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

A small smile touched Zuko’s lips when the sound of Katara’s soft breathing reached his ears and his
eyes softened as he looked down to see her sleeping face pressed against his chest. He wanted to bring her closer until she was flushed against him and kiss her cheeks, but he refrained since he was catching up to the others.

He did not know if he would be able to keep his hands off Katara’s lovely body once they arrive at the Fire Nation Palace.

He just hoped Katara would not get too mad.

End of Part Four
The Fire Lord’s magnificent flagship glided swiftly through the choppy waters as a light rain fell upon the great ocean. Gazing out into the sea from the small porthole in his cabin, Zuko watched with wary eyes as gray clouds swirled above them and small waves brushed against the side of the metal ship. Flashes of the last storm surfaced in his mind and his expression turned grim. However, once he was satisfied that it was no huge storm that could cause them trouble, he returned to his desk where his uncle was sitting on one of the chairs before it with a deep frown on his face. Zuko sat on his chair and waited patiently as Iroh processed everything he had recounted from the time Katara and he washed to shore, their encounter with Jianguo, having their bending blocked, their escape, the old couple’s hospitality, the village, and finally ended with the day Iroh had found them with the help of Jun and her shirshu.

His room had been cleaned and tidied up, one would never have guessed that it once had been a complete disaster due to the last storm. Zuko leaned back in his seat and again glanced at the window were the only thing he could make out was the gray of the sky.

After reassuring the colony’s governor about the Fire Lord’s wellbeing and paying Jun her reward money so she could be on her way—much to Iroh’s disappointment—they were finally on their way to the Fire Nation and would be arriving in a few days. Zuko had sent a message to his Council and a letter to his mother to reassure them that he and Katara were fine. Katara had also sent a message to her family, though she only wrote that both Zuko and she were all right and were on their way to Zuko’s palace. He wondered how Katara’s family would react when they learned the whole truth.

He was brought out of his thoughts when Iroh let out a deep sigh before taking a long sip from his tea. Zuko straightened and turned back to his uncle who was again frowning into his teacup.

“We should have known a man such as the ex-general would seek revenge,” Iroh spoke up solemnly, his usual warm eyes glinting in suppressed anger. “Do you have any idea who the traitor within the palace could be that gave Jianguo so much information?”

Zuko placed his elbows on the wooden desk and rested his chin on his grasped hands as he stared at Iroh pensively for a few minutes before he finally spoke up, his features turning dark.

“I think I know who it is.”

“Who?” Iroh asked as he leaned forward curiously, his hands clenching his teacup in anticipation.
“Wei,” Zuko spat angrily.

White eyebrows lifting high on his forehead, Iroh leaned back in his seat in surprise as he watched his nephew curl his hands into tight fists. Another frown settled on his aged face as he rubbed at his chin.

“It does seem likely,” Iroh commented.

“It’s more than just ‘likely’, Uncle,” Zuko growled out lowly. “We all know how much Wei despises me and the fact that I called off the war. Katara, Toph, and I saw him leave the prison tower when we went to see Ozai and I have strong suspicions that Wei may have been seeing him.”

“But how?” Iroh spoke up as he settled his cup on the desk. “No one is allowed to visit Ozai, and except for you, the only other person to have a key to his cell is the captain of the prison guards, who uses it when Ozai’s meal is brought to him. Do you think the captain could be working for them?”

“I don’t know,” Zuko admitted darkly as he rose from his chair and began to pace the length of the cabin. “But why else would Wei be in the prison tower?”

He paused again at the porthole and sighed agitatedly as he ran a hand down his face before he turned back to look at his frowning uncle.

“I told you the reason Jianguo was able to capture me was because they knew I would not escape them if it meant Katara would be harmed,” the young lord continued as his eyes narrowed. “They knew about my affections for her, they knew what she means to me, and they took advantage of that by luring us both toward the ‘infested’ colony. During my birthday celebration Wei had been making hints about Katara, so it could have easily been him who told Jianguo!”

Iroh again rubbed his chin and stroked his small beard as he looked at his angry nephew with a pensive frown.

“You make a very good point, Nephew,” he began slowly, “but it will be difficult to accuse him without proper proof, especially since he’s a nobleman, a Royal Council member, and a very influential person in our society.”

Zuko growled as he abruptly moved away from the window toward his desk where he slammed his fist on the hard surface as he glared at his uncle, who, as usual, was unaffected by his outburst.
“I’ll find the evidence if it’s the last thing I do!” he ground out between gritted teeth before he
growled out, “And if Wei is truly the culprit, not even the gods will be able to save him. I swear it,
Uncle.”

Iroh was intrigued at the murderous look on his nephew’s face, but before he could comment on it,
Zuko sat back down heavily on his large chair and began to rummage through the small stack of
papers on his desk.

“I want to hurry and finish with these documents so we can meet Katara for dinner,” Zuko said as he
picked one of the scrolls up and began to read.

The retired general was once again curious at the expression on his nephew’s face, although this time
the dark look had been replaced by a soft one, and if he was not mistaken, Zuko’s tone had a hint of
longing in it. Unable to curb his curiosity and hope any longer, Iroh cleared his throat to get the
young firebender’s attention and smiled when Zuko looked up with a raised eyebrow.

“Nephew, I’ve been wanting to ask,” the old man began as he again took his teacup into his hands,
“Did anything happen between Miss Katara and you while both of you were traveling…alone?”

Zuko made sure to keep his expression blank as memories of what Katara and he had done so far
surfaced pleasantly in mind.

“What do you mean, Uncle?” he asked instead.

“Well, Miss Katara and you seem much more comfortable around each other than before, so much so
that you had no qualms in being comforted by her or of you comforting her,” Iroh commented
casually in order not to make Zuko defensive and in the process close himself off.

“Nothing too drastic happened,” Zuko confessed with a small shrug before his lips curled into a
satisfied smile. “And if it did, it wouldn’t really matter since Katara is going to be my wife soon
anyway.”

Iroh almost dropped his cup as he stared in wide-eyed shock at his smirking nephew.
“W-what did you say, Zuko?” he asked incredulously as he placed the teacup on the table. He was almost sure he had imagined it.

Zuko suppressed a chuckle at his uncle’s skeptical yet hopeful look and he smiled.

“Katara has agreed to marry me,” he said, the smile on his face growing a bit wider. “She is going to be mine. She’s going to be my wife, Uncle.”

Iroh grinned widely as he leapt from his seat with a joyful cry before moving around the desk to grasped Zuko’s arm and clap him on the back.

“Congratulations, Zuko!” Iroh exclaimed enthusiastically. “You have no idea how long I have waited to hear such words! Your mother is going to be so overjoyed with the news!” he continued rapidly as he made his way back to his seat where he smiled widely at his amused nephew.

“Thank you, Uncle,” Zuko said simply and sincerely.

“You know, Nephew,” the retired general began with a large smirk on his face and a teasing glint in his eyes, “I was beginning to resign myself of never having grandnephews and nieces. I had begun to worry at your denseness.”

Zuko scowled him, but Iroh just smiled as he took a small sip from his tea. The delighted smile on Iroh’s face faded a bit and he frowned.

“But what about Mai and Aang?” he asked tentatively.

Zuko’s eyes narrowed before he shrugged.

“I ended things with Mai and Katara broke up with Aang before we left the Fire Nation,” he explained in a cool tone. “Now there is nothing to keep me from marrying Katara.”

“Well, that does make things easier for both of you,” the retired general commented with a smile.
“Somehow, I doubt it,” Zuko muttered. “I still have to ask Chief Hakoda for Katara’s hand in marriage.”

“Don’t worry, Nephew, all men have to go through such a thing at one point in their lives,” he said amusedly. “Let us just hope Chief Hakoda and Master Sokka go easy on you.”

He chuckled when Zuko let out a disgruntled grunt.

“So have you planned on when to have the wedding?” Iroh continued excitedly. “We must start immediately with the preparations! And we must send invitations to everybody! Oh, and you and Miss Katara must have a celebration to announce your engagement! And—”

“Uncle!” Zuko interrupted with a frown. When his uncle turned to him, he leaned back in his seat with a long sigh.

“Please keep my engagement to Katara a secret for now,” he said sullenly.


“I don’t want to keep it a secret!” Zuko growled out. “If it were up to me, I would have announced my intentions to take Katara as my wife as soon as we arrived at the colony! But Katara wants to talk to her family and to…Aang first.”

Iroh tried to protest the idea before he relented when Zuko told him firmly that it was what Katara wanted and he would not break his promise to her. They were silent for a moment as Zuko concentrated on his papers while Iroh inwardly mused about the upcoming royal wedding. Iroh just hoped the Court Council would not object to Zuko marrying the Water Tribe woman.

“Zuko, could you answer a curious old man’s question?” Iroh spoke up, breaking the silence beyond the sounds of the rain outside.

“Alright,” Zuko relented with a weary sigh as he placed the scroll he had been holding aside before looking up at his uncle with a cautious frown.
“What happened to finally make you and Katara confess your feelings to each other?” the old man asked with a large grin. But his curious grin dropped when he noticed Zuko tense and a dark expression appear across his face.

“What’s wrong?” Iroh asked in alarm.

“If it wasn’t for a near tragedy, I don’t know how long I would’ve taken before confessing my feelings to her,” Zuko began with a rough edge to his voice. “Agni, I was so stupid. I was such a coward for not letting her know sooner,” he growled out as he clutched his unbound, dark hair with his fingers.

“What are you talking about?” the old prince asked him with a concerned frown.

Zuko glanced at his uncle briefly before he looked down at his clenched fists now resting on the desk.

“I told you Katara and I escaped because I killed the men Jianguo left behind to guard us while he and the rest left toward the colony, right?” Zuko began in a low tone.

“Yes,” Iroh said slowly as he eyed his nephew curiously.

“Well, I didn’t tell you the real reason why I attacked them without mercy and without caring that it was me against ten of them,” Zuko told him as his eyes flashed in anger at the memory before he closed his eyes and clenched his hands.

“They…they wanted to…hurt Katara,” he said lowly and nodded when understanding came to Iroh who then gave him a worried look. “I wasn’t about to let them touch her, so I fought against the one who wanted to hurt her, but once he realized he could not win against me…he attacked Katara before I could stop him.”

Zuko clenched his jaw tightly and his nostrils flared at the memory of Feng wounding Katara before the bastard dared make a joke while she lay injured on the forest floor.

“The sight of Katara’s blood spilling around her, of her terrified and pained eyes, I…I just,” Zuko growled out as he stared at his hands before he snapped his head up to look at a wide-eyed Iroh with furious features, “I lost it, Uncle! I never felt so much rage in my entire life. I never wanted to kill
someone as much as I wanted to kill them for hurting Katara! So I did. I killed them, ignoring their pleas for mercy.”

Taking a deep breath to rein in his turbulent emotions, Zuko unclenched his hands and ran them through his hair as Iroh waited for him to continue.

“I wanted to make them suffer before I ended their lives, but the only thing that stopped me from doing so was the urgent need to take Katara to the stream so she could heal her wound. But once I finally managed to place her in the water, she was already too weak…she had lost so much blood.” Zuko paused and drew in a painful breath as he glanced down at the desk before him.

“Katara…died,” he rasped out and squeezed his eyes shut. “She died in my arms. I almost lost her, Uncle!”

Iroh gasped in horror at his nephew’s words laced with pain and remorse, and he now understood the saddened look Katara had and the dark expression Zuko wore when he had asked earlier if they had been hurt.

“But…how…?” Iroh began before he trailed off as he placed a hand over his chest, “Oh, Agni.”

Zuko sighed and he slumped in his chair as he once again lifted his head to look at his uncle sitting across from him with a confused and horrified expression.

“I held Katara’s cold body in my arms as I raged at the gods to return her to me,” Zuko continued, his voice subdued. “I don’t know how it happened, or if perhaps the gods took pity on me, but Katara came back to life. She was weak from all the blood loss, but she was alive and I was not about to let her go, so I confessed my feelings to her, not caring if she rejected me.”

The Fire Lord let out a humorless chuckle as he smiled at his uncle.

“It really does take losing something important, or having the threat that they will be taken away, to make us understand its worth,” he said.

Iroh nodded in understanding as he gave his nephew a small smile.
“I have once before said that destiny is a funny thing,” he commented with a low chuckle.

“It sure is, Uncle,” Zuko agreed.

“But Katara is indeed fine?” Iroh asked with concern.

“Yes, there is no evidence that she had been injured at all,” Zuko reassured him.

Iroh cocked his bushy eyebrow as he wondered how Zuko would know such a thing, but decided he really did not want to know. All that mattered was that Katara was all right. Of course, that did not stop him from asking Zuko how he confessed his love for the lovely waterbender, and of course, his nephew refused to give him any good details except that he had told Katara his true feelings and she had confessed her love for him in return.

“Didn’t I tell you to trust me when I said that you had not lost Miss Katara’s love?” Iroh said with a cheerful grin.

“Why couldn’t you have just told me and saved me the misery of thinking I never had a chance?” Zuko asked with a small growl.

“And what would be the fun it that?” the old firebender commented innocently.

He sighed when his nephew glowered at him.

“I told you it was something that was between Miss Katara and you, and now look! Didn’t you find peace and happiness by telling Katara you love her and finding out what her response truly was?”

“I suppose you are right,” Zuko conceded reluctantly.

“And you are happy, correct?” Iroh prompted with a grin.

“I am in love and I am loved, Uncle,” Zuko answered quietly with a small smile. “Two things I thought would be impossible for me to experience in my life.” His eyes narrowed. “And I will not...
lose them.”

An understanding and happy smile stretched Iroh’s thin lips as he sat back contentedly on his seat.

“I am happy to hear you say so, my nephew,” he admitted, the smile still on his face. “And I am very grateful to Miss Katara for making you this happy.”

“I would be even happier if she agreed to allow me to announce our engagement as soon as we arrive at the Fire Nation,” was Zuko’s muttered reply as he returned his attention to his forgotten papers.

Iroh chuckled loudly at his disgruntled words and laughed more loudly when his nephew scowled darkly at him.

“I am still curious to know how you were able to defeat ten men all by yourself while you had your bending blocked,” Iroh decided to change the subject before his nephew kicked him out for teasing him too much.

The old prince was once again intrigued by the smug smirk that appeared on the young Fire Lord’s face and he raised a thick eyebrow in interest.

“I was able to call forth a new level of firebending,” Zuko replied vaguely.

“And by this you mean…?” Iroh pressed with an inquisitive frown.

His frown deepened in curiosity as he watched his nephew raised his hands and light them with fire before Zuko closed his eyes and relaxed his features and body in concentration, while his breathing became steady and regular. A long moment passed with nothing occurring and Iroh began to wonder what his nephew was up to and if perhaps he planned not to say anything. He opened his mouth to get Zuko’s attention, but his words caught in his throat and he choked as the bright red fire in his nephew’s palms expanded and then changed into a lighter color.

“White fire,” Iroh breathed in incredulity and awe as he stared at the white flames before he raised his eyes to see Zuko’s satisfied face. “Zuko, you’re bending white fire!”
“I know,” Zuko responded with a low chuckle at his uncle’s amazed expression. “This is what helped me get rid of all those bastards that wanted to hurt Katara.”

“B-but how?” Iroh sputtered before he collected himself and smiled proudly at his nephew. “I mean, the last person known to have been able to bend this high level of fire lived many, many years ago! And it is said that not many firebenders will be able to achieve such a skill. So how did you do it, Nephew?”

“I don’t really know,” Zuko began with a frown before he clenched his flaming fist. “The rage that consumed me when Katara was hurt was so great that my suppressed inner fire just exploded from within me.”

The white flames flared at his heated emotions and Zuko took a calming breath to control the flickering fire before he looked at his uncle.

“But I don’t want my anger to control my bending,” Zuko continued and they both knew he refrained from saying ‘again.’

Zuko could feel himself tiring out, so after a deep exhale, he extinguished the white flames.

“I also can’t bend the white fire for too long for I tire too easily,” he explained before he asked, “Do you think it takes more energy to bend such fire?”

Iroh leaned back in his seat with a contemplative look as he stroked his chin.

“That is a very good question that, unfortunately, I cannot answer at the moment,” he began before he smiled encouragingly. “But I am sure we can find some old scrolls concerning everything there is to know about the art of bending white fire in the palace library.”

“You’re right,” Zuko agreed with a nod. It had been a while since he had visited the library last.

“You’ll see that with some practice you will master the white fire as well,” Iroh told him confidently. He placed his hands inside his sleeves and his eyes widened when his fingers came in contact with metal.

“Oh! I almost forgot to return this to you,” Iroh exclaimed as he extracted his hand from his sleeve
and revealed the Fire Lord’s golden fire crown.

Zuko reverently took it from Iroh’s outstretched hand and stroked the cool metal with his thumb as he gazed down at it.

“Thank you, Uncle,” he said as he placed the fire crown inside one of the drawers of his desk so he would not misplace it. He planned to wear it again tomorrow.

“I also have something that belongs to Katara,” Iroh continued with a smile as he reached into his other sleeve and pulled out the silver rose hairpin before handing it to his nephew.

Zuko immediately took it before he smiled gratefully at his uncle.

“We should go to dinner now,” the retired general spoke up before he chuckled. “I’m pretty sure Miss Katara is as anxious to see you as you are to see her. Am I right?”

“Uncle,” Zuko groaned exasperatedly when the old man waggled his eyebrows at him.

It was early in the morning as the Fire Nation citizens crowded along the street that led to the palace, watching a group of guards mounted on komodo rhinos and surrounding their Fire Lord who was riding beside a carriage. If they looked into the opened windows they could see Lady Katara peeking out as she took in the sight of the bustling city. The people welcomed their lord and the master waterbender enthusiastically since there had been rumors that they had either died or had been kidnapped, and although they did not know if the latter was true, they were just glad to know their Fire Lord and Lady Katara were back and safe. The people remained outside the palace walls speculating about the events even after the Fire Lord, the guards, and the carriage disappeared behind the large steel doors.

Zuko breathed a mental sigh of relief once they entered the courtyard. He did not like to be surrounded by so many loud people, especially since he did not know how to react when said crowd was cheering at his return instead of hurling insults.

Riding expertly on his black komodo rhino, the young Fire Lord once again glanced at the window of the carriage and smiled slightly when Katara caught his eye and blushed before she was distracted when Iroh, who was sitting across from her, engaged her in conversion. Zuko returned his gaze back ahead of him and suppressed the smug smirk that wanted to appear on his face. Ever since they had pleased each other on that ostrich-horse, Katara had been unable to look at him without blushing, and every time he saw that lovely blush on her cheeks, he felt his body warm up. He had wanted to ride
into his palace with Katara sitting in front him so he could have an excuse to have her lovely body pressed to his, but his uncle had convinced him it would be better if Katara rode on the carriage so as not to start any rumors.

When they arrived closer to the palace, Zuko noticed his mother standing atop the long flight of stairs with Jee standing at her side. The young Fire Lord felt an immense relief wash through him to see that his mother was indeed fine and he pressed his booted heel against his rhino’s side in order to increase its pace. He watched as his mother smiled brightly before she quickly made her way down the stairs, clutching her long robe with one hand as she descended.

Zuko dismounted from his komodo rhino and handed the reins to one of the stablemen before making his way to the carriage. He waved away the carriage driver, who backed away with a bow, and opened the door. He smiled as he offered his hand to Katara who blushed as she took it and allowed him to help her out of the carriage.

“Thanks,” she muttered once she was standing outside and slipped her hand away from his in order to smooth the dark red dress she had hastily packed when they had first made their way toward the colony.

“You’re welcome;” Zuko responded with a smoldering look.

Again, Katara felt her cheeks heat up since she could not stop remembering what they had done on that ostrich-horse before she scowled when Zuko smirked knowingly at her. Fortunately, Zuko decided to stop when Iroh cleared his throat as he stepped out of the carriage.

Zuko glanced at the grinning old man briefly before he turned away in order to go greet his mother, who had already reached the bottom of the stairs and was running swiftly toward them. Jee trailed a bit slower behind her. Katara watched with a smile as Zuko quickened his pace and opened his arms so his mother could embrace him as tears ran down her pale cheeks. The guards and servants pretended not to notice the scene and looked elsewhere.

“Zuko, my son, I was so worried,” Ursa cried out softly. “I was afraid that I might have lost you so soon after finding you again. I don’t know what I would have done if that had been so.”

Zuko’s arms tightened slightly around his mother before he pulled back to look at her—to make sure she was indeed alright—just as Katara and Iroh approached them.
“I’m sorry to have worried you, Mom,” he told her sincerely. “But I’m fine now and I won’t let anything take me away from you…and Katara,” he added softly.

He glanced at Katara who was blushing again before he looked back at his mother who was staring at them both with wide eyes. Ursa moved away from him and walked toward Katara who smiled at her.

“Katara dear, I am so relieved to know you are well,” the older woman told her sincerely as she embraced the waterbender.

“Thank you, Lady Ursa,” Katara responded as she returned the motherly embrace. She was reminded of her own mother for a moment before thoughts of her family surfaced in her mind. She hoped she could see them soon.

They pulled apart and smiled at each other just as Jee finally approached them.

“My lord, Lady Katara,” Jee began as he bowed, “I am very glad to see that both of you have returned safely.”

“Thank you, Admiral Jee,” Zuko responded as he graced his admiral with a small smile. “And thank you for keeping my mother safe.”

Jee smiled and gave another small bow. The small group finally made their way into the palace while the servants scurried to do their duties and the guards returned to their posts.

“You should refresh yourselves and rest before lunch,” Ursa suggested as she turned to smile at her son, Katara, and Iroh. “And then you can tell me what has happened since you left the Fire Nation.”

“That is a great idea, my dear Ursa!” Iroh exclaimed beside her.

“I would like a real bath again,” Katara chimed in with a soft laugh.

“Then we will meet in my antechamber for lunch,” Zuko spoke up as he led them toward the western wing of the palace where some of the guest rooms, the royal family quarters, and his privates
When they were standing outside the room Katara had used since her first visit, the two young benders looked at her door before they glanced at each other.

“Uh, well, I’ll see you all for lunch then,” the waterbender said, though she was staring at Zuko only.

“Yes,” Zuko responded without taking his eyes away from hers. His hands twitched at his sides as he curbed the need to tug Katara to him.

They were pulled away from each other when they heard Iroh clear his throat before he chuckled quietly. With a blush, Katara opened the door and quickly stepped inside before she closed the door behind her. Zuko ignored his uncle as he turned away and made his way to his rooms without saying another word.

Ursa watched as her son walked down the golden corridor before she glanced at the closed door where Katara had disappeared to, and then looked at her son’s retreating form again before she looked at Iroh with a raised, thin eyebrow.

Iroh smiled widely at her as he said, “I am positive you will hear good news soon, Ursa.” He chuckled again as he turned away to retire to his own room.

Ursa watched him go before she glanced at Jee who looked at her with an equally bewildered expression.

Zuko sat on the dais in the throne room with the wall of fire blazing warmly before him. He had just finished a pleasant lunch with Katara and his family and now he was having a much needed meeting with his advisors. Iroh and Jee had decided to accompany him and were sitting off to one side. He had just recounted some of the things that had occurred since he and Katara had left after they received that false message, and now he was silently listening to his advisors tell him how glad they were he was all right and that they had been worried that it might have been true that he was captured for they had been concerned of the right course of action.

“Even though we did not wish you and Lady Katara any harm, we could not release Ozai, not with the Fire Nation prospering so well,” Advisor Chao spoke up and he gave the young lord a respectful bow.
Zuko gave him a small nod before he let his eyes wander among his advisors.

“That would have been the best solution and I would have expected such from you all,” Zuko told them with a cool tone. “We cannot allow Ozai to escape and cause destruction to our nation and the world.”

He paused as the Court Council members murmured in agreement amongst themselves, but Zuko barely heard their words since his attention was focused on Wei who had been unusually quiet since the meeting had commenced.

*He is probably disappointed that their plan failed,* Zuko thought as he narrowed his eyes at the old advisor.

“You seem strangely quiet today, Advisor Wei,” Zuko spoke up suddenly in a deceptively calm tone. “Is there a reason for such behavior?”

Wei raised a thick gray eyebrow before he gave a small shrug of his shoulders, his round belly shaking at the movement.

“Of course not, Young One,” the advisor said with a small sneer. “I am just surprised that you managed to escape, after all, you said you were captured by a large group of rebels.”

“Is it surprise or disappointment you feel?” Zuko questioned casually.

“My lord?” Wei asked as his eyebrow once again lifted high on his wrinkly forehead.

“I have great suspicions that you are the traitor who has sent all those anonymous letters and the one who made it possible for the rebels to capture Lady Katara and me,” Zuko announced with a slight growl.

The meeting room went completely silent as the advisors looked in shock between the impassive Fire Lord and the wide-eyed Wei before they began to murmur quietly with each other. Wei shook his head as he recovered himself, straightened his back and narrowed his dark eyes.
“I do not appreciate being accused of something I had no part in,” Wei growled out indignantly.

Zuko’s nostrils flared as he swiftly dismissed everybody except for his uncle, Jee, and Chao as he stared Wei down. The other men reluctantly followed their lord’s order, though they were curious to know what was going to happen. Once the large doors were closed behind them, Zuko pinned an angry glare at the old advisor who was glaring back at him.

“I have many reasons to believe you are the culprit for what has happened,” he said darkly.

“I would like to know what those reasons are for you are wrong,” Wei demanded as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Did you eagerly comply with Jianguo’s demands for Ozai’s release?” Zuko asked instead.

“My lord?” Chao spoke up quietly and swallowed when the Fire Lord turned piercing, golden eyes on him. “Advisor Wei actually was one of the first to refuse to do such a thing.”

Zuko was surprised at Chao’s words, but his facial features did not show it as he raised an incredulous eyebrow at him before he turned to glare suspiciously at Wei.

“I find that hard to believe,” he said coldly.

Yet maybe not, since Wei has always shown his dislike of me, and if Jianguo’s demands were not met I would have been killed, thus getting rid of me, Zuko thought.

Wei seemed to understand what he was thinking for he shrugged as he said, “I know we never got along, Young One, and I never hid my dislike of you, but I love the Fire Nation and I want to keep it safe.”

“If you want to keep the Fire Nation safe, then why did you want the war to continue?” Zuko countered.

“That was four years ago and my views have changed slightly,” Wei answered smoothly. “Although I still think the Fire Nation has the right to rule the other nations as the superior element,” he added
with another shrug. “And besides, if Ozai was released he would not hesitate to kill us all for agreeing to be part of your new rule, and I am no fool to think Ozai would spare me, even if I disagreed with you many times.”

Zuko was silent as Wei’s words reached him. Wei may have argued about his new rule and his decision to end the war, but the advisor had never said that he supported Ozai. Was what he was saying the truth or all lies?

“Besides,” Wei continued with a dry chuckle, “Ozai has no army to back him except for a bunch of dirty rebels, so how could he dream of defeating the great Fire Nation Army? I would be a fool to ally myself to the side that will, undoubtedly, lose very quickly.”

Though he did not show it, Zuko was confused and irritated for Wei had an answer to everything and it all made sense, but he still had his suspicions and he will not let himself be deceived so easily.

“I saw you leave the prison tower where Ozai is held,” Zuko said in the same unaffected tone as if all he heard did not matter.

“I visit my younger brother who was one of the foolish ones who rebelled against your rule when you first became Fire Lord,” Wei responded with another casual shrug.

_Damn!_ He had been sure he would have caught Wei with that one.

Zuko glanced at his uncle, who was scowling slightly at Wei, before he glanced at Jee and Chao who were frowning, uncertain of what was happening or what they should do. He took a deep breath to prepare himself for the next reason for his suspicions.

“During my twenty-first birthday celebration, you were asking many questions regarding my… relationship with Lady Katara,” Zuko began with narrowed eyes. “Jianguo and his men knew Lady Katara is…important to me.”

“I am not the only one aware of the affection you hold for the waterbender,” Wei replied with another shrug and a small smirk.

Zuko frowned slightly since he had thought he was being discreet about his feelings for Katara. He was brought of his thoughts when Wei spoke up again.
“Are you done accusing me of such nonsense?” the advisor ground out with an annoyed expression on his round face.

Zuko leveled an irate glare at him.

“For now, you are dismissed,” Zuko growled out as he waved his hand irritably at him.

Wei glared indignantly as he stood up. He gave a stiff bow before he made his way to the doors and left once they were opened for him.

The three men who had been silent during the exchange glanced at each other before they looked questioningly at their silent lord. They watched as he stood up from his throne and swiftly descended the marble stairs before parting the fire wall and stepping through. He motioned for them to follow him, and they silently stepped behind him as they left the meeting room. They reached the Fire Lord’s study, and once the door was closed, Zuko strode behind his desk where he banged his palms against the hard, wooden surface. He looked up with blazing eyes, and except for Iroh, the other men flinched in uneasiness.

“Who else knows about the anonymous messages, Advisor Chao?” Zuko asked curtly as he sat down on his large chair.

“Except for the other Court Council members and your Lady Mother, I know of no one else, my lord,” Chao responded quickly. “Although I did send a message to Avatar Aang—”


Chao was startled at the anger in the Fire Lord’s voice that it took him a few seconds to answer.

“I thought Avatar Aang could help rescue you and Lady Katara if you were indeed being held hostage.”

Zuko caught Iroh’s disapproving look and he took a deep breath to calm himself down. His confrontation with Wei had not gone as he had planned and it infuriated him. And the jealousy he felt towards Aang at the moment was not making his temper any better.
“That was a good idea, Advisor Chao,” he consented.

“Lady Ursā asked me to send Chief Hakoda a message a few weeks ago informing him of what was happening. We received his reply a few days ago saying he will sail to the colony to help General Iroh search for you and his daughter,” Chao informed him quietly.

Zuko gave a curt nod. “Lady Katara has already sent her family a message that we were returning to the Fire Nation.” He was silent for a moment before he turned to Jee.

“Admiral Jee, could you send for the messenger that arrived with the false missive?” Zuko ordered as he shifted the stack of papers that had somehow accumulated on his desk since he had finished lunch with his family. He looked up with a frown when the admiral did not immediately respond to his request.

“Uh, my Lord,” Jee began before he cleared his throat. “The messenger caught a fever from exhaustion and died a few days later after your departure.”

“What?” Zuko exclaimed before he narrowed his eyes as he growled out, “Are you sure it was a fever that killed him?”

“That is what the physician’s assistant told me,” Jee explained.

Zuko frowned.

“It seems too convenient that the messenger who brought a false message died so soon,” he said. “Send for the Physician Toshiro. I want to ask him some questions.”

“He is not here at the moment, my lord,” Jee spoke up. “He received news that one of his daughters has given birth and he has gone to visit her.”

“Then send him to me as soon as he returns,” the young lord said tersely.

The room was silent for a moment before Zuko finally spoke up.
“Admiral Jee, I want you to send a few loyal men to discreetly spy on Wei and report to me everything they see and hear.”

“I will do so immediately, my lord,” Jee responded as he bowed and turned to leave.

“Admiral Jee, wait,” Zuko called out.

He waited until the admiral turned back to look at him before he continued.

“I know I told you that you would be in charge of my mother’s safety until I found her a personal guard, but with the threat of a traitor among us I’d like for you to continue to guard her, for I do not trust anyone else to keep her safe when I’m not around her. I’m afraid you will not be able to return to your duties as admiral to my flagship until we get rid of the problem.”

Jee bowed as he sincerely replied, “You are the lord and I will follow any order you demand. I will be glad to act as Lady Ursa’s personal guard until you decide otherwise.”

Zuko thanked him with a nod of his head, and after another bow, Jee retreated to accomplish his lord’s bidding.

After dismissing Chao as well, Zuko slumped in his chair with a tired sigh. Iroh sat on the chair across from his nephew and watched him silently. A long moment passed in which his nephew did not say a word, and Iroh began to wonder if he could ask a servant to bring him some tea while he waited.

“I didn’t think Wei would’ve been able to defend himself and I was so sure I had him,” Zuko finally spoke with a growl. “And if everything he said is true, then how can I accuse him? And without any proof how can I have him arrested?”

“Do not despair yet, Zuko,” Iroh advised him wisely as he slipped his hands into his long sleeves. “Perhaps the spies will find something useful that will convict Wei of his crimes and signal him as the traitor.”

“That could be a possibility, but what if they don’t find anything against Wei?” Zuko speculated as
he clenched his hands.

“And what if Wei is really innocent?” Iroh spoke up and ignored his nephew’s unconvinced snort.

Zuko ran a hand down his face as he let out a frustrated sigh. “Then who could the traitor be?”

Before Iroh could answer, they were interrupted when a soft knock was heard at the door. Zuko glanced at his uncle before he called for whoever was at the door to enter. Both men watched as the door was opened and Ursa and Katara stepped into the room with Jee trailing behind them.

Zuko again felt his body warm up as his eyes landed on Katara for he had been unable to touch her, much less kiss her, since their arrival. He frowned, however, when he saw her look at him with a sad expression before she glanced back at his mother, and he wondered what was wrong. His eyes moved away from Katara so he could look at Ursa and his frown deepened at the solemn expression on the usual calm features of his mother.

“What’s the matter?” he asked worriedly as he stood up from his seat and walked around his desk so he could stand before them.

Ursa looked at him silently for a moment before she took a deep breath when Katara gently squeezed her shoulder.

“Zuko…I want to visit Azula,” she said determinedly.

“What?” Zuko exclaimed quietly before he shook his head. “You know that you can’t visit her,” he reminded her gently.

“Please, Zuko,” Ursa pleaded, her golden eyes filling with tears. “I was so afraid and devastated when I thought I lost you and it reminded me that I could so lose my daughter as well. I haven’t seen her in years!”

Zuko refrained from saying that Azula was already lost to them, but he did not want to distress his mother more than she already was.
“Azula is in no condition to see anyone,” he told her softly.

“My daughter has been alone for so long!” Ursa cried out. “I can’t stand the thought that my daughter is suffering by herself while I live comfortably in the palace!”

Katara again placed her hand on Ursa’s shoulder while Jee stepped hesitantly closer to the crying woman. Katara turned to Zuko who was looking worriedly down at his mother.

“Lady Ursa deserves to see her daughter, Zuko,” she told him firmly yet gently when he looked at her.

“If Azula sees our mother, her condition might worsen,” he said with a frown.

“Or it might help,” she countered.

They looked silently at each other as Zuko debated what to do. He felt warmth spread in his chest at the knowledge that Katara really cared for his mother, for he knew Katara held no great affection for his sister after what she tried to do to them. However, he was also afraid that his mother seeing Azula’s condition might hurt her and he did not want her to suffer. His mother had suffered enough.

“Please, my son,” Ursa pleaded one more time in a soft whisper.

Zuko looked at her silently for a moment before he let out a reluctant sigh.

“Fine,” he agreed with a displeased grunt before he frowned seriously at his mother. “But if anything bad happens, you will never set foot in that place again,” he told her firmly.

“Thank you, Zuko,” Ursa said gladly as she moved forward to embrace her son.

Zuko did not respond as he returned the embrace. He glanced at Katara who was smiling gently at him and he frowned.

Things were getting more complicated.
Glancing out the carriage window, Katara’s eyes widened as she took in the large white stone building that loomed before them, though it probably only seemed that way since it rested atop a large hill. Thick, tall walls surrounded the building where she could see a few sentinels standing guard. It had taken a few hours for them to ride away from the palace and arrive at the place where Azula was being held. She could already see the sun sinking lower in the sky. She would have stayed in the palace if Zuko had not insisted she accompanied him and Lady Ursa, for he did not want to let her out of his sight. She sighed. She really needed to get used to Zuko’s overprotectiveness.

Katara looked away from the building and sat back against the carriage wall. She glanced to her right at Lady Ursa, who had been silent ever since they climbed into the carriage, and placed a comforting hand over the older woman’s clenched one. Ursa looked up at her, her golden eyes filled with sadness and anxiety, before she gave her a tiny, grateful smile and patted Katara’s hand. Returning the smile, Katara retracted her hand and again sat back in her seat as she looked up at Zuko sitting across from them. She frowned when she saw him scowling darkly out the window just as he had been doing since they left the Fire Nation Palace.

He had changed into his dark red and golden armor and his hands were clenched tightly atop his knees as he sat there, silent and brooding. Katara knew he was upset about allowing his mother see what had become of Azula now. Although she would never be able to forgive the fallen princess for all the hurt and suffering she had caused Zuko, her friends, and her, Katara wanted to support Ursa, who had asked for her help in convincing Zuko to let her see her daughter. Katara knew that what the gentle woman would see might pain her, and even though she did not want Lady Ursa to get hurt, Katara thought it was the best way to stop Ursa from wondering and agonizing over what had become of her daughter.

It was a few minutes later when the carriage was let through the walls once it was known it was the Fire Lord and his mother visiting. As soon as the carriage stopped before the building, Jee dismounted from his komodo rhino and opened the door to help his lord and the women descend from it. Just as they were surrounded by Zuko’s personal guards, the doors to the wide building were opened and a tall elderly man with cropped, gray hair walked swiftly toward them. He was wearing a simple gray outfit and what looked like a long, thin white coat that reached down below his knees.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” the man exclaimed breathlessly as he bowed. He pushed his thin glasses up his nose once he straightened after Zuko gave him a curt nod. “I was not expecting your visit, my lord, so I apologize if you had to wait long.”

“Doctor Nao,” Zuko interrupted the older man, “we would like to see my sister.”

Doctor Nao paused and he looked over the Fire Lord’s shoulder as he finally noticed the other
people standing with his lord. His eyes lingered curiously for a moment on the caramel-skinned young woman before his eyes widened in surprised when he noticed the dark-haired woman standing beside her who resembled both royal siblings so much.

“My lord,” the doctor began hesitantly, “I do not believe it wise for your sister to receive visitors at this time.”

“It will only be for a moment,” Zuko responded.

The older man hesitated for a few seconds before he bowed his head. Who was he to deny his sovereign?

“If you would please follow me,” he indicated as he turned back toward the doors.

Once they were inside with Jee and Zuko’s two personal guards following behind them, Katara took in their surroundings curiously. The design of the inside of the building was simple, with no decorations of any sort anywhere except for a few paintings of Fire Nation sceneries. The walls were painted a calming cream color. The doctor led them through different halls where they passed many steel doors. Katara could not help but wonder what kind of place this was for it looked different from any prisons she had seen before. As if he could read her thoughts, the doctor turned to smile at them.

“The patients are given a few hours a day to leave their rooms and walk in the garden. Of course, only those that are of no threat to the others are allowed to,” he explained.

“Patients?” Katara asked.

“Yes. This is a mental institute for those who…suffer mental illnesses,” Doctor Nao explained in a pleasant tone. “They receive the help and care they need.”

Katara guessed he had stopped himself from saying ‘who are insane’ and now she understood why Zuko did not have Azula locked in the prison tower.

“How is Azula?” Zuko asked quietly.
“She is doing much better these days, my lord,” Doctor Nao spoke up with a kind smile. “She has her moments, but she is calmer than she was when she was first brought in. Sometimes she is even allowed to go into the garden and we do not need to give her shots to suppress her bending in fear that she would hurt anyone or herself. She has been calm today.”

Zuko tightened his lips as he glanced at his mother before he continued walking without saying anything else. Katara glanced at Ursa who was walking silently a few paces behind her son before she looked at Zuko who was walking ahead of them, his shoulders tense and back straight. Katara wanted to run her hand along his back to soothe him, but she refrained herself from doing so.

She was brought out of her thoughts when she noticed they had turned into a very long corridor where there were fewer doors that seemed much thicker than the others they had passed so far. As they followed the doctor down the hall, one of the thick doors was thrown open and two large men wearing the same gray outfit as the doctor—minus the white coat—stepped out holding a young, burly man between them. The man had a blank expression on his face, but when he spotted the women standing before him he grinned widely and began to laugh deafeningly.

Katara’s view was partially blocked from the cackling man as Zuko stood protectively before her and she scowled at his back. She was about to step around him, but she was distracted when she saw Ursa grab tightly onto Admiral Jee’s arm who then gently grabbed her hand and squeezed it. She quickly glanced at Zuko to see his reaction, but he was not paying attention as he had turned to glare at the doctor who bowed and apologize as the two other men tried to drag the snickering man away from them.

Finally, the doctor stopped before a door, and after rummaging through a large ring holding many keys, he opened the door and stepped into the slightly dark room, motioning for the silent group to follow him. As they stepped in, Ursa let out a gasp and her hand flew up to cover her mouth.

Azula sat cross-legged in the middle of a cot with her arms wrapped around her chest as she rocked back and forth. They could hear her mumbling under her breath. Her skin seemed paler than usual and her lithe frame seemed thinner than before. Her once pristine obsidian tresses now fell straight down her back and shoulders with a few dark strands covering her face as her fingers clutched at the white shirt she was wearing.

“Princess Azula,” Doctor Nao called out gently. “Look. You have visitors.”

Azula’s head snapped up as she turned dark, golden eyes at those who dared disturbed her before her eyes widened when she noticed that one of them was her brother. A maniacal grin spread across her lips as she glared at Zuko.
“I haven’t seen you in a while, dear brother,” she mocked as she flicked a long strand of black hair over her shoulder. Her eyes flickered for a moment on the blue-eyed woman standing beside him before she looked back to Zuko. “How nice of you to bring your waterbending wench with you,” she taunted.

Katara clenched her hands at her sides while Zuko narrowed his eyes at Azula who had a sharp smile on her face. Before Zuko could respond, his mother stepped around him with her hands outstretched.

“Azula, my daughter,” she said softly.

Azula’s smile fell from her face as her golden eyes widened impossibly large before she glared at her.

“Go away!” she screeched before she grabbed her head tightly with her hands. “Go away! You’re not here, you’re not real!” she chanted loudly.

“Azula,” Zuko spoke up, struggling to keep his tone calm. “I finally found our mother, Azula. Mother is really here.”

Azula raised her head slightly away from her hands to look at Zuko suspiciously, almost as if she were trying to figure out if he was mocking her, before she turned her eyes toward Ursa who had a hopeful expression on her face. Azula looked at her silently for a moment before her pleasant features contorted into an angry snarl.

“Why are you here after you abandoned Father and your children?!” Azula growled out loudly as her golden eyes glinted in rage.

“Is that what your father told you?” Ursa asked with a horrified gasp.

“Father told me the truth!” Azula screeched as she pulled at her hair.

“It’s a lie!” Ursa cried out. “I never wanted to abandon you or your brother!”
“Of course you didn’t want to leave Zuzu,” the deranged princess sneered. “He’s always been your favorite!”

“No, Azula! I—”

“You always loved Zuko more than me!” Azula cut her off wildly. “You would scold me for everything I did, while you mothered Zuko for every mistake he made! Every time I tried to ask for your attention you would put me aside because poor Zuzu needed you!”

Katara gasped softly at the pain she could detect in Azula’s voice and she turned to look at Zuko whose eyes were wide with shock.

Zuko stared at his screaming sister in astonishment. He had never thought Azula felt that way, since she always seemed so confident, independent, and nonchalant when they were children. She had their grandfather and father’s respect and approval, two things he strove to gain when he still believed he needed them. He never thought Azula might have felt jealous because of the close relationship he shared with their mother. He was the one who had always been jealous that Ozai paid more attention to her. Perhaps this feeling of rejection was part of why Azula had lost her mind.

“I’m so sorry, Azula,” Ursa exclaimed as tears ran down her cheeks. “I did not mean to hurt you and make you feel as if I did not love you because I do! I love you and your brother the same—”

“Lies!” Azula screeched before she sneered. “You never loved me! How could you love a monster like me?”

Zuko stiffened for it was the same question he had asked Katara a while ago.

“Despite everything, I still love you, Azula,” Ursa tried to say as she moved forward with an outstretched hand.

“Don’t touch me!” Azula growled as she jumped away from the cot to stand menacingly before a wide-eyed Ursa. “I don’t want to listen to any more of your despicable lies!”

Doctor Nao could sense that things were about to turn for the worst and he quickly exited the room in order to call a nurse and some guards.
“Father is the only one who loves me!” Azula stated as her eyes darted wildly around the room. “He was the only one who praised me! He was even going to make me his heir!”

“Azula!” Zuko tried to intervene, for he could see her words were affecting their mother too much.

Azula turned to glare at him before she sneered in that mocking way he had become used to as they grew up together.

“You must be so happy your mommy came back to you,” she taunted in a fake sweet tone. “But Father loved me more than you and I would’ve been a better heir than you’d ever be! I could’ve been a better Fire Lord if you hadn’t saved that stupid Water Tribe peasant who later chained me down! I would’ve killed her! If you hadn’t stepped in she’d be dead by now!”

Zuko’s heart constricted in his chest at the painful truth and he shifted closer to Katara who also stepped closer to him as she gaped at the hatred she could see in Azula’s eyes.

“And then after the wench lay dead on the ground, I would’ve killed you next!” Azula continued and laughed maniacally as she cracked her fingers.

Ursa gasped.

“But he’s your brother!” she cried out.

“He would’ve killed me, too!” Azula screamed in rage as she turned to snarl at their shocked mother. “But you care more for his life than my own!”

“No, Azula! That’s not true!” Ursa protested loudly.

She moved forward again and tried to embrace her daughter, but she stumbled back when Azula pushed her away from her. Luckily, Zuko was there to catch Ursa before she fell to the floor. Zuko settled her on her feet beside him as he glared at Azula.

“I told you not to touch me!” she shrieked as she pointed a finger at all of them. “I hate you all!” she growled before she turned burning eyes at a crying Ursa. “I hate you!”
Ursa let out soft painful cry as she stood frozen in shock as her daughter’s words sank in. She did not even move when Azula raised her fist and shot a blue fire ball at her and her son’s frightened shout did not even penetrate her mind. She blinked when someone pulled her back and spun her around until she collided into a firm chest. She blinked again when she realized it was Jee. Ursa looked over his arm and watched as Katara drew up a wall of water to extinguish the fire blast just as Zuko rushed at Azula and pushed her down onto the hard ground.

Azula cursed and thrashed wildly as she tried to dislodge Zuko from her back, but he was holding her too firmly for her to do much. He had grown taller, heavier, and stronger with the years while she wasted her days locked in a cell.

It was a few seconds later that the doctor and a young woman carrying a tray in her hands entered the room with two big men who immediately rushed to pin the crazed princess down. Zuko stood up as soon as the men had a hold of her and he moved aside as the doctor and the woman approached. His mother approached him and he opened his arms to her. He held her to him as he looked up to give Katara and Jee a grateful look for keeping her safe.

The doctor grabbed what looked like a thin glass tube from the tray filled with a yellowish liquid and a long needle attached to it before he pierced the needle into Azula’s shoulder as he pulled the edge of her shirt down. They watched as Azula’s loud curses quieted and her thrashing calmed down until she lay still as she looked up at them with dazed eyes, giving her the expression of a person with terrible hallucinations. It seemed that reality was lost to her forever. Finally, her eyes closed and her breathing became soft and slow as Ursa continued crying softly while Zuko held her close to him.

Gliding smoothly over the calm water, the Water Tribe vessel sailed swiftly across the grand ocean. Two men with dark brown hair and blue eyes stood silently at the front of the ship as they stared across the sea, watching with grim expression on their tanned faces as the sun began to set over the horizon. The older of the two clenched the scroll in his hand while his other hand flexed at his side.

“First Iroh sends us a message saying that Katara and Zuko have fallen overboard during a storm and could not be found and that the illness in the colony was false,” Hakoda began in an angry tone, “and now we receive a message saying that they are probably captured! My daughter is being held hostage because of the Fire Lord!”

He pressed his lips tightly together when he felt his son place his hand firmly on his shoulder.

“Calm down, Dad,” Sokka spoke up with a frown as he glanced at his twin daughters who were trying to crawl away from their mother and great-grandparents before he added more quietly, “It’s not Zuko’s fault, and besides, you know that Zuko would never have put Katara in danger if he
could help it. He will always try to keep her safe.”

Hakoda remained stiff for a moment before he relaxed and let out a deep breath as he nodded at his son’s words. It still amazed him that his son could be so mature when he bothered to be.

“Besides, Advisor Chao said they weren’t even sure if it’s true that they’ve been captured,” Sokka continued.

The chieftain nodded again just as the sound of his granddaughters’ laughter reached his ears. They glanced to where Suki, Kanna, and Pakku sat around the twins who were now playing with small wooden toys their father had tried to carve into animal shapes. Jing squealed happily as she banged the wooden toy against the deck of the ship while Ting giggled as she began to chew on her fist. The twins were oblivious to the worry and fear the adults were feeling at not knowing where Katara and Zuko were.

“If it’s true that they’re being held hostage, what will we do?” Sokka spoke up as he turned to frown at his father. “We can’t possibly let Ozai be set free.”

“We will search for them, of course,” was the Southern Water Tribe Chief’s immediate answer, confidence and determination deep in his voice. “We will rescue them. By rescuing Zuko, I will return the favor to him for helping you break me free from the Boiling Rock, and I will have my daughter back with us.”

“I won’t rest until my sister is safe with us again,” Sokka said solemnly, his usual cocky expression fierce and determined.

They were silent for a moment, each dwelling in their own thoughts, as the setting sun created a golden glow over the water. Sokka was worried and angry at himself for not keeping his baby sister safe as he had tried to do ever since his father left him in charge of protecting her. He should have insisted on going with her and Zuko to the colony, but he had a family of his own to think about now. He just hoped that everything was just a rumor and they were indeed okay.

Hakoda did not bother to wipe away the cool mist that landed on his face as the soft waves crashed against the swift Water Tribe vessel. He remembered the fear he had felt when he was told that his daughter had been lost in a storm and could possibly be in the hands of some damn rebels. His heart still clenched at the thought that she might be hurt or worse. He had been unable to save his beloved wife when their village had been invaded all those years ago and he was not going to lose their daughter as well.
The chieftain closed his eyes to help bear the pain at the memory of losing his Kya, of the memory of holding her burned and unresponsive body in his arms as he cried into her singed hair. She had been everything to him and her death had almost crippled him. If it were not because his children needed him, he might have let himself die along with her. But he had vowed to get justice for Kya’s death and protect their children. He had not been there for Sokka and Katara as they grew up, but he would be there for them now and in the future. He would find a way to return his daughter back to them.

“Dad! Look!”

Sokka’s voice brought him out of his depressing thoughts and Hakoda opened his eyes to see his son pointing at the sky. Squinting against the sun’s rays, the older tribesman watched as a bird flew toward them. His eyes widened when he recognized it as being one of the Fire Nation’s messenger hawks. He felt his stomach drop. Was it more terrible news?

He extended his arm and the reddish bird landed gracefully on it, flapping its wings for a moment before it tucked them against its body. Hakoda quickly retrieved the small scroll from the metal tube attached to the hawk’s back before he handed the bird to one of his men to feed it. He unfurled the thin paper just as the rest of his family crowded around him.

“What does it say, Hakoda?” Kanna asked with a worried frown.

Hakoda scanned the message quickly and his face broke into a relieved and happy smile before he looked up at his anxious family.

“It’s from Katara!” he exclaimed as he glanced back down at her neat writing. “She writes that both Zuko and she are fine and they are heading toward the Fire Nation. She wishes to see all of us soon.”

Kanna let out a relieved cry and Pakku held her to his chest and rubbed her back. Sokka let out a joyful whoop and wrapped his arms around his wife and their children that she was carrying at the moment.

“Thank the gods they’re both safe,” Suki said with a relieved sigh.

She looked up at her husband and they smiled brightly at each other. However, when Hakoda did not say anything else, Sokka frowned.
“That’s it?” he asked as he threw his hands in the air. “What about the storm? And the kidnapping?”

“She says that she’ll explain everything once we meet her in the Fire Nation,” Hakoda responded as he frowned at one particular sentence. “She also says that she needs to speak to me about something important.”

“I wonder what that could be,” Suki spoke up curiously as she shifted Ting to her other hip when Jing was picked up by her father.

Hakoda folded the paper and placed it inside his shirt as he turned around and began to bark orders for the vessel to be turned toward the Fire Nation at full speed. The waterbenders quickly scrambled around the deck as they worked to turned the ship to the west and toward the Fire Nation.

The doors to the meeting room closed silently behind the Fire Lord as he and his admiral exited and walked swiftly down the hallway. A deep frown marred Zuko’s features and he resisted the urge to pull his hair in agitation.

Things were not going has he had hoped. During the meeting, he had discussed with his advisors and generals about the rebels’ threat, but they had disappeared once again and nobody knew where they were hiding now. Zuko was concerned that they were planning something and he could not stop worrying over when and how they would strike next. The spies he had sent to watch Wei have not reported anything unusual about his activities that indicated he was really the traitor. Zuko had also confirmed that Wei indeed had a younger brother in the prison tower whom he visited once in a while.

To make matters worse, he received a letter a few days ago from Mai’s father basically demanding to know why he had ended his relationship with his daughter and at the same time subtly begging Zuko to reconsider taking her back. Zuko had sent a message in reply, saying he had done the right thing in breaking up with her and did not regret it before firmly stating that he will not reconsider resuming his relationship with her.

He scoffed, causing Jee to look curiously at him, but Zuko just shook his head and continued walking.

*As if I would resume my fake relationship with Mai now that I have the real thing with Katara, he thought.*
He sighed. He had not spent any time with Katara since they arrived in the Fire Nation, for both of them had been busy. He was either in meetings with his advisors and generals or stuck in his study, going over everything that had been neglected since his absence. Katara had spent her time with his mother, trying to bring her out of her depression.

A week had passed since they had left a subdued Azula behind and his mother was still not the same. As soon as they had arrived at the palace from the mental institute, Ursa had closed herself off in her room and refused to come out and eat. Jee had to stand outside her door and Zuko knew the admiral disliked being idle, though he never complained. Katara had not left the older princess’ side since and tried to help her with her dejected state. Her care had paid off, for two days ago, Ursa had finally left the room to eat her meals with her family or walk in the private garden to take care of her rosebushes and herbs, and she seemed more relaxed. Zuko was grateful that Katara was caring for his mother when he did not have the slightest clue how, which made him even angrier at himself.

He had cursed himself many times for relenting to let his mother visit Azula, for even though Ursa had survived and lived by herself for years, she was still a gentle and delicate person, and he had known that if she saw Azula’s condition it would hurt her. Although his mother reassured him that she was fine and was grateful that he had taken her to see her daughter, he still felt responsible and guilty for her unhappiness. Iroh had convinced him that it was for the best for both Ursa and Azula to have seen each other and expressed what they felt. Perhaps one day, Azula would become better and be able to talk with her mother more calmly. Zuko was not sure and he did not want to raise his mother’s hopes.

He was still shocked over Azula’s words and he could not stop replaying them over in his head. It seemed like both of them had some lack of self-confidence about whether they were worthy of being loved. If Ozai had been a different man, a more respectful husband to Ursa and a more loving and encouraging father to Azula and him, would everything be different, better? Would they have been a happier family?

But if that were the case, Zuko would never have been banished, he never would have seen the atrocities of the war, and he would have never joined Aang to end said war. Everything that had happened to them had been for a reason, a part of their destiny, what fate had planned. Perhaps if his mother had never been made to leave, his father would have never burned and exiled him, and Azula would have never lost her sanity, but then Zuko would have never ended the war and many people would have died. But most of all he would have never met Katara, never would have fallen in love with her and known what true happiness and true love really were.

Zuko felt his heart clench at the thought. He may have suffered many things, but he would endure them again if it meant he got to be with Katara. He would not trade anything or wish for things to have been different. Maybe it was selfish of him for thinking in such a way, but such was the way he felt.
His pace increased and he was barely aware that Jee had to practically jog after him to catch up with his long strides. He needed to see Katara, even though he could not touch her, kiss her, hold her, he wanted to see her beautiful face and those bright, cobalt eyes staring at him as she gave him a lively smile with those lovely, soft lips of hers. His feet took him past the guest rooms and toward the Royal Palace Garden for that is where Jee had said Katara, his mother and uncle were last.

His golden eyes scanned the peaceful private garden until he spotted them sitting at the veranda drinking tea. He quickly stepped onto one of the stone paths and made his way toward them with Jee quietly following behind him. His eyes landed on Katara, who had her back to him, and his body heat flared again at the sight of her and at the sound of her delighted laughter caressing his troubled mind.

“Zuko!” his uncle exclaimed as Zuko finally stepped into the veranda. “We’re so glad you could join us! Would you like some jasmine tea?”

Zuko felt like having something stronger than tea and he grunted a ‘no’ before turning to tell Jiao to bring him some wine.

“Right away, my lord,” Jiao said as she bowed and hurriedly went to follow her lord’s orders.

Zuko watched as Katara turned around to look at him so quickly that her hair even whipped around her, their eyes locked, and they shivered as if an electric current had passed through them. She flushed at the smoldering look he was aiming at her and she looked down to nibble on a cookie as he moved to sit at the head of the low table on her left side. Zuko had insisted that she sit next to him on his right side as was the custom for the Fire Lord’s wife to sit, and she had agreed with a pleased blush, especially since they had not eaten with any of his courtiers who would notice the significance. Zuko finally took his eyes off his blushing bride-to-be and looked at his mother who was watching them curiously.

That’s right, we still haven’t told her, he mused as he gave his mother a small smile.

“How are you feeling, Mom?” he asked softly.

“I am still sad, and it still pains me to know what Azula…feels toward me, but I’m doing much better thanks to Katara,” Ursa replied to her son with a soft smile which she also gave Jee as he stood guard over her.
Katara smiled at her after she took a sip of the tea to wash down the cookie she had just eaten to keep herself from staring too much at Zuko.

“I’m just glad to help,” she replied.

Ursa patted her hand before she again turned to smile brightly at her son, who was watching their interaction with a pleased expression on his face. It pleased him to know that the two most important women in his life got along so well.

“Katara is such a wonderful woman, Zuko,” Ursa remarked just as Jiao finally returned with the wine and more snacks.

“You’re right, Mother,” Zuko agreed with a small smile before he added, “That is one of the many reasons why Katara will be much help to the Fire Nation in the future.”

He suppressed a smirk as he watched Katara blushed deeply. He noticed his uncle grinning widely over the rim of his teacup as his mother looked at him with wide eyes, Jee frowned curiously, and Jiao pretended not to be listening. He wondered briefly if he should dismiss Jee and Jiao from this conversation, but thought that the admiral and the maidservant would find out soon enough, if they already did not suspect something going on between Katara and him.

“Zuko dear, are you saying what I am hoping you are saying?” Ursa asked as she stared at him with hopeful eyes.

“I confessed to Katara and she said she returns my feelings. She has agreed to marry me,” Zuko informed her with a pleased smirk as the blush on Katara’s cheeks darkened as she smiled at him.

“Oh my goodness! Really?” Ursa exclaimed happily as she got up and rushed toward her son to give him a hug before she moved to embrace Katara before he could react. “I am so happy for you both! Congratulation! You must allow me to help plan your wedding!”

Zuko was a bit surprised at his mother’s enthusiasm, but he was glad to see the pain and sadness diminish a bit from her eyes with the news.

“Thank you, Lady Ursa,” Katara replied just as happily as she returned the older woman’s embrace. “I’m relieved to know that you approve of our marriage.”
“And why would I not approve, Katara dear?” Ursa asked with a soft smile as she turned to touch her son’s hand. “You are the woman my son wishes as his wife. You are the one who will make him so happy.”

Katara looked down in embarrassment at such praise as she mumbled another thank you when Jiao congratulated them in a shy tone. The waterbender glanced at Zuko out of the corner of her eye and saw that he had a smug smirk on his lips. Lips that she wanted to kiss so much…

“Congratulations, my lord, Lady Katara,” Jee’s words startled her out of her thoughts and she looked up to see Jee smiling at her before he turned to give Zuko a sly grin. “Though I must admit, I did suspect something.”

“It seems everybody else knew except for these two,” Iroh chimed in with a cheerful smile.

“Uncle,” Zuko growled out, but as usual, the old man ignored him and instead took another sip of tea.

“Oh, I cannot wait to hold my grandchildren in my arms,” Ursa exclaimed with a dreamy sigh and Jiao placed her hand against her mouth to muffle her giggles.

“Mother,” Zuko muttered.

He looked at Katara whose cheeks were a deep red hue as she glanced at him from beneath her long lashes. Well, it wasn’t like he had not thought of Katara pregnant with his child. A smirk pulled at his lips.

“Why haven’t you announced your engagement yet?” Ursa spoke up with a frown as she returned to her cushion beside Katara.

Katara saw Zuko raise an expectant eyebrow at her and she scowled at him before she turned to Ursa and gave her a strained smile.

“Well, uh, I would like to speak to my family first and Zuko must ask my father for his consent,” Katara began as she fidgeted with her fingers. “And even though I already ended things with Aang, I
want to tell him the news first.”

Ursa frowned and she turned to look at her son who was scowling at the table before him.

“Well, I admit I am not happy for the wait, but I will respect your wishes,” Ursa said with a small nod of her head before she broke into a curious smile. “So how did you confess to each other?”

Katara suppressed a giggle when Zuko groaned, and they spent a few minutes telling Ursa a milder version of it. And then the men listened silently as Katara and Ursa enthusiastically went over ideas for the wedding.

The sun had just set and the moon was rising in the dark sky by the time Iroh finally decided to step in.

“My, it sure is getting late,” the retired general commented innocently as he gave a dramatic yawn. “I think I will retire to my room.”

He glanced at Ursa and Jee and then at the young couple who were eating each other with their eyes, though they were trying to be discreet about it. Ursa smiled once she understood what Iroh was trying to do and she gave a soft yawn of her own.

“I believe I will retire for the night as well,” she said.

Zuko looked away from watching Katara’s reaction to his smoldering looks and frowned at his mother.

“Are you not feeling well?” he asked with concern since it was still early.

“No, I’m perfectly fine,” Ursa assured him as she stood up from the table along with Iroh and Jee. “I just had too much excitement for one day. Jiao, could you help me with my bath? You can clean the table later.”

“Of course, Lady Ursa,” Jiao replied quickly as she turned to smile at Katara.
“Why don’t you keep Katara company for a while longer, Zuko?” Ursa addressed her son. She smiled when Zuko’s eyes lit up in understanding. “Good night, dears.”

Once they left and only Katara and he remained, Zuko turned to smirk at her. She was blushing at the knowing looks they had received.

“Well, if that wasn’t subtle, then I don’t know what is,” Katara remarked as she turned to grin at him.

Zuko chuckled at her before he took a sip of his red wine. He poured more wine into another cup and offered it to her.

“No thanks,” she declined with a small shake of her head.

“Are you refusing to drink Fire Nation wine?” Zuko asked in a mock insulted voice.

“Only because it’s late,” she replied with a grin.

“It’s never too late to indulge in some good Fire Nation wine,” he stated with a serious frown, although his lips twitched in amusement.

“I’m pretty sure there are other things better than wine to indulge in,” Katara countered as she thought of some of her own tribe’s drinks.

She raised an eyebrow when Zuko’s lips curled into a devious smile and she swallowed at the smoldering look he was sending at her.

“Really?” he whispered huskily. “How about we test that?”

Before Katara could asked him what he meant, Zuko took her left hand and brought it over to his cup of wine before dipping her finger into the cool, red liquid.
“What are you doing?” she asked with a confused frown.

Her frown deepened when Zuko did not reply and only gazed at her with those heated, golden eyes of his. Katara watched as he raised her hand to his lips and she shivered as he pressed a kiss on her wet skin before she gasped when he opened his mouth and slid her entire finger drenched in red wine into his hot mouth. A shiver went through her at the sensation of her cool finger being warmed by his mouth combined with the blazing look he aimed at her, and she squirmed as the spot between her legs began to tingle.

Zuko watched her wriggle in her spot as she stared at his mouth, and he curled his tongue around her finger. A low growl vibrated in his chest as the taste that was her and the flavor of the sweet red wine exploded in his tongue. He heard Katara let out whimper before she tried to pull her hand away, but Zuko tightened his hold on her wrist and pulled her closer to him until she was almost leaning over the low table.

Katara watched as Zuko’s eyes darken into a molten amber color, and she moaned softly as he wrapped her finger more firmly with his tongue as if he were trying to wipe all traces of the wine from her skin, even though she had a feeling there were none left. The amazing feeling of her finger in his warm mouth stirred Katara’s arousal and she was unable to curb another moan from escaping her lips. She watched, mesmerized, as he pursed his moistened lips while he watched her with half-lidded eyes before he pulled her finger out, forming a loud sucking sound as he did so. Instead of releasing her, Zuko brushed her gleaming finger along his bottom lip before he gently nipped the tip of it, causing her body to shudder almost violently as she tried to suppress her growing arousal.

“How?” he murmured and smirked when her dazed, blue eyes snapped to his. “Some things do taste better than red wine. It makes me wonder what else is there that I can indulge my thirst on.”

Katara saw him looking at her as if she were an oasis for a thirsting man and she swallowed thickly as her heart pounded hard in her chest when his eyes fell upon her lips and he began to lean toward her.

“I, uh… I think it’s best we, um, go to our rooms and, uh, sleep,” Katara stuttered as a blush surfaced on her cheeks.

Zuko paused and leaned back with a frown. He wondered if he had overwhelmed her too much, but he refused to part from her so soon now that they finally have some time to themselves. Zuko stood up, and with her wrist still clasped in his hand, he pulled her gently to her feet as he gave her what he hoped was a calm smile in order for her to relax once again.
“I still think it’s too early. Will you walk with me in the garden?” he asked, his husky voice from before now soft.

Katara eyed him cautiously for a moment before she smiled and agreed with a small nod. She was still trying to get used to this new side of Zuko—his blatant masculine sensuality—and the sensations he easily evoked in her. Zuko smiled as he hooked her arm under his and led her away from the veranda and into the cool, stone path. They walked around the quiet place, admiring the many beautiful flowers that surrounded them, breathing in the fresh night air, until they finally stopped alongside the serene pond like so many times before. The little white and pink flowers from the cherry blossom tree danced gracefully around them as they leaned over the water and glanced at each other through their reflections upon the clear surface.

“Do you remember the last time we were here?” Zuko asked quietly.

“Yes,” Katara responded just as silently and she ducked her head while she fidgeted with a long strand of her hair. “You held me to you as I cried my eyes out,” she mumbled.

“That night I…I overhead you and Aang arguing,” he began in a strained voice and his hands clenched at his sides.

Katara’s eyes widened. “You did?”

“I saw what he did and I wanted to hurt him so badly,” he continued and let out a sigh. “But when I saw you crying…I wanted to comfort you, even if it pained me.”

“Why would it pain you?” she asked softly.

“Because you were crying…for him,” he answered with a growl.

“What?” Katara exclaimed with a frown before she shook her head. “That was not the reason for my tears.”

Zuko looked up to frown at her.
“Then what was the reason?” he asked, unable to curb his curiosity.

Katara was silent a moment as she stared at the tranquil pond before them.

“I cried because the words Aang said about your… close relationship with Mai pained me and… because I thought you would never return my feelings,” she replied with a sad sigh at the memory.

Zuko’s eyes widened at her soft confession and he scowled, berating himself for his foolishness.

“If only I had told you my feelings for you sooner, we could have avoided all these misunderstandings,” he said with a deep sigh as he again returned his gaze to their reflections upon the still pond.

“There’s no point in crying over it now,” Katara spoke in a light tone, trying to dispel the dark mood. “What matters is that we now know our feelings for each other and we are together.”

Zuko smiled as he caught her eye from their reflections.

“You’re right. We are going to get married and that’s what matters,” he said with a smirk.

“Your mother was happy with the news of our engagement,” Katara spoke up and she leaned back to grin at him.

“I told you she and Uncle would accept you,” he reminded her with a small chuckle as he straightened before he quieted down and grimaced. “Now it’s my turn to be nervous and wonder if your family will accept me.”

“Oh my!” Katara gasped dramatically. “The Great Fire Lord Zuko is nervous?! What has the world come to?!"

Zuko chuckled at her antics and the teasing glint in her blue eyes, but then he let out a deep sigh and his expression turned serious.
“Once they know what happened, that I did not keep you safe, that you…died, they will hate me,” Zuko began in a grave tone as he looked across the pond to a point beyond the distance. “They will not allow me to marry you.”

A small frown appeared on Katara’s brow and she reached her hands up to grab his face and gently turned it so he could be facing her again. She did not like to see the guilt and pain in his eyes.

“I was not planning on telling them about my near death,” she said quietly.

“But, Katara, they need to know!” he exclaimed as he brought his own hands to grasp her upper arms.

“And have them lock me away so I won’t get hurt again?” Katara huffed before she shook her head when he frowned stubbornly at her. “Besides, what matters now is that I’m alive. You saved me by letting yourself get beat up in order to protect me and you defeated all those men that…wanted to hurt me.”

Zuko’s grip tightened at the reminder before he pulled her close to his chest and wrapped her tightly in his arms. Katara wound her own arms around him and placed her head on his firm chest with a soft sigh.

“What matters is that you always try to keep me safe,” she told him softly.

Zuko buried his face in her neck and breathed in the scent of her hair as he gave her a gentle squeeze.

“Thank you. I really needed to hear that,” he told her in a strained voice.

Katara did not reply as she squeezed him in return and placed a quick kiss to his covered chest. They remained in the same pose for a moment before Katara finally pulled away with a blush. She had forgotten where they were and she was afraid that someone might see them. Zuko allowed her to move away and he began to search among his dark robe before he pulled out a small trinket.

“With everything that has happened since we arrived, I kept forgetting to return this to you,” he said as he opened his hand to reveal the silver rose hairpin.
“My hairpin!” Katara exclaimed happily as she took it and brought it close to her chest and stroked the smooth blue and red gems. “I was afraid that I lost it. Thank you.”

“Uncle kept it safe until our return,” he explained briefly as he watched her gaze fondly at the silver flower-shaped hairpin. “It pleased me very much to see you wear my gift to you during my birthday celebration.”

Katara looked up at him and blushed.

“I told you I thought it was a good time to wear it so you could see how much I appreciated and loved it,” she began before she smiled. “To show you how much I love you even if I couldn’t tell you.”

Zuko smiled at her as he took the hairpin from her hand and clipped it on her right temple so that her loose hair was up and exposed her face and smooth neck. His fingers touched the trinket before he trailed them down the soft skin of her face and down the column of her throat, causing her to shiver at his warm touch, before he trailed his fingers back up until he glided them against her plump, lower lip. Agni, he wanted to kiss her again, feel those soft lips of hers molding against his, taste the sweet flavor of her mouth. He leaned down to take her lips, but Katara gasped and placed her hands against his chest to stop him.

“No, you can’t,” she told him nervously. “Someone might see us.”

But Zuko did not let that stop him as he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close to him.

“No one is here to see us,” he said in a low and husky voice.

He looked around the quiet garden to make a point, and before Katara could protest again, he swooped down and captured her parted lips. He kissed her with all the pent up passion and longing he held within him as he delved his tongue deep within her hot mouth. Katara immediately responded to him since she had missed being close to him as well and she moaned when the sweet taste of the red wine he had consumed earlier hit her taste buds and gave her a heady feeling.

Zuko smiled inwardly as Katara surrendered to him. Agni, how he had missed having her in his arms. His lips teased hers for a while before he gently captured her lower lip between his teeth, that plump and delicious piece of flesh that always tempted him to taste. He heard her let out a soft moan
and he again kissed her deeply, fiercely—biting, caressing, and sucking her lips. His hands ran up and down her back before he began to glide his hands down to caress the lovely curve of her waist and hips until he slid his hands over her firm ass. With a groan, he lifted her slightly and pressed her tightly against him.

Katara gasped before she stiffened and quickly pulled her lips away from his hot kiss.

“We can’t,” she repeated breathlessly as she tried to twist away from his tight embrace.

Zuko became irritated at her resistance and he gave her a frustrated frown before he drew her to him again despite her struggles.

“Dammit, Katara! Can’t you see I miss you?” he growled out as his golden eyes flashed in both annoyance and suppressed arousal. “I miss touching you, kissing you, watching you come undone in my hands, and I hate it that we can’t be close to each other, hate it that we have to hide our feelings for each other and our relationship.”

He pulled away from her and ran his hands down his face with a frustrated growl before he turned blazing eyes at her.

“Tell me, Katara, do you even want to marry me?” he asked her in a cold tone.

“What?! Of course I want to marry you!” Katara exclaimed as she brought her hands to her hips. “You know the reason why we have to keep a distance between us is because I need to speak to my family first and I need to tell Aang that—”

“I know, but I still don’t like it,” Zuko cut her off gruffly.

He sighed and again wrapped his arms around her luscious form to bring her to his chest. He bent his head down to nuzzle against her throat before he kissed the smooth column.

“I desire to kiss you, to protect you, to take you, to love you,” he groaned into her ear before he again brushed his lips along her throat. He nibbled on her skin and she moaned softly before he leaned back just enough to gaze into her conflicted eyes.
“All I want to do,” he whispered huskily as he brushed his lips against hers, “is announce to the entire world, to let Aang know, that you are mine and that you’re going to be my wife.”

Katara could sense his upset, feel his tense muscles beneath her hands, see his frustration in his usually masked eyes, and she felt a twinge of guilt in knowing that it was she that was causing him to feel this way. She reached both hands to cup his face and urge his head close to hers so she could kiss him. She pressed her lips soothingly against his, ran her tongue gently against his lower lip, until he relaxed and returned the slow and gentle kiss.

When they pulled apart to gather some air, Katara raised her head to kiss his jawline which he responded by squeezing her.

“Please be a bit more patient, Zuko,” she asked him softly. “I can’t have rumors be spread about us, I can’t have my family’s honor ruined because of me.”

Zuko closed his eyes and sighed. It was so hard for him to keep to his word since what he really wanted was to have her as his wife already, but he had to respect her wishes, for after all, she would be sacrificing a lot more than he when she finally married him, she would be leaving her family and childhood home behind. The least he could do was control his desire and be patient.

“I understand, love,” he told her quietly.

Katara gave him a grateful smile before her eyes widened at the endearment.

“Did you just call me ‘love’?” she asked softly, her heart swelling in her chest.

Zuko stiffened slightly for the word had just slipped from him, it just seemed so natural. Did it bother her?

“What if I did?” he asked warily.

Katara smiled as she noticed the darkening stain on Zuko’s right cheek despite the stoic expression on his face and she threw her arms around his neck with a happy cry.
“I love it!” she exclaimed happily before she added amusingly, “It’s better than ‘pumpkin’!”

Zuko relaxed and let out a soft chuckle. He pulled her back slightly so he could place his fingers beneath her chin to lift her head toward him before he kissed her softly. When she returned the kiss and his body began to warm up again, he wondered if he really could keep his promise and not find a way to seduce her. He moved away from her delicious mouth and pushed her at arm’s length in order to regain some of his control.

“I think it’s best we retire to our rooms before I try to change your mind,” he said huskily with a small grin.

A blush blossomed across Katara cheeks before she smiled at him.

“Okay, my love,” she breathed out.

Zuko felt his heart skip a beat at her words and he smiled at her, at the way her cheeks flushed and at the swollen look of her lips, feeling smug at the thought that it was he that caused her to look in such a way. He again grabbed her hand and placed it beneath his arm before he led them back inside the quiet palace. They were silent as they made their way down the semi-dark corridor, and it was not long when they finally reached her door. Wanting to take another sweet gift from her before he retired for the night, Zuko quickly leaned toward her and stole a kiss from her lips, but the sweet taste of her again robbed him of his senses. With a low groan against her mouth, Zuko backed her up against her door and pressed himself against her soft body.

“Zuko,” she tried again to protest as she weakly pressed against his chest, even as her lips moved against his.

Zuko reluctantly pulled away from her delicious mouth with a deep sigh and buried his face against her shoulder with a frustrated groan. Damn, his lower regions ached so badly he felt he would explode at any moment. There was nothing to do except for him to return to his room and solve the problem himself. Damn it.

“Alright, alright, I’ll leave you alone now,” he said with another sigh as he moved his arms away from her, taking a few steps away to put some distance between them so he could regain some control. “Get some rest. I’ll see you at breakfast tomorrow.”

With a strained smile, the golden-eyed young man with a problem in his trousers turned away from
the blue-eyed woman with irresistible curves and began to make his way to his room, but a small hand clutching the back of his tunic made him pause.

“I’m sorry,” he heard Katara whisper.

Frowning, Zuko again turned back around to face her, but she was looking down at her feet.

“For what?” he asked.

“I…I know it frustrates you that I keep you at a distance and that…we can’t be i-intimate,” she said softly. “I’m sorry for making you wait, especially since I know in the Fire Nation it is expected for a couple to—”

She was cut off by Zuko pressing his thumb on her lips as he gently grasped her chin with his fingers.

“We’ve already talked about this,” he said sternly yet gently. “I already told you that I will respect your views and your wishes. Yes, it frustrates me not to be able to make love to you to my heart’s content, but for you I will endure it and so much more.”

He gently added pressure to her chin to encourage her to lift her head up, and once she was looking at him, he smiled at her while his thumb caressed her lower lip.

“Waiting will create anticipation and once our bodies are finally joined together in the most intimate of ways it will be beyond wonderful,” he finished huskily.

“You think so?” she asked softly.

“I know so,” he answered just as softly.

He leaned back toward her, but he straightened himself and his face became the usual cool mask he wore, although his eyes continued to burn with a strong intensity.
“Good night, Katara,” he said before he added with a soft smile, “Sleep well, love.”

“Good night,” Katara sighed out dreamily as she struggled for a moment to open her door since she could not take her eyes away from the man before her.

Once she finally had the door opened, she slipped inside the room—their eyes still locked together—until she closed the door and blocked them from each other’s view. Katara leaned her back against the door for a moment. She heard Zuko’s soft footsteps move away until she could no longer hear them. With a sigh, she slipped down onto the floor and let her head fall back against the door.

She hoped she could talk to her family and Aang soon for she did not know if she would be able to resist Zuko any longer.
The Fire Lord’s antechamber was filled with the sound of rattling plates, the clicking of chopsticks, and excited talk as the Fire Lord and his small family consisting of his mother, his uncle, and his intended bride ate their breakfast. Ursa and Iroh were talking nonstop about the upcoming wedding, when it should be, who should be invited, and how wonderful it would be combining traditions from both the Fire Nation and the Southern Water Tribe.

Sitting on the Fire Lord’s right, Katara was amused at the way Zuko would blanch at the outrageous ideas Iroh would come up with and she could not help but to pitch in with outrageous things from old wedding traditions of her tribe.

“How about we just get married right now to save ourselves the trouble?” Zuko threatened with a raised eyebrow.

Katara snapped her mouth shut before she grumbled when he smirked at her. She picked at her food with her chopsticks, but she stilled when she felt Zuko’s hand slide beneath the dark red skirt she had on. Soft hues of pink prickled on her cheeks when he rested his hand lightly on her thigh. She shivered when his fingers padded gently up and down her skin before he slowly trailed them inward. She quickly grabbed his hand to stop him when he came dangerously close to her aching warmth. Her eyes darted to Iroh and Ursa—who were too busy arguing about a certain part of the wedding ceremony to notice—before she turned to give Zuko an uncomfortable look. With an inaudible sigh, Zuko reluctantly moved his hand away and brought it upon the low table where he clenched it into a tight fist. Katara smiled at him gratefully, but he just gave her a strained smile in return.

She felt her heart sink when he looked away and resumed eating in silence for she knew that it frustrated him that they were unable to be together as often as they wanted, much less be intimate with each other. It was not as if she did not want to, because she did. She missed him, missed his touch, missed the times when it was just the two of them. But they couldn’t do such things since it would raise suspicions and rumors would spread. She had already broken a few rules the few times she had allowed herself to get close to him and if they continued who knew what could happen. She just did not want to risk it.

Katara was brought out of her thoughts when Zuko rose from his place beside her and she looked up.

“I must take my leave,” he said coolly as he placed his napkin down. “I have a meeting with the
“I think I will go with you today, Nephew,” Iroh spoke up as he, too, rose from his cushion beside Ursa.

Zuko nodded at him and smiled at his mother before he looked down at Katara. His eyes softened and he let out another inaudible sigh.

“I’ll see you both at dinner,” he said before he made his way to the door with Iroh following behind him.

Katara looked longingly after him before she returned to her meal once the doors were closed behind him and Iroh.

“It’s just you and me again today, Katara dear,” Ursa spoke up from across the low table with a smile.

The waterbender returned the smile before she looked down at her unfinished meal, allowing her mind to wander. Zuko and she had not held each other, much less kissed, since that time in the garden a few days ago for they were rarely alone and Zuko refused to show his affectionate side in the presence of his mother and uncle. Although he could not hide his feelings when he would stare intensely at her with those smoldering, amber eyes of his.

She sighed softly. She hoped she could talk to her family and Aang soon so she could finally marry Zuko. So they would not have to hide their immense feelings for each other anymore and so she could make him happy.

However, there was a part of her that felt a sense of dread that made her stomach twist and she wondered why.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The Fire Lord listened silently as one of his generals made his monthly report concerning the Fire Nation army and the progress of training new recruits. His advisors sat quietly in their places as they waited for the general to finish his report so they could begin discussing matters within the country as well as international relations with the other nations. Zuko lifted a hand to silence the general before he asked him to leave a written report on his desk with the excuse that he had other matters to attend to. The broad-shouldered general agreed, and after a respectful bow to his lord, he left the meeting room.
Zuko waited until he left before he returned his attention to his advisors. He wanted to make sure not to say too much with Wei present, even though he still had no evidence of Wei’s treachery. As for Wei, he continued to act as if he had not been accused of treason against the Fire Lord and Zuko again wondered if he might have been wrong in his assumptions against the advisor.

One of the members of his council stood and began to list the monthly profits from the trade with the other countries. Zuko tried to pay attention to what the man was saying, but his mind began to wander to Katara and her family. Once they arrived, he would be one step closer to taking Katara as his wife.

He remembered the way her smooth thigh had felt under his hand and he shifted slightly when his groin twitched. Agni, how he missed touching her, kissing her, watching her face flush as he brought her to that blissful release, but he was unable to do any of those things because Katara did not want them to raise any suspicions. But all he wanted to do was crush her to him and kiss her senseless before everyone so they could all see that she was his and she was the woman he was going to marry!

He was snapped out of his thoughts when the advisor finished and he frowned at himself for allowing his focus to wander. He would blame Katara for his distraction if it weren’t for the fact that he did not mind so much when he thought of her. He would just have to read the written records of the trading profits later in order to know what had been said. Clearing his throat, he thanked the man who bowed and sat back down.

“If there is no other matter to attend to, then the meeting is over,” the Fire Lord spoke coolly as he made to stand up from his throne.

He wondered if he could convince his uncle to ask Jee to escort his mother and Iroh outside the palace, that way he could have Katara to himself for the rest of the day. He was about to step down the marble stairs when he heard one of his advisors clear his throat rather loudly—obviously to gain his attention. Zuko paused and looked at the men with a frown.

“My lord,” one of them spoke up and bowed his head when the Fire Lord’s eyes landed on him, “may I have a word?”

Frown deepening, Zuko gracefully sat back down.

“Go on,” he said curtly.
The man cleared his throat again—this time nervously—before he spoke.

“There are rumors that Lady Mai has moved out of the palace,” he began slowly, testing his lord’s reaction. “Such a rumor could only imply that your relationship with her has ended.”

Narrowing his eyes, Zuko frowned. He knew servants would always gossip, so he really should not have been surprised to hear that the news had spread. He let out an inaudible, tired sigh and resisted the urge to rub his temples.

“It is true,” he answered in an impassive tone. “I am no longer in a relationship with Lady Mai.”

*If that is what it ever really was,* he thought to himself.

He immediately became wary when many of the men sat up and smiled calculatingly. He mentally prepared himself for what he knew would come next.

“You are now single and must be looking for a woman as a candidate for your wife and Fire Lady,” another of the advisors commented with a glint in his eye.

“No,” was Zuko’s direct and simple response. He ignored the shocked murmurs of his advisors.

It was true that he was not searching for such a candidate for he had already found his woman, and if he had his way, he would have been married to her already. He glanced at his uncle who was grinning knowingly at him.

“But, my lord!” another man exclaimed, “You are already twenty-one years old! That’s three years past the age of when you should have married and produced an heir!”

“I will marry when I am good and ready!” Zuko growled out automatically to their nagging protests.

“You have already been captured once, what if the next time you…die?” the first advisor that had spoken said with concern and frustration. “There will be no one to inherit the throne, the royal
Zuko again resisted the urge to rub his temples since he knew they made a good point, but he could not tell them he was already engaged to Katara for he had promised her that he would not say anything, even if he really wanted to.

“Perhaps the Young One already has a woman in mind?” Wei interrupted over the loud protests of the other advisors.

Zuko turned to look at him suspiciously, but Wei only raised a gray eyebrow and shrugged.

“Yes, perhaps he does,” Iroh immediately piped in with smile. “Maybe you already have a lady in mind, Fire Lord Zuko?” he asked pointedly.

Zuko got the hint and gave his uncle a small smirk before he addressed the murmuring men.

“That is correct. I do have a woman in mind,” Zuko proclaimed and he suppressed a grin when the men gasped in shock. “It is very likely that she will soon become my wife.”

“Who is the lady?” one of the advisors asked with a displeased frown.

“First, I must make sure to secure her hand before I announce the news to you,” the young lord replied simply.

Before they could ask any more questions, Zuko swiftly stepped down from the dais, parted the wall of fire, and strode toward the doors. Iroh stood up from his spot and gave the baffled men a cheerful smile before he followed after his nephew. Once they were a good walking distance away from the throne room, Iroh let out a deep chuckle.

“That was good thinking, Zuko,” he praised as he smiled at his silent nephew.

“I just hope that will make them shut up and leave me alone,” the Fire Lord replied tersely.
“Oh, I doubt it,” the older firebender retorted with another chuckle. “Now that you are ‘single’, the noblemen will come down upon you to flaunt their unmarried female relatives at you.”

“There will be so many broken hearts,” the old man commented with a sigh.

He grinned when his nephew rolled his eyes.

The following day, Iroh’s prediction came true. Every single woman from the Fire Nation nobility flooded the public garden accompanied by their male relatives as they asked for an audience with the Fire Lord. Tension was high amongst the women of the upper society as the competition to win their lord’s favor became intense. Although they hid their hostility and competitiveness behind deceitful smiles and fake flattery.

The Fire Lord was not at all pleased to have his home invaded in such a way for now he had less of a chance to sneak in a private moment with his waterbender. It was all he could do not to throw them all out and ban them from the palace until she was safely married to him.

Blue eyes narrowed in annoyance, Katara balled her hands as she made her way toward the public garden where Advisor Chao had directed her to Zuko. When she woke up that morning she had been looking forward to another pleasant day in the Fire Nation Palace and even wondered if she could make some kind of excuse so she could have Zuko all to herself. But those wishes had been dashed rather rudely when the sound of feminine giggles and loud male voices reached her ears as she moved further away from the west wing.

At first, she had wondered if there was some kind of celebration that she did not know of to have gathered so many people, but when she asked Jiao what was going on, she had been so surprised and angry that it took all of her control not to cause a scene. Jiao had explained to her that the noblewomen had heard news of Zuko’s breakup with Mai and had invaded the palace in order to catch the Fire Lord’s eye and be proposed to!

The nerve!

Katara’s pace quickened a bit, but not so much as to raise any questions about her agitated state. She had to stop herself many times from running to the public garden in order to keep all the women away from her Zuko. She refused to make a fool of herself in front of all these snobbish
noblewomen.

The public garden finally came into view and Katara paused at the edge to look around and take in the sight before her. There were so many people, more women than men, mingling around the garden as if there was a party going on. She stepped onto one of the stone paths and began to make her way through the noisy crowd in search of Zuko. She ignored the curious and disdainful looks the women threw at her and she did not notice the way the men eyed her appreciatively when she passed them. She had donned a light blue dress edged with silver lace at the hem that fell just below her ankles. She had placed her long, brown hair into a loose bun so that a few wisps of hair fell around her face in order to entice Zuko into spending some time with her. But it seemed that plan had also gone to waste.

Glancing around the garden, she finally spotted him surrounded by a group of women who were smiling coquettishly at him as they each tried to start a conversion with him over each other. Katara clenched her teeth as jealousy flared within her before she closed her eyes briefly and took a deep, calming breath, telling herself to be reasonable, since this was essentially her fault. She took a step forward, but paused and frowned when she saw one of the pretty noblewomen touch Zuko’s arm. Katara watched as Zuko looked down with an impassive expression at the woman who then threw him a coy smile, though her eyes were seductive as she leaned toward him. Katara’s heart constricted in her chest and her hands fisted at her sides, but she was relieved when Zuko frowned and slowly lifted the woman’s hand off him before he looked away.

Unable to watch the women flirt with the man she loved and was secretly engaged to, Katara turned away and began to swiftly make her way through the crowd so she could escape into the palace, her happy mood from that morning now gone. She was startled when her way was blocked and she looked up with a frown only to be met with four young men smiling charmingly at her.

“Good morning, Lady Katara,” one of them spoke in a pleasant tone as he and the others gave a polite bow. “It is good to see you again,” he continued as he flicked his long, black hair over his shoulder.

“And you look as lovely as always,” another of them said as his dark brown eyes raked her form before he smiled at her.

Katara frowned at them since she did not know who they were, but then realized they were a few of the men she had danced with during Zuko’s birthday celebration. But since her attention had been entirely centered on Zuko, she could not remember their names or anything about them. Not wanting to be rude, Katara gave them a small smile and returned the bow.

“Noblemen, it’s, uh, a pleasure to see you again,” she said politely as she tried to go around them, but she narrowed her eyes when they moved to block her again.
“We are so glad to see that you and the Fire Lord returned safely,” the shorter of the men spoke up sincerely.

“Yes, there were so many rumors, one more horrible than others,” the first man with the long, dark hair spoke up. “Being stranded on an island after falling overboard during the storm must have been terrible.”

*Is that the story that is being told to the people?* Katara thought to herself. But before she could ponder on it any longer another man with a long crooked nose spoke up.

“It must have been so frightening for you,” he said in a deep voice filled with sympathy.

Katara resisted the impulse to roll her eyes at him. Just because she was a woman did not mean she would let something as being stranded in an island scare her.

“Oh, well, Fire Lord Zuko did everything he could to keep me safe—” she began before she was interrupted by the man with the dark eyes who still had a leering smile on his lips.

“Who would not want to keep a beautiful woman as yourself protected?” he cooed.

The waterbender frowned. She was not in the mood for their flattery, but before she could reply, the one with the long hair interrupted her musings once more.

“The Avatar is so lucky to have such a beautiful woman as his companion,” he said with a wistful sigh.

Katara opened her mouth to say something, but she paused when a deep, baritone voice caressed her ears.

“Lady Katara, may I have a moment to speak with you?” Zuko asked as he appeared at her side, his tall form towering over the other men who stiffened at the dark look he was sending them.
Katara shivered at the cold tone of his voice before she finally found her own.

“Of course, Fire Lord Zuko,” she said formally as she glanced briefly behind him to see the group of women frowning after Zuko.

She bowed to the men who returned the gesture with enthusiasm and to the silent Fire Lord who did not spare them another look as he turned to walk away. Katara followed him quietly, ignoring the curious looks the courtiers gave them as they opened a path for the Fire Lord and the waterbender. Once they entered the palace, Katara had to lift the hem of her dress a little in order to quicken her pace as Zuko swiftly strode down the golden corridors. She noticed that his shoulders were tense and his hands kept clenching at his sides, and she wondered what was wrong. The silence was killing her!

It was not long before she realized they were walking toward the western wing where only those with permission from the Fire Lord were allowed to enter, and she knew that Zuko was taking them to a place where they could talk in private. Zuko led her toward the Royal Palace Garden and stopped only after they were standing below the cherry blossom tree before he whirled around to face her.

Katara reeled at the angry look on his face, but before she could ask what was going on, he grabbed her upper arms to crush her to him before his lips smashed into hers in a hard kiss. A gasp escaped her at the fierceness of it, and Zuko immediately took advantage of her parted lips to plunge his tongue inside her mouth, flicking it against her cheeks, twining it around her tongue, dominating her mouth. Katara struggled for a moment at his unrelenting kiss, but her body soon surrendered to the sensations and she was returning the kiss just as fervently. But then, Zuko pulled away with a growl and pinned her with a glare.

“How could you let those bastards flirt with you?!” he asked angrily.

“Excuse me?!” Katara exclaimed indignantly as she tried to steady her breathing and calm her racing heart. “You’re the one who has a bunch of lustful women throwing themselves at you and you don’t seem to mind! I’m the one who’s supposed to be angry here, not you!”

Zuko opened his mouth to retort, but instead he let out a sigh and frowned. He eased his grip on her arms and gently ran them up and down to soothe her.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted like that,” he apologized as he took her hand and brought it to his lips. “It’s just that when I saw those men surrounding you, looking at you like you were a piece of meat…It made my protective instincts surge forward and I immediately made my way over, almost knocking the noblewomen out of my way.”
He chuckled dryly before the angry fire returned to his eyes again.

“But when one of them mentioned you being Aang’s girlfriend…” he trailed off with a growl, “It took all I had not to shout that you are mine and not Aang’s.”

“I’m sorry, Zuko,” Katara apologized softly as she brought his hand holding hers to his lips toward her cheek. “I know how much this displeases you. I’m sorry for making you so unhappy, for hurting you—”

“No,” Zuko interrupted firmly as he cupped her cheek. “You don’t make me unhappy and I know you would never hurt me intentionally. It just frustrates me that we’re keeping our relationship a secret, but I already told you that I understand and will respect your wishes.”

Katara’s blue eyes began to glisten with tears and she wound her arms around him before she buried her face in his chest. Zuko immediately wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her head.

“You’re too good to me, Zuko,” she whispered against him and sniffled softly.

“You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me, Katara,” Zuko responded sincerely and squeezed her gently. “And I will do everything in my power not to screw it up and lose you.”

“You won’t lose me if you make mistakes because I’ll probably make some, too,” she replied as she lifted her head to give him a watery smile.

“Well, then we’re just going to have to learn from our mistakes, just like Uncle would say,” Zuko said with a soft chuckle.

“Yeah,” Katara agreed with a giggle.

“You look very beautiful in this dress,” Zuko praised with a grin as he brushed his fingers along the lacy edge of the top, touching the skin of her chest as he did so. “It took all I had not to carry you off to my room.”
Katara laughed at his words, pleased that he found her beautiful in her outfit, as she again snuggled into him.

“Yeah, well, every time I’m near you my heart starts to pound like crazy,” she told him with a grin.

“Really?” Zuko asked with a playful concerned look as he pulled her slightly away to stare at her chest. “Maybe you’re sick. We just have to check it,” he stated seriously and buried his face between her breasts as if he were trying to hear her heartbeat.

Katara laughed and tried to push him away. Zuko chuckled as he ignored her attempts and instead brought her back against him.

She sighed against his warm chest, at the feeling of being protected and cherished, as Zuko wound his arms tighter around her to bring her closer to him. The shade the cherry blossom tree provided against the sun felt wonderful as the scent of various flowers combined with the sound of chirping birds, quacking turtle-ducks, and the rustling of leaves surrounded them in a pleasant cocoon.

“I must return to my guests before they start to demand my presence,” Zuko spoke after a while in a dry tone. He gave her one more squeeze before reluctantly letting go. He wished he had more time to spend with his water nymph, as he had come to call her in his mind.

“Can’t you just kick them out?” Katara asked with a pout that caused Zuko to chuckle and peck her pursed lips swiftly.

“I wish I could, love, but unfortunately, I can’t be rude and have them thrown out of the palace if I want to avoid any problems,” the young lord explained coolly before he sighed. “As long as I do not present to the Royal Court with the woman I have chosen to marry, they will not stop in their pursuit to win my favor.”

Katara’s shoulders slumped as she began to wring her hands together.

“I know and I’m sorry for making us wait,” she began quietly before she looked up to narrow her eyes at him. “It’s just that seeing all those salivating women clinging to you just…Ugh!”

Zuko smiled at her irritated expression as he pulled her to him again and kissed the top of her head.
“You don’t need to worry about them, love,” he reassured her as he nuzzled his nose against her cheek. “I have chosen to take you as my wife.”

“I love hearing you call me your love,” Katara said with a bashful smile.

“It is what you are,” Zuko responded matter-of-factly. “You are the one I love.”

Katara sighed happily—it never stopped amazing her to hear Zuko say he loved her—and she relaxed into him.

“I miss us being like this,” she said softly as she squeezed him and placed a kiss on his covered chest.

“I do too,” he responded just as softly. “But soon we will marry and I will have you all to myself, just like you will have all of me.”

Katara raised her head to smile brightly at him as she said, “That’s a promise.”

A large smile appeared on Katara’s face, Lady Ursa laughed softly, and Zuko’s two personal guards were grinning as the admiral’s cheeks flushed lightly, though he tried to hide it by pretending to fix the sheath of his sword tied to his hip. They had been teasing the man when they finally made him confess that he had grown fond of the little turtle-ducklings that lived near the Royal Palace Garden’s pond.

Once he knew he had composed himself, Jee looked up to glare at the two smirking guards before he scowled halfheartedly at the giggling females that were very important to his lord—and to him as well.

Jee’s eyes widened at the last thought before he mentally shook his head. When Lady Ursa smiled at him and told him he need not feel embarrassed, he again felt that strange feeling in his chest that started when he began to guard her. He hardened himself, he could not get attached for he was a simple admiral and he was just doing his duty in protecting his lord’s mother.

“We should hurry to the garden before General Iroh becomes impatient and begins to drink the afternoon tea without us,” Jee spoke up gruffly.
“You’re right, Admiral Jee,” Lady Ursa responded with a soft smile, hoping she had not gone too far in teasing him.

Ursa, Katara, Jee, and the two guards continued their walk down one of the hallways that would lead them to the Royal Palace Garden. A week had passed since the palace was invaded with almost all the single female members of the Royal Court and their male relatives. Even though Zuko continued to ignore the men’s hints and requests and the women’s advances, they did not give up and continued to arrive at the palace. Fortunately, the Fire Lord did not invite them to stay in the guests rooms, and so, they had to return to their homes at night, leaving the lord, his family and servants in peace.

While Lady Ursa and Jee had a light conversation, Katara glanced at the two guards that were silently following behind her as they had been doing for the past few days before she glanced away with an inaudible sigh.

She had left her room one day when Zuko approached her with his personal guards and simply told her he was appointing them to protect her, which meant in Katara’s mind ‘to follow her everywhere she went’. He had already told them that she was his intended bride and they had immediately agreed to protect her. She had pulled him aside after giving the guards a small smile before she hissed at him that she refused to be babysat and did not need to be protected as if she were one of those delicate noblewomen. Zuko had frowned at her before he firmly replied that the Fire Nation was not as safe as the Southern Water Tribe and now that there were so many speculations about his relationship with her, someone may use her to get to him again. And besides, they still did not know who was the traitor living among them or when they would strike next, and Zuko was not about to risk her safety.

‘I also want them to discourage any more eager noblemen from approaching you,’ he had added with a growl.

She had wanted to roll her eyes, but she could see the worry and determination in his eyes, and after a long moment of debating with herself, she had relented. The relieved smile he gave her was enough to compensate for her sense of lost independence. But she should not have worried, for the two guards followed her at a respectful distance and did not interrupt with whatever she was doing. Sometimes she even forgot they were there.

Katara glanced back at the two silent guards, and when she caught their eye, she smiled at them. Their lips twitched into a small smile and she turned back around with a grin on her face since it was so funny to break them from the stern expressions they had on to ward off everybody else. The first day they began to ‘guard’ her, she asked them for their names. The older of the two was named Shen and she had found out that he had been one of Zuko’s soldiers when the young prince had been banished. When the new Fire Lord had asked him if he would like to be one of his personal guards,
Shen had immediately accepted. He had a severe expression and was rather silent most of the time, but he loosened up a bit with those he held loyalty to. The other taller guard was named Kuo, and he was only a few years older than Zuko. Katara found out he had a funny sense of humor and smiled easily, but when he was on duty he turned into a rather intimidating being. No nobleman or noblewoman had dared to approach her with two fierce-looking guards standing behind her.

“Katara dear, is there anything specific you would like to do today?” Lady Ursa’s voice brought the musing waterbender out of her thoughts.

“Not really, but is there something you would like to do?” Katara asked as she looked up to smile at her.

While the older woman asked the admiral if they could all go into the city, Katara's smile widened a bit. Although she could tell Lady Ursa was still sad and hurt over what happened with Azula, the gentle woman was doing much better if she wanted to leave the palace and the sanctuary of her room. Zuko had thanked her for helping his mother out of her depressed mood and Katara had sincerely replied that she was glad to help, after all, she had been the one who had suggested Ursa visit Azula.

At the thought of Zuko, a smile spread across her face and she let out a tiny blissful sigh. She recalled all the stolen moments they had shared since Zuko had pulled her away from those noblemen that had been flirting with her in the public garden. Those stolen moments between them were filled with quick kisses, light touches, whispered loving words, and although they were short, she treasured those small moments she was able to have with Zuko.

As they passed the hallway that led to Zuko’s study, Katara wondered if she could pop in for a small visit. She glanced at his door only to freeze when she saw Mai opening the door. Mai paused as she noticed her, and with a blank expression, she entered the room and closed the door behind her without another glance.

When did Mai get here? Did Zuko already know? Katara thought to herself as she felt her heart constrict in her chest. And why is she going into his study?

“Katara?” Ursa called out her name gently and touched her arm. “I’m sure Zuko must have an explanation.”

Katara nodded slowly as she allowed Lady Ursa to lead her away, ignoring the worried looks Jee and the two guards gave her. As they walked away, Katara glanced once more at the closed door, wondering what it was Zuko and Mai were talking about and what they could be doing.
Frowning at the knock on his door, Zuko called for whoever it was outside to enter as he finished sealing the message addressed to the prison guard captain directing him to report any activity surrounding Ozai and Wei’s brother. He heard the door open and then close, and he suppressed a tired sigh.

Placing the scroll aside, Zuko looked up and his eyes widened slightly when he saw Mai standing silently before him. Leaning back against his chair, he frowned as he regarded her curiously.

“Mai,” he began. There was a brief pause before he asked, “What are you doing here?”

Mai walked closer to the large desk with a soft smile and Zuko eyed her warily.

“I was worried when news that you had been stranded on an island reached me, so I returned to the Fire Nation to see for myself that you were truly all right,” she responded simply as she moved closer.

Zuko frowned at her words for she should have known he was fine after he had sent a message in reply to her father who had begged him to take her back.

“I am fine,” Zuko replied with a small smile. “You should not have traveled all the way from Omashu, but I thank you, nonetheless, for your concern.”

“Of course I would be concerned about you and would want to make sure you were indeed well,” Mai reiterated with a small frown marring her pale features. “I was worried that you were hurt. I love you.”

Zuko let out a sigh as he stood up from his chair, turned toward the large window, and stared outside.

“You already know what my feelings toward you are,” he reminded her softly.

Although he had his back toward her, Mai gave a small nod and straightened herself as she regarded him silently.
“I’ve been thinking a lot this past month,” she began quietly, “and I have come to realize that I may not have been the best girlfriend for you. But if you give me another chance, I will try my best to be.”

Zuko turned away from the window to frown at her.

“I will not give you another chance because I will never be able to love you like you wish me to,” he told her gently yet firmly.

“But why?” she demanded with narrowed eyes. “Why won’t you?”

Zuko pressed his lips tightly together. He wanted to tell her he would never consider giving her a second chance for he was in love with Katara and he was going to marry her. But, he remained silent since he had promised Katara not to say anything about their engagement yet. Instead, he looked away and turned his gaze back to the scenery outside the window.

Narrowing her eyes in frustration, the tall noblewoman walked around the desk to stand beside him, but he did not even glance her way. She resisted the urge to grind her teeth in anger at his dismissive manner.

“There are other rumors, besides the one about you breaking up with me,” she said dryly, “that say you have already chosen a woman.” Her tone became strained at the end of her sentence. “Is it true?”

Zuko glanced at her from the corner of his eyes before he returned his attention back outside as he answered a simple and truthful, “Yes.”

Mai flinched before she closed her dark eyes and clenched her hands tightly at her sides. Once she knew she was in control again, she reopened her eyes and slowly unclenched her hands.

“Who is this woman?” she asked coldly.

“Everybody will find out soon enough,” he said shortly.
“It’s Katara, isn’t it?!” she hissed angrily.

Zuko let out a sigh as he finally turned his head to look at the angry woman standing beside him. He felt terrible for hurting her. She had been by his side for almost four years after all, even if he had been unhappy during that time. And he had to admit that he was not exactly a good boyfriend to her either. They were just not good for each other.

“Yes,” he confessed softly for he did not want to hurt Mai more than he already had. “Katara is the woman I have chosen as my future wife.”

He sighed guiltily when Mai let out a pained gasp before she recovered herself.

“Why her?” Mai demanded to know. “I am better suited for the position of Fire Lady, I know the way of court life, and I know what is expected of such a position, while Katara is nothing but a simple peasant with no special qualities—”

Her eyes widened when Zuko whirled around to pin her with an angry glare.

“I told you not to insult Katara ever again!” he growled out furiously. “The reason I am marrying Katara is not because she will be the perfect Fire Lady, but because she will be the perfect wife for me!”

Hurt flashed across Mai’s usually expressionless face before she looked away.

“You never defended me like you always do her,” she said blankly.

Zuko let out a tired sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose before he looked at her again.

“After everything I went through for you, this is how you repay me?” she asked bitingly before her voice became laced with pain. “My parents never showed me any affection and I never knew any happiness. But with you I thought I would finally have that chance, a chance to be what I wanted to be and have someone love me. You made me believe I did for four years and now you’re telling me that you’re marrying someone else!”
“I am sorry if I hurt you, if I caused you pain. That was never my intention,” Zuko told her softly. “In the beginning, I truly believed you would make me happy as I would make you. But I cannot lie to you now and say I love you, because I don’t. I can’t.”

“It’s all because of the waterbender,” the dark-haired woman said without any hint of emotion as she stared at him.

Zuko again returned his gaze outside the window where he could just barely see his private garden, the place where Katara and he spent most of their time when they had some free moments to themselves, however brief. A wistful sigh escaped him.

“I have fallen in love with a divine being, a wonderful woman that has shown me how to forget and forgive the horrible events and mistakes in my life,” he spoke up almost to himself.

“How can you say that to me? Don’t you know it pains me to hear you say you love another woman?!” she cried out.

“I’m sorry, Mai, truly I am,” he told her as he again looked at her. “But I am honest with her and with you. While I do care for you and am grateful for everything you have done, I love Katara.”

Mai turned away from him and clenched her eyes shut. Zuko felt another pinch of guilt and he reached out a hand to touch her shoulder.

“If you’d like, we can be friends,” he told her softly. “I’ll help you forget the past—”

She wrenched her shoulder away from his touch and she spun around to glare at him.

“I don’t want to be just friends!” she gritted out. “I don’t want to forget what was between us, I don’t want to stop loving you, and I don’t want you to love another woman!”

“Do not cling to the impossible!” Zuko reprimanded sharply. “I told you that I can never love you. I will always love Katara and she’s going to be my wife!”

He sighed at her pained look and then more softly he said, “Do not hurt yourself anymore, Mai.
Please accept that there is nothing between us and there never will. I’m sure one day you will find a good man who will truly love you.”

“You promised me four years ago that you would never break up with me again,” she reminded him stubbornly.

“This time I cannot keep my promise,” he stated.

Mai was silent for a moment as she continued to stare at him before she straightened her thin shoulders and clasped her hands before her.

“At least this time you didn’t break up with me though a letter,” she said coldly.

Zuko cringed at the reminder before he replaced his impassive mask.

“I already apologized for that,” he said as he clenched his jaw.

She ignored him as she turned away and began to make her way to the door. She opened it and stepped out, but not before looking over her shoulder to give him one last glare.

“You and Katara will regret this,” she warned silently before she closed the door behind her.

Zuko frowned at her words before he sighed as he sat down heavily on his chair. Maybe he should not have said he would be her friend since he knew that he could not, for it would hurt Katara to have to tolerate his former girlfriend’s presence, and he did not want to cause Katara such pain.

He hoped Mai would return to Omashu and someday find the happiness that she longed for. He also hoped she had just said those last words because she was angry and truly did not mean it because if she somehow tried to harm Katara he will not be merciful to her.

Jee frowned as he studied the Pai Sho tiles before him and tried to find a good move. He resisted the urge to smile triumphantly as he moved his piece and sat back to watch the retired general take his turn. Iroh sipped his tea calmly as he studied the Pai Sho board before he reached a hand out and moved his tile.
Katara, Ursa, and Chao glanced at each other with smothered grins when Admiral Jee scowled as he looked down at the game board and Iroh smiled cheerfully as he took another sip from his green tea. They smiled at Jiao as she passed them some pastries and Katara turned to ask Shen and Kuo if they wanted any. A smile had begun to spread across Kuo’s face as he stared at the pastries, but a jab to his side from the older guard’s elbow made him decline and resume his alert position. Shen turned dark, gray eyes to Katara and smiled politely. Katara rolled her eyes at them, but let it go as she turned back to watch Iroh and Jee play Pai Sho.

She remembered watching Mai enter Zuko’s study and she smothered the jealousy that flared within her. It did not matter what Mai wanted because Zuko had assured her he had never loved the young noblewoman and will never resume a relationship with her. But still, that uncertainty continued to nag her.

Iroh and Jee were interrupted from their game when a shadow fell across the board and they all looked up toward the entrance of the veranda where they had been resting for the past hour or so. Realizing it was Mai, they glanced around at each other before they all looked at Katara.

“Why, Lady Mai,” Ursa greeted politely, “I did not know you had returned from Omashu.”

“I just arrived this morning, Lady Ursa,” Mai replied tonelessly. “It is good to see you again, General Iroh.” She gave a small bow to the Fire Lord’s mother and uncle before she turned dark eyes on the silent waterbender. “I would like to speak to Katara.”

It did not go unnoticed by the others that the noblewoman had refrained from adding the respectful title of ‘lady’ to Katara’s name.

Shen and Kuo took a step forward with menacing looks. They had never liked the cold noblewoman and they were not about to allow her to insult the woman that had changed their lord for the better and meant so much to him. The entire palace had noticed that their Fire Lord was no longer in the livid mood he had been in when he returned from the Southern Water Tribe. There was a subtle softness and contentment in his eyes, and Kuo and Shen knew it was all thanks to Lady Katara. They paused, however, when the kind waterbender waved them away with an unaffected smile before she turned to regard the other woman with a wary look.

“Alright,” she consented as she stood from the low table before she smiled at the small group who frowned at her. “I’ll be right back,” she told them.
“We’ll be waiting for you here, my dear,” Iroh piped in with a smile.

Katara nodded, and with another suspicious look aimed at Mai, she walked past the silent dark-haired woman and stepped back into the garden. Mai felt a twinge of resentment swell within her. She had been unable to get close to Zuko’s family like the waterbender had and she clenched her jaw tightly as she followed after the blue-eyed woman.

Iroh and Ursa looked at each other worriedly while Zuko’s personal guards walked toward the entrance of the veranda so they could see the two women. Chao cleared his throat uncomfortably and Jiao nervously began to clean the table of crumbs for both had never seen such a deadly look from the young noblewoman.

“Kuo?” Iroh spoke up softly.

“Yes, General Iroh,” Kuo immediately responded. The younger guard’s light amber eyes flashed as he glanced away from the retreating women as he turned to look at his lord’s uncle.

“I think it’s best you tell my nephew to come,” Iroh told him before he glanced at Ursa. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Kuo glanced briefly at Shen, who nodded, before the younger guard bowed and swiftly made his way back inside the palace in search of his lord.

Katara led Mai some distance away where they could not be heard, but still be seen before she turned toward the taller woman with a guarded expression. She had to stop herself from blurting out the question of what she had been doing in Zuko’s study.

“What do you want to talk about, Mai?” she asked brusquely.

“I know you are the reason why Zuko dumped me,” Mai replied instead in a bitter tone. “You are the reason why Zuko doesn’t love me,” she added more quietly.

Katara frowned at the pain she could detect in the other woman’s cold voice before she let out a sigh. She could understand that Mai must be hurt and that was why the older woman acted so curt toward her—she would probably be the same way if their roles were reverse.
“I had nothing to do with Zuko’s decision in breaking up with you,” she said softly.

“You are lying!” Mai hissed and her hands clenched at her sides. “Zuko would have never broken up with me if you hadn’t intervened! What did you do to snare him?”

The waterbender narrowed her blue eyes indignantly at Mai’s words. As if she would lower herself to tricks just to steal a man. However, she was not even going to bother denying such a stupid accusation.

“The only thing I did to win Zuko’s heart was show him the compassion and friendship that he needed in his life,” Katara answered instead as she raised her chin determinedly. “I lent him a sympathetic ear when he needed someone to talk to, I was there to listen to him and be there for him when he needed someone to keep him company, even if he said so otherwise.” Her cobalt eyes glared angrily at the expressionless woman before her. “Unlike you, I showed Zuko that I love him for everything he is, for both his virtues and faults, and not just for what he has. I showed him that he is worthy of being loved.”

Mai reared back a step as if she had been physically slapped, but she immediately composed herself and squared her thin shoulders, raising her chin even higher as she glared heatedly at the brunette waterbender.

“If Zuko has really told you he will marry you, then why has he not announced his intentions of doing so?” she spat out angrily.

“Oh, if he had his way, Zuko would’ve done so the moment we arrived in the Fire Nation,” Katara replied with a smug smile. “But he held back because of me, because I asked him to wait a bit longer to announce our engagement.”

Mai gritted her teeth together and clenched her hands so tightly that her pale skin turned white.

“Do you really think the Royal Court will accept a mere Water Tribe woman as their Fire Lady?” she asked harshly. “Do you really believe you can handle the tasks and responsibilities of being wife to the Fire Lord and Fire Lady to the Fire Nation?” Mai continued, her tone turning cold and cutting. “You do not even know the way of court life, so how can you believe that you are worthy of such a position, that you will be welcomed?”
Katara felt her stomach sink since all Mai had said was true, those were the same questions she kept asking herself, but she refused to back down and be cowed by this bitter woman.

“As long as Zuko wants me as his wife, that is all that matters,” the blue-eyed woman replied confidently.

There was a long, tension-filled silence as both women glared unwaveringly at each other. The sounds of rustling leaves and the quacks of the turtle-ducks went unnoticed as well as the curious and worried stares from the small group waiting in the veranda. Katara’s eyes narrowed cautiously when a malicious smile spread across Mai’s thin lips.

“You must know some of the Fire Nation traditions,” Mai began casually as she brought a thin hand up to brush her long, dark hair over her shoulder. “Do you really believe Zuko will be faithful to you? As Fire Lord he can have as many concubines, mistresses, lovers as he desires.” Her malicious smile grew. “Perhaps I will be his favorite one. We have been acquainted with each other quite intimately, after all.”

Katara felt a stab of pain, anger and jealousy in her chest at the reminder. She had to force down the urge to lunge at Mai and pull out the woman’s hair in rage. However, she pushed those feelings away and told herself that all of that was in the past and will never be repeated again. She ignored the haughty look Mai gave her at her silence, for Katara knew Zuko was going to marry her, so she tried not to let Mai’s words upset her.

“You may have been close to Zuko in such a way, but it seems you were unable to satisfy and please him, both of which I’ll make sure to do once we marry,” Katara countered with a cool smirk that caused Mai to stiffen and growl under her breath. “Whatever you have to say doesn’t matter because I know Zuko loves me and only me. So just because you were unable to win his love, you don’t have to take your anger out on me.”

Katara’s head snapped to the side when Mai’s palm connected with her cheek. She heard Ursa and Jiao’s loud gasps from all the way in the veranda as well as the men’s angry voices as they shouted her name in concern. Katara brushed her hair away from her face as she slowly turned back. She noticed Jee and Shen swiftly making their way toward them, but she waved them away as she pinned blazing, azure eyes on Mai. Without warning, Katara struck her hand out and slapped Mai’s cheek, causing the noblewoman to gasp and stumble a bit to the side.

Mai looked up to glare at the waterbender as she touched her throbbing cheek with incredulous and angry eyes. She jumped a step back as she slid two small daggers from each of her sleeves before throwing them at the waterbender. Katara expected some sort of retaliation, so she had already pulled a stream of water from her waterskin, and when she saw the daggers heading her way, she flicked them aside with her water whip before she threw a sharp ice disk at Mai, who easily jumped out of
Just as she landed a few feet away, Mai slashed her right arm sideways and a few shuriken flew from her sleeve and headed toward Katara who raised an ice shield before her with one hand. The sharp, metal stars imbedded themselves in the ice with sharp crackling sounds before they were thrown to the side as Katara returned the ice to liquid while with the other hand she cracked her sharp water whip at Mai. The noblewoman tried to dodge but she was not fast enough as the water whip cracked against shoulder. Mai cried out in pain as the force of the blow had her spinning in the air before she fell to the ground.

Standing a few feet away, Jee and Shen looked on with worried frowns as they wondered if they should separate the fighting women.

Katara watched with angry, narrowed eyes as the noblewoman jumped to her feet and clutched at her bruised shoulder. She did not want to hurt Mai out of jealousy, but she was also not going to let the older woman defeat her. She wanted to make it perfectly clear to Mai that Zuko belonged to her and there was nothing the noblewoman could do to separate them.

“Zuko is mine! He is supposed to marry me!” Mai screamed angrily as she righted herself.

“You should accept that Zuko never loved you!” Katara tried to reason with her as well as keep her jealousy away. “Zuko will only love me!”

“Shut up!” Mai shrieked. Her once blank features now contorted in an angry snarl.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she slashed them sideways and a few darts flew at Katara again. The waterbender was able to repel all of them, though there was one that came close to slicing her cheek open. Katara did not let it faze her as she shot forth a few balls of ice. Mai quickly evaded them as she again raised her arm to throw another barrage of sharp weapons. Katara did not give her a chance to launch her attack as she wrapped a water tentacle around the woman’s ankle and pulled it back. Mai gasped as her leg was pulled under her and she landed hard on her side. The waterbender called back the liquid tendril and it coiled around her shoulders as she watched the dark-eyed woman with a satisfied smirk.

“You bitch!” Mai screamed as she swiftly jumped to her feet.

She attacked again, but to her growing anger, the waterbender easily deflected her attacks.
The small crowd in the veranda looked at the fight with worry since it seemed obvious that Mai seriously wanted to hurt Katara. As the fight continued, they wondered what was taking Zuko so long.

Zuko’s worried frown deepened as Kuo silently urged him to go faster. He had been looking through his general’s written report in his study when Kuo had entered and quickly told him his presence was needed in the Royal Palace Garden. The concern in his guard’s eyes made Zuko immediately leave his desk and race down the corridor toward the garden. Kuo had not explained what was going on and Zuko hoped it was not something serious for the thought of something happening to Katara or his mother made his stomach clench.

The entrance to the garden finally came into view and Zuko swiftly stepped out only to be frozen in shock at the scene before him. Katara and Mai were fighting and it was obvious they were intent on harming each other. His eyes quickly accessed his waterbender and he was relieved to see she was unharmed before he looked at Mai. It was obvious she was not faring well against the master waterbender. A few bruises had already formed on her cheeks, there were rips on a few parts of her clothing, and her usually neat hairdo was in disarray.

He wondered what the hell was going on as he stood rooted to the spot—puzzled at the scene and admiring Katara’s graceful movements. He watched as Katara spun away when Mai threw a few kunai at her before Mai was knocked back when Katara slammed a ball of water into her stomach. With a pained grunt Mai landed on her back a few feet away. When it seemed Mai was too exhausted to stand up, Katara relaxed from her fighting stance and turned around to head back to the veranda.

Zuko snapped out of his confused daze when he saw his former girlfriend quickly regain her feet, and with an angry shout, throw more darts from her sleeves at the retreating back of the woman he loved. Katara swiftly whirled around to repel the attack. However, one of the sharp weapons sliced Katara’s arm and her sleeve immediately became stained with blood, causing Zuko to become enraged at the sight. He immediately rushed forward with Kuo running after him.

A satisfied smirk appeared on Mai’s thin lips as one of her darts caught Katara’s arm, making the waterbender wince as she jumped back. Mai slipped a dagger into her hand and swiped her arm out, the small sharp blade flying out swiftly from her hand and aimed at the waterbender’s heart. Katara’s eyes widened but before she could bend some water to block the dagger, a bright fire whip shot forth and deflected it, causing the blade to spin away before it imbedded itself in the grass a few feet away.

“That is enough, Mai!” they heard Zuko roar and both women turned to see him striding angrily toward them.
Kuo, Jee, and Shen were following close behind him with dark expressions on their faces, but they stopped a few feet away just as Iroh, Ursa, Chao, and Jiao approached. They waited quietly to see what was going to happen.

Zuko’s body was stiff with anger as he stopped to stand protectively beside Katara, who was grateful that he had not insulted her skills by pushing her behind him. Katara could feel her sleeve becoming wet with her blood by the small cut on her arm, but she refused to show that the injury and pain affected her. She would heal it later since it was a minor wound. The warmth of Zuko’s body close to hers and the way his arm brushed against her uninjured arm made her heave a relaxed and contented sigh in her head.

Panting in exertion, Mai’s eyes narrowed at the closeness between Zuko and the waterbender’s bodies, but she backed down and relaxed her aggressive stance as she resumed her emotionless mask, though her dark eyes blazed with rage as she glared at Katara. She could not believe she had allowed the water wench to affect her so much that she lost her composure. The noblewoman returned her gaze to Zuko’s hard features and a pleading expression came over her face.

“Zuko, I—”

“How dare you come into my home and attack the one I care so much about,” he cut her off with a growl.

Mai’s hands clenched at her sides as she hissed out, “I was just fighting for what is mine—”

“I already told you that I never belonged to you!” Zuko again interrupted her in a hard tone.

“You would if it wasn’t because of her!” Mai hissed as she turned her glare at Katara. A few strands of her disheveled hair fell over her face and she angrily flicked them away. “She’s the one who took you away from me!”

“It’s not Katara’s fault I was unable to love you,” Zuko growled out lowly, his patience now gone as he stated, “It was your own fault.”

Mai stepped back with a gasp as if he had physically struck her.

“I had foolishly offered my friendship to you and you repaid it by harming someone that is very
important to me,” Zuko continued in a biting and hard tone as he stepped closer to Katara. “I will not make the same mistake twice.”

Katara frowned slightly as she glanced at Zuko while Mai’s eyes widened.

“What do you mean?” the dark-haired noblewoman asked as she clutched at her throat.

“I do not want to see you again, Mai. For daring to hurt the one I love most, you are prohibited from entering the palace until I say so otherwise,” Zuko proclaimed coldly.

“You cannot do that!” Mai exclaimed angrily as her back stiffened.

“I can and I will, for I am Fire Lord,” he replied firmly.

He paused when he felt a small hand touch his arm, and he looked down to see Katara staring up at him with a small frown.

“Maybe you’re being a bit too harsh, Zuko,” she said softly.

Despite the violent anger coursing through his body, Zuko placed his hand above her own and squeezed it gently as he looked intently into her blue eyes.

“I will not forgive those that harm you, Katara,” he told her firmly.

He returned his hard gaze to Mai, who was watching them with angry, narrowed eyes.

“I want you to leave my home immediately, Mai,” he ordered. “Return to your house or to your parents in Omashu. You are not welcomed here until I deem it fit to lift your punishment.”

Mai’s fuming expression disappeared and in its place there was desperation and hurt. What would people say when they found out she had been banished from the Fire Nation Palace?
“Please, Zuko, don’t do this to me!” she exclaimed. “I am sorry! I—”

“Leave now before I ask my guards to escort you out of the palace gates,” Zuko interrupted as his hand continued to hold onto Katara’s, who had decided to let him handle things as he saw fit.

Mai stiffened and her hands clenched at her sides as she glared at them both with hatred. Jee and Zuko’s guards prepared themselves in case the noblewoman decided to attack their lord and his future wife, but she relaxed and straightened herself into the noblewoman she was raised to be, her blank features once again returning to her. She looked at Zuko sadly before she glared at Katara.

“Everything I told you before is the truth,” she said in a monotone voice. Without another glance or word she turned around and walked back toward the entrance of the palace.

Once she was out of sight, Zuko swiftly turned to Katara to check on her, his enraged features now full of concern as he brushed his fingers along the bloody sleeve.

“Are you all right? Does it hurt too much?” he asked worriedly as his eyes darted back to her face to see if she was in too much pain.

“I’m fine. It’s just a small cut,” Katara reassured him as she covered her hand with glowing water and brought it to her wound to heal it. “There, all better,” she said as she looked up to give him a reassuring smile.

Not caring if they were being watched or not, Zuko wrapped his arms around her and gently pulled her to him. Katara tensed for only a second before she melted into his warm and protective arms.

“I was worried,” he confessed quietly against her temple where he pressed his lips.

Katara pulled slightly away to frown at him.

“I am more than capable of defending myself against Mai,” she told him stiffly.

“I know you are,” Zuko admitted. “But when I saw your sleeve get stained with your blood it reminded me of…” he trailed off since they both knew he was thinking of the time Feng had
wounded her. His arms tightened around her.

“Katara?” they heard Ursa called out and they pulled apart to watch her approach them quickly with the others following behind her. “Are you all right, Katara?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Katara reassured them with a small smile.

She tried to ignore the fact that her cheeks were probably painted red with her blush. Her smile widened when Ursa embraced her briefly before she pulled her sleeve up to make sure her wound was healed, smiling gladly when she saw it was.

“What are you going to do with Mai?” Iroh asked as he grimly looked at his nephew.

Zuko took his eyes away from Katara long enough to address his personal guards.

“Shen, Kuo, alert the other guards that Lady Mai has been banished from the palace until I say otherwise,” he told them firmly. “She is not to approach Lady Katara.”

“Yes, my lord,” Shen immediately answered as his features hardened in determination.

“We will keep Lady Katara safe,” Kuo answered fiercely.

Both of them bowed before they turned away to follow their lord’s orders as well as to make sure the noblewoman had left the palace. After fussing over Katara a while longer, Ursa and Iroh, along with Jee, Chao, and Jiao, walked back inside the palace to give the young lord and his waterbending woman some privacy.

As soon as they were alone, Zuko pulled her close to him again and kissed her softly on the lips before he tucked her against his chest as he ran his hand through her mussed hair, whispering to her that he was glad she was all right and that he would not have forgiven himself if something happened to her. Katara relaxed in his embrace since she knew he had been worried and afraid due to past memories of their capture. Besides, she needed some comforting since Mai’s parting words shook her up a bit.
Blue eyes staring blankly at the dark ceiling, Katara let out a sigh before she rolled to her side and stared at the window in her room. The curtains were drawn closed, so the room was dark except for the light coming from the small candle on her nightstand. It was sometime in the late hours of the night and she could not find rest no matter how much she tried to make herself sleep, for Mai’s words kept repeating over and over in her head. She knew she should not allow what Mai had said affect her, but she could not deny the fact that some of the things she had said were true. Katara was born an ordinary woman, and even thought she was a chieftain’s daughter, it did not hold the same significance of a noblewoman in her culture. She did not have the right upbringing to be Fire Lady, and she was probably not going to be accepted, being from the Southern Water Tribe and a waterbender.

She knew in her heart that Zuko wanted to marry her for her, because he loved her, loved who she was, but she did not want him to have any problems with those of his court or with his people, because of his decision of taking a waterbender as his wife. But she also did not want to give him up. A deep sigh escaped her and she rubbed her eyes. What should she do?

She was startled out of her thoughts when a faint scratching sound coming from the window reached her ears. She tensed, fearing that someone was trying to break into her room. She held her breath in order to make sure what she heard was real, and when she made out the sound of something outside her window, her heart began to pound in anxiety. She glanced at her door. Should she run and search for Zuko?

Shaking her head and berating herself for letting herself be frightened, she took a deep breath to calm herself down before she quietly slipped from the bed, gathering water from the basin on the dresser and bending it into a liquid ribbon around her arm as she moved toward the window. She paused beside it when she heard the window being opened and her heartbeat increased as cold sweat beaded on her forehead. Narrowing her eyes and preparing herself for a fight, Katara swiftly pulled one side of the curtain aside before she threw the water at the shadow. Hearing a muffled curse, she gathered more water to her and prepared another attack.

“Katara, wait! It’s me!”

“Zuko?” Katara asked incredulously.

She cautiously stepped closer to the window and looked down, and sure enough, she spotted Zuko hanging from the windowsill, his face, hair, and clothes dripping with water as he glared at her. She suppressed a laugh at the sight of him, but Zuko saw her lips twitch in amusement and he scowled at her.

“What are you doing here?” Katara asked softly as she looked around to see if anybody was watching them. “You should leave before someone sees you.”
Zuko pulled himself up and crouched on the windowsill as he raised his body temperature to dry himself before he climbed off and stepped into the room. Katara backed away to give him some space, returning the rest of the water to the basin before looking at him again. She noticed he was wearing his Blue Spirit outfit minus his swords. The white and blue demon mask hung behind his head. Zuko turned to close the window and pulled the curtains close before he turned back to face her. Katara felt her heart skip a beat as he continued to stare at her without saying anything and she self-consciously pulled at her white nightgown as she shuffled her bare feet while her other hand tried to smooth back her hair.

“Zuko?” she called out softly.

Zuko blinked at the sound of her voice and he snapped his eyes away from admiring her form and looked back to her blushing face. He had never seen Katara in a nightgown before and he was unable to stop himself from staring. The white nightgown was long, lose, and simple, not at all revealing or provocative, but the innocent look it provided Katara along with the red blush on her cheeks and her mussed hair made something clench within him and his desire spike. It took all he had not to carry her to her bed. Damn, he knew he should not have come.

“I, uh,” he stammered before he inwardly scolded himself. He had never allowed a woman to affect him the way Katara did without even trying. He cleared his throat as he pulled off his gloves and tucked them into the sash around his waist.

“I’m sorry if I woke you up, but I wanted to see you and make sure you were really okay after what happened with Mai earlier today,” he said with a concerned look.

“I’m fine,” Katara reassured him again before she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and narrowed her eyes. “I was not about to let your ex-girlfriend defeat me.”

Zuko frowned at her words before he sighed as he ran a hand through his short hair.

“I’m sorry,” he began softly, “I should have known Mai would’ve done something since she was very upset when she came into my study to ask me to give her another chance and I refused. She was even more upset when I confessed that you are the woman I love.”

Katara felt her heart flutter at his words and she uncrossed her arms as she gave him a soft smile before a frown appeared on her brow.
“You told Mai about our engagement?” she asked.

“No, she figured it out on her own. She heard people gossiping that I already have a woman in mind as my future wife,” he replied. “And when she asked me if it was you, I could not deny it.”

Katara nodded before she sighed as she brushed her hair out of her face. She missed the smoldering look that flashed across Zuko’s face as her smooth throat was exposed by her action.

“I hope she doesn’t say anything about our engagement before I can talk to my family and Aang,” she muttered.

“Mai is not a person that enjoys to gossip,” Zuko assured her. “And I’m sure she will not say anything in order to avoid being ridiculed for losing the Fire Lord’s favor.”

*Or maybe she won’t say anything because she still believes she can win you back,* Katara thought grimly.

“I see,” was her low response before she sighed. “She was very hurt.”

“I know,” he responded quietly as he again ran a hand through his loose hair. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. I had hoped that she would understand and accept my decision to break up with her the first time, but I see now it was foolish of me to think that. But,” his voice hardened, “that is no excuse for her attacking you.”

Katara sighed again and wrapped her arms around herself.

“Katara,” Zuko spoke up softly as he moved closer to her, though he refrained from touching her since he wanted to maintain control. “My mother told me you and Mai had been arguing for a while before she attacked you,” his face darkened as he said this, “and you fought back, and I was wondering if you could tell me what she said to you.”

Katara stiffened slightly before she turned away and moved closer to the center of the room. Zuko frowned in alarm and concern as he followed after her, placing a hand gently on her shoulder to stop her from moving further away from him.
“Katara, what did she tell you?” he asked more commandingly.

The blue-eyed woman sighed before she turned to look into the concerned eyes of her beloved. La, she loved him so much and she did not want to lose him. She would not be able to bear it if that were to happen.

“Mai just wanted to let me know that she will not give you up,” she began hesitantly. She relaxed a bit when Zuko scowled. “She basically said that…that I am not right for you.”

Zuko frowned darkly as he growled out, “As if she’s right for me.”

He lifted his hand from her shoulder and caressed her cheek softly with the back of his fingers before he cupped her smooth cheek. Katara immediately relaxed underneath his touch and she leaned her head toward his warm hand.

“You are the woman for me, Katara, for in some ways you are just like me, but in others you are different and complement who I am,” he told her resolutely.

Katara smiled at the conviction in his voice and she reached up a hand to gently trace her fingers along the edge of his scar. Zuko pressed his lips against her wrist as he smiled softly at her, a tender smile he only reserved for her and no one else. They were silent for a moment as they stared into each other’s eyes, their hands caressing each other’s faces, before Katara sighed and moved away, causing Zuko to frown.

“Mai did make some good points, though,” she said quietly as she moved toward the window where she slightly lifted one side of the curtain and peered out into the dark night.

“And what are those?” the golden-eyed lord asked as he followed her, his frown deepening.

Katara remained quiet for a moment before she let out a tiny sigh as she dropped the curtain in its place and turned to regard Zuko with a frown.

“Your courtiers will probably not accept you taking a Water Tribe woman as your wife,” she began, “And I don’t want to cause any problems for you—”
“No,” Zuko interrupted her quickly with a shake of his head. “Don’t think that you will be problematic for me. I know some will protest the idea of having a Water Tribe woman as my wife and their Fire Lady, but they will eventually have to accept my decision. If there are problems, they will be worth it as long as I have you.”

“Zuko,” Katara breathed out.

“Besides,” Zuko continued firmly, “I could always add that times have changed and a marriage between us will benefit both our countries. It will bring a strong alliance between the Fire Nation and the Southern Water Tribe and ensure peace.”

“I…I guess you’re right about that,” Katara agreed hesitantly.

“They will accept you eventually. Don’t worry,” he told her gently with a small, reassuring smile.

“But there’s also the fact that I know nothing about being a Fire Lady,” she continued slowly. “What if I make a mistake and I end up shaming you?”

“I know you are not knowledgeable about court life and the responsibilities of being my Fire Lady, but that is not why I chose to marry you,” Zuko stated as he crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at her.

“I know that, Zuko,” Katara replied with a bit of exasperation. “But I refuse to be an incompetent Fire Lady!”

Zuko opened his mouth to argue, but Katara did not let him say anything as she placed her hands on her hips and looked at him determinedly.

“If I am going to marry you, then I want to learn how to act with the Royal Court, what traditions I should know of the Fire Nation, and what will be expected of me as Fire Lady,” she told him firmly.

“It will be too much to learn so quickly,” Zuko warned her softly.
“I will learn everything there is to know. I will not make a fool of you or myself,” Katara stated decisively. “I will prove Mai wrong. I will be a worthy wife and Fire Lady for you!” she added and her blue eyes blazed with determination.

Zuko felt a flare of heat go through him at her flashing cobalt eyes and resolute words. This was the woman he wanted as wife, strong and beautiful, determined to stand by his side and do everything in her power to help him and make him happy. Not a placid and emotionless woman like Mai or a simpering and fragile female like the other noblewomen.

The young lord swiftly took the few steps that would bring him closer to the waterbender and he wrapped his arms around her body, drawing her close to his chest and nuzzling his face against her hair.

“You have always been worthy,” he whispered gently near her ear and he smiled when Katara shivered as his breath coasted along her skin. He squeezed her once before he pulled back slightly to look at her.

“I will ask my mother and have a tutor help you so you can be prepared for when we do marry,” he told her with a smile.

“Thank you, Zuko.” Katara returned the smile with a bright one of her own and she nuzzled her face against his chest and squeezed him tightly with her arms, making Zuko chuckle softly as he returned her embrace.

Zuko kissed her temple and sighed as he rested his chin on her head as he softly said, “I should be the one thanking you for wanting to take your responsibilities as Fire Lady seriously. It makes me glad to know that my wife will be willing to help me in my rule.”

Katara blushed slightly and smiled happily as she snuggled into him with a content sigh. How she missed having Zuko’s arms wrapped around her.

“Did Mai say anything else to you?” he asked with a sharp edge to his voice and his arms tightened around her protectively when Katara tensed slightly. “She did, didn’t she? What did she say?” he asked again more darkly.

Katara pulled away from him as she hesitated for a moment for she did not want to show him how pathetically low her self-esteem was concerning him. Exhaling deeply, she turned away and sat
down at the edge of her bed. Zuko watched with a frown as Katara looked down to stare at her hands in order to avoid his eyes. He walked forward and quietly sat down beside her, staring intently at her as he waited for her to continue.

“She asked me if I truly believe that I will be the only one in your life,” she said almost in a whisper.

“What?” Zuko asked as his brow furrowed.

“She said that being Fire Lord allows you to have all the women, concubines, you want,” she continued quietly and clenched her hands on her lap.

Zuko’s frown deepened as he watched her chew her lip and glare at the floor, still refusing to meet his gaze.

“That is true,” he began slowly before he continued quickly when he heard her sharp intake of air, “But I refuse to have them. I have refused the concubines a few noblemen have tried to gift me since my coronation. I don’t have a need for them. You don’t have to worry about that because I am not going to accept or demand any in the future.”

“Are you being truthful or are you just saying that to placate me?” she asked warily.

“I am being truthful,” Zuko growled out firmly before he continued more softly, “I witnessed how it hurt my mother to know Ozai slept with Azulon’s concubines.”

Katara gasped softly. Poor Lady Ursa. She deserved someone better who could treat her and love her the way she deserved. Perhaps one day she will find that person to make her happy.

“My mother’s love for Ozai disappeared with his mistreatment and unfaithfulness and she suffered so much. I will never hurt you in such a way, Katara,” he reassured her definitely.

He reached out to take her hand and brought it to his lips as he stared into her conflicted eyes.

“Besides, you’re the only woman I desire,” he stated huskily.
“You say that now, but what if you get bored of me once you finally have me?” she countered quietly as she tried to pull her hand away.

Zuko tightened his grip on her hand and pulled her firmly to him, until she was caged within the circle of his arms. He lifted her chin with one hand and narrowed his golden eyes at her, causing Katara to gasp softly at the simmering anger she could see in those amber orbs.

“That is not going to happen,” Zuko growled out as his face contorted into a fierce scowl. “I already told you it isn’t just your body that I desire. I desire everything that you are! You’re the only one I love, you’re the only one who makes me happy, something Mai and no other woman could or would be able to do. I don’t want to hear you say something like that again.”

Katara stared deeply into his eyes for a long moment, and what she saw made her heart swell and her doubting spirit ease. She reached for his face, and pulling him down toward her, she pressed her lips fiercely to his, licking his lower lip and pulling it into her mouth to nibble softly at it. If Zuko was surprised at her reaction to his words, he didn’t show it as he lifted her to him so their upper bodies pressed tightly together, and he returned her kiss just as ardently. They groaned against each other’s mouths for it had been a long while since they had kissed one another so passionately. When they pulled apart to take in some air, Katara gave him a radiant smile that made his breath hitch.

“Good, because having concubines or lovers is unacceptable in my tribe, and I will not allow you to have one and disrespect me in such a way,” Katara told him sternly. “If I’m to learn and follow your traditions, then I expect you to know and follow some of mine.”

Zuko chuckled quietly as he pressed a kiss against her furrowed brow.

“It’s only fair I do so,” he agreed with a nod.

“You are mine and mine only,” she continued with a low growl and Zuko shivered pleasantly at the possessiveness in her tone. “I do not and will not share, you hear me?”

“Perfectly, love,” Zuko replied as he gave her a playful squeeze as he smirked at her. “You don’t need to worry about any concubines because you are the only woman that can arouse me so quickly and for the slightest thing.”

He proved his point by pressing against Katara’s lower back and pulling her tightly against him.
Katara groaned as she felt his hardness against her stomach and a low moan escaped her lips. She tensed, however, when one of his hands cupped her breast and she immediately tried to place some distance between them.

“Zuko…” she said breathlessly as she tried to fight the desire growing within her. “You should leave…”

“No, let me stay.” Zuko murmured against her ear as he grazed his nose down her throat and inhaled her scent. “Just for a few more minutes, love. Who knows when I’ll be able to touch you again like this in the following days?”

Katara pressed her hands against his chest to push him away, but his whispered words and the feeling of his lips against the skin of her throat made her fist her hands in the fabric of his black shirt and she tilted her head slightly to the side to give him more access to her neck. Zuko groaned as she again relaxed against him and he pressed hot, wet kisses on her skin.

One of his hands caressed her cheek before he curled it around to cup her neck and urge her lips up to his, sighing when he savored her sweet taste. When she moaned softly against his mouth, he outlined her lower lip with the tip of his tongue, and when she opened her mouth, he swiftly thrust it between her succulent lips. Katara felt her bare toes curl as Zuko’s wet tongue played with hers and her hands clenched more tightly onto the fabric of his shirt as he tightened his grip on her long hair.

As they pulled slightly apart to gather some air, Katara again tried to convince him to leave before she lost all reason. With his reassurance came a quiver of warmth and desire that she linked with being caressed and kissed by him. He was hard and masculine yet he was also gentle. Every time he touched her, he taught her what her own body wanted and needed. Only being within the warmth and strength of Zuko’s arms did something strong and fierce awakened deep inside her, something that strained hungrily toward him and only him. The longer they touched, the more they kissed, the more difficult it was for her to stick to her principles. Unlike Aang or Jet, she could not resist Zuko. There was a part of her that was nervous and frightened at what she would find if she gave into her desires. But she knew Zuko would never hurt her. When Zuko pressed his lips against hers once again and dipped his tongue inside her mouth, Katara melted against him, her resistance evaporating like a puddle in a desert, and she reciprocated his passionate kiss with her own.

Zuko groaned loudly at her surrender, immensely grateful that she was once again gifting him with a part of herself that she had never given any man before. He did not take her capitulation for granted, for he knew how much it cost her to disregard what her culture dictated in order to please him and be close to him. He cherished and treasured her more because of it. With a sigh, he deepened their kiss and pressed closer against her.

Katara moaned against her firebender’s mouth when Zuko slid his hand up her side to firmly cup her
breast through her nightclothes. She inhaled sharply when his palm brushed against her nipple, causing it to immediately harden. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and gently sucked on his probing tongue.

Zuko groaned at the pleasurable sensation as he began to gently knead her breast. He smiled against her lips when she softly called his name. He could feel his cock straining against the tightness of his black pants, and it was all he could do not to take her right then and there. He squeezed his waterbender’s soft breast a few more times before he slowly began to slide his hand down her side, the slimness of her waist, and the curve of her hip until he stopped at her knee. Tangling his tongue with hers, Zuko slowly raised the hem of her white nightgown until it bunched up past her knee. He felt more than heard Katara gasp as his hand roamed up under the thin nightdress.

Katara trembled in Zuko’s embrace as she felt his warm hand slowly, gently, travel up her thigh. He traced languid circles on her flesh and she felt her breath quicken when he trailed his fingers inwardly. She held her breath when his long fingers inched closing to her aching core, sending a shock of electricity through her body.

Zuko’s breath hitched in surprise when his fingers came in contact with her bare, damp curls. Pulling back from their kiss, Zuko panted heavily as he stared down into her face. He watched as Katara opened her eyes to give him a shy smile.

“You aren’t wearing your wrappings,” he stated the obvious in a husky tone.

“I only do so when I’m not camping in the wilderness. They’re uncomfortable to sleep in,” she responded dazedly.

“All this time I was talking to you while you were naked beneath that nightdress,” he groaned as he kissed her cheek. Then he again bent down to devour her mouth.

Katara moaned against his lips before she gasped in surprise and delight when Zuko began to rub his fingers gently between her legs. The touch of his hand on such an intimate place was no longer a shock, but it was powerful nonetheless. The waterbender felt a rush of her arousal seep out from within her at the incredible pleasure and she kissed him desperately. She moaned loudly and threw her head back when he slipped his fingers between her slick folds and slid them up and down. He stroked her a few times before he gently slid a finger inside her, eliciting a loud moan from her. When he curled his finger and rubbed against her slick walls, Katara’s head fell forward on his shoulder with a whimper.

“Mm, you’re so wet, Katara,” Zuko growled delightedly against her hair.
He gently pulled her head back with his other hand so he could stare at her face. His eyes darkened and his cock throbbed at the sight of Katara’s flushed cheeks, kiss-swollen lips, and parted mouth. When she opened her ocean blue eyes to stare at him with a dazed, passion-filled gaze, he swooped back down to capture her mouth. Katara groaned as their lips rubbed against each other and their tongues intertwined. Suddenly, Zuko pulled his finger out of her and she groaned in disappointment. A surprised gasp escaped her when Zuko wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her up so she could straddle his lap—the nightgown now pulled up to her thighs.

“Zuko,” she breathed tremulously as she pulled her head back to stare at him—equally nervous and aroused.

“Shh, it’s okay,” the firebender soothed her softly as he reached up a hand to gently caress her cheek. “I just want to touch you.”

He drew her face down and touched his lips to hers. Katara sighed breathlessly at the sultry kiss he was bestowing on her. Zuko grabbed her hips and caressed her slowly for a moment before he pulled her tightly against him. Katara gasped loudly as her aching core came in contact with his covered hardness. A long groan of pleasure escaped Zuko’s throat. He could feel her damp heat through the only cloth that separated them and his hips grinded against her at the thought.

“Ohh,” the waterbender mewled at the sensation, “Mmm.”

She again opened her eyes when Zuko ended their kiss and she watched dazedly as he stared passionately at her before his eyes roamed down to her heaving chest. She felt her heart thump wildly when Zuko reached up and slowly tugged at the laces that held the top of her nightgown closed. She felt the cloth give way beneath his hands and she moaned, desperate to feel his hands on her aching breasts. When he began to part the edges aside, she ground her hips into his in anticipation, causing him to pause as he groaned her name. She felt his erection straining against his pants and she squirmed a little harder, moaning as pleasure sparked up her spine at the amazing sensation.

“Gods, Katara, you’re killing me,” Zuko rasped before he captured her lips in an ardent kiss that soon had them breathless.

Zuko quickly pulled away, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply in order to once again rein in his urge to throw her onto her back and make her his.
Not yet, he reminded the animal side of him, But soon.

“Zuko?” he heard Katara called out to him inquiringly as she gently touched his cheek.

He reopened his eyes and smiled at her reassuringly before he kissed her forehead then her mouth. He leaned away and again returned his attention to where his hands were still holding the sides of her nightdress. He quickly slipped his hands inside and touched her chest, causing her breath to hitch. He ran his hands up onto her shoulders then down her arms, slipping the white material down until it pooled around her waist. His eyes quickly fixated themselves upon her exquisite breasts. His mouth watered when he saw that her dusky peaks were hard and protruding.

Katara trembled at the sensation of the chilly temperature hitting her bare flesh and at the hungry gleam in her firebender’s amber eyes. Her hands twitched anxiously in the dark strands of hair at his nape.

“So beautiful,” he breathed tenderly, causing Katara to smile.

Her smile soon turned into an ‘O’ of pleasure when Zuko bent down to lick her right nipple while one of his hands stroked her other breast. Her hands clenched more tightly into his hair when he licked a few more times before he sucked the stiff bud into his hot mouth.

“Oh, ah!” she cried out, her back arching instinctively closer to him.

Wrapping one arm tightly around her lower back, Zuko closed his eyes in pleasure and began suckling her more insistently as he rubbed his aching erection against her warm core. When she moaned, Zuko gently scraped his teeth on her nipple before soothing it again with his tongue and lips. He pulled his head back to watch the pleasure on her face as his hand continued to knead her breast.

Leaning forward to press his lips against her cheek, Zuko cupped her ass with his other hand and began to grind his waterbender’s hot, drenched pussy slowly against his cock. He felt her jerk and heard her gasp when the ridge of his shaft rubbed against her little bundle of nerves, and he smiled.

“Ah, my little waterbender,” he breathed huskily into her ear, “can you feel what you do to me?”

Katara could only moan as pleasure robbed her ability to speak and turned her brain to mush. Her
body felt like it was on fire and it seemed like all her blood had rushed down to the spot between her legs where Zuko was rubbing his hardness against.

With a groan, Zuko leaned his forehead against her and began to rock his hips against her at the same time he ground her against him. They both gasped in pleasure as they moved against each other. Zuko again leaned down to suck her nipple into his mouth while his hand continued to squeeze and rub her other breast.

“Zuko, oh!” Katara cried out as her head fell back.

She closed her eyes tightly and breathed shallowly as her stomach quivered in pleasure. Her fingers dug into his clothed shoulders. Zuko’s movements were slow, but the friction of his clothed erection against her bare sex sent shockwaves of immense pleasure throughout her body. Just when she thought the pleasure could not get any better, Zuko let go of her breast and slipped his hand between their straining bodies. Katara cried out when his fingers circled the swollen nub nestled above her clenching entrance at the same time he tugged her nipple with his lips. When she felt Zuko moved his head away, Katara dazedly opened her eyes and looked at him. She was mesmerized by the sight of his face as he continued to rock them together. The strong line of his jaw was tense, the muscles flexing and jumping underneath his skin, sweat beaded on his forehead, his teeth tightly clenched together. His eyelids were low as he watched his hand move frantically beneath the hem of her white nightdress as he continued to touch her slick pussy.

Zuko’s golden eyes flickered up toward Katara’s face when he felt her watching him. Her long, dark eyelashes fluttered over the soft skin of her flushed face. Her liquid blue eyes held so much wonder and desire it made his breath hitch and pleasure skitter down his spine. He crashed his mouth to hers and kissed her hungrily, exploring every inch of her delicious mouth with his eager tongue. The contrast between Katara’s semi-nude body and his fully clothed one caused his stomach to tighten and his shaft to throb. He could feel her aroused fluids saturating into his pants, and the damp feeling against the skin of his cock only caused him to grind his hips faster and fiercely rub against her clit as his orgasm approached.

“Ahh!” Katara’s cry of ecstasy was swallowed by Zuko’s mouth as she jerked and strained against his firm body.

“Ohhh!” Zuko groaned in pleasure a few seconds later as he wrapped his arms tightly around her and followed her off the cliff into his own shuddering release.

They pressed their lips together in a small kiss before they rested their foreheads together as they panted and trembled, waiting blissfully to come back from their orgasms. Zuko again captured Katara’s lips with his, tenderly gliding them together in gentle, affectionate kisses. Katara sighed contentedly against his mouth as she slumped against his strong frame. Zuko smiled at her obvious
contentment and he brought her tightly against his chest, tucking her head beneath his chin, while one hand stroked her back.

“I can’t wait to finally make love to you, Katara,” he breathed softly against her head, “I want to make you mine in every way possible.”

Katara felt her cheeks heat up both in pleasure of his words and embarrassment for her lack of self-control when it concerned Zuko.

“How do you have us continue in such a manner until we marry.”

Zuko frowned and his chest tightened. Did she regret what they did?

As if reading his thoughts, Katara pulled back to stare softly into his eyes and cupped his left cheek with her hand.

“I don’t regret any of the moments I’ve spent in your arms, Zuko,” she told him truthfully, “I enjoy them very much, too much, and that is the issue.”

When he frowned in confusion and apprehension, Katara leaned forward to peck his lips before looking at him again.

“My desire for you is so powerful that it scares me to think that I will shame my family’s honor and our traditions in a moment of passion and heat,” she continued hesitantly.

Zuko relaxed and he reached up his own hand to cup her soft cheek.

“I understand,” he told her, “My desire for you is as powerful if not more so, but I will never do anything that would hurt you.”

“I know,” she breathed with a smile.
She paused briefly and Zuko watched as she nervously licked her lips.

“Perhaps…if we make sure I do not become completely undressed as I am right now…it would be okay?” she began carefully.

Groaning, Zuko bent down to kiss her gratefully and his arms tightened around her. When he pulled away he smiled widely at her. Katara’s hesitation disappeared at his expression and she smiled at him.

“Thank Agni you said that,” the firebender muttered huskily, “I think I would die if you don’t let me touch you again.”

Katara could not suppress her giggles at his exaggerations.

Zuko stared intensely into her blue eyes before he leaned toward her face, his warm breath coasting along the skin of her lips. Katara’s eyes fluttered close when Zuko brushed his lips against hers in a gentle kiss. Zuko sighed as her sweet taste once again coated his tongue. He could not get enough of her. He could sit here with his waterbender straddling his lap, languidly kissing her all night, but he knew he could not if he wanted to keep his promise to respect her family and culture, which caused a pang of regret to appear on his chest.

With another sigh, he wound their kiss down before slowly pulling away. Katara opened her eyes when his lips no longer touched hers. Zuko gently lifted her from his lap and settled her back down on the bed beside him. He smiled affectionately when she blushed as she hurriedly retied the laces of her nightgown.

“I’ll let you rest now. You’ve been through a lot today,” he said as he caressed her blushing cheek.

Katara nodded as she looked down to smooth down her nightdress, remembering in pleasurable detail the sensation of her sex pressing against the hardness between Zuko’s legs. Her eyes automatically landed on that spot of his anatomy and they widened in embarrassment at the evidence of her aroused wetness staining his dark pants a darker color.

Watching the direction of her gaze and the reddening of her cheeks, Zuko glanced down at his lap. A smirk curled his lips at the large, damp spot before he looked up at her with a roguish smile.
“I will definitely never wash these pants again,” he said wickedly.

“Zuko!” Katara exclaimed even as a laugh escaped her mouth.

Chuckling, Zuko stood up and grinned in satisfaction down at her. Katara shook her head, but a smile still tugged at the corner of her lips as she stood up before him.

Zuko’s expression softened as he cupped her cheek and bent down to kiss her one more time before pulling away. Sighing softly, Katara slowly opened her eyes. Her heart skipped a beat at the look he was giving her, a look that expressed all the love and tenderness he felt for her and only her.

“Good night, Katara,” he breathed softly against her skin, causing a pleasant shiver to trickle down her spine.

“Good night, Zuko,” she whispered with a loving smile.

Zuko returned the smile briefly at her before he again turned toward the window, pulling the Blue Spirit mask over his face and his gloves over his hands. He lifted one side of the curtain, and once he was sure there was no one in sight, he pulled the curtain aside and opened the window. He climbed onto the windowsill and the curtains ruffled as a night breeze blew in, and with one last look over his shoulder from behind the mask, he dropped down silently and disappeared.

Katara stared at the spot where Zuko had been before she moved to close the window and the curtains before going to the bathroom to clean up. She blushed deeply as she washed between her legs, remembering the passionate moment between them from a few minutes ago. She had to be more careful when she was around Zuko. It seemed as if she could not control herself. Once finished, she returned to the comfort of her bed. As she laid down, she brought her fingers to her lips where it still tingled because of the last kiss Zuko had given her. Closing her eyes, she let out a sigh as she waited for sleep to claim her as her doubts and that strange sense of dread disappeared for the moment as she recalled Zuko’s words and his touch.
Painful Insecurities

Resisting the urge to rub her temples, Katara took a deep breath as she repeated all the names of the past Fire Lords and their family members for the third time. Once she ended with Zuko as the current Fire Lord and Lady Ursa and General Iroh as his only family members at the moment, she beamed proudly for getting all the names and their orders right without stumbling.

“Very good, Lady Katara,” Madam Fang Hua praised her with a small smile and an approving nod of her head before her aged face again returned to its stern expression. “Now we will study some of the most important traditions in the Fire Nation.”

Katara’s smile dropped a bit and her shoulders sagged in fatigue for a brief moment. Sitting beside her, Ursa smiled sympathetically and patted her hand. The three women were sitting on a pile of large, comfortable cushions surrounding a small low table covered with piles of scrolls and tomes. Jee was sitting on a chair some distance away reading over a report, and standing quietly on either side of him, were Shen and Kuo.

They were in the spacious library of the Fire Nation Palace, and although not as magnificent as Wan Shi Tong’s Library that was now buried deep in the Earth Kingdom desert, Katara still thought it was impressive. Dark mahogany shelves reaching from the floor to the high ceiling along all four walls of the large room were filled with thousands of books and scrolls. There was another door that led into another room with more scrolls and tomes, and when Katara asked about that room, she was told it was where the ancient records and scrolls were held. Some of the documents were so old they had to be handled carefully or they would come apart.

Ever since Mai had attacked her, Zuko was even stricter with her safety. And it did not help matters when a few more noblemen had tried to approach her again. Whenever he was not with her, Zuko had Shen and Kuo, or other guards accompany her everywhere she went despite her angry protests. Luckily, he had relaxed a bit once they found out Mai had again departed for Omashu when it was obvious Zuko was not going to forgive her any time soon, if ever. Katara had tried to reason with him again, arguing that he may have been too harsh on his punishment of the noblewoman, but Zuko had again told her he would not forgive any who dared hurt her.

With an inaudible sigh about his stubbornness and overprotectiveness, Katara straightened herself and listened to the slightly rough, yet soft tone of the old tutor as she began another lesson.

Madam Fang Hua was the head of the oldest noble family in the Fire Nation after her husband died two years before. She was a tiny, old woman whose small round face held more wrinkles than wet leather and whose head was covered with long silver hair that reached almost to her knees. Her rich, brown eyes still held a hint of sharp intelligence and cunning that caused most people to become unnerved by them. However, when she smiled and her eyes brightened in amusement or approval,
Katara could see that in her youth the small woman must have been a beauty.

Madam Fang Hua had been delighted when she was asked to instruct Fire Lord Zuko’s future bride about everything there was to know about the Fire Nation, such as its traditions and history, as well as the way of court life. If she was surprised to find out the future Fire Lady was from the Southern Water Tribe, the old woman did not show it and swore not to tell anyone whom the Fire Lord planned to marry. She took her job seriously, practically pounding all her lessons into Katara’s head.

As the morning turned into noon, Katara felt a headache coming on as the lessons continued. For the past few days, both noblewomen taught her all about court life, the proper way to behave among the upper society, the history of the Fire Nation and its traditions, and all the responsibilities that came with the title of Fire Lady. Katara felt overwhelmed as she tried to remember everything she had learned so far and along with what was being said at the moment, but there were so many things to remember! Some of the traditions were just so different from the Southern Water Tribe. The more she learned, the more she questioned if she could really do this, if she was capable of leaving her safe and simple life in her tribe to live in this strict environment with so many rules, politics and intrigues.

But she wanted to marry Zuko, there was no question about it. If she was going to become the wife of the Fire Lord, then she would have to endure it and learn everything she had to learn.

She had also found out that the Fire Sages were visited by the Fire Lords and the rest of the nobility in order to see which day special events—such as the Fire Lord’s coronation and wedding—should be held due to the good omens given by the position of the stars and planets in the sky. She wondered if Zuko was going to take them to the Fire Sages to see what day they considered the best for their wedding. That is, if she was accepted by the council once they announced their engagement. What if the Fire Sages refused to marry them?

Madam Fang Hua was interrupted from her lesson when the large door to the library was opened and the occupants in the room turned to see Zuko and Iroh enter. All except Ursa and Katara stood and bowed to the Fire Lord who acknowledged them briefly with a nod of his head, for his attention was solely focused on his waterbender. Their eyes met immediately and Zuko frowned slightly when he noticed the weariness in his future bride’s blue orbs. It was all Zuko could do to break eye contact so he could address the old noblewoman.

“Madam Fang Hua, I believe that is enough for today,” he spoke up coolly. “You may return tomorrow morning to resume your lessons with the Lady Katara.”

“As you wish, my lord,” the tiny woman immediately agreed with another bow. She smiled at the Water Tribe maiden before she again turned to the silent Fire Lord. “Lady Katara is a very determined young woman and she is learning very quickly. It will not be long before she is ready.”
Zuko graced her with a smile as he said, “I am glad.”

The silver-haired woman bowed again before she gracefully made her way to the door and disappeared.

Zuko sat down next to Katara and smiled at her just as Iroh took a seat beside Ursa and began to talk to her about a particular brand of tea he was trying at the moment.

“How are your lessons going?” Zuko asked her curiously.

“There are so many things to remember,” Katara responded with a tired sigh before she smiled determinedly at him, “But I will try my best to be worthy of being called your wife.”

“I have no doubts,” he replied with a nod of his head.

Katara felt herself flush at his confidence in her, and in order to change the subject, she asked, “How was your meeting with King Kuei’s representative?”

“It was fine,” he said with a small shrug. “The representative informed me that the trade between the Fire Nation and Ba Sing Se, as well as the tourism flooding the city, is really improving the Lower Ring.”

“That’s great!” Katara exclaimed sincerely.

“After the meeting, I dispatched a messenger to head toward the Earth Kingdom to give the money we owed to Zhuang Yu and Satomi,” the young lord said before a small smirk curled his lips, “after all, we have much to thank them for.”

Katara felt her cheeks warm up when she caught his meaning, since not only did the old couple welcome them to their home and help them on their way to Omashu, but thanks to Satomi’s words, she and Zuko had been able to enjoy each other in an intimate way that did not compromise her virtue. Ever since that first night Zuko had snuck into her room, he had done so a few more times. He was always careful to arrive late at night and leave before dawn. Although they made sure to always keep their lower halves covered, they were able to bring each other pleasure nonetheless.
There was a knock at the entrance and Kuo immediately went to open the door. Jiao stood outside and she blushed at the guard who smiled as he moved aside to let her enter the room. Jiao walked toward the royal family while the younger guard closed the door and moved to stand beside Shen and Jee.

“What is it, Jiao?” the young Fire Lord asked.

“A message for Lady Katara arrived a few minutes ago, my lord,” Jiao responded with a bow before she handed the scroll bound by a blue ribbon to Katara.

“It’s probably from my family,” Katara exclaimed happily as she untied the scroll and broke the seal. She read the rather short message quickly and she smiled at her family’s relief that she was safe.

“What does it say?” Zuko asked with a small frown.

Katara looked up to smile at him.

“My father writes that they are relieved both of us are all right and that they are on their way to the Fire Nation,” she summarized. She decided to leave out the part where her father threatened bodily harm on the Fire Lord if he found one hair on his daughter’s head misplaced.

“That’s wonderful news!” Iroh commented as he turned to wink knowingly at his nephew.

“Yes,” Zuko responded with a smirk.

Katara smiled as she rolled up the scroll.

“Now I won’t have to wait much longer to announce to Chief Hakoda that I wish to marry his daughter,” Zuko continued as he turned to smile at Katara while his eyes simmered brightly.

Katara blushed deeply when Ursa laughed daintily and Iroh chuckled loudly. When his old uncle and his mother turned to each other to speculate on the reaction of the Southern Water Tribe
chieftain, Zuko leaned down to whisper in Katara’s ear.

“You’ll talk to your father as soon as they arrive, right?” he asked her before he added, “I don’t want to wait any longer.”

“I will,” Katara reassured him softly. “And once you ask for my hand, we can meet with the Fire Sages to set a date.”

“That’s if your father agrees,” Zuko muttered with a frown.

Katara laughed quietly behind her hand as she said, “Don’t worry, Zuko.”

Her face reddened again when Zuko gave her a smoldering look as he whispered huskily, “Soon you’ll be mine.”

A strong burst of white fire shattered another of the stone targets placed in a horizontal line across the large arena. A second later, another one was destroyed into many pieces that flew in every direction. Taking a deep breath, Zuko punched his other arm out and another ball of white fire shot forth and struck the last target with a loud, shattering explosion.

“Excellent, Nephew,” Iroh called out from the sideline, “Your strength is improving.”

Zuko did not get a chance to reply for his uncle was already instructing him to begin a series of advanced firebending moves while using his white fire.

Ever since they returned to the Fire Nation, Zuko and Iroh had spent hours and days trying to find any information regarding the art of bending white fire, and when they had not found anything, Zuko had begun to despair. But fortunately, they finally found an old scroll wedged in a corner of a bookshelf in the ancient Dragon Bone Catacombs that was written by the last person known to have been able to bend such a high level of fire.

There were many theories as to why only a few people were able to reach such a level of firebending, one being that it could be only triggered by a traumatic event. Another theory was that it was achieved by a great amount of training and discipline, and another was that the person had to have a strong will and inner fire, and yet another said that the firebender was born with the ability. Whichever the real reason was, the author wrote that the most important thing was to harness
and master the white fire for it could lead to a loss of control that could cause destruction, and if used incorrectly, could even lead to the loss of that person’s firebending.

“Good, Zuko,” Iroh praised as he continued to guide his nephew as the young lord quickened his pace.

Zuko adjusted his stance as he remembered what he had read on that old scroll. White fire came easily when the person was experiencing extreme emotions such as anger and fear, but these emotions could not be relied upon if one wanted to truly master it. Bending white fire required more energy from the inner fire of every firebender, which was the reason why it was difficult to maintain for long when one was untrained, unless that person was calling it forth due to those extreme emotions. However, with rigorous training and many hours of deep concentration to strengthen and steady the inner fire, one can come to fully master the white fire.

Zuko found that now it was easier for him to summon the white flames, but he still could not bend for long periods of time or he would become extremely exhausted, and if he forced himself to bend longer, he would feel lightheaded and his limbs would feel like they were sapped out of their energy. Luckily, Iroh was always there to make sure he stopped to rest so they could continue another day. Today, however, Zuko felt as if he could go on longer, and he continued practicing his white fire as Iroh continued to instruct him.

And that was how Katara found him.

She paused at the edge of the arena and smiled excitedly at the scene. She had convinced Shen and Kuo to take her to the arena and she was glad she had come up with the excuse that she wanted to practice her waterbending. She watched how Zuko’s dark-raven hair plastered to his forehead and the nape of his neck with sweat, how his alabaster skin gleamed under the sun with perspiration, how his muscles rippled as he moved vigorously yet gracefully along the stone floor of the arena, and she blushed lightly when she felt her skin heat up. She was again amazed by the glorious sight he made as he bent white fire, and again she thought that Lady Ursa was right when she said that Aang was not the only powerful bender in the world. Katara was positive that Zuko was the bender Aunt Wu had predicted she would marry. She felt as if her heart would burst in happiness at the thought as she continued to watch Zuko firebend.

“That is enough for today, Zuko,” Iroh spoke up proudly.

Zuko slowed his movements to cool down before he stopped. A servant rushed forward to hand him a towel and some water. Zuko drank the refreshing water before handing the cup to the servant who bowed and retreated. Wiping the sweat from his face, Zuko placed the small towel around his neck as he watched his uncle approach him.
“You were able to endure longer today,” the retired general commented with a proud smile, “Soon you will master the white fire.”

Zuko did not respond for he had spotted Katara walking toward them with Kuo and Shen following behind her. She had a bright smile on her face as she looked at him and he wondered why her cheeks were flushed. He felt his loins stir and again he frowned at how easily his body responded to Katara’s presence.

“You’re getting better at bending the white fire,” Katara told him once she was standing next to them.

Shen and Kuo stayed on the sideline of the arena to give them some privacy.

“Thanks,” he replied with a smile before he turned to his uncle, “Of course, I wouldn’t be if it wasn’t for Uncle’s guidance.”

“But it’s all because of your determination, Zuko,” Iroh demurred with a smile. He grinned at them both before he said, “I’m going to look for Chao to see if he wants to play Pai Sho.”

Zuko smiled at his uncle gratefully for he was giving him a chance to be alone with Katara—well, as alone as they could be with servants and guards around them. Once Iroh left, they looked at each other longingly, each wanting to be in each other’s arms, but knowing they could not for they were not alone.

“With a bit more practice you’ll master the white fire,” Katara commented.

“Yeah, and I have to thank Uncle for that,” he said as he stared at her. His hands twitched to touch her.

A playful smile appeared on Katara’s face as she patted her waterskin.

“I’d like to spar with you and see how it feels to go against such a high level firebender,” Katara told him with a grin.
“No,” Zuko immediately refused, fearing for her safety.

“What?!” Katara exclaimed indignantly as she placed her hands on her hips, “You think I can’t fight you?”

Zuko shook his head and frowned at her.

“It could be dangerous, I could lose control and accidentally hurt you,” he explained and swallowed thickly at the thought, “I am not willing to risk your safety.”

Katara crossed her arms over her chest and huffed at him before she sighed when he continued to look at her with that concerned expression on his face that made her insides tingle pleasantly. Damn him.

“Fine,” she relented with a small pout before she brightened. “But we can still spar like we used to before. I haven’t practice my waterbending in a while and I really need the exercise after being cooped up in the library for days.”

“Alright,” Zuko agreed immediately with a smirk.

He was a bit tired, but he chose to ignore it if it meant he could spend some time with Katara. After throwing the towel aside, he lit his hands in red fire and took on a fighting stance as he smirked at her. Katara smiled happily and immediately uncorked her waterskin and pulled forth her water as she, too, took on a fighting stance, her blue eyes glinting in excitement.

Without warning, Zuko shot a fireball at her and Katara immediately brought up a water whip to destroy it before she retaliated with a few sharp icicles that he quickly melted as they collided against a wall of fire.

They sparred for a long while, both firebender and waterbender refusing to back down. Shen, Kuo, the other guards and servants watched the display of both bending masters with awe as fire flashed, water splashed, and steam rose around them. They all knew that their lord usually practiced by himself since no one was able to keep up with his skill, but it seemed the kind waterbender was a match for him, although they could also see that both of them tried not harm the other.
Katara and Zuko pulled apart after a series of fast attacks to regain their breaths as they eyed each other appreciatively.

“I hate to cut this short, but I have a meeting in a few minutes,” Zuko spoke up as he glanced briefly at the sun before he returned his attention to the flushed woman before him. “How about we continue another time?”

“Alright, besides, I promised your mother I would accompany her to buy something in the city,” Katara told him as she returned the water into her waterskin.

Zuko frowned. “You’ll be careful, right?”

Katara stopped herself from rolling her eyes and instead said, “Admiral Jee, Shen, and Kuo are going with us. So don’t worry.”

Zuko opened his mouth to say something, but stopped when he saw a guard heading swiftly toward them.

“My lord,” the guard greeted as he bowed before he lifted his hand toward Katara to reveal a scroll, “this letter arrived for Lady Katara.”

“Thank you,” Katara said with a smile as she took the scroll.

The young guard flushed as he stuttered, “Y-you’re welcome, Lady K-Katara.”

He bowed again and quickly retreated.

Katara turned to Zuko and raised an eyebrow at the frown he was aiming at her.

“What?” she asked.

“With just a smile you have my well-trained guards acting like fools,” he muttered.
The waterbender laughed at his disgruntled tone as she turned her attention to the scroll and immediately opened it. Zuko watched her curiously as she read, but he became concerned when her eyes widened and she paled slightly.

“What is? Who’s it from?” he asked her with a frown.

She looked up at him before she quietly whispered, “Aang.”

Zuko’s golden eyes narrowed at her tone. He grabbed her by the elbow and led her a bit away so they could have some privacy from anyone who could hear them before he released her and turned toward her as he held out a hand.

“Let me see it,” he commanded between gritted teeth.

Frowning at his tone, Katara hesitated for a moment before she reluctantly handed the letter to him. Zuko took it and immediately began to read. His eyes narrowed into dangerous slits and his nostrils flared as his eyes become fixated on one sentence:

*I’m coming back for you, Katara.*

Zuko rolled the scroll up before he looked up with hard features at Katara who had been watching him silently.

“By Aang’s letter, it doesn’t seem like you broke up with him,” he said coldly.

Katara narrowed her own blue eyes as she hissed out, “Are you calling me liar?”

Closing his eyes, Zuko breathed deeply before he again opened his eyes to look at her.

“No,” he replied with a sigh, “It’s just that I can’t stand the thought that Aang still believes you are his.”

Katara reached out a hand to touch his arm, even though what she wanted to do was wrap her arms
around him to give him some comfort.

“I was never Aang’s,” she said softly.

“But Aang seems to think so,” he growled out lowly.

Katara moved her hand away and remained quiet since she could not dispute with him. Zuko let out another low growl as he ran a hand through his damp hair.

“As soon as Aang arrives, I want us to set him straight on that notion and immediately inform him that we are engaged,” he told her firmly.

“I want to be the one to talk to Aang,” Katara repeated just as firmly.

“Why can’t we tell him the news together?” he asked her angrily.

“Because I want to tell him gently so he won’t get hurt,” she answered.

“It doesn’t matter how he finds out, he’s still going to be hurt,” Zuko ground out, “Why do you worry so much about him? He’s not a kid that needs to be protected from everything anymore, Katara.”

“I know that!” Katara snapped as she glared at him. “But Aang’s my friend, we’ve been through so much together, and he cares for me. And I’m not about to repay all that by hurting him!”

“If you were going to be this worried, then you shouldn’t have broken up with him and agreed to marry me!” Zuko growled out angrily as his hand burst into flames, which immediately burned the paper until it was nothing but ashes.

Katara gasped and her eyes widened at his angry words and features.

“Zuko…”
“I have things to do,” he interrupted coldly.

Before she could say anything to him, Zuko turned away from her and strode toward the palace. He had to get away before he gave in to the urge to shake some sense into her or before he kissed her and did something more to her to stake his claim.

Katara stared after him, wide-eyed and shocked. She was barely aware of Shen and Kuo approaching her until they were standing before her and she looked up to see their concerned expressions.

“Is everything all right, Lady Katara?” Kuo asked her softly.

Katara nodded stiffly before she silently made her way back to the palace. Shen and Kuo glanced worriedly at each other and wondered what had happened, hoping it was not something serious, before they followed her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After having dinner with Iroh, Ursa, and Jee, Katara slowly made her way to the Royal Palace Garden. Was it just her or did Jee look at Lady Ursa in a certain way? Katara shook her head and sighed, just as she had been doing a lot lately.

A day had passed since she had last seen Zuko or spoken to him, and Katara felt terrible for she knew he was angry and frustrated with her. She did not like it when they were angry at each other, but what could she do?

Just as she rounded a corner she bumped into a firm chest and she gasped when familiar hands grasped her arms to steady her when she stumbled back. She raised her head and her eyes locked with piercing, golden orbs. Her heart fluttered when Zuko’s warmth and his sandalwood scent reached her senses, but it stilled at the unreadable look in his eyes. They stared silently at each other for a moment before Zuko let go of her and moved away a step. He cleared his throat and ran a hand over his bound hair.

“I’m sorry for my reaction yesterday,” Zuko apologized lowly, his features smooth as stone, “but I still do no approve of your choice.”

Katara frowned at him, at the cool way he was acting and speaking to her.
“I understand how you feel, but I feel that I must do things this way,” she told him softly.

Zuko was silent for a moment as Katara stared at him resolutely before his brow furrowed into a frown.

“I don’t like it, but I will try to be understanding,” he told her impassively, “I just hope you do a better job at explaining things to Aang than I did with Mai.”

Katara felt her heart clench in worry as that feeling of dread once again surfaced within her.

“You don’t think Aang will attack you, do you?” she asked with concern.

He gave an indifferent shrug, but when Katara’s frown deepened, he added, “I don’t think so. Or I hope not because, despite everything, I’d still like to be friends with him. After all, Aang was the first to befriend me and give me a chance to prove myself.”

“That is why I want to talk to Aang,” Katara explained carefully. “I want him to understand my feelings and not get angry with you and think that you seduced me or something.”

Zuko nodded to acknowledge her words.

“I hope so too, but if it’s a fight Aang wants, then it’s a fight he’ll get,” he told her grimly, “I will not give you up.”

Katara frowned at him as she said, “I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

They were silent for a moment before Zuko let out a deep sigh. He reached out for her, but stopped himself since he still felt upset and frustrated with their situation.

“I wish your family and Aang arrive soon,” he said with another sigh.
“I do, too,” she replied softly.

She watched as Zuko again reached out for her, but just as before, he stopped himself and brought his arm back to his side.

“I’ll see you at breakfast,” he told her coolly.

With one last look, he walked passed her and headed down the silent corridor.

Katara watched him go with a frown. He was becoming distant with her again and it pained her. She placed her hand on her chest as the feeling of trepidation increased.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Katara felt tears prickle her eyes as she glanced around at all the angry, disgusted, and disappointed looks the people of her tribe aimed at her. Snow was falling heavily on them and a cold wind was howling around them.

“How dare you bind yourself to the Fire Lord!” her father said angrily. “Even after everything the Fire Nation has done to us.”

“But, Dad, I love him!” Katara tried to argue.

“Love?” Sokka spat as he glared at her, “How can you love our enemy?”

“But Zuko isn’t our enemy!” Katara again tried to make them see reason, “The Fire Nation isn’t our enemy anymore!”

“She’s only saying that because she lusts after him!” Suki hissed as she clutched Jing and Ting to her protectively.

“No!” Katara gasped, horrified.

“You are no longer welcomed here. Leave,” Kanna spoke up, her light-blue eyes hard and unyielding.
“Gran-Gran?” Katara cried out in shock. “Why?”

“You have shamed us by letting him touch you,” Kanna hissed.

“She’s no better than a whore, spreading her legs for the Fire Lord!” a voice among the angry crowd exclaimed.

Katara stared at them in shock as the words continued to echo around her as one by one the people began to disappear until she was standing by herself in an empty, cold winter land.

The scenery changed suddenly and Katara found herself in one of the Fire Nation Palace’s grand halls. Again she was surrounded by a crowd, but this time by angry noblemen and noblewomen.

“How dare you think yourself worthy of being our Fire Lady!” one old man cried out.

“She can’t do anything right!” another person shouted.

“How could Fire Lord Zuko choose a Water Tribe peasant as a wife?” a beautiful, young woman said with a sniff. “I would have been a better choice.”

Before Katara could retort the crowd parted to make way for the Fire Lord.

“Zuko!” she exclaimed in relief.

She rushed toward him, but she gasped when he moved away from her with a dark scowl before she could touch him.

“I regret choosing to marry you,” he said angrily, “You have been nothing but trouble to me. I don’t know how I could’ve believed I was in love with you.”

“Zuko!” Katara cried out in shock. “Why are you saying this? Haven’t I done everything to make
“you happy?”

“Marrying you was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made,” he continued coldly.

Katara felt tears sting her eyes at his cruel words. She watched as he lifted a hand up to his side and a thinner hand settled atop his. She followed the pale arm to see who it belonged to, and she felt her heart clench when she realized it was Mai’s. Katara made a strangled sound when Zuko pulled the taller woman to his side as he continued to stare at her with cold eyes.

“I want you leave the palace immediately so I can marry Mai,” he said as he smiled at the noblewoman before he turned to glare at the shocked waterbender, “She would be a much better Fire Lady than you.”

A broken sob escaped her and she clutched at her chest. She felt as if her heart had just been ripped from its confined cage and crushed into a million pieces.

Again, the scene changed and Katara found herself walking on one of the stone paths that led to the turtle-duck pond in the private garden. She smiled when she spotted Zuko feeding the turtle-ducks.

“Zuko!” she called out happily as she quickened her pace.

Zuko turned at the sound of her voice and smiled at her as he waited for her to near him. Something shot past her, and a gasp escaped Katara as she froze in dismay when an ice dagger pierced right through his heart. Zuko clutched at his chest as blood began to seep onto his tunic and he raised a trembling hand to look at his bloodied fingers. He turned pained eyes on her and a cry escaped Katara at his look of betrayal.

“W-why did you betray me? Why?” he whispered just as the ground opened up beneath him and swallowed him.

“Zuko!” Katara screamed in horror as she tried to run to where he had been, but a pair of arms wrapped around her from behind and stopped her.

She looked down and gasped when she saw the blue arrow tattoos on the arms that were holding her back just as she heard Aang whisper near her ear.
Katara’s eyes flew open and she realized she was screaming before she slapped her hand over her mouth. She bolted into a sitting position and frantically looked around herself only to notice she was in her room and it was morning. She could feel perspiration on her forehead as well as tears sticking to her cheeks just as her heart continued to pound wildly in her chest.

“It was just a nightmare, it was just a nightmare,” she chanted quietly to herself as she wrapped her arms around her middle. She wiped her tears and laid her face against her knees that she had drawn to her chest.

A knock on the door made her jump and her head snapped up to see the door open and Jiao walk in with a smile and a silver tray in her hands.

“Good morning, Lady Katara,” the young maidservant said cheerfully after she had closed the door, but she paused and frowned at the pallor on the waterbender’s face. “Are you not feeling well?”

Katara swallowed thickly as she tried to calm her pounding heart and harsh breathing. She removed her arms from around herself and tried to smile.

“I’m fine,” she said.

Jiao frowned at her, unconvinced, and Katara cleared her throat as she pulled away the covers and stood up from the bed.

“Where is the Fire Lord?” the blue-eyed woman asked instead as she eyed the tray.

The maidservant smiled at her as she placed the tray with food on the nightstand before she began to rummage for clothes in the small wardrobe for the waterbender to wear.

“Fire Lord Zuko has been called to the outskirts of the capital and has told me to inform you that he will not be able to see you until late today,” Jiao said as she pulled out several articles of clothing, “He also said that he had Shen and Kuo accompany him and would like for you to remain in the western wing of the palace until they return.”
Katara nodded and made her way to the bathroom as she tried to forget her dream and the dread that had spread through her. She relaxed slightly as she started to get ready for the day and start her lessons with Madam Fang Hua.

“I am sorry, my lord, but my master has not returned from his morning ride yet,” the retainer apologized in a tremulous voice as he did a series of bows before the frowning Fire Lord.

The golden-eyed firebender watched the sweating old man with cold eyes, and when it seemed the man began to tremble in anxiety the longer he remain staring silently at him, Zuko looked away to stare out the window he was standing in front of in the sitting room he had been directed to a few minutes ago.

“I will wait until he finally shows himself,” Zuko finally replied in a hard tone. He hated when he was made to wait.

“Oh of course, Fire Lord Zuko!” the balding servant stammered out as he again made several more bows, almost groveling at Zuko’s feet. “I will send a few maids to bring you more tea and some refreshments—”

“There is no need,” Zuko interrupted the man sharply. “Just send your master to me as soon as he appears from his morning ride,” he ordered dryly before he waved a dismissive hand.

The man bobbed his head as he answered before he turned away and practically raced out of the room so he could send for a few servants to go search for their master before the Fire Lord became more impatient and angry.

Zuko narrowed his eyes as he glanced around the overly furnished sitting room before he again returned his attention to the window where he could see a few men scurrying into the surrounding woods, probably in search of their lord who it seemed did not know what common courtesy was. It was the nobleman, after all, who had sent for him in the first place with a message saying he had an important matter to discuss with him.

Early that morning, Zuko had just entered his study when he had been interrupted by a knock on his door, and once he had bid whoever was outside to enter, he had been curious to see one of his maidservants close the door behind her. The servant had told him one of the royal advisors had approached her the previous night as she went about her duties in the palace and asked her to give the bound scroll to the Fire Lord, saying he had to meet with him immediately. Zuko had opened the
scroll to find out the old advisor had information about a possible plot against the Fire Lord.

He had startled the young maid as he barked for Shen and Kuo to have his komodo rhino saddled and a group of guards ready to come with him before he raced to his room to change into his armor and grab his swords. He had enough time to inform his uncle and mother what was going on and to order Jiao to tell Katara he would arrive late, before he mounted his komodo rhino and headed toward his advisor’s country house where he probably waited so they could have more privacy to talk. Zuko was curious for the old advisor was usually very quiet and seemed a bit timid most of the time, so it was strange to know that such a man had such dire information. Of course, Zuko took a group of guards with him in case it could be a trap to lure him out of the palace unprotected.

However, upon arriving at the country house, the main manservant had told him the nobleman had not returned from his morning ride and Zuko found himself getting irritated at the man’s audacity to keep the Fire Lord waiting after urging him to meet with him immediately. If it wasn’t because the man might have important information, Zuko would have had the man arrested for wasting his time.

Moving away from the window, Zuko sat on one of the gaudy chairs and grimaced when he sank down in the overly soft cushion before he resumed his stoic and alert expression as he waited for the nobleman to make an appearance. He ignored the cooling tea that had been placed on the golden table before him when he had entered the room and again looked around the extravagant room in distaste before he let his mind wander to other thoughts while he waited.

He wondered how the old advisor had come upon the discovery of a plot against him. What kind of plot was it and when did they plan to strike? Zuko narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands in anger. Why were they so set against him since all he had done was for the betterment of the Fire Nation? They were fools if they believed it would have been or would be better if Ozai remained in power. Did the advisor know who was behind this plot? Was it Wei? What if it was the same traitor who had made it easy for Jianguo and his men to capture him and Katara?

Katara.

He sighed as he reached up a hand to rub his temple. He had not seen her since yesterday, much less spoken to her, since he had been so upset with her and her constant worrying over Aang. How would she like it if he was constantly worrying about Mai? Not at all, he was sure. And honestly, he did not care if he acted like a jealous jerk whenever Aang was brought up or whenever another man approached her.

Gods, something was wrong with him.
Dismissing such thoughts from his mind for the moment to focus on more urgent matters, Zuko again glanced at the window only to realize that the morning had now turned into noon and the nobleman had still not shown himself.

Clenching his jaw in impatience, Zuko rose from the uncomfortable chair and made his way to the window only to see a few of the servants returning without any sign of their lord. The raven-haired firebender watched as the men approached the old retainer and talked with him, while shaking their heads and shrugging their shoulders. The old servant shook his head and wrung his hands in worry as he kept throwing nervous glances in the direction where the Fire Lord was currently waiting. Zuko frowned deeply as he turned away from the window to pace the length of the garish room in restlessness.

A few minutes later, there was a timorous knock on the door before the old servant appeared and immediately began to bow in apology.

“I am sorry, Fire Lord Zuko, but it seems my master is nowhere to be found,” he said as he kept his head bowed and his body tense, almost as if he expected Zuko to strike him down for the unfavorable news.

Zuko frowned at him and almost sighed when the man flinched. As if he would hit an old man for something that was not his fault. Turning away from the servant, Zuko rubbed his chin as he again frowned in thought. He had either been given another false message or the advisor had run away. However, he strongly suspected that whoever was behind this plot had found out that the old advisor knew of the conspiracy and had thus gotten rid of him. Zuko ground his teeth together.

_Damn it all to Koh’s lair!_

“I will have some of my guards search for your master,” Zuko spoke up impassively, “Thank you for the tea.”

Before the servant could respond, Zuko swept past him and out the door. Shen and Kuo immediately stepped up behind him and the three strode down the flashy passageway of the country house until they went outside where the rest of Zuko’s guards awaited him. Mounting his komodo rhino, Zuko motioned for one of his guards to step up next to him.

“I want you and a few of the men to search the area for Advisor Kang,” he said grimly, “Report to me if you find him…or if you don’t.”
“As you wish, my lord,” the older guard replied as he bowed before he turned away and pointed to a few men to follow him.

Zuko pressed his heels against his mount’s side and the black komodo rhino immediately began to walk down the path that led outside the walls surrounding the large country house. With Kuo, Shen, and the rest of his guards following, Zuko rode back toward the capital city and to the palace in deep thought.

Hopefully they found the nobleman alive, but Zuko highly doubted it. Just when things seemed to be going well, this had to happen, making him wonder if things could get any worse.

Once she was bathed and dressed, Katara rapidly ate her breakfast before walking toward the library with Jiao following quietly behind her. Katara did not need to look at the young servant to know she was worried, but Katara could only smile at her as reassurance. They entered the library and headed toward the corner covered with cushions surrounding the low table where Madam Fang Hua was already waiting for Katara to begin their lessons.

“Good morning, Lady Katara,” the old woman greeted with a gentle smile that made the wrinkles around her eyes more pronounced, “I hope you are ready to continue with where we left off yesterday.”

Katara bowed as a greeting before she took a seat across the silver-haired woman. She could already feel a headache forming.

“I am ready,” she replied with a strained smile.

Madam Fang Hua nodded and handed the waterbender more scrolls for her to read through.

As more time passed, the more Katara became overwhelmed with everything. She began to question if she was really capable of remembering everything there was to know about how to act like a proper lady, not only of the Royal Court, but also as the Fire Lord’s wife and Fire Lady.

‘She can’t do anything right!’

‘How could Fire Lord Zuko choose a water peasant as a wife?’
‘I regret choosing to marry you.’

‘W-why did you betray me?’

Katara’s stomach twisted at the memory of that horrible dream and her anxiety rose.

How could she have thought that it would be so easy? Was she perhaps rushing into things? Could she really leave her family and home in order to live in a foreign land that once used to be their enemy?

“Lady Katara,” the tiny old woman’s stern voice brought Katara out of her rushing thoughts, “repeat all the family names of the Royal Court and their connections to each other.”

“Yes, uh, there is the Hong Family, the Lee Family, and…” Katara trailed off as her mind suddenly went blank. She tried to call forth the names of the families she had memorized the previous day, but she could not seem to remember them and she began to despair as the words from her nightmare echoed harshly in her head.

“There is the…um…the…” Katara struggled to say before she cried out as she covered her face in frustration, “I will never get this! There are just so many!”

“You need to know all the noble family names in order to keep the peace among them and not offend anyone by forgetting them,” Lady Fang Hua stated firmly as she pointed with a gnarled finger at a scroll laid on the table with the list of the noble family names.

“I know, but it’s just that there are so many new things to memorize and know!” Katara exclaimed as she looked up with anxious eyes at the old woman.

“As the future Fire Lady of the Fire Nation, it is your responsibility to be knowledgeable in its traditions and history,” Lady Fang Hua informed her firmly, “By knowing the noble family names it will aid you in establishing alliances between the Fire Lord and them.”

Katara swallowed and nodded.
“It is also the central duties of the Fire Lady to supervise the departments of education and art as well as social campaigns such as orphanages, hospitals, schools, and the rights of the common people,” Madam Fang Hua continued. “You must educate any future children you bear Fire Lord Zuko of their heritage. You must guide the future heir that will one day rule over the nation as his father does now. That is why you must learn all that I am teaching you.”

When the waterbender looked at her with wide eyes and a trembling lip, the silver-haired woman’s eyes softened and she let out a tiny sigh, taking pity on the poor girl.

“I know everything must be overwhelming for you, child,” the old woman said softly as she reached out a warm and wrinkly hand to pat the waterbender’s clenched fist, “but you must not despair. With just a bit more work, you will succeed in learning what you must.”

“Thank you,” Katara said quietly.

“Get some rest,” the woman encouraged as she brought back her hand to her lap, “We will resume tomorrow.”

Katara thanked her again as she stood up and bowed before making her way to the door with Jiao following behind her. Once they left the library and were walking down the golden corridor, Jiao cleared her throat.

“Would you like to eat now or would you like to wait for the Fire Lord to eat dinner?” the maidservant asked softly.

“I’m not hungry,” Katara replied silently, “Please tell Fire Lord Zuko and his family that I’m very tired and that I’ll see them tomorrow.”

Jiao frowned slightly as she replied, “I will, Lady Katara.”

She bowed and hesitated for a moment before she walked away to continue her other duties.

Katara watched her go for a moment before she turned away and headed to her room. Once she arrived, she closed the door behind her and made her way to the bed where she threw herself onto
her back. Staring unseeingly at the ceiling, the waterbender began to wonder if what she was doing was the right thing.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Long, pale fingers drummed against the wooden surface of the low table as the Fire Lord stared impatiently at the doors that opened to his antechamber. His mother and uncle were silent as they waited for Katara to show up for breakfast and it was all he could do not to leave his anteroom in search of her. He looked out the window as he let his mind wander.

Once he had arrived at the capital city the previous day from the nobleman’s country house, Zuko had visited the prison tower afterwards, but the captain of the prison guards had told him no suspicious people had visited Ozai or been near his cell at all. And except for Wei, nobody else visited the old advisor’s brother.

And to make matters worse, they still had not heard any news about where the rebels could be hiding or what they planned to do now that he and Katara had escaped them. Zuko feared something worse could happen, and he had ordered for the palace security to increase. He may be going overboard with his paranoia, but he did not want to take any chances with the safety of Katara, his mother, and his uncle.

In a dark mood, he had returned to the palace and had been anticipating spending some time with Katara during dinner, but to his disappointment, Jiao had told him Katara had retired early. He had not wanted to disturb her, so he had eaten with his family and prepared himself to wait for morning so he could see her and perhaps talk to her about the distance that seemed to be growing between them.

There was a knock at the door before it was opened, and Zuko looked up with an expectant smile only to frown when it was not the person he wanted to see. Jiao bowed after Kuo closed the door behind her.

“Where is Lady Katara, Jiao?” the young lord asked with a deeper frown.

“Lady Katara sends her regrets, but she will not be joining you for breakfast,” Jiao began before she hurried to finish when the Fire Lord narrowed his eyes, “She is not feeling well this morning.”

Zuko’s frown turned into a concerned expression and he stiffened in his spot.

“Is she okay?” he asked worriedly.
“Has she seen the physician’s assistant?” Ursa asked with a frown.

The Palace Physician had still not returned from visiting his daughter and new born grandchild, so that left his assistant.

“Lady Katara said it is just a mild headache and wishes to rest,” the servant responded as she kept her eyes to the floor in deference to her lord.

Zuko made to stand before he changed his mind and sat back down. He wanted to see Katara, but it would not be proper for him to be seen entering her room while she was indisposed.

“Tell her we will see her once she feels better,” he ordered the maidservant.

Jiao bowed before she retreated. Once the door was closed behind her, Iroh and Ursa turned to look at the frowning Fire Lord.

“I hope it is nothing serious,” Iroh said worriedly.

“Katara has been acting a bit strangely recently,” Ursa commented with a deep frown on her delicate features.

Zuko clenched his hands. He had a strange feeling in his chest and he did not like it. He just hoped Katara felt better soon so he could see her and get rid of the uneasiness that had suddenly taken hold of him.

Katara did not feel better the next day and remained in her room where only Jiao and Ursa could enter. Zuko was worried and he wanted to see her to make sure she was all right. His mother had assured him that Katara was fine, although she did look tired, almost as if she barely slept, and she looked extremely anxious. He wondered what was bothering her and it upset him that Katara refused to see him and tell him what was wrong.

Zuko strode purposely down the corridor that would lead to the northern wing of his palace. He had just arrived from some business in the capital and he still had no news of the missing advisor. He had no doubts that the man must be dead by now. He would have to be more careful and vigilant than
He decided to think of such things later as he wondered if Katara was still in her room. He glanced back at Shen and Kuo, who had accompanied him into the city, before he turned back around and resumed walking toward his study. He could see his personal guards were worried for Katara as well and it made him glad for it meant they would protect Katara with their lives as they would him. If Katara did not leave her room this day, however, he will barge into her room and damn the consequences.

Spotting Jiao turning a corner with a basket of laundry, he quickened his pace, his features determined. The servant woman froze and her eyes widened when she saw the tall Fire Lord almost barreling down on her.

"Jiao, how is Lady Katara feeling today?" he asked even before he reached the young woman.

Jiao relaxed once she saw the Fire Lord was not angry with her before she smiled as she shifted the basket more securely on her hip.

"Lady Katara left her room a few hours ago and is in the library at the moment," she informed him with a small bow.

A bed sheet fell from the basket as she bowed, but before she could reach down for it, Kuo stepped forward and picked it up before placing the sheet back into the basket. Zuko raised an eyebrow at the blush that surfaced on Jiao’s cheeks as she smiled at his guard, who returned the smile briefly before he resumed his position next to Shen. Zuko thanked the servant and quickly headed to the library. His two personal guards practically had to jog after him as he strode speedily down the passageways.

Once the doors that led into the massive library came into view, Zuko paused before them to regain his composure before turning to his guards, ignoring the knowing looks they were trying to hide.

"You may take a rest," Zuko told them coolly.

"As you wish, my lord," both guards said as they bowed and walked away to get some food.

Zuko turned back to the doors and quietly opened one of them before stepping into the library and closing the door behind him. He glanced around the grand library, though not as ancient or extensive ever.
as the Dragon Bone Catacombs, it was impressive nonetheless. After his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting of the room, Zuko walked further into the silent place until he spotted Katara sitting alone at the low table surrounded by many cushions and pillows. A smile began to spread on his face before it disappeared and a frown replaced it when he noticed that Katara was clutching her head, her elbows resting on the table covered with piles of scrolls and papers.

“Katara,” he called out softly as he walked up to her. His frown deepened when she gasped and jumped.

“Zuko!” she exclaimed as she straightened before she began to nervously fidget with her hair. “What are you doing here?” she asked hesitantly.

The frown marring Zuko’s features deepened even further as he finally stood before her.

“I haven’t seen you in two days and I wanted to make sure you were all right,” he told her.

“I’m fine,” Katara answered quickly and shrugged.

“You’re lying,” Zuko growled out lowly and Katara flinched. He sighed before he more softly asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Katara insisted.

“I know there is something wrong,” the golden-eyed male growled out, “How can I help you if you don’t tell me?”

Katara remained silent for a moment before she slowly stood up, her unbound hair covering her face as she looked away from him.

“I promised your mother I’d meet her in the garden,” she said quietly.

She moved away from the table and walked past him, but Zuko was not about to allow her to walk away, and so, he grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him.
“Tell me what’s wrong, Katara,” he demanded again with narrowed eyes.

At his commanding tone, all of Katara’s pent up emotions of anxiety, doubts, and fears broke free and she harshly wrenched her arm away from his grasp as she looked up to glare at him.

“I can’t do this!” she screamed.

Zuko’s eyes widened at her outburst and he felt his heart twist in his chest.

“What do you mean?” he asked her with a frown.

“I will never be able to get the perfect noblewoman act right!” she exclaimed in frustration as she rubbed her face. “Many of the Fire Nation traditions are so different from my own! There are so many rules, what if I forget something and I make a major mistake?!”

“Katara,” Zuko called her name softly, “nobody would expect you to know everything and be perfect. You were born to a different culture with different traditions and it’s understandable.”

Katara shook her head as she continued, her arms flailing beside her as she tried to make Zuko understand.

“That’s easy for you to say because you want to marry me!” she began exasperatedly.

“I just found out the Fire Lady has to be submissive to her husband and do everything he says even if she doesn’t agree with it!” she exclaimed loudly. “If he wants to have a mistress, the Fire Lady has to silently endure it, if the Fire Lord wishes to have children with his concubines, the Fire Lady has to accept it, and if he wants to send her away to live somewhere else, she has no say in it! I will not be such a woman and I will not put up with such disrespect!”

“You know I will never treat you in such a way, Katara,” Zuko told her with a frown, “and I know you will never become such a submissive and weak woman. That is why I want to marry you because I don’t want a slave as a wife but someone who will help me rule the Fire Nation and always be by my side.”
Katara relaxed slightly at his words, but her shoulders drooped a little and she glanced away as she clutched at her mother’s necklace.

“I will be leaving my family and home. I’m going to miss them,” she said quietly, her voice breaking in the end.

Zuko frowned darkly. He did not like where this was heading. He had enough problems already and he did not want to deal with this at the moment.

“It’s not as if you could not visit your family in the Southern Water Tribe,” he told her, “and your family will always be welcome into the Fire Nation.”

Katara could feel her anxiety lessening as Zuko confidently answered each of her concerns, but there was still that sense of dread that would not leave her.

“Aang is going to be angry,” Katara muttered.

“That is a given,” Zuko responded with a shrug.

“You could get hurt,” she said quietly and her eyes clenched tight as the memory of the ice dagger piercing Zuko’s heart resurfaced in her mind.

“You don’t have any confidence I could defeat Aang?” he asked her tersely.

“That’s not what I meant!” the waterbender exclaimed as she looked at him with pleading eyes.

“So what do you mean, Katara?” Zuko asked her gruffly. Why was she saying all these things?

Katara froze before she took a deep breath as she averted her eyes from him.

“Maybe we’re making a mistake,” she said softly.
“What?” Zuko exclaimed as his golden eyes widened.

“We have only confessed our feelings a few weeks ago and we’re already planning to get married,” she continued quietly, “Maybe we’re rushing into things that we’ll later regret.”

Zuko had begun to shake his head even before she had finished her sentence and he frowned at her.

“I have never been so sure of anything in my life,” he told her firmly.

“How can you be so sure?” she asked him as she spread her arms wide. “What if later on you regret marrying me and not a Fire Nation noblewoman…or Mai?”

“I will not regret it,” Zuko growled out angrily as he took a step closer to her. “If I wasn’t sure I wanted you for the rest of my life, I would not have asked you to marry me! What? Would you want me to ask Mai to marry me instead? Would you want me to sate my carnal urges with another woman?”

“No!” Katara shouted, her heart wrenched at the thought.

“Then why are you hesitating?” he asked coldly. His nostrils flared and his hands clenched into trembling fists at his sides as he gritted out, “Are you regretting that you agreed to marry me? Did you now find out you really do not love me as you believed you did?”

“No!” Katara denied again, shocked at his words and the pain she could detect in his voice. “I do want to marry you and I do love you!

“Then what is the problem?!” Zuko shouted angrily.

“It’s just that everything is so overwhelming!” Katara tried to explain. “Things are going too fast!” She took another deep breath as she looked at the dark-faced firebender from beneath her lashes as she more quietly said, “Maybe we should slow things down…and wait a year or two—”
“No,” Zuko cut her off firmly.

“But, Zuko—”

“No,” he interrupted her again with a growl. “I already agreed to wait for us to get married until you talked to your family and Aang, and I will not wait any longer! I will have you as my wife and soon!”

Without another word, Zuko spun around and headed toward the doors, his broad shoulders stiff and his hands balled into fists beside him. If he waited for them to get married, then how could he keep her safe and protected?

“Zuko, wait!” Katara called after him in alarm.

Zuko did not turn back—even though he really wanted to run to her and pull her to him—for he was beyond angry and frustrated and he was afraid of what he would do if he remained any longer in her presence. He wrenched the door open and slammed it behind himself, the last thing he heard was the sound of Katara’s voice calling to him.

The turtle-ducks quacked questionably at the silent figure sitting at the edge of the pond, begging for treats before swimming away to frolic in the water when no morsels were tossed their way. Katara stared blankly at the little creatures waddling in the water before her arms tightened around her legs as she dropped her head to her knees, biting her lip to stifle a sob.

Almost two days had passed since she had that argument with Zuko and it was killing her. She hated that they were fighting, hated this distance between them, but most of all hated that Zuko was angry with her and that she was causing him unhappiness. She felt miserable and there was a familiar pain in her chest from being away from him. She buried her face into her knees and sighed sadly.

What should she do?

“Good morning, Miss Katara,” Iroh’s cheerful voice startled her out of her thoughts.

“Uncle Iroh, good morning,” Katara replied as she looked up, plastering a smile on her face, as he sat down beside her.
“Zuko is angry,” Iroh commented bluntly.

Katara looked away and sighed.

“I know,” she responded quietly.

“What is the problem?” the wise firebender asked gently.

Katara hesitated for a moment, but when Iroh squeezed her arm gently in comfort, she relaxed slightly and again looked at him.

“I…I told Zuko that I wanted to wait a bit longer before we got married,” she confessed sadly.

“I see,” Iroh muttered as he rubbed at his bearded chin, “No wonder he’s so upset.”

Katara looked down at her lap, ashamed. Iroh cared so much for his nephew and she was hurting him. Would the wise old man hate her for it?

“Why do you want to wait?” he asked her after a moment of silence in which Katara began to chew on her lip in anxiety.

Katara again hesitated before she finally confessed to him her insecurities of never being able to understand court life, her doubts of being able to carry on the responsibilities as Fire Lady, her struggle of leaving her family and home, and her fear of being rejected by the Royal Court.

“I don’t think I’m ready for all of it yet,” she finished quietly and clenched her hands on her lap.

“How can you say that?” Iroh exclaimed with a shake of his head.

When the waterbender turned wide and confused eyes on him, he continued a bit more softly.
“How can you doubt yourself when you left your home to help the Avatar at age fourteen and
helped save the world at fifteen? If you were ready for all of that, then you are ready for anything,
even becoming the wife of the Fire Lord and the Fire Lady to this nation.”

Katara was silent as she pondered his words for they did make sense. She used to be so courageous
and did not allow anything stop her. What happened to her, to her adventurous and fighting spirit?

“What else is bothering you, my dear?” he asked her.

He pulled out a small bundle of cloth from his sleeve and opened it to reveal a piece of bread. He
broke it in half and gave one piece to the silent waterbender before he returned his gaze to the pond.
He crumbled a piece of the bread, threw the crumbs into the water, and smiled when the turtle-ducks
immediately swam close to them to snatch the treats out of the water.

The blue-eyed woman threw some crumbs into the water and looked at the quacking animals for a
moment before she finally replied to Iroh’s questions.

“I don’t want Zuko and Aang to fight because of me,” she said guiltily.

“Love causes much happiness as well as much pain,” Iroh told her wisely, “Unfortunately, Aang will
be the one to suffer such a pain this time, but he must, eventually, accept that you and Zuko love
each other. You should not ignore your own happiness just because you are afraid to hurt Aang.”

Katara nodded at his words for it reminded her of the words her Gran-Gran had advised her all those
months ago.

‘Promise me that you won’t sacrifice your happiness because you are afraid that another person
might be hurt.’

She planned on keeping her promise, for even though she did not want to hurt Aang, she was still
going to remain by Zuko’s side.

They were silent for a moment as they continued to feed the turtle-ducks with the bread. Once they
ran out, Katara wiped her hands from remaining crumbs and folded her hands on her lap while she
“What are you truly afraid of, Katara?” Iroh finally asked.

The question made her tense up and she clenched her hands as she stared at the water before her. She was silent for a long moment, but Iroh patiently waited for her to speak.

“I… I’m afraid Zuko will end up regretting marrying me,” she finally confessed in a whisper.

Iroh ‘tsked’ and shook his head as he slid his hands inside his sleeves while he regarded the young woman sitting beside him with her shoulders slumped and her hands fidgeting on her lap.

“That is a ridiculous fear, if I do say so myself,” Iroh mused with another shake of his head.

“How can you say that, Uncle Iroh?” Katara exclaimed indignantly.

“Zuko has been pressured into marrying ever since he turned eighteen and he has been fighting against the Royal Court about it for years,” Iroh informed her, his bushy eyebrows furrowing deeply. “If he really did not want to marry you, or if he thought he would regret such a decision, he would have continued refusing to marry and not have proposed to you.”

When Katara looked up to stare at him, Iroh continued, “Zuko is not a fickle man, and when he cares for something or someone, he will do so forever.”

Katara felt her heart clench and her eyes begin to sting with tears. She brought her hands to cover her face as the tears she been holding back finally fell from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

“T’m being stupid, aren’t I?” she asked with a small whimper.

Iroh placed a hand on her back and rubbed comforting circles as he waited a moment for her tears and soft sobs to subside.

“It is normal to have doubts and fears,” he reassured her gently as he softly patted her back.
“Marriage is a big step, especially for someone like you who would be leaving her family and country behind to become the wife and consort to the Fire Lord.”

There was another short silence which the turtle-ducks filled with soft quacks and splashes of water.

“Katara,” Iroh began in a soft voice as he turned to regard her seriously, “have you ever thought that Zuko would one day get tired of waiting and decide to marry someone else? Although he is resisting the Royal Court at the moment, it is his duty to marry and produce an heir, after all. Besides, a person can only take so much before they feel rejected.”

Katara gasped and her heart constricted painfully in her chest as her eyes once again filled with tears. She had not thought of that possibility, but she would not blame Zuko if he wanted to break up with her now.

“Think about all I have said,” Iroh told her softly as he stood up, “Just follow what your heart tells you, even if the whole world is against you, it will not lead you astray. But just remember that Zuko loves you.”

He brushed his clothes from clinging grass and smiled gently at her before turning around toward the palace. Watching the retired general until he disappeared inside the palace, Katara turned back to stare at the quiet pond as she went over his words.

‘…there are times when we must also think of ourselves, of our own happiness,’ her Gran-Gran’s words resounded in her head, ‘even if it goes against the wishes of others, because in the end you will only live with regrets and sorrows that can never be fixed.’

Was this one of those times?

One of the grand golden doors was thrown open as Zuko stormed into his bedchamber before he slammed it shut behind him. He roughly stripped his robes from his body and threw them aside before sinking onto his bed and clutching his head between his hands, his fingers grasping almost painfully onto his messy hair.

He had not seen or spoken to Katara in a couple of days and he felt like he was going insane. Never before had he had such a great need to be around one person constantly and he did not know how to deal with it. But he wanted to be near her, dammit!
He growled and crushed the heels of his hands into his clenched eyes as the same pain in his chest he had felt when he had left the Southern Water Tribe and Katara behind intensified.

But he was just so angry, frustrated, afraid, and hurt and he did not want to say or do something he would later regret if he approached Katara at the moment. He had spent his days brooding, throwing himself into his work, bending white fire until exhaustion, and all the while thoughts of Katara and a potential plot set against him bombarded his mind.

He was not only impatient to marry Katara because he could not wait to have her as his wife, but he would be able to have her close and protected from anyone who tried to harm her once they married. If he let her leave his side, who knew what could happen or if someone would try to kidnap her again to get to him. He could not let that happen. He had promised to protect her. But she was making it so damn difficult!

He wanted to barge into Katara’s room, yell at her for all these strange feelings she caused within him that made him feel weak and vulnerable, yell at her for denying them, yet he also wanted to gather her in his arms in order to keep her safe, beg her not to leave him, and then make sweet love to her until she surrendered and agreed to marry him as soon as possible.

Agni, what was wrong with him?

Glaring into the darkness, he saw himself as a creature driven by anxiety and his eyes burned with anguish and anger. The main reason he was afraid to approach Katara was that he feared she would tell him that she did not want to marry him anymore. It pained him to think that she would leave him, that she would remove herself from his life forever. He had always scoffed at the melodramatic words of lovers, but he was now sure that if Katara went out of his life it would cripple him.

The royal bloodline would cease to exist for he refused to have another woman as his wife or mother of his children, he would not love another. Just the thought of being with another woman disgusted him.

And the thought that Katara would find another man, maybe go back to Aang, made him want to kill something. And if she did leave him, he would know pain and loneliness the likes of which he had never known that it would not surprise him if it actually killed him.

Snapping his eyes opened, Zuko moved his hands away from his head and clenched them on his knees.
“I won’t let her leave me,” he growled out into the dark and silent room. “I won’t let her go. I will just have to convince her that there’s no reason for us to wait to marry!”

He rose from his massive bed determinedly and glanced at his balcony. The curtains were pulled slightly apart and he could see that it was already dark. His family and Katara were probably just finishing their dinner—he had taken his by himself in his study.

Now was a good time as any to have a talk with Katara.

Turning toward his dark mahogany wardrobe, Zuko extracted the steel chest that rested at the bottom and inserted the key he always had with him. Opening the lid of the chest, he took out the Blue Spirit’s black suit, black boots and the pair of black gloves. He looked at the white and blue mask for a moment before he decided to leave it behind.

After dressing in the dark attire, Zuko opened the balcony doors, looked warily around, and then jumped down to his garden without a sound. He waited a few seconds before he slinked off and disappeared among the shadows.

He will not allow anything to take his waterbender away from him, not a plot set against him, not the rebels, not Aang, and especially not Katara’s doubts. He would not allow Katara to refuse him.

The cool wind rushed swiftly by as the large creature flew at an incredible speed above the dark ocean. The light the crescent moon provided reflected off the white fur of the flying sky-bison as well as the pale skin of the two passengers riding on the back of the great beast.

Appa let out a low groan before he quieted when his master and friend patted his furry head after flicking the reins.

“Just a bit longer and then you can get some rest, Appa,” the young Avatar said softly so as not to wake Toph up and have to deal with her crankiness.

Appa grunted before he remained silent as he swished his tail to gain a bit more speed. Aang sighed guiltily and promised himself to reward his sky-bison with a long rest and a huge pile of his favorite food once they reached their destination. They have been flying almost nonstop since they left the Earth Kingdom village in the northeastern part of the great continent and Aang was impatient.
He glanced over his shoulder and his eyes landed on the small form huddled in the center of the huge saddle. Toph was wrapped in a blanket he had tucked around her once she fell asleep and she had a small frown on her face—probably because she hated sleeping on something that was not solid and steady ground. Momo was curled against the petite earthbender’s side and he was also sleeping, one of his huge bat-like ears twitching at every little sound. Aang smiled softly for all three of them—Toph, Appa, and Momo—kept him from breaking at the pain he felt inside. He winced and turned away to stare at the dark sky.

He remembered the false missive he had received when he was in the Fire Nation almost more than a month ago and wondered what was going on. Toph and he had arrived at the village, prepared for the worst, but to their shock they were met with a peaceful little town. The villagers had been surprised to have the Avatar visit them, but they did not waste any time in welcoming him and the master earthbender to their village and immediately prepared a feast in his honor. Confused, he had sought out the village headman to inquire about the rebels, but the governor had been just as confused for he had not sent such an urgent message to the Avatar.

Toph had advised him that they should head to the Fire Nation colony to help Katara and Zuko. He had been reluctant at first for he was still hurting over Katara’s final words before he finally agreed, but the governor had asked him to stay, for even though there was no revolt in the village, they were having some problems with wild animals as well as bandits attacking their homes and destroying their crops. So as an excuse to hide from the pain of losing Katara, he had been helping the small village with the help of Toph for the past month.

Shaking his head to dismiss his memories, the airbender reached inside his tunic and pulled out two small scrolls. The first one was from Chao informing him that Katara and Zuko had been kidnapped and asked for his help. He almost had a heart attack and flew into a panic, ready to go save Katara from her captors, but Toph had yelled at him to calm down before she knocked him out for an entire day. He had been grateful, as well as a bit resentful, that she had stopped him for he could have lost control, but he was also angry that he had wasted time in which he could have been searching for and rescuing Katara—and Zuko as well, of course.

Glancing at the second scroll, Aang let out a relieved sigh. In it, Chao told him that Zuko and Katara had managed to escape and were on their way to the Fire Nation. He was glad to know that both of them were safe, but once he arrived at the Fire Nation he will make sure to never let Katara out of his sight again. He placed the messages back inside his tunic before he reached inside his sleeve and pulled out the necklace he had made himself this time. It was simple yet beautiful like the one he had made for Katara when she had lost her mother’s necklace years ago—which Zuko had found.

Frowning, Aang’s gray eyes narrowed before he shook his head as he smiled at the thin necklace in his hand. He hoped that this time Katara would like it and agreed to marry him once he proposed to her again. He was sure she will accept him this time. When she broke up with him on that day and told him she did not love him the way he loved her, he had been devastated and he felt like the world was crumbling around him. But a month later, he now felt positive that she must have regretted her decision and come to terms with her feelings. He had been upset ever since he left the Fire Nation at
the thought that Zuko was alone with Katara, but Aang was positive that Katara only loved him despite what she had told him earlier, and now that time had passed surely she had come to realize it.

They were some days away from the Fire Nation, and soon he will see Katara again, have her in his arms again, and soon they will be married.
Katara sighed dejectedly as she made her way to her room to hopefully find some sleep, which had been eluding her ever since she had that argument with Zuko. He had not been at dinner that evening just like last night, and once again, she felt that stab of guilt in her chest. She went over the advice Iroh had given her earlier in the day in her head. She knew he was right, she knew she was in a way being unreasonable, but she was still so afraid and unsure of the future looming before her.

Following silently behind her, Shen and Kuo looked at her worriedly. Sensing their concern, Katara glanced back and gave them a small smile to reassure them. The two guards glanced at each other, unconvinced, but they did not say anything as they escorted the waterbender to her room before they could retire for the night.

“Good night, Lady Katara,” both guards said with a small bow once they reached her room.

“Good night and thank you,” Katara responded as she plastered a smile on her face.

They again looked at her with concern before they turned around and silently headed down the corridor. Katara’s smile faded and she sighed as she opened her door and stepped inside, closing the door softly behind her. She turned around and frowned when she saw that the room was completely dark and the candles had not been lit. Perhaps Jiao forgot to light them.

Katara walked blindly in the direction of the window so she could open the curtains and have a bit of light from the moon, but she could not see a thing and she worried she would trip over something. Suddenly the candle on her nightstand sparked to life and Katara let out a surprised gasp as she whirled around toward the light. Her hand automatically moved to her waterskin when she detected a moving shadow, ready to defend herself against an attack. She froze and her eyes widened when she realized it was Zuko. She had almost not noticed him in the shadows since he was again wearing all-black.

He was sitting on her bed, leaning back against the wall, and his eyes were dark and simmering while the candlelight cast shadows on his impassive features, causing his scar to look even more intimidating.

“Zuko, you scared me!” Katara exclaimed with a scowl as she brought her hand above her racing heart.
Zuko did not reply as he stood up from the bed, his expression unreadable as were his eyes, and Katara began to fidget uncomfortably in the silence. After a moment, Zuko flicked his wrist and a few more candles lit up so that they could see each other better.

“There is something that I need to tell you,” he finally spoke, “and you will listen.”

Katara felt her heart pound in her chest at the hard tone of his voice. She would have retorted that he could not order her around, but she could sense that her temper would only make matters worse. She gave a small nod for him to continue since it seemed she could not find her voice. She swallowed thickly and bit her lip.

“I am sick and tired of this situation and I’m going to put an end to it,” he continued in the same hard tone.

_Oh, La, he’s going to break up with me!_ Katara cried out in her head.

She felt as if her heart was being wrenched from her chest and she choked back the pleas that wanted to burst from her lips.

“I…I don’t blame you for it,” she said brokenly and looked down at the floor before taking a deep breath.

She wanted to tell him that she had been thinking things through and that she was starting to see that some of her worries were not so bad. She wanted to beg him not to leave her, but she could not do that, she could not make him do something he did not want—and it seemed that he no longer wanted her. She needed to be strong and endure the pain since this was her fault, her doubts and insecurities had finally tired him. She had pushed him away.

“I’ll pack my things immediately and leave,” she said quietly.

Zuko’s confident stance faltered at her words and he stiffened, his eyes widening in shock and pain.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

His eyes narrowed as his temper began to rise while he tried to ignore the ache that was beginning to form in his chest. Was she leaving him?
Katara looked up to frown at him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears that made him frown.

“I understand that you want to…end things with me,” she said miserably.

“What?” Zuko asked in bewilderment as he frowned more deeply.

Clenching her hands besides her, Katara glanced away as she tried to hide the tears that were beginning to gather in her eyes, and she grit her teeth to stop herself from screaming at him for making her repeat herself.

“You said that you wanted to e-end things with me,” she repeated quietly, grimacing at her stammer.

“No!” Zuko exclaimed as he rushed forward to crush her to his chest, his arms tight around her as if he were trying to keep her permanently in place, “What I meant was that I want to put an end to your doubts about us.”

Katara sagged against him in relief, and Zuko held her close to him as she buried her face into his chest.

“I thought you d-didn’t want m-me anymore!” she cried out softly.

He pulled away slightly to frown at her as he asked, “What made you think that?”

“You avoided me!” Katara exclaimed as she returned his frown with one of her own. “What else was I supposed to think other than that you didn’t want me anymore?” she continued more softly.

“That will never happen, I will always want you,” he reassured her, his anger now simmered down in face of her tears. “I admit that I thought it was you who wanted to leave me because you regretted accepting my proposal.”

The waterbender again frowned at him as her hands clenched onto his dark shirt.
“I never wanted to leave you and I never said I didn’t want to marry you!” she told him with an exasperated sigh. “I was just so overwhelmed and I wanted time to adjust, but instead of trying to understand me, you got angry.”

“I… I thought you were having second thoughts about marrying me,” Zuko admitted with a guilty frown.

“I would’ve explained myself better if you would’ve stayed to listen to me and hadn’t ignored me,” she said with a soft sigh.

“You avoided me too,” he countered in a low tone.

Zuko stared into Katara’s hurt, blue eyes before she looked away in shame.

“You’re right,” she said sadly, “I’m sorry.”

He felt his stomach clench in guilt, she was also right. He had allowed his anger to control him and he had not stopped to listen to what she had to say.

“I’m sorry, Katara,” he apologized as his frown deepened, “I admit that I acted like a jealous and insensitive jerk, but you must understand that all of your doubts about us and your constant pushing me away was bound to make me angry.”

“Yeah…I guess I would’ve been angry too if our roles were reverse,” Katara admitted.

“I also ask that you be patient with me,” Zuko told her as he tightened his hold of her arms slightly before he cleared his throat as he continued, “This whole serious relationship thing is still new to me and I’ll probably continue to make many mistakes, especially with how impatient and temperamental I am. But I promise that I will try my best.”

“I understand and I promise that I’ll try my best to make this work, too,” Katara replied with a small smile before she grimaced, “I know that I have let my doubts control me, but I will try to work them out.”
The firebender relaxed and smiled at her before he furrowed his brow when she glanced down to his chest and took a deep breath.

“It’s just that…I’m scared,” she confessed quietly.

She did not want to seem weak or cowardly in front of Zuko, but she knew she needed to be honest in order for him to understand.

“Scared of what?” he asked her worriedly.

He again pulled her to him and tightened his hold on her, as if to protect her from whatever was distressing her. Perhaps she knew of the plot against him and was afraid that she would be hurt? No, that was not like Katara, and besides, he was going to make sure that nothing and nobody hurt her.

“I’m scared that I will not do a good job as your wife and Fire Lady,” Katara admitted as she continued to stare at his chest. “I’m scared that…you’d regret marrying me and end up resenting or even…h-hating me.”

Zuko pulled her slightly away to scowl down at her and Katara felt her cheeks warm up in shame.

“You silly woman,” he growled out frustratingly yet affectionately. “Do you really think I’d marry you only to regret it later?”

Katara lowered her head sheepishly as she muttered, “Uncle Iroh told me the same thing.”

“We both know how wise Uncle can be,” he told her.

He sighed deeply when she continued to avert her eyes and he reached up to cup her cheeks and lift her head so she could see him and he could gaze into her cobalt eyes.

“You’re not the only one who has fears. I also have fears and insecurities,” he admitted as his thumbs stroked her soft skin, “But I try not to let those fears stop me from getting what I want.”
“What kind of fears do you have?” she asked him incredulously.

The young Fire Lord hesitated for a moment for he disliked showing any kind of weakness, but he knew he could trust Katara, and he wanted her to understand what he was feeling.

“What if I can’t make you happy? What if I make a mistake and drive you away? What if you realize that you don’t love me? What if it’s you who regrets having me as your husband?” he said quietly.

Katara gasped at the uncertainty and fear she could see in his eyes and she felt her heart constrict. She never would have imagined that Zuko would have the same kinds of fears and doubts as she did. And the fact that he had admitted to them made things more painful, sadder, and caused her to want to love, protect, and comfort him even more.

“Never!” she exclaimed fiercely and she wrapped her arms tightly around him. “I will always love you and will always be happy at your side!”

Zuko felt his heart ease and then swell with happiness at her firm tone, and he buried his face in her hair, breathing in her sweet gardenia and rain scent. Gods, how he had missed her! He hoped he did not have to part from her for so long again. Granted, it had only been a few days, but still. He did not give a damn if it seemed like he was a sappy fool.

“Now you understand how I feel when you doubt me?” he whispered in her ear.

Katara’s eyes widened as his words sank in and she buried her face on his warm chest while she grabbed onto the back of his shirt.

“I’m sorry, Zuko. I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

Zuko rocked her gently in his arms as he shushed her softly.

“I don’t like for us to be fighting or to be angry with each other. There was plenty of that years ago,” he said dryly before he sighed. “I hate it when there is a distance between us,” he told her as he ran his fingers through her long hair, “Stop denying us, Katara.”
“I don’t want to,” she replied as she looked up at him with a frown, “But what if the Royal Court doesn’t allow you to marry me? Our countries were once enemies, after all.”

Zuko’s face darkened and he tightened his arms around her once again.

“They will regret it if they try to keep you from me,” he growled out in a low tone.

His expression softened as he pulled away slightly to look at her.

“I…You…” he began before he let out a frustrated sigh as he tried to put into word what he felt, “You mean so much to me, Katara, and I’m so happy being with you, but I hate it when you don’t trust me when I say that there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Katara told him with a frown, “but you can’t always get what you want, even if you are the Fire Lord.”

“I know, but I won’t let anyone stop me,” he answered with a growl before he added more softly, “Let’s forget the past and what people might say. Let’s focus on our future together.” He paused to smile at her.

Katara was silent a long moment as she stared into his unwavering, golden eyes. Could it really be that easy? Or maybe it won’t be, but would she let that stop her from achieving her happiness? But the most important question was if she would allow herself to be separated from Zuko because of the prejudices of other people.

And the obvious answer was a firm ‘no’.

Katara smiled as she rested her head on his chest with a soft sigh.

“You’re absolutely right,” she said softly, “What matters is that I love you and you love me.”

Pulling her back slightly to look at her, Zuko regarded her for a moment, his eyes searching hers.
“Katara, there is something else you need to know,” he began seriously as he continued to gaze at her. “There may or may not be another plot set against me.”

Katara gasped as she tightened her hold on him.

“What kind of plot? Is it against your…life?” she asked anxiously.

“I don’t know,” Zuko responded with a frown, “But I just want you to be aware that things will not always be peace and happiness, but I promise you that I will do everything in my power to keep you protected when you’re married to me. Are you…okay with this?”

“Of course!” Katara replied quickly as she stared determinedly into his golden eyes. “Something like that isn’t going to stop me from marrying you, quite the opposite, it makes me want to marry you even more in order to help you and keep you safe!”

She paused before she more softly added, “I won’t leave you to deal with this alone. I will stand beside you through the good times and bad.”

Zuko’s eyes softened and he smiled at her words.

“Then you’re still willing to marry me as soon as your father gives his consent?” he asked her slowly, carefully.

“Yes!” Katara assured him with a joyful smile. “I will have no more doubts and I won’t let my fears get the best of me again. I won’t allow anyone or anything to stop me from marrying you.”

Reaching her hands up to grabbed Zuko’s face, Katara pulled his head down and kissed him fiercely, licking and sucking on his lower lip and grasping his hair between her fingers, conveying all of her love, relief, and hope in the kiss.

Zuko groaned loudly against her mouth, at the way her small tongue caressed his lips and her hands played with the hair at his nape, and he pulled her even closer to him until she was flush against him. He felt his body immediately respond as it always did with her and he growled out when Katara began to rub her breasts against his hard chest. Agni, how he had missed her, his little water nymph. Grabbing her round bottom with both of his hands, he drew her toward him, and they both moaned at the delicious friction against their aching parts.
Katara gasped when Zuko suddenly lifted her into his arms and moved them toward her bed while he continued to devour her mouth. When he settled her on the soft mattress, Katara quickly tried to sit up, but Zuko placed a hand on her shoulder and gently pushed her back down as he hovered above her, nibbling on her lips.

“Zuko,” Katara panted against his mouth, planting her hands against his chest to push him away as a reflex, but her attempts were weak and halfhearted. After the nights he had snuck into her room to bring her pleasure she could no longer deny him. “Wait, Zuko…Oh!”

She moaned when he grabbed one of her breasts and gave it a gentle squeeze before he pinched her hardening nipple through her clothes.

“Let me touch you again, love,” Zuko murmured against her cheek as he grazed his nose against her soft skin, “I just want to make sure you are still here with me…make sure I won’t suddenly wake up finding you gone.”

“I won’t leave you,” she reassured him, her hands fisting in his black shirt.

She let out another gasp when he nipped at her throat and she automatically tilted her head to the side to give him more access while he trailed his hand slowly down her stomach.

“I-it’s just that I already broke so many rules and—”

A loud gasp cut off her words and she arched her back when Zuko gently pressed his hand against her aching warmth.

“I know that you like it when I touch you,” he whispered huskily against her mouth as his hand pressed against her more firmly before he moved it away to grab her hand, bringing it toward his covered erection and curling it until she was cupping him in her small hand. “And I also like it when you touch me,” he groaned against her lips before again taking possession of her mouth.

Katara felt her heart pound in her chest at the feeling of his clothed hardness in her hand, while she fought to stay coherent as Zuko kissed her so passionately. She clenched her eyes shut as she warred with herself for a moment as her previous nightmare resurfaced in her mind, at the cruel words that had been directed at her by her people—even if it had just been a dream. Should she again keep him at a distance or give in to what her body wanted—no, what her heart desired.
This was what her heart wanted, to be close to Zuko, to love him, to marry him, to be by his side forever. Even if she could not be a perfect Fire Lady, even if the Royal Court hated her, even if she had to leave what she knew behind, she would endure it all as long as Zuko loved her. And even though she could not completely gift Zuko with her body yet, she will give him what she could at this moment, make him forget his worries for at least a moment.

Breaking slightly away from the hot kiss, Katara cupped him more firmly in her hand, eliciting a surprised and pleased grunt from Zuko.

“Touch me, Zuko,” she whispered against his lips, her blue eyes bright as they stared into his blazing golden one, “Please, touch me.”

At her words and touch, he broke. Letting out a loud growl, he hungrily possessed her mouth, brushing his wet tongue against her full lower lip before sliding it inside her mouth to probe against her own questing tongue as he again brought his hand to rub against her covered, damp center, while she continued to give him gentle squeezes. They both let out moans as he lowered himself gently on top of her.

She needed more. She needed him to touch her, to show her how much he wanted, needed, and loved her. She wanted him to reassure her she belonged here with him, that no matter what, they will always be together and that he will never let her go. Filled with determination, Katara moved her hand away from the big bulge in his pants and shifted beneath him, spreading her legs a bit until he was cradled between her thighs. Her firebender gasped when she lifted one leg around his hip and brought him closer to her covered core as she took over their kiss and began to dominate his mouth, clenching his hair in her hands.

Groaning in pleasure at her fervent actions, like that of a swift and raging river, Zuko grasped her full breast more firmly in his hand, pinching the nipple between his fingers while his other hand trembled beside them as he held himself up so he would not crush her. He wanted to bare her wonderful breasts once again, feel her skin against his, and so, he quickly untied the sash around her waist and parted her dress. He heard her gasp just as he threw his own shirt somewhere behind him. Before Katara could try to stop him, he pulled at the end of her breasts bindings until the white wrappings were hanging loosely around her chest, before he impatiently grabbed them and let them fly over the bed as well, revealing her delectable mounds tipped with dusky nipples to his hungry gaze. Gods, the wonderful sight of Katara’s breasts was unbearably alluring. His already painful erection throbbed more insistently.

Blushing bashfully, his waterbender tried to cover herself, but he grabbed her hands and gently placed them beside her. With a groan he buried his face on the soft mounds as his hands reached up to squeezed them. He took in her sweet scent for a moment before he flicked his tongue out to slowly
lick one of her hardening nipples. Katara gasped and threw her head back onto the pillow, her hands shooting up to grab his head so she could bring him closer to her aching breasts. Flicking at the hardened peak a few more times, Zuko then drew the delicious morsel into his hot mouth and swirled his tongue around it.

“Ah!” Katara gasped as her fingers tightened in his short hair.

Zuko sucked on her stiff peak fiercely before he let it go with a loud, wet ‘pop’. He leaned forward again to kiss her mouth ravenously.

“When we’re married, I’m going to make love to you so passionately that you won’t be able to live without my touch,” he whispered huskily against her mouth as he nibbled and sucked on her lips.

Katara groaned when she felt her aching core clench in need. As if reading her thoughts, Zuko smiled lustfully down at her.

“Do you want to feel me inside you, Katara?” he asked her throatily, eliciting a moan from the waterbender. “Do you desire to know what it feels like for me to push this…” he paused as he ground his cock tightly against her covered pussy, “inside your body?”

Katara moaned again at his words, her arousal spiking at the images he created in her head. She gasped as her hips arched when he rubbed more firmly against her womanhood.

“Does the thought make you wet?” he purred huskily as he licked her lower lip before he softly commanded, “Answer me, Katara.”

“Oh, gods, yes,” the waterbender moaned before she could stop herself.

“Yes, what, love?” he asked teasingly as he kissed her jaw.

Katara felt her cheeks heat up and she bit her lip. When Zuko stopped all his movements and looked down at her with a raised eyebrow, she groaned in frustration before she smiled at him bashfully.

“Yes…I want to feel you inside me,” she whispered breathlessly, “The thought makes me so wet.”
“Ah, Katara,” Zuko groaned deeply as he captured her mouth again in a fiery, passionate kiss before he again bent down to suckle at her other neglected nipple.

Zuko groaned as she cried out and her hips bucked beneath his. He wanted to strip all of her clothes from her so he could touch more of her skin, but the still functioning part of his brain advised him against it. He did not know if he would not end up taking her if he did.

With one last suck on Katara’s nipple, Zuko pulled away so he could kiss the panting waterbender’s lips, and they both hissed pleasurably when their naked chests touched. Twining their tongues together, Zuko pressed his aching cock against her covered sex more firmly, hissing when a shot of pleasure skittered along his spine, eliciting a soft mew from her, before he began to rock almost frantically against her.

The semi-dark room was filled with quiet sighs and loud groans, the only other sound was that of rustling fabric as they moved against each other. Katara closed her eyes, her heart racing wildly in her chest, as she threw her arms around her firebender’s bare back as that familiar feeling coiling in her lower stomach made itself known once more. She again wanted to feel that amazing, pleasurable release that she had only found with Zuko, she wanted to feel close to him, wanted to be reassured that she belonged with him.

“Zuko,” she panted against his lips.

Zuko pulled away from her mouth so they could gather some air and he buried his face against her neck as his movements became more agitated while his waterbender continued to gasp beneath him as she strained her hips against him. He mentally cursed the clothes that impeded him from being where he wanted to bury himself so badly, but he knew that that time would come soon.

He was going to be her first and that thought made him groan with pride and pleasure. He would be the one to explore, touch, and taste every inch, every part of her. He would be the only man to learn the secrets of Katara’s beautiful body, and no one else would ever be able to make her feel the things he could.

Zuko closed his eyes tightly, imagining how Katara’s entire naked body would feel against his, how her hands would clutch his shoulders and her legs would wrap tightly around him when he finally made love to her. He imagined how he would hold her gaze, his hands cradling her hips, as he slid himself inside her, taking her, making her his, loving her and feeling her warmth surrounding him, taking him inside her to make him hers, their names on their lips as they reached that glorious state of ecstasy. With his body, he would make her understand what he felt in his heart, show her how much she meant to him, and it would be incredible.
Grinding himself more firmly against her, Zuko angled his hips so that the ridge of his shaft kept striking against her sensitive bud and he growled when she began wailing his name and undulating desperately beneath him.

“So close, Zuko, so close,” she chanted desperately as she clawed at his back. “Please!”

Growling her name, Zuko again captured her mouth and kissed her with so much passion and longing that it caused the coil to snap within the waterbender. Zuko heard Katara cry out, felt her body tense with her release, and he let himself go with a low growl. Heaving, he twisted his body off her before he collapsed atop her, and brought her with him until they were both lying on their sides, panting and trembling against each other, relishing in the feeling of their release and of being close.

It was a few minutes later when they finally opened their eyes to look at each other. Katara blushed and averted her eyes bashfully as she gathered her dress closed before returning to gaze back at him. The words from her nightmare evaporated from her mind as she stared into his warm eyes.

Was it so wrong to desire the man she loved? It couldn’t be.

Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, Zuko gave her a small smile before he caressed her flushed cheek with his fingers.

“Promise me you won’t push me away again, Katara,” he told her softly yet firmly, “I won’t tolerate it.”

“I promise,” Katara responded quietly as she stared into his eyes, “I promise I’ll try not to let fear control me again. I promise to fight for us, for what we feel for each other.”

“That is all I ask,” he said as he continued to touch her skin before he lifted his head to kiss her lips as he stared intensely into her blue orbs. “I won’t let you go. Your heart belongs to me.”

“You sound so sure of yourself,” Katara teased as she smiled against his lips.

Zuko pulled away and cocked a brow.
“I don’t hear you denying it.”

“You arrogant jerk,” she muttered.

Chuckling quietly, Zuko pulled her to him so her head was resting on his shoulder. Katara brought one arm around him and snuggled closer to him.

“But you’re my arrogant jerk,” she confirmed teasingly.

“And you’re my infuriating and beautiful woman,” he responded seriously.

He chuckled a bit more loudly when she smacked his chest. Gently bringing her head down on his shoulder again, he sighed contentedly. All the anger, fear, and hurt he had been feeling for the past few days vanished to be replaced with relief and anticipation.

“I’m sorry for the way I was acting,” he heard her whisper against his neck.

“It’s okay,” he told her gently as he ran a hand up and down her back, “And I’m sorry for not being more understanding about your feelings. But you don’t have to worry if you make a mistake as Fire Lady, I will always be there to help you. You won’t be alone since you also have my mother, Uncle Iroh, and even Jiao to help you.”

“You’re right,” Katara replied softly as she rested contentedly against his warm side.

“If…if I was not so desperate to marry you and keep you safe, I would have agreed for us to slow things down,” Zuko told her quietly before he paused and moved a bit away so he could look at her. “Maybe you should add selfish bastard to your list,” he said with a frown.

Katara reached a hand up to smooth his brow before she cupped his cheek.

“No,” she said softly and she smiled at him, “Now that I have decided to place my doubts and fears aside, I’m as desperate for us to marry as you are.”
“Good,” Zuko stated as he returned her smile, leaning into her hand, “Just remember that we belong to each other and no one will separate us.”

The smile faded a little from her face and Katara bit her lip.

“I just hope no one tries to separate us,” she said quietly.

“They won’t. I will not let them,” Zuko growled out reassuringly as he wrapped his arm protectively around her.

With a soft sigh she clung to him, wrapping her arms tightly around him, burying her face in his neck. She felt him curl around her body, enveloping her in his strength, his firm, larger body warming her, reassuring her just like his confident words did.

“I love you so much, Zuko,” she told him fervently, “So much.”

“And I love you, Katara,” he whispered against her hair, unable to contain himself from saying it again.

He sighed softly against her. Now he understood that it was he who needed to say it and not so much for her to hear it—which, of course, she did, especially at the moment—but it was more to release the burden of emotions that this beautiful woman made him feel that he sometimes found difficult to understand and express. All these strange sensations he experienced only in her arms, only with his waterbender.

Tightening his hold on Katara, he brought her closer to him, so close they could feel each other’s steady heartbeats against their chests.

“More than I ever thought possible,” he continued in the same quiet tone.

Three days passed since they settled their misunderstanding and worked at reassuring each other. They still had arguments about one thing or another, but they tried to find a way to work it out—which admittedly was a difficult task since both had hot and stubborn tempers.
Whenever Zuko did not have meetings or was surrounded by eager noblewomen and greedy noblemen, he would spend his time with Katara whenever she did not have lessons with Madam Fang Hua. They would either spar together or Katara would watch Zuko practice his white fire, or they would go out into the city and walk around. The people speculated about their relationship, but Katara tried not to let it bother her for she knew Zuko and she were not doing anything wrong.

They already had to deal with some disapproval from the noblemen about their close relationship, but without any evidence to outright call them out on it, the Royal Court was left to seethe in frustration and suspicion. They tried to command the Fire Lord to tell them who was the woman he had chosen to marry, but the young lord continued to avoid answering their questions. Katara worried that they might force Zuko to pick a woman from his court, but Zuko reassured her that they could try but it wouldn’t work.

Katara went into her lessons with such renewed determination that it surprised and pleased Madam Fang Hua so much she would not stop singing her praises to the Fire Lord whenever he would stop by to check on his betrothed’s progress—much to Zuko’s amusement and Katara’s embarrassment.

Although they had not heard any news about an attack on the Fire Lord, or who the traitor was or where the rebels were, the young couple tried to continue with their lives. They would spend their time in the private garden when they were alone, either in comfortable silence or in conversations that would lead to light sparring matches or hot make out sessions. Ever since they had reassured themselves in a most pleasant way that night, Zuko could hardly keep his hands off Katara that she had a hard time convincing him to stop before somebody caught them, reassuring him that he will have all of her once they married. Of course that did not stop him from sneaking into her room late at night so they could indulge in each other. They were both anxious for the arrival of Katara’s family and they worried about Aang’s reaction once he was told.

Glancing at the sun moving toward the western horizon, Zuko looked away to stare impatiently at the palace entrance. He, along with his uncle, Admiral Jee, and his two personal guards were waiting silently for Katara and his mother to show up so they could head into the capital. Zuko wanted to take Katara to dinner at the restaurant he had taken her to the previous summer and he decided to invite his family since he felt a bit guilty for neglecting them.

“Why do women take so long to get ready?” Zuko grumbled as he crossed his arms over his armored chest in annoyance.

“It is one of the many mysteries of the fairer sex,” Iroh commented with a wistful sigh.

Zuko resisted the urge to roll his eyes while Jee, Shen, and Kuo tried to hide their grins. Tuning out
his uncle and Jee, Zuko’s mind wandered to the nightmare he had the previous night…

*He smiled at Katara as he took hold of her hands. They were standing before the Great Fire Sage as he and Katara waited to take their vows of marriage while all their love ones watched.*

“*Do you take Fire Lord Zuko as your husband?*” the fire sage asked the waterbender.

Zuko watched in anticipation as she opened her mouth to respond.

“*Katara!*”

Zuko stiffened at the shout and he watched as Katara quickly looked away from him to smile in the direction the voice had come from.

“Aang!” she called out happily.

*Head snapping to the side, Zuko narrowed his eyes on the airbender as he stood before the murmuring crowd with an outstretched arm as his gray eyes held those of the waterbender.*

“*Don’t marry him, Katara,*” the Avatar said softly, “*Come with me.*”

Katara pulled her hands away from his as she tried to turn away, but Zuko grasped her arm and pulled her to him.

“*Let me go!*” she screamed.

“No,” Zuko growled, “You belong with me! You said you were never going to leave me!”

“That was because I thought I loved you!” she shouted.

“W-what?” Zuko asked in a strained voice.
“I can’t marry you,” she told him in an irritated tone, “I don’t love you. I love Aang.”

“No,” Zuko muttered as he shook his head, her words piercing right through his heart, “No. You love me.”

She again pulled away from him with an angry scowl.

“The one I love is Aang,” she repeated.

Zuko felt his body go numb at her words and he watched with a constricting heart as she stepped away from him and ran to Aang. She threw herself at the airbender, who caught her with a happy laugh. Before Zuko could do anything to bring Katara back to him, they disappeared, leaving Zuko standing alone in shock and pain...

Shaking his head to get rid of the dream, Zuko clenched his hands as he tried to calm his anger and bring his fear down.

Katara loves me, he reassured himself, She would never betray me with Aang. She would never leave me.

He again shook his head and instead focused his thoughts on the two engagement trinkets he had ordered for Katara and were now safely stored in his room. One was a tradition from his nation and the other was a tradition from Katara’s, and he wondered about the best way for him to present them to her once he finally had Hakoda’s consent. He was still learning about being romantic and he was afraid he would do something wrong and end up embarrassing himself. He now had a feeling what Sokka must have gone through when he had thought of proposing to Suki.

The young lord was brought out of his thoughts when he saw the men straighten and he looked at the doors where the two women finally appeared, chatting animatedly with each other and unaware of the men waiting on them. Zuko felt his mouth go dry at the sight of Katara clothed in a simple yet elegant dark blue qipao edged in silver thread that seemed to hug her every curve. Her hair was pinned elegantly up on her head by the rose hairpin he had gifted her with and a few wisps of her chocolate hair curled around her cheeks. He thought the wait was so worth it.

Finally wrenching his eyes away from Katara’s lovely form, Zuko cleared his throat to get their attention as well as to clear the lump that had gotten stuck there.
“If we don’t hurry, the restaurant is going to close by the time we get there,” he said dryly.

“No it won’t,” Katara piped in cheerfully. “They know the Fire Lord’s arriving with his family. They’d probably have it open all night until you finally appear.”

“Hm, they probably would,” Zuko mused with a frown, causing the Water Tribe maiden to giggle.

With an impassive face, Zuko extended his arm toward Katara, who eagerly grasped it and allowed him to lead her down the stairs and to the carriage waiting for them.

Glancing over her shoulder, Katara watched curiously as Jee bowed to Ursa before offering his own arm to help her descend the long flight of stairs. The golden-eyed woman blushed lightly before she smiled at the admiral as she grasped his arm. Jee averted his eyes and his face became blank as he stepped onto the stairs. Katara watched as Lady Ursa frowned slightly at his behavior before the waterbender was distracted when she almost stumbled on a step and Zuko tightened his hold of her hand. She righted herself before anybody could have noticed, but she saw Zuko’s lips quirk when she glanced his way. She scowled at him and his lips twitched again.

Soon they were on a carriage surrounded by guards on komodo rhinos, and headed out of the palace grounds. The Fire Nation citizens talked excitedly as they spotted the royal carriage passing them by. A few minutes later, they finally stopped before the large building and entered the busy restaurant. Once again, Zuko was greeted exuberantly by the short restaurant owner who greeted Katara just as enthusiastically once he saw her among the royal family.

As they ate the delicious food, reminiscing about the last time they had been there, Katara continued to watch the odd behavior of the admiral as he sat stiffly beside Ursa, who kept frowning his way whenever Iroh was not distracting her. Since Jee spent all his time guarding her, Ursa decided to treat him as a friend more than her guardian so it was now normal to see the admiral eating with the family. Jee had tried to protest at first, but Zuko had agreed with his mother since he still felt a little guilty that Jee had to leave his post on the flagship to watch over Ursa. Katara looked away from Ursa and Jee to glance at Zuko and finally noticed the smoldering looks he kept aiming her way and she blushed.

She felt as if her blood was melting in her veins when she would catch his eye, feel she needed air when he would not so accidentally touch her, feel her heart pound when he would lean toward her to whisper something in her ear as a pretense because of the loud din of the restaurant.
It was hard to relax, much less concentrate on what Iroh or Ursa were saying, with her firebender’s vivid golden gaze looking at her with an intensity to which she was still getting used to. And as if that was not enough, she held no power over her own traitorous gaze, as time and again she found herself staring at him before she caught herself and looked away. She could feel his appraisal, the weight and heat of it, as pleasantly as if he were trailing his fingers over her skin.

So it was to her relief when they finally finished their meal and headed out of the restaurant with the short owner thanking them profusely for their patronage again and again.

Katara again took notice of Admiral Jee’s distant behavior as he gently handed Lady Ursa into the carriage before he quickly turned away to mount his komodo rhino and wait for his lord’s signal for them to make their way back to the palace. The waterbender looked at Zuko to see his reaction, but it seemed as if he had not notice anything different as he grasped her elbow to help her.

Zuko was about to hand Katara into the carriage when one of his guards quickly approached them down the street on a komodo rhino. Feeling himself stiffen, Zuko tried to relax when Katara turned a worried look on him. Releasing her hand, the young lord straightened as he waited for the soldier to dismount once he reached them.

“My lord,” the young guard greeted breathlessly as he bowed, “A Water Tribe vessel has been spotted heading toward the docks.”

Hearing Katara gasp, Zuko turned to look at her and he smiled when she gave him a joyful smile.

“It’s my family!” she exclaimed assuredly.

Zuko turned to the guard and ordered him to have the servants prepare rooms for the guests and more carriages brought to the docks. Once the guard bowed and rode away, the young lord turned back to Katara with an expression full of anticipation.

“How about we head to the docks and greet them?” he asked coolly and smiled when Katara enthusiastically told him to hurry up and get in the carriage.

Katara watched excitedly as the Southern Water Tribe vessel docked and she had to stop herself from jumping up and down in happiness as she spotted her family waving from the deck of the graceful ship. Standing silently beside her, with his mother and uncle beside him and Jee and his personal guards behind them, Zuko had to swallow down his anxiety as the ramp was lowered and
Katara’s family quickly stepped down.

“Katara!” they heard Sokka cry out as he handed Jing to Suki and raced toward his sister.

“Sokka!” Katara shouted happily as she moved away from Zuko’s side and ran toward her brother who caught her up in a bear hug before their father stepped in to embrace her just as tightly.

“Katara, I’m so relieved to see you’re all right,” Hakoda exclaimed with a catch to his voice as he cupped his daughter’s cheeks, “I was afraid I had lost you as well.”

“I’m sorry to have worried you all,” Katara told softly as she squeezed her father’s hands, knowing he was referring to her mother. She hugged him again before she moved next to embrace Kanna who was too relieved to talk at the moment. “But I am fine.”

Zuko and his small family watched quietly off to the side as Katara was next surrounded by Pakku and then Suki holding the twins, who giggled and babbled at their aunt as if asking where she had been all this time. Zuko waited patiently as the Water Tribe family had their moment and he felt himself smile at the happiness that surrounded his beloved.

As if finally remembering they were not alone, Katara pulled away from them to motion for Zuko and his family to approach them. Zuko hesitated for a moment, but when Katara smiled at him reassuringly, he composed himself and strode regally toward them until he was standing beside her.

“Chief Hakoda, Master Pakku, Lady Kanna, I welcome you again to the Fire Nation,” he said as he gave them a respectful bow which they returned with a happy greeting.

Turning to give Sokka and Suki a small smile, he said, “I’m glad to see you again.”

“Thanks, man,” Sokka said with a grin as he again grabbed his oldest daughter from his wife’s arms. “I’m glad to see you’re okay, too.”

Then it was Iroh and Ursa’s turn to greet them and express their pleasure at their arrival, although only Zuko and Katara knew the real reason was because now Zuko could have a talk with her father.
“I’m very glad to see Katara is well,” Hakoda said with a smile.

“It’s all thanks to Zuko that I’m still alive,” Katara spoke up softly as she looked up to smile at her firebender.

“Thank you, for keeping my daughter safe,” Hakoda said sincerely as he gave Zuko another bow, “I will be forever grateful to you.” He straightened and frowned. “But I would like to know what was really going on during your disappearance. Are the rumors true about your capture?”

Zuko cleared his throat before he gestured toward the awaiting carriages.

“We will discuss everything in the palace,” he said grimly.

Hakoda frowned deeply but gave a nod of acknowledgment. The others quickly agreed and they followed behind the Fire Lord as he led them toward the carriages while the guards rushed to secure the guests’ belongings to another carriage.

Without thinking about his actions, Zuko reached out to help Katara into the carriage. Katara was so distracted by having Zuko’s hand grabbing hers that she stepped incorrectly on the small step and stumbled forward. Zuko immediately caught her before she smashed her face against the floor of the carriage, and without thinking about it, he brought her close to his chest.

“Are you all right?” he asked her worriedly as he cupped her cheek.

“I-I’m fine,” Katara stammered as she felt her face flush in embarrassment. “Thanks.”

Zuko smiled at her before he froze when he heard Iroh clear his throat. Settling Katara on her feet, Zuko released his hold on her before he turned to look stoically at the tribesmen who were scowling at him.

“Hakoda, Sokka, don’t just stand there and get inside,” Kanna chided from the window of the carriage the women were sharing. She looked at Zuko and winked.

Zuko looked at the old woman in bewilderment just as Hakoda and Sokka scowled at her and moved
toward the carriage the men were going to share toward the Fire Nation Palace, but not before aiming a suspicious look at the young lord.

Zuko groaned inwardly. Things were not looking good.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

They all descended from the carriages once they arrived in the courtyard and climbed the long flight of stairs just as more servants appeared to retrieve their belongings. Zuko automatically placed his hand on the small of Katara’s back to guide her into the large sitting room before he could stop himself. He stiffened when this time he heard Hakoda clear his throat and he immediately moved his hand away from Katara when he saw her father and brother narrowing their eyes on him.

“I think we should talk now,” Hakoda gruffly told Zuko as he took a step closer to his daughter.

Zuko nodded as he led the way in silence. As soon as they arrived in the sitting room where the large low table was surrounded by couches and plush cushions, Ursa immediately asked a servant to bring the guests refreshments as they all entered the room.

As her family moved to sit, Katara leaned toward Zuko and whispered, “Please try to be more discreet with your affections.”

“You’re the one who makes it so hard,” he replied back with a low grunt.

Katara did not have a chance to reply for her father was calling for her to sit between him and Sokka on one of the couches. Katara gave Zuko another reassuring smile as she moved to sit between her overprotective male relatives, who were again eyeing Zuko suspiciously.

Zuko exhaled deeply and prepared himself for the next few hours. Just as he was about to move toward one of the elegant chairs, a commotion from outside caught their attention. Jiao appeared a few minutes later and gave a low bow.

“My lord,” the maidservant said, “Avatar Aang and Lady Bei Fong have just arrived.”

Both Zuko and Katara stiffened and their eyes quickly darted toward each other. Katara gave him a nervous smile and Zuko’s face smoothed into an unreadable mask as he clenched his hands beside him. He had hoped to have talked to Hakoda about marrying Katara first before they had to deal with Aang.
“Have them meet us here, Jiao,” he said impassively as he straightened himself.

He was silent as his mother and uncle made small talk with Katara’s family while they waited for Aang and Toph to show up. He glanced at Katara and frowned slightly when he noticed her nervous fidgeting before he gave her a smile when she looked at him. It was a few minutes later when they heard Toph’s sarcastic remarks as she complained to Jiao about having to ride on Appa for days before her slight figure appeared at the entrance.

Toph paused before the group and crossed her arms as she raised a dark eyebrow while her lips curled into a wry smirk.

“What’s this? A party and I wasn’t invited?” she said, “That’s messed up.”

“Toph!” Katara exclaimed as she jumped from the couch to hug the short earthbender, “I’m so glad to see you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Toph sniffed as she allowed the waterbender to hug her for a moment before she pushed her away. “Sweetness and Sparky, scare me like that again, and I’ll kick both your asses,” she grumbled sardonically. It was her own way of saying she had been worried about them.

“Rude as ever, I see,” Zuko commented coolly before he smirked when Toph turned to scowl at him, “But we missed you, too.”

“Whatever,” Toph muttered as she again crossed her arms over her chest.

“Where’s Aang?” Sokka spoke up as he tried to move his head away from his youngest daughter who was trying to pull at the bead on the short beard on his chin.

“Eh, getting Appa settled,” the blind earthbender responded with a shrug.

Just then, the mentioned airbender appeared hurriedly at the entrance with Momo flying behind him. Aang’s gray eyes were bright and expectant as he looked around the room before a huge smile broke on his face as they settled on Katara.
“Katara!” he cried out happily, and before anyone could react, he rushed forward as if he were the wind itself, pulled the waterbender to him, and kissed her.

Suddenly the candles and torches placed around the room flared dangerously high and the others gasped in surprise. Katara quickly pushed Aang away from her, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, and turned wide eyes on Zuko, who had a thunderous expression on his face as he shot flaming daggers at Aang with his eyes. Without saying a word, the Fire Lord turned around and stormed out of the sitting room, the flames settling back to their normal state once he left.

“What was that?” Suki asked with wide eyes.

Ursa and Iroh looked at each other and grimaced, while Kanna shook her head and sighed just as Hakoda stared with a frown at the spot where the Fire Lord had last been. Katara took a step to follow after Zuko, but she paused when she felt a hand gently grasp her arm.

‘I have come back for you, Katara.’

She gulped as the nightmare resurfaced in her head before she looked over her shoulder at Aang, who was smiling at her.

“I’m so glad that you’re okay, Katara,” Aang told her sincerely, “I’ve been so worried. I missed you so much.”

He leaned down to kiss her again—much to Hakoda’s displeasure—but Katara quickly pulled her arm away from his grasp and stepped away from him with narrowed eyes.

“You can’t go around kissing me whenever you feel like it, Aang,” she told him firmly.

Aang stiffened as he gave her a hurt look.

“What’s going on?” Sokka asked as he looked between his sister and his friend.
Katara glanced away from Aang and looked at her family, who were frowning, before she straightened herself.

“I broke up with Aang before I left for the colony,” she said softly.

They looked at Katara in shock before they glanced at Aang—who had his head bowed—with sympathy.

Hakoda cleared his throat after a long moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Well, uh—”

“I’ll be right back!” Katara interrupted her father as she made her way toward the corridor, “I need to find Zuko so we can finish telling you all what has been going on.”

Before they could say anything else, she stepped into the corridor, missing the longing look Aang aimed her way. She spotted Jee, Shen, and Kuo looking down the corridor in bewilderment and hurriedly made her way toward them.

“Did Fire Lord Zuko go that way?” she asked even though she already knew the answer.

When they nodded at her, she quickly raced down the hall until she turned the corner. She did not spot him, so she continued until she came to another empty corridor. She saw another puzzled servant and quickly asked which way Zuko had gone. The servant immediately told her that it seemed the Fire Lord was heading to his study. Katara thanked him before she hurried in the direction of Zuko’s study, all the way cursing the tight dress Jiao had insisted she wore for their outing. She hoped Zuko was not angry with her, for after all, it wasn’t as if she wanted Aang to kiss her. She had not been expecting it.

‘Why did you betray me?’

She harshly shook the memory of her nightmare away.

Finally she arrived at the Fire Lord’s study and quickly knocked on the door as she softly called out
his name. When she heard Zuko grunt out a gruff ‘enter’, Katara opened the door.

Just as she took a step inside, she was pulled forward and the door was firmly closed behind her before she was pushed with her back against it as Zuko pressed himself against her front. Her gasp was cut short as Zuko’s mouth crashed onto hers, and she only had a second to realize he had taken off his armor and was only wearing the tunic underneath, before her thoughts scattered. He kissed her roughly and possessively, as if he were trying to wipe all traces of Aang away and only leave his taste in her mouth and only his touch on her body as his hands roamed just as roughly over her curves.

When he pulled away from her mouth, Katara opened her eyes and she swallowed when she saw the rage in his amber orbs. He eclipsed her completely, standing tall, a daunting shadow of masculine superiority. But despite his great strength, his explosive temper, his many years training for violence, his jealousy and possessiveness, never did he make her feel other than safe, protected, and loved.

“Watching another man kiss you made me see red,” he growled out against her lips, his harsh breathing coasting against the sensitive skin of her face. “It was all I could do not to throw Aang away from you and smash my fist in his face.”

“I don’t know why he did it,” Katara said quietly as she looked him straight in the eye in order for him to see she was being truthful, “but I told him that he can’t be kissing me anymore since I already broke up with him.”

“It’s obvious that he still wants you,” Zuko growled out. “He still hopes that you will take him back.”

“You know I won’t,” she told him.

She frowned when he did not immediately agree. She shifted slightly since he was still pinning her to the door, but he did not budge, instead, he pressed himself even closer to her so that her breasts were smashed against his hard chest. She felt her entire body flush just like she knew her cheeks were.

“Only I can kiss you, you hear me?” he growled out in a low tone as he rubbed his lips against hers. “Only I can touch you,” he continued fervently as his hands again roamed over her, squeezing her breasts, caressing her sides, grasping her hips, touching her thighs. “You’re mine!”

Again, he captured her mouth in a possessive kiss that had Katara’s head spinning and her knees
This kiss was fire—a sweet, fierce fire that she had no desire to extinguish. His lips molded over hers, claiming them entirely, giving heat, fire, and passion and demanding it in return just like his element. She moaned when he pulled her closer against him and her heart raced in her chest. He asked no permission as he swiftly parted her lips and slipped his tongue into her mouth, leaving nothing untouched, not even her soul. The excitement she always felt when he was near rose quickly within her, causing her heart to pound and her body to tremble. He continued to kiss her, unrelentingly and greedily, his tongue engaged ardently with hers, his lips demanding, his body so close, so firm and tight.

Maybe she should have been angry at the possessive way he was kissing her, but the truth was that she reveled in it, in the knowledge that he did not want anyone else to have her but him because she felt the same way toward him. She did not want to share him.

It seemed like hours, though it was just minutes, when he finally broke the kiss, but only enough to lift his lips from hers. The warmth of his breath, the rise of his chest, the heat of his eyes, evoked an even deeper quavering within her as his growled whisper caressed her ears.

“You’re mine and no one else’s,” he repeated fiercely.

“Yes,” she told him softly, sincerely, hoping to calm him down. She moved her hands that had been holding tightly onto his back and reached up, pulling his head down until his forehead met hers. “Only yours.”

Zuko closed his eyes and exhaled deeply as his tensed body relaxed slightly and his heart eased at her words. When he saw Aang kiss her, it reminded him of the nightmare he had. He had felt such immense anger mixed with pain that he had no alternative but to leave before he did something he would later regret—like break Aang’s neck. Katara was his and he would kill anyone who tried to so much as to touch a hair on her head. However, there was a small part of him that had feared that Katara would somehow realize she loved Aang and not him, that she belonged with the airbender. He was afraid that she would leave him for Aang.

He opened his eyes when he felt Katara touch his cheeks, her fingers leaving trails of heat in her wake, before she traced the contours of each of his ears. As she touched the burned shell of his left ear, he almost pulled away, but he ordered himself to remain still for he knew that she did not find his disfigurement revolting at all. He felt her press her lips softly against his forehead, then against each eyelid, placing a lingering kiss on his scarred eyelid, a kiss as light as a fluttering feather, and he knew that she was trying to reassure him and calm him down. Then her mouth was on his, brushing his lips so gently he thought he might have imagined it if it weren’t for her sweet breath. She pulled away slightly, and when she kissed him again, he moved to capture her mouth, shaping his lips to hers. His tongue probed her lips beseechingly this time, and as she quickly parted them, he felt the rush of her breath and tasted her against his tongue.
When she opened her mouth to him so trustingly and without reserve, something inside him snapped at the surge of need that burst to life within him. Need for her, hot and fierce, made itself known again in his loins, but at the moment there was a greater need to place a claim on her for everyone to see that she was his. He wanted to hold her, touch her, and explore every inch of her luscious body and brand it with his hands, with his tongue, with his body for all time. But he knew that he could not until she was married to him. Yet a primal part of him told him that there was another way.

He cradled her head between his hands, his fingers burying in her hair, as he deepened their kiss, possessing her mouth. He wedged a thigh between her legs and the hem of her qipao rode high on her thighs as he pressed against her. He ached to feel more of her skin, and so, his fingers worked quickly to unfasten the ties that held her dress closed until the top half of her dress parted open. He broke their kiss as he looked at her covered breasts with a hungry gleam in his eye. Katara tried to cover herself again, but he grabbed her hands and pinned them over her head just as his head leaned down and his mouth took one of the hardening nipples through the cloth of her bindings. He could feel his shaft hardening even further as desire exploded within him.

“Oh!” Katara gasped and her back arched, instinctively pushing her chest out to get closer to his mouth only to groan in disappointment when Zuko pulled away to stare into her eyes.

“Your body will only be seen and touched by me,” he growled out as he reached down a hand to slip it beneath the hem of her dress to cup her covered heat while he grasped both her wrists with the other.

Katara let out another moan before she gasped when he pressed his thumb on the little sensitive bud through her clothes, sending a tingle to shoot to all of her nerve endings. She whimpered and rocked her hips when he pressed firm circles on her clit. She could feel a rush of her arousal seep out of her, drenching her under-wrappings.

“I’m a very possessive man, Katara, and I will also not share what belongs to me,” he continued huskily, repeating the exact sentiment she had told him after her fight with Mai.

He moved his hand away and Katara moaned in disappointment before gasping when he scooped her up a little against the door so he could wedge his hips between her thighs and press his erection against her sex.

“Ohhhh, mmm,” she mewled when he began to move his hips in a slow grind.
Zuko reached up to grab her breast, pinching the nipple between his fingers, causing her to moan and buck against him. Nudging her with his nose, Zuko made her tilt her head to the side and he brushed his mouth against her throat, pressing hungry kisses. He stuck out his tongue, tasted the skin of her neck, felt the pulsing vein of her life force flutter against his lips as he lapped at her throat while his hand continued to knead her concealed breast and his hips rocked against hers. With that urgent need driving him more insistently, Zuko opened his mouth and latched onto the place where her neck met her shoulder, biting her skin gently and then sucking on it almost desperately. Katara gasped at the sensation and tilted her head further aside to give him more access, causing Zuko to groan appreciatively as he ground his erection even more tightly against her warmth.

But as much as he wanted to continue where they were going, he knew they needed to stop unless they wanted someone from her family—mainly her father or brother—to walk in on them, thus ruining Zuko’s chance of winning Hakoda’s approval. With one last gentle lick of her skin to soothe the sting, Zuko moved his mouth away and buried his face in her neck as he tried to somehow rein in his need and will his arousal away.

Katara wound her arms around him, as if understanding what he was going through, and held him tightly against her. He felt the difference of her soft body and gentle hands compared to his hard frame and the slightly rough way he had touched her before. Her heart beat rapidly yet smoothly against his chest as she ran her hands gently down his back. With each breath he felt her bound breasts press against him and he closed his eyes. Gradually her warmth seeped into him like sunlight, relaxing him until he no longer felt that wild possessiveness within him.

“You’re mine just like I’m yours and we belong together…for eternity,” he finally spoke up in a firm tone.

“For eternity,” Katara agreed softly.

Zuko moved away from her neck and lifted his head to look at her. She had a gentle smile on her lips and he felt his heart clench at the almost brutal way he had handled her, even though he knew she would have frozen him to the wall if she had truly been outraged at his behavior. Leaning down toward her face, Zuko caressed her lips with his.

“Do you love me?” he whispered against her lips.

“More than anything,” she replied truthfully before she just as softly asked, “Do you love me?”

“More than my own life,” he stated.
Katara smiled before she pressed her lips gently against his. Despite his stoic and impassive tone, and despite not voicing it out loud, she knew that he feared she might leave him for Aang.

“You don’t need to worry, Zuko,” she told him tenderly, “I will never leave you. No man is going to take me away from you. My heart only belongs to you.”

Zuko groaned softly as he again captured her mouth in a searing kiss, wrapping his arms around her and drawing her tightly close to him. He felt his fear lessen at her sincere words.

“You buried yourself in my soul and I will never let you go, ever,” he growled out fiercely.

He kissed her once, twice, three more times before he finally settled her back on her feet and stepped slightly away from her. Katara blushed deeply when the air of the room brushed against her chest and she quickly closed the top half of her qipao and began to fasten the ties while avoiding looking at Zuko. She cleared her throat.

“My family must be wondering what’s taking us so long,” she mumbled.

“I’ll think of something to tell them,” he said distractedly as he watched her.

He was a bit disappointed to see her semi-uncovered top disappear, but he knew they had to hurry and go to the others if they wanted to avoid any problems. His eyes moved away from Katara’s covered chest and drifted to the spot where he had marked her, where a love bite now decorated her skin, thanks to him. Though he knew nobody would be able to see his mark, it pleased him greatly to know it was there and that it was he who had done it.

Animalistic and savage? Perhaps…

Chauvinistic? Maybe…

Possessive? Definitely.
He reached out a hand and gently touched the red spot with his finger, causing her to slightly flinch. She smiled at him when he frowned. He leaned his head down and pressed a tender kiss to the mark before he leaned back and straightened her clothes around her. She tightened the sash around her waist and he fixed the collar at her throat while she fixed her hair until she looked as presentable as she was before he had pulled her into his study.

“Alright, let’s go back,” he said impassively once his erection had finally gone away, but not before he pressed his lips against her forehead and then her lips.

“I think you should talk to my father about us until tomorrow when he’s more rested and less anxious. Especially after we tell him about Jianguo and the traitor’s plans,” she told him as she smoothed the tunic over his chest.

Zuko was a silent for a moment before he gave a brief nod.

“That would probably be best.”

They lingered for a moment, staring at each other silently, both hoping everything came out well, before they finally stepped out of the study and headed back to where the others were. Zuko nodded and Katara smiled when they passed Kuo, Shen, and Jee, who bowed their heads to hide their curious expressions.

“There you are,” Ursa exclaimed with a smile as her son and the Water Tribe maiden finally appeared, “We were wondering what was taking you so long.”

“Is everything all right?” Hakoda asked with a frown as he stared between his daughter and the young Fire Lord.

“I apologize for leaving so abruptly,” Zuko spoke up coolly as he went to sit on one of the plush chairs placed at the head of the table.

Instead of sitting between her father and her brother again, Katara sat on the other chair next to him.

“A problem came up that I had to see to,” Zuko continued.
“I hope you were able to solve your problem,” Kanna spoke up as she glanced at her granddaughter, who tried not to blush as she smiled at everyone innocently.

“I did,” Zuko spoke up cryptically as he glanced at Katara beside him before he looked at Aang who was sitting silently on one of the cushions beside Toph, “I just hope I will not have to deal with it again in the future.”

His hands clenched as he watched Aang throwing sad yet hopeful looks at Katara before he told himself to relax.

“Alright, well, now that we’re all here, can you tell us what is going on?” Hakoda spoke up again as he reached inside his tunic to pull out all the missives he had received for the past month. “General Iroh wrote that both of you fell overboard during a storm and could not be found, and then we’re told that you might have been captured, but everyone is saying that you have been stranded on an island all this time. What is the truth?”

Katara and Zuko glanced at each other briefly before they returned their gazes to the frowning chief.

“We were captured,” Zuko affirmed grimly.

“What?” everybody cried out in shock.

“How?!” Aang asked as he gripped his staff.

“Why?!” Sokka shouted.

“How dare they!” Pakku exclaimed.

“Who captured you?!?” Hakoda demanded angrily.

“When Zuko swam us to shore we decided to wait until Uncle Iroh found us, but…” Katara trailed off as she looked down at her clenched hands, “I was impatient to go to the colony and I ventured into the forest, even though Zuko tried to reason with me that it was a bad idea. That’s when I came upon three men. They attacked me and I fought back, but a fourth man appeared, a former Dai Li
agent, and he blocked my bending. When they tried to take me away, Zuko appeared and attacked them.

“And Sparky kicked their asses and you escaped, right?” Toph spoke up.

“No,” Zuko said solemnly, “More men appeared and attacked me. I tried to fight them all, but Chang, the Dai Li agent, held a dagger against Katara’s neck. Their leader spoke up and told me to back down unless I wanted Katara to be hurt. So I did. I stopped fighting them and they suppressed my bending as well.”

“Are you both all right?” Suki asked worriedly.

She still had nightmares at the torture she and her fellow Kyoshi Warriors had gone through when Azula had captured them. She shivered but smiled when Sokka placed a comforting hand on her thigh.

Hakoda looked at his daughter with a pained frown.

“Did they…?” he trailed off and cleared his throat.

“No,” Katara said and shook her head, understanding what her father was trying to ask her. “Zuko kept me safe. He even let himself get beat up in order to protect me.”

Everybody seemed to let out relieved breaths, but then they frowned when she said Zuko had been hurt.

“Thank you for keeping her safe,” Hakoda spoke up as he turned to look at Zuko.

“I did what I could, given the circumstances,” Zuko replied with a small nod before he glanced at Katara. “I was not about to let them hurt her,” he continued in a hard tone.

Aang frowned at the way Zuko was looking at Katara and he clenched his hands on his knees just as Kanna and Sokka repeated their thanks.
“But who kidnapped you?” Sokka finally asked, “And why did they do it?”

“It was mostly out of revenge,” Zuko informed them darkly, “They are the group of rebels that have been terrorizing my colonies for the past months. I had banished them from the Fire Nation four years ago when they tried to rise against me, and they wanted vengeance. Jianguo, their leader, especially hates me.”

He paused before he continued, “But their main objective in capturing us was to demand the Court Council to release Ozai from prison in exchange for our lives.”

“What?” they exclaimed.

“They’re fools!” Aang cried out as he gripped his wooden staff. He did not go through a difficult emotional struggle in his decision to end or spare Ozai’s life just so the evil former Fire Lord could be released!

Zuko and Katara glanced at each other before the firebender took a deep breath as he began to relate all they knew from what Jianguo had told them. They explained that it was the rebels who sent those false messages about an illness striking the colony and about the revolt in the Earth Kingdom in order to lure them out. They recounted how they had been stripped from their bending and forced to march through the Earth Kingdom for weeks. They gave small details about their escape, their journey for help, and finally ended with how Iroh found them with the help of Jun and her shirshu—of course they left out the parts that would reveal their relationship.

The sun had finally settled over the horizon by the time they finished. Katara’s family, Toph, and Aang sat in silence as they processed what they had heard. Jing and Ting, oblivious to the adults’ concern, were happily playing with the wooden animal figures by their parents’ feet.

“Who could the traitor be?” Sokka finally asked as he pulled Suki to his side.

“I had suspicions that it was Wei,” Zuko spoke up darkly, “But, unfortunately, I have no evidence against him. I have people working on finding out everything he does as well as looking to see the possibility of someone else being the traitor. I also have others searching for the rebels.”

His eyes narrowed and he fistbanged his hand as he growled out, “And once I know who this traitor is, I will make sure they regret crossing me and daring to hurt Katara.”
“But why did they lure Katara out, too?” Aang finally asked with a deep frown marring the arrow tattoo on his forehead.

“To keep me subdued. They knew I was not going to let any harm befall her,” Zuko replied imperturbably as he stared levelly at the frowning airbender.

Aang narrowed his eyes at him.

Sokka glanced at his father as if to say ‘I told you so’ and Hakoda nodded in consent.

“You all must be tired,” Ursa finally spoke up when the twin girls gave simultaneous yawns. “Why don’t you retire to your rooms to rest after a light supper?”

“Thank you very much, Lady Ursa,” Kanna spoke up before the men could protest, “We’ve had a very long and tedious journey to reach the Fire Nation.”

As they all stood, Zuko turned to address Katara’s father.

“Chief Hakoda,” he began before he continued once he had the older man’s attention, “I would like to speak to you about something important tomorrow once you are rested.”

Hakoda frowned in wonderment before he nodded. Who was he to reject Zuko’s request after he had saved and protected his daughter?

“Of course,” he said with a small smile before he turned to Katara and clasped her hands, “You have no idea how relieved I am to see that you are well.”

“You don’t have to worry anymore, Dad,” she told him reassuringly as she squeezed his hands and smiled at him.

After a few more words with her, Katara’s family finally began to head toward their rooms for some much needed rest. Aang ignored Toph’s jab on his side to make him walk outside the sitting room,
and instead, he headed toward Katara who was talking to Zuko’s mother. He missed the narrowed look Zuko threw at him as he approached the waterbender.

“Katara,” he began hesitantly.

When she turned to look at him, Aang gave her a small smile as he said, “Can we talk? There are some things I want to say to you.”

“I’m sorry, Aang,” Katara told him softly. She could feel Zuko’s eyes on them and she resisted the urge to look at him. “We’ll talk tomorrow. I also have something to tell you.”

Aang frowned before his heart swelled in hope at her last words. Maybe she wanted to tell him that she had thought over breaking up with him! Once she apologized, he will immediately tell her that he would take her back!

“Okay,” he said as his smile turned a bit wider, “Until tomorrow then, Katara.”

Katara gave him a brief nod, missing the hopeful look in his eyes as he walked away, and she turned to smile warmly at Zuko as he answered when everybody bid him a good night. Kanna waited by the entrance for her granddaughter while her husband, son, her grandson and his wife lingered outside.

Aware that they were still not alone, Zuko watched as Katara passed him by slowly and he tried to keep himself from reaching out to pull her to him.

“Only one more night before I can announce our engagement,” he whispered to her as she passed.

Katara turned her head to smile at him as she whispered, “One more night.”

She turned back around and smiled at her family as they surrounded her and began to again express their relief that she was all right. She smiled and laugh with them as happiness spread through her. Just one more night and she will finally be a step closer into marrying Zuko.

She ignored that sense of dread that rose again in her chest.
The next day found Katara sitting on her bed and going over another of the scrolls Madam Fang Hua had given her to study. She had finally found some alone time since her family had not let her out of their sight all day. Aang had also tried to get her attention, which worried her since he acted as if they were still together. She really needed to talk to him and soon.

Zuko had to settle something in the city and had asked her father for a private word after dinner, and Katara and he had agreed that she will talk to Aang at the same time. That dreadful feeling came over her again and she shook herself to get rid of it.

She wanted Aang to understand that there never was going to be another chance for them and that she loved Zuko and he was the one she wanted to marry. She knew Aang would be hurt and angry, but if she dragged this on, then he would get his hopes up and be even more hurt in the end. Besides, she would also be hurting Zuko and that, to her, was worse.

The door was suddenly thrown open and she jumped in surprise only to scowl when she saw Toph barge into her room with Suki trailing after her with the laughing twins.

“Don’t you know you’re supposed to knock first before you enter someone’s room?” Katara asked sarcastically as she rolled up the scroll and placed it on the nightstand.

“But this way’s more fun,” Toph countered with an unrepentant grin.

“I’m sorry, Katara, I tried to stop her,” Suki said with a small laugh as she placed her daughters on the bed beside their aunt before she sat on their other side.

Toph dropped herself at the foot of the bed with a snort.

Katara cooed at the twins for a moment as they reached out to her with their chubby hands and gurgled happily before they lost interest in her and began to play with each other.

“It must have been scary for you with what happened with the rebels,” Suki spoke up softly after a while.

“It was,” Katara admitted quietly as she unconsciously ran her hand over her stomach where she had
been injured, “Especially since Zuko and I had no way to defend ourselves when they took our
bending away. And then the men tried to…” She trailed off and shuddered in disgust before she
smiled slightly when Suki patted her arm in comfort. “But Zuko kept me protected as much as he
could and stood up to them when they tried to…attack me.”

Suki nodded to show she understood and she smiled at her sister-in-law.

“I’m glad Zuko fought to keep you safe,” she said.

“I wonder how Sparky managed to defeat them all by himself,” Toph piped in with a raised brow.
She was curious since they had been vague about that part.

Before Katara could respond she was distracted when Ting rolled over and bumped onto her hip.
Katara laughed softly as she reached down to steady the younger baby and place her back beside her
sister. She looked up when Suki cleared her throat.

“Did you really break up with Aang?” the female warrior asked curiously.

Toph sat up and tilted her head in Katara’s direction.

“Yes,” Katara answered truthfully.

“I noticed Twinkletoes was depressed while we were in the Earth Kingdom village, but he never
said anything,” Toph commented as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“I figured as much,” the waterbender muttered.

“Twinkletoes told me you wanted to talk to him after dinner,” the small earthbender remarked before
she casually asked, “Are you gonna take him back?”

“No,” Katara responded.

Toph uncrossed her arms and frowned slightly when she felt her racing heart slow down.
“Why?” Suki asked curiously.

Katara fidgeted for a moment and Suki raised an eyebrow when the waterbender blushed.

“Because I’m in love with Zuko,” Katara replied softly.

Suki gasped, but Toph smirked as she again crossed her arms.

“Please tell me both of you stopped being stupid and finally confessed to each other,” the milky green-eyed woman asked sardonically.

Katara scowled at her and Toph grinned even though she could not see it. The waterbender wondered if she should confessed to them that she was now engaged to Zuko before she told herself that they were her friends and would not say anything until her father knew. Taking a deep breath, Katara let it out slowly as a bright smile spread across her face.

“Zuko has confessed that he loves me,” she said with a wistful sigh and ignored Toph’s snicker. “Right after dinner, Zuko is going to ask my dad for my hand in marriage,” she said rapidly and then she blushed.

This time Toph gasped along with Suki as both women gaped, wide-eyed, at the smiling waterbender before the earthbender shook herself and chuckled, bringing the auburn-haired woman out of her shock.

“Well, that was pretty quick,” Toph remarked with a grin, “But knowing Sparky, I shouldn’t be so surprised.”

Suki stared at Katara for a moment longer, watching the pleased blush on the dark-skinned waterbender’s cheeks, before she smiled happily as she patted Katara’s hand.

“I admit that I did suspect there was something going on between you and Zuko, but I never thought you loved each other,” Suki spoke up with a small grin. “But marriage? Wow.”
“Yeah, I know,” Katara said before she laughed sheepishly and rubbed her arm. “I almost had a panic attack and I had some doubts, but Zuko reassured me that there is nothing for me to worry about as long as we have each other.”

“Wow, did Sparky really say that?” Toph asked as her grin grew, “You must’ve really gotten to him.”

The blue-eyed woman again ignored her as she smiled at Suki who was smiling along with her.

“I love him so much and I want to marry him,” Katara said softly.

“I understand how you feel since it’s the same thing I felt toward Sokka,” Suki replied with a soft giggle. She opened her arms and hugged the brunette waterbender tightly as she exclaimed, “Congratulations!”

“Yeah, Sugar Queen, congrats!” Toph piped in as she lightly punched Katara’s arm.

Katara laughed before she calmed herself down and grimaced.

“Well, we still have to see what my father says,” she mumbled.

“So this is why you wanna talk to Twinkletoes? Let him down gently?” Toph asked as she leaned back on the bed on her elbows.

“Yes,” Katara replied and sighed deeply as she tickled the sleepy twins, “I just hope Aang will understand.”

“I hope so, too,” Toph muttered, “but I have a bad feeling.”

Katara bit her lip.

_I do too_, she thought.
The only sign of his apprehension was the flexing of his hands as Zuko walked away from his bedchamber after removing the armor that he had worn for his visit to the city. In a few minutes, dinner would be served and, after they finished their meal, he would ask Hakoda to give him his consent to marry his daughter. His stomach twisted in anxiety.

Although Katara had reassured him that her father would grant his permission, Zuko was not so confident. Hakoda may respect him, and he may be grateful to him for helping Sokka save him from the Boiling Rock and for saving Katara, but that did not automatically mean the chieftain would accept his daughter marrying the lord of the country who had brought their family and people so much pain.

Zuko winced as he continued walking down the empty corridor. And as far as he knew, Hakoda seemed to like Aang and perhaps wished for him to be his son-in-law. That thought made him grit his teeth before he ordered himself to calm down. He would just have to make Hakoda see that he really cared for Katara and would not give her up, and if he had to beg for the man’s consent, he would.

He just hoped it didn’t come to that.

Once Hakoda gave his consent, he planned on proposing to Katara again with the two engagement items. He hoped she liked them.

There was still time left before dinner, so the young lord decided to visit his private garden to take in some fresh air and find some peace and calm. As soon as he stepped into the garden, he took in a deep breath of the sweet aroma that greeted him and sighed when he felt some of his anxiety ease before he stepped onto one of the stone paths to make his way to his favorite spot beneath the cherry blossom tree. He paused and a smile curled his lips when he spotted Katara standing there, feeding the turtle-ducks.

For a long while, he silently admired her form, the way her hair gleamed beneath the sun, the way her dark blue outfit fitted against her body, her lovely face lighting up as she fed the eager little creatures in the pond. She really was a water nymph that continued to enchant him and lure him to her without any resistance from him. Feeling warmth spread through his chest, he finally moved toward her in an unhurried pace so his eyes could continue taking her in.

“Katara,” he called out softly so as not to startle her.
Katara paused before she turned to him with a wide smile as she dusted her hands of crumbs before straightening herself.

“What are you doing?” he asked with a smile.

“Killing time before dinner,” she responded with a shrug as she grinned at him.

“That was my plan, too,” he admitted as he glanced at the descending sun before he returned his gaze to the pond.

They were silent for a moment as they watched the turtle-ducks frolic in the water before they looked at each other again.

“Are you ready to tell Aang after dinner?” he asked with a cocked brow.

“Yes,” Katara responded with a firm nod before she smiled at him as she asked, “And are you ready to talk to my father?”

“I’m more than ready,” he replied firmly.

His eyes drifted from her smiling face and landed on the high collar of her blue tunic that effectively covered the skin of her throat.

“It’s too hot to be wearing a high collar today,” he commented casually, but the affect was ruined when he smirked knowingly.

Katara scowled at him as her hand flew to her covered neck before she pointed an accusing finger at him.

“I’m not about to go parading around with a bruise on me,” she grumbled.

“Not a bruise, Katara, it’s a love bite,” he corrected, his smirk growing a bit wider.
It was the first time he had given a woman a love bite and he could not help feeling smug that it was also the first time Katara had received one. A flood of color rushed to the waterbender’s cheeks before she looked away with a huff. Zuko frowned at her and he again felt a bit of guilt gather in his stomach. Maybe he had been too rough.

“I won’t do it again if it bothers you,” he said quietly.

“No!” Katara exclaimed as she whirled back to look at him. She blushed at her outburst and at the raised eyebrow he aimed at her before she cleared her throat. “Uh, I mean…it’s not that bad. And if I didn’t like, I could’ve healed it,” she said softly as her blush deepened in color.

Zuko stared at her wide-eyed for a moment before he chuckled quietly as she looked away in embarrassment. She was just so adorable when she became shy and embarrassed. It made him want to do naughty things to her.

He glanced around the garden and listened to their surroundings for a moment, and when he did not see or hear anyone else near them, he quickly reached out for her and pulled her to him before she could react.

“Zuko,” Katara protested even as her hands wound themselves around him.

“As soon as your father accepts my proposal, I will announce my wish to take you as my wife to my people,” he said against her hair.

Katara felt her stomach flutter in anxiety, but she told herself to calm down as she took comfort in Zuko’s embrace and his warmth. She pulled away slightly to grin at him.

“I can’t wait to let everybody know you are mine,” she said with a smirk.

Zuko groaned before he leaned down to kiss her softly on her plump lips.

“I can’t wait either,” he replied huskily.

He moved one hand away from around her so that he could open her tunic slightly apart just enough
to pull her collar aside. The red love bite contrasted nicely against her brown skin and Zuko again felt that pride and possessiveness swell within him at the sight of it. He leaned down to touch it softly with his lips before he flicked it with his tongue. Katara jumped and hissed as she clutched at the back of his robes. Zuko gave it a languid lick before he pressed soft kisses on it and along her throat, causing Katara to shiver and moan softly.

“Soon you’ll be all mine,” he whispered huskily against her skin as he pushed her gently against the cherry blossom tree behind her.

Katara moaned softly at the feeling of his hard body pressing against hers.

Zuko pulled away from her throat to brush his lips against hers, parted already as if awaiting his kiss expectantly. His hand reached up to tangle in her hair and he pulled her head slightly back so he could kiss her more deeply. Reaching a hand down, Zuko caressed the back of her thigh before trailing it up until he rested it on her ass. He squeezed gently and Katara moaned as she pressed herself closer to him. His tongue slipped inside her mouth eagerly, and they moaned against each other’s lips as they lost themselves in their passion, forgetting everything else but themselves and the sensations and feelings they felt with each other.

“Get your hands off her!” they heard someone angrily shout.

Zuko and Katara pulled away from each other’s mouths in surprise as their heads whipped in the direction of the voice.

“Aang!” Katara exclaimed in horror.

The airbender was trembling in both shock and rage as he gripped his wooden staff tightly while he glared angrily at Zuko, who had yet to release Katara.

Aang took a menacing step forward as he demanded between gritted teeth.

“What the hell is going on here?”
**Anticipated Confrontation**

“I said get away from her!” Aang shouted again as he pointed the wooden staff menacingly at the Fire Lord.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the command, but decided to comply in order to avoid any problems. He reluctantly moved his hand away from where it had been resting on Katara’s backside. Zuko steadied her on her feet before he took a step away from her stiff form as he turned to stare levelly at the angry Avatar.

Katara swallowed nervously as she watched the two men glare silently at each other and she prayed nothing drastic would happen. How did things come out like this?! She and Zuko had been very careful to hide their relationship, but it all had been for nothing just because they had lost themselves momentarily in each other.

Zuko cleared his throat.

“Aang, let us explain—”

Aang interrupted him as he heatedly demanded, “How dare you assault Katara like that?!”

“Aang, it’s not what you think,” Katara tried to explain as she took a step forward, but she froze when the airbender turned to look at her.

Aang opened his mouth to ask her if she was all right when he noticed that her tunic was slightly open, but he stopped when a mark on the skin of her neck caught his attention. His gray eyes widened in shock when he realized it was a bruise before they narrowed in anger at the thought that Zuko dared to hurt her.

“Step away from him, Katara!” he demanded as he turned to glare with fury at Zuko. “You’re a monster for hurting her!” he shouted as his grip on his staff tightened so much that his pale knuckles turned even whiter.

Zuko stiffened at the accusation. How dare Aang accuse him of such a thing! He took a threatening step toward the younger man, but he paused when Katara immediately placed her hand on his arm to stop him.
“I would never harm Katara,” Zuko growled out angrily.

Katara quickly pulled the collar up and closed her disarrayed tunic before she looked up to frown at Aang.

“There are some things you don’t know, Aang, so you shouldn’t say such things about Zuko,” she told him firmly.

“Why are you defending him?” Aang asked her incredulously, “He was kissing you against your will!”

“If Katara didn’t accept my advances, she would’ve done something about it,” Zuko responded between gritted teeth.

“Katara, get away from him so I can teach him a lesson!” Aang shouted, ignoring Zuko’s words entirely in his anger and jealousy.

“No,” Katara told him defiantly as she took a step closer to the tensed firebender, “Zuko wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

“W-what?” Aang stammered as he frowned at her.

Katara took a deep breath as she gathered her courage. She needed to make Aang understand that he did not have the right to demand things from her and that he needed to see that she would never take him back.

“I wanted to tell you this privately so you could understand,” she began slowly.

“Tell me what?” the airbender asked as the grip on his staff tightened in anxiety. He had a feeling he was not going to like what she was going to say.

Katara glanced at Zuko and he looked down at her questioningly before his eyes widened when she
took his hand, entwined their fingers together, and gave it a firm squeeze. Aang’s eyes also widened as he saw the gesture before he looked up at Katara with a pained frown.

“Zuko and I are engaged,” she confessed softly.

A horrified gasp escaped the airbender and he backed away a step as if he had been struck. He stared at her in both shock and hurt.

“N-no, that can’t be!” he stammered, shaking his head almost violently in denial.

“Aang, please listen—”

“Tell me you’re lying!” he interrupted as he looked at her with a pleading expression, “Tell me it’s just a joke!”

“It’s not a joke,” Zuko spoke up coolly as he gave Katara’s hand a squeeze. He had feared that Katara would never have explained to Aang what was going on, but he was glad that she had finally told him about them. “We are really engaged.”

Aang’s hurt expression turned into one full of fury as he turned on Zuko, causing Katara to gasp for she had never seen the lovable monk so angry before.

“How dare you seduce Katara while we were separated?!” Aang shouted at him.

“I didn’t seduce her,” Zuko growled out.

“You know how much Katara means to me!” Aang continued, again ignoring Zuko’s words in his anger and pain, “You knew I wanted to marry her, so why are you taking her away from me?!”

Then in a broken voice, he said, “I thought we were friends.”

Zuko frowned and then sighed guiltily at the hurt expression on the gray-eyed airbender’s face.
“I tried to keep away from Katara because I did know what you felt for her and I didn’t want to ruin our friendship,” Zuko began before he added more firmly, “But I could not stop…my feelings for her.”

“What?” Aang exclaimed just as Katara turned surprised eyes on Zuko for his confession.

Zuko pressed his lips tightly together at his admittance since he was always uncomfortable talking about his feelings with another person that was not Katara, but he wanted to make Aang understand that he loved her and that he will not give her up.

“I love Katara,” the golden-eyed Fire Lord stated before he determinedly added, “And I’m going to marry her.”

“No!” Aang shouted as he again shook his head furiously before he again turned his glare on Zuko. “You have Mai! You could have any woman you want! So why did you pick Katara when you knew we were together?!”

“We already ended things!” Katara exclaimed exasperatedly.

Aang ignored her words as he turned pained eyes on her.

“How could you do this to me when you know how much I love you?”

“Aang,” Katara said more softly as she spread her hands pleadingly, “Please understand…”

She paused when he shook his head at her and took another step back before he looked at Zuko with cold, gray eyes.

“Why did you take her away from me?” he hissed.

“I didn’t do it to hurt you, Aang,” Zuko responded with a frown. “And besides, Katara is…was free to be pursued.”
“You’re lying!” the airbender raged, “I noticed all those looks you would throw Katara even when we were together! I had my suspicions that you were trying to get her for yourself and I see that I was right!”

The airbender slashed his wooden staff to the side and a gust of wind flew at Zuko, sliding him a few feet away from Katara.

“Zuko!” Katara cried out as she whirled around to see where Zuko had skidded to a stop.

Once she knew he was all right, she turned to look at Aang with narrowed eyes.

“Stop it, Aang!” she exclaimed, “Let’s just talk about this!”

But Aang’s attention was on Zuko who was casually straightening his clothes with a cold expression on his face.

“Leave Katara alone!” Aang demanded.

“Unless Katara tells me otherwise, I will not leave her,” Zuko responded with a growl, “And even if she does, I would do anything to get her back.”

With an angry shout, Aang again shot a gust of wind at him, his entire body trembling in anger. Zuko crossed his arms over his face as the ball of air hit him full force and again pushed him a few feet away before he looked up once he skidded to a stop. He narrowed his eyes once he realized Aang was moving him away from Katara, so he deliberately took a few steps toward her.

“Why are you taking her away from me?!” the young Avatar shouted as he took a step closer to the anxious waterbender when he saw Zuko moving toward her again.

“I already told you I’m not doing it out of malice!” Zuko hissed out as his hands clenched at his sides, “And she doesn’t belong to you!”

“Stop lying!” Aang cried out as this time he summoned a chunk of rock from the ground and hurled
it at the golden-eyed firebender.

“Zuko!” Katara screamed.

Zuko shot a ball of fire to destroy the incoming rock and it exploded into many pieces just as he turned to glare at Aang.

“I don’t want to fight you,” he said between gritted teeth.

“Well, that’s too bad!” the younger man growled as he raised his staff and prepared to send another attack.

“What’s all the damn shouting about?” Toph’s annoyed voice interrupted Zuko from responding, Katara from protesting, and made Aang pause from attacking.

The three turned in the direction of the earthbender’s voice and they saw that she was not alone but was accompanied by Katara’s family as well as Zuko’s. Jee, Shen, and Kuo were standing behind them with tensed postures as they eyed the airbender with guarded looks. The others were looking at the three with confused and curious expressions.

“What is going on?” Hakoda asked as he frowned at the three of them.

Zuko tensed and groaned inwardly as he flicked a glance at Katara, who gave him a worried frown, before he returned his attention to the chieftain. Things were not supposed to be like this!

Katara took a step toward her father as she tried to give him a smile, which came out more like a grimace.

“Dad, let me explain—”

“Zuko seduced Katara and he’s trying to take her away!” Aang interrupted her as he pointed an accusing finger at Zuko.
“What?” Hakoda, Sokka, and Pakku growled out in unison.

“That is not true,” Zuko said as he narrowed his eyes angrily at Aang.

“Zuko didn’t—” Katara tried to explain, but once again Aang cut her off. She gritted her teeth in annoyance.

“I will not give Katara up!” Aang told Zuko stubbornly.

“Neither will I,” Zuko responded just as adamantly.

With another angry cry, Aang again threw a ball of wind at Zuko to keep him away from Katara. The waterbender cried out as Aang ripped a large chunk of earth and flung it at the raven-haired man, who again, demolished it with a quick fire blast.

“Stop it! Both of you stop fighting!” Katara demanded angrily.

This was not how things were supposed to be! Zuko was supposed to talk to her father and she was supposed to explain things to Aang in a calm manner! All of her trouble of keeping her engagement to Zuko a secret, all of her distress of keeping Zuko at a distance, and all of her anxiety to keep Aang from being hurt and from fighting with Zuko was all in vain just because Aang had accidently caught them kissing!

She ran to Aang in order to stop him when he raised his staff once again to attack Zuko, but Aang did not notice her and accidently knocked her sideways when he slashed the wooden staff to the side. With a pained cry, Katara flew a few feet before she landed on the ground on her side, coughing loudly when the wind was knocked out of her lungs and wincing at the jarring impact.

“Katara!” everybody shouted in alarm.

“I’m so sorry!” Aang cried out as he rushed to help her.

He skidded to a stop when a wall of white fire suddenly sprang in front of him, cutting him off from Katara. Aang quickly jumped back in surprise as well as from the heat of the scorching flames.
When the wall of fire extinguished, they all gaped in shock to find Zuko standing protectively before Katara with white fire engulfing his clenched hands that trembled with his rage.

“What the…?” Sokka breathed in awe as his blue eyes widened in shock, not only at the intimidating sight Zuko made as he stood protectively in front of his sister, but at the fact that the Fire Lord was bending white fire. How was that even possible?

Zuko glanced worriedly at Katara, who was sitting up and shaking her head as if to clear it. When he saw that she was all right, he turned to look at Aang with a livid expression. The wrath present in the Fire Lord’s glare made it seem as if fire could shoot forth from those golden orbs and incinerate the airbender on the spot.


Zuko had felt his anger flare at the sight of Katara hitting the ground. He tried being understanding toward Aang, but with this, he felt his patience and sympathy vanish. He wanted to make Aang see that Katara belonged only to him.

Sensing that Zuko was angry, Katara quickly rose to her feet and clung onto his arm, careful of keeping her body away from the white flames in his hands.

“Zuko, it was an accident!” she tried to reason with him as she gave his arm a reassuring squeeze to calm him down.

“It doesn’t matter,” Zuko responded coldly as he continued to glare at the wide-eyed Avatar, “The point is that he hurt you and you know I’m not going to allow anyone who harms you get away with it.”

Glancing at her from the corner of his golden eye, the young Fire Lord then firmly added.

“You are mine to protect.”

Katara felt her cheeks burned as her heart fluttered at the words he had uttered in front of everybody and she found herself speechless as she stared at his serious profile.
“Zuko…” she breathed out.

“Katara doesn’t belong to you!” Aang shouted heatedly, interrupting their moment.

With an livid yell, Aang summoned another burst of air to separate the two so he did not hurt Katara again when he fought Zuko. Never had he felt such rage and pain in his life!

Katara crossed her hands over her face as the dust stung her eyes just as she felt the wind push her away from Zuko. Once the wind died down, Katara’s eyes flew wide open and immediately darted in search of the men. She cried out as she saw them fighting with each other, Zuko forcefully punching white fire in Aang’s direction while the airbender attacked just as angrily with sharp rocks and piercing wind. She was a bit relieved to know that Zuko did not have his dual broadswords with him at the moment. Who knew what would happen then.

The others were amazed and confused as they watched the Avatar fight the young Fire Lord. They did not know what was going on to have brought both friends to attack each other. Jee and Zuko’s personal guards were tense since they wanted to rush forward and protect their lord, but they knew that this was a fight they could not intervene in.

Aang slashed his staff to the side and a great burst of air flew at Zuko and crashed into him. Zuko clenched his teeth as he planted his feet firmly on the ground to keep from being thrown in the air, and instead, he slid backgrounds, dust and debris flying around him as he dug his feet on the grassy ground. As he straightened himself, he saw Aang bend a sharp water whip he gathered from the pond and aim it at his chest.

Narrowing his eyes, Zuko shot forth his own fire whip, but due to his anger it burst into white flames that immediately evaporated the cool water whip. He cracked the white fire whip on the ground before he lashed it at Aang. The airbender gasped as he saw the deadly attack aimed at him. With a gust of wind from his staff, he bounded into the air just as the fiery whip struck the place where he had been standing a second ago. The grass turned into dark ashes and a hole was torn into the ground as the tip of the white fire whip touched it.

Growling, Aang landed a few feet away and brought down his staff parallel to the ground. Another gust of wind was hurled at Zuko, who easily flipped to the side before he was hit. Anticipating his move, Aang summoned another chunk of rock and struck Zuko from behind, knocking him forward.

Katara cried out as Zuko crashed onto the ground and Aang let go of the rock to crush him. Zuko
rolled to the side, sprang up and jumped back, shooting another fireball at the rock that immediately destroyed it. Landing gracefully, Zuko aimed a glare at the angry Avatar.

Aang again hurled a piece of rock at Zuko, but the firebender again destroyed it with a fiery kick and simultaneously shot a ball of fire at the airbender. Aang cried out as the fireball struck his shoulder, but he quickly extinguished the flames and then jumped back in time before he was struck by Zuko’s fire whip. But he had not anticipated Zuko flicking his second fire whip, which tore a howl of pain from Aang when the fiery whip slashed his chest. Aang ground his teeth in both pain and anger as he watched Zuko retract the fire whip with an unreadable expression. With a cry, Aang again attacked him, ignoring the pain in his chest.

“Stop it!” Katara shouted once more as she watched them fly at each other again. She did not want them to fight over her as if she were a prize that was to be given to the victor!

She took a step forward to stop them, but her arm was caught by a strong hand and she was pulled back. With a growl, she turned her head to shout at whoever was holding her back to let her go, but she paused when she saw it was her father, who had a dark frown on his face.

“Don’t rush in there,” he ordered her. “You could get hurt.”

“But, Dad!” she protested as she tried to pry his hand away from her arm, “I have to stop them! I can’t let them hurt each other!”

“Listen to your father, Miss Katara,” Iroh interrupted as he laid a firm hand on her shoulder as he looked seriously into her eyes, “Let them work out their differences this way.”

Katara clenched her teeth in both frustration and anxiety. Could they not see that one of them could be seriously hurt?

She allowed her father to pull her back as she returned her worried gaze to watch her friend fighting with the man she loved. Zuko had a small bruise forming across his forehead, a small cut on his right cheek, and his clothes were dirty and disarrayed. But Aang was much worse. The airbender had a painful burn mark on his arm, his shoulder, and across his chest, and his clothes were ripped and burned in a few places. Both young men did not seem to notice as they continued to attack each other for the woman they both loved and refused to give up.

The once beautiful garden was being destroyed as the Fire Lord and the Avatar continued fighting. Aang would tear chunks of grassy ground and use the water from the pond to attack Zuko, while the
firebender would leave scorch marks on the grass as he used his firebending to attack Aang. They would have been evenly matched. After all, Zuko had once been Aang’s teacher and Aang had the benefit of being able to use all four elements, while Zuko had the advantage of being a trained warrior that had the ability of bending such a strong level of white fire. Aang, however, had allowed his emotions to control him, which was causing him to fight sloppily.

Aang growled in frustration as he once again was thrown back by Zuko’s blast of white fire. He quickly rolled away when Zuko brought down a flaming fist to where the airbender’s stomach had been a second before. Jumping a few feet away, Aang panted hard and quickly wiped the sweat running down his eyes before resuming his fighting stance.

He had given up using water since Zuko’s white fire was too strong and easily evaporated or melted any water attack he threw at him. Rock seemed to help him a bit, but Zuko just as easily destroyed any of his earthbending attacks. Wind and fire were the only elements that he was able to use to throw in an attack. He had never heard of a firebender being able to bend white fire and he was beginning to realize that perhaps he would not be able to defeat Zuko as easily as he had thought. However, he refused to give up. His heart was in too much pain and his mind was filled with too much anger and jealousy to stop and think about what he was doing. All he knew was that Zuko was taking Katara away from him and he needed to stop the firebender from keeping him away from the woman he loved.

“Leave Katara alone!” Aang shouted when they paused to catch their breaths and figure out each other’s next move. “She’s mine!”

“Katara is going to be my wife, so you should accept it,” Zuko growled out as sparks flew from his mouth and the white flames in his hands flared.

That seemed to make something snap within the airbender. With an angry cry, Aang attacked Zuko with all four elements and began to drive him back more fiercely. Zuko cursed as he narrowly avoided having his head lobbed off by a large rock before he somersaulted over Aang’s head and kicked the airbender’s back. He landed in a crouch and resuming his fighting stance. Aang stumbled forward, but managed to propel himself up with a burst of wind he shot from his mouth before whirling around to continue with his attacks. Zuko met his attacks fiercely since he refused to back down. He would not lose Katara!

They broke apart and landed a few feet away from each other, both panting from exhaustion and eyeing each other angrily.

“Give up, Aang,” Zuko growled at him with narrowed eyes, “Katara’s mine!”
The airbender stiffened before his body began to tremble with rage and the arrows tattooed on his pale skin began to give out a low glow. He tightened his hold on his staff as wind began to swirl around his form, ruffling his clothes and picking up debris, and he hissed at Zuko.

Zuko waited for Aang to attack him, but his eyes widened in shock when his feet were suddenly encased by rock before he was pulled into the ground until he was submerged to his calves. He tried to pull his legs up, but of course it didn’t work. With a growl, Zuko shot a burst of fire at the rock trapping his feet, but it seemed to only scratch the surface and caused the ground to tighten around his legs, causing him to wince, effectively making him immobile. With a growl he looked up to glower heatedly at Aang who now held a small smirk on his lips. Zuko glared at him. As if he would allow himself to be trapped!

Standing off to the side with her worried and bewildered family and friends, Katara pressed a hand to her chest as she felt that same dread return more painfully than before as the last scene of her nightmare surfaced in her mind. She could not stop remembering the vision of Zuko being pierced through his chest, blood running down his clothes and staining his hands before the earth swallowed him.

“Zuko!” Katara cried out in fear. She needed to do something! She needed to protect him!

“Katara isn’t yours!” Aang shouted at Zuko, his usual cheerful face contorted in a snarl. “I’m not going to allow you to take her away from me!”

Before he could retort, Zuko watched with wide eyes as Aang squatted down with his palms to the ground before he flung his arms up. At the movement, a large boulder burst from the ground and hovered in the air. Zuko ground his teeth since he knew that if he was hit by that rock he would be in deep trouble.

“Aang, stop!” Toph shouted just as everybody else gasped when Aang raised his hands.

It was as if time had slowed down as they watched the Avatar flung his hands forward and the huge rock headed straight for the young Fire Lord.

Zuko narrowed his eyes as he brought his flaming fists to his chest, preparing himself to hurl a large fire blast in order to destroy the boulder, but he dispersed his white flames when he saw Katara suddenly lunge herself at him. Katara wrapped her arms around Zuko and clenched her eyes tight, ignoring her family calling her name in horror. All that she was thinking at the moment was that she had to protect Zuko, that she could not let her nightmare become true. Zuko felt his stomach clench in fear at the thought of Katara getting hurt and he grabbed her to him, curling her into him to protect
her as much as he could with his body as he waited for the impact.

But as soon as he noticed Katara, the airbender immediately crushed the rock into a million pieces and the dust flew past the pair, coating their clothes, skin, and hair in dirt, as they continued to hold each other.

Peeking through his lashes, Zuko opened his eyes fully when he saw that they were fine. With a shaky breath, he hugged Katara closer to him, terribly shaken, as he was again reminded of how he had almost lost her once. It seemed he would never be able to forget it.

“Why did you do that, Katara?!” Zuko growled angrily into her ear even as he gave her a gentle squeeze, “You could’ve gotten hurt.”

Katara shook her head as she clutched the back of his tunic.

“I couldn’t bear the thought of you getting hurt,” she responded softly.

Zuko sighed and did not argue with her on how he had been about to destroy the boulder as he tightened his hold on her. Damn, stubborn woman always putting herself in harm’s way in order to protect someone else. But that was why he loved her.

Aang watched them with wide eyes and his entire body shook with shock and remorse before he glanced down at his trembling hands in horror. He had almost hurt his friends because of his jealousy! What kind of person was he? He felt so ashamed. But still, how could they do this to him?

He watched as Zuko pulled slightly away to gently grasp Katara’s face as if to reassure himself she was unharmed while Katara grabbed his wrists and smiled at him before she also looked him over. Aang felt his heart give a painful lurch in his chest. He had seen how Katara was willing to risk her safety for Zuko and Zuko had done the same. He wondered if he had been wrong about Zuko’s intentions and Katara’s feelings for him, especially by the loving manner they were staring at each other. Katara had never looked at him in such a way and that realization pained him. He did not want to accept that he may lose her, that she never loved him. With a movement from his hand, Aang released Zuko from the ground as he watched them with pained eyes.

At the feeling of his feet being released, Zuko and Katara finally seemed to snap back to reality and they turned to look at the airbender.
“I’m… I’m sorry,” Aang said quietly before he looked at Katara with a pleading expression. “Maybe you’re just confused again. You need more time to think about this.”

His voice was strained in the end, hoping that it was like last time when he had pleaded with her and she had relented to give him another chance. He was willing to wait for her to clear her head because surely she could not love Zuko! She couldn’t! She loved him!

“I’m not confused, Aang,” Katara replied firmly as she grasped onto Zuko’s arm. “I already told you that I only see you as a friend. I’m sorry for not telling you sooner, but the man I love is Zuko.”

Aang ignored everybody else’s gasp as he vigorously shook his head as if to deny her words. No, no this couldn’t be! She must be lying! But why? He turned angry eyes on Zuko as if he could make the firebender confess that he was forcing Katara to say such words, but Zuko only narrowed his eyes as he wrapped an arm around Katara and brought her closer to him. As if understanding his thoughts, Katara shook her head as she looked up at Zuko before returning her gaze to him.

“Zuko’s not at fault. I can’t return your feelings, Aang,” she told him with a frown before she softly added, “I’m sorry for hurting you, but it was time that I made a choice for myself to be happy. And that choice is Zuko.”

Except for Iroh, Ursa, Toph, Suki and Kanna (who already had her suspicions) everybody else murmured to themselves in shock while Sokka shouted a loud ‘Say what?!’ He yelped when Suki elbowed his side sharply.

Aang ignored them as he lifted agonized, gray eyes to Katara. He was devastated at her words, at the way she leaned comfortably against Zuko, at the way Zuko brought her protectively and possessively close to him. He felt like the world was falling apart around him, like a knife had twisted his heart, and he felt his eyes sting with tears. He looked away as he tried to hold them back and his shoulders slumped in defeat. He wanted to deny her words, but he could see that she was serious. After everything they had gone through during the war, after everything he had done, it had not been enough. He could now see that all this time he had been lying to himself.

And it hurt. It hurt so much.

He looked up when he heard Zuko clear his throat.

“I’m sorry you had to find out this way, Aang,” Zuko said sincerely, “I didn’t want things to come
about like this, I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I will not give Katara up. She means too much to me.”

Aang stared at him silently for a long moment as he again tried to convince himself Zuko was lying, but he knew Zuko would never do such a thing, he knew Zuko was being truthful. Licking his dry lips, the young airbender tried to gather his sluggish yet flying thoughts and control the whirling emotions that churned within him. He wanted to fight, to somehow bring Katara back to him, but he knew deep down in his aching heart that there was absolutely nothing he could do to change the fact that Katara loved Zuko and Zuko loved her.

After a long moment of tense silence, Aang finally spoke in a quivering voice.

“I…I’m devastated, hurt, and angry,” he began shakily before he cleared his throat, “But I can see there’s nothing I can do.”

*I can see that I have lost*, he thought dejectedly in his head.

“If…if it means your…happiness, then I will learn to accept it,” he said before he added, “At least, I will try.”

“Aang…” Katara tried to say, but Aang cut her off with a shake of his head.

“I-I need to leave, gather my thoughts…come to terms that I have l-lost you,” he told her miserably, his voice cracking in the end.

“I hope you can forgive me one day,” Katara said softly as she gave him a hopeful look.

Aang did not reply as he gave her a strained smile. Turning to Zuko he gave him a hard look. Zuko stiffened and narrowed his eyes on the young monk.

“You better take care of her,” he said threateningly.

“I will,” Zuko responded firmly with a nod of his head.
Turning to Katara to give her one more pained and longing look, Aang turned around and headed swiftly back toward the palace. He passed the stunned audience silently, and without another word or another glance, the young Avatar disappeared into the palace.

Toph turned to Zuko and Katara and crossed her arms over her chest.

“It’s about time everything came out in the open,” she said with a snort before she grinned. “Congrats and I wish you good luck.”

“Wait, what? What’s going on?” Sokka shouted as he looked at Toph and then at Katara before he glared at Zuko.

“I’m sure Sparky can explain,” the blind earthbender replied sadistically.

Toph grinned impishly when Zuko growled at her as all of Katara’s male relatives turned their attention on him before she turned away and followed after the monk.

As soon as he had turned the corner of another empty corridor, Aang punched his fist on the wall. With a pained sigh, he leaned on it and pressed his forehead to the cool surface as the tears that he had been holding back finally fell from his eyes and ran down his pale cheeks just as his other hand pressed his constricting chest.

Why? Why was this happening to him? He defeated the evil former Fire Lord. He saved the world! He was supposed to get the girl! After everything he had done, he was supposed to be happy!

He shook his head even as his tears continued to pour out from his blurry eyes. He needed to leave before he broke down in anguish or did something he would later regret. Once he found Appa and Momo, he will leave the Fire Nation and fly far away, away from everything, away from the pain.

Rubbing his hands across his eyes to dry his tears, Aang pushed himself away from the wall and hurriedly made his way to the stables where he knew his loyal flying sky-bison and flying-lemur were resting.

“Wait up, Twinkletoes!” he heard Toph shout out.
Without even turning to look at her, Aang continued in his fast pace down the golden passageway.

“Leave me alone, Toph,” he said between gritted teeth. “I don’t want to hear you say ‘I told you so,’ okay?! I want to be alone.”

The small earthbender was unfazed by his words as she continued to follow him.

“I’m coming with you to make sure you don’t do anything stupid,” she told him with a snort and an indifferent shrug.

Aang sighed since he knew he was not going to be able to stop her even if he tried.

“Do whatever you want,” he said morosely as he continued walking.

He tried to suppress the vision of Katara in Zuko’s arms, of them kissing each other, their bodies pressed close together from surfacing in his mind, but the image seemed burned into his brain. Again his heart lurched painfully in his chest.

He needed to get away.

Katara watched as Toph disappeared back into the palace and she sighed sadly as she remembered the pained look in Aang’s gray watery eyes. Would he ever forgive her and Zuko?

As if sensing her thoughts, Zuko gave her waist a gentle squeeze and she looked up to see him look at her with reassuring amber eyes even if his face had changed back into its emotionless mask. Smiling gratefully, Katara snuggled closer to him.

“What is going on?” Hakoda’s deep voice made them turn to him.

He had a hard look on his face as he eyed the way the young man was holding Katara before he gruffly demanded, “Step away from my daughter, Fire Lord Zuko.”

Even though he was still shaken by the thought that Katara could have been hurt, Zuko reluctantly
let go of her as he faced the frowning chieftain since he did not wish to have problems with her father—and hopefully, his future father-in-law.

Blushing, Katara cleared her throat to get her father’s attention away from Zuko.

“Dad, one of the reasons I broke up with Aang was because I’m in love with Zuko,” she told him softly before she glanced briefly at Zuko to give him a reassuring smile.

Hakoda stared at his daughter with wide eyes, he never would have thought his daughter loving the firebender possible, before he looked at the silent Fire Lord with a raised eyebrow.

“The reason I wanted to have a talk with you after dinner, Chief Hakoda,” Zuko began in his usual cool tone, “was because I wanted to ask you for Katara’s hand in marriage.”

Hakoda and Pakku gaped at him, Kanna grinned, and Sokka shouted another loud ‘Say what?!’

The blue-eyed chieftain composed himself immediately and cleared his throat before he frowned at the Fire Lord who was staring at him steadily with Katara at his side. How did this suddenly come to be?

“We must have a talk. This is just too sudden,” Hakoda finally said.

Zuko gave him an understanding nod as he glanced at Katara briefly before he returned his gaze to the frowning older man.

“We can talk in my study,” the young firebender suggested.

“I would like to speak to my daughter first, if you don’t mind. I’ll be in your study soon,” Hakoda spoke up seriously.

Zuko again glanced at the silent waterbender beside him, who gave him an encouraging smile and a reassuring squeeze of his arm, before he turned to the chief with a nod.
“I will be in my study then,” the young Fire Lord stated coolly.

Zuko glanced down at himself and frowned as he took in his dirty clothes before he looked up with an unreadable expression as he added, “I will change quickly first.”

Grabbing Katara’s hand, which was still holding his arm, Zuko gave it a gentle squeeze as he looked at her before he let her go and silently made his way back to the palace with Iroh, Ursa, Jee, and his personal guards following behind him.

Katara watched as Zuko waited for his mother to catch up to him then he talked to her quietly for a moment before resuming to his destination. Lady Ursa smiled widely as she turned to glance briefly at the waterbender before she pulled Iroh next to her and began to talk quietly to him as they headed toward the palace. Katara wondered what they were up to.

Those from the Southern Water Tribe stared after the royal family, and once they disappeared, they turned to Hakoda.

“Can you please leave us alone?” he asked them with a raised eyebrow.

They glanced at each other before they turned to leave. Kanna glanced back and smiled reassuringly at her granddaughter who gave her a grateful smile in return.

Once father and daughter were alone, Hakoda walked toward the destroyed pond and glanced down at the remaining water at its bottom as he stopped at its edge. He stood there in silence for a long moment before he sighed and turned toward his daughter, who was also staring silently into the ruined pond with a sad expression.

“Do you truly love Zuko, Katara?” he asked her softly.

Katara looked away from the pond so her father could see her sincerity.

“I love him more than I’ve loved anyone else,” she responded firmly.

Hakoda assessed her heartfelt expression for a few moments before he smiled as he glanced at a
patch of flowers that had been spared from the terrible fight between the young Fire Lord and the Avatar.

“It is the same way I felt toward your mother,” he said with a melancholy sigh.

Katara smiled sadly and she reached out to embrace her father since she now had an understanding of what her father must feel for having lost the love of his life. She would feel the same if she ever lost Zuko. Hakoda allowed his daughter to hug him for a brief moment before he cleared his throat and gently pulled away to smile at her before his expression turned serious once again.

“How did this relationship between Zuko and you come to be?” he asked with a raised brow.

“I…well, the more time I spent with Zuko, the more I came to know him, and all the times he would protect me, made me fall in love with him,” Katara tried to explain concisely. “But I tried to deny my feelings for him because I didn’t want to hurt Aang and because, well, I thought Zuko would never return my feelings.”

She paused and took a shaky breath as she continued, “But when we were captured and we thought we’d lose the other, we finally confessed our feelings to each other. And when Zuko asked me to marry him, I immediately accepted.”

Hakoda nodded as he said, “Your grandmother tried to make me see what was going on between you two, but I ignored it since I never thought it could be possible.”

Pausing, he turned to his daughter with a grim expression as he grabbed her hands and held them protectively in his larger and calloused ones.

“But are you sure about this?” he asked her gravely. “He once invaded our home. Zuko is the Fire Lord, ruler of the country that has hurt us so much, the country who took your mother away from us. I’m just not sure I want my daughter to marry into the nation that has caused us and the world so much pain. To marry a man that has once been our enemy.”

Katara squeezed her father’s hands and she looked resolutely into his concerned, dark blue eyes.

“But the Fire Nation did cause a lot pain, but that is in the past,” she told him firmly before she more softly added, “Zuko did make mistakes, but he has changed, he is trying to help the world, and you
know he is not responsible for Mom’s death.”

Hakoda stared into his daughter’s unwavering gaze and sighed.

“I know that and I know Zuko is a good man, but…” he paused with another sigh before he continued more quietly, “I just don’t want to lose you after finally getting you back.”

“It’s not like I’m going to be held captive in the Fire Nation and you’ll never be able to see me again,” she said softly. “Zuko has told me that we’ll visit the Southern Water Tribe whenever we can, and you and the others will always be welcome to visit the Fire Nation.”

Hakoda felt glad at her words and he relaxed slightly.

“Are you sure you want to marry Zuko?” he asked her again with fatherly concern in his tone, “You will have lots of responsibilities if you become his wife and Fire Lady.”

“I know it won’t be easy, but I will endure everything as long as I have Zuko as my husband,” Katara told him determinedly.

Hakoda was silent for a long moment as he contemplated everything his daughter had told him as well as the things she had not but that he was becoming aware of. He remembered the fleeting glances the Fire Lord and Katara would throw each other when they thought no one was looking, or all the times Zuko would protect Katara. He wanted to tell her that she should think things through before she married the Fire Lord, after all, he was a father who wanted to keep his only daughter close to him so she would not be hurt. He also did not want to think of his little girl as someone’s wife. But ever since his beloved Kya gave birth to his children and he held their little bodies in his hands, he knew that one day they would grow up and have a family of their own to love and protect.

He had nothing against Aang, but he had hoped Katara would have ended her relationship with the young airbender and married a warrior from the tribe so that way they could live close by, but now she wanted to marry the Fire Lord and live in another country. But he knew that Zuko was a good man and would be a better husband to his daughter than any young man he knew, a man that could handle her strong and loving spirit.

“If you truly love Zuko and if marrying him is truly what you want, then I will not stand in the way of your happiness,” Hakoda finally spoke with a tender smile on his tanned face.
Katara smiled happily at her father, but before she could thank him, his expression once again turned serious.

“But first I need to have a talk with Zuko before I actually consent to the Fire Lord marrying my daughter,” he told her firmly.

Her smile faded into a serious expression and Katara gave him a nod.

“I understand, Dad,” she began before she continued more strongly, “But even if you refuse, I will still marry Zuko.”

Hakoda stared at her with a dark frown for a moment, at her determined features and steadfast blue eyes, and he knew she was serious. Even if he did not give his consent, he was positive she would marry the Fire Lord because of the love she held for him.

“Then I hope the Fire Lord convinces me,” he said with a small smirk.

Katara gave him a small smile as he placed his arm around her shoulders and led her away from the destroyed garden and back to the palace where the rest of their family was anxiously waiting for them.

“Well?” Sokka asked impatiently as he held a sleeping Ting in his arms.

“I will talk with the Fire Lord now,” Hakoda said as he let go of Katara and turned around in the direction of the Fire Lord’s study.

“Dad, wait!” Sokka spoke up.

The older man turned around and watched as his son handed one of his sleeping granddaughters to Katara before swiftly walking toward him.

“I’m coming with you,” the young Water Tribe warrior said firmly.
Sokka ignored Katara’s protests and Suki’s groan as he stared at his father. Hakoda nodded. He was proud that his son wanted to protect his sister and make sure she was not making a mistake. They turned around and walked in the direction of the Fire Lord’s study.

Holding her sleeping niece in her arms, Katara stared after her father and brother with hopeful eyes. As much as she loved her family, she was not going to give up Zuko even if they were against their marriage.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Staring silently out the large window of his study where he could see the sky changing into red and orange colors as the sun began to set, the young Fire Lord waited anxiously for Chief Hakoda to show up after he talked to Katara. He wondered what they could be talking about before he dismissed the thought from his mind since it was making him more nervous. He hated feeling nervous.

Deciding to think of something else, Zuko looked down at himself and nodded approvingly at his more presentable appearance. He casually smoothed down his dark royal robe and then reached up to fix his fire crown before he frowned when he caught his reflection on the glass. He touched the small cut that marred his cheek and winced slightly before his expression returned to his normal stoic mask.

He remembered what happened with Aang moments ago and how Katara almost got hurt, and he narrowed his eyes. He remembered the anger he had felt toward Aang for hurting Katara—even if it had been unintentional—as well as at Aang’s words when he kept insisting Katara was his. Zuko had been unable to control his rage and jealousy, even if he had felt terrible that Aang had to find out about them in such a way. He understood the way Aang had felt for he would have probably felt the same way had their roles been reversed, although he would probably have reacted much worse and seriously harmed Aang.

Looking at the setting sky, Zuko wondered where Aang had gone to and if one day they could be friends again like they used to be. His thoughts again wandered to Katara and her father, and he wondered if perhaps now he would not have a chance with her because of the things Aang had said about him and because of the way he had lost his temper.

He began to panic at the thought that perhaps Hakoda was trying to convince Katara not to marry him. What would he do if Katara decided to obey her father and left him to return to the Southern Water Tribe? He could not just force her to remain in the Fire Nation against her will and marry him. And if he did, another war could be started. He could not let that happen.

Gazing in the direction where he could just make out the trees from his private garden, the young Fire Lord frowned before he straightened himself with a determined glint in his amber eyes. He was a descendant of Agni and of Avatar Roku, son of the great Fire Nation, and Fire Lord of one of the
most powerful countries in the world. He will face everything head on and not cower down for fear of what may come. He will convince Hakoda that he was the perfect man for his daughter and he will marry her.

Zuko placed his hand to the hidden pocket of his robe and smiled once he felt the two engagement items he had picked up from his room after he had showered and dressed. If Hakoda agreed for him to marry Katara, then Zuko’s plan of presenting them to her would come true and asking his mother to help him would not be in vain.

He was interrupted from his thoughts when a firm knock reached his ears.

“Enter,” Zuko called out impassively as he turned away from the window to face the large door.

He schooled his features back into an expressionless mask in order to hide his anxiety just as the door opened and Hakoda stepped in with Sokka following behind him. Zuko was not surprised to see that Katara’s overprotective brother had also come. He waited until Sokka closed the door behind them before he bid them to take a seat on the two chairs that were placed before his large desk. Hakoda nodded as he and Sokka took a seat just as Zuko did the same on his own large chair across from them.

“Is it true that you seduced Katara?” Hakoda began bluntly with a sharp look in his eyes.

“That is a lie,” Zuko responded just as frankly.

Hakoda and Sokka relaxed noticeably and Zuko did not doubt for a second that both tribesmen would have castrated him in order to avenge Katara’s honor. Both dark-skinned men were silent as they eyed the young Fire Lord for a long moment while Zuko return the stare without showing one single emotion—even though inwardly he could feel his anxiety rising as the silence stretched on. Finally, Hakoda moved and he leaned forward with a dark expression.

“Is there a particular reason why you want to marry Katara right after you returned from the Earth Kingdom?” he asked suspiciously, “After all, you never made it known you had any interest in her before. Why the rush?”

Zuko resisted the urge to narrow his eyes.
“No,” he responded firmly, “I respect Katara and her traditions.”

Sokka relaxed against his chair. He knew Zuko had too much honor to seduce Katara. But why did he want to marry her?

“I wanted to marry Katara a long time ago,” Zuko continued as if he could read their thoughts, “But I never acted upon my wishes because both of us were in relationships and I didn’t think I had a chance with her.”

Hakoda gave another nod as he said, “I understand.”

There was silence again before Sokka decided to speak up.

“Katara isn’t royalty or wealthy, she isn’t from the Fire Nation, nor knowledgeable about being a Fire Lady,” the younger man began before he continued with a curious frown, “So why do you wanna marry my sister?”

“I’m aware of all of that,” Zuko replied with a frown, “but I still want to marry her.”

“Is it to bring an alliance between the Southern Water Tribe and the Fire Nation?” Hakoda spoke with another frown. “It seemed that was what you were doing when you were in the Southern Water Tribe for Sokka and Suki’s wedding. If that’s why you want Katara, then you can just forget it. I am not about to sacrifice my daughter’s happiness to ensure peace between our countries.”

Zuko resisted the urge to scowl at the older man for thinking he would be so callous to Katara’s feelings in order to help his nation. Instead, he frowned deeply.

“That’s not the reason why I was in the Southern Water Tribe,” he said in a serious tone, “I wanted to ensure an alliance, a friendship, with both tribes in order to make it easier to marry Katara.”

“I see, but I still want to know why you want to marry her,” the southern chieftain insisted as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“She’s a beautiful woman, both on the inside and physically,” Zuko responded sincerely. “She
would help me greatly in my rule. She understands me and makes me happy—"

“So you want her just so she could make you happy?” Hakoda interrupted gruffly.

Zuko’s jaw clenched and he balled his hands into fists in order to suppress his raising temper since it seemed Hakoda kept thinking the worst of him. He ordered himself to calm down so he could respond without growling.

“I am also looking out for Katara’s happiness,” he replied firmly, “When we marry, I will make sure to provide for her, give her whatever she needs and wants, and protect her and any children we have with everything I am.”

Both Water Tribe warriors did not miss that Zuko had said ‘when’ and not ‘if’ and Hakoda had to admire his confidence and determination. Sokka was still reeling at the turn of events, but he knew Zuko would not just marry Katara out of a whim and he was sure Zuko cared about her. He would not mind having Zuko as his brother-in-law, but it was up to his father to have the final say.

Hakoda’s resolve that Zuko would make Katara a fine husband seemed to become more firm, especially now that he was aware that any children Katara bore would be cared for as well. However, until the young man told him what he really wanted to know would he give his consent. Leaning back in the chair, the blue-eyed chief regarded Zuko silently for a moment before he spoke.

“Katara does not need any luxury to be happy and she could be provided for and protected at home just like any man could do, including Aang.”

Hakoda watched as the young firebender clenched his jaw and his golden eyes flashed before he calmed himself and took a deep breath.

“What can you give her that no other man can?” Hakoda again asked, “Why should I allow you to marry her?”

Without showing any reaction, Hakoda felt his son kick his foot when Zuko again clenched his hands. He knew he was tampering with the Fire Lord’s short temper, but Hakoda was determined to find out the answer he wanted to know.

It was then that Zuko realized that Hakoda was trying to make him confess his feelings for Katara.
He stopped himself from shifting uncomfortably in his seat for it would not do for the Fire Lord to show his uneasiness. It was one thing to say what he felt to Katara and admit it to his uncle and mother, but it was another thing to admit his feelings to another person. Could they not see his deep feelings for her through his actions? Must he say it out loud? Apparently Hakoda would not be satisfied until he heard the words coming from his mouth. But if he wanted Hakoda to accept his marriage to Katara, then he would have to lower his defenses.

Staring Hakoda straight in the eye, Zuko finally responded.

“Because I love her.”

Both father’s and son’s blue eyes widened in surprise before they composed themselves.

“Really?” Sokka asked.

“I would not lie about something like this,” Zuko firmly replied as he stared at both men sitting before him with determined eyes, “I’ve been in love with Katara for a long time now, but I already explained why I didn’t pursue her.”

Hakoda inclined his head again to acknowledge his last words.

“Is that why the rebels lured Katara into the colony, too?” Sokka spoke up with a frown.

Zuko stiffened slightly before he gave a curt nod.

“Someone found out about my affections for her, and because of it, she was also captured in order to keep me compliant until their demands were met,” the Fire Lord admitted grimly.

He wondered if this would cause Hakoda to deny his wish to marry Katara, but he knew that he needed to be truthful. He was surprised, however, when Hakoda smiled at him.

“You kept her from harm and even allowed them to hurt you so you could keep her safe,” the chief said.
Zuko relaxed a bit, but he stiffened again when Hakoda’s expression turned serious and dark once again.

“Howver, how will we know that the same thing won’t happen again during her marriage to you...if you get married?” Hakoda added.

Zuko’s hands again clenched into fists, but he ordered himself to calm down since he understood that Hakoda was just concerned and wanted guarantees that his daughter will be safe.

“I have taken measures for Katara, as well as my mother, to be protected at all times by people that I trust,” he began in a strong tone. “I also have people searching for the traitor and the rebels. I will not allow anyone to harm Katara. She means everything to me.”

Sokka listened silently as his father and his friend talked and he found himself believing everything Zuko had said. Sure, he once had hated the Fire Prince when he had invaded their home and continued to chase after them, but once Zuko had joined their group and helped defeat the former Fire Lord, Sokka had accepted that Zuko was not such a bad guy. And as the years passed by, Sokka came to see him as one of his best friends. He knew Zuko was an honorable man and if he said he would do anything to keep Katara safe, Sokka knew he would. He was still surprised to know his sister and Zuko loved each other, but once he began to remember all those little moments between them, such as when Zuko had taken Katara to avenge their mother or the tea incident in Ba Sing Se from a few months ago, Sokka wondered how he could not have seen it coming. Glancing at his silent father, Sokka waited to see what his answer would be.

Hakoda remembered all those subtle looks Zuko had thrown Katara back in the Southern Water Tribe last winter, the softer way Zuko would speak to her and act around her, and he wondered how he did not realize it sooner even after Kanna had hinted at it. He then remembered that Zuko had protected Katara while they had been captured and he had again protected her during the fight with Aang, shielding her with his own body.

“You are mine to protect” were the words Zuko had told Katara, and Hakoda knew that the young Fire Lord would give up his own life for her if it came to that. Not that he wanted Zuko dead, but it was a comforting thought to know his daughter would always be protected.

Staring into the sincere and unwavering golden eyes of the young Fire Lord, the Southern Water Tribe Chief felt himself relax with relief at the knowledge that his daughter will be taken care of, but most of all she would be cherished and loved.
“I can see that you are sincere and I can see that you indeed love Katara,” Hakoda finally spoke up. “You will make a good husband for her.”

He suppressed a smirk when the Fire Lord’s impassive face lightened up in hope.

“If it means Katara’s happiness, then I give you my consent for you to marry my daughter,” Hakoda told him with a firm nod.

Zuko had to stop himself from grinning like a fool at the thought that now nothing was standing in his way in taking Katara as his wife.

“Thank you, Chief Hakoda,” Zuko said with a grateful bow of his head. He looked up at Sokka when the younger man cleared his throat.

“I also agree that you’ll make Katara happy, but…” he trailed off and narrowed his blue eyes on Zuko as he stroked the boomerang that was strapped to his hip, “if I find out you’re making my little sister unhappy, I’ll immediately sail to the Fire Nation to give you a good beating.”

This time Zuko was unable to stop himself from rolling his eyes just as Hakoda nodded his head in agreement to his son’s statement. Seriously, did they not have faith in him to make Katara happy?

“That won’t be necessary. I plan on doing everything I can to make her happy,” Zuko told them seriously.

Both blue-eyed men nodded, satisfied.

“When will the wedding take place?” Hakoda decided to ask now that he had given his consent.

“I would like it to be as soon as possible, but first I must let my advisors know I intend to marry Katara and then I have to present her to my Royal Court,” Zuko began as he relaxed slightly back into his chair. “Then we have to see what day the Fire Sages believe the right date would be for the wedding to take place.”

“Hopefully that will give us enough time to gather Katara’s dowry,” Hakoda said as he stroked his
“I don’t need to be given a dowry,” Zuko told him with a frown.

“But you will get it, nevertheless,” the tribal chief insisted firmly.

Zuko’s frown deepened. He did not want Katara’s dowry, he just wanted her. She was all he needed and wanted. He opened his mouth to refuse again, but he was cut off when Sokka shook his head at him.

“It’ll look like an insult if you refuse the dowry,” Sokka explained. “It’ll seem like you found Katara’s dowry lacking, which will then look like she’s lacking in something, too.”

“Alright,” Zuko immediately conceded. He will not do anything that would harm his waterbender.

“We will discuss the details of the wedding and the conditions of the marriage later,” Hakoda spoke up with a satisfied nod.

“Don’t forget it’s a new tradition in the tribes that the bridegroom gives his bride a betrothal necklace. It would be something that Katara would like,” Sokka said before he added with a proud smirk, “I made Suki’s.”

“I already have one engagement article to give her,” Zuko began as he reached into his pocket and pulled it out to show them, “It is tradition among the Fire Nation nobility to give it to the brides.”

“It is very beautiful,” Hakoda said as he studied the trinket, “I’m sure Katara will like it.”

Zuko replaced it into his robes with a pleased smile before he cleared his throat.

“About the betrothal necklace…since I have no idea how to go about carving a necklace, I was wondering if it’s alright that I design the pendant but have a professional make it. I want Katara to have the best.”
The tribesmen frowned as they looked at one another in deep thought before they turned to look at the silent firebender. Hakoda rubbed his chin as he thought.

“You see, I already had it made,” Zuko added as he reached into his robe and pulled out the necklace before placing it across his hand to show it to them.

They leaned forward to see it better and their eyes widened in amazement as they gazed upon it.

“Well, I have to say that is a very excellent piece of craftsmanship,” Hakoda remarked with an approving nod. “Not to mention it is a very clever way to combine symbols of both countries.”

“Yeah,” Sokka agreed enthusiastically as he admired the carving a moment longer before he looked up at Zuko, “and you designed it?”

“Yes,” Zuko responded proudly as he once again replaced the necklace into his robe.

“Since you are not used to such a tradition, I do not see why not as long as Katara is proposed to with her own betrothal necklace,” Hakoda relented.

“Thank you,” Zuko said as he gave out a mental sigh of relief.

The chief nodded before he gave Zuko a large grin as he said, “I’m sure Katara must be anxious to know what I have decided. I wonder how she’ll react to the necklace.”

He chuckled when Zuko immediately stood up. The two tribesmen stood up with another series of chuckles that made the Fire Lord give them a small glare.

“I will go to her immediately,” Zuko said.

“But I expect her to be in her room early,” Hakoda spoke up with a serious expression.

“Of course,” the golden-eyed lord responded smoothly.
Even though what he really wanted to do was to celebrate with Katara in a very pleasing manner, Zuko decided not to tempt the fates and have Hakoda retract his consent if he were to somehow find out that Zuko had been unable to completely keep his hands away from Katara.

Zuko almost shuddered at the thought.

With another threat about having Katara in her room early, Hakoda and Sokka opened the door and closed it quietly behind them. As soon as they left the room, Zuko slumped back down onto his seat and exhaled deeply. Well, that was not as bad has he had thought it would be.

A smile spread on his lips at the thought that he was now able to marry his waterbender. Standing up quickly from his chair, Zuko left his study and walked swiftly down the corridor toward his private garden where he had told his mother to tell Katara to wait for him.

He could not wait to give her the news.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Standing beneath the cherry blossom tree, Katara chewed on her bottom lip as she anxiously waited for news. Would she be receiving joyful congratulations or would she be saying goodbye to her family forever? Shaking the last thought from her mind, the waterbender looked around the destroyed garden and sighed sadly. The turtle-ducks were nowhere to be found and she hoped they had found a temporary shelter somewhere. Fortunately, the cherry blossom tree had been spared from the Avatar and Fire Lord’s wrath.

She chewed on her lip more insistently as she again wondered what her father, brother, and Zuko were talking about. As soon as her father and Sokka left to meet with Zuko, Lady Ursa and Jiao had hurried her to her room so she could take a quick bath to get rid of the dirt that clung to her. Then she was given a beautiful silver dress to wear after Jiao had brushed her hair until it shone, before she was rushed back to the garden where Ursa had told her to wait for Zuko. She hoped all this dressing up was worth it. A long time had passed since they had left and she hoped her father had accepted Zuko’s request because she did not want to choose between Zuko and her family.

“Katara,” she heard a rich, baritone voice call her name softly and she gasped as her heart skipped a beat at the familiar timbre.

Looking up at him as he approached her, Katara waited until he was standing before her.
“Zuko,” she said his name softly before she hesitantly asked, “What did my father say?”

She became alarmed at his blank expression and she felt her heart sink.

Oh, no! This can’t be happening! she cried out in her head.

But before her anxiety rose higher, Zuko broke into a large smile and he gave her a nod. A small gasp escaped her and then, with an exultant cry, Katara threw herself at him. Zuko immediately caught her in his arms with a happy chuckle as he brought her close to him. Their lips met instantly and they kissed each other with both relief and happiness. They pulled away and Katara rested her head against his chest as he placed his chin on the top of her head. They remained that way in silence for a moment, each reveling in the good turn of events.

Finally, Katara pulled away and Zuko watched as she gathered water from her waterskin and onto her hand. It glowed around her slim hand and Zuko silently allowed her to heal the bruises and cuts on his face since he knew that she would not stop worrying until she had healed him. He sighed at the cool and tickling contact. As soon as she finished, Katara replaced the water into her waterskin before she smiled at him as she snuggled into his chest again.

“Thank you,” he said as he gave her a squeeze.

“You’re welcome,” she responded as she leaned back to smile warmly at him.

Katara again placed her head on Zuko’s chest while he wound his arms around her, but she frowned when she again noticed the damaged garden.

“The garden is destroyed,” she said sadly.

“I’ll order for it to be restored. Don’t worry, love,” Zuko responded and squeezed her gently.

Raising her head, Katara smiled at him before she licked her lips nervously as she carefully said, “I’m…I’m worried about Aang and what he might do.”

Zuko was silent for a short moment as the jealousy once again tried to surface within him before he...
firmly pushed it down. Katara was his, he was now able to marry her, and he did not need to fear that she would leave him for Aang. And he had to admit he was also a bit worried about the airbender since he had looked terrible when he left.

“As long as Toph’s with him, he’ll be fine,” he finally responded.

Katara relaxed against him when she realized he had not gotten angry with her for her concern. She did not want to make him jealous, she was just worried for her friend—their friend.

“Do you think Aang will forgive us someday?” she asked quietly.

“Aang is hurt and angry at the moment, but he’s not one to hold a grudge for long,” was his reply.

Katara nodded against his chest. She hoped he was right.

She looked up when Zuko pulled slightly away and she raised a curious eyebrow when he grabbed her hand, turned around, and silently led her away from the cherry blossom tree, the destroyed garden, and into the golden corridors of the palace.

“Where are we going?” she asked curiously.

“You’ll see,” was his mysterious reply as he glanced down to smirk at her before he tugged on her hand so she could continue to walk beside him.

They were heading toward the west wing and she felt a bit of disappointment at the thought that he was escorting her to her room, since she had wanted to talk to him about what her father had said and celebrate in some small way for their success. She was confused when they passed her room and headed toward the royal wing, and she raised an eyebrow when they turned right and headed toward the Fire Lord’s royal bedchambers. Soon they were at the entrance of the anteroom, and Katara blushed when Shen and Kuo tried to suppress their smiles as one of them opened the door for their lord and the waterbender.

With another glance at his betrothed, Zuko brought her to his side as he stepped into the anteroom before Shen closed the door behind them.
Katara gasped in amazement as she took in the sight. There were candles everywhere! On the low table were two sets of plates, a pitcher of wine, two golden candlesticks with long glowing candles, and in the center was a vase filled with fresh flowers.

“Oh, Zuko! It’s wonderful!” she exclaimed as she turned to smile at him.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I only planned to have a small meal for the two of us since we missed dinner,” Zuko muttered as he sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck before he cleared his throat, “It looks like my mother and Uncle outdid themselves again with the candles and the flowers.”

“Well, it’s still wonderful,” Katara told him with another smile as she reached up to kiss his cheek.

Zuko smiled as he again grabbed her hand and led her to one of the cushions at the table before he took a seat beside her. They spent a few minutes eating their delicious meal and drinking wine as each recounted what had happened with their talks with Hakoda. Katara had to stop herself from laughing at Zuko’s scowl when he mentioned that her father threatened him if he did not return her to her room early. Then they finally turned their conversation to their future and what could be expected of their marriage.

The candles, the flowers, the food, the wine, Zuko’s presence, his warm gaze, and his velvety voice, as well as the thought that her father had accepted their marriage, made the waterbender feel like this was one of the best nights of her life.

Katara had just finished taking another sip of the cool wine when she felt Zuko grab her hand as he stood up. Placing the cup down, Katara stood up as well and she raised her eyebrow again when he led her to the center of the candle-lit room before he turned around so that they were facing each other. She watched curiously as he swallowed nervously before he straightened himself out, his features shifting into his trademark cool expression, as he gazed steadily into her eyes.

“I know the first time I asked you this it wasn’t at the best time, or at the best place, or in the right way…” Zuko began before he gave a small shrug as he added, “And I still don’t have a flowery speech, but I wanted to make it at least a bit more memorable for you.”

Katara’s eyes widened as he grabbed both her hands and brought them to his lips where he touched them softly before he lowered them as his golden eyes again stared intensely into her blue orbs.

“I love you, Katara, and it will be my great honor if you agreed to become my wife,” he said
sincerely before he asked her softly, “Will you marry me?”

He was doing all of this for her? Katara felt overjoyed tears gather in her eyes at his sweet gesture but she forced them back since she did not want to ruin the moment with her tears. Instead, she gave him a large, elated smile as she jumped up and wound her arms around his neck.

“Yes!” she exclaimed as she kissed him before she repeated the word a few more times, each time more softly, as she placed another swift kiss on his lips at the end of each word.

Zuko gently grabbed her chin to stop her before he kissed her mouth properly as his other arm tightened around her. He felt just as ecstatic, if not more so, from the first time he had heard her accept his proposal, but this time he finally had something—two to be more precise—that would show her his commitment. Pulling apart from their kiss, they breathed deeply as they embraced each other for a moment before Zuko leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“Do you remember when I said that I would one day tell you what the engagement tradition for the Fire Nation nobility is?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Katara responded with a nod as she tried to calm her racing heart.

She felt him pull away from her and she looked at him with a confused frown when he reached into his robe. She watched curiously as he took her left hand and slipped a thin gold ring onto her third finger. Katara stared at the beautiful ring in surprise as she noticed the elegant engravings on its smooth surface before she looked up at Zuko—who was staring at her with glowing amber eyes—with a confused expression on her face.

“I ordered it made as soon as we arrived in the Fire Nation,” he said with a small smile.

Lifting her hand to his lips, he kissed the gold metal before he continued.

“This ring symbolizes that you are spoken for, that you are an engaged woman now, and once we marry it will symbolized that you are a married woman,” he began before he pointed to one particular design that was craved on the surface. It looked like a dragon coiled around itself. “Once they see this symbol, my Royal Court will know that I have chosen you as my wife.”

Katara smiled joyfully as she brought her hand to her chest and caressed the cool ring before she
lifted herself on her toes to peck his lips. When she pulled away, she smiled brightly at the warmth and satisfaction in his golden eyes.

“It’s lovely,” she told him.

“There’s still one more thing that I want to give you,” he told her with a smile before he added, “I had the idea for the design of the pendant ever since you agreed to marry me the first time.”

Reaching into his robe again, he grasped the necklace and pulled it out. Grabbing her hand, he gently placed the trinket on her palm as he watched anxiously for her reaction. Would she like it?

Katara gasped softly as she stared wide-eyed at the piece of jewelry that she was holding in her hand.

It was a choker—much like the one she had on—made of a black silky cloth and with a round pendant hanging from the center. The charm was made of a black onyx stone, but what had her speechless in astonishment was the design of the engravings on its smooth surface. On the right side, filled with gold ink, was a carving of a form of a magnificent dragon curled on its side, and on the left side was a graceful koi fish curved on the surface of the dark stone etched in silver. The tip of their tails touched the other’s head where she could see that both creatures had a small gem as an eye—a blue sapphire for the dragon and a red ruby for the koi fish. The way they curled around each other reminded her of the yin and yang symbol and she smiled.

It was just like them. Red and blue. Gold and silver. Fire and water. Fire Nation and Southern Water Tribe. Male and female.

Zuko and Katara.

“Oh, Zuko, it’s beautiful,” she breathed in awe as she looked up to give him a watery smile.

“So… you like it?” he asked her hopefully.

“I love it,” she responded genuinely, happily. “Thank you, so much.”

“I wanted to give you something that described us,” Zuko said softly, “I’m glad you approve of it.”
He smiled at her, pleased at her obvious delight, and he touched her cheek, marveling at how content he felt at her happiness, something he had never experienced with anyone before and probably never would.

He reached down to take the necklace from her hand and he gently led her to a mirror that hung on one wall of the room. He placed her in front of it as he moved behind her. He caressed her neck for a few seconds before he slowly unclasped her mother’s necklace. Katara touched her bare skin before she moved her hand away when Zuko brought the betrothal necklace he had given her to her throat. Katara moved her hair out of the way and she watched with a smile as he placed it against her throat. Once he had fastened it, he pressed her mother’s necklace into her hand before he moved her hair so that it fell down her back again. He placed his hands on her shoulders, and tugging the edge of her dress slightly down, he leaned down to place a kiss on the love-bite on her skin and then on the black lace of her necklace before he kissed her cheek.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered into her ear as he looked at her through their reflections.

Katara touched the new necklace that now adorned her neck as she smiled at him before she glanced down to look at her mother’s necklace. She had worn it for many years in order to keep the memory of her mother alive, but now she knew that her mother will always live in the hearts of her loved ones.

Raising her head to look at Zuko, who was regarding her silently with simmering golden eyes, Katara smiled as she clasped the new pendant gently. Now she had a betrothal necklace of her own, she had a man who loved her immensely, and they had a future ahead of them. And although she knew it would not always be easy, she knew they would try their hardest to be happy.

“I will wear it proudly,” she told him softly.

“I know you will,” Zuko responded.

He turned her around so they could face each other and he ran his thumb on the engraved pendant before he leaned down to kiss her plump lips again. She sighed softly against his mouth, and with a groan at the feeling and taste of her, Zuko reluctantly pulled away before he carried her to the bedchamber so he could show her his pleasure in her acceptance in a more personal manner. That would surely anger the Southern Water Tribe Chief, if he were to find out.

“After I introduce you as my intended bride to my Royal Court, we must visit the fire sages to see
when the best day for our wedding would be,” he explained as his eyes softened.

Katara nodded even though she felt anxiety swell within her again at the thought of what Zuko’s courtiers would think of her, but she pushed it aside as she smiled at her betrothed.

“I can’t wait,” she told him sincerely.

She gasped when Zuko wrapped his arms around her and brought her flush against him as he smirked at her.

“Neither can I,” he said huskily as his eyes darted toward the doors that led to his bedroom before he looked at her again. He smiled when she blushed.

Leaning down, Zuko captured her lips and they both groaned when their tongues met as they opened their mouths while their hands gently roamed the other’s body. It was a few minutes later when they finally pulled away from each other to gather some air and regain their control.

Katara resisted the urge to laugh when Zuko groaned as he muttered that it was her father and Sokka’s fault he had to behave himself.

With a soft sigh, Katara rested her head against his chest as she stroked the stone on her new necklace a few times before she brought her left hand to her face so she could gaze at the beautiful ring on her finger. It seemed to shine at her with the light of the many candles. She felt her heart swell with happiness at the thought that she would soon marry Zuko, that she will soon become his wife and he her husband.

Zuko smiled as he watched his future bride admiring and lovingly stroking the ring he had given her before he tilted her chin up with his fingers and kissed her lips softly before pulling away.

“I should return you to your room before both your father and brother come upon me to avenge your honor,” he said with a serious expression, though there was amusement in his amber orbs.

Katara giggled this time as she took his offered arm and allowed him to lead her toward the doors. She bid the two guards good night and they responded with small smiles as they watched their lord reluctantly walking her to her room. Once the couple disappeared around the corner, the guards turned to look at each other. Shen’s lips lifted in a small smirk and Kuo chuckled quietly since they
had noticed the new necklace on the waterbender’s neck and the golden ring on her finger. But just as quickly, they sobered up and resumed their positions.

As they neared her room, the blue-eyed waterbender leaned her head against her firebender’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Zuko,” Katara told him with a happy sigh, “This night was so wonderful.”

“You’re welcome,” he responded with a smile as he gave her waist a squeeze as they stopped at her door.

Looking around them in order to make sure no overprotective fathers or brothers were lurking around, Zuko again brought Katara to him and kissed her deeply before pulling away. He smirked at her dazed look.

“But I promise that I’ll give you even more wonderful nights after we marry,” he promised her in a husky tone as he brushed his hands against her rear before he grabbed her hips and pulled her tightly to him.

The blush surfaced once again on Katara’s cheeks as she felt a tingle in her core and anticipation flutter in her stomach before a tiny smile touched her lips as she gazed at him beneath her lashes.

“Really?” she asked coquettishly, “I’m curious to know what we will be doing on these wonderful nights.”

“Don’t tempt me, love,” Zuko told her with a groan.

Katara bit her lip to stop herself from giggling when she felt the evidence of his arousal against her stomach. She was glad to know she was not the only one to be affected. With a smile, she reached up to kiss him softly on his lips before she whispered against them as he held her to him.

“Soon,” she said.

“I can’t wait,” he responded just as softly as he kissed her. Then he moved to huskily whisper in her
ear, “I’ll see you later tonight in your room.”

“Zuko,” she breathed both uncertainly and excitedly.

“I promise I’ll be careful,” he told her as he nibbled at her ear, causing her to moan softly.

“Then I’ll be waiting,” she responded softly.

Zuko groaned and he again kissed her mouth deeply before pulling away to smile at her as he gave her waist a gentle squeeze.

They had passed two obstacles this day. Now they had a few more before they could finally be happy together.
“What a beautiful ring,” Suki gushed as she admired the golden ring on her sister-in-law’s finger.

Katara retracted her hand and placed it against her chest as she stroked one of the engagement trinkets Zuko had given her. Right at that moment Zuko was talking to his royal advisors about his engagement to her. She was so nervous about what they might say, but she could not stop feeling happy.

“Isn’t it?” Katara replied to Suki with a pleased sigh.

The waterbender was sitting at the low table in the library with Gran-Gran, Suki, and Lady Ursa. As they waited for Madam Fang Hua to arrive for Katara’s lessons, the women exclaimed over the engagement items Zuko had given her the previous night. As soon as they noticed Katara wearing them, her grandmother and sister-in-law had rushed forward to congratulate her before they demanded she tell them how Zuko had proposed. Katara had enthusiastically recounted to them how romantic and sweet his proposal had been before she made them swear they wouldn’t tell anyone in order not to embarrass him. He hated showing his soft side to anyone but her.

“Do all Fire Nation women receive a ring when proposed to?” Kanna asked curiously as she turned toward the Fire Lord’s mother, who was lightly tickling the twins.

Ursa patted the little girls’ heads before she looked up to answer the gray-haired tribeswoman.

“No, only the women from nobility,” Ursa explained with a small smile.

“But why a ring?” Suki asked as she carefully watched her daughters, who had begun to crawl away from the table.

“Since noblewomen tend to wear many pieces of jewelry, a ring placed specifically on the fourth finger of the left hand makes it known to all that she is spoken for,” Ursa replied with a patient smile.

“Just like everywhere else, it’s the woman who has to wear something to show she belongs to a man,” the auburn-haired warrior muttered as she crossed her arms.
Katara frowned at Suki’s words before she gave a nod of agreement. Lady Ursa and Kanna glanced at each other and smiled ruefully at the younger women’s thoughts. It was just the way their world worked.

“You know,” Lady Ursa began as she smiled gently at Suki before she turned to Katara, “many years ago, before marriages among the nobility were for convenience like they are now, there used to be another reason behind the ring.”

“Really? What was it?” Katara asked curiously.

“It was thought that a large vein connected the fourth finger on the left hand to the heart,” Ursa explained with a wistful expression, “So the man would place the ring on his intended’s finger to symbolize he would forever be connected to her heart.”

“Aww, how romantic,” Suki breathed before she was distracted when her daughters began to crawl further away from them. She stood up to retrieve them and then placed the two giggling girls next to her again.

Katara looked down at the golden ring on her finger in a new light and she smiled happily as she again stroked the cool metal. She was positive Zuko had given her the ring to forever remind her that their hearts were linked. Although he had a hard time showing it, Zuko really was sweet—at least when it came to her.

“That is a very beautiful thought,” Kanna spoke up as she smiled at her granddaughter before she turned to Ursa. “Were you given a ring when Oza—?” she cut herself off and her eyes widened in mortification of what she had brought up.

Ursa looked down for a moment before she returned her gaze to the old woman, who was looking at her guiltily. The golden-eyed princess smiled softly to show she was not upset.

“Yes, he gave me a ring when he proposed to me,” she began quietly, unable to even say his name. “I was young and thought myself to be in love, and I thought he had given it to me to show his love and devotion…But I was wrong. He only saw me as a prize and wanted everybody to know it.”

A frown settled on her delicate brow as her gaze took on a faraway look.
“But when he banished me, he completely destroyed our already fragile marriage bond. So when I ran out of money, I sold the ring. It was either keep it as a reminder of my unhappy marriage or sell it to survive. Besides, I refused to be reminded of the fact that I once belonged to such a man,” she said, her usual serene voice turning dark as she rubbed the now bare finger on her left hand.

She paused and smiled apologetically at the other silent women.

“Please excuse me. I didn’t mean to ruin the mood with my sad tales.”

“There’s no need for you to apologize,” Kanna spoke with a kind smile.

“Yeah,” Katara added, “He didn’t deserve you and you didn’t deserve to go through all that.”

“Perhaps,” Ursa consented before she gave a genuine smile. “At least something good came out of such a broken marriage. My children…” She paused and her smile turned a little sad. “Well, at least, Zuko did.”

The other women knew she was thinking of how badly Azula turned out and they did not say anything. Kanna cleared her throat and clapped her hands heartily, the sound seeming to push away the melancholic air that had suddenly settled over them.

“The ring is lovely, but I think the betrothal necklace is simply beautiful!” the old woman exclaimed before she frowned, “Though I still think the young Fire Lord should have made it himself.”

Katara clutched the onyx pendant protectively as if to shield it from the old woman’s disapproving statement and she frowned deeply at her grandmother.

“Zuko can’t be expected to do something that he’s not used to and is not his tradition. At least he gave me a betrothal necklace,” she defended her future husband. “Besides, he doesn’t have time to be learning how to make a necklace.”

“Hm, well, that is true,” Kanna conceded.

“And he was the one who designed the symbols and chose the materials,” Katara added with a proud
“And it came out amazing!” Suki exclaimed. She touched her own necklace and smiled. It was simple, but she loved it because Sokka had made it for her.

The women again began to talk about how unique and beautiful Katara’s necklace was, and how surprising it was to find out Zuko had a romantic side to him—albeit a small one. They were interrupted from their lively chatter by a knock at the door. They looked up as the door opened and Madam Fang Hua stepped into the library with Jiao and another servant trailing after her with trays full of refreshments. Another servant followed them with arms full with scrolls and papers.

The tiny, old woman quickly made her way to the low table, but then she froze in her spot, almost causing the servants to crash into her. Then the old noblewoman began to exclaim over the two engagement trinkets and how it was about time her lord found a wife.

Katara smiled smugly at the thought that she was one of a few women, if not the only one, who was the proud recipient of not one, but two engagement items. And from the Fire Lord no less.

“Enough stalling. We need to continue your lessons,” the tiny noblewoman spoke sternly a moment later, effectively making Katara’s smile vanish from her face.

“Yes, Madam Fang Hua,” Katara managed to say without a tired groan.

When the old woman ruffled through the many piles of scrolls on the low table, the waterbender scowled at Suki and her grandmother when they coughed to hide their amusement.

“Now,” Madam Fang Hua began as she looked up with a small smile, “we have covered the most basic traditions and responsibilities you will need to follow, but now we will discuss the most important duty you will have as Fire Lady.”

“Alright,” Katara said with a pensive expression.

_I wonder what duty is that_, she mentally mused as she took a sip of tea.
“You must bear Fire Lord Zuko an heir as soon as possible,” Madam Fang Hua stated bluntly.

Katara choked on the tea and then coughed loudly as the hot liquid burned down her throat. Her grandmother patted her back with an amused smile on her wrinkled face, while Lady Ursa pressed her lips to keep from smiling and Suki openly grinned at her sister-in-law.

Clearing her throat in a more delicate manner, Katara raised her head to stare at the unperturbed old noblewoman with a dark blush on her cheeks.

“Oh…why as soon as possible?” she finally managed to ask.

“Fire Lord Zuko is already three years past from when he was supposed to sire an heir,” the tiny woman explained as she calmly sipped her tea before she placed the teacup on the table with a small frown, “Although times are better than they were four years ago, one never knows if something fatal could befall the Fire Lord. I know it may sound cruel, but we need the royal bloodline to continue.”

Katara nodded in understanding, although she vowed to herself that she would do everything possible so Zuko may live a long life with her, and then their child would be ready to take the throne. However, she was not sure if she was ready to be a mother yet. But then again, she was well past the year she was supposed to marry by her tribe’s standards. Women usually wedded at sixteen and were mothers soon after. Some would say it was about time she got married and started a family, but did Zuko and she really need to start having babies so soon?

Yet, she could not deny the warmth that went through her at the thought of having Zuko’s children.

“But of course conception may take a while,” Madam Fang Hua continued in a lighter tone as her thin lips curled into an impish grin, “So that means there will have to be many tries before the Fire Lord can impregnate you.” She chuckled.

Katara’s mouth flew open and she was sure her entire face was glowing red as all the women laughed. She would never have thought the stern noblewoman would say such a thing.

But the thought of those ‘many tries’ made Katara grin inwardly.

The royal advisors talked quietly amongst themselves as they wondered where Advisor Kang could be, since he had again missed a meeting. However, their musings soon turned toward the Fire Lord
who was just finishing talking to one of the governors from a small northern island. They were curious to know why they had been summoned so early in the morning, but not as curious as to know why Chief Hakoda, Master Pakku, and Master Sokka were in the throne room as well. The three tribesmen were sitting on cushions across from them, their arms crossed over their chests, and their blue eyes piercing as they silently stared at the old advisors. They almost let out a simultaneous sighs of relief when their lord finally concluded his meeting with the governor and the Water Tribe warriors’ attention shifted to the Fire Lord.

Sitting among them, Chao resisted the urge to grin at his fellow advisors for their behavior as he waited for his lord to speak. The Fire Lord had confided in him that he was finally going to be able to marry Lady Katara, and Chao had agreed immediately to help his lord sway the advisors’ minds in his favor. He caught Iroh’s eye, who was sitting beside the tribesmen, and he smiled and nodded when the retired general winked at him.

As soon as the door was closed behind the governor, Zuko briefly glanced at Hakoda, Sokka, and Pakku before his eyes landed on his advisors.

“I have received consent from the father of the woman I want to marry,” Zuko spoke up without stalling.

The old men looked around each other curiously and enviously as they tried to figure out if there was anyone among them that had gained their lord’s favor, before they returned their attention to the figure sitting behind the wall of fire.

“Who is the woman you have chosen to marry?” one of them finally asked.

“Lady Katara of the Southern Water Tribe,” Zuko responded coolly, although his heart was pounding wildly in his chest, “Chief Hakoda has agreed to allow me to marry his daughter.”

“What?” a few exclaimed in shock.

“But, my lord!” others cried out.

“Surely you jest,” one of them said.

The sound of two throats clearing rather loudly brought the old noblemen from their protests and
their eyes darted toward the tribesmen whose arms were still crossed over their chests, their dark eyebrows raised high on their foreheads challengingly, their eyes hard. The advisors sat back in their spots and grumbled to themselves. It would be catastrophic if they were to begin protesting too much when the Southern Water Tribe members were present

“I am speaking the truth when I say that I have chosen Lady Katara to be my wife,” Zuko repeated impassively as he stared at his advisors levelly.

“By not picking a noblewoman from the Fire Nation, your own country and your own people, you are insulting us,” one of the oldest of the men spoke up.

“None of your female relatives or any other noblewoman has been able to catch my attention,” the young Fire Lord stated bluntly. “And besides, if I had chosen a woman from the nobility, the rest of you would have been insulted anyway.”

The men glanced at each other sheepishly before they grumbled lowly to themselves just as Chao tried to reason with them in a subtle way.

“But my lord,” another spoke up, “if you marry Lady Katara, the pure royal bloodline would cease to exist!”

The other advisors perked up at this and immediately began to agree and exclaim that they needed to preserve the royal bloodline, but they were cut off by a dark look from their lord.

“What matters is that any children Lady Katara bears me will have my blood,” Zuko stated firmly.

At this statement, the men quieted down again as they mused over the idea while they sneaked glances at the silent and intimidating tribesmen.

Expression impassive, Zuko was proud of himself for coming up with the idea of having Katara’s father, brother, and new grandfather attend this meeting with him since his advisors were not protesting as much as he knew they would have for fear of insulting the Southern Water Tribe Chief, his heir, who was a master swordsman, and the master waterbender.

“Chief Hakoda and I have agreed that with my marriage to Lady Katara there will be a peace treaty signed between our countries to ensure another war does not occur,” the Fire Lord continued, his
The advisors murmured amongst themselves for a long moment before they finally agreed that a peace treaty was a good idea. Iroh mentally congratulated his nephew.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Young One?” Wei’s voice interrupted the other men and everybody turned to look at the balding advisor who was looking at the Fire Lord with an indifferent expression. “You can still have a peace treaty, you don’t have to marry the woman. Having her as your royal concubine will serve the same purpose.”

Iroh grit his teeth, and Chao and the other advisors gasped just as the fire wall blazed and Hakoda, Sokka, and Pakku sprang to their feet in outrage, their azure eyes blazing in anger and indignity.

“Hell no!” Sokka snarled angrily as his hand immediately went to his hip to grasp his sword. To his regret, no weapons were allowed in the throne room, which perhaps was a good thing or else he would have killed the old bastard for the insult to his sister.

“My daughter will never be made a concubine!” Hakoda roared in outrage.

“Even for a peace treaty between our countries!” Pakku growled.

“Chief Hakoda, Master Sokka, Master Pakku,” Zuko spoke up in a stoic tone as he kept his dark gaze on the old advisor, “Would you please sit down?”

The three tribesmen remained standing as they fought to regain their control and rein in their anger before they slowly sat down next to an equally angry Iroh. However, they continued to glare murderously at Wei, who ignored them as he frowned at the Fire Lord.

Zuko had expected Wei to oppose his marriage to Katara, but he did not give a damn what the man thought, especially since he was still a suspect.

“I respect Lady Katara and I will never insult her, her family and her culture by making her my concubine,” Zuko stated definitely as he added, “I want her as my wife.”
“But why?” Wei asked as if he could not wrap it around his head why Zuko would want a woman from the water tribes.

“Why?” Zuko repeated as if the question was plain stupid before he said, “Why not? She helped save the world, she saved me when Azula attacked me, she helped me find my mother, and she was willing to help the colony when we were told it had been infected.”

He paused and a small smile tugged at his lips just as his amber eyes darkened a little.

“And she is also a very beautiful woman. Why wouldn’t I want her as my wife?” he asked.

The other men immediately agreed with nods and murmurs, but they stopped and pretended to find an interest in something else when Hakoda cleared his throat and glared at them. Zuko felt himself flush for admitting his attraction to Katara in front of her father before he composed himself. It would be stupid of Hakoda if he had not realized Zuko was physically attracted to his daughter. And it would be best the chief accepted it, for Zuko will have a hard time keeping his hands off Katara once they married. Not that he would be showing his desire for her in front of anybody.

“She’s an intelligent and strong woman with a caring heart,” he continued, “And I know that she will help me and the Fire Nation once she becomes my wife and Fire Lady.”

The advisors again murmured in agreement since they had also heard the common people speak highly of her and her kindness.

“But she has no knowledge of how to be a noblewoman, especially not a Fire Lady,” Wei spoke up with a sneer.

Zuko glared at him heatedly before he smirked.

“Lady Katara had been concerned of that as well and that is why she has insisted in taking lessons with Madam Fang Hua,” he told them. “Madam Fang Hua has expressed her approval on how well Lady Katara is doing in her lessons.” He was unable to keep the pride from reaching his voice.

Wei frowned and the other advisors exclaimed in surprise. They were pleased to know the waterbender was taking her duties seriously and they wondered if it would be that bad for their lord to marry her, especially if the respected Madam Fang Hua approved of her.
“We understand all of this, my lord,” one of the younger advisors spoke up, “But any other noblewoman could do the same.”

Zuko had to stop himself from snorting at the man’s words. All the women he had been forced to listen to as they invaded his home only wanted him for his power and wealth, and possibly his body as well.

“Why are you so adamant on marrying Lady Katara?” the man continued to ask.

Zuko balled his hands as he stopped himself from shifting uncomfortably on his throne. He already had to confess the real reason to Hakoda and Sokka and he refused to say it to his advisors.

“I… We… care for each other,” he said smoothly.

“More like they are deeply in love with each other,” Iroh piped in cheerfully.

Hakoda and Pakku suppressed their amused grins and Sokka outright guffawed at the deadly glare Zuko sent his witty uncle, who again was unaffected by his nephew’s dark look as he smiled at the shocked men.

The advisors looked at the silent Fire Lord with wide, unbelieving eyes and gaping mouths, but when he did not deny his uncle’s words, they composed themselves as they began to murmur amongst each other again. Now they understood why their Fire Lord and the waterbender spent so much time together.

After a few more attempts to change his mind, the men finally give up, after all, they really did not have any real reason to disapprove of Lady Katara except that she was from the Southern Water Tribe. Besides, they really did not want to incur their lord’s wrath if they denied his wish to marry the woman he had chosen.

“If it is what you wish and if you are positive she will fulfill her duties as Fire Lady, then we accept your marriage to Lady Katara of the Southern Water Tribe,” the oldest of them finally spoke up.

Zuko’s eyes widened slightly before he again resumed his impassive features. He was surprised since
he had expected that they would have argued more insistently, but he supposed they were just relieved to know that he had finally decided to marry.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely.

After a few more minutes of discussing the peace treaty, they all agreed to converge again another day to go into more detail. Zuko heaved a mental sigh of relief as he left the room with the tribesmen, Iroh, and Chao following behind him.

“Congratulations,” Hakoda spoke up with grin as he gave the Fire Lord a clap on the back. “That went better than I expected.”

“Yes,” Zuko agreed with an incline of his head before a small smile tugged at his lips.

“Wow, now it feels more real that you’re gonna be my brother-in-law!” Sokka piped in with a dramatic gasp. “I’m gonna be related to Lord Jerkbender, here. Can you believe it?”

He grinned hugely when Zuko gave him a dark look. Chuckling, Sokka placed an arm around Zuko’s shoulders and squeezed.

“I know you must be glad to have the Mighty Warrior Sokka as your brother-in-law!” Sokka exclaimed cheerfully as he puffed out his chest. “Who wouldn’t? I am amazing, after all.”

Zuko shrugged the young warrior’s arm from his shoulders and gave him a blank stare.

“Maybe it’s a good thing you live in another country,” Zuko said coolly.

“Ouch. That hurt!” Sokka cried as he dramatically clutched his chest.

Zuko smirked and the other men laughed. Hakoda sighed at his son’s antics, though his lips twitched in amusement.

“I’m going to look for Katara in the library,” Zuko spoke up with a smile.
The smile dropped and he scowled when the men grinned at him and his uncle waggled his eyebrows. Without another word, the young Fire Lord turned around.

“Wait! I’m coming with you!” Sokka said as he quickly followed after the firebender. “I want to see Suki and my little girls.”

The older men watched them go with amused expressions on their faces.

“Ah, to be young and in love,” Iroh mused with a grin.

The others chuckled as they watched the Fire Lord and the Southern Water Tribe heir disappear around the corner before they agreed to play Pai Sho with the retired general.

Zuko had to stop himself from increasing his pace as he and Sokka neared the library where he knew Katara was once again taking her lessons with Madam Fang Hua and his mother. Sokka had been teasing him nonstop on their way to the library, but Zuko had learned to tune him out. Zuko raised a dark eyebrow when he spotted Jiao and Kuo talking quietly to each other beside the doors that led to the room before they stopped when they saw him approaching. Kuo straightened himself and resumed his alert position while Jiao blushed as she bowed to her lord before she hurried down the corridor in the opposite direction.

Zuko chose to ignore them as he knocked on the door once before he opened it and went inside. Sokka followed after him with a grin. Zuko found Katara surrounded by his mother, Kanna, Suki, and Madam Fang Hua, while the twins played near their mother’s feet. He was curious since it seemed the women had been arguing before they abruptly stopped when he and Sokka appeared.

“Uh oh,” Sokka whispered loudly to Zuko, “We must have intruded upon their girl talk.”

“What’s going on?” Zuko asked.

“What’s going on is that Madam Fang Hua and your mother are insisting that I get fitted for new clothes when I already have a lot with the ones Uncle Iroh had me buy last summer!” Katara exclaimed in one breath.
“Pfft! That’s it?” Sokka said carelessly as he waved his hand in the air.

He walked forward to kiss Suki on her forehead before he knelt on the ground to play with the twins. Katara turned to glare at her older brother before she turned back to Madam Fang Hua when she began to speak.

“The future Fire Lady must wear appropriate and formal attire deemed by her title and position,” the tiny old noblewoman insisted calmly.

“Well, we still don’t know if I’ll ever become Fire Lady,” Katara retorted stubbornly as she crossed her arms over her chest, “And I don’t need to be fitted for new clothes.”

“Madam Fang Hua,” Zuko spoke up coolly even though his eyes were locked on Katara’s, “Please have the royal seamstress meet with Lady Katara tomorrow.”

“I already said that…” the waterbender began before she trailed off with a gasp. Eyes wide and staring at Zuko, she asked, “Does that mean the Court Council agreed to our marriage?”

Zuko inclined his head and smiled at her.

“Your father, brother, and grandfather can be quiet intimidating,” he said with a small grin.

With a happy squeal, Katara jumped to her feet and race to her firebender before she lunged herself into his arms and began to rain kisses along his strong jaw. She heard him clear his throat and she immediately pulled away from him with an embarrassed blush staining her cheeks.

“Sorry,” she mumbled as she stared at his chest.

She felt him place a finger under her chin and she looked up when he gently nudged her to lift her head. He smiled down at her.

“You can show me how happy you are when we’re alone tonight,” he whispered so only she could hear.
Katara’s blush turned a darker hue as Zuko straightened and looked away to smile at the women who were congratulating them enthusiastically. Mentally shaking her head, Katara smiled in anticipation. Hooking her arm under his, Zuko led her toward the table where Katara again took a seat. Turning to his mother, Zuko smiled.

“Mother, I want Katara to be appropriately attired for when I officially announce her as my future wife,” he said.

“Of course, dear,” Ursa told him happily, “When would you like to have the engagement party?”

“In three days,” Zuko replied smoothly.

“In three days?!” the women exclaimed.

“Damn, you have it bad,” Sokka piped in amusedly as he allowed his daughters to crawl onto his lap.

Zuko pointedly ignored his future brother-in-law as he addressed the women.

“Yes,” Zuko said before he looked down at Katara with a frown, “I told you I was going to announce our engagement as soon as the Court Council agreed.”

“I know,” Katara responded with a smile, “I was just surprised, but I’m happy.”

She grinned at him brightly and Zuko relaxed as he returned her smile with a small one of his own.

“Then I will send the invitations for your engagement party immediately and have the seamstress look into fitting Katara for new clothes,” Lady Úrsa told them with a joyful smile.

Madam Fang Hua turned to Katara with a haughty expression.
“Do not argue with a wise old woman again, my dear,” she advised.

“I tell her that all the time,” Kanna spoke up, a teasing glint in her light blue eyes.

Zuko gave Katara a sympathetic look when she groaned as the women and Sokka laughed.

Sitting on a rock overlooking the ocean with knees clasped to his chest, Aang sighed sadly before he rubbed his neck to soothe the ache that had appeared there since that morning. After leaving the Fire Nation, he had had Appa fly nonstop until they landed on this small uninhabited island. Luckily, Toph had remained silent during the entire ride since he did not feel like talking. The feeling of betrayal, anger, and pain were still too real.

For the past few days he had vented his anger onto the small island, causing a lot of damage, before he felt guilty and began to fix what he had destroyed. But now that he had exhausted himself and had nothing to do, the pain returned, and with it, plaguing thoughts. He thought over what had happened during his confrontation with Zuko and he felt ashamed for almost hurting his friends, but could anyone really blame him for the way he had reacted?

Yet he had known for some time that Katara did not love him the way he loved her, but he had ignored it for fear of losing her. He had also known Zuko had feelings for her and that Katara had feelings for him, but he had also ignored that and preferred to think that Zuko just wanted to seduce her to hurt him. But why did they not tell him sooner and why did they let him continue to believe he had a chance with Katara? Why did she lead him on?

He clenched his hands tightly before he relaxed them and sighed.

No, she had not been leading him on. She had told him no when he proposed to her and broke up with him, but he had not accepted it. It was not Katara’s fault—not even Zuko’s—it was his own fault for not accepting the truth sooner and choosing to ignore it.

Momo chirped beside him and nuzzled his hand. Aang smiled sadly and scratched behind the small creature’s large ears before sighing as he wrapped his arms around his knees again.

Glancing at the sea once more, Aang watched as the golden sun touched the blue ocean as it began to set and he could not help but think of Zuko and Katara and how they had been kissing and embracing each other when he had caught them in his search for her. Wincing, he looked away as he once again clenched his hands at the pain in his chest.
He had told them he wished for their happiness and he had told Katara he needed to come to terms, but would he ever be able to let her go and accept her relationship with Zuko? Would he ever stop loving her? Would he ever find happiness?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The Fire Nation nobility were arriving at the palace in hordes for the Fire Lord’s engagement celebration. He had finally announced that he had chosen a woman to be his wife and Fire Lady and they were all curious to know who she was and from which noble family she came from. They were envious at the thought, however, that another family had gained their lord’s favor. The women were jealous and disappointed at the thought that they now did not have a chance to marry the Fire Lord because another woman had beaten them to it.

Walking toward the great banquet hall with Shen and Kuo walking behind them, Zuko and Katara quietly went over what she was supposed to do during the engagement party.

“There really isn’t much for you to do except talk about yourself if any of the nobility asks you, which they will,” Zuko informed her coolly. “You will remain by my side all night and mostly listen to their flattery. They will not let us leave their sight throughout the entire celebration.”

“How fun,” Katara said sarcastically.

“I will enter first to introduce you and then you will join me,” he reminded her.

Katara nodded to show she understood before she bit her lip and clasped her hands in anxiety. La, she was so nervous! What if they hated her? What if they made Zuko change his mind? What if they made him choose a noblewoman as his wife?

She was brought out of her thoughts when she felt Zuko touch her bottom lip with his thumb to make her stop chewing on it and she glanced up at him with a frown.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about, Katara,” he told her reassuringly. “We already passed the most difficult obstacle in convincing the Court Council. Even if the nobles disagree with me and my choice of wife, they can’t do much unless they wish to have my wrath fall upon them.”

“Anybody will say they agree with you in order to avoid your temper,” Katara remarked dryly.
Zuko shrugged at her words.

“I’m glad you know it,” he said with a smirk.

Katara smacked his arm and scowled at him.

“Don’t mess with me,” she grumbled, “I’m already nervous at it is.”

Zuko grasped her hand where he had placed her ring and kissed it briefly since Shen and Kuo were walking behind them, although far enough behind to give them some privacy.

“Everything will be okay,” he told her softly before he smiled at her as he reached up to touch the betrothal necklace, “You look beautiful.”

Katara felt her anxiety lessen a bit and she smiled as Zuko allowed his eyes to discreetly wander down her form. His waterbender indeed looked beautiful in her new blue dress he had ordered to be made for her. Zuko wanted his people to acknowledge her Southern Water Tribe heritage. He looked away when his body again stirred in desire the longer he stared at her enticing form, and he again glanced up to admire the way the betrothal necklace wrapped around her slender neck before he looked at the golden ring around her finger. A smug smile curled his lips at the thought that now everybody will know Katara was his.

Soon they were standing before the large doors that lead to the dais of the banquet hall. Zuko stared at the doors as he reminisced about the last time he had been standing before them on the day of his birthday celebration, thinking that he had forever lost Katara and his chance of happiness. He glanced at his waterbender, who smiled at him softly, and he immediately returned the smile as he thought that now he had her and he would never let her go.

Shen and Kuo stepped forward and opened the doors just as the older guard announced the Fire Lord’s appearance. With one last smile aimed at his intended, Zuko smoothed his features into his usual stoic expression before he stepped through the doors and strode to the edge of the dais where a small wall of fire blazed. The people bowed in deference to him before they straightened to look at him expectantly.

“I have asked you all to come here today so that I may announce to you that I have finally found the woman worthy enough to be my wife and Fire Lady,” Zuko began in a strong voice that carried toward the ends of the room. “She will not only make a good wife, but she will also help me in my
rule of this great nation.”

He paused for a moment and he almost grinned as some of them actually leaned forward in anticipation.

“I proudly present to you my future bride,” he began as he turned toward the doors which opened again as Katara stepped through, “Lady Katara of the Southern Water Tribe.”

The noblemen and -women gasped loudly in shock before they murmured amongst themselves at the revelation.

Zuko’s golden eyes gleamed in pride as he watched Katara walked toward him confidently, none of her anxiety and fear showing through, and he extended his right arm toward her. She smiled beautifully as she took his outstretched hand, placing her small hand delicately in his larger one. The nobility gasped again as they noticed the golden ring on her finger and they knew their lord was serious.

Zuko brought Katara close to his side as he again returned his attention to the people.

“Lady Katara took part in ending the hundred year war that had hurt many people. She also saved my life. She is a wonderful woman with a great love for those less fortunate and she will make a great Fire Lady,” the raven-haired lord continued, “With our marriage, the Fire Nation and the Southern Water Tribe will have an unbreakable peace treaty drawn that will ensure another war does not occur.”

The older noblemen grumbled in discontent at having the Fire Lord marry a woman that was not from the Fire Nation, while the young noblewomen groused silently in jealousy that a Water Tribe woman had gained the Fire Lord’s favor. The low murmurs paused when they saw the waterbender take a step forward with a smile on her face.

“I know I may not be a noblewoman, or from the Fire Nation, but I swear that I will do everything in my power to help Fire Lord Zuko, my future husband, as well as both the Fire Nation and the Southern Water Tribe,” Katara stated in a calm yet strong voice.

There was silence for a moment as the people stared at her in surprise before they began to murmur amongst themselves again. Zuko resisted the urge to smirk since it was just like Katara to make a speech in order to ease their minds.
The nobility contemplated what they had heard for a moment before they bowed to the Fire Lord and his future Fire Lady in acceptance since not only did they not have the power to go against him, but also they did not want to bring the Fire Lord’s displeasure on them. The young women were less reluctant to accept as they continued to whine and pout, but their elders hushed them and nudged them to bow respectfully.

Katara let out a subtle breath of relief as her racing heart calmed. There was a small part of her that felt irritated that all of her fears and doubts had been for nothing, but a bigger part of her felt relieved that no one had actually protested the idea of Zuko marrying her. She knew some of them still did not really approved of her becoming Zuko’s wife and Fire Lady, but she vowed to herself that she would change their minds. She glanced at Zuko to smile happily at him. Zuko did not return her smile, but Katara saw how his eyes lit up and her smile widened a bit.

“Please partake in the refreshments set out for your enjoyment,” Zuko finally spoke as he gestured toward the banquet tables.

Taking Katara’s hand and tucking it under his arm, Zuko parted the wall of fire before he led them down the dais to mingle with the crowd.

As soon as they stepped down, they were surrounded by people who immediately began to congratulate them. The men would comment to the Fire Lord on how beautiful his chosen wife was while the women would admire and flatter Katara’s ring and necklace. Katara’s head swam as men praised her beauty and women after women vied for her attention. Zuko had warned her that this would happen since the noblewoman would want to gain her favor so they could form part of her female courtiers. She was not sure if she really wanted to have a group of gossipy women following her around wherever she went.

Finally Zuko got tired of their annoying presence and tersely excused Katara and himself. The crowd parted to let the Fire Lord lead his intended bride to where his family was standing with hers. The nobility frowned at the loss, but they were soon distracted by the delicious food set out before them and the soft music that reached their ears.

“That’s something I’m going to have a hard time getting used to,” Katara muttered as she touched her temple.

“I know how you feel. I’m still not used to it after all these years,” Zuko commented dryly.
“That’s not surprising. You hate having your personal space invaded,” she remarked with a small giggle.

“True, but there’s one person that I don’t mind invading my personal space,” Zuko countered as he gave her hand a squeeze while he glanced at her with smoldering eyes. “In fact, I want her to be as close as possible to me.”

A small blush surfaced on Katara’s cheeks since she had a feeling she knew what he was referring to before a small smirk appeared on her lips.

“That will have to wait until we wed,” she said impishly.

Before Zuko could remark on her words, both their families stepped up to them. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes when Hakoda and Sokka narrowed their eyes suspiciously at him. Zuko let go of Katara’s arm as her grandmother embraced and congratulated her before his mother and then Suki did the same, while the men grasped his arm and clapped him on his back.

“You really outdid yourself with the betrothal necklace, Zuko,” Sokka commented after he had given his sister a one-armed hug.

“Katara deserves nothing but the best,” Zuko stated coolly.

“Gees, man. Way to put pressure on the rest of us men, Lord Hotstuff,” Sokka said with a dramatic groan.

Katara ignored her brother as she smiled at Zuko. She glanced at her grandmother when Kanna elbowed her side.

“This one is a keeper, Katara,” the old woman teased.

The group laughed when Zuko flushed and cleared his throat as he composed himself.

“Fire Lord Zuko, Lady Katara.”
Zuko and Katara turned at the sound of their names and they watched as an elderly man with cropped white hair and a woman with a graying braid bowed to them.

“My wife and I express our most sincere congratulations upon your upcoming wedding,” the man said.

“Physician Toshiro, thank you,” Zuko said as he inclined his head.

The old physician smiled before he turned to smile widely at the waterbender.

“I am sure you will make a wonderful Fire Lady, Lady Katara,” he said genuinely.

“Thank you,” Katara replied with a pleased smile.

“I did not know you had returned to the palace,” Zuko spoke up, “How are your daughter and grandchild?”

“They are both well, my lord,” the Palace Physician said happily.

“Our grandson is such a healthy baby boy,” his wife added joyfully.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Zuko began before he more seriously added, “Now that you have returned, Physician Toshiro, I would like to speak with you tomorrow about something urgent.”

The old man frowned slightly before he bowed.

“Of course, my lord,” he complied.

With another few words of congratulations to the engaged couple, the physician and his wife left to talk with the other nobles. As soon as they were out of sight, Katara squeezed Zuko’s arm as she looked up at him in concern.
“Are you sick?” she asked worriedly.

“No,” Zuko quickly responded in order to cease her worries.

He glanced discreetly around before he more quietly said, “I want to talk to Physician Toshiro about the false messenger that collapsed when he arrived at the palace. I want to know why he got sick and why he died.”

“Zuko dear,” Ursa spoke up softly.

When Zuko looked at her, the noblewoman continued in the same quiet tone.

“Did he have a high fever? What were his other symptoms?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” the golden-eyed firebender replied with a frown. “Why?”

Ursa pressed her lips tightly together as she looked around them to make sure on one else was listening before she took a deep breath.

“What if he was…poisoned?”

Zuko’s eyes widened slightly before he frowned deeply as they all contemplated the possibility of the false messenger being poisoned intentionally.

“Poisoning seems a likely possibility,” Zuko began pensively before he straightened as he looked at his mother, “Can you be there when I interrogate Physician Toshiro?”

“Of course, my son,” Ursa responded immediately.

When he felt Katara again squeeze his arm, Zuko looked down to see her worried blue eyes. He sighed guiltily.
“I’m sorry for talking about such things on our engagement party,” he apologized.

“It’s all right. I understand,” she told him with an understanding smile.

Placing his hand atop hers, Zuko gave her a small smile as his eyes warmed.

“Let’s pretend we believe the nobles’ flattery, shall we?” he asked with a smirk.

“Why, of course,” she replied with a giggle.

After a quick smile to their family, the Fire Lord and the waterbender left them and headed to the dance floor, but just as they had been expecting, they were swarmed by people before they could actually reach it.

“I feel like my stomach is eating itself. How about we head to the banquet table, Suki?” Sokka spoke up with a smile as he hooked his wife’s arm under his, then with a grin he whispered in her ear, “Then you can satisfy my other kind of appetite later.”

Suki shook her head and laughed as her husband waggled his eyebrows suggestively at her.

“Let’s go,” Suki said with a grin as she tugged on her husband’s arm. They had left their daughters in the care of Jiao since the engagement party had started late and would probably end late.

As soon as the younger people left, Iroh turned to grin at Kanna who scowled when she caught his eye.

“Didn’t I say my nephew and Miss Katara would be getting married this year?” he said cheerfully, “Now you need to pay up, my dear.”

“I was only a year off,” Kanna grumbled as she crossed her arms over her chest.
The others laughed as the party continued.

A few days after the Avatar calmed down, Toph’s brow furrowed again as she felt Aang sulking on the boulder as he had been doing after he had vented his anger on the island. She had kept quiet at first to give him time to heal, and then she had tried to cheer him up, but he would either ignore her or tell her that he was not in the mood for her jokes and wanted to be left alone. She had again given him his space so he could come to terms with everything that happened, but it seemed as if he was getting worse instead of better. She missed the cheerful and sometimes annoying boy and hated this depressed and melancholy shell of a young man.

Narrowing her milky green eyes, Toph balled her hands into fists. She had had enough of his angst!

She stomped over to where he was sitting, and with a firm stomp of her foot, she threw him off the rock. Aang landed on the ground with a startled yelp.

“What is your problem, Toph?!” he yelled as he picked himself off the ground and dusted himself off with a low growl.

“Stop being a sissy, toughen up, and move one!” she told him firmly, “So what if Sweetness dumped you? It’s not the end of the world!”

“It’s not that easy!” Aang angrily shouted at her, “I can’t just forget and stop loving Katara after four years!”

“Well, that’s too bad ‘cause you’re gonna have to. Katara loves Zuko, and if I know Sparky, he’s planning to marry her as soon as possible,” the short earthbender said bluntly.

“Shut up!” Aang screamed, “Stop reminding me!”

“It’s not like Katara’s the only woman in the world!” Toph finally snapped as she stomped her foot, causing the ground to tremble, “If you would just open your eyes and stop being so damn stupid, you would’ve realize that there are others who like you!”

Aang’s gray eyes widened and he gaped at the angry earthbender.
“What do you m—?”

He was interrupted, however, when Toph roughly grabbed him by the collar of his tunic and pulled him down before she smashed her mouth to his. Aang froze in shock as Toph kissed him and at the thought that she could like him, but before he could react, she pulled away. Speechless, he stared down at her sightless eyes as she glared at him, but there was a light pink flush to her pale cheeks. He had only seen Toph blush a few times.

“Toph…I—I had no idea,” he said quietly.

The dark-haired young woman let him go and shrugged.

“I tried to stop it and I tried to deny my feelings, but it was useless,” she said with another shrug. “Love’s like a sneaky little thing that crawls up behind a person when they least expect it. You’ll never know it’s there until it bites you in the ass. It couldn’t be helped.”

Aang frowned at her.

“You make it sound like it’s a bad thing,” he muttered.

Toph grinned at his disgruntled tone.

“I’ll let you get used to the idea,” she began before she lightly punched his arm as she firmly said, “But I won’t wait forever for you to make a decision, ya hear?”

“I…I will try, Toph, but I won’t make any promises,” he told her sincerely

“I’ll change your mind,” she responded confidently.

She again grabbed hold of his shirt and pulled him down to kiss him again. Wow, this was better than she imagined and she be damned if she would ignore her feelings. Now there was nothing standing in her way of what she wanted except for his lingering feelings for Katara, but Toph was determined to change his feelings and sway them toward herself.
Aang gasped slightly when he felt a small tingle run down his spine as Toph kissed him a second time before he closed his eyes to enjoy this new sensation. He found that he liked Toph’s warm and slightly rough lips on his.

He was not sure if he would be able to return Toph’s feelings, but if it meant both their happiness, then he was willing to give it a try.

Perhaps destiny had an entirely different plan for him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Early on the day after the engagement party found Zuko sitting on his throne behind the wall of fire. His advisors were murmuring amongst themselves as they wondered why they had been summoned again and why the Palace Physician was also in attendance. Zuko ignored them for the moment as his eyes wandered to where Katara and his mother were sitting between Iroh and Jee. Katara had insisted on attending since the matter of the false message about the ‘infested’ colony also concerned her. Their eyes met briefly before Zuko returned his gaze to the physician sitting alone before him.

“What was the messenger’s condition when he supposedly collapsed after arriving in the Fire Nation Palace?” he asked in a blank tone.

The physician started at the sudden question before he frowned as he tried to remember.

“Other than being exhausted from the long journey, his condition was fine,” the white-haired man began before his frown deepened, “That is why I was surprised when he suddenly fell terribly ill.”

“When did you notice he had fallen ill?” Zuko asked in the same cool tone.

“The following day when I went to see if he had awakened,” the man informed him, “When I examined him, he had a high fever, which did not lessen until his death.”

“When did you notice he had fallen ill?” Zuko asked in the same cool tone.

“The following day when I went to see if he had awakened,” the man informed him, “When I examined him, he had a high fever, which did not lessen until his death.”

“Were there any other symptoms besides the high fever?” the Fire Lord questioned.

“Yes, there was weakness of muscles, dizziness, a rapid heartbeat, excessive sweating, nausea and vomiting,” Physician Toshiro listed off with another frown as he again tried to remember, “On the last days before his death he began to have seizures.”
Zuko glanced at his mother, who gave a subtle nod to indicate she had been correct in assuming the messenger had been poisoned. With an emotionless expression on his face, Zuko returned his attention to the old physician.

“These sound like symptoms of poisoning,” Zuko stated.

The physician frowned as he thought over what the Fire Lord had said before his eyes widened

“That is true, but why would anyone poison him?” he asked in bewilderment. “And besides, except for my assistant, I was the only one near the messenger.”

Zuko was silent for a moment as he regarded the old man before him. He did not doubt for a second the physician’s loyalty for he had been there ever since Zuko could remember. Toshiro was the one who had seen to the wound on his face when Ozai had struck him all those years ago. The old physician had lamented quietly about such a cruel fate for a young boy as he gave Zuko sleeping draughts for the pain. And when Zuko returned to the palace as the newly crowned Fire Lord, Toshiro had looked after any injury or small illness he had sustained within the years with such dedication.

After a few more minutes of tense silence, Zuko called out to one of his guards. When the soldier stepped up and knelt before him, Zuko spoke.

“Bring me the physician’s assistant,” he said impassively.

The Palace Physician gaped at him for a moment as the guard bowed before he left to do his lord’s bidding.

“Surely you do suspect my assistant, my lord,” Toshiro exclaimed, “Such an act is treason and Kuro is the most loyal person I know.”

“We’ll see about that, Physician Toshiro,” Zuko responded coolly.

The advisors again began to talk quietly amongst themselves as they speculated about the recent events while they waited for the guard to appear with the physician’s assistant. A few minutes later,
the guard arrived with the assistant following behind him. The young man looked around the throne room in confusion as he was led below the Fire Lord’s dais where he bowed before taking a kneeling position next to the physician.

Zuko silently eyed the young assistant. He was of medium stature, slim, with unremarkable features, dark eyes and long dark hair.

“Kuro, correct?” the Fire Lord finally spoke.

The young man jumped at the commanding voice before he bowed his head.

“Yes, your majesty,” he replied.

“How long have you been an assistant to Physician Toshiro?”

“Three years.”

“Do you enjoy your job?”

“Very much so, my lord.”

“Do you have any complaints about the way you are living? About my rule?”

“Of course not, Fire Lord Zuko!” the young assistant exclaimed with wide eyes.

“What were you doing on the night the messenger that brought the missive from the colonies died?” Zuko asked without any more pretenses.

“I was helping Physician Toshiro try to save the man, but nothing we did worked, my lord,” Kuro responded quickly as he sat perfectly still.
Zuko was silent for a moment as the rest in the room waited to see what was going to happen next.

Katara frowned as she stared at the man. If only Toph were there, they would know if he was lying. The blue-eyed waterbender then glanced to where her future husband sat in deep thought and she bit her lip and grasped her hands in worry. Could Zuko be in the same danger as the messenger had been? She prayed it wasn’t so.

Zuko suppressed the frown that wanted to appear on his face as the man answered all his questions without any hesitation. What if it was someone else who had poisoned the messenger? But who? Yet, Zuko still could not ignore the feeling that the assistant had something to do with it. The young lord glanced at Wei, who was staring at the young man with a curious look on his wrinkled face. Why was Wei not reacting? Was he not afraid Kuro would point him out?

Straightening, Zuko decided to test the assistant and see what would happen, and if the man was innocent, then Zuko was going to be back to the beginning of the problem and his suspicions of Wei.

“Stop lying,” he said coldly.

“M-my lord?” Kuro stammered in surprise.

“I know everything,” the Fire Lord continued in the same icy tone, “Before his disappearance, Advisor Kang told me everything and insisted that the messenger’s death was all your idea.”

“That is a lie!” Kuro shouted, his meek posture immediately changing into indignation, “It was all his idea!”

Kuro choked on his words as he slapped his hand over his mouth. He stared wide-eyed at the intimidating-looking Fire Lord while everybody gasped.

“K-Kuro?” Physician Toshiro stammered in shock as the young man glanced at him before lowering his gaze.

Zuko’s eyes widened slightly in surprise. So Advisor Kang was behind all of this? But then why had the old advisor urged him to meet with him in order to warn Zuko about a plot? What really happened to the advisor to cause his disappearance? Narrowing his golden eyes, Zuko leaned forward as the shadows the flames cast made his features seem darker.
“You will explain everything,” Zuko commanded firmly, “If not, the information will be tortured out of you.”

“Y-you’re b-bluffing,” Kuro stuttered even as he tried to act fearless.

“For my safety and those close to me, I am capable of anything,” the Fire Lord replied darkly.

The young man paled and he stiffened.

Zuko stared down at the wide-eyed assistant, waiting for a response, but when he received none, the flames that stood before him flared in his impatience. Kuro jumped with a frightened gasp.

“Tell me everything you know,” Zuko demanded imperially.

Zuko glanced quickly to where Wei sat, thinking that he could have evidence against the old advisor now that the assistant would reveal everything. He was confused, however, when he saw that Wei did not seem alarmed and was looking at the young man with an intrigued expression just like the rest of the advisors.

“I-I know nothing!” Kuro shouted with wide, fearful eyes.

“Don’t lie to me!” Zuko growled out angrily.

Kuro flinched at the Fire Lord’s anger and he cowered down in his spot.

“Whatever Advisor Kang said was false!” the young man exclaimed as he again looked up at the angry Fire Lord.

“Then let me hear your version,” Zuko said in a deceptively calm voice.

Zuko watched as the assistant glanced at Toshiro, as if looking for help or understanding, before
Once again lowering his eyes when the old physician frowned sadly at him.

When Kuro did not immediately respond, Zuko added more darkly, “If not, then I will have you killed for treason.”

The young assistant did not even hesitate as he immediately launched into his own story.

“The day the messenger arrived, Advisor Kang approached me when I was going on an errand! He told me to poison the messenger in exchange for a very large sum of money…and I agreed. So that same night when Physician Toshiro had left, I sneaked into the messenger’s room, mixed the poison with a draught, and made him drink it. I-I did this for several nights until he d-died.”

Katara gasped softly. Did he not feel any remorse for killing a man just to get money?

“Why would Advisor Kang want to poison the messenger?” Zuko asked.

“I-I don’t know the particulars, but I think it was so the messenger could keep his mouth s-shut about something. P-permanently,” Kuro stammered.

“Advisor Kang asked me to visit him in his country house,” Zuko said as if he had not heard a word, “He wanted to tell me that you had planned a plot against me.”

“But I wasn’t behind the plot, my lord!” the young assistant exclaimed in dismay, “I was just in it for the money to have a better life for my family! I swear it!”

Kuro grasped his hair as he looked imploringly at the silent Fire Lord.

“When he offered me more money for another job, I immediately refused!” he continued, “It’s one thing poisoning an unknown messenger, but it’s another thing poisoning the Fire Lord!”

Zuko remained immobile even as he heard Katara, his mother and Uncle Iroh gasp in horror.
“What?” the advisors shouted in shock and the entire room erupted into chaos.

Raising the flames of the fire wall, Zuko continued once everybody calmed down enough for him to be heard.

“Were you really not going to poison me even after you were offered a reward?” Zuko asked cynically.

“Of course not, my lord!” Kuro exclaimed as he again fell to his knees before he bowed low until his forehead touched the ground. “I am loyal to you and the Fire Nation.”

“What else happened?” the Fire Lord asked.

The man lifted his head and he trembled at the blank expression and tone of the Fire Lord. He once again glanced at his mentor imploringly, but Toshiro looked at him sadly and shook his head.

“Answer the question, Kuro,” Toshiro said in a quiet, tired tone.

Sitting silently, Katara watched as Kuro once again lowered his gaze and swallowed. She could only imagine how ashamed Kuro must feel to not only have betrayed his lord but the man that had taken him in as his assistant.

“W-when I told A-advisor Kang that I refused, he became angry and…threatened me,” Kuro continued.

“How?” Zuko asked.

“He…planned on telling you that I was the one who poisoned the messenger and that I was the one behind the plot against your life. He knew you suspected Advisor Wei, so he believed you would have no reason to doubt him. And once he gained your trust, he planned on finding a way to end your life.” He paused before he added with a scowl, “I wasn’t about to let him screw me over!”

Katara’s eyes widened in fear before she grasped Ursa’s hand when the noblewoman gasped while everybody else in the room murmured amongst themselves about what had been revealed.
Zuko was silent for a moment as he stared at the cowering man before he looked at Wei, who caught his eye and raised an eyebrow. Zuko narrowed his eyes before he looked back down at the assistant.

“Are you the reason why Advisor Kang is missing?” he asked impassively.

Kuro’s eyes widened again before he pressed his lips tightly together and looked down at the floor.

“Answer me,” Zuko ordered firmly.

“Yes,” he replied quietly, “When I found out that Advisor Kang was meeting with the Fire Lord, I rushed over to his house and surprised him during his morning ride.”

“You killed him,” Zuko stated bluntly.

“I didn’t mean to!” Kuro shouted pleadingly. “I just wanted to make the advisor stop with his plans, but he ignored me! I got angry and threw a rock at him, but it stuck his ostrich-horse and the animal reared at the impact. It threw off the advisor, who fell on the ground and struck his head on a large rock. He was dead before I reached him, I swear!”

All the advisors gasped.

“Why didn’t you tell anybody about what happened?” Zuko asked.

“Nobody would’ve believed a simple physician assistant!” Kuro cried out, “Nobody would’ve believed it was an accident! I would’ve been accused of killing him on purpose!”

“What did you do with the body?” one of the advisors dared to ask.

At the Fire Lord’s nod for him to continue, Kuro swallowed as he wrung his hands in anxiety.

“I-I buried his body somewhere in the surrounding area of his country house,” he confessed quietly.
“What else do you know?” Zuko asked again, “What about the rebels? And Ozai?”

Kuro frowned.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said truthfully.

Damn it, Zuko cursed in his head.

“Guards,” he growled out as he motioned for them, “Take him to the prison tower for further questioning.”

“But, my lord!” Kuro protested as two guards grabbed him by the arms and hauled him up. “Let me go!” he shouted as he struggled against the guards who were dragging him away.

As soon as the door closed behind them, the men in the room immediately began to declare their indignation about a plot set against their lord’s life while exclaiming their concern at the same time. Wei did not say anything as he sat back and crossed his arms above his protruding stomach and frowned.

Zuko did not pay them any attention as he sighed inwardly. He still had so many questions left unanswered. He again glanced at Wei and his brow furrowed when he saw the old advisor speculating with the others. Had he been wrong all this time in suspecting Wei? Or was Wei just pretending he knew nothing?

He looked away to see how his family was taking the news. Jee and Iroh were frowning at each other while his mother and Katara murmured lowly to themselves. Katara looked up and again their eyes met. He frowned at the worry in her eyes.

“Advisors,” he called out coolly.

The men paused in their commotion and looked at him expectantly.
“This meeting is concluded for today. We’ll discuss what happened later.”

“But—”

“Do I have to repeat myself?” Zuko cut off the man that had begun to argue with a growl.

The old advisors frowned as they mumbled to themselves before they finally stood up, bowed, and reluctantly headed toward the doors. Once they had all left and the doors were closed behind them, Zuko sighed as he stood up from his throne and stepped down the marble steps. Just as he part the fire wall and stepped through it, he found himself in Katara’s tight embrace. He looked up to see his uncle, mother, and Jee talking to each other a few feet away, and with a soft sigh, he wound his arms around his waterbender and hugged her close to him.

“Just the thought that you could’ve ended up like the messenger…” Katara began in a strained voice before she trailed off with a shuddering sigh.

“But I didn’t,” he reminded her reassuringly, “Kang is dead and so is his plan.”

Katara nodded against his chest before she pulled away from him since she knew it made him uncomfortable to show physical affection in front of other people. He touched her cheek briefly and she smiled.

As if just noticing their moment had passed, the other three approached them.

“Zuko,” Ursa said anxiously as she grasped his arm, “Why didn’t you tell me there was a plot against your life?”

“I wasn’t sure if there really was a plot,” he answered as he squeezed her hand, “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“You cannot keep such things for your mother,” Ursa admonished him with a frown, “Promise me you will never do it again, my son.”

Zuko did not immediately respond, but he eventually conceded.
“What are you going to do now, Zuko?” Iroh asked.

“I don’t know,” the young man admitted with a growl, “I can’t even trust my own advisors.”

“You should have all the advisors’ houses searched without alerting anyone else,” Katara suggested, “Maybe we can find something.”

“That’s a good idea,” Zuko responded with a pensive frown before he turned to Jee. “Please look into that, Admiral Jee,” he commanded.

“Yes, my lord,” Jee immediately replied, “I will lead the search.”

Zuko gave a nod, satisfied. He then returned his attention to his worried mother.

“Are there any antidotes for poisoning?” he asked her.

“Yes,” Ursa said, “I know how to make a few.”

“Since we don’t know which poison they used, could you make a few different ones?” he asked, “Just in case.”

“Do you think someone else would attempt to…poison you?” Katara asked worriedly and she bit her lip in anxiety.

“If not me, then anybody close to me,” Zuko responded darkly before he more softly added as he gazed down at her, “I won’t allow anyone to harm my family.”

Katara gave him a small smile, even though she was not as concerned for herself as she was for him.

“We should go to dinner,” Ursa reminded them, “I am sure Katara’s family is anxious to know what happened.”
The four of them left the throne room in silence. Jee bowed to them before he parted ways in order to organize the search. Iroh and Ursa walked ahead of the young couple in order to give them some space since the moment Katara’s family had arrived, they had not allowed Zuko to be alone with her for more than a minute.

“Katara,” Zuko called her name softly.

When she looked up at him, he continued in the same quiet tone.

“Things are getting complicated,” he said, “Are…are you sure you still want to marry me? I don’t want you to get hurt…or worse.”

“Of course I still want to marry you, Zuko!” Katara exclaimed in the same soft tone as she frowned at him, “I already told you I’m not going to leave you to deal with this alone. I will try my best to keep you safe.”

“That’s supposed to be my line,” Zuko said with a small chuckle.

He let out a mental sigh of relief at the thought that she would not leave him.

Katara smiled at him.

“Then we’ll protect each other,” she replied.

His eyes warmed as he continued to stare at her.

“Always,” he promised.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Admiral Jee stood perfectly straight in the middle of the dead Advisor Kang’s study as some of his soldiers went about rummaging and searching the large house. All of the servants of the town house huddled together in confusion as they watched their dead master’s house being ransacked. Papers, scrolls, and books littered the polished floors, furniture was overturned, and the once neat bedrooms
were a mess.

Jee watched it all silently as he waited to hear of anything important. He had informed the Fire Lord that he would have his men search every single advisor’s house at the same time so none of them could be alerted as to what was happening, and thus, have a chance to hide anything. Jee had decided to go to Advisor Kang’s house himself in order to find any more clues about a possible plot against his lord.

The admiral narrowed his eyes as he grasped his hands behind his back. If they did find anything that could possibly mean a threat to the Fire Lord, he was determined to stop it at all cause. Fire Lord Zuko was a great and honorable lord. Granted, Jee had disliked him in the beginning of his exile before General Iroh had told them the reason why the young prince acted the way he did. Zuko treated his loyal subjects well and he had even promoted Jee to admiral. Zuko gave him his trust by appointing him to look after duties that should fall to someone else, something the older man would forever be grateful for. And Jee had vowed that he would serve and protect him with his life.

But there was another reason why Jee was determined to destroy any plot set against his lord, and that was Lady Ursa. If anything happened to her son, the gentle and kind woman would be devastated and she would suffer more than she had during her banishment. Jee could not allow Lady Ursa to suffer ever again and he would do anything in his power so it will not be so. She deserved to be happy after all the harm her former husband had caused her with his ambitions to become Fire Lord.

The admiral ground his teeth and clenched his hands into fist at his sides at the thought of the previous Fire Lord. Jee would never forgive Ozai for causing such a wonderful woman as Lady Ursa so much pain. If Lady Ursa were married to him, he would treat her like the princess she was and—

No. He could not think such things. Lady Ursa was the mother of his lord, the young man Jee admired and vowed to honor and protect. She was only his charge that was assigned to him to guard. She was royalty and he was a simple admiral. It would never work out. She would never see him as more than just her personal guard. Fire Lord Zuko would never allow him to marry his mother.

Jee’s head kept repeating this to himself and he knew it was right.

Yet, it seemed his heart refused to listen to him as it would beat wildly in his chest whenever he was near her, whenever he heard her soft voice and her musical laughter, whenever she would give him one of her gentle and beautiful smiles.
Stop, he growled at himself.

He needed to get rid of such thoughts. He was no teenage boy whose hormonal body heated at a single glance from a pretty girl for Agni’s sake! And Lady Ursa was no girl. She was royalty, a mother, a woman to be respected and protected.

And that was all he was going to do. Respect and protect her as her guardian.

“Admiral Jee,” Shen’s voice brought him out of his thoughts.

Jee blinked as he suddenly noticed Shen and Kuo standing in front of him before he composed himself as he shoved his thoughts away. Now was not the time for such things. He had a duty to uphold.

“Did you find something?” he asked the older of the Fire Lord’s personal guards.

Shen gave a firm nod as he indicated to a chest he and Kuo had carried and lowered before the admiral. It was a rusty metal chest wrapped in heavy chains and closed tightly with a large lock.

“We found this in the cellar hidden beneath many other boxes,” Kuo spoke up as he gave a curious kick to the heavy trunk, “We thought it could be important since it’s sealed so tightly.”

“We should open it before showing it to Fire Lord Zuko,” Jee replied as he eyed the chest with a frown, “It could be nothing and I don’t want to waste his time.”

Both guards nodded. The admiral called for another guard to bring something sharp to break the lock. He did not want to risk setting the chest on fire if he used his firebending in case there was something important inside. After a few unsuccessful tries, the lock finally broke under the heavy blows and the thick chains fell to the floor with a loud ‘clang’.

Looking at the other two guards surrounding the box, Jee lifted the lid and peered inside. He frowned at the contents he found before he lifted one thin scroll. As he unfurled it and started to read, his eyes widened in shock.
“What is it?” Shen asked.

Jee did not reply as he furled the scroll up and placed it back inside the chest before closing the lid.

“Fire Lord Zuko has to see this,” was his grim reply.
Katara glanced around Zuko’s study as she sat on the chair across from his large desk. She again took in the large bookcase that lined the entire eastern wall, scanning all the scrolls and books that were neatly stacked on the shelves. Her eyes shifted to the amazing map that depicted the entire Fire Nation and its colonies on the opposite wall before she glanced back to where Zuko sat before her. She wanted to jump over the large desk and plant a passionate kiss on his lips. It had been so long since they had shared a moment alone together, at least it felt like it. Zuko did sneak into her room last night, she mused with a dazed grin. However, she refrained from doing so since they were not the only ones in the room.

Sitting next to her was Sokka, deep in conversation with Zuko about something that she had stopped listening to a while ago. Zuko had asked her to meet him in his study after lunch in order to go over her lessons with him as an excuse so they could spend some time together. But just as soon as she had arrived and closed the door so she could jump into Zuko’s arms, Sokka barged into the room. As he strode in, he had exclaimed that he had missed his firebending friend and wanted to catch up. Katara had fiercely scowled at her brother and Zuko had frowned deeply. They both knew that Sokka had said that as an excuse for him to be there so they wouldn’t be alone.

It was the same thing with her other family members. Whenever it seemed she could have a moment alone with Zuko, her father, Gran-Gran and Pakku, or her brother would pop out of nowhere with a lame excuse. Did they seriously think Zuko was going to seduce her and she was going to allow herself to be seduced by him while they were there? La, did they have no faith in them? They had never acted that way when she had been dating Aang for four years. It was as if they thought Aang was too innocent to do anything inappropriate to her or maybe it was because he was a monk that they trusted him more. On the other hand, they treated Zuko as if he was a randy bull-horse that could not control his sexual urges.

*If only they knew,* she thought with a mental giggle, even as her cheeks flushed red.

Katara glanced at her brother with a frown and then she glanced at Zuko with a scowl as they continued talking. Zuko had seemed so urgent about being alone with her, but now he was ignoring her for her brother! But then again, she could not always demand his attention and it had been a while since Sokka and Zuko had seen each other. She couldn’t begrudge them that. And it was nice to know that her brother and her future husband got along well.

With a soft sigh, Katara leaned back in her seat as she wondered if she should go look for Suki so they could have a nice girl talk or a small sparring match. Just as she was going to interrupt both men, a knock at the large door made them pause.

“Enter,” Zuko called out coolly.
The door opened and Iroh walked in with a smile on his face.

“Ah, Nephew, I see you have visitors,” the retired general commented, “I suppose I’ll come back later.”

“Don’t worry about it, Iroh,” Sokka spoke up as he stood up, “I was just about to leave to find Suki and my daughters.”

*Oh, now he leaves,* Katara thought as she glowered at her brother when he turned to look at her.

He either did not notice or chose to ignore it as he gave her a big grin before he moved toward the door and left. Iroh looked after the young warrior before he turned toward the silent couple with an amused twinkle in his golden eyes.

“It seems the role of chaperon as fallen onto me now,” Iroh mused with a chuckle.

Zuko frowned at his uncle before he turned to Katara, who had a small pout on her lips and her arms crossed beneath her breasts. He knew he was the one who had asked her to meet with him, he did not mean to ignore her, but Sokka had distracted him. Sokka was the only person he could term as something of a best friend and it had been nice to have a conversion with a male his age. But still, he did not want Katara to think he was ignoring her. He cleared his throat, and when Katara turned to look at him, he gave her an apologetic look. She sighed before she gave him a small smile to show she was not angry.

Still chuckling, Iroh moved to sit beside Katara. Before any of them could say something, another knock was heard at the door. Zuko let out a sigh before he again called out for whoever was outside to enter. He wouldn’t be surprised if it was Katara’s father.

They watched as the door opened and Jee stepped inside with a serious expression on his face before he bowed as he neared the desk.

“My lord, I have come to report to you that we have searched all of the advisors’ houses,” the admiral informed him.
Zuko straightened in his chair as anticipation curled in his stomach. Would they finally find answers? It had been a day since Kuro had been arrested after confessing that he had poisoned the messenger at Advisor Kang’s command and Zuko was still amazed that they had solved one problem.

“Did you find anything?” Zuko asked expectantly.

“We found a heavily chained chest hidden in a cellar,” Jee stated with a nod.

“Let me see it,” the Fire Lord commanded coolly.

Jee walked to the door and called for Shen and Kuo. They watched as the two guards walked into the room, carrying a metal chest between them, before Jee closed the door immediately behind them. Kuo and Shen settled the heavy box on the floor before they straightened and stepped away.

“You will find many interesting things within the chest, my lord,” Jee spoke up again.

Zuko stood up from his chair and quickly made his way to the mysterious chest. He noticed briefly that the lock had been broken before he lifted the lid and peered inside. He saw numerous small bags that he knew contained coins, along with a disarray of countless papers and scrolls. He picked up one of the scrolls and read it before his eyes widened in disbelief. He picked up another of the missives and read briefly through it before a dark expression settled on his features.

“What is it, Zuko?” Katara asked worriedly.

“Many of these letters are from Jianguo,” he said with a growl.

Katara gasped. Zuko scanned through another letter that seemed to be the most recent one and he narrowed his eyes.

“Jianguo writes in this one that they are laying low until further instructions, although he doesn’t address any of the letters to a particular person,” he said before he turned to Jee, “Where did you find this chest?”

“In Advisor Kang’s town house,” Jee told him.
Zuko’s eyes again widened before he composed himself. So Kuro had been saying the truth after all. Zuko had harbored a small doubt about his confession.

“Did you find anything in Advisor Wei’s house?” he asked.

“We searched Advisor Wei’s as well as the other advisors’ houses thoroughly, but we found nothing that could convict them,” Jee responded.

Zuko frowned as he looked down at the chest filled with money and paper. Had he been wrong about Wei all this time? It seemed that while he was accusing another, the real traitor had been going about unnoticed. Until now, that is.

“Thank you, Admiral Jee,” the Fire Lord said before he thanked his personal guards who bowed. “Shen, inform the advisors to meet me in the throne room tomorrow for further questioning of Physician Toshiro’s assistant.”

“Yes, my lord,” the dark gray-eyed guard said.

“You are dismissed,” the young lord told them as he returned his attention to the letters in his hands.

Katara frowned as Jee bowed along with the two guards before they turned to the door and left after closing it softly behind them.

“Can you help me read through all of these?” Zuko asked as he gathered a pile of papers. “I want to see if we can find anything else that is important.”

The waterbender and the retired general stood up and walked toward the metal chest. They gathered more of the papers before walking back to Zuko’s desk and placing them on the smooth surface. All three sat on the chairs and began to go through the letters. They spent the next few hours sorting through the pile in silence until Iroh finally broke it once they finished.

“I never would have guessed the quiet and seemingly insignificant Advisor Kang was behind all of this,” the old firebender said with a frown.
“Looks can be deceiving,” Katara stated.

“That is very true, my dear,” Iroh agreed with a nod.

Zuko was silent as he stared at all of the letters that Jianguo had written. If the chest had not been found in Kang’s home, they would not have known to whom he was sending the letters to, since Jianguo did not address the letters to anyone. It seemed that Kang was the one who had been supporting and giving information about the Fire Lord to the rebels. Zuko never would have imagined Kang would be behind all of this. He seemed so loyal. Why would the former advisor want to get rid of him? Was he also the one who sent that cruel letter to Ursa to stop her from meeting her son when he was crowned Fire Lord four years ago?

In the letters, Jianguo reported everything they did such as the attacks on the villages, how they had captured the Fire Lord and his waterbender, and how Jianguo had found his men slaughtered and their captives missing. Zuko crushed that particular missive in his hand. It made his blood boil at its contents and he did not want Katara to see it. Jianguo had ranted angrily throughout the letter about the deaths of his comrades and how he would make Zuko pay by taking his waterbender away from him and using her as his sex slave.

Over my dead body would I let him touch Katara, Zuko vowed vehemently.

“It seems Advisor Kang was really wealthy if he agreed with Jianguo’s demands in exchange for his help in freeing Ozai,” the blue-eyed woman commented, snapping Zuko out of his murderous thoughts. She held out a short message with the demand for some money.

“Kang had no family to worry about,” Zuko replied bluntly before he growled out, “If only Jianguo would have written where he and the rebels hid, I could’ve sent men to capture them. But Jianguo was cautious enough to never reveal any of their locations to give their positions away.”

“Well, now that their main conspirator and informant is dead, Jianguo and the rebels have no one to guide them,” Iroh spoke up.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean they will stop causing me trouble,” the golden-eyed lord replied with a growl. “I need to send more men in search of them.”

“Do not worry, Nephew,” Iroh began before he continued quickly when Zuko turned an incredulous
glare on him, “I have asked the Order of the White Lotus for aid in finding the rebels.”

“What? Why haven’t you told me this before?” Zuko demanded with a frown.

“Because they haven’t had any luck either,” the retired general responded calmly before he added, “But with your men and the members of the Order, I am sure they will be found soon.”

“I hope you’re right, Uncle,” Zuko muttered.

Leaning back in his chair, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed irritably.

“I’m going to have to apologize to Wei for accusing him of treachery when it had been Kang all along,” the young lord grumbled, “But I had been so sure Wei was the traitor.”

“Maybe that’s why Kang was so confident,” Katara spoke up, “He knew you would immediately suspect Wei since everybody knows both of you don’t like each other.”

Zuko was silent for a moment as he thought over what she said before he nodded.

“That makes sense.”

They speculated a moment longer before they decided to take a much needed rest.

“I will have to show this to the advisors tomorrow,” Zuko said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Well, for now all we can do is hope your men find the rebels,” Iroh replied as he stood up, “I am going to look for Chao and ask him if he wants to share some tea.”

He walked to the door before he paused and turned to look at the young couple with another twinkle in his eyes and a grin on his lips.
“Promise me both of you will behave,” he told them amusedly.

Katara blushed lightly and Zuko glowered at his uncle.

“Just go drink your tea,” the young firebender growled out.

Iroh chuckled as he opened the door and stepped out, giving them a wink before closing the door behind him.

Zuko stood up from his chair and turned toward the large window behind him with a deep sigh. Katara was silent as she watched him with worried eyes.

“I can’t believe the traitor was so close to me without me knowing it.” Zuko growled out as he clenched his hands at his sides, “If it weren’t because of the Kuro’s objection to poisoning me, who knows if Kang would’ve succeeded in killing me.”

Katara sprang from her seat and rushed to him, encircling her arms around him from behind and placing her cheek against his broad back.

“Luckily nothing happened to you,” she said softly before she added in a shaky voice, “I wouldn’t bear it if you were harmed…or k-killed.”

Zuko turned around in her embrace to look at her and his heart clenched at the sight of her wide, worried eyes and the anxious frown on her lovely features. He reached up to touch her cheek before he brought her close to his chest, his arms tight around her.

“It scares me more to think that Kang could’ve targeted you too,” he told her quietly as his hold tightened.

“I guess all that matters is that the traitor’s dead and we’re all fine,” the waterbender replied softly as she grasped the back of his clothes tightly with her fingers.

“You’re right,” he agreed with a nod. “I’m glad that the traitor mystery has been solved. I just hope it’s the last of our troubles.”
He pulled away slightly and Katara looked up to see him frown down at her as he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“I’m sorry all of this has set us back from planning our wedding.”

“Why are you apologizing? It’s not your fault,” Katara told him softly as she pressed a finger on his brow in order to smooth his frown. “This is important and it couldn’t be ignored.”

Zuko caught her hand and gazed down upon the golden ring he had given her before he looked up to smile at her. He knew he had made the right choice in choosing Katara as his wife for she was strong and did not allow what was happening to scare her away. She was resolute in helping him, in keeping him safe and in loving him. What more could he ask for?

Cupping a hand behind her head, Zuko leaned down to place a kiss on her lips. Katara wrapped her arms around his neck and he lifted her to him in order to deepen the kiss. He felt Katara lick the seam of his lips, and with a groan, he opened his mouth to allow her access to his mouth. She slipped her tongue inside and explored his mouth slowly, occasionally touching his tongue briefly before pulling away, teasing him. He smiled against her moist mouth as he briefly mused on how she had changed from shy and hesitant to confident and passionate.

He tangled his fingers in her soft hair and pulled her head back. Zuko deepened the kiss and took over her mouth, as he caught her elusive tongue and entwined it, caressed it, with his. Katara moaned and pressed herself closer to him. It had been a while since they had been able to do this outside of Katara’s room late at night.

At the thought, Zuko pulled away from her delicious mouth with a groan and pressed his forehead against hers, both panting against each other.

“I think we should stop before someone from your family barges in,” he said dryly.

Katara giggled as she moved her arms away from his neck, taking a step back and smoothing her hair and clothes. Just as she opened her mouth to retort, there was a knock at the door. They glanced at each other before Zuko called out a tired ‘enter’. The door opened and they watched as Hakoda stepped in.

“Ah, Katara, there you are. I was wandering if you wanted to spend some time with your father,”
Hakoda said innocently even though he was eyeing them suspiciously.

Katara glanced at Zuko and saw that he had a raised eyebrow aimed at her as if to say, ‘Told you so’.

“I guess I’ll see you later,” she said as she smiled sheepishly at him.

The next morning found Zuko in the throne room, sitting behind the wall of fire, silently observing his advisors, who squirmed and frowned as the minutes dragged on without their lord having said a single word since they had arrived. They wanted to demand to know why the Fire Lord had his guards search their homes without their notice, but they decided to remain silent and see what was going to occur.

“I know all of you are wondering why I had your houses searched,” Zuko finally spoke in a cool tone and caused a few of the men to jump.

When the men nodded and murmured that they were, Zuko continued.

“Advisor Kang was supposed to be a loyal advisor that I could trust, but I found out that he had planned on killing me,” the young lord began in the same impassive manner, “I could not risk the same betrayal happening again, so I had your homes searched in order to see who else was plotting against me.”

“I would never betray you, my lord!” one of the younger advisors exclaimed.

The rest of the men immediately began to assure him that they would never plot against him while at the same time they stated how honored they were to serve such a great Fire Lord.

Zuko did not respond or give any indication that he was moved by any of their words as they pledged their allegiance to him. Just because no evidence was found to condemn any of them did not necessarily mean that Zuko believed all of them were loyal to him. Perhaps they were, but he preferred to be wary of them all.

“Nothing suspicious was found in any of your homes,” the golden-eyed lord interrupted the men. “But evidence of his treachery was found in Advisor Kang’s house,” he continued as he indicated the metal box that rested below the dais with a nod of his head.
“The chest contains many letters from Jianguo, the leader of the rebels,” Zuko continued as his expression turned dark. “Here is the evidence that indicates Kang was the traitor that was working with the rebels. It seems he was the one who came up with the idea of the ‘infested’ colony, giving them information about me that helped them capture Lady Katara and me.”

“What?” a few of them exclaimed in shock.

“I never would have imagined Advisor Kang being behind the plot of releasing Ozai,” Chao commented with wide eyes.

“He seemed so unsuspecting,” Enlai, another of the advisors, remarked.

“Well, now he’s dead for planning to assassinate the Young One,” Wei commented with a shrug.

Zuko stopped himself from growling indignantly at the name, and instead, he looked emotionlessly at Wei sitting unaffectedly with the rest of the men. He was still not convinced that Wei was completely innocent, but with all the evidence it was obvious that the true culprit was Kang. Was he perhaps just letting his loathing for the old advisor rule his judgment? Either way, he knew he needed to apologize to Wei publicly.

“Advisor Wei,” the young lord spoke up stoically.

When the old man turned to raise an expectant eyebrow at him, Zuko continued.

“Now that we are aware who the true traitor is, it seems I owe you an apology,” Zuko began before he forced himself to say the words, “I…apologize for accusing you falsely of plotting against me.”

“I knew that you would have eventually realized you were wrong,” Wei responded with a smirk as he gave an uncaring shrug.

Zuko clenched his teeth at the triumphant look on Wei’s face and his eyes narrowed into a glare the longer he continued glowering at the smug, old advisor. If it wasn’t because he knew it was the right thing to do, Zuko would have never apologized to the irritating man. The sound of Iroh clearing his throat made Zuko order himself to calm down.
He acknowledged Wei’s words with a stiff nod before he focused his attention on the other men, who had been silent during the exchange. They were aware that it had been difficult for their lord to admit he had been wrong and to apologize for it to the one advisor they knew he did not get along with. And that was putting it nicely.

They froze when the young Fire Lord suddenly looked at them with piercing, golden eyes and a dark expression on his face that seemed even more intimidating due to the shadows the wall of fire created before him.

“I want to make one thing clear,” Zuko began in a dark and chilling tone, “If I find out that anyone else dares to plot against me, I will be unmerciful to the traitor. I will make sure he suffers in the worst possible way for betraying me.”

The old advisors trembled at his promising words and they immediately rushed to say that they understood, that they would never betray him, and that he did not need to worry.

Satisfied at their response, Zuko gave them a nod before his face once again returned to its stoic expression. He almost smirked at their obvious relief.

“Now that the issue with the traitor is settled, we need to decide what punishment to deal onto Physician Toshiro’s former assistant,” the young lord told them. “Even though Kuro refused to kill me, he still poisoned the messenger, whom Kang feared would have revealed that he was behind the idea of the ‘diseased’ colony to lure Lady Katara and me out.”

They spent a few hours trying to decide what punishment the former assistant deserved, but they would all disagree with each other over one thing or another. Zuko felt as a headache began to form and he was losing his patience with all the arguments going on. Half of the advisors believed Kuro should be given a lenient punishment since he refused to kill the Fire Lord, while the other half argued that the assistant should be given a more severe punishment for going along with half of Kang’s plot.

“Fools,” Wei’s mocking voice made the other men pause in their arguments and turn to glare at him. “The obvious punishment is death for treason.”

The men gasped.
“But he refused to poison Fire Lord Zuko,” one of the men argued.

“He committed treason by not revealing the plot sooner and letting us know that Kang had been behind it,” Wei responded with a sneer. “Because of his silence, I was accused of treachery while the real traitor continued with his life, unperturbed.”

“So you’re taking revenge upon him?” Chao asked with a frown.

Wei gave another shrug that caused his large belly to shake.

“He kept important information secret, and would have continued to do so if he had not been caught,” the rotund advisor continued as he narrowed his eyes on Chao. “His execution will be an example to anyone who dares to take place in a plot against the Fire Lord and the Fire Nation.”

Zuko eyed Wei warily just as the other men murmured to themselves and debated whether or not to agree with him. However, before any of them could voice their opinion, the large double doors were thrown open and the men turned toward the entrance with startled exclamations. Zuko’s golden eyes narrowed in irritation at the rude interruption, but he settled down with a frown when he noticed the captain of the prison guards marching quickly toward the dais where he stopped with one knee and one fist to the ground.

“My lord,” the captain of the prison guards breathed in anxiety as he tried to catch his breath.

“What is it?” Zuko asked in alarm as he sat stiffly on his throne.

Did Ozai escape?

“Physician Toshiro’s former assistant was found dead this morning,” the man informed him as he kept his head bowed in respect.

“What?” Zuko exclaimed with a growl just as the other men gasped in shock. “How did he die? Did you find his murderer?”

“It seems he committed suicide sometime in the middle of the night, my lord,” the guard continued in
a grave tone.

“Suicide?” Zuko repeated in disbelief. “How was he able to accomplish it?”

“It appears that he broke the clay cup he had been given to drink water with the night before and used a sharp edge to…slit his wrists,” the man continued, his frown deepening, causing hard lines to surface on his forehead. “He bled to death.”

The old advisors gasped and began to talk rapidly amongst each other at the unexpected news.

“Silence!” the young Fire Lord growled out and the men immediately quieted down.

“How did you not notice until this morning that he was dead?” Zuko asked the captain with a suspicious frown.

“When one of my guards passed his door to check on him during the night, he thought the prisoner was sleeping since he was lying down on the cot and completely covered with a blanket,” the graying-haired guard replied immediately. “The guard that brought him breakfast noticed something was wrong when the prisoner did not respond to him. And when he entered the room to check up on him, he saw one of the prisoner’s hands hanging from the cot…his wrist sliced open.”

Zuko sat back with a frown and suppressed the tired sigh that wanted to escape him.

“But why would he kill himself?” Iroh finally spoke up after remaining quiet during the entire meeting.

The captain shifted his eyes toward the old prince before he again turned his attention to his lord.

“A few hours after being locked up in his cell, the prisoner kept screaming that he had saved the Fire Lord’s life and did not deserve a traitor’s death before he finally quieted down.”

“A traitor’s death?” Zuko repeated with a deep frown. “He was being held in the prison tower until he was brought to me for further questioning. Nobody told him he was going to suffer a traitor’s death. Why would he think that?”
The captain glanced up with an apologetic look.

“I do not know the answer for that, my lord.”

Zuko waved his hand at him to show he did not expect him to answer as he again got lost in his thoughts. He closed his eyes and sighed heavily as the advisors began to speculate amongst themselves in hushed tones.

“Besides screaming that he did not deserve a traitor’s death,” the captain continued slowly as if hesitant to interrupt the Fire Lord’s thoughts, “the prisoner also repeated that he needed to speak to you about something important that would surely sway your mind about executing him.”

“Did he say what that was?” Zuko asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“No, my lord,” the man replied.

*Then why would he kill himself, if he knew of something that would save him?* Zuko thought to himself as his brow furrowed pensively.

If only Kuro had waited to be interrogated, Zuko would have let him go after a small punishment since the former assistant had saved his life, after all. Even if he had kept Kang’s plot a secret. His death had been in vain and unnecessary.

“Take care of the body, captain,” Zuko finally spoke up.

“Yes, my lord,” the man replied as he continued to kneel before the Fire Lord.

The next few hours, Zuko ordered that the former assistant’s family be informed of what had occurred before he let his advisors know that he would later decide what to do with Kang’s properties and possessions as well as the recovery of his body from where it was buried in the woods. Finally the meeting was concluded, and Zuko and Iroh exited the room in order to have dinner with Ursa, Katara, and her family.
Zuko tuned out his uncle’s words about how strange were the ways of life as he let his mind wander to other things.

He still could not believe that he had found out who the traitor was that had been causing him so much trouble, and although Kuro’s death was unfortunate, there was nothing Zuko could do about it except wonder if he could have gotten more information out of the former assistant. All he needed to do now was find the rebels and put a stop to their terror and their plan of releasing Ozai in order for everything to be peaceful again. Now he did not need to worry about someone targeting Katara as well when they got married.

Was it really that easy?

He could only hope.

Katara watched with curious blue eyes as the fire sages murmured amongst themselves about the right day for the royal wedding to be held. She was kneeling silently beside Zuko as the men continued with their task.

After the last details about Kang and Kuro were finally settled and everything had returned to normal, Zuko had finally taken her to meet with the fire sages. He had apologized again that such matters were causing their wedding planning to be pushed aside, but she again had reassured him that she understood and did not hold it against him.

As they had neared the Fire Temple, she had been worried that the fire sages would be the ones to finally protest the idea of Zuko marrying a Water Tribe woman. But just like Zuko’s advisors and courtiers, the fire sages had reluctantly accepted his choice and immediately began to search for the best day for their wedding. She had been slightly shocked since she had prepared herself for their objections, but she decided not to dwell on that too long, and instead, she allowed herself to be happy in knowing that they had not come across great obstacles. She was so overjoyed at the thought that she really was going to marry Zuko.

The waterbender was brought out of her thoughts when she felt Zuko’s fingers briefly caress her thigh before pulling away. Glancing furtively at him, she saw that he was also looking at her inconspicuously, his amber eyes warm and intense, and she could practically hear his thoughts saying that soon he would make her his. She felt herself blush before she returned her attention to the old fire sages, but not before throwing him a small, happy smile.

Some of the fire sages were looking studiously through old scrolls. Others were looking at the night sky and the positions of the stars and planets through long instruments she had seen a couple of times
during her travels that she now knew were called telescopes. Zuko’s birthday and hers were also taken into consideration in order to find a most auspicious day for their wedding. In her tribe, a couple decided upon what day they wanted to marry by the season they favored the most. When she was a little girl she had always imagined her wedding being during the winter since it was her favorite season, but that was before she met Zuko, who as Fire Lord, had to follow his own country’s traditions.

A few minutes passed, and Katara shifted slightly on her cushion since one of her legs was getting cramped from sitting in the same positions for so long. In order to distract herself, Katara looked around the grand temple curiously, but she did not get the chance of seeing much since one of the fire sages finally stepped away from the others and slowly approached her and Zuko.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” the thin, old man that Zuko had introduced her as the Great Fire Sage began, “We have finally found the best date for your wedding to the Lady Katara.”

Zuko gave him a regal nod as he asked, “When?”

“The end of spring, my lord,” the Great Fire Sage informed them, “Exactly two months from now.”

A small frown appeared on Zuko’s impassive features. Two months? It was still a long time for him to wait to marry Katara, but he knew he had no choice but to accept what the fire sages had concluded.

“Thank you,” he finally spoke up before he added in a cool tone, “As the Great Fire Sage, you will lead the ceremony along with the main spiritual leader of my betrothed’s tribe.”

“As you wish, my lord,” the old man replied with a gleeful smile. It was a great honor to participate in the Fire Lord’s wedding.

After a few more details were discussed, Zuko and Katara left the great temple and climbed inside the carriage that would take them back to the Fire Nation Palace.

As soon as the door was closed behind them and the carriage was moving, Zuko pulled her onto his lap and kissed her passionately just like he had done when they had left the palace. Katara moaned into his mouth as their tongues danced around each other’s and Zuko ran a hand up her side. Since no one from her family was near, they had taken advantage and smothered each other with affection and longing kisses. But when Zuko again tried to divest her of her clothes, she playfully smacked his
hand away like she had done before and climbed off his lap with a giggle.

“I had to try again,” he remarked with a smirk as he tried to regain his composure.

Katara rolled her eyes at him as she straightened her clothes and smoothed down her hair even as her cheeks continued to flush.

“Two more months will give me more time to prepare for the wedding,” she said happily.

“Two months is two months too long for me to wait to marry you,” Zuko grumbled as he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest with a frown.

Katara giggled at him and she was almost tempted to tease him and ask if the mighty Fire Lord was pouting, but she decided not to say anything since she herself was anxious for the wedding day to finally arrive.

“Shouldn’t you be celebrating your last days as a bachelor?” she asked with a teasing smile.

Zuko snorted as he uncrossed his arms to give her a dry look.

“What’s there to celebrate?” he asked dryly. “It’s not as if I enjoyed my bachelorhood.”

A mischievous smirk curled his lips as he leaned toward her, reaching out a hand to trail the back of his fingers on her stomach, up between her breasts, across her collarbone, and then down her side. His smirk widened when she shivered and bit her lip at his touch.

“Besides, I am sure to celebrate much more pleasantly on our wedding night,” he told her in a hushed, husky tone.

He suppressed a grin when Katara’s cheeks immediately reddened, and he leaned down to nuzzle her flushed flesh before kissing her sweet lips. She responded to him immediately, opening her mouth eagerly, and pressing herself closer to him. Zuko groaned against her mouth when she began to rub her breasts against his chest as she breathlessly murmured his name. He could feel his hard shaft pressing against his trousers and he knew it would not go away if Katara did not do something
to relieve his tension.

“Katara, if you don’t let me touch you and you don’t touch me, I’m going to go insane,” he rasped against her eager mouth.

Panting softly, Katara pulled back slightly, her heart pounding hard in her chest, her arousal seeping into her wrappings, and she smiled at the strained and intense expression on her soon-to-be husband’s face. She knew having to hold back because of her family’s presence was greatly affecting him—heck, it was affecting her too—and she did not want to keep denying them when they had this opportunity. Leaning toward him again, she sweetly kissed his lips as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Then what are you waiting for?” she asked throatily.

Zuko’s eyes widened a little at her quick acceptance, but he did not hesitate for fear that she would change her mind. With a low, husky growl, he pulled Katara onto his lap until she was straddling his hips, her long dress rising to her thighs. They both groaned when his hard length pressed against her aching warmth. Grasping her ass gently with both his hands, Zuko began to rock her against him, following the rhythm of the swaying carriage. It wouldn’t do to have the guards knowing what they were up to.

“Oh, Zuko,” Katara moaned softly as she dug her nails into his shoulders. “Mmm, that feels so good.”

The firebender ground her against his cock and he groaned quietly as pleasure skittered up his spine. He removed a hand from one of her ass cheeks and he reached up to firmly grasp her breast. Katara threw her head back with a gasp and her eyes fluttered closed when her core clenched at the pleasure. Suddenly, she felt Zuko wrap his arms around her before he carefully brought them down upon the floor of the carriage. She spread her legs wider so he could fit his hips perfectly between them and smiled when he rasped her name. She arched her back when he began to grind his hardness against her throbbing core, hitting that sensitive nub above her drenched entrance, and she wrapped her legs around his waist to pull him closer. She could feel another surge of wetness seep from her pussy and pleasure coursed throughout her body. She missed being this close to Zuko.

“Katara,” the young Fire Lord growled lowly in pleasure when she began to rock herself against him. “Damn, so good.”

He swooped down and again captured her lips in a soft and passionate kiss just as he grabbed her breast. He kneaded the soft mound as his tongue tangled with hers while he rubbed his erection
tight and roughly against her center. A few moments later, he felt her body begin to thrash as she let out a low whimper and he mentally smiled in satisfaction that he already brought her so close to the edge. He could feel himself reaching that glorious end as well and he began to grind harder against her. Groaning, he firmly pinched her nipple through her clothes just as he pressed himself tightly against the damp heat between her luscious legs. He swallowed her loud moan just as her body arched against him and her limbs tightened around him. A second later, he was softly groaning his release as he slowly rocked against her, vaguely paying attention to the sensation of his hot seed coating the inside of his trousers. Once spent, he carefully slumped over her with a quiet moan of her name.

Katara sighed softly in satisfaction as she caressed Zuko’s hair, her body still giving little spasms of pleasure. If she had not been feeling so wonderful, she would have flushed at the sensation of her arousal drenching her undergarments. Her heart warmed at the comforting feeling of having Zuko’s larger body pressed close to hers and the warm sensation of his panting breath against the skin of her neck. She was no longer surprised how well Zuko could make her body follow his erotic demands. It also pleased her that she could do the same thing to his body. There was no denying their bodies and pleasures were truly compatible. It only made her wonder how much more incredible it would be when they finally made love in the true sense of the word.

Once coherent thought returned, Zuko realized Katara might be feeling uncomfortable lying on the hard floor of the carriage. Wrapping his arms around her, he rose to his knees and carefully sat back on the cushioned bench. He placed his waterbender sideways on his lap and kissed her temple before he tucked her head under his chin.

Katara murmured softly as she snuggled close to his chest. Her body felt sluggish in her sated state. How could she deny him when he made her feel so good, so cherished?

“I can’t wait for these two months to be over,” Zuko murmured deeply as one of his hands slowly played with her long, wavy hair.

“Me too,” the waterbender replied softly as her fingers traced patterns on his covered chest.

She felt Zuko grasp the back of her head and gently nudge it back. Katara lifted her head to look at him. He leaned his head down and she eagerly lifted hers to meet his lips halfway. Their mouths touched in a languid, sensual kiss and they murmured softly against each other.

Their moment was interrupted when the carriage came to a stop and they heard their driver jump from his seat in order to open their door. The young couple quickly pulled away from each other as they scrambled to straighten themselves before they caught each other’s eye and laughed.
“Sokka and your father would have my head if they knew what we just did even after all their precautions,” Zuko said in a low tone, his eyes gleaming in amusement, as he smoothed down Katara’s hair.

“Good thing they won’t know,” Katara replied with a grin as she fixed his fire crown.

A few minutes later they were inside the palace. They made a quick stop at their respective rooms to quickly wash and change before they went in search of their family in order to give them the news that they finally had set the date for their wedding. Shen and Kuo followed silently behind the couple. Both guards smiled discreetly at each other since they could see that their lord was happy. They had never seen him look so content in all the years they had served him.

As they rounded a corner, they saw Physician Toshiro walking down the corridor with a short, young woman at his side. Katara noticed that the woman was really pretty with dark hair pulled up into a bun and skin as pale and blemish-free as most of the noblewomen. Although she was wearing the clothes of a servant, Katara could see that she carried herself in a different manner, more graceful and refined than normal maids. As soon as the physician spotted Zuko, he smiled widely and quickened his pace to meet him.

“Fire Lord Zuko,” he greeted with a small bow that the young woman mimicked although she kept her head down. “I was on my way to your study to see if you had finally come back.”

“We just arrived from the Fire Temple,” Zuko responded as he glanced at Katara with a gleam in his eye.

“Oh, I see. Congratulations,” Physician Toshiro told them sincerely before he gasped softly as if he had just remembered something.

“Oh! I just wanted to tell you that I found a new assistant,” he said as he indicated to the silent woman beside him. “This is Yin-Min. I wanted to present her to you for approval after what happened with…my other assistant.”

He frowned deeply and Zuko saw the sadness that flashed in the old man’s eyes. Zuko had heard that Physician Toshiro had looked at Kuro as a son for the old physician only had daughters, and Zuko could only guess how greatly betrayed he felt.

When he noticed that Physician Toshiro was still waiting for him to approve of his choice, Zuko
finally looked at the young woman who had not said a single word. He was surprised to see that she was wearing the uniform all maids wore and he wondered why Physician Toshiro had chosen a servant for his assistant. As he looked her over, Zuko realized he had seen the young woman a couple of times cleaning the royal family wing and guest wing, but he had never paid much attention to her. He did not know her and he was wary of her becoming the new physician’s assistant.

“How is it that you could help Physician Toshiro?” he asked her calculatingly.

The young woman jumped when he addressed her and she nervously bowed her head.

“I was a top student in the medicinal arts when I used to attend the Fire Nation Academy for Girls, my lord,” she replied quietly.

Katara looked at the young woman in surprise. She wondered how a servant could have attended a prestigious academy meant only for the nobility. It seemed Zuko thought the same thing since he was frowning and looking at the woman suspiciously.

“Did you truly attend the academy?” he asked her doubtfully.

Yin-Min nodded as she glanced briefly at the tall Fire Lord before she again lowered her eyes.

“I did until my stepfather took me out of the academy seven years ago in order to become one of Ozai’s…concubines,” she said very quietly that they almost did not hear her.

Katara gasped softly as she watched the woman avert her eyes and clasp her hands tightly together as she ducked her head. Yin-Min did not look much older than herself, so Katara concluded with sympathy that she must have been very young when she became Ozai’s concubine.

Zuko cleared his throat uncomfortably as he glanced at his physician.

“She is very knowledgeable in the art of medicine, my lord,” Physician Toshiro told him with a firm nod.

Zuko again returned his attention to the quiet woman before him. She must be one of the few of
Ozai’s concubines that had decided to remain in the palace as servants when Zuko gave them the choice when he became Fire Lord.

“How will I know you would not betray me?” he asked her sternly.

Yin-Min’s head snapped up at his words and she looked at him with wide, yellowish eyes.

“I will never betray or hurt you, my lord,” she said steadfastly, her posture now strong as she tried to make her loyalty known. “Not after you rescued me and my friends from Ozai’s clutches and gave me a choice to remain in the palace as a servant instead of making me return home where I am unwanted and mistreated.”

Katara felt her heart go out to the young woman who seemed had suffered so much in her young life. She was timid and hurt, and Katara felt herself get angry at the thought that such a fragile girl had to be subjugated to Ozai’s lust just because her stepfather had wanted to rise in prestige among the Royal Court. Katara looked at Zuko, silently beseeching him to accept Physician Toshiro’s choice of assistant.

Zuko saw Katara almost pleading with him to give the woman a chance. With an inward sigh about how easily he caved when Katara looked at him in that way, Zuko turned to the physician and nodded. Shen and Kuo, who had seen the exchange, suppressed their amused smiles.

“Alright. If you believe she will be of help, then I approve of your choice, Physician Toshiro,” he said.

“Thank you,” the man said with a bow.

Zuko turned to the woman and he raised an eyebrow at her.

“As long as you do your duties, you will be his assistant,” he told her firmly.

Yin-Min smiled widely before she caught herself. She blushed faintly as she gave him a grateful bow.
“I promise I will do my duties well, my lord,” she vowed.

“I will teach her all she needs to know,” Physician Toshiro added.

Zuko did not reply as he gave a nod before he walked past them and headed down the corridor.

“Congratulations,” Katara told the woman sincerely.

Yin-Min looked up in surprise before she bowed her head.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Katara smiled at them before she walked quickly away to catch up to Zuko, who had stopped to wait for her and his two personal guards when he finally noticed that she had not been walking beside him. She smiled at him and he returned the smile briefly before he again made his way down the golden passageway.

As they reached the western wing, the small group came upon Jiao and a short-haired servant carrying empty trays as they made their way to the kitchens.

“Jiao, where is everybody?” Zuko asked as the two women bowed respectfully.

Jiao did not need to wonder who he was referring to since the only people he interacted with willingly were his family and Lady Katara’s.

“They are drinking tea in the sitting room, my lord,” she replied with a small smile that she also directed at Katara.

Since the Royal Palace Garden was being restored, the sitting room was the place that they all gathered in now.

Katara watched as Jiao discreetly glanced at Kuo, who caught her eye and smiled at her. The young servant blushed as she bowed to Zuko and Katara before she scurried away with the tray held tightly
in her hands while the other servant hurried after her.

“Shen, Kuo, you may take your break now,” the Fire Lord spoke up as he turned to glance at his guards.

“Thank you, my lord,” they replied in unison with a bow and a small smile directed at Katara before they turned and followed after Jiao and the other maid toward the kitchens.

Zuko again began to walk, heading toward the sitting room, and Katara quickened her pace to catch up to him.

“Is it just me or does Jiao always blush when Kuo’s near?” Katara whispered to Zuko.

“I’ve noticed too, but what of it?” Zuko responded with a shrug. “Kuo has that effect on many women.”

“Yeah, but Kuo acts differently around Jiao,” the waterbender retorted as she glanced behind her where the two people they were talking about had disappeared to.

“Don’t start seeing things that are not there, Katara,” he told her with a small frown.

“Well, it’d be nice if they ended up together,” she said with a wistful sigh.

“Well, don’t get your hopes up,” the firebender advised her.

“Why do you have to ruin my fun?” Katara asked with a huff.

Zuko chuckled quietly as he threw her an amused look, but he did not respond since they had finally arrived at the sitting room. His mother and Katara’s female relatives were drinking tea, eating pastries, and talking. Iroh and Pakku were playing Pai Sho while Hakoda and Sokka watched. They all stopped what they were doing and looked up when Katara and Zuko stepped into the room. Suddenly, the place was filled with commotion as they all asked at once what day did that fire sages decide on for the royal wedding.
Katara smiled happily as she moved away from Zuko’s side and glided swiftly to where the women were sitting.

“It’ll be in the end of spring!” she exclaimed joyfully.

“Exactly two months from now,” Zuko continued in a more subdued tone yet not lacking in happiness.

Everybody again began to talk excitedly at the news.

“We need to send the invitations as soon as possible!” Ursa exclaimed.

“We need to start on the wedding dress!” Kanna and Suki said at the same time.

“We need to begin planning the wedding celebration!” Iroh piped in cheerfully.

Zuko was unable to curb his sigh as the women and his uncle prattled on and on. He glanced to his side when Hakoda and Sokka approached him with the same tired expression on their faces.

“Can we go to your study to talk?” Hakoda spoke above the squeals and exclamations.

The young Fire Lord mentally thanked his future father-in-law for giving him an excuse to escape. Planning any kind of celebration was not his thing.

“Of course,” Zuko responded with a nod as he turned around and walked out of the room with the two Water Tribe men.

Once they finally arrived at his study, Zuko made his way to his large chair while the other two men sat across from him after Sokka had closed the door behind them.

“What do you want to talk about?” Zuko asked coolly, though inwardly he was feeling a bit anxious.
What if Hakoda was beginning to regret giving him his consent to marry Katara?

“I must return to the Southern Water Tribe,” Hakoda began as he leaned back in his seat, “I have been away from my duties for too long and we also need to prepare our end of the wedding preparations.”

Zuko inclined his head to show he understood, but before he could talk, Hakoda continued.

“Because it is tradition in our tribe, Katara has to come with us and live with her family until the day she gets married as a…precaution,” the chief said and cleared his throat as he glanced at his son.

Sokka had the decency to blush since he had gotten Suki pregnant before they got married.

Zuko frowned and he felt his heart sink at the thought of Katara leaving him even if it was just for two months. He did not want to let her out of his sight, he did not want to be without her presence, but he understood that it was the tradition in the tribes. He could not argue with them since they were already consenting to do many things the way they were supposed to go in his own country’s traditions.

“I understand,” Zuko finally replied even as his hands clenched.

“I plan on us leaving tomorrow,” Hakoda continued.

“Tomorrow?!” Zuko repeated in disbelief.

It was too soon! He wouldn’t have enough time with Katara before she left!

“It’ll give us more time to have everything finished for the wedding,” Sokka spoke up with a knowing smile.

Zuko gave a nod as a response.

“We should tell Katara now,” the blue-eyed chieftain said as he stood up.
Both Water Tribesmen paused when the Fire Lord cleared his throat and they turned to look at him.

“There’s a favor that I’d like to ask of you to do while you’re in the Southern Water Tribe,” he began.

“What kind of favor?” Sokka asked curiously.

After discussing what Zuko wanted of them, the three men left the study. Soon they were in the sitting room once again where the women and his uncle were still chattering about the day of the wedding and what needed to be done before it. Hakoda cleared his throat a few times until he finally gained their attention.

Katara looked at her father curiously before she glanced at Zuko, and even though he was not showing a single emotion on his face, she could see the discontent in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” she asked worriedly as she stood up from her spot between Lady Ursa and Gran-Gran.

“We need to return to the Southern Water Tribe before the wedding, we leave tomorrow,” Hakoda answered her question.

Katara gasped softly as her eyes again locked with Zuko’s. She did not want to leave him, but she knew she could not go against her father wishes, not until she was married and moved out of her father’s house. But she still did not want to leave Zuko, even if it was just for two months.

“We should start packing our things,” Kanna spoke up as she stood up from her spot with Pakku’s help.

Katara and Zuko did not look away from each other as the others started to make their way to the door, though Hakoda stayed at the entrance to watch Zuko warily. Katara could see the subtle message in Zuko’s golden eyes and her heart pounded. Before Zuko could say anything to Katara, Suki slowly approached them. Zuko looked away from Katara and glanced at the female warrior, who looked at them with a grin when Katara blushed deeply at being caught staring so intently at Zuko.
“Katara, do you want me to help you pack?” she asked with a smile to show she would pretend she saw nothing. “We can even have a sleepover before we have to leave tomorrow.”

Zuko and Katara frowned before they caught the knowing gleam in Suki’s eyes. Zuko suppressed a smirk and Katara blushed faintly. How did Suki know?

“Sure, thanks,” Katara responded as she smiled at her sister-in-law.

Suki grinned at them both before she turned around and waited for the waterbender in order to give them a few more moments together. Satisfied that his daughter was not going to be alone with Zuko, Hakoda turned around and left. Suki watched her father-in-law go and mentally grinned. Oh, if only the chieftain knew what the looks Katara and Zuko were throwing at each other meant. She did not know for sure if her sister-in-law and Zuko were already intimate, but she had a feeling they would like to have some alone time before they left the Fire Nation. Suki hoped that by pretending she would be helping Katara, Hakoda would not get it into his head to start snooping around in order to keep his daughter safe from the Fire Lord.

“I’ll see you tomorrow for breakfast,” Zuko told his waterbender with a small smile before he whispered, “I’ll be in your room later tonight.”

Katara felt her body tingle with anticipation even as her heart ached with sadness at their separation. She gave him a small smile.

“See you tomorrow.”

Katara anxiously paced the length of her room as she waited for Zuko to show up. She paused and her heart pounded in her chest when she heard the soft knock at her window. The waterbender quickly went over to pull the curtains aside and open the window. She stepped back to let Zuko enter. He was again wearing his Blue Spirit outfit minus his swords. Zuko swiftly closed the window and the long curtains before he pulled down his mask over the back of his head. As soon as he turned around, Katara flung her arms around his neck and Zuko wrapped his arms around her body and lifted her to him, their lips instantly crashing together in a desperate and hard kiss.

“I don’t want to leave,” she told him between kisses.

“I don’t want you to leave either,” he responded against her soft lips as he brought her even closer to him.
“But I have to,” the waterbender replied with a sigh.

She pulled slightly away from his kisses and Zuko watched as she looked up at him with hesitating eyes.

“I don’t want to leave you, but I also need this. I want to visit the Southern Water Tribe one last time before I become your wife and the Fire Nation becomes my permanent home,” she said softly and held her breath almost as if she were waiting for him to get angry or disappointed.

“I understand and I won’t take that away from you,” Zuko responded with a soft smile to convey he did not resent her feelings, “Especially since you have to give up so many things to become my wife.”

“All that matters to me is that I’ll be your wife,” she replied with a gleeful smile which then turned sad as she pressed her cheek on his chest and whispered, “I’m going to miss you.”

“Me too,” he said with a sigh.

“I’ll try to come back two weeks before the wedding to help Ursa and Iroh,” she added softly.

“I’ll be eagerly waiting your return,” he said as he tightened his hold of her.

They pulled apart to look at each other, their eyes met with an electrifying intensity, and then their lips were once again devouring each other’s. As their mouths continued to ravish one another, Zuko moved the hand that had been holding the back of Katara’s head and trailed it down her cheek, sliding it softly against her neck until his fingers came in contact with the hem of her nightgown. Katara let out a disappointed moan when Zuko’s mouth left hers before a sigh escaped her when he touched his lips to her cheek, following the trail his hand had created before down her neck and pressing his lips against her betrothal necklace.

His fingers pulled her collar aside and he nuzzled against her hot skin for a moment. He pulled back slightly to gaze at her soft brown flesh and he smiled when he noticed that, although the love bite he had given her was very faint, it was still there.
Katara watched as her firebender’s golden eyes gleamed with restrained desire and pride as he gazed at her neck and she knew what he was staring at so intensely.

“The love bite is fading, but now that you are wearing my ring and betrothal necklace, everybody will know you belong to me,” he said with a soft growl.

Katara gasped when his mouth came into contact with the fading love bite he had left on her skin, sucking and nipping at it softly, not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to send her senses flaring with heat.

“Very soon, Katara,” he began huskily as he softly kissed the fading mark, “You’ll be completely mine.”

The waterbender did not respond as she tilted her head closer to him, touching her lips to the pale skin below Zuko’s right ear before she trailed them slowly closer to his jaw. She parted her lips slightly and touched the tip of her wet tongue on his skin, causing Zuko to jump slightly and gasp in surprise at the unexpected sensation at the contact. Katara continued to lavish his skin with soft licks and nips that made Zuko groan, and before he knew what she intended to do, she bit him.

Zuko’s body jerked in shock, a loud growl erupting through his lips as the small pain sent a shot of pleasure straight to his groin, causing his cock to harden even further. When Katara pulled away to soothe the sting with her tongue, he grasped her hair to tilt her head back so he could crash his mouth against hers.

“Did you just mark me?” he asked incredulously against her lips as he stared into her bright, blue eyes in astonishment.

“Yes,” Katara responded without hesitation even as her cheeks flooded with color. “Like you said, the betrothal ring and necklace allows everybody know that I belong to you…”

She trailed off and she lightly touched the spot where she had bitten him with her finger. When Zuko hissed and tightened his hold on her, a smirk curled her lips.

“So I only though it fair that I should leave a mark on you to show everybody that you belong to me,” she continued smugly before she narrowed her eyes as she growled out, “Hopefully once they see my mark, no woman will approached you while I’m away.”
“Even if they did, I will order them away,” Zuko promised as he suppressed a smile at her jealousy and possessiveness. They were both so alike.

He pressed his finger on the stinging bite between his ear and his jaw, and he smirked since he knew that Katara had chosen a spot where her mark would be visible for all to see since he would not be able to hide it. Not that he wanted to. Not only would everybody know that she was his, but everybody would now that he was hers while they were separated.

Groaning, he bent down to capture her lips in another passionate kiss. Katara moaned as she pressed herself closer to him, rubbing her breasts against his chest and grinding her stomach against his hard erection. Liquid heat pooled between her legs. With a soft growl, Zuko scooped her up into his arms and swiftly carried her to her bed.

No more words were said as they held each other close. Wet tongues intertwined inside hot mouths, desperate hands roamed feverish bodies, hearts pounded hard against aching chests as they tried to take something from the other to cherish during their brief separation.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Zuko watched with a stoic expression on his face as the Southern Water Tribe vessel was being loaded. The young Fire Lord tuned out what his family, Katara, and her family were saying as the ache on his chest grew at the thought that she was leaving. Not only did he not want to wait two long months to finally make her his wife, but he was not going to see her, kiss her, or be in her presence for those months. He had grown so accustomed to the fact that he could see her whenever he wished, that now he did not know how he would be able to continue without her presence. How did he even live without her before?

Discreetly, Zuko pressed lightly against the mark Katara had left on his skin the previous night. As he had entered the royal family dining hall that morning, he had immediately felt every eye in the room zoom in on the love bite. His uncle had winked at him, his mother had blushed lightly, Suki had grinned, Kanna had frowned slightly but a small smile had appeared on her thin lips, while Katara’s male relatives all glared at him suspiciously. He had ignored them as he took a seat at the head of the table and turned to greet Katara, who sat quietly next to him. Everybody then turned to Katara as if she would confirm their suspicions. His waterbender had flushed deeply, but luckily Iroh and Suki had spoken up and quickly diverted their attention.

During his meeting with his advisors after breakfast, the men had stared at the mark near his jaw in surprise and the servants stared at it with curiosity. Zuko refused to hide it. Instead, he wore it proudly and smugly, which caused Katara to flush with pleasure.

But now she was leaving. And the love bite would soon fade.
He was brought out of his thoughts when he noticed Katara disengage herself from everybody and began to approach him. His mother and uncle smiled as they walked to the awaiting carriage while Katara’s family began to board the swift vessel after again saying goodbye to him. He mentally thanked them since he knew they were all giving Katara and him a moment alone to themselves.

Katara gave him a small smile as he stared down at her.

“I know I’ll see you soon,” she began softly, “but I’m going to miss you so much.”

“I will miss you, too,” he replied in the same quiet tone.

Katara remained silent as she stared into Zuko’s simmering, golden eyes, waiting for him to say something else or give her a farewell hug. But when he did neither, she smiled since she knew that Zuko hated showing any kind of affection in front of other people. She sighed softly as she continued to smile sadly at him.

“I’ll see you in a month and a half,” she told him as she began to turn away.

Suddenly struck by the full significance of how miserable he would be with her gone, Zuko stepped forward, and to her shock as well as those around them, clasped her to him tightly and captured her lips in an ardent kiss. He did not care if everybody saw them. He had to kiss her one more time before they had to separate again. Let them see how much this wonderful woman had changed him. Let them see how much she meant to him.

When he finally pulled slightly away to gaze down at her, Katara’s blue eyes were dazed and her cheeks were glowing with her blush.

“I wish Agni could make time go by quickly,” he whispered as his mouth lingered over hers, “I can’t bear the thought of you leaving and not being able to see you, touch you, or kiss you.”

“Oh, Zuko,” Katara sniffled as she stared sadly into his eyes, “That’s how I feel, too. I don’t want to leave, but I have to.”

“I know,” he replied with a soft smile as he brushed away a tear that had escaped her eye with his thumb. “I will be counting the days until you finally become my wife.”
“Oh, Zuko,” Katara breathed and sighed blissfully.

Before she could say anything else, the sound of someone clearing their throat brought them out of their own little world. Zuko immediately moved a step back from her as he cleared his own throat before they turned to their side to see Sokka standing with his arms crossed.

“Can you guys hurry it up?” Sokka told them with exaggerated exasperation. “We’d like to set sail sometime today.”

He grinned when his sister and his future brother-in-law glared at him. With another exasperated sigh, he turned and made his way toward the ship, but not before throwing them another grin.

Katara and Zuko looked at each other again. Without saying another word, they kissed one more time, their lips lingering for a moment, before Katara stepped away and turned to follow her brother. Just as she was about to step on the ramp, she glanced over her shoulder at Zuko, who was still watching her, before she boarded the ship.

The firebender watched the sleek vessel glide away as Katara moved to stand at the back of the ship’s deck. They held each other’s gaze as the vessel continued to sail away. Zuko continued to stare after his waterbender until the ship disappeared in the horizon and a sigh escaped him as that ache in his chest grew a bit more.

*It’s just a little over a month,* he repeated to himself.

He glanced to his right when he felt someone step up next to him. When he saw it was his uncle, the young lord again returned his attention to the blue sea. Blue like the eyes of the woman he loved.

“Before you know it, you’ll be a married man, Nephew,” Iroh commented with cheerful chuckle.

Zuko did not reply as he turned around and headed toward the carriage where his mother was waiting for them. He heard his uncle chuckle again as he followed him.

Zuko smiled since his uncle was right. The next time he saw Katara, they would be getting married.
He could not wait.

End of Part Five
Final Preparations

Closing the heavy steel door behind him, Zuko blinked as his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the dank cell. The flames from the torch beside the door cast disturbing shadows along the walls. Zuko’s eyes coolly observed the dark room before he settled his sight on the figure resting against a wall behind the cell bars.

“Ozai,” he called out dispassionately.

His sire stirred and sat up to glare at him. Standing smoothly to his feet, the former Fire Lord allowed a mocking smile to touch his pale lips.

“Why, Zuko,” he greeted, “how nice of you to visit your father. It’s been awhile.”

Zuko ignored his mocking tone and glared at him. With a sniff, Ozai flicked a piece of his long, dirty hair over his shoulder.

“There must be something you want from me if you brought yourself to see me,” the older man said with a quirked eyebrow.

Zuko again remained silent as he studied his ruthless father. There was indeed something Zuko wanted from him, but would Ozai tell him what he wanted to know? Zuko mentally snorted. He highly doubted his sire would help him. But still, Zuko needed to do something even if it seemed impossible to gain what he wanted. He was tired of waiting idly for news of the rebels. It had been a week since Katara’s departure to the Southern Water Tribe and he missed her terribly. He wanted to ensure Katara’s safety when they got married in two months and he could hardly do that with Jianguo and the rebels on the loose. But would his father give him the answers he needed?

“I remember from my last visit that you told Mother you would reclaim her and the throne,” Zuko began in an impassive tone, “What made you so confident you would succeed?”

Ozai gave a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders and glanced down at his dirty nails.

“What makes you believe I’m confident I would succeed?” Ozai countered evasively. “I could have just said that in my anger. Or maybe I just wanted Ursa to know she’s still mine. Or I just wanted to anger you. Who knows?” Another shrug followed his statement.
The younger man growled at his sire’s oblique words.

“Mother doesn’t belong to you,” Zuko growled lowly. He wanted to make this point clear and added, “You lost every right to call her your wife when you banished her from the palace and abandoned her to live a hard life just so you could become Fire Lord.”

Zuko felt a small amount of satisfaction when Ozai’s impudent manner and expression immediately shifted to one of anger and pain. He watched as his sire tried to relax from his suddenly stiff posture and unclench his hands.

Good. He was glad to know he could unsettle Ozai.

“She belonged to me once and she will belong to me again!” the older man growled.

“Keep telling yourself that,” the young Fire Lord said smoothly. “She will never go back to you. She hates you.”

Ozai’s golden eyes blazed in rage and his face contorted into any angry snarl, but Zuko could detect the pain hidden in his eyes. However, he could find no sympathy within him for Ozai after everything he had done to his mother.

“So here you will stay to rot like the monster you are,” Zuko added.

“You insolent brat!” Ozai snarled. “Instead of just scarring you face, I should have ended your life!”

Zuko inwardly flinched. Even though he did not care about Ozai, it still hurt to think his own father hated him so much as to want to outright kill him. But he would not let that bring him down. He had matured and done well without a father (for the most part), so he did not need Ozai. Besides, Iroh was a great surrogate and now Zuko found the love and affection he needed from Katara.

“Too bad you didn’t succeed in that,” Zuko finally replied to the older man’s irate words.
“Oh, don’t count yourself lucky yet,” Ozai chuckled humorlessly before he hissed, “I will find a way out of this wretched hell hole even if I have to sell my soul to Koh.”

“I’m sure Koh would appreciate adding your face to his collection,” Zuko replied indifferently.

Ozai growled. Zuko’s satisfaction immediately changed into one of wariness when he saw a leering smirk suddenly appear on his sire’s thin lips. Ozai flicked his long hair over his shoulder as he relaxed his posture.

“So tell me, Zuko, how is that erotic waterbender of yours? Why didn’t you bring her with you, hm?” Ozai asked leeringly.

Zuko tensed this time and he glared at the older man.

“She is none of your concern,” Zuko growled out.

“My, such protectiveness,” Ozai taunted before he lewdly added, “Why don’t you bring her back so I could play with her? Maybe she can pry the information you need out of me by using her hot body to pleasure mine? I’m sure that hot little mouth of hers can have me spilling all my secrets and—”

“Shut up!” Zuko roared furiously as he blasted a fire ball at Ozai’s feet, causing the older man to jump back with a curse. “I swear I’ll cut off your disgusting tongue and feed it to the wolf-dogs! I won’t have you talking about my future wife in such a way!”

“Future wife?!” Ozai exclaimed incredulously. His eyes widened in disbelief before he narrowed them as he growled, “You’ve got to be joking! I won’t have you tainting the purity of our line with a woman from such a primitive country! Hell, I would rather you tie yourself to that cold bitch Mai than have a tribe woman as Fire Lady!”

“I don’t give a damn about what you think!” Zuko snarled as his body shook with his rage. “You have no say in who I marry. Katara is going to be my wife and I could not have asked for a better woman in my life.”

“If it’s because you derive so much pleasure from her body, then I understand wanting her around, but you don’t have to marry her,” Ozai sneered, “She can serve you well enough as your concubine and give you the pleasures you need—”
“I thought I told you not to talk about her in such a way!” Zuko growled angrily as his hands blazed at his sides. “I’m marrying her and no one, especially not you, will stop me.”

“You’re such a fool! Don’t you see you’re making a mistake?” Ozai hissed.

“You’re one to talk,” Zuko replied darkly, “You did all those horrible things to Mother just to gain control of the throne and now you want her back. I won’t make the same mistake as you and cast the woman I care for from my side.”

Zuko took a deep breath to calm himself before he turned around and headed toward the door when he found he could not bring down his anger.

“I see I wasted my time here,” he said coldly.

“This isn’t over, boy!” Ozai screamed after him.

Zuko ignored his shouts as he stepped out of the cell and closed the heavy door with a loud slam, effectively cutting off his sire’s words. He locked the door and nodded grimly at the guards posted outside before he strode down the dark corridor as he tried to rein in his temper. He could still hear Ozai ranting as he walked away. He knew it was a mistake coming to visit Ozai. His sire never helped him before so why would he start doing so now? He would just have to find another means of locating Jianguo and the rebels.

Zuko’s mind shifted from his disastrous meeting with his father and instead focused on his upcoming marriage to Katara. In just a little over a month he would see her again. He could not wait to kiss her, touch her, and hold her in his arms. And soon they would be married and she would never leave his side nor he hers.

He would never make the same mistakes as his father did.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A proud smile touched Katara’s lips as she watched her young waterbending students complete their last bending move. This was her last waterbending class with them before she had to take up her responsibilities as Fire Lady.
“You all did so well today,” Katara praised the little ones before she gave them a sad smile. “I’m so proud of all of you.”

“Thank you, Master Katara,” the children chorused as they relaxed in their stance. They smiled at her knowingly.

They all knew this was the last time they were going to have the kind waterbender as their teacher before she had to go live in the Fire Nation with her new husband. The children had enthusiastically congratulated her on her marriage to Fire Lord Zuko and it had warmed her heart.

“Will you come visit us again?” the youngest of her students asked.

“Of course,” Katara responded with a smile.

“Will Fire Lord Zuko come with you, too?” the oldest boy asked hopefully.

Katara suppressed a grin at the look of hero worship in the boy’s eyes.

“Yes, he will,” she replied with a smile.

After a few more curious, childish questions, congratulations, and ‘see you later, Master Katara!’ the children bounded away to go penguin sledding. Katara watched them go with a wistful smile. Startled out of her melancholy mood, she looked down to her side when she felt the bottom of her parka being tugged gently. She smiled when she saw it was Lien, the little girl Zuko had saved the last time he had visited the Southern Water Tribe for Sokka and Suki’s wedding.

“I knew you were gonna marry Fire Lord Zuko,” Lien said with a grin. “I told you he liked you.”

Katara laughed happily as she bent down to hug the little girl tightly who giggled along with her. Katara pulled away to playfully tap Lien on the nose.

“You were right. I should’ve listened to you,” the waterbender commented with a grin.
“My daddy says that I’m too smart for my age,” the little girl said proudly.

“And he’s right,” Katara agreed with a serious nod before she smiled.

“I wish I could go to your wedding,” Lien grumbled as she crossed her arms. “I wanna see you marry Fire Lord Zuko.”

“We’ll come visit you,” Katara told her as she tickled her sides to make the little girl laugh.

“Promise?” Lien asked after she stopped laughing.

“I promise,” the waterbender replied.

Lien smiled, and after a quick hug and a goodbye, she raced after her friends to play with the penguins.

The smile on Katara’s face fell since penguin sledding reminded her of Aang. She sighed sadly at the memory as she began to make her way home. She had not heard from him since his confrontation with Zuko and she wondered if he was okay and if Toph was helping him. Before she left the Fire Nation, Katara had asked Lady Ursa to send a wedding invitation to Toph’s parents’ house in case both young benders stopped by. Though, Katara did not know if Aang would come to her and Zuko’s wedding. It would be nice if both her friends were there to share such a happy day with her, but she would understand if Aang did not want to go. However, if he decided not to attend the wedding, Katara would not have that ruin the day she was to become Zuko’s wife.

Katara reached into the pocket of her parka to retrieve her mittens only to have her fingers brush against paper. She smiled before she excitedly pulled out the letter Zuko had sent her and she had received on her way to her last waterbending class. She eagerly broke the red seal on the scroll and quickly unfurled another of the many letters Zuko had sent her over the past weeks. Her eyes lovingly caressed the masculine writing of her beloved.

Katara

*How are you? I hope you are doing just as well as you have said in your previous letters, which, by the way, I keep rereading just so I can imagine your voice recounting what you have written to me.*
Katara smiled since it was the same thing she did, rereading every word he had written and cherishing it in her heart.

The next part of Zuko’s letter was always the same. He would write about his Fire Lord duties, his investigation about the rebels, his arguments with his advisors, how the wedding preparations were coming along for their part, and how his mother and his uncle were driving him insane with everything. She had guessed that Zuko always wrote this informative part in order to balance the last part of his letter, which was more about his feelings and his longings for her. Only Zuko would add mundane information in a love letter. She giggled as she continued reading.

*I miss you so much, Katara. You have no idea how many times I find myself turning to ask you a question, or reaching out to draw you close to me so I could kiss you, only to realize that you are not there. I wish you were here with me. I wish I were there with you. And it kills me to think that I still have to wait three more weeks before I can see you again.*

*I love you so much, Katara. Ever since I met you, you woke up feelings in me that I never thought could be real. Such strong feelings that I have never felt for anybody else before. And that’s not adding how greatly you have increased my libido. All I can think about is making love to you. I must admit that it even shocks me at how much I lust after you. What have you done to me?*

*Yet, I would have it no other way. I will show you how much I desire and love you on our wedding night, so I warn you now that you better be prepared, my little waterbender.*

Katara blushed and she felt a tingle in her core as she read his words, imagining the desire smoldering in his amber eyes, and she bit her lip. She continued reading.

*I can’t wait to see you again. I can’t wait to finally be able to call you my wife. So until that day finally comes, I will content myself with reading all your letters again and again, and with the thought that you are thinking of me and that soon you will come back to me.*

*Zuko*

Katara sighed happily as her heart warmed at his words. She folded the letter and brought it to her lips as she closed her eyes and imagined him waiting for her, his golden eyes warm and a wistful smile on his handsome face.
She touched her chest where an ache had formed ever since she left Zuko and the Fire Nation. She missed him so much, but soon she would see him again. In a few days she will be leaving with her family for the Fire Nation. She felt her heart swell with joy at the thought that in just a few more weeks she would be married to Zuko, the love of her life.

Opening her eyes again, Katara carefully tucked the letter into her parka until she could place it with the other bound letters she had hidden beneath her clothes in her dresser. She then glanced at the golden ring on her finger. With a smile, she caressed it lovingly for a moment before she touched her betrothal necklace. She loved them both. They were so beautiful and they showed how much Zuko cared for her.

A small, smug grin appeared on her face as she remembered all the jealous stares the young women—from both the Southern Water Tribe and the Fire Nation—had thrown her way. It reminded her of the envious looks she received when Zuko sent her the beautiful rose hairpin for her birthday. She shook her thoughts away as she put on her warm mittens.

She had made Zuko a wedding gift as a way to repay him for the betrothal gifts he had given her. She had worked so hard on it and she prayed to La that he liked it. It had taken her several tries until she was finally satisfied with it. There was another reason why she had created it for him, however. Though she knew he would be more amused than annoyed when he found out why she had made it.

Again she shook her thoughts away, and when she looked up, she finally realized that she had arrived at the edge of the ice city. As she walked down one of the clean, snowy streets, she began to remember everything that had happened over the past few weeks since she had arrived. She remembered all the preparations, the fitting of her wedding dress, and the gifts and good wishes of her people, who surprisingly, had accepted her marriage to the Fire Lord quite easily. There had been a few young men, however, who had tried to convince her to rethink her marriage to the Fire Lord and give them a chance—after all she was a war hero and the daughter of a chieftain. She had firmly rebuked their advances, but they had been persistent. It was not until Sokka threatened them to leave her alone unless they wanted the wrath of the Fire Lord to fall upon them for trying to steal his bride that they stopped. Katara and Sokka had a good laugh when the men had immediately backed away after that.

As she climbed one of the ice bridges, Katara paused and gazed at her snow city fondly and with admiration. They had changed and grown so much from the tiny village they had been years ago. The waterbender felt her eyes begin to mist with nostalgia. She was going to miss teaching waterbending, the chirp of the penguins, the way the bright moon made the sea and the snow shine, the exquisite delicacies of her tribe’s cuisine. She was going to miss her tribe, her people, her family, her home.

No, her home was now going to be the Fire Nation where she will live with her husband as his wife and Fire Lady. It was not as if she would never return to her home country, which she would always
love and cherish in her heart, for Zuko had promised her that they would visit the Southern Water Tribe whenever they could.

Zuko. Oh, how she missed him! She missed his strong presence, his protective embrace, his large smiles and loud chuckles that he would only let her see and hear. And it was torture not being near him—to touch and kiss and to be touched and kissed by him—especially now that she would have such erotic dreams about him almost every night.

The brunette waterbender felt her cheeks warm just as her entire body did. She understood how Zuko felt when he wrote about how lustful he had become for it was the same for her. Soon she would not dream or imagine what it will be like to be with Zuko in such a way because it will become a reality.

“Katara!”

Suki’s voice snapped Katara out of her thoughts. The waterbender blushed more deeply before she tried to compose herself as she smiled at the older woman.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you!” the auburn-haired warrior huffed and playfully scowled at the waterbender.

“Sorry, I was reading a letter Zuko sent me and I lost track of time,” Katara apologized sheepishly. “Why are you looking for me?”

“Gran-Gran wants you to meet her in your room to put the last touches on your wedding dress before we have to sail to the Fire Nation,” Suki told her with a smile.

Katara groaned softly. It was tiring to have to stand in the same spot for hours and be poked at with needles. She already had to deal with that when Zuko had agreed with Lady Ursa and Madam Fang Hua that she be fitted for more royal clothes before the engagement celebration. Not that she didn’t love her clothes and her wedding dress.

Suki laughed as she grabbed her sister-in-law’s arm and lead her toward the chief’s grand house. She knew how the waterbender felt.

“How are you feeling about your upcoming wedding?” Suki asked after a while.
A large, bright smile lit up Katara’s face.

“I feel so nervous but mostly excited!” she exclaimed.

Suki smiled at her. Katara had responded so differently from the last time Suki had asked her if she ever thought of marrying Aang. The auburn-haired woman could see that Katara really loved Zuko.

“Every bride must feel that way,” Suki finally responded with a laugh.

A wistful sigh coming from Katara made Suki glance at her.

“Oh, Suki, I miss Zuko so much,” the waterbender began with another sigh as her blue eyes took on a faraway look. “I can’t wait to marry him. I love him like I’ve never loved anyone else. Whenever we’re together we’d almost destroy each other with kisses. Just thinking about him makes me so happy. I love everything about him. His intense, golden eyes, his velvety baritone voice, his warm hands, his skin touching mine, his perfect mouth…”

Katara blinked away the haziness and her vision of Zuko when she heard Suki clear her throat. Embarrassed, Katara covered her mouth with her hand and blushed deeply.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

Suki laughed quietly as she waved aside her apology.

“I don’t see anything wrong with that,” she said with a small shrug. “Besides, who am I to judge?”

Katara braced herself when an impish smile curved Suki’s lips.

“Have you and Zuko…?” she asked before she trailed off suggestively.

“No!” Katara exclaimed with wide eyes before she embarrassingly added more quietly, “We’ve
only…touched each other.” Her blush deepened.

Suki gaped at her innocent sister-in-law in surprise before a grin appeared on her face. She leaned closer to Katara so they would not be overheard.

“So…how is it?” she asked curiously with the grin still on her face.

“How is what?” Katara asked with a frown.

“Every woman must be curious to know how…big the Fire Lord is,” the older woman rephrased her question.

When Katara continued to stare at her incomprehensibly, Suki flushed and cleared her throat.

“You know, how big is his…” she trailed off as she pointed down.

Katara’s blue eyes widened impossibly large when she finally understood what the other woman was trying to say.

“Suki!” she exclaimed, horrified.

“What? As I said, every woman must be curious,” Suki responded with an innocent look.

Katara sputtered for a moment, but when it seemed that Suki was not about to let the subject drop, she decided to be truthful.

“I haven’t seen…it yet,” she stuttered.

Suki frowned in disappointment before she shrugged.

“It’s understandable since you grew up with such strict traditions,” she said with an understanding
Another frown appeared on her face and she stopped them, turning to face Katara and grabbing her hands.

“I’m telling you this so that you won’t be too shocked on your wedding night,” she began with a serious look, “When you first see his…uh, it…it will look frightening, but you shouldn’t be intimidated by it because it will bring you much pleasure.”

Katara was blushing hard at her words, though she was grateful that a woman her age was telling her this. She knew her grandmother was going to talk to her about her wedding night soon, as was tradition, since her mother was not there to do it. How embarrassing.

“Thank you, Suki,” she said sincerely as she squeezed her sister-in-law’s hands. “I will remember your advice.”

“You’re welcome,” Suki replied with a smile as she again hooked her arm under Katara’s and again began to walk toward the grand house. “I wish I had someone tell me what to expect for my first time. I was so scared the first time I saw Sokka’s that I almost threw him off me in order to get it away from me—”

“I really don’t want to know about my brother’s sex life,” Katara quickly interrupted her with a grimace.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Suki apologized as her pale cheeks turned pink.

Katara smiled at her as she changed the topic to something less embarrassing, mainly the final preparations before they sailed to the Fire Nation. As they neared their destination, Katara stopped them when she noticed Sokka and her father entering the grand house.

“Sokka and Dad have been acting suspiciously for the past few weeks,” Katara remarked with narrowed eyes.

Suki stiffened almost unnoticeably beside her.
“What do you mean?” she asked calmly.

“I’ve seen them carry boxes into the Fire Nation cargo ships that would depart to the Fire Nation,” the waterbender replied.

“It must be nothing serious,” Suki said with a nervous laugh.

Katara eyed her suspiciously, but Suki distracted her as she again tugged at her arm to lead her into the house.

“I have to check on my daughters and you need to go to Gran-Gran and the seamstress before they get impatient,” she said with a grin.

Katara let out another groan and Suki laughed as she dragged her reluctant sister-in-law into the grand house.

Resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration, Zuko quickly left the room where he had had a meeting with his mother, Iroh, and a professional planner about the upcoming wedding. He honestly did not care how it was done as long as he married Katara, but he knew that a royal wedding was mostly a show for his people to see their Fire Lord take a wife. And he also understood that a wedding was something women dreamed of, and he knew that Katara was excited about hers. Besides, he wanted everybody to see him take Katara as his wife and she deserved the best wedding ever. So that meant he had to endure all the hassle of planning a wedding.

Just as he rounded a corner, he almost bumped into someone, but he reflexively jumped back to avoid colliding with the person. He looked down to see yellowish eyes staring widely at him from a pretty feminine face. He took a step back as he stared at the short woman warily before he realized it was Physician Toshiro’s new assistant.

“I am so sorry, my lord,” she said softly as her cheeks flushed slightly and she bowed. “I was not paying close attention to where I was going.”

What was her name again? Yin-Min, he believed, although he was not too sure. He suppressed a frown when he realized that she looked familiar though different, as if he had seen a similar woman like her but with a different attitude and attire, before he mentally shook his head. He noticed that she was staring at the fading love bite Katara had left just between his ear and his jaw and he again felt that smugness spread through him whenever someone looked at it.
“Do not worry about it,” he told her coolly as he stepped around her and began walking again, but he paused briefly when her meek voice reached him.

“Congratulations on your upcoming marriage, my lord,” she said quietly.

“Thank you,” he replied absentmindedly as he continued walking without looking back, his mind already occupied with the many things that he needed to see to.

For the rest of the day, Zuko went through his paperwork in his study. Once he was finished, he went to check on the two surprises he had in store for Katara as a wedding present. He was pleased when he saw that they were almost complete. He could not wait to see Katara’s reaction when he showed them to her. Just two more days and he would see her again. In just a few weeks they will be married.

He still could not believe it was happening. He almost expected a problem to suddenly appear to impede them from marrying each other. For years it had seemed as if happiness would always vanish from his life whenever he thought he could finally grasp it.

He quickly destroyed his dark thoughts. He had to believe that he deserved this happiness.

After a light dinner with his uncle and his mother—who kept going on and on about the preparations for the wedding and all the guest they had invited—Zuko finally made his way to his royal bedchamber, which in about two weeks would become his and Katara’s room. Their room.

As he entered the large bedchamber, his eyes immediately landed on the massive bed that rested against the northern wall across from the grand doors. He could not wait to finally have Katara in his bed—and that also meant she could sleep next to him. He mentally chuckled at his thoughts.

He would never have thought that he would be anticipating the day he would marry. Before he had finally realized he was in love with Katara and wanted her as his wife, he had briefly entertained the thought of marrying Mai and he had always dreaded the thought of marrying a noblewoman that would be chosen for him. But he could not wait to tie his life to Katara’s, share himself with her, and love her for the rest of his days.

After taking off his royal robes, Zuko walked to his wardrobe and pulled out the metal chest from the bottom. Inserting the key on the lock, he opened the lid and stared at the items that made up his Blue
A few minutes later, a dark figure was running swiftly from rooftop to rooftop as he surveyed his city in the cover of the night. He felt exhilaration course through his body as he leapt over buildings and silently hid behind objects when it seemed he was about to be spotted.

The night after Katara had left toward the Southern Water Tribe, he had been unable to find sleep, his mind had been too agitated and his body too restless at the reminder that he would have to wait two whole months to see his waterbender again. So he had donned on his Blue Spirit ensemble and slipped out into the city in order to tire his body out. He had been doing the same thing for the past weeks and he loved the sense of freedom he experienced when he left the palace and roamed the dark streets as the Blue Spirit. He had caught a few thieves, however, only two were enough of a challenge that he actually had to use his swords, but other than that there weren’t many disturbances. At least, that could be seen. He wondered if this had to do with his upcoming marriage to Katara. As he hid in the shadows, he had heard the people talk. Mostly those of nobility were still upset over his choice of wife, but the common people seemed to love the idea of Lady Katara being the Fire Lady.

Without making a single sound, the masked being dropped at the edge of a house’s roof that stood directly in front of a tavern. He wondered if maybe tonight there would be some trouble that would need the use of his skills in order to defuse it. He was itching for a confrontation that would tire him out enough that he could find some rest as he waited for Katara to return to him. He did not know if he would continue running as the Blue Spirit once he married.

*I suppose I’ll find out later,* he mused as he prepared himself to wait.

An hour later three drunken men burst out of the rowdy establishment, staggering against each other as they bellowed a bawdy song off-key and with slurred words. Zuko eyed them from behind the Blue Spirit’s white and blue mask, before he snorted when they tripped over their feet and promptly fell asleep where they had landed. When it seemed like nothing else was going to happen, he decided to return early to his room instead of slipping back in before dawn.

After making sure no one would be able to notice him, he jumped over the palace wall and landed in some bushes. Then he swiftly crossed his garden before leaping onto his balcony, closing the door softly after him and pulling the curtains closed. Placing his swords on their respective place, he quickly took off his clothes and put them back into the chest until he found time to wash them. Then he walked into the large bathroom to take a quick bath. As he dried his wet skin and placed dark sleeping pants on, he glanced at his reflection on the mirror that hung above the basin. He reached up a hand to brush his hair from his forehead. He had not cut it since he and Katara returned to the Fire Nation and now it fell a little below his neck. He thought it was time for a new look.

Shifting his attention to the rest of him, his eyes landed on Katara’s fading love bite. It was barely
visible now, but the memory of Katara’s lips and teeth grazing his skin was still imprinted on his mind. He reached up to touch the mark and he hissed lightly as it made his loins twitch. The day after Katara had given him the mark, everybody had stared at it. He knew that they understood what it was and he was not ashamed of it. He wanted them to see how much he trusted Katara and just how much she meant to him that he allowed her to leave a visible mark on him. He wanted everyone to see that he belonged to her.

He had not allowed any of the few women he had been with before to place any form of mark on his body for he rebelled at the thought of belonging to anyone. But with Katara it was different. She was different. He wanted to belong to her just as he wanted her to belong to him and only him.

Agni, how he missed her.

He hoped the next two days passed quickly.

Zuko left the bathroom and began to get ready for bed, anticipating the dream that would visit him that night featuring Katara. A knock on his door, however, brought him out of his fantasy and he frowned as he wondered if there was a problem. He was glad he had decided to return early before the entire palace went into a panic at his disappearance. He placed a light robe over his bare torso and sighed.

“Enter,” he called out coolly.

He turned to see Jiao bow at the entrance and he frowned again.

“What is it?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“A letter arrived for you a few minutes ago, my lord,” Jiao responded immediately, “I was sure that you would have wanted to read it now. It is from Lady Katara.”

Jiao suppressed a smile when the Fire Lord quickly approached her with an outstretched hand.

“Give it to me,” he commanded.
Jiao handed him the scroll with a small smile.

“Thank you, Jiao,” he said as he grasped it.

Jiao smiled again, bowed, and closed the door behind her.

Zuko was barely aware of the door shutting as he made his way to the bed. Taking off his robe and throwing it to the side, he quickly broke the seal and opened the scroll. As he settled on the bed, he again admired Katara’s feminine calligraphy and absentmindedly remembered when Iroh had mentioned it all those months ago. Touching the writing on the paper as if he were caressing Katara’s skin, he began to read.

Dear Zuko

I’m very well, thank you. I hope you feel just as great as I do as our wedding date comes closer and closer. I smiled at the last letter you sent me since I also reread every single letter you have written to me.

Zuko smiled at the thought that she was doing the same thing. In the next part, Katara described more things about the Southern Water Tribe, about their part of the wedding preparations, how she hated getting fitted for clothes, although she really liked how her wedding dress came out and hoped he did too. He had to grin at the part where she wrote that she had noticed her father and her brother acting strangely and he thought that soon she would find out why. She continued with details about their journey as they sailed toward the Fire Nation.

He had to smile again on how perceptive Katara was. She had noticed that he was a bit uncomfortable writing a love letter and she had responded to him in the same format in which he wrote to her—unimportant information mixed with feelings. His first attempt at writing to her had been a failure. He had been too worried about sounding too lovesick, so he had written about everyday things. It had sounded like a report, so he had discarded that one. The next try he wrote about his feelings and how much he missed her. It was so sappy that it made his eyes hurt and he immediately lit it on fire. He had wasted many pieces of paper until finally he settled in writing with a balance of the first two attempts.

With a chuckle, he continued reading.

A long time has passed since we last saw each other. I know it’s just been less than two months, but
it seems like it has been forever. I miss you so much, Zuko. The desire to see you, to feel your strong arms wrapped around me, your lips kissing mine is nearly killing me. This separation is so painful I don’t know how much longer I’d be able to take it. I need to see you, be near you. I wish you could come for me, but I know you have things to take care of before our wedding.

I love you so much, Zuko. More than I’ve love anyone and more than I will love anyone else. Because of you I have experienced an immense passion that I never would’ve thought possible to have felt with a man. Because of you all I can think about is the moment when you will make love to me, when you will make me yours. I have such erotic dreams about you that leave me breathless and aching for your touch. Even now as I write this letter, I feel myself blush as flashes of my dreams make my body heat up.

What have I done to you? What have you done to me?

I will hold you to your promise that you will show me how much you desire and love me on our wedding night and I promise that I will show you how much I desire and love you. At least, I will try with the little knowledge I have about lovemaking.

I’m so impatient to see you again. And I can’t wait for the day I will come back to you so you can make me your bride.

With all my love, yours always,

Katara

Zuko sighed as he finished reading her letter, her words causing warmth to spread throughout his body. He missed her so much and he could not wait to marry her. His eyes drifted to the part where Katara wrote about her erotic dreams and how much she desired him. He groaned softly. It seemed he was not the only one who was having such dreams. She wrote that she would try to show him how much she wanted him even though she was inexperienced. But what she did not know was that just being with her would be an amazing experience for him. His loins stirred at the thought that Katara was aching for him, and when his thoughts shifted to their wedding night and how he would finally be able to make love to her, he felt his cock stiffen.

He tried to suppress his arousal and shift his thoughts to other things, but his mind instantly went to the hot dream he had had of Katara a few nights ago. A dream in which he had been doing very naughty things to her that caused her to moan and scream his name. As if on its own accord, the hand that was not holding Katara’s letters glided down his stomach before drifting close to his hard erection. He paused, and his fingers twitched, as he fought himself for a moment, but then the tip of
his fingers touched the head of his covered length and he groaned quietly.

He rubbed himself a couple of times through his sleeping pants and his breath hitched at the pleasure. He brought back to mind the times when Katara had touched him and he groaned.

He squeezed a few times, but frowned when that was not enough to satisfy him. After a few more squeezes, he reached into the front of his dark pants and pulled out his hard shaft. He stroked his swollen length a few times and moaned.

He wondered how it would feel to have Katara take his heavy cock into her warm mouth. No woman had ever done such a deed to him. One of the women of the brothels had offered, but he had vehemently refused when he had seen her rotten teeth. But a few days ago, as he had gone in search of his uncle for another lesson in his white fire, he had come across a few of his guards who were on their break and had been eating. He had accidentally overheard as they began talking about how incredible it felt to have a woman’s mouth on that part of the body. Now the thought of having Katara’s mouth on him was all he could think about.

His breath came in rough pants as he felt his heavy balls start to pulse before he released his dripping shaft. Swiftly, he stripped himself of his sleeping pants then sprawled out, lifting his knees up and spreading his legs. Eyes sliding shut once again, he reached down and began to stroke his hard, aching flesh, biting his bottom lip as he did. Zuko groaned as his speed increased as he again brought up the memory of Katara wrapping her small hand around him and experimentally stroking him. He growled lowly when that flared his arousal. He stroked himself faster and groaned as he visualized sinking his cock into Katara for the first time, hearing her soft cries of pleasure as he penetrated her.

He resumed pumping his shaft in a tight fist, threatening to rub his skin raw as his release slowly began to grow. Needing more stimulation, he rubbed a thumb across the wet bulbous head of his erection as he imagined that it was Katara stroking his cock, kneeling naked before him and looking at him with sultry, blue eyes. Ah, his exotic water nymph! His body tightened as his increased arousal caused his hard length to throb.

He then imagined how it would feel to finally make love to Katara, having her tight, wet pussy surrounding him. Hips arching up off the bed, meeting his hand as he stroked firmly, he grunted harshly, feeling his skin tingle, dancing with sensation as his release started approaching. Imagining her long legs wrapped around his hips, holding him tightly to her as his fingers tangled in her chocolate mass of hair while he thrust into her, he threw his head back and growled loudly as a sharp tingle shot down his spine and into his cock. His back arched sharply as he ejaculated large spurts of his whitish seed onto his hand and stomach while his hips continued to thrust and he squeezed his swollen tip as his body still tingled with pleasurable sensations. Softly moaning Katara’s name as his orgasm finally subsided, he fell back on the bed in a slightly sweaty heap, his eyes shut.
Panting harshly, Zuko felt his entire body still pulsing from his release and he reveled in it. Before he knew his feelings for Katara, he rarely pleasured himself, but now he found himself doing it more often due to his desire for her. And as it had been so infrequent before, the sensations were even more intense. As he lay thinking about Katara, he thought of how he wanted to hold her tenderly against him after they both found their pleasurable release, something that made him exhale a contented sigh. If he were completely honest he wanted such a moment almost as much as he wanted the sexual act itself.

Zuko waited until the last tremors left his body before he opened his eyes. He looked down at himself, his hand still tightly grasping his now flaccid shaft, and groaned when he saw his stomach and chest coated with a big amount of his semen. He slowly released himself with a satisfied sigh. As he sat up carefully, he noticed that his other hand was tightly clenching Katara’s letter. He would definitely keep this letter.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. Nude, he walked across the room to place the letter atop his dresser before he made his way to the bathroom to clean himself off.

Soon Katara would be the one who will bring him to release. He grinned. He could not wait to have her in his bed. 

Every inch of the large desk in the Fire Lord’s study was covered with piles of papers and scrolls. Leaning back in his chair, Zuko rubbed his neck tiredly after placing his seal on another of the documents. Then he placed it atop one of the piles. He had so much paperwork to go through before he could enjoy his wedding and honeymoon.

For the past week, important guests from every nation that his mother and uncle had invited to attend the royal wedding were starting to arrive to the palace in droves. That was one of the reasons why Zuko had retreated to his study in order to find some peace and quiet.

As Zuko placed another sealed scroll on a pile and picked up another document, he wondered where Iroh was. He had not seen his uncle all day, which was strange since the old man hardly left him alone these days. Zuko placed the paper aside with a sigh since he could not concentrate on the words, and with a frown marring his features, he stood up and turned to look outside the large window.

He could not stop the feeling of anxiety that wanted to rise within him. The wedding was to take place in less than two weeks, but Katara and her family had not arrived yet. They were supposed to have reached the Fire Nation four days ago so Katara could give her input on the preparations. He was worried about what could have detained them. Was Katara all right? Would she make it in time for the ceremony? His eyes widened in dread as a sudden thought came to him. Did perhaps Jianguo capture her again?
He shook his head. That couldn’t be, could it? There had to be logical explanation for her tardiness.

A soft knock brought him out of his thoughts and he scowled as he called out a cold ‘enter’. He hoped it was not another person come to congratulate him again and try to make small talk with him. He hated making small talk.

He heard the door open and then close softly, and he turned around to see who had entered, only to freeze in surprise. He recovered quickly from his stupor, however, and a smile melted his cold features and warmed his impassive eyes at the sight of the person standing before him.

“Katara,” he called out softly. There was evident relief in his voice and the way his tense shoulders relaxed.

“Zuko,” she responded with the same soft tone.

Zuko hastily rounded his desk and approached her in quick strides while Katara rushed toward him with a happy cry. He opened his arms to her and she flew into them with a happy laugh. They embraced, their arms swiftly encircling the other tightly, and their mouths met in a passionate kiss. They moaned and pressed their bodies tightly together to reacquaint themselves with the other’s touch. It was a long moment before they finally pulled slightly apart to regain their breaths.

“When did you arrive?” Zuko asked her huskily as his lips continued to touch hers. “I was worried that something happened.”

“The twins got sick during the journey and we had to stop at a port in the Earth Kingdom until they got better. I’m sorry to worry you, but everything’s fine now,” Katara responded breathlessly as she clung to him. “We arrived about an hour ago.”

Zuko pulled back slightly to frown at her.

“Why wasn’t I told?”

“I asked Uncle Iroh not to tell you because I wanted to surprised you,” she told him with a smile.
“And it’s a lovely surprise indeed,” Zuko responded as he kissed her again.

He pulled away when he felt moisture touch his fingers as he reached up to caress her face. Tears of both sadness and joy rolled down a face the color of soft caramel and cheeks as red as wine.

“What’s wrong, love?” he asked her worriedly as he brushed her tears away with his thumbs.

“Oh, Zuko, I missed you so much,” she said as she placed her hands above his.

“So did I,” he replied as he leaned down to kiss her. He sighed against her mouth. “I hope that we won’t have to be separated from each other that long again.”

“I hope so, too,” she said softly as she pulled back to stare into his eyes.

She kissed him again and Zuko cupped the back of her head to deepen the kiss. The ache that had formed in their chests began to vanish.

Zuko inhaled deeply of her sweet scent and reveled in it. His waterbender felt so good in his arms—where she rightly belonged—and he had never felt as good as he did when she held him in her arms.

As if she had read his mind, she spoke.

“I’ve never felt as good as when you hold me, Zuko.”

Zuko groaned against her lips.

“And I’ve never felt as good as when I hold you.”

The soft kisses and tender embrace soon turn heated and passionate. Katara gasped softly when she felt Zuko’s hardness press against her stomach, and with a moan, she pressed herself more firmly against him. Zuko groaned and pressed back for a moment before he pulled away and held her at
arm’s length. He panted hard as he tried to control himself just as Katara tried to do as well. They gazed into each other’s eyes and Zuko smirked.

“We need to stop or else we’ll be having the wedding night before the actual wedding,” he told her huskily, his golden eyes smoldering.

A blush stained Katara’s cheeks and she giggled.

“If that happens, my father and Sokka will come down upon you to avenge my honor,” she teased.

“I’d like to see them try,” he responded with a sniff.

Katara playfully rolled her eyes at his arrogance.

“Where’s your family?” he finally asked once he reined in his desire, although it still simmered on the surface.

“They’re settling in their rooms, but before they noticed, I rushed over to see you as soon as I arrived at the palace,” she told him with a shy smile.

“I’m glad you did,” the dark-haired male growled out as he leaned down to brush his lips against hers before pulling back. “I really needed this moment with you before I went insane.”

Katara blushed as the memory of his words in the letter he sent her where he described his desire for her surfaced in her mind. She was about to respond, but paused when she got a better look at him. She tilted her head to the side and smiled.

“Your hair is longer,” she observed as she reached up to brush a few strands of his dark hair.

Zuko had his hair pulled back into a topknot with his fire crown nestled on it, but instead of the neat hairdo he wore before, a few strands escaped down his forehead and the back of his neck. It reminded her of the time when he had been crowned Fire Lord years ago.
“Yeah, I decided to grow it out,” the firebender replied self-consciously as he reached up to smooth his hair back. “I figured I needed a new look for my new life.”

Katara smiled and she again wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m sure you’ll look even more handsome,” she assured, then with an impish grin she added, “I can’t wait to run my fingers through more of your hair.”

“Damn it, Katara,” Zuko groaned huskily as he bent down to capture her lips in another hot, intense kiss.

Another moan escaped the waterbender and she pressed herself closer to him. She felt her entire body heat up in desire, so she pulled back this time. She decided to change the subject before she embarrassed herself.

“Your mother stopped me on my way to see you to tell me that we’ll be given a brief lesson about what we have to do for the combined wedding ceremony later today,” she told him rapidly. Her anxiety rose a bit. “I’m also going to help her and Uncle Iroh with the preparations tomorrow.”

Zuko inclined his head and smiled reassuringly.

“I still have some things to finish here so I can be free for our wedding and honeymoon,” he informed. He smirked when he saw the blush on her cheeks darken. “I’ll see you as soon as you refresh yourself and get some rest.”

“Will you visit me in my room tonight?” she asked throatily.

“Nobody will be able to keep me away from you,” Zuko rasped as he stared intensely into her darkening blue eyes. “I’ve missed touching you so much.”

“Me too,” she moaned softly.

Zuko leaned down to kiss her and Katara raised herself on her toes to meet him halfway. They kissed each other ardently again, each reluctantly to let the other go, but this time it was Katara who pulled
away first. She bit her lip at his smoldering gaze.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said.

“Yes.”

With a smile, she slowly made her way to the door and opened it. She glanced behind her shoulder with another smile before she closed the door behind her.

Zuko licked his lips to savor her lingering taste and groaned as he went to sit back down on his chair as he again tried to mentally will his arousal away.

Soon he would be able to have his problem seen to by his wife.

The following week found Katara, Ursa, Iroh, Kanna and Suki finishing the preparation for the upcoming wedding. Katara found it both amusing and frustrating when Iroh and her Gran-Gran argued about which wedding traditions should be added based on their cultures while they rejected each other’s ideas. Alright, honestly, it was more than frustrating, though luckily Katara was the one who had the final say. Sokka had tried to put in his own thoughts—which, not surprisingly, were terribly outrageous—but was quickly shot down. Zuko and the other men had wisely stayed out of the women’s way.

As the day of the wedding approached, more people began to arrive at the palace. Zuko had asked Katara to help him greet the dignitaries. She had been nervous at first, but she was eager to start her first duties as Fire Lady. To her satisfaction and Zuko’s pride, she was doing a remarkable job and the visitors were pleased with her warm reception. It also helped that she knew most of the great leaders of the other countries thanks to her travels during the war.

Master Piandao arrived in his usual serene manner and was immediately sought out by Sokka. King Kuei, along with Bosco his bear, and King Bumi had arrived together at the beginning of the week. It was all Zuko could do not to visibly flinch every time the old king of Omashu would make a joke, clap him hard on the back, and cackle loudly. Katara had been unable to hide her amusement, until the old king turned his crazy humor on her and began to make suggestive remarks about Zuko’s virility and her stamina. Then it was Zuko’s turn to be amused.

Chief Arnook arrived with his wife and some of his men two days ago, expressing how surprised he had been when he first received the invitation to the Fire Lord’s wedding to Hakoda’s beautiful
daughter. But he had immediately rushed to the Fire Nation to be witness to the wedding that would combined the Fire Nation and the Southern Water Tribe.

Toph’s parents had also arrived a few days ago, and when Katara and Zuko had inquired if their daughter and Aang would attend the ceremony, they had said they were not sure since the airbender had not said a word when he saw the invitation. Katara and Zuko would have liked it if their friends were to be present for such a special occasion, but they understood if Aang did not attend.

A few more minor lords and governors and their families had arrived from both the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom. Zuko was not surprised when he found out Mai and her family had declined the invitation his mother had reluctantly sent to them. He was glad since he did not want to deal with Mai on the day he took Katara as his wife. Katara was also glad she did not have to tolerate the vindictive noblewoman. If Mai had so much as tried to impede their wedding, Katara would have frozen her to the ceiling of her guest room.

Haru also arrived and Zuko and Katara were not surprised to see that Ty Lee had arrived with the earthbender. They had been amused to see Haru flush when Ty Lee had asked for her things to be placed in the same room as Haru’s.

All the guest rooms of the Fire Nation palace were occupied and the palace was full with so many people that were going to attend the royal wedding—not counting the Fire Nation nobility that were also going to attend. Zuko really could not be blamed for hiding in his study.

The Fire Lord and his waterbender could feel their anticipations rising as their wedding drew closer.

Katara smiled happily at the chattering people around her as they ate dinner in one of the many grand halls of the palace, in order to accommodate everybody. Zuko sat at the head of the table, with her on his right and Iroh on his left. Lady Ursa sat next to Iroh and next to Ursa sat Jee with a blank expression on his face. Katara’s family sat beside her and Sokka was devouring everything in sight. Sitting on the other chairs were Master Piandao, Chief Arnook and his people, King Kuei and King Bumi and the people they had brought with them, and finally Haru and Ty Lee.

Katara could not help but wonder how they finally confessed their feelings to each other.

As Zuko talked to Jee about the security issues for the wedding ceremony that was to take place the next day, Katara thought back to the practice lesson Lady Ursa, Madam Fang Hua, Gran-Gran, the fire sages, and the oldest spiritual priest of her tribe had given her and Zuko. She could not wait for the actual ceremony. She was nervous and excited—nervous that she might end up doing something wrong and excited because she was finally going to marry Zuko.
“The betrothal necklace Fire Lord Zuko gave you is so beautiful, my dear,” Chief Arnook’s wife commented with a sweet smile on her delicate feminine features.

“Thank you,” Katara responded with a pleased flush as she smiled at the woman sitting a few chairs across from her.

“It is an excellent piece of craftsmanship and creativity,” the Northern Water Tribe Chief praised as he turned to look at the Fire Lord.

“Thank you,” Zuko responded with a small incline of his head, also pleased.

King Bumi’s loud cackle interrupted the conversation and they turned to look him. There was a large grin on his wrinkled face and his green eyes gleamed with mischief as he stared at the engaged couple. Zuko and Katara braced themselves for whatever he was going to say next.

“So will we be seeing a new heir nine months from now?” he asked with a cackle before he added with a waggled of his eyebrows, “Or would it be sooner than that? Haha!”

Katara could feel her entire face heat up at the mad king’s implication as everybody stopped what they were doing to stare at them. Zuko fought to remain unperturbed when Hakoda and Sokka whipped their heads to glare at him. Geez, would it matter if he had gotten Katara pregnant before their wedding? They were going to get married anyway. Besides, Sokka had no right to judge him. He looked at Sokka in the eye and raised an eyebrow. As if reading his thoughts, Sokka flushed and cleared his throat. Zuko suppressed a smirk. He enjoyed it when he was able to get back at his future brother-in-law.

“I assure you that our heir will not be born before then,” Zuko finally responded in a smooth tone.

Katara’s family relaxed at his words while everybody else smiled and stirred to different topics.

As soon as dinner was over, everyone that was not the couple’s family piled out of the room and wished the soon-to-be-married couple good night. The two families remained at the table to talk some more before they decided to call it a day. Jee lingered as he waited to escort Lady Ursa to her room. Katara turned away from talking to Suki and caught her father’s watchful eye. She noticed Zuko and her father having a silent staring contest and she wondered what was going on.
“Come on, Hakoda,” Kanna’s soft yet stern voice was heard. “Let the young ones have a moment to themselves before their big day.”

Hakoda’s eyes narrowed before he finally broke eye contact with the Fire Lord in order to smile at his daughter.

“Oh, alright,” he consented. “Good night then.”

“Good night,” Pakku addressed the Fire Lord, though he was smirking at his stepson.

“I will come to your room later, Katara,” the old woman added, “We need to have a talk.”

“Yes, Gran-Gran,” Katara muttered since she knew her grandmother was going to talk to her about her wedding night as was tradition.

“I would like to come too,” Suki added quickly.

The female warrior smiled reassuringly at her sister-in-law. She did not know if Gran-Gran would scare Katara more than help her. Katara would benefit more in hearing about the experiences of a younger married woman. Did Kanna, in her advanced age, even have sex anymore? Suki shuddered at the thought of what Kanna and Pakku did in the privacy of their room.

Ew, don’t think about it! Don’t think about it! Suki mentally chanted as she cringed.

She caught Sokka giving her a questioning look and she gave him a strained smile. Well, at least Jiao had agreed to look after the twins, so that gave Suki a bit of time to herself.

“I would also like to join you three, if you don’t mind,” Ursa spoke up with a gentle smile aimed at her future daughter-in-law.

I didn’t think I needed that much advice, Katara mused wryly.
“I think that would be wonderful,” Kanna said. “We can even spend the night in Katara’s room to talk.”

The old woman glanced at the Fire Lord and grinned.

Zuko’s eyes widened before he frowned. Damn it, he had planned on sneaking into Katara’s room that night. Well, now there was nothing for him to do but sleep in his lonely room.

“Well, if you girls are having a ladies’ night, we guys should have one too!” Sokka piped in with a grin. “I’m sure Lord Hotstuff will appreciate the advice from us married men.”

Zuko inwardly cringed when Sokka, Iroh, Hakoda, and Pakku turned to give him evil smirks. He had a bad feeling about this. He glanced at Jee, the only man besides him who had never been married, and grimaced when the admiral gave him a sympathetic look.

“That is a wonderful idea, Master Sokka,” Iroh piped in with a cheerful grin aimed at his frowning nephew. “How about we meet in my room? I have a special bottle of sake saved up for such an occasion.”

“That is genius, Iroh old man!” the blue-eyed warrior exclaimed before he turned to grin at the admiral. “You have to join the party too, Jee.”

Jee was unable to respond because the other men were already agreeing to it. He glanced at Ursa to see her smiling at him.

Zuko opened his mouth to dissuade the men from their plans, but he was interrupted when Pakku spoke next.

“I also have a special alcoholic brew from the Northern Water Tribe we can partake in,” the old waterbending master said with a smirk as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“You’re not going to back down are you, Fire Lord?” Hakoda asked as he grinned at his future son-in-law.
Zuko narrowed his eyes at the challenge.

“I will meet with you in Uncle’s room,” he finally agreed.

The men cheered and the women shook their heads at their antics. Men, they would never grow up.

“Fine, but I expect Zuko to be in good shape for the wedding,” Katara spoke up firmly as she looked at her male relatives seriously.

“Relax, Sis,” Sokka assured as he waved his hand in the air. “I promise he’ll be functional tomorrow.”

Zuko snorted. He did not need to be looked after. He could handle his alcohol very well, mostly because of his heated blood, thanks to his firebending. Most firebenders were renowned for being able to drink other benders under the table. In fact, he would bet a large sum of money that he would not feel the effects of the alcohol the following day. His uncle was an even better drinker than him. It would be amusing to see the usually grim Pakku and the level-headed Hakoda drunk, though. He suppressed a grinned at the thought.

The men headed toward Iroh’s room while the women went to their rooms to gather their sleeping attires, so they could give the couple a moment to themselves. Zuko looked down to smile at Katara.

Without a word, they began to walk slowly to her guest room. They wanted to spend as much time together as possible since they would not be able to see each other until the wedding ceremony because it was considered bad luck according to Water Tribe customs. Too soon, they were standing outside her door. Katara turned around to look at Zuko.

“This will be the last time you sleep in this room,” Zuko stated with a smirk.

“Yeah,” Katara replied with a smile.

Looking around, and not seeing anyone watching them, Zuko reached toward her and drew her to him, leaning his head down to place a soft kiss on her expectant lips. Katara grabbed the back of his clothes as she pressed herself closer to him. But just as quickly, they pulled away. It was best not to tempt fate.
“In just one more day, we’ll be married,” Zuko told her before he huskily added, “And in one more night I’ll make you fully mine.”

Again, color rushed to Katara’s cheeks as she shyly averted her eyes before she looked up to smile at him.

“I can’t wait,” she said softly.

Their lips again met in a tender and promising kiss before they pulled away. With one last lingering look, they both went their separate ways, both anticipating what the next day would bring.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

From the shadows of some thick trees, dark golden eyes narrowed at the sight of the lively Fire Nation colony. The villagers were scurrying from place to place in excitement as the sun began to set. His right hand clenched the object in his fist more tightly as his anger soared before he took a deep breath to tame it for the moment. The sound of light footsteps combined with the heavier ones of booted feet caught his attention. Slanting his eyes toward the approaching men, the silent individual waited for them to inform him about what they had found out.

“It was as you suspected,” Chang’s passive voice reached his ears.

“Yah, the Fire Lord’s marryin’ da waterbendin’ wench tomorrow,” Ping spoke next with a sneer.

“Every village is preparing to celebrate,” Chang continued as if the other man hadn’t spoken. “What do you plan to do, Jianguo?”

Jianguo returned his gaze to the unsuspecting village before them as he got lost in his thoughts. When they did not receive an immediate answer, Ping dared to speak again.

“Are we gonna do somethin’ ta stop da weddin’?” he asked in anticipation. “Maybeh raid another village? Have some fun with da women?” His smile curled into a leer.

“You know we can’t attack the colonies now that they are protected,” the former Dai Li Agent reminded him. “Besides, we haven’t been given any more orders.”
The other earthbender sniffed and then spat at the ground in frustration.

Still silent, Jianguo’s thick eyebrows furrowed deeply at Chang’s word. He had not received one word from their informant in months. Had something happened? Had he been caught? His other hand balled at his side. How dare Zuko foil his plans! First, Zuko killed his men and escaped with the lovely waterbender. And now the bastard might have destroyed the only way Jianguo could gain information, and thus his ultimate goal for revenge and glory. Ping had recounted to him what had happened that night his prisoners escaped. Jianguo could still not believe that Zuko had the ability to bend white fire. Such a thing was a myth! Besides, the whelp could not possibly have the power to wield such immense fire.

“What are your plans?” Chang once again asked.

“Yah, so wat are we gonna do?” Ping asked in exasperation.

“Nothing,” Jianguo said calmly.

“Wat?” the earthbender growled, “Wat da ya mean we’re gonna do nothin’? I thought ya wanted revenge on da bastard.”

“I do,” the firebender responded in the same cool tone.

“Then why you say we’re doin’ nothin’?” Ping asked in confusion as he scratched his dirty head.

“For now we aren’t going to do anything and we are going to lay low,” the golden-eyed man continued.

“So ya gonna let the bastard marry the waterbenda so they can live happily with each other?” Ping mocked before he spat again in distaste.

“Yes,” Jianguo replied casually.
Chang frowned and Ping sputtered in disbelief.

“I’m going to let Zuko marry the waterbender,” Jianguo continued, “I’m going to let him have a taste of happiness.”

Both Ping and Chang froze when Jianguo turned to them with a dark and cruel smile that caused the hair on the back of their necks to stand up.

“Because it’ll hurt him more when I ripped everything he loves from him,” he said with a low, malicious laugh.

Jianguo turned away from the now silent men and looked down at his clenched hand. He opened his palm and looked passively down at the bloody blue tunic one of his men had found floating down a river. He was positive it was the same one the beautiful, blue-eyed waterbender had worn when he had captured her along with that insolent Zuko. A small, lewd smile appeared on his thin lips as his thumb caressed the fabric as it were her skin he was touching.

“You have no idea of the pain I will inflict on you, Zuko,” Jianguo murmured to himself as the smile turned into a cruel smirk, “But you will when I take the waterbender away from you.”
Early the next morning, the entire Fire Nation was aflutter with activity and excitement as the common people prepared their own celebrations in honor of their Fire Lord’s upcoming marriage to Lady Katara. They hoped the new Fire Lady would aid them, for she must understand their situation a bit better. After all, she was not born a noblewoman—not that they were suffering under the rule of their Fire Lord. They had heard stories of her kind heart and compassion, so they knew she was perfect for their lord.

The Fire Nation Palace was alive with busy servants as they rushed to put the last finishing touches on the decorations. Everybody in the kitchen bustled about as the main cook gave out orders for the delicious banquet to be readied for the guests to enjoy after the ceremony. Jee and another general were ordering the guards to secure the premises and apprehend anyone who dared ruin their lord’s wedding. The Fire Nation nobility all crowded into the palace to witness the wedding of the year, while the ordinary people of the capital city waited beneath the balcony outside the palace. They could not wait to have their first glimpse of their lord’s new wife and their new Fire Lady.

Zuko stood perfectly straight as he was readied for the ceremony. Although he was not outwardly showing it, he was both excited and nervous. In just a few moments he would finally marry Katara. Again, he was assaulted with the thought that something horrible would occur. It would be just his luck, since it seemed every time he was happy something happened to change it.

He shook his head. Today was a joyous day and he refused to allow his pessimistic thoughts to ruin it.

Once his polished fire crown was nestled on his topknot, Zuko thanked the old servants as they backed away after they had finished dressing him. He was getting ready in one of the many empty rooms in the royal family wing. His mother and uncle had practically kicked him out of his bedchamber as soon as he woke up and prohibited him to enter it until the wedding night.

Agni, he could not wait. He could not wait to marry Katara. He could not wait to finally make love to her and live the rest of his life with her.

The servants placed a full-length mirror before him so he could admire their work. As Zuko looked himself over in the mirror, a small smirk curled his lips. He was sure Katara would like what she saw. His feet were encased in black pointed boots edged in gold that reached below his knees. His legs were clad in dark red trousers that were tucked into his boots and on his torso he wore armor of the same dark red color also edged in gold. A thick, golden sash wound around his waist, its two long ends falling down his side. Clipped to his armor and hanging down his back was a black cape trimmed in gold that reached right behind his knees. Tied to his right hip were his sheathed dual broadswords. They were more of a show to demonstrate his strength and power since it was not as if
he was going to use them. At least he hoped not, but if someone dared to object to his marriage to Katara, he would cut them down.

He was interrupted from his thoughts when a soft knock was heard at the door.

“Enter,” Zuko called out absentmindedly as he again adjusted his swords at his hip.

He looked up as the door opened and he smiled softly when his mother entered with a joyful smile on her lips. The two servants bowed and retreated, closing the door behind them.

“Mother,” he greeted warmly.

“Look at you, Zuko,” she said proudly. “You look so handsome.”

“Thanks,” he muttered as he turned toward the mirror and pretended to fix his fire crown.

Zuko turned back to look at his mother when he heard her clear her throat. He raised a curious eyebrow when he noticed that her cheeks had turned pink and she was looking at him with a serious expression.

“Zuko…about your wedding night,” she began carefully.

Oh, gods, no, Zuko thought in mortification.

It was one thing listening to his uncle’s advice about sex and what to expect on his wedding night, but it was another thing having his mother talk to him about his sex life. Zuko was sure his right cheek was a deep red color.

“It is easy for men to engage in…intimate activities,” Ursa began slowly, “But for a woman her first time will be painful and far from pleasant if the man is not gentle and careful of her.”

She paused and took a deep breath, and if Zuko had not been looking at her, he would have missed her slight wince. Zuko frowned darkly. Was his mother talking about her own experience? Was Ozai
…rough with her on their wedding night? Zuko would not put it passed his sire. Ozai was a selfish bastard and he did not care if he hurt anyone as long as he got what he desired.

*I won’t be like him, Zuko vowed fervently. I will never hurt Katara in such a way.*

He was brought out of his dark thoughts when he saw his mother shake her head as if to dispel her memories. She gave him a shy smile.

“In order for you and Katara to have a memorable wedding night, you must rein in your passion in order to heed her needs and be mindful of her discomfort,” she continued kindly. “Once she feels the pain subside she will let you know, but I advise you that for the first time you should…be gentle.”

Zuko understood his mother was just worried that he would allow his lust to take complete control over him, that he would not be attentive to Katara’s pain. Probably just what Ozai did to Ursa. But she should not have worried for Zuko had already planned on doing everything possible in order for Katara to have a wonderful and enjoyable wedding night. His uncle had already given him advice on how he should care for Katara, but he supposed it did not hurt to have a woman’s perspective on the matter. After all, his mother knew what she was talking about. Zuko quickly shook the thought away. He did not want to think about it or else he would get angry.

“Thank you for…the advice,” he said before he cleared his throat. “I promise I will be mindful of Katara’s comfort and…pleasure.”

Ursa smiled and the awkwardness quickly dissipated. She walked closer to her son, placing a hand on his arm so he could turn to face her again. She reached both her hands up and cupped his face.

“I also wanted to let you know how proud I am of you, my son,” she told him softly. “You are a fine young man and I know you will be a fine husband for Katara. I could not have asked for a better son.”

She paused and sadness settled on her features.

“I am so sorry that I was not there for you as you grew up. I will always regret it,” she continued, her voice strained with remorse and sadness.

“It saddens me too, but you had to do what you had to do,” Zuko reassured his mother as he placed
his hands over hers. “Thanks to you, Mom, my life was spared and thanks to your sacrifice I was able to meet the woman I will love for the rest of my life. And now I’m going to marry her.”

Ursa smiled at him gratefully as her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She took a few breaths to calm herself before she ended up crying before her son’s wedding even began and she smiled.

“Katara is a wonderful woman, Zuko,” Ursa commented assuredly as she took his hand and gave it a motherly pat. “She will be a good wife to you. She will make you happy.”

“I know,” Zuko responded with a smile.

“Well, I have to go help Kanna finish getting Katara ready,” the Fire Lord’s mother said enthusiastically. “From what I have seen, Katara is coming out wonderfully!”

“I can’t wait to see her,” the firebender said excitedly.

“Patience, my son,” she told him with a soft laugh.

Zuko flushed and grumbled under his breath when his mother laughed a bit more loudly. With a peck on his cheek and wishes of good luck, Ursa left him alone. Not a minute passed after she left than there was another knock and the door was opened. Silently, Zuko watched as his uncle stepped in followed by Jee, Hakoda, Sokka, and Pakku.

Zuko suppressed a smirk as he remembered the drunken antics of the tribesmen the previous night. Even Jee had loosened up a little and joked with the men. It had been amusing, awkward, and embarrassing when they had tried to give him advice about his marriage—which included keeping his wife well satisfied in bed—by talking about their own experiences. He did not think they realized they were giving him advice on how to keep Katara satisfied until he pointed it out. Then it seemed to dawn on them that they were also talking about their other female relatives. Sokka had freaked out at the thought of what his dad did to his mom and what Pakku had done to his grandmother. Hakoda had also been scandalized at the thought of Pakku doing such things to his mother. The waterbending master had flushed so deeply, Zuko thought it would become a permanent color on him. The expressions of horror on the men’s faces had been hilarious and he had been unable to curb his chuckles.

Sokka had then angrily and drunkenly demanded Zuko to keep his hand off his baby sister unless he wished to die. Zuko had wickedly retorted that he was no eunuch and, as long as he was alive, he
would touch his wife as much as he wished. The men had spluttered and raged, their faces flushed with their intoxication, anger, and embarrassment, but they were distracted when Iroh had cheerfully asked if they wished for more of his special sake. Iroh had been the only one who found the entire experience humorous. They had lasted a few more hours before the tribesmen passed out in a drunken stupor on Iroh’s floor. Feeling the effects of the alcohol a little, Zuko had made it to his room without staggering and stripped himself of his rumpled clothing. He had only had time to bemoan the fact that he had to wait until the next day to see Katara before he promptly passed out on his bed.

Fortunately, he had been able to wake up at dawn as usual without any lingering effects, which could not be said for the other men. When his uncle arrived to kick him out of his room, Iroh had amusedly told him the tribesmen had woken up with massive hangovers and had continued to lie on the floor, groaning over their discomfort and misery. The only reason they got up was because Kanna and Suki had arrived to order them to bathe and change and drink a potent Water Tribe beverage that was said to cure any hangover. It seemed it worked since the men did not look as if they would be getting sick at any moment.

“Nephew, you look so gallant!” Iroh exclaimed with a grin. “Miss Katara will surely swoon at the sight of you.”

“Oh uncle,” Zuko muttered.

He glowered as the men laughed.

“I congratulate you again on your wedding, my lord,” Jee interrupted, taking sympathy on the young man. “All the guards are in position. Nothing will ruin your wedding to Lady Katara.”

Zuko inclined his head to show that he understood. He had ordered Jee to keep an eye on Wei. Even though the old advisor had not done anything suspicious as of late, Zuko still did not trust him.

“Thank you, Jee,” the young lord said sincerely and with a small smile.

Hakoda cleared his throat and Zuko turned to look at his soon-to-be father-in-law. The firebender sobered up when the chieftain gave him a serious look.

“Katara is my only daughter and I love her dearly,” Hakoda began, “She has been the light of my life ever since my Kya brought her into this world and she deserves to be happy.”
“I swear to you, Chief Hakoda, on my honor, that I will do everything in my power to make it so,” Zuko vowed firmly.

Hakoda smiled and gave an assured nod.

“I know,” he said as he reached out a hand to firmly grasped Zuko’s forearm before he added with a grin, “Congratulations.”

“Take care of my baby sister, you hear?” Sokka spoke up as he gave Zuko a manly pat on the back.

“I will,” the young lord promised.

After a few more congratulations and jesting remarks, mostly from Sokka, all the men left except for Iroh. Zuko looked up from smoothing his cape when his uncle remained quiet.

“Uncle?” he called out.

Iroh smiled as he moved closer to his nephew until they were facing each other.

“You have changed so much over these past years, Nephew, especially this year,” he began as he smiled, “I am so proud of you.”

“Uncle,” Zuko again said when it seemed the old man’s words caught in his throat due to his emotions.

Taking a deep breath, Iroh again smiled as he placed his hands on Zuko’s shoulders.

“If Lu Ten had lived and married I’d be saying this to him, but I will say it to you since I consider you as another son,” Iroh continued in a firmer tone, “I’m proud of the man you have become. You have come across many obstacles in your young life, but you fought against them and became stronger. You have found your destiny and you have become a great Fire Lord.”
“And now you have come to the next stage of your life and I know you will try your hardest to be a
good husband to Miss Katara,” he said proudly. “I wish both you and your new bride much
happiness.”

Zuko smiled at his uncle fondly. His real father may hate him and Ozai may be the worst father ever,
but Zuko was glad to say that Iroh was like a true father to him. And Zuko knew he did not need to
say the words aloud to express his feelings, for his uncle understood.

“Thank you, Uncle,” he told him sincerely.

A grin again appeared on Iroh’s face and he gave Zuko’s shoulders a few pats.

“I’ll see you at the ceremony, Nephew,” he said with a chuckle.

With a nod, Zuko watched his uncle turn and leave. The young lord turned away from the mirror and
began to slowly pace the room as he waited for the ceremony to begin. He had not walked a few
steps when another knock sounded at the door. Zuko frowned. Who the hell could it be now?

As he heard the door open and close, Zuko turned around only to stiffen in shock when he saw who
had entered the room. Aang stood before him wearing a formal monk’s robe, his wooden staff
clenched tightly in his hand. Zuko hid his surprise in a stoic mask as he wondered what Aang could
be doing there. The memory of the nightmare he had where Aang took Katara away from him
surfaced in Zuko’s mind and he quickly shoved it away.

The Fire Lord and the Avatar eyed each other guardedly for a moment without saying a single word.
Tension was thick in the air. Zuko heard Aang take a deep breath and he prepared himself for what
the airbender had to say.

“Even though it was a hard decision…” Aang began slowly as he glanced away. Then after a
moment, he again looked at Zuko. “I decided to come because I wanted to be there for your and
Katara’s…big day.”

Zuko relaxed slightly and he unclenched his hands. He had not even realized he had balled them into
fists.

“Thank you,” Zuko said coolly. “Katara will be happy.”
There was a tensed pause before Zuko continued, his cool tone defrosting a bit.

“I never meant to hurt you, Aang, and I really am sorry that you had to find out about Katara and me the way you did,” he said truthfully.

“I know,” Aang responded lowly. “And I’m sorry for attacking you.”

“I understand why you reacted the way you did,” Zuko replied with a small shrug.

Aang took another big breath and Zuko could see that this was difficult for the young airbender. He also noticed that Aang seemed…different, more…mature.

“Even though it still hurts, the thought of Katara being with you…” Aang trailed off in a strained tone before he cleared his throat and continued, “I want Katara’s happiness and I now accept that that’s with you.”

“I will make her happy,” Zuko promised before he added, “I hope one day we can be friends again.”

Aang gave him a small smile.

“We’re still friends,” he said and chuckled when Zuko gave him an incredulous look, “But it’ll take a while before things return to normal and the awkwardness goes away.”

Zuko chuckled quietly as the dark tension that had grown between them over the past months seemed to lessen.

“I see now that Katara’s good for you,” the gray-eyed monk commented with a grin, “You’ve changed.”

“I know,” the dark-haired lord replied with a smirk.
Aang’s grin faded and he sighed as he rubbed at his chest above his heart.

“Even though it’s hard, I’m working on moving on,” he added before he mumbled, “But Toph’s helping me with it.”

“Toph?” Zuko repeated with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Aang replied as his pale cheeks flushed.

“Well, I wish both of you luck,” Zuko said with a small grin.

The blush deepened on Aang’s cheeks as he muttered a low ‘thanks.’ Clearing his throat, the Avatar then gave the Fire Lord a hard look.

“You better treat Katara right and make her happy. Or else I’ll come after you,” he threatened.

“You’ll have to get in line then,” Zuko said dryly.

Aang laughed at Zuko’s disgruntled expression.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you later,” the airbender said once he composed himself.

Without another word, Aang left.

Zuko sighed and then smiled. Well…he had not expected that to happen so soon, if at all. But he was glad Aang had forgiven them. Perhaps Aang being there was a good sign that everything would come out all right. Maybe nothing bad will happen. Perhaps Zuko really was finally going to be happy.

Katara tried not to fidget as her wedding dress was given the finishing touches. She had been woken up right at dawn by the women and rushed to the bathroom where she bathed in water that had been mixed with sweet smelling oils and soap that left her skin feeling as smooth as a baby’s. Then she was quickly taken back into her room in order to begin styling her long hair. A few hours later, her
chocolate-brown hair was piled atop her head in an elaborate coiffure. Light makeup was applied to her face and black kohl lined the rims of her eyes. Soft rouge was applied to her cheeks and her lips had been slicked with a soft red paint in order to enhance her natural beauty. Then she donned her beautiful wedding dress.

She was so nervous! But she was more happy and excited than anything else. In just a few moments she would become Zuko’s wife!

She had asked Ursa how Zuko was faring that morning after drinking with her male relatives the previous night. Ursa had assured her he was perfectly well and eager to see her again. Katara had been amused when Suki told her the other men had been feeling the opposite and she and Kanna had to whip them back into shape for the wedding.

The waterbender tried to tune out what the other women were talking about as they fussed over her. Suki and Ty Lee were each carrying an excited twin. Lady Ursa had returned to place beautiful gold and black jeweled pins on Katara’s hair to compliment her necklace. Gran-Gran and the palace seamstress were making sure everything was perfect with the dress. Ty Lee had confessed a few hours ago that she had suspected Zuko and Katara loved each other because of the color of their auras, but she had not wanted to intervene in their business, so she stayed quiet. Katara had scowled at her halfheartedly.

“So when did Haru and you finally get together?” Suki asked curiously as she bounced Ting on her hip.

Ty Lee let out a dreamy sigh.

“Haru came to visit me on Kyoshi Island a few months ago,” the acrobat began happily, “He confessed that he loves me and I confessed that I love him, and now we’re together and couldn’t be happier!”

“Young love is an amazing thing,” Lady Ursa commented as she smiled at Katara who returned the smile.

“But Lady Ursa,” Ty Lee exclaimed with wide eyes, “you’re still young! You can find love again!”

Katara quickly glanced at the beautiful noblewoman who held a sad smile on her face.
“Not everybody is meant to find true love,” Ursa said quietly.

Katara almost blurted out that she should give Jee a chance, but she bit her lip and remained silent. It was none of her business and she was not completely sure if Jee was interested in Ursa romantically. Besides, she did not know how Zuko would feel at the thought of his mother being with another man. She was brought out of her musings when she felt her hands being clasped in a gentle hold. She looked up to see Lady Ursa smiling gently at her.

“Thank you so much for being there for my son when I could not,” the older woman began softly, “Since the moment when you left my old cabin and I saw you two embrace, I knew you were the right woman for Zuko. Thank you for giving him your love.”

Katara felt her eyes prickle with tears and she fought to hold them back.

“I will try with everything I am to make him happy,” Katara promised as she gave her future mother-in-law a watery smile.

“I still remember when you told me you were not ready for marriage,” Gran-Gran piped in with a teasing smile, “Seems the young Fire Lord changed your mind rather quickly.”

Katara again felt herself blush when the women laughed, but she could not deny it. They were interrupted as a knock sounded at the door and all the women turned to look at it curiously.

“If it’s the Fire Lord, we’ll have to kick him out,” Kanna said with a small grin on her aged face.

The door was thrown open and they watched as Toph strode in with her own grin.

“Luckily, I’m not Lord Sparky then,” she commented with a chuckle.

Katara gasped.

“Toph!” she exclaimed happily.
“Even if I can’t see you, I’m sure you’ll give Sparky a heart attack,” Toph teased with another chuckle.

Katara felt herself flush as the women laughed and giggled.

“I’m so glad you came,” the waterbender said after the laughter had calmed down.

“I wouldn’t have missed your wedding to Zuko for anything in the world,” the short earthbender remarked with a casual shrug before she added with a grin, “Especially since I’ve been waiting for it for years!”

The women again laughed and the waterbender scowled. Sobering up, Katara wrung her hands as she looked at Toph anxiously.

“Did…Aang come with you?” she asked quietly.

“Yup,” Toph responded with a nod before she jerked her thumb toward the door, “He’s waiting outside to speak to you.”

Katara’s eyes widened in surprise. Then she looked at everybody with an expectant look.

“We’ll wait outside,” Kanna spoke up as she began to usher everybody out before she added sternly, “But you only have a few minutes since we haven’t finished yet.”

Katara nodded and smiled gratefully at her grandmother. As the other women stepped out of the room, Kanna motioned for Aang to enter before she stepped out, leaving the door open behind her.

As soon as he spotted Katara, Aang’s gray eyes widened.

“Y-you look wonderful, Katara,” he stuttered and then blushed as he rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Thanks, Aang,” Katara replied softly as she gave him a small smile. “Despite everything, I’m glad
that you decided to come.”

“Although it still hurts, I wanted to be there for you on your...wedding,” he responded in a low tone.

“Thank you,” the waterbender again said before she sighed sadly. “Aang, I’m so sorry for hurting you.”

Aang shrugged.

“The pain is just a dull ache now as I’ve come to terms with what happened and what you feel for Zuko,” he reassured her.

“Do you really mean it?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” he said with a firm nod.

Katara’s shoulders sagged a bit in relief and she smiled.

“I’m glad,” she told him sincerely.

She was curious when Aang suddenly blushed, averted his eyes, and shuffled his feet.

“Toph’s been helping me move on,” he admitted.

“How?” Katara asked curiously.

The flush on Aang’s cheeks deepened.

“She has made me see that I still have another chance at love,” he said with a smile.
“Toph?” Katara repeated with a raised eyebrow.

Aang laughed and then grinned.

“Zuko reacted the same way.”

Katara quickly got over her shock and composed herself as she smiled.

“I’m sure if you give Toph a chance, she’ll make you happy,” she said assuredly.

“I know,” Aang responded with a soft smile on his lips that suddenly turned sad. “At first, I was so hurt and angry when I thought that Zuko had taken you away from me, but the more time I spend with Toph, and as I thought things over, I realized something.”

He paused and took a deep breath as he stared at her sadly.

“I never lost you, Katara,” he began quietly, “because I never had you.”

Katara’s eyes softened at the sadness in his eyes, but she could not dispute with what he said because it was true.

“I also realized that I had sometimes been a childish and selfish person, and that’s one reason why you couldn’t love me,” he continued, “You needed a man, not a selfish brat, and Zuko was that man.”

Aang shook his head and smiled again.

“I hope one day I can come to love Toph the way she loves me, so she won’t know such a pain as unrequited love,” he said softly. “It is the worst kind of love because it is an incomplete love. I…I want to make her happy.”

Katara gave him a glad smile.
“And I’m sure you will,” she told him encouragingly before she added, “Thank you so much for forgiving us and for coming.”

“No, thank you, Katara,” he said with a shake of his head and a smile, “You set me free from the iceberg, you were there when I needed someone the most, and because of you I know what love can be. You taught me that I am capable of loving someone, and if it’s fate’s plan, I will show that love to Toph.”

“I wish you both luck,” Katara told him sincerely before a teasing smile appeared on her lips as she added, “Maybe there will be another wedding soon.”

Aang’s entire face turned red and he stuttered while Katara laughed quietly.

“Well, I’ve said what I needed to say,” he told her after he composed himself. “I’ll see you and Zuko at the end of the ceremony before Toph and I leave.”

With one last sad and pained smile, he turned and walked out the room. Katara let out a small relieved sigh. She was glad to know Aang did not hate her and Zuko, and she was so grateful that he had decided to attend their wedding even though it still pained him. She hoped that Aang would find his happiness soon—hopefully with Toph.

As soon as Aang left the room, all the women except the blind earthbender rushed back inside. They began to fuss over her again since the time was drawing near for the ceremony to begin. Once they were satisfied, they stepped back to admire their work.

Kanna and the seamstress stepped forward, the latter carrying a long box, and stopped before the waterbender. The seamstress held out the box and Kanna opened the lid before she carefully pulled out a long, beautiful veil that was made of a shimmering, transparent material to cover Katara’s face as was tradition in the tribes. They had decided to make it translucent since the bride’s face was uncovered in Fire Nation tradition. Kanna moved behind her granddaughter and pinned the elegant veil below Katara’s elaborate hairstyle so her hair could be seen. Then she moved the extra part over her head until it fell gently down to cover her face.

Katara turned to look herself in the full-length mirror that had been brought in while she had been taking a bath. The waterbender gasped softly at her reflection.
Her wedding dress was tinted a dark cerulean color with gold and black embroidery to compliment her jewelry. The beautiful dress fell below her feet, which were encased in slippers of the same dark blue color, and ended in a small train. A thick golden girdle with black embroidery and a blue braided cord accented her slim waist and her hips. Long sleeves edged with gold designs ended to her knuckles and flared several inches below the elbows. Her betrothal necklace was in view for everyone to see due to the slight draped neckline. The veil had been the last detail.

“Oh, Katara, you look so gorgeous,” Suki gushed.

*I hope Zuko thinks so too,* Katara thought to herself as she softly thanked the women who kept complimenting her.

Another knock at the door made the chattering women pause and turn toward the sound. Ty Lee bounced toward the door and opened it, revealing the smiling father of the bride. As Hakoda stepped inside the room, he stopped short at the sight of his daughter before he quickly walked up to her. Katara was glad to see her father did not show any signs of his drinking binge of the previous night.

“Katara, you look beautiful,” he exclaimed in fatherly pride before a nostalgic smile touched his lips. “Just as beautiful as your mother on the day I married her.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Katara replied with the same sad smile.

Hakoda shook himself to disperse the sudden melancholic mood and he grinned at his daughter.

“Are you ready?” he asked before he added teasingly, “There’s still time left for you to change your mind.”

He ignored his mother’s scowl and Lady Ursa’s frown.

“There’s nothing that will change my mind, Dad,” Katara responded as she laughed softly at her father’s teasing. Then in a firmer tone, she added, “I’m ready.”

Hakoda reached out to gently grasp his daughter’s hands in his, squeezing them softly as he smiled down at her.
“You have grown into a strong and beautiful woman, Katara,” he began with a catch to his voice, “I am so proud of you and I am honored to call you my daughter.”

He paused before he continued in the same melancholy tone as before.

“I’m sure if Kya still lived she would have said the same and much more to express our happiness since she was always better at these things.” He paused again and cleared his throat.

“Oh, Dad,” Katara sniffled as she wrapped her arms tightly around her father.

She had not said anything before, but as soon as Zuko had proposed to her, Katara had lamented the fact that her mother would not be present to witness her wedding to the man she loved. But Katara was so happy to hear her father say how proud both her parents were of her. She sniffled again as tears began to sting her eyes.

“Don’t you dare cry!” Suki cried out. “You’ll ruin the makeup.”

Hakoda’s booming laughter resounded around the room as he pulled away and joked that Katara’s ruined makeup would give her more time to think things through. They laughed since they all knew he was trying to make up for his small emotional moment.

The southern chieftain then turned to his daughter. She was his little girl no longer for she was now a wonderful woman that was soon to become the wife of a great man.

“You’ll do great,” he told her when he noticed her looking nervously out the window.

Katara took a deep, calming breath and smiled at her father.

“It is time,” Lady Ursa spoke up and smiled gently at Katara.

After a few more congratulations and good wishes, the women left the room in order to take their seats among the excited crowd. Katara and Hakoda were the last ones to leave the room. The waterbender smiled when she spotted Shen and Kuo who had been waiting outside in order to escort her to the wedding ceremony. Both guards returned the smile, and soon the small group was heading
toward the public garden, which Ursa had convinced Katara would be a better place for the ceremony to be held than the banquet hall.

As they walked, Hakoda squeezed Katara’s hand, which was tucked beneath his arm. He smiled at her when she looked up at him.

“Zuko is a good man and he’ll make a fine husband for you. If he wasn’t, I wouldn’t have allowed him to marry my precious daughter,” Hakoda told her with an assured nod and a soft smile. “I know he will do anything to make you happy.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Katara replied with a grateful smile.

Soon they arrived at their destination with the silent guards following a respectful distance away. Katara was curious of how the decorations came out to be. Although most of the ideas were hers, Ursa and Iroh had not allowed her to step into the garden while it was being prepared. Hakoda and Katara paused just outside the entrance to the public garden. The waterbender gasped in awe at the sight that greeted her.

There were red and blue paper lanterns hanging overhead and the trees had been decorated elegantly with silks and crystals. Beautiful flower arrangements were placed around the place and lined the aisle on which she was going to walk down. The aisle led to a small platform beneath a canopy of flowers and silks where the Great Fire Sage and the Water Tribe spiritual priest were waiting to officiate the wedding ceremony. The many rows of low benches that were placed on either side of the aisle—which was speckled with red fire lily and white rose petals—were crowded with people conversing animatedly with each other as they waited for the big event to commence.

It was magnificent. All the preparations for this day had paid off.

Suddenly, the deep sound of a gong resonated throughout the garden, and Katara gulped when everybody turned in their spots to look at her. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, Katara stepped into garden and a soft tune composed of Fire Nation and Southern Water Tribe instruments floated around them.

Standing straight at the front, Zuko spun around as soon as he heard the gong and the people gasp. His breath hitched at the sight of his bride walking down the aisle toward him. She was breathtaking in her wedding dress and it was all he could do not to spring toward her and scoop her up in his arms. He watched as Katara smiled at the people she passed by before she turned her gaze before her. A shock went through him when their eyes met through her veil.
Katara gasped softly at how incredibly handsome her soon-to-be-husband looked. The satisfaction and warmth in his amber eyes made her speed up a little. Her father had to gently hold her back. She blushed when she saw Zuko’s eyes gleam with amusement and she heard her father chuckle quietly under his breath.

The bride and groom could not take their eyes off each other. The people murmured amongst themselves about how dashing the Fire Lord looked and how beautiful the woman he had chosen to marry was.

Finally, the soon to be wedded couple thought as Katara finally made it to where Zuko was standing.

Katara and Hakoda bowed before Zuko as a sign of respect and he returned the gesture as a sign of acceptance. With one last squeeze, Hakoda handed his daughter’s hand over to her future husband and Zuko immediately took her hand in his.

“Take care of her,” Hakoda said softly.

“I will,” Zuko responded.

Hakoda smiled as he stepped down to take his seat on the front bench where the family of the couple was sitting.

Zuko tightened his hold on Katara’s small hand and he smiled down at her.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered softly.

The elegant gossamer-thin veil did little to hide his bride’s blushing cheeks as she returned his smile and compliment. They turned around to face the Great Fire Sage and the spiritual priest, then they knelt down on elaborate red cushions as was custom in the Fire Nation.

“Today we celebrate the union between Fire Lord Zuko and Lady Katara,” the Great Fire Sage began in a loud voice that carried throughout the garden, “This marriage between this man and this woman will not only unite two people but two nations.”
“We are here to witness the beginning of a new life for this man and this woman,” the Water Tribe spiritual priest spoke next before he looked at the couple before him. “Marriage is not an easy road, but if both of you put your minds, wills, and hearts into making your partner happy, marriage can be a wonderful thing.”

After both men finished their speech, the spiritual leader stepped forward with a long, thick string which was made of red and blue threads entwined together. Zuko held out his left hand and the old man tied one end of the string on his middle finger before tying the other end on Katara’s right middle finger.

“This string is as a symbol of your lives, hearts, and souls being forever tied together in matrimony,” he recited.

As he finished, the man stepped back to again stand beside the fire sage .The Great Fire Sage stepped forward with a golden chalice in his hand filled with a bittersweet wine.

“The sharing of the cup of bittersweet wine is a symbol of the married couple sharing both the bad and good times during their life together,” the fire sage recited. “It is a reminder that there will be hardships, but there will also be happiness.”

He handed it to Zuko who took it with an incline of his head and brought it to his lips to drink from before he turned to Katara and handed it to her. Katara inclined her head to his offer and took the goblet to drink the rest of the wine. Then she handed it back to the fire sage. Once the tribal priest had taken the cup from him, the fire sage turned to address Zuko.

“Do you, Fire Lord Zuko, swear before Agni and before your people to provide for and protect your wife and any children she bears you?” the fire sage asked.

“I swear,” Zuko responded firmly.

“Do you promise before Tui and La to be a strong beam for your wife where she can find support from her troubles? Do you promise to be faithful to your wife, to stand beside her through both hardship and happiness, through sickness and health, for as long as you both live?” the spiritual leader recited from the Water Tribe’s tradition.

“I promise,” Zuko again replied fervently.
He turned slightly to smile at Katara who smiled lovingly back at him. The waterbender returned her attention forward when the Great Fire Sage addressed her next.

“Do you, Lady Katara, swear before Agni and your new people that you will help Fire Lord Zuko in his rule, to care for your husband and any children he gives you?” he asked.

“I swear,” Katara responded immediately.

“Do you promise before Tui and La to be a refuge for your husband where he can find solace from his burdens?” the spiritual leader continued, “Do you promise to be faithful to him, to cherish him, and stand by his side through both hardship and happiness, through sickness and health, as long as both of you live?”

“I promise,” Katara replied firmly as she glanced at Zuko and smiled when he glanced at her with bright, golden eyes.

The spiritual priest then grabbed a small bowl that was resting beside the golden cup and stepped toward the couple again. He carefully removed the string from their fingers and placed it inside the bowl before turning toward the fire sage who was holding a lit candle. The fire sage handed it to the other man, who tipped the candle into the bowl so the small flame could touch the red and blue string. As soon as the flame touched it, the string caught fire and incinerated into ashes. It was a symbol of precaution, as if by having the string cut the couple’s relationship would be severed.

“Once two individuals,” the old tribesman began in a loud voice for all to hear, “will now become one. May no one dare to come between what the gods have now joined.”

Once finished, he stepped to the side as another fire sage appeared and stood behind the Great Fire Sage with a golden box held in his hands. The Great Fire Sage stepped up to stand before the bride and he looked down with a serious expression on his face.

“Are you, Lady Katara of the Southern Water Tribe, willing to take your responsibilities as Fire Lady?” he asked.

“I am,” she replied.
“Are you willing to help Fire Lord Zuko in his rule, to help him make the right decisions if needed to guide this nation, to help the Fire Nation and its people?”

“I am.”

“Are you willing to provide Fire Lord Zuko an heir in order to continue the royal bloodline?”

“I am,” Katara responded fiercely, her blue eyes glinting in determination.

The Great Fire Sage turned toward the other man holding the box. Lifting the lid, he pulled out the golden fire crown. The Fire Lady crown was smaller and more feminine-looking than the Fire Lord’s. Stepping forward, the Great Sage held the crown high for everyone to see.

“I proclaim you Fire Lady Katara!” he said loudly as he pinned the crown in Katara’s hair.

The crowd applauded and cheered.

“Rise and acknowledge your people,” the old man told the couple.

Zuko took hold of Katara’s hand and helped her up before they turned around to face the crowd.

“I present to you Fire Lord Zuko and his wife, Fire Lady Katara!” the Great Fire Sage exclaimed. “May they reign over the Fire Nation justly and may they live happy lives together!”

Again the crowd cheered and applauded. The newlyweds smiled when they heard Iroh and Sokka whistle and Toph shout a ‘hell yeah!’

The spiritual priest again stepped forward as he exclaimed in a lively voice.

“The groom may now kiss his bride!”
Zuko and Katara turned to face each other for the Southern Water Tribe’s traditional first kiss of the newly married couple. Such a display was not done in the Fire Nation wedding tradition since such affectionate acts in public were frowned upon by the upper society. But when Katara had asked him what he thought about such a tradition, Zuko had immediately agreed upon it.

Eyes gleaming brightly, Zuko carefully lifted the thin veil over her head, and Katara blushed at the intensity in which he stared at her. Grabbing her arms gently, Zuko pulled her to him and their hearts raced as he leaned down to kiss her lips softly.

The watching crowd burst into louder cheers and whistles.

Pulling away, Zuko smiled at his blushing bride.

“I finally have you,” he whispered to her. “Now nothing can take you away from me. You are mine.”

The waterbender felt her heart skip a beat and she smiled at him.

“I’ve always been yours,” Katara replied softly.

Warmth spread through Zuko’s chest at her words and all he wanted was to kiss her again. Before he could do so, the Great Fire Sage cleared his throat. Zuko suppressed a frustrated frown as he turned to look at the old man.

“You must present your Fire Lady to your awaiting people, my lord,” the fire sage reminded him.

Zuko inclined his head to show he remembered the tradition. Tucking Katara’s arm beneath his and placing her hand over his forearm, Zuko stepped down from the small platform and walked back down the aisle with Katara at his side. The people had risen from their seats and were smiling and cheering as the married couple passed by.

As soon as Zuko and Katara stepped back into the palace corridor, Kuo and Shen appeared behind them to escort them toward the grand balcony that overlooked the walls of the palace and to the city below. As they stepped onto the balcony and walked toward its edge, Katara gasped at the multitude of people standing below. A cheer went up when the crowd spotted the couple.
Zuko held out the hand that was not holding Katara’s arm and the people quieted.

“Children of the Fire Nation,” Zuko began in a loud and strong voice, “With Agni’s blessing I, Fire Lord Zuko, present to you your new Fire Lady and my wife, Fire Lady Katara!”


Katara smiled in delight at their excitement. She raised a hand to wave at them and more cheers erupted at her gesture and smile. She heard Zuko chuckle quietly beside her and she glanced at him to see a pleased expression on his face.

“Go and celebrate this joyous day!” Zuko again shouted and the citizens again cheered.

After a few more cheers as Katara waved, Zuko led her away from the balcony and the loud crowd. They headed back to the public garden with Shen and Kuo following silently behind.

“They love you already,” Zuko murmured, pleased, as he glanced at her from the corner of his eye.

“I hope you’re right,” Katara replied softly.

“I am right,” he answered assuredly before he added in a more quiet tone, “But not as much as I love you.”

“Zuko,” Katara whined softly, “Don’t say such wonderful things when you know I can’t kiss you.”

Zuko chuckled quietly at her pout, but he could see the pleasure in her eyes due to his words.

Soon, they stepped back into the public garden. The rows of benches had been moved around the place and tables had been brought in so the hungry guests could partake in the delicious banquet.
As soon as they were spotted, the newlywed’s family swarmed around them to congratulate them with hugs and good wishes. Then they were led to the table of honor where the royal couple was to sit for the celebration. Just as they sat down, Katara and Zuko were approached first by Chief Arnook, King Kuei, King Bumi and their people followed by the rest of the minor nobility of both the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom. If Iroh had not stepped in to point out that the married couple should also have a chance to partake in their own banquet meal, they would not have been left alone.

As soon as they had finished their meal, Zuko helped Katara up and led her toward the center of the garden for their first dance as a married couple. Katara smiled joyfully and Zuko’s eyes gleamed in happiness as he twirled her around and brought her close to him. Those that watched them could see how much they cared for the other. The Fire Nation nobility were surprised to see their usually emotionless lord so happy.

“You know,” Katara began teasingly after Zuko had spun her around again and brought her close to him, “I think the noblemen might think something’s wrong with you if you continue smiling like that.”

Zuko shrugged before he grinned as he brought her even closer to him as he spun them around.

“Well, if there’s someone to blame for that, it’s you,” he replied grimly yet the playfulness could be heard in his tone.

“Well I’ll take the blame,” she replied impishly.

Zuko chuckled and his golden eyes gleamed.

After the dance ended, the Fire Lord and his Fire Lady began to mingle with the crowd—much to Zuko’s reluctance. Again, they were surrounded by people. The royal couple was glad to see old friends they had come across during the war. Haru’s parents had also arrived to witness their marriage. Teo and his family were also there and The Duke, now a young teen, had come with them since both boys had become best friends during the group’s time in the Western Air Temple. Zuko was glad to know that Katara had not invited Jet to their wedding and Katara was relieved that Mai had decided not to make an appearance.

Katara smiled when she saw her brother and his family approaching them again when Chief Arnook and his wife left them. Sokka tried to keep Suki from being around his first love Yue’s parents too much so she would not feel uncomfortable.
“Congratulations you two,” he said with a grin.

“Thank you, Sokka,” Zuko responded with a nod and a small smile.

Sokka gave him a manly pat on the back with one hand, while he held Jing with his other arm.

“If you need any advice about being a great husband, I’d be glad to give it to you,” the blue-eyed warrior said with a grin.

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Zuko responded wryly. Did Sokka forget he had already declined his offer the previous night?

“Oh, come now,” Sokka exclaimed with a laugh. “You can ask me about anything. You should listen to a wise, married man, my dear brother-in-law.”

“Oh, really?” Katara interjected with an impish grin aimed at her older brother. “Anything? Does that also include the more…intimate aspects of marriage?”

Suki laughed and Zuko smirked when Sokka’s eyes bugged out in horror.

“Ew, gross!” Sokka shouted as he tried to cover his daughter’s ear with one hand. He shuddered. “Anything but that!”

“But Sokka,” Zuko spoke up smoothly, though his eyes gleamed in amusement, “You said you’d give me advice on anything.”

Yeah, he doesn’t remember anything about last night, Zuko mused with wicked enjoyment at Sokka’s discomfort.

Eyes narrowed, the tribe warrior turned to glare at the amused Fire Lord.
"I said anything but that!" Sokka repeated vehemently. "If you try to talk to me about you doing...that with my baby sister, I will cut off your tongue."

"Believe me, I will not be going to you to talk about such things," Zuko replied sardonically. It always amused him when he was able to discomfit the joker of the group.

"Good," Sokka said with a firm nod.

He ignored his sister's snicker and his wife's laughter. When they calmed down from their amusement, Sokka looked at Katara and his expression turned serious.

"I'm gonna miss my baby sister," he began with a sigh. "I promised Dad I was gonna look after you and I tried to keep my promise to keep you out of trouble," he teased and laughed when Katara scowled at him. Sobering up, he added, "Now I place that responsibility of taking care of you to Zuko."

Katara felt tears gather in her eyes and she stepped forward to hug her brother that, although sometimes was a jerk and a bit of an idiot, had been her protector and her friend. She was going to miss him.

"Thanks, Sokka," she said with a sniffle.

With a tight squeeze, Sokka finally let his sister go, placing an arrogant smirk on his face.

"What are big brothers for?" he asked haughtily.

"I'm still trying to figure that out," Katara replied musingly.

"Hey," he protested.

She laughed when Sokka scowled down at her before he looked up to scowl at Zuko who was chuckling quietly. Then he frowned at Suki when she snorted as she tried to suppress a giggle. He really hoped his daughters were laughing because of something else.
“I’m just teasing,” Katara told him as she again moved forward to hug him.

“Whatever,” Sokka replied with a sniff although he did return the hug with one arm.

They laughed when Jing tried to grab the shiny fire crown on her aunt’s head.

“Hey look. It’s a gang reunion,” Toph’s voice reached them and the small group turned to see the small earthbender approach them with Aang at her side.

“Uh…congratulations,” Aang mumbled with a small, pained smile as he shuffled his feet awkwardly.

“Yeah, congrats,” Toph piped in before she turned to grin in Katara’s direction, “I knew Sugar Queen was a fitting name for you.”

“Aw, Katara, you’re the queen of Zuko’s heart,” Ty Lee’s bubbly voice interrupted as she approached them with a smiling Haru. By the way her cheeks flushed greatly and her body swayed, they knew she was a little drunk.

“Please don’t say that out loud,” Zuko muttered with a grimace.

“So that means I can say it in my head?” Ty Lee responded with a cheesy grin.

Zuko scowled when the small group laughed, even Aang laughed genuinely at the Fire Lord’s discomfort.

Katara then turn to Toph with a raised eyebrow.

“So you and Aang, huh?” she said and the blind earthbender could almost hear her teasing smile.

“Yeah,” Toph replied with a shrug although her pale cheeks had turned pink.
Aang blushed as well as his lips lifted into a small smile.

“And you ranted about mine and Zuko’s denseness when you didn’t even confess to Aang your feelings for him,” Katara continued.

Toph scowled and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I know I’m awesome and all, but I can have insecurities too, jeez,” she muttered.

They chuckled and Toph relaxed when she felt Aang gently place his hand on her back. As the days passed, Toph noticed that Aang was getting more comfortable with the idea of giving love a second chance and she again felt her heart skip a beat. She was also trying hard to make this work since it was not as if she had any past boyfriends or men lining up to ask her out. They were intimidated by her, but not Aang.

After talking idly about different things, the small group left the newlyweds in search of food and entertainment. Sokka spotted Master Piandao and he immediately rushed toward his former sword master to reminisce.

Katara watched them with a content smile before her eyes landed on Lady Ursa and Jee. Her mother-in-law was conversing with one of the Fire Nation noblemen. Jee was standing close behind her and he was glaring darkly at the other man, who quickly bowed and moved away once he saw the broad-chested admiral’s dark look. Katara watched as Lady Ursa frowned slightly in confusion, but as she turned to look at Jee, the admiral moved back a step and schooled his features into an emotionless one.

“What are you looking at?” Zuko’s voice made her look away.

“Nothing,” Katara responded quickly as she smiled at him.

It was not really a lie since she really did not know what was going on between Lady Ursa and Jee. Maybe she was just seeing things that were not there.

The rest of the day and well into the evening was spent eating, drinking, and dancing while people
continued to congratulate the royal couple. They would admire Katara’s wedding dress, her necklace, and her ring. At the same time, Zuko would be praised for having married such a beautiful and wonderful woman. Zuko was sure that some of them were still upset with his marriage to Katara, but he did not care.

However, as the evening sun finally sank into the horizon and the moon rose high in the night sky, Zuko’s impatience began to grow greatly. He even surprised himself that he had not started to snap at people. He could not wait to have Katara in their rooms. He could not wait to finally make love to her after all this time of desiring her, of imagining and fantasizing of making her his. Now she was married to him, but he still could not have her because of the celebration. But he could see that Katara was having a good time and he did not want to interrupt her fun and end their wedding celebration early—even if he was going insane with want and need.

Taking his eyes away from Katara’s enticing form before he lost control and carried her to their rooms in front of everybody, Zuko glanced around disinterestedly at the crowd. He barely paid attention as Katara talked to Physician Toshiro and his wife. He had noticed that as soon as night appeared, Aang and Toph had left. He understood that Aang must still feel uncomfortable with the thought of Katara having her wedding night with him.

Agni, how much longer will he have to wait?

Just when Zuko thought about throwing decorum to the wind and scooping Katara into his arms, he saw his uncle step upon the platform. Iroh cleared his throat lightly before shooting a spark into the air to gain the people’s attention. Zuko let out a relieved breath since he knew what his uncle was going to say and it could not have been at a better time.

Once the crowd had quieted down to listen to him, Iro grinned.

“It is time for the bride and groom to retire for the night,” he announced and winked at the royal couple. “The rest of us will continue to enjoy the delicious banquet!”

Zuko smirked slightly and Katara’s cheeks flooded with color when a few whistles—courtesy of Ty Lee and Bumi—were thrown their way and others wished them a good night with knowing smiles and winks. Kanna and Suki moved away from the crowd and headed toward Katara in order to prepare her for her wedding night.

Just before the women could reach them, Katara felt her heart pound in her chest when Zuko leaned down to whisper in her ear.
“I will see you soon, love,” he told her huskily, his tone full of promise and desire. He pulled away when the women approached.

Katara felt her legs turn to mush at the intense manner in which he was looking at her before she was lead back into the palace by her grandmother and Suki. Once they stepped inside they were joined by Jiao.

Soon, Zuko thought anxiously as he stared after his bride, Soon we’ll be joined in more than just name, Katara.
The light from a small campfire illuminated the lone figure before it as soft breeze blew by and a bird sang into the night. Eyes closed, hands resting on knees, and sitting in the lotus position, Aang tried to clear his thoughts by meditating. He tried to cast away all thoughts about what was going to occur that night. He tried not to think about Katara being in Zuko’s arms, about Katara letting Zuko kiss her, touch her, love her…

“You’re gonna have to accept it, one way or the other, Twinkletoes,” Toph’s voice mercifully yanked him from the path his thoughts were heading.

He had not realized Toph had woken up. As soon as they had left the palace, they had flown for a while before landing in a small clearing to settle for the night. Tomorrow, Aang planned on flying them nonstop toward the Earth Kingdom.

With a sigh, Aang gave up meditating and opened his eyes as he relaxed his rigid posture. He glanced at Toph as she plopped herself next to him. Appa and Momo were sleeping a few feet away, the lemur slumbering on the flying sky-bison’s nose.

“I know,” the airbender finally replied to her comment, “But…it’s hard.”

With a groan, he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms before running his hands over his bald head.

“I always thought I was going to be Katara’s first and only like she would be mine,” he continued in a strained voice, “But now I have to accept the fact that Zuko is going…That he’s going…to love her…not me.”

“I thought you said you were moving on,” Toph said with a snort, but Aang could detect the hurt in her tone.

He sighed guiltily. He did not want to hurt Toph, who had been by his side all these years and loved him—in her own way. She was not a typical woman who was very emotional and affectionate, and he understood part of it was because she had no experience with such things. So it was a little difficult for him to get closer to her since he liked to kiss and cuddle like he had done with Katara when she had let him. He shook his head before he answered her.
“I have,” he assured her. “Part of me has accepted their love for each other and is glad they’re happy.” He paused before he continued slowly as if trying to find the right words, “But another part of me is…hurt and jealous. The thought of them together…it kills me.”

His shoulders sagged and he sighed.

“I’m sorry,” he told her softly.

Toph let out a sigh of her own as she crossed her arms over chest. Although she would never admit it out loud, his words did hurt her. It made her want to hurl boulders at something to vent her anger and jealousy. But she had known this was not going to be easy, especially since Aang had been infatuated with Katara for years. She understood that it was something hard to forget. But she was determined to win Aang’s heart—as corny as that sounded. She would make him realize that the only woman he could really love was her…even if that meant that she would have to do certain things that she was unaccustomed to.

“Don’t apologize,” she snorted with a frown. “As long as you’re willing to move on and give us a chance, then that’s what matters. But like I said, I won’t wait for you forever.”

“I know,” he said quietly before he again turned to look at her. “I really do like you, Toph,” he admitted before he smiled when he detected a faint blush on her cheeks. “And I can see that with a bit more time, perhaps I’ll come to love you.”

“More than Sweetness?” she asked with a casual tone as she raised a dark eyebrow.

Aang had to smile since she could not hide the hope in her voice.

“Maybe even more than my own life,” he said with a grin, although he was being serious.

“You’re so cheesy,” she muttered even as her blush deepened a little.

The airbender laughed. This was one of the reasons why he could see himself falling in love with Toph. He liked making the brash and rough earthbender blush prettily with embarrassment or pleasure that she struggled to hide by making snide remarks. He wanted to shower her with love and affection. Something she had never received since her birth because her parents had been more overprotective than loving due to her blindness. But it was hard since she hated shows of affection.
“All we need is time,” he finally spoke in a cheerful tone.

He raised his eyebrow when Toph turned to face him fully. Curious, he did the same so that he sat staring at her. He watched as the pink blush on her pale cheeks darkened a little and she averted her lime-colored eyes for a moment.

“I know what else we can do to bring us closer,” she said in an uncharacteristic, soft tone.

The airbender’s gray eyes widened in shock and he gaped at her. He was mildly surprised when his heart started to beat faster in his chest.

“T-Toph, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he stuttered, “I mean, not that I don’t like the idea, but it’s too soon and—”

“Whoa, hold on, Twinkletoes!” Toph interrupted him loudly, “Keep it in your pants. That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s not?” Aang asked and he rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment.

“I didn’t know you were such a perverted monk,” Toph teased him with a smirk. Now it was her turn to make him squirm uncomfortably.

“I’m not!” Aang protested with a scowl.

But come on! He was seventeen-years-old! What else was he supposed to think? Yet, he knew it was still too early for them to engage in…such activities. Even though the Air Nomads were not as strict in their rules as the Southern Water Tribe was about chastity and engaging in sex before marriage, Aang wanted his first time, their first time, to be special. Something they would cherish because of their mutual feelings.

When Toph chortled, Aang scowled more deeply.
“Well, then what did you mean if not…that?” he grumbled.

Toph fell silent at his question and she resisted the urge to snap at him to forget it. What she had in mind was a bit embarrassing, but she would admit to herself that she looked forward to it. But what if Aang laughed at her? The earthbender mentally berated herself. What was wrong with her? She was not a sissy! And if Aang laughed at her, she would just punch him in the face. Okay, maybe she wouldn’t do something so dramatic—or violent.

“What I meant was…that we…uh…could…um,” she mumbled.

“That we could what?” he asked her with a teasing smile.

“That we could kiss and cuddle, damn you!” she shouted before she snapped her mouth shut and scowled at him fiercely.

Aang again suppressed his laughter at her words that contradicted with her actions, but he would not tease her anymore—especially since she was willing to do something that made her uncomfortable. Besides, he really liked the idea of cuddling with and kissing Toph.

“Why didn’t you say so before?” he asked as he scooted closer to her.

The earthbender muttered under her breath before she stilled when Aang gently grasped her upper arms. She held her breath when she felt him lean down to brush his lips against hers. They both sighed. She really liked having Aang’s warm, thin lips on hers. Not wanting gentle kisses at the moment, Toph grabbed the front of his tunic and pulled him closer to her so she could deepen the kiss.

Aang chuckled at her enthusiasm as he wrapped his arms around her petite form. All thoughts about Katara, about what could have been, about what she and Zuko were doing left his mind and the pain around his heart lessened. All he cared about at the moment was Toph’s soft body against his and the passion that her ardent kisses aroused in him.

Katara fidgeted nervously as she once again stepped into her guestroom where she was going to prepare for her wedding night. As soon as the door was closed, Kanna and Suki immediately began to gush about how wonderful the wedding ceremony had been, and what the guests had said and did during the reception. The new Fire Lady barely paid attention to what they were saying. After reassuring Katara about the events that were to occur that night, they bid her good night. Jiao softly
closed the door behind them.

Katara bit her lip as she remembered the talk she had had with her grandmother, Suki, and Lady Ursa the previous night about what to expect. All three women had different experiences. Suki had said the first time was wonderful, though she did not go into much detail since it did involve Sokka. Katara had been both relieved Suki had not explained much since she really did not want to know what her brother did to her, but she was also disappointed that Suki did not give her more details to reassure her. Kanna had said her first time with her first husband had been awkward, uncomfortable, and a little painful. To Katara’s sadness, Ursa’s experience had been the worst. Ursa had said that her wedding night with Ozai had been extremely painful and even a little traumatizing. However, all three women had agreed that it got better with practice and time.

As she recalled Ursa saying how painful the first time was, the more nervous and frightened Katara became. She was not ignorant. She knew that the first time for a woman was supposed to be very painful, but was it really that horrible as Ursa and Gran-Gran had described it?

However, it wasn’t the thought of the pain exactly that made her nervous, but the unknown. Why didn’t they give her advice on what she should do? What if she did something wrong and she displeased Zuko?

What…what if I’m not as good as the other women Zuko…had been with? she thought anxiously and her stomach clenched painfully at the thought.

Katara was snapped out of her thoughts and she shook her head as Jiao returned from the bathroom and moved forward to begin assisting her out of her elaborate wedding dress. Jiao carefully laid the dress aside and guided the musing waterbender toward the bathroom, then stepped back inside the room.

Once she finished taking a bath in the sweet scented water, Katara stepped out of the bathtub. After patting her skin dry and using her waterbending to remove the water from her hair, she wrapped the towel around her form and returned to the room. She saw that Jiao had laid out her night clothes on the bed. Katara was surprised to see that her under-wrappings had been replaced with different ones. She picked up the strange, white undergarments and inspected them curiously. The lower undergarment was one piece like that of the bottom of a bikini and the wrap that was to cover her chest was also one piece with strings at the back to hold it close. Turning to Jiao, Katara raised an eyebrow.

“These are undergarments women of the upper class wear. Fire Lord Zuko would like it if you wear these from now on,” the maid informed her. Then with a smile, she added, “For…easier access.”
“Oh,” was Katara’s reply as she flushed.

As Jiao turned away, Katara dropped her towel and quickly put on the new undergarments. It took her a moment to figure out how to tie the strings of the upper garment, but once she finished she was surprised at how comfortable they felt. They were made of silk, not the itchy material of her wrappings. They were not tight around her, but still fit nicely. And the sensation of the silky material against her most intimate parts felt nice. Katara then put on a light blue nightdress that fell just below her knees.

Jiao then motioned for the waterbender to sit on the corner of the bed and began to brush the long, brown locks. She brushed Katara’s hair until it gleamed and fell down her back in soft waves.

In just a few moments, Katara thought, she would finally become Zuko’s woman. She let out a shaky breath and chewed on her lip.

“Are you all right, Fire Lady Katara?” Jiao asked gently.

Katara was startled for a moment at her new title before she let out another sigh.

“I’m fine,” she responded, “Just a little nervous. I’ve heard so many stories about how painful the first time is, and I’m afraid that I’ll do something wrong and embarrassing. I…don’t want to disappoint him.”

“Don’t worry so much, my lady,” Jiao spoke up when Katara paused, “Although it is painful the first time, it doesn’t last long. Once the pain lessens, you will experience a pleasure like no other.”

Katara turned around to look at the older woman curiously, and Jiao paused in fixing her lady’s hair.

“Have you...been intimate with a man?” she asked softly.

Jiao’s cheeks turned pink and she averted her eyes, even as a smile came to her lips.

“Yes,” she replied simply.
Katara eyed her silently for a moment before she smiled.

“Is he someone I know?” she asked teasingly.

The young servant fidgeted as her blush darkened.

“Yes,” she admitted softly, “It’s Kuo.”

Katara’s eyes rounded before her smile widened.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed, “I knew there was something going on between you two!”

Jiao was blushing hard, although she could not stop herself from smiling happily.

“We’ve been dancing around each other for four years,” she began with a giggle, “But it all changed thanks to you.”

“Me?” Katara asked incredulously.

Jiao smiled as she motioned for Katara to turn around so she could continue fixing her hair.

“At your brother’s wedding last winter, when that Water Tribe warrior asked me to dance and you persuaded Fire Lord Zuko to allow me, Kuo saw us,” the dark-haired servant began.

Katara remembered wondering why Kuo had stared at the dance floor with a dark look.

“He became jealous at the thought that another man could take me away,” Jiao continued. “So the night after I helped Lady Suki give birth to her twins, Kuo approached me and confessed the feelings he’d tried to hide. He had not wanted a relationship to distract him in his duties, but he changed his mind at the possibility that he could lose me and then began to quietly court me.”
“That’s so romantic,” Katara gushed.

“It is,” Jiao agreed with a smile, “And as the days pass, the more I love him.” She paused with a dreamy sigh before she shook her head, as if she remembered the reason why she had begun this conversation. “Well, when we returned to the Fire Nation, we consummated our love.”

“How…was it?” Katara asked curiously.

“The first penetration was painful, but Kuo was very patient and gentle, and I enjoyed it,” Jiao admitted softly. “I heard that it could be extremely painful to some women and often women don’t find pleasure the first time,” she explained before she added reassuringly when Katara frowned, “But if that were the case for you, you shouldn’t feel discouraged because it will get better.”

Katara gave a stiff nod.

“You will be sore a bit afterwards,” Jiao continued in the same kind tone, “But that will also go away.”

Gran-Gran had already told her that.

When her lady did not say anything, Jiao remained quiet as she finally finished piling Katara’s hair into a loose bun. Kuo had told her some men liked to loosen their women’s hair and watch it fall down over their bodies, and Jiao was sure her lord would want to do that to his new wife.

“My lady,” she said in a soothing tone, “What matters is the act of lovemaking, the intimacy shared between a man and a woman.”

Katara turned around when Jiao took a step away to signal she had finished and the waterbender smiled.

“You’re right, Jiao,” she said, “Thank you for the advice.”
“I’m sure Fire Lord Zuko will be considerate of your needs, my lady,” Jiao added with a gentle smile, “He loves you and will try to cause you the least amount of pain. He will treat you well.”

Katara felt her uncertainty diminish a little and she smiled.

“I’m sure he will,” she responded softly.

With a smile, Jiao then handed her a long robe of the same light blue color to put on above the thin nightdress and then some soft slippers. Katara placed the robe on, tying the sash snuggly around her waist, and again sat down on the bed to put on the slippers.

A soft knock sounded at the door and the women glanced at each other curiously before Jiao went to open the door. Standing outside was Yin-Min, the new physician’s assistant, holding a tray with a cup.

“Congratulations on your marriage, my lady,” the small woman said meekly and bowed.

“Thank you,” Katara said with a smile as she eyed the cup. “Please come in.”

The young woman hesitated before she stepped into the room slowly. She looked around nervously as she approached the waterbender who was smiling encouragingly. Katara wondered what horrible things Ozai had done to the young woman when she had been his concubine to make her so skittish. She mentally cursed the evil man.

Once she was standing before the waterbender, Yin-Min gave her a small smile as she timidly held out the tray to her.

“I have nothing expensive to give you for your marriage and for helping me get the position as Physician Toshiro’s assistant,” she began in a low tone, “but I can give you this.”

Katara eyed the cup before she looked at the small woman curiously.

“It’s wine that I mixed with a special blend of crushed flowers and herbs,” Yin-Min began as she smiled into the cup before she smiled at the waterbender.
“Thank you,” Katara said as she finally took the cup and looked curiously into the dark liquid. “What’s so special about the blend?”

Yin-Min’s cheeks turned pink as she averted her eyes bashfully.

“The blend of such ingredients helps with fertility,” she muttered shyly.

“Oh,” Katara said and blushed.

“If my lady keeps taking the blend of herbs, you will soon become with child and you will give Fire Lord Zuko his heir,” Yin-Min said, “That is my gift to you.”

Katara smiled happily at the thought.

“Thank you,” she said again.

Katara lifted the cup of wine and sniffed it delicately.

“It has a unique aroma,” she remarked before she brought the cup to her lips and drank it.

When she lowered the empty cup, her eyes widened in surprise and she smiled at the young assistant.

“It tastes very bitter, but it leaves a sweet aftertaste,” she commented.

Yin-Min smiled proudly.

“Then it means that I’ve mixed the ingredients perfectly,” she said with subdued happiness.

Reaching into her apron, Yin-Min pulled out a small bag and handed it hesitantly to the waterbender,
almost as if she were afraid her gift would be rejected.

“I placed the crushed herbs into this bag for you,” she said with a shy smile, “Mix a small amount with any kind of drink you like. If you take it every morning, you will soon conceive, although sometimes it takes a while for the body to get used to it. Of course, you may not even need the help of the blend.” She blushed.

Katara reached for the bag with a grateful smile and thanked the small woman again, who flushed in pleasure.

“I won’t waste any more of your time and keep you from going to my lord,” Yin-Min said and flushed more deeply.

With a small smile and a bow, Yin-Min walked to the door and closed it softly behind her.

“That was really nice of her,” Katara said.

“Yin-Min has always been shy and quiet, but helpful when she became a servant,” Jiao responded. “I think she was only fifteen when she was brought here.”

“Maybe her experience as Ozai’s…concubine affected her a lot,” the waterbender said with a sad frown.

“Perhaps,” Jiao agreed.

Poor Yin-Min, Katara thought with a frown. She could not imagine the things the young woman had to endure.

Katara looked down at the bag she still held in her hands.

Would the herbs really make her more fertile? She again asked herself if she was ready to be a mother. Well, Yin-Min did say that sometimes the body had to adjust to it. But still it was a nice gesture, especially knowing that the Fire Nation nobility expected Zuko to sire an heir soon. She felt her body warmed at the thought of what they first had to do before they conceived a child.
Jiao pinned the Fire Lady crown in Katara’s loose bun and then stepped back.

“You are ready, my lady,” she proclaimed with a smile.

Katara again felt her stomach squeeze nervously, but she took a few breaths to calm herself down. After all, it wasn’t as if she did not want Zuko to make love to her.

They left the room in which Katara had stayed in during her every visit, but will never use again now that she was married to Zuko. La, she was a married woman now! Katara felt her anxiety lessen again in her happiness.

As they reached the corridor that led to the royal family wing, Katara made to turned left toward the Fire Lady bedchamber, but Jiao stopped her and led her to the right toward the Fire Lord’s royal chambers. Katara was confused as they headed toward Zuko’s room.

“Madam Fang Hua said it was tradition to have the wedding night in the Fire Lady’s room,” Katara said as her confusion mounted.

It was where she was going to sleep for her entire marriage and where Zuko was to come to her whenever he wanted to make love to her. She had wanted to sleep next to Zuko every night just as married couples did in the Southern Water Tribe, but she knew that many Fire Nation married nobles slept in separate rooms. Besides, she knew that Zuko liked his privacy and did not allow anyone but a few servants to enter his bedchamber. But perhaps she could persuade him to change his mind. After all, he had been insistent in sneaking into her guest room to be with her, she mused with a mental grin.

“Fire Lord Zuko has ordered for you to be brought to his chambers, where you will wait for him to come to you,” Jiao answered with a reassuring smile.

Soon they approached the end of the long corridor and stopped before the great golden doors of the Fire Lord’s royal chambers. Stationed on each side of the doors were Shen and Kuo. Katara blushed and averted her eyes at the knowing smiles the guards gave her. She glanced back in time to see Kuo smiling tenderly at Jiao, whose cheeks turned pink as she returned his smile. Katara suppressed a giggle when Shen rolled his eyes. She could see that the older guard knew of Kuo and Jiao’s relationship. Shen opened one of the heavy doors before he moved aside and smiled at his new lady.
“Thank you,” Katara said softly.

“You’re welcome, Fire Lady Katara,” the older guard replied.

Katara smiled again at the title before she stepped into the antechamber. Jiao seemed to snap out of her stupor and quickly followed after the younger woman. She guided Katara toward the low table and the waterbender slowly sank onto the cushion as she again began to bite her lip nervously.

“Please wait here for Fire Lord Zuko, my lady,” Jiao told her.

With another reassuring smile, the young maid turned around and stepped out of the room. The door was closed after her.

Katara took a few deep breaths as she prepared herself to wait for her husband.

Her husband.

She felt warmth spread through her entire body at those two words and her heart fluttered in her chest. She hoped Zuko did not take long to come to her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Zuko had to stop himself from running as he headed swiftly toward the royal bedchamber he would now share with Katara for their entire lives. That way their children, a thought that never failed to make him equally happy and nervous, would know that their parents loved each other just as much as they were loved. As soon as Jiao had appeared to inform him that Katara was ready for him, he quickly strode out of the room where he had taken a bath and prepared himself for the wedding night. Then he raced to where his wife was waiting for him.

His wife.

Agni, did those words sound wonderful.

His pace quickened as did his already pounding heart.
He did not know when was the last time he had made it so quickly to his rooms, but he soon found himself outside the grand doors. His personal guards bowed to him.

“You are dismissed for the night,” he told them impatiently.

With amused and knowing smiles, Kuo and Shen bowed again before they left their posts and retreated.

Zuko took a moment to calm himself down before he pounced on Katara and ended up hurting her with his eagerness. But he could not deny that he was also nervous. It had been a long while since he had sex with a woman and he had never bothered to pleasure one before during the act. He might as well be a virgin, he mused wryly. What if he could not last long and humiliated himself? What if he was unable to bring Katara to ecstasy? What if he hurt her badly and frightened her enough that she would never let him touch her again?

Oh gods, he would die if that were to happen.

The Fire Lord shook his head and straightened himself. He would not fail his waterbender. He refused to have Katara remember their wedding night as a bad memory. He wanted her to enjoy this night as much as he and he would make sure she did.

He smoothed down the dark red night robe he had placed over his black sleeping pants. He raised a fist and knocked on one of the golden doors softly to alert Katara of his presence before he opened the door. He quickly closed it behind him as he stepped into the antechamber.

Zuko’s blood raced in his veins and he felt his desire flare up at the sight of Katara standing by the window, clad in a simple yet elegant light blue robe. Katara turned to look at him, and the sight of her wide, cobalt eyes made something clench within him. He did not speak as he finally moved away from the door and approached her. She also did not say anything as he made his way to her. Once he was standing before her, Zuko slowly lifted his hands to caress her cheeks before he cupped them softly. Slowly, he leaned down and kissed her lips gently.

At the soft touch of his lips, Katara sighed and she felt herself relax a little as she returned his soft kiss. But when they pulled away and she noticed his intense amber eyes, she felt her anxiety return. Trying to give herself a few more minutes before her life changed indefinitely, she decided to ask the question that had not left her mind.
“Why are we here?” she asked.

Zuko frowned in confusion.

“What do you mean?” he questioned as he looked around before he turned to gaze at her with a worried look. “It’s…our wedding night.”

Katara suppressed a smile at his misunderstanding. She could almost hear his trepidation at the thought that she would back out of consummating their marriage.

“Oh, Zuko,” Katara breathed with a delighted smile as she leaned into his touch. “Thank you. I really didn’t want to sleep by myself, because I wanted to share a room with you too.”
that he had control of himself again, Zuko smiled down at her and took her hand, leading her toward the bedchamber that was beyond the other set of identical golden doors.

With another glance at each other, Zuko opened one of the doors before swiftly sweeping Katara into his arms. Katara squealed and held tightly to his neck as he stepped into the bedchamber and closed the heavy door swiftly with his back. As they turned their attention to the room, Zuko froze and Katara gasped at the sight that greeted them.

Candles were placed everywhere and the fireplace was blazing merrily, giving the room a warm and inviting atmosphere. Red rose petals were strewn across the marble floor and there was a path leading from the doors to the bed. The top bedcover had been turned down to reveal a silky white sheet beneath that had also been sprinkled with the deep scarlet petals.

Katara looked up to grin at Zuko and he looked down to stare at her.

“Let me guess, this is your mother and uncle’s doing, huh?” she asked with a giggle.

“Most likely,” was Zuko’s response as he smiled at her laugh before he added, “But do you like it?”

“Yes. It’s beautiful,” Katara replied honestly.

“I’m glad,” Zuko told her as he brought her closer to him and bent his head down to kiss her again.

Sighing when they pulled away to gather some air, Zuko walked upon the petal path toward the center of the room. Slowly, he placed Katara on her feet, his hands sliding up her body as she went, causing her to shiver lightly.

“Let me put our fire crowns in their box,” he said as a distraction when he noticed that she began to breathe heavily due to her anxiety.

Biting her lip, Katara gave him a nod and Zuko smiled as he reached up to pull the Fire Lady fire crown from her bun. Katara’s eyes followed him as he moved to the dresser resting on the eastern wall and opened a beautifully engraved ebony box, placing her crown inside. Zuko removed his own fire crown and ran his fingers though his now lose hair before placing the crown next to hers.
“I had this box made a few weeks ago so it could hold both our crowns,” he told her after closing the lid and walking back to her with a soft smile.

Katara returned the smile.

“That’s a sweet gesture,” she told him softly as he finally stopped before her.

He stared at her silently for a moment and Katara wondered at the emotions she saw in his eyes. What he said next made her heart swell with love.

“I’m determined that our wedding night be perfect, Katara,” he began as he cupped her cheek in his large hand, his expression intensely serious, even as he touched her gently.

Katara brought her hand up to rest it upon his and she leaned into his touch as she smiled at him.

“I’m sure it will,” she began, but she paused when he lightly shook his head.

“It will. It has to,” he added firmly.

Katara was speechless at the fiercely determined expression on his face.

“I love you like I’ve never loved before, Katara,” Zuko continued as he stared intently into her blue orbs. “I sometimes find it difficult to express how much. My life used to be full of darkness and monotony, but you’ve brought light and happiness into it. Before you, I wasn’t living, only existing. Can you understand what I’m trying to tell you? You gave meaning to my life that I didn’t know I needed.”

“Zuko,” Katara said breathlessly, “I understand what you’re telling me. And I promise that I will try with everything I am to continue making you happy because I love you so much.”

“I know you will,” Zuko responded confidently as he brought his other hand to cup her cheek, his thumbs caressing her smooth skin, “You have already shown me so many times, but I’ll never get enough. I can’t get enough.”
He leaned down to kiss her ardently and Katara moaned into his mouth.

“I’m so glad that you’re in my life, Katara,” he said, his lips still caressing her lips, “I’m so glad that you’re my wife. And I promise to make you glad of it too, every single day, every single moment, for the rest of your life.”

Katara felt tears pool in her eyes before they trickled down her cheeks where Zuko gently wiped them away with his thumbs.

“Oh, Zuko, you don’t have to promise me,” she told him with a watery smile, “Because you have already started.”

Zuko smiled down at her as he again brushed her tears away before he seized her lips in a slow yet passionate kiss that soon had them both panting and straining against each other. Slowly, so as not to startle her, Zuko reached for the sash around her waist and gently tugged at it until it loosened around her. He paused briefly when he felt Katara tense slightly before he pushed the edges of her robe down her shoulders until it slid to the floor.

He stepped back a little to look at her and smiled slightly at the thin, light blue nightdress she was wearing that contrasted nicely with her dark skin. His anticipation flared. It was as if he were unwrapping a gift. A very exquisite and precious gift.

He leaned down to kiss her when she began to tremble before pulling away again. He reached up to release her hair from its bun and he watched, mesmerized, as her chocolate tresses tumbled down her back and framed her face. He gently combed her soft hair with his fingers before he gently clasped a piece of it and brought it to his nose. He deeply breathed in her sweet gardenia scent before letting her hair slip through his fingers and fall down onto her left breast.

Katara tried not to fidget as Zuko lifted his hands and slowly, very slowly, pulled the strings that held her nightdress closed. With a tug, the thin nightgown slid down past her breasts, her hips, her legs, and pooled into a silky puddle around her feet. She felt her cheeks heat up as she stood before him in just her undergarments and she fought to keep her hands to her sides.

Zuko groaned softly at the sight of Katara, clad only in the white undergarments he had ordered made for her as a few locks of her hair fell onto her chest. Again, he fought himself from taking her like a lustful beast. When she began to fidget nervously as he continued to stare at her ravenously without saying a word, he gave her an encouraging smile.
“Why don’t you take off my robe, love?” he asked her, partly so she won’t feel as if she could not participate, and partly because he was feeling smothered in the red robe as his body heated up in desire.

The waterbender suppressed a relieved breath as she moved closer to Zuko, glad that she would not be the only one half naked, and that she had something to do. Slowly, just as Zuko had done before, she tugged the sash until it hung lose before she slowly parted the red robe aside. Her eyes widened a bit when she revealed pale flesh underneath and not a tunic. With shaky fingers, Katara placed her hands gently on his chest and heard him let out a sigh.

The waterbender stared at her hands as she leisurely slid them up his torso and then sideways to his shoulders, before pushing the red robe aside so that it fell to the marble floor. She ran her hands down to his chest where Zuko stopped her by placing his hands above hers. Looking up at him, Katara saw him stare at her with simmering eyes. He bent down to capture her lips in a fiery kiss that made her knees buckle from the intensity.

With a low growl, Zuko quickly swept her into his arms, and without parting from her soft lips, he walked toward the massive bed. He placed her gently upon the petal covered sheets as he continued to kiss her, his body hovering close above hers but not quite touching. Katara had her arms wrapped around his neck and Zuko groaned when she nibbled gently on his lower lip. The firebender placed one of his hands on her waist and rubbed the flesh for a moment, before he trailed his hand up her side and past her ribs. But before he could touch her covered breast, he moved his hand to her back.

Katara let out a disappointed moan since she had been anticipating his touch on her aching breast. But then she felt him tug at the strings of the top that covered her chest and she tensed slightly before she forced herself to relax. After all, it wasn’t as if Zuko had not seen her already. Soon Zuko had her top undergarment loose around her chest as he continued to bestow hungry kisses on her lips. She felt him grab one end of it before tossing it aside. He lifted his mouth from hers and pulled back slightly so he could see her.

Zuko watched as his wife blushed endearingly before she moved her hands to cover her breasts either in an involuntary reflex, or because of his hungry gaze. With a small frown he placed his hands over her arms.

“Please don’t hide from me again, Katara,” he told her in a soft yet firm tone, “I enjoy looking at your wonderful breasts.”

Katara gave him a small smile as she moved her arms away and placed them gently down at her sides.
Zuko’s golden eyes took her all in. Her large sapphire eyes shining up at him, her soft lips that were parted so she could take air in, her brown skin glowing from the light of the fireplace and the many candles spread throughout the room, and her wavy, chocolate tresses that fanned out upon the white pillow beneath her. His eyes then landed on her soft breasts that moved up and down as her breathing accelerated—those soft mounds that were tipped with tight dusky buds that just begged to be kissed and savored. His gaze lingered for a moment before he allowed his eyes to take her all in once again.

His eyes caressed her lovely face, her wide blue eyes, her flushed cheeks, her lightly parted, plump lips. His gaze then traveled down her slender neck, her shoulders, and her gleaming chest. Then his eyes landed on her generous breasts and he admired the perky globes—staring with satisfaction at her nipples that had hardened into pebbles and were almost pleading him to take them into his mouth. Moving his gaze away from the temptation for the moment, he continued his perusal down her lean stomach, her slim waist, her curvy hips, and her long, toned legs—admiring every flawless inch of her soft, bare flesh. He took in her scent of rain just hidden beneath gardenias and he let out a deep sigh. How marvelous she looked laying beneath him in nothing but a white piece of cloth that covered where he so desperately wanted to be buried in. She was perfect in every single way and she was all his.

“So beautiful,” he whispered as he again leaned down to kiss her.

Katara sighed softly into his mouth before he moved away.

The young Fire Lord kissed his wife on her smooth brow, on her pert nose, on each of her cheeks, and finally on her mouth again. He gazed deep and loving into her large cobalt eyes, eyes that gazed back at him lovingly, but nervously. He wanted so much to be inside her, but he knew that she was not ready yet to receive him.

“So lovely, my wife,” he whispered tenderly. Again those two words caused an intense emotion to go through him.

“So Zuko,” Katara moaned softly.

His light touches, his penetrating gaze, and his loving words were making her body heat up and her core tingle. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down so she could kiss him. But he quickly moved away from her mouth so he could trail his lips down her jaw, which he nibbled softly, and down her throat, which he licked slightly. Then he moved down her collarbone, which he bit gently, before moving down the valley of her heaving breasts.
A soft moan escaping her, Katara felt her heart quicken its already fast pace when Zuko began to trace his lips slowly around her right breast, occasionally flicking out his tongue to taste, while her other breast was being gently caressed and squeezed by his calloused hand. She waited almost breathlessly as Zuko’s mouth spiraled closer and closer to her aching nipple in that same infuriating slow pace. A fire was building inside of her as she silently begged him in her mind to finally end her torture. She cried out when his mouth suddenly latched onto her tight peak.

“Zuko, oh!” she cried as her fingers threaded into his dark hair, bringing him closer to her chest.

Zuko felt his cock stiffen as he licked, flicked, and sucked on her lovely nipple while he continued to squeeze her other breast, pinching and rolling the neglected tip between his fingers. He quickly switched breasts and engulfed the other stiff crest in his hot mouth while he grabbed and pushed her other breast up, revealing a glistening peak into the warm air. Katara pushed her chest up so he could have more access, then gasped when the movement caused her sensitive nipple to brush against the rough texture of his scarred cheek.

She felt Zuko freeze before he pulled away from her breasts to look at her. She did not like the wary look that had appeared in his eyes, as if he were expecting her to recoil with disgust at having his scarred flesh touch her. She was not repulsed. It had felt good, very good. Why could he still not see that she loved all of him? Scars and all—whether physical or emotional. With an inviting smile, she gently urged his head back down.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered. “That felt so good. Do it again. Please?”

Zuko stared down at her incredulously as he tried to fight the pressure of her hand. Did she really mean what she said? Was she really not disgusted that such a lovely part of her body came in contact with that flawed part of him? As he stared into her darkened, blue eyes, he felt his body relax slightly while his heart expanded as he saw the lust, longing, and love in them. Why did he think Katara would turn away from his disfigurement? She had told him that she loved his scar as much as she loved him.

She was so beautiful. With her glittering, blue eyes, soft skin, and delicious feminine curves that made his loins ache every time he saw her. But it was her heart, her honesty and loyalty, that he loved the most. She looked at him as the man he really was rather the title he bore or the immense wealth he possessed. Or the scars that marred him. Katara was special and unique. And she was his.

With a growl that reflected his delight as much as his relief, Zuko buried his face between her breasts and nuzzled them before again sucking on her left dusky tip as he caressed the other breast. He teased her neglected nipple with his fingers for a second before he slowly rubbed his scarred eye
against it. He heard and felt Katara’s breath hitch before she moaned.

“Oh,” she breathed out as she tightened her hold on his hair and pushed her nipple closer to his face. “That feels so nice.”

In response, Zuko sucked harder on her peak while he roughly brushed her right nipple across the rough texture of his scarred skin.

Katara gasped and she pushed her breast closer to her husband’s caresses. Her body was getting so hot and that tingle in her center was getting even more intense. She could feel her arousal leaking into her undergarment. She felt him latch his teeth gently on her nipple and tug on it before covering it entirely with his mouth and twirling it with his tongue. Suddenly, Zuko groaned around her nipple and the vibration sent a shock throughout her body, causing her to tremble and moan as she felt another rush of liquid seep from her aching core.

With one last roll of his tongue, Zuko pulled away and sat back on his knees. His lust flared and he felt his erection push against the confines of his sleeping pants as he gazed down at his wife. She was panting beneath him, her glistening breasts heaved as she breathed, and her blue eyes were dazed as she gazed back at him.

Katara moved her eyes away from Zuko’s darkened, golden orbs and his handsome face as she allowed her gaze to trail down. She regarded in admiration at his lean-muscled broad shoulders and then his smooth pale chest and muscled stomach. Her eyes rested for a moment on the scar that marred his otherwise unblemished flesh—the scar he had received in order to save her life, the evidence of his feelings for her. Raising herself up until she was sitting before his kneeling form, Katara lifted her hand and softly placed it on the skin between his chest and stomach, right above the scar that resembled a bursting star. She caressed it a moment before she leaned down to kiss it gently. She pulled back and glanced up to see his face. He was looking at her with a smoldering look, yet she could see the tenderness in those bright amber eyes as he allowed her to touch him.

Breaking eye contact, she returned her attention to his upper body. She moved her hand to his rib cage, slowly spreading her fingers, gliding them up again toward the left side of his chest where she could feel his pounding heart beneath. She then placed her other hand onto his right pectoral and it quivered. His body was incredible, all lean muscles and hard planes. As her hands slid upward, her fingers gently brushed his small nipples and she watched as the muscles underneath her exploring fingers jumped reflexively. Surprised, she stopped briefly before she brushed them again a bit more firmly. She heard Zuko suck in his breath and again the muscles quivered.

“Do you like that?” Katara asked curiously as she again raised her eyes to his.
“Yes,” Zuko responded in a surprised tone, “I’ve never been touched like that before, but it felt… nice.”

Katara suppressed a smug smirk as she quickly looked down to see her hands kneading his hard body. She thought on how amazing it felt to have Zuko touch her breasts and nipples with both his hands and his mouth, and she wondered if it would feel the same for him. She could feel Zuko’s curious gaze on her, but she did not look up as she leaned her head down and touched her lips to his hot skin. Again the muscles leapt at her touch and Zuko let out a sigh. Before he could figure out what she was planning, Katara opened her mouth and ran her wet tongue over his dark male nipple. This time Zuko’s entire body jumped at the new sensation and he gasped. Smiling, Katara caught his small nipple gently between her teeth and tugged softly, before she caressed him with her tongue as he had caressed her a moment ago.

Zuko placed his hand on the back of her head as she continued to tease his nipple with her lips. He had never thought having them touched would feel so good. It was like he was new to all of this and he was learning just like Katara was—which in a way he was. Suddenly Katara’s hands were sliding down his chest and down his stomach, and he felt his cock twitch as her hands lowered closer to it.

Quickly he had her beneath him again with their mouths pressed together and his hands holding her wrists beside her head. He wanted her to touch him so badly, but not yet. He was not sure he would be able to control himself.

Pulling away. Zuko again knelt back and ran his hands leisurely down her sides, past her slim waist, until he rested them on her hips. His fingers played with the edge of her last piece of clothing before he slowly began to tug it down. He saw Katara tense rigidly and he paused, flicking his eyes up to see her staring at him with wide, nervous eyes.

“It’s okay,” he murmured reassuringly, “Relax.”

Katara swallowed thickly as Zuko again tugged at her undergarment. Her body stiffened even further as he pulled it down her hips and her breathing increased as he slid it down her legs. She felt her face heat up as he held the small white clothing in his hands, stared at the damp spot heatedly for a moment, before tossing it over the bed like he had done to her top wrap.

Zuko’s eyes quickly darted to the place he had wished so many times to gaze upon and feel surrounding his thick cock, only to be disappointed when he saw that Katara had closed her legs tightly. She was lying woodenly on the bed, her eyes uncertain and embarrassed. He leaned over her and kissed her mouth softly, trying to comfort her and distract her for a moment.
Katara trembled beneath her husband’s body as he kissed her reassuringly. She knew that with nothing covering her most intimate of places, it meant that the time had come for them to consummate their marriage. She was nervous and afraid, but most of all embarrassed that such an intimate part of her was going to be seen. Granted, Zuko was her husband, but she was still shy of letting him see what no one had seen before. She was brought out of her thoughts when Zuko moved away from her mouth so he could brush his lips on her neck. She shivered.

“I want to see you, Katara,” Zuko groaned huskily near her ear, “Spread your legs for me, love. I need to see all of you. Please.”

Katara heard the immense need in his voice and something clenched within her, but it was what he had asked her to do that caused that fire within her to flare. After a slight hesitation, she gave him a nod and relaxed slightly.

When he felt her nod and her body relax, Zuko again knelt back and eagerly watched her. He heard her let out a deep breath and then he saw her slowly part her legs so he could finally see what now belonged to him.

What he found delighted him, and a pleased and aroused groan fell from his lips. He gazed at the neatly trimmed curls, a shade darker than her tresses, which rested above her womanhood and were gleaming with her juices just as were her smooth upper thighs. But what had his cock straining against its confine was the glistening slit of her sex.

Zuko ripped his eyes away from what would be his paradise and looked at Katara again. A deep red blush had blossomed across her cheeks. She was biting her lip as her naked body lay upon the white sheets and above the crimson rose petals like he had once fantasized about months ago.

Of all the women, no, goddesses assembled together, she was the most beautiful, the most ravishing. And she was all his.

He finally noticed that her eyes were nervous and uncertain as she looked at him, as if she anticipated his disapproval at any moment. Well, that moment would never come because he was far from disappointed. He was pleased beyond belief and had no doubts that being inside her will feel divine. But for now he needed to reassure her.

“So beautiful,” he whispered huskily and he smiled when he saw her relax and her eyes brighten.
Katara had been sure that Zuko would immediately touch her uncovered flesh, but instead he placed his hands on her legs. He trailed them slowly upward, past her knees, to her thighs, before sliding his fingers inward. He traced circles with his thumbs on the sensitive skin of her inner thighs, so close to her aching core that it caused more of her aroused fluids to leak out at the anticipation of having Zuko touch her. She felt his hands slide up again as his gaze continued to be riveted on her most intimate place. Her heart sped up in excitement, but she let out a frustrated groan when he pulled his hands away. He chuckled and she raised her eyes to his to give him a small glare.

Even her blue eyes glaring at him caused Zuko’s covered shaft to throb. He looked away from her eyes so he could again return his attention to his new fascination. He reached down one finger and slid it along her wet slit, causing her to jerk, throw back her head, and moan. Zuko continued to run his finger up and down the cleft of her pussy. Then he gently parted her feminine folds with both of his thumbs, revealing the dark pink flesh of her sex that contrasted deliciously with her brown skin, wet and swollen with her arousal. He groaned deeply at the sight and the feeling of her as he coated his finger in her essence and continued to touch her.

“Ohh,” she moaned in pleasure. “Mmm.”

Closing her eyes, Katara pressed her head deep into the pillow beneath her. She let out a soft mewl as Zuko continued to caress, touch, and tease her sex, but always avoiding her entrance and that bundle of nerves above it. She arched her hips and strained against his hand, but it was to no avail.

Suddenly Zuko was no longer touching her and her eyes flew open to see what happened. She was surprised to see that he was not kneeling before her but was standing at the foot of the large bed, his eyes dark with desire. He was rubbing himself through his clothes and she blushed as she stared at the hand that he used to pleasure himself. Sitting up, Katara watched him, that fire inside her growing even stronger. Zuko’s hand moved away from himself and he trailed it up so he could pull at the strings that held his dark sleeping pants up. He placed both hands on the edge of his pants and pushed down. Katara’s eyes quickly darted up to his face again.

“Look at me, Katara,” he demanded huskily. “I want you to look at what you do to me.”

Katara looked away from his amber eyes and slowly allowed her eyes to again trail down his body, admiring every perfect line of his torso, the perfect planes of his muscular chest, and the perfect ripped ridges of his muscular stomach. Her eyes went lower, tracing the twin lines between his hips, the thin trail of dark hair that led down, and then her eyes landed on that part of him that she had only touched a couple of times.

She gasped softly and her blue orbs widened. When she had touched him, she had thought that he was big, but actually seeing it made her realized that she had underestimated him.
He was huge! His cock jutted brazenly out of a neat thatch of dark hair, rearing high like a fearsome dragon, the big dark-reddish tip level with his stomach. It was long and thick, and Katara felt a twinge of fear surface at the thought that Zuko would be putting such a huge appendage inside her. With his fingers alone it was a tight fit.

Zuko stepped forward and slowly crawled onto the bed toward her with a predatory grace, like that of a great panther-tiger, his golden eyes now molten amber. Katara’s eyes widened impossibly large as he neared her and her gaze again became transfixed on his erection, which bobbed with his every movement. She raised her eyes to his face once he was kneeling before her.

“Touch me, Katara,” he told her in a husky tone. “Touch the evidence of my desire for you. What belongs to you.”

At his words, Katara’s gaze dropped once again to his well-endowed member that seemed to be pointing at her, as if begging for her touch. Slowly, she raised her hand toward it. She paused when she neared his shaft and glanced up to give him a swift look of inquiry, asking his permission. Zuko nodded encouragingly, smiling at the pure delight of her.

Looking back down, Katara curiously admired his large, turgid shaft for a moment. There were several bluish veins, and a large vein in particular grew from the root of his groin and traveled the long length of his arousal, stopping at the thick mushroomed head. Instead of placing her hand directly on him, Katara moved her hand to his upper thigh, massaging the flesh as he had done to her, before moving inward. Her fingers came in contact with his dark hair and she curiously coiled them in the thick curls.

Lifting her hand, Katara again moved it until it hovered above his erection, and then she grazed the head of his member with her fingers. Zuko hissed and jumped in both shock and pleasure at her touch, before throwing his head back with a groan. Encouraged by her firebender’s pleased sound as well as her growing fascination, Katara began to circle the head with her fingers. She played with the round edge before sliding all the way down his length and to his base, causing him to let out a deep groan. She traced the large bluish vein and admired the feeling of the pulse of blood underneath the pads of her fingers. Then she gently followed its path to the heavy sac below before trailing her fingers back up again.

Closing his eyes, Zuko let out another hiss when Katara dragged her fingers up again to circle his swollen tip, before he looked down to stare at the movement of her hand. His breathing accelerated as he watched, fascinated, as she touched him, the golden ring he gave her glinting at her movements. He ripped his eyes away from her hand and looked into her face. Katara exploring him, touching him, caressing him with such wonder in her eyes was the most arousing thing he had ever seen. Agni, she was so incredible, and yet, she returned his fervent affections with all the innocent
curiosity and uncertainty of a woman being made love to for the first time. He was so utterly captivated by her as she continued to pleasure him with her fingers, that he jerked in surprise when she finally wrapped her small right hand as much as she could around his aching cock.

“Ah, Katara!” he cried out with a deep moan as he slightly thrust his hips into her hand.

“Oh,” Katara gasped softly.

The needy sound that escaped her husband made Katara’s stomach clench and her core quiver. She tightened her grasp a little. She again marveled at the paradox of how soft his skin was, yet how hard his shaft was beneath, like steel sheathed in velvet. Giving a soft squeeze, Katara began to stroke up and down his length like he had taught her before. Her other hand curiously moved lower and she gently cupped one of the heavy sacs below his length, before squeezing the other one. The pleased grunt that escaped from him at her touch had her attention diverted from what she was doing to see his furrowed brow and strained features. She felt feminine pride swell within her at his obvious pleasure, and she quickened the pace of her hand. Looking back down, Katara noticed the semi-translucent, whitish liquid seeping from the small slit on his tip. She stroked him one more time before pressing her thumb on his swollen head, spreading the liquid around it. His cock jerked almost violently from her touch, the sight of it causing hot liquid to slide down her nether lips.

Zuko growled.

Agni, he was so hard and aroused that it was all he could do not to throw Katara down and thrust himself inside her. Her light touches were building a rampant pressure inside him. The feeling of him in her hand as she meticulously explored and stroked his engorged shaft was causing an immense inferno to roar within him. Awash in passion, Zuko shuddered with the force of his need. Those delicate fingers of hers were tormenting him to the point of embarrassing himself, and he knew that if he allowed her to continue he would not last any longer. He refused to find his release on their wedding night so soon.

“Stop, Katara. That’s enough,” he commanded in a harsher tone than he intended as he grabbed her wrists and drew them away.

She looked up at him with hurt and confused eyes, and he knew she was wondering if she had done something wrong to displease him. He could not let her continue thinking that. He quickly pulled her to him and kissed her ardently before gently laying her back on the bed with him hovering over her smaller frame.

A gasp was torn from Katara’s throat as Zuko brought his long, lean body down along hers and
every inch of their bare skin touched. She delighted in the weight of his body against her, how his hard, muscular planes and every dip and rise in his flesh molded perfectly with her soft curves. In that moment, she felt so feminine and delicate. Another gasp escaped her when she felt his hard length pressing insistently into her thigh, hot and heavy, scorching her, leaving her breathless.

“I can’t take it any longer,” Zuko panted against her mouth as his body trembled, “I need to be inside you, Katara. Now.”

He felt how Katara’s entire body froze beneath his and again he worked to reassure her and calm her down enough so she could be ready for him. He reached down a hand toward her wet center, parted her slick folds, and swiftly inserted his middle finger. Katara gasped sharply and moaned as her hips instinctively moved up so she could press his finger closer. As he continued to kiss her, Zuko then inserted a second finger inside her hot pussy. He curled and twisted them, stretching her for his thick girth and preparing her for when he would finally and completely make her his.

“Zuko, ah!” Katara cried out into his hot mouth as she strained her hips to his touch. Her head thrashed from side to side as the pressure in her belly began to grow intensely.

Zuko groaned and quickened the pace of his fingers a little. He was drunk with joy and smugness at the thought that no other man, not even Aang, had touched her like he had. He was her first, and he would be her only. He lamented the fact that she would not be his first, but he vowed that she would be his only from now on. No one but Katara, his wife, would do.

No other man knew the softness of her brown skin, no one had heard her little breathless moans and soft cries. No one else had seen the deep blush that would cover her cheeks entirely as her passion grew, no one had gazed upon her beautiful sapphire eyes that darkened in lust, and no one knew where and how to caress her to make her melt into one’s arms. No other man knew how sweet her kisses tasted, how amazing her touch felt, how wonderful it felt just to be with her.

No one but him.

_Mine_, was the one word that resonated in his head as his kiss became more passionate—fueled by his thoughts and desire.

This woman was made for him and only him. Zuko did not know which god had decided to place such a wonderful woman in his life and as his wife, but he dared not question it and discard such a gift. A gift that he would treasure above anything else for the rest of his life.
He pulled away to stare intently into Katara’s dazed eyes as she panted with her arousal.

“Your body was made for me and for me only,” he growled lowly.

Katara’s answer was a sigh through parted lips and a small smile. There was an almost imperceptible change in her tensed body, a delicate movement that revealed more evidently than words that she had already given herself to him in her mind, just like she had in her heart. Katara felt the shudder that went through him at her acceptance and her smile widened a little bit.

“Make love to me. Please,” she murmured softly, “make me yours, Zuko.”

Zuko groaned as he felt his cock stiffen even more at her amorous words. He had thought he was stiff and aroused before, but he found that he had never been this hard in his life. It actually hurt.

“I will,” Zuko finally managed to groan out. “I will make love to you tonight, Katara,” he promised passionately.

He continued to pump his fingers in and out of her for a moment longer as he tried to adjust to the fierce arousal within him. But he could see that, although she was still nervous and fearful, Katara was as ready as any woman could be who had never before been made love to by a man. Pulling his drenched fingers out of her when her walls began to clench around them, Zuko knelt back between her parted legs as she groaned in disappointment. Uncle had advised him that sometimes if the woman was really aroused and almost at the brink of release, the first penetration would not be as painful. He hoped it worked for Katara.

Besides that, he wanted his waterbender to find her first release with him buried deep inside her.

Zuko brought the hand that had been pleasuring his wife to his cock and he stroked himself, spreading her juices along his length. The sensation ripped a groan from him and the visual elicited a moan from her. Amber eyes burning with lust and love, Zuko gently descended on top of her again, spreading her smooth legs widely so he could be cradled by her hips. Leaning down slowly, he claimed her mouth once more as he settled completely between her parted thighs, allowing his heavy, rigid member to rest gently over the mound at the apex of her legs. He moaned again as their skin, from their chest to their thighs, touched, sending a delicious spark to skitter up their spines. Gods, nothing had ever felt so good, so pleasurable, as being like this with Katara.

The feeling of Zuko’s stiff cock pressing softly against her core, however, made Katara tense as her
fear resurfaced tenfold. Would it really be as horrible as Ursa made it seem? What if she was one of those women who could not find pleasure the first time as Jiao had said? What if she ended up disappointing Zuko?

He was so long and thick and she was so small and tight. Would he even fit?

“Zuko?” she whimpered uncertainly.

Zuko immediately paused in his movements as he lifted his mouth from her lips so he could see her. Her blue eyes were again wide and nervous and he leaned back down to kiss her softly.

“Ssh, love,” he crooned tenderly as if he could read her mind, “It will fit.”

At her unconvinced look, he tried to give her a reassuring smile.

“It will hurt at first, but once the pain subsides, we will both enjoy the tight fit,” he told her, “I promise.”

Katara gazed at him for a long moment, to make sure he was telling her the truth, before she gave him a stiff nod and wrapped her arms around him to steady herself.

At her consent, Zuko felt his erection throb almost painfully. He was amazed that he had been able to hold back his need and desire for her this long, but he had to if he wanted to make this a memorable and pleasurable night for Katara.

Reaching down with one hand, Zuko grasped his cock and squeezed the darkish head slightly before he rubbed it against her slick folds and swollen nub, causing her to throw her head back and moan softly. The sound of her pleasure seemed to envelop him, making his already engorged shaft throb with need. It was exquisitely painful, his need to bury himself within her, to fill her, make her his. Her heat was calling to him, and he could no longer ignore its sweet call.

Unable to wait for one more second, Zuko brushed against her feminine folds in order to coat his entire length with her slick fluids before carefully dipping the tip of his cock into her entrance. He met a bit of resistance, so he pulled back slightly before pressing against her tiny opening a couple more times until finally he pushed the bulbous head inside her. He saw her wince slightly, but she did not cry out, she only tightened her hold of him. Agni, just the feeling of his tip inside her was
pure bliss!

Zuko slid slowly inside an inch, groaning as her burning sheath contracted around him as it stretched to his girth. He paused when the head of his cock nudged against a barrier—her maidenhead.

*Only mine,* he thought smugly and possessively.

Katara was biting her lip as she tried to adjust to Zuko’s impressive girth, but when he paused as he nudged something within her, she looked up into his eyes. With a gasp at the burning fire within his golden orbs, she knew he had reached her maidenhead. Her eyes seemed to burn in his golden orbs while his seemed to drown in her cobalt ones. She forgot her discomfort for a moment as she lost herself in his loving and intense stare, admiring the many different golden-colored flecks embedded in his eyes.

Not wanting to prolong her discomfort and pain, Zuko pulled his hips back a little before thrusting forward, breaking her virgin barrier, claiming her innocence, and making her his forever before burying himself deep within her.

Katara cried out at the searing pain. She clenched her eyes shut, her fingers digging into Zuko’s back, as a few tears trickled down the corner of her closed eyes. 

Oh La, it hurt! It felt like she was being ripped in two, like she was being stretched beyond capacity…and it burned.

“I’m sorry,” she heard Zuko moan near her ear before he nuzzled her cheek, “I’m sorry.”

_Damn, she’s so tight!_ Zuko groaned mentally, _So good._

By the power of Agni, she was molten warmth and silky wetness. Zuko fought to take in air and resisted the need to move as Katara’s tight, wet walls continued to constrict around him, as if unsure whether to push him out or pull him in. Her hot passage embraced him, tantalizing him to begin pumping inside her, to bury every inch of his aching shaft within her body’s tight grasp. But he knew she was still in pain and he refused to hurt her more than was necessary.

Gritting his teeth tightly, Zuko took deep breaths as he held himself back, waiting for a sign from her to continue, even as his throbbing cock begged for completion. And because this was Katara, he
would have no qualms about releasing himself inside her, as he had refused to do with those other women from his past. He wanted to fill Katara with his seed. It would be even more intimate, for it seemed as if he had saved this right just for his lovely wife, for the woman he loved.

“Relax, Katara,” he prompted her gently, though he could not stop the groan that escaped him.

Katara tried to heed his words, but the pain and discomfort were making it hard for her to do so. She heard him repeat his regret for her pain before he began to whisper little words of thanks, desire, and love to her. She felt Zuko again nuzzle her cheek before he claimed her lips in a heady kiss. He nibbled softly on her bottom lip, and when she opened her lips to him, he entered her mouth. She finally began to relax as the pain subsided until there was only a dull ache, and she returned his kisses fervently.

Coiling their tongues together, stroking and probing her mouth in an imitation of what he longed to do within the heaven of her hot pussy, Zuko did not move until her fingers eased their grasp on his back.

Pulling away from his mouth, Katara looked down between their bodies and saw where they were joined, where Zuko’s thick member was buried inside her. Then she looked up into his strained and pained features. Again, she felt her heart swell with love and gratitude at the knowledge that he was holding himself back because he did not want to hurt her when it was obvious his need was great. Experimentally, Katara shifted her hips slightly. The pain did not return and she felt only mild discomfort, so she lifted them and then squeezed her inner muscles around him, causing Zuko to close his eyes and groan deeply.

“I’m fine,” Katara whispered when Zuko continued to remain still before she added softly, “Love me, Zuko.”

With a nod, Zuko pulled his hips back, gazed deeply into her eyes, before slowly sliding back in. A growl ripped from his throat, before he again pulled back and then thrust slowly forward.

It was incredible. There were no other words that he could think of to describe what taking Katara was like. She fitted perfectly around him, as if her body was especially made for him, clenching around him in a hot silken grip. Moving his mouth to her ear, Zuko gently licked and sucked on her lobe as he began to move in and out of her in a slow rhythm. He did not pull out of her amazing core too far because he could not even stand the thought of it. With a groan, he continued his slow pumping inside her body, because he wanted Katara to adjust fully to his large girth, and also because he wanted this moment to last forever.
Katara remained still as Zuko continued to move in and out of her, and for a brief moment, she wondered if something was wrong with her when she did not feel that amazing pleasure she had heard about.

But suddenly a loud gasp fell from her lips when a tingle of pleasure started to grow within her core when Zuko picked up his speed a little. Then she moaned loudly as the delightful friction when he plunged his hard length into her caused a spark of pleasure to shoot up her spine. She tightened her limbs around him. Now that the pain was gone, Katara marveled at the new sensation, at having Zuko inside her, making love to her so slowly, so gently. His huge cock driving into her, stretching her to accommodate him, made her feel so full. It felt perfect. She felt complete, as if she had been empty all this time and he had been the missing piece. The brunette waterbender sighed when her husband kissed her softly on the lips.

Katara then felt herself blush when the erotic wet sound of Zuko plunging in and out of her drenched core made her arousal flare to high levels. She groaned as a particular stroke of his caused her toes to curl and more liquid to rush from her core.

“Zu-ah! Zuko!” she mewed, “Uuuuh, oh!”

“You feel so good, Katara, so warm, so damn good,” Zuko groaned hoarsely near her ear before he began muttering huskily, almost to himself, “So wet, so tight! Ahh, feels so good.”

With a soft moan, Katara pushed her hips up to meet his. Again he thrust into her and again she met him, this time with no sign of pain or discomfort, just the pleasurable feeling of being full. It was a feeling like no other and she did not want it to stop. She wanted it to last forever.

Zuko delighted in the feeling of Katara’s soft hands tracing his body, her hips meeting his insistently, her tight, wet pussy squeezing him firmly as all her shyness and uncertainty disappeared. He could see that she was intent on bringing him as much pleasure as he was giving her…and he loved it.

“Tell me…uuh…how do I make you feel?” he told her with a deep, passionate grunt, “Does it…ahhh...feel good, Katara?”

“Ohh, yes! So good,” she panted passionately, “You make me feel so good, Zuko.”

“Gods, Katara!” Zuko growled as her words caused his cock to throb excruciatingly.
Changing his slow pace into a slightly swifter one, Zuko looked down to see his waterbender throw her head back and cry softly, as her cheeks flushed a deep red hue and a slight sheen of sweet began to coat her olive skin. Zuko could not remember ever seeing anything as beautiful as the sight of her at that moment. He leaned back down to engage her mouth in another passionate kiss. He felt her inner muscles squeeze him and he moaned as he pulled himself out before slamming back in.

Katara cried out as he spread her open once more. There was a slight pain, but she ignored it in favor of the pleasure he was giving her. She squeezed him again, causing him to throw his head back and groan loudly as he closed his eyes shut and clenched his jaw tight. She was mesmerized by the sight of the veins that throbbed on his neck with the strain, the muscles that flexed with his thrusting movements and quivered with her touch, the glistening sweat that ran down his pale skin due to his exertion that made his dark hair stick to his temples, and the pleasured yet anguished expression on his handsome face. La, she had never seen anything so magnificent in her life, and she arched her back with a moan as more hot liquid seeped out and coated around his pumping shaft.

With a growl, Zuko knelt back, grabbed her hips gently, and slowly plunged himself into her over and over again. She winced at first at the new angle, but soon moaned as she stared passionately at him. Zuko looked down to the place where they were joined and he groaned deeply at the sight. He watched as his thick shaft stretched her tight, pink hole as he pulled in and out of her, his cock glistening with her aroused juices and her virgin blood. The firebender had never seen such an erotic and incredible sight and he felt his engorged shaft pulse painfully. With another growl, Zuko quickly leaned back down over her and nuzzled the necklace he had given her before he kissed her neck, licking and sucking softly at her flesh, tasting the slightly salty flavor of her sweaty skin. Then he lifted his head to kiss her lips, devouring her sweet mouth hungrily. Both his tongue and his cock thrusting fervently and simultaneously inside Katara’s mouth and pussy was pure ecstasy.

Lifting his mouth from hers with a breathless gasp, Zuko clenched his teeth as he tried to hold back his release a bit longer as his wife continued to moan and gasp underneath him. Gazing down, Zuko’s attention was caught by the sight of Katara’s breasts jiggling and bouncing with each of his thrusts. He grasped her right breast with one hand while the other held him up over her thrashing body.

“Aahh, Zuko!” Katara cried in pleasure at having her sensitive mounds touched and then moaned when Zuko kissed her again. “Mm!”

Running his palm over her nipple, Zuko caressed it firmly, eliciting a loud groan from his wife. Then he massaged the entire breast with his large hand as he continued to gently thrust into her. He moved his mouth away from hers, and bending down, he licked the other neglected nipple. He drew the tight, pebbled peak into his mouth, sucking on it greedily, and reveled in the taste of her skin that was just as arousing as her loving touch and sweet scent.

Katara cried out as she buried her head into the pillow beneath her as all the sensations Zuko was
bestowing upon her were causing that fire to blaze fiercely within her. Her hips began to lift to his harder as she ground herself against his pelvis insistently.

A growl forced itself from Zuko at the sound of her pleasured wail and at the feeling of his wife beneath him, her every interior molding around his hard length to perfection. He could wish for no better place than to be buried within her every day of his life. He swallowed her every sigh and whimper, every moan and cry, and he kissed her again, over and over again, reluctantly letting her catch her breath before diving back in to capture her lips. Again, he was ecstatic at the thought that she fit him as though the gods themselves created this woman just for him, only for him.

Mine, he growled mentally, She is all mine.

He began to thrust more insistently inside her, though not as hard as he wished for fear of hurting her. However, his increased pace caused Katara’s eyes to roll back. The sound of their flesh slapping against each other resonated around the large room. Zuko could feel his end coming, he was so close! He groaned deeply at the sound of his balls slapping against Katara’s firm ass as he continued to thrust into her wet pussy that caused loud squelching sounds. Such a sound, combined with her pleasured moans, caused his shaft to grow impossibly hard and made him delirious with lust.

“Haa, oh, Zuko…ah, Zuko!” Katara chanted his name against his mouth as moans, sighs, and mewls escaped her to signify her pleasure. “I…uuh…I love you,” she cried out as that wonderful pressure began to grow incredibly within her center.

“Ka-tara…I…ah, mm…” Zuko groaned in between pants, growls, and grunts as if his pleasure was robbing him of his ability to talk, “love…ah…love you…Gods, so good…”

His hand went to her hair, chocolate strands sticking to her sweaty forehead, as he repeated the words. It was as if having once spoken of love he could not stop, conveying to her with each caress, each breath, each kiss, each thrust how preciously dear she was to him. Katara’s words of love blended with his, her mouth caressing him, her hands touching him, her body loving him, communicating to him in return what he told her with his words and his body.

Katara cried out at a particular hard thrust of his. Her jaw dropped open on a silent moan when she felt Zuko’s thick member pulse and throb within her and she felt herself tipping toward the edge of release, but not quite there yet.

“Z-Zuko,” she managed to moan out as she stared at him with large eyes that told him she was close.
Zuko could feel his balls tightening, he knew that he could hold on no longer, and he wanted to bring Katara to that blissful released with him.

“Let go, Katara,” he growled out, “Come for me, love!”

With a few more thrusts, Zuko reached down a hand between their straining bodies and firmly rubbed his thumb on her swollen nub, causing the dam to break.

“Zukooo!” Katara screamed as she threw her head back, dug her nails in his back, and raised her hips as the coil inside her snapped. Stars burst before her eyes and flames erupted within her, sending her screaming into a world of rapture.

If he thought she was tight before, it did not compare to the pleasurable sensation of Katara coming around him. At the sound of Katara screaming his name and at the feeling of her tight, silken walls constricting almost painfully around him, Zuko felt his cock throb before an immense pleasure, the likes of which he had never known, exploded throughout every inch of his body. He ignored the reflex of pulling out to spill himself on the sheets and instead drove himself as deeply as he could go inside his wife’s welcoming body.

“Kataraaa!” he roared his own passion into the room, and the flames of the candles and fireplace flared wildly as he released into her body.

Katara gasped and convulsed at the sensation of jets of burning liquid hitting her walls. She could feel Zuko’s shaft pulsating, like a heart, pounding, thumping, throbbing as spurts of his hot semen emptied into her.

Groaning loudly, Zuko wrapped his arms around his wife, pulling her closer to his hard body.

“Katara, oh, Katara,” he chanted in her ear in rapture as his hips jerked convulsively again and again as he spilled his hot, thick seed inside her, filling and coating her clenching pussy. Oh gods, the sensation of coming inside her instead of on the sheets was indescribable—pure ecstasy. Then he drove into her one last time, gasping her name, before he slumped and shuddered atop her trembling body as his pleasure robbed him of all coherent thought.

Katara clung to his sweaty form as her body continued to give little spasms, her core continued to constrict, and her heart pounded wildly in her chest. The feeling of her husband’s heavier body on top of her did not bother her, instead the reassuring weight of him as he shuddered and panted hard
against her made her sigh in happiness.

Heaving, Zuko carefully pulled his now flaccid member out of her, simultaneously making her wince and eliciting a soft mewl from her at the sensation. She flushed when she felt their combined fluids, warm and sticky, pour out from her opening and run down the line of her bottom to coat the sheets beneath her.

Zuko kept his grasp on Katara until his breathing started to slow down and the intensity of what he was feeling began to subside, but not completely vanish. Body still shaking, he knelt back and looked down between them. He saw his seed mixed with her juices and virgin blood seep out of her clenching hole. He groaned as the sight caused a primitive part of him to howl in triumph at his conquest of the woman he loved. He carefully laid back down over her to kiss her softly. He then languidly rolled himself away from her and lay down on his back to her left. He brought his wife with him, cradling her tightly against his side as he waited for the thundering beat of his heart to ebb. He heard her sigh softly as she rested her head on his chest while the rest of her body remained limp. He trailed a hand over the soft and flushed skin of her back, his mind still astounded by the explosive release his body had just experienced. Nothing he had ever experienced approached the mind-blowing ecstasy that Katara had wrenched from him.

Looking down at his wife, whose gleaming, glorious naked body lay trembling partially atop him, her eyes closed, a sated expression on her lovely face, the young lord smiled. He brought a hand up to brush a few sweaty strands of her hair away from her flushed cheeks. At his touch, Katara slowly opened her blue eyes to look up at him. Zuko leaned his head down to kiss her softly before pulling away.

“Gods, you’re amazing,” he muttered, his voice still hoarse from his cry of release, “I can’t thank Agni enough that you are my wife.”

A happy smile spread on her kissed-swollen lips.

“Mm, Zuko, my husband,” she breathed out softly as her eyes fluttered. “That was so, so…uuhh, incredible,” she groaned softly.

Zuko smirked smugly before his eyes softened when she yawned softly. He could sense that she was exhausted and at the brink of sleep. They had had an eventful day after all. He wanted to take her again, already he could feel his body stirring for another round of lovemaking, but he would allow her to sleep since she had pleased him immensely. Besides, he knew that she would be in pain soon for having to accommodate and stretch for his size for the first time. But once she was feeling better and rested, he would have her again, and again, and again.
“Get some sleep, love,” he told her gently, “I will be by your side when you wake up like I’ll be for the rest of our lives.”

Katara murmured and rubbed her face gently against his skin.

“I love you, Zuko,” she managed to whisper as sleep began to claim her.

She smiled softly when she heard him respond, “And I love you, Katara.”

With a flick of his wrist, the many candles were extinguished. It plunged them into darkness except for the light of the fireplace and the moonlight that spilled from the partially opened curtains of the balcony. Zuko moved away from her so he could grab the warm coverlet at the foot of the bed before settling back down beside her. When she frowned at the loss of his warmth and touch, he took her again into the protection of his arms before he pulled the blanket over them. He curled himself protectively around her and she sighed softly in her sleep.

A feeling of peace and contentment that he had never felt before settled over Zuko as he held his sleeping wife in his arms. It was not long before sleep claimed him as well.

It was a wonderful night as the joining of two bodies, two hearts, and two souls combined into one.

And it will not be the last.
Groaning softly as he pressed closer to something warm and soft, Zuko slowly opened his eyes. He blinked for a second to rid himself of any lingering sleep, and then looked down to his right. A soft smile spread on his lips as he gazed down upon Katara, now his wife and Fire Lady, sleeping next to him. Her head was pillowed on his upper arm that was holding her to him, her right hand resting on his chest. The blanket with which he had covered them both the night before was now pulled down around their waists, revealing their bare upper bodies.

He admired her sleeping and naked form curled into his body, gleaming with the morning rays of sunlight that spilled into the room from the slightly parted curtains of the balcony. He was surprised to realize that dawn had passed three hours or so ago and he had slept through it. But he did not mind since his exhaustion was caused by something pleasant—his Katara. Crushed rose petals were strewn around her and a few were stuck to her soft, brown skin. His eyes darkened a little as he remembered wondering a few months ago how Katara would look lying naked among roses and he thank the gods that he was able to find out for himself that she looked divine. He brushed the petals from her skin and then ran his hand slowly, caressingly, down her soft back. She moaned softly at the touch, but continued in her sweet slumber.

The sound that escaped her caused Zuko to remember their wedding night and the moans, gasps, and screams he had elicited from her as they made love for the very first time. Even more surprising were the sounds he made. He had never been vocal during sex before. He brought back to his mind the way his waterbender’s nude and soft body had felt against his heated flesh, how her darkened blue eyes had gazed intently into his, how incredible it had felt being buried inside her. He groaned as he felt his body immediately respond with arousal.

And oh gods, he had no idea how gloriously pleasurable the sensation of coming inside a woman—no, not just any woman, but Katara—was and he was sure he was already addicted to the feeling. Katara had ruined him for finding his release in any other form. Masturbating would never be as pleasurable and not even the stroking of her hands would live up to the amazing sensation of coming inside that wonderfully tight, wet pussy of hers.

Agni, the entire experience had been amazing. She has been amazing.

He could not compare the pleasure he had felt to anything. Those times with those women in the brothels and with Mai could not come close to how amazing it felt being with Katara. With them it had been having sex, a way for him to find some release for his sexual frustration and nothing more. Those encounters had always ended quickly and were forgotten just the same.

But with Katara it was something better, something more deep and meaningful. Having those previous encounters made him realized how incredible and special it was and would always be with
Only with Katara had it ever felt like making love. They had shared themselves completely, not only physically, but emotionally as well. And it was the most rewarding, trilling, pleasurable, and touching experience he had ever had. Only with Katara did he feel complete.

He could not describe how content, happy, and astounded he felt right at that moment.

The feeling of Katara sleeping in his arms, after all this time of yearning for her, filled him with a sense of satisfaction as he gazed down at her. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as her scent gently floated to his nose. The thought of having her sweet scent permeating his pillows and bed made him tighten his hold of her with a content sigh. Of course, now it was their bed and their room.

He loved how soft her brown skin felt, the way her long hair curled around them, and the way her plump lips were slightly parted in her sleep. He loved how her dark lashes fluttered softly to graze her cheeks, and how her small body exuded warmth. Feeling her soft breath caressing his skin, her bare breasts brushing against him as she breathed, and her delicate body pressed tightly against his larger frame, made his heart swell with possessiveness, protectiveness, and love for his wife.

She was all his now—his and nobody else’s. Ever.

She is completely and irrevocably mine, he crowed mentally.

He wrapped his arm more tightly around her, bringing her even closer against him, and he pressed his lips against her soft hair. He reached his other hand out to caress her cheek before he placed it above her smaller hand resting on his chest as he allowed his mind to wander while he waited for her to wake up. It was still early in the morning even if dawn had passed.

The feeling of being pressed against something hard and warm, and the sensation of her back being stroked softly, began to stir Katara from her deep sleep. It took her a moment to realize where she was—or more importantly, whom she was with. She felt her chest fill with warmth and a small smile curled her lips. She decided not to let Zuko know just yet that she was awake, for she wanted to enjoy this moment a bit longer.
She reveled in Zuko’s warmth, at the feeling of her smaller body fitting so nicely against his bigger and stronger frame. She felt so good, so protected and loved, wrapped in his arm and curled into his side, his other hand holding hers right above his beating heart. A heart that was beating just as strongly, just as passionately, as hers was and forever will be for her husband.

He was only and entirely hers. They belonged to each other and she would not let anything or anyone to take him away from her—not a lustful woman or a vengeful rebel.

Her thoughts scattered when she felt Zuko slide his hand down her back. She held her breath when he touched and lightly squeezed her bottom before trailing his hand up her back once again, caressing her skin with his fingers. She began to remember what Zuko did to her the previous night and she blushed lightly. His first penetration had been painful, but once her body had adjusted to his massive girth, she had experience a pleasure the likes of which she had never known.

Her mind replayed the passionate events of the previous night—their wedding night. The way his scorching tongue seemed to brand her skin as he kissed and suckled her breasts, the way his fingers had touched her so intimately, how incredible it felt as he thrust his large shaft in and out of her, and the way his eyes had gazed at her with so much passion, heat, and love.

She felt herself flush even more deeply and her body warmed as she became aroused at the memory.

Zuko paused in his caresses when he felt Katara’s body warm up a little and he glanced down to see that a soft, red blush was staining her cheeks and she was lightly biting her lip. He smiled when he realized she was awake. Why was she pretending to be sleeping?

“Good morning, wife,” he greeted her warmly as he gazed down at her with a small smirk.

Knowing there was no point in pretending she was still asleep, Katara opened her eyes and smiled at him, pleased by his words.

“Good morning, husband,” she replied softly.

Her blue eyes brightened in happiness at the sight of him lying next to her, his pale upper body exposed and majestic.

Zuko’s smile widened a bit. After all the obstacles they had gone through, they were finally married.
And now there was nothing that could separate them.

“How do you feel, love?” he asked her gently as he brushed a few of the rose petals from her mussed hair.

Katara took a moment before she answered him. She felt her inner muscles ache a bit when she moved and she blushed slightly.

“A bit sore,” she answered truthfully before she added with a loving smile when he frowned, “but I feel wonderful more than anything.”

Zuko smiled at her words for he felt the same way. He leaned toward her and they kissed gently—not how they had devoured each other’s mouths last night. When they pulled away, Katara sighed softly as she gazed into his gleaming, golden eyes.

“You made me feel like a true woman,” she remarked with a blush.

“And you made me feel such incredible things I’ve never thought possible,” was his husky reply, “I’ve never experienced anything as amazing as what I did with you.”

Katara smiled happily before her smile faded a bit and she averted her eyes. Zuko frowned at the sudden change in her mood and he reached out a hand to cup her cheek so she could look at him again.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her in concern. Did he perhaps hurt her too much?

“I…I was just curious to know…” she began before she trailed off and again avoided his eyes.

“Curious to know what?” he prompted her as he caressed her cheek with his thumb.

“Never mind,” she responded instead, “It’s nothing.”

“What is it, Katara?” he encouraged her. “I’m your husband. You can tell me anything.”
Encouraged by his words, she glanced at him again.

“Was I…?” she began before she paused.

She did not know why she wanted to ask him what was on her mind, especially when they were having such a sweet moment, but she needed to know his honest answer. She bit her lip, debating with herself for a moment, before she let out a deep breath as she hesitantly continued.

“Was I as good as any of the other women…you’ve been with before? Was I as good as…Mai?” she asked quietly.

Zuko’s hand stopped as he stared incredulously down into her hesitant and insecure eyes. Was she serious?

“How can you ask that?” he asked her in disbelief, his tone almost harsh.

At her confused frown, he continued more softly, more reassuringly.

“You can’t compare yourself to them, Katara,” he told her firmly, “You were amazing, the best. Even being inexperienced, you were truly astonishing, fantastic, and you brought me a pleasure I’ve never known.”

He paused briefly before he asked, “And do you want to know something else?”

“What?” she asked almost inaudibly, wanting to hear what he had to say next with an intense anticipation.

“With them I’ve never…let myself go completely,” he confessed quietly, choosing his words carefully.

It took a moment for Katara to understand what he meant, but once she understood her eyes widened.
“You mean I’m the only one you…uh…” she trailed off and blushed deeply.

“Yes, you’re the only one I’ve released my seed into,” he continued for her in a husky tone.

“Why?” she asked before she could stop herself.

This was such an awkward conversion, but it made her glad to know that Zuko had only shared himself in such a way with her.

“Because it was something too intimate, something I did not want to experience with a complete stranger…not even Mai,” he responded slowly as if he were trying to find the right words to explain himself before he smiled as he held her gaze.

“And I’m glad I didn’t because experiencing it with you was the best feeling I’ve ever experienced,” he continued before his voice turned passionate and husky as he brought her closer to him, “I wanted to share such intimacy with you, to find my release within your wet, tight core. I craved it, dreamed of it. And now that I know how amazing it feels, I will want to experience it many, many times more.”

Katara felt her cheeks burn at his almost crude words even as her heart swelled with giddiness and her belly clenched in desire. He had been honest about what he had felt and she wanted him to know her own thoughts and feelings over the matter.

“I…also loved the sensation of you…spilling your seed inside me,” she confessed breathlessly and she watched as Zuko swallowed thickly and his eyes darkened at her words. “It was hot and thick and it made me feel even fuller, even with your hard…uh, manhood inside me, filling me up completely.”

“Gods, Katara,” Zuko groaned deeply as he stared intensely into her wide eyes, “You’re so damn incredible. I will never get enough of you.”

He swooped down to kiss her passionately yet still gently. The kissed each other for a moment before they pulled apart to gather some air.
“You don’t know how happy it makes me to know that,” she told him, referring to everything he had confessed to her.

“I told you that you will be my first for many things,” he reminded her with a small smirk.

Katara grinned at him and her eyes glinted with curiosity and mischief as she ran her fingers lightly across his bare, muscular chest.

“I can’t wait to know what those things are,” she said excitedly before she frowned when the soreness between her legs made itself known again right at that moment.

As if understanding, Zuko’s smirk turned into a soft smile.

“Soon,” he said gently, yet huskily.

He leaned down to kiss her and they groaned lowly before he pulled away to stare at her.

“I can only imagine how much more incredible you’ll make me feel once you gain some experience,” he told her with a husky growl as he gave her a small smirk.

Katara gazed deeply into his eyes and she smiled when she saw that he was being completely honest. She felt her heart expand with happiness and relief. He began to caress her cheek again and she leaned toward his hand as they continued to hold each other’s gaze.

“Being with you was amazing,” Zuko continued as his voice turned into a softer tone, “Because, unlike with those other women, I love you. I made love to you, Katara. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Katara replied with a large happy smile before she lifted herself up a little to kiss him passionately.

Zuko groaned against her mouth and he wrapped his arms tightly around her, their bare upper bodies pressed flush against each other. Katara moaned softly and the sound again made the blood in Zuko’s veins heat up. He could feel his semi-erect cock stirring with his arousal and he growled lowly at the thought of making love to Katara again. But then his uncle’s words about waiting until
she felt better and was ready again to engage in intimacy came to his mind.

With a sigh, Zuko reluctantly pulled away from her soft lips and he gazed into her slightly darkening blue eyes. Agni, he wanted her again. He wanted to ask her if he could take her again, but he was concerned that she would agree even if she were in pain. No, he will wait until she was feeling better.

“I’ll get your bath ready,” he began and cleared his throat at the huskiness in his voice, “I’m going to get ready in another room and then I’ll ask the servants to bring our breakfast.”

He did not know if he would be able to resist making love to her if they were to bathe together. Better not to tempt the fates.

Katara suppressed a confused frown since she had thought he was going to make love to her again, but she was a bit glad that he had not for she was feeling very sore.

“Thank you,” she said with a gleeful smile at the mention of a warm bath and food.

Zuko smiled at her, kissed her softly on the lips, before moving away from her and standing up from the bed. He wanted to stay in bed with Katara for a moment longer, but he knew that they couldn’t remain in bed all day while their family waited for them to show up.

“Don’t take long with your bath,” he told her with a smirk as he turned toward her.

Katara blushed slightly as he regally stared down at her, looking magnificent and imperious even without a piece of royal garb to cover his nudity. Though he had nothing to be ashamed of, for his body was perfect and she enjoyed looking at it.

“Okay,” Katara finally remembered to answer when he raised a dark eyebrow at her.

With a satisfied nod, Zuko turned away. He paused briefly, however, when he noticed his reflection on the full-length mirror standing in a corner. It was not his body that caught his attention, but what he saw behind it. He saw that Katara was surreptitiously glancing at his ass with a blush tinting her cheeks. He felt male pride swell within him at the knowledge that his wife was pleased by what she saw.
Zuko had never thought much about his good looks or about his body. The visible scar on his face had damage his confidence about his physical image a bit, and although many women praised him for his appealing looks, he sometimes found himself not believing them. But the way Katara always looked at him made him feel as if he were the handsomest male in the world and he himself began to believe that he was indeed an attractive man despite his disfigurement.

With a small smirk, the young lord stretched his muscles, allowing his body to lengthen and his muscles to flex and define. He heard her breath hitch and watched her eyes widened, and he smiled. He was glad she found him physically attractive and he was glad to know his body pleased her.

“Do you like what you see, Katara?” he asked her with a smirk.

Katara jumped, startled. How did he know? She looked beyond his body and finally noticed the mirror and that he was looking at her with a teasing smirk. She wanted to hide in embarrassment, but instead she raised her chin with a smirk of her own.

“Very much,” she replied impishly.

The smirk on Zuko’s lips widened and his eyes darkened a bit.

“And I very much like what I’m seeing, too,” he responded huskily.

Katara frowned in confusion before she noticed where his gaze was directed at. She looked down and saw that her breasts were completely exposed, and with a gasp, she instinctively covered herself with her arms before she scowled at him when he chuckled amusedly.

Still chuckling, Zuko walked toward the bathing chamber.

Katara watched him go with a pleased smile. He was so handsome, his body was so perfect, and he was all hers. She fell back on the bed as her smile widened. She rolled to her side so she was now lying on Zuko’s pillow and buried her face in its softness so she could curb the sudden urge to giggle giddily. The spicy sandalwood scent of her husband reached her senses and she inhaled it deeply before sighing softly as it brought a feeling of warmth and happiness to her entire body. She would never tire of waking up to Zuko’s masculine scent.
Her thoughts once again returned to the intimate event of the previous night. She was even more aware of her body now. Her breasts felt heavy and her nipples ached pleasantly due to Zuko’s caressing mouth, by his lips suckling firmly on the peaks and his tongue licking them insistently. Her breasts were not the only place that felt the remembrance of Zuko’s touch, she mused dazedly as she again remembered the amazing feeling of his cock filling her deeply. Her womb contracted and her core ached with both arousal and soreness.

In the large bathing room, Zuko quickly filled the bathtub with water before returning to the room to find his wife scooting toward the edge of the bed, trailing the blanket after her.

Katara did not want to leave their bed so soon, she wanted them to cuddle some more, but she knew they could not do that…at least, not right now. As she stood up from the bed, she suppressed a hiss of pain when her inner muscles protested at her movements. Muscles she had never known existed ached painfully, but she smiled at Zuko when she saw him return so as not to worry him.

However, Zuko had noticed her small wince and he frowned guiltily.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized softly as he approached her.

“What’s there to feel sorry for? It’s normal,” she replied with a small shrug, “So stop feeling guilty, okay?”

Zuko was silent for a short moment before he smiled at her.

“Okay,” he responded.

Katara smiled before she wrapped the sheet around her body. She was still shy about walking around nude. Zuko smiled affectionately at her bashfulness.

_She’ll get used to being naked around me soon_, he thought with a smirk.

His thoughts deviated when something dark on the white sheet that covered the bed caught his attention.
Katara watched curiously as Zuko frowned slightly before his lips curled into a pleased and smug smirk as he stared at the bed. Following his gaze, Katara’s cheeks flooded with color as she saw the dark red blood stains.

The evidence of her virginity.

Katara glanced up to stare wide-eyed at Zuko.

“You’re not going to show our families, right?” she blurted out in mortification before she could stop herself.

“Well…” Katara hesitated before she explained, “It’s tradition in the tribe, especially among the most conservative members, for the newlyweds’ families to inspect the bed after the wedding night in order to check if the bride had been pure before her marriage.”

Zuko stared at her incredulously. What an embarrassing tradition. But he decided not to let his thoughts known.

“Does everybody follow such a tradition?” he asked.

“Not anymore,” the waterbender replied. “If the husband doesn’t confront his in-laws that his bride had not been a virgin, then everybody assumes that she had been untouched before her wedding night,” she said this almost angrily.

“I see,” Zuko remarked before he continued with a distasteful frown, “No, I won’t show our family.”

Katara let out a relieved breath. It would have been so embarrassing to have them see the evidence of their activities from their wedding night. She raised an eyebrow when she noticed that Zuko was smirking again.

“But the servants will see when they clean the room,” he commented smugly. “And soon news that the Fire Lord had deflowered his wife and Fire Lady will spread throughout the country by tonight.”
Katara gaped at him in horror.

Zuko chuckled at her mortified expression before he pulled her tightly to him to kiss her soundly on her mouth. When he pulled away, he stared intensely into her dazed eyes.

“You’re mine and only mine, and everybody will know it,” he growled lowly as he kissed her again.

When they pulled away, Katara smirked up at him.

“And you’re only mine too,” she retorted firmly as she pulled him down so she could kiss him fiercely.

Zuko smiled against her lips before he pulled away. Lifting her into his arms, Zuko carried her to the grand bathroom. Katara wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed contentedly as she rested her head on his shoulder. Once inside the bathing room, Zuko gently placed Katara on her feet near the black marble bathtub. Dipping his hand into the water, Zuko raised his body temperature. Soon the water was warm and steam was rising toward the ceiling.

Satisfied with the water temperature, Zuko straightened and again took Katara into his arms and kissed her softly.

“I’ll see you soon,” he told her before he moved away from her and headed out of the bathroom, closing the door softly behind him.

Katara looked after him dazedly before she shook herself and returned her attention to the great bathing chamber. Why was she not surprised to see it was as magnificent as everything else Zuko possessed? Gold and black designs covered the top edges of the dark red walls and the black marble floor had a glossy shine to it. A small cabinet rested against one wall with neatly folded towels. Then she turned toward the large marble tub that rested against the wall opposite the door, already filled with the inviting, steaming water. A shelf was carved on the wall next to it with a great assortment of bath oils and soaps.

Dropping the blanket with a delighted smile, the waterbender carefully stepped into the tub before gratefully sinking down into the heated water with a content groan. Leaning against the edge, she sighed blissfully as the warm water immediately began to soothe her aches. She stayed immobile for a few minutes, just relaxing, before she started the act of bathing herself.
She examined the soaps on the shelf and smiled when she saw that next to the almost scentless soaps for Zuko there were perfumed ones for herself. She grabbed a blue glass bottle, uncorked the top, and inhaled curiously. She sighed in contentment at the delicate, flowery scent. She poured some of the liquid into her palm and meticulously began to wash her hair. Then she grabbed a new sponge, rubbed the bar of soap on it until there was a rich, soapy lather, before she washed her body. As she brought the foamy sponge to wash between her legs, she bit her lip and flushed as she remembered the feeling of Zuko’s hot seed spilling into her before it leaked out of her, warm and sticky, when he pulled out. Swallowing, she shook her head as she resumed in her task. As she pressed more firmly, she winced slightly at the dull ache she felt in her core. She ignored it as she again began to remember the previous night.

It had been painful at first, and she had even wondered why women wanted to have sex, before the most incredible pleasure she had ever experienced crashed into her. She was glad that she had not caved in to Aang’s insistences, and even Jet’s proposal that night in Ba Sing Se. Having her first time be with Zuko, giving her virginity to him, had been wonderful and special. Making love to him was a mind-blowing experience. Would it always be that way? She hoped so because she wanted to experience it again.

She shifted in order to wash her legs and again she winced at the soreness in her center.

Okay, maybe not anytime soon, she mused with a wry smile.

She frowned pensively. Maybe her healing abilities could help relieve the pain. Nodding in satisfaction, Katara wrapped her hand in glowing, healing water and brought it to her sex. After a few unsuccessful minutes, Katara decided to stop and frowned in confusion. The pain lessened only a little, but it was still there. Was it perhaps because muscle soreness was natural and not an injury or illness? What now?

She bit her lip. What if Zuko wanted her again soon? Could she deny him? Maybe the pain would go away soon and she would not have to worry.

Finished with her bath, Katara rose from the now tepid water and stepped out of the tub. She dried her hair with waterbending, but decided to use the soft towel to pat her skin dry. Wrapping another towel around her, Katara walked slowly toward the door and opened it.

She paused as she stepped into the room when she spotted Jiao opening the curtains to fully let the sunlight in. Jiao turned around and smiled warmly at the waterbender when she saw her.
“Good morning, my lady,” the maidservant greeted softly as she walked away from the closed balcony. “I brought you a fresh set of clothes. Fire Lord Zuko wants a bigger wardrobe to replace this one before your clothes are brought in.”

“Oh,” Katara muttered as she glanced at her clothes resting at the foot of the bed.

Jiao walked toward them and motioned for the frozen Fire Lady to come closer. Katara blushed as she neared the bed, but she was grateful when Jiao studiously ignored looking directly at the center of the bed as she handed Katara her new undergarments first.

“Thank you,” Katara said with a smile as she grabbed them.

Jiao smiled and turned around to allow her lady privacy before turning back in order to help Katara place the rest of her clothes on. Now that she had to wear formal attire, Katara found out that she needed help getting dressed.

“Are you all right, my lady?” Jiao asked softly as she tied the sash around the waterbender’s waist.

Katara understood what she was asking and she smiled.

“Yes,” she responded immediately, “You were right, Jiao. Zuko was so careful and gentle and understanding…” she trailed of wistfully and then sighed happily. “Oh, Jiao! It was amazing!”

She smiled even as her cheeks turned red. Jiao returned the smile happily.

“I’m glad, my lady,” she said sincerely.

They smiled at each other as the older woman helped the waterbender finish getting ready. They said nothing else as Jiao combed and styled Katara’s hair before pinning the Fire Lady fire crown on the bun she had created. As Jiao stepped away, Katara looked at herself in the mirror and smiled at the image she made.

“Thanks, Jiao,” she said.
Jiao bowed her head and smiled before she reached into the pocket of her apron. She pulled out a small bag and handed it to Katara.

“I thought you might want this,” she said, “It’s the gift Yin-Min gave to you last night.”

“Oh!” Katara exclaimed as she grabbed the bag. “I forgot about it.”

“I brought a cup of juice in case you wanted to take the blend,” Jiao said as she walked toward the dresser where she had placed the cup on the surface. Grabbing it, she walked back to her lady and handed it to her.

Katara opened the bag and sprinkled some of the crushed herbs into the juice before taking the cup. She drank the juice quickly and smiled at the sweet aftertaste as she gave the cup back to Jiao. Would the blend really work? Would she soon become with child? What would Zuko say?

“Thanks, Jiao. You’ve been of great help,” Katara told her.

“You’re welcome, Fire Lady Katara,” Jiao replied as she sincerely added, “I’m honored to serve such a wonderful woman as you. I’m glad Fire Lord Zuko chose you as his wife.”

Katara blushed, pleased—though she still had to get used to being referred to as Fire Lady.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Staring outside the window in the antechamber, Zuko stood perfectly straight with his hands clasped behind his back. His face was expressionless as two of his servants quietly set out the breakfast meal on the low table for the newlyweds. He had bathed in the room he had used the previous day and had to resort to pleasuring himself to release the arousal that had overtaken his body when he woke up next to a wonderfully naked Katara. Once finished and changed, Zuko had rushed back to see her.

Although his outer appearance did not show it, Zuko’s mind was preoccupied with images that made his heart race in his chest and his groin twitch. He imagined Katara bathing, her olive skin glistening with drops of water, and her long, wet hair curling around her flushed cheeks.

He had to force himself to remain where he was and not barge into the bathroom where his...
waterbender was bathing as he once again felt the stirrings of his arousal. Now that he knew what it felt to make love to Katara, he wanted her again and would want her again and again after that.

He closed his eyes as he ordered himself to calm down. He knew that he could not act upon his carnal desires at the moment since Katara was still in pain from receiving him for the first time. He did not want to cause her more discomfort. He had to be patient and wait until she was ready.

But he wanted her again, damn it!

The young Fire Lord was brought out of his thoughts when one of the doors to the bedchamber opened and he heard quiet feminine voices. Snapping his eyes open, Zuko turned around expectantly and he watched as Katara and Jiao walked out of the room. He took in the dark red dress of his wife and the fire crown that rested on her head. His eyes warmed at the lovely sight of her dressed in his colors. As if sensing his intense gaze, Katara paused in whatever she was saying to Jiao and turned to him. When a soft blush blossomed on her cheeks and a pleased smile curled her lips as their eyes met, Zuko thought it was going to take all his self-control to resist her.

Mentally shaking his head, Zuko moved away from the window and approached his wife in a few long strides. He took her hand and smiled down at her.

“Come, let’s eat our breakfast, my lady,” he told her coolly as he gestured to the low table where the servants had just finished setting up.

“As you wish, my lord,” she replied just as serenely.

Katara smiled since she could see by the gleam in his eyes that he was pleased by her appearance and her words even if he had not said anything. As long as there were strangers around them, he would act taciturn and aloof, and she understood.

Without another word, he led her to the table and helped her sit down on the elaborate cushion before he sat beside her. As soon as they began to eat, Jiao and two other maidservants entered the royal bedchamber to clean it. The royal couple ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes, while stealing glances at each other with teasing smirks and knowing smiles.

The door to the bedchamber was opened once again and Jiao and the other servants came out with baskets of dirty laundry. They were blushing and smiling as they covertly glanced at the young pair of newlyweds. Katara blushed deeply and looked down to stare intently at her plate, while Zuko
unperturbedly continued eating the delicious meal.

Once all the servants left, Katara looked up and let out a relieved breath. How embarrassing. She glanced at Zuko and scowled when she saw him smirking smugly.

“So I was right,” she began with a smug tone in order to distract his thoughts.

“About what?” he asked as he took a sip of his tea.

“Jiao and Kuo are together!” she exclaimed with a smile.

Zuko shrugged.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” he replied casually.

“They won’t get into trouble for being in a relationship, will they?” she asked in concern. She would feel guilty if they got in trouble because she just blurted out their secret.

“As long as they both continue to do their duties well, I don’t see a problem,” he reassured her.

Katara relaxed and smiled happily as she ate some fruit.

“So what are we going to do now?” she asked curiously. “Do I have to start on my duties as Fire Lady today?”

“No,” he responded as he placed down his chopsticks, “We have a week to ourselves before we have to return to our duties.” A smile curled his lips as he continued, “I want to take you to the royal beach house on Ember Island for the rest of our honeymoon.”

“That sounds like fun,” Katara agreed in excitement, a smile brightening her face, “I can’t wait.”
“Rather eager, I see,” Zuko teased suggestively.

Instead of blushing in embarrassment as he had expected her to do, the young lord watched as a mischievous smile spread on his wife’s lips and she batted her eyelashes coquettishly at him.

“Of course. Aren’t you?” she asked innocently even as her eyes gleamed warmly.

“Oh, you have no idea,” he replied with a groan as he looked at her with heated eyes.

Katara threw him a coy smile before she continued eating. She loved it when Zuko allowed himself to flirt with her.

The rest of their meal was spent in teasing banter and suggestive glances. Once they were finished, Zuko looked at Katara for a moment before he let out an unenthusiastic sigh.

“We have to meet with our family now,” he muttered as he took a final sip of his tea. He wanted Katara all to himself and did not want to share her—even with family—but he knew they would have to see them eventually.

Katara smiled happily that he had said ‘our family’ and not ‘our families’. She then hid her grin as she wiped her mouth with her napkin at his reluctant expression.

Zuko stood up first and then helped her to her feet before leading her toward the doors, out of the royal chambers, and into the golden corridors. Shen and Kuo were already posted outside and they greeted the royal couple with bows before following behind them toward the sitting room where everybody else was gathered.

Katara suppressed a grimace as her intimate parts ached and protested at her movements, and although she wanted to ignore the pain, it caused her to walk stiffly.

Noticing her strange manner of walking, Zuko wondered what was wrong before he understood. He thought of carrying her in his arms so she would not feel pain, but he knew she would refuse to be treated as if she were weak and fragile. So instead, he adjusted his long strides to smaller steps to match her speed and he tightened his hold of her arm that was tucked under his in order to support her. His eyes gleamed in pleasure when she looked up to give him a grateful smile.
Soon they were entering the sitting room where everybody was chattering loudly as they drank tea and waited for the newlyweds. As soon as they were spotted, all the women smiled knowingly and all the men grinned reluctantly, except for Hakoda and Sokka who were frowning with arms crossed over their chests. After a greeting, Zuko led Katara toward one of the plush couches and then sat next to her. Katara was smiling, and although Zuko was not, they could all see his pleasure and contentment.

“You are late,” Kanna was the first to speak, her tone teasing as were her light blue eyes, “Were you two unable to sleep?”

“Maybe you should have slept in this morning,” Ursa said innocently, although she was smiling.

“You guys look tired,” Suki spoke up next with a grin, “Did you have a rough night?”

“Here, have some tea,” Iroh said with an amused smile as he poured them two cups of the sweet-smelling, hot liquid. “It will replenish your energy after going through such…vigorous activities.”

Katara blushed deeply, even Zuko’s right cheek flushed lightly, when they realized they were being teased about their wedding night. Before Zuko could coldly demand them to stop, Hakoda cleared his throat loudly.

“That’s enough,” he said gruffly, his frown deepening as he glanced briefly at his daughter and her husband. “A father does not wish to hear such things about his daughter.”

Everybody else laughed quietly at his disgruntled expression while Sokka nodded in agreement with his father, but they decided to stop with the teasing and talk about other subjects—much to the relief of Katara and Zuko. Iroh and Pakku moved toward the Pai Sho game board and Sokka sat down on the floor to play with his daughters. The Fire Lord and the Southern Water Tribe Chieftain began to talk about the treaty between their countries that had been signed the day before and expressed their hopes about the future relationship between the two nations.

Katara had been listening intently to what her husband and her father were saying, but her attention was diverted when the women surrounded her and carefully dragged her toward the cushions they had been sitting on. Zuko glanced at her before returning his attention to his father-in-law. Katara scowled. She was a bit annoyed for she had wanted to hear more about the treaty.
I’ll just ask Zuko later, she thought with a firm nod before she reluctantly looked at the women surrounding her. She had a feeling she knew what they wanted to talk to her about.

“Are you all right?” Kanna asked with concern when she saw her granddaughter wince slightly as she tried to find a comfortable spot on the cushion. “Does it hurt a lot?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m just a bit sore,” Katara responded quickly.

“Your husband wasn’t too rough with you, was he?” the old woman asked with narrowed eyes.

“Of course not!” Katara exclaimed, immediately wanting to defend Zuko against any accusations they might have. Then with a dark blush staining her cheeks, she added softly, “He was gentle and patient…It was wonderful.” She sighed blissfully.

The women relaxed before they began to tease her again. Katara was both mortified and amused. Now that she had experienced what goes on in a marriage bed, the older women had no qualms in talking about and joking about sex with her. Katara smiled with pleasure since it seemed that now she was truly being treated like a woman and not a girl that needed to be kept safe and ignorant.

When it seemed both her grandmother and new mother-in-law were distracted by something else, Katara leaned closer to Suki with a small grin. Suki raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

“How about what you asked me back in the Southern Water Tribe…” Katara began in a teasing whisper, “Now I can give you a reply.”

The older woman frowned as she tried to remember what that question was.

“Oh yeah?” she asked, “And what is the answer?”

Katara glanced quickly at her occupied husband before she returned her attention to Suki with a smirk curling her lips.

“I was pleased to find out last night that…Zuko is very, very big,” she confessed smugly.
The auburn-haired warrior’s mouth fell open and she blushed at her sister-in-law’s words before she giggled.

“I’m sure you’re the envy of many women,” Suki stated.

“You got that right,” Katara replied with a soft laugh.

“And I will say the same thing about Sokka and me,” Suki added with another laugh.

They both grinned at their husbands when the men glanced in their direction at the sound of their laughter. Sokka grinned back at his wife, even though he had no clue what had caused her amusement, while Zuko aimed a raised dark eyebrow at his waterbender before their attention was once again called for.

Ursa and Kanna asked what had caused them to laugh, but the younger women quickly said it was nothing and changed the subject. Their fun was cut short a few hours later when the Fire Lord cleared his throat to gain everybody’s attention.

“I plan on taking Katara to Ember Island for the rest of our honeymoon,” Zuko informed them coolly.

His announcement brought another round of teasing and suggestive remarks, but the happy mood soon changed when Hakoda spoke next.

“We will be returning to the Southern Water Tribe after both of you leave,” he said with a bit of sadness as he turned to look at his daughter.

Katara felt herself get teary-eyed at the news, but she ordered herself to calm down. She did not want to make it harder on her family with her tears.

“I’m going to miss you all,” she said with a sad smile.
“We’ll visit the Southern Water Tribe whenever we have a chance,” Zuko promised as he turned to his wife with a soft look in his eyes. Again he felt warmth gather in his chest when she gave him a grateful smile.

“Take care of my precious granddaughter,” Kanna spoke up as she placed a hand above Katara’s.

“I will,” the young lord vowed with a firm nod.

“Please write to me whenever you can,” Kanna told Katara.

“To me, too,” Suki spoke up.

“I promise I will,” the waterbender assured them as she hugged them both.

“Remember what I said about making Katara happy,” Sokka threatened teasingly to Zuko as he again stroked his dark space sword.

“I won’t forget,” Zuko responded dryly.

Sokka chuckled and the mood soon lifted into a happier one. Not understanding what was going on, but reveling in the laughter, Jing and Ting babbled and giggled happily as they demanded their father’s attention.

Just as dinner approached, Zuko stood up and excused Katara and himself for the evening. They both flushed when they were teased again as they left the room.

“Sorry about that,” Katara said with a sheepish smile as she squeezed Zuko’s arm, “They can be too much to handle sometimes.” She meant her family’s unabashed teasing.

“I don’t mind,” Zuko responded with a small smile, “It means that they really have accepted me into your family.”

“Just like your mother and uncle accepted me,” she replied happily.
“And they were doing much of the teasing, too,” Zuko remarked with a dry chuckle.

Katara giggled before she stopped when she finally noticed that they were heading toward their rooms. She bit her lip in anxiety. Was Zuko going to make love to her again? She was still sore. Maybe she could distract him for a while before they went to their room.

“Let’s go to the Royal Palace Garden!” she exclaimed a bit too loudly, causing Zuko to jump slightly at the sudden outburst. “I miss the turtle-ducks!”

After composing himself, Zuko’s eyes widened before he frowned. He could not allow Katara to see the garden yet. Her present was still not ready. It had been difficult keeping her away from it for the past few weeks, but luckily she had been distracted with the preparations for the wedding. He needed to come up with a good excuse.

“We’ll go another day. It’s getting late and dinner is being brought to our rooms,” he told her in a cool tone. Not the best excuse, but it would have to do.

“Okay,” Katara replied reluctantly as she walked beside Zuko in the same slow pace from before.

They finally arrived at the royal chambers and entered the anteroom where the servants were already setting up their dinner on the low table. It was a Fire Nation tradition for newlyweds to share meals alone during their entire honeymoon before they could join the rest of their family and friends. It was meant for the couple, who were most of the time strangers, to have alone time to get to know one another without any interference.

Once all the servants, except for Jiao, left, the Fire Lord and his wife ate in silence, mainly because both were preoccupied with their own thoughts about what to do for the rest of the night. As soon as they finished, Jiao began to clean up before she asked another servant to help her take everything back to the kitchen. Zuko again helped Katara stand up, and she nervously followed him toward their room.

Zuko held opened one of the doors only closing it after Katara went in. The waterbender looked around the room and saw that it was meticulously clean once again, candles no longer lining up every surface or rose petals scattered on the bed. She noticed that on the bed their sleeping attire had been laid out for them. She also noticed a great pile of wrapped boxes and objects in one corner of their room. Those were a few of their wedding presents from their family and the most important dignitaries from the other nations. Zuko had ordered the rest of their presents—which were too
numerous to fit in their bedchamber—to be placed in another room.

The waterbender took a deep breath. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt that bad, maybe she would feel pleasure despite the discomfort? Why didn’t the aching go away? Why did women have to go through such pain and soreness when they lost their virginity?

So unfair, she thought with a scowl.

She really wanted to make love to Zuko again and enjoy it.

Still mentally debating the issue, Katara helped Zuko take off his fire crown before she walked to the box to place it and her own crown inside it. Then she turned around to face her silent husband, who was puzzled at her behavior.

As he started to remove his regal robes, Zuko noticed Katara stiffen slightly before she tried to hide it as she began to slowly remove her own clothes.

“What’s wrong?” he finally asked her.

Katara opened her mouth to say there was nothing wrong before she remembered that he had told her she could tell him anything. She fidgeted with the sash around her waist before she looked up at him.

“Are you going to…take me again?” she asked as she blushed. “I mean I want you to…but I’m still a little sore…”

Zuko could see that, although she was nervous, she was determined. He frowned before his features softened. He walked up to her and cupped her cheek, caressing her soft skin with his thumb.

“I very much want to make love you again, Katara, but I understand that you must still be in pain. I’ll wait until you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Zuko,” she said sincerely as she smiled at him and nuzzled his hand.
She gasped softly when he pulled her tightly against him and kissed her deeply. When he pulled away she gazed at him dazedly and wonderingly. His golden eyes now seemed a deep amber color.

“But once you’re ready, you better be prepared,” he told her huskily as his arms tightened around her, “because I plan on having you again and again.”

“I’m eagerly waiting for it,” she replied with a coy smile.

She pulled his head down and kissed him before she pulled back to gaze lustfully into his eyes.

“Maybe we can just touch each other like we did before we married,” she said huskily.

“Yes, please,” Zuko groaned.

Katara giggled quietly at his eagerness before she moaned softly when Zuko crushed her to him and kissed her passionately before they pulled away to get ready for bed. Once they had washed separately in the bathroom, Zuko helped her into her nightgown. Even though she could see the lust in his eyes as her flesh was bared to him before being covered up, he touched her in a gentle manner and without any sexual intent. It almost made her give in to him and damn her discomfort.

They climbed into the bed and wrapped their arms around each other and kissed. Soon they were pulling at each other’s sleeping clothes and were touching each other erotically until they were both lying sated on the bed. Katara had only been able to handle gentle touches before the discomfort became too much, but she enjoyed herself nonetheless.

They spent their time touching each other, reading out loud to each other from the books Zuko had asked Jiao to bring to them, and looking over their presents. They smiled at the sentimental ones given to them by their family and close friends and laughed at the more outrageous ones from the nobility.

They did not seem to notice as the vivid sun finally dipped below the horizon and the moon appeared bright in the dark sky. The night ticked away, minute by minute, hour by hour, as Katara lay in Zuko’s warm and protective arms. They lay in bed, basking in their time together, their voices softly hushed as they spoke of many things from their past, their present, and their hopes, dreams and yearnings for their future together.
Zuko rested on his back with Katara pressed against his side with one of her slender legs tucked between his muscled ones. He would occasionally bend his head down to kiss her softly or teasingly nibble on her earlobe or neck. Katara would brush her lips against his smooth chest or just as teasingly nip his flesh as their eyes shone with the deep feelings they held for the other.

It was the beginning of a marriage. The building of a sturdy foundation that could be enhanced by the pleasures and happiness life could bring, but that would also stand firm against any trial and tribulation that life would equally throw their way.

It was a gentle blending of two lives, two souls, into one.

Standing at the bow of the magnificent flagship, Katara watched excitedly as Ember Island became more visible as they neared, the setting sun casting a warm glow over the small island with its white sandy beaches and tall palm trees. It was just as beautiful as the last time she had seen it and this time she would be exploring the island as a newly married woman.

Zuko stood calmly beside his thrilled wife and he smiled affectionately at her when she smiled endearingly at him. He admired the way the sun gleamed off her olive skin and how the wind gently ruffled her brown hair around her. His water nymph still continued to charm him.

The pleasing warmth radiating from her husband’s body reminded Katara of how warm she had felt when she again woke up in his arms that morning before they sailed toward Ember Island. She smiled sadly as she thought of bidding her family goodbye. She would miss them, but she comforted herself with the thought that she would see them again.

She then remembered how caring her firebender had been to her the previous night and she was grateful that he had been concerned for her even though his desire had been obvious. But now that she was feeling better, there was no longer any aching or discomfort, if Zuko wanted to make love to her again, then she would not object and would even encourage him. But she was embarrassed to tell Zuko she was ready to be intimate with him again.

Oh, La, she sighed and berated her own bashfulness.

Unknown to her, Zuko kept wondering if Katara was ready to allow him to take her again. He did not want to be a lustful and insensitive jerk and pounce on her when she was still hurting. It had been almost two days since he had made love to her, but his body craved her again, hot and writhing against him. But unless she told him that she was feeling better, he would not pressure her by bringing up the subject.
A few minutes later, they were disembarking the ship and then heading toward the royal beach house with Jiao, Kuo, and Shen following behind. The servants that maintained the house during the royal members’ absence had already prepared for the Fire Lord’s arrival with his bride and they were now scurrying about to settle them in comfortably.

After introducing the servants to his wife and their new Fire Lady, Zuko led Katara to what was now their room. Anticipation curled in his stomach as they entered the grand chamber before he squashed it down.

Katara took in her surroundings with curious and wondrous eyes. The room was not as large as the royal bedchamber in the palace, but it was impressive nonetheless. She admired the tasteful decorations, the low table in the middle of the room, the plush cushions piled on one side, and the large couch across from them. Then her eyes landed on the bed that rested against the wall. It faced the large opened window where the thin curtains were swaying gently by the breeze that blew in from the sea. She crossed the room and stood at the window, admiring the fantastic view of the beach and of the setting sun over the blue ocean. Another salty breeze swept in and she took in a deep breath before she turned to smile at Zuko, who had been admiring her instead.

“This room is wonderful,” she exclaimed as she glanced around again before settling her gaze on her husband. “I didn’t get a chance to really look at it the last time when Mai…” she trailed off and smiled awkwardly.

Zuko frowned as he made his way to her and stood beside her as another soft breeze ruffled their hair and clothing.

“I always wondered why you came in looking so worried that night,” he said curiously as he remembered that day last summer. Had it really been almost a year?

“Well, uh, Mai told me that you weren’t feeling well and she asked me to check up on you,” she confessed in a quiet tone, “I just wanted to help you, but instead I intruded upon…an intimate mome —”

“No,” Zuko interrupted her firmly, “I didn’t plan for Mai being here that night, she had never been here before, and she caught me off guard. But when you appeared, my thoughts shifted toward you, and when you left, I ordered Mai to get out.”

“So that night…you guys didn’t…?” she trailed off again when Zuko shook his head.
“No. We didn’t do anything,” he told her truthfully. “And even though you and I weren’t together then, I didn’t want you to think we did.”

Katara smiled.

“You tried to tell me that before,” she said before she turned around to gaze at the ocean outside, “And I told you that you didn’t need to explain, but the truth was, even though I didn’t know why then, the thought of you two together…it made me jealous.”

Zuko reached out and wrapped her in his arms, pulling her back into his chest and resting his chin atop her head.

“Don’t think about that, or Mai, or any other woman again since they’re not important,” he told her firmly but softly, “What matters to me now is you. The woman I love is you.”

“And the one I love is you,” she said lovingly as she turned around and raised herself on her toes to kiss him softly.

Zuko pulled her up to him, placing his hand behind her head in order to deepen the kiss and groaning softly at the taste of her lips and the soft sounds she made. Just then, Katara’s stomach growled and they pulled away to stare at each other. She was blushing in embarrassment and Zuko could not help but chuckle at her expression, earning himself a scowl from her.

“This reminds me of that time when I ran into you in the Fire Nation capital last summer,” he said amusingly.

Before Katara could retort, her stomach gave another growl. Her blush became darker.

“What kind of husband am I? Having my lovely wife suffer so?” Zuko asked with mock mortification.

“Well, why don’t you start being a good husband by feeding your lovely wife first?” she retorted with a giggle.
Zuko chuckled as he grabbed Katara’s arm and hooked it beneath his.

“I have already asked the servants to have dinner ready for us to enjoy, my lady,” he said gallantly, causing Katara to let out another laugh.

“Then lead the way, my lord,” she said with a grin as she allowed him to lead her out of the bedchamber and toward the dining room.

During dinner they reminisced about the past times they had been on the island and then planned what to do during their stay as they finished the delicious meal that had been prepared for them.

Once they finished, Zuko then surprised her when he told her to dress elegantly because he wanted to take her to see a play. He laughed at the uncertain look on her face before he promised that it was not the Ember Island Players, but a famous group of actors visiting from one of the big cities of the Fire Nation. When they arrived at the theater in all their regalia, the people gawked and admired them as they passed by surrounded by a group of guards. They were led to the royal box before they were left alone. It was the first time Katara had experienced such privileges, and although it made her feel a bit awkward that they were in plain sight of the audience below, she ignored it in favor of enjoying the play.

The actors were wonderful and the play exquisite, although the end brought a few tears to her eyes when the lovers in the story decided to die together instead of being ripped apart by envious and vengeful people. Zuko grasped her hand and gently squeezed it and she looked up at him to give him a smile. It was late by the time the royal couple left the theater and returned to the royal beach house.

Zuko took her toward the back of the house to enjoy the night scenery. He sat on the top step and pulled Katara to sit on the step below it, placing her between his legs, before wrapping his arms around her and holding her close. They stared silently at the dark waves that crashed onto the beach and the many bright stars that dotted the inky night sky. When the sea breeze became colder they decided to return to the warmth of their room.

The young lord stopped his wife before they entered their chamber and she looked up questioningly. Noticing her confused frown, Zuko gave her a reassuring smile.

“Why don’t you get ready for bed, love?” he asked her, “I have to look into something before I can join you.”
“Okay,” Katara responded with a raised eyebrow as she curiously watched him smile at her briefly before he turned around and walked away.

Once he disappeared around the corner of the corridor, Katara turned back toward the door, opened it, and then went inside before closing it softly behind her. She wondered what Zuko was up to as she took off her clothes, took a quick bath, and then combed her hair. Wrapped in a towel, she searched for one of the sleeping attires that Suki had convinced her to take for their honeymoon. Once she found it, she looked at it with an unsure frown before she gathered her courage. She donned on the thin, silvery nightdress that had long, billowy sleeves and fell down to the middle of her calves, but that was the only modest thing about it. It fit nicely to her curves with a low neckline that exposed her ample cleavage.

She walked toward a long mirror that hung from the wall and looked at herself. She blushed at her reflection and the sight she made since she was not used to wearing such revealing outfits once her body had matured. She remembered the outfit she wore when she and the gang had barely arrived at the Fire Nation years ago and wondered how she would look in it now that her body had filled out completely. She was sure Zuko would love it. But now she wanted to let Zuko know that she was ready and willing and wanted him desperately without having to actually say the words. She gave herself a once over before she grinned at herself. She did look nice.

_I hope Zuko doesn’t take long_, the waterbender thought in anticipation.

Moving away from the mirror, Katara sat down on the low table and rummaged through one of the small bags containing her essential items. A small smile appeared on her face as she took out the small pouch of blended herbs Yin-Min had given her. She poured some water from the pitcher into a cup that also rested on the table, sprinkled some of the crushed herbs, and then quickly drank the liquid. She shuddered and grimaced at the taste. It was more bitter than sweet mixed in with just plain water.

Placing the empty cup down on the table’s surface, she stood up and walked to the bathroom to wash her mouth, hoping it would get rid of the bitter taste. As she dried her mouth, she wondered if the herbs would help her conceive much more quickly. She gasped.

_What if I’m pregnant right now?_ she wondered.

The thought was both joyous and frightening. Was she ready to be a mother? Her thoughts scattered when she heard Zuko call out her name from the room. After smoothing her nightdress down and patting her loose hair, Katara walked out of the bathroom and saw Zuko taking off his dark tunic, leaving him only in his trousers. She felt heat gather in her belly.
Zuko turned around when he heard Katara walk into the room, but his words got stuck in his throat when he saw what she was wearing. Agni, she was so sexy and stunning. Was she trying to make him lose control? He ripped his eyes away from her tempting form and swallowed thickly as he tried to will his arousal away. Clearing his throat, he gestured toward the low table where two bowls, another pitcher of wine, and cups had been placed.

“I brought you something,” he said huskily.

Katara inwardly frowned at his lack of reaction to what she was wearing. Did he not notice? Or worse —did he not desire her anymore? She shook her head before she moved toward the table. She glanced at Zuko, who had a small smile on his face, before she looked down at the plates. She gasped softly in surprise. One bowl held large strawberries, deeply red and ripe, and the other was filled with melted chocolate.

“I wanted to share dessert with you in the privacy of our room and with no servants lingering around,” he told her softly.

Katara looked up to smile happily at him.

“Thank you, Zuko,” she exclaimed before she grinned, “You can be so romantic sometimes.”

“I try,” he responded dryly.

Katara laughed as she tiptoed to kiss his scarred cheek before eagerly sitting down on one of the cushions. Zuko smiled contentedly as he joined her. When she reached for a strawberry, Zuko quickly caught her wrist to stop her. Frowning, she turned to him curiously, but he just smiled as he placed her hand back down. Instead, he reached for one of the bright, red strawberries, dipped it in the creamy chocolate, and then brought it to her lips.

Blue eyes bright, Katara smiled widely before she opened her mouth and carefully bit into the delicious morsel. She moaned as the tangy and chocolaty flavors exploded on her taste buds.

“How is it?” Zuko asked quietly as he stared at her mouth.
“Delicious,” Katara responded blissfully, unaware at the erotic thoughts that were running through her husband’s head.

Once she finished eating the treat, Katara quickly reached into the bowl to grab a strawberry before he could stop her, coated it with chocolate, and then brought it to Zuko’s mouth. Golden eyes gleaming, the firebender caught the offering between his teeth before taking it into his mouth, but not before sticking his tongue out to lick her fingers. Katara gasped and shivered, and Zuko watched her with a smirk as he ate the chocolate covered fruit.

Without a word, Zuko grabbed another treat and pressed it against his wife’s lips. Staring into each other’s eyes, she bit into it. Strawberry juice ran down her chin and Zuko leaned down to lick the sweet liquid before licking the chocolate away from her bottom lip. He leaned back and licked his lips with a groan.

“I’m glad I decided to have dessert later,” he commented.

Katara giggled.

They continued to feed each other the chocolate covered strawberries, drink wine, and tease each other until there were no more strawberries and chocolate.

“It’s late,” Katara remarked as she glanced at the opened window where moonlight spilled through.

“Yeah,” Zuko responded.

They fell silent as both waited for the other to make the first move, but neither of them did. With a resigned sigh, Zuko slowly stood up, keeping his stare away from Katara’s lovely body clad in such seductive attire.

“I’m going to get ready for bed,” he said.

“Oh kay,” Katara muttered.

With a small frown, Zuko walked toward the bathroom. After a quick bath, Zuko dried himself with
firebending and then placed on a pair of dark red sleeping pants. He wondered if he should say something and make the first move.

Gods, he wanted Katara so badly. But what if his insistence annoyed her? What if she said yes in order to please him even though she was still hurting? No, he could not do it. He had to wait until she approached him.

Running his hand through his hair in frustration, Zuko shook his head before walking back into the room. He paused when he noticed Katara already lying on the bed with the blanket up to her stomach. His shoulders slumped a little at the thought that she was ready to sleep. Maybe tomorrow he could make love to her again? He hoped so for he did not know how much longer he could wait without possessing her again. Silently, he walked toward the bed and slid in beside her, covering his legs with the blanket.

Katara’s heart pounded in anticipation when Zuko snuffed out the candles and the room was plunged into semi-darkness thanks to the light of the moon as he settled himself next to her. She bit her lip as she waited for him to take her into his arms and make love to her.

When Katara did not say anything or move, Zuko sighed in disappointment.

“Good night,” he said coolly before rolling to his side with his back to her in order to keep his control on his desires.

Disappointed, Katara replied quietly before she, too, rolled to her side with her back to him. Was something wrong? It had seemed like he wanted to take her a few moments ago. Maybe he was just tired, she tried to convinced herself.

She bit her lip and frowned. She wanted him to want her just as desperately as she wanted him. Maybe she could ask Jiao for advice since it would be less embarrassing than asking Suki, especially now that her sister-in-law was back in the Southern Water Tribe. Resolute, she closed her eyes and waited for sleep to claim her, hoping everything would be better by tomorrow.

A few seconds later, she heard Zuko roll over and her eyes snapped open when she felt him place his arm around her waist before she felt him hover over her. Curious, Katara moved to lie on her back to look at him. By the light of the moon, she saw his strained features and she wondered at it.

“I can’t do it, Katara,” he groaned huskily.
“Zuko, what’s wrong?” she asked him in concern.

“I know I should wait until you’re feeling better, but I can’t,” he rasped, his hand now squeezing her hip desperately, “I want you, I need you so badly.”

Katara felt her heart ease at his words and at the same time she felt her body flare in desire.

“Zuko,” she said breathlessly.

“I want you, Katara, my body needs you,” Zuko continued, his voice husky and strained. “I’ve been holding myself back in order to honor your culture’s traditions before our marriage, and then to allow your body to heal. Please,” he pleaded with a growl.

Katara lay there, speechless and amazed at his obvious need of her, and she watched with bated breath as Zuko leaned down to kiss her. However, it seemed like he caught himself for he stopped, leaving his lips within just an inch of her own as his warm breath fanned softly across her face.

She could not wait any longer. With a soft cry, she forcefully closed the gap between them as she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and crashed her anxious lips to his. She devoured his mouth brazenly, pushing her tongue desperately into his gasping mouth as her fingers flew to his dark hair and fastened themselves deep within the longer strands. Zuko groaned deeply as he returned her kisses just as fiercely.

“I thought you were just tired,” Katara managed to get out through panting kisses.

“Even if I was exhausted I would still crave your body,” he groaned before he leaned back to roughly brush his lips against her, “I’m a man in love who has finally gotten the woman he’ll love for his whole life. I will always want you.”

“Zuko,” Katara again breathed his name as many delightful emotions swirled within her. She brought his head back down and kissed him softly.

“Does this mean you’re ready?” he asked her when they pulled away to gather some air.
“I’ve been ready for you since morning,” she confessed with a soft blush, “But I was too shy to say so.”

“We’ve just been married two days and we’re already having misunderstandings,” he remarked with a dry chuckle.

“We just need more work on communicating,” she reassured with a smile.

“True,” he consented before he added with a smirk, “But for now we need to work on getting our bodies acquainted with each other again.”

Katara giggled softly before a moan escaped her when her firebender took possession of her mouth in a passionate and promising kiss that had them soon panting and pressing against each other. Pulling away, Zuko willed a few candles to light up and he knelt back to admire her appealing body clad in that tempting nightdress.

“You look so sexy, my wife,” he said huskily as he glanced at her briefly to give her a roguish smirk that caused Katara to melt.

“All for you, my husband,” she responded with a coy smile.

“All for me,” Zuko repeated her words with a possessive growl.

He placed his hands on the hem of the silky piece of clothing before slowly lifting it up, exposing her exquisite body as he went, before depositing the lovely nightdress over the bed. He then quickly got rid of her undergarments before letting them fly behind him. He was glad he did not have to worry about undoing her complicated under-wrappings anymore. He would set them on fire if she ever wore the irritating things again.

He swallowed visibly as he again took in Katara’s body, glorious and naked beneath him. He brought his hands to her thighs and then up her waist, his fingers slightly shaky with his need as they touched her soft skin. He felt his erection protest its confinement and he groaned deeply.

“Your skin on mine brings out an almost animalistic quality in me that I didn’t know I possessed,”
Zuko growled out lowly as he ran his hands firmly up her waist, up her sides, and then even further up, cupping her soft breasts within his warm and large hands.

“Oh!” the waterbender moaned. “More,” she managed to pant as she stared at him.

Zuko responded to her plea by squeezing her mounds more firmly before leaning down to capture her lips fervently. He pressed both thumbs on her hardening nipples and she whimpered into his mouth as his tongue worked ardently against hers.

They kissed frantically as their hands roughly roamed the other’s bodies, gripping and clasping each other as though they would never get enough.

She wanted and needed him, she was desperate for him. She needed to show him how much she craved him, how overwhelming and powerful her love and her desire for him were.

“Zuko,” Katara moaned against his mouth as she wound her arms around his shoulders and crushed herself impossibly closer to him, wishing she could express the burning sense of need that arose within her body at his every touch and kiss.

As if he could hear her thoughts, his hand flew to the back of her head, tangling his fingers in her hair, before pulling her head back as he started spreading desperate kisses across her face, down her throat, and then down her heaving chest. His lips never left her as he licked, kissed, and nipped his way across her flushed skin, causing her to shiver and moan against him.

“I want you,” he growled against her skin.

With the hand that was not tangled in her hair, he pushed her right breast up and lapped the tight bud hotly before he sucked on it fervently, causing her to cry out. Then he pushed his hips against hers, his clothed cock pressing against her wet core desperately.

A needy cry escaped Katara as she felt his erection press firmly against her aching entrance and she bucked her hips against his wantonly. A scorching fire ignited within her as Zuko’s tongue swirled firmly around her aching nipple, the simmering warmth that had been growing within her erupted into licking flames as she again pressed her hips roughly against him, arching her back sharply when his hardness hit that sensitive little bud.
Zuko grunted in pleasure and pushed back against her as he continued suckling at her breast. Agni, he wanted her so much. He could not explain the overpowering craving for her that racked his body every time he touched, saw, or even thought of her. The need for her was consuming him, compelling him to have her, to draw her closer to him, to show her the desperation that was blazing hotly within him.

“I need you, Katara,” he murmured huskily against her soft breast as his hands began to roughly caress every inch of her body that he could reach. He had to feel her, to touch her, wanting her to want him just as fiercely as he wanted her.

“Then make love to me, Zuko,” she moaned, partly commandingly and partly beseechingly, “Take me, please! I need you!”

With a growl, Zuko swiftly divested himself from his sleeping pants, and just as quickly, he was lying between her warm thighs, pressing his throbbing erection against her wet entrance, as he kissed her passionately. He reached down between their bodies, parted her moist folds, and swiftly inserted two of his fingers into her warm core, causing her to cry out softly in pleasure. When he found her slick with her aroused cream, ready for him, he pulled his fingers out with a groan. He settled atop her and ground himself against her a few more times, causing their anticipation and pleasure to rise even further, before he pushed the bulbous head into her clenching entrance as he stared at her.

The Fire Lady’s cobalt eyes were burning with the same undeniable passion that had overtaken the Fire Lord’s impassioned senses, and in one, slow and fluid motion, he slid completely inside her.

Katara winced slightly when her walls stretched to accommodate his girth, but the small discomfort soon disappeared and her arousal flared at the feeling of being full. Zuko groaned against her mouth as his wife kissed him passionately and he stilled for a moment as he allowed the incredible pleasure of being surrounded by Katara’s impossibly tight and magnificently wet pussy wash over him once more.

“Agni, I can’t describe how damn good you feel, Katara,” he growled as he pulled his head slightly back in order to catch his breath.

“And it’ll feel even better once we start moving,” was her breathless response as she slightly lifted her hips against his.

Zuko groaned and pushed back into her as he leaned back down to kiss her, thrusting his tongue inside her delicious mouth as his cock jerked inside her hot sheath. Then one of his hands fastened around her waist and he crushed her closer to him as he began to move in and out of her in a slow
Katara moaned softly into her husband’s mouth and she wrapped her arms around his back as the friction of him moving inside her caused the fire within her to erupt even hotter. Her hands began to wander down his back, gripping, caressing, and stroking every dip and curve of his muscular body with her fingers. Zuko responded to her touch as his hand began to roam up and down her trembling body, sliding up from her hip, up her waist, caressing her side and then gliding across her chest before cupping her left breast firmly.

“Yes, oh!” the waterbender mewled.

A slight shudder racked his body as Zuko swallowed her soft cry, and he bucked his hips sharply, moving himself within her and making her whimper loudly from the sensation. When the need for air became too great, they pulled apart from their frantic kiss and panted hard against the other as Zuko continued to plunged into her slowly, stroking the immense inferno within them to scorching heights.

She needed more! She could not stand the slow pace, the slow torture any longer! She wanted him to take her with everything he had!

“Faster, Zuko, please harder!” Katara panted out, as she wrapped her arms more tightly around him with a cry.

“As you wish, love,” he ground out.

Grasping her hips firmly, Zuko moved back onto his knees and thrust himself inside her as he quickened his pace, immediately causing Katara to cry out in pleasure as she arched her back. He looked down and watched the place where their bodies were intimately joined as he pulled out of her. He was once again fascinated by the sight of her juices coating his engorged cock and how her slick pussy, having stretched to accommodate his large size, reverted back to the tiny hole that it was before he had penetrated it. He would never tire of such a magnificent sight.

“So damn hot,” he growled out as his gaze continued to be absorbed with what he was seeing.

He pressed forward again, watching as the head of his thick length disappeared and she stretched to take him in. He gripped her hips more tightly, brought her closer to him, and watched as he did it again.

Even though she could not see what Zuko was seeing, Katara moaned and clenched the sheets
beneath her with her fingers at the ardent gleam in his amber eyes as he continued to thrust himself into her. Katara then squeezed her inner muscles since she had found out from their last coupling that he really enjoyed it when she did that.

Zuko gasped at the sensation of Katara squeezing him and his eyes rolled to the back of his head as his hips surged forward more forcefully.

“Yes!” Katara screamed as he hit a particular spot that made her toes curl, “More, Zuko!”

“I’ll always give you more,” Zuko growled out as he leaned back down over her and wrapped his arms around her, pressing her bouncing breasts against his muscled chest as he pumped into her.

“Oh, oh, Zuko!” she cried out.

Back and forth, their bodies swayed, much like the ebb and flow of the ocean’s tide outside their window that sent waves crashing against the sandy shore only to withdraw before doing it all over again.

Katara wrapped her legs around his hips, and they both gasped when it caused him to press deeper inside her. She could feel him touching her womb. With a growl, Zuko buried his face in Katara’s neck as his pants grew heavier. He began to kiss, lick, and nip at her perspiring skin while she gasped and moaned as her nails clung to his sweaty back. He trailed one hand down her back until his palm was tightly cupping one of her firm rear cheeks, then he jerked her towards him as he shoved his hips harder against hers.

Katara let out a loud cry against his neck as his move caused her stomach to clench sharply and a pleasurable jolt to explode through her nerves. She tightened her limbs around him and squeezed her inner muscles around his length once again. Zuko groaned against her skin before he raised his head to kiss her hungrily.

“I need you, Katara. Dammit, I need you!” Zuko growled huskily against her lips as his hips buckled above her. “But I don’t want to hurt you,” he panted in a strained tone.

The passion in his voice made the heat in Katara’s belly flare intensely, but his concern for her, even during such a passionate time, seemed to melt her heart. Her entire body burned with delight from the awareness that he needed her with the same intensity that she needed him. With a soft moan she crushed herself harder against him, smashing her sensitive breasts against his hard chest as she
crashed her mouth against his.

“Take me as hard as you want, my love,” she told him fervently against his lips, “I won’t break. Please. I need you.”

“Katara,” Zuko groaned deeply since he could feel his desperation reflected in her tone.

At her words, at her consent, he growled loudly as he gripped her ass more firmly, drawing her more tightly against him, before he began to pound into her, taking her with a desperate and frantic need as he had dreamed of doing ever since he realized he loved her.

“Ah, ahh, ah, Zuko!” Katara screamed as she held more tightly onto him as her pleasure increased more than she thought possible as he wildly plunged himself inside her.

She heard him growl and she gasped when she felt his thick member twitch with excitement within her drenched folds, causing a pleased shiver to rack her body as she arched into him again.

Zuko’s golden eyes were penetrating and attentive as he brought her pleasure while seeking his own. He watched her hungrily, reveling in her soft sighs and loud moans. His jaw clenched as he shifted the angle of his hips, going deeper inside her warm pussy. The sound of their flesh slapping loudly against each other and the wet sounds as he plunged into her only caused him to go faster. He saw Katara’s eyes roll to the back of her head as she groaned and gasped loudly. The Fire Lord growled and dipped his head towards his wife again, catching her lips with his as he increased the speed and force of his hips to a frantic pace.

“Agni, Katara,” Zuko groaned as he stared at her flushed features. “So good.”

With another fierce growl, Zuko began to ram himself inside her as the tightening of her wet walls caused his balls to tighten with his impending release.

Katara could no longer follow his movements as Zuko took her with a wild abandon and everything within her flushed body began to wind up so tight she could not even breathe anymore as she panted in short, quick gasps. She was so close!

As if reading her thoughts and needs, Zuko twisted his hips sharply at the same time he pressed his thumb firmly on the oversensitive nub above her entrance where he was buried in.
“Yes, Zuko!” Katara screamed as the coil snapped and she spiraled up into euphoria.

Bright stars flashed before her eyes as fire erupted throughout her body, sending electric jolts through every fiber of her being, causing her toes to curl and her back to arch as she clung to Zuko like a lifeline. She gave herself up to the incredible sensation completely, letting every inch of her body burn with ecstasy.

Her scream, the clenching of her hot core and the rush of liquid coating his shaft, triggered Zuko’s own pleasurable release.

“Katara!” he roared loudly and gloriously as he came inside her for the second time.

Staring up at him, Katara was lost in awe of the primal beauty of her husband’s climax. She felt pleasured pride go through her at the thought that she had done that, that her body had given him such pleasure. The undeniable power that emanated from his roar of ecstasy and the feeling of his hot seed coating her insides sent her into another delightful orgasm.

Shit, so good, so good, Zuko chanted incoherently in his head as his throbbing cock continued to spurt his semen inside his wife’s spasming passage. Once spent, Zuko groaned deeply and he managed to twist himself to the side before he crushed his wife. He brought her with him, still buried deep within her swollen folds. His seed combined with the fluids that he had so skillfully coaxed from her body poured out of her and slid between her thighs and fell upon his.

They panted and trembled against each other as they basked in the afterglow of their lovemaking. The sounds of the waves could be heard once again in the now silent room.

After several minutes, Zuko’s hand began to gently stroke Katara’s back and she moaned softly before she lifted her head to look at him. Her husband’s gaze was serious as he looked down at her and she frowned slightly at his expression.

“What’s wrong?” she asked quietly.

Zuko moved his other hand to brush a stray lock of hair away from her face before he caressed her kiss-swollen lips with his fingers.
“I was too rough,” he stated grimly, “Did I…hurt you?”

“Of course not!” Katara exclaimed as her brow furrowed.

A blush appeared on her face as she smiled at him.

“I…loved it,” she confessed in a shy whisper.

Zuko’s tensed body relaxed and he let out a relieved breath as he leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead.

“I’m glad to hear you say that. I can’t stand the thought of hurting you,” he told her quietly.

“I know you will never hurt me on purpose,” was her confident reply as she nuzzled her face against his chest.

The waterbender felt him place a finger beneath her chin and she raised her head to look at him again only to see a crooked smirk curl his perfect lips.

“You don’t know how excited you make me feel to know you love it that I take you hard,” he said with a husky growl.

His fingers swept lightly across her blushing cheek, and he chuckled quietly for a moment at her embarrassed expression before planting a gentle kiss on her mouth. When he pulled away, he was surprised to see an impish grin on her lips.

“I’ll always look forward for you to make love to me, whether it’s gentle or rough,” she declared breathlessly, causing Zuko’s breath to catch in his throat.

“Good,” he replied huskily.

Katara grinned before a small yawn escaped her, making her blush and causing Zuko to chuckle softly.
“Sleep,” he ordered gently.

With another yawn, the young woman nuzzled her face comfortably into the crook of her husband’s neck.

“I love you,” she whispered as she snugged closer to him, wrapping one of her arms around him.

“As I do you,” Zuko sighed as he wrapped his arm more tightly around her smaller form.

Katara shifted and blushed when she finally realized that Zuko was still buried inside her, although now his shaft was soft and limp.

“Can I remain inside you while we sleep?” she heard him ask her softly.

“Yes,” was her whispered reply as she settled comfortably against him. She wanted to feel close to him while they slept.

Zuko smiled, pleased.

Soon he heard his wife’s even breathing and he knew she had fallen asleep. He tightened his arm around her and brought her even closer to him. He had wanted to make love to her throughout the night, but he supposed he could do that another time—after all, they had a whole week for their honeymoon, not to mention the rest of their lives. Still, he held her tightly against his body, afraid of moving too much that it would cause him to slip out of her warm core. If he could, he would want to be buried inside her until the day he died. He smiled. He wondered how she would feel about that.

A soft breeze blew into the room from the opened window and gently swayed the curtains before they settled serenely back in place. They newly wedded couple slept, their bodies pressed tightly together and their limbs intertwined, the soft crashing of waves their lullaby.

Ignoring the wailing woman beneath him, Jianguo groaned harshly as he spilled himself inside her. Panting roughly, he quickly pulled out of her, moved away from her, and lay on his back to recover. He never bothered to pull out of the women he fucked because the sensation was more pleasurable than having to release himself on them or on the sheets, although he sometimes did pull out and had
them suck him off until he came. Prostitutes were taught to be cautious of the consequences when their clients made use of them. Jianguo knew, however, that such precautions were not always effective, but he did not care if he got them pregnant. There were ways to deal with an unwanted pregnancy and if they decided to go through with raising a brat that was their problem. He was sure he probably had several bastards roaming the world, but he really did not care.

He closed his eyes as he brought back to his mind the vision of the blue-eyed waterbender writhing underneath him as he strove to find his pleasure with another woman’s body. He found the desire of taking the Water Tribe woman’s body overtaking his everyday thoughts more and more. It was closely followed by the pleasing thought of knowing Zuko would suffer once he did.

He heard the Earth Kingdom whore he had taken for the night stir beside him before he felt her place her head on his naked chest and wrap her arm around him. He frowned darkly when her dirty smell of sweat and sex—that had accumulated for who knew how long—reached his sensitive nose. It was nothing compared to the clean and sweet scent of the waterbender.

“Ye sure know how ta please a woman,” her shrill voiced irritated his ears as she rubbed her cheek against his chest. “Can we do dat again?”

Snapping his eyes open, Jianguo grabbed her arm and flung it away from him in disgust before he stood up. Nude, he moved across the room he had rented for the night for his pleasure. He couldn’t actually summon a prostitute to his campsite unless he wanted her to blurt out where his hideout was located. Picking up the bottle of liquor he had purchased, he took a deep drink before turning around to regard the woman silently.

She had sat up on the bed and was looking at him expectantly, her long, dark hair falling wildly down her shoulders and her naked breasts. The only reason he had picked her from the other bunch of whores that stood outside the tavern was because she was young and fairly pretty. But she was not the beautiful and fiery waterbender he was obsessed over.

“Ye won’t ev’n ‘ave ta pay me,” she purred seductively.

She spread her legs apart to entice him. He watched as she dipped her fingers inside herself before pulling them out to reveal them slick with his semen before she crudely placed them into her mouth and moaned. He felt his cock stir at the sight, but he ignored it.

“Get out,” he ordered impassively.
“Aww, don’t be like dat, handsome,” she teased as she brought her hand back down to rubbed herself and moaned, “Ye can ev’n ‘ave me for da whole night. Ye can fuck me as hard as ye want.”

With a smirk, the firebender moved back to the bed and leaned toward her. She looked at him lustfully from beneath her heavily painted lashes as she smiled at him. He reached out to roughly fondle her breast, pinching her nipple almost cruelly, and smirked when she moaned loudly before he gently ran his fingers along her throat. He leaned close to her face and smiled.

“Do you really think I’ll just spend my time with one whore?” he asked, “One that’s not even that good?”

Her sultry look immediately vanished and she frowned. Before she could indignantly retort, she gasped in pain when he circled his hand around her neck and pressed tightly.

“I said to get the fuck out!” he growled in her face before he threw her off the bed.

The woman hastily scrambled to her feet and just as quickly pulled on her soiled dress, not even bothering to tie it as she ran and opened the door. As if gathering courage by being far away from him, she turned around to glare at him.

“It ain’t dat big anyway, ya bastard!” she hissed before she whirled around and slammed the door shut.

Jianguo’s nostrils flared at the insult before he calmed himself and again picked up his liquor bottle. As if he would allow a simple whore’s words to affect him, though maybe it had been too hasty of him to kick her out so soon. After all, she had been willing to service him without being paid.

He shrugged. He could easily find another companion for the night if he wished.

Moving toward the wooden chest placed in the corner of the room, he opened it before he pulled out the missive one of his men had handed to him as he had made his way to his room with the woman. Now he had time to read it.

Walking toward the lumpy bed, he sat on it before he untied the string and unfurled the letter. He leaned close to the candle resting on the small table near the bed and eagerly read what his men had to say.
He had found out the royal bastard and the exotic waterbender had planned to visit Ember Island for their honeymoon, so he had sent a few of his most inconspicuous men to the island to spy on them. It was the best chance they had of being near the royal couple since they were always protected in the capital.

As he read, his mood soon changed to anger. The only thing his men wrote was that by the small glimpses they had been able to see of the royal couple when they ventured into town showed that they were completely smitten with each other. The royal beach house was too heavily guarded for them to be able to sneak into it without being apprehended.

“Incompetent fools!” he cursed.

How was this insignificant information going to help him? He still did not know what had happened to his informant in the palace, so now he had to find another way to enact his revenge on Zuko and regain everything he had lost. But Zuko was too cautious and astute and had thus far ruined all his plans.

Jianguo narrowed his eyes as he crushed the letter in his hand.

He would make Zuko pay for taking everything away from him. He would make Zuko suffer in the worst possible way. He would make Zuko wish he were dead.

Setting the paper on fire until it turned to ashes, Jianguo stood up and again made his way to the chest. He pulled out a bloody and ripped blue tunic and smirked evilly.

And he would do so by taking away from Zuko what he cherished the most.

The stunning waterbender.

Was Zuko enjoying taking pleasure from her lovely body at that moment? Jianguo could just imagine the incredible sight the blue-eyed brunette made. He could practically hear her screams of pleasure. He brought the tunic to his nose and inhaled deeply, imaging her scent on it. He closed his eyes and shuddered as he felt himself harden before he placed the tunic back in the chest and closed it. Placing his trousers on, he turned around and headed toward the door.
It seemed he would need to look for another woman to keep him company for the night after all.
The first thing Katara became aware of as she slowly drifted up from the depths of slumber was Zuko’s warm and strong hand moving over her skin, bringing a pleasure that made her entire body melt like the sweet chocolate they had eaten the previous night. The second thing that reached her senses was the soothing sound of waves. In her still foggy mind, she realized her husband was hovering over her by the warmth and light weight of his body touching hers. His lips brushed her cheek, moved to caress her lips for a moment, brushed against her other cheek, before again returning to kiss her mouth. She murmured softly as his light caresses and kisses sparked a flame within her.

“Mmm,” she moaned softly when his fingers slowly trailed down her side.

As if knowing that he had succeeded in waking her up, Zuko’s soft touches became more firm and adventurous.

“Good morning,” she heard him greet huskily.

“It’s morning already?” Katara muttered as she gave out a soft yawn before finally deciding to open her eyes.

She saw Zuko looking down at her with a smile and gleaming, golden eyes before she allowed her gaze to sweep the room as her drowsiness began to leave her. A light furrow appeared on her brow when she saw that the dark room was bathed in a soft orangey and yellowish color before her eyes widened in disbelief.

“It’s barely dawn!” she almost whined as another yawn escaped her.

She felt more than heard Zuko chuckle and she glanced back at him with a halfhearted glare.

“I did tell you,” he said amusedly before he continued in a husky growl, “I rise with the sun.”

With that said, he bucked his hips slowly and Katara gasped in shock when she felt him harden
inside her, reminding her that they had fallen asleep with their bodies connected intimately. She felt herself flush along with the rest of her body as her core immediately clenched in need.

“Mm,” Zuko murmured in pleasure at the sensation of her warm walls fluttering around him. “They say the mornings can be the best time to make love,” he commented with a wolfish grin.

“What you say about the mornings is a pretense because it doesn’t seem to matter to you the hour or the place,” she retorted playfully as she giggled.

“You know me so well, my wife,” he responded with a chuckle.

Their laughter was cut short, however, as the trembling motion rocked their bodies, causing a pleasurable vibration to throb through the intimate spot where their bodies were joined. Their eyes locked instantly as they felt the tremors pulse between them. The waterbender was unable to stop the wanton mewl that escaped her as her firebender stared at her with obvious need.

The young Fire Lord’s golden eyes seemed to darken into molten amber at her soft cry, regardless of the soft light of dawn that was shining through the windows. She was just as beautiful moaning underneath him in the early light of day as she had been moaning beneath the glow of moonlight the night before.

They were motionless for a moment, regarding each other passionately, attempting to express their emotions using just their eyes. As she continued to stare at him, captivated by the allure of his eyes, Katara found herself unconsciously moving toward him. The small movements of her body beneath his stirred their joined parts once again, and she felt his cock jerk immediately inside of her. Katara moaned and froze instantly, desire written across her face as his length began to grow firmer and larger inside of her.

Knowing she was not nearly wet enough for him to continue, and after a few seconds of silence heavy with anticipation, Zuko moved and dipped his head down toward her. A thrill shot through Katara as she watched him with rapt attention as he brought his head closer to hers and his erection stiffened and thickened between her folds. The passion between them seemed to send electrical currents through the air as they held one another’s gazes and their arousal flared. As he continued to lean towards her, Zuko managed to tear his gaze away from her azure eyes and dart them down to her lips, staring at those soft petals with unrestricted need. They were only a few inches away from his now, and he watched as she licked her lips eagerly as he continued to draw closer. He desperately wanted to taste her again.

The waterbender relished the anticipation as he continued to move slowly, inching his way towards
her awaiting lips as his cock swelled completely inside of her. She resisted the urge to shift against
him as she felt him filling her to the brim, pushing inside of her, stretching her to encompass him
snuggly. Her breath grew heavier as the incredible sensation caused wetness to rush from her depths.
Her eyelids grew heavy with desire, but she kept them firmly open and continued staring at him
ravenously.

Her own hunger reflected in Zuko’s penetrating stare as his eyes continued to bore into hers. He was
again mesmerized by the flecks of dark and light colors that made up her beautiful cobalt eyes. Then,
with a soft growl, Zuko swiftly cut the distance between them and hungrily captured her plump lips,
leaving her almost breathless with his intensity. Before she could respond to his kiss, however, he
moved away to latch his mouth onto one of her dusky nipples.

“Ohhh!” she moaned as she arched her back in order to press her breast closer to his hot mouth.

Zuko swirled his tongue around her lovely nipple, tugged on it with his teeth, and then hungrily
suckled it until it hardened into a tight pebble. Once satisfied, he moved his mouth to her other
neglected and aching peak and gave it the same treatment as she wound her arms around his neck.
He slowly painted a path with his fingers down her stomach, making the muscles quiver and her
body shiver. His fingers went lower and he began playing with the soft curls of her sex for a
moment. Then he went further down, parted her dampening folds, and pressed the little swollen bud
that made her go wild.

Katara gasped and bucked her hips against his. Zuko groaned when he felt another flow of her
aroused juices coat his hardened shaft and he pressed deeper inside her. He circled the bundle of
nerves with the tip of two of his fingers as he continued to suck on her nipple. His eyes were closed
as he tried to keep himself still for a moment longer. He paused when he felt Katara’s fingers join his
in pleasuring her and his head jerk back to stare at her. She was blushing hard, but she did not look
away from his gaze as she breathed heavily as their fingers moved together. Her actions only caused
his cock to harden more than he thought possible that he again jerked his hips against hers, causing
her to moan deeply.

He pulled his hips back a little before sliding back in. She gasped and he groaned before he did it
again. Zuko slowly moved their drenched fingers away from her swollen clit and trailed them down
to her entrance where his shaft was buried deeply in. Katara’s eyes widened as she continued to stare
at Zuko when their fingers touched his length as he pulled out of her before thrusting back in. She
shuddered and moaned.

Unable to stand the slow pace any longer, Zuko removed their hands from between their bodies,
gently placed Katara’s hand around his neck, and then proceeded to make morning love to his wife
in a fierce rhythm.
"Zuko!" Katara cried out and threw her head back onto the pillow as she thoroughly enjoyed the sensation of Zuko taking her so fervently.

With a pleased grunt, Zuko again leaned down to take possession of her mouth. Katara tightened her hold around his neck and locked her legs around his hips as he began pumping even faster into her.

Zuko would never tire of being entangled in Katara, in his wife. Her sweet scent, soft skin, slender limbs, her burning heat, her wet clenching walls, and her soft whimpers and resonating cries all summed up to overpowering ecstasy. He gasped and then clenched his jaw when he felt his end come upon him more quickly than he had anticipated, but first, he needed to bring Katara with him.

He again brought his hand between their straining bodies and quickly began to rub her swollen clit.

Wholly vulnerable to his touch, Katara cried out as she writhed wildly beneath him, suspended in a sweet agony that only he could end, helplessly consumed by her firebender. He moved swiftly and powerfully, claiming her body more deeply with each penetration of his thick shaft. Then with a combined press of his thumb on her oversensitive nub and a sharp twist of his hips, she was crying out his name as her entire body arched into him.

Only when he felt Katara meet her end, did Zuko surrender to her softness and heat.

"Uuuhh," Zuko growled quietly as he spilled himself inside her with a final thrust of his powerful hips.

Panting and shuddering from the intense ecstasy, the young lord rolled away from her, carefully slipping his flaccid member out of her overflowing pussy, and lay down upon his back beside her as they tried to calm their racing hearts and trembling bodies. After a long moment of comfortable silence that was only interrupted by the sounds of the soft breeze that ruffled the curtains and the crashing of waves, Zuko opened his eyes and turned his head to look at his waterbender. She had her own eyes closed with a sated expression on her beautiful face. He sighed softly and smiled proudly at the thought that he was able to please his wife so well.

As if sensing his intense stare, Katara opened her eyes and gave him a radiant smile. Zuko raised a dark brow when her forehead creased slightly with a small frown as her eyes landed on his neck.

“What is it?” he asked curiously.
“The love bite I gave you is gone,” she remarked.

Zuko reached up a hand and touched the spot where the love bite Katara had given him before she departed to the Southern Water Tribe two months ago had been. It had healed a few weeks before their wedding.

“I wore it proudly when you left,” he confessed. Then he gathered her in his arms with a wicked grin as he suggestively said, “But you can give me another one if you’d like.”

Katara playfully smacked his arm with a giggle as he tried to drag her beneath him again. She managed to wiggle away from his grasp and jumped away from the bed wrapped in a silky sheet, laughing more loudly when he actually pouted at her.

“Even if I do, it'll eventually fade away,” she told him as she moved to where their clothes had been stored away for their visit to the island.

Zuko raised himself on his elbows and he watched her rummage around. He frowned in disappointment at the thought that she was getting ready for the day, but he was surprised when she returned to the bed, holding something in her hand behind her back, while the other clutched the bed sheet closed around her nude form. She sat down beside him, the sheet slipping down one of her shoulders, exposing her delicious brown skin to his view. He sat up in order to see what she was holding without bothering to cover himself.

“While I was in the Southern Water Tribe, I made this for you as a wedding present,” she began with a shy smile, “I know it’s nothing fancy or great, but I hope you like it.”

Grabbing his larger hand, she brought her hand from behind her back and placed her gift on his palm. Zuko stared at her with a smile before he looked down to see what she had made for him.

It was a wristband made of a thick, black leather strap, but what caught his attention were the designs carved into the leather. They looked like ancient symbols of the moon and the sun. It was impressive.

“The sun and the moon represent us,” he stated rather than asked as he looked up from the wristband to smile at his wife.

“Yeah,” Katara said with a smile as she touched the pendant of her necklace with the golden dragon
and the silver koi fish.

She placed her hand back on her lap and cleared her throat a little as she averted her eyes for a moment, her cheeks turning slightly red, before she stared unwaveringly into his eyes.

“But there is another reason why I’m giving you this present,” she told him with a firm tone despite her blush.

“Oh? And what’s that?” Zuko asked as he again glanced down at the wristband before once again looking at her.

“I have two things that let everybody know I belong to you,” she began as she again touched her necklace and then lifted her left hand to show the golden ring. “I made you this wristband with both symbols from both our cultures to show the world that you belong to me,” she told him resolutely.

Zuko suppressed a smirk as her possessiveness brought a shiver of pleasure down his spine. Her reason behind her gift did not bother him since it was only fair that he wear something to show everybody that he was completely and exclusively hers.

“I’ll wear your gift proudly,” he promised fervently.

Katara seemed to relax at his words and she smiled brightly at him as she leaned over to kiss him gleefully before pulling away when he sought to deepen the kiss. She grinned when he frowned at her.

“Will you put it on?” he asked her as he held out his left arm.

With a happy nod, Katara grabbed the wristband and placed it over his wrist, quickly tying the thinner strings attached at the ends together into a tight knot. Once finished, she pulled away and Zuko stretched out his arm to admire the thick wristband.

Then without warning, he pounced on her. Katara shrieked in surprise, which quickly turned into a moan when he crashed his mouth to hers, not allowing her to pull away from his kiss this time. She did not protest when he ripped the sheet away from her, and instead, welcomed him eagerly into her body again when he ground himself insistently against her. The room was once again filled with pleasured moans and groans and then a final pleasurable scream and a roar.
After they finished the second round of lovemaking of the day, they spent a few hours in bed kissing and talking before the rumbling of their hungry bellies finally incited them to get ready for the day and leave their room in search of food.

Once they finished their breakfast, the royal couple headed out of the royal beach house and ventured into town with their personal guards trailing protectively behind them. As they explored the island, the people bowed and congratulated them excitedly as they passed by. But when the Fire Lord got tired of the constant congratulations, whether sincere or not, he led his wife to the royal beach house for dinner. Then they retired to their room late at night for another round of lovemaking.

So far their honeymoon was coming out perfectly and they couldn’t be happier.

On the third day of their honeymoon, the young couple decided to spend the rest of their day on their private beach after having a light lunch in the town. Not a single cloud marred the bright blue sky or impeded the sun to shine its rays on the ocean water and the sandy beach below. It was a perfect day to go for a swim.

After a playful sparring match, Zuko sat down on the sand with a contented sigh before shaking his head to get rid of the seawater that clung to his hair. He had been too distracted staring at his wife’s enticing form to notice the wave she had summoned behind him. When he had finally realized what she was doing, he had already been doused. It reminded him of their last visit to Ember Island and how Katara had drenched him with a wave when he had not been paying attention as he lay back on the shore.

He smiled wryly. He never would have thought he would lose his concentration at the mere sight of a woman—although it was only understandable if that woman was wearing an appealing bikini and that woman also happened to be his wife. He never would have bothered to participate in such playful antics if it wasn’t for Katara and he would probably have continued being a harsh and unyielding person if it wasn’t for her.

A dark look settled on his features as the thought reminded him of why he had insisted they spent their time at the private beach and not in town.

After lunch in a quaint little restaurant, they had stopped at the small marketplace. They had not wanted to bring attention to themselves and be bothered by annoying people, so he had reluctantly agreed with Katara to put on some disguises. As Katara looked at a stall that sold exotic candy, Zuko had stayed a short distance away with Shen and Kuo also dressed like ordinary people to the insistence of their Fire Lady. He had watched her with a soft look in his eyes that he hid beneath the straw hat he was wearing, only to stiffen in anger at the conversation that had reached his ears.
A small group of visiting nobles from the Fire Nation had been arguing with two wealthy tourists from the Earth Kingdom. The former group had kept insisting that the Water Tribe woman their lord had married was unfit to be their Fire Lady. The Earth Kingdom tourists had retorted by saying that the violent Fire Lord did not deserve such a kind and gentle woman as the Lady Katara and were positive he would make her life miserable.

Zuko had begun to turn around in a rage at their words, but Kuo had stepped forward to block him. His guard’s interference had only increase his wrath, but Zuko had been aware enough to notice Kuo tilt his head forward with a frown. Zuko had looked over his shoulder to see that Katara was making her way toward them with a happy smile on her face and a bag in her hand—not doubt filled with candy. He had immediately composed himself in order not to worry her and returned her smile stiffly before immediately suggesting they spend the rest of their day on their private beach.

He had thought she had not noticed his agitation when she instantly agreed, but once they arrived in the privacy of their rooms to change into their swimwear she had asked him what had happened. At her determined insistence, he had recounted to her what he had heard.

She had been sad at what the Fire Nation group thought of her before she became angry at what the tourists had said about him. Then she had embraced him and reassured him that she would always be happy with him and they only needed time to make the world see they were happy with each other. He had crushed her tightly to him and said he hoped she was right before he led her toward the private beach. But the words he had heard earlier would not leave him alone.

With a shake of his head, the young Fire Lord’s eyes landed on his waterbender who had decided to stay in the water. He watched as she gathered thin tendrils of seawater around her form as the waves lapped against her legs and the sunlight made her wet olive skin shine and her chestnut hair gleam, making her resemble a water nymph more than ever.

Although she could sometimes be as fierce as a raging storm when angered, most of the time Katara was as gentle as a spring shower, especially now that she had matured. Soothing, fresh, and tender; just like her element of water.

He frowned slightly as he glanced at his clenched hands. She was different from both him and his own element of fire. Fire could be wild and dangerous and, if not controlled, could cause much pain and agony. Much like him when he became enraged.

They were so different—their elements of fire and water and themselves. He could understand why some would say that they were unsuited for each other.
But both elements also depended on the other. Fire could be a destructive force without mercy and could destroy everything in its path without the cool influence of water. And water could be cold and harsh without the warmth fire can provide.

It was just like Katara and him. They may be different, but their differences were what made them perfect for each other. It was her gentle and calm nature that soothed his fiery and explosive temper, and it was his ardent and vehement feelings for her that ignited a fire in her heart and body.

Yet, they were also very similar.

His tense form and whirling mind seemed to relax at the truth of his thoughts as he glanced at the now setting golden sun touching the blue ocean before returning his admiring gaze to his waterbending wife. As twilight approached, Zuko swiftly stood up, and without making a single sound, he stalked toward her, stepping carefully into the cool water. He scooped her into his arms without warning, causing her to shriek and drop her hold on her element. Then he swung her high with a deep laugh before pressing her close to him and kissing her deeply. When he pulled away, he smirked at her dazed expression.

“I love you in this new bathing suit,” he commented with a rakish grin as he allowed his eyes to roam down her form. “You look delicious in it.”

Katara blushed, but she smiled with pleasure.

“Thanks,” she said coyly before a mock pout appeared on her face as she looked down at herself. “Are you sure it looks nice on me?” she asked with an innocent bat of her long eyelashes as she twirled around slowly to allow him to look at her with a critical eye.

Zuko hummed deeply as he drank in every inch of her lovely body covered in the bikini. It was much the same style as the one Iroh had bought her during their last visit to Ember Island. He had a feeling his witty uncle had done it on purpose so his nephew would notice her—not that Zuko hadn’t before—and he had appreciated the sexy bathing suit. Just as much as he did the one Katara was wearing now. Instead of being navy-blue, however, it was a deep burgundy color that accentuated her tanned flesh magnificently.

“It looks great,” he reassured her huskily, “I like it has much as I did the one you wore last summer.”
“Do you even remember that?” she teased with a grin.

“Of course,” Zuko immediately responded, “I couldn’t take my eyes off of you and keep the erotic thoughts out of my head…but at that time it only made me feel confused and guilty.”

Katara smiled sweetly as she wrapped her arms around his neck and raised herself on her toes to kiss him.

“Well, you don’t have to feel guilty anymore,” she told him softly.

“True,” Zuko agreed before he smirked as he tightened his embrace, “And I also don’t need to stop my erotic fantasies about you from becoming reality.”

Katara squealed when Zuko again scooped her up without warning, placed her over his shoulder so that she was lying on her stomach, and rapidly strode away from the shore.

“Zuko! Put me down!” she screamed as she playfully pounded his back with her fist and wiggled in his hold.

“Silence, woman,” Zuko teasingly demanded as he grabbed the back of her thighs to keep her in place.

“Make me!” Katara retorted as she wriggled even more wildly.

“Don’t tempt me, my love,” Zuko warned with a grin and then he lightly smacked her ass.

Katara gasped loudly, more out of shock than pain.

“Hey!” she protested.

Another light slap and a deep chuckle was his response. A smirk curling her lips, Katara lifted her hand and smacked his backside in retaliation. He froze in surprise and she burst into giggles.
“Oh, for that you shall suffer the consequences,” he growled out playfully and he quickened his pace until he was nearly running.

Katara shivered and her stomach clenched in anticipation as she remained still over his shoulder. Zuko practically bounded up the stairs to the beach house and Katara used her waterbending to extract the water from them so they would not wet the clean floors. They did not notice the shocked and amused gazes of the quiet servants as they passed by. Then Zuko burst into their room, slammed the door shut behind them before making his way to the bed. He gently dumped Katara on it and a gasp escaped her when he pounced on her and claimed her lips in an intoxicating kiss.

“Mm, I can’t get enough of you,” Zuko groaned against her mouth as his hands caressed and squeezed every inch of her.

“I know how you feel,” Katara responded with a soft moan as her hands tangled in his hair. It was growing longer and she loved being able to grab more of the silky strands.

After a few more ardent kisses, Zuko pulled away and sat back to stare at her lustfully as his hands slid down her shoulders to cup her covered breasts. His cock hardened painfully when Katara moaned.

“I hope you are ready for the consequences of your actions, waterbender,” he warned teasingly.

“Bring it on, firebender,” she retorted playfully.

“Oh, I will,” he promised huskily.

Moaning softly at the intense look he gave her, Katara’s eyes rolled back and she held her breath as his fingers came to rest lightly on the hem of her dark red bikini top. He gently hooked his fingers under it and slowly started to pull it up, exposing the bottom of her pert breasts. His cock hardened painfully when Katara moaned.

After a few more ardent kisses, Zuko pulled away and sat back to stare at her lustfully as his hands slid down her shoulders to cup her covered breasts. His cock hardened painfully when Katara moaned.

“I hope you are ready for the consequences of your actions, waterbender,” he warned teasingly.

“Bring it on, firebender,” she retorted playfully.

“Oh, I will,” he promised huskily.

Moaning softly at the intense look he gave her, Katara’s eyes rolled back and she held her breath as his fingers came to rest lightly on the hem of her dark red bikini top. He gently hooked his fingers under it and slowly started to pull it up, exposing the bottom of her pert breasts. Then with a growl, Zuko quickly pulled her bikini top over her head and groaned when her breasts bounced at the action. He bent down to plant hungry kisses all over her chest and soft mounds before he again pulled back, this time to drag the bottom of her swimsuit down her slender legs in order to have her completely naked before him. Then he was hovering above her again, resting between her legs, and kissing her senseless once more.

Katara mewled when their naked chests touched and his wet tongue invaded her mouth. She opened
her eyes when he pulled his head away and she shivered as his hot breath coated over her face. She could see his well-defined arms and shoulders flexing as he held the weight of his body over her. Slowly, Zuko pushed his clothed erection against her, causing her to gasp loudly and buck her hips wildly to press him further into her aching center. She felt him trail one of his hands down her side before he moved his hand inward to touch her slick sex. She cried out and arched her back when he swiftly inserted two of his fingers inside her.

“Mm, you’re already so wet for me, my lovely wife,” he hummed lustfully.

“Always,” she purred before she gasped as he twisted his fingers along her clenching walls before she cried out when he made a scissoring motion inside her.

When it seemed as if she was about to find her release, Zuko quickly pulled out his fingers and smirked when she growled in disappointment. He glanced down to gaze at his fingers drenched with her juices before he glanced back to her strained features. He bent his head down and grazed her ear with his lips, before softly nibbling on her lobe, her panting breaths loud near his ear.

“I want to try something,” he whispered throatily.

“Like what?” she managed to say through her dazed mind as her passage trembled and ached with her interrupted climax.

Zuko did not reply and her thoughts scattered when he kissed her deeply once again before moving away from her mouth. He quickly divested himself of his swimming trunks before kissing her again. He moved downward and placed soft kisses on her heaving chest and down her lean stomach. She moaned and strained at his caresses. Once he reached her navel, his tongue slid out to dip in the tiny hollow. His tongue did a few delicate swirls, causing her muscles to quiver, before he blew gently against the damp circle. Katara gasped at the sensation. She felt him placed his hands around the deep curve of her waist, and then he shaped the roundness of her hips in his palms, caressing and kneading softly as he went another inch lower.

The feathery brush of her curls against his chin was a potent incentive and Zuko worked his mouth down even closer to her inviting warmth, ignoring her sudden jump of uncertainty. He had never done what he was about to do, but he had dreamed of pleasuring Katara in such a way. He slowly moved his mouth lower to the small patch of soft curls, her heady scent calling out to him, pleading him to taste the honeyed depths and pleasure the woman beneath him. He breathed in her slightly musky scent deeply and then groaned when his cock became even stiffer by the sweetness that was her essence.
“You smell so intoxicating, Katara,” he murmured in a husky tone.

As he kept his eyes on hers, Katara blushed when he pressed his nose into her lush curls and inhaled deeply.

“I want to know how you taste,” he growled throatily as he continued to hold her gaze.

The waterbender’s brow furrowed as she looked down at him incomprehensively.

Looking away from her curious gaze, Zuko gently pushed her legs wider apart before he continued down until his face was finally settled between her thighs.

Katara’s blue eyes widened in shock, her face turning a deep shade of red, once she understood what he intended to do.

“Zuko, stop!” she exclaimed in dismay and embarrassment.

Her hands went to his hair and she yanked his head up before closing her thighs tightly together. Mortified that Zuko would do such an act, Katara struggled frantically to escape him. Ignoring her struggles, Zuko quickly slid his hands up the insides of her thighs, gently urging her to part them again. When she refused, he slowly crawled back up her body and kissed her reassuringly.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, love,” he told her gently. “Open your legs for me,” he urged her between groans as he hungrily kissed her lips. “I’ve never done this before, but I want to pleasure you. Let me taste you and drink up your warm juices, Katara.”

Gasping against his hot mouth, Katara’s entire body flushed as his bold declaration made her feminine walls clenched in anticipation just as much as the erotic images that played in her mind at his words. Zuko broke their kiss and she watched as he again crawled down her body and caressed her upper thighs expectantly.

The waterbender decided to push her shyness aside and see what Zuko would do, though she was still embarrassed that he would dare to place his mouth in such an intimate place. Letting out a deep breath, she slowly parted her legs and allowed Zuko to again settle down between them.
Glancing at her with a pleased smile, Zuko spread her legs farther apart, revealing the swollen folds that hid the place that he loved to be buried in, and he breathed her in. He was rapidly becoming drunk by the intoxicating scent of her essence and he could not wait any longer to find out if she tasted as good as she smelled. He pressed his lips softly against her curls.

Katara sucked in a sharp breath as she felt him kiss her and her heart began to pound wildly in her chest. She shifted slightly, but he hooked his arms beneath her knees and pulled her closer to him. At the first touch of his mouth against her feminine folds, Katara jolted nervously, but Zuko grasped her thighs firmly and stopped her from pulling away from him.

Zuko reached down over her thighs and slowly slid his thumbs along her slick folds. He groaned at the sight of her pink flesh as he spread her open like a ripe, trickling peach. Looking up the line of her body, he could see Katara looking down at him with wide, blue eyes above her heaving breasts as he brought his mouth closer and closer to her wet core. Without any warning, Zuko slipped his tongue out, slid it up her slick folds and grazed the sensitive nub at the top of her hot center.

“Ah!” Katara cried out pleasantly at the sensation and she jerked. Zuko found himself loving her reaction.

“Mm,” he groaned at both the sound she made and her taste.

He would never have thought that the taste of her would be unbelievably erotic. Her nectar was tangy yet sweet.

“You taste so good, love,” he growled out against her sex, causing her to gasp at the sensation.

Katara groaned a halfhearted protest as he reached deeper into the wet cleft, searching for the heady taste of her body. Without another word, Zuko covered her enticing swollen folds with his mouth and tugged firmly with his teeth.

“Ohhh!” the waterbender gasped.

Once again, Zuko glided his tongue up her moist slit and applied a bit more pressure on both her entrance and her clit. He was rewarded with another soft cry and a fresh rush of juices seeping from her clenching pussy and leaking down the line of her firm ass.
“Uhhh,” she moaned as Zuko thrust his tongue into her slit, dipping slightly inside to collect a bit of her aroused cream before withdrawing only to do it again a moment later.

Katara let out a soft cry and Zuko chuckled pleasantly, causing his warm breath to roll against her opening. She whimpered as a delightful tremor racked her body. As Zuko ran his tongue through her folds again, she instinctively thrust her hips toward his mouth, anxious for more.

Zuko smiled against her damp flesh as Katara pressed herself closer to him. He pulled back slightly and he chuckled quietly when she groaned in frustration. He spread her drenched folds with his thumbs to reveal her clenching hole. Glancing back to her half-lidded eyes, Zuko lowered his head again to gently press his tongue more insistently against her entrance.

“Oh, gods, Zuko!” the waterbender mewled, as her body thrashed with the sensation of his warm tongue pressing against her opening.

Then her breath escaped her in a sharp cry when Zuko slid his tongue more firmly and deeply into her, rubbing against her quivering walls in extraordinarily wonderful ways. Zuko groaned as his tongue gathered more of her delicious essence as he swept insistently inside her before pulling away to drag it upwards to part her soaking lips and then to briefly touch her clt. Katara cried out again, and with a growl, his hot tongue began to rub up and down her slit.

Gods, her taste and the sounds she made as he pleasured her with his mouth caused his already stiff cock to harden excruciatingly. But he took his time. He wanted to learn what brought her the most pleasure as he explored her sweet, intimate place with his mouth.

Katara’s hips started undulating towards him once again as she mewled and whimpered, but Zuko immediately placed his hands on her hips and pinned them firmly against the bed to keep her still. The waterbender pressed her head back against the pillow and roughly bit her lip as she tried to keep from moving like he wanted. But when Zuko’s tongue once again dipped into her entrance, she bucked toward his wonderful mouth before she could stop it. As her cries resonated through the air, Zuko groaned softly against her wet skin, causing sizzling sparks to shoot from her center and spread throughout her body, before he pushed his tongue deep within her pussy at every thrust of her hips.

“Do you like that?” Zuko asked her with a growl as he flicked his tongue in rapid succession, “Do you like how I’m devouring your sweet, little pussy?”

“Y-yes,” Katara managed to moan out even as her cheeks blazed at his dirty words.
Zuko pulled back slightly before he latched his mouth against her engorged clit.

“Ahh, Zuko!” she yelped as he began to work his tongue and lips harder against her.

Having Zuko’s mouth, his wonderful tongue, tasting and touching her most intimate place felt so incredible, so unlike anything Katara ever imagined. Her stomach twisted into a tightly wound coil as the flame inside her leapt into a scorching inferno, so much like her husband’s element.

Encouraged by her passionate cries, Zuko sucked harder on her swollen nub as he pressed and rubbed his erection against the mattress to relieve some of his torture.

“Mmmm,” he groaned at the pleasure and he slurped up at her warm juices even more eagerly.

“Ohhhh!” Katara screamed and her hands flew into his hair as she ground his face into her. “Yes! So good!”

She felt her husband’s hands wrap tightly around her hips again, but instead of pushing them back down to keep her still like she thought, he hastily shoved his hands under her to grab her rear and jerked her upwards, sending her core colliding against his face.

“Oh, gods!” she gasped out as his tongue again swept deeply into her clenching passage. She locked her legs around his neck as she felt her orgasm approaching rapidly.

Zuko’s hands firmly gripped her ass, kneading her cheeks as he held her hips above the bed, causing her back to arch and her head to press hard against the pillow. Gods, he couldn’t get enough of her!

Katara felt Zuko growl and she let out a deep groan as he moved to pleasure her clit, occasionally sucking on it and kissing it with his lips or licking it and flicking it with his tongue. The sensations were overwhelming and the pleasure was assaulting her senses like a wild hurricane. That raging fire that was gathering in her stomach blazed into dangerous flames and she dug her toes into the bed just as she tightened her hold of Zuko’s hair as her walls began to pulse. She groaned when Zuko placed her hips back on the bed and moved his hands back up her thighs. But just when she thought the pleasure could not get any better, Zuko proved her wrong as he quickly inserted two of his fingers into her just as he firmly pressed his tongue onto her bundle of nerves.

“Ahhhh!” she cried out as she again thrust her hips toward his face as she felt the pressure of her
She looked down to see his dark head buried deeply between her legs and she moaned. She was so close. Her stomach was coiled painfully tight and her entire body was throbbing, desperately craving its glorious release.

And then, Zuko lifted his eyes, locked his impassioned gaze with hers, and thrust his fingers rapidly into her at the same time he scraped his teeth gently across her swollen bud.

“Zuko!” Katara screamed his name as she shattered with a fierce force, arching her back sharply as she threw her head back and rode the scorching waves of her climax. She felt the warmth of her release gush from her core and she moaned loudly as she writhed beneath him.

Zuko’s entire being shuddered with satisfaction when Katara cried out his name. His golden eyes smoldered heatedly as he watched her pussy spasm around his fingers as he continued his thrusting. Each time he pulled out, more of her cream coated his hand. A tremor ran through him of both pride and pleasure that he was able to please her. As his wife continued to ride her climax, Zuko removed his fingers from her quivering core and replaced it with his mouth. He groaned deeply against her pussy as he continued to rub his tongue along her clenching walls, coaxing all the honey she could give him into his mouth.

Katara shuddered and her eyes rolled back as his mouth only intensified her orgasm and sent hot tremors of ecstasy sparking throughout her body. She groaned with pleasure as she felt Zuko lapping every drop of her release with his tongue.

After it seemed as if he had licked her clean, Zuko pulled his head away and slowly, meticulously licked his lips. With one last, tender kiss on her swollen folds, Zuko crawled up her body to nuzzle her flushed cheek.

“Gods, Katara. You’re so delicious,” he crooned against her ear before he kissed her passionately.

Katara tasted herself on his tongue and found that it was not that bad or disgusting as she had thought—especially after the incredible pleasure he had given her. He pulled away and she opened her to eyes to see him.

“I have to take you now,” he growled out lustfully.
Katara was still dazed with her powerful climax that the only thing she could do was moan.

As her last tremors subsided, Zuko settled himself between her thighs and grabbed her hips in his large hands. Without another word, he swiftly pushed the head of his erection inside her still clenching sheath, and she gasped at the friction against her oversensitive flesh. Tightly swollen, Zuko had to fight her milking pussy in order to slide the entire length of his throbbing cock deep within her. He gave a pleased groan and Katara moaned deeply as they wrapped their arms around each other. Zuko pulled his hips back until only the tip of him remained inside her before he rammed himself back in, causing them both to groan and gasp. He did it again before he began to thrust into her in a fierce motion. Their bodies pressed tightly together until there was no space left between them as they rocked and bucked against each other while they hungrily kissed one another.

It was not long before Katara felt her stomach twist into another climax, and after a particular sharp thrust of Zuko’s hips, Katara screamed his name repeatedly. A few seconds later, Zuko stiffened and growled as he met his own end before collapsing atop his wife. Feeling the shudder of his release hitting deep within her womb, Katara sighed softly as she enfolded him in her arms.

Once he was completely spent, Zuko rolled onto his back with a groan as he continued to pant. He stared at the ceiling blankly for a moment before he moved to lie on his side propped up on his elbow and gazed down upon his shuddering Fire Lady. He again licked his lips at the fading taste of her and he smiled as he reached down to caress her flushed cheeks.

She opened her blue eyes and turned to give him a sated smile.

“I’m guessing I did excellent for being my first time doing such an act,” Zuko commented with a smug grin.

“That…that was…wow,” was the only thing she could get out.

Zuko chuckled quietly as he wrapped his arm around her and kissed her gently.

“Good, because I plan to pleasure you in such a way again, my little waterbender,” he vowed.

“You won’t hear any complaints from me,” she replied with a grin even as her cheeks turned a red hue as she snuggled into him.
The young Fire Lord chuckled again before he sobered up and a determined expression appeared on his face.

“Zuko?” Katara asked curiously at the sudden change of his mood.

“Despite what anybody else says and thinks, we are meant for each other, Katara,” he stated firmly and she knew he was referring to what he had heard in town earlier in the day. “I don’t care if they think you aren’t right for me because you are, you are perfect for me, you make me happy. And I promise that I will do everything in my power to give you a happy and wonderful life with me.”

Katara smiled as she reached up a hand to caress his face before gently touching his scarred cheek. She raised her head to lovingly press her lips against his.

“I know,” she responded softly but with conviction, “There will always be difficulties in life, but I know you will strive to make me happy, just as I will do anything to make you happy. They can say what they want, but we know the truth, and the truth is that we belong together.”

Zuko seemed to relax at her words and he let out a soft sigh. He pressed his forehead against hers and his golden eyes gazed long and deep into her ocean-blue eyes before he captured her lips in a gentle yet passionate kiss that spoke of unbreakable promises.

The rest of the night they spent making love to each other just as Zuko had fantasized about doing since he ask her to marry him.

Come what may, they would withstand everything that life threw at them. And they would do so together.

Katara discreetly pressed her napkin against her mouth to hide her yawn as a servant refilled her cup of juice before he stepped back with a smile when the Fire Lady thanked him. After taking a sip of the delicious tropical drink, Katara returned her attention to her breakfast, but just as quickly, her gaze shifted to Zuko who was sitting at her left, silently eating his own meal. She kept getting distracted by her husband’s mouth as he ate and occasionally darted his tongue out to lick his lips. She would feel her core clench as she continued to watch his mouth since it brought back to her mind how it had been her that he had eaten last night. She blushed at her thoughts and squirmed in her spot.

He had been insatiable the previous night as he kept her awake with round after round of lovemaking
before he finally allowed her to sleep a few hours before dawn. Not that she was complaining. She loved every second of it and wanted more.

Her eyes once again moved to his mouth and she suppressed a whimper when his tongue darted out. Having his mouth pleasure her most intimate place in such a way had been amazing. It was incredible, such a scandalous act, and she hoped that he would do it again. She was glad that he had never done such a deed to another women and she felt smug at the thought that she was the only woman who had been honored with the touch of his skillful mouth. She wanted to return the favor.

Hearing Zuko call her name snapped Katara out of her thoughts and she quickly moved her gaze from his mouth to look into his eyes.

“Are you all right? Does the food not please you, my lady?” he asked her coolly with a raised eyebrow. But the gleam in his amber eyes and the slight twitch of one corner of his mouth let her know that he knew what she was thinking.

Katara cleared her throat delicately as a few servants turned to her in concern at their lord’s words.

“I am fine, thank you, my lord,” she replied calmly as she returned to eating. She then smiled reassuringly at the servants. “And the food is delicious.”

The servants relaxed.

“Yes, very delicious,” the Fire Lord repeated as he took a sip of his drink.

Something in his tone made Katara pause in eating and look back at him. His eyes were smoldering over the rim of his cup as he stared at her before he lowered it and slowly, deliberately, ran his tongue across his lower lip. Katara’s eyes widened and she blushed deeply once she realized he was repeating the same words he had said about her when he had brought her to ecstasy with his mouth.

If the servants were not around she would have lunged at him and attack his lips with her own for teasing her. But instead she just smiled at him before continuing with her meal.

“I would like to take you sailing today,” Zuko’s stoic voice again brought her out of her thoughts, “Would that please you?”
“Yes,” Katara responded enthusiastically, “That sounds exciting.”

Zuko allowed a small, pleased smile to touch his lips and Katara returned his smile with a wide one of her own.

After the meal, Zuko took her to the beach where a servant was waiting beside a low sailing boat that bobbed gently with the waves. Zuko helped his excited wife climb in before he jumped in after her. Then with a nod of his head, the servant pushed the boat into the water before climbing in once they passed the waves. They spent the next few hours soaking up the sun and enjoying the salty breeze that ruffled their hair and clothes as the servant expertly maneuvered the small vessel above the water. Zuko watched contentedly as Katara would lean down over the low edge to skim her fingers on the ocean’s surface or used her waterbending to trail ribbons of water after them with a happy laugh.

Just as the sun began to set, Zuko ordered the servant to take them back, and a few minutes later, they were once again walking on the shore and heading to the beach house. They arrived just in time to take quick baths and change clothes before they were served their dinner. Then they headed toward their rooms to retire for the night.

As soon as the door was locked behind them, Zuko lunged at Katara and pinned her on the bed underneath him as he took possession of her mouth.

“I want to taste you again,” he told her huskily.

“Yes,” she moaned, “Please.”

Before Katara knew what was happening, Zuko had divested them of their clothes, lifted her so that she was sitting at the edge of the bed, and had eagerly spread her thighs widely apart as he knelt on the floor and settled his head between them. The sensation of the cool air of the room hitting her heated sex had her shuddering and moaning. He plunged a finger into her and she arched her back with a cry. He pumped furiously before inserting another finger, causing her to wail and throw her head back in pleasure. He pulled them away a second later, and holding her gaze, he placed his drenched fingers into his mouth and sucked. Katara moaned as she stared at him. She had no idea such a sight could be so arousing. Once he had cleaned his fingers of her sweet nectar, Zuko pulled them away from his mouth and grinned wickedly at her. She shuddered.

He wrapped his arms up around her thighs, holding her still, and his head dipped low into the space
he had created for himself. Katara placed her hands out behind her to keep her up as she watched him. He swept through her soft curls with short, coaxing touches of his tongue. Then he stroked her soaked slit, teasing her sweet softness.

Pulling away slightly, Zuko then parted her drenched feminine folds with his thumbs and licked his lips as he stared intently at the swollen pink flesh, glistening with the combination of her juices and his saliva. He watched as her tiny hole clenched and unclenched, wanting to be filled by him. With a husky growl, he swiftly leaning his head down to plunge his tongue inside her. Katara cried out as she felt her center throb. Zuko groaned as her passage clenched around his tongue. He continued to firmly caress her inner walls before pulling away. Then he was kissing, licking, nibbling, and sucking from her clit to her tight, quivering pussy.

“Ah, Zuko, mm!” she mewled as her hand reached down to grab his hair. “Yes…y-yes, just like…that!”

Zuko groaned she gripped his hair tightly and her hips bucked in her pleasure. He moaned as he tasted her essence again, he could not get enough of her and her reactions to his touch. There was only one word he could think of:

_Delicious._

She was so warm, compliant, and beautiful as he loved her with his mouth, lips, and tongue as he had done the previous night, becoming more acquainted with her body and its responses. He again entered her with his fingers and he smirked when she bucked her hips and whimpered. After a few strokes, he replaced his fingers with his tongue once again before bringing his hand coated with her essence down to his thick erection to spread along his length. As he stroked himself with a deep groan, smearing her juices along his sensitive tip with his thumb, Zuko firmly flicked his tongue against her folds and then furiously lapped at her sex before burying his tongue deep inside to taste her fully.

With a soft cry, Katara fell back upon the bed, clenching the sheets tightly with her hands as the sensations shook her entire body. Releasing his aching cock, Zuko hooked his arms beneath her knees and pulled her closer to him, so that her enticing ass was resting on the edge of the bed and her slender legs were resting over his shoulders.

“Z-Zuko,” she moaned breathlessly.

The firebender insistently inserted his tongue into her wet pussy, and a few seconds later, his wife was thrashing and bucking on the bed as she reached her climax. Zuko eagerly drank up her juices,
but before he could go any further and bring her into another release, he felt Katara pull at his hair. He reluctantly leaned his head away to stare inquisitively up at her as he licked his lips.

After recuperating from her pleasure, Katara sat up. She moaned as her gaze became riveted by the sight of his mouth and chin glistening wetly with her aroused cream. She really wanted him to continue, but she wanted to do something before she lost her courage. Removing her legs from his shoulders, she smiled at him as he raised an eyebrow at her. With another pull of his hair, she finally managed to coax him to stand up, even though he was frowning as he did so.

Katara bit her lip as Zuko’s turgid cock came to the level of her face before she stood up on shaky legs. She wrapped her arms around Zuko and he immediately wound his arms around her as she kissed him. Again she tasted herself on his tongue, but she ignored it in favor of something better as she subtly turned Zuko until his back was facing the bed. She pulled away and his eyes searched hers as he held her to him. She smiled coyly at him, and the eagerness that ignited in his golden eyes made her sensitive core ache. With one gentle push from her, Zuko sat down on the edge of the bed, and although he was looking up at her in confusion, there was a fire in his eyes.

“Let me pleasure you,” Zuko heard her say softly, though he could hear the shyness in her tone. Curious, he let himself relax a bit, even though his throbbing length was demanding he find release within her folds.

Katara’s gaze moved from his intense amber orbs and his handsome features, down his alabaster, muscular torso, caressing every ridge of his muscled stomach, until her eager eyes landed on his impressive length that seemed to be straining toward her. She felt her mouth water and she suppressed a moan.

He was so perfect and he was all hers.

Again her wet center ached to be filled by him, but for the moment Katara ignored it. She wanted to know what it felt like to take him into her mouth and taste that part of him that brought her so much pleasure. Jiao had hinted at it that morning as the servant dressed her when Katara had subtly asked about what women could do to pleasure their men. Katara wished to see if she could bring Zuko great pleasure by using only her mouth, lips, and tongue just like he had done to her.

She bit her lip in uncertainty. She had no experience or idea on how to proceed, but she hoped that some feminine instincts would guide her. But what if she did it wrong and ended up displeasing him? Yet she could not deny that she wanted to know how it felt to have him in her mouth, to taste him, to bury her nose in the dark curls, and breathe deeply of his musky, masculine scent.
It seemed she had been lost in her thoughts longer than she thought for she heard Zuko hoarsely call out her name. She glanced up at her husband’s face to see his strained features and his clenched jaw. 

Zuko had been wondering about what was going through his waterbender’s head as she stood unmoving before him, but when her gaze became fixated on his aching cock, he felt like he was going to go insane with lust. Why was she not doing anything? Before he could grab her to him so he could finally bury himself inside her, his wife positioned herself between his legs and leaned down a little to place a deep kiss on his lips. He groaned into her mouth as she ran her hands down his chest and caressed his abdomen. His mind became hazy with the heady kiss she was bestowing on him, but then she pulled away and he opened half-lidded eyes to look at her. 

She smiled diffidently at him as she slid her hands down his chest, letting her fingers trail the path of his defined upper body. Silent and intense, Zuko watched her as she dragged her fingers along his muscular stomach before she sank down to her knees between his legs, so that her face came close to his hard shaft. His breathing accelerated and he felt his stomach tighten as he waited to see what she had in mind. 

Admiring his erection once again, Katara raised a hand and lightly touched the length of him with her fingers, causing him to let out a deep groan, before she firmly grasped him just how he liked it. Zuko hissed and bucked his hips into her small hand. She stroked him for a moment as he panted above her and she thought it was so erotic to be sitting there and gazing onto Zuko’s incredible shaft. She was unable to stifle her moan at the arousing sight of another small, white drop of liquid oozing from the slit and clinging to the darkish head of his erection, glistening temptingly in the candlelight. Gathering her courage, Katara leaned forward and tentatively licked his wet tip with her tongue. 

“Ah, Katara!” Zuko cried out in both shock and pleasure as he stared down at her with wide eyes. 

Katara pulled back slightly and swallowed. It wasn’t exactly good, but it wasn’t bad either. She decided after a moment that she liked the way he tasted as the salty and spicy taste of him hit her taste buds. She looked up into his smoldering eyes and smiled. 

“You taste so good, my love,” she purred at him, repeating what he had told her the previous day. 

Zuko groaned as her words caused his cock to jerk and he shuddered. Katara was amazed that anything could make this strong, sometimes ruthless but perfect man tremble, least of all her. The waterbender leaned back down and gently swirled her tongue around his swollen head before she took the tip into her mouth. 

“Gods, yes!” Zuko groaned as his fingers clutched tightly onto the sheets beneath him in order to
stop himself from thrusting his cock between her soft, plump lips.

A fine tremor overtook his body as something he had fantasized about so many times finally became a reality. The sight of Katara kneeling naked between his legs and the sensation of her hot mouth enveloping his cock stunned him. He had never felt anything so incredible before except for the sensation of being inside his wife’s tight, wet sheath. Yet this feeling was so new to him and he loved it. He had never thought that a woman’s mouth could be so amazing before Katara. The feeling of her tongue as she slid it along his shaft had him shuddering and his heart pounding hard in his chest.

Katara released his tip and began to lick her way down his shaft before coming back up, smiling when he again let out a moan. Rolling her tongue over the bulbous tip once again, she coaxed a few more drops of his arousal to fall upon her tongue. The only word that she could think of to describe his taste was that it was so deliciously male. She lifted her eyes and saw that he was watching her intently as he panted and trembled from the pleasure she was giving him. She smiled inwardly in triumph.

Panting harshly, Zuko watched as Katara pulled back slightly to plant a gentle kiss on his weeping tip as she held his gaze before she opened her lips and took his length into her mouth as far as she could.

“Uuhh!” Zuko growled out deeply as he laced his fingers through Katara’s chocolate tresses.

It was so hot and tight. It felt so good. When her warm mouth closed more tightly around his shaft, the capability for rational thought fled his mind as he grabbed the sheets beneath him with his other hand more tightly as if they were a lifeline.

Unable to draw his entire length into her mouth, Katara sighed softly around the hard flesh. Her jaw ached a little since she had to open her mouth wide to accommodate his girth, but she ignored the slight discomfort.

Consumed with arousal, Zuko breathed hard as he watched Katara pull away, and he groaned in disappointment as the silky heat of her mouth vanished. Then he growled when she leaned forward to capture the traces of liquid that she had managed to coax from his rigid body before she again took him into her mouth and swirled her tongue around him.

Fuuuuuck, he mentally cursed.
Panting, he watched as his waterbender looked up to see him watching her as she cupped his heavy sac within her palm. His eyes became half-lidded in response to the gentle massage of her fingers, mouth, and tongue. She tugged his tender flesh experimentally and she was rewarded with a strangled groan. Katara moaned against him as her body reacted to his obvious pleasure. Zuko gasped when she wrapped her fingers around the length that she could not fit into her mouth and began to stroke it reverently. He moaned her name as he felt a bit more of his arousal seep out.

Katara moaned as the taste of her husband’s essence filled her mouth again, and Zuko groaned deeply from above her. The firebender entwined his fingers in her hair and gently thrust his length into her mouth. The gentle pull of his fingers in her hair caused Katara to moan softly, and she felt her husband’s body shudder as his erection jolted inside her mouth. Desire flaring within her, Katara immediately began to pump her lips up and down his length, pressing her tongue firmly up against his shaft.

“Yes, Katara!” Zuko moaned from above her as his grip on her hair tightened. “That feels so damn good.”

He looked down at her, locking his eyes with hers as her head bobbed up and down on his cock, slick now with her saliva, while her hand stroked his base. Agni, the sensations were so unbelievable, not to mention the erotic sight of her pleasuring him with her mouth with equal fascination displayed in her eyes. She was so magnificent in that moment that he would not have been able to look away even if the world was coming to an end. He was reduced to panting, groaning, and growling, unable to stop the way the muscles in his legs jumped and his cock jerked as his pleasure mounted to sweltering levels. What she lacked in experience, his wife certainly made up for it by utter, determined enthusiasm.

Her husband’s scorching gaze and his pleasured groans caused Katara’s wet walls to clench tightly and she trembled as her desire leapt. His pleasure was making the fiery heat of her lust begin to engulf her completely. It consumed her so much that she began to rub her lips furiously up and down his engorged length.

Zuko growled as he watched her, and then he felt her force him deeper into her mouth until he felt his tip strike the back of her throat.

“Oh, gods!” he shouted in pleasure.

Pausing, Katara suppressed her gagging reflex as she watched as Zuko’s eyes rolled back before he dropped his head back and his mouth fell open. Still pumping him with her hand, she pulled away to catch her breath before she once again engulfed him into her mouth as much as she could as she continued to watch him intensely.
Snapping his head back down, his eyes met hers once again and Katara felt her stomach clench. His golden eyes were a dark amber imbued with passion, his lips were pressed together, and his jaw was clenched tightly as he stared down at her. She felt him push her head faster onto him as he began to thrust himself into her mouth.

“Yes, Katara, yes,” he chanted between clenched teeth before he growled thickly, “Just like that. Suck me harder!”

Oh, gods, the pleasure was incredible. He was so close! But he was not sure if she would like it if he released himself into her mouth.

Her husband’s guttural words caused wetness to gush from her pussy and Katara moaned. With each throb of his erection, her body grew hotter until the fierce flames of her desire raged in her core, causing her aroused fluids to flow from her folds and down her thighs.

“K-Katara, stop…” Zuko gasped out even though what he wanted was the complete opposite. He halfheartedly tried to push her away from him. “I’m…oh, Agni…about to…uuuh…come!”

He growled when Katara ignored his weak attempts to dislodge her, and instead, increased her pace a bit as she let out a deep moan. The vibration of Katara’s moan caused his thick shaft to throb and Zuko growled fiercely as he began to pump his cock into her mouth with more force while his hand tangled tightly in her hair.

Katara knew he was close and she met his thrusts eagerly, taking him deeply while she stroked him within her small fist. His erection was hard and fully swollen. She desperately wanted to bring him to release.

Zuko was growling and panting as he watched Katara with unrestrained desire, and he felt his shaft pulse as she met his lustful gaze with one of determination and elation. When he thought the sensation could not get any better, Katara proved him wrong. She sucked his length firmly as her hand squeezed him and then she *hummed*.

“Katara!” he growl violently as he gripped her head to hold her in place as he felt his release shoot up his cock and into her mouth.

Katara’s eyes widened when Zuko’s hot semen burst into her mouth with such force that she was
unable to swallow quickly, causing a little to dribble from the corner of her mouth. Although his hand held her head firmly in place as he jerked his hips into her mouth, she could not help but moan around him as he came for her. She continued to caress his pulsing length with her tongue as she fervently swallowed every drop he had to offer.

With each pulse of his release, Zuko’s hips jolted upwards, stroking his cock jerkily between his wife’s wonderful lips as he rode the waves of his climax. Once his orgasm subsided, he slowly released Katara’s hair as he limply fell back onto the bed on his elbows and panted, feeling as if his entire energy had been sapped from his body. He felt Katara pull away before she placed a gentle kiss on his now semi-flaccid cock and he shuddered at the sensation. He opened his eyes to stare down at her and groaned at the sight of her swollen lips and flushed cheeks as her eyes gleamed with new knowledge and unadulterated, wanton desire.

Katara almost swooned from the lusty smirk that appeared on her husband’s face as he again sat up and looked down at her as she remained kneeling between his legs. She felt her aching walls quiver. Reaching toward her face, Zuko swiped the remnants of his semen from her chin to the corner of her mouth with his thumb before he gently pressed it to her lips. He watched as Katara quickly opened her mouth and gently sucked his thumb, licking her hot tongue around the digit, before swallowing.

With a growl, his arms flashed out and he grabbed her by the arms to haul her roughly up to him, before spinning them around and pinning her beneath him. Before she could speak, Zuko’s lips crashed to hers. When she gasped he swiftly thrust his tongue deeply in her mouth, stroking the wet appendage against hers as he rubbed her lips frantically with his. He groaned at the strange taste of himself on his wife’s tongue, and he felt her shiver fiercely against him as she wrapped her slender limbs around him. He felt her ground her wet pussy against him, but he knew he had to wait a moment before he could recuperate from such an intense orgasm. They pulled away from devouring each other to gather some air and they panted hard against the other.

“Agni, Katara,” he groaned against her lips, “You are incredible.”

“And you are simply delicious,” Katara quipped with a grin.

Zuko chuckled quietly since that was the word he used to describe her taste. Settling himself beside her, he brushed his lips roughly against hers as he wrapped her tightly in his arms.

“That was even better than I ever imagined,” he whispered against her mouth.
Katara leaned her head back slightly to look at him curiously.

“You mean I did better than what you thought I would?” she asked.

“No,” Zuko said, “I meant that my fantasy of such an act, of imagining you taking my cock into your mouth, is nothing compared to the real thing.”

Katara’s blue eyes widened in surprise as she stared into his gleaming, golden eyes.

“Are you saying that…you’ve never experienced it before?” she asked quietly, her heart racing.

“I told you that I was going to experience many firsts with you,” he reminded her softly.

“You’ve already experienced many firsts with me,” she mused curiously as she held his gaze, “It makes me wonder about what you have done…before.”

She felt a small pinch in her heart and looked away before Zuko could see the hurt and jealousy in her eyes. She felt her ardor cool. She really needed to get over his past. But it was so difficult. She felt him grabbed her chin gently before turning her back so she could look into his eyes.

“If it will make you finally stop wondering about my past, then I’ll tell you that what I’ve done before, we have already done,” he told her firmly.

“What’s that?” Katara asked hesitantly.

“Before you I’ve only…found my release in the traditional position and no other way,” he confessed before he smiled wryly, “Well, except with my hand when I was longing for you.”

“Really?” Katara asked incredulously.

“I told you that I only sought the quickest way for sexual release and nothing more,” he again reminded her, “And I’ve already confessed to you that I’ve only come inside you instead of…on the sheets. It’s only with you that I learned there are many different ways to receive and give pleasure.”
The implications of what Zuko had just said made that small ache in Katara’s chest disappear as she realized that Zuko was exploring the wonders of sexual intimacy with her just like she was with him. It made her heart swell with happiness at the fact that he was only hers and that only she would ever know him thusly. She felt her body once again heat up with her joy and arousal.

“I’m glad to know that,” she said breathlessly as she kissed him deeply, “I can’t wait to see what other firsts we can discover together.”

Zuko groaned against her mouth as he felt his shaft twitch and then immediately harden. He didn’t think that was possible.

“You know what’s another first?” he asked her huskily as he nibbled on her lower lip. “I’ve only wanted round after round of lovemaking with you and the thought of stopping actually hurts me.”

Katara giggled softly before she smiled sultrily up at him.

“Then come here, my lord,” she purred as she pulled him atop her, “I’ll make the hurt go away.”

“I know you will, my lady,” he responded with a wicked smirk.

Throughout the rest of the night, Zuko proved to his wife that she was the only one that mattered to him, and that because of her, he found out he was insatiable. And Katara enthusiastically proved to her husband that she could be just as insatiable as him and only because of him.

“Oh, Zuko! It’s so amazing!” Katara enthused as she spread her arms wide to indicate the scenery before them.

“Yes, it is,” the young lord agreed as he took in the sight.

Standing among tall grass that reached to their ankles, they stood upon the edge of a high cliff on the eastern side of the island that overlooked the great ocean. From their high vantage point they could see the houses of the town far off behind them, and below them, they viewed the jagged rocks where the foamy waves crashed before retreating. The sun was rising on the horizon, painting the sky and the few wispy clouds a soft pink and lavender hue while the sun’s golden rays made the dark water
sparkle.

Zuko glanced at Katara, admiring the soft colors that touched her lovely features and the way the salty sea breeze made the strands of her hair dance around her. It was the last day of their honeymoon before they had to return to their duties and he wanted to do something special for his wife. Seeing her enthralled expression, he could not help but smirk.

After allowing her to sleep for two hours after another vigorous session of lovemaking, he had gently woken Katara up and told her to get dressed in something warm and comfortable. She had scowled and snapped at him to let her sleep before she burrowed deeper into the blankets.

Undeterred, he had pulled the blankets away from her, exposing her nude body to the chilly air and again told her to wake up. She had curled into herself, determined to continue sleeping, before she reluctantly sat up to glare groggily at him. She had tersely asked him why they needed to dress when the sun was not even up yet, but he had only told her it was a surprise. Grumbling, she had tiredly rolled out of bed before standing up to find something to wear just as he did. She had still been grumbling when he led her out of the beach house and into the carriage that waited for them. She had muttered a reply when Shen and Kuo had greeted her upon their komodo rhinos before climbing inside the carriage. Zuko had exchanged a brief amused look with his personal guards before he followed after his irritated wife. She had instantly dozed off as the carriage left the royal beach house property, past the sleepy town, and out into the uninhabited part of the island.

An hour or so later, he shook her gently and told her they had arrived. She had allowed him to help her out before she frowned when they came upon a hillside before her eyes widened in incredulity when he told her they were going to climb to the top. She had given him such a frigid stare that, for a moment, he actually thought she was going to freeze him to a tree. He pretended not to notice, however, as he told his guards to wait for them before he gently took her hand and tugged her after him, urging her to quicken her pace before they missed it. It took them a few minutes to climb, especially since it was still dark, before they finally reached the top of the cliff, just in time to see the sunrise.

“Is it amazing enough to ignore some lack of sleep?” he asked her amusedly as he came out of his thoughts.

He watched as his wife’s cheeks turn a soft red, probably in embarrassment for her grouchy behavior from before. She gave him a small smile of apology.

“Yes and thank you,” she told him happily before she slightly narrowed her eyes at him, “But next time at least let me get some rest from your insatiable appetite before you drag me out of bed before the sun is up.”
“I make no promises,” he retorted with a wicked grin.

Katara rolled her eyes at him—although she admitted there was nothing for her to complain about—before she turned around again so she could admire the splendor of dawn. She felt her husband move behind her before he wrapped his arms around her middle, pulling her against him and resting his chin on her head. With a soft sigh, the waterbender leaned her head back on his chest and placed her hands above his arms, enjoying the warmth he provided her against the chilly air. The world may think that Zuko was a harsh, cold, and unfeeling person, but she knew he was the complete opposite—at least, when it came to her. She loved him for it and vowed to herself that she would always show him her appreciation and love for his loving gestures.

Even if he dragged her out of bed before dawn.

“Before my mother…passed away,” she began softly after a moment of silence, “Our family was a very happy one. We all loved each other so much, but nothing could be compared to the love my dad and mom shared. I remember I would wake up at night to see my parents cuddled before the fire wrapped up in a fur blanket. My dad would whisper in her ear and my mom would smile as she raised her head to look at him.”

Zuko squeezed her softly as he listened to her talk in a nostalgic tone. He appreciated the fact that Katara always felt comfortable enough with him to talk about her mother and show how much she still missed her. It had been the same way with him before he found his own mother after so many years of missing her.

“The love that shown in their eyes always fascinated me and the sorrow that later appeared in my dad’s eyes when she was gone brought a pain to my heart. But it was something that I didn’t fully understand at that time,” she continued, the sea breeze carrying her soft voice toward Zuko’s ears.

“But as I got older and I listened to the women’s stories of brave warriors and the great feats they did because of their women’s love made me long for what my mom and dad had. I wanted a love as deep as the ocean, but I never held hope that I would find it because I was afraid I would lose it to the war.”

“Just like your father lost his,” Zuko murmured quietly.

“Yes,” Katara replied softly before she lifted her head.
Zuko looked down to gaze into her blue eyes, but instead of finding sadness or melancholy in their sapphire depths he was surprised to find a quiet happiness.

“But now I understand the love that appeared in my parents’ eyes when they looked at each other,” the brunette continued softly, “Because I’m sure it’s the look that shines in our own eyes.”

An affectionate smile spread across the Fire Lord’s lips before he bent down to tenderly kiss his wife’s mouth.

“Now you share a love that can’t be measured by the depths of the sea,” he whispered against her lips.

Katara smiled pleasantly as her heart gave a joyful leap at his words before she turned around to once again stare at the dawning sky and the calm sea below. If her mother were still alive she would have been so delighted to see how happy her daughter was. Kya would have greatly approved of Zuko.

Silently, they stood facing the horizon for a few more hours before Zuko turned her toward him. His arms still wrapped around her, he leaned down and Katara raised herself on tiptoes to meet his lips. They kissed slowly, unhurriedly, but with a soft, simmering passion. When they pulled apart, Zuko tucked a few flying strands of her hair behind her ear before he sighed.

“We have to pack our things for our return to the palace tomorrow,” he said, his tone once again cool.

Katara felt their happy bubble burst as reality intruded upon them. She frowned slightly before she mentally shook her head. They had responsibilities they had to look into, but she was sure that that would not stop them from enjoying each other’s company. She rose on her toes to peck his lips before she smiled at him.

“Then let’s go pack,” she said, “Besides, I miss Uncle Iroh and Lady Ursa.”

Zuko’s lips turned up into a small smile. He took hold of her hand and, interlacing their fingers together, he led her away from the cliff and back down the small trail to their awaiting guards and carriage.
Just as they spotted them, Zuko tensed and quickly brought Katara close to his side as he just as quickly pulled out one of his swords and held it before them.

“What is it?” Katara asked in concern as she moved her hand to her waterskin at her hip.

“I thought I heard something,” Zuko said in a low tone as he stared hard at a cluster of bushes where he had heard a rustle.

He opened his mouth to demand who the coward was hiding behind the bushes when a jackal-fox darted out, stared at them for a second, and then raced away in another direction. Katara and Zuko glanced at each other before they relaxed.

“Is everything all right, my lord?” they heard Shen ask.

He and Kuo had raced toward the royal couple when they saw their lord pull out his sword. Both guards went to stand on either side of them as they scanned the area carefully.

“It was just an animal,” Zuko responded coolly as he replaced his sword back into its sheath, though he did not let go of Katara.

Both guards relaxed slightly before they escorted them back to the carriage. Once he helped Katara climb in, Zuko glanced back toward the cliff before he shook his head and climbed inside to sit beside his wife, pulling her close to his side to reassure himself that everything was fine.

He missed the two pairs of eyes peeking from the bushes.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Once they returned to the beach house, the couple ate breakfast before they started packing their most personal things. Once they did, they allowed the servants to finish packing the rest of their belongings and the small souvenirs Katara had purchased during their stay on the island.

Once noon approached, Zuko proposed they have lunch in town as Jiao and a few servants gathered the last of their things so they could be placed on the flagship. When Katara did not immediately respond, Zuko turned away from packing his dual broadswords to look at her. Her blue eyes were large and innocent, but he could see the impish smile on her lips. He narrowed his eyes at her. He knew she had something in mind.
“Can we have a picnic at the beach instead?” she asked softly, beseechingly.

The servants paused, attentively listening to what their lord decided so they could make the arrangements.

“I would really like it if we spent our last day with only the two of us,” the Fire Lady continued. “Please, my lord?”

There was something about Katara being so formal with him that delighted Zuko to no end. As Fire Lord, he was used to his subjects treating him with respect and addressing him with formality. However, listening to his wife, a master waterbender who helped end the war and the only woman who was able to capture his heart, speak to him in such a way empowered him beyond his imagination.

“If it would please you, my wife,” he acquiesced, unable to deny any of her requests—especially when she was looking so innocently at him like that.

Katara beamed at him.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said as she lowered her eyes demurely, which Zuko knew was just to excite him.

He glanced at his servants who immediately bowed and hurried out of the room so they could make the preparations for their picnic. He looked back at Katara only to see her walking to the bathroom with a new blue bathing suit in her hand before she flashed him a grin as she closed the door.

Zuko raised an eyebrow since he had thought all their belongings were packed before he looked around the room to see if he could spot his swimming trunks, and sure enough, he found them laying across the arm of the small couch. Zuko frowned before he chuckled as he shook his head. Katara had known he was going to agree with her. The minx.

An hour later, they were sitting on a blanket beneath a large beach umbrella and eating a light and refreshing lunch. However, Zuko barely paid attention to the food as he watched Katara eat. Now he understood why she had been unable to look away from him as they ate breakfast the previous morning when he had pleasured her orally the night before. Every time she would lick her lips or suck on a piece of fruit, he was reminded of how it had been him that she had sucked on last night.
He had been unable to stop thinking about it since he woke up.

The sensation of having Katara pleasure him with her mouth had been unbelievable. Even thinking about it made his loins twitch. His imagination of how great it would feel had been completely off. Although it wasn’t as amazing as being inside her wet, silken core, he sure hoped that Katara would please him with her mouth again many more times. He had heard that some women hated the act and he fervently hoped Katara wasn’t one of them. But by the moans she had made and the triumphant look she had given him when he came, he was sure that she enjoyed it as much as he enjoyed pleasuring her.

He was brought out of his thoughts when Katara asked him if he was finished eating so they could build a sandcastle. He opened his mouth to protest that the Fire Lord did not build sandcastles, but he sighed in surrender when she again turned her huge, blue eyes on him. Really, he needed to find a way to become immune to that look.

Although they didn’t have Aang or Toph’s earthbending skills, they thought they did a pretty good job in creating a decent sandcastle. Once satisfied, they spent the next few hours swimming, basking in the sun’s rays, and sparring.

After distracting Zuko with a wave, Katara laughed as she raced away from him and ran along the shore, sprinting further away from the beach house. She heard Zuko growl as he pursued her. It reminded both of that game of chase they had when they were in the Earth Kingdom after having escaped the rebels. It seemed like such a long time ago.

Katara cursed inwardly when her path was blocked by some huge rocks. To her left was the forest that was part of the beach house property and to her right was the ocean. Just when she decided to race into the water, she squealed when Zuko grabbed her around the waist and spun her around in his arms with a deep chuckle.

“You should know by now that I will always catch you,” he whispered in her ear in a husky tone.

“That’s what I was hoping for,” she purred.

Zuko chuckled as he gave her a squeeze before letting her go. They sat down to catch their breaths and enjoy the cool breeze that swept through them.

“Do you remember when I caught you off guard and doused you with a wave last summer?” Katara
asked with a grin as she turned to rest on her side with her elbow propping her up so she could look down at Zuko. The water was lapping at their legs as they lay on the shore, letting the late afternoon sun soak into their skin.

When Zuko made a noncommittal sound as he lay on his back with his eyes closed, the waterbender’s grin widened.

“I still say your expression was priceless,” she continued amusedly.

Zuko opened one eye to glare at her, but it only caused her to laugh. When his glare intensified as he opened his other eye, Katara leaned down to press a kiss to his lips before pulling back. She watched as his expression softened as he reached up to touch her lips.

“Thanks,” he said.

“For what?” she asked curiously, captivated by the soft look in his golden eyes.

“Because of you I can laugh and play around more easily,” he said, “Because of you I know what happiness is like.”

Katara gently grabbed his wrist, where the wristband she had given him was, and turned her head so she could kiss his palm.

“And I’ll do anything for it to remain that way,” she promised fervently.

Zuko’s eyes became smoldering embers at her words. She was his and he was hers, and it would be so until forever. Tangling his hand in her wet hair, he kissed her deeply. Katara moaned. Without breaking their intense kiss, the hand that had been gently grabbing her head started to slide down her face, her neck, over her shoulder and down her arm until it settled on the exposed skin of her waist. Katara sighed softly as she moved closer to him, delighting in the sensation of his hand on her flesh. In response, his hand trailed slowly up and down her side, heating her more with his touch, before he slid his hand down to caress her upper thigh.

Gently, Zuko guided her onto her back on the wet sand as his hand continued to stroke her. Ever so slowly, his hand slipped higher until his thumb was grazing the side of her covered breast. Katara gasped as the contact caused her nipples to instantly harden. The firebender pulled his head back and
looked down at her, his golden eyes ablaze with lust. Katara moaned. Her husband’s alabaster skin was gleaming under the sunlight and his raven hair was wet and disheveled from their swim and recent run. Without breaking eye contact, he grasped her breast, kneading the soft mound before he gently pinched her nipple. Katara arched her back and whimpered as again that flame ignited in her belly.

“Katara,” he breathed before he again swooped down to kiss her.

Katara moaned into his mouth and the sound seemed to spark something in his sunlit eyes for he brought her roughly up against him, grinding his hard erection against her covered sex, as he devoured her mouth.

The waterbender’s hands flew to his dark hair before sliding down his strong shoulders, raking her nails down the muscles of his solid back. Zuko took a shuddering breath at the slight pain and then he leaned down to place hot kisses across the swell of her breasts.

“I need you, Katara,” he growled lowly as he pressed himself desperately against her.

“Then let’s go to our room,” she panted as she looked at his strained features.

“No,” he rasped, “I can’t wait. I want you now.” With a deep groan he pulled her closer, possessing her mouth hungrily.

“Zuko…” Katara breathed uncertainly, “Someone might see us.”

“This is private property, no one is allowed to come here,” he reassured her, “I have guards patrolling the area at all the times. I also ordered the servants to remain near the house for today. No one will see us.”

When she continued to look at him with an unconvinced expression, he frowned slightly.

“Do you really think I’ll allow anyone to see what only I can see and touch?” he asked her with a low growl.
Then he bent down to gently brush his lips to hers.

“I want to make love to you with the sunlight warming our skin and with the ocean waves cooling us,” he said softly.

Katara moaned softly and immediately relaxed against him, trusting him wholeheartedly. Zuko groaned in triumph at her surrender and kissed her ardently. He knelt back and again reached for her breasts, squeezing them softly, before he pulled her bikini top down so that the blue fabric was cupping her exposed breasts. He groaned at the sight of her dusky tips already hardened in arousal before he leaned down to gently suck on one while he rolled the other between his thumb and forefinger.

“Mmm,” the brunette moaned as she placed her hands behind his head. “Uhhh.”

The feeling of the wet sand beneath her and the cool water brushing against her legs in contrast with the warmth of Zuko’s masculine body above hers and her own rising temperature caused a spark of pleasure to tingle up and down her spine. Her firebender moved away from her sensitive breasts and looked up at her. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of his eyes dark with passion.

“I’m going to make love to you now, Katara,” he murmured huskily.

“Yes, Zuko, please,” she pleaded breathlessly.

He knelt back between her legs and took in the sight of her brown skin and cobalt eyes shining softly as the sunlight touched her. Never breaking contact with her gaze, he slid his red swimming trunks down only enough to quickly pull out his swollen cock. He moved over her again, placing his left hand on the sand beside her, while with the other he grasped his turgid member. He pushed the edge of her bikini bottom aside with the head of his erection before he pressed a few times against her clit and then her wet entrance. Katara moaned softly and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Slowly, gently, he slid inside her. Zuko released a deep breath as he drove himself in inch by agonizingly slow inch, savoring the feeling of Katara’s sweet pussy, hot and tight around him, before he slammed into her.

“Yes, Zuko!” Katara wailed, “Oh, gods, more! Please!”
She threw her legs around his hips, making him penetrate her even more deeply, and then she squeezed her inner muscles.

“Agni, Katara! Oh, gods,” he groaned as he jerked his hips forward. Then with a growl he reared back and began to pound into her harder and faster.

“Ah, ah, ah!” she screamed with each plunge as she bucked her hips to meet his every thrust, “Zuko!”

He growled at the sound of his name falling from his wife’s sweet lips and picked up his pace, thrusting fiercely into her that it caused their slapping skin to send sprays of seawater flying around them.

Katara’s eyes rolled back as she felt the coil tighten in her stomach and her inner walls quiver as her climax approached. She was so close!

“Zuko, oh, Zuko!” she chanted as she thrashed her head from side to side.

Understanding that her release was upon her, Zuko’s amber eyes blazed.

“Yes, Katara! That’s it,” he growled out hoarsely. “Let go! Come for me!”

At his words and a sharp twist of his hips, Katara threw her head back and screamed his name, her body arching off the sand and into his thrusting hips as sweet agony racked her body. Zuko’s eyes widened when large waves crashed around them at the power of her orgasm. A second later, Zuko sucked in a sharp breath before he rammed into her one last time as he released into her convulsing pussy with a hoarse cry.

Panting, he shuddered as he rested his head on Katara’s shoulder as the last tremors of his orgasm subsided. Gods, he would never get enough of the incredible sensation of coming inside Katara. The suddenly turbulent water calmed and receded into its normal peaceful rhythm. He slowly pulled himself from her, pulled his swimming trunks up again, and languidly lay down at her side, bringing her close against him after he had pulled up the bikini top to cover her chest. He looked into her eyes to see her shyly avert them. He reached up a hand to gently nudge her chin up so she could look at him. He smiled at her when her blush deepened.
“Still so shy, my sweet wife?” he crooned, his tone amorous and intimate from their lovemaking as he caressed her cheek. “It is both amusing and endearing.”

“You make me lose all inhibition,” she responded truthfully, breathlessly.

Zuko smiled as he leaned down to kiss her softly before he pulled back and pressed her close to his side again. They let out soft, satisfied sighs as the sea’s sprays cooled their heated flesh. After a moment of silently watching the sun begin to descend closer to the horizon, Zuko felt Katara nuzzle his chest before she gave it a soft kiss.

“These have been the best days of my life,” she breathed gently.

“Mine, too,” he told her softly.

“I love you, Zuko,” she whispered tenderly as she raised her head to look at him.

“And I love you,” he murmured and his lips met hers in a slow and tender kiss.

As the sun fully disappeared and the moon began to rise, they finally stood up and returned to their room to indulge in one another once again. Sometimes they loved playfully, teasingly, something Zuko found as refreshing and delightful as when he allowed himself to indulge in such playfulness with Katara outside their room. Other times they loved fast and rough, yet not lacking in love and passion. But most of the time, they loved each other gently, taking the time to explore their bodies and learn the other’s reactions to the caresses of hands, mouths, and lips.

For the rest of their lives, they would never forget the past few days they had spent together, exploring and loving each other. They hoped many more days of such happiness would come in the future and that nothing would ever separate them.

Chapter End Notes

Not much of a plot, I know. This was more of a filler chapter. I want to show a bit of their blissful life before the next arc of the story.
The magnificent Fire Nation flagship gradually made its way across the rough ocean. Strong gusts of wind and large waves crashed against its steel sides. Light rain pelted its surface. The storm had appeared suddenly that morning, causing the royal couple to have to wait until after noon before embarking. Luckily, the storm was abating now. Unfortunately, it caused the ship to go slower as it rode the high waves. Now they were expected to arrive at the Fire Nation capital sometime the next morning instead of that same day, as was planned.

After carefully pouring red wax on a scroll and stamping it with his royal seal, Zuko placed the document aside before grabbing another of the scrolls upon his desk. As soon as Katara and he had boarded the flagship, he had been given all the important paperwork that had sprang up during their honeymoon. After enjoying a delicious dinner in their opulent cabin, he had excused himself to Katara and began to sort through the pile of papers. Katara had only smiled and made it her purpose not to distract him from his work as she busied herself with other things.

Zuko’s eyes slanted away from the paper he was looking over and discreetly glanced at his wife. Currently, she was sitting on the bed and reading a book Madam Fang Hua had insisted she read. There was a small frown on her face, and occasionally, he would hear her mutter something. He glanced back at the words before him, but not a second passed before his eyes were once again taking in her form. Agni, he wanted her again. But he had to finish going through everything that needed his immediate attention before he could satisfy his carnal desires—which had not lessened since the first time he made to love Katara. Actually, it seemed it had only increased.

If he didn’t know any better, he would think Katara had bewitched him and cast a spell on him that turned him into a lustful animal. Zuko shook his head to clear his thoughts before he smirked.

Later, he promised himself as he returned to reading and signing papers.

Oblivious to her husband’s thoughts, Katara suppressed a sigh as she continued reading the book Madam Fang Hua had given her on court etiquette. Were all these etiquette rules and traditions really necessary? Why did they have to make everything so damn complicated?

Well, there was no point in crying over it now. As Zuko’s wife and the Fire Nation’s Fire Lady, she had to do her best. Once they arrived at the palace, she planned on asking her mother-in-law to help her with her first duties. She vowed that she would show all those who thought her unfit to be their queen that they were wrong.

Lowering the book a little, Katara glanced over it to where Zuko was sitting at his desk. She sighed
as she looked at him longingly as he continued working. She admired his serious and concentrated expression as he took his responsibilities earnestly. She watched as his hands moved to smooth the scrolled papers on his desk, and all she could think about was his hands on her flushed body. Gods, she wanted him again.

Cheeks burning, Katara looked away and again glanced down at her book. La, what had she become? Ever since Zuko introduced her to the art of lovemaking, all she wanted was for them to make love again and again. Was that normal?

Dismissing the thought for the moment, the brunette waterbender set aside the book and closed her eyes with a soft sigh. She was getting a headache and decided a small break would do her good. She had not slept much the night before; Zuko had kept her busy in the most pleasurable ways all night and had woken her up right at dawn to continue. Not that she minded. It made her happy to know that Zuko desired her as much as she desired him. She wondered if once they returned to the Fire Nation Palace and their responsibilities, they would still have moments to indulge in each other as often.

The next thing Katara knew she was drowsily fluttering her eyes open. She did not remember dozing off or for how long, but she found herself being pulled from her slumber as she felt large hands caressing her now bare breasts and a hot mouth kissing, licking, and sucking her exposed, wet sex. Her silky undergarments were gone and the hem of her dress was bunched around her waist.

“Zuko,” she moaned as she gently thrust her hips into his face. Gods, what a way to be woken up.

She could see that it was night now as the only light visible were from a few candles. The soft rolling of the ship and the heavy patter of raindrops against the window let her know the storm had not gone away. Her attention was brought back to her firebender when he squeezed her breasts more firmly before he plunged his tongue into her quivering pussy and stroked her drenched walls. She cried out loudly and she bucked her hips in pleasure.

“I didn’t want to wake you, you looked so peaceful in your sleep,” Zuko groaned softly yet huskily against her slick folds, “But I couldn’t help myself. I want you again.”

Another cry escaped the waterbender when he began to gently rub his fingers against her clit while he roughly sucked at her folds.

“Mm, you taste so good,” he rasped against her damp flesh, “So wet.”
Katara reached a hand down to gently pull his hair so he could look at her. Once he raised his head, looking at her with lust-induced eyes, she smiled at him a smile of invitation to worlds of rapture.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she purred, her previous drowsiness causing her voice to sound even sultrier than usual. “I want you so, so desperately.”

Zuko groaned as he crawled up her body and leaned down to capture her mouth in a searing kiss as he tried to get rid of the rest of her clothes, but he frowned in bewilderment when Katara grabbed his hands to stop him. His frown deepened when she wiggled beneath him. He reluctantly moved away from her and sat at her side. He relaxed, however, when she gave him a sexy smile and he watched in curiosity as she moved off the bed to stand beside it. He swung his long legs over the edge of the bed to see what she was planning to do.

With the same sultry smile on her lovely lips, Zuko watched as his wife slowly discarded one article of clothing after another. With each new flash of exposed skin she presented to him, he felt his breath accelerate as his erection strained against his trousers. It was the only article of clothing he had left on when he had begun to rouse his dozing wife with intimate kisses and caresses. Soon, Katara stood completely nude before him and Zuko groaned at the wondrous sight. He was glad to know that she was getting more comfortable around him.

With a satisfied smile at the way her husband was gazing passionately at her exposed body, Katara stepped away from the pile of clothes at her feet and slowly approached him. His intense stare caused her inner walls to tighten and changed her previous bashfulness to wanton desire. She knelt between his legs, and with darkening eyes, she placed her hands on his knees before she slowly slid her palms up his thighs.

With bated breath, Zuko watched the movement of her hands as she trailed them higher, but he growled in disappointment when she deliberately avoided the big bulge straining for her touch, and instead, lightly pulled at the hem of his trousers.

“Will you take this off, please?” she inquired softly as she looked up at him from beneath her long, dark lashes.

Manfully refraining from moving in tactless hurry, Zuko eagerly fulfilled her request as he stood up. She scooted back a little to give him space. He had a feeling he knew what his wife was planning to do and he could feel himself harden even further in anticipation. He quickly dropped his trousers, stepped away from them, and swiftly kicked them out of the way as his cock stood proudly erect for her excited perusal.
Without preamble, Katara’s hand wrapped around one of her favorite aspects that her firebending husband possessed. Stroking his hard flesh, she leaned forward and sighed into the dark hair of his sac. Zuko groaned as he tangled his fingers in her long tresses. With another soft sigh, Katara deeply inhaled his musky scent before running her cheek along his stiff erection that had begun to throb within her grasp. Looking up into his dark, amber eyes, Katara stuck out her tongue and slowly licked a path from his base to his weeping tip.

Zuko felt his knees go momentarily weak and he bit back a crude curse at the amazing sensation and the sight of her hedonistic delight. Afraid his legs would give out on him from the pleasure, he sank back down upon the bed with a groan. Katara did not miss a beat as she continued to lick and nip his turgid flesh and he growled as he tightened his hold on her hair.

“I like touching you,” she murmured sensually against his skin. “I love knowing that I can make you feel good. It pleases me.”

She smiled when Zuko’s breath hitched as her palm fondled his heavy sac while her other hand continued to stroke the hard length before her.

Zuko’s eyes rolled back as he felt himself grow impossibly hard in her hands with her sultry words. Agni, she would make him orgasm with only her voice if she continued. Even though she was still learning, she was truly a magnificently sensual woman, one who sought to bring him the most pleasure. And she was all his. His blood even seemed to sing her name. A gasp escaped him, disrupting his thoughts, as she engulfed him in her sweet mouth.

“Yessss,” he hissed as he gently thrust his shaft between her soft lips. “Gods, that feels so damn amazing.”

With a soft whimper, Katara rolled her tongue over the bulbous head and coaxed a few drops of his arousal to fall upon her tongue. She pulled back to catch her breath and smiled coyly up at him as her hand continued to stroke his base. Just as she leaned back down to take him into her mouth, the ship gave a violent jerk as a huge wave crashed into it. Katara gasped as she lost her balance and fell on Zuko just as he grabbed her upper arms to steady her.

Zuko’s eyes widened and he groaned as his shaft became wedged between Katara’s breasts, his tip brushing against her lips as she fell forward. The waterbender gasped in shock and tried to jerk back, but he tightened his hold on her and pressed her against him again.

“Don’t move away,” he ordered huskily, “Having my cock between your soft breasts feels so good.”
Katara’s cheeks flushed a deep crimson color at his words before she slowly looked down to see the dark-reddish head of his length poking from between her breasts. She bit her lip when Zuko shifted lightly and her hardened nipples brushed against his groin. She gasped softly when he grabbed one breast in each hand, pressed them even more tightly against his erection so that it was completely encased between them, and began to slowly thrust his hips. She moaned loudly when pressed his thumbs on her nipples so that they rubbed against his hard length as he stroke himself between her breasts.

“Agni, that feels incredible,” Zuko growled out as he stared down at what he was doing before he lifted his eyes to her wide, blue orbs. “You just keep surprising me, love.”

Katara moaned softly as she felt more of her juices seep from her core and slide down her upper thighs as she watched Zuko use her breasts to pleasure himself. La, she could not wait to feel him doing the same inside her, stroking, stretching, and caressing her walls until her mind and body were completely overwhelmed with pleasure. She smiled when her eyes landed on the dark wristband she had made him. He was all hers. Wanting to participate, Katara gently persuaded him to move his hands away before she cupped her own breasts and slowly began to move them up and down his thick shaft.

Leaning back on his hands, Zuko began to pant heavily as he watched his wife rub her breasts against him. For a second he had been afraid that she would have protested his scandalous actions, but he had been unable to stop such an unexpected outcome that had felt so wonderful. He was happy to know Katara was determined to pleasure him.

Looking away from her firebender’s fascinated expression, Katara glanced back down to see how his secreting tip would disappear between her breasts before popping back out to point at her face.

Zuko looked away from the arousing sight to gaze at Katara’s features as his heart pounded hard in his chest and his breathing accelerated. He watched as Katara leaned down and wrapped her lips around his swollen head.

“Gods, Katara!” Zuko growled as he threw his head back and groaned deeply at all the new sensations. “That’s it. Suck me harder.”

Breathing heavily as her own arousal mounted, Katara did just as he wanted and sucked the bulbous head even more firmly, making sure to tease his slit with the tip of her tongue, while she pressed her breasts even more tightly against the rest of his throbbing cock.
“Uuuuh, yesss,” the firebender growled as his eyes rolled back at the intense pleasure.

As Katara continued to suck on his tip while she stroked his throbbing length between her delectable mounds more rapidly, Zuko felt the telltale signs that his climax was approaching much faster than he anticipated. Mustering all his willpower, Zuko placed his hand on her shoulder to stop her. When she released his tip from her mouth, he looked back down at her as he panted.

“Not…yet,” he rasped as she frowned at him, “I want to come inside you.”

Katara moaned and pressed her thighs tightly together as her core clenched almost painfully at his words. He leaned down to kiss her deeply before pulling her up roughly against him. He moved them so that he was hovering over her on the bed as they continued kissing, nipping and sucking each other’s lips and tongues almost desperately, but then he suddenly rolled them until she was straddling his stomach. Panting, Katara steadied herself by planting her hands on his muscular chest. She glanced down at him with a confused expression on her flushed face.

Agni, what a wonderful sight. Zuko could not stop the groan that escaped him at the feeling of his wife’s wet pussy on his skin. His fingers outlined the generous curve of her breasts, the perfect arch of her waist, and traveled down to her hips. Katara was so wonderfully, perfectly proportioned. He continued to trace the shapely curve of her hips before he allowed his fingers to slide downward. Then he began to glide them up and down her thighs as he indulged in the softness of her brown skin.

“I want us to make love with you on top this time,” he told her huskily as he gently squeezed her hips.

The waterbender’s eyes widened in shock and uncertainty. Feeling her anxiety, Zuko rose up slightly to give her a reassuring kiss while he ran gentle circles on her hips with his thumbs. Pulling away, he lay back down and smiled at her.

“I have never allowed myself to be in such a vulnerable and emasculating position before you,” he confessed to her in an impassioned and soft tone, “But I want you to make me yours at your own rhythm.”

Katara moaned softly since his confession caused a tingle to shoot up her spine, but she did not make a move as she stared down at him. Did he really want her to take control of his body in such a manner?
Sensing the uncertainty in her eyes and body’s movements, the young lord frowned slightly. Did she really not yet comprehend the astounding power she held over him?

“I need you, Katara,” he whispered ardently beneath her lovely body. “Take me inside you and ride me hard before I go insane.”

Katara felt her heart pound even fiercer in her chest and the ache inside her increased. Taking a deep, labored breath, she lifted herself slightly and slid down. She could feel his heat at her center and she looked up to his face. Even though his expression was one of patience and curiosity, his amber eyes were burning with wild anticipation.

She raised herself on her knees, and with his help, positioned herself over his stiff erection. Zuko’s breath hitched and Katara felt his length twitch against her wet entrance. She looked down at him, hesitantly gazing at him with her wide eyes. She felt so exposed in this new position. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw that his strong jaw was clenched tightly and his chest rose and fell in short, quick breaths. But it was the look in his eyes, smoldering like golden embers as he stared intently at her as if she were the most desirable woman in the world that vanquished her uncertainty.

Well, if he wanted her to love him at her own pace, then she would. With a sultry grin, she pressed her wet folds against his solid length, causing him to groan.

Zuko clenched his teeth at the sensation of her hot sex rubbing up and down his stiff shaft at a deliciously, slow pace. The sight of her body hovering over his erection was incredibly erotic. Letting out a deep, guttural groan, his gaze swept down her nude body as she swayed back and forth, massaging his engorged cock between her drenched folds, while teasingly eluding the heaven of her core. She leaned toward him and pressed her lips against his with a soft moan. She pulled back slightly to gaze into his eyes, her hair falling around them like thick waves of chocolate, before she captured his lips again. One of his hands flew to the back of her head as he ravished her mouth and bucked his hips against her. She gasped and his stomach clenched sharply as she began grinding against him more insistently, making sure to rub her swollen clit against his hardness. Zuko could not stop himself from thrusting up to meet her just as he thrust his tongue into her mouth.

Katara moaned deeply as the ache in her center became fiercer. She needed to feel him inside her, completing her, filling her fully. With a groan, she pulled away from his skillful mouth and sat back with deep panting breaths. Keeping her gaze on his, she again lifted herself over him. Reaching one hand down between them, she grasped him and positioned his large erection to her entrance. She gave him a soft look of inquiry, and she watched as he immediately nodded, giving her silent permission to do as she pleased.

Taking another deep breath, Katara gripped his hard shaft in her hand more firmly and guided the mushroomed tip into her before she slowly sunk herself onto his stiff erection, whimpering in
pleasure as his thick hardness stretched and stroked her walls.

“Oh, Katara,” Zuko breathed out harshly as her wet, tight pussy enveloped him as she completely impaled herself on him.

A deep moan escaped the waterbender, in this position he was so deep inside. The feeling of him within her, pushing deep into her, forcing her body to stretch for his massive girth, was a blissful sensation that she was quickly becoming addicted to. Holding his passionate gaze with her own fervent one, Katara raised herself up until only his bulbous head was inside her before plunging back onto him.

“Ahh!” she cried out as she threw her head back in pleasure before she did it again.

“Katara,” Zuko groaned as his hands clenched the sheets beside him.

He saw a pleased and seductive smile appear on her flushed face before he felt her lower herself on him more firmly at the same time she squeezed her inner muscles around him so tightly his breath hitched. His jaw went slack from the pleasure and his eyes rolled back.

“I’ll make you mine,” she vowed with a warm purr, a wicked smile curling her lips, when his eyes focused once again on her face.

Before Zuko could feel shocked at her brazen behavior, a loud grunt escaped him when she impaled herself roughly onto his thick erection over and over again. He watched in delight as his wife whipped her head back, tossing her luscious brown tresses behind her so that the tips tickled his thighs, and started bouncing rigorously on top of him as she took her pleasure from his body while she reciprocated it to him. He was fascinated with the sight of her breasts bouncing above him.

“Oh! Oh! Zuko! Ah!” Katara screamed. “So good, so good!”

She closed her eyes, savoring the new sensations and moaning with each delicious thrust as she continued to bounce on him as hard as she could. Then she began grinding against his pelvis and cried out loudly as her clit rubbed against him. It felt so good. She relished at the force with which his length kept striking her depths as she roughly ground and impaled herself on him. She could hear Zuko groaning and she forced her eyes to open so she could see her magnificent husband.
She had never seen anything as erotic as the vision of Zuko beneath her as she controlled their pleasure. His hands were tightly clenching the sheets beneath him and his veins strained against the pale flesh of his muscular arms. His chest was heaving and his muscles were rigid as he groaned deeply with each breath he released. But it was the expression on his handsome face that caused her body to shudder in pleasure. His eyelids drooping heavily with lust, his mouth hung slightly open in order to take in air. His golden eyes blazed as he looked at her as if he wanted to devour her whole, while his body rocked against the mattress with the rhythm of her movements. The sight of Zuko watching her as she took him inside her and rode him fiercely was utterly sinful that it caused flames to erupt in her stomach.

It made her feel immensely, sensually powerful.

Beneath half-lidded eyes, Zuko watched as Katara squeezed her blue eyes shut as her desperate cries of pleasure complemented each of her cadenced thrusts. Each time she deliciously impaled herself on him, it forced a delirious groan to rip from his throat. He could not look away from the perfection above him.

His waterbender’s head was thrown back in her desire and her soft moans and loud cries accompanied the sounds of the raging storm outside. He stared in lustful enthrallement at the place between their bodies, watching as his cock would appear glistening with her juices before it disappeared within her swollen folds again. The undulating motion of her body was fascinating, and the real vision of Katara riding him as he had fantasized so many times before quickly overwhelmed his senses. For the moment he was in no hurry for their lovemaking to end, so he continued to let her direct their movements, blissfully content to watch her as she steadily rocked against him.

“Oh, Zuko, mm!” she moaned, “Uhhh. Ahh!”

Panting, Zuko looked up into her pleasured face before his gaze traveled down the column of her slim neck, pausing briefly on her necklace, before moving lower. He was again captivated by the sight of her beautiful breasts bouncing with each thrust of her hips. And he watched them bounce and jiggle before him with hungry eyes.

He unclenched his fingers from the bed sheet and quickly grabbed her tantalizing mounds, fondling them roughly.

“Yes!” she cried out, “Oh, Zuko! Touch me! Please!”

With a growl, he lunged towards her and began kissing and suckling her alluring breasts while she continued to ride him. He took one hard nipple into his mouth, savoring the taste of her sweet, salty
peak on his tongue, while his hand kneaded her other soft mound as she moaned. She slowed her movements a little and began to grind hard against him, causing them both to groan loudly. Zuko pressed both breasts together and rubbed his face against them, making sure his rough scar touched her nipples as he had learned she liked. When she groaned more deeply, he began to roughly lap her nipples before engulfing both into his mouth. She whimpered under his touch, and his shaft jerked violently as Katara again threw her head back and began to moan repeatedly.

Zuko groaned, but then he found himself on his back once again when Katara pressed against his chest. Dazed, he looked up at her as she again gave him that sexy smile. Then his breath hitched when she began to press hot, moist kisses to his chest and nipples, occasionally flicking out her tongue to taste him as she increased the force and speed of her rocking hips. His eyes rolled back. He had planned for Katara to bring them to release, but he couldn’t wait anymore.

Groaning loudly, his hands ran down her back before he swiftly cupped her exquisite behind in both of his hands and jerked her onto him roughly. Katara pulled her head back a little and gasped, but did not stop her movements. Zuko gently massaged his wife’s firm, round cheeks as he lean forward a bit to kiss and suck on her bouncing breasts. He continued to knead her sweet flesh before he roughly spread her ass cheeks wide open. He heard her cry out her pleasure and felt her body shudder just as her wet walls squeezed him tightly, shooting scorching vibrations throughout his body. Growling in carnal need, he grabbed her ass more tightly and began to roughly shove her onto his cock as his hips surged forward into her.

“Ahhh!” she screamed at his every thrust, “Zu-Zuko! Ah! Ah!”

“Oh, Agni! Katara!” he cried out, “Oh, gods, yes!”

His voice was rough and husky by his overpowering need, but he could not stop thrusting into her for anything in the world. He was buried so deeply in her tight core that he could feel every one of her muscles as they began to ripple around him.

Katara felt as if her entire body was consumed in the flames of passion as her throbbing pussy dripped heavily around his erection. She was so close. Her muscles were tightly clenched and she was just hanging by a thread. She did not care that Zuko had taken control—all she wanted was to reach that blissful release.

“Zuko, please! I’m so close!” she begged wantonly.

Zuko almost came at the sound of her pleading voice, but he forced himself to hold back for just a moment longer to give his wife what she needed. Removing one hand from her ass, he reached...
down between them and began to rub furious circles on her sensitive nub. Katara’s sapphire eyes widened as she looked down at him with blazing need, and he looked back at her, reflecting the scorching passion in her expression. Then she stilled on top of him.

Katara cried out as her climax raged through her body and she immediately surrendered to the inferno.

“Zuko!” she screamed his name.

She gripped his sides as her entire body trembled and writhed with the blasting surges of pleasure. She heard him growl deeply as he again grabbed her ass with both hands and continued to pull her onto him. His continued assault only caused the blazing waves of pleasure that were mercilessly rolling through her to prolong, and she continued to scream out her husband’s name with each rough thrust. Then she gripped his sides more tightly and threw her head back, screaming in ecstasy as another intense orgasm crashed into her.

Zuko growled as her slick walls clamped even more tightly down on him as she continued to wail his name. The hot flow of her cream around his cock that gushed down his heavy sac and thighs caused a violent need to swell through him and he gripped her round ass more tightly as he rammed himself up into her. Then a fierce roar ripped from his throat and he froze as his cock tightened for the final time. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as his hips surged forward, burying his entire length inside her tight pussy, before he exploded.

His release was staggering. It felt as though his entire being had combusted from the sheer force of his climax. Each incredible pulse of his release inside Katara’s body racked his body and he shook violently.

Katara gasped before she moaned as the sensation of the hot spurts of her husband’s release inside her sent new waves of bliss rushing throughout her body. She collapsed against his sweaty chest, trembling and moaning, lost in a sea of pure ecstasy. She closed her eyes as she listened to her husband’s thundering heartbeat and panting breaths, much the same as her own. After a moment, she felt his hands slide up and down her back in soothing caresses before he leaned down to kiss her head. She hummed softly. She felt as if her limbs had been sapped of their energy, but she managed to lift her head enough to look at him, her chin resting on his chest. There was a wide, pleased grin on his face, and she raised an eyebrow at him.

“That’s definitely one of my favorite positions,” he said huskily, “I can’t wait to explore more with you.”
“There’s more?” she asked incredulously, her eyes wide in shock, but also in delight.

“Yes,” he answered amusedly yet with a hint of anticipation. “I heard there are even books that teach them.”

“There are?” she asked, her eyes growing even bigger.

Zuko chuckled quietly at her reaction. He slowly lifted her off him, both of them groaning at the sensation as he slipped out of her warm sheath. Still breathing heavily, Zuko glanced down between them to see his whitish seed pour out steadily from his wife’s core and onto his currently resting shaft. Agni, he would never tire at the sensation and thought of releasing inside his waterbender and seeing the evidence of his claim on her. Smiling up at her, he rolled them until they were lying on their sides. Propping himself on his elbow, he leaned his head closer to her face and grinned widely when she blushed bashfully. She was so adorable. Her chocolate hair rested wildly around her and her blue eyes were wide, but there was a small smile on her lips and her cheeks were still flushed from their incredible lovemaking. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of her, and he leaned down to kiss her softly before he nuzzled her cheek. She sighed contentedly, and when he pulled away, she was smiling radiantly at him.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Zuko smiled and bent down to kiss her, knowing that he did not need to say the words out loud for her to know that he felt the same about her.

He caressed her sweet lips gently, tenderly, and then he brushed his lips against her cheek before kissing her mouth again. He pulled back to see she was still smiling at him, but he could see that sleep was claiming her. Stubbornly, she weakly tilted her face upwards, asking for one more kiss. Zuko smiled at the precious woman beside him, and he bent down again to give her one more loving kiss before wrapping one arm around her and curling her into him.

“Sleep,” he ordered softly.

“You can’t order me around,” Katara muttered sleepily even as she sighed and nuzzled her face against his chest.

Katara felt his chest shake with silent laughter as he again rubbed his hand soothingly up and down her back. She smiled drowsily before sleep claimed her. Zuko heard her breathing even out and he sighed contentedly as he gathered her closer to him. His wife’s warmth and the sound of the rain
outside, coupled with their vigorous and pleasurable activities, soon lulled him to sleep.

Aang grinned as he finally spotted a place where they could find shelter from the storm that had suddenly appeared that morning. They had been flying above the ocean when it took them by surprise before they finally sighted a small island a few hours later. It was now sometime late at night. The airbender smiled when Momo let out a chip as he burrowed deeper into his shirt to ward off the raindrops.

“Yip, yip!” Aang shouted above the howling wind.

Appa let out an answering groan as he descended onto a clear path the trees made. Aang glanced down and noticed a swift river passing below them.

“How much longer do we have to wait?” Toph’s irritated voice reached his ears.

“I spotted a cave in a cliff just ahead of us,” he told her, “It’ll be just a few minutes.”

“Stupid storm. Couldn’t it wait until we were on land?” she grumbled.

Grinning, Aang turned around to look at the earthbender. She had a scowl on her face and her arms were crossed over her chest to clearly indicate her annoyance and discomfort, but all Aang could see was strands of her dark hair plastered to her porcelain cheeks and the outline of her petite body as her wet clothes clung onto her skin. The airbender felt himself flush as his heart began to race in his chest as it had been doing for the past few weeks. The more time he spent with Toph as a potential love interest, the more attracted he became to her and the more the pain he felt at losing Katara lessened.

Instead of Katara’s face that was always on his mind, it was Toph’s. Instead of the waterbender’s soft voice, it was Toph’s teasing tone that he dreamed of. Everything he saw reminded him of her. When he saw something that he would think she would find pleasing or amusing, he would describe it to her in great detail so she could fully appreciate it. The first time he did so, he had been afraid she would be offended, but Toph had only grinned and said that she was sure that the way he was describing it was better than if she saw it.

His eyes drank her every expression from her fierce scowl, her teasing smirk, to the blushes he was able to bring out of her. His ears reveled in her voice, chortles, and the soft moans he elicited from her when they kissed. He especially liked those sounds she made and the way her cheeks flushed once they pulled away from each other’s mouths before they got carried away.
He enjoyed their moments together, and if he was honest to himself, he began to wonder if what he really felt for Katara was the true love he always made it to be. Perhaps what he felt for Katara was a young boy’s first love, a crush that almost bordered on obsession. That is not to say that he did not care for Katara anymore, that a part of him did not wish they could have ended up together, and that he did not feel hurt that she had chosen Zuko over him. However, he had never felt the way he did with Toph when he was with the waterbender. But what was it that he truly felt for Toph? He cared for her deeply and he was greatly attracted to her—if his body’s reaction was any indication—but did he love her? Could he love her? What if he was just accepting her feelings for him now because he did not want to be alone until he found someone else?

He shook his head. No. He wouldn’t do that to her. Not only could he not hurt her, but he could not imagine feeling the same way he did for anybody else. Yet, could he really have fallen for her so soon?

With a sigh, Aang rubbed his wet face before he shivered when another strong, cold wind swept through them. He opened his eyes and ducked to the side with a gasp as a broken tree branch almost hit his face. He watched it fly passed him only to shout in alarm when it struck an unsuspecting Toph’s head with enough force that it threw the small earthbender over the side of Appa’s saddle.

“Toph!” Aang screamed in horror as he watched her fall.

He pulled on the sky-bison’s reins to turn him around before he flicked them urgently so Appa could dive down after her. Chattering in fright at his master’s agitation, Momo crawled out of his tunic to clutch onto one of Appa’s horns. As they neared Toph’s falling, unconscious form, Aang jumped away from Appa and propelled himself with airbending while he stretched out one hand. But he was not fast enough and she plunged into the river. Aang dove into the cold water after her as his panic rose. He waited a second until another streak of lightning illuminated the dark water before he spotted her being pulled away by the river’s current. Boosting forward with waterbending, he finally caught her in his arms and held onto her tightly before he created a water tornado to push them out of the water and high into the sky. He gasped in air just as he saw Appa moved under them. He let go of the water and created a current of air to soften their landing on the sky-bison’s huge saddle just as another crack of thunder rumbled the sky.

Sitting down, Aang placed Toph across his lap and looked down into her closed eyes in growing fear. Momo flew away from Appa’s head to land beside them with ears drooped in concern. Placing his fingertips on her chest, Aang pulled them up until a string of water followed his movement out of her mouth. He bent the water away as he peered down at her face. He was relieved to see that the tree branch had not struck her hard enough to open up a wound, but she had not responded even after he had pulled out the water from her lungs.
“Toph!” he shouted as he lightly slapped her cheek, “Toph! Wake up!”

When she didn’t respond, he felt his heart constrict tightly in his chest. No, no, this couldn’t be happening! Not now! Not when he was beginning to realize how much she meant to him!

“Toph!” he screamed as he bent over her.

“Damn, Twinkletoes! Are you trying to make me go deaf?!” he heard her asked gruffly even though there was a weak quiver to her tone.

With a relieved gasp, Aang pulled back to see her frowning at him, though there was a subtle expression of pain on her delicate features.

“Toph!” he exclaimed in happiness before he crushed her to him, “I’m so glad you’re okay! I was worried!”

“As if some stupid branch would be the end of me,” she sniffed haughtily, though she felt herself blush in pleasure when she found herself pressed tightly to his chest.

Just as she opened her mouth to make another snide remark, she felt Aang pull away before she felt him crash his mouth onto hers. Gasping, her eyes widened in surprise at the suddenness of it and then she jumped when she felt Aang take advantage of her opened lips to plunge his tongue inside her mouth. He kissed her with a fierce desperation that left her breathless and clinging to his clothes. He had never kissed her like that before. Her surprise quickly vanished, however, and she was soon battling his tongue for dominance, but then she gasped in pain when his hand touched the bump the tree branch had left on her head. She groaned in disappointment when he immediately pulled away.

“Are you okay?” he asked in concern.

“I’m fine. Nothing a little rest won’t fix,” she assured him with a snort.

Aang had to smile at her bravado even though he could see she was in pain. He frowned. They needed to stop soon so they could take care of her injury. Toph felt him nuzzle the other side of her head as he let out a sigh.
“I thought I lost you for sure,” she heard him whisper near her ear, “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I had.”

For once, Toph was at a loss for words as she felt her heart skip a beat. Would it really affect him that much if something suddenly happened to her? Did he care that much for her? Had he finally let Katara go? She wanted to ask him those questions and more, but she did not want to sound whiny or jealous, so she remained quiet and basked in the affection he was bestowing on her.

“I think we’re almost at the cave,” he said.

Toph waited for him to lift her from his lap so he could settle her on the wet saddle, but instead, he carried her gently in his arms as he again settled her on his lap as he sat back down on Appa’s head to grab the reins to lead him toward the cave. She protested at first, but he stubbornly refused to let her go, so she had no choice but to cross her arms and remain still on his lap. She couldn’t ‘see’ anything flying in the air, but listening to Aang’s steady heartbeat as he pressed her face against his chest to ward of the rain made her relax.

Once they arrived at the dry cave, Aang erected a stone wall to keep the rain out, and then used waterbending to dry them off before he created a fire to warm them from the chilly air. Even as he did all of this, he did not once let her go. Her protests fell on deaf ears as he sat down with her on his lap. She grumbled when he insisted on checking her injury, and after seeing that it was only a bump, he gathered some water and bent it into a small block of ice and had her press it on the bruise. He then pulled out their bedrolls, set them side by side, and finally laid her down on hers before he did the same. Toph tried to sit up, but Aang gently pulled her back down before he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close against him. Toph blushed profusely since they had never been this close when they slept, but exhaustion soon fell upon her and she snuggled against his warmth with a sigh. Maybe things were going better than she had hoped. Would he soon forget Katara?

Aang knew that he had been able to order Toph around only because she was in pain and tired. He smiled once he heard her snore lightly in her sleep, and he brought her even closer to him as he remembered the moment her body disappeared over Appa’s saddle before plunging into the cold river. He screwed his eyes shut as the fear of losing her once again resurfaced and his heart clenched.

No. He couldn’t lose her.

I…I love her, he confessed quietly to himself.

As soon as he did, he felt like he could breathe again, like the world was bright once more, like everything was right, more than right. Maybe he had been in love with Toph all along, after all those years of traveling together, but had stubbornly ignored it in his obsession over Katara. Whatever it was, what mattered was that he truly did love Toph and it had taken a near tragedy for him to see it. He brought Toph closer to him and grinned when she murmured a protest before once again falling
Now the only thing left was to convince Toph of it.

The blue-eyed Fire Lady could not stop smiling in pleasure as their carriage passed through the gates of the Fire Nation Palace. As soon as they had disembarked from the flagship, they had been greeted excitedly by the common people all the way to the palace. Katara had gracefully waved at them from the carriage window, while Zuko remained impassive beside her. She knew many of the nobles disapproved of her, but she was glad to know that the rest of the population accepted her. She vowed that she would do everything in her power not to disappoint them. As the gates were closed behind them and the carriage came to a stop, she glanced at Zuko and grinned when she noticed the pleased expression on his face.

A few minutes later, they were walking down one of the impressive, golden corridors in search of Iroh and Ursa with Shen and Kuo walking silently behind them. As they passed, the servants bowed and greeted them respectfully. Zuko responded with just a nod, unfazed, but Katara found that she really needed to get used to the sudden deference that came with her new title. As they rounded a corner, they spotted Chao walking down the hall.

“Chao!” Katara greeted the old man happily before she covered her mouth with her hand. A proper lady never raised her voice in public as that book she read stated. She glanced up at Zuko and scowled when she saw his lips twitch in amusement.

At the sound of his name, Chao looked up and smiled at the approaching royal couple. The old advisor bowed as they neared him.

“Welcome back, my lord, my lady,” he greeted sincerely.

“Thank you, Advisor Chao,” Zuko spoke coolly, his demeanor now that of a lord and not the relaxed and playful man Katara had come to know. “Have you seen my mother and uncle?”

“I left them in the sitting room, my lord,” Chao responded with a smile.

With a nod, Zuko continued walking. Katara smiled at Chao before she followed her husband. Shen and Kuo stepped behind them once again. As they approached the sitting room, Zuko dismissed his personal guards, who bowed before retreating silently.
“Are you ready?” Zuko asked with a dry smile.

“Yes,” Katara replied with a grin.

As soon as they entered the room, there were gasps and exclamations of surprise. Iroh and Ursa quickly rose from their cushions and rushed toward the royal couple. Jee followed them at a more sedate pace.

“Zuko! Katara!” Lady Ursa exclaimed happily as she embraced her son and then her daughter-in-law tightly. “We expected you to arrive yesterday.”

“I suppose your honeymoon was too good to return to the palace as was planned,” Iroh mused with a waggle of his bushy eyebrows.

Katara felt herself blush and Zuko glowered at his uncle, but the old man ignored his look as usual.

“There was a storm,” was the only thing Zuko said as an explanation.

“Ah, of course,” Iroh said as he continued grinning.

Zuko ignored his uncle as he turned his attention to Admiral Jee who was standing patiently beside Ursa.

“I hope there was nothing amiss during our absence,” he said.

“Nothing unusual or suspicious presented itself, my lord,” Jee responded with a bow of his head.

Katara looked up at Zuko and smiled. He returned her smile briefly, but he could not stop the suspicious feeling from rising in him. He could not believe that everything had suddenly turned out peacefully, but he decided to enjoy it while it lasted. He was brought out of his thoughts when his mother lightly clapped her hands.

“You are just in time for lunch,” she said as she urged the newlyweds toward the low table.
They spent the next hour or so eating and talking about the last few days. Katara had been expecting their teasing and suggestive remarks, but they kept the conversation normal and she relaxed. After much cajoling, Zuko finally relented and allowed Katara to recount their honeymoon, skipping their more intimate moments, of course. Ursa exclaimed that it sounded so romantic before a sad, wistful expression flashed across her face. Zuko and Katara glanced at each other with a frown since they had a feeling she was thinking about Ozai before they resumed eating. Katara subtly glanced at Jee and noticed that a dark look had settled on his face before it quickly disappeared.

As the servants cleared away the dishes and brought them more tea, Katara cleared her throat lightly and smiled at her mother-in-law.

“Lady Ursa,” she began.

“Call me Ursa, Katara,” the older woman interrupted with a kind smile, “We are family now, after all.”

“Ursa,” Katara repeated and smiled.

Zuko looked at his wife and his mother with a pleased expression before he glanced at his uncle to see him smiling.

“I was wondering if you could guide me in my first duties as Fire Lady,” the brunette asked.

“Of course, my dear,” Ursa immediately replied and the two began to discuss what they should do first.

Zuko frowned slightly since he was anxious to show Katara one of her presents. And maybe she would express her gratitude and happiness in a delightful manner. Anticipation curled in his stomach. He was interrupted from his thoughts, however, when a servant appeared at the door and bowed.

“What is it?” the young lord asked. He knew his small vacation had just ended.

“My lord,” the servant greeted, “You are needed in the capital.”
“I will be there shortly,” Zuko responded.

The servant bowed before retreating.

Katara’s brow furrowed as she turned to look at her now impassive husband. They had just arrived and Zuko was already being bombarded with work, but she understood it was inevitable as a country’s sovereign. She wiped the frown from her face when he turned to look at her.

“Duty calls,” he said apologetically.

“Go,” she told him with an understanding smile, “I have things to see to as well.” Then more quietly so only he could hear, she said, “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Zuko gave her a grateful look before he regally stood up, placing his blank mask on, before he turned to Iroh who was looking at them with a subtle smile.

“Uncle, I need to speak to you,” he said before he strode out of the room.

Taking another sip of his tea, Iroh placed the cup down, smiled at the women and at Jee, before standing up and following his nephew out the room. Once they were both standing outside, the old firebender raised a curious eyebrow.

“I want you to distract Katara and make sure she doesn’t see her wedding gifts,” Zuko told him.

“Ursa and I will keep her occupied,” Iroh assured him with a grin.

Zuko inclined his head in thanks before he adjusted his scabbard more securely on his hip. Iroh’s bushy eyebrow rose even higher on his forehead as he noticed the thick wristband on his nephew’s left wrist.

“It’s Katara’s wedding gift to me,” Zuko said in a pleased tone.
“Ah, I see,” the old man said with a smile before he frowned. “I hope whatever needs your attention in the city isn’t too serious.”

“I won’t get my hopes up,” Zuko muttered before he turned around. “I’ll be back later.”

Zuko strode silently down the golden corridor, and a moment later, he was walking down the long flight of stairs that led to the palace courtyard. He was pleased to see that his komodo rhino was already saddled and his personal guards were waiting for him. He hoped whatever needed his attention in the capital city did not take long so he could return to Katara.

As he thought of his wife, he felt his legs shake a little as he swung himself onto his komodo rhino. This had been the longest time he had gone without taking her since their first night on Ember Island. Every time they made love, his desire for her seemed to intensify. He only needed to recall her flushed and passionate face in his mind, think of her soft moans near his ear, remember the feeling of her tight, wet feminine walls surrounding him, to be overwhelmed with the fierce need to possess her once again. Remembering all their passionate moments thus far, it was all he could do not to turn his mount around so he could be with her again.

No, he had responsibilities to look after and maybe later he could practice his white fire. It would certainly make it easier for him to maintain control if he tired himself out a little. He should have known that Katara would prove as unrestrained in love as she did in life. Not that he wished it otherwise. He would merely have to grow accustomed to walking around in a state of semi-arousal. He smiled wryly.

With a light press of his heel, he urged his komodo rhino to move forward, and soon they were passing the palace gates.

Meanwhile, back in the sitting room with her in-laws, Katara sipped the last of her tea before standing up with a smile.

“I want to visit the garden,” she told them when they looked up at her, “I haven’t seen it in a while.”

“No!” Iroh exclaimed before he cleared his throat when they all turned to look at him in surprise, “Ahem, I mean, you have duties to attend to first.”

Ursa frowned at his outburst before she smiled when she understood what Iroh was trying to do. She stood up gracefully and gently grabbed her daughter-in-law’s arm.
“Iroh is right. We will help you,” she said softly.

Katara mused that if Zuko took his responsibilities without complaint, then so would she. She would prove to everybody that she would be a great Fire Lady. With a smile, she allowed Ursa to lead her out of the room.

“She needs a break.”

“Please show me,” she said.

For the rest of the day, Katara spent her time sending thank you letters to the nobles that had attended their wedding and had given them wedding presents. Ursa explained to her that personally sending the letters would show that she cared and appreciated their thoughts. Katara held back an unconvinced snort.

As she signed another of the letters, she wondered when Zuko would return and if he was having trouble with whatever had called him into the city. But she was distracted when Iroh handed her another piece of paper, and with a tired sigh, she began to write.

“Can we take a break in the Royal Palace Garden now?” she asked an hour later.

“After you look over this list of possible charity organizations,” Iroh told her as he handed her a scroll.

“And then you must look over the set dates for when the noblewomen may visit you to pay their respects,” Ursa added.

Katara felt her eye twitch before she took a deep breath. She glanced at Jee, who had been silent the entire time, and watched him give her a sympathetic smile. She returned his smile gratefully—although she was sure it looked more like a grimace. She turned back to her in-laws, who were piling more papers on the low desk, and she frowned suspiciously. If she didn’t know any better, she would say they were trying to distract her from something. But she dismissed the thought as she glanced at the list of charity work in her hand.

During her lessons, Madam Fang Hua had told her that setting up charity organizations was the Fire Lady’s duty, but many of the past Fire Ladies had not bothered with such responsibilities since they were more concerned with their personal advancements. The charity work had also suffered since there had not been a Fire Lady after Azulon’s wife died. Ozai did not have a Fire Lady when he had
ascended the throne. Madam Fang Hua had added that the Fire Lady’s involvement in charities usually endeared her to the people, who then appreciated their Fire Lord even more for marrying such a woman. Katara hoped that with her participation she could help strengthen Zuko’s popularity among the common people. She also found that the thought of helping people because of her status as Fire Lady made her feel great. She did not have to worry at the thought that she was only useful as an adornment.

An hour later, the new Fire Lady was given another tour of the entire palace so she could become more familiar with her new home and remember what each wing held. She already knew the western wing was made up of the royal family rooms, the private garden, and a few guest rooms for close friends as well as the chambers she now shared with Zuko. The northern wing was where Zuko’s study was located along with the throne room and other rooms where he conducted his royal business. Katara now knew where the servants’ quarters were, where the soldiers’ barracks stood outside the palace, as well as the location of the huge kitchen and the storeroom where the food that fed everybody in the palace was kept.

“And here is the infirmary,” Ursa pointed out to her daughter-in-law with a smile as they entered the room.

The small group watched as Physician Toshiro and Yin-Min looked up from the many scrolls and books piled on the desk they were sitting at. The old physician and his new assistant immediately stood up and bowed.

“My lady, I am glad to see you have returned,” Toshiro spoke up with a smile, “I hope you had a pleasant time with Fire Lord Zuko.”

“It was wonderful, thank you,” Katara replied even as she tried to suppress her blush at the reminder of how pleasant it had been.

“Welcome back, my lady,” Yin-Min spoke up quietly as she glanced shyly up at the waterbender.

“Thank you, Yin-Min,” Katara replied kindly as she smiled at the timid woman. She glanced at the books resting on the table before asking, “Are you studying?”

Yin-Min fidgeted at the attention before she gave a small nod.

“Even though I was a top student of my class, there is still much I need to learn,” the small young
woman explained softly.

“And she is doing a wonderful job,” Physician Toshiro spoke up with a proud smile, “If she keeps this up, she might replace me when I finally leave this world.”

“Don’t say that, Toshiro,” Iroh piped in with a grin, “You make me feel old, and you’re only a few years older than me!”

The old physician laughed.

“That is exactly what Chao told me,” he chuckled, “And he’s older than both of us!”

Katara, Ursa, and Jee glanced at each other bemusedly as the old men continued chortling as they left the room in search of Chao without even sparing them a second glance.

_Probably to badger him_, Katara mused with a shake of her head.

As Ursa turned to talk to Jee about something, Katara walked up to Yin-Min with a smile as the physician assistant tidied up the table. She suppressed a frown when the woman tensed slightly before she relaxed. What had Ozai done to her? Katara vowed that she would somehow make Yin-Min be less afraid and more open.

“So how is Physician Toshiro treating you?” she asked softly.

A small smile appeared on Yin-Min’s thin lips.

“He is treating me well. He is very kind, patient, and understanding,” she began in an adoring tone, “He reminds me of my father. He even looks like him with his white hair and the deep wrinkles on his forehead.”

“Really?” Katara asked with wide eyes, “But Physician Toshiro is an…uh…”

“Old man?” Yin-Min finished for her with a quiet giggle as she placed a stack of books aside.
Katara flushed slightly.

“My father was forty years older than my mother...He was an old man when her parents arranged for her to marry him,” the dark-haired woman explained. A sad smile appeared on her face as she absentmindedly caressed one of the books she held in her hand, “But I loved him dearly because he loved me and cared for me so much. It pained me greatly when he died a few months before my tenth birthday.”

Katara remained silent as she allowed Yin-Min to talk with a faraway look in her yellowish eyes. She would always lend a sympathetic ear to anyone who needed it. And she knew what it felt to lose a parent.

“A few months after his death my mother married her lover, a nobleman much younger and more handsome than my father,” Yin-Min continued and her voice turned bitter. “A year later they had a son they completely doted upon and I was cast aside. Only my father had cared for me. My mother had always ignored me, even though she gave birth to me.”

“You mentioned before that it was your stepfather who...gave you to Ozai,” Katara said sadly.

Yin-Min started and blinked rapidly as if she had not realized someone had been listening to her. She glanced into the comforting, blue eyes of the new Fire Lady hesitantly for a long moment, unsure if she should tell her or not, before she finally nodded her head to answer her question.

“As I came of marriageable age, my stepfather grew concerned. He did not want to part with his wealth to give as dowry to someone who was not his own daughter...” she trailed off with a quivering sigh.

“So he gave you to Ozai to be his...concubine,” Katara continued softly for her.

Yin-Min swallowed thickly as she gave a jerky nod.

“I didn’t even know about it until my stepfather and mother came to take me from the Royal Academy for Girls and brought me to the palace,” Yin-Min said as her voice became even quieter, pain laced in her tone. “I still did not grasp what was going on as two very beautiful women dressed me in elegant but seductive attire, much like their own, before they took me to a very grand room and left me alone.”
Yin-Min’s eyes became watery and filled with pain and sadness as her voice began to tremble.

“I still didn’t comprehend even as my m-mast— I mean Ozai e-entered the room and approached me. It was only when he…when he grabbed me to him and…t-that I understood what they had done.”

Katara watched as Yin-Min screwed her eyes shut and her body shuddered as if she were trying to suppress the memory. The waterbender felt her chest ache at the thought of what the young woman had to go through. Then she felt herself grow angry at what Yin-Min’s mother and stepfather did just as she felt revulsion for what Ozai must have done.

“Yin-Min—”

“Please,” the small woman begged in a small whisper as she opened her tearful eyes, “I don’t want to talk about it anymore…”

“Of course,” Katara said quietly, “I’m sorry for bringing up the subject.”

“I…I just need some time alone,” Yin-Min whispered. She gave Katara a swift bow before she quickly turned away and headed out the door.

Katara sadly watched her leave the room. As Yin-Min passed, Ursa and Jee stopped in their conversion and watched her too before they turned to Katara.

“Is anything wrong?” Ursa asked.

“No,” the waterbender responded. She did not want to talk about someone else’s painful history.

“Come, Jee is going to show you the rest of the palace grounds,” her mother-in-law continued as she grabbed Katara’s arm and led her out of room.

Katara forced a smile as she followed the two. She would somehow help Yin-Min overcome her troubled past. Everybody needed a friend.
As the hour grew late, Iroh reappeared and they all headed to the dining room to have dinner since they had not had a word of when Zuko was returning. Tuning out what Ursa and Iroh were talking about, Katara frowned as she pushed her food around her plate. She hoped Zuko was not having too much trouble.

She glanced up and noticed with curiosity that Jee was again staring intently at the dark-haired princess before his expression softened a little when she laughed. Then it seemed like he caught himself for his expression turned blank again and he looked away. The waterbender wondered at the admiral’s behavior. She then glanced at her mother-in-law and wondered how Ursa could not notice. Maybe she did not return his feelings.

Poor Jee, Katara mused before she mentally shook her head. Maybe she was wrong. Perhaps now that she was happily married to Zuko she wanted everybody else to find their true love. She smiled wryly. Zuko was right. She should not start seeing things that were not there.

Just as the servants were beginning to clean everything, Zuko walked into the room. As her eyes landed on her husband, Katara realized that she had missed him despite the fact that they had only been apart for a few hours.

“Zuko,” she greeted softly as he sat down beside her with a small smile.

Even though nobody else could see it, she noticed that he was tired and perhaps a little annoyed.

“Have you eaten?” she asked in concern.

“Not yet,” he replied coolly.

Katara turned to one of the servants and smiled.

“Would you please bring my husband his dinner?” she asked softly.

The servant flushed as he immediately bowed before he hurried to do her bidding. Katara was a bit surprised at how quickly her order had been followed. She really needed to get used to giving orders to the servants, among many other things. But when Zuko gave her a grateful smile, she thought that
she could do anything for him.

“You have chosen a good wife, Nephew,” Iroh commented with a grin.

“I know,” Zuko replied with a pleased nod.

Katara suppressed the smug smirk that wanted to appear on her face and instead she smiled brightly at him.

After the servant brought the Fire Lord his dinner and everybody had left except for the royal family and Admiral Jee, they talked about idle things while Zuko ate in silence. When it seemed he was about to finish his meal, they decided to give the newlyweds some alone time.

“Good night, dears,” Ursa told them as she stood up with Jee.

“Have a pleasant rest of the night,” Iroh remarked with another waggle of his eyebrows.

Zuko again frowned at him and Katara bit her lip to keep from giggling at the old man as the three walked away. Once they were alone, Katara turned to grin at Zuko, who only shook his head as he continued eating.

“Was there a problem in the city?” she finally asked worriedly.

“It was nothing serious,” he reassured her as he took another drink of his red wine, “Just the usual dispute between some old noblemen that I finally settled without throwing them into the prison tower for wasting my time with their stupid arguments.”

Katara pressed her hand against her mouth to hide her smile at her firebender’s irritated face. Zuko placed his wine cup down and smiled at her, his stoic expression melting immediately now that it was just the two of them.

“So what did you do today?” he asked.
They spent the next hour talking about their day and discussing the things Katara had to work on. Zuko was pleased he married Katara for she listened attentively to what he said and eagerly and intelligently responded to his questions. Once he finished eating, the young lord stood up and reached a hand down to pull his wife up beside him.

“It’s late. Should we retire for the night, my lady?” he asked with a smirk.

“I think we should, my lord,” she quipped with a grin.

Tucking her arm around his, Zuko led them away from the dining room where the servants would later go in to clean up. As they walked closer to the royal wing, Katara felt her heart beat faster in her chest. But instead of turning right, Zuko turned left into the royal family wing. Confused, Katara followed him silently. But when they neared the Fire Lady bedchamber, Katara frowned and she felt her heart sink. Did Zuko change his mind and now wanted her to sleep in the Fire Lady room?

As they approached the large door, Katara’s confusion and anxiety rose.

“Do…do you want me to sleep here now so you can have your privacy?” she asked quietly as she looked up at him.

She watched as he frowned before his golden eyes locked on hers. They were smoldering with an intensity that she had not been expecting that it nearly stole her breath away.

“No, of course not,” he stated firmly before lifting his hand to caress her cheek.

His brow creased faintly as his lips curved slightly. When he spoke again, his tone was almost spellbinding.

“I like having you sleep next to me,” he clarified softly, “I like waking up to you in the morning. I want to come to you or wait in our bedchamber for you to come to me at night. I love to see you read and catch you singing to yourself when you think I’m not there.” He smiled when she blushed.

“I love to watch you get ready for the day and crawl into bed with me every night. I love that you are the first thing I see when I wake up and the last thing I see when I fall asleep,” he murmured slowly, as if he were trying to choose the right words to express himself. “So of course I want you sharing my room—our room now. It’ll be difficult enough that we’ll have to be away from each other
during the day. I don’t want to be apart from you when night comes.”

Katara felt her heart swell with every word he uttered that when he finished she let out a dreamy sigh and leaned against him.

“You really do know how to charm a girl, my love,” she said with a pleased smile.

Zuko quirked an eyebrow.

“Only you, wife,” he replied amusingly.

Katara laughed quietly before she turned her attention to the door before them.

“Okay, so now that we established that we like to share a room,” she said with a grin, “why are we here then?”

“I have a surprise for you,” he replied, his tone taking on an edge of excitement.

The waterbender raised her eyebrow at him as he opened the door for her before she walked in curiously. She looked around the small room and admired the tasteful decorations. There was a low table in the middle and a few plush cushions spread around, but when she saw that there was no bed, she realized it was the anteroom. It was lovely, but what had her bewildered were the prominent colors of the room. Instead of it being the typical red and gold of the Fire Nation, it was blue and white. Before she could comment on the color scheme, Zuko led them to the other set of doors. Her eyes widened in wonder when she saw that these doors were made of silver and they had intricate Water Tribe carvings. She was distracted when Zuko opened one of the doors with a smile on his face and motioned for her to enter. She gazed at him curiously as she walked past him. As soon as she stepped into the other room, she froze and gasped in awe as she took in her surroundings.

The Fire Lady bedchamber had been remolded to imitate a Southern Water Tribe room. The antechamber had just been a preview. The floor was made up of pure white marble that sparkled softly as if it were snow. The walls were a soft blue color where the paintings that used to hang in her old room now decorated them. There was a low, white wood table in the center surrounded by piles of cushions and furs of different shades of white, black, and silver. A large gray fur rug rested neatly before the small blazing fireplace. Her eyes landed on the four poster canopy bed made of white wood opposite the door. The semi-transparent white canopy was not tied to the posters at the moment and flowed gently down the sides. And although it wasn’t as big as Zuko’s—*their* bed, it
was impressive nonetheless. It was beautiful.

Zuko closed the door softly behind him and waited in anticipation for his wife to say something. Finally, she turned toward him wide-eyed and speechless, looking at him questioningly.

“I wanted to gift you with this place where you can come to if you’re in need of some peace or whenever you’re feeling homesick,” he told her quietly.

With a happy squeal, Katara threw herself at him and he caught her with a breathless gasp. Then she was planting joyful kisses on his mouth.

“I take it you like it,” he mused breathlessly as they continued kissing.

“I love it! Thank you!” she exclaimed before she gave him one more deep kiss. Pulling away, she sighed softly as she said, “I love you.”

She kissed him again, but before Zuko could deepen it, she flitted away from him like a butterfly. Zuko smiled at her happiness as she explored the room like an excited child and he was content just to watch. It seemed everything had paid off if her pleasure was any indication.

Katara then entered the bathing room and smiled happily at what she saw. The walls were also a pale blue, but the white ceiling was made up of some kind of material that made it sparkle like snow when the morning light touched it. There was a large stand with neat white and blue towels laid out. What caught her attention was the white marble tub that was sunken into the floor with a long rack mounted on the wall next to it filled with many bottles of bath oils and soaps. She could not wait to try it out one day—with Zuko of course. She grinned at her thoughts before she continued with her observations. Once she had seen everything, she turned to look at her firebender with a curious expression.

“When did you have the time to get all this?” she asked.

“I asked for your father and brother’s help,” he confessed.

“So that’s what they were up to,” she mused amusedly before she frowned. “Your present is better than the wristband I gave you.”
He walked up to her and drew her into his arms.

“You can’t compare the two,” he told her, “I love my wristband because it shows that I’m yours.”

Katara smiled at him before she raised an eyebrow when a smirk curled Zuko’s lips and his eyes darkened. A small shiver went through her; Zuko seemed to notice for his smirk widened.

“If you want to give me another gift,” he began in a low, husky murmur, “then gift me the first pleasurable night in this room tonight.”

A tingle trickled down the waterbender’s spine. She married an insatiable beast. She grinned mentally. And La, did she love it. Katara gave him a small, coy smile as she looked at him beneath her lashes.

“Why, anything my lord desires,” she purred.

Zuko groaned at her words as he tightened his hold of her before he swooped down to kiss her hungrily. Then he was pulling off her clothes while she did the same to his. Only when she was clad in her undergarments did he scoop her up into his arms and carried her toward the bed. He pulled aside one of the gauzy curtains and laid Katara gently on the center of the bed as he continued to possess her mouth.

Katara reached her hands up to dive into his hair, fisting tightly into the dark strands as their tongues passionately tangled together. She whimpered when he pulled away before she moaned softly when he placed hot kisses along her throat—licking, nipping, kissing, and sucking all the way to her navel. She tensed in anticipation when his chin nudged the hem of her satin undergarment before she exhaled deeply when he crawled lower to kiss her thigh.

Zuko grinned as he licked every inch of her exquisite leg and gently kissed her toes. His explorations caused her to giggle and moan. Then he repeated the same thing to her other leg but in reverse so that he was moving up her thigh.

The waterbender moaned softly when her firebender slowly parted his lips, and his warm wet tongue began to stroke its way higher, making an unhurried trail up to the edge of the piece of clothing that hid her intimate parts. He spread her legs a little and moved inward. As soon as his mouth came in contact with the fabric, Katara could feel the wetness between her legs growing rapidly. It was all
she could do not to grab his face to shove him against her center. She cried out when she felt his
tongue roughly lick the silky cloth heavily saturated with her arousal before pulling away. Before she
knew what was happening, Zuko crawled up her body like an animal stalking its prey, planting moist
kisses on her skin as he went.

He suckled and teased her breasts and nipples until she was writhing and moaning beneath him
before he pulled away. Then he quickly divested her of her last articles of clothing, while she took
off the rest of his clothes with equal urgency. Once they were both naked, Zuko pressed his entire
body along hers. They groaned at the close contact of their warm flesh as they continued to devour
each other’s mouths, their hearts pounding together as their flesh warmed the other.

“I’m going to make love to you, Katara,” he crooned as his lips brushed roughly against her lips. “I
need you so badly.”

“Then make love to me, Zuko,” she begged wantonly as she raised her hips to press her wet sex
against his thick length. “Please. Take me!”

Zuko’s eyes rolled back and he tightened his arms around her. He would never know what he had
done to deserve such an amazing woman, but she was his, and he was going to enjoy her to the
fullest and forever.

He reached down between them and swiftly inserted one finger inside her, causing her to bow her
back and cry out.

“Mm, you’re already so wet, my little waterbender,” he growled approvingly.

“Always for you, my love,” she purred as she raised her hips against his hand so his finger could
sink deeper into her.

With a groan, Zuko pulled his hand away and quickly spread her legs further apart before wrapping
her slender limbs around his hips. He rubbed his cock against her swollen folds for a moment,
making sure to press against her swollen clit, then without warning, he roughly thrust himself into her
tight, wet pussy until he was buried to the hilt. Katara cried out and he grunted in equal pleasure.

His name was the only word that fell from her lips as they came together, their bodies fitting
perfectly. Katara threw her head back and moaned when Zuko pulled back only to slam into her
again.
“Oh, Zuko, uhh,” she groaned and panted as he began to pound into her in a slow, even rhythm.

His hands began to caress and knead her body while his mouth drove her to heights that only he could as he teased and sucked on her throat and breasts. As he continued to move gently within her, her body matched to his as only she could, and she raked her nails down his back as she squeezed her slick walls tightly around him just the way she knew he liked it. Zuko growled deeply at the sensation and his hips began to thrust more fiercely between her parted legs. She gasped when she felt her release come upon her faster than she had anticipated and she groaned as she waited for the sweet climax.

Then she felt Zuko stop suddenly before he pulled himself completely out of her. Her eyes flew open, her chest rose and fell rapidly, and her core ached with her interrupted orgasm as she looked up at him in bewilderment.

“Wha—?” she began.

She gasped when Zuko suddenly flipped her onto her stomach. Dazed, she vaguely noticed that they had not bothered to remove the silky blue comforter and that she was lying on a dark fur blanket. Her thoughts scattered when she felt Zuko grasp her hips and lift them up so she was kneeling with her backside in the air. She moaned when he pressed a kiss at the back of neck before he moved lower. She gasped and trembled when she felt his wet tongue lick its way down her back to the cleft of her ass.

Zuko pulled back and he groaned at the sight of her swollen, pink folds glistening with her aroused juices. Kneeling further back, Zuko gently grasped each of her rounded cheeks and spread them further apart before he roughly shoved his face to her drenched pussy.

“Ahh!” the waterbender cried and her hips bucked. “Oh gods!

Zuko groaned at the delicious taste of her cream coating his tongue and throat. Gods, he could not get enough of her. He reached down and grasped his cock, still slick with her juices. With a loud growl he began pumping the hard length fiercely and quickly, groaning when pleasure shot up his spine.

Katara gasped when her husband began to wildly lap at her folds and suck on her swollen nub. She cried out loudly when his tongue suddenly plunged deep inside her and began to insistently press against her fluttering walls.
“Zuko, oh, mm!” she moaned as her back arched and she pressed herself closer to his skillful mouth, thrusting herself into his face. “So good!”

The firebender licked, sucked, and kissed his wife’s wet and swollen sex a moment longer before he abruptly pulled away. He was panting hard as he continued to roughly stroke his cock, occasionally thumbing his weeping tip to spread his seeping seed around the edge. He groaned as he licked his lips of her juices, his arousal almost unbearable, then he moved up so he covered her back.

Delirious with need, Katara felt him press his chest against her back and kiss her right ear. Moaning in arousal, Katara shivered when the rough texture of her firebender’s scarred cheek brushed against the sensitive skin.

“Move up onto your hands and knees, love,” he rumbled softly as his hands caressed her sides. “I want to take you from behind, like an animal would his mate.”

Katara’s eyes widened at his words and she moaned when his hot breath sent a chill scurrying down her spine. A gasp escaped her when she felt him press his erection against her backside. Zuko smirked against her ear as he felt her drenched core twitch in anticipation. He pressed against her firm rear again and groaned when she shuddered. His mind was hazy with lust.

“I want to watch my cock disappear into your tight, wet pussy as you moan and scream my name, Katara,” he growled huskily.

The waterbender’s eyes widened. She had found out that the more times they made love, the dirtier his words became. Instead of being shocked, however, she found that she liked that the usually proper Fire Lord lost control around her. She was panting so hard in anticipation. She groaned. Would he also like it if she were to be as naughty as him?

“Please, Zuko,” she moaned wantonly, “I want you inside me. I want…I want your…big cock inside me.”

She felt him freeze and she tensed, wondering if she had disturbed him with her words. She gasped loudly when he pressed even more tightly against her with a growl.

“Gods, woman,” he rasped in delight. “You make go crazy with want of you.”
With a groan, the firebender knelt back up and helped guide her to her knees. He pulled her back against his chest and his rigid shaft became delightfully wedged against the cleft of her ass. He trailed his hands slowly up the curves of her body, worshipping her irresistibly feminine form, before moving to her breasts to roughly pinch her sensitive peaks as his mouth greedily sucked on the skin between her neck and shoulder. Katara trembled violently against him, whimpering softly in obvious need, and it sent delightful sensations through his body all the way down to his erection. She began to grind herself against him and he gasped as his cock was delightfully massaged between the twin globes of her beautiful backside. He gently pushed her shoulders down so she was resting on her hands and knees in front of him. Zuko took another moment to admire the view of her glistening sex. He caressed her back for a moment, admiring the sexy dimples on her lower back, and then slid his hands down to fondle her rear cheeks.

“You have such a lovely, perfect ass, Katara,” he rasped as he continued to caress her round flesh, squeezing, kneading, and spreading them widely apart.

Then he reached between her legs. Katara let out a loud gasp when he pushed two fingers inside her and began to pump rapidly in order to inflame her arousal once again, making her forget her slight embarrassment from being in such a position. A deep moan escaped her lips.

When he felt her walls begin to quiver around his fingers, Zuko pulled away and almost smirked when she growled in disappointment. He loved it when he made her insane with need for him. He sucked his fingers clean of her sweet nectar before he placed his hands on her hips and pulled her back against him. He nudged her slick entrance with his large tip, and then he slammed into her, jolting her to the core. A deep growl ripped from his throat, but it was lost beneath the sound of the hoarse, feminine cry from Katara. Zuko closed his eyes to relish the sensation. He was buried so deep inside his wife’s slick sheath in this position. Panting, he snapped his eyes open and looked down the line of his body to where he was joined with his trembling waterbender. He pulled back and then rammed himself back in.

“Oh, gods!” Katara wailed loudly and she clenched the fur blanket tightly with her fingers. It felt so good in this position.

Zuko leaned down to kiss and lick a path up her back and to her shoulder. Then he covered her perspiring back with his chest as he set up a fast pace.

In and out, in and out. Over and over again.

Growling in pleasure, Zuko grabbed a fistful of her long hair and gently pulled her head back so he could hungrily kiss her throat and jaw, while his other hand squeezed her breast and pinched her
pebbled nipple. Katara panted and moaned as she tilted her head aside so he could have more access.

“Do you like that, Katara?” he growled in a low tone as he gave a sharp twist of his hips, causing her to cry out. “Do you like it that I take you from behind? Do you love it when my huge cock stretches you tiny pussy widely apart?”

“Yes! Oh, La, yes!” Katara screamed with each plunge of his massive length, “Oh, Zuko! Ah! Ah!”

Zuko hissed through his teeth before he let her go and knelt back. He placed a hand between her shoulder blades and forced her upper body down on the bed, causing her lovely behind to lift a little. Katara moaned and her fingers convulsed since his thrusting was making her sensitive nipples rub against the soft fur. She gasped when she felt his heavy sac slap unrelentingly against her clit, causing her stomach to tighten at the pleasurable sensation.

Zuko growled as he looked down at his beautiful wife moaning before him. He enjoyed dominating her body, controlling and bringing her pleasure as he sought his own. The utter dominance of this position, and his power over her delicate body, excited him beyond belief. The feeling and erotic sound of her backside slapping against his pelvis only incited him further. Sliding his hands away from her curvy hips, he gripped the cheeks of her ass and spread them apart so that he had a better view. He sucked in his breath and groaned. He watched in rapt fascination as he pulled out of her tiny, pink hole until only his bulbous tip was prodding her. He rolled his hips a little, rubbing against her wet feminine walls, before shoving back inside her, stretching her pussy for his invasion. He almost came right then and there at such an erotic sight. He would not last any longer.

“Come on, Katara,” he urged ardently, “Come for me!”

Reaching one of his hands around her hip, he found her drenched and swollen bundle of nerves and began to furiously rub it. Katara’s eyes clenched shut as liquid flames erupted from her core and spread along her veins. Then she cried out her release with a loud scream as her body convulsed at the immense ecstasy. Dazed, she barely felt his hand fist tightly into her hair and his movements become erratic as he sought his end, for all she was focused on were the waves of pleasure coursing through her.

Zuko growled as he rode her release, pumping even faster into her clenching pussy, until he reached his own climax. There was a desperate need to spill his seed inside her and mark her in the most primitive of ways and from the most primitive of positions. He thrust one more time before he buried himself deep, coating her warm walls with his hot essence. He gasped her name as he stiffened in pleasure, then collapsed on top of her, panting heavily against her ear.
When he heard her groan, he carefully pulled out of her before he gently rolled her limp form until she was lying on her back. Moving just enough so that he would not crush her, he folded her beneath him and laid his head between her breasts and over her rapidly beating heart, curling his leg and arm around her sated body.

Once his body relaxed from his high and coherent thought returned, Zuko frowned in concern. He hoped he had not been too rough. And he hoped she did not become upset with his crude words. As he had told her before, she just brought an animalistic side out of him that he never knew he had. She just made him want to possess her body in every way possible. Just as he opened his mouth to apologize, he felt her hand gently caress his hair.

“Mm, that was amazing,” she breathed out throatily, “I can’t wait for that to happened again.”

Zuko sighed and he felt his suddenly tense body relax at her words. He should have known Katara would not shy away from his fierce actions. She was just as passionate as he. He pondered if she would ever understand how the unconditional giving of her body, demonstrating her complete trust in him, made him love her even more.

He chuckled softly from his paradise between her soft, delectable breasts.

“I’m glad to know my wife is so eager for my amorous attentions,” he crooned huskily.

“Eager and always ready,” she quipped with a soft giggle.

Zuko responded to her words by tightening his arm around her and nuzzling her breasts, planting playful nips against the swell of her soft mounds. Katara bit her lip to stifle a moan when his scarred cheek brushed against her nipple.

“Thank you again for the room, Zuko,” she told him with a happy sigh, “It’s perfect. I will visit it whenever I have time.”

“You’re welcome,” he responded before he raised his head a little to look into her eyes, “Even if the days are busy for both of us, I want the nights to be just for us to enjoy each other.”

“I’d love that,” she said with a smile. She raised an eyebrow when Zuko suddenly smirked at her.
“I hope that will give me enough time to satisfy my wife’s insatiable appetite,” he teased.

“My insatiable appetite?” she exclaimed with another giggle, which Zuko joined with a deep laugh of his own.

Katara smiled. It was moments like this where it really sunk in that he was hers. For the rest of her life, she would have moments such as this where she would welcome him after a busy day, where they would banter and converse about their day, flirting playfully and making love.

---

A low groan escaped the young Fire Lord as the early energy of the sun coursed through his body and nudged him into the waking world. He tried to ignore it and fall back asleep, but he knew he could not afford to remain in bed with his wife even if he really wished it. Thinking of his waterbender made Zuko open his eyes. He was met with a mass of soft, brown hair where he had buried his face and he inhaled deeply of her sweet scent. He smiled when he realized that sometime during the night he had spooned against Katara’s back. His thighs were tucked beneath her bottom and his arm was wrapped around her waist. His smile turned into a wicked smirk when he realized that his other hand was grasping Katara’s breast.

He raised his head a little and blinked as he found himself in unfamiliar surroundings. He frowned when he saw that they were surrounded by a white mist before he realized that it was not mist but the canopy of the four poster bed. He relaxed once he remembered they had fallen asleep in the remolded Fire Lady bedchamber. He felt smug pride settle in his chest at the knowledge that Katara had really loved his gift to her. He could not wait to see how she reacted when she saw her second wedding gift.

He was brought out of his thoughts when he heard Katara let out a little moan as she snuggled closer to him. Zuko swallowed thickly when her rear rubbed against his stirring manhood. Groaning, Zuko gently squeezed her breast as he fantasized about lifting her leg so he could slide himself into her before he shook his head. As much as he would love to, he did not have the time. He had a busy schedule that day since his honeymoon had set him back from his paperwork. Besides, he should really let Katara sleep after being at her all the time this past week. Though he was sure she did not mind in the least.

With a sigh, he reluctantly removed himself from around her, but not before fondling her soft breast one more time. Just as he moved to sit up, Katara rolled toward him and sleepily grasped his wrist. Zuko looked down to see her blinking blearily at him.

“Where you going?” she mumbled drowsily.
“I have an early meeting with the advisors and then I have to go back into the city,” he informed her in a quiet tone. “I will see you later today. Now go back to sleep, Katara,” he ordered her softly.

Katara murmured her consent before she sighed contentedly when Zuko kissed her gently on the lips. He pulled back and chuckled affectionately when he saw that she had already fallen back asleep. Shaking his head, Zuko removed the warm blankets from him before he pulled aside the white curtain and stepped onto the chilly floor. The light of dawn softly illuminated the room. He silently searched for his discarded clothes that Katara had strewn around the room in their haste to indulge in their passion before he quietly dressed. He frowned slightly when he saw that his clothes were wrinkled. He hoped he did not come across anyone when he made his way to their bedchamber so he could bathe and put on clean clothes.

He went back to the bed, and parting the gauzy curtain aside, he gazed down upon his sleeping wife. She had rolled onto her stomach with her hair falling around her pillow and her lower body covered by the dark fur blanket. Her bare back and shoulders were subjected to his hungry stare before he let the curtain fall in place. He turned around and headed to the door, which he then closed quietly behind him before leaving.

A few hours later, blue eyes fluttered open and a soft yawn was heard. Katara stretched lightly before she raised her arm to drape it over her husband only to be met with cool sheets and not a warm body. Frowning, Katara lifted her head and saw that the spot beside her was empty. Where was Zuko? This was the first time since the morning after their wedding night that she had woken up alone.

The memory of Zuko murmuring to her that he will see her later and telling her to go back to sleep before kissing her came to her mind and she relaxed. Sitting up, the waterbender pushed her mussed hair back before she stilled when she was met with white curtains in every direction. Then she remembered Zuko’s sweet gesture in giving her this room and she smiled. A blush stole onto her cheeks a second later at the wonderful memory of what they had done the previous night. Pushing the fur blanket away, Katara pulled the light curtain aside before sliding away from the bed and onto the floor. She quickly gathered her scattered clothes and dressed.

She headed toward the door before she paused and turned back around. She took another moment to admire the room that reminded her of her homeland and she smiled. She would definitely come back when she had the time.

The brunette turned back toward the door and opened it, walked across the antechamber, and slowly opened the other door. She peered outside cautiously to see if anyone was around. She did not want anyone to bump into the new Fire Lady looking like a disheveled mess. Maybe she could ask Jiao to place some spare clothes and other items for such occasions in the room. Once she was sure there
was no one around, Katara stepped away from the door and closed it quickly. Smoothing down her wrinkled dress and tilting her head up, she swiftly walked down the long, long corridor of the royal family wing until she finally reached their royal rooms at the other end. She was glad to see that Shen and Kuo were not posted outside the huge doors. Once inside the bedchamber, she let out a relieved breath only to stiffen when she heard a soft knock behind her.

“Who is it?” she asked warily.

“It is Jiao, my lady,” the maidservant’s voice sounded behind the door, “I’ve come to help you prepare for the day.”

“Oh,” was Katara’s response before she smiled, “Please come in, Jiao.”

The door was opened as Jiao stepped in with a small smile.

“Good morning, my lady,” she greeted, “Fire Lord Zuko told me to come back later when I came earlier to see to your needs.”

“Oh, yeah, I was, uh, busy,” Katara stammered before she composed herself, “I’d appreciate it if you got the bath ready.”

With a knowing smile, the older woman bowed her head before heading to the bathroom to get the bathtub ready. A few minutes later, Katara was soaking in the warm, sweet-scented water. After bathing, getting dressed, and taking the blended herbs Yin-Min had given her, the new Fire Lady was walking into the antechamber in order to join her mother-in-law for breakfast. Jiao had told her Iroh had gone with Zuko to his meeting and would accompany him into the city.

“Good morning, dear,” Ursa greeted happily as she watched her daughter-in-law walk into the room, “I hope you slept well.”

“Very well,” Katara replied with a smile.

*After Zuko let me sleep, of course,* she added mentally with an inward grin.

“Did you like Zuko’s gift?” the dark-haired noblewoman asked curiously as the servants placed their
food on the low table, “He had been frantically making sure everything came out flawless for when you saw it.”

“I love it,” Katara admitted with a gleeful smile.

“I’m glad,” Ursa said as she raised her chopsticks.

They spent the next few minutes going over what duties Katara had to see to that day as they ate. Once the servants had left after cleaning their plates away, Ursa turned to give Katara a stiff smile.

“I should warn you that the first batch of noblewomen will be arriving today to pay their respects,” she said with a tired sigh.


“Now that they don’t have a chance to marry Zuko, they will try to gain your favor instead,” Ursa reminded her.

“Ugh,” the waterbender grumbled.

She really did not want to deal with the noblewomen’s false flattery and spiteful gossip. But she could hardly throw them out. It would not only make them hate her more, but might also cause problems for Zuko. She refused to cause him any trouble.

“Fine,” Katara consented resignedly as she stood up, “But I make no promises that I will like them.”

The two women laughed as they exited the room and headed toward the large sitting room where the royal family greeted their less familiar guests. An hour later, eight noblewomen were led into the room after the Fire Lady had allowed them an audience with her. As they introduced themselves, Katara found out three of them were the mothers of the five younger women. Behind their placid and friendly expressions and greetings, Katara could see their envy and jealousy as they stared at the golden ring Zuko had given her.

She ignored their less than kind expressions as she asked a servant to bring them refreshments before
she elegantly returned her attention to the women. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her mother-in-law nod approvingly and Katara mentally smiled in pride. She could do this.

A few hours later, Katara retracted her previous declaration as she listened to the women chatter on and on about what noblewoman said what, who wore what, and who did what. She was about ready to freeze them to the wall just to get them to shut up. She dreaded the days to come. She was grateful for her mother-in-law’s help for she was sure that if she was left to her own devices she would have done something not befitting a Fire Lady. Ugh, she preferred throwing herself into paperwork than having to deal with these foolish noblewomen.

Katara almost sagged in relief when the women stood up to leave as dinnertime approached, but not before promising to visit her again. They enthusiastically claimed she was a much more charming woman than they had previously thought she was. Katara could not discern whether they meant it or not, or if to feel insulted or not. Once the eight guests left, the waterbender actually slumped in her chair.

“Well, that went better than I thought,” Ursa commented with a smile, “You did wonderfully.”

“Thank you,” Katara said before she added dryly, “Though it took all I had not to do something drastic so they’d stop talking. Seriously, who cares that Lady Fu wears a wig to hide her balding head?”

Katara’s disgruntled remark only made Ursa laugh.

“I see you met up with some of the noblewomen today,” Zuko’s voice caused both women to turn their heads in his direction. He was walking into the room with a grinning Iroh.

“Zuko!” Katara called out happily as she sat up before she rolled her eyes, “I can see why you refused to marry a noblewoman. They’re…”

“Annoying,” Zuko finished for her in a blunt tone.

“I was going to say silly,” Katara told him with a grin.

“Well, Zuko doesn’t have to worry about that anymore,” Iroh piped in as he took a seat beside Ursa while his nephew stood beside Katara’s chair, “I’m sure you will keep him on his toes, Lady
Zuko did not refute his uncle’s words since they were true. Katara was not a meek and fickle woman. She constantly challenged him, but that was why he loved her. He knew his life would never be boring with her around.

“Are you tired?” Katara’s concerned voice brought him out of his thoughts.

Zuko looked down to see her looking up at him worriedly.

“A little,” he admitted with a shrug before adding, “But I want to spend some time with you before we retire to our room for dinner.”

The waterbender smiled brightly at him and the Fire Lord immediately returned her smile. They missed the happy and satisfied look Iroh and Ursa shared. They were glad to know they had been right in thinking that Katara was perfect for Zuko as he was for her.

After bidding Ursa and Iroh good night, Zuko helped Katara from her chair and led her away from the room. As they headed toward the western wing where their royal chambers were located, Katara felt her heart pound in anticipation for the passionate night to come. But she frowned when Zuko gently tugged her hand and led her another way. Curious, she looked up at him.

“I have another present I want to give you,” he told her.

“Another one?” Katara asked incredulously.

Her tone made him chuckle.

“Any other woman would be delighted to be given gifts,” he commented.

“Well, I’m not like other women,” she responded dryly.

“I know,” Zuko reminded her, “And that’s why I love you.”
Before Katara could respond, the feeling of a soft breeze and the aroma of flowers reached her senses, letting her know they were outside. She smiled when she realized they had stepped into the Royal Palace Garden, before she gasped. The once destroyed garden had been restored to its previous beauty.

_No, it’s slightly different_, she observed.

There were many more evergreens and deciduous trees and the grass had grown into a lush green carpet. Speechless, she allowed Zuko to lead her onto a stone path so they could walk deeper into the garden. There were many new patches of different varieties of flowers and plants. She spotted the firelilies, violets, white and purple orchids, hydrangeas, peonies from before, but she could also see irises, gardenias, and azaleas arranged in beautiful patterns. She could not see any evidence that showed there had been a fight between the Fire Lord and the Avatar.

“Oh, Zuko,” she whispered in awe.

Zuko smiled since he was reminded of the first time he had showed Katara the private garden last summer. She had appreciated it then and he was sure she would appreciate it more now.

“I didn’t want to show it to you only until it was perfect,” he confessed quietly as if he did not want to break the sudden spell that had befallen them.

“It’s beautiful, perfect,” she praised as she turned to smile at him. “Is that why Ursa and Uncle Iroh kept trying to distract me from coming here?”

“I knew you would’ve notice,” he said wryly.

She laughed. As they passed Lady Ursa’s rose bushes, Katara veered off the path with Zuko beside her. She bent down toward one particular bloom to take in its fragrance and sighed contentedly. Zuko swallowed thickly, remembering how Katara looked lying naked among red rose petals—simply stunning. Katara straightened so she could smile at him and Zuko cleared his throat.

“Come,” he said as he tucked her arm beneath his, “There is something else I want you to see.”

He took them back onto the stone path as they walked to the center of the large garden. Katara smiled as she spotted the familiar cherry blossom tree before she paused in surprise as her eyes
landed on the pond. It was bigger.

Eager, Zuko quickly led her to the pond and the Fire Lady peered down at it. There were large lily pads floating on the clean surface of the water with white, pink, and lavender blooms. A movement in the water caught her eye and she gasped when she realized there were many koi fish gliding about ranging from small to large sizes. There were golden ones as well as red, orange, black, white, and silver ones. Many of them had beautiful patterns and combinations of these colors. Then Katara smiled widely as she spotted the turtle-duck family making their way toward them with loud quacks.

“How do you like it?” he asked softly.

“I love it,” she said happily, “Thank you.”

She bent down slightly to coo at the turtle-ducklings as they quacked at her as if in greeting. Zuko smiled smugly at the thought that he had pleased her again. But then he quirked an eyebrow when he noticed a frown mar Katara’s brow.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as he glanced around as if he could spot what the problem was.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you give me,” she began carefully as she looked at him, “It’s just that I don’t like to be the only one receiving gifts when I haven’t given you anything.”

She paused when he pressed his thumb against her lips as he cupped her cheek. She watched him frown.

“How can you say that?” he asked, “You have given me something more precious. You’ve given me your love, your body, and your mind. What more can I ask?” He leaned down to press a soft kiss to her lips. “Besides, I like to give you gifts because I can and because I want to.”

“You’re too good to me,” she sighed blissfully as she melted against him.

“No, don’t think that,” she admonished him gently as she wrapped her arms around his neck to bring
him closer so she could kiss him. “You are more than worthy of my love, Zuko.”

“The same could be said of you,” he told her as he deepened their kiss.

They pressed against each other as they kissed slowly and tenderly before they pulled away when the sounds of the turtle-ducks distracted them. Katara laughed when Zuko turned to give them a small glare. Taking his hand, the waterbender led her husband toward the cherry blossom tree, where she sat under its leaves. She tugged at his hand to urge him down next to her, and with a smile, he did. But instead of letting him sit beside her, she gently tugged him to lay down with his head pillowed on her lap. With a smile, Zuko did as she asked and relaxed against his wife with his eyes closed. Katara smiled as she glanced down at her husband lying on her lap with a peaceful expression on his usually impassive face.

A moment later, Zuko felt Katara carefully removed his fire crown before releasing his hair from its topknot. Then a content sigh escaped him when he felt her gently run her fingers through his slightly longer hair. He remembered wanting such simple intimacy when he had seen Sokka and Suki in the same position as they made their way to find his mother before he had dismissed the thought as idle fantasies. But now, lying on the grass and his head pillowed on Katara’s warm lap with her fingers caressing his hair, he understood why he had been envious of them. He loved the passionate, physical acts he shared with Katara, but he also enjoyed these sweet and simple moments.

Moments he hoped they would continue to share in the future.
Fulfilling Fantasies

One month passed after the most talked about wedding of the year took place. It was a month the Fire Nation royal couple spent in utter bliss—with a few minor arguments as were to be expected. Zuko’s days belonged to meetings, treaties, training, and other lordly duties. To Iroh’s delight, he came to master his white fire, but Zuko decided to keep his ability a secret. He wanted to keep Jianguo wondering and ignorant of his skills. He had also convinced Iroh to help him bend lightning and not just redirect it. It was slow process, but he was doing much better than he thought he would. Iroh had assured him that in a year or so, Zuko would be able to master the art of bending lightning too.

Although it had been extremely difficult at first and she was still learning, Katara was taking her responsibilities as Fire Lady rather well. Her time was consumed with the undertakings of the palace’s necessities, the wellness of their people, charity works, practicing her waterbending, and the careful friendship and correspondences with the noblewomen, to ensure alliances between their husbands. More work than any Fire Lady had done in memory. Katara was happy to know that she was more than a mere trinket as wife to the Fire Lord. The work gave her purpose during the day and kept her busy when Zuko and she had to be apart. When she had free time or was feeling lonely and homesick, she would visit the remolded Fire Lady bedchamber where Zuko would later find her and either stayed with her or led her back to their room. It had been an eventful, delightful month.

Blue eyes fluttering open, Katara yawned softly as she searched the spot beside her for Zuko only to again be met with cool sheets. She let out a sigh as she again reminded herself that Zuko now always woke up before her to start his busy schedule. With another soft yawn, Katara rolled onto her back only to frown as she remembered that something had woken her up. Just as she was wondering what it was, a small cramp on her lower abdomen made her grimace.

Just great, she groaned irritably.

She quickly got out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. As the bathwater heated up, the waterbender took off her clothes only to groan again when she saw that her underwear was lightly stained with blood. It confirmed her suspicions that her monthly bleeding had come. How could she have forgotten about it? Well, she had been pretty busy.

A disappointed frown marred her features as another thought entered her head. It meant she was not pregnant yet. She shook her head and smiled. Zuko and she had only been married a month. They had plenty of time.

With a nod, she bundled the silky piece of cloth to be discarded later since it was stained. Then she quickly stepped into the bathtub and began to wash herself. She was glad Zuko was not there at the moment. It would have been embarrassing.
A few minutes later, she stepped back into the room, wrapped in a towel. She smiled when she saw that Jiao was already straightening the room. Katara was now used to having Jiao dress her for the day and no longer felt embarrassed to stand half naked before the older woman.

“Good morning, Jiao,” she greeted.

“Good morning, my lady,” the maidservant responded with a smile and a bow as she stepped back from fixing the bed.

“Jiao, I was wondering,” Katara began slowly. “Do you have any old rags I could use?”

“Old rags?” Jiao asked with a bewildered frown.

“Yeah,” Katara replied, “I need them for my monthly bleeding.”

“Oh,” Jiao uttered once she understood before she smiled gently, “Fire Nation noblewomen don’t use old rags.”

“They don’t?” Katara asked before she dryly added, “Why? Do they use silky cloth instead?”

Jiao laughed softly as she moved to pull aside the curtains at the balcony to let the sunlight in.

“No,” she responded amusedly, “There are special strips of cloth they use that are very absorbent. I’m sure if I ask the palace seamstress she can provide some for you whenever you need them.”

“Well, that sounds better than old rags,” Katara responded with a grin before she grimaced as she felt another cramp.

“I’ll go get some for you right now,” the older woman said as she moved toward the door.

A few minutes later, Katara made her way from the royal bedchamber to meet with her mother-in-law to discuss her wish of building a new school for the children in a town miles away from the
capital. That way the children would not have to travel a long distance to the capital to attend class and it would also be closer for the children of neighboring villages. As she sat in the sitting room with Ursa after breakfast to discuss more details, Katara was grateful for the new cloths Jiao provided for her. They were soft and comfortable, unlike the rough old rags she made use of before.

As the day progressed, however, the cramps became more painful, and worse, it distracted her from her work. It caused her good mood to disappear and she became cranky and irritated. When lunch came, Zuko decided to join them. Katara’s mood lifted a bit, but only for a short moment so that Zuko found himself the recipient of her sharp tongue and irritated glower. Confused, the young Fire Lord had wisely decided to retreat until his wife’s temper cooled down.

As dinner approached, Zuko made his way toward the royal family dining room in high spirits. He had just received news from one of his colonels stationed in the colonies about the possible whereabouts of Jianguo and his men. It seemed the rebels’ leader had been frequenting a particular tavern to make use of some prostitutes and, apparently, Jianguo had offended one of the women. She did not have any qualms in pointing out his location to the Fire Nation authorities when she saw the wanted poster for his capture when she moved to a bigger town in search of…richer clients. Zuko had sent a reply to his colonel to immediately send men, but to do so as discreetly as possible so as not to alert the former Fire Nation general. Zuko hoped that this time they could finally capture Jianguo and thus end the threat to the Fire Nation, Zuko’s position on the throne, and Katara.

At the thought of his wife, a small frown appeared on his face. He wondered if Katara’s strange mood from before was better now. He did not know what had caused her to become so irritated, but he hoped that this time he would be graced with her smile and not a scowl. As he entered the family dining room, he greeted his mother and uncle when they called to him with nods before he sat down at the head of the table. He frowned when he saw that the chair to his right was empty.

“Where is my wife?” he asked one of the servants as they moved around to place their food before them.

“Fire Lady Katara said she was not hungry and retired early, my lord,” she rapidly replied.

Zuko frowned as he picked up his chopsticks and absentmindedly started eating. Was Katara not feeling well? He barely paid attention to what Ursa and Iroh were talking about as he finished his meal quickly. Once done, he swiftly stood up.

“I’m going to check on Katara,” he said as he strode toward the doors, “Good night.”

He did not hear their replies since he was already out of the room. He walked quickly toward the
chambers he shared with Katara. He was eager to make love to her. A month had passed since their wedding night and he still could not get enough of her. She touched him in the ways he liked best, ways that brought him immense pleasure. She would tell him how handsome he was, how happy he made her, and what great pleasure she derived from his touch, stroking his male pride. He hoped he could help Katara with whatever was affecting her at the moment so they could spend the rest of the night in more pleasurable activities.

As he reached the large golden doors that led to the royal rooms, Zuko swiftly opened one and closed it behind him. He quickly crossed the antechamber before he opened the other set of doors that led to the bedroom. He closed the door softly and frowned when he saw it was dark, even the fireplace had been extinguished. With a smirk, he willed a few candles to light up and he eagerly scanned the room for his wife. His lusty grin faded from his face when he saw that Katara was already lying down with the blanket drawn up to her neck.

*I’ll just have to wake her up,* he thought wickedly as he began to discard his clothes. His grin reappeared as he strode toward the bed.

Not bothering to put on his sleeping pants, the firebender lifted the blanket and slid in naked beside his sleeping wife. He pressed close against her back and groaned quietly as his loins rubbed against her firm rear. He reached around her and softly began to play with one of her covered breasts. He heard her groan, and with a triumphant smile, his caress became rougher as he ground his hips more insistently against her.

“Zuko?” he heard her mumble.

“I want you,” he growled huskily against her ear as he squeezed her breast.

“Not now,” she grumbled as she pushed his hand aside and scooted away from his heated advances.

Zuko could only stare at her back in shock. Was…was she *rejecting* him? Surely that wasn’t it. She was just playing, right? She was just challenging him, trying to make him go crazy in want of her. With a smirk, Zuko wrapped an arm around her and pulled her back against him.

“Why not?” he asked throatily.

“I’m not in the mood,” she responded with a low hiss.
“Well, I can change that really quickly,” he told her in a husky tone as he again pressed his growing erection against her backside and began to pull the hem of her nightdress up, “Now let’s get this off so we can—”

“I said not now!” Katara snapped as she slapped his hand away and again moved away from him.

Zuko’s eyes widened in shock at her outburst as well at the fact that she did not want to be intimate with him. He had heard that after a few years some wives lost interest in sex, but he had never thought his own wife would…and so soon in their marriage! It would kill him if Katara no longer allowed him to make love to her! He frowned deeply and opened his mouth to ask what the hell was going on, but he paused when he saw her curl into herself as she let out a pained groan.

“Katara!” he asked in alarm as he gently placed his hand on her arm, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fine,” she mumbled before she groaned softly in pain again.

“Don’t lie to me, Katara,” he growled.

“Leave me alone,” she moaned miserably as she crossed her arms over her abdomen.

“I won’t leave you alone until you tell me what’s wrong,” Zuko insisted firmly as he sat up so he could look down at her. He frowned in worry as he noticed her pinched features. “Katara?”

“It’s just cramps,” she mumbled after a while.

“Cramps?” he asked with a frown. “Did you eat something bad? Do you want me to call Physician Toshiro?”

“No,” she quickly replied, “It’s nothing serious. You don’t have to call him.”

“I don’t understand. You look to be in pain,” he responded in worry as she again groaned.

Katara glanced over her shoulder to see his concerned face. She felt her face heat up a little before
she turned away and curled more into herself.

“I...I’m on my monthly bleeding,” she whispered shyly.

“Monthly bleeding?” Zuko repeated with an incomprehensive frown before his eyes widened once he understood what she meant.

He was not very familiar with the ailment that befell all women—after all, he had lived on a ship with only men for years. But he had a vague understanding about it just like all men did. When Azula had been chasing them down, his uncle used to joke that Azula was at her most homicidal when she had her monthly time.

“Oh,” he uttered for lack of anything better to say. Now he understood why Katara had been in a bad mood.

Katara’s shoulders slumped. It seemed her anger had rushed out of her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Why are you apologizing? It’s not your fault,” he told her gently, “It’s not like you can help it.”

“Well, I’m sorry for snapping at you,” she replied before she again looked over her shoulder to give him a sheepish smile, “It’s not like it’s your fault I have to suffer this every month.”

Zuko shrugged and gave her a small smile before he frowned.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

He cocked an eyebrow when she averted her eyes.

“I was embarrassed,” she finally mumbled.
“What’s there to be embarrassed about something that is natural?” he replied gently, “Besides, we’re married. I’m bound to find out every time it happens.”

Katara turned her head to smile at him.

“You’re right,” she told him as she snuggled back against him.

Zuko lay back down beside her and wrapped an arm around her, glad to know she was not really mad at him.

“You know, it’s tradition among the Fire Nation nobility for women to sleep in separate rooms from their husbands during such a time,” the firebender idly informed her.

Katara turned slightly so she could look at his face. She frowned.

“Is this your way of telling me you want me to leave?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course not,” he responded quickly as he pressed her back against him again. “I was just saying.”

“Good,” the waterbender said as she again snuggled into him with a grin, “because I’m not moving. If you want to sleep in a separate room during my monthly time, then you can leave.”

“Oh? What’s this? You dare kick the Fire Lord out of his own room?” Zuko told her in a mock indignant tone.

“Our room, my love,” Katara reminded him with a grin.

Zuko chuckled quietly as he curled himself around her and placed his hand against her lower stomach. He froze before he slowly made to move his hand away. He paused, however, when Katara grabbed his hand and pressed it back against her abdomen.

“Your warmth makes the pain go away a bit,” she said with a soft sigh.
Zuko pressed his hand more firmly against her and smiled when she let out a relieved breath.

“Do you always get cramps?” he asked curiously.

“No,” she responded, “I usually don’t get them at all, but when I do they’re very painful.”

“Is there anything that can help your pain?” he asked with a frown.

“I think there are some teas that can help,” she replied after a while, “I’ll ask Ursa if she could recommend one.”

Zuko nodded. They were silent for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts. Katara was beginning to doze off since Zuko’s warm hand was soothing her cramps, but Zuko was far from sleepy. This would be the first night that he wouldn’t make love to Katara since the first night of their honeymoon. His body was still too strung up from his earlier arousal.

“How long does your, uh, monthly bleeding last?” he asked carefully.

“A few days,” she responded with a soft yawn.

*A few days?!* Zuko exclaimed mentally in dismay. He will have to abstain from taking Katara for a few days?! How was he going to survive?

His was brought out of his self-pitying thoughts when he heard Katara let out a pained groan as she again curled into herself. Without even thinking about it, Zuko warmed his hand with firebending and rubbed it against her lower abdomen. He smiled when he felt Katara’s tense body relax and heard her let out a contented sigh.
How much more of an insensitive jerk could he be? He told himself that he could sacrifice his desires while his wife was on her monthly time. After all, she was the one who was truly suffering. Besides, the anticipation would only make it sweeter for when they could be joined physically again.

With a sigh, Zuko tightened his hold of her and closed his eyes.

“Are you warm enough?” Aang’s concerned voice made Toph huff.

“I’m fine,” she muttered.

The bedrolls they were laying on, plus the blankets and the large campfire had her feeling very toasty. She could hear Appa’s loud snores and Momo’s soft chirps as they slept off to one side.

Ever since the incident, Aang never left her side and did everything in his power to please her. She would snap at him and indignantly remind him that she was a strong earthbender and did not need to be pampered, though secretly there was a part of her that was pleased at the attention. She may be a tough fighter and an independent individual, but she was a woman, and what woman did not like being shown affection by the man she favored? Aang ignored her protests and insisted that he just wanted to make her happy.

Toph frowned slightly. Something had changed, she didn’t know what it was, but Aang seemed different somehow when he interacted with her. Even the kisses they shared were different, though not in a bad way. His kisses were more gentle, passionate, and…caring?

She shook her head. She was confused at his behavior, but he had not said anything and she did not want to pressure him into telling her anything he did not want…at least not until she lost her patience.

She brought the blanket that Aang had covered them both with up to her chin. Ever since that night Aang had held her in his arms as she slept, he had continued to do so every night. He would not hear any of her protest to be given her space, though they both knew that if she really wanted her space that badly she would have done something about it. And she knew that he knew that she enjoyed sleeping next to him if the smugness that radiated off of him the next day was any indication.

*The smug bastard*, she thought irritably.

But she loved the jerk. There was no denying that, even to herself. And even though it galled her to
admit it, she was afraid to tell him again. Sure he already knew when she had told him after his confrontation with Zuko, but she had not repeated it since then. If he decided one day that he really could not love her, then she preferred that they parted ways without feeling like a rejected fool and without letting him know that she would be heartbroken. She sighed.

*Now I know how Sweetness and Sparky must have felt,* she thought begrudgingly.

She was interrupted from her thoughts when she felt Aang wrap his arm around her before he let out a sigh. By the sound of his even breathing and heartbeat she knew he had fallen asleep. With a yawn, the small earthbender closed her eyes and cuddled closer to him now that she knew he was not awake to notice. She was just drifting off to sleep when Aang’s sudden increase in heartbeat caught her attention followed by his soft groan.

“Toph,” she heard him whimper in his sleep.

She frowned. Was he having a nightmare? She made to roll to her other side to wake him up, but she was unable to because he tightened his hold of her. With a huff, she reached for his arm so she could loosen his hold enough so she could breathe, but paused when she felt something poking her lower back. She frowned. What the hell? Was she lying on a stick or a rock? Still constricted, she reached behind her to see if she could find the stupid thing and throw it away so she could sleep. Her hand bumped against something and she grabbed it, finding it hard and warm. She absentmindedly heard Aang moan, but she was more concerned with getting rid of the annoying rock. As she grabbed it more tightly, she heard Aang gasp before she felt him grab her hand.

“Toph!” he exclaimed in surprise, now completely awake, before he quickly apologized, “I’m sorry. I can’t control my body’s reaction.”

“What?” she asked. Then her eyes widened once she comprehended what he meant, but more importantly what she still held in her hand. Her green eyes widened even more when she felt it grow bigger.

Aang groaned softly. He had been dreaming about doing very erotic things to Toph before he was awaken by a spark of pleasure that raced up his spine as his semi-erect member was grabbed by a hand that was not his. He was afraid of her reaction, but how could he have stopped his body’s response to having the woman he loved pressed so close to him? Mustering all his will, he tried to move her hand away so he could be at a more safe distance before she lashed out at him. He gasped in shock when she did not pull away, but instead tightened her hold as she turned toward him. Wide-eyed, he stared down at her to see her blank expression.
“Where you having a naughty dream about me, Twinkletoes?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I-I…uh…” he stammered, knowing that he could not lie because she would immediately detect it and also knowing he would be in big trouble if he admitted it.

“Well?” she insisted.

She squeezed him again and he groaned. Why had she not let him go? If she continued touching him, he would be searching for clean trousers soon.

“I…um…I…Yes,” he finally confessed quietly before a smirk appeared on his lips.

Why should he feel bad? If she was truly angry or repulsed, she would have thrown him away from her as soon as she realized what was happening, but instead she hadn’t and was still holding him.

“Why? Are you happy I have naughty dreams of you?” he whispered huskily.

By the light the campfire created, he watched as a blush spread across her cheeks even as she spluttered, and his smirk widened. She tried to pull away from him immediately, but he held her hand against him and even made her squeeze him again as he leaned closer to her.

“This is what you do to me,” he groaned before he smashed his lips to hers.

Toph gasped, unsure whether to push him away or bring him closer. She decided to press herself closer to him instead as she returned his ardent kisses with fervent ones of her own. She was not the least bit intimidated, just curious, and honestly, excited that she was able to affect him so strongly. She was so lost to the sensations and the heady feeling of power that she almost missed his whispered confession.

“I love you, Toph.”

She froze instantly and he stiffened, though he still continued to hold her.
“What…what did you say?” she asked in an uncharacteristic soft tone.

“I love you,” he repeated softly, “I think I’ve loved you for a long time, but didn’t want to acknowledge it. But when you got hurt…” He paused and let out a shaky breath before he continued, “I love you like I’ve never loved before.”

“Not even Katara?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

He was quiet for a moment as he evaluated the feeling before he continued.

“Yes,” he admitted before he smiled, “I did tell you that maybe one day I would love you more than my own life.”

Toph was silent a moment and Aang knew she was trying to detect if he was being sincere. It seemed she found what she wanted because she grinned broadly.

“Good,” she said before she brought him down toward her so she could kiss him deeply.

Toph could not stop the frantic beating of her heart as a sudden fierce joy spread through her chest. She could not believe it. Aang loved her! Not Katara, but her, Toph! She never thought she would ever know what love was or what being loved in return meant, but she was starting to see that it was amazing.

After a moment, Aang pulled away with a gasp before he frowned.

“Well?” he prompted.

“Well what?” she asked.

“You didn’t say you love me back,” he said with a deeper frown.

“So?”
“So?” he repeated incredulously before he more firmly said, “I want to hear you actually say it.”

Toph bit her lip as she gathered her courage to tell him, it was embarrassing, after all. It seemed she had taken too long to answer because Aang sighed sadly and began to move away from her. She tightened her hold of him to keep him against her.

“I love you, you idiot,” she mumbled with a blush before she bit out, “Happy?”

“Very!” he exclaimed gleefully before he pressed his lips against hers again.

A few seconds later, he pulled away with a gasp when her thigh brushed between his legs. His arousal had not gone away, but increased instead.

“I see that something else is happy,” she teased with a grin, not at all shy or scared at his reaction.

She chuckled when Aang pressed his head onto her shoulder with an embarrassed groan.

The light streaming from the opened balcony stirred Katara from her slumber. She blinked her eyes opened and saw the curtains swaying gently as the sun’s rays fell upon the marble floor. The previous night had been hot, so Zuko had opened the doors to let the cool air in. She smiled as she remembered the day Zuko had shown her what lay behind the curtains. It had been the day after he had shown her the restored Royal Palace Garden. He had not wanted to spoil the surprise by letting her see the renovated garden from the balcony.

‘Come,’ he said with a smile as he held out his hand, ‘I want to show you something.’

Katara paused from reaching for her fire crown in order to place it in its box. Curious, she took his hand and smiled as he led her toward the dark curtains that hid the outside view. Zuko pulled the curtains aside before he opened the doors. A soft breeze blew in and Katara deeply breathed in the flowery scent that came to her senses. Taking her hand again, Zuko led her onto the balcony.

‘Wow,’ the waterbender breathed.
Below them she could see one part of the beautiful garden. The cherry blossom tree and the pond were a few feet away. And behind the wall surrounding the garden at the distance, she could see the setting sun touching the ocean.

‘Amazing, isn’t it?’ Zuko spoke up quietly.

‘Yes,’ she responded just as softly.

She felt Zuko stand behind her and she smiled when he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him. They stood on the balcony in comfortable silence for a long moment, even as the sun disappeared and the moon rose high in the sky.

With a soft smile, Katara rolled onto her back only to freeze when she bumped into something hard. She glanced to her left side, and blinked owlishly as her blue eyes met with the body of her sleeping husband. She was curious as to why he was still asleep since he was always awake at dawn and gone before she woke up. Not that she minded. She liked waking up next to him while he slept. Shifting so that she was lying on her side facing him, Katara admired his sleeping form with warm, caressing eyes. He was lying on his back and his lips were slightly parted. Her eyes traced every inch of his handsome face before trailing down to caress every muscular ridge of his naked torso. Too bad the bed sheets impeded the rest of her view.

He had been so busy lately, he needed his rest, but she knew they could not afford to sleep the day away. She would make sure to have him sleep that night and ignore his pleas for intimacy, although they had not made love the past few days due to her monthly time. Even though he had tried to be understanding and had not made any sexual advances towards her, she had known he was affected by it, so she had proposed that she pleasure him with her mouth and hands until she was ready again. He had protested at first, but only a few times before he caved in.

Katara grinned before she shook her head. She needed to wake him up before he was late to any of his meetings.

She reached over and caressed his cheek, but he did not stir at all. She called his name softly, but he only murmured sleepily. She ran her hand down his chest and over his stomach. He groaned softly, but did not wake up. With an affectionate smile on her face, Katara shook her head and sighed. Sitting up, the young Fire Lady crawled over him and sat on top of him, straddling his waist.

“Zuko,” she called again, “Zuko, it’s time to get up.”
“I am up,” she heard him mumble and saw his lips curl into a smile.

She gasped softly when he gently bucked his hips, letting her feel his swelling length against her. He ran his hands over her thighs, trying to raise the hem of her nightdress up.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” she exclaimed with a giggle as she slapped his hands away.

Zuko chuckled and opened his eyes to grin at her as he tried to lift her nightgown again. Katara again playfully slapped his wandering hands.

“Dawn passed hours ago. You’re going to be late,” she reminded him as she tried to get off him, but he stopped her by grabbing her hips.

“I don’t have much of a busy schedule today,” he told her unconcernedly as he rubbed circles on her covered hips with his thumbs.

“That’s good. You needed to catch up on some sleep,” she said with a smile.

Before Zuko could respond, she removed his hands and rolled away from him. She scooted toward the edge of the bed before standing up.

“I’m going to get our clothes ready,” she informed him as she walked toward the large wardrobe.

Zuko sat up with a suppressed groan as his morning erection throbbed with his need. Trying to redirect his thoughts on something else, Zuko looked around the room and surveyed how it had changed now that he was married to Katara. His old wardrobe had been replaced by a larger one that could hold both their clothes, shoes, and other items—though there was a secret plank on the bottom of his side where he hid his metal chest containing his Blue Spirit outfit. He had bought Katara a vanity set that had replaced his old bureau. It was made of the same dark wood as the rest of his furniture, but he had commissioned the vanity set to have beautiful and elegant carvings of flowers round the legs, the edges, and the frame of the delicate mirror. An elegantly iron-wrought, full-length mirror was placed in one corner for both their use. Before the fireplace were two comfortable armchairs where they sometimes sat to read and a small table between them so they could place their tea. There were also a few feminine items such a flower vases and decorations that Katara had tastefully brought in because his room had been ‘too masculine’.
It was different, but he did not mind for it meant that he was no longer alone and had someone to share his room and life with. He felt more satisfied with life at that moment like he had never felt before. He finally had his mother back with him after thinking her dead for so many years and now he was blissfully married to and deeply in love with a wonderful woman like Katara.

It reminded him that in just a few more days it will be her birthday. Katara was a bit sad at the news that her family would not be able to be with her because Hakoda had accidentally fallen on ice and broken his leg and Jing and Ting had caught a cold. She had wanted to immediately rush back to the Southern Water Tribe to help, but they had insisted that they were fine before reminding her she had duties to attend to now as Fire Lady. Although her family could not be there, Zuko vowed that he would give her an unforgettable birthday. He needed to talk to his uncle and mother and start planning.

“I’m going to get the bath started,” Katara’s voice brought him out of his thoughts.

Zuko watched her hips sway as she walked into the bathing room. He licked his lips and smirked before he frowned. He wondered if Katara was ready to be made love to already. He had not had her for days once her monthly time began and he was going crazy with want. Sure he enjoyed it when she pleasured him with her hands and that wonderful mouth of hers, but it was not the same as being inside her tight, wet passage. And they had not had morning sex since their honeymoon because he always woke up early to start his busy day, he mused with a wistful expression.

Pulling the bed sheet aside and swinging his long legs over the bed, Zuko stood up naked, stretched, and quickly walked into the bathroom. He saw that Katara was about to heat up the water. With a smirk, he silently stepped closer.

“Let me,” he offered huskily.

Katara started in surprised before she turned toward him. Zuko stepped beside her near the tub and dipped his right hand into the water. He heated the water with firebending, and once the water was steaming nicely, he pulled his hand out.

“Thanks,” Katara said with a smile.

She gasped when Zuko suddenly wrapped his arm around her and pulled her up against him. She moaned softly when he kissed her deeply before pulling away.
“We’ll save water and time if we share a bath,” he told her playfully as he smirked down at her.

He was surprised when, instead of being embarrassed, Katara smiled coyly yet seductively as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I did tell you we would share a bath one day, so let’s take a bath together,” she purred.

“Is your monthly bleeding over?” he asked hopefully.

“Yes,” Katara assured him with a smile before she pressed herself closer to him, “And I want you, Zuko.”

Zuko groaned deeply before he pulled her up to kiss her fervently. He quickly stripped her of her clothes, uncaring if he had torn them in his haste for his mind was already hazy with his lust. He swiftly grabbed her to him again and they both moaned when their naked skin touched. Katara wantonly rubbed her stomach against his hard erection and Zuko hissed in pleasure before he swiftly lifted her into his arms. He hastily yet carefully stepped into the bathtub before sinking into the warm water, resting his back against the edge. He brought Katara down upon his lap and moaned when his hardening shaft became wedged between them. He enjoyed the wet, slippery sensation of their flesh pressed together and he groaned throatily.

Ignoring the temptation of just lifting Katara onto his stiff cock for the moment, Zuko grabbed the sponge and poured some of the liquid soap from the bottle his waterbender had laid out on the edge of the tub. Rubbing it into a rich lather, he brought the sponge and his other soapy hand to her shoulders and began to massage her flesh gently. Then he worked on her neck and face before returning to massaging her shoulders again.

Katara let out a soft sigh of contentment. She moaned as his long fingers worked the tension from her body and her head fell forward so she could give him more access. Zuko carefully laid her against his arm and urged her head closer to the water so he could cup some of the warm liquid and pour it onto her head until her hair turned a dark chocolate brown from being drenched. Then he pulled her back up against him and once again picked up the soapy sponge. He rubbed it along each of her arms and then as far as he could reach of her legs in this position before he gently scrubbed it over her back.

Katara sighed softly again. She was feeling so relaxed. She had assumed that Zuko would have immediately attacked her with his passion and she had been eagerly waiting for it. But this felt really, really nice.
Slowly, caressingly, Zuko graced his wife’s stomach and torso with the sponge and his warm hand. Her breath accelerated when he moved closer to her breasts before he pulled away. He smirked when she huffed in disappointment. He poured more soap onto the sponge before he placed his hands right below her breasts. He trailed his hands down her lean stomach before slowly trailing them back up. Then his hands were on her breasts and she let out a soft, little cry as her head fell against his shoulder. He took a much longer time on washing each breast, paying extra attention to her hardening nipples.

Looking over her shoulder, Zuko watched the movement of his hands. He was mesmerized by the sight of her soft mounds and dusky peaks glistening wetly and covered with suds as he pushed them up and continued rubbing them. He loved the feeling of having Katara’s wet breasts cupped in his hands. Agni, he wanted her. He nuzzled her cheek before he nudged her to lift her head toward him. Once she did, gazing at him dazedly, he bent down to kiss her sweetly parted lips with all the leisured meticulousness of a man in no hurry.

Moaning softly into her husband’s mouth, Katara trembled as he continued to touch her. She felt herself grow so hot and wet with need. And he was not even touching her most sensitive spot! She could feel her heart pounding in fierce anticipation. As if reading her thoughts, he suddenly turned her around on his lap, causing her to gasp as he made her straddle him with her legs spread around his hips. She heard him moan deeply when her core pressed against his hard erection. The warm, soapy water and her juices created a wonderful lubricant.

“Mm,” he murmured as he gazed down at her, “I saved the best for last.”

Katara moaned and arched her back when he pressed the sponge to her sensitive center. She began to pant heavily as he rubbed the soapy sponge along her delicate folds. She could feel more of her aroused fluids seep out of her as her walls clenched in need. Her head rested heavily on his shoulder, her eyes closed, as she panted and moaned near his ear. She was ready to come apart by the time he lifted a hand to grab one slippery mound and brought it up to his face so he could take a wet, pebbled nipple to his hot mouth. She began to shamelessly moan and whine into his shoulder, quietly pleading for more, begging him to bring her to that blissful end.

Zuko suckled his waterbender’s nipple hard before he pulled away so he could watch her face. Her features were flushed and filled with passion as he continued to move the sponge firmly against her pussy. He was more than ready to make love to her again. He never knew bathing his wife could be so incredibly arousing and erotic. He was so hard he was sure he would go insane if he did not bury himself inside her soon. The sounds she was making and the way her wet breasts rubbed against his chest certainly were not helping him to retain his control. She truly was a water nymph.

“Please, Zuko!” she moaned urgently, “Take me! Please!”
A loud groan escaped Zuko’s throat at her plea. With a growl, he threw the sponge aside, grabbed both her ass cheeks in his hands and lifted her before he swiftly impaled her onto his hard cock in one, fluid move.

“Yes!” the young lord hissed in pleasure.

With a cry, Katara wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her thighs tightly around his flexing hips as he thrust hard and fast into her like a man possessed.

“Ah, Katara!” he growled as he impaled her roughly onto him, “I missed being inside you so much! It was torture!”

Katara could not find her voice to respond to him as she continued to cry out her overwhelming pleasure every time his hard shaft penetrated her so wonderfully. The feeling of him inside her, pushing deep into her and forcing her body to stretch for him was a blissful sensation that she would never tire of. Water splashed everywhere around them as they rocked desperately against each other. A few minutes later, their release came upon them faster than they had anticipated and they cried out their pleasure as they clung to each other once they reached that wonderful pinnacle.

They moaned and trembled against one another as they waited for their incredible pleasure to subside and their heartbeats to slow down from their thundering pace. After a long moment of just basking in the afterglow, Katara pulled back slightly to smile at him.

“That was wonderful,” she breathed, “I wish I hadn’t waited this long for us to bathe together.”

Chuckling, Zuko cupped her cheek gently before he kissed her, claiming her lips in a slow dance of tender passion.

Katara sighed as she returned his kiss just as affectionately. He made her feel so thoroughly cared for, so utterly desired and loved, that she felt herself fall even more in love with this man than she thought possible. She did not know what she would do if she were ever to lose him. She trembled at the thought and kissed him almost desperately as she pressed herself even more tightly to him, as if she could permanently hold him to her forever. They pulled apart when the need for air became too great.
“Let me wash your hair,” he said as he smiled at her now that he no longer felt like he was about to die in want of her. Still imbedded inside her, he twirled one of her long, wet locks around his finger.

“Okay,” she replied with a bright smile, “Then it’s my turn to wash you.”

They took turns washing each other meticulously before they decided they were both satisfactorily clean. With Katara in his arms, Zuko stood and carefully stepped out of the tub before setting her down on her feet. He grabbed the red towel she had set aside and rubbed the moisture from her hair. Then he slowly began to dab the drops from her face, her arms, her stomach, and her legs. He took extra attention of patting her inner thighs and breasts dry. Katara sighed blissfully at his attention even though she could have used her waterbending to dry both of them off. Once he stepped away, Katara opened her eyes to smile at him.

She grabbed another towel and copied his actions—although she focused most of her attention in wiping down his manhood. She quickly moved away with a giggle when it twitched and Zuko reached out for her with a growl. Once they were both dry and Katara had used her waterbending to remove the water off the floor into the tub, they returned to their room and helped each other get dressed, which took longer than usual since they kept teasing each other.

“Do you have anything important to do today?” she asked once they stepped out of their room.

“No. I just have a few papers to look over,” he replied before he looked down at her with a raised eyebrow, “Why?”

“I was wondering if you wanted to have breakfast in the veranda and spend some time with me in the Royal Palace Garden,” she began with a smile, “It’s such a beautiful day.”

“Hm, what a difficult decision,” Zuko mused playfully, “Look over a bunch of boring papers or spend some time with my beautiful wife…?”

He frowned as if it was really a hard decision and Katara bit her lip to curb her smile.

“Fine,” he finally replied with a mock resigned sigh. “But just know that I protested with all my might.”
Katara laughed as she tucked her hand under the crook of his arm and leaned against him.

“That’s what we’ll tell everybody, my lord,” she said with a serious nod before she laughed again.

In the private garden, they ate their delicious breakfast and then spent the entire morning feeding the turtle-ducks and koi fish, walking among the flowers, sitting beneath their cherry blossom tree and talking about idle things the way only lovers do. When noon approached, they ate lunch before they had to go their separate ways to attend to their duties, but not before promising to see each other later that night.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

In his study the next day, Zuko was just signing one of the last documents on his desk when he heard a knock at his door. He bid whoever was outside to enter before looking up when he heard the door close. He raised a dark eyebrow when he saw it was Kuo. His personal guards were usually training or doing other things when he was in his study, so he was curious to know why he was there.

“Kuo, what is it?” he asked.

The young guard bowed before he approached the desk. He cleared his throat before he straightened himself more fully.

“My lord,” he began slowly, “I’ve come to tell you that I have asked Jiao to marry me.”

Zuko relaxed against his chair. For a second he had been worried that something had happened to his family.

“Congratulations, Kuo,” he told him sincerely, “Jiao must be very happy.”

“She is,” Kuo replied and a small smile appeared on his face.

“So when is the wedding?” Zuko asked as he set aside the document he had signed.

“Jiao and I have decided to get married after Fire Lady Katara’s birthday,” Kuo informed him, his smile growing a bit more.
“That was pretty quick,” Zuko mused before he mentally laughed at himself, *Says the one who wanted to marry Katara as soon as he realized he was in love with her.*

“That’s great,” he said instead.

Kuo cleared his throat again and subtly shifted, indicating to Zuko that he was nervous about something. Zuko raised his eyebrow again in silent inquiry.

“I would like to ask for your permission to allow Jiao and me a day off for our honeymoon, my lord,” Kuo told him, his tone hiding a hint of hope.

Zuko gave him a small smile.

“Both of you have served me well these past years and for that I will give you three days for your honeymoon as a gift.”

*Besides, Katara will give me hell if I only gave them a day off,* he mused dryly.

Kuo’s light-golden eyes widened at such generosity. After all, most of the time servants were expected to keep working after any special occasion. He smiled and bowed deeply in gratitude.

“Thank you so much, my lord,” he said gratefully.

A few minutes later, Kuo was rushing out of the Fire Lord’s study in order to search for his future bride to tell her the good news.

Zuko could only chuckle at his personal guard’s enthusiasm as he went back to work. Was he just as eager when he sought Katara out to let her know the Court Council had allowed them to get married? With a shake of his head, the Fire Lord unfurled the next scroll before him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“How generous of you, Zuko!” Katara exclaimed as she grasped the maidservant’s hands and gleefully squeezed.
“Thank you so much, my lady,” Jiao responded with a large, happy smile as she just as joyfully returned the gesture. She no longer felt so shocked whenever the Fire Lady acted so friendly toward her.

“This must be the year for weddings,” Lady Ursa commented with a smile as she watched the young women.

Katara and Jiao looked at each other and giggled.

Kuo had interrupted their activity a few minutes ago and asked to speak to Jiao. Katara and Ursa had surreptitiously glanced at the couple as they talked in the entrance of the room only to gape when the usually calm Jiao had squealed and jumped into Kuo’s arms. They had been even more shocked when the normally serious Kuo had laughed deeply as he caught her and kissed her intensely before he pulled away in embarrassment once he remembered they were not alone. He had bowed and muttered a sheepish apology before he quickly turned around and left. Jiao had come back into the room with a large smile on her face, and after some prompting, she told them the Fire Lord had given them permission to get married and have three days off for their honeymoon.

“If only my parents were alive to see me get married,” Jiao said with a sad smile.

“I’m sure they are proud of you, wherever they are,” Katara told her gently, “And they would’ve approved of Kuo. He will make you happy.”

“I know,” Jiao replied as her happiness once again returned.

After a few more congratulations, Katara and Ursa once again turned their attention to their plan on setting up the school. Once they had all the details straightened out, they would have to present their ideas before the Court Council and the Fire Lord. Even if the advisors protested, both women knew Zuko would approve. And if the Fire Lord approved, the old advisors would not be able to say much about it.

A few hours later, the Fire Lady and her mother-in-law made their way to the royal couple’s anteroom to meet up with Zuko and Iroh for dinner. Katara smiled as Zuko entered a few minutes later and sat down next to her with a small smile of his own. She told him she was very happy he allowed Jiao and Kuo to have three days for their honeymoon. Zuko only shrugged and smiled at her as they continued to eat. Once they finished, the servants cleared the dishes and brought them tea as the Dragon of the West had asked them to.
“Here, don’t forget to drink your tea,” Iroh interrupted the couple as he poured them each a cup of tea from a separate teapot.

Katara smiled as she took the offered teacup and took a small sip. Zuko also took a sip before he frowned down at the tea.

“Uncle, why do you give us separate teas?” he asked suspiciously as he eyed the other teapot Iroh was using to pour himself and Ursa tea. “You’ve been doing it for a few weeks.”

“Ah, always so perceptive, my nephew,” the retired general exclaimed with a calm smile as he took a sip of his own tea.

“It’s not hard to miss two teapots,” Zuko responded dryly.

Katara giggled softly.

“It’s only ginseng tea…” Iroh began innocently.

Zuko raised his dark eyebrow.

“…blended with the extracts of rose petals and Damiana leaves,” the old man added.

“What does it do?”

“Are you accusing your old uncle of deceit?” Iroh asked with wide innocent eyes.

“Absolutely,” Zuko responded bluntly.

“Ah,” Iroh feigned shock, throwing his hand over his heart. “You wound me terribly, Nephew!”
Katara and Ursa chuckled at his dramatic display.

“What’s the reason behind the blend?” the Fire Lord prompted firmly.

When Zuko raised a dark eyebrow again, the old man’s hurt expression vanished.

“Why, it’s so you can perform your husbandly duties, Zuko!” Iroh finally confessed with a grin, “It’s an aphrodisiac tea that I recently created. Is it good?”

“Uncle!” both Zuko and Katara exclaimed in embarrassment.

“What?” the old man said innocently. Ursa hid her laughter behind her hand.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at him before he straightened himself and tilted his nose in the air.

“I don’t need the help of any tea to bed my wife,” he said with an arrogant sniff.

“Zuko!” Katara yelled in mortification as her entire face turned red.

“Good! Then it won’t be long before the next heir will be born!” Iroh exclaimed cheerfully.

Zuko smirked and Katara turned a darker shade of red as she looked down at her teacup in embarrassment. The Fire Lord watched intensely as his wife sat very primly next to him, the very picture of decorum. Nothing indicated that her very hands, small and delicate, folded so modestly in her lap, had raked his back during her throes of pleasure the previous night, leaving small welts on his skin. Not that he was complaining, he mused with a mental groan.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door before Jiao appeared. With a small bow, she told Katara there was something that needed her attention. The waterbender did not even wait for her to be finished before she was walking out the door. Jiao turned around and smiled when the Fire Lord gave her an approving nod for calling his wife away as planned. Then she closed the door and followed after the still blushing Fire Lady.
Zuko found it tremendously endearing that his wife was so demure and bashful when it came to such things in the company of others, yet was a wanton goddess when it was just the two of them in the privacy of their room. He found such a contrast to be so enticing.

The young firebender looked away from the door once Katara was out of his sight to give his uncle a small glare for embarrassing them like that, but the old man grinned unrepentantly, even going so far as gesturing for his nephew to continue drinking the tea. Ursa shook her head with a smile before she cleared her throat.

“Now that Katara is away, we can start planning what to do for her birthday,” she began.

“We should make it a big celebration just like Zuko’s was,” Iroh suggested as he calmly took a sip of his normal green tea.

“Katara won’t like it,” Zuko immediately rejected the idea, “especially since her family won’t be able to visit.”

“That’s a shame,” the old man said with a small sigh.

“I want Katara’s birthday celebration to be special and intimate,” Zuko began musingly.

“I think that it a wonderful idea,” Ursa said with a smile, “That way she won’t have to be surrounded by irritating nobles and will have fun.”

The three of them continued planning before pausing when the door was opened and Katara stepped into the room. The waterbender paused after a step since they had all stopped talking and turned to look at her.

“It’s getting late. I think I will retire for the night,” Iroh was the first to speak. He stood up with a small yawn. “Good night.”

“I think I’ll retire to my room as well,” Ursa spoke up softly as she stood up, “I wonder if Jee has already returned.”
Both of them did not wait for a reply as they quickly left the room. Katara watched them go in bewilderment before turning to her silent husband once the door was closed.

“What was that about?” she asked as she approached the low table.

“Nothing,” he responded coolly with a small shrug as he stood up.

Then with a smirk, he reached for her and pulled her toward him until she was flush against his body.

“You know, I think Uncle’s tea is really effective,” he told her huskily, “I really want to bed my wife right now.”

Katara giggled at him as he leaned down to kiss her before squealing when he scooped her into his arms and strode quickly toward their bedchamber.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A few days later, Katara found herself waking up alone in their room. She frowned since she did not remember Zuko rousing her enough to say good morning and that he would see her later in the day like he always did. Today was her birthday, the day she turned twenty years old. Did he forget? She shook her head when she felt sadness settle over her. She was getting ahead of herself. She was sure Zuko would remember later. After all, he was a very busy man.

Pushing the blanket aside, the waterbender got up and headed toward the bathroom to take a bath. She smiled as she remembered that pleasurable day when they had bathed together. They would definitely do that again. As she returned to the bedchamber a few minutes later, she saw Jiao straightening the room. Her clothes were already neatly laid out at the foot of the bed.

“Good morning, Jiao,” Katara greeted her happily.

“Good morning, my lady,” the maidservant replied with a smile.

She neared the Fire Lady and quietly began dressing her for the day. Katara’s smile faded when Jiao did not congratulate her as she continued to dress her silently. Maybe Jiao did not know it was her birthday. After all, only those closest to her knew.
Once Katara was dressed and ready, Jiao led her to the antechamber where her breakfast was being laid out. Katara sat down on the cushion and waited silently for Zuko, Ursa, and Iroh to show up. When a few minutes passed and there was no sign of them, Katara turned to Jiao with a frown.

“Jiao, where is everybody?” she asked.

“Fire Lord Zuko went into the city with General Iroh,” the young woman spoke up, “Lady Ursa said she would be visiting a friend and Admiral Jee went with her. They told me to let you know they won’t be back until late.”

Katara looked sadly down at her plate as she felt a pinch in her heart at the news. Then she frowned as her temper flared slightly. How could they forget it was birthday? The anger vanished quickly and was once again replaced by sadness and hurt.

She mentally shook her head. She had to understand that they were busy and she was sure they did not mean to hurt her. She dismissed the thought as she picked up her chopsticks and began to eat silently. A few minutes later, she left the room to go about her duties. Being busy helped her forget her sadness for the rest of the day.

However, as night approached she became dejected again. Her family back in the Southern Water Tribe could not come and her new family forgot. It was her first birthday being married to Zuko, she had wanted it to be special, but she supposed that she could not have everything. With a sigh, she made her way to the antechamber to have dinner before she retired for the night. She would not be able to sleep since it was the night of a full moon, so she wondered what she could do to spend the hours until she could finally sleep. She did not even know when Zuko would return, but she knew she was going to feel lonely.

Just as she was about to round the corner of the royal wing, she heard Jiao call out to her. Katara paused before she turned around to wait for the maidservant.

“What is it, Jiao?” she asked. Her heart picked up its speed at the hope that Zuko and the others had returned and were waiting for her to celebrate her birthday.

“Fire Lord Zuko has returned,” Jiao began.

Katara felt a smile start to appear on her face.
“Uh, an ambassador from the Earth Kingdom has arrived unexpectedly and Fire Lord Zuko wants you to get ready for when both of you greet him,” Jiao continued as she averted her eyes for a second.

Katara felt her smile fall before she snapped out of her sadness and disappointment as she rushed to get ready to greet the ambassador. If Zuko was willing to meet with him at such a late hour, then he must be someone important. Katara did not even question Jiao when the woman helped her into a beautiful formal dress she had never seen before. It was an exquisite cyan color that shimmered in the candlelight, but she had only a moment to admire it before Jiao sat her down to fix her hair into an elaborate hairdo and retouched her makeup. Once she was ready, Jiao rushed her out of the room and into the Royal Palace Garden. This confused Katara since she thought that they would meet the ambassador in the throne room like they did all the other visiting dignitaries.

As they stepped onto the stone path that led to the veranda, the waterbender frowned since the garden was completely dark and she could not see or hear anything. She looked around herself before looking forward again so she could ask Jiao what was going on. Her eyes widened when she realized she was all alone.

“Jiao?” she called out softly. She tensed and her heart pounded in alarm. Was this a trap?

She cursed mentally since she forgot her waterskin. Just as she prepared herself to call forth some water from around her, a number of sparks flew out of nowhere and the garden was flooded with light. She gasped in surprise at what greeted her eyes.

There were many candles placed in small glass bowls surrounding the place, while blue and white paper lanterns hung from the branches of the many trees above her that were also decorated. She jumped when a loud screech was heard before a firework exploded in the dark sky. She gasped in awe as a few more flew up and exploded in amazing colorful patterns.

It must indeed be a very important ambassador if he was having such a grand welcome, she thought. Her eyes shifted before her when the veranda was suddenly lit and she frowned when she saw Zuko, Iroh, Ursa, and Jee standing there. She also noticed Jiao smiling at her as she stood between Kuo and Shen a few feet back. Glancing back at her husband, Katara saw the warmth in his golden gaze as he gave her a small smile.

“What?” she uttered in bewilderment. Where was the ambassador?

“Happy birthday!” she heard them all shout.
“Oh my,” was the only thing Katara could get out in her surprise and delight as she remained frozen in place.

Zuko stepped down from the veranda and approached her quickly in a few long strides. He opened his arms and she quickly fell into them as she felt herself tear up.

“I thought you forgot,” she whispered against his chest.

Zuko embraced her tightly to him as he nuzzled her head.

“How could I forget the day the woman I love was born?” he whispered softly into her ear.

Katara felt her heart melt at his words and she leaned back so she could give him a joyful, watery smile—her previous hurt and anger quickly being replaced with happiness and gratitude. Zuko reluctantly let her go and Katara soon found herself being tightly hugged by her mother-in-law and Uncle Iroh. Jee and the others respectfully congratulated her, before Jiao and the guards left in order to give them privacy.

“Surprised?” Iroh asked with a grin.

“Very,” the brunette replied with a smile which widened when Zuko placed his arm around her waist. He was becoming more comfortable showing her affection outside their rooms—at least when only their family was around.

“Come,” he prompted, “Let’s eat.”

As they ate the delicious dinner, Katara listened to them tell her that everybody knew it was her birthday, but Zuko had ordered for them not to say anything to ruin her surprise. Well, they sure did not give her any hints that they knew, she thought wryly. She also found out the entire Fire Nation was celebrating in her honor as well. She felt her heart warm at that bit of news.

Once they finished eating, Katara was presented with her gifts. She was not surprised when most of the gifts—including her new, stunning dress—were from her husband. She laughed and kissed Zuko on the cheek, causing him to flush slightly, when she opened his last present for her. It was a finely
made waterskin with elegant designs stitched on it that would complement the formal clothes she now wore. She smiled when she was then handed letters from her family, Aang and Toph wishing her a wonderful birthday.

They spent the next few hours talking and laughing, but as the hour grew late and the moon rose high in the sky, the royal couple watched the others stand up.

“I hope you enjoyed your birthday, my dear,” Ursa said with a smile at her daughter-in-law.

“I did, thank you,” Katara responded as she immediately returned the smile.

“I have a feeling you will continue to do so,” Iroh piped in as he waggled his eyebrows.

“Uncle,” Zuko spoke up with a frown as Katara smiled behind her hand.

The old man only chuckled as he bid them good night and left. Ursa and Jee did the same before leaving them alone. Zuko had given strict instructions that nobody should enter the garden to bother him and Katara and he turned to smile at his wife.

“Why don’t we test your new waterskin?” he asked.

“Okay,” she responded with a grin as she grabbed her new present.

Tucking her arm beneath his, Zuko led her toward the large pond beneath the cherry blossom tree where Katara filled the waterskin with water and tested it out for a while. She found that the design made it easier for her to uncork the opening, thus, she would be quicker to pull out her element when she needed to. Since it seemed the turtle-duck family was sleeping, they spent the next few minutes feeding the koi fish, whose scaly bodies gleamed under the silvery moonlight as they glided in the tranquil water.

“Thank you, Zuko,” Katara spoke up softly as she looked away from the fish to smile at him, “I will never forget this day.”

“I have another present for you,” Zuko replied with a smirk as he reached into his long sleeve and
Katara wondered at the gleam in his eye as she grabbed the item he handed to her. She raised an eyebrow when she saw it was a scroll. Curious, she unfurled it before her eyes widened when she saw what it was. It was a replica of the waterbending scroll she had stolen from that shop years ago that eventually led to Zuko capturing her. She looked up inquiringly at him.

“Do you remember what happened because of the original scroll?” he asked her with the smirk still in place.

“You had pirates try to capture me,” she said with a sniff.

“But I rescued you later,” he responded.

A small snort escaped Katara as she stared at him.

“Yeah, and then you tied me to a tree,” she replied as she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and cocked her hip to the side.

She gasped when Zuko suddenly backed her against the cherry blossom tree. He took the scroll back and she shivered at the intense look in his eyes.

“I haven’t been able to forget the vision of you tied to that tree and at my mercy,” he reminded her huskily. “But back then I thought capturing Aang more important. But now…” he trailed off as he pressed closer to her, “I will not miss the opportunity.”

He backed away completely from her and Katara could only stare back at him as she exhaled deeply.

“Tell me where it is and I won’t hurt you,” he told her in a cajoling tone.

Katara frowned in confusion since she did not understand what he was talking about, though his words did sound familiar.
“I wonder how much money this is worth,” he mused.

She watched as he silently produced a flame on his palm and held one end of the scroll over it. Her eyes widened once she remembered that night almost five years ago before she smirked when she realized he was reenacting, although with altered words. His amber eyes seemed to darken when he realized that she understood what he was doing.

“Tell me where it is and I won’t hurt you,” he repeated in the same soft voice.

“Go jump in the river!” Katara replied in an angry tone even as her blue eyes danced with playfulness.

Zuko smiled, pleased that she was playing along with one of the many fantasies he had had of her. Extinguishing the flame, he tucked the scroll into the sash at his waist before he began to slowly circle around her and the tree.

Katara’s breath accelerated when he left her line of sight, but she could still hear and feel him behind her. She stayed unmoving, her back pressed against the tree’s trunk. She did not need ropes to hold her in place, only Zuko’s powerful presence and mesmerizing voice. She did not want to escape.

“Please try to understand,” she heard him say in the same coaxing tone on her left side, “I need to restore something I lost.”

When he did not say anything else, Katara decided to improvise to make it even more exciting.

“Even if you kill me, I won’t tell you,” she responded firmly, although a bit breathlessly.

She gasped when she felt him place his warm hand gently over her throat as he leaned close to her from behind. His sandalwood scent made her head spin.

“I don’t want to kill you,” he whispered in her ear as his fingers trailed down her throat to dip below her collar. She bit her lip when they touched the top of her breasts as he continued, “But I won’t be above using…other methods to make you tell me what I want to know.”

Another shiver raced down her spine and her core clenched since she really wanted him to use such
“Your methods won’t work on me, firebender,” she retorted in breathless anticipation.

She gasped softly in surprise when Zuko suddenly appeared before her again. His golden eyes were gleaming as he smirked down at her. Reaching up, he pulled her hair free from its coiffure, causing it to fall in waves around her.

“Oh, they will, waterbender,” he told her huskily, “I’ll have you screaming over and over again once I’m done with you. You won’t be able to stop.”

A moaned escaped Katara when Zuko crashed his mouth to hers and kissed her roughly as he pressed himself tightly to her. Electricity seemed to spark in the air around them. He pulled at the ties that held the top part of the new dress he had commissioned for her as a birthday gift. He leaned away from her mouth and they panted hard against each other.

Zuko looked down as he pulled down the top undergarment that covered her chest and groaned when her breasts bounced as they became exposed to the moonlight. Katara gasped as the chilly night air hit her sensitive peaks before moaning softly when Zuko cupped her breasts in his large, warm hands. Not wanting to be undone, she quickly had his chest as exposed as hers and she gently scraped her nails down his flesh. He growled softly before he pinned her hands against the tree and nuzzled his face between her mounds before he began kissing and suckling on them.

“Zuko, mm,” she moaned again.

“I want to make love to you under the moonlight shining on your skin,” he groaned throatily.

She stiffened at his suggestion. What if somebody saw them? As if sensing her thoughts, he covered her body with his as he extinguished all the flames illuminating the garden. Once they were plunged into the darkness with only the ethereal light of the full moon to help them see, he kissed her again, this time slowly and tenderly.

“I made sure everybody stayed away,” he assured her.

Sighing softly into his mouth, Katara relaxed against him, trusting him completely. Zuko groaned in triumph as he crushed her to him before he ran his hands down her sides and thighs. He bunched the hem of her dress in his hands and pulled it above her waist. He cupped her ass, kneading the
tantalizing mounds, before he lifted her swiftly and pressed his hard erection against her covered sex. They moaned as their arousal flared at the sensation. Wrapping her legs around him, Zuko began to slowly grind his confined cock against her covered, wet pussy. Katara gasped and moaned as she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, mentally cursing the material that separated them.

“Instead of trying to capture Aang,” Zuko panted harshly against her ear as he continued to leisurely grind against her, “I should have made love to you like this instead that night. You would’ve been mine for all these years.”

Before Katara could respond, Zuko stepped away and swiftly lifted her into his arms. He took them deeper into the garden where they could find more privacy. He stepped through a cluster of thick bushes and into a very small circle of trees where he gently laid her down among a bed of forget-me-nots. Katara glanced up and her eyes met the starry night sky and the full moon shining over them from the opening the circle of trees made. It reminded her of the enclosed lake where Zuko had come upon her as she bathed and she knew Zuko had intentionally had this part of the garden imitate it. She was brought out of her thoughts when Zuko laid down over her and kissed her passionately.

As their lips and tongues continued to connect in a slow and erotic dance, Zuko slowly ran a hand down her now exposed chest and over her lean stomach where he splayed his fingers possessively, causing her to moaned softly. Then he trailed his hand further down to grasp the bottom of her dress before he sensually pulled it up until it again bunched around her waist. She trembled.

Not wanting to part from her for even a second, the firebender ripped her last silky undergarment away from her before he let it fall beside them. Katara gasped softly at his rough actions and moaned. His hands devoured her, savoring the feminine curves and silky softness of her body. Zuko heard her moan more deeply and the anticipation made his cock harden further. His kiss became more passionate as he settled himself between her lush thighs and pressed his clothed erection against her now exposed core. They both groaned at the amazing sensation.

Pulling back after a moment, Zuko panted as he looked down at his waterbender lying with her front bare beneath him. Her blue eyes were sparkling as she stared at him. Her chocolate hair was spread around her in curling patterns. His attention was drawn to her breasts which rose and fell at her panting breaths before his eyes traveled down the length of her until he stopped at the spot between her wonderful legs. Her pink folds were swollen with her arousal and glistening with her juices. She was naked among the blue and white flowers that contrasted nicely with her skin and he looked at her with molten golden eyes.

For a long moment he did not touch her, fighting to control the hunger thundering in his blood.

Moonlight kissed feminine curves and tanned skin, leaving highlights and shadows as his wife reached up and lovingly ran her hands down his chest. He closed his eyes at the heightened desire
that coursed through him at her touch. He opened his eyes again and he saw her, his water nymph, smile at him.

Agni, she was so beautiful it was almost painful to watch. He bent down swiftly and captured her mouth. With each breath he took, he could taste her on his tongue, and her sweet and enticing flavor overwhelmed his senses as her lips fell slightly open with desire.

“I want you…” he rasped against her lips, “You make me so hungry for you…”

“Love me, Zuko,” she breathed softly against his mouth, mesmerized by the fierce hunger she could see in his eyes. “I need you inside me.”

With a groan, the firebender quickly reached into his trousers and just as quickly pulled out his achingly hard shaft. He continued to devour her mouth as he rubbed his length against her wet folds, coating his hard flesh with her essence and causing them both to moan, before he slowly pressed his tip into her. She hissed softly in pleasure at the intrusion of his hard flesh and she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, but she surprised Zuko when she lifted her hips firmly and impaled herself on him, unable to wait any longer.

“Ah!” she cried out softly.

The firebender let out a deep gasp, shuddering at the feeling of her tight walls sucking at his cock. Her heat was indescribably pleasurable, wet and constricting. Gazing at each other passionately, they paused for a moment to savor the sensation of being so intimately connected before they simultaneously began to slowly rock their hips together just as their mouths pressed hungrily together. The secluded area of the garden was filled with sighs and moans and whispered words as the couple strove for that pleasurable end.

When he felt her walls begin to flutter, Zuko pulled away from her lips to intensely, tenderly, watch her fall over the edge. He reached between their bodies and gently pressed his thumb on her sensitive nub just as his hips gave a sharp twist.

With a pulse of pleasure so strong it actually took her breath away, Katara went over, softly chanting his name out over and over as she convulsed underneath him.

Zuko watched in awe as she became undone under his ministrations, her release so achingly beautiful, before his vision inverted, and he groaned loudly as his orgasm was forced from him.
Body rigid, teeth gritted painfully tight, he rammed into her one last time, forcing himself as deep as he could go as the rush of his seed spilled into her. Her clenching pussy pulled his seed from him ruthlessly as she moaned and writhed against him. With a gasp, he collapsed on top of her. He stayed that way for a moment before he carefully slipped from her still clenching core to rest beside her.

Both panting, Katara felt him wrap an arm around her as he pulled her close against him. Opening her eyes, Katara stared dazedly up at the bright, full moon above them before she glanced at her husband, whose eyes were closed as he breathed harshly. She admired the way the moonlight flowed over pale skin and ridges of hard muscle and made his dark hair glisten against his perspiring forehead. She glanced down and smiled when she saw his now flaccid length, resting against his thigh, also gleam under the moonlight from both their mixed fluids. Once she came down from the cloud she had been floating on, she placed her hand over his chest, feeling his heartbeat return to normal.

“Thank you for the birthday present, Zuko,” she told him with a smile a few minutes later.

She watched as he opened his eyes and turned to look at her with a small smirk.

“Oh, it’s not over yet, my little waterbender,” was his husky reply as he tightened his hold of her, “We still have a few more hours until your birthday ends.”

“Oh, really?” Katara asked coquettishly as she batted her eyelashes at him, “You mean you have more gifts for me?”

“Oh, yes,” he responded throatily as his smirk widened a bit, “I’m sure you’ll find much pleasure in the gifts I’m going to bestow on you.”

Before Katara could reply, Zuko stood up and tucked himself back into his dark pants before he bent down to pick up her ripped underwear. He smirked at her as he tucked it into his sleeve. Just as Katara moved to tie her sash to close her dress, Zuko scooped her into his arms. The sudden move made her gasp and cling to his neck, causing him to chuckle. She looked up to give him a playful scowl. He walked out of the secluded place where they had indulged in their passion among the flowers and beneath the moonlight before he stepped back onto one of the stone paths. Instead of making his way back to the entrance into the palace as she had feared, considering their disheveled appearance, he walked in another direction until he stood beneath the balcony of their bedchamber. Katara frowned in confusion when she saw a rope hanging before them.

“Get on my back, Katara,” he told her as he settled her on her feet.
Still confused, Katara did what he asked and wrapped her arms and legs around him after he had helped her settle on his back. She watched him grab onto the tied rope before he began to climb up toward the balcony, using the wall to push himself with his feet. She grinned.

“You thought of everything, didn’t you, my love?” she purred next to his ear.

He chuckled.

Once he climbed onto the balcony, he helped her slide down from his back before he spun around to bring her tightly to his chest. Pressed tightly together, they kissed unhurriedly yet not lacking in passion, an intricate dance of tongues and mouths.

After a long moment of ravishing her delicious mouth, he pulled away. Zuko grinned when she sighed in pure bliss before she slowly opened her eyes. Her ocean eyes were clouded over with pleasure, the haze seeming to seep into her body as she turned to mush against him.

Katara saw him smile down at her and she let out another sigh. He took her hand and she eagerly followed him into the room, leaving the balcony doors open to let the sweet night air in. He stopped them beside their bed and she looked up at him wonderingly. The gleam in those sun-colored eyes of his made her stomach clench in need of him again. He took off her fire crown and walked toward its box to place it and his own crown inside before he quickly returned to her. His hair was longer now, the ends reaching just above his shoulders, and her fingers twitched to bury themselves in the dark strands.

He held her gaze as he slowly began to divest her of her clothing. The lovely silk dress he had gifted her slithered almost noiselessly toward the marble floor to pool around her feet like a cyan colored puddle. Then he scooped her nude body into his arms and laid her gently on the bed, her blue eyes held captive by his soft, passionate gaze. He bent his head down and Katara readily raised her head to meet his mouth, but she frowned when he pulled away quickly. He chuckled at her expression as he raised a hand to brush his knuckles against her cheek.

“Patience, love,” he purred sensually, his baritone voice making a pleasant shiver run down her spine.

Before Katara could answer him he moved away from her and stood beside the bed once again. She watched eagerly as he slowly began to discard his clothes, revealing his alabaster flesh and hard muscles until he stood completely naked for her fervent perusal, his shaft already full and erect. She
moaned softly. This was definitely one of her favorite presents he had given her so far.

The brunette waited with bated breath for him to join her on the bed again, but she was confused when he instead walked away. She raised herself on her elbows to see him approach the small table they used to set their tea between the chairs they used for reading. She watched him place the scroll and her ripped undergarment on it before he picked up a tray with two small bowls. She had not even noticed the bowls when they entered the room. Curious, Katara watched as Zuko walked back to her before he paused to pick something up from the floor, but she was distracted when he placed the tray next to her. When she looked at the contents in the bowl, she smiled.

One contained melted chocolate with a small spoon dipped into it and the other had sliced strawberries and a few whole ones. Did he plan on feeding her the treats again like he did on their honeymoon?

“Lay back, Katara,” he ordered her softly as he climbed on the bed and knelt before her.

Katara did as he asked as her curiosity and anticipation grew. She closed her eyes with a soft moan as he captured her lips in another slow and tantalizing kiss. His teeth gently grazed her bottom lip and she opened her mouth for him. Their tongues immediately met in a sensual dance. Forgetting the treats, her arms moved to wrap around him, but she paused when he grasped her arms to prevent her from doing so. Frowning, she opened her eyes to see him smirk crookedly at her. Her pussy clenched in sharp need at the sight.

“Ah, ah, ah, love,” he chided her, “Lie still.”

Smiling at her, he took her hands and pulled them above her head. Katara watched as he reached for the item he had picked up earlier and realized it was his dark red sash. Silently, he wound it around her wrists and secured the ends to the headboard before she realized what he was doing. Tilting her head back in confusion, she pulled on her binding, but it did not give way. It was secure to keep her bound, but it was not too tight that it caused her harm. She looked back to turned curious eyes on her husband.

“What are you doing?” she asked as she squirmed in her place, but her bindings held her still.

Satisfied that the binding would hold, Zuko sat back on his heels and observed his beautiful, restricted wife with a smirk.
“Having my dessert,” he answered her huskily as he leaned over her.

Katara felt her arousal spike, an almost inaudible moan escaping her. She had an idea of what he planned to do and she could not wait. She wriggled again.

Taking a whole strawberry carefully between his long fingers, Zuko dipped it into the melted chocolate. Turning back to her, he smiled. He rubbed the fruit over Katara’s lips, leaving a trail of the rich chocolate to coat her plump lips. Leaning his head down, he slowly ran his tongue across her lips, meticulously cleaning the sweet topping from them. Once the substance was completely gone, he moved back. Her cobalt eyes were sparkling at him and he smiled down at her. He then placed the ripe strawberry between his lips before he leaned back toward her face. Raising her head, her lips met his and he bit down gently. He pulled away with half of the sweet fruit and left her with the other. Her breath speeding up a little, Katara chewed her half of the strawberry slowly and moaned. Holding his gaze, her tongue darted out to catch the juice that had fallen on her bottom lip.

With bated breath, the firebender watched as her pink tongue licked the honeyed liquid from her delectable lips as he swallowed his half of the fruit. The image had his cock throbbing as he recalled a number of delightful uses for that wonderful tongue of hers. He almost decided to forgo his plan so he could give them what they both wanted, but he firmly ordered himself to control his raging desires. He intended to savor his dessert and make this an incredible birthday his waterbender would never forget.

He reached for the bowl of chocolate and lifted the spoon. Carefully, he drizzled some of the melted chocolate into the hollow of her throat and she shivered at the feeling. Zuko painted a path of the treat down the valley of her soft mounds, then down her lean stomach before he stopped at the beginning of her slick folds. He could hear her breathing accelerate and he grinned. Once he was satisfied, he set the bowl back on the tray before picking up the other one.

He positioned one slice of strawberry at her throat atop the chocolate before he placed another just a little below it. Breathing shallowly, Katara watched him work. She smiled as she caught sight of the wristband she gifted him. Zuko continued to place strawberries slices on the trail of chocolate he created until he reached the end. Sitting back, he contemplated his masterpiece before he decided to place one last touch. Smirking, he picked up the bowl of chocolate once again and placed dollops on each of her hardened nipples until they were completely covered.

Katara moaned as she began to squirm again, partly from the strange feeling of the sticky substance on her skin, and partly from the erotic thoughts she was having about how he would eat his dessert. Then she gasped when she felt him place another strawberry slice into her drenched pussy.

“Zuko,” she murmured wantonly as her arms strained again her bindings.
“Don’t move or else you’ll ruin my dessert,” he reprimanded her softly as he smirked at her.

He moved away to place the tray down on the floor beside the bed before he returned quickly to her side.

“I’m going to enjoy my dessert now,” he growled softly.

He knelt with his knees on both sides of her and kissed her lips, careful not to destroy any of his work. Once he was satisfied that her lips were wet and swollen with his kisses, he pulled away to leave a path of scorching kisses from her jaw down to her neck. He nuzzled her necklace before he continued on his trail down her throat.

Wanting to touch him and pull him down over her, Katara pulled at her ties, but they held firm. She groaned. She forgot about escaping her bindings, however, the moment she felt his tongue lick across her throat, swiping up some chocolate and a strawberry slice into his mouth. He gave a low growl.

“Delicious,” he purred throatily.

Katara closed her eyes with a sigh as his teeth lightly scraped her skin as his lips closed over the next strawberry slice. She shivered at the blazing path his lips and tongue were creating as he went lower. He paused to worship her soft mounds. His tongue swirled around, teasingly avoiding her hardened nipples, causing her to pull on her bindings.

She cried out when his hot mouth finally closed on one peak and he began to suck hard in order to clean all the chocolate away. If possible her nipple got even harder as he nipped it with his teeth before soothing it with his tongue. Then she felt his teeth scrape her other neglected tip before he slowly lapped up the chocolate, causing her to moan loudly. Her moan deepened when he pulled the nipple into his mouth and suckled fiercely, engulfing her breast as much as he could into his widely opened mouth. A spark tingled down her spine all the way to her curling toes.

Once he had paid proper homage to her breasts and had her panting beneath him, he continued his downward path. His mouth left no trace of his delicious artwork in his wake. Katara moaned and writhed at the sensations. She had felt his tongue, lips, and mouth on her body many times before, but this was different, something indescribable. This was one of the most erotic moments she had thus far experience with Zuko and she loved it, craved more of it. She pulled on her bindings again. Her senses were becoming overwhelmed. Every time she would open her eyes to watch his progress,
they would close again as intense feelings overcame her.

“Ooohhh,” she moaned as his tongue licked the chocolate from her belly.

Zuko smirked as he resumed his slow journey down her body. He felt masculine pride swell within him at how absolutely her mind had detached from reality, all but the reality of his erotic touch upon her exquisite body. Scraping his teeth against her flesh as he picked up another slice, he then licked the chocolate slowly until her skin was clean of the substance. Smiling, he let his warm breath coast on the lingering wetness and become a cool caress. Pleased at the intense shiver it evoked from her, he continued on his trek, immensely enjoying his dessert and the effect he had on his wife.

Once he swallowed the last strawberry slice at the end of the chocolate trail he had smeared on her and roughly licked all the remaining chocolate, he raised his head to look at her face. He smirked when he saw that her eyes were closed in delight and her face was flushed. He licked his lips to relish the last of his amazing masterpiece.

“So delicious,” he whispered huskily to her when she opened her eyes and looked down at him.

Holding her gaze, he spread her legs wide then he gently lifted them and laid them over his shoulders as he prepared her for his ultimate banquet. Running his hands gently on her thighs, he turned his head to place soft kisses on her right inner thigh. He smiled when she trembled and moaned.

Settling his head at the apex of her sex, he groaned softly at the sight. Her feminine folds were swollen in her arousal and the fruit slice he had inserted into her opening was drenched in her juices. Heart pounding in his chest, he let his tongue slowly stroke her wet petals. He paused when she cried out and bucked her hips against his face as she again fought her bindings. Placing one hand on her hip to hold her still, he let his tongue continue to tease her before he engulfed his mouth on the strawberry slice and sucked it into his mouth. Chewing and then swallowing, Zuko groaned as the combined flavor of the fruit juice and her cream exploded on his tongue.

“So sweet. So delicious,” he groaned against her wet skin before he began to devour her sweet pussy hungrily.

Thrashing her head, Katara cried out loudly at the stroke of her husband’s skillful tongue on her hot center. She curled her hands into fists at the need to shove her fingers into his hair, but the sash he had tied around her wrists continued to restrict her. The sensation only caused the flame in her belly to erupt even fiercer and she moaned and whimpered shamelessly. When his tongue suddenly touched her oversensitive bundle of nerves, the flames exploded and she cried out her release, her hips bucking at the intensity.
“Zuko, ohhh!” she wailed.

Smirking in prideful exultation as her release came more quickly than he had anticipated, Zuko pulled back to watch her opening clench with her orgasm. His smirk widened. He had not even used his fingers to explore her wet passage.

When it seemed his waterbender was coming down from her euphoria, Zuko did not give her a reprieve as he again latched his mouth onto her soaked folds, causing her to arch her back and cry out. He plunged his tongue into her core and rubbed against her tight ring of muscles, savoring her flavor and the mewls she emitted as she weakly strained her bound arms toward him. He trailed his tongue up her slit and prodded the swollen bud above her opening, making her moan his name as he flicked and swirled his tongue around it. Then he latched his mouth on her clit and sucked hard just as he plunged one long finger into her and curled it. He growled in triumph when he again sent her over the edge, screaming and thrashing beneath him.

“Oh, oh, gods!” Katara screamed as she pushed her head against the pillow just as she pushed her hips up to ride her next orgasm following so close to the previous one. The pleasure was so overwhelming it was almost painful, but she loved it, she did not want it to stop.

Zuko turned his head to the side and rubbed his lips against her inner thigh as he waited for her climax to subside. He groaned against her perspiring skin at the sensation of her slick walls clenching his finger. He could not wait to experience the same sensation on his aching cock. He grunted in pleasure. When he felt her body slumped against the bed, he waited a moment longer until her trembling stopped.

“I’m not done with you yet, Katara,” he rumbled huskily against her skin.

“Oh,” the brunette managed to moan as she closed her eyes when her stomach once again clenched in arousal.

Slowly, Zuko began to move his finger and she mewled softly. Once he had stretched her enough, he swiftly inserted a second finger, the long digits pushing upward inside her tight passage to press against her drenched walls. She arched her back, his name a whispered cry on her lips. He continued the slow pace before he carefully pressed his thumb on her oversensitive nub. She moaned deeply, but he made sure not to apply too much pressure. He wanted to string her along for as long as he could, so that her next climax would be all the more powerful and intense.
When it seemed her release was upon her, he would slow down or stop completely, ignoring her disappointed cries and impatient pleading. Then he would resume his ministrations until he had her panting heavily and writhing beneath him as she strained against her bindings before he stopped once again. He was panting hard himself as his arousal continued to increase at her pleasure. He knew he was torturing himself as well, but he wanted to bring her to as many climaxes as he could before he surrendered himself into her wet heat. Painful as this was, he could not deny the deliciously tormenting pleasure rippling through his powerful body.

Katara felt as Zuko again brought her toward the pinnacle for what seemed like the tenth time and she bit her lip hard to keep from moaning, hoping that the sound would not alert him so he could finally let her fall into that pleasurable abyss, although she knew he would immediately know when she was close. Just as she felt her core flutter with her impending release, she closed her eyes to savor the sensation before Zuko stopped again to prevent her from truly tasting it. Her eyes opened in surprise and delight when he did not stop, but instead increased his speed and force of his plunging fingers and she moaned long and loud.

As he continued to fiercely impale her with his strong fingers, Katara felt him engulf his mouth on her clit and groan loudly as he sucked it before he curled his fingers up and furiously rubbed against that sweet spot inside her. Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to scream as a wave of ecstasy—more intense than any she had ever experienced before—crashed into her like the ocean waves crashing violently against a group of rocks.

“Aahhhh!” she shrieked as her body convulsed and her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

Zuko’s eyes widened when a heavy gush of her clear fluids squirted everywhere—drenching his hand, arm, face, and throat. It was the first time it had happened, and he was confused for a moment, before he remembered hearing that a few women were able to ejaculate almost like a man when they were touched in the right way. His ego swelled in his chest just as his cock throbbed with pleasure and need. Growling softly, Zuko continue to suck her clit and rapidly pump his fingers into her clenching pussy as he prolonged her release before he replaced his fingers with his mouth.

“Oh, mmmm,” the waterbender moaned incoherently.
Zuko chuckled against her oversensitive folds and Katara trembled when his warm breath rushed over her.

“Do I make you feel good, love?” Zuko whispered throatily against her thigh.

Katara moaned as she weakly nodded her head before she collapsed limply against the mattress, her breath coming out in short, panting intakes. A moment later, she lifted her head to look down at him. His eyes were gleaming with satisfaction as he grinned triumphantly at her—his lips, chin, and throat glistening wetly with her juices—before he looked back down to observe her still quivering center. She moaned as she let her head fall back. She did not know what Zuko had done to pull such an intense orgasm out of her, but she thoroughly enjoyed it.

“What…what did you do to me?” she asked breathlessly.

“I think people call it squirting,” he replied huskily.

“You definitely made me squirt,” she panted heavily.

“How did it feel?” he inquired curiously as he caressed her wet thigh.

“Incredible,” she moaned.

“Good,” Zuko groaned deeply as he continued to stare at her, “Because I plan on making you squirt many times more.”

“Oh gods, yes,” Katara moaned loudly, feeling her oversensitive pussy throb at his promising words.

She was extremely glad it was a night of a full moon. The energy the sliver orb in the sky was radiating seemed to be giving her extra strength, as well as serving as a kind of aphrodisiac. She had never experienced such an overpowering feeling before, not until Zuko had introduced her to what passion truly was. She moaned as fire seemed to race through her veins to collect at her heat where she could still feel Zuko’s fingers imbedded in her. La, she wanted him. She needed him inside her.

“More,” she begged softly, “Please. More.”
Zuko’s head shot up toward her face at the breathless, wanton sound of her voice. It almost sounded as if she were caught in some sort of enchantment. He saw her lift her head to look at him and the passionate expression on her features and the hungry sparkle in her sapphire eyes made his shaft throb almost painfully.

“More, Zuko,” she repeated with a moan, “I want your cock inside me. I want to come around you…uuhhh…I want you to come inside me.”

The young Fire Lord groaned deeply at her words, thrilled that she was still eager to feed his hunger. He slowly removed his fingers from her overflowing core and quickly brought them to his mouth to clean every trace of her juices. Once he did, he placed her legs back on the bed before he slinked up her lovely body. He bent his head down and she quickly met him halfway. They moaned as their mouths devoured each other. Pulling away, Zuko quickly untied the sash around her wrists and threw it to the side.

He barely had enough time to assure himself that her delicate skin had not been damaged before she shot her arms forward to bring him down to her as she took possession of his mouth. His eyes widened briefly at her aggressiveness before he reciprocated her fervent kiss. Katara clenched his longer hair in her fingers and pulled, causing Zuko to growl lustfully at her at the slight pain. As they continue to kiss, Zuko reached down between them and tightly grasped his aching erection. He stroked himself a few times before his hand guided his hard cock to the opening to his paradise.

He eased into her tight wetness, not stopping until he was buried completely inside her, their hips pressed so tightly together that there was no open space between them. They moaned into each other’s mouths. Hesitating only a moment to revel in the sensation of wet warmth surrounding him, Zuko began to slowly thrust his hips. He increased his pace a little as he continued thrusting inside her before he reached down between their bodies to firmly rub her sensitive clit. He watched as her mouth fell open and she threw her head back when another orgasm hit her hard. He delighted in the little whimpers and cries coming forth from his wife’s lovely mouth as her pussy tightened almost painfully around his engorged length. He groaned when she loudly cried out his name into the room.

He slowed his pace and pressed light, tender kisses on her lips as he waited for her to come down from her euphoria. When she moaned and pressed back against his mouth, he lifted his head slightly to look at her face.

“Gods, Katara, you are so beautiful when you come,” he rasped huskily as he stared deeply into her azure eyes—dark with her arousal and warm with her love for him. “I love it when you come around my cock.”
When she smiled at him and clenched her inner walls tightly around him, Zuko swooped down with a groan to kiss her passionately at the same time he plunged powerfully and swiftly into her, unable to hold back his intense hunger for her any longer. She clung to him with her arms and legs as they continued to rock against each other for a long blissful moment. Then she grasped his ass tightly, drawing him forward into her, reluctant to release him. He pulled away from her mouth with a gasp and buried his face at her throat. He felt his impending release approach him, but he closed his eyes as he tried to control it. He wanted to bring his waterbender to the throes of passion with him one more time.

“Ah, Zuko, uhh,” she moaned against his ear with his every thrust, “Faster, harder!”

Zuko grunted harshly as he increased the pace and force of his penetration. He smirked when she threw her head back and wailed. He could sense her next release coming closer just like his own was, and with a growl, he began to wildly pound into her, causing their flesh to slap loudly together. She began to fiercely dig and scratch her fingernails into the flesh of his back and he groaned at the mixture of pain and pleasure as he felt her go wild beneath him.

Katara cried out before she forced her eyes open when she felt him pull his head away from her neck. Mesmerized, she saw him throw his head back with a groan, his eyes closed in concentration and pleasure. She felt the cored muscles of her husband’s body, which she was tightly wrapped around like vines on a marble statue, begin to tighten. He looked like a god in his throes of passion and she felt her heart flutter wildly in her chest. She could feel her pussy contract, heralding her next imminent climax, and she knew she could not hold back even if she wanted to. The scream in her throat released the same time she did.

“Oh my gods, Zuko!” she screamed, his name echoing off the walls around them, as pleasure exploded in her belly.

Zuko’s breath hitched when he felt another surge of Katara’s aroused fluids flood around his shaft and gushed against his sac and thighs as he pounded into her.

“Katara!” he roared as he felt his balls tighten before his cock throbbed unceasingly. He thrust once, twice, before he gasped as his burning seed erupted forth to spurt against her clenching walls. Agni, he loved coming in Katara so much.

Labored breathing and soft moans were the only sounds that reigned in the otherwise silent chamber as they trembled and clung to one another. Hands leisurely caressed sweat slicked bodies and mouths tenderly touched. Holding his wife’s sated body close to him as their thundering heartbeats returned to normal, Zuko sighed in contentment and pride at the fact that he was able to bring his wife to such great heights and so many times. They were silent for a long moment, basking in the afterglow.
“Happy birthday, love,” he rumbled softly after a moment.

“This is definitely the best birthday ever,” she murmured as she rubbed her face against his chest.

“There are still many more birthdays to come, Katara,” he told her huskily.

“I don’t think I’ve ever looked forward to getting older before,” she responded with a laugh.

Zuko chuckled as he bent his head down to kiss her head.

“If only the noblewomen knew how right they were in their suppositions about you,” Katara spoke up as she looked up to grin at him.

“What do you mean?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“You are a sex god,” she said with a wicked smirk.

Zuko’s eyes widened at her words before he laughed as he hugged her tightly to him. Agni, how he loved her.

“Oh, Katara, Katara,” he rasped amusedly and lustfully against her hair, “It seems we are made for each other since you are my delicious sex goddess.”

He heard his wife giggle and he affectionately tightened his hold of her. He felt Katara squirm in his grasp and he reluctantly released her with a confused frown. He watched as she crawled toward the edge of the bed before she stood up.

“Aren’t you tired?” he asked.

“Nope,” she responded with a seductive grin, “There’s a full moon tonight…and I feel like I have a lot of energy to spend.”
Curious, he watched as she picked up the tray he had previously placed on the floor before she climbed back on the bed, placing the tray next to him. There remained a few more strawberry slices and a bit of melted chocolate in the bowls. Then she turned to smile sexily at him and his heart throbbed in his chest before something else below his waist did the same when she straddled him.

“What are you doing?” he asked her huskily as he placed his hands on her hips.

He raised his eyebrow when she grabbed his hands and tied them against the headboard with the same sash he had used on her.

“You had your dessert,” she purred as she reached for the bowl of chocolate before she turned to him, “Now it’s my turn. You made me…squirt so many times, so I think it’s fair that I make you do the same.”

Zuko was no longer surprised when he felt his cock immediately swell beneath her so soon after his last release. When Katara scooted back to place a thick coat of the chocolate substance on his cock, he thanked the gods for creating his wife, full moons, and waterbending.

The Fire Lord’s study was quiet as Zuko read over the reports from the colonies. He was pleased to see that they were prospering well after they had been taught to protect themselves from the rebels. As he came to the last report, he eagerly opened it when he realized it was from the colonel he had sent to capture Jianguo.

As he read the letter, the Fire Lord’s eyes blazed with anger before he growled as he threw it on the desk. His colonel wrote that a few of his men had discreetly entered the village where the woman had said Jianguo frequented. After searching for a while, they realized Jianguo and his men had not stepped foot in the village in weeks. Did Jianguo somehow find out Zuko’s plans or did he just decide he had been staying in one place too long?

“Damn it,” Zuko growled out furiously as he banged his fist on the desk, rattling the items on its surface. “Where the hell could they be?”

Not until Jianguo and the rest of the rebels were captured would he be at peace. He rubbed his temples in frustration before he stood up from his chair and turned toward the large window behind him. He stared at the sky angrily for a moment before he sighed as he took in the rest of the scenery.
He smiled when he made out the top of the trees above the wall that surrounded his private garden. A soft groan escaped him when he remembered how he had taken Katara among the flowers and beneath the light of the full moon on her birthday weeks ago. Could they do it again? And then in the privacy of their bedchamber, he had taken her all night because she could not sleep. Due to the power of the full moon, Katara had been more aggressive and insatiable than usual. He loved it. He could not wait for the next full moon.

Agni, he wanted her again, but he would have to wait a few hours for that to happen. Katara had gone to a village with his mother, Admiral Jee, and a large group of guards he had appointed to take care of them for the opening of a new school for the children of the lower class. He had wanted to go, but he had meetings with his governors. He even tried to convince Katara to wait until he could accompany her, but she had firmly said that she did not want to make the children wait.

He smiled. His wife was so kind and compassionate, and the common people had come to love her. And thanks to her, they were more accepting toward him. They no longer saw him as a traitor or a disgrace, but as their sovereign who wanted what was best for them. What would he do without her?

He was brought out of his musings when he heard a knock at his door. He quickly sat back down on his seat and pulled close to his desk in order to hide his semi-erect member. Damn.

“Enter,” he called out brusquely as he glowered at the door.

His glower quickly disappeared, however, and his eyes darkened with lust as he watched Katara enter the room with a bright smile. Just the woman he wanted to see.

“Zuko!” she exclaimed excitedly, “Everything was a success!”

“Lock the door, Katara,” he ordered her huskily.

She did so, without questioning why he told her to do such a thing, as she continued to talk about the opening of the school, how happy the people had been, and that Jiao and Kuo had returned from their honeymoon. She did not notice as Zuko began to move the things on his large desk aside in order to create an empty space in the middle. When Zuko continued not to say anything, Katara finally paused with a frown. Standing from her seat, she rounded the desk until she was standing next to him.

“Zuko, what’s wrong?” she asked worriedly.
Katara gasped loudly when Zuko suddenly grabbed her waist and pulled her down toward him so that she was straddling his lap. Then she was being kissed senseless. Heat instantly spread through her body at his touch and her stomach clenched in desire. She moaned when she felt his hardness pressing against her core as his hands roughly, yet reverently, caressed her every curve.

Zuko did not want to tell her about his disappointment and anger with the lack of information concerning Jianguo’s whereabouts, so he decided to distract both of them with something more pleasant. It had been hours since he last made love to her, after all. Running his hands down her back as he continued stroking his tongue insistently inside her mouth, he grabbed her firm rear and pressed her closer to his arousal, grinding slowly against her. She gasped breathlessly.

“I want you,” he growled out lowly.

“Can’t you wait until we retire for the night?” she asked even as she pressed closer to him and wound her arms more tightly around his neck.

“No,” he responded, “I need you now.”

Katara moaned when he captured her lips in another searing kiss and bucked his hips hard against her. When they pulled away to catch their breath, she smiled at him.

“What brought this on?” she asked breathlessly as she reached up a hand to caress his scarred cheek.

“I was remembering your birthday,” he told her with a smirk.

Having Katara’s soft, loving touch on his scar no longer fazed him—in fact, he sometimes forgot about his disfigurement when she touched him.

At his words, a deep red blush blossomed across Katara’s checks from both bashfulness and arousal before she moaned when he captured her mouth in a heady kiss. Electricity skittered down her spine when he gently tangled her tongue with his before sucking it into his mouth.

As he continued to make love to his wife’s mouth, Zuko slowly dragged his hands up her sides before cupping her breasts and squeezing lightly. Her breath hitched then accelerated when he just as
slowly began to unbutton the top of her silver dress. Coiling his tongue around hers, he slipped his hands inside to touch the heating flesh of her chest before he pushed her clothes aside to expose her heaving breasts. Panting, Zuko pulled away to admire the view as he gently fondled the soft mounds. Moaning, Katara opened her eyes to see him smirking lustfully at her. She gasped when he suddenly lifted her from his lap and sat her down on his desk, parting her legs and scooting his face between them.

Holding her gaze, he reached below her dress and trailed his hands up her legs and thighs until he hooked his fingers on the hem of her satin undergarment. At the silent command of his gaze, she quickly raised her hips. Slowly, sensually, he began to slide the silky piece of cloth down her smooth legs. It was so damp with her juices that he practically had to peel it away. Panting softly, Katara watched as he brought the damp cloth up to his nose and inhaled deeply as he continued to look intently into her eyes. Exhaling loudly with a groan, Zuko placed the undergarment on the desk beside her before he buried his face on her covered womanhood to inhale even more deeply.

“Lift your dress for me, love,” he instructed throatily against her, “Expose your sweet, little pussy to me.”

Moaning softly, Katara found her legs trembling beneath him as he spoke, his warm breath heating her already molten core despite the cloth that separated them. Zuko pulled away and leaned against the back of his chair expectantly, his eyes dark with his arousal. Hesitating only a moment, the brunette reached over between her thighs to shyly lift the material from herself. She squirmed when he sat unmoving and stared intensely at her exposed flesh.

“Spread your legs more, Katara,” he ordered huskily as he brought his hand down to give his hardened confined cock a few squeezes and strokes. He grunted lowly in pleasure.

Katara mewled as she did what he ordered her and moaned when she felt her juices pour out of her as his black pupils dilated in desire and his nostrils flared. He shifted a little in order to pull the edge of his trousers down enough to pull out his turgid shaft, and Katara moaned as she watched him stroke his impressive length. She whined desperately as she lifted her hips out shamelessly toward his face.

“Zuko…” she whimpered desperately.

Zuko looked away from his heaven, from admiring his wife’s pink, wet, and swollen folds, and shifted his impassioned gaze to her needy one. Keeping his gaze locked with hers, he lifted his unoccupied hand and slid it up her inner thigh while with the other he continued to pump and squeeze his hard erection within his tight fist. He moved inwardly and began stroking her oversensitive flesh, making her tremble beneath his hand as he caressed her swollen folds. Then he slipped two fingers inside and stroked her gently, slowly building the fire within her, before he
pressed his thumb against her nub and circled it firmly. She gasped loudly and her hips arched.

“Do you want me, my little waterbender?” he whispered huskily as he rose to his feet between her spread legs.

“Yes,” she moaned.

He groaned huskily as he stoked himself a few more times before he placed his hands on the hem of his dark trousers and swiftly pushed down until they pooled around his booted ankles. They both groaned when his turgid cock bobbed, a thin line of his arousal already trailing down from his tip down his length. Zuko’s amber eyes devoured the sight of his waterbender lying across his large desk with her exquisite breasts and wonderful womanly sex bare before him. Many times he had envisioned taking Katara in this room, his masculine domain. Moving forward with a growl, he placed his hips tightly between her thighs and slid his heavy cock slowly along her drenched feminine petals, causing her to drop her head back and moan. She shivered and sighed when he bent down to kiss her lips.

“If it were possible to never leave your tight, wet pussy, I’d remained impaled there forever,” he growled lowly against her lips as he stared ardently into her half-lidded eyes and pressed his shaft tighter to her swollen sex.

“Oh,” Katara moaned breathlessly. His words, uttered in all seriousness, made her center clench in need. “Zuko, please.”

“Do you want me take you with absolute abandon?” he asked with a low growl as he leaned over her shivering body with his erection still grinding brazenly against the folds of her slick core.

Katara moaned more loudly at both the sensations wreaking havoc on her body and at his heated words. She opened her mouth to respond, but the only sounds that came out where more moans and whimpers when he pressed his spongy head against her swollen clit.

“Do you want me to take you right here, right now, Katara?” Zuko continued as he pressed his lips to her ear as he spoke. He then kissed her cheek tenderly.

“Yes,” Katara finally managed to groan out.
Insane with need, the waterbender nuzzled her face into the neck of the panting Fire Lord hovering above her as she raised her hips to press herself tightly against him, urging him to enter her and give them what they both wanted.

“Yes what?” he asked teasingly as he rubbed against her entrance.

“Uuhh, take me,” the waterbender pleaded wantonly as she reached up to hold his body closer to her own, “I want you inside me. Please, Zuko.”

Groaning, Zuko allowed more of his weight to rest upon her gorgeous body, crushing her soft breasts against his hard chest, his length pressing tightly against her weeping opening endeavoring to swallow him entirely. Pressing his lips to her temple, he suppressed a needy groan at the sensation of her core quivering around his shaft. Her body trembled beneath his larger one as he savoring the sensation of her muscles convulsing around him as he went, until he was finally buried to the hilt.

“Oh, Zuko,” she sighed against him in pleasure.

Lifting his head, Zuko pressed his mouth against hers and kissed her softly. When she opened her mouth to him, he slipped his tongue inside and began to slowly dip it back and forth just as his erection slid in and out of her. Katara moved her tongue to tangle with his just as she moved her hips to the rhythm of his. Desire exploded within, between, and around them like the magic and power of flaring fireworks.

Zuko kept the slow pace for a long moment in order to gradually build their climax to the highest pinnacle. Katara sighed lovingly against his mouth as she felt her pleasure glow and simmer in her belly. The firebender pulled away from her delightful mouth so they could catch their breaths, but did not part from her skin as he trailed his lips down her neck to her chest. He cupped her breasts and squeezed before he pulled one nipple into his mouth and sucked gently. Katara’s breath hitched as she pushed her chest closer to his mouth and murmured her pleasure into the charged air. Zuko paid homage to her breasts for a moment longer before he captured her mouth in another passionate kiss. Their moans, heavy breathing, and the soft slapping of flesh rebounded in the Fire Lord’s study as they loved each other with a gentle passion.

Zuko panted as a moment later he heard Katara begin to moan loudly and felt her writhe wildly in his arms as he continued to slowly thrust inside her. He liked the way her body rocked against him as she loudly, fervently, moaned her pleasure, the way she thrashed beneath him without the slightest hint of shame. Her lack of inhibition was extremely arousing and he swiftly leaned down to kiss her deeply. When he felt the telltale pleasure begin to build at the bottom of his spine, Zuko leaned back
to stand between her parted thighs. Grasping her hips tightly and pulling her firmly against him, he increased his pace and rammed into her, causing her breasts to bounce at his thrusts as she slid back and forth across his desk.

“Oh, gods, yes!” she cried out. “Yes, just like that!”

Katara raised her arms over her head in order to grab the edge of the desk to brace herself for her firebender’s rough plunges. Wrapping her legs tightly around his waist, she held him against her to make sure he would not leave her. Her heart pounded hard in her chest as her husband stared down at her with golden eyes glowing with a combination of passion, possessiveness, and love.

Gazing lustfully at his face, she smiled as she witnessed the excruciating desperation and pleasure that showed in the furrow of his brow and the clenching of his jaw as his movements became more erratic. The knowledge that she made him feel that way was overpowering and she thought that he was even more devastatingly handsome when he lost his iron control. A gasp escaped her when he reached a hand down to furiously rub her nub. A second later, her eyes rolled back and her mouth fell open in a silent scream as she reached that euphoric end. She felt like she was drowning in an ocean of intense ecstasy and she thrashed her head from side to side as a long moan was ripped from her throat.

Feeling the rush of her juices and the convulsing of her tight walls, Zuko gasped before he let out a low groan as he surrendered to his pleasure. He felt like fire had consumed his entire being as he released himself into her with hot jets of his seed and jerky thrusts.

With another groan, Zuko sat back down on his large chair, bringing her along with him so that he was still imbedded within her overflowing pussy. They panted hard against the other for a few long moments, just enjoying the other’s presence as their pleasure subsided. Katara mewed softly when he nuzzled her temple before she heard him sigh.

“I’ve always fantasized about making love to you on my desk,” he confessed in a husky whisper.

“First under the sunlight on the beach, then in the bathtub, then against the tree and the garden under the moonlight, and now your study,” Katara listed as she looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. “I wonder how many more fantasies you have, my lord.”

“Many, many more, love,” he purred throatily.
She flushed before she smiled.

“I can’t wait to see what they are,” she sighed against him.

Zuko groaned deeply. He would never have been able to find such a passionate woman as Katara in his entire life and he, not for the first time, thanked the gods for his fortune. He grasped her chin with his fingers and lifted her head up so he could kiss her affectionately. She sighed lovingly against his mouth and he wrapped his arms around her to pull her closer to him, not out of arousal—they were both sated at the moment—but out of a need to prolong their emotive connection.

They pull apart quickly when a soft knock interrupted them, immediately dispelling their delightful moment. They looked at each other in surprise before Zuko grasped her waist and lifted her off his lap. They moaned at the sensation from where they had been joined before they scrambled to fix their disheveled clothes and hair. Once they were presentable—or as much as they could be, given the circumstances—Katara sat on the chair opposite Zuko’s, while he quietly rushed to unlock the door before he raced back to his chair. Clearing his throat, he called out for whoever was outside to enter. They both watched as Jiao stepped in.

“What is it?” the Fire Lord asked.

If Jiao suspected anything about what they had been up to, she did not show it as she gave a bow before walking toward the desk.

“A letter just arrived for you a few minutes ago, my lord,” she said quietly as she handed the letter to him.

“Thank you,” he replied as he grabbed the letter.

Jiao bowed again as she smiled knowingly at both of them before she turned around and closed the door softly after her. The couple slumped in their seats before Katara laughed and Zuko chuckled.

“I will never find another servant as good as Jiao,” he commented after he quieted from his chuckles.

“Yeah,” Katara agreed as she continued to giggle. That was a close one.
Zuko smiled at her before he returned his attention to the scroll in his hand. He turned it over and raised an eyebrow in curiosity when he saw who it was from. He broke the seal and unfurled the paper. Katara watched as his happy mood quickly disappeared and was replaced by a grim expression.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in concern.

“It’s from King Bumi,” he began.

“What does he say?” she asked.

Zuko was silent for a moment after he finished reading before he rolled the scroll up again. He then glanced up at his worried wife with a deep frown on his face.

“We need to go to Omashu immediately,” he responded.

Katara would have been ecstatic at the thought of going back to the Earth Kingdom city, but his dark mood concerned her.

“Why?”

“The rebels haven’t been attacking any of the Fire Nation colonies because they are now attacking Earth Kingdom villages,” he growled out angrily, “An entire village was completely wiped out a few days ago.”

“Oh no!” Katara gasped in horror.

Zuko rose quickly from his chair and strode toward the door which he swung open, startling a few servants that were passing by.

“Have my things along with Fire Lady Katara’s packed and the airship ready to fly to Omashu in a few hours!” he barked out the orders.
His servants jumped at the fierce order before they bowed and hurriedly scurried to follow his command. Zuko closed the door before he made his way around his desk to slump in his chair.

“I knew something would happen eventually,” he growled as he ran a hand roughly down his face.

Katara stood up and rounded the desk to stand beside him, winding her arms around his shoulders. He turned toward her and rested his head on her chest just as he wrapped his arms around her waist. Removing his fire crown for the moment, she ran her fingers through his now loose hair in comfort.

“Even if things turn out very badly, you will always have me,” she told him gently yet firmly.

Zuko moved back and gently pulled her to him so she was sitting sideways on his lap. He hugged her tightly to him as he buried his face in her soft neck, inhaling her soothing, sweet scent deeply.

“Oh, Katara, I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he sighed against her skin as he tightened his hold of her possessively and protectively.

“I feel the same way,” she whispered back.

Zuko raised his head to look deep into her azure eyes before he leaned forward to kiss her. They kissed softly, angry that their good mood and what had happened a moment ago had to be ruined. When they pulled apart, Katara watched as Zuko’s golden eyes became ablaze with his anger.

“I will make Jianguo pay, if it’s the last thing I do,” he vowed darkly.

End of Part Six
The citizens of Omashu paused in their various activities and stared at the opulent Fire Nation carriage that passed them by. The group of guards mounted on intimidating komodo rhinos that surrounded it kept them at a distance. They wondered what the occasion for such a visit was. The Fire Lord had only visited their city a few times and this would be the first time he would do so with his new wife. They were all still surprised that the new Fire Lady was Waterbending Master Katara from the Southern Water Tribe, former girlfriend of the Avatar. It seemed some relationships were not meant to be while others are destined, they mused to one another. There were also rumors that Avatar Aang and Master Earthbender Toph Bei Fong were more than just traveling companions.

Looking out the carriage window, Katara watched the city go by her. They had arrived by airship, and despite the reason for this trip, she had been unable to help herself from admiring the view below. She noticed there were some changes to Omashu from what she last recalled. She had many memories of this city that made up part of her quest to save the world with her companions.

Who knew what would have become of it if Ozai had won? What would have happened if Zuko had not decided to turn his back on his own father to join them in their fight for freedom?

Well, I wouldn’t be married to him, that’s for sure, she mused with a small frown before she smiled,
And I wouldn’t be as happy as I am now.

She leaned away from the window and turned to look at her husband. He was silent as he read over the reports of the attacks that one of Bumi’s soldiers had handed to him as soon as they entered the city gates. Katara let her eyes roam his features and frowned. His expression was grim, his eyes hard, and his jaw tightly clenched. Even though he had not said anything, she knew that he was feeling guilty that more people were suffering because he was unable to capture Jianguo and the rebels.

Reaching out a hand, she gently settled it on his arm. Zuko glanced at her before he relaxed slightly as he reached over to squeeze her hand in assurance.

Before they could say anything, they felt the carriage come to halt. They let go and the firebender quickly folded the reports and placed them in a box that currently carried his important documents. He locked it before he settled it on his lap. They looked at each other again just as the carriage driver
jumped down from his seat to open the door.

Zuko stepped down, the sun’s rays glinting off his fire crown, armor, and scabbard, before he turned to assist his wife. Once they were standing together, they looked up to stare at the wide door that led to the palace just as servants scurried out to gather their belongings. Zuko handed the box to Jee, who bowed as he took it before he went to stand beside Lady Ursa and Iroh. Zuko’s mother and uncle, as well as Jiao, had traveled in another carriage behind the royal couple.

A few minutes later they were shown to their rooms so they could refresh themselves from their long journey before dinner. Iroh instead went directly in search of Bumi. After refreshing herself by the stand that held a basin of water, Katara turned around to see Zuko pacing the elegant room with dark green as its main theme color.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sit through dinner,” Zuko growled lowly.

Katara walked toward him and wrapped her arms around him from behind. She felt Zuko stop, but his body was still tense. She pressed her cheek against his back as she tightened her hold of him.

“Just remember that I’m here for you,” she reminded him gently.

Zuko let out a sigh before he relaxed against her warmth. What would he do without her? He turned around so that he could return the embrace and he buried his face in her soft hair.

“Thank you for being by my side.”

“I always will be,” she promised softly.

Zuko lifted his head to gaze into her blue eyes for a long, intense second, to see the truth of her words in their depths, before he slowly leaned down to softly press his lips against her plump ones. She sighed softly against his mouth and he felt his heart swell with emotions. Before their kiss could lead to something else, they were interrupted by a knock at the door. They pulled away just as Zuko called out a gruff ‘enter’ and the door was opened.

“Good afternoon, Your Majesty. King Bumi is awaiting you and your wife’s presence for dinner,” a young servant announced with a timid bow. He gulped when the Fire Lord’s golden eyes slanted his way.
“Yes, thank you,” Katara quickly spoke up with a smile to reassure the young man.

His brown eyes widened in appreciation at the lovely sight of the Fire Lady and he immediately smiled at the beautiful waterbender in admiration.

“Lead the way,” the Fire Lord ordered curtly as he narrowed his eyes at the man staring at his wife.

The servant stiffened at the menacing look and he squeaked out an affirmative before scurrying from the room. Katara turned to raise an eyebrow at her husband, who shrugged as he tucked her arm under his. She shook her head at his antics as they walked out of the room and followed the nervous servant to the great dining room. As they entered, they saw that they were the first ones there. Katara looked around as she remembered the last time she was in the room before the sound of footsteps interrupted her thoughts.

“Katara! Zuko!”

The royal couple turned at the sound of their names to see Aang and Toph walk into the room. They tensed slightly as they looked at the airbender, but relaxed when Aang genuinely smiled at them both. Momo flew away from Aang’s shoulder and landed on Katara’s, who giggled as she reached up to scratch under his chin. Momo purred before he jumped onto Zuko’s shoulder to rub his cheek against the tall firebender’s. Zuko frowned when the others laughed, but he still reached up to pat the small lemur’s head.

“What are you guys doing here?” Katara asked as she smiled at them.

“We received Bumi’s message,” Aang responded in a more serious tone.

“Do you know what has happened since?” Zuko asked with a frown.

Aang shook his head. “We just got here this morning.”

Zuko’s frown deepened and Katara again reached over to touch his arm. The firebender looked down to give her a small smile that did not reach his eyes and the brunette frowned.
“So how was your honeymoon?” Toph’s teasing voice interrupted them. “I’m surprised both of you are still walking.”

“Toph!” they both exclaimed. They glanced hesitantly at Aang, worried he might be feeling hurt, but they were surprised when he laughed as he nudged Toph with his elbow.

“Stop teasing them, Toph,” he told her and the married couple let out relieved breaths. Then a mischievous grin appeared on the young monk’s face as he continued, “They probably are having a difficult time walking right now as it is.”

Toph let out a loud laugh and slapped her knee as Katara and Zuko stared at the usually polite monk in shock. Zuko was the first to compose himself as he cleared his throat. He sure did not expect that coming from Aang, who even left the wedding early when the time approached for the wedding night. Had he perhaps really moved on?

“Do you know where King Bu—”

“Katara!” a masculine voice interrupted Zuko’s question and caused them all to look up.

Katara’s eyes widened and Zuko stiffened when Jet strutted into the grand room with a cocky grin on his tanned face.

“Jet?” the waterbender said in surprise as he stopped before her. Katara glanced quickly at Zuko to see him glaring at Jet.

“Ah, Katara, you’re as gorgeous as always,” the freedom fighter cooed, ignoring the firebender at her side. Before anybody could do anything, he quickly reached for the brunette’s hand and kissed it.

With an indignant gasp, Katara swiftly pulled her hand away from his grasp just as Zuko pulled her to him.

“I would appreciate it if you refrained from touching my wife,” the Fire Lord growled out darkly.
“What, afraid she’d leave you for me?” Jet tauntingly asked as he smirked.

Zuko raised a dark eyebrow as he replied, “No. My wife would never leave me, especially for someone like you.”

Jet stiffened at the insult and he balled his hands as he glared at the tall firebender. He opened his mouth to retort, but he paused when Katara tucked herself against Zuko’s side, placed a hand on his chest, and looked up to smile at him.

“You know me so well, dear husband,” she said softly.

Zuko smirked at Jet. Aang tried to suppress his grin behind his hand while Toph openly chortled in amusement at the obvious way Katara was showing her preference and loyalty to Zuko. Jet frowned deeply as he stared at Katara, but before he could say anything the loud cackle that could only be identified as King Bumi’s was heard. They looked up at the entrance to see the old earthbender walk into the room with General Iroh, Lady Ursa, and Admiral Jee.

“Ah, you’re all here!” Bumi exclaimed loudly. His bulging green eyes darted quickly between the Fire Lord and the waterbender. A wide grin stretched across his wrinkled face and he waggled his bushy eyebrow at the couple. “How’s the heir coming along? Haha!”

Katara felt her face heat up when Bumi, Iroh, Aang, and Toph openly laughed. Zuko stared at the mad king with a blank expression before he turned to give his blushing wife a smoldering look that only caused the reddish hue on her cheeks to deepen. The Fire Lord then glanced at the silent freedom fighter to see a dark expression cloud his tanned face. A small smirk appeared on the young firebender’s face before he scowled at his uncle’s next remark.

“With the way they keep shutting themselves in their rooms, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear news about the next heir one of these days,” Iroh piped in with a cheerful smile.

“Uncle Iroh!” Katara hissed as she narrowed her eyes at the old man.

Toph snickered and everybody else but Zuko and Jet laughed. The freedom fighter was glaring hatefully at the Fire Lord who raised an unperturbed eyebrow at him as he deliberately brought Katara closer to his side. He pretended not to notice Katara’s small glare at his possessive display.
“Good. Let’s eat!” Bumi boomed enthusiastically after he had calmed down from his cackles. He sure did love to tease the youngsters. They were just so easy to rile up.

The mad king either did not notice or completely ignored the tension coming from the Fire Lord and the freedom fighter as he walked past them to sit at the head of the table. Jet continued to glare at the Fire Lord, but Zuko ignored him as he tucked Katara’s hand under his arm and led her to her chair before sitting beside her once he helped her into her seat. The rest of his family sat on the chairs beside theirs. Sitting on Bumi’s right, Zuko watched as Aang sat across from him with Toph sitting next to the airbender. His eyes immediately narrowed, however, when Jet sat next to Toph and smiled roguishly across the table at Katara. As the servants moved around to serve their meal, Zuko turned to Bumi with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m curious to know why a…simple man is eating at your table,” he asked impassively as he glanced blandly at Jet.

Bumi continued to chew noisily as he loudly replied, “Jet was there to protect one of the villages. He has helped a lot.”

Jet, hearing what the old king said, turned to smirk at Zuko, who raised his eyebrow at him again before ignoring him completely as he again turned to Bumi.

“Is there more news about the attacks?” the Fire Lord asked with a frown.

“Patience!” Bumi exclaimed as he ripped a piece of pig-chicken with his teeth, “We’ll talk about that later. Now eat!”

Zuko frowned at the command, but he let it go as he looked down at his food. He did not have much of an appetite at the moment. He wanted to know what was going on. He was brought of his thoughts when he felt a small hand touch his knee. He glanced to his side to see Katara smile at him.

“The food is delicious, Zuko,” she said softly as she gave his knee an encouraging squeeze before subtly lifting her hand back on the table.

Zuko relaxed slightly at her care. She knew exactly how to comfort him without making it seem like he was weak. He picked up his chopsticks and slowly began to eat. He would wait until he could discuss the matter about the attacks later.
“The rebels have not made themselves known, but we are positive they are the same ones that were attacking the Fire Nation colonies months ago,” one of Bumi’s generals explained before he indicated to a large map of the Earth Kingdom. “They have attacked here, here, and here,” he continued as he pointed at each spot where there have been attacks.

“They are all around Omashu,” Iroh observed as he stroked his chin.

Zuko frowned as he stared at the map. After dinner, Bumi had led him, Aang, Iroh, and Jee to his study. Katara and Toph had insisted on being part of the discussion as well. Bumi allowed them to join because he was fond of both young women and he knew from the war that they were also seasoned warriors. Since Jee could not be with Ursa, Zuko had ordered Kuo and Shen to guard her while they were busy. Zuko was relieved when Jet was not invited. The freedom fighter was Bumi’s honored guest, but not a trusted friend or ally.

The study was cluttered with many objects, disarrayed scrolls, and papers piled up everywhere. Bumi sat at his large chair before his untidy desk while Zuko and Iroh sat on the only other chairs in the room. Katara, Toph, and Aang sat on cushions. Out of respect for Iroh’s age, Aang had given the chair to the old firebender despite being the Avatar. Jee stood slightly behind his lord as they listened to the general’s report.

“How do you know it’s the same rebels?” Zuko asked.

“The aftermath shows evidence of both firebending and earthbending attacks,” the general responded quickly.

“King Kuei and I are trying to keep the identity of the rebels a secret for now,” Bumi spoke up as he scratched behind his large ear.

“Why?” Aang asked.

“We don’t want the people to start blaming and hating Fire Lord Zuko and cause problems for both our countries,” the old king explained.

Katara frowned as she turned to look at Zuko whose jaw was tightly clenched as he glared down at his balled hands.
“We’ll have meetings to discuss this further before every party,” Bumi continued in his booming voice.

“Every party?” Katara asked with a confused frown.

“People will start wondering why the Fire Lord is here so soon after the attacks,” he explained loudly, his green bulging eyes darting around the people looking at him as he grinned. “So I planned a welcoming and congratulating celebration for the newly married Fire Lord and his wife as an excuse, haha! There’ll be three parties during the week. The other days will be used so you can see the damage to the villages and see if you can find any clues about the rebels’ whereabouts that we may have missed.”

The young Fire Lord frowned. He did not think it right to have parties while others were suffering. As if reading his thoughts, Bumi spoke up again.

“I already sent help to those in need,” he explained, his usual boisterous voice more quiet and subdued, “They are being taken care of.”

Zuko sighed before he inclined his head in acceptance.

“We’ll talk later. The first party starts tomorrow, so you should all rest!” the old man boomed again. “I’ll have no party-poopers at my parties, alright? Haha!”

All except for Zuko stood up and made their way to the door. Katara stopped and turned around to wait for her husband.

“I need to ask King Bumi something,” Zuko explained.

Katara nodded before she followed the rest out of the room and closed the door. Bumi’s general bowed to them before he walked away. Jee bid them good night as he also walked away in search of Lady Ursa. Katara watched as Toph smirked in her direction before she moved away from Aang’s side to go talk to Iroh. Katara watched her go with a frown as she was left alone with the airbender before she understood that the small earthbender wanted her and Aang to have a talk.

“How are you?” Aang’s voice made her look back at him. “Is Zuko treating you well?”
“Yes, I’m happy,” she replied softly, afraid to say just how happy Zuko made her in order not to hurt Aang.

“That’s good,” the airbender replied with an awkward chuckle as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“How…how have you been?” she hesitantly asked as she wrung her hands together in worry.

A comforting smile appeared on Aang’s face as he reached out to grab one of her hands and give it a soft squeeze.

“Zuko and you don’t need to worry about me anymore, so enjoy your life together,” he told her truthfully. “I…I’ve moved on.”

He let go of her hand as they both look at Toph who was grinning at something Iroh was telling her.

“Toph,” Katara stated with a smile.

“Yeah,” Aang replied as he continued to stare at the rough yet pretty earthbender. Then he returned his attention to Katara as he continued, “Even though it was hard at first, and I thought I would never forget you, Toph was there to prove me wrong. These past few months I’ve been able to see what kind of woman Toph is without…”

“Without me in the way,” Katara softly finished for him when he paused.

The airbender gave her a small smile.

“As time passed I was able to see that my love for you was centered on familiarity and safety,” he explained carefully. “You were the first person I saw when I woke up after being frozen in the iceberg and you were the only person that understood me in a world that was no longer my own. You were kind, and comforting, and beautiful that I couldn’t stop myself from wanting you to be mine forever.”
Aang paused as he again looked up at Toph to see her laughing and Katara watched as his gray eyes soften.

“But with Toph, I realized that there could be more than that,” he confessed quietly.

The waterbender’s eyes widened at the implication of his words.

“So does that mean…?”

“Yeah,” Aang continued with a pleased sigh, “Before I realized it I fell in love with Toph.”

Katara smiled happily as she exclaimed, “That’s great!”

The young airbender blushed and shuffled his feet, though his smile did not disappear.

“It’s not easy,” he admitted quietly. “Toph and I are different and we sometimes butt heads, but I find that I like the challenge.” His face flushed even more deeply as he more softly said, “But there are times when she is almost gentle and soft… I really like those times.”

Katara laughed quietly at the blushing monk. She understood what he meant for she acted differently around others and acted differently when with Zuko. Zuko also had such a side when he was with her.

“I’m really happy for you, Aang. For you both,” she told him earnestly.

“Thanks, Katara,” he responded with a smile. “Although we were not meant to be, just know that you’ll always have a special place in my heart.”

Katara returned the smile. Although she did not love Aang that way she loved Zuko, she still considered the airbender an important person in her life. After all, if hadn’t been for Aang, she would have never left her tribe in order to save the world. She was glad to know that he did not hate her for choosing to be with Zuko.
“Finally! The awkward air is gone,” Toph’s blunt words made the two benders turn to see her walk toward them with a grin.

Katara and Aang laughed. Iroh smiled at them before he turned around and headed down the corridor.

“So now I don’t have to worry about my boyfriend trying to steal his ex,” the earthbender said with a grin.

“As if I’d let him,” Katara replied with a mocking sniff.

“More like as if Sparky would let him,” Toph corrected with a chuckle.

“You’re right. Zuko would track him down in order to save me and bring me back home,” the waterbender said amusedly.

“After he kicks Twinkletoes’ ass,” the green-eyed earthbender added with another chuckle.

“You girls do know I’m standing right here, right?” Aang interrupted with a frown as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, and?” Toph retorted with a raised eyebrow.

Aang opened his mouth before he closed it and shook his head. Well, at least they were having fun...even if it was at his expense.

“Do you wanna ride the mail slides?” Toph’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Yeah!” he replied excitedly before he grinned at the waterbender. “We’ll see you later, Katara.”

“You and Sparky have a good night,” Toph added before a wicked grin appeared on her porcelain face. “That’s if you and Zuko sleep at all.”
“Toph!” Katara exclaimed.

The earthbender laughed loudly at the embarrassed Fire Lady as she followed Aang down the hall.

Katara shook her head with a smile as she watched them go. Even if they had their differences, Aang and Toph were the same when it came to having fun. Her smile widened when she felt a warm and strong presence beside her and she glanced up to see Zuko also watching the other two leave.

“They seem happy,” he remarked coolly.

“They are,” Katara replied before she added with a grin, “They’re in love.”

Zuko looked down to smile at her.

“Much like us,” he said softly.

Katara smiled brightly at him.

“Yes,” she agreed before a small frown appeared on her face. “What did Bumi say?”

Zuko ran a hand over his hair and sighed.

“There hasn’t been another attack, but I’m not convinced that they have stopped or left,” he replied darkly.

“I hope they’re captured soon, so they won’t cause any more damage,” she said firmly.

“I hope so, too,” he replied, although he did not say that he thought it would not be that easy. He was not as optimistic or hopeful as his softhearted wife.
He reached for her hand and again tucked it under his arm to guide her to their guest room.

“We should head to our room, so we can be up for the party tomorrow,” he said in a blank tone.

“I’m not up for a party,” Katara replied with a sigh.

“Neither am I, but Bumi told me that the nobility of Omashu and the surrounding areas are eager to come tomorrow and celebrate our arrival,” he explained.

Katara sighed as they silently walked down the empty corridor.

---

The next day, King Bumi’s palace was flooded with noblemen and women who crowded around the Fire Lord, his Fire Lady, and the Avatar. Whenever there was talk about the attacks, Zuko came to realize that indeed they did not know who had done it and why. Zuko could not stop wondering why Jianguo was not revealing his identity and intentions. What could he be planning to do? The young Fire Lord mentally growled in frustration. He hated that he did not know what to expect and when.

He was distracted from his thoughts by his wife who leaned discreetly against him as if she could sense his anxiety. He responded by pressing back into her and he suppressed a smirk when he glanced down to see her lips curl into a small smile as she continued to listen to the group of women talking to her about idle things. With a mental sigh, Zuko returned his attention to the old nobleman who was trying to convince him that his products would be a good trade for the Fire Nation. Zuko was not interested, especially since he had more urgent things on his mind.

The nobleman finally seemed to sense the Fire Lord’s lack of interest and stopped talking. The old man took a sip of his wine and cleared his throat as he stood there awkwardly for a moment before he bowed and quickly scurried away.

Zuko did not even notice since his attention was once again caught by Jet. The freedom fighter, dressed in a more refined warrior outfit, was standing across the room from them surrounded by a large group of young women. Even though he was among so many coquettish females, his dark eyes kept fixing upon Katara, as they had been ever since she and Zuko had appeared for the banquet. Zuko did not fear that Katara would fall for Jet’s charms—after all, he made sure to keep her well satisfied—but he hated that the bastard was even trying to seduce his wife.

As if feeling his stare on him, Jet glanced away from watching Katara and looked at the firebender
with a smirk. Raising a cool eyebrow, Zuko deliberately grazed his hand on his wife’s own. Katara looked up at him and Zuko glanced down at her to give her a small smile. Oblivious to the male posturing going on around her, Katara smiled gently at him as she wrapped her arm around his and continued her conversation with the women. Zuko looked back at Jet and was unable to curb his smug smirk. Jet narrowed his eyes as he gulped down his drink before storming away. The women giggled as they followed him.

“I can practically feel your smugness from here,” Toph’s amused voice reached his ears.

Zuko turned to see Toph and Aang, both dressed formally, grinning up at him. He gave a shrug as a response as he took a sip of his wine. Katara was still distracted by the women’s conversation.

“Hopefully he got the message that what he hopes for will never come true,” he replied coolly.

“I doubt it,” Toph snorted.

“Jet isn’t that bad of a guy,” Aang spoke up, as always trying to keep the peace. “He wouldn’t fool around with a married woman.”

“Unless that married woman is Sugar Queen,” the earthbender retorted with another snort.

Zuko narrowed his eyes as he ominously said, “I’ll break his neck if he even tries.”

Aang and Toph shivered at the darkness of his tone. They had no doubt that Zuko would do it if Jet ever tried to do anything to Katara.

“What are you guys talking about?” Katara’s voice made them stiffen.

“Nothing,” the three said in unison.

Zuko cleared his throat and Aang and Toph smiled innocently at the waterbender. Katara stared at them suspiciously, but she was distracted when she felt Zuko place his hand over hers.
“Would you like to dance, my lady?” he asked her with a small smile.

“I would love to, my lord,” she quickly responded. She knew Zuko did not like to dance if he could help it, so she took advantage whenever he was in the mood. She had a feeling he was trying to sidetrack her, but for the moment, she decided to let him try.

Excusing them from the group, Zuko led her to the dance floor where other couples were already dancing. Aang and Toph followed behind them with smiles. Katara noticed that Lady Ursa and Jee were already dancing. She grinned when she saw that Iroh was dancing with a pretty woman. Zuko brought her before him and they bowed at each other before he took her into his arms and led her in the dance. As they moved around the dance floor, they caught the low murmurs of how great an image they made and Katara looked up to smile happily at him. Although he had not said anything nor smiled, Katara knew he was pleased with the murmurs as he brought her closer to him and stared intensely into her eyes.

Once the second dance was finished, they paused and walked away even as a few people called for them to continue. Katara suppressed a laugh when Zuko cringed at the exaggerated praise. They walked back to the banquet table to grab something to drink. Katara smiled as Zuko handed her a cup. They stood by each other in comfortable silence as they watched the other dancers.

“Hello, Zuko,” they heard a low feminine voice greet from behind them.

The couple stiffened at the familiar voice. They turned around to see Mai and her family standing silently beside her. Katara tensed at the glares they were giving her before she relaxed slightly when Zuko touched her arm. They bowed to Zuko, but completely ignored the new Fire Lady.

“We hope you are enjoying your stay in Omashu, my lord,” Mai’s father, the ambassador to Omashu, began politely.

Zuko narrowed his eyes angrily at them. If it wasn’t because the nobleman was a good ambassador, he would have imprisoned him for the insult to his waterbender.

“Thanks to my wife I am enjoying myself very much,” the young Fire Lord deliberately replied.

He mentally smirked when they stiffened at his words. He grabbed Katara’s hand and placed it over his arm as he gently pulled her a bit forward.
“It seems you did not see her before,” he continued as he glared at them, “But now that you do, why don’t you properly greet your new Fire Lady?”

Katara glanced up briefly at Zuko to see him glaring at the arrogant family before she looked back at them to see them reluctantly give her a small bow. The waterbender narrowed her own eyes when she noticed that Mai had not taken her eyes off Zuko.

“We hope you enjoy your stay as well…Fire Lady Katara,” the ambassador said as he gave her a rigid smile.

“Thank you,” she replied graciously as she stared levelly at them. “As my husband just said, we are enjoying ourselves immensely.”

“I am greatly impressed,” Mai’s mother spoke up in a fake, sugary tone. “Even though you are a commoner from the Water Tribes, you really do act the part of a lady very well.”

Katara felt Zuko stiffen at the same time she did at the insult, but she squeezed his arm. She watched Mai smirk, but Katara ignored her as she returned the fake smile to the older noblewoman.

“A woman does not have to be a noblewoman to be a lady,” Katara replied sweetly before she glanced at Mai then back at the older woman as she continued, “I’m sure you’ve noticed that there are many noblewomen who are no ladies at all.”

The woman gasped at the veiled insult and Mai turned a hateful glare at the waterbender smiling innocently at them. Zuko mentally smiled in pride at Katara’s quick retort.

“Ah, yes, that may be true,” the nobleman spoke up as he grasped his angry wife’s arm to keep her silent when the Fire Lord narrowed his eyes at her. “We were just really surprised a Water Tribeswoman is able to handle Fire Nation responsibilities so well, but we still believe a Fire Nation noblewoman could have been better.”

Zuko stiffened again as his glare intensified. He knew the man meant Mai could have been better, but Zuko thought otherwise. Katara actually cared for the betterment of the people. He was tired at the insults they were throwing at his wife and he would make them regret their words. He moved a step forward with a low growl, but paused when he felt Katara again squeeze his arm as she also took another step forward.
“Although I am a Water Tribeswoman and a waterbender, the Fire Nation people seem to like me very much for everything I’ve done for them,” she replied coolly before she stared straight into Mai’s cold, dark eyes, “which I cannot say for other Fire Nation noblewomen.”

A smirk appeared on Zuko’s lips at their shocked and indignant expressions before he looked down at his waterbender.

“It is not only the people who love you, wife,” he began in a slightly softer tone, “You have pleased me well.”

Katara looked up to smile warmly at his words.

“How could I forget, husband?” she responded happily, “You remind me all the time.”

Mai, who had been silent the whole time as she enjoyed her parents insulting the water wench, looked at the couple angrily. The affectionate way they called each other wife and husband, the loving way the waterbender was looking at Zuko and the soft look in his eyes as he stared down at her made Mai feel sick. This was not how she had imagined it would go when she met Zuko again. She had been expecting to see Zuko regretting marrying the waterbender!

With a loud snap of her fan, Mai turned around and angrily walked away without saying a word. With an indignant sniff and a small bow, her mother hurried after her. Her father bowed stiffly before following behind them. Katara let out a sigh as she relaxed.

“That was pretty mean of us,” she mused.

“Not when it’s the truth,” Zuko replied with a shrug. “Besides, they started with the insults.”

“And it’s not like it’s anything I haven’t heard before,” she added with a smirk. “It’s kind of fun when I prove them wrong.”

“You defended yourself wonderfully,” he congratulated warmly. “I’m proud.”

Katara laughed softly as she took a sip of the drink Zuko had handed to her before they were
interrupted. With a pleased sigh, she looked at him with a bright smile once she remembered something he said.

“You do realize you practically told them you love me, right?” she remarked.

Zuko smiled down at her as he replied, “I want everybody to know it.”

Katara smiled at him before she leaned closer to him. Zuko closed his eyes briefly as he inhaled her sweet scent.

“When you said I pleased you well, do you mean in every way?” she whispered with a soft purr.

“Oh, yes, you please me in every way,” he growled out huskily.

His lips curled into a smirk and his golden eyes darkened when Katara giggled and her cheeks flushed a soft red. His eyes darted to her smiling lips and he watched as she deliberately ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. He again looked into her eyes to see the blue depths darken slightly in arousal. Another group of women suddenly surrounded them, breaking the electrifying spell between them, and he quickly straightened with a scowl. They began to coo over Katara’s ring and necklace and the wristband he wore. He was grateful when a minute later a servant appeared at his side to tell him King Bumi wished to speak to him.

“Take me to him now,” Zuko immediately ordered.

He turned to Katara to tell her he would see her later before he turned away and followed the servant. Katara suppressed an amused smirk as he escaped the flock of chattering women, though she did not appreciate that she was the one stuck with them. A few minutes passed as the women continued talking to her—mostly commenting on how lucky she was for having such an attractive man as the Fire Lord as her husband. Katara was just wondering what was taking Zuko so long to return to her when she suddenly felt someone stand close behind her.

“Good afternoon, Lady Katara,” she heard a masculine voice greet smoothly behind her.

The waterbender stiffened as she turned around to see Jet smirking rakishly at her. She took a step to the side in order not to be standing so close to him. The women stopped talking as they stared at the man and the Fire Lady in wonder.
“You look gorgeous,” he praised charmingly.

“Thank you,” she replied politely but tersely.

She did not want to speak to him, especially after what he tried to do to her the last time they were in Ba Sing Se. However, she could not be rude to him in front of everybody or else they would start suspecting that something was going on between them.

“How have you been?” he asked with the same smirk on his face.

“Fine, thank you,” she responded curtly.

Her aloof attitude did not seem to faze him, instead, it made his arrogant smirk widen. He was enjoying the challenge.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked as he raised his hand for her to take.

Katara did not even glance down at his hand as she declined his offer.

“I’m too tired after dancing so much with my husband,” she added pointedly.

“Just one dance,” he insisted as he took a step closer to her.

“Are you deaf?” the Fire Lord’s hard voice was heard and the women immediately parted to allow him to make his way to the waterbender. “My wife told you she doesn’t want to dance with you.”

Jet pulled back his arm as he glared at the firebender before his smirk reappeared. The wheat stalk he usually chewed on was not present at the moment.

“I’ll leave her alone…for now,” he said.
Zuko glowered heatedly at him before he looked down when he felt Katara grab his arm as she leaned against him.

“I suddenly feel energized. Can you take me to dance, my lord?” she intentionally asked with a bright smile she had denied Jet.

“Of course. Anything my lady desires,” Zuko responded as he turned them around and led them back to the dance floor without looking back at the freedom fighter.

As they again twirled around the dance floor, they could feel Jet staring at them. Zuko maneuvered them to the center so the other dancing couples could form a sort of cover. Once satisfied, he pulled Katara close to him.

“Thank you for standing with me, Katara,” he said quietly.

Katara looked up to gaze into his piercing, golden eyes.

“Where else would I be, Zuko, but at your side?” she replied softly.

Zuko smiled as he raised a hand and gently caressed her cheek before he pulled her closer.

“Promise me you will always be by my side,” he whispered fervently.

Raising her hand, Katara placed it over his and leaned into his warm touch.

“Always,” she promised ardently, “For as long as you want me.”

Sliding his hand from her cheek down to gently grasp her chin, Zuko leaned down and softly brushed his lips against hers before pulling away to stare intensely into her cobalt orbs.

“Forever,” he breathed, “I want you forever.”
“Then you will have me for forever,” she responded with a soft smile.

Katara felt him relaxed. They danced in comfortable silence for a moment, basking in each other’s presence, before Zuko spoke again.

“If I ripped his eyes out, Jet would finally stop staring at you,” he growled out.

“He can look, but it’s you who can touch,” she responded softly as she pressed herself closer to him.

“Hm, you’re right,” he agreed with a small smirk. “And I can do more than just touch you,” he added as he lifted her slightly so that her center was pressed tightly to his loins and spun them around in the dance.

Katara moaned softly before he brought her back down to her feet. She looked into his smoldering golden eyes and smiled.

“I wish you could do so at this moment,” she purred softly.

“And I will,” he stated as he brought them to a halt, tucked her hand under his arm, and quickly led them toward the doors.

“Zuko! It’s still too early to leave!” Katara whispered urgently. “People will wonder what we’re doing, if they can’t already guess!”

“So?” he asked with a raised eyebrow. “We’re married. If we want to indulge in each other we can and there’s nothing they can say or do about it.”

A small grin appeared on the brunette’s lips.

“Let’s go,” she said eagerly as she quickened her steps.
“Agni, how I love you,” he growled lowly into her ear.

She let out a soft laugh as they exited the banquet hall and hurriedly made their way to their guest room. They did not notice that two sets of eyes watched them leave.

With a frown, Jet looked away from the retreating royal couple and smiled charmingly at the group of young women who had gathered around him again. Mai, on the other hand, did not look away from the door as she clenched the fan in her hands so tightly that it snapped. She glanced down to see a thin red line run across her fingers before she clenched her bleeding hand.

With a grim expression on his face, the Fire Lord observed the destruction before him with sharp eyes. The last village that was attacked had been completely destroyed, and according to what Bumi told him, there were no survivors. The attack happened a few weeks ago and Bumi had ordered his soldiers to bury the dead and then held a burial ceremony for their souls.

Zuko’s soldiers, as well as Bumi’s, were searching more carefully to see if they could find any clues from the attackers. Jet and his freedom fighters were also there and Zuko would raise an irritated eyebrow every time Jet smirked in his direction.

Zuko felt his anger rise as he made his way through the ruined village. Every single structure and house had been burned to the ground, the fields where the villagers grew their crops were now a charred wasteland, and the rotting corpses of animals were still scattered about. Once in a while he would catch the sight of household items and children’s toys. He paused every time he saw a ripped article of clothing and his hands clenched tightly as his rage rose. Bumi’s general had told him that they found the bodies of many women lying everywhere, their clothes ripped open, their throats slit, and their legs spread apart to show the evidence of what their rapists had done to them.

These people had done nothing wrong, their homes were destroyed and their lives were taken from them just for the greed and revenge of a few men. It was a warning aimed toward Zuko. He felt his guilt rise once more and he closed his eyes to bear it before he snapped them open again and straightened himself. The villagers’ deaths were horrible and unfortunate, but he knew that he could not give in to Jianguo’s demands. He could not hand the throne over to Ozai for that would only lead to more pain and destruction. He would not let that happen.

I’ll make Jianguo and his men regret all the damage they have done, he vowed darkly as he balled his hands into tight fists.

He turned around and headed toward Bumi and Iroh, who were conversing quietly off to the side, as the rest of the men continued in their search. Both old men stopped talking when they sensed
someone approaching, but they continued when they saw it was the young Fire Lord.

“I already sent messages of warning to the other members of the White Lotus,” the old king said, his expression unusually grim. “Hopefully someone can find the bastards.”

“I already did that when the rebels first attacked, remember?” Iroh reminded him with a frown, “They haven’t found anything. The rebels are just too cautious.”

“Maybe this time we’ll have luck,” Bumi remarked as he crossed his arms over his broad chest, his large bushy eyebrows bunched together. “They’re bound to make a mistake.”

“I hope so,” the old firebender responded with a sigh as he slipped his hands into his long sleeves, “But I have a feeling it won’t be that easy.”

Bumi grumbled under his breath, but nodded his head in acknowledgement.

“I’ll send help to rebuild the village,” Zuko spoke up after a moment of silence.

“No need, young Fire Lord,” Bumi spoke up as he waved his large wrinkly hand aside, “I have everything taken care of.”

“But—”

“I just want the bastards captured so they can pay for their crimes and before they cause even more damage,” the old man interrupted firmly, his large nostrils flaring.

Zuko frowned deeply before he inclined his head in acceptance.

“Very well,” he reluctantly said.

“We’ll look at the other villages in two days,” Bumi added in his usual loud voice.
The young firebender gave a nod before he looked at their surroundings. He watched as the men began to stack the charred piles of wood to one side to begin cleaning up. He saw the freedom fighters doing the same and he mentally agreed that they were of some help. He frowned, however, when he did not spot Jet and his eyes darted around. Now that he thought about it, he had not seen the insufferable freedom fighter in a while.

Feeling a sense of urgency, Zuko turned around and began walking away.

“Where are you going, Nephew?” Iroh called after him.

“I’m heading back to the palace,” was his only response as he strode to where their mounts were grazing together.

Zuko grabbed his komodo rhino’s reigns and led it away from the others before he swung onto the animal’s back. He pressed his heels into its sides and the animal quickly moved forward before it switched into a gallop when Zuko spurred it on. At the sound of pursuit, he glanced back with a flaming fist only to extinguish it when he saw that it was Shen and Kuo trying to catch up to him. He turned back around and narrowed his eyes. If he found Jet trying anything with Katara, he would make him regret it.

Katara laughed along with the other women as Toph finished telling them about a funny incident that occurred during her travels. The waterbender along with Ursa and Toph were in one of the sitting rooms of the Omashu Palace with a group of noblewomen. Unlike the fake flattery of the Fire Nation noblewomen, Katara found herself enjoying the carefree chatter of these women since they had nothing against her.

Her light mood ended, however, when Mai and her mother entered the room and sat down with them. The younger woman raised a thin hand and a servant immediately rushed over to serve the ambassador’s daughter and wife tea. Katara watched as Mai raised her teacup and took a small sip as she darkly stared at her over the rim.

The other women cleared their throats uncomfortably as they covertly looked between the ambassador’s daughter and the waterbender, one the Fire Lord’s former companion and the other his wife. Katara raised her own cup and took a delicate sip before she continued the conversation to indicate she was not intimidated. She felt confident of Zuko’s love for her and that was what mattered. Ursa and Toph immediately responded to Katara and soon the other women joined the conversation.

“I’ve never been to the Fire Nation, but I heard the palace is very beautiful. Is it more beautiful than
“the Earth King’s palace?” one of the younger women asked the Fire Lady.

Before Katara could answer, Mai’s mother spoke up with a sweet laugh.

“Oh, it is!” she exclaimed before she tittered as she looked at her silent daughter. “Mai can attest to that. She was living in the Fire Lord’s palace after all.”

Katara clenched her hands around her teacup as she glared at the woman for bringing up that subject.

“Oh, but my daughter-in-law knows much more about the palace,” Ursa spoke with a smile as she glanced at the waterbender before she looked at the other women. “My son personally gave her a tour of the entire palace and the grounds so she could become more familiar of her new home.”

Toph let out a chortle and the other women laughed uncertainly at the small glare the older woman sent Lady Ursa, who ignored it as she took a small bite of a pastry. The conversation started again. When some of the women began to describe the gifts their husbands or suitors had given them, the ambassador’s wife spoke up again.

“The Fire Lord gave my daughter a beautiful bracelet last summer,” she said before she grabbed Mai’s arm and raised it to show everyone the golden piece of jewelry.

Katara again felt her irritation flare. Why were they still bringing up the past? It was not like it would change anything. She was still married to Zuko. The women murmured in confusion before Toph’s snort interrupted them.

“You still have that thing even though he broke up with you?” she asked bluntly as she tilted her head in Mai’s direction. “That’s kinda pathetic.”

Toph ignored the shocked gasp that came from Mai’s mother and smirked when she felt the younger woman’s heartbeat quicken in anger.

“And if you wanna compare, that thing is nothing compared to what Fire Lord Zuko has given to Fire Lady Katara,” the small earthbender added as she began to count on her fingers, “There’s that silver rose hairpin, and the wedding ring and betrothal necklace, and the waterskin to name a few.”
“Oh, and my son also modified the Royal Palace Garden and remodeled the Fire Lady’s bedchamber to resemble a Water Tribe room as wedding gifts for Lady Katara,” Ursa spoke up with another smile before she giggled as she nudged Katara in the arm, “Though the Fire Lady’s chamber is more of a recreational room since my son only allows Katara to sleep in the Fire Lord’s bedchambers with him.”

The waterbender would have blushed at the women’s giggles and suggestive remarks had she not noticed the shocked expression on Mai’s usually blank face. Katara knew it was mean, but she could not help but smirk smugly at the thought that she was the only woman Zuko had allowed to share his room and sleep in his bed—a bed where they have indulged in each other more than they could count. Mai’s shocked look vanished quickly to be replaced with a dark glare as she slowly opened her fan. Katara moved her hand to touch her new waterskin as she raised an eyebrow. Mai closed her fan with a snap and Katara calmly moved her hand from her waterskin.

The conversation again switched to other topics, but just as before Mai’s mother always found a way to bring up Mai’s past relationship with Zuko. Ursa and Toph, however, always had something to say to make them see that Zuko cared more for Katara and remind them it was she he was married to. After yet another remark from the older noblewoman, Toph finally had enough and loudly banged her teacup on the low table. Startled, the women jumped as they all turned to look at the blind earthbender.

“Zuko married the woman he wants and loves,” she bluntly stated, “He was with Lady Doom and Gloom over there for four years, but he never asked her to marry him. But then he was reunited with Katara and a few months later he was desperate to marry her. He was even willing to defy the Royal Council in order to have her! Do I have to keep bringing more things up to prove that Zuko is madly in love with Katara to get you to shut the hell up?”

Mai’s dark eyes widened at the earthbender’s frankness while her mother spluttered and gaped like a fish out of water. The other women suppressed snickers since they never got along well with the two haughty noblewomen. Ursa hid a smile behind her hand before she delicately cleared her throat.

“Well, now that Lady Toph has settled that matter, why don’t we talk about the upcoming party tomorrow?” she asked.

As the women immediately began to chatter about the upcoming event, Katara quietly excused herself and stood up. She ignored the glares coming from the two Fire Nation women as she walked toward the doors. She needed fresh air and some peace and quiet after having to listen to Mai’s mother bringing up Zuko’s past relationship. She was getting better at accepting his past, but that did not mean she wanted to keep being reminded about it. A few minutes later, she stepped into one of the gardens of the palace and let out a sigh at the soft breeze that greeted her.
She made her way through the garden, passing trees and flowers, before she spotted a stone bench. She sat down and rearranged her dress around her legs as she observed her surroundings. She was proud to admit that none of the gardens she had seen so far could compare to the splendor of the Royal Palace Garden that Zuko had renovated for her. She raised her head to look at the sky that was spotted with a few clouds and a group of birds flying by. She could see that the sun was already descending and she frowned slightly.

Zuko, King Bumi, and the rest had left early in the morning toward one of the destroyed villages. At first, she had been a bit upset that she was not able to accompany them, but as a proper Fire Lady she could not act as impulsively as she used to, or go around traipsing in the countryside. That was one of the negative sides of being Fire Lady. But she did not mind it as much as she thought she would, and although she could not give her opinion as freely as before because of the old advisors’ views on women participating in politics, Zuko always went to her for advice and opinions on certain matters. She appreciated that. As she stared at the sun again, she wondered how Zuko was doing at the moment and if they found anything.

“You and Zuko seem happy,” Mai’s monotonous voice interrupted her thoughts.

The waterbender glanced behind her to see the tall noblewoman staring blankly down at her. Katara stood up and turned around to face Mai with a suspicious frown.

“We are happy,” she responded simply.

“I wonder how long that will last,” the dark-haired woman coolly remarked.

“What do you mean?” Katara asked with a raised eyebrow.

Mai shrugged as she walked around the bench. Katara discreetly moved her hand toward her waterskin as Mai approached her, but the older woman only passed her by to cut a flower from a bush. Katara watched her warily as Mai twirled the small flower between her long fingers as she stared at it with a bored expression.

“Everything is great now because you are newly married,” Mai began as she began to slowly pluck the flower’s petals, “But after a few years, once both of you realize how different you are, you will only resent each other.”

After she said that, Mai crushed the flower in her hand before she opened her palm to let the
destroyed flower fall to the ground. Katara did not allow the woman’s actions or words faze her.

When Mai turned around to see the waterbender’s reaction, she was disappointed at her unperturbed expression.

“Zuko and I aren’t as different as people think,” Katara replied smoothly, “And the differences we do have are what keep us interested in each other.”

Mai let out a quiet snort as she said, “Only time will tell.”

“And you’ll be there waiting?” Katara retorted.

“Yes,” Mai responded bluntly, “I still believe Zuko will come back to me.”

Katara almost felt bad for her delusion. Could she not see her hopes would never come true?

“A marriage once made cannot be so easily dissolved,” Katara reminded her.

“I know that,” the noblewoman snapped before she smirked, “But that doesn’t mean I can’t have Zuko again.”

The waterbender felt her temper flare at her insistence.

“Why can’t you leave Zuko alone?” Katara asked with an exasperated growl, “He’s married! To me! Why don’t you find an available man who does want you?”

Mai narrowed her eyes at the barb and clenched her hands.

“I will never give up on Zuko,” she hissed, “He was mine first!”

The blue-eyed woman scoffed.
“We all know that he was never yours,” the waterbender said firmly.

Mai took a step back as if she had been slapped.

“He’s mine,” Katara continued with a smug smirk.

The noblewoman balled her hands as she glared at the confident brunette.

“Enjoy your happiness for now, water peasant,” she hissed, “before Zuko begins to receive propositions for concubines.”

“Zuko would never take a concubine,” Katara responded confidently.

Mai interrupted her with a harsh laugh and Katara could only stare at her with a frown.

“Zuko is a man, and men can never remain faithful to one woman.”

“If you believe that’s true, then why do you want Zuko so badly?” Katara asked.

“I wanted to marry him for years and have the extra bonus of being Fire Lady,” Mai confessed as she stared down at her nails before she looked back at the waterbender, “My love for him would forgive him for any concubines he takes. After all, it is the way things are in Fire Nation culture.”

“That may be so, but Zuko respects me and my culture,” Katara responded firmly, “He would never dishonor me by taking other women.”

Another harsh laugh interrupted the waterbender.

“You’re so naïve,” Mai spat cruelly, “Stupid and naïve.”
The waterbender narrowed her eyes as she straightened herself out.

“You may have anticipated Zuko taking other lovers because he doesn’t love you,” Katara began and continued even when Mai gasped, “but I am confident in his love for me. I know he will never be unfaithful to me.”

Mai narrowed her dark eyes and again clenched her hands at her sides.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” she hissed, “And once he gets bored of you, I will be there to take him back as his royal concubine. It will be me whom he will come to at night.”

“Just keep telling yourself that,” Katara irately responded, “It will never happen.”

Katara let go of her irritation as a thought sprang in her head. She knew what she could say to make the jealous noblewoman back off from Zuko as well as make her see she didn’t have the smallest chance of capturing his interest. She did not want to cruel, but she needed to do something to get it through Mai. Even if she didn’t like it.

Mai’s eyes narrowed when she watched a self-satisfied smirk curl the waterbender’s lips.

“After all, I make sure to keep Zuko well pleased and satisfied in bed,” Katara added, her tone confident. “You have no idea how often he comes to me, sometimes he can’t even wait for us to be in our room so he can have me. He’s like an insatiable animal in his quest to take me. Our lovemaking is so passionate and intense that it sometimes lasts long into the night and even continues early in the morning when we wake up. He can be both rough and dominating but he is also gentle and loving. And the way he groans or roars my name when he succumbs to the immense pleasure I give him...La, it makes my body warm up just thinking about it.”

Katara paused to see the dark expression on the noblewoman’s usually blank face and she raised an eyebrow almost mockingly. She no longer felt any sympathy for the woman.

“Can you say that was the case when you were together?” the waterbender asked.

Mai felt her body shake with her anger and she balled her hands into fists since they both knew the answer. If Katara asked such a question, Zuko must have told her about their sexual exploits. She hated the thought of Zuko being with the water wench in such a way. She had dreamed of him being
that way with her, but when he wasn’t, she had assumed it was just his way. But now she was being
told he was a passionate and incredible lover when he was with the simple waterbender. She wanted
that for herself and she would get it one way or the other!

“We will see who is right,” Mai hissed. With a raised chin, she turned around and walked away.

Katara angrily watched her go. The audacity of these people! In her tribe, if a man or woman dared
to get involved with a married person, they were shamed and made an outcast as much as the
adulterer was. But in the Fire Nation, adultery was almost expected, at least in the noble class. But
she was confident that Zuko would never disrespect or hurt her by taking concubines or having
affairs with other women. He had promised her and he had too much honor to break his promise.

But more importantly, he loved her. And despite what Mai said, Katara would do anything to keep
them as happy as they were now. She relaxed at her thoughts and let out a long sigh. She could not
wait for Zuko to return so they could sneak into their room to indulge in each other and bask in the
love they had for one another.

Mood uplifted, Katara smiled as she bent down to pluck one of the flowers from the same bush. She
brought the flower to her nose and inhaled softly only to stiffen when she heard a low masculine
voice whisper in her ear.

“Hello, gorgeous.”
Recurring Misfortunes

Chapter Notes

Warning: There is mention of violence in this chapter.

Quick footsteps echoed through the palace corridor as the Fire Lord went in search of his wife. A servant had led him to the sitting room where the women had been gathered, only to be told that Katara had gone to the garden. He had briefly noticed Mai’s mother, but he paid her no heed nor spared a thought to Mai as he left the room without another word and strode quickly toward the gardens. All he could think about was finding Katara. He had inquired about Jet’s whereabouts as soon as he arrived at the palace, but no one had seen him. He could not shake off the feeling that Jet might be trying to get close to Katara when Zuko was not there. If Jet tried anything, he would make the scoundrel regret it.

The raven-haired lord finally stepped outside into the garden and quickly began to search the place for his waterbender. Just when he was about to give up and go search another of the palace gardens, he spotted her standing alone beside a stone bench. He let out a relieved breath to see she was all right before he shook his head at his anxiety. It seemed being married had made him more paranoid when it came to her.

With a smirk, Zuko quietly hid behind some trees and bushes in order to observe her without her being aware of his perusal. In the shadows, his eyes roamed her entire body and caressed every curve before he glanced back to her lovely face. Ah, his enticing water nymph, how she continued to bewitch him.

He wondered what she was thinking since she seemed pensive and tense, making him frown slightly. But then she smiled as she bent down to pick up a flower and inhaled its scent. He was about to take a step forward only to stiffen at the same time she did when Jet stepped up behind her and whispered in her ear.

The firebender balled his hands in anger, but paused when he saw Katara quickly move away from Jet and turn around to glare at him.

“You can’t act so familiar with me, Jet,” Zuko heard her admonished him curtly.

“Why not?” Jet asked her unrepentantly. “We’ve known each other for years. We’re friends.”
“That’s it,” Katara said firmly. “We’re just friends. So you should treat me as such.”

Zuko smirked as he again made to step out of the shadows only to freeze at what Jet said next.

“What if I want to be more than just friends?” he asked her huskily.

The young Fire Lord growled as he prepared himself to defend Katara, but he decided to wait and see how Katara handled the situation before he made a scene with his overprotectiveness and possessiveness. He knew Katara could defend herself against the freedom fighter. Maybe she could finally put Jet in his place. Zuko watched as his waterbender crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her blue eyes.

“If you keep acting like that, then we won’t even be friends,” she told him firmly.

“It doesn’t need to come to that,” Jet replied with a frown.

“If you keep propositioning me, then it will,” Katara responded with a raised eyebrow before she added, “Especially after what you tried to do in Ba Sing Se last fall.”

Jet winced at the reminder before he frowned again.

“You have no idea how sorry I am for acting like that,” he told her sincerely, “I just wanted you to want me. But I never would have hurt you. I swear!”

Zuko let out a mental snort.

“Well, I made sure of that,” the waterbender said bluntly.

She smirked when Jet winced and subtly covered his groin at the memory.

“Luckily Zuko arrived to stop you before I did any more damage,” Katara added.
Jet pressed his lips tightly together at the reminder and his dark brown eyes flashed.

“If the firebender hadn’t intervened, you would’ve been mine by now,” he growled out.

Hiding behind the cover of the trees, Zuko gritted his teeth at his words.

“That’s not likely,” Katara spoke up with a scoff before she asked, “Why do you keep bothering me? I saw the group of women that were following you during the party. Why don’t you bother one of them?”

“I don’t want them,” Jet replied frankly before he huskily added, “I want you.”

“But why?” Katara exasperatedly asked.

“How could I not want you?” he asked, “You’re smart and gentle and kind…”

A smile appeared on the young man’s face as he began to slowly circle the waterbender. Katara stiffened since she could feel his intense stare on her body.

Silently, Zuko watched Jet with wary eyes.

“And most of all you’re beautiful,” Jet continued throatily, “Why wouldn’t I want a woman like you?”

Katara let out a soft snort. Did he really think that she would fall into his arms and betray Zuko because of some flattery?

“You should accept that you will never have me,” she spoke up without acknowledging his words, “Not only am I not interested in you, but I’m married.”

“So?” Jet responded with a shrug before he smirked. “You could learn to love me once you give me
a chance.”

Zuko clenched his jaw in anger at Jet’s audacity.

*How dare he proposition my wife to have an affair with him?! Katara is mine!* he mentally growled, but he paused when Katara stumped her foot in irritation.

“Are you even listening to me?!” she hissed. “I said I’m a married woman!”

“Is that supposed to stop me from wanting you?” Jet asked mockingly. “Besides, didn’t you hear Mai?”

Katara’s eyes widened before she narrowed them.

“You were listening?” she asked him angrily.

“Yeah,” the rogue confessed with a nonchalant shrug. “And I think she was right in what she said.”

Zuko wondered what Mai had told Katara as he saw his wife stiffen.

“If the firebender can take concubines, why can’t you have your own lovers?” Jet asked logically.

The Fire Lord’s eyes widened. What was going on?

“Zuko will never do that and I will never dishonor my marriage vows by taking lovers,” she told him definitely before she added icily, “especially you.”

Zuko felt himself relax and he smiled in approval at the fact that Katara knew him so well before he smirked triumphantly at her rejection of the annoying freedom fighter. Zuko tensed and growled lowly when the bastard took a step closer to Katara.
“You shouldn’t say that until you try it,” Jet told her smoothly, cajolingly, “Maybe you’d like being with me so much you’d never return to the firebender’s bed.”

“That won’t happen,” the blue-eyed woman replied bluntly before she turned to walk away, an obvious sign of dismissal.

She gasped angrily when she felt him grab her arm and pull her back to his chest.

“We should test that theory right now,” he whispered huskily in her ear.

Enraged, Zuko moved to throw the bastard away from his wife, but Katara beat him to it as she wrenched her herself away and slapped Jet across his face. Jet’s head snapped to the side before he slowly turned back to frown at her.

“Don’t touch me,” she gritted out angrily. “Stop harassing me, Jet. I will never be with you and I will never be unfaithful to Zuko.”

Jet touched his stinging cheek as his frown deepened.

“But why not?” he insisted.

“I’m no whore that eagerly jumps into any man’s bed,” she firmly stated, “But more importantly I love Zuko and he’s the only man I’ll ever want. He satisfies me greatly in everything. No man can compare to him.”

A smug smirk curled Zuko’s lips at his waterbender’s words. He was glad he had not intervened. Watching Jet being repeatedly rejected was more entertaining.

Jet clenched his jaw and balled his hands into fists. If that stupid, scarred firebender had not intervened between them in Ba Sing Se, Katara would have been his. She would be saying the same things as she was now, but it would be him she would be talking about and not the Fire Lord. He got so pissed off when he heard Katara tell Mai how much she and Zuko enjoyed each other in bed. The thought of the scarred Fire Lord touching and loving Katara made his blood boil. And the thought that Katara actually enjoyed it only increased his anger.
After all these years he could not stop thinking about and longing for her. Sure he had bedded many women during those years. He had even had a few trysts with a few noblewomen during the party the previous day. One of those noblewomen had been Lady Mai, who had enticed him into one of the empty guest rooms after asking him if he wanted to help her separate the royal couple. After discussing ways they could achieve what they both wanted, they had tumbled onto the bed. He had realized that she was desperate for sex and he indulged her twice, though he quickly found out why the firebender had gotten tired of her. He had wondered if after a few lessons, he could help Mai become a better bed partner. A few hours later, he was again crying his release with a different woman. But Katara was the only one he wanted as a lifelong companion, and if she wanted it, even a wife. Could she not see how much she meant to him? Why was she so loyal to such a cold bastard like the Fire Lord?

“You say that now,” he finally replied, “But you’ll change your mind once you see that your dear husband is like any other man.”

“I’m tired of listening to you, Jet,” Katara interrupted him coldly. “Leave me alone.”

She moved to turn away, but Jet’s arms shot out and he pulled her close to him just as he bent down to kiss her. With an indignant gasp, Katara turned her head sideways and raised an ice-covered hand to strike his face at the same time she felt him being pulled away from her. Confused, she looked back only to gasp again when she saw Zuko standing before her as he glared down at Jet, who was lying on the ground.

“Zuko,” she called his name in surprise.

“If you try to touch my wife again, I’ll kill you,” Zuko vowed with a growl.

Jet scoffed loudly as he picked himself off the ground and dusted his clothes as he glared at the Fire Lord standing protectively in front of the blue-eyed woman.

“I ain’t afraid of you,” he spat.

“You should be,” Zuko replied in a deceptively calm tone.

Katara shivered at the darkness of his threat. She hoped he was not angry with her at catching her and Jet in such a situation when it wasn’t her fault. If Zuko had not arrived, she could have put Jet in his place without her husband finding out. However, now that he was here, Zuko would do anything
to protect her, especially since he greatly disliked the freedom fighter. Katara sighed as the ice around her hand melted and she threw the liquid into the bushes.

“Leave Katara alone or else,” the golden-eyed male warned.

“What? Are you afraid that she’ll finally decide to be with a real man?” Jet asked with a smirk.

Eyes flashing in indignation, Katara opened her mouth to retort, but Zuko beat her to it as he let out a mocking laugh. Jet glared angrily at him.

“Katara is an honorable woman,” Zuko told him firmly. “She will never betray me, especially for the likes of you.”

“We’ll see, firebender,” Jet responded confidently before he looked at Katara with a rakish smirk. “Keep Mai’s words in mind. Her prediction will come true, and once it does, I’ll be waiting for you to invite me into your bed and be your lover.”

With a growl, Zuko lashed out with a fire whip, but Jet quickly jumped out of the way with a curse. He glared at the enraged firebender before he again turned to smirk lustfully at the silently fuming brunette.

“I’ll see you soon, gorgeous,” he said smoothly before he turned around and walked away.

Katara quickly grabbed Zuko’s arm when he took a step forward with an angry growl. Zuko glared flaming daggers at Jet’s back as they watched him leave.

“I wish I could break his neck,” the firebender rumbled before he turned around to look down at his wife. The anger in his eyes burning down to a low simmer, he more softly asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she responded reassuringly before she quickly added, “You do know that what you saw was nothing, right? Even if you hadn’t arrived, I wouldn’t have let him kiss me. I—”

“I know,” he interrupted as he gently grabbed her upper arms to stop her rambling, “I saw and heard everything.”
“What?” Katara asked in confusion before she continued with a raised eyebrow, “You were hiding behind a tree, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” he replied bluntly.

She frowned before she let out a sigh at his unrepentant expression.

“It doesn’t matter. I will never betray you for Jet or anyone else,” she reminded him.

“I know,” he repeated with a smile, “I trust you.”

Then a frown appeared on his brow and he tightened his hold of her arms.

“What did Jet mean about keeping Mai’s words in mind?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she replied with a wave of her hand and a shrug.

“It can’t be ‘nothing’, Katara,” he insisted with narrowed eyes. “I want to know if Mai is bothering you again.”

The waterbender let out a long sigh. She knew that if it meant her safety, Zuko would keep asking until she finally relented. He was as stubborn as she was. Might as well get it over with. In a few sentences she told him what Mai had said when the older woman accosted her. When Zuko’s face hardened and his golden eyes blazed in anger as he let out a low growl, Katara wondered if it was such a good idea to tell him after all. Zuko let her go in order to run a hand over his pulled-back hair.

“She’s trying to ruin our marriage by making you doubt me,” he gritted out before he more softly asked, “But you trust me, right?”

“I, well…” Katara began hesitantly, “I admit there were times when I wondered since it is part of your culture…’
When he stiffened and narrowed his eyes at her as his jaw clenched, Katara wrapped her arms around him.

“But just like I told Mai and Jet, I trust you and I know you will never hurt me by having concubines or mistresses, especially Mai,” she continued soothingly.

Relaxing, Zuko returned her embrace as he looked intently down into her eyes.

“It may be part of my culture, but it doesn’t mean I agree with it,” he told her firmly, “I witnessed how it had hurt Mother to know Ozai slept with Azulon’s concubines. I don’t want you to go through the same thing and have you end up hating me.”

He paused to smirk down at her, wrapping her tightly in his arms, as he huskily added, “Besides, I already told you many times that you’re the only woman I desire.”

“I believe you,” Katara replied with a happy smile before she raised herself on her toes to kiss him.

With a groan, Zuko pressed her closer to his hard frame. He tilted her head back so he could kiss her deeply and roughly. She moaned into his mouth as her fingers fastened themselves into his clothes. When the need for air became great, they pulled away and panted against each other.

“I won’t feel at ease until we’ve left Omashu and Jet behind,” he said as he reached up a hand to caress her slightly swollen lips with his thumb.

“It’s your turn to believe me when I say that you’re the only one I want, Zuko,” she spoke up with a frown.

“I do trust you,” he replied sincerely before he growled out, “It’s just that I hate to see other men lusting after my wife.”

“It’s you whom I go to bed with every night,” she reminded him as she pressed herself closer to him, caressing him with her body, soothing him with her words.

“And that’s how it’ll be forever,” he stated firmly.
Then he bent down to bestow an astounding kiss on her lips that left her breathless. When he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, Katara moaned and fell against him. Smirking inwardly, Zuko wound his arms around her and brought her closer to his chest. She moaned softly when he curled his tongue around hers and smiled when Zuko let out a groan when she sucked on his wet tongue.

Too absorbed in each other to notice anything else, Zuko and Katara exchanged kisses of equally greedy and passionate violence until the flare of desire was stoked to a scorching fire. Pulling away slightly to catch their breaths, Zuko forged a blazing path of hungry, wet kisses down the soft skin of her exposed throat. Katara’s head fell back and she moaned loudly as his lips touched her sensitive flesh, her hands clutching his strong shoulders.

Panting, mind hazy with lust, Zuko spread his feet to enclose his wife’s curvy body more closely within his ardent embrace. Lifting his head to once again devour her mouth, Zuko bent his knees and pulled her tightly against him. Katara gasped softly into his mouth when she felt Zuko’s hardness against her and they groaned when she mindlessly rubbed herself against his thick erection.

The sound of someone softly clearing their throat interrupted them through their haze and they quickly pulled away to look at the intruder with wide, startled eyes. Jiao and one of King Bumi’s servants were respectfully standing a few feet away. Jiao seemed unperturbed by the scene, but the younger servant girl’s green eyes were wide with surprise.

Zuko cleared his throat as he moved behind his wife in order to hide the visible bulge in his trousers and Katara smiled sheepishly as she smoothed down her dress. How could they have forgotten they were in a place where anyone could have a chance of seeing them?

“King Bumi sent us to tell you everybody is waiting for you to join them for dinner, my lord, my lady,” Jiao formally informed them with a bow even as her lips twitched into a small smile.

“Ah, yes, we’ll be there soon, Jiao. Thank you,” Katara spoke up quickly.

Jiao bowed and turned around. The other girl, still astounded at the passionate display, quickly did the same before she followed after her.

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose. What happened to his iron control? Apparently it flew out the window when he married Katara, just as his paranoia increased.
“Well, at least we were just kissing,” Katara’s amused words made him open his eyes to look at her.

“If we’re not careful, the next time we’ll be caught doing more than just kissing,” he retorted with a smirk.

“Zuko!” she exclaimed with a blush.

“Not that I’ll let anyone see you in such a ravishing state,” he growled as he again pulled her to him. When he tried to kiss her again, she placed her hand on his lips with a laugh.

“We have to go to dinner, remember?” she chuckled.

“Fine,” he consented with a huff before he grinned down at her. “We’ll continue this later.”

“I will be eagerly waiting,” she purred.

They waited until Zuko was presentable to appear in front of everybody without giving them a great shock before they made their way back to the palace. As they walked toward the dining room, Katara remembered that Zuko had left that morning to inspect the rebels’ damage.

“Did you find anything at the village?” she asked hopefully.

Zuko’s good mood soon shifted into a grim one as he shook his head.

“We didn’t find anything,” he informed her, his tone serious. “The rebels left evidence to let us know that it was them alright, but they didn’t leave enough evidence to show us why they attacked or where they went.”

“Do you think they are still around?” she asked. “Or maybe they left and are causing more destruction somewhere else.”

“I don’t know,” he responded truthfully before he growled out in frustration, “I don’t know what they’re up to.”
Katara leaned closer to him.

“They’ll be caught one of these days,” she reassured him, “They can’t hide forever.”

Zuko did not respond, but he hoped that it could be as she said. But he did not want to tell her that he had a bad feeling ever since he learned of the attacks. He just had to make sure Katara never got near Jianguo or the rebels again. If his overprotectiveness brought down her wrath on him, then so be it. He preferred to have her angry at him and safe than to have her taken away from him.

He brought her closer to his side.

---

Frowning, the young Fire Lord left Bumi’s study after having another meeting about the attacks. Zuko silently walked down the green corridor toward their guest room in order to collect Katara before the second party commenced. He did not feel like attending, but he had promised to follow Bumi’s instructions since this was his home. There had been no sign of the rebels after the last attack. They planned to head out again the next day to see if they could find any clues they may have missed, but Zuko had a feeling they were just wasting their time while Jianguo planned something. But what?

He was brought out of his thoughts when he noticed that someone had stepped in front of him to block his path. Stopping, he looked up with a glare only to frown when he saw that it was Mai. She was dressed in another elegant but dark gown and she was smiling softly at him. He remembered when she attacked Katara back in the Fire Nation Palace and what Mai said to her the previous day and he narrowed his eyes at her.

“I am positive I told you I didn’t want to see you again when I banished you from the palace,” he reminded her impassively.

“Are you still mad at me for what I did?” she asked him with a frown.

“How can I not be?” he asked her incredulously. “You tried to hurt the woman I love.”

The dark-haired woman stiffened before she clenched her thin hands. It angered her that Zuko was being so opened when it came to declaring his feelings for Katara.
“Do you still believe you love the waterbender?” she asked.

“I don’t,” he replied smoothly.

He raised a dark eyebrow when she looked at him hopefully.

“I know I love Katara,” he continued firmly.

Mai narrowed her dark eyes as she straightened herself out.

“Can’t you see that woman has changed you?” she hissed out angrily. “You’ve turned into a lovesick fool.”

“Katara loves me for who I really am,” he responded without taking offense to her words. “She understands me. If I have changed, I’d like to think I changed for the better. That’s why I love her.”

“You say that now,” she told him as her voice changed to its usual dull tone, “But in a few years, you’ll think otherwise.”

“I don’t like it when other people decide what my future or destiny will hold,” he growled out before he darkly warned her, “Stop telling my wife lies to make her doubt my loyalty. I will never cast her aside for another woman, especially for you. And unlike you or any other, Katara pleases me greatly. You can’t compare to her in any way, both in and outside of bed.”

Mai stepped back as if he had physically struck her since his words were further proof of what Katara had told her. Hurt flashed in her eyes, but Zuko did not care. He had tried to be understanding to her because of their past and her feelings for him, but he was tired of being nice since she was insistent in making trouble for Katara and him. Without another word, he stepped around her. What she said next made him pause.

“You may be honorable, but what about her?” she hissed.

Zuko turned around to glare at her.
“What do you mean by that?” he angrily asked her.

“Men aren’t the only ones who desire other lovers,” she spoke up as she casually inspected her nails.

“Are you accusing Katara of betraying me with another man?” he ground out.

“And why couldn’t she?” the noblewoman asked nonchalantly, “Especially if a handsome man like Jet pursues her. She can easily welcome any lover into her bed when you’re not around.”

She paused when Zuko angrily strode toward her until he stood towering over her. She tensed at the livid expression on his face and a shard of fear raced down her spine.

“If I hear you say such things against my wife again, I’ll make you regret it,” he threatened her darkly, “Katara would never betray me, especially for someone like Jet. If you find the bastard so attractive, why don’t you go to him instead and leave Katara and me alone?”

He missed the expression that appeared on her face at his mentioning of Jet as he turned away from her. He took a step forward, but she clutched onto his arm and stopped him.

“I will never give you up!” she exclaimed. “I love you!”

Zuko roughly wrenched his arm free and turned his head to glare at her.

“I already told you I don’t feel the same for you,” he reminded her firmly before he gruffly added, “Never touch me again.”

Without another word, he walked away from her.

“This isn’t over!” he heard her scream, “You’ll see what kind of woman you’re married to really is and then you’ll come back to me!”
Zuko scoffed at her words as he continued on his way without sparing her another glance. He quickened his pace as he neared the guest wing where he shared a room with his waterbender. He needed Katara. He needed her to soothe his frayed nerves and cool down his temper before they made their appearance with the other guests.

Katara stood perfectly straight as Jiao fixed her formal dress around her form. It was a dark blue that nicely complimented the silver rose hairpin with the rubies and sapphires that Zuko had given her for her previous birthday. She had not used it in a while and she wanted to please Zuko by wearing it for the party. She hoped she was finished getting ready by the time Zuko came back for her. He had gone to another private meeting with Bumi a few hours ago. She frowned as she wondered what the rebels could be up to since they had not made another move. Maybe they had run away when they heard the Fire Lord had arrived. Where could they be?

Why do they have to keep causing problems for Zuko? she angrily thought as she clenched her hands.

She was brought out of her thoughts when she felt Jiao step back and declare that she was ready.

“You look wonderful as always, my lady,” the older woman complimented with a smile.

“Thanks, Jiao,” Katara replied as she returned the smile only to gasp in alarm when she saw her sway. “Jiao!”

Katara quickly wound an arm around the woman to keep her up before she helped the maid sit on the edge of the bed. Jiao groaned softly as she touched her head. Katara walked toward the nightstand and poured a cup of water before she handed it to her. Jiao thanked her quietly as she took the cup and carefully drank the water.

“Are you all right?” the Fire Lady asked worriedly.

“I’m fine, my lady,” Jiao responded after a moment as she shook her head, “I just felt a bit dizzy for a moment, but I’m fine now.”

“Are you sure?” Katara asked.

“Yes,” the servant replied with a smile as she stood up. When nothing happened, her smile widened.
“It was just a dizzy spell.”

“You’ve been working too hard. Maybe you should see the physician,” Katara told her, unconvinced.

“I will,” Jiao replied reassuringly.

Before Katara could say anything else, there was a knock at the door before it was opened. They looked up to see the Fire Lord enter. Zuko froze as he caught sight of Katara. She watched as his eyes darkened as he hungrily perused her and she shivered pleasantly. He smiled in pleasure when he noticed she was wearing the rose hairpin.

“You can leave us, Jiao,” Zuko ordered absentmindedly without taking his eyes away from his wife. She became more beautiful with every day that passed. And she was all his.

With a knowing smile, Jiao bowed before she quickly walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

“We should hurry before the banquet starts,” Katara spoke up as she made her way to the door as well.

A gasp escaped her when her back was suddenly pressed against the wall with Zuko pressed to her front and his mouth devouring hers. She moaned as she immediately melted against him.

“You’re too beautiful for your own good, woman,” he growled against her lips. “I want you.”

“Now?” Katara asked incredulously even as she felt a flare of heat go straight to her core.

“Now,” Zuko groaned before he smashed his lips to hers.

He kissed her frantically, sucking on her bottom lip and rubbing his tongue against hers, as he roughly squeezed her breasts and caressed her curves. She moaned when she felt the evidence of his arousal pressing against her stomach. When he began to hastily pull the hem of her dress up, Katara pulled away from his demanding mouth and grasped his hands to stop him. Panting, Zuko opened
his eyes to frown at her for the interruption.

“You seem angry,” she observed breathlessly. “What happened?”

He was silent for a moment before he let out a deep sigh.

“I was accosted by Mai on my way over here and the encounter angered me,” he confessed.

Katara felt a twinge of jealousy at the thought that he had been alone with his former girlfriend before she shoved the ugly feeling away.

“What did she say?” she asked.

“The same thing she told you except that I should expect for you to be unfaithful to me,” he growled out angrily.

He captured his waterbender’s lips again before she could ask him any more questions. He pressed closer to her, eliciting a moan from her when he smashed her sensitive breasts with his hard chest, and producing a groan from him when his erection pressed even more tightly against her belly.

“I want you now,” he repeated huskily, “I want to reinstate the feeling that we belong only to each other.”

They kissed hungrily once more before Katara again tried to stop him, albeit halfheartedly.

“Jiao will have to help me put on my clothes again and we’re going to be late,” she panted out, “Can’t we wait until tonight so we can have more time?”

“No. I want you now,” he repeated before he throatily added, “You don’t need to take off your clothes for me to make love to you.”

He demonstrated by hurriedly untysing the ties that held his trousers up, reaching inside, and pulling out his painfully aroused shaft. Katara licked her lips as she stared down at his magnificently erect
flesh. Zuko felt his cock throb at the hungry look his waterbender was bestowing on his arousal. He stroked himself a few times and smirked when she moaned at the sight before he released himself in order to reach for her.

Lifting her against the wall, Zuko raised her dress around her hips and pulled aside her already drenched, silky underwear to reveal her wet sex, and in one smooth move, impaled her onto his thick cock. Katara threw her head back with a cry as she clutched his shoulders.

Groaning as her wet heat surrounded him, Zuko allowed her to adjust to his sudden invasion for a moment before he roughly began to thrust into her with wild abandon. He pulled the top edge of her dress down so it cupped her breasts and he watched them jiggle and bounce as he repeatedly slammed his hips onto hers. Growling, his hands firmly came around and under her dress as he bent her knees over the crook of his arms. He suddenly pulled out of her, but before she could protest, he lifted her higher against the wall so that her weeping pussy came in level with his face, and with one hand, pulled her undergarment far to the side.

“Ahhh!” she cried out in pleasure when he buried his face between her thighs and began to furiously lap, lick, and suck on her drenched folds. “Zuko, mm!”

She placed a hand on the wall and another behind his head to find purchase at the elevated height. She could not help but appreciate his great strength as he lifted her over his shoulders. She panted and moaned as he pushed his tongue in and out of her before sucking her clit.

“Zukooo! Oh!” she groaned loudly and her eyes rolled back at the immense pleasure. She felt fire spread through her veins, her mind out of control.

Zuko groaned lustfully as the sound of her pleasure and her delicious taste made his cock ache for her warm depths once again. He swiftly leaned away before he brought her down and again impaled her onto his hard shaft with her legs still thrown over the crooks of his arms.

“Yes!” he growled at the amazing sensation and his waterbender’s cry.

Pushing away from the wall, he braced his legs as he grabbed both her rear cheeks and squeezed roughly as his hips surged upward into her at the same time he impaled her on him. Gasping, Katara could do nothing but cling to his neck at the pleasure and amazing sensations that came from the new position. Then she buried one of her hands into his long hair at the back of his head, using it to urgently press his face into hers so she could kiss him deeply. He grunted into her mouth, sucking on her lips with a renewed fervor as he kneaded her firm cheeks before he pressed her body closer to his, crushing the softness of her breasts to his chest, as he began to grind his pelvis into her. The
move stimulated her clit as well and it startled a gasp of delight out of her.

“Yesss,” she hissed before she huskily groaned, “Oh gods!”

The fast and fierce rhythm he set washed away their troubled minds, taking over and blinding them both of everything and everyone except for each other. Zuko grunted in pleasure as he thrust more deeply inside her, bouncing her in the air to slide repetitively down his long, thick shaft. He groaned as he felt her cream coating him and dripping down his sac and he bent down to gently suck her neck.

Katara’s eyes closed as sensations exploded and heat grew within her. She gasped when his warm mouth suddenly devoured her right nipple and she dug her nails on his clothed shoulders just as her inner walls fluttered around his hardness. Zuko groaned as his knees weakened a bit at the pleasure and he again pressed her back against the wall.

He removed his arms from under her knees and wrapped her legs around his hips. He steadied himself with one forearm against the wall while his other hand grasped her ass to press her to him. He firmly thrust his hips forward, fiercely plunging his thickly engorged cock hard up inside of her that is caused his heavy balls to slap against her backside.

“Yes, yes, Z-Zuko!” she chanted inarticulately.

“Shit,” Zuko cursed when she rocked herself wildly against him, driving him so deeply inside her warm, silky depths that he saw stars. “That’s so good.”

A few seconds later, her wet pussy gripped him like a vise as she came with a cry, pulsing against his length, seeking to milk him of his seed. With a loud gasp of her name, he convulsed into her as he met his end, pouring himself inside her clenching passage. He stood pressed against her for a long moment, breathing and panting heavily just as she moaned and trembled against him.

Once their bodies relaxed from their amazing release, Zuko untangled her legs from around his hips and pulled out of her with a small groan. She mewed softly next to his ear. Carefully he settled her back to her feet as he looked down at her. Her face was flushed and her eyes dazed and half-lidded as she stared at him.

He gently grabbed a strand of her soft hair—that had loosened from her bun due to their vigorous activity—and tucked it behind her ear before he kissed her softly on her lips. With one last caress to
her breasts, he raised the edge of her dress to cover them before he pulled away to place his now flaccid member, still slick with their combined fluids, back into his trousers. As he did, he watched as Katara raised the hem of her dress with one hand while with the other she made a motion he knew was to waterbend his semen out of her, as he had seen her do a couple of times when they had made love outside their rooms. His hand shot forward to stop her. With a frown, she looked up at him questioningly.

“Don’t clean or wash yourself off,” he told her hoarsely.

“What?” Katara asked him incredulously, her blue eyes wide. His expression was firm and intense and it made her stomach quiver with renewed heat.

He tugged her hand until she fell forward onto his chest while his other arm held her tightly against him. He nuzzled her cheek and breathed in her scent. He could almost make out his own scent mixed in with hers.

“I want to know you are filled with my seed when near other men, especially Jet,” he breathed hotly against her ear. “Every time I see you during the party I want to know you feel it leaking out from inside your wonderful, little pussy and running down your thighs.”

Katara moaned softly since she could feel their combined juices doing just that before she held them back with her waterbending.

“I also want you to know that I am covered with your essence when I’m approached by other women, especially Mai,” he whispered as he licked the shell of her ear.

“O-okay,” she moaned loudly in agreement.

He pulled away and stared intensely at her before he bent down to kiss her softly upon the mouth.

“We don’t even need to call Jiao to help you redress,” Zuko commented with a smirk.

Katara laughed softly as she raised herself to plant a swift kiss to his lips. They fixed their appearances until none could be the wiser as to what they had done a few moments ago before they left the room and headed to the banquet hall.
King Bumi’s guests were sitting on cushions surrounding low tables as they ate dessert and watched a comedy being enacted by a traveling group of actors. They could all hear the old king cackling loudly at the table he shared with Iroh and other older nobility. Next to their table sat the Fire Nation royal couple with their friends the Avatar and Lady Bei Fong. Lady Ursa sat with Admiral Jee at a table next to theirs with another group of nobility.

Momentarily distracted from the show, Katara noticed that while Ursa was oblivious, Jee sat protectively beside her and glared at any man who stared at the princess too long for his liking. Was he jealous? The waterbender again returned her attention to the entertainment before she glanced at Zuko to make a comment about the funniest character. She paused, however, when she saw Zuko reach over to grab another of the pastries and placed it on the plate in front of him.

Some of the frosting got on his fingers and she watched in rapt attention as he licked it off, his tongue darting out over his thumb. When he licked his index finger he looked over at her and paused when he caught her staring. A smile slowly spread across his face as they continued to stare at each other. With a wicked smirk, he licked the rest of the frosting the same way he did when he was savoring her essence. Katara felt herself blush as she remembered what they did a few hours ago and what Zuko had told her to do, but she did not look away even as she felt his seed seeping out of her along with her own juices. It was thanks to her waterbending that the fluids were not sliding down her legs. As if he could read her thoughts, his gaze shifted to her lap, to her concealed sex, before he looked at her again with smoldering, golden eyes.

They looked away when they heard Aang clear his throat.

“Cut it out, you two,” he said with a chuckle.

Katara looked down at her plate as she felt her entire face heat up. She sometimes forgot the rest of the world existed when Zuko looked at her like that. Zuko only glanced at the monk with an impassive expression.

“I’m blind and I can almost see you guys eat each other with your eyes,” Toph remarked with a smirk. She was glad that these two stubborn idiots were happy after all the misunderstandings and troubles they went through.

Zuko shrugged in response while Katara muttered a sheepish apology.

“We’re not the only ones to notice,” Aang quietly commented as he discreetly pointed to the table
where the Fire Nation ambassador sat with his family and other guests.

Zuko and Katara looked and were surprised to see Mai and Jet sitting together at the same table. Mai looked longingly at Zuko when she realized his attention had turned toward them before she glared hatefully at the waterbender. Katara frowned at her, but Zuko ignored Mai as he saw Jet raise his wine cup mockingly at him before he stared leeringly at Katara.

The Fire Lord narrowed his eyes before he smirked as he placed a possessive arm around Katara as he remembered what they had done hours ago. He glanced down at his waterbender to see her blushing as she looked up at him. His smirk widened since he knew she was thinking about it too. Could she still feel his seed inside her? He suppressed a groan at the thought. Once they retired to their room he would definitely indulge them both many more times and for a much longer period than what happened against the wall a few hours ago.

The crowd laughed again at the actors and the royal couple returned their attention to the play, pointedly ignoring the other two sitting at the other table.

“It’s harder for some people to move on,” the young Avatar remarked softly.

“Only those who are delusional think they have a second chance with something that was never theirs in the first place,” the small earthbender retorted.

They did not say anything else as they watched the comedy, and an hour later, the entire room erupted into applause when it finished and the actors bowed. As the servants began to clean up the tables, the guests stood up and mingled amongst themselves while others made their way to the dance floor as the musicians began to play their instruments. Others decided to head to the gardens for fresh air just as Zuko, Katara, Aang, and Toph did.

As the four of them made their way to find a spot that was not overcrowded with people, Toph stomped her foot and a small stump of rock appeared before Aang, who easily jumped over it before he tripped. He stomped his own foot to do the same, and when Toph made to jump out of the way, he swept his staff to the side to throw a small ball of air at her. Caught off guard, the earthbender lost her balance, but the airbender was quickly there to catch her. He laughed when she grumbled at him. Katara and Zuko stared at them in surprise.

“Okay, you win this time,” Toph consented grudgingly as she crossed her arms over her small chest once Aang placed her back on her feet.
“You know you like to lose as much as to win,” Aang replied teasingly.

“Whatever,” she muttered even as a soft pink hue covered her cheeks.

Zuko and Katara glanced at each other with wide eyes.

“You don’t suppose they’re…” Zuko began to whisper to Katara before he dodged a small rock aimed at his head.

“It’s not as perverted as what you’re thinking, Sparky,” Toph growled out. “I see being married has made both of you big perverts.”

“We’re taking it slow,” Aang piped in with a grin.

“Aang!” the earthbender hissed as she punched his arm.

Aang laughed even as he rubbed his aching arm.

“What is it, Toph?” Katara spoke up with a smirk. “Don’t like it when you’re the one who’s being teased about such things?”

“Shut it, Sugar Queen,” the smaller woman said with a sniff.

The others laughed.

“Well, it makes me glad to know you two are happy with each other,” the waterbender commented sincerely as she smiled at them both.

“Me too,” Zuko agreed. He was also glad to know that he would never again have to worry that Aang might try to take Katara away from him.
Toph retorted to their teasing by making inquiries of their honeymoon, which caused both Zuko and Katara to snap at her to stop. Aang could only laugh at their antics before he changed the subject to something else.

None of them noticed the two individuals that watched them from the cover of some trees. Jet and Mai watched the group with narrowed eyes. The freedom fighter could not understand why such a kind woman as Katara could allow the harsh firebender to touch her. Jet would grit his teeth every time the Fire Lord caressed her or wound his arm around her lovely body.

As for Mai, the dark-eyed noblewoman could see that Zuko was clearly infatuated with his new wife. His golden eyes devoured the waterbender’s every smile, her every laugh, her every expression and movement, and every inquisitive glance. He answered Katara whenever she talked to him, asked her opinions whenever he wanted them, listened to her with captivated interest as he intertwined his long, lean fingers with her slender ones, laid an arm around her shoulders to bring her to close against his side, or pressed a quick kiss to her lips when he thought no one was looking. Neither of them seemed the least bit ashamed by their subtle yet fervent displays of affection.

If the waterbender had not intervened between them, would Zuko have acted the same way with her? Mai frowned. They were together for almost four years, but not even once did he touch or look at her the way he did the Water Tribe woman. If Mai even dared to touch him in public, he would give her a small glare or a sharp reprimand until she moved away. What did the waterbender do to make him allow her to act so familiar with him in public? Mai’s glare intensified when Katara giggled at something Zuko whispered in her ear before she whispered something back that made him chuckle.

During the party two days ago, Mai had approached Jet and asked him if he wanted to help her separate Zuko and the waterbender as she led him to an empty room. He agreed immediately and they decided that the best way to achieve what they wanted was by making the couple doubt the other’s fidelity by pointing out their cultural differences. Content with their plan, they celebrated by indulging in each other’s bodies. Ever since Zuko dumped her and sent her away, Mai had had a few lovers, but they either decided to stop their trysts or she turned them away because they could not satisfy her. She had to admit Jet was a good and attentive lover that knew how to bring a woman to pleasure, but it was Zuko she wanted, even though he never bothered to pleasure her the few times they were together. She supposed it was mostly her fault for not inspiring him to want to.

But she knew Zuko could be an exceptional lover from the rumors she had heard from the servants and the other guests alike. She heard that Zuko and Katara would often go to their room at any time of the day. One of the maidservants had even said that she had accidently caught the Fire Lord and his wife in a passionate embrace in one of the gardens. Mai had also heard that all through the night the palace residents could hear the muffled pleasured moans and screams of the waterbender and the muted groans and growls of the young Fire Lord. It seemed the couple had not realized that their guest room was not as soundproof as their room in the Fire Nation Palace. Mai clenched her teeth as she remembered Katara’s words the last time she confronted her. Why was Zuko so attentive in bringing the waterbender so much pleasure? Why did he bed her so often?
Glancing to her side, Mai clenched her hands when she noticed that Jet was staring longingly at the blue-eyed woman. What did men find so fascinating about the Water Tribe bitch?! She glanced back at the group of friends. She was angry yet not surprised when the royal couple excused themselves to retire early to their room. Katara had a smile on her face and Zuko a hungry gleam in his eyes Mai had never seen before as he quickly led them back inside the palace.

Smoothing her features into a pleasant one, Mai placed her hand on Jet’s arm and smiled softly when he turned to look at her.

“Why don’t we go to that empty room again?” she asked quietly.

“Can’t get enough, can you?” he asked with a smug smirk.

“I’ll wait for you in a few minutes,” she said instead as she turned around and walked away from the garden.

She made sure that nobody saw her as she entered the room and closed the door to wait for Jet. It would not do to have Zuko find out about her trysts with the freedom fighter. Jet was also careful since he did not want Katara to find out about Mai or any of the other women he was rutting with.

Mai had just removed her hidden weapons and let down her black hair when there were two soft raps at the door before Jet walked in and softly closed the door. Jet slowly removed his hook swords and armor and placed them aside before he walked toward her.

Without a word, they collided against each other and they began to quickly divest the other of their clothes as their mouths crashed together. Jet fell on top of her on the bed and she let out a moan as he roughly grabbed her small breasts. As he spread her legs apart to settle between them she imagined it was Zuko before the image was destroyed when she pictured him calling out the waterbender’s name. She narrowed her eyes before she harshly grabbed Jet’s coarse hair to pull his head away from her neck so she could smash her mouth to his.

It did not matter. Once Zuko got tired of the waterbender, Mai would be there to take him back even if it meant she had to be his concubine or mistress. She would make Zuko crave her like he never craved anyone else. She would make Katara suffer for daring to take him away.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A loud pounding sound made Zuko snap his eyes open as he instinctively reached for his swords and
crouched protectively over his sleeping wife. Once he realized that they were alone in their room and the frantic knocking was coming from the door, he frowned irritably as he noticed that it was a few hours before dawn. What was with the racket? Swinging his legs over the bed, he put on his robe to hide his nakedness before he grabbed one of his broadswords.

“What is it?” Katara’s sleepy yet alarmed voice reached his ears.

He looked up to see her sitting up on the bed, clutching the bed sheet up to her chest to cover her nude form as she looked at him in confusion and apprehension. Her long hair, disarrayed from their vigorous activities during the night, tumbled around her naked shoulders. He suppressed the sudden flare of arousal that surged through him at the sight of her before he returned his attention to the door.

“I don’t know,” he finally said as he quickly walked toward the door.

Still frowning, Katara watched her husband approach the door as she summoned a ribbon of water from the basin and wrapped it around her arm, ready to protect her firebender.

“Who is it?” Zuko asked suspiciously.

“It is Shen, my lord,” his oldest bodyguard called out anxiously from the other side. “I’m sorry to interrupt your sleep, but something urgent has come up.”

Alarmed now, Zuko quickly opened the door only enough so his guard could see him but would not see Katara’s state of undress. His frown deepened when he saw the older man’s grim expression.

“What’s wrong, Shen?” he asked.

“We just received news that another village is being attacked,” the guard informed him, pausing when he heard the Fire Lady’s loud gasp and his lord curse, “A few villagers, many of them injured, have arrived at the palace.”

Zuko cursed again. Worried, Katara quickly placed the water back in its place as she rose from the bed.
“Avatar Aang and Lady Bei Fong already left a few minutes ago to stop the attack. King Bumi is sending soldiers and is wondering what you would like to do,” Shen continued.

“Tell him my soldiers and I will join them immediately,” Zuko growled out. “Alert the men and tell them we will head out in a few minutes.”

“Yes, my lord,” Shen replied as he gave a bow before he raced down the hall in order to carry out the orders.

Slamming the door close, Zuko discarded his robe and swiftly began to dress. He paused briefly when he saw that Katara had already risen from the bed and was doing the same.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

“I’m getting ready to go with you,” she responded with a look that said he must be dense for asking that.

“Oh no, you’re not,” he disagreed as he began searching for his armor. “You’re staying here.”

“Excuse me?!” Katara exclaimed angrily as she spread her legs and placed her hands akimbo in the universal sign of female indignation. “The hell I am! I’m going and that’s that.”

With a frown, Zuko placed his chest armor aside and walked up to her. Even as he loomed over her, she did not back down as she craned her head back to glare at him with flashing, sapphire eyes.

“Katara,” he said gruffly at her stubbornness, “listen to me and please wait here.”

“You can’t make me, Zuko,” she replied furiously. “Don’t treat me like a weak woman and have me hiding behind locked doors while you go out and fight.”

“I’m not,” he assured her with a frown.

He could not help but remember the letter that Jianguo sent Advisor Kang where he vowed that he
would make the waterbender his sex slave if he ever caught her. Zuko felt his chest tightened in anxiety just as he felt his body stiffen in anger. He could not let Katara go near the bastard.

“I know you’re not weak,” he continued when she continued glaring at him, “I just want to keep you safe. Can you begrudge me that?”

“Well, no…” the waterbender began as she frowned, but she still held her ground, “I want to help.”

“You will be of more help to the injured,” he told her reassuringly, appealing to her healing nature.

Katara frowned deeply as she looked at him. She knew what he was trying to do and a part of her wanted to rebel and tell him that he could not stop her. But the healer inside of her told her that the injured needed her more than she needed to prove herself. She was no fourteen year old girl anymore; she had more important duties than to argue with her husband over his overprotectiveness.

“Fine,” she finally relented with obvious reluctance, “I’ll stay.”

The expression of immense relief that settled on his features made warmth spread through her chest despite herself.

“Let me help you with your armor,” she told him.

At his nod, she walked toward the chest armor he had put down earlier before she walked back to him. They were both silent as she helped him dress as their concern again went back to the attack. They hoped that the soldiers arrived in time to rescue the villagers. They fervently hoped that this time they would be able to capture the rebels. Zuko allowed her to place his dark cloak around his shoulders to ease her worry, even though the chilly morning air did not really affect him. As Zuko tied his broadswords’ sheath to his hip, Katara quickly finished getting dressed. She placed on one of her simpler light blue dresses and gathered her hair into a braid so she could be more comfortable when she healed the wounded. Once they were both ready, they left the room and swiftly strode down the corridor where servants were frantically running around. As the royal couple finally arrived at the courtyard, they saw that Zuko’s men and Bumi’s soldiers were already mounting their steeds.

Zuko took a step forward, but paused when he felt Katara grab his arm. He turned around to ask her what was wrong only to have his words get stuck in his throat. Her smooth brow was marred with a concerned frown and her blue eyes were wide in anxiety.
“Please be careful, Zuko,” she whispered.

Placing a hand over hers, the Fire Lord gave it a small squeeze as his eyes softened.

“I will,” he assured her before he bent down to give her a quick kiss on the lips.

When he straightened, Katara saw that he had placed his emotionless mask back in place. With another squeeze of her hand, he let her go. Placing his helmet on, he quickly made his way to his komodo rhino waiting next to Bumi’s general. Katara watched as Zuko made a signal and then they were all riding out of the protective doors.

Once her husband was out of sight, the waterbender turned away and rushed toward the infirmary. As she entered the large room, she saw that the place was in chaos as women hurried to attend the injured that were moaning and crying on the narrow cots.

“Katara!”

The waterbender turned at the sound of her name to see Ursa and Jiao rushing toward her. Although her outer appearance was calm and collected, Katara could see that her mother-in-law was distressed.

“How many injured are there?” Katara asked sharply as she spotted an apron and quickly tied it around herself.

“About thirty so far,” Ursa responded as she tucked a strand of her hair that had escaped her bun behind her ear.

“And more keep arriving,” Jiao added, “There aren’t enough cots for them all.”

Frowning, Katara began to walk down the aisle as she looked at the injured. She paused and gasped when she saw a little girl whose entire right arm was burned. The white blankets peeled away her bloody and charred skin whenever she writhed in pain. The waterbender immediately rushed to her side and began to murmur softly as the child continued to cry.

“Fire Lady Katara, what are doing here?!” the main physician asked as he spotted her, “This is no
place for a lady. You should return to your room."

Katara looked up to glare at him.

“I am first and foremost a healer before I am Fire Lady,” she told him firmly. “I will not ignore those who are suffering and need my help.”

Ignoring his protests, she uncorked her waterskin and pulled out the water before she wrapped both her hands in liquid gloves. She ignored the physician’s surprised gasp when the water started to glow.

“There, there,” she cooed soothingly to the little girl who began crying even harder when she saw her move toward her, “Everything is going to be all right.”

Slowly, so as to not frighten the child more than she already had, Katara placed her healing hands on her arm. A few minutes later, the girl slowed her crying when the pain began to lessen before she stopped completely when she could feel no pain at all. The physician could only gape when he saw that the Fire Lady had completely healed the burn before he was snapped out of his thoughts when her sharp, blue eyes snapped to his again.

“I need more water, lots of it, so I can heal the rest,” she told him.

“O-of course,” he stuttered.

“And I want the more severely injured to be placed on the cots and be attended first,” she ordered, “You and your assistants can see to those who have minor wounds.”

“A-as you wish!” he replied quickly before he began giving out orders to his assistants and the guards that were bringing in the injured to do what the Fire Lady had said. None of them dared to refute her even though she was not their queen.

A few minutes later, Katara was seeing to the more severely wounded. They were either badly burned, had broken bones, or both. Some of them suffered from bruises and sword cuts. Jiao rushed back and forth to bring her bowls of clean water after emptying the dirty ones while Lady Ursa brewed calming tea to help the patients rest or fall unconscious as they waited to be healed. Admiral Jee helped move the patients onto the cots or grimly carried away those who died. As she
encountered the tenth child with a broken arm and leg, Katara again cursed Jianguo and the rebels. She hoped Zuko and the other men captured them so they could pay for everything they had done.

A sense of dread rose in her chest and she took a shaky breath as she glanced down at the golden ring on her finger and rubbed it. She hoped Zuko was all right.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was an hour later when Zuko and the soldiers arrived at the village. They were greeted by burning huts and screaming people. Black smoke rose to the now dawning sky as heat and sparks flew in every direction. A few of the rebels were currently fighting Aang and Toph while others continue to attack the village and its people. With a roared command, Zuko charged forward with his dual swords flaming at his sides and was immediately followed by the soldiers. Hearing the thundering sound of pounding hooves and angry shouts, the rebels stopped what they were doing before they turned their attacks on the upcoming army.

Swinging his sword, Zuko severed one of the attacker’s head cleanly off his body before he stabbed his other sword through another’s chest as his komodo rhino charged through the village. Jumping down from his mount, the Fire Lord began to cut down every opponent that raced his way. He scanned his surrounding and was relieved to see Toph and Aang fighting back to back. With a growl, Zuko spun around with a flaming sword to cut down the rebel that had approached from behind. Dust and smoke was making it hard to see, but Zuko continued on his way as he searched for Jianguo. Where was the bastard?

A feminine wail coming from around the corner of a house caught his attention and he sprinted toward the sound to see a young woman fighting a man who had her legs spread as he tried to push his erect member into her while holding her clawing hands down. Zuko moved forward and stabbed the man in the back before he grabbed the surprised rebel by the hair and pulled him off the woman. Once he was sure the man was dead, Zuko turned back to the cowering woman who quickly covered her legs.

“I won’t hurt you,” he told her calmly. When she shrank away from him, he took off his helmet to show her he was the Fire Lord before he more softly said, “Make your way to Omashu Palace. My wife is a waterbender and she will heal your wounds. Have the other villagers follow you there.”

When he saw her give a shaky nod, Zuko replaced his helmet before he turned away and continued fighting, cutting down anyone who came at him in his anger. Why had Jianguo not made an appearance or attacked him?

It seemed like hours passed before the fighting stopped. The rebels had either fled or were dead. Zuko panted as he surveyed the scene before him. Once they were sure that they would not be attacked again, Bumi’s general ordered his men to take the injured to the palace while directing those who could still walk to follow. Zuko ordered his men to quickly extinguish the flames while he had
others search the surrounding area to see if they could capture some of the runaway rebels. He was surprised to see that Jet and his freedom fighters were also there. He had not noticed them arrive.

There were dead villagers scattered on the ground as well as rebels, but Zuko could see that they were only a few from the many he knew were following Jianguo. Where were the rest? Where was Jianguo? What did he achieve by attacking this Earth Kingdom village?

As his soldiers finally controlled the fire, Zuko narrowed his eyes when he realized that the houses were not really as damaged as he had thought. He tensed when he felt someone approaching him and he spun around with a raised sword aimed at the person’s neck. His eyes widened when he saw it was Aang who was looking at him with equally wide eyes.

“Sorry,” he apologized as he brought down his bloody sword to his side.

“No, I shouldn’t have approached you from behind without saying anything,” Aang responded with a shrug before he sighed deeply as he took in their surroundings. “Something doesn’t seem right,” he commented quietly.

“I know,” the Fire Lord replied grimly.

It was some time later when Bumi’s general approached them.

“We didn’t find any interesting clues,” he began, “They didn’t take anything. They just started attacking for no reason.”

Zuko frowned as he remained silent. They looked up when Toph approached them with an irritated expression on her face.

“I can’t feel any suspicious vibrations,” she stated irately, “The rebels that escaped must be long gone.”

“Where do you think they went?” the general asked with a frown.

“What is their plan?” Aang questioned miserably as he bent down to close the unseeing eyes of a
little boy who had a stab wound on his chest. “Those monsters,” he hissed angrily as he tightened his hands around his wooden staff.

The young Fire Lord did not say anything as the others continue to speculate about the current events. He was trying to ignore the sudden feeling that something was terribly wrong. He closed his eyes and tried to rein in his sudden anxiety before he snapped his eyes open as he began walking down one street. He felt the others quickly follow after him.

He had nothing to worry about. He was surrounded by people he trusted—well, with the exception of Jet, he mused. Katara, his mother and uncle were safe in the guarded palace. He dismissed the grim feeling as he turned his attention on giving his men orders, but he paused when the sound of cracking wood coming directly from above him reached his ears.

“Zuko, watch out!” Aang shouted.

Zuko looked up and his eyes widened when he saw part of the destroyed roof of a house fall toward him.
A few hours had passed since Katara started healing the wounded. There were so many of them and more kept arriving. Some of them died before she could reach them and she would feel her heart grow heavier with guilt when another villager passed away. She tried to tune out the wails of widows, the anguished screams of parents who had lost their young ones, and the cries and whimpers of orphaned children.

As much as she tried to stop it, she could not help but remember that day her village was attacked by the Southern Raiders and the pain and destruction they had wrought. She felt her heart again clench in grief as she remembered her mother’s death before she closed her eyes and calmed herself. She needed to be collected in order to help these people. And she did. She continued to treat their injuries without pausing for rest or food. She ignored her worried mother-in-law and maidservant as she determinedly healed the wounded. Soon only those with mild injuries were left.

“Fire Lady Katara,” a voice distracted her from her concentration as she healed a large cut on a man’s back. Once she sealed the wound, she turned toward the person addressing her.

“Yes?” she asked as she stared at the servant standing patiently next to her.

“Two soldiers wish to speak to you,” he informed her with a bow of his head.

“About what?” she asked with a frown.

“They said they have a message from the Fire Lord,” he told her.

“My husband?” Katara mused before her frown deepened in concern. Was something wrong?
Worried, she stood up and removed the apron from around her waist before she told the servant to take her to the soldiers. With a bow of his head, the man turned around and led her out of the infirmary. Katara looked back when she felt someone following them and smiled when she saw it was Jiao. Once the servant brought them to one of the palace sitting rooms, he bowed again before he continued down the hall after the waterbender dismissed him. Katara immediately walked into the room and spotted the two Fire Nation soldiers. When they saw her, they quickly bowed and greeted her. She frowned as she noticed their dirty and battered armor. Her frown deepened at the weary and anxious expressions on their faces.

“You have a message from my husband?” she asked.

The taller one of the two stepped forward with another bow before he straightened with a grim expression on his face.

“The Fire Lord has ordered that we escort you to the village, my lady,” he said in a raspy voice.

“Why? What’s wrong?” she asked.

“A group of children were trapped in one of the burning houses before we were able to extinguish the flames,” the soldier informed her, “They are badly injured. The Fire Lord is afraid to move them and hopes you could heal them.”

“Of course I’ll go!” Katara immediately said before she turned around, “Let me just get some things and inform my mother-in-law—”

“We don’t have much time, my lady,” he interrupted her anxiously, “If we don’t hurry the children… won’t survive.”

“Then we will hurry,” the Fire Lady replied as she indicated for them to lead the way.

The soldiers bowed their heads and quickly walked out of the room. Katara and Jiao hurried after them. Soon they stepped out of the palace and headed toward the stables to grab two ostrich-horses for the women. The two soldiers waited outside with their own komodo rhinos. As Katara and Jiao waited for the stable boy to saddle their mounts, Katara bit her lip in anxiety before she frowned as an odd feeling went through her. She shook her head to dismiss it as she thought of the children.
Luckily, her healing abilities were not needed as much in the palace now. The physician and his helpers could continue helping the rest of the injured while Lady Ursa brewed them calming tea and comforted them. As the stable boy walked toward her with the ostrich-horse, Katara grabbed the reins with a smile. The boy blushed and shuffled his feet. He reminded her of Aang when she first met him.

“Can you do me a favor?” she asked him sweetly.

“A-anything, Fire Lady Katara!” the young teen exclaimed quickly.

“Can you tell my mother-in-law that I received a message from Fire Lord Zuko asking for my help?” she asked. “I don’t want her to worry when she can’t find me.”

“O-of course!” he replied. He puffed out his chest as if he had been given a very important task.

Katara suppressed her smile.

“Thank you,” she said before she turned again to the ostrich-horse and swung herself onto its back. “Let’s go, Jiao.”

“Yes, my lady,” Jiao responded as she mounted the animal with the help of the stable boy.

They rode out of the stables to see the soldiers were silently waiting for them. Once they saw the women were ready, the men turned their mounts and led them toward the large door that led out of the palace. As they neared it, King Bumi’s guards eyed them curiously before they bowed respectfully at the Fire Lady as they passed through the gates. Once they were outside, the soldiers quickened their pace. Katara silently followed them as that uneasy feeling grew more intense as minutes passed.

“How far is the village?” she finally asked.

“Not too far,” the same soldier replied, “If we hurry we will be there in an hour or less. The Fire Lord will be relieved that you will look after the children.”
“Then maybe the Fire Lord would allow you to look at him,” the other soldier spoke up.

He felt silent when his partner shot him a disapproving look. Katara felt her worry increase at the man’s words.

“What do you mean? What’s wrong with my husband?” she asked anxiously.

“It is nothing, my lady,” the tall soldier immediately reassured her.

“Tell me what is wrong,” she ordered firmly.

She watched as they exchanged uncertain looks and she felt her heart constrict in anxiety.

“Fire Lord Zuko ordered us not to tell you,” the first soldier finally responded.

“And I order you to tell me,” she insisted.

Shooting another disapproving look at his partner, the tall one let out a resigned sigh.

“Fire Lord Zuko has been injured,” he said gravely.

Katara and Jiao gasped.

“What happened? How hurt is he?” Katara began to ask in a panic.

“It is nothing too serious,” the soldier immediately reassured her, “He is more concerned with the children.”

“We must hurry!” the waterbender exclaimed.
The soldiers nodded grimly before they spurred their mounts to go faster. With a press of her heels, Katara quickly followed after them as her chest began to ache in her apprehension. Was Zuko really all right or did the soldiers just say he was in order to keep her from being concerned? She knew Zuko would hide his pain in order not to worry her. She needed to see him for herself to see how badly hurt he was. She needed to get to him so she could comfort and heal him. She also needed to help the poor children.

Soon Omashu was out of sight and an hour later they were riding toward some rocky hills as the afternoon sun beat down on them. She barely paid attention to their surroundings as her anxiety grew. Katara slowed her ostrich-horse when she noticed that the soldiers had stopped before a path between two rocky hills and were dismounting.

“The animals can’t get through on this road,” the tall soldier told them when the waterbender frowned impatiently at them. “The village is on the other side of this path.”

With a nod, Katara dismounted from her ostrich-horse and Jiao quickly did the same.

“We will tend to the animals,” he added as he grabbed their reins.

Katara barely heard him as she turned around, her anxiety playing havoc to her mind. She prayed that they arrived in time as she and Jiao quickly walked along the uneven path between the hills. As they almost tripped for the third time, Katara wondered if this was a strategic plan to slow any invaders down from reaching the village.

Just as they arrived on the other side, Katara’s eyes widened and she froze in her tracks, causing Jiao to bump into her. The waterbender hardly noticed since she was taking in the sight before her with disbelieving eyes.

Instead of a destroyed village, they had stumbled upon a group of six men sitting around a campfire as they drank and ate. Once they spotted the women, the men sprang to their feet and turned toward them with grins.

What is going on? the waterbender thought as she stared at them in confusion. Where is the village? Where is Zuko? And the children?

An incredulous gasp escaped her mouth before she could stop it when she recognized Ping and three of the other rebels that had been there when Zuko and she had been captured months ago. Quickly,
she grabbed Jiao’s wrist and turned them around so they could mount their ostrich-horses to escape and warn the soldiers, but their path was blocked by the two men whose once grim expressions now turned into leering grins.

“What is the meaning of this?!” she demanded angrily. “How dare you betray your lord!”

“That bastard isn’t our lord,” the tall one spat before he mockingly added, “But it wasn’t hard to make you believe so.”

“Especially after we stole the real soldiers’ uniforms and komodo rhinos,” the other one added with a laugh.

Katara gasped. She was duped and she fell for it! What did they do to the soldiers? She cursed herself for being too trusting and for ignoring her instincts that kept telling her something was not right. She felt Jiao move closer to her in uncertainty and fear.

“What is going on?” a new voice asked.

The waterbender spun around to see Chang, the former Dai Li agent, appear from around the bend of another hill and she tensed. He looked at the Fire Lady impassively before his eyes shifted toward Jiao who was partially hidden behind the waterbender with wide, frightened eyes. Katara watched as Chang’s green eyes widened and a stunned expression overcame his usually blank face. Sensing his perusal, Jiao stepped closer to her lady.

“Let us go,” Katara spoke up in order to direct Chang’s attention away from Jiao. “I’ll reward all of you greatly if you do.”

She narrowed her eyes when the men laughed. She scanned their surroundings carefully and knew that escape would be difficult since it seemed they were surrounded by rocky hills. Zuko could not rescue them because he did not know what had happened. At least she assured herself with the fact that Zuko and the children must be all right. She hoped. Now it was up to her to find a way for her and Jiao to escape.

Where was Jianguo? She prayed he was somewhere far away. She did not like the way he looked at her when he had captured them. She had a bad feeling whenever he was near.
Chang seemed to finally snap out of his stupor as his eyes moved away from the dark-haired woman to return his attention to the angry waterbender.

“Jianguo doesn’t want your money,” he said in a passive tone.

“What does he want then?” she asked with a frown before she narrowed her eyes as she firmly said, “I won’t help him capture Zuko and release Ozai from his prison.”

Before any of them could guess her actions, she quickly uncorked her new waterskin and lashed out at them with her waterbending. The men cursed as they tried to avoid her attacks while they retaliated. The earthbenders in the group tried to cuff her wrists to block her chi, but she made sure to keep them from doing so and attacked them fiercely. She would never allow herself to be beaten again and have her chi blocked. She never wanted to feel that emptiness again.

Keeping Jiao at her back, Katara shot a jet of water toward one of the men, causing him to fly and land hard on the ground a couple of feet away. She narrowed her eyes. Something was wrong. It seemed as if the men did not want to hurt them, but just subdue them. Why? But the most important question was how were they going to escape?

She was snapped out of her thoughts when she heard Jiao gasp behind her before she was swallowed into the ground.

“Jiao!” Katara screamed in fear as she spun around, but the woman was not there.

Katara jumped sideways and water whipped one of the rebels who had tried to grab her from behind. She then deflected two stone cuffs before they could chain her wrists. Panting in exhaustion, she narrowed her eyes in confusion when the men suddenly stopped attacking her.

“Why don’t you stop before you hurt yourself?” a familiar voice made Katara freeze in terror.

She pivoted toward the sound of the voice as she wrapped tendrils of water around her arms, her stance aggressive. Jianguo stood a few feet away, smiling at her, but the gleam in his eyes made fear skitter along her spine. She glared at him in order not to give him the satisfaction of knowing that his presence unnerved her.

“I will never allow you to capture me again,” she hissed.
The former Fire Nation general laughed at her words and his men laughed along with him.

“Oh, really?” he taunted with a raised eyebrow as he pointed to his left, “Even if it means the cost of your servant’s life?”

Katara glanced in the direction he was pointing to and tensed when she saw Jiao in Chang’s arms with a knife pressed lightly to her pale throat. The waterbender thought she saw Chang holding the woman gently against him, but Jiao’s eyes were wide with terror. A movement from one of the earthbenders caught her attention and Katara quickly deflected another pair of stone cuffs with her water whips. She looked up to glare at Jianguo.

“Then again, she is only a servant,” he said with a mocking sigh of pity.

“Let her go!” she demanded.

She growled under her breath when Jianguo and his men again laughed at her. If Jiao’s life wasn’t being threatened, Katara would have shown them not to mess with a waterbending master. But Jiao was in danger and Katara had to be careful and not act rashly. She had to think of a way to save them, but what?

“Stand down and allow your chi to be blocked,” Jianguo ordered more firmly when the waterbender refused to answer before he added, “If not, then the woman will die.”

Katara clenched her hands tightly as she glared hatefully at the arrogant firebender.

“Don’t do it, my lady!” Jiao screamed, “I’m not worth it”!

Jiao gasped when Chang pressed the cold knife closer to her neck, but it was not that that shocked her but the fact that he had pressed her closer against him so that she could feel every inch of him against her back. Jiao shivered in revulsion. She wished she was in Kuo’s arms, but she could not allow her lady to be hurt. Lady Katara had been so kind to her.

“What is your decision, waterbender?” Jianguo asked with a raised brow.
When the blue-eyed woman hesitated, the firebender narrowed his eyes before he glanced at Chang. The earthbender frowned, but obediently brought the knife closer to Jiao’s neck so that the sharp edge of it bit into her skin and turned her flesh paler.

“Let her go!” Katara shouted in alarm.

“Why, doesn’t this feel familiar?” Jianguo commented as a cruel smile stretched his lips.

Katara hissed at him as her hands clenched into tight fists. Was this what Zuko had to deal with when he had to choose to either fight or back down in order to keep her safe? She had later berated him for ignoring her pleas for him to run, but now she found that she could not fight back because she wanted to rescue Jiao. It seemed she took too long in deciding because Jianguo narrowed his golden eyes and growled impatiently.

“Kill the woman,” he brutally ordered the earthbender.

Even though he was frowning deeply, Chang moved the knife in order to slice the terrified Jiao’s neck.

“No! Stop!” Katara screamed, and without thinking about it twice, she let go of her hold on the water. She flinched when the water hit the ground at her feet, useless now.

“No! My lady, no!” Jiao exclaimed in dismay.

Katara did not look at her as she glared at a spot in the distance.

“A very smart decision,” the firebender assured pleasantly.

The Fire Lady looked up to glare at him. She knew that without her waterbending, they were in deep trouble and now they had no way to defend themselves or find a way to escape. It was times like these she wished she had mastered her bloodbending. She was scared, but she refused to show it as she stood perfectly straight with a defiantly raised chin.
Jianguo watched the waterbender with a gleeful smile. Even though she tried to act brave, he knew she was terrified, and he reveled in it. He wanted to break her spirit, he wanted that blue fire of hatred in her eyes to extinguish and be replaced by fear and awe of him. He wanted to corrupt her body, find pleasure in it as she screamed in both pain and pleasure. He wanted her to be dependent solely on him.

With a command from him, one of the earthbenders moved forward and shackled the silent waterbender’s wrists. His smile widened as his anticipation flared. Now he had her. Now he could finally satisfy his curiosity and obsession of her.

Katara clenched her eyes as that cold, empty feeling once again seeped into her soul as the connection with her element was blocked. She felt like a failure, she felt weak, but she could not let them kill Jiao because of her. What could she do now? What should she do?

With another command from Jianguo, Chang removed the knife from Jiao’s neck and reluctantly released her. As soon as the man’s arms loosened around her, Jiao broke free and raced toward the waterbender and desperately clasped her suddenly cold hands.

“You shouldn’t have, my lady,” she cried in a whisper.

“I couldn’t let them kill you, Jiao,” Katara whispered back as she squeezed the other woman’s hands.

“That’s better,” Jianguo spoke up with a pleased smile.

The waterbender looked up to glare icy daggers at him, even though she was inwardly quaking with fear. She hated the look of triumph in his expression. She wanted to wipe it off his face with a water whip.

“It’s over,” she told him. “Your plot to reinstate Ozai on the Fire Nation throne will never work. Your informant was found out and now he’s dead. There’s no one to help you and fund you. You should just give up.”

Jianguo growled angrily and the men began to murmur loudly. If their informant was dead who were they going to get information from? But most importantly how were they going to keep getting paid? As the men began to bicker and complain, their leader turned to give them a heated glare. They stiffened and immediately fell silent.
Sensing their agitation and discontent, Katara continued to mock them. Maybe she could make the men turn on Jianguo and she and Jiao could make an escape while they fought amongst themselves.

“Advisor Kang is dead and now there is nothing you can do,” she added with a smirk.

Something passed across Jianguo’s face, but it disappeared too quickly for Katara to determine what it was. Anger? Disappointment? Fear?

“It doesn’t matter,” he spoke up gruffly. “Ozai will return to the throne and we will receive our just reward.”

Katara raised a mocking eyebrow.

“Zuko will never release Ozai,” she hissed. “He will rescue us and he will kill you!”

Jianguo interrupted her as he threw his head back and let out a laugh, a deep and arrogant laugh. Once again his men laughed with him. With a scoff, the firebender returned his gaze to the angry brunette and smirked.

“Zuko won’t be rescuing you,” he taunted cruelly. “He’s too busy dealing with our little ruse at that dirty village.”

Katara gasped. The attack was just a trick to lure Zuko out? She narrowed her eyes at Jianguo. She should not be so surprised since they had also faked that illness in the colony those months ago. But why did they do it this time? What was their purpose?

“I knew Zuko would have left you behind in the palace to keep you protected while he went to fight,” Jianguo continued as he stared smugly at the woman. “So while he was away, all I had to do was lure you out. Zuko really did make this easy for me.”

He chuckled.

“By the time the insolent whelp notices you’re gone, it’ll be too late,” he continued, his smirk widening.
The waterbender raised her chin defiantly.

“And what do you plan do to?” she asked. “Ransom us for money or Ozai’s freedom?”

Her fear doubled when Jianguo raked his eyes along her body before he smirked leeringly at her when he again locked eyes with hers.

“Oh, no, my sweet,” he breathed out huskily, “Nothing like that.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

She felt herself tense when Jianguo’s eyes darkened.

“You see,” he began as he started to walk slowly toward her, “I don’t plan to return you to your husband soon…if at all.”

Katara felt her blood freeze in her veins with fear.

Frowning deeply, Zuko surveyed what was left of the destroyed village. It would take a while before it was restored and the surviving villagers could return to their homes. He felt his hatred for Jianguo and his men grow.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Aang’s worried voice brought him out of his thoughts.

“I’m fine,” he responded simply before he smiled slightly when the airbender continued to frown.

They had all gotten quite a scare when the roof almost fell on Zuko, but luckily his fast reflexes saved him as he quickly jumped away before he was crushed. Everybody had rushed toward him before they paused in relief when they saw him stand up and dust himself off as he began to give out more orders. Toph had punched him on the arm and said that he was fine if he was barking out orders already. He had only glared at her.
They had planned on going in search of the rebels, but he knew that it did not matter how much they searched. The rebels would not let themselves be caught so easily. They had left no clue as to where they had disappeared to. But why had they attacked the village? What was their game? That uneasy feeling he had felt since he arrived grew and he felt a pang in his chest. What did it mean? He turned to his guards and Bumi’s general.

“I need to return to Omashu,” he said impassively, his expression showing nothing of his agitation. “I will return shortly.”

Without waiting for them to respond, he strode toward his mount with Shen and Kuo quickly following behind. He needed to see Katara. He had an urge to be with her and make sure she was all right, which was ridiculous since she was safe in Omashu. But nonetheless, he would not feel at ease until he saw her. Once he did, he will return to the village and help his men.

“Sparky, wait for us!” Toph’s voice made him turned on his komodo rhino to see them run toward him.

“Is something wrong?” Aang asked. Momo landed on his shoulder with a chirp.

“I just have an uneasy feeling,” Zuko began with a frown as he looked in the direction of Omashu, “But after I reassure myself, we’ll continue with the search.”

He turned his mount around and pressed his heels into its side to make it walk forward. With another press, the komodo rhino changed into a fast gallop. His personal guards quickly followed. Aang and Toph raced to where Appa had been grazing, and soon, they were slowly flying over the three mounted figures. Soon they arrived at the courtyard of the palace. Appa groaned as he landed softly on the ground. Aang and Toph had barely dismounted when they realized Zuko was already entering the large building.

The first place Zuko went to was the infirmary where he knew he would find Katara healing the wounded. As he entered the room, he was greeted enthusiastically by the healed villagers. He barely acknowledged them as he inquired after his wife. The main physician told him she had stepped out and had not returned. Frowning, Zuko marched out of the infirmary without another word as he felt his anxiety rise. He searched the gardens and the library, but he did not find her.

“Zuko! When did you arrive?” Iroh’s voice made him pause as he rounded a corner.
The Fire Lord turned around to see his uncle and Bumi hurrying toward him with worried and expectant expressions.

“Did you catch the rebels?” Bumi asked with a growl, “Did they say why they are attacking my villages? Dammit, if I hadn’t gotten drunk last night, I could’ve been there.”

“You and me both,” Iroh added with a sigh as he rubbed his temple. He and Bumi had started a drinking game during the party to see who could outlast the other. To say the least, they both passed out.

Zuko hesitated since he wanted to continue searching for Katara, but he knew he needed to inform Bumi of what happened. Straightening himself, he quickly and concisely told them everything he knew. Once he finished he waited almost impatiently for them to say something.

“I will cancel the next party and immediately have people rebuild the village,” the old king said. “I will have more guards patrolling the area. If the rebels come back, they will not escape this time!” He boomed as he cracked his knuckles.

As Bumi and Iroh discussed between themselves about asking the Order for more help, Zuko interrupted them.

“Have you see Katara?” he asked with a frown.

“We saw her in the infirmary this morning,” Iroh replied. His bushy eyebrows bunched together in concern when he saw the subtle agitation of his nephew. “Why? Is something wrong?”

“I need to see her,” was his nephew’s quick response as he turned around and walked down the corridor without listening to their questions.

He ignored the servants he passed by as he strode toward the guest room he and Katara were sharing. He hoped she was waiting inside for him with a bright smile before opening her arms to comfort him when she noticed his anxiety. He arrived at the room and quickly stepped inside. He scanned the area quickly only to frown in disappointment when he saw it was empty.

“Where are you, Katara?” he asked quietly into the vacant room.
He felt his chest ache once more as he walked out of the room and again went in search of his waterbender. Where could she be? He spotted his mother and Jee heading toward the infirmary and he quickly approached them.

“Zuko,” Ursa greeted her son with a relieved smile and a hug. “I’m so happy to see you are all right. I—”

“I’m sorry, Mom,” he interrupted her as he grabbed onto her arms and leaned back, “but have you seen Katara?”

His dread rose when he saw his mother and Jee exchange a confused frown before they turned to look at him.

“I thought she was with you,” Ursa told him.

“What?” he asked as he frowned. Did Katara decide to follow him instead of waiting for him to return?

“You’re the one who summoned her to the village,” his mother continued as her confusion grew.

“What?” Zuko exclaimed. He felt as if his heart dropped to his stomach.

Greatly concerned now, Ursa glanced at Jee before she turned back to her son and began to wring her hands together.

“A stable boy gave me Katara’s message that she was leaving because you asked for her help,” she informed him.

“I never sent for her!” Zuko shouted as he ran a shaky hand over his pulled-back hair.

“What?” Jee exclaimed just as Ursa gave out a loud gasp.
“Jianguo! It has to be him!” Zuko whispered harshly to himself.

Feeling his chest constrict in panic, Zuko pivoted around and sprinted toward the stables. Ursa and Jee quickly ran after him. They raced past Toph, Aang, and Zuko’s personal guards who decided to follow when they saw the alarmed look on the Fire Lord’s usually stoic face.

“What’s wrong, Sparky?” Toph shouted, but she was ignored as Zuko stormed into the stables, startling the animals inside.

The stable hands jumped at the intimidating Fire Lord’s sudden appearance before they tried to calm the animals down. Zuko scanned the men with piercing, golden eyes and they shrunk back.

“Who was the one who gave my mother the message from my wife?” he barked out the question.

The men jumped at the harshness of his voice before they glanced at each other in confusion. Zuko gritted his teeth when no one responded. He opened his mouth to demand they answer him when he saw a young boy timidly step forward.

“I-it was m-me, my lord,” the preteen stammered as he wrung the hem of his dirty shirt in fear.

Zuko approached him in a few long strides before he took a deep breath to calm himself down when the boy flinched.

“How long ago did she leave?” he asked more calmly, even though he was feeling anything but.

“A-about less than an hour ago,” the boy said after he thought about it.

“Did she leave by herself?”

“I think there were two Fire Nation soldiers with her,” the boy began as he frowned in thought, “Oh, and a woman. I think she’s Fire Lady Katara’s maidservant.”

“Jiao!” Kuo gasped.
Zuko felt as if he could not breathe. Where had the soldiers taken Katara? And why?

“What did they ride on?” Zuko asked.

“The ladies took two ostrich-horses and the soldiers were on komodo rhinos,” the pubescent boy answered quickly.

Then they could not have gotten far, Zuko mused. Komodo rhinos were known for their strength and stamina, not their speed. He needed to ride something even faster than an ostrich-horse in order to catch up with them.

“Are there any eel-hounds?” Zuko asked.

“King Bumi has some of the best,” the boy answered proudly.

“Then ready some eel-hounds,” he ordered the boy and the stable men.

When he noticed they were looking at him curiously, he tried to calm himself.

“I need to speak to my wife about something important and I can’t wait for her to return,” he stated nonchalantly to the room, speaking to no one in particular. He did not want to raise any questions or rumors about why he was going after his wife after he had supposedly sent for her.

As the men quickly went about in saddling the animals, Zuko turned around and clenched his eyes shut as the pain in his chest increased. Where was his wife? If it was indeed Jianguo who had planned all of this, then Katara was in terrible danger! He needed to save her! He opened his eyes when he felt his mother touch his arm.

“Zuko, what is going on?” she asked worriedly as the others surrounded them.

“I think Katara is in trouble,” he growled out in a low tone so the stablemen would not overhear.
“You think Katara’s been kidnapped?” Aang asked in alarm.

“It’s the only possible conclusion,” Zuko told them as he clenched his hands. “I didn’t give my men orders to bring her to the village. They lied to her and she, not knowing they were lying, must have followed them without question.”

He knew something was not right. This was Jianguo’s plan all along! He tricked him into going to help the attacked village while he lured Katara away. But he will get her back!

“It’ll be faster finding them if we ride on Appa,” Aang interrupted the anxious firebender’s thoughts.

“I don’t want to risk Katara and Jiao’s safety if the men spot Appa,” Zuko told him. “There are no trees for cover.”

They became silent when they heard someone clear their throat. They turned to see the stable boy.

“The eel-hounds are ready, Fire Lord Zuko,” he said quickly.

“Thank you,” the firebender replied as he moved toward one of the animals.

Kuo immediately went to the other saddled animal, worry for his own wife twisting his face into a frighteningly grim expression. Shen followed after him.

“Wait, my lord, I wish to accompany you too,” Jee spoke up.

“I want you to stay with my mother,” Zuko told him with a frown.

“I want to help save Lady Katara,” Jee replied firmly. “Besides, you might need more help.”
Zuko thought about it before he gave a curt nod.

“Very well,” he said before he raised his voice so the stablemen could hear him, “Saddle another eel-hound and quickly.”

“Make it two more!” Toph piped in as she pointed at herself and at Aang. “We wanna help, too.”

The men quickly went to work when the Fire Lord told them to hurry up.

“Mother, go to Uncle and King Bumi and tell them what has happened,” he told her firmly, “Please stay with them until we return.”

“Be careful, my son,” Ursa said as she grasped his arm. “Bring Katara back safely to us.”

“I will,” Zuko responded with a firm growl.

A few minutes later, the six of them were headed out of Omashu and heading in the general direction the guards at the main doors saw the Fire Lady and the soldiers go. Since Toph could not see, she was riding behind Aang. As they continued to ride, Zuko scanned the ground beneath them. When something caught his eye a few miles later, he made a motion with his hand and they all stopped. Dismounting quickly, Zuko knelt on the dusty ground and examined it for a moment until he made out the prints of two ostrich-horses and two komodo rhinos. He let out a sigh and shut it eyes in relief for a moment. He was grateful for all of his time of tracking Aang, Katara, and Sokka.

“It must be them,” he whispered to himself as he felt a bit of hope rise within him.

It seemed the men had not thought he would follow since they did not bother to cover their tracks. They had not counted that he would want to return to Omashu so soon and find his wife missing. But when he found them, he would make them pay for daring to take her away.

Standing up, he swiftly swung onto his mount’s back and urged it to go faster. The others quickly followed after him. Zuko felt his dread increase until it was almost painful. He felt like an icy band was constricting his chest. He hoped he was not too late.

Katara forced herself not to back away in fear and disgust when Jianguo stepped closer to her.
“And what will that accomplish?” she finally asked with a mocking raised eyebrow.

She felt another shiver of terror run down her spine when the firebender smirked cruelly as he leaned close to her so that their faces were inches apart. Jianguo was silent for a moment before he pulled back, the smirk still in place. Katara let out the breath she’d been holding at his closeness.

“The thought that I have you and that he is unable to save you will eat at Zuko,” the former general finally explained, his tone full of satisfaction and malice. “The guilt he will feel because he was unable to protect you will fester until he wishes he were dead. And once he is weak and full of despair, I will propose to have Ozai released in exchange for you.”

“It won’t work,” Katara told him firmly though her voice shook a bit. “Zuko will never release Ozai.”

“Ah, but he will!” Jianguo assured as he smiled at her before he mockingly added when she gave him a skeptical look, “He will do anything for you. Isn’t that sweet?”

Katara ignored the men’s mocking laugh as she clenched her hands at her sides as her heart constricted in her chest. She could not find a retort because she knew it was true. She knew, just like Jianguo did, that Zuko would do anything to keep her save, even risk his own life. He had even told her that he would always choose her.

No, this could not be! She had vowed that she would never make Zuko choose between his country and her! She would rather die than give him such pain.

As if sensing her thoughts, Jianguo once again stepped close to her. This time, Katara took a step back when he glared at her.

“If you do not cooperate, I’ll have the servant girl raped and tortured before I slowly kill her,” he warned darkly.

Both women gasped. Jiao let out a soft sob as she pressed closer to the waterbender’s back. Katara glared at the firebender with all the hatred and loathing she felt toward him before she looked down.
“That’s better,” he said with satisfaction. “Women should know their place.”

Katara clenched her teeth in anger, but forced herself not to verbally lash out at him for his chauvinistic remark. She would pretend to be cooperative and obedient for now if it meant they were left alone. She would never forgive herself if she allowed Jiao to be hurt when she could have prevented it. She guessed that Jianguo would make them march through the terrain again until he found a suitable spot where he can make his trade to Zuko for their return. She would just have to find a way for them to escape when Jianguo was distracted.

“Now, in the meantime,” Jianguo spoke up again as he turned to his awaiting men, “Why don’t we have ourselves some fun before we head out?”

Katara’s head snapped up in alarm just as Jiao let out a terrified cry when the men howled in glee as they grinned lasciviously at them. The women clutched tightly onto each other.

“Jianguo,” Chang interrupted in his usual blank tone, “I think we should leave now before—”

“Relax, Chang,” the firebender interrupted unhurriedly as he smiled, “This will only take a few minutes. Enough time for us to leave and be far from here before they come searching for us.”

Chang frowned at their leader’s disregard, but remained silent. The men laughed as they approached the women slowly.

“Have fun with the serving wench, but the waterbender is mine,” Jianguo told them.

He stalked toward Katara and tightly seized her arm before she could move away. Both women screamed just as two men grabbed a hold of Jiao and pulled them apart.

“Jiao!” Katara screamed in panic as Jianguo began to pull her after him even as she struggled against his hold.

“Lady Katara!” Jiao shrieked in terror as the men dragged her away.

Katara turned around and slammed her fist against Jianguo’s side, effectively making him lose his
hold of her from both the pain and surprise.

“No! Let her go!” the waterbender shouted as she raced after Jiao who was clawing at her attackers.

She cried out when she felt someone grab her braid and pull her back before an arm wound tightly around her waist. She gasped when she was pulled into a hard chest.

“You think you can escape me so easily, waterbender?” Jianguo growled into her ear. He ignored her struggles to free herself as he tightened his hold of her and again began to drag her away around the bend of a hill.

“Let me go, you bastard!” she shouted in both anger and fear as she looked back to where Jiao was struggling against the other men who had all gathered around her.

“No!” she cried out in horror as she saw the men begin to rip Jiao’s clothes from her body. That was the last thing she saw before Jianguo rounded the corner and her view was block by the rocky hill. “No! Jiao!”

With a crazed cry, Katara flung herself at Jianguo and began to punch, kick, and claw at him in order to get him to release her so she could save Jiao. With an angry growl, Jianguo raised his hand and slapped her hard across the face. Katara staggered to the side from the force of the blow, but before she could gather her bearings again, she felt the firebender grab her around the waist before he threw her over his shoulder. The sudden move and the pain from the blow made her head spin.

Once the spinning stopped, she began to hit at his back and kick at his front as she continued screaming at him to let her go, but to no avail. He was physically stronger than her and his tight hold was making breathing difficult. But she needed to escape! She could not let him rape her! She needed to save Jiao! She renewed her efforts with more vigor that this time the firebender had to really struggle to keep her from breaking his hold. He quickened his pace when he neared a group of boulders.

“Keep still unless you want me to tie you up while I take my pleasure of you,” he growled out warningly, yet Katara could detect anticipation and lust in his tone.

She felt her stomach churn in disgust and terror, but she did not stop her struggles. She would not give into him without a fight! She gasped when he suddenly dropped her onto the hard ground and she cried out at the painful impact. When he leaned toward her, she raised her legs and kicked him
hard on his chest, knocking him back.

As he fell, Katara tried to scramble to her feet, but she was pulled back down when Jianguo grabbed her ankles. Gasping at the jarring impact, Katara then coughed when she felt him fall onto her back, his heavier body pinning her to the ground beneath him. Her eyes widened in shock and repugnance when she felt something hard poke her backside.

“You can’t escape me,” he tauntingly whispered in her ear before he stuck out his tongue and licked the shell just as he slipped his hands beneath her to roughly cup her breasts. “Oh, the things I’m going to do to you.”

“Don’t touch me!” she yelled furiously as she kicked her legs out and tried to push him off her.

She gasped when he suddenly flipped her onto her back and again crushed his body atop of hers. When she tried to kick him off and push against his chest, he grabbed onto her wrists and pinned them beside her head.

Jianguo groaned in pleasure as he felt her every soft curve mold into his frame. It was better than he ever imagined. And he hadn’t even started.

Katara saw him smirk down at her smugly and lustfully and she glared at him. Wanting to wipe that smirk off, she angrily spat at his face. She braced herself for his retaliation, but he only raised one eyebrow as he used one hand to wipe the spit from his face. She cried out when he brutally tightened his grip on her hands.

“There are other ways for you to use that nice, little mouth of yours, waterbender,” he growled at her, “But for now, I’m more interested in something that you have hidden beneath that dress.”

When he reached toward the bottom of her dress, Katara threw her head forward and hit him on his nose. The unexpected impact made him lose his hold of her wrists as he reached for his face with a howl of pain, but he still kept her pinned beneath him. With a furious hiss, Katara shot her hands forward and began to fiercely scratch his face like a crazed puma-cat. Growling angrily, the firebender grabbed her clawing hands and again pinned them on the ground once he realized his nose was not broken.

“Do you really think that a mere woman is going to win against me?” he told her mockingly.
“Why don’t you let me use my waterbending and we can find out, you coward!” she responded angrily as she bucked and twisted so she could break his hold.

He threw his head back and laughed.

“As if that would make any difference,” he retorted arrogantly before he smirked at her. “Besides, I prefer not to have to worry about you driving an ice spear through my chest as I take your lovely body.”

Having just said that, he again settled even more heavily on her, causing her to gasp for air.

“Get off of me!” she screamed in fear, anger, and revulsion as she thrashed against him.

Jianguo laughed at her attempts to escape.

“You don’t know how long I waited for this, waterbender,” he growled huskily as he leaned his head down and licked her neck. He smiled when she gasped in disgust. “You don’t know how many nights I dreamed of having you naked beneath me. I even began to imagine it was you whom I was thrusting into when I was fucking other women.”

“You’re disgusting!” she hissed at him as she tried to free one of her legs so she could kick him, but the only thing she succeeded in doing was give him the chance to slip between her thighs. She cringed in horror when she felt his arousal against her.

“No! Get off me!” she shouted as she tried to recoil away from his touch.

He chuckled before he pressed into her more firmly.

“Don’t touch me!” she cried out.

Ignoring her cries, Jianguo pressed himself against her again and groaned loudly. He then grabbed onto both her shackled wrists with one hand while with the other he tore her top open. The sound of ripping fabric was loud in Katara’s ears. She began to shout and struggle even more fiercely.
“What a nice view,” the firebender commented lustfully as he stared at the woman’s generous breasts covered in a silky, white cloth. Uncaring of her struggles, he grabbed one soft breast and squeezed hard.

“No! Stop!” Katara screamed in both pain and repugnance as she tried to break his hold of her wrists. If only she had her waterbending! She felt terrified and frustrated tears begin to gather in her eyes. This couldn’t be happening!

“I wonder if your husband would still want you once he finds out your body has been tainted. Or would he cast you aside like a common whore when he finds out I have taken my pleasure of your body many times before I get rid of you?” Jianguo mused cruelly as he watched tears of despair fall down her cheeks, “Or maybe I will keep you if you are good.”

Katara screamed in disgust when he bent his head down and licked her chest. He licked a path down the cleavage of her covered breasts before he wrapped his mouth around her clothed nipple while his free hand roamed her body. She renewed her struggles as her fear and panic grew.

“No! Please!” she shouted as her body bucked in order to push him off, but he only pressed his hips more tightly against her, making her choke with her tears at the unwanted feeling.

“I promise that if you let go, you will feel pleasure, too,” he told her throatily as he raised his head to look at her tear-stained face.

“Never, you bastard!” she cursed at him before she again spat at his face.

Jianguo wiped his face with his free hand as he glared at her before he grinned as he leaned down toward her mouth. Katara quickly turned her face away, disgusted at the thought of having him kiss her, but Jianguo tightly grabbed onto her chin and forcefully turned her back to him before he crashed his mouth against hers in a brutal kiss. Katara struggled against him, but when she felt him try to pry her mouth open with his tongue, she felt bile rise in her throat. With an enraged hiss, she bit his lip hard enough to cause him to bleed. He pulled back with an angry curse and she spat his disgusting blood from her mouth.

“Suit yourself!” he growled at her angrily.

He knelt back and reached for the hem of her dress. He ignored her terrified protests as he pulled it
up until it bunched around her waist. He smirked as he was met with another silky, white cloth to cover her womanhood.

“I must thank your husband for making this easier for me,” he commented with a leering laugh as he reached down and pressed his hand against her.

“Don’t!” she screamed.

Chuckling, he rubbed against her a few times as he leaned over her again and closed his mouth around her other covered nipple. Katara cried out for him to stop.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” he groaned as he hooked a finger on the hem of her undergarment.

“No!” Katara shrieked in a wild terror. Her fear gave her enough strength to free one of her hands and punch him across the face.

She barely registered the pain in her hand at his roar of pain. He moved back a bit from the shock and pain and it gave her enough room to kick him hard between his legs. He cried out and curled on himself, but he did not loosen his hold of her as she had been expecting. Panicking, she raised her foot to kick him again, but he quickly grabbed her leg when he realized what she planned to do and pinned it down. The fuming glare he sent her made Katara’s heartbeat race in fear before her head snapped to the side when he struck her painfully across the face.

There was a cracking sound as his fist connected with her cheek before another one followed as he punched the other side of her face. Her face cracked against the hard ground. She cried out as pain exploded behind her eyes at the multiple blows. She opened her eyes a second later, but the painful strikes disoriented her so much she could not focus as black spots danced before her and the world spun around her.

“You little bitch!” she heard him growl angrily at her above the ringing in her ears.

She shook her head to refocus so she could renew her efforts to free herself, but her body did not obey any of her orders as she lay limply on the ground. Her eyes widened when she felt him rip away the cloth that covered her chest before she felt him harshly grab one of her breasts.

No!
She tried to recoil away, but her body felt sluggish and did not listen to her mental commands.

“I wanted this to be pleasant for both of us,” she again heard him growl, “but for what you did I will be rough with you as I take my pleasure of your body!”

He again settled between her legs and reached down to rip her underwear away.

*No! No!* she mentally cried out, but when she felt the cloth almost give way to his tug, she managed to open her mouth to scream.

“*No!*” she cried in anguish.

Chapter End Notes

Don't despair yet!
They had been riding hard and fast, but they still had not found any sign of Katara, Jiao, and the men who had taken them. Zuko and Kuo were in the lead as they desperately scanned ahead of them for any sign of their wives. Jee and Shen rode behind them with grim expressions. Following behind them, Aang held a worried expression as he grasped tightly onto Toph’s hand which she had laid around his waist. For once, Toph was silent since she knew that any sarcastic remark would make Zuko explode in anger.

“Don’t worry, my lord,” Jee spoke up quietly, “We will find them.”

Zuko gave a nod to show he had heard his admiral, but other than that he did not respond. Silent and anxious, Zuko continued to follow the animal’s tracks as he calmed himself with images of slowly killing the ones who had dared to take his wife away from him.

“There are some hills ahead of us, my lord,” Kuo’s voice brought him out of his thoughts, “Do you think they went through them?”

Zuko looked up and spotted the rocky hills his guard had mentioned. He frowned. It would be harder to track the footprints on rock. But perhaps they had gone around them since komodo rhinos had difficulty climbing over rocks.

A sharp pain went through his heart and Zuko grabbed at his chest with a silent gasp. His golden eyes widen. Katara was in danger! He did not know how he knew, but he was sure of it. He had to save her! He would kill whoever dared to hurt her!

With a sharp kick of his heel, he forced the eel-hound to run faster toward the craggy hills as he kept an eye on the animals’ tracks. They paused before the hills since there seemed to only be one narrow path through them. Zuko dismounted quickly and knelt toward the ground to inspect it. He saw that the animals had been led away in another direction and he almost got up to follow the tracks, but he paused when something else caught his attention. His hope rose and his heart picked up its speed when he noticed two pair of small feet follow the path into the hills. They had to belong to the women!

When he felt the others approached him, he stood up and turned to them with a sharp look. He brought his finger to his lips when they began to ask him questions. Understanding, they nodded their heads before they silently followed after the Fire Lord when he rapidly stepped into the rocky trail. They had barely walked a few steps when they heard angry shouts. They all glanced at each other before they stealthily approached the sounds. When they came upon the exit to the other side,
Zuko made them pause before they carefully peered out from the shadows. What they saw made
them tense.

“Jiao!” Kuo whispered in horror.

Trembling and crying softly, Jiao was sitting on the ground as she tried to cover her chest with the
tattered clothes that hung from her body. But what surprised them even more was that one man stood
protectively before her with a fierce expression on his face while facing off eight equally angry men
who were shouting at him.

“Git out of da way, Chang!” one man growled, “Give us da woman. Ye can’t ‘ave ‘er all ta yerself!”

“Yeah!” another one shouted, “Ye can ‘ave her afta we all get a turn with ‘er!”

Zuko glared at them angrily before he frowned in anxiety when he could not see Katara. He turned
to Kuo, but before he could stop him, his guard was already running toward the men with blazing
hands and an incensed expression. Pulling out his dual broadswords, Zuko quickly followed after
him while the others did the same.

“Get away from my wife!” Kuo bellowed furiously.

The men turned in surprise before they jumped out of the way when the angry firebender shot fire
balls at them. They quickly assumed fighting stances when the Fire Lord, the Avatar, and three
others attacked them.

“Kuo!” Jiao shouted in relief and joy.

Something passed across Chang’s face at her cry before he narrowed his eyes at Kuo as he blocked
him from approaching the woman. Kuo growled at him before he threw a fiery punch at his face
which Chang quickly avoided as he retaliated by hurling a boulder at the firebender. Kuo jumped out
of the way before he attacked the earthbender fiercely as he tried to get to his wife.

Zuko avoided another weak attack from the two men he was fighting. He recognized Ping and
regretted not ending his life when he had the chance.
“So we meet again, Fire Lord,” Ping mocked, “Dis time I’ll ‘ave me revenge!”

“So we meet again, Fire Lord,” Ping mocked, “Dis time I’ll ‘ave me revenge!”

“Where is my wife?” Zuko demanded to know with an impatient growl.

The men jeered at him.

“Ye should start lookin’ fer a new one,” the other man laughed.

Infuriated, Zuko was before him before the man could react and beheaded him with a flaming sword.

“Where is she?!” the Fire Lord thundered again as he turned to a wide-eyed Ping.

“My lord!” Zuko heard Jiao shout, “Jianguo took her with him!”

“Where?” he asked desperately.

“I-I d-don’t know!” Jiao sobbed, “He w-wants t-to…You have to save her!”

Feeling his heart constrict, Zuko turned to Toph who had just thrown one man a few feet away with the force of a pillar of rock she had summoned from the ground.

“Toph!” he shouted as he avoided Ping’s attack.

“She planted her feet on the ground and concentrated hard from distinguishing the vibrations in hopes that she could know where Katara was located. She screamed in pain when she felt fire lick at her feet and she fell on her back in agony.

“Toph!” Aang screamed in alarm before he growled as he attacked the firebender who had purposely burned her feet.
Punching Ping unconscious in his anger and frustration, Zuko raced to where Toph was cursing and moaning in pain. He panicked since Jianguo could have taken Katara in any direction and with Toph injured he did not know which way they could have gone. He bent down to tell the earthbender to hold on, but she grabbed onto his arms to get him to shut up and listen to her. Aang arrived to stand protectively over her.

“I felt something in that direction!” she said as she pointed to another hill. “Hurry and save Katara!”

The firebender hardly waited for her to finish her sentence as he jumped to his feet. Heart in his throat, Zuko raced in the general direction Toph had pointed to. He rounded the small mountain and continued to run. He remembered the words Jianguo had written in that letter to Advisor Kang and he felt fear grip his chest. He had to find Katara! He had to save her! He hoped he was not too late.

“No!” he heard Katara scream.

Katara!

He veered toward the sound of her pained and fearful voice.

“No!” he heard her shriek in terror and his heart constricted.

Katara!

He spotted a cluster of boulders and dashed toward them. As he finally neared them, he stopped dead in his tracks at the sight before him. Jianguo lay on top of a struggling, half-naked Katara whose face was streaked with tears. The rebel had her shackled wrists in one hand as he tried to rip her undergarments off. With an enraged roar, Zuko raced forward and harshly grabbed a surprised Jianguo by his shoulders before throwing him off Katara.

Feeling Jianguo’ heavy weight being lifted off her, Katara painfully lifted her head as new hope faintly rose in her heart. The sight of her husband’s imposing figure standing protectively before her made an aching relief surge through her that it forced a choked sob to escape her bleeding lips.

“Zuko!” Katara weakly cried in relief as she tried to sit up, but the movement made her lightheaded
and she fell back onto the ground with a groan of pain as the world spun wildly around.

“I’ll kill you!” Zuko roared as he lunged himself at Jianguo before the older man could get up, “I’ll kill you for touching my wife!”

He struck Jianguo’s jaw hard, knocking him back and stunning him, before Zuko punched him two more times. Through his wrath, Zuko noticed that there were bruises and deep scratches on the older man’s face, and he felt pride at the thought that Katara had fought back. He dodged to the side when Jianguo finally retaliated with a flaming fist and then a kick. Avoiding the attacks, Zuko jumped back just as Jianguo rose to his feet to glare at him.

Jianguo spat blood onto the ground as he angrily seethed in his mind. He had waited so long for this moment and now his plan was ruined. His men had been unable to get close to the royal couple during their honeymoon on Ember Island. A chance for the men he had sent to capture the waterbender had presented itself when Zuko and the blue-eyed beauty had separated from their guards to stare out into the rising sun, but it seemed Zuko had sensed their presence because he became more alert and protective of his wife. His actions brought the attention of his guards, so Jianguo’s men had been forced to retreat. That was why Jianguo came up with another plan to kidnap the waterbender where it would be more difficult for Zuko to keep her protected. Leading her out of Omashu had been so easy that he could not help celebrate his victory early. But how did the infuriating whelp find them?! This was not part of his plan! Zuko was not supposed to notice the waterbender’s absence at least for a few more hours! By that time Jianguo had planned on being in one of their hideouts where he could continue indulging himself some more on the enticing Water Tribe woman and at the same time gloating at the thought of Zuko’s suffering.

“Couldn’t you have waited a few more minutes to intervene?” Jianguo sneered as he wiped at the blood pouring from the now two cuts on his lip.

With an angry growl, Zuko sprang at him again, but this time Jianguo was ready and blocked the younger man’s attack before he fiercely retaliated. Jianguo frowned. Why was Zuko not using the white fire Ping told him about? Had it perhaps been a fluke? They threw deadly punches at each other before they broke apart. Zuko panted with rage as he furiously glared at the older man, who smirked at him as he looked back at the waterbender.

“I can see why you fight so vehemently for her,” Jianguo began.

Zuko glanced briefly back to see Katara trying to cover her chest as she finally managed to painfully sit up before he quickly returned his attention to the man before him.
“After getting a feel of the waterbender’s lovely body, I only crave more,” the older firebender taunted with a leer.

“You bastard!” Zuko snarled as he sprang swiftly forward that he took Jianguo by surprise and tackled him to the floor.

Rage clouding his mind, Zuko began to repeatedly strike the older firebender’s face with his fists until Jianguo was completely covered in blood. Zuko withheld using his white fire because he wanted to prolong Jianguo’s suffering. He would kill the bastard painfully and slowly for daring to touch his wife.

“Zuko, look out!” he heard Katara scream.

Zuko barely had enough time to avoid the sharp rock spike that was aimed at his head. He landed before Katara with a growl as he glared a Chang who had suddenly appeared next to the bloody Jianguo who was sitting up slowly. Zuko took a few steps forward, but was quickly blocked by Ping who punched a rock at him. Zuko easily destroyed the boulder with a fire blast as he focused his attention back to the rebels’ leader. Jianguo spat blood before he wiped his mouth as he glared at the furious Fire Lord before his eyes shifted to the side.

“Get the woman!” he barked.

Alarmed, Zuko whirled around in time to see another man rush forward to grab Katara off the ground. With a distressed cry, he was about to sprint forward, but paused when he saw Jee run the man through with his sword before throwing the body aside as he took position in guarding the distraught Fire Lady. Seeing that his wife was safe, Zuko again spun around to face his enemy with an incensed expression on his face that made his scarred side seem more intimidating.

“This isn’t over, boy,” Jianguo growled from between Chang and Ping. “I will make you suffer and I will have the waterbender if it’s the last thing I do!”

Zuko snarled as he moved toward him with flaming fists, but Chang quickly submerged the three of them into the ground. With a vehement curse, Zuko took a step forward, wanting to chase after them, but he stopped himself. His wife was more important right now and she needed him. He turned and raced to her before he dropped to his knees beside her.

“Katara,” he cried out in relief as he opened his arms to her.
Katara threw herself at him and clutched at his clothes as she buried her face on his neck. Zuko wrapped his arms tightly around her and brought her closer to him when she began to tremble uncontrollably. They did not notice when Jee silently made his way back to the others to give them some privacy.

“Oh, Zuko, Zuko,” the waterbender chanted his name as if it were a blessing.

“Katara, are you all right?” he asked her softly as he nuzzled her tangled hair before he more quietly asked, “Did he…?” he choked. He could not finish the thought. It brought a physical pain to his chest.

She shook her head and clutched even more tightly to him. She wished he was not wearing his armor so she could feel more of his warmth.

“No,” she whispered with a shudder. “You arrived in time to save me.”

Zuko relaxed heavily as he pulled her closer to his chest.

“Thank Agni,” he breathed in immense relief. “I never would have forgiven myself if I had been late.”

Katara shuddered more strongly at the thought and Zuko ran a hand down her back to soothe her, wanting nothing more than to take her to their home in the Fire Nation where she could be safe. She pulled slightly away with a gasp and Zuko looked down at her in concern.

“Jiao!” she exclaimed in anxiety. “We have to save her!”

“Jiao’s fine,” he assured her, “Kuo saved her.”

The waterbender sagged against him and closed her eyes.

“Thank La,” she whispered.
She opened her eyes when Zuko pulled back and she watched him frown as he touched the stone cuffs around her wrists. She clenched her hands and looked away in shame.

“He said he wouldn’t hurt Jiao if I allowed my bending to be blocked,” she said quietly before she bitterly added, “I should have known he wouldn’t keep his promise.”

“He has no honor,” Zuko remarked angrily.

“Jianguo planned the attack on the village to keep you busy while he had his men, posing as your soldiers, make me follow them,” she explained, “They told me you and some children from the village needed my help.”

“I figured as much,” he growled out.

“He…he planned to use me against you so you could release Ozai,” she added quietly.

“I would have if it meant I could take you back,” he told her firmly.

“Zuko, no!” she exclaimed, “You can’t do that. I’m not—”

“Don’t you dare say you’re not that important or else I’ll get angry with you, Katara,” he warned darkly.

Katara opened her mouth to keep arguing, but decided to bite her lip to hold back her words instead. She knew nothing she said would change his mind. She looked down and gasped softly.

“You’re hurt!” she exclaimed as she gently grabbed his hands.

Zuko looked impassively down at his hands being cradled between Katara’s smaller ones. His knuckles were torn and bloody from striking Jianguo’s face so many times. Zuko had not felt the pain only the dark satisfaction of hitting the bastard’s skin and bones. He would have felt more gratification if he had used his firebending behind his strikes, but he had wanted to prolong Jianguo’s
suffering. But for that selfish reason Jianguo had escaped. His face hardened in anger.

“It’s nothing,” he said gruffly when Katara continued to look worriedly at him. His injury was nothing compared to hers. He balled his wounded hands into fists as his fury once again resurfaced before he hugged her tightly close to him again.

“Toph was hurt when she tried to figure out your location,” he continued when it seemed she was about to argue.

“Take me to her,” she told him softly.

Zuko pulled away to looked at her beloved face to make sure she was indeed there with him. His heart was still pounding hard in his chest at the thought that he could have been late, that he could have lost her. His face darkened when he saw her bruised features. He touched one of her cheeks gently before he quickly pulled away when she flinched in pain. He cursed Jianguo.

“They’re just bruises,” Katara assured him as she gently grabbed his face between her hands. “I’ll heal them later, but first you need to take me to Toph.”

Zuko frowned since she was not acting like he thought she would be at almost being…He shook his head before he could finish the thought. Grabbing her arms gently, he helped her stand up, steadying her immediately when she swayed unsteadily on her feet. He frowned darkly when her arms immediately went to cover her exposed chest. The top of her dress lay in tatters around her and the cloth that had covered her breasts rested on the ground a few feet away, also ripped. His jaw clenched and he balled his hands into fists as his body trembled with his wrath before he ordered himself to calm down so he would not frighten her more than she was. Removing his short cloak, he draped it over her shoulders before tying it securely closed around her. He shot a small spark of fire at the ruined undergarment on the ground and watched it burn slowly as if to erase some evidence of what happened. He then turned back to her and bent to pick her up into his arms, but she moved away and shook her head.

“I can walk on my own,” she said when he frowned at her. “I don’t want to seem weak in front of the others.”

Zuko opened his mouth to argue before he decided to do what she wanted so he would not add more to her trauma. Wrapping an arm around her, he led her back to where he had left the others. He wondered what had happened after he had left. He was not really worried since Aang, Toph, and his men were more trained than any of Jianguo’s rebels. He remembered that Jee had come to Katara’s rescue and planned to thank his admiral profusely for the deed. Looking back down at his wife, he
frowned in concern at her silence. There was a blankness in her eyes that he did not like. He would talk to her more calmly once they returned to Omashu. He clenched his hands. He should have killed Jianguo quickly, but he had let his anger control him in his goal to make the former general suffer greatly.

When they finally arrived to where the others were waiting for them, they saw that six men had been killed. One was still alive, however. He sat with his hands tied to his back and a hateful look on his dirty face. Katara looked away from the man and searched for Jiao. Once she spotted her, she smiled in relief. Wearing Kuo’s cloak, Jiao was safely nestled in the arms of her husband, who had her pressed tightly to him. Once the others saw the royal couple approach, they all exclaimed the Fire Lady’s name in relief. Before Kuo could stop her, Jiao broke away from him and ran toward the waterbender. She grasped her hands tightly.

“Are you all right, my lady?” she asked fearfully as she looked at the forming bruises on her face.

Katara smiled to reassure her and the others.

“I’m fine. My husband arrived in time to save me.”

They turned to Zuko for confirmation, and at his nod, they all relaxed.

“Thank the gods,” Jee said as he exhaled deeply, relieved at the news. Lady Ursa would also be glad to hear her daughter-in-law was safe.

“Men who prey on helpless women are monsters that need their dicks cut off with a rusty spoon,” Toph remarked with a snort.

“Toph!” Katara exclaimed as she moved away from Zuko and Jiao and raced toward her.

The short earthbender was sitting with her back against a worried Aang’s chest. Her burnt feet were propped upon a raised stump of rock.

“Does anyone have water?” Katara asked as Zuko moved to stand behind her.
Shen quickly handed her a water canteen he found among the rebels’ belongings. With a smile and a ‘thanks’, Katara took the canteen. She smiled at Zuko when she saw that he had picked up her empty waterskin before she returned her attention to Toph.

“Here,” Aang spoke up with a small, comforting smile.

With a flick of his wrist, the stone manacles around her wrists fell away. Katara exhaled deeply and closed her eyes as she savored the feeling of being reconnected with her element.

“Thanks, Aang,” she said gratefully.

She bent the water from the canteen and enveloped it around her hands until it glowed. She then began to heal Toph’s feet, which luckily were not as burned as she feared. She felt Jiao move close to her and she glanced up at her.

“Are you okay, Jiao?” she asked quietly, “Are you hurt anywhere?”

Jiao gave her a small smile to reassure her.

“I am well, my lady,” she responded sincerely, “Only some minor scratches and a few ripped parts of my clothes, but I’m fine.” She turned to smile reassuringly at her husband when Kuo growled.

“What happened?” the waterbender asked with a frown.

Jiao shuddered and Kuo immediately wrapped an arm around her.

“The men began fighting amongst themselves to see who could…” Jiao paused in disgust before she continued, “to see who could have me first, but then that tall earthbender shoved them away from me.”

Katara and Zuko exchanged a look since they remembered Chang said that even though he did not condone the violation of women, he did not bother with stepping in to stop it.

“Why did Chang stop them?” Katara asked curiously.
Color suffused Jiao’s cheeks and she trembled.

“He said that he was the only one who was to...have me,” she said in a quiet tone.

“I’ll kill the bastard if I ever see him again,” Kuo growled, “Too bad he escaped from me when another man attacked me. The coward.”

They were interrupted when their captive laughed. They turned to stare at him.

“Chang did dat cuz the woman looks a lot like his dead lover,” he said with a sneer as he leered at Jiao. “Yea, ‘cept dis one has gold eyes ’stead of green.”

When they glared at him, the man cringed. Katara glanced at the dark-haired woman. No wonder Chang had looked so stunned when he first saw her. He must have wanted to replace his dead lover with Jiao.

“Where are the rest of the rebels?” the Fire Lord asked the man roughly, “Where is your hideout?”

The man pressed his lips together and refused to respond to the questions. Irritated, Zuko stalked menacingly toward him, causing the rebel to cower from him.

“Answer me or else I’ll have the truth tortured out of you,” Zuko threatened darkly.

“Okay, okay, I’ll tell ya!” the man relented when the Fire Lord lit one of his hands, “I’ll tell ya everthin’ if ya promise ta ‘ave mercy on me!”

Zuko eyed him hard for a few seconds until the men squirmed in anxiety and terror before he gave a nod.

“Fine. I promise to be lenient on you if you tell me everything,” the Fire Lord agreed, though he would not let him go for fear he would warn the others.
The man opened his mouth only to gasp in pain.

Confused, they watched as blood trickled down one corner of his mouth before he fell forward. They gasped when they saw a rock spear imbedded in the man’s back, blood seeping into his clothes. Taking up defensive stances, they scanned their surroundings for more attacking rebels. Minutes passed in tense silence, before they slowly relaxed when nothing happened.

“Dammit!” Toph cursed after Aang told her what occurred, “I could’ve sensed them if my feet weren’t burnt.”

“Katara will have to finish healing you in the palace,” Zuko spoke up as he kept his eyes scanning the area, “It’s best we leave.”

Nodding, they all followed his directions. Shen checked on the man and informed Zuko he was dead. Without any remorse, Zuko told him to leave the body to the wilderness. Aang ignored Toph’s protests as he lifted her into his arms and followed after the others to where they had left their eel-hounds. Placing her on the back of the animal, he then climbed on behind her. Toph continued to grumble in order to hide her pain, but held tightly to his arms when he urged the animal forward.

Holding Katara tightly before him, Zuko quickly led the way back to Omashu with Kuo and Jiao riding the same way. Jee and Shen brought up the rear to make sure they were not attacked from behind. The ride was grim and silent, though they were all relieved that the two women were safe and back with them.

Night had fallen by the time they finally neared the gates of Omashu. Katara turned to look up at Zuko’s dark expression.

“Please be discreet about what happened,” she implored him quietly as she pulled down the hood of the cloak to hide her injured face, “I don’t want rumors to spread and have panic seize the people. I don’t think Jianguo will appear anytime soon.”

Zuko was silent for a moment before he reluctantly agreed. He remembered Katara telling him that the rebels had dressed in his soldiers’ uniforms. He wondered where his soldiers were, he needed to send men to look for them.

The sentinels at the gates immediately opened the doors when they recognized the Fire Lord and the Avatar. The streets were empty as the citizens got ready to turn in for the night. The small group rode
in silence toward the courtyard of the palace before dismounting. The stablemen hastily rushed forward to take the animals. The stable boy from before quickly took the reins from the Fire Lord and looked curiously up at them. Katara smiled under the shadows of the cloak’s hood to reassure him and the boy smiled back with a blush. He puffed up his chest when the Fire Lord gave his thin shoulder a firm squeeze. As they all entered the palace, Kuo bade them good night before he quickly left with Jiao to their guest room in the servant quarters.

“Do you need anything else, my lord?” Jee asked as he and Shen waited for the answer.

“No,” Zuko responded, “Thank you for your help. You should go rest.”

His admiral and personal guard bowed at him and Katara before they turned around to find their way to their rooms.

“Aang, take Toph to her room so I can finish healing her,” the waterbender spoke up.

With a nod, Aang carried the still grumbling earthbender to her room with the royal couple following behind. They entered and Aang laid her on the bed where she crossed her arms and glared ahead of her. Ignoring her attitude, Aang sat on a chair beside the bed and held onto one of her hands. With a smile at their antics, Katara immediately set out to heal Toph’s injury. Zuko stood near her, not wanting to part from her side after the horrible fright he had experienced that day.

“There, all better,” Katara announced a few minutes later, “Your feet might be a bit sensitive for a while since the skin is new.”

“Eh, I’ll live,” was Toph’s nonchalant response as she gave a shrug. Then she smirked as she added, “Can you let me borrow Sparky so he can piggyback me until I’m better?”

“I only did that as repayment for accidentally burning your feet years ago,” Zuko replied with a sniff, “I won’t go through the humiliation as Fire Lord.”

“Fine,” Toph replied with a snort before she turned to grin at Aang. “I bet piggybacks from Twinkletoes will be more fun anyway.”

Aang and Katara laughed quietly when Zuko indignantly asked her if she was calling him boring. Despite his protest, Katara healed Zuko’s hands and they all fell into a grim silence. After Katara
reassured them once again that she was fine, they left the younger couple to themselves before Zuko wrapped an arm around her and led her to their guest room. As they entered, Zuko went to the small bathing room to find the copper bathtub already filled with water for their regular bath time, but the water was cold now. Zuko moved toward the tub and dipped a hand inside to warm the water until it was steaming nicely before he went back to his wife. Again, he frowned at her silence and watched as she clutched his cloak tightly around her form.

“The bath is ready. I need to tell Mother, Uncle, and Bumi what happened,” he told her as he moved toward her.

“Do you have to?” she asked him quietly.

“I want to let them know that I want to return to the Fire Nation tomorrow,” he explained gently.

“We don’t have to leave,” she said with a small frown.

“You will be better protected in our home,” he replied firmly, “Besides, I don’t think Jianguo will cause any more problems here since his plan to capture you failed.”

Katara did not respond since she really wanted to return home and forget what happened. She shuddered at the memory of Jianguo hovering over her before she quickly shoved it away. Zuko moved forward to help her undress, but she flinched away before she could stop herself.

Zuko froze in surprise before he dropped his arms back to his sides.

“What’s wrong?” he asked with a concerned frown.

“You should go tell them what happened,” she said instead as she gave him a small smile. “They must be worried.”

Frown deepening, he said, “I don’t want to leave you…”

“I’m fine. I’m going to bathe while you’re gone,” she reassured him.
Hesitating, Zuko stared at her for a while before he relented.

“I promise I’ll return quickly,” he told her as he moved toward the door. “I’ll have a servant bring you food. I’ll be back soon.”

Closing the door behind him, the young firebender walked down the hall in worry. Passing a servant, he asked her to bring Katara dinner before he continued on his way when she bowed at him. He went to Jee’s guest room and found that the admiral was still awake. Zuko thanked him for saving his wife before telling him to have his men ready the airship so they could depart tomorrow toward the Fire Nation. Jee immediately went to follow his orders. Zuko continued toward Bumi’s study where a servant had told him he could find the old king with Iroh and Ursa.

Knocking once, Zuko opened the door and stepped inside. The three turned before they stood up and began shooting questions at him. He raised his hand to ask them to stop before he heaved a sigh when they anxiously waited for him to explain what happened. In a few minutes, he gave them a brief account of what had occurred since his departure. With a curse, Bumi stalked toward the door and bellowed for his guards to set up a perimeter around the palace before slamming the door shut.

“I plan on leaving to the Fire Nation tomorrow,” the Fire Lord added seriously as he looked at Bumi, “I wish I could stay and help, but—”

“You should take Lady Katara home,” Bumi interrupted firmly, quickly dismissing the young man’s guilt, “She’ll be better protected there. Who knows, maybe this Jianguo could plan to kidnap her again if you remain here any longer. And if he does succeed this time, we all know what will happen.”

Zuko balled his hands as he looked away, knowing Bumi was referring to the fact that he would agree to release Ozai in order to get Katara back. Zuko narrowed his eyes. He could not let that happen.

“I want to keep Katara’s kidnapping a secret,” Zuko told them grimly after a moment of silence, “I don’t want people to spread untrue rumors about her. I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Of course, we’ll keep this a secret,” Bumi spoke up before he added with a frown that caused the wrinkles on his forehead to be more pronounced, “You should’ve killed the bastard when you had the chance.”
“I know,” Zuko growled out as he clenched his hands.

“How is Katara?” Ursa asked worriedly.

“She is a bit shaken up, but she seems fine,” Zuko answered after a second.

“Thank Agni,” Iroh breathed as he sat back heavily onto the chair and rubbed his forehead.

“I have to return to her,” the Fire Lord said as he turned toward the door. “We will leave tomorrow as soon as everything is ready.”

Without waiting for their response, he walked out of the room and quickly headed back to the guest room and Katara.

“Zuko, wait,” he heard his mother call after him.

Zuko turned around to see her hurrying after him. Once she stood before him, she glanced around them to make sure they were alone before she turned back to her son.

“Is Katara truly all right?” she asked grimly, her delicate features marred by an anxious frown.

Zuko hesitated for a moment before he sighed.

“She seems fine, but…” he trailed off with a frown.

“But what?” Ursa prompted.

“When I tried to touch her, she…flinched away from me,” he confessed quietly.
Ursa’s frown deepened.

“That’s a natural reaction to victims or would-be-victims of rape,” she clarified softly.

“What do you mean?” he asked her anxiously.

“Right now Katara might loathe the touch of any man, including yours, because it will remind her of what happened,” she explained gently to him.

Zuko balled his hands into tight fists and growled in anger at the memory of what Jianguo had been doing to Katara.

“I should have killed him quickly,” he hissed furiously.

“You have to be understanding and gentle with her as she tries to come to terms with what almost happened,” Ursa advised him. She paused before she grabbed her son’s clenched hand as she more softly added, “You also need to understand that Katara might abhor the thought of sexual intimacy at the moment.”

Zuko’s eyes widened in dismay. He could not live without making love to Katara! As if understanding his thoughts, Ursa gave him a frown and squeezed his hand tightly.

“You have to be patient and wait until she approaches you in order not to hurt her, Zuko,” she told him firmly.

At her reprimand, Zuko lowered his eyes in shame. He berated himself harshly. How selfish could he be? While Katara was hurting, all he could think about was his own discomfort? No, he would resist his urges and wait until Katara was ready. He would help her overcome this. But, what if he could not comfort her? What if he could not help her? Sensing his distressed thoughts, his mother squeezed his hand gently and smiled at him when he looked at her.

“Katara is a strong woman, she will surpass this,” she assured him confidently, “And it is your job to be there for her when she needs you.”
Zuko gave a firm nod.

“I will,” he said firmly.

Patting his hand, she smiled at him before she released him.

“Go to your wife, my son,” she told him.

Thanking her, Zuko bid her goodnight before turning back around and heading toward the guest room he shared with Katara. Once he stood before it, he paused to calm himself so he would not alarm her before he opened the door and entered. He frowned when he saw the room was empty, but he relaxed when he heard the sound of splashing water.

*Katara must still be bathing,* he thought in relief.

He saw the dinner plate the servant must have brought and frowned when he saw that his wife had barely touched it. He hurried to the bathing room only to freeze in shock at the sight that greeted him. Sitting in the copper tub, Katara was vigorously scrubbing her skin, causing it to turn red as tears ran down her cheeks and silent sobs racked her body. He could see that she had healed her bruises and cuts, but he feared that she would cause herself injury.

Oblivious, Katara continued scrubbing herself roughly with the sponge. She felt dirty. She could still feel Jianguo’s disgusting touch on her. She scrubbed her neck and then her breasts where he had placed his mouth and she shuddered in revulsion as tears continued to pour out of her eyes unchecked. She wished she could tear her skin off and replace it with new and clean skin.

Watching her actions in shock, Zuko’s first impulse was to run to her and gather her in his arms to make her stop hurting herself, but he remembered his mother’s words about Katara distrusting a man’s touch. He did not want to alarm her. Slowly, he made his way to her and knelt by her side. She was still busy tearing at her skin to notice him.

“Katara,” he called out softly to her.

Gasping in fear, Katara flung her hand forward and slapped the male intruder as she pressed herself against the side of the tub. Frightfully, she opened her eyes to see Zuko touch his cheek as he turned his head back to gaze apologetically at her. Why was he sorry? She was the one who slapped him!
“Zuko!” she cried out his name as she moved toward him and cradled his face in her hands. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine,” he reassured her gently as he resisted the urge to touch her wrists. “It was my fault for startling you.”

At his words, Katara’s face crumbled again and she brought her face to her hands and cried harder. She felt her heart clench in anger at herself for hurting him while he was so caring toward her. Zuko again reached for her before he stopped himself, clenching his hands tightly upon his thighs as he watched her cry. He cursed Jianguo with every possible painful death there was. Reaching for a towel, he spread it wide for her.

“Come to bed and rest, love,” he said gently.

Katara moved away from him and again picked up the sponge.

“I haven’t finished bathing,” she said hysterically as she again began scrubbing her skin raw.

Gathering courage, Zuko gently grabbed the sponge.

“Stop, Katara, before you hurt yourself,” he told her softly.

“I’m still dirty,” she muttered as she tried to pull the sponge away from his hold.

Zuko frowned in confusion at her words.

“You’re already clean,” he said.

Katara shook her head vehemently as she let go of the sponge and wrapped her arms around herself as she brought her knees close to her chest.
“I…I feel dirty,” she whispered as more tears fell from her eyes.

Understanding what she meant, Zuko clenched his jaw as rage against Jianguo once again consumed him before it was replaced by concern for Katara. Slowly, he touched her chin. She flinched but allowed him to raise her head toward him. He gazed unwaveringly into her distressed, blue eyes so she could see his sincerity.

“You are not dirty, Katara,” he told her firmly. “What happened was not your fault.”

Katara stared at him for a long moment before she threw herself at him and sobbed quietly against his chest. Zuko hugged her tightly to him, disregarding the fact that he was getting wet as he gently ran his hand through her wet hair while her body racked with her soft cries.

“Jianguo is to be blame here,” he growled lowly, “You did nothing wrong.”

“It is my fault,” she cried out as she clutched at his clothes. “I was too trusting. I was weak. I didn’t have the strength to stop him.”

“It’s Jianguo who did wrong for taking advantage of your lack of waterbending,” he told her. “It’s understandable that you couldn’t fight against his physical strength. But you are not weak. It takes great strength and courage to decide to put yourself at risk in order to save someone else. If you hadn’t, Jiao would be dead by now…or worse.”

He paused when she continued to cry silently before he continued, “Besides, you fought with everything you had to stop him from…You had courage to do that instead of giving up and letting him do what he wanted.”

He felt and heard Katara’s cries quiet down a little, but she did not say anything. He frowned since he knew he had been unable to convince her, but thought that maybe all she needed was time to overcome this and see that he was right and that nothing was her fault. When it seemed her tears had drained her energy, he pressed her closer to him. He mentally sighed in relief when she did not flinch away from him.

Silently, he stood up with her in his arms and lifted her out of the tub. Carefully and gently, he dried her hair and body without lingering too long before lifting her in his arms to carry her back to the room. He helped her into her nightclothes before he placed her on the bed, tucking the blankets around her. Then he took a quick bath, dressed in his sleeping pants, and slid into the bed beside her.
He moved close to her, but when he tried to wrap his arm around her waist to press her against him, she cringed and tensed. He immediately backed away.

“I’m sorry,” Katara whispered as she clenched the blanket tightly with her hands as she looked at him. She felt so selfish, but she could not help her fear.

“There’s nothing for you to feel sorry about,” he told her gently as he gazed at her. “Try to get some sleep. We will fly to the Fire Nation tomorrow.”

With a small nod, Katara sighed before she closed her eyes. She snapped them wide open a second later when she saw Jianguo hovering over her with that leering smirk on his face. Shaking her head fiercely, she scooted a bit closer to Zuko as she told herself that Jianguo did not succeed in violating her and that she was safe with Zuko, her husband. She relaxed a little at her thoughts and closed her eyes. A few minutes later, she was fast asleep. The terrifying events of the day had tired her out.

Hearing her breathing even out in sleep, Zuko let out a sigh and relaxed back into the pillow as he gazed into her sleeping face. He was glad to see that her lovely features were no longer marred by bruises, but he did not like the small frown that lingered on her brow even as she slept. He closed his eyes for a moment as he allowed his anger and guilt reign free. This was his fault. He should have protected her better. He should have never let her out of his sight. Opening his eyes, he again stared at his wife’s face.

“I promise I will catch Jianguo and make him pay for everything he has done,” he vowed silently into the room.

She was alive and safe in his arms, but Zuko knew recovering from all that had happened would take both of them some time. The trauma, the anguish, the fear, it had shaken both of them to their cores. Zuko was not sure how to take the next step. For himself, or for Katara.

The sound of Katara’s terrified scream woke Zuko up from a fretful sleep. He instinctively jumped from the bed with blazing hands, ready for an attack.

“No! Get away from me!” Katara’s cry made Zuko’s dazed mind immediately clear up.

Whirling back to the bed, his eyes widened when he saw Katara crying and thrashing about as she clawed at an invisible attacker. Realizing she was having a nightmare, he rushed to her side and clasped her hands. His hold only made her furiously renew her struggles.
“Katara, wake up! It’s just a nightmare!” he called to her worriedly as he tried to avoid her clawing hands.

“No! Don’t touch me!” she cried as tears poured out of her closed eyes. “Let me go! Please!”

Zuko felt his heart break at her pained and fearful plea.

“Katara, it’s me, Zuko! Your husband!” he called to her soothingly. “Please wake up. You’re safe now. You’re safe.”

Hearing his words, Katara finally snapped her eyes open, darting them wildly around as she tried to figure out where she was. She realized that she was not lying on the rocky ground in the wilderness, but on the bed in the guest room of Omashu, and Jianguo was not the one holding her, but Zuko. With a cry, she lunged herself at him and whimpered quietly. Why couldn’t she forget?

“Ssh, love, everything is fine,” Zuko crooned softly against her head as he stroked her long hair. “You’re safe. I’m here.”

Katara closed her eyes as she tried to take deep, calming breaths, but that only succeeded in making her remember her nightmare. It was a replay of what Jianguo did, but this time he had managed to have her completely undressed and he was about to… She shook her head to get rid of the horrible dream. She shuddered in disgust. Would the memory ever go away?

“It was Jianguo,” she whispered quietly, “He tried to… he a-almost…”

“It was just a nightmare,” he reminded her before he softly repeated, “You’re safe.”

When he felt Katara nod against his chest, Zuko tightened his embrace. He felt fury swell within him once more. He recalled how he had beaten Jianguo up until his face was a bloody mess as Zuko sought vengeance for what the dishonorable bastard tried to do to his waterbender. Zuko stiffened when all of the sudden he felt the need to possess her. He was not just shaking with suppressed rage, he was trembling with need. A need that he was so familiar with, but was somehow different. He could only assume that some primitive innate reaction had been sparked to life by his fight with Jianguo. It was completely ludicrous and yet he could not deny it.
What was wrong with him? He had to stop it. He loved this woman shivering in his arms. She had almost been violated by that bastard Jianguo, and here he was thinking such things. He was just as bad as that bastard, if not worse! He had to stay away from her until such outrageous feelings passed.

Grabbing her arms, he gently pulled her away from him, away from his traitorous body. Letting his arms fall to his sides, he turned away from her when she looked at him with wide, blue eyes. He closed his eyes and clenched his hands.

“It was just a nightmare,” he repeated through clenched teeth, “You should try and rest now.”

Katara frowned at his back before she felt her heart constrict in her chest as Jianguo’s words came to haunt her.

‘I wonder if your husband would still want you once he finds out your body has been tainted. Or would he cast you aside like a common whore when he finds out I have taken my pleasure of your body…?’

Was…was Zuko repulsed by her? Did he not want her anymore because of what almost happened to her?

“You are angry,” she whispered dejectedly as she wrapped her arms around herself. “Are you disgusted with me? I swear Jianguo didn’t succeed in raping me! Please, Zuko, don’t hate me. I—”

She gasped when Zuko whirled around to glare at her.

“I’m not disgusted with you, Katara!” he growled angrily at her, angry that she would think such things of him, of her. “Even if that bastard had succeeded, I would still love you since it wouldn’t be your fault!”

Katara felt her heart ease and her body relaxed slightly. Taking a deep breath to calm himself down, Zuko closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“It’s just that I…I’m having trouble controlling myself,” he tried to explained to her between gritted teeth, “It’s just that I…I want you so desperately right now that I can’t trust myself around you at the moment. If I so much as touch you, I fear I might go insane in my desire to possess you.”
He paused to look grimly into her wide eyes as he added, “And I won’t be gentle or tender, Katara, which is how I should treat you right now. If I take you, I would be driven by anger and fear. I don’t want to hurt you or scare you more than you are now. I’m trying to keep my distance from you. To keep you safe.”

Saying that, Zuko again turned away from her and stood up to leave, but he paused when he felt Katara clutched tightly onto his arm.

“Don’t leave me, Zuko,” she pleaded as she gazed up at him. “Please. Stay with me.”

“Katara, didn’t you hear me?” he asked her frantically as he tried to gently pull away from her. “I need to leave before I do something I will later regret.”

“Stay with me, please,” she repeated, ignoring his words as she pulled him so he could sit back down next to her. When he continued to refuse to look as her, she added, “It’s what I need. I need to be with you…” She paused briefly as she licked her suddenly dry lips before she continued more softly, “I…I want you to make love to me.”

Zuko turned to give her an incredulous look. He was shocked at the desperation he found in her blue depths.

“Katara, how can you…?”

“Please, Zuko!” she implored, desperately pleading him to understand. “I want you to erase…his touch and replace it with yours! I need to know I belong to you and only to you, Zuko! I want you to remind me that I am yours and no one else’s. Please.”

Zuko closed his eyes as he fought with himself for a long moment—his mind and heart waging a silent war—before he gave in to what they both wanted, what they both needed. Snapping his eyes open, he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to him, smashing his lips on hers. He thought no more about it, or anything other than Katara, in reestablishing his claim on her body, in restoring her confidence in herself once again, and in showing her his love for her.

He pulled away and when he reached for her nightgown, he paused briefly when she immediately tensed before he continued to divest her of it after she gave him a shaky nod. Once he had her completely bare, he quickly got rid of his sleeping pants before he slowly laid her back onto the bed.
Looming over her as she lay beneath him, he watched as her arms moved to protect her modesty—to protect herself—before she paused and forced herself to remain still. Her eyes were wide with uncertainty and a bit of fear, and he hated it. There should only be desire and pleasure in her gaze during such intimate moments. But he was glad to also see her complete trust in him in not to actually harm her.

His hands reached out shakily before he gently pressed against the inside of her knees. She resisted for only a second before she allowed him to spread her legs wide for him. As he knelt there, staring at his possession, his treasure, his heaven, she began to tremble and her hands grasped the sheets tightly beneath her to stop their quaking. He silently admired her for enduring any impulse she might have had to cover herself as she forced herself to go through with this in order to heal. While he knew with absolute confidence that he would have respected her decision to keep him at a distance, the knowledge that she wanted him at that moment, that she consented to his actions, obstinately strengthened his need to have her.

Yet, he stopped himself from continuing, not wanting to hurt her, even if she wanted this. He wanted to be gentle with her, but he could feel his blood boiling in his veins with his rage, fear, and possessiveness and he knew that he could not be tender. It seemed she understood the war that was raging within him, for she gave him a small, trembling smile as she lay completely back and let her hands rest beside her head in a sign of undeniable submission, letting him know that she would only be thus with him and only him. A low growl of triumph left his mouth and he positioned himself between her legs.

His hand trailed up her thigh before he pressed against her center. She tensed again, but remained still as she gazed intensely at his face, as if to reassure herself that it was he who was touching her. He took delightful note of the moisture he felt, but frowned since he knew she was not nearly ready enough to receive him. Holding her gaze, he trailed his finger along her slit before slipping it inside her. She winced slightly and he paused in concern.

"Don’t stop. Please,” she begged in a small whisper.

Nodding, he began to pump his finger before pressing his thumb on her clit in order to get her wet enough for his intrusion. It only took a few strokes before he heard her moan softly and felt a rush of wetness coat his finger. He inserted another finger and increased his pace, glad that he was arousing her. When her moans increased in volume and her hips began to move with his thrusting fingers, he groaned. He continued in his slow caress for a long moment as he ushered her to that realm of pleasure. When he felt her muscles clench with her impending release, he lost what little reserve he had, and lowered his body over hers. She tensed immediately and he paused in concern.

"Look at me, Katara,” he told her, firmly yet softly. “It’s me, Zuko, your husband, who is going to take you, love you. Me and no one else.”
“Yes, only you,” she affirmed as she reached for his face with one hand and stroked his scar to again reassure herself it was him.

Holding her gaze, he slowly slid the tip of his shaft into her quivering entrance. Her eyes widened, but she held still. Zuko paused for a second as he continued to stare at her before he quickly thrust into her and buried himself inside her. Katara gasped and stiffened before she forced herself to relax once again and wrapped her legs around his hips. They stared at each other for another second before Zuko slammed his mouth on hers just as he began to thrust unrelentingly inside her.

“Ohhh, Zuko,” Katara moaned as the familiar fire sparked to life in her belly.

She clenched her eyes to savor it, overjoyed to know that both her body and her mind were welcoming the pleasure her husband was bestowing on her, even if he was being rough. She did not need gentle at the moment. She wanted Zuko to take her with everything he had, she wanted him to erase the memory of Jianguo’s disgusting touch, she wanted to only feel Zuko around, above, and inside her.

“Oh, gods!” she cried as his hips began to slam wildly against her, thrusting his iron length between her slick folds with astounding force.

She tightened her hold of her legs around his waist, making him sink deeper into her as he continued to slam into her. She moaned loudly as heat surged through her body. Yes, this is what she wanted! It was what she needed. Tears began to trickle from the corner of her eyes as many different emotions warred within her. Her hands slid up Zuko’s arms before she tightly gripped his strong shoulder blades in a fervent attempt to hold him to her, to reassure herself that he was there with her, needing her, wanting her, making love to her, and essentially healing her. She wanted to remind herself that Zuko was the only one who knew her body completely. He was the only one who would. She was his and no one else’s, just as much as he was hers.

“I love you, Zuko,” she cried softly into his ear.

At her words, Zuko’s eyes screwed shut and he groaned harshly as he captured her within his arms and crushed her to him to hold her steady for his driving assault.

“Mine!” he growled, ramming his hips against her, feeling his balls slap against her round cheeks as his cock plunged into her. “It is my cock that is inside you. It will be my seed that takes root in your womb.”
“Yes! Ahh!” Katara wailed as she threw her head back.

“You’re mine!” Zuko hissed as he panted in pleasure before he was consumed with fear and anger as he began to remember what happened.

What would he have done if she had been taken from him? If he had arrived late and not been able to find her, what could he have done? He could have followed their tracks, but knowing Jianguo he would have the earthbenders submerge them underground to lose him. And if Zuko lost track of them, he would never have been able to find Katara. He could have lost her forever…

“Only I do this to you, you hear?” he growled into her ear. “Only me! Do you understand, Katara?”

“Yes!” she moaned as she thrust her hips upward to welcome his onslaught.

Groaning severely, Zuko increased his speed and penetration, causing the bed to creak and shake violently. He gasped and closed his eyes tightly shut as terrifying images of what Jianguo would have been doing to her now if Zuko had not arrived in time bombarded his mind. Without her waterbending to defend herself, Jianguo could have easily held Katara down and taken his time to… If Zuko had been even a few minutes later than he was to rescue her, he would have arrived to see…

“No!” he roared angrily, “No, damn it!”

Katara’s eyes flew open at his anguished scream and she was struck by the fear and desperation in his gaze. She wrapped herself more tightly around him, knowing that he needed this as much as she did. Wrapping one of his arms around her shoulders, Zuko reached down with his other arm to put pressure on her bottom, bringing her up and against him harder as he reclaimed her body with his own. Lifting her ass up to meet his hips, he shifted and plunged deeper, harder, unable to fill her enough. Irrational as it may be, the desire to bury himself deeply inside her body, to entirely possess the woman beneath him assaulted his mind, his body, his being. As if she understood his painful need, his wife’s soft lips caught his mouth. She nibbled his lower lip before pulling his insistent tongue inside her moist hot mouth and curled her own against it until he was growling lustfully into her mouth.

“You’re mine, Katara,” he panted harshly against her lips, “He won’t touch you again…Never, ever again…I won’t let him or anyone…”
Her body was his and his alone to worship, and Jianguo’s disrespect would cost him his despicable life. Feeling his rage consume him once again, the Fire Lord pressed the waterbender back against the mattress and crushed himself atop her as he rammed into her in quick, short strokes as his hands swept frantically across her body, firmly cupping her breasts, running up and down her back, her firm backside, and desperately squeezed and grasped.

“Yes, Zuko!” Katara cried out, not just from the pleasure of his fervent thrusts, but from the reassurance in his possessive words. Somehow, Zuko knew what she needed, and he was giving himself completely to her, filling her with his body, his comfort, his confidence, his love. She wanted to reciprocate the feeling to him.

Zuko felt Katara’s arms coil lovingly around his neck and her legs wrap more tightly around his waist. Her fingers spread out over his shoulder blades, and then pressed down to hold him to her. He did not slow down in his relentless thrusts. He could feel his breath come out in pants from both the pleasure and exhaustion, but he ignored the slight discomfort in his pursuit to reclaim and love her. He nuzzled his face against her neck and he groaned as he touched the necklace he had given her. He was then aware of the sting of metal on his back as Katara gripped his slick skin with her fingers, reminding him of the gold ring on her finger. They were constant reminders that she was his and his alone.

And she would forever be so.

“You’re completely mine,” he growled again, fiercely and aggressively.

“Ohhh!” Katara wailed, “Mmm, uhh!”

With his every thrust, the blazes of passion sprang higher inside of her, twisting her stomach and causing her eyes to roll to the back of her head. Katara buried her face in Zuko’s perspiring neck as he continued to ram his thick length into her welcoming, wet passage, sending her further and further towards the edge, making her forget everything but this moment with the man she loved.

“Zuko! Oh, Zuko! Oh, Zuko!” she began chanting desperately as her pleasure heightened. Her firebender responded by pounding impossibly harder against her, burying himself again and again within her slick core. “I need you, Zuko! I need you!”

She gasped and moaned loudly when she felt Zuko’s hard shaft throb violently inside her at her desperate cries. Zuko groaned deeply before he raised his head to press his lips to his moaning waterbender’s ear.
“You’re mine, Katara,” he hissed possessively as he crushed her to him.

“Uuuuuh, yes!” she cried out.

Her entire body felt ablaze with desire and passion while her lower stomach began to coil tightly. As Zuko continued to ram into her, desperation surged through her veins, causing her need to flare within her until she was entirely consumed from the sensation. She had never needed anything so much, so completely, in her entire life, but even in the heat of such impassioned lust, she took a moment to thank the gods that she had Zuko. She would forever be grateful that they had given him to her and that he would always be here for her, willing to give himself to her, to complete her in every way she needed him to. She promised herself that she would always, always do everything she could to show him how much she loved and appreciated him. With an overwhelmed cry, her hands were suddenly all over him, grasping and squeezing as she raked her fingernails down his chest, his shoulders, his back, his backside while she began to nip and lick at his neck with wild abandon.

Zuko growl fiercely at her actions and he reached one hand down to clench one of her ass cheeks to impale her hard onto his cock. He grabbed her chin with his other hand and pulled her lips toward his. He nipped her lower lip before his mouth utterly devoured her, his tongue thrusting deeply into her mouth as he moaned and growled against her lips. She responded just as desperately, forcing her tongue roughly against his as her hands continued to curl around his body, clutching him tightly against her. Their movements were wild as they continued to grab each other blindly, wanting to be close, wanting to assure themselves and the other. Just wanting more.

“Mine,” Zuko rumbled as he thrust into her again, his possessive words keeping time with his plunges, “You’re mine… mine… Only mine… No other man… ever… ever touches you…”

“I’m yours, only yours,” Katara whimpered back as his possessive words not only fueled the flames within her, causing her stomach to begin to clench with her imminent climax, but also ease her fear from her trauma a little.

She gasped when she felt Zuko’s thumb press hard against her swollen nub as he murmured in her ear.

“Come for me, love,” he commanded.

Her eyes widened. Just as Zuko had responded to her every need, her body did the same for him as she suddenly blasted into her release. She dug her nails into his back as the white-hot pleasure
exploded throughout her body and lights flashed before her eyes, sending her screaming his name into oblivion.

The feeling of her wet walls clenching around him triggered his own release. Zuko roared in pleasure as his cock pulsed wildly inside of his wife, bringing her once again to the height of ecstasy. He thrust his hips against hers a couple more times, filling her completely with his hot seed, before collapsing with a groan against her perspiring body with his lips against her throat.

Katara felt his hot breath blow out of his mouth in heavy pants on her skin and she was sure he felt her own heaving breaths against his. A long moment later, a moment where her mind was completely absorbed in bliss, she felt him hold her tightly against him as he began to nuzzle her neck while his body trembled.

“Gods, Katara, don’t hate me for that,” he whispered hoarsely against her skin, unable to look at her. “Agni, please don’t hate me, Katara.”

Katara frowned. How could he think she would ever hate him for making her feel secure and loved?

“I could never hate you, Zuko,” she told him firmly yet gently. “Not when you have been so good to me.” She gently combed her fingers through his dark hair as she shyly added, “I don’t think you realize that we both needed that. I needed to be with you as much as you wanted to be with me.”

Gathering courage, Zuko lifted himself up and stared down into Katara’s blue eyes. He searched her face, fearful of seeing repugnance or loathing. He saw nothing but love and gratitude reflecting in those cobalt depths and he felt his heart constrict almost painfully in his chest with his ardent feelings for her. He tightened his hold of her, this time not out of possessiveness but of protectiveness. He vowed that no one else would harm her ever again. He would not allow it.

“I love you, Katara,” he rasped passionately.

He leaned down and kissed her gently, this time not seeking to claim her body, but to express his hopeless devotion and love of her. She sighed softly against his mouth before quickly opening up to him when he requested permission. His tongue stroked hers sensually, tenderly, willing her to understand him. After a long moment of just kissing, one of his hands trailed the length of her side before slipping between their tightly pressed bodies to caress her breast and tease her nipple. She gasped into his mouth and tilted her hips forward towards his. Zuko groaned deeply since the sensation caused his cock to immediately harden.
He began to move within her with a different purpose now. He strove to bring her to fulfillment. He wanted to bring her closer to him, not only physically but emotionally as well. He needed to bring her to share in the euphoria he now felt and she so utterly deserved. Her moans and whimpers filled his mouth, her legs clamped tightly around his body, and her fingers grasped his back as silent tears began to fall down her eyes, and yet he did not release her or moved his ardent gaze from hers. He would not allow her to be alone now—or ever—when she needed him. He told her how wonderful she was, what she made him feel, and that she was his everything. He whispered against her lips his love for her as he again made her his. When he saw her eyes widened with a gasp before she shuddered against him, he pushed even deeper inside her. Only when she had experienced the greatness of her rapture did he let himself go, crushing her tightly against him.

Even through their powerful climaxes, they kept hold of one another, refusing to let go of each other as they rode the waves of pleasure. When they finally recovered from their overwhelming heights, they found themselves wrapped completely around each other. They sighed deeply as they crushed themselves even closer, both refusing to let the other go, just enjoying the afterglow. No more words were spoken. They were not needed at the moment.

When Katara finally fell into a restful sleep, Zuko continued to hold her protectively, still buried deeply within her, as he glared into the now dark room. He vowed to kill Jianguo. When he finally saw that bastard again, he would kill him for the harm he had done to his wife. He would not rest until the rebels’ leader was dead. And once Jianguo was dead, Katara would never have to live in fear again. That, Zuko vowed upon his honor.
Katara slowly opened her drowsy eyes, and noticed that Zuko was once again protectively wrapped around her. He was asleep with his head pillowed by her breasts, one of his strong legs thrown over and curved around both of hers. His left arm was wrapped around her, holding her close and tightly to him. He was very warm and slightly heavy, but that did not bother her. With a small smile, Katara lifted her hand and gently ran her fingers through his dark hair, longer now than before. With a soft sigh, she looked away from gazing at his dark head to look around the royal bedchamber. The light of dawn was spilling into the quiet room, casting it in a soft orangey hue.

A month had passed since the rebels’ attack on the Earth Kingdom villages. Ever since the morning after Jianguo had almost forced himself on her and Zuko had loved her both possessively and tenderly, she had woken up with her husband holding her tightly to him as if he were afraid she would be snatched from his side while he slept. But she did not mind. It made her feel safe and she had not had another nightmare of that horrible event.

Her smile faded.

However, only when she was near Zuko did she feel secure. She now tended to look over her shoulder as if expecting someone to jump out to grab her. And whenever there was another man present, she would feel her hands begin to sweat and her heart quicken in anxiety. If they came closer than she was comfortable, she would flinch and quickly move into a defensive stance before she could stop herself.

She had first noticed her reaction the day they left Omashu and Jet had approached her. He had tried to convince her to stay, and when she had firmly refused, he had moved to embrace her, leaning down and trying to kiss her as he had many times before. She had jumped away and backed herself against the wall as she stared at him in fear. Jet had frozen in shock at her reaction before he worriedly asked her what was wrong. She was saved from responding when Zuko had immediately rushed over to her side. He had curtly bid farewell to Jet before he wrapped his arm around her and led her away. Jet had seemed so stunned, then hurt and resigned as he called out a sad goodbye to her. She had only given him a tentative smile as she allowed Zuko to lead her away. She felt bad since it was not Jet’s fault that Jianguo attacked her and it wasn’t Jet’s fault that he did not know what happened. Yet, she could not help feeling relieved at the thought that Jet would no longer chase after her. At least she hoped he didn’t.

However, she also reacted the same way with Iroh, Jee, Shen and Kuo—men she knew would give up their lives before harming her. Although her logical side knew this, her body and mind acted as if she feared they would attack her out of nowhere. She could not help but remember her helplessness when Jianguo loomed over her and the fear and disgust that roiled through her. Zuko now tried to find time in his busy schedule to spend time with her and try to help her overcome her sudden fear of men, but so far nothing was working. She could barely concentrate on her lessons with Madam Fang.
Hua. Her condition was also affecting her duties as Fire Lady for she made excuses about postponing some of the charity works that required her leaving the safety of the palace and be amongst a crowd. She would feel herself get anxious at the thought that Jianguo could be there to kidnap her again and this time she would not be able to do anything to keep from being violated.

Screwing her eyes shut, Katara shook her head. Why could she not forget? She hated feeling weak. She hated that she was always in fear. She hated living this way. She blinked her eyes open when she felt Zuko stir above her as he tightened his hold of her slightly before relaxing.

“Good morning,” she greeted softly.

At the sound of his waterbender’s voice, Zuko looked up and gazed searchingly into her eyes before he smiled.

“Good morning,” he responded before he added with a frown, “You’re up early again.”

Katara gave him a tight smile since the thought of waking up alone after Zuko left made her apprehensive. Now she tended to wake up around dawn like Zuko did. She had to admit that it made her more tired than usual. She watched Zuko frown as if reading her thoughts before he leaned down to kiss her gently on her lips. He lingered for a second before he disentangled himself from around her and stood up from the large bed.

“We should get ready,” he said, “We both have busy schedules today.”

Katara sat up on the bed and nodded her head. Zuko was silent as he stared at her before he sighed and turned around to head toward the bathing chamber to wash up. Katara frowned as she hugged her knees to her chest. Zuko now treated her as if she were a fragile piece of glass that would shatter at any rough touch or harsh word. Whenever she irritated him, he would close his eyes and breathe deeply to calm himself down instead of arguing with her, with that fiery temper of his, as he would do before. Whenever he made to touch her, he would move slowly as if giving her the chance to move away if she wanted to. The worst part, however, was that he never initiated sexual intimacy anymore. She was the one who had to initiate it. And once they did finally come together, he loved her gently as if afraid if he was any rougher she would break down.

She appreciated everything he did to make her feel safe and comfortable, but it only made her realize how weak she had become, how much she had changed from the fearless woman she used to be.
Sighing, Katara lifted the covers away from her and stood up. She was just fixing her nightgown when Zuko walked back into the room and sat down to meditate before the small altar in the corner. Katara frowned at his silence, before she silently walked into the bathroom to bathe, closing the door softly behind her.

Out of the corner of his eye, Zuko watched his wife go before sighing when she disappeared. Everything was different now. He did not know what to do to make Katara feel better. She was so skittish now, so he tried to do everything in his power not to upset her and to help make her feel like her old self. He even tried to rein in his temper when she sometimes argued with him. He sought her out every chance he got, even if it upset his advisors for neglecting some of his duties. They had noticed a change in Katara and had begun asking what had happened to their lady, but Zuko always told them it was nothing for them to worry about.

He now tended to sleep wrapped around her body so he could make her feel safe. But it also comforted him at the thought that nothing could steal her away from him. And although he still wanted to make love to her at every moment, he curbed his urges and waited until she initiated their intimacy. And when she did, he took her slowly and tenderly. She sometimes withdrew to some place inside at such moments, and still he held her, loved her. Although the more passionate and wilder side of him wanted to take her fiercely, needed to touch her, taste her, melt into her slick and heated body, he knew she needed time to truly feel safe once again.

He did not like how things had become. And it was all Jianguo’s fault.

Zuko grit his teeth as rage once again consumed him as it did every time he thought of the bastard. The candles before him flared at his heated emotions. Because of Jianguo, Zuko had almost lost Katara. Twice. And what Katara was going through now was all Jianguo’s fault. A man who could harm a woman in such a way was no man in his opinion. He would make the former general pay with his life.

The firebender was brought out of his murderous thoughts when he heard Katara open the door. He blinked before he frowned because he had failed in his meditation exercises. He would just have to make it up the next morning. Extinguishing the candles, he gracefully stood up from the cushion and turned around. He saw that his wife was wrapped in a towel. Zuko swallowed hard before he looked away from her tempting body in order to rein in his desire to grab her to him, lay her back on the bed, and slip himself inside her. He gave her a strained smile before he turned away. They made small talk as they dressed themselves for the day. Once they were ready, Zuko gently took her hands and leaned down to kiss her cheek before letting her go.

“Mother and Uncle are probably already waiting for us to eat breakfast,” he said as he walked toward the door and opened it for her.
Katara thanked him as she went through before smiling when she spotted Iroh and Ursa already sitting in the antechamber. After a brief greeting, Zuko and Katara sat on their spots and the small family began to eat their breakfast. Ursa and Iroh started a light conversation and Katara soon joined in. Zuko ate in silence as he listened to them, while occasionally observing his wife eat.

“During lunch today, we have to meet a few of the noblewomen in the public garden,” Ursa told Katara with a sympathetic smile.

They laughed quietly when Katara groaned.

“Well, I’ll leave you to that,” Zuko spoke up with a chuckle as he wiped his mouth, “I have a very busy schedule today.”

“Okay, try not to let the advisors upset you,” Katara teased as she smiled at him.

Zuko returned the smile wryly. He reached his hand out to softly squeeze her hand before he stood up. Nodding at his older relatives, Zuko made his way to the doors and left. Katara watched him go with a sad smile. She knew how much their situation was affecting him even though he did not say anything.

“Come,” Ursa said, bringing the waterbender out of her thoughts, “We have to look into a few things before we meet the noblewomen.”

“I will see you ladies at dinner,” Iroh spoke up with a smile as he stood up before he added teasingly, “Good luck with the noblewomen.”

“Thanks, Uncle Iroh,” Katara muttered sarcastically.

Iroh chuckled as he left the room. Ursa and Katara gave each other a disgruntled look before they laughed and stood up. As they left the royal antechamber, they saw Shen and a female guard come to attention. With a smile aimed at them, the Fire Lady and her mother-in-law walked down the corridor with the guards following silently behind. Katara remembered Zuko telling her that Kuo had asked for a few days off because Jiao had not been feeling well for the past week. Katara hoped she was okay.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

With a grim expression, Zuko turned the lock of the heavy, steel door and opened it. He stepped
inside the gloomy prison cell before closing the door firmly behind him. He took a second to adjust his eyesight to the darkness. The only light visible was from the torch hanging beside the door. Narrowing his eyes, he strode toward the cell bars that divided the cold room.

“My, what a pleasant surprise,” Ozai’s sarcastic voice echoed in the dark space. “I would have thought you wouldn’t want to see me again after your last visit.”

Zuko clenched his jaw as he remained silent. This time he would not allow his father to distract him from getting the answers he wanted.

He was brought out of his thoughts when Ozai spoke again.

“I heard from the guards you actually got married. How is that waterbender wife of yours?” Ozai asked as he glanced at his nails uninterestingly before he looked up to smirk at his silent son.

Zuko forced himself not to tense at Ozai’s question and remain impassive.

“I bet she satisfies you greatly in bed,” the older man continued with a leer. “Tell me, does she use her waterbending in the bedroom?”

“What my wife and I do is none of your business,” Zuko growled out angrily.

Ozai chuckled as he again looked down at his nails.

“I can’t believe you actually went through with it and married that tribe woman,” Ozai added derisively. He paused before he looked up and lewdly added, “I understand wanting to fuck her and wring out all the pleasure her body can give you, but I can’t understand wanting to actually marry her.”

“I thought I told you I’d cut off your tongue if you ever talked about her in that way,” Zuko growled out angrily as he threateningly lit one hand in fire. “Katara is my wife and she deserves to be respected.”

Ozai eyed his son’s blazing hand warily and with a bit of envy. He missed being able to firebend, he
missed the feeling of immense power that coursed through his body as he created fire. He missed many things such as wine, exquisite food, and the pleasure of a woman’s body. He’d preferred if that woman was Ursa, but he also liked to have a bevy of women waiting for his pleasure. But because of Zuko and that child-Avatar, he was stuck to wile his days away in a dirty prison cell. He hated them. He could only hope a day would arrive soon when he could escape his prison and take revenge for what had been done to him. Coming out of his thoughts, Ozai looked away with a shrug and casually paced the length of his cell.

“Tell me what you know of Jianguo,” Zuko ordered firmly. He wanted to know what Jianguo’s plans were so he could keep Katara safe and away from the bastard. He also did not want Ozai to know that Katara was not herself at the moment or that Jianguo and the rebels were targeting Katara and him. He observed his sire’s reaction with deep scrutiny.

“Jianguo?” Ozai asked in confusion before he waved a dismissive hand. “Ah, you mean General Meng. The arrogant man is probably dead by now, which is too bad since he did give me some of the best concubines I ever had.”

Zuko sniffed derisively at the older man’s words.

“I know you are aware that Jianguo participated in the rebellion to overthrow me years ago,” Zuko continue in a harsh tone, “I want you to tell me everything you know about that and what he plans next.”

“Why do you assume I know anything?” Ozai asked with a sneer. “I haven’t set foot outside this wretched place in years,” he growled as he indicated the dirty prison cell he was locked in before he mockingly added, “And even if I did know anything, what makes you think I would tell you?”

The younger man narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw since his sire made valid points.

“But I’m glad to know that there are still people loyal to the true Fire Lord,” Ozai continue with a smirk. “You just gave me a bit of hope.”

Zuko mentally growled at his slip. It would have been better if he had not told Ozai anything if his sire really did not know.

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you,” Zuko commented coolly before his tone became hard as he added, “I will not allow them to succeed. When I finally catch those opposing me, they will suffer
the consequences, even if they swear their loyalty to me. Your former most trusted advisor will be the first to suffer my wrath.”

“Are you talking about Wei?” Ozai asked uninterestedly as he again inspected his nails before he sniffed, “That coward? If he really wanted to help me, he should’ve made himself useful during the rebellion, but instead he decided to remain an advisor so he could get fatter and richer.”

Zuko narrowed his eyes. He did not know what to make of all that Ozai had said. Was he lying or did he really not know anything about Jianguo? Zuko leaned more toward the idea that what Ozai said was a lie, yet how would his sire know about anything going outside the prison tower? He wanted to ask Ozai what he knew about Jianguo’s plan and the rebels, but he pressed his lips tightly together and remained silent. If for some reason Ozai was truly ignorant about the rebels’ plan in releasing him, then Zuko wanted to keep him as ignorant about it as possible. Besides, he knew that if Ozai really was aware of their plans, then he most assuredly would not divulge anything to his despised offspring. Zuko clenched his hands. He saw Ozai smirk calculately and he glared at his sire warily.

“Something must have happened for you to come to me with such questions,” Ozai mused as he shrewdly observed his now impassive son.

“Why do you say that?” Zuko asked tersely.

“You haven’t bothered to visit me for months now,” Ozai commented casually as he flicked a speck of dust from his shoulder. “So something tragic must have happened for you to come to me.”

He paused before he again looked up to observe his suddenly tense first born. Ozai was silent a moment before a knowing smirk appeared on his dry lips.

“It must be something that made you angry and scared…” he trailed off before he cruelly added, “Did something happen to your lovely wife?”

Zuko suppressed the urge to growl at him as he forced himself not to react violently as the memory hit him once again. He did not want to divulge anything that concerned Katara to Ozai.

“I see I wasted my time coming here,” the young lord finally replied in an expressionless voice.
Without another word, Zuko turned away and headed toward the door.

“Wait!” Ozai called out.

Zuko paused before he looked over his shoulder and lifted an expectant eyebrow.

“Tell me how Ursa is,” Ozai commanded.

Zuko was about to turn back around and ignore the question, but he decided to make his cruel sire suffer a little for all the pain he had caused his mother.

“Mother is doing very well,” Zuko replied coolly. “She is content, much better off than she ever was with you.”

The last thing he saw was Ozai’s pained expression before Zuko opened the steel door and walked out, already regretting wasting his time in visiting Ozai. Locking the door, the Fire Lord frowned as he strode down the long, gloomy hall. If only there was some way he could learn of Jianguo’s whereabouts so he could end the rebel’s life for the suffering Katara was going through. All he could do now for the moment was comfort his wife the best way he could.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After looking over some petition letters from the common people, Katara and Ursa decided to visit the infirmary and Yin-Min, Physician Toshiro’s assistant. Katara wanted to make sure the medicinal supplies she had ordered from Toshiro’s list had already arrived.

After returning to the Fire Nation, Katara had visited the young female assistant to shyly ask for more of the fertile blend, though she wondered how it would work if Zuko and she were barely intimate at the moment. Before the incident in Omashu, she and Zuko had been at each other like squirrel-rabbits, as something Toph would say, making love a couple times a day and almost every night. But now they only had sex a few times a week and sometimes even less than that.

Yin-Min had frowned, expressing her concern for the blend’s ineffectuality, before she agreed to make some more. Katara had visited the next few days and they made small talk since the assistant was still so timid with others. During one of those days, Katara almost had an anxiety attack when one of Physician Toshiro’s patients, suffering from a serious injury, had woken up and mistakenly took Katara as his wife in his delirium. He had jumped from his cot and stumbled toward the frozen waterbender before he collapsed in his weakness. Toshiro and a servant had apologized to their Fire Lady before they rushed to help the man back to the cot.
They had not noticed the waterbender’s fear, but Yin-Min had and she rushed to help her. She took the shaken woman to Toshiro’s office where she then gave the waterbender a soothing tea. Katara had thanked her and quietly drank the tea, ashamed by her reaction. She paused when Yin-Min hesitantly asked her if a man had hurt her. Katara stared at her in shock, but Yin-Min smiled sympathetically and said she understood what it felt like to be afraid of men. After a long hesitation, Katara confided in her what she had gone through in Omashu. Yin-Min had been sympathetic and offered words of comfort and understanding. She was the only one who seemed to understand what Katara was going through. It seemed their experiences, though different, had not only made Yin-Min less timid around Katara but also brought them closer.

The waterbender and her mother-in-law arrived in the infirmary and looked around the spacious room. Katara smiled when she spotted Yin-Min stocking supplies.

“Hello, Yin-Min,” Katara greeted as she approached the woman. “How are you?”

The small woman turned around and gave a small smile as she bowed to the Fire Lady.

“I am well, my lady,” she replied quietly before she worriedly asked, “How are you feeling today?”

“A bit better, thank you,” the waterbender replied vaguely.

Yin-Min smiled softly in understanding before she informed them that the new supplies had arrived and they were being brought in by the servants. For the next few minutes, the three women talked idly as they looked over the supplies that had already been brought in. Katara paused mid-sentence when she felt someone approach her from behind. She spun away as quickly as she had pulled out the water from her waterskin and formed a water whip, her stance aggressive. Her eyes widened as large as the servant’s who was carrying boxes and stopped mid-step at the threat. Ursa and Yin-Min froze in surprise.

“M-my l-lady?” the male servant squeaked.

“I-I…I’m sorry,” the waterbender stammered as she quickly replaced her water and moved away.

“Ah…why don’t you put those boxes over on that desk?” Yin-Min quickly spoke up as she directed the frightened servant to a table far away from the nervous Fire Lady.
The servant quickly set down the boxes before he swiftly walked out of the room.

Katara clenched her eyes shut and sighed deeply, berating herself for her reaction.

“Katara dear, are you all right?” Ursa asked softly as she approached her daughter-in-law and gently placed her hand on her back.

“I don’t know why I keep reacting that way,” Katara hissed between gritted teeth.

“Do not be too hard on yourself, my lady,” Yin-Min spoke up shyly before she painfully added, “At least you are not crying uncontrollably or quivering in fear in a corner whenever a man approaches you.”

Katara opened her eyes to stare wide-eyed at the woman.

“Yin-Min…” she began before she trailed off uncertainly, “Is that how you…reacted?”

The physician’s assistant fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment as she averted her eyes to the floor and cringed. Katara frowned before she opened her mouth to tell her she did not need to answer.

“Yes,” Yin-Min finally confessed and she clenched her trembling hands before her. She closed her eyes and swallowed thickly as she continued, “The constant years of being…raped by O-Ozai instilled a great fear in me at the mere thought of being near a man. I lived in such a state for many years, but fortunately, I am better now.”

“Oh, Yin-Min,” Ursa breathed sadly.

Yin-Min again fidgeted as she hugged herself before she took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She regarded the two women looking at her sympathetically for a long moment, as if debating with herself, before she continued.

“O-Ozai…was not a gentle lover,” she admitted with a shudder of revulsion. “Every time he…made
use of my body, he was brutal and relentless. He also had very strange and perverse ways for rutting. And when he was angry, I suffered bruises and burns. He was a cruel man and only sought his own pleasure.”

Yin-Min again shuddered and grimaced as if she were remembering some of those horrible moments. For the next few minutes, she opened enough of herself to painfully recount her past as Ozai’s concubine. Katara and Ursa listened to her story with sadness and anger. Once Yin-Min finished her story, Katara turned to look worriedly at her mother-in-law. The noblewoman noticed the waterbender’s stare and shook her head.

“Ozai never hurt me when we…were together,” Ursa assured her softly before she added, “Perhaps he was afraid of the repercussions if he did so and that is why he sought to have his…more perverse desires satisfied by his concubines.”

After composing herself, Yin-Min shook her head. Ursa frowned confusedly at her.

“He never hurt you because he cared for you,” the young assistant confessed quietly.

“What?” Ursa asked incredulously.

“Sometimes,” Yin-Min continued as she licked her suddenly dry lips, “when Ozai was very drunk he would call your name and would almost be gentle before he…turned even more violent than usual when he realized it was not you he was with. Since we all thought you were dead, the other concubines and I thought he acted that way because he missed you. That or because he felt guilty for what he did to you.”

Clenching her hands to her sides, Ursa narrowed her eyes.

“As he should,” the noblewoman said heatedly, “However, I still believe he would have harmed me if he could. My banishment was both a blessing and a curse.”

The times that Ozai had bedded her in the early years of their marriage, he had only sought his own pleasure. He had not hurt her, but he had not been a gentle or caring lover either. If Ursa thought really hard about it, she could honestly say that she had experience pleasure perhaps a few times. At the time she had been young and inexperienced, and fancied herself to be in love with him so she had not minded his attentions—or inattention, as if were, when it came to herself and her pleasure.
This time it was Katara who laid a comforting hand on the older woman’s back.

“Both of you are lucky for not knowing the cruel touch of a man,” Yin-Min spoke up quietly.

Both Katara and Ursa frowned since they did not know how to respond without making Yin-Min feel worse for what happened to her. Katara felt even more horrible. Even though what Jianguo did to her had traumatized her, he had not succeeded in raping her, yet she was constantly afraid. But Yin-Min had actually suffered endless abuse for years and she was getting better, albeit slowly as was understandable. She was brought out of her thoughts when Yin-Min continued.

“That is why I am so grateful to Fire Lord Zuko for giving me a choice to live my own life,” the young woman confessed with a small smile and a slight blush, “And I vowed to be loyal to him because he is a kind and honorable lord.”

The Fire Lady caught her mother-in-law’s eyes and they smiled proudly before they looked back at the now calm Yin-Min.

*It seems that Zuko was the one who started Yin-Min’s process of healing,* Katara mused with a smile, *And of course, he’s not even aware of what he did.*

They were again interrupted when more servants arrived with the last of the medicinal supplies. For the next few minutes, Yin-Min stocked the medicine while Katara and Ursa inspected the boxes and noted down the items on Toshiro’s records. With a thoughtful expression, Katara watched as Yin-Min finished placing the last item on one of the many shelves around the room.

“Yin-Min,” Katara called out before she curiously added, “Have you ever thought of marrying or being in a relationship?”

The young assistant paused before she slowly turned around to face the curious Fire Lady. She again fidgeted with her hands as she tried to gather enough courage to open herself up.

“I…I hated the thought of being with another man for a long while,” Yin-Min admitted with a grimace before she softly added, “But I do want to have a healthy relationship and know what it feels like to be loved.”

Katara saw a small blush had appeared on Yin-Min’s cheeks and her curiosity rose.
“Is there a man you like?” Katara asked with a gentle smile.

Yin-Min’s blush intensified and she averted her eyes shyly as she fidgeted with her apron. After a moment, she raised her eyes to Katara and bashfully nodded her head.

“Yes,” she confessed quietly.

“Have you tried to have some kind of relationship with him yet?” Ursa asked kindly.

“No,” Yin-Min admitted with a grimace.

“Why not?” Katara asked with a frown.

The small woman averted her eyes again and her shoulders hunched a bit as she let out a sad sigh.

“He barely acknowledges my existence,” she muttered before she let out a pained sigh. “Besides, what man would want a woman who has been used and damaged?” she whispered brokenly.

With a small frown, Katara walked up to the dejected woman and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. Yin-Min looked up in surprise to stare at the Fire Lady’s kind, blue eyes.

“What Ozai did to you was not your fault,” Katara told her softly. She paused since it seemed as if she were comforting herself as well. Shaking her head, the waterbender continued with a smile, “You are young, beautiful, smart, and gentle. If this man doesn’t appreciate it, I’m sure you’ll find that special man who will overlook what happened to you and love you for you.”

Katara watched as Yin-Min’s yellowish eyes began to glisten with tears. Smiling encouragingly, Katara gave her shoulder a soft squeeze as the woman began to cry quietly.

“You are so kind, my lady,” Yin-Min said gratefully, “Thank you for your words.”
Ursa smiled at her daughter-in-law as they waited for the physician assistant to compose herself. Once she did, they talked for a while longer before the Fire Lord’s wife and his mother left the infirmary. As they walked down the golden corridor, Katara again remembered the words she told Yin-Min and tried to apply them to herself. She wanted to get better. She wanted to be herself again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Lunchtime arrived and Katara found herself surrounded by Fire Nation noblewomen once again. They were sitting on cushions in one of the clearings of the public garden, drinking tea and eating a light lunch as they enjoyed the warm weather. For the next two hours, the blue-eyed Fire Lady forced herself to sit through another session of gossip and fake flattery. Tuning out what the women were talking about, Katara wondered what Zuko was doing. Remembering her conversation with Yin-Min, Katara was grateful that she had such an understanding and honorable man as her husband. If Zuko had been like many other men, he could have cast her aside, if not for being actually raped at least for almost being violated. She thought her heart would have broken if Zuko had reacted in such a way.

She was brought out of her thoughts when her mother-in-law discreetly nudged her elbow. Katara refocused her attention and noticed that the women were expectantly looking at her.

“Uh, excuse me, would you mind repeating that again?” she asked politely.

“We were saying that it would be nice if you hosted a ball soon,” one of the younger women repeated excitedly, “Royal celebrations are the best!”

“Absolutely!” another woman enthused, “It has been a while since there had been a party at the palace!”

Katara mentally sighed as the women continued to chatter. She was not up to having any kind of celebration at the moment. Besides, she knew how much Zuko detested having their home invaded with nobles as much as he hated dancing in public. She almost smiled. Her husband’s taciturn personality was sometimes adorable. When she realized the women were waiting for her response, she cleared her throat to speak.

“I will ask my husband about a possible celebration in the palace,” she replied.

The women exclaimed their excitement with squeals and giggles. They were too busy thinking about what to wear to such an event that they did not realize their Fire Lady had not exactly promised to host a ball. Katara caught her mother-in-law’s amused look and she inwardly grinned. A few minutes later, the women bid their goodbyes with promises of another luncheon before departing. Katara almost sagged with relief. She did not think she will ever get used to them.
“Now we have to look over the list of things that need to be stocked for the kitchen,” Ursa spoke up as she daintily wiped her mouth before she smiled at Katara. “I suppose we can wait another day before we head out to the city for other business.”

Katara gave her a strained smile as they both stood up and walked back down one of the stone paths that led to the palace. Admiral Jee, Shen, and the female guard immediately step behind them. Halfway on their walk, Katara paused when she realized she had forgotten the waterskin Zuko had given her for her birthday. She had taken it off and placed it next to her cushion while she had lunch with the women.

“Is something wrong?” Ursa asked.

“I forgot my waterskin,” Katara told her with a sheepish smile, “I’ll be back.”

She turned around and motioned for the guards to wait for her when they moved to follow her. They frowned but bowed their heads in acquiescence. Walking quickly, Katara retraced her steps and sighed in relief when she saw that the servants had still not arrived to clean the table. She moved to the spot where she had been sitting and smiled when she found her waterskin where she had left it.

She bent down to pick it up only to freeze when the sound of male voices reached her ears. Her hand hovered over the waterskin’s opening before she ordered herself to calm down. She stood up and tied it to her hip as she warily strained her ears to figure out where the men were. She relaxed when she realized they were in the next clearing which was blocked by high, thick shrubberies. Satisfied, she began walking away only to pause when she heard Zuko’s name, but she could not really hear what the men were saying. Curious, she walked closer to the high wall of bushes and silently pressed close so she could make out what they were saying. She recognized the voices as two of Zuko’s advisors and she strained her ears to discern what they were saying.

“…know why Fire Lord Zuko bothers with meetings if he is just going to dismiss us a few minutes later so he could run to his wife,” one of the men said, disapproval heavy in his tone.

“I wonder what happened to Fire Lady Katara,” the other man, a younger one by the sound of his voice, said.

“I don’t know,” the first man replied gruffly before he added, “But she has changed our lord. Now he’s constantly worried about her. She’s a weakness to him. She doesn’t leave the palace and only stays in the western wing. She doesn’t even bother with the charity works like in the beginning.
Maybe she got bored of it.”

“I really believed Lady Katara would have made a fine Fire Lady,” the second man added with a sigh, “But I’m disappointed to see I was wrong.”

Katara bit her lip when she felt a fire of indignation flare within her before she stopped herself from tongue-lashing them. She could not refute their words since they were right. Carefully, she made her way back to where the others were waiting, deep in thought. She gave them a small smile when they turned to look at her.

“Are you okay?” Ursa asked her gently.

Wincing inwardly, Katara plastered a reassuring smile on her face.

“I’m fine,” she replied before she added, “But if you don’t mind, I’d like to rest a bit in the Fire Lady bedchamber before we continue.”

Ursa and Jee turned to frown at each other as they watched the young waterbender leave with her guards.

“Do you think she will ever return to herself?” Ursa asked quietly.

“Only time will tell,” Jee responded before he added reassuringly, “Fire Lady Katara is a strong woman. I have faith that she will surpass whatever is bothering her.”

Ursa smiled. “You are right.”

Entering the remodeled Fire Lady bedchamber, Katara softly closed the door before she slowly looked around one of her favorite rooms in the palace. Even though she had been in this room many times, she never got tired of it. For the past month, it had become her refuge. She smiled. She was so grateful that Zuko had given her such a gift, a way for her to stay connected with her origins and her family. The thought of her family made her smile sadly. She missed them and she wondered when she would be able to see them again.

With a sigh, Katara walked toward one of the plush pile of furs in the room and sat heavily down on it as she repeated the advisors’ words in her head.
Am I really a weakness to Zuko? she thought forlornly to herself.

Such a thought made her realize other things she had tried to avoid. She had been wallowing in fear and self-pity that she had not noticed how badly she was hurting her husband, the one person she wanted to make happy above anything in the world. Hurting him was the last thing she wanted.

Rising to her feet, Katara strode toward the mirror hanging on one wall and shrewdly studied her reflection. She looked at the timid woman before her, at the paler-than-normal tone of her brown skin, at the dark circles under her nervous, blue eyes. She narrowed her eyes and clenched her fists against her sides.

Enough.

She had lived in fear long enough. She had to overcome it so she could move on. If she continued the way she was, she would only allow Jianguo to win. And she refused to allow that to happen. She would try to forget what happened, learn from it, and put it behind her. She would become stronger from it. She would make Zuko stop holding himself back from her for fear of hurting her. She would make him proud. And most of all, she would prove to everybody that she was a strong woman and would be the best Fire Lady that ever was.

She would make those men regret their words.

New determination flared within her and she smiled as she felt she was once again becoming the strong woman she was—maybe one who was even stronger. With one last look at her reflection, Katara squared her shoulders and walked out of her sanctuary. Shen and the female guard immediately came to attention.

“Shen, where is my husband?” Katara asked him as she turned to face him expectantly.

Shen’s gray eyes widened a bit in surprise at his lady’s former strong-willed tone before he composed himself.

“I believe he is in his study before his next meeting commences,” he informed her quickly.
With a nod, Katara determinedly walked down the long corridor and made her way toward Zuko’s study. Shen followed bewilderingly behind her, though he was glad to see his lady’s former spirit return.

Sitting behind his large desk, Zuko carefully looked over a stack of documents before the upcoming meeting with his advisors. He knew some of them were upset with him and his behavior, but he did not let that bother him since he was not completely neglecting his duties. He still had Wei on watch, but the old advisor had not done anything suspicious. Zuko frowned. Perhaps he should stop laying the blame on the one advisor he disliked just because he had no other suspects in mind.

When he came upon the last scroll, Zuko eagerly broke the seal once he realized it was from his captain stationed in the colonies. As he finished reading it, he angrily pushed it away with an angry snarl. His captain reported that they still could not find any clues about Jianguo’s whereabouts or any of his rebels.

They are hiding again like the cowards they are, Zuko thought with a sneer before he growled and banged his fist on the desk.

A few days ago, Zuko had received a letter from Aang saying he and Toph were also looking for Jianguo whenever they had the chance, but they have not had any luck. Zuko appreciated their help. Iroh had informed him that the Order of the White Lotus had also not found any clues. Zuko sighed.

Where could Jianguo and the rebels be?

Zuko clenched his hands and smoke rose from them. If only he could track Jianguo down to beat him within an inch of his life before he slowly killed the bastard. But then that meant he would have to leave Katara behind and that was something he would not do, especially since it could give Jianguo an opportunity to kidnap her again. Zuko knew that the only reason Jianguo had failed in his first attempt to capture him and Katara and his second attempt to kidnap Katara was thanks to Jianguo’s overconfidence. But Zuko could not rely on that to keep Katara and his nation safe. But once his men found Jianguo, Zuko would make him pay with his life for all the harm he had done.

The Fire Lord was interrupted from his thoughts when he heard a knock at his door.

Frowning, he called out an impassive ‘enter’. When he heard the door open, he looked up and his eyes widened when he saw Katara enter the room. His cool mask fell and was replaced by a warm expression.

“Katara,” he called out softly as he stood up from his large chair as she approached.
He paused when he noticed that his now skittish wife had been replaced by the former strong woman he married. His eyebrows rose in surprise at the fire he saw in her once dull eyes. Snapping out of his stupor, he rounded the desk to meet her.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Katara stopped before her husband and looked determinedly up into his curious, golden eyes.

“I want you to train me to fight and defend myself,” she told him firmly without any hesitation.

“What?” Zuko asked in bewilderment.

“I can defeat anyone with my waterbending,” she continued resolutely before she frowned, “But twice now I have come to realize that without my waterbending, I’m weak.”

Zuko opened his mouth to argue, but he stopped when she held out a hand. He frowned.

“You know it’s true,” she told him.

The firebender’s frown deepened.

“You don’t need to worry anymore,” he spoke up comfortably, “You’re safe now.”

“You can’t guarantee that even if you really wish to,” she replied truthfully.

Zuko narrowed his eyes.

“You don’t believe I can keep you safe?” he growled out.
Frowning, Katara stepped closer to him and placed a gentle hand on his chest.

“That’s not what I meant,” she told him softly, “I know you can keep me safe. I feel protected when I’m with you, but we can never be sure of the future.”

When Zuko continued to frown, Katara ran soothing caresses on his chest as she stared up into his piercing, amber eyes.

“Even if we take all the precautions possible, something could happen when we least expect it,” she reasoned before she continued firmly, “I want to be prepared. I never want to feel vulnerable and weak again. I never want to find myself in a helpless position, waiting to be rescued.” She paused briefly before she softly added, “What if next time you don’t make it in time?”

A pained expression flashed across Zuko’s face at the thought. It was a fear that he now constantly carried with him.

“I don’t want to be a weakness and a liability to you, Zuko,” Katara continued as she stared sincerely into his eyes.

“You are not a weakness,” he replied with a frown.

“Many of your advisors think otherwise,” she replied with a grimace.

Growling, Zuko narrowed his eyes.

“Who told you that?” he asked angrily.

Katara shook her head and waved her hand dismissively.

“That doesn’t matter, what matters is that I refuse to be a timid and weak wife,” she told him firmly, “I refuse to continue living in fear. I want to be like how I was before. I want to be stronger.”

Zuko was silent as he thought over what his wife said before he finally acknowledged to himself that
she was right. Even if he swore to himself that he would keep her safe, anything could happen. Life was unpredictable like that. And what if next time he did not make it in time to save her? He closed his eyes to bear the pain and fear at that possibility before he opened his eyes to look down at his wife patiently waiting for him to reply. He admired her determination. He could not begrudge her wish to become stronger and her desire to defend him from what his men thought of him. He would help her become stronger and he would help her get her confidence in herself back.

“I agree with everything you said, Katara,” he told her sincerely, “You have my complete assistance and support.”

Zuko saw Katara relax immediately at his words and she smiled brightly at him before she wrapped her arms around his waist and embraced him tightly. He quickly returned her embrace.

“Thank you, Zuko,” she sighed.

Zuko swallowed as he tried to rein in the sudden flare of arousal that sprang within him at the feeling of her in his arms. He wished he could ease her back onto his large desk, raise her dress over her hips and make love to her like he had done before. Zuko mentally shook his head. He should not get ahead of himself. Just because Katara was determined to become stronger did not necessarily mean she was ready for any wild trysts. With a sigh, he held her tenderly against him.

“I can’t prohibit your wish to better yourself,” he admitted to her softly.

He pulled away slowly and stared down into her cobalt eyes.

“What do you wish to learn?” he asked.

“Hand-to-hand combat,” Katara replied immediately, “In case I can’t waterbend and have no weapons, I want to know how to defend myself against a larger opponent.”

“That is a good choice,” Zuko replied with a nod.

Katara smiled. She was glad to know that Zuko wanted to help her better herself and become stronger instead of keeping her hidden in the palace to keep her safe from the outside world. She knew he would understand that she needed to do this.
“Thank you, Zuko,” she said as she snuggled into his warmth.

“What is there to thank?” he asked.

When Katara raised her head to look at him, Zuko leaned down to kiss her gently. With a soft sigh, Katara pressed herself closer to him and slowly parted her lips. She moaned happily when her firebender quickly slipped his tongue into her inviting mouth and deepened their kiss. When he crushed her to him so tightly that her breasts ached at the hard contact with his chest, she groaned in approval. Maybe this time Zuko would have no qualms in making love to her however and whenever he wished. She felt her body warm at the memory of Zuko taking her on his desk and she wondered if he would do so again right at the moment.

A knock at the door interrupted them and they quickly pulled apart. Cursing under his breath, Zuko growled frustratingly as he let go of his tempting wife before he moved back to sit on his chair. With a sigh, Katara sat on the chair across from him.

“Enter,” Zuko called out gruffly.

They watched as the door opened before they relaxed when they saw Kuo allow Jiao to go ahead of him before he entered and closed the door after him. They both bowed to their lord and lady before they approached closer.

“How are you feeling, Jiao?” Zuko inquired after Katara had greeted them.

“I’m feeling better, my lord,” Jiao responded with a small smile.

“I was worried when my husband told me you weren’t feeling well,” Katara spoke up as she smiled kindly at her maidservant, “But I’m glad to know that you are fine.”

Katara and Zuko watched curiously as a large, happy smile stretched Jiao’s lips.

“I am more than fine, my lady,” she assured them.
The royal couple looked at her wonderingly before they turned their attention to Kuo when he cleared his throat.

“My lord,” he began as he straightened himself, “I would like to ask for your permission for my wife to have a lighter workload for now.”

Zuko frowned at the request.

“Is something wrong?” Katara asked worriedly as she again turned to look at Jiao.

“No,” Kuo quickly assured them.

“Then what is the reason for your request?” the Fire Lord asked.

Zuko and Katara watched as a blush stained Jiao’s pale cheeks and Kuo puffed out his chest in pride.

“I’m pregnant,” Jiao announced with a shy smile before she added, “I’m three months along and we didn’t even know until a few days ago.”

“Oh, Jiao, congratulations!” Katara exclaimed as she rose from her seat to grasp the woman’s hands before she turned to smile at Kuo. “Congratulations, Kuo!”

“Thank you, my lady,” Kuo responded with a small, joyful smile.

The three turned their attention back to the Fire Lord when he congratulated them from his spot behind the large desk. When he caught his waterbender’s pointed look, he cleared his throat.

“Because of both your loyal services I will concede to your wishes,” Zuko told them before he looked at Jiao. “If you wish it you can focus on easy things before becoming my wife’s lady companion when it becomes more difficult later on in your pregnancy.”

“Thank you, my lord,” they both said in unison as they bowed respectfully before they smiled at the blue-eyed woman. They knew their Fire Lady was a large factor that helped convince the Fire Lord
to grant their request.

After a few more congratulations and curious questions from Katara, the young couple once again bowed in gratitude before they departed. Once the door was closed behind them, the waterbender sat back down with a smile on her face.

“At least there are some good things among the bad,” she commented with a soft sigh as she looked at him.

Zuko nodded at her words before he stopped when a thought crossed his mind. He gazed at her for a short moment and watched as she looked at him wonderingly at his silence.

“Your sacrifice was worth it,” he spoke up quietly.

When she frowned at him incomprehensibly, he gave her a small, proud smile.

“If you had not listened to Jianguo’s demand, not only would Jiao have been harmed, but her unborn child, too,” he explained softly.

Katara’s eyes widened at the thought. If she had refused to follow Jianguo’s orders, the rebels would have raped and tortured Jiao. The abuse might have caused Jiao to lose her baby as well as her own life. Katara would not have been able to live with herself if she had been the cause of Jiao losing her child. The truth of such a thought made her make peace with what happened and brought her confidence back in herself. Jianguo might have hurt her, he might have almost succeeded in violating her, but she had been strong enough to save two innocent lives. And now she was more determined than ever to learn how to defend herself so she would not put others and herself at risk.

“You’re right,” she finally replied and she smiled brightly at him.

At the sight of her smile, a true one and not one that was forced, Zuko felt relief once again consume him. They may have gone through a tough time, Katara especially, but now he was convinced that everything would be better.

“Jiao and Kuo seem very happy with the news of their upcoming parenthood,” Zuko remarked as he smiled at her.
“They are,” Katara agreed.

Her genuine smile faded and was replaced with a frown. Kuo and Jiao’s news reminded her that her monthly bleeding had ended the previous week, signifying another month in which she had not gotten pregnant yet. Why? She had taken Yin-Min’s herbs regularly. Why had she still not gotten with child?

“What’s wrong, love?” Zuko asked worriedly when he noticed her happy mood suddenly change.

“It’s nothing,” Katara quickly assured him as she tried to give him a reassuring smile.

“Please don’t lie to me, Katara,” he told her with a frustrated frown.

Averting her eyes, Katara fidgeted with her hands before she let out a small sigh.

“Their news just reminded me that I haven’t given you an heir yet,” she confessed quietly.

The firebender was silent a moment as he stared at her.

“Come here, Katara,” Zuko commanded gently.

Katara looked at him and watched as he opened his arms for her. She quickly stood up and walked around the large desk before sitting sideways on his lap, winding her arms around his neck. Zuko wrapped his arm around her and pressed her close to him. He leaned his head down to touch his lips to her head before he tucked it under his chin.

“Maybe it is for the best,” he began softly, “Who knows what could have happened if you were pregnant when…everything happened.”

Katara was silent for a moment as his words sunk in before she relaxed into his comforting and warm embrace.
“You’re right, Zuko,” she responded.

She felt him lift his head and she looked up into his reassuring, golden eyes. He reached a hand up and caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers before he smiled at her.

“Besides, we’ve been married for a little over two months,” he reminded her, “We still have plenty of time to have a child.”

Katara felt her heart ease a little at his words and she smiled at him.

“That’s true,” she relented before she excitedly added, “I just can’t wait to have our child in my arms.”

“And we will one of these days,” he assured her with a smirk, which widened when Katara grinned at him.

Expression softening, Zuko leaned down and kissed her softly. Katara sighed into his mouth and wrapped her arms tighter around his neck as she pressed herself closer to him. They shared slow and tender kisses before the firebender pulled away. They gazed silently into each other’s eyes for a moment before Zuko broke the sudden comforting spell that had befallen them.

“We will start your training tomorrow,” he informed her, his expression turning serious.

Katara’s eyes blazed with determination.

“I’ll be ready,” she said firmly.

“Very good, Katara,” Zuko praised as Katara deflected his strike with an upright thrust of her arm. “Remember to strike back aggressively, quickly and with as much force as you can to defend yourself.”

When Katara moved her arm to strike his face, Zuko grasped her arm to stop her. However, Katara twisted out of his grip and struck out with a raised knee. Zuko had barely enough time to jump back before getting hit on his stomach. Panting, he nodded approvingly and Katara smiled even as she
quickly assumed a fighting stance and awaited his next move.

A week had passed since Zuko began Katara’s lessons in hand-to-hand combat. It was early in the morning and they were currently training in the large arena. Off to the side, Iroh sat on a bench watching silently or occasionally pointing out things and giving advice. He was proud to see his nephew teaching Katara the way Iroh had taught Zuko when he was younger. The old man was also happy to see that his niece-in-law had bravely pulled herself out of her fear and was determined to become stronger.

Although Katara needed a lot of practice and time before she could become truly skillful in the art, Zuko was proud to admit that she was a fast and avid learner. Her waterbending skills leant much help in her agility. He was sure that in a couple of years she would reach his high level, but for now the basics will help her enough to keep her safe from anyone who tried to attack her if she were unable to use her waterbending. Although he admitted that Katara made a good point in arguing that they cannot be sure what the future might bring despite their precautions, Zuko was determined that he would do everything he could to protect her.

“Good,” Zuko called out a few minutes later before he straightened from his fighting stance.

Panting, Katara imitated his actions and waited to see what he would teach her next. She had never bothered in learning close combat nor had it appeal to her because she had emphasized much of her fighting power in her waterbending. But as Zuko continued to teach her, she found that it was exhilarating, though perhaps a little too violent for her. But it would help her greatly if she ever found herself unable to waterbend—though she hoped she would never find herself in such a situation again. To be able to defend herself another way would reassure her greatly.

“Now I’ll teach you some of the most familiar pressure points,” Zuko began as he walked forward to stand closer in front of her.

Katara nodded as she paid close attention.

“The human body has many different points that can cause a great deal of pain when hit appropriately,” Zuko instructed. “Hitting your opponent’s eyes is not only very painful, but it can temporarily damage his vision, giving you time to escape.” He demonstrated by grabbing her arm and showing her how to strike. “Landing a blow squarely on the forehead with sufficient pressure can knock your attacker’s head back and cause whiplash.” He again showed her how to move and where to hit. “Punching the nose with great strength can lead to a fracture and bleeding. Striking the collarbone with enough force can break it, thus incapacitating your opponent entirely. A hard kick to the knee or groin is usually enough to bring your attacker down.”
They spent a few more minutes practicing before Zuko finally called an end to it. Relaxing, Katara smiled at her husband confidently, already anticipating her next lesson. They walked back to the bench where Iroh was sitting and drank water from the cups the servants rushed forward to give them. As Katara quenched her thirst, her eyes again focused on Zuko’s profile. His hair, which was now long enough to reach his shoulders, was pulled up into a high ponytail at the moment. A light sheen of perspiration clung to his temples and neck, reminding her of the same sight when they were striving to achieve their pleasurable climaxes. Zuko caught her eye, and knowing what she was thinking, a small smirk curled his lips.

“You are doing wonderful, my dear,” Iroh praised as he smiled at Katara, effectively bringing the couple out of their naughty thoughts.

“Thank you, Uncle Iroh,” the waterbender replied happily.

“Have you given thought to learning how to wield a weapon?” the old man asked musingly. “Hand-to-hand combat will help you fight in a close range, which can become a problem if your attacker is stronger and more skillful. With a weapon you can defend yourself at a safer distance.”

Katara frowned at the thought as she hesitated to answer.

“I don’t know,” she replied with a grimace, “I can’t bring myself to use a weapon to harm or kill anyone.”

She looked up when Zuko laid a firm hand on her shoulder.

“You will have to, if it means your life against your attacker’s,” he told her grimly, “If you hesitate in bringing him down, he will hurt you and…kill you. He would surely not care in sparing your life.”

“I know,” Katara responded with a sigh.

Zuko frowned.

“You should take some time to think about it, my dear,” Iroh spoke up. He completely agreed with his nephew that Katara should learn to use a weapon so she could be better protected. “Perhaps you can discuss this with your husband later when you are more adept in close combat.”
Katara nodded since she knew both of them were right. She just needed time to get used to the idea. Her waterbending defeated many assailants, but it did not actually cause any great harm or threatened any lives. But if she actually used a weapon against anybody she would not only hurt them but would directly end their lives as well. It was not something she would be able to easily do considering she was a healer who fought to save lives. Yet, she also understood that if it came to protecting someone she cared for and herself, she would have no choice.

“I will think about it,” she replied.

“Good,” Iroh said with a smile. They both glanced toward Zuko when he cleared his throat.

“I may not be able to train you every day, Katara, so I asked Uncle if he could help you when I can’t,” Zuko informed her.

“I understand,” she told with a reassuring smile. “I trust Uncle will teach me many things.”

Zuko nodded before he carefully asked, “I also wanted to ask if you wouldn’t mind if Admiral Jee trained you in developing your strength. He is the only one I trust for such a job.”

Katara stiffened at the suggestion before she ordered herself to relax. She needed to get rid of this sudden fear of men. Jee was not a bad person and not all men were malevolent like Jianguo. She had promised herself that she would become stronger and she could not always depend on Zuko to come save her. She had been fine defending herself without him before and she would do so again. Besides, she did not want Zuko to ever be hurt because he was protecting her.

“Alright,” she agreed firmly.

If Zuko was surprised at her answer, he did not show it.

“Good. I’ll ask Jee when I see him today,” he said.

Katara nodded before she smiled at Zuko then at Iroh who reassured her that Jee would be a great instructor when Zuko was not around.
“How about a sparring match using our bending?” the Fire Lord challenged Katara with a smirk.

“You’re on,” the waterbender replied with a grin as she quickly grabbed the waterskin she had placed on the bench and tied it to her waist.

Smiling, Iroh watched as his nephew and his niece-in-law took on their stances. When it came to her waterbending, Katara was an admirable warrior, equally as skillful as her husband.

As Zuko evaded one of her attacks, Katara smiled confidently. She would become stronger. She knew Zuko vowed that he would kill Jianguo when he found him and she would not stop him. But if Jianguo ever tried to kidnap her again, he would realize his mistake for underestimating her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The loud crash of the wooden chair hitting the wall followed by vicious curses did not faze Chang while it made Ping flinch beside him as they watched their leader vent his anger at the room they had rented in an obscure tavern. They had stayed at the small lodgings with the money Jianguo had saved up from their informant and waited for Jianguo to heal from the wounds he had suffered in the hands of the enraged Fire Lord. They had made sure to keep to themselves so as not to raise any suspicions, but the wretched villagers barely paid them any mind. They had never seen Jianguo lose control of his temper so drastically before, it left them stunned. Ping took a step back when Jianguo flung the only small table in the room against the wall, but Chang remained still and emotionless as he waited for their leader to calm himself down.

Chang’s mind wandered, not for the first time, to the woman that had accompanied the blue-eyed Fire Lady. Jiao was what the waterbender called her and he could not stop thinking about her. She resembled his beloved Aiko so much that he was left speechless and astounded when he laid eyes on her. Three years had passed since Aiko passed away from a malady of the lungs, an illness that caused her much pain until her last dying breath, a sickness he was unable to save her from. He had loved her so much that her death had numbed him completely, so much so that no other woman had been able to arouse anything from him except for the occasional, mild lust. But then this Jiao suddenly appeared in his life and emotions he thought long dead were beginning to awaken. He knew Jiao was not Aiko, but that did not stop him from wanting her all for himself, so much so that he fought the other rebels from touching her. For some strange reason he had decided to woo her during their journey to their hideout and make her come to care for him.

But to his surprise and anger it seemed she was already spoken for when her husband appeared and attacked him. Even though Jiao was already married, Chang had refused to give her up and fiercely attacked the firebender, hoping to kill him, but the man was too skilled. It was only after he realized that they were losing that Chang decided it was best he found Jianguo and retreated. With one last longing look aimed at the golden-eyed beauty, Chang had submerged himself into the ground and disappeared only to emerge again in another location to see the Fire Lord brutally attacking Jianguo.
Chang and Ping rescued their leader before they again submerged themselves in the ground as their only route of escape. They would have succeeded in capturing the Fire Lady, have the Fire Lord meet their demands, and Jiao would have been his, if only Jianguo had not allowed his obsession and lust in having the waterbending woman take control of him.

“I was this close to getting my revenge and achieving our goal, but Zuko, that fucking bastard, had to ruin everything!” Jianguo growled as he kicked another chair out of his way.

“Da bastard was lucky,” Ping spoke up in hopes to restore his leader’s good humor, which he knew was not likely since Jianguo had been in a foul mood ever since the Fire Lord thwarted their attempts to kidnap the Fire Lady.

“We would have succeeded if you had heeded my advice to leave as soon as we had the waterbender,” Chang spoke up as if Ping had not spoken. Ignoring the annoyed glare the large-jawed earthbender sent him, Chang stared levelly at Jianguo when the firebender slowly turned to look at him.

“What?” Jianguo asked angrily.

“If you would have waited a few more hours instead of insisting on having the woman at that moment, Zuko would not have come upon us and ruined our plan,” Chang continued emotionlessly.

“Shut up!” the firebender growled.

“You know I am right,” the former Dai Li agent stated evenly, his green eyes hinting at nothing.

“Get out!” Jianguo snarled as he picked up a vase and hurled it at the wall next to the tall earthbender.

Ping jumped at the impact before he scrambled toward the door, but Chang remained unmoving as the ceramic vase shattered into pieces behind him.

“The waterbending woman has addled your mind,” Chang spoke up again, not at all afraid of the older man. “You would not have made such a mistake before.”
“I told you to shut the hell up, Chang,” Jianguo growled at him as his golden eyes narrowed into irritated slits.

Chang raised an eyebrow in challenge, but remained silent. Taking a deep breath, Jianguo tried to rein in his temper and regain his composure. He was glad that none of his other men were there to witness his rare display of temper. He, Chang, and Ping were the only ones to escape when Zuko and his companions had come upon them unexpectedly. One of his men would have survived if Jianguo had not ordered Ping to kill him before the man revealed anything to the Fire Lord. But dammit, he had been so close to achieving everything he wanted!

“Now we know what happened to our informant in the Fire Nation, so we must come up with a new plan,” Jianguo said as he straightened out his shirt.

“Will you give up on the waterbender?” the green-eyed earthbender asked.

“No,” was Jianguo’s simple and firm response.

Chang frowned, but before he could say anything Jianguo turned away from him.

“Make sure you and Ping rest for we leave to our hideout tomorrow at dawn,” he said dismissively.

“Very well,” Chang replied passively as he turned toward the door and closed it lightly behind him.

Jianguo walked across the room to pick up his bottle of liquor from the old bureau resting against the wall. He paused when he caught sight of his reflection on the dirty mirror that hung above it. He felt his anger spike once again as he saw the fading bruises on his pale skin, bruises that insolent whelp had inflicted on him when Jianguo was about to enjoy the waterbender. With a growl, he smashed his fist into the mirror, creating cracks on its surface. Ignoring the sting of the glass cutting his flesh, he walked to the other side of the room.

Jianguo stared out the window into the dark night. He took a drink of the sweet liquor as his thoughts once again became lost in the memory of having the woman he was obsessing over trapped beneath him. He vowed that he would make Zuko suffer and have his revenge, but most importantly he vowed that he would capture the beautiful waterbender again. Now that he knew how incredible she felt, how sweet she smelled, how utterly erotic everything about her was by just having held her, he could not wait to find out how much more incredible it would be once he took her completely. He vowed to capture Katara again one day and she would be his, Zuko would suffer greatly, their plan
would succeed, and this time Zuko would not be able to take her back.
Zuko let out a low groan as the energy of the dawning sun stirred him into the waking world. His still drowsy mind registered the fact that at some time during the night Katara and he had changed positions and he was now curled behind her. His left arm enfolded her body, holding her closely against him, while his right hand that curved underneath her was cupping her breast. Her nightgown must have ridden up during the night because he had somehow managed to insert his shaft between her thighs, pressed against warm, soft, and invitingly moist female flesh. He groaned when his semi-erect cock rose and hardened fully.

Still not fully awake, his knee pushed against Katara’s, forcing hers to bend and her leg to shift upward. His cock sought entrance to his paradise, but somehow his still hazy mind wanted to ensure that Katara was ready for his invasion and would enjoy it.

His right hand slipped inside her nightgown and captured her naked breast more firmly, squeezing the tantalizing mound and teasing her nipple. His other hand caressed up and down her body before grasping her other bare breast to reward the other nipple the same attention. As he stroked her breasts to life, Zuko began to slowly rock his hips so his stiff cock massaged her feminine folds as well as to stimulate his own pleasure. He groaned, and his heart quickened its beat in his arousal before he moved his left hand down her belly and further south. Through his sleepy mind, he heard Katara gasp softly and then moan when his fingers touched the sensitive bud above her entrance.

When he felt her aroused cream coat the length of his cock, he again shifted her leg before he slowly buried himself inside her tight, wet pussy. They both moaned at the delicious sensation as his hard flesh stretched her slick, warm walls. His lips latched onto her slender neck and shoulder, kissing, sucking, and nipping while his hands continued to stroke her body. When Katara breathed out his name as she pressed her hips back against him, Zuko’s thrusting became more persistent. He continued to ram his hard shaft inside her over and over again, his movements interrupted by sporadic groans, growls, and grunts. He again grasped her breasts firmly and sucked the skin of her neck even harder.

Gasping, his wife lifted one of her hands over her head and placed it on his head for support. Her fingers clenched his hair at his every thrust. Zuko’s dazed mind instinctively interpreted her movement as a sign of complete surrender and a victorious growl escaped him as he crushed her closer to him. The dominance of the position, his control over her delicate body, and the feeling of her clenching, wet walls, excited him beyond measure. With a thunderous growl, he began to thrust ruthlessly inside her, the sound of their flesh slapping as his pelvis and balls smacked against her firm ass resounded loudly in the room.

A few moments later, he felt Katara suddenly tense before she cried out incoherently. The sensation of her wet passage quivering around his cock immediately brought forth his own orgasm and he groaned harshly as he spilled himself inside her. He licked and kissed her neck soothingly as he

**Increasing Power**
continued to thrust into her until he completely released his seed inside of her. Once he was completely spent, he slumped against her perspiring back. He could feel his wife panting equally as hard as him as sleep finally left him.

His eyes snapped open in alarm.

Oh no. What had he done?

Having been awakened from a deep sleep by his own desires, he did not have the necessary degree of awareness to protect Katara from his baser instincts and urges he promised himself he would suppress so as not to harm her. He slowly pulled himself out of her and she mewed weakly. Lifting himself up a little, Zuko slowly moved her onto her back, worriedly searching her face for any sign of distress.

Two months had passed since Jianguo’s attack in Omashu, and although Katara was returning to her old self, he was still afraid that he would trigger her fear of sexual intercourse. Which was why he continued to allow Katara to initiate their intimacy and he was always gentle when they came together. But this morning he had forgotten his promise and he had taken her like a mindless beast. Could she forgive him?

Looking up from beneath her suddenly silent husband, Katara frowned at his concerned expression. She had been stirred awake by her body responding to her husband’s caresses, but had come fully to her senses when he entered her. Her heart and body had rejoiced at their passionate joining. She had been reveling at the fact that Zuko had finally let himself go and loved her as fiercely as he had before the incident, but seeing his anxiety now made the glow of what happened minutes before diminish a bit.

“What’s wrong?” she asked hesitantly.

“I’m sorry for taking you like that,” he apologized in a strained tone, “I—”

Katara quickly placed her fingers against his lips to stop him. Zuko’s frown deepened.

“You have to stop, Zuko,” she told him firmly.

Zuko’s heart sank at her words. Did she resent him?
“Stop what?” he whispered apprehensively.

“You treating me like glass that will shatter at the slightest touch,” she replied firmly yet softly as she caressed his cheek.

Zuko gently grasped her hand and brought it to his lips to kiss her knuckles.

“Yes, I was fragile before,” the waterbender continued, “but I’m better and I refused to be treated like a frail woman. I want to be and feel stronger, but I won’t if you continue to fear hurting me.”

When her husband continued to look at her silently and uncertainly, Katara decided to bring up something she knew would help her cause. Bringing her other hand between them, she placed it on his chest and slowly began to caress his smooth muscles as she stared seductively, intensely, into his golden eyes.

“I miss you loving me roughly, possessively, taking my body completely,” she whispered throatily before she purred, “Don’t you?”

“Gods yes,” Zuko groaned huskily.

He swiftly leaned his head down and kissed her deeply, wrapping an arm around her to pull her up against him. Katara moaned into his mouth as she wound her arms around his neck, but she whimpered in disappointment when he pulled away.

“I…I will to think about it,” he rasped before he moved away from her.

Katara opened her mouth to argue, but was interrupted when he shook his head and gave her a strained smile. Sighing, Katara nodded her head. She understood that Zuko was just trying to protect her and was having a hard time. He just needed time to see that there was nothing she could fear from him.

“We should hurry so we can train in the arena before I have to meet with the Earth Kingdom’s ambassadors,” he prompted her as he stood up from the large bed and walked toward their big wardrobe.
The blue-eyed brunette reluctantly got out of the bed. Smoothing her nightgown down, she went to wash up. When will Zuko be comfortable enough to let himself go and love her fiercely? It was not that she did not love the moments when he loved her tenderly because she truly did, but they were both passionate people and it was incredible, almost magical, when they came together in their ardent and frenzy need.

She almost laughed at the reversal of their roles. Now it was she who was trying to persuade Zuko into sex and he was the one who was being hesitant. But she would not pressure him too much. He had done more than enough for her these past months. She knew he was just trying to protect her, even from himself.

“Are you ready?” she heard Zuko ask a few minutes later.

“Yes,” she replied with a determined smile.

For the early part of the morning, they spent their time training in the arena. Katara found that she really was not that bad in hand-to-hand combat. Her waterbending had lent her dexterity and fast reflexes, but she still needed to work on her physical strength that would help her push or throw a heavier attacker away from her. That was what Jee was helping her with when Zuko could not train her. Jee had her lift light weights to build her strength; she had refused to lift heavier ones for fear of having unfeminine, bulging muscles. His lessons also included exercises to build up her endurance.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Zuko spoke up as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm.

Panting, Katara dropped her fighting stance and placed her hands on her hips as she waited for her breathing and heartbeat to slow down.

“You’re getting better and better,” the Fire Lord complimented proudly.

“I should be, having you as my instructor,” the waterbender replied with a grin.

“You do make a good point,” Zuko responded with a smirk.

Katara laughed as she shook her head at his arrogance before her expression turned serious. Zuko’s
humor subsided at her change of mood and he frowned.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Zuko,” she began carefully before she continued more firmly, “I want to spar with you while you use your white fire.”

“What?” Zuko exclaimed with wide eyes before he quickly shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?” she asked exasperatedly. “You are able to control it now. Besides, going against such a high level firebender can only improve my waterbending skills.”

When her husband continued to shake his head, Katara placed her hands on her hips.

“We don’t have to go full on battle mode,” she said, “We can start slow with small fighting exercises.”

Zuko was silent a moment as he frowned at her before he sighed at her determined expression.

“What if…what if I hurt you?” he asked quietly, anxiously.

Katara’s expression softened and she stepped forward to cup his cheek.

“You won’t,” she said confidently.

When he remained skeptical, she gave him a small smile and wound her arms around him. The young lord immediately wrapped her in his arms and pulled her tightly against him.

“If you do accidentally hurt me, I can always heal myself,” she assured him.

Zuko remained silent for a long moment as he debated what Katara had said before he decided she
was right. It would also be fun to be able to spar with someone using his white fire instead of practicing alone. Besides, he had to stop letting fear rule him.

“Allright,” he consented as he pulled her back slightly to look down at her. “We will start slow, but you have to promise me that you will not push yourself beyond your limit.”

“I promise,” Katara told him as she smiled happily at him, “Thank you, Zuko.”

They spent the next few minutes stretching and cooling down before they walked back to the side of the arena where servants rushed forward with water and towels. Idly talking about Zuko’s upcoming meeting with the ambassadors and Katara’s next duty as Fire Lady, they walked back to their bedchamber to bathe before they ate breakfast in the adjoining room.

“I’ll see you later,” the golden-eyed firebender said once they finished their meal.

“Okay,” Katara responded as they both stood up and walked toward the door.

Before Zuko opened it, he turned toward her. He gently grabbed her upper arms and pulled her closer to him before he bent his head to kiss her softly. Katara sighed as she pressed herself tightly to him and eagerly kissed him back.

“I really wish I could make love to you anytime I want to, just like before,” he whispered against her lips, “But I’m afraid you would regret it if I did. I don’t want to be selfish. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know,” Katara replied with a soft sigh. “I just wish you could have more faith in my mental and emotional strength.”

They pulled apart and stared intensely and silently into each other’s eyes. Reaching a hand up, he stroked her cheek and she leaned into his touch.

“I promise I will think about it,” he told her.

Katara nodded before she gave him an understanding smile. They were interrupted when they heard a soft knock at the door. Straightening himself, Zuko gave her one last smile before he opened the door. They watched as Jiao paused with a raised fist ready to knock a second time before she gave a shallow bow due to her condition.
“Good morning, my lord, my lady,” she greeted with a polite smile.

“Good morning, Jiao,” Zuko replied as he stepped around her to exit the room, but not before throwing his waterbender one last lingering look.

“Are you ready to meet with Lady Ursa, my lady?” Jiao asked once the Fire Lord left.

“Yes,” Katara replied with a smile as she observed the maidservant.

Jiao was already showing signs of her pregnancy. Her belly was more visible than it had been the month before and there was a glow in her golden eyes.

“How are you feeling, Jiao?” Katara asked as they walked out of the room and headed down the long corridor.

“A little tired,” Jiao admitted truthfully with a sheepish smile before she added fondly, “But I’m very happy.”

Katara watched Jiao place her hands on her growing stomach. Again the waterbender wondered when it would be her turn. She took a moment to fantasize about what her first child would look like. Would he or she have Zuko’s black hair or her brown locks, Zuko’s golden eyes or her blue ones? The possibilities made her smile in anticipation.

The two women walked in search of Lady Ursa so they could go over the Fire Lady’s new project; remodeling the city orphanage and supplying the children with much needed aid. Katara smiled when she spotted her mother-in-law talking to one of the youngest advisors, with Jee standing attentively at her side. Katara raised an eyebrow when she noticed the dark look Jee was sending the oblivious advisor. As she approached them, she watched Jee compose himself as they all turned to greet her. After requiring after her well-being, the advisor excused himself with a respectful bow before he retreated.

“Are you ready to go, Ursa?” Katara asked with a smile.

“Yes, of course, dear,” the older woman replied as she returned the smile.
The Fire Lady and her mother-in-law led the way down the corridor toward the palace courtyard. A few minutes later, the three women were sitting in a carriage. Jee, Shen, Kuo and a large group of guards surrounded it on komodo rhinos. As they reached the grounds of the orphanage, Jee dismounted before he quickly walked toward the carriage to help the women down.

Smoothing her royal dress—an elegant dark red robe with a thick black and gold sash—Katara looked at her surroundings before she glanced at the building. She frowned at its dilapidated state before she was distracted by movements coming from the building. She spotted the children looking curiously at her from behind windows and doors before her attention was caught by the approach of the elderly woman who ran the place.

“Fire Lady Katara, you honor us with your presence,” the gray-haired woman greeted as she gave a respectful bow. “I was both shocked and delighted at receiving your message that you wish to help the children.”

“I am glad that I can help,” Katara replied sincerely, “And as Fire Lady it is my duty.”

The older woman continued talking, but Katara was distracted as she caught sight of a little boy—no more than five years old—hiding behind the skirts of his caretaker. When he noticed that she had seen him, he blushed and hid again.

“Hello,” Katara called out gently as she leaned to the side so she could see him better.

The boy peeked up and again stared at her in curiosity and admiration. The older woman stopped talking as she watched their interaction.

“Your eyes are blue,” he said as he pointed at Katara’s eyes before he came out of his hiding place and smiled, “They’re pretty.”

“Thank you,” Katara replied with a smile, “I think your green eyes are amazing.”

The boy blushed bashfully as he kicked his foot on the ground.

“My mama said they are the color of my father’s eyes, but I’ve never met him,” he explained matter-
Katara suppressed her frown since she did not want to alarm the child and looked up inquiringly at the orphanage’s owner, who sighed sadly.

“His father is a wealthy, married Earth Kingdom merchant living somewhere on the great continent. His mother, who recently passed away due to an illness, was a poor and young servant working at the house the merchant was visiting. She was a naïve and unfortunate woman,” she explained vaguely.

Katara clenched her hands as she figured out the boy’s history, which apparently he did not understand due to his young age. His father must have been visiting the Fire Nation and seduced the young woman, who then became pregnant. The man must have denied the boy’s parentage and left the woman pregnant with their child and returned to his family in the Earth Kingdom. She hated such cold-hearted and irresponsible men. And now the boy was alone, just like many of the children in this place. Her anger was then replaced by sadness. Bending a little, Katara reached out a hand to caress the boy’s dark hair and smiled.

“What is your name?” she asked softly.

“Takeo,” the little boy quickly replied.

“Nice to meet you, Takeo. I have come to help you and all the other children,” she told him kindly.

“Really?” the boy asked with wide, green eyes. “Will you give us more food? And better clothes?”

“Yes, that and much more,” she assured him as she gently patted his head before she grinned, “But you have to promise me that you will grow big and strong.”

“I promise!” he enthused as he puffed out his small chest.

“Good!” Katara exclaimed as she straightened herself out before she added, “Now, why don’t you go tell your friends what I said?”
“Okay!” he yelled before he turned around and raced back to the large building, shouting excitedly at the top of his lungs.

Katara chuckled as she watched him go before she and the older woman followed in the boy’s wake. Urs, Jee, Jiao, Kuo and Shen followed after them. As news of the Fire Lady’s generosity reached their ears, the children eagerly fled their hiding places and swarmed the kind waterbender. Katara laughed delightedly as the children enthusiastically welcomed her into their current home and vied for her attention. Takeo held her hand throughout her visit. She felt compassion for the orphaned children, who either lost their parents through death or, more sadly, were abandoned. She knew what it felt to live without the warmth and love of parents. Luckily for her, she was able to get her father back, which unfortunately, would not be the case for many of these orphans.

She spent the next few hours listening to the children before she gently commanded them to heed their caretaker’s order for them to prepare for supper. Once the children left, Katara walked with the orphanage’s mistress to her office to discuss the details of Katara’s plan to better the orphanage. Once everything was settled, the older woman enthusiastically thanked the kind Fire Lady as they exited the place. Before Katara could leave, Takeo and the other children poured out of the building to bid her goodbye and made her promise to visit them again.

There was a pleased smile on Katara’s face as she finally settled in the carriage with Urs and Jia. It felt so good to be able to use her role as Fire Lady to help those less fortunate and to change things to something better. Of course, not everybody welcomed her help readily or agreed to her projects enthusiastically. There were some who still did not accept her as Zuko’s wife and Fire Lady, but she did not let any of that get to her. Instead she focused on the gratefulness and affection she received from those who did appreciate her efforts—which were mostly those from the lower class.

Her train of thought once again turned to how she had been pleasantly awakened that morning by her husband’s passionate lovemaking. She hoped Zuko realized soon that she was better and would not go back to the weak person she was two months ago so he could once again unleash his fierce and passionate side. She did not want him to keep suppressing what was in his nature.

Her thoughts shifted to Zuko’s insistence of her learning to wield a weapon. She had thought long and hard upon the issue before she finally decided that he and Iroh made a good point. She could not always depend on hand-to-hand combat to save her from an attacker. However, she still could not figure out what kind of weapon she wanted to use. Although swords fascinated her, especially when her husband used them, she could not see herself cutting someone down. The same went with daggers or any projectile of the same category—especially since she did not want to imitate Mai. Katara frowned at the thought before her face took on a pensive expression. She wanted a weapon that would not hinder her when she used her waterbending, one that would be easy to use and would not cause much damage.

“Thanks to you, the children of the orphanage will know a better way of living than they have for
some time, and in some cases, since their births,” Ursa’s pleased voiced interrupted Katara’s thoughts.

“They will,” Jiao agreed with smile.

The blue-eyed Fire Lady turned to her poised and smiling mother-in-law. Katara smiled when inspiration struck her.

“Ursa, I just thought of something,” Katara began as she tried to think things through, “Can you teach me how to use a bow and arrows?”

“You want to learn archery?” Ursa asked with a surprised, raised eyebrow.

“Yes,” the waterbender replied determinedly. “It’s one weapon that might immobile an attacker but not kill him.”

A small frown appeared on the golden-eyed noblewoman’s face as she contemplated for a moment what her daughter-in-law had said before she smiled.

“If that is what you want, then I will gladly teach you archery,” she responded.

“Thank you,” Katara said as her smile widened.

“We can start tomorrow before your lessons with Jee,” Ursa told her.

“That’s fine,” the waterbender assured her enthusiastically.

She could not wait to tell Zuko.

“Remember to straighten your spine, but not too much,” Ursa instructed as she pressed her hand on her daughter-in-law’s back. “Good. Now nock your arrow like I taught you.”

With a nod, Katara placed the arrow nock onto the bowstring before she raised her arms into
position. She remembered Ursa’s instructions as she tried to draw the arrow back, but again found it difficult to pull the tight bowstring. A few hours had passed since they started and Katara could already feel her fingers cramping. She had to admit that this was harder than she had originally thought, but if her mother-in-law could do it, then so could she. When she told Zuko about her choice in weapons the previous night, he had said it was a good idea. He told her that once she became adept in it, he would commission a personalized bow, quiver, and arrows for her that would not hinder her waterbending. Katara had only smiled, but the truth was that she had a different plan as to why she wanted Ursa to teach her archery.

“Good. Now focus on your target,” Ursa’s voice brought the waterbender out of her thoughts. “If you want to just wound your attacker then you need to aim at the limbs, preferably the legs to incapacitate them. In order to kill you have to aim your arrow at the head or preferably the heart.”

Katara swallowed before she nodded that she understood. Drawing the arrow close to her cheek, she closed one eye as she focused on the target ahead of her with her other eye. She took a deep breath to steady her arms before she released the arrow. To her embarrassment, it fell almost at her feet just like it had in her previous attempts. Blushing, she looked up with a grimace at her mother-in-law. Hearing a muffled chuckle, the waterbender glanced to the side to glare at Jee. Catching her glower, Jee composed himself and muttered an apology. Huffing, Katara turned back to Zuko’s mother. Ursa smiled reassuringly as she stepped forward to pick the arrow up from the ground and hand it back to Katara.

“Don’t be discouraged,” the older woman told her, “This is just your first day. It takes time and practice to get it right.”

“I know,” Katara sighed, but still it was embarrassing. She was glad Zuko was not present to witness her failures.

“Here, observe what I do,” Ursa said as she stepped into Katara’s spot after the waterbender moved aside.

Pulling an arrow from her quiver, Ursa took her stance before drawing the bowstring close her mouth. Taking a second to focus on her target, she released her fingers. The arrow shot straight forward and embedded itself on the target’s bulls-eye. Katara and Jee applauded. Curious, the waterbender glanced at the admiral out of the corner of her eye. She noticed that he had an awed look on his face as he stared at the dark-haired noblewoman as she relaxed in her stance. Katara was distracted from her observation when Ursa turned to her.

“Try again,” she encouraged as she stepped aside.
With a nod, Katara returned to the spot before the target and again tried to pull the bowstring taut.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was the same routine for the next month. Katara was proud to admit that she was becoming better in everything she was learning, although she still had a long way to go before she would become an expert. Zuko had also convinced her to carry a sheathed dagger for extra protection, which he had trained her to use. She strapped it on her waist belt on the opposite side of her waterskin for easy access. Now she would have nothing to fear if she found herself without her waterbending. She promised herself that she would never become a liability to Zuko.

Although he was now comfortable enough to initiate their sexual intimacy, he was always careful and gentle. She missed his fire and knew it affected him, too. She had tried many times to coax him into it, but with no avail. He feared she was just being insistent just to please him no matter how many times she told him otherwise. She just had to hope he would get over his fear soon.

“Strengthened your legs, my lady,” Jee instructed with an observant eye, “Match your breathing every time you lift the weights.”

Katara nodded as she exhaled and inhaled as she lifted one arm at a time. Strengthening her muscles was necessary if she ever needed to throw a heavier person away from her. Jee was a strict instructor, but a very good one. She could see why Zuko appreciated the older man’s skills as well as his loyalty.

“Good. I think that is enough for today,” Jee spoke up. “Now take a moment to stretch your muscles.”

After they were finished with their training, Katara silently drank water from a cup a servant gave her and observed Jee as he wiped the sweat from his brow as he again glance at the sun’s progress in the sky. She had a feeling he kept checking to see how close it was to the noon meal where they were to join Ursa and Iroh in the private garden’s veranda. Gathering her courage, Katara cleared her throat to gain his attention.

“Have you ever been married, Jee?” she asked casually as she placed the small towel around her neck and looked at him.

“No, my lady,” Jee responded frankly. He raised one eyebrow at her sudden curiosity.

“Really?” she said. “I can’t believe it.”
“There were women who were after me with hopes of marriage when I was younger,” he admitted after a while, “But once I joined the military, I did not have time for a wife, especially after leaving the Fire Nation with the then former Crown Prince Zuko and General Iroh.”

Katara hummed at his response, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“But now it’s different,” she spoke up. “You’re a respected admiral and still young enough to marry.”

Jee flushed before he cleared his throat.

“Perhaps,” was his simple reply.

“Has a woman caught your eye recently?” she asked innocently.

“Ah, if we do not hurry we will be late for the noon meal, my lady,” he said instead as he tried to usher her back into the palace.

“I can tell you have a woman in mind, Jee,” Katara told him, ignoring his attempts to distract her.

Jee frowned, then he hesitated, before he sighed in resignation. He knew their Fire Lady was too observant for him to think he could lie to her.

“I do,” he finally relented.

Katara suppressed a triumphant grin at his confession. Now she had to continue carefully if she wanted Jee to reveal to her what she had been suspecting for a while now.

“Do you plan on proposing to this woman soon?” she asked.

“No,” he immediately replied.
“Why not?” Katara asked with a frown.

“Because I can’t, it is impossible,” he responded grimly.

“Why?” the waterbender again questioned.

Jee hesitated before he continued.

“She is not a woman I can be with,” he explained somberly, “I’m not even supposed to have feelings for her.”

“Is she married?” Katara inquired with a raised brow.

Jee frowned.

“Not anymore,” he muttered.

“Does she have eyes for someone else?” she asked, determined to get him to confess his feelings.

Jee’s expression darkened at the thought.

“I don’t believe she does,” he answered gruffly.

“Well, if she’s not married nor has any kind of relationship with someone else, then why is it impossible?” Katara asked as she raised an eyebrow.

“It just is,” he replied, heavy resolution in his tone, “She does not see me as something more…”

“Jee,” Katara said as she stared into his eyes, “You love Lady Ursa, don’t you?”
She watched as his eyes widened in surprise before he quickly tried to deny her words.

“I’ve been observing your reactions when you’re near her for months,” she interrupted him, “I know it’s true. You love Ursa.”

Jee remained stiff and unyielding for a long moment, but when the blue-eyed Fire Lady continued to stare at him, challenging him to lie to her, he sighed and slumped his shoulders in defeat. Now he could understand why his Fire Lord sometimes found it so hard to deny his wife anything.

“I…I do,” he confessed sincerely.

A smile appeared on Katara’s face at his admission.

“Please, my lady, I ask that you don’t tell anyone,” he requested urgently.

Katara frowned before she nodded.

“You have my word that I will not reveal your secret,” she promised before she added more softly, “But you should let Lady Ursa know your feelings for her.”

Jee shook his head.

“She must never know,” he said resolutely.

“But why?” Katara asked.

“A noblewoman would never glance twice at a simple admiral, much less marry him,” Jee explained morosely.

“If the Fire Lord married a simple Water Tribeswoman, then a noblewoman can marry an extraordinary admiral,” Katara insisted, “One who has been at the Fire Lord’s side for years.”
Again, Jee stubbornly shook his head.

“I was assigned by Fire Lord Zuko as Lady Ursa’s guard,” he replied. “I can’t be anything else. Besides,” he paused briefly before he continued more quietly, “she does not return my feelings.”

“How do you know if you don’t ask her?” the waterbender told him gently.

Such a question and possibility seemed to perk Jee’s spirits up before he composed himself and shook his head.

“Even if that were true, which it isn’t,” he asserted before continuing more firmly, “Fire Lord Zuko might not like the idea of his mother remarrying and I will not do anything to distress him.”

Katara frowned since she could see that she would not be able to change his mind. Besides, she understood how he felt. They were the same fears she had when she thought Zuko could never return her feelings. But was there really no chance for Jee and Ursa?

“I understand,” she said before she added with a reassuring smile, “But don’t worry. I will not betray your confidence.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Jee replied gratefully with a bow of his head.

Silently, he escorted her back into the palace before they headed their separate ways to freshen up for the noon meal.

Bathed and dressed in her royal robes, Katara entered the Royal Palace Garden with Kuo and Shen following after her. As she neared the veranda, she smiled at Iroh and Ursa when they happily greeted her. She glanced at Jee, who was already sitting next to the noblewoman, and gave him another reassuring smile before sitting down at her place. The servants quickly moved forward to place their food before them. A few gray clouds had begun to cover the blue sky for the past hour or so, but the temperature was still nice and warm.

As Iroh questioned her about her progress in her training, her continued lessons with Madam Fang Hua, and her next projects as Fire Lady, Katara would surreptitiously observe Jee and Ursa. Now
that she knew Jee’s real feelings, she could not help but notice the admiral’s reactions to the beautiful noblewoman. Why didn’t Ursa notice?

The small group was interrupted from their meal and conversation when Zuko arrived unexpectedly. Katara noticed Jee stiffen almost imperceptibly as he subtly glanced her way. She smiled slightly to show she would keep her promise to guard his secret.

“Zuko!” Iroh exclaimed enthusiastically as he lowered his teacup to beam at his nephew. “If we had known you were going to join us, we would’ve waited before eating.”

“It’s fine. The meeting ended early,” Zuko explained impassively as he sat down next to his wife who threw him a happy smile. He returned her smile before glancing down at the plate a short-haired servant had rushed to place before him. It had been a while since he had shared lunch with his family.

They spent the next few hours talking about idle things before the conversation shifted to the whereabouts of Jianguo and the rebels. Katara no longer felt terror grip her chest at the mention of the rebel, but a deep hatred for his despicable acts and a determination to help Zuko in whatever way to bring Jianguo down. When their speculations ended with nothing promising, they again changed the subject to Zuko’s duties and Katara’s charity cases. When they finally realized they had spent almost the entire day in the veranda, Iroh and Ursa decided to leave and give the royal couple some alone time that they were rarely able to enjoy lately. Once everybody was out of sight, Zuko let down his indifferent mask and smiled affectionately at his wife. Even with his other family around, he found it hard to show his true feelings.

“It’s been a while since we spent some time in the garden,” he spoke up smoothly.

“Yeah,” Katara agreed with a smile before she added, “Let’s feed the turtle-ducks and the koi fish!”

“Alright,” Zuko consented with a chuckle as they gathered pieces of leftover bread and placed them in napkins before they stood up.

They walked away from the veranda and made their way on one of the stone paths lined with grass and flowers that led to the pond. Once they reached the cherry blossom tree, they sat down under its cool shade and Katara began to croon at the turtle-ducks who waded close when they saw the couple. The Fire Lord and his waterbender began to throw crumbs into the calm water, which were immediately devoured by the little creatures and the surfacing koi fish. They were content in the comfortable silence that surrounded them even as they finished feeding the animals. Although barely visible due to the gray clouds that covered it, the sun continued its slow descent on the sky. In an
hour or two, night would follow.

Inhaling deeply as a cool breeze swept by them, Katara exhaled softly before she turned to regard her husband with a pensive expression. His eyes were closed as he relaxed against the trunk of the tree, one arm resting on his bent knee, his other leg extended in front of him. The perfect picture of tranquility. She admired his handsome profile and his strong frame for a moment before she cleared her throat to gain his attention. Zuko opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her.

“Zuko,” she began casually as she pretended to arrange her formal robes around her legs, “have you ever given thought that Ursa could one day remarry?”

“No,” he replied bluntly.

Katara suppressed a frown at his quick response.

“Okay, well, would you be agreeable to it if she ever wanted to?” she asked.

This time Zuko took a moment to think over her words before he frowned.

“No,” he answered.

“What?” Katara asked, barely managing not to sound exasperated with his one-word negative answers.

She frowned when he shrugged and again closed his eyes. Licking her lips, Katara gathered her courage to continue, prepared if she evoked his temper with her questioning.

“Is it because you don’t want to share her affections with anyone else after being reunited with her?” she inquired carefully.

Zuko opened his eyes to stare at the now serene pond as he again mused over her words.

“Yes,” he sighed almost shamefully.
“Ursa has a right to love someone and be loved in return, Zuko,” she told him gently.

“I know,” he replied as he again turned to look at her, “It’s just that I don’t want her to be hurt again, the way she was hurt by Ozai.”

“I understand,” Katara agreed, “But maybe Ursa would find a man who would treasure her.”

Zuko did not comment on her words, but Katara refused to drop the subject now that she had brought it up. She wanted to know what Zuko thought and see how difficult Jee’s path would be when and if he ever decided to confess his feelings for Ursa.

“What would you do if your mother ever found such a man?” she asked quietly.

Zuko frowned deeply.

“I don’t know,” he told her truthfully before he added gruffly, “And I don’t want to think about it.”

Sensing that he was getting annoyed, Katara bit her lip before deciding to stop for now. Maybe she would bring up the subject again another day and little by little make him think about the possibility. With a smile, she changed the subject to Jiao and Kuo’s upcoming parenthood and Zuko relaxed as he listened to her talk. There was a lull in the conversation, the only sounds that could be heard were the quacks of the turtle-ducks and the rustling of leaves and branches, before Zuko heard Katara clear her throat again.

“Zuko,” she began before she continued more seriously, “I want to participate in the meetings with the Court Council.”

Zuko looked at her and noticed her determined expression. He was not at all surprised at her request, in fact, he had expected her to bring up the issue a long time ago.

“You know the advisors are against the idea of a woman participating in the sessions,” he reminded her.
He wondered what the advisors would have done if Azula had become Fire Lord. Suck it up because she would have set them on fire? Zuko suppressed an amused smirk at his thoughts before he shook his head.

“I know, and I’m not saying that I want to participate in all of them, just the ones that deal with the problems of the common people and the relations with the Water Tribes,” she explained before she firmly added, “I want to show them that I am a capable and strong Fire Lady.”

“You know I’d gladly accept your input on such matters, Katara, but it’ll be hard to change the minds of the old advisors,” he told her.

“Then I will prove myself before them,” she responded resolutely.

Zuko smiled and he reached out a hand to caress her cheek.

“Have I told you how grateful I am to have you as my wife?” he asked softly.

Katara placed her hand above his and smiled gently at him.

“You show me through your actions every day,” she responded.

Zuko bent down to bestow a soft kiss on her lips at her reply before leaning back to smile at her and ask what she had in mind that would convince his advisors. Katara frowned in thought as she speculated out loud. When she stopped talking a few minutes later, Zuko turned to look at her curiously. He watched as she fidgeted in her place and bit her lip uncertainly.

“What is it?” Zuko asked with a concerned frown.

He watched as she took a deep breath and straightened herself.

“I’ve been thinking about this for the past few months,” she began carefully before she continued more firmly, “Besides learning hand-to-hand combat and how to use a weapon, I want to perfect my bloodbending.”
Zuko’s amber eyes widened in surprise as he sat up straight and turned toward her.

“I thought you hated it,” he said in confusion.

“I do,” she replied with a nod before she continued, “but I have to stop being naïve and be realistic. Bloodbending will help me protect others as well as myself. I thought long and hard about it and came to the conclusion that there is no harm in it as long as I don’t abuse the power like Hama did.”

Zuko regarded her silently. Although he could see the determination in her expression, he also noticed the uncertainty in her blue eyes, as if she were afraid he would be disappointed in her. How could she think he would think less of her for such a decision when he was a ruthless man who did not hesitate to end someone’s life in order to protect those he cared for? It just went to show how kindhearted his wife really was.

“I think that is a great idea,” he assured her with a smile. “I know you will only use your bloodbending for a good reason.”

Katara sagged with relief and gave him a large, grateful smile.

“Thank you, for understanding,” she said.

Zuko nodded before he grinned.

“Besides, it always fascinates me to see you bloodbend,” he confessed, then with a lusty smirk he added, “It also makes me wonder what other things you can do with the human body.”

Katara’s eyes widened before she laughed.

“Oh, and would you be willing to volunteer for such an experiment?” she asked innocently.

“I sure as hell won’t allow you to experiment on someone else,” he retorted dryly.
Katara again laughed at his words, relieved to know that he did not judge her for her decision. They continued to tease each other as the koi fish swam gracefully in the pond and the turtle-ducks quacked and frolicked in the water.

Zuko enjoyed the return to normalcy in their relationship—well its almost return to normalcy since their sex life was still not the same as it had been before. He had to curb his need to take her wildly and hear her screams and moans of pleasure. But he could see that Katara was once again the strong and confident woman he married. She could now throw him off his feet in hand-to-hand combat and he was relieved at the thought that she could now hold her own, even when she could not defend herself with her waterbending. His mother had also told him that Katara had talent with the bow and arrows, though he wondered why Katara had not mentioned it to him so he could commission the equipment for her. And now her bending would be even more powerful if she honed her skills in bloodbending. He was interrupted from his thoughts when he felt a few drops of water fall upon his forehead and nose.

“It’s sprinkling!” Katara exclaimed in delight.

Zuko glanced up to the sky and finally noticed that the gray clouds had become darker before he blinked when the drops increased from a light sprinkling to pouring rain. He looked back down to Katara to tell her they should head back inside the palace only to have his words get stuck in his throat at the sight that greeted him. His wife’s lovely face was tilted upward as raindrops kissed her skin, a pleased smile curling her plump lips, cobalt eyes closed, arms spread wide as she welcomed the rain.

“I didn’t expect it to rain,” she spoke up softly.

“Neither did I, since it usually rains in winter in the Fire Nation and it’s barely the end of summer right now,” he explained just as quietly.

He watched as Katara opened her eyes and looked at him with a smile. She grabbed his hand and urged him to stand up with her. Silently, he obliged her and stepped out from the flimsy protection of the cherry blossom tree’s leaves. Not a second passed before their hair and formal robes were completely drenched, but Zuko found he did not care in the face of his waterbender’s delight. They silently enjoyed the cool rain, the soft breeze, and the fresh scent of the rain. Zuko looked away from his wife to watch as the turtle-ducks hurried to the protection of some bushes. He observed the way the rain created ripples in the pond while the koi fish continue to swim unperturbed. He turned to look back at Katara when she released his hand.

“I want to show you something,” she told him.
“Show me what?” he asked.

He watched curiously as she stepped away from him and gathered some water from the falling rain. Her face took on a concentrated expression as she moved into a stance as if she were holding a bow. His eyes widened in admiration when a liquid bow appeared in her hand followed by an arrow. He watched as she drew the arrow back before releasing it in a sigh. The liquid arrow turned into one made of sharp ice and it shot forward before it embedded itself in a tree trunk a few feet away. Zuko stared at it in amazement before he turned to his smug waterbender.

“Is this what you’ve been planning all along?” he asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“Yes,” she replied with a grin, “that is why I asked your mother to teach me archery. It will be faster with my waterbending. Of course, I still plan to use a regular bow and arrows in case I find myself unable to waterbend.”

“Well, it’s amazing,” Zuko told her with a smile.

“Thanks,” Katara responded happily before she grimaced, “I was horrible in the first few lessons and it took me weeks to master it with waterbending. I still have to work on the accuracy of my shots, though.”

“Even so, it’s still incredible,” he assured her.

Katara smiled before she again turned her face up to the cool rain.

“I love the rain!” she sighed happily before she looked back to her husband when she felt him step closer to her.

“And I love you,” Zuko said softly.

Katara felt her heart flutter at his words and she smiled. Mesmerized by the soft look in her eyes, Zuko leaned down toward her face. They stared at each other for a second before he kissed her softly, caressing her lips with his and slowly licking the seam of her bottom lip. She sighed delightedly at the taste of his kiss mixed with the rain water and pressed closer to him. They pulled apart and gazed intensely into each other’s eyes. When he reached for her, Katara stopped him as she splashed him with water. She laughed when he growled at her before she spun around and raced
Grinning, Zuko quickly chased after her, determined to catch her, but she did not make it easy, especially since she would use the rain to her advantage to thwart his efforts. Leaves rustled softly in the swaying branches and water splashed everywhere as they raced over the drenched grass.

Zuko finally caught up to her and growled triumphantly as he wrapped an arm around her waist and spun his stunning water nymph around toward him. When she collided against his chest, he swooped down and claimed her mouth in a deep kiss that had her moaning and melting against him.

Zuko groaned loudly at the sensation of her wet, soft body pressed so tightly against his hard frame. Breathing harshly, he pulled away from her mouth and stepped back a bit to see strands of her chocolate hair curled along her cheeks and neck. His smoldering eyes trailed lower and took in the sight of her clothes plastered to her alluring, feminine curves, her hard nipples protruding against the wet cloth, before he again crushed her to him and kissed her passionately. His wife moaned and clung to him as she returned his kiss, battling fiercely with his tongue.

Agni, he wanted her. Tonight he would love her with a wild passion that would prevent her from walking properly for days! He had thought that by suppressing his possessive and rough side, he would help Katara, but he now realized that he was only hurting both of them and letting Jianguo come between them.

No more. Just like Katara was willing to forget what happened and put it in the past, so would he. Though he would never forgive and would continue seeking revenge. But now he would worship Katara, take her, and love her with all the fierce passion he possessed.

“You truly are an enchanting water nymph,” he rasped as he pulled back slightly in order to catch his breath.

“Water nymph?” Katara asked breathlessly with an amused smile.

“I’ve been mentally calling you a water nymph ever since you set out to seduce me at the waterfall that first night I gave you an orgasm,” he growled out lustfully.

He smiled smugly when Katara’s blush intensified. He ran his thumb across her rufescent cheek before he bent down to kiss her passionately so that they were straining against each other once again.
“My lovely, sensuous water nymph,” he said throatily against her lips.

“Oh,” Katara moaned as she clung to him. She could feel her nipples aching against her wet clothes from both the cold rain and Zuko’s warmth and words.

Gently pulling her head back, Zuko deepened the kiss as he touched every inch of her mouth before coiling his tongue around hers. When Katara moaned and sucked his tongue, he growled huskily before pulling away.

“I want you,” he rasped.

“Don’t you have more work to do?” she asked breathlessly even as she pressed herself enticingly against him. She wanted him, desperately, but she also did not want to come between him and his duties.

“There are only documents I need to look over, but I can do that tomorrow,” he explained before he throatily added, “I’m more concerned with pleasuring my wife at the moment and being pleasured in return.”

*Oh, thank La,* was the only thought that passed through Katara’s head as she pulled his head down and kissed him hard.

Zuko groaned as he returned her ardent kiss, pushing his tongue insistently, coaxingly, inside her mouth. He cupped her ass with one hand and pressed her tightly against him. She moaned when she felt his hardness press against her stomach before she began to rub herself against him. She smiled into their kiss when he groaned loudly and bucked his hips tightly against her.

“Let’s go to our room,” she panted against his mouth.

“I can’t wait that long,” he rasped huskily, “I need to have you *now.*”

Before Katara could do anything but moan, Zuko swiftly swept her into his arms and quickly made his way to the veranda. Katara’s eyes widened when she realized where he was heading before she looked up to smile sultrily at her husband. At her eager look, Zuko paused briefly to bestow a
passionate, heady kiss on her lips before walking forward once again as the rain continued to fall steadily around them. Wrapping her arms around his neck, the waterbender began to kiss and lick his strong jaw. Zuko groaned at her actions and he increased his pace as he climbed the few steps that led to the veranda. Without setting her down, he hurriedly slid one of the shoji doors open before moving away from the rain as he closed it and walked inside the enclosed veranda. He only had enough time to shoot sparks at a few of the candles before Katara was kissing him breathless again.

“I want you, Zuko, please,” she moaned breathlessly as she rubbed herself against him.

Zuko captured her lips in another searing kiss before he settled her on her feet. He pulled away from her and Katara frowned when he walked away only to smile when she saw him quickly gather the cushions around the low table. Once he had created a comfortable pile of cushions, he quickly took off his heavy formal robes until he stood before her in only a thin tunic and dark trousers. He threw the garment aside before he turned and held out his hand invitingly to her. Heart beating rapidly and body tingling in anticipation and lust, Katara quickly stepped toward him and placed her hand in his larger one. She gasped when he roughly pulled her against his chest and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, hiked up one of her legs around his, and ground her belly insistently against his erection as she sucked on his tongue.

“Gods, Katara,” Zuko rasped as his arms tightened around her.

If he had wondered if this was what Katara really wanted, her fervent actions said it all. She wanted him, all of him, and he could not be happier. Or more aroused.

Desperate need coursed through the Fire Lord’s body as his wife rubbed herself against him enticingly, arousing him to no end until he thought he would go insane with lust. He could feel his hard cock throbbing in his trousers every time Katara pressed against it. With a groan, Zuko wrapped his arms tightly around her before he quickly brought them down upon the pile of cushions, uncaring that their wet clothes were drenching them.

They kissed for a moment before Zuko sat back on his knees between her legs. He was panting hard as he gazed down at his waterbender. By the minimal light of the candles he had lit, he admired the way the light danced on Katara’s brown skin and made her blue eyes sparkle. A few strands of her wet hair were plastered to her forehead and droplets of water kissed the skin of her face and neck. Her chest was heaving, and with an aroused growl, he quickly leaned down to bury his face on her breasts before he reached up to cup and squeeze them firmly in his hands.

“Zuko, oh,” the waterbender moaned as she pushed her chest closer to his amazing hands before she thrust her hips up.
She grinned when Zuko gasped as she pressed tightly against his cock. Her husband caught her grin and, with a wicked smirk that caused a flare of heat to spread throughout her body, he ground himself hard against her aching core at the same time he pinched one of her nipples through her wet clothes. Her head fell back onto one of the soft cushions and she moaned loudly as her hands grasped tightly onto his biceps.

Zuko leaned his head down to kiss her mouth before he trailed his lips across her soft cheek until he stopped at her ear. He nibbled at the lobe before he licked the shell of her dainty ear as he continued grinding against her center. He heard her moan and felt her arch against him. His breath hitched when she wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed her warm sex more tightly against his confined erection. He increased his pace and growled lustfully when she cried out his name. He wanted her desperately, needed to bury himself inside her, find comfort and ecstasy in her arms, but first he needed to taste her.

He nibbled on her earlobe one more time before he used the flat of his hot tongue to trail down her neck, tasting the fresh rain on her flesh. He licked her wildly beating pulse and felt her shiver against him as his hot breath touched her cool, wet skin. Heartened by her reaction, he placed a few open mouthed kisses on the soft column of her neck before sucking gently on her flesh just how he knew she liked. Her sharp intake of air followed by her soft moan was music to his ears. He bucked his hips more tightly against her at the same time he sucked more strongly and lapped more firmly on her skin, increasing her pleasure as well as his.

“Ohh,” she groaned. “Zuko…mmm…”

Zuko pulled away and leaned back on his knees as he swiftly pushed her dress over her hips and just as quickly removed her silky undergarment. Once her pussy was bared before him, he gazed at it hungrily for a moment before his eyes flicked upward to gaze at his wife with barely contained lust. The wanton gleam in her eyes as she stared back at him caused a groan to escape his throat. Scooting backward until he was lying on his stomach with his head between her thighs, Zuko reached one hand up to slowly caress her swollen folds, groaning when he found her already so wet for him. Her gasp of pleasure resonated in his ears and he smiled as her hips bucked into his touch. He slid his fingers along her slit before he circled them firmly on the swollen bud, causing her to moan and arch her back. Then he quickly slipped two fingers inside her drenched passage and began to thrust them frantically.

“Oh, gods!” Katara screamed as pleasure erupted in her stomach.

Zuko pumped his fingers inside her for a moment before he pulled them out and latched onto her slick folds with his mouth. She wailed as she brought her hands down to clench her fingers in his hair, urging him to pleasure her more. Zuko complied readily as he lapped, sucked, licked, and kissed her folds and engorged clit, then he plunged his tongue inside.
“Yes!” the waterbender mewled as she threw her head back on the cushion beneath her. “Yes, just like that, oohhh!”

Zuko groaned at the delicious taste of her and the feeling of her tight pussy clenching around his tongue. He panted hard as he insistently rubbed his tongue along the fluttering walls before he curled it upwards, causing her hips to jerk into his face like he knew they would. He pressed her hips down as he continued to devour her.

Katara’s eyes rolled back at the incredible pleasure and she could feel her stomach clenching and her core tightening with her upcoming orgasm. Then with a particular stroke of his tongue and the sensation of his fingers rubbing firmly on her clit, the dam of ecstasy broke.

“Ahhhh!” the waterbender wailed as her hips bucked and her head thrashed from side to side.

Zuko groaned in pleasure as he drank up her tangy juices and reveled at the feeling of his wife writhing beneath him. He could feel his cock throbbing painfully in his trousers. He loved it when he was able to pleasure his wife so well.

Lifting himself up, Zuko moved over his waterbender and watched as she trembled and moaned. He leaned forward and kissed her with all the passion in his heart, then he grasped her hips and lifted her up against him as he sat on his knees. Katara moaned as Zuko’s tongue entered her mouth and she mindlessly sucked on it and rubbed her sensitive breasts against his hard chest. Zuko growled in pleasure.

As they continued kissing, he hurriedly undid the ties that held his pants up and pushed them down enough to free his aching length. They pulled away to catch their breath and Katara looked down to admire his impressive shaft. Looking up to hold her husband’s intense gaze, the waterbender smiled sexily as she quickly reached for his cock and began to caress him with firm, quick strokes.

“Yesss,” Zuko hissed and his head fell back in immense pleasure. “So damn good…”

Katara smiled in satisfaction at his reaction and she began to stroke him faster and more roughly, just the way she knew he liked. Zuko’s breath hitched in his throat and he looked back down to watch his wife’s hand stroking him, but when she pressed her thumb on the bulbous head to spread the whitish liquid that had seep out from the opening, Zuko could not take it anymore.
He needed to bury himself inside her!

Sitting back on the cushions with his back pressing against the low table, Zuko grasped her hips and guided her down until she was straddling his lap. Katara stroked him a few more times before she moved her hand away as he lifted the hem of her dress around her hips. Before Zuko could urge her forward, Katara quickly spread her legs even further and shifted over his straining length, and then, with a seductive smile on her face, she sank down over his erection and took him deeply inside her.

“Oh, gods, Katara,” Zuko rasped huskily as he tightly gripped her hips, the sensation of her wet heat surrounding him almost causing him to go over the edge.

“Mm, yes,” Katara mewled softly as her eyes fluttered at the pleasurable feeling of having her walls stretched widely by his thick cock.

Then she opened her eyes to gaze deeply into his golden ones as she began to rock and grind her hips against his. Zuko roughly called her name as he drew her hips tightly against him. Katara gasped before she spread her knees even more and pressed her hips lower as she increased her speed and began to bounce rigorously atop his turgid shaft. Panting, she leaned forward, splaying her hands with greedy need across his chest, before she latched her mouth against his throat, wet from the rain and his sweat, and began to wildly lick and suck at his skin.

Zuko gasped at her actions before he bent his head and eagerly nudged hers up. Knowing what he wanted, Katara lifted her head and fiercely captured his lips in a deep kiss. Zuko growled lustfully against her sweet mouth as his hands tightened on her hips before he swiftly brought them down so that he was lying on top of her. At Katara’s murmured satisfaction, Zuko shifted his hands down to cup her firm ass. With a groan of her name, he began to thrust fiercely into her, going deep and hard until he was nudging her womb. He grunted in pleasure when she squeezed his backside in her hands, pressing him tightly to her as she undulated beneath him, rubbing her clit against his groin. Her pussy was a velvet vise, tight yet soft, wet and hot as it clenched around his aching shaft. He loved being buried in the blissful heat of her incredible body. He had missed taking her with all the passion and heat in his soul and vowed that he would always love her thusly.

“Zuko!” Katara gasped as her hands flew up to tangle in his hair at the back of his head as he began to thrust almost violently into her. Yes, this was what she wanted! Zuko’s passionate and fierce lovemaking as he took her with wild abandon—without restraint, without reservation.

Faster, harder, hotter, more intense and powerful did their lovemaking become as they strained, bucked, and rock against each other. Trying to catch their breaths, their hungry mouths detached for a moment and their eyes connected and locked in a desperate yet tender gaze as they gave themselves to the moment and to each other. A moment later, they both reached that glorious peak and tumbled into an abyss of excruciating ecstasy.
Katara gasped and her hips bucked wildly as her juices flowed out of her. Zuko groaned harshly as his hips thrust into her in erratic movements as her clenching walls milked him of his seed. With one final thrust, Zuko rasped her name before he slumped over her, panting and shuddering from his incredible release as he tightened his hold of her body. Katara wrapped her arms around him as she gasped and panted for breath, her heart beating rapidly in her chest.

It was a long moment later when Zuko finally had the strength to lift himself enough to look down at her. Her blue eyes were half-lidded, her lips swollen from his kisses, and her expression one of immense pleasure and satiation.

“Gods, I missed this,” he groaned throatily as he raised a hand to tuck her damp hair behind her ear before he caressed her flushed cheek.

“You won’t hold yourself back from me anymore?” she asked breathlessly as she reached up her own hand to brush a few strands of his long, black hair aside.

“Never. I promise,” he vowed firmly, his tone fierce, his eyes intense and affectionate. Then a smirk curled his lips as he added, “In fact, I planned on showing you how sincere I am by demonstrating it to you throughout the night.”

“You will need to demonstrate it to me many, many, more times before I’m convinced of your sincerity,” Katara quipped playfully yet seductively as she undulated her hips underneath him.

Zuko’s breath caught in his throat as his cock twitched inside her still wet core, but he instead pinned her hips down before she made him lose his mind again. A plan was forming in his head, a way to show her how much he desired and loved her and her body. But to also demonstrate how much her body craved him inside her, just as his craved to be buried within her. He bent down to kiss her deeply, and with a buck of his hips to make her gasp, he pulled away from her.

“Come. I want to show you something in the privacy of our rooms,” he told her huskily as he held out a hand toward her.

Katara eagerly grasped his hand and he pulled them up. Katara let her dress fall back down her legs as she watched Zuko tuck himself back into his pants. He then snatched up his robe and her undergarment from the floor and, with a wicked smirk on his lips, he brought it to his face and licked the spot damped with her aroused juices. Katara let out a breathless little moan and he chuckled as he stuffed the delicate article into his pocket. Placing his robe over his arm, Zuko held out his other hand...
to her and Katara quickly took it, entwining their fingers together as they smiled at each other.

They walked toward the shoji door and Zuko quickly opened one and closed it behind them once they stepped out. The rain was still falling steadily and, with another amorous glance at each other, they stepped out of the protection of the veranda’s roof and swiftly headed into the garden, rain once again drenching their hair and clothes.

Once they entered the palace, they walked swiftly down the corridors, leaving a trail of rain water for the servants to clean up since Zuko was too impatient to have her in their rooms to wait for her to clean up the mess with her waterbending. Luckily, they did not encounter anyone as they made their way.

When they arrived in the seclusion of their bedchamber, they turned quickly to each other and gazed at one another in anticipation. The curtains before the balcony doors were closed to ward off the chill and rain. The fireplace was lit as well as a few candles and the light chased away the darkness. Water dripped from their drenched clothes and hair and puddled on the marble floor around their feet. Katara quickly used her waterbending to dry them off before Zuko pulled her to him and kissed her until she was breathless and limp with pleasure against his chest. After a few moments of slow, heated kisses, he slowly pulled away and stared down into her darkened azure eyes.

Agni, she was beautiful.

Without a word, he grabbed her hand and led her to their massive bed where he gently urged her to sit. He glanced at her briefly before he let go of her hand. Katara watched in silent curiosity as her husband went into the bathing room only to return with a thick towel. Her eyes hungrily followed his movements as he placed the large towel across the back and seat of one of the chairs resting before the warmly blazing fireplace before he again moved across the room to where their large full-length mirror rested.

The waterbender tilted her head in wonder as she watched Zuko pick up the mirror and walk back to place it before the chair. He stood back to critically analyze his work before he shifted both the chair and the mirror so that the light from the fireplace could illuminate the chair and make it visible through the mirror’s reflection. Then he turned back to his curious wife and smiled seductively. Katara felt her pulse quicken and she swallowed thickly as she fixedly stared at him as he approached her like a stalking predator.

Zuko stopped in front of her and, with a rakish curl of his lips, began to slowly divest himself of his clothing. Once he was completely naked, he stood still to allow his waterbender time to admire him. He smiled in both pride and eager expectation as he watched her eyes ravenously rake his entire musculature in blatant lust and anticipation. He felt his already erect cock twitch and throb when her blue eyes settled lustfully on it and she licked her lips. Even with the scars marring his face and
abdomen, she gazed at him as if he were the handsomest man in the world. No other woman would be able to make him feel so empowered, desired, and loved like his Katara. She was the perfect mate for him.

He reached forward and quickly pushed her dress up to her hips. He slowly trailed his fingertips down the smooth and enthralling curves of her hips and thighs before he pushed her legs widely aside. He moved between his wife’s legs and leaned down to kiss her sensually, passionately, sucking gently on her full lower lip. Katara moaned and murmured against his mouth as she reached up her hands to grasp the back of his head.

Zuko slowly urged her back and Katara lay down upon the mattress as he gently settled on top of her heating body. They continued kissing as Zuko blindly unraveled the sash around her waist and pulled at the ties that held her elegant robe closed. Katara murmured incoherently as she struggled to free herself from the confines of her clothes, wanting desperately to feel that incredible sensation of her firebender’s hot skin touching, sliding against, and caressing hers.

Realizing his body was impeding them, Zuko lifted himself enough to drag the material up. Between the two of them, they finally managed to pull her robe away and Zuko threw it behind him. Before he could continue, Katara had already taken off the silky top that contained her breasts and tossed it away. Zuko did not care where it landed because his eyes were already engrossed on his wife’s delectable breasts. There was no better place to be, but there on their bed with his wife lying gloriously naked beneath him. With a husky groan, he buried his face between her soft mounds before he took one hard nipple into his mouth.

“Uhh,” Katara mewled and she pushed her chest closer to his mouth.

She hissed in pleasure when Zuko deliberately rubbed the rough texture of his scarred cheek against her neglected nipple the way she liked. He sucked on her pebbled nipple fervently, causing her to throw her head back and moan his name, before he moved up to cover her lips with his. He kissed her hungrily as he again settled himself completely between her thighs. They gasped and groaned as their naked loins touched before they began to rock against each other.

Katara felt like her entire body was on fire as Zuko’s hard shaft rubbed against her slick folds and pressed against her sensitive nub. She lifted her hips insistently, trying to angle them so that he could slip inside her, but he only chuckled at her struggles as he continued to grind and slide his cock against the lips of her pussy.

“Zuko,” she hissed both impatiently and pleadingly.
“Patience, my wanton goddess,” Zuko hushed throatily as he licked her bottom lip. “You’ll have me inside you soon enough.”

Before Katara could respond, a gasp escaped her lips when Zuko suddenly lifted them off the bed with his arms wrapped tightly around her. Katara wound her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips, thinking excitedly that he was going to enter her in this position like he had a few times before. The memory of their interlude in their guest room wall in Omashu caused her stomach to clench in arousal. She moaned and tightened her limbs around him as one of his hands grabbed her backside and pressed her center against his big length. They both moaned against each other’s mouths as his shaft once again massaged and glided against her wet pussy but still not penetrating her. Katara whined and writhed against him as she felt her empty core clench in need to be filled.

Why was he torturing her so?

She did not realize she had spoken out loud until she heard him chuckle sexily into her ear.

“Don’t worry, your torture will soon come to an end,” he growled huskily. He licked the shell of her ear and continued grinding slowly between her legs as he asked, “Do you want my cock inside you, Katara?”

“Gods, yes,” the waterbender mewled loudly as she felt more of her aroused juices seep out of her.

With a groan, Zuko tightened his hold of her as he swiftly walked to the chair before the fireplace and gently placed her on her feet. Mind dazed with arousal, Katara waited curiously as Zuko settled himself on the seat of his chair directly in front of the full-length mirror before he grasped her arms and pulled her toward him so that she sat on his lap with her back to his firm chest. Her heart beat faster and her stomach fluttered at the sensation of his hard length pressed against her lower back. She looked up and saw his handsome face staring over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror with dark, golden eyes as he smoothed her long hair away from her front. The light from the fireplace cast a golden shower over their skin.

Grasping her hips, Zuko moved his powerful thighs between hers and urgently pressed his knees outward so that he had her legs spread. Not sufficient enough for what he wanted, he instead grabbed her legs and rested them across the high armrests, spreading her more widely.

“Look at yourself, my lovely waterbender,” he commanded softly. “I want you to see what I enjoy gazing at when I make love to you with my fingers, tongue, and cock.”
Katara’s eyes widened at his words before her eyes slowly shifted down her body through the reflection in the mirror, taking in her quivering breasts and her smooth stomach until her eyes landed on her exposed sex. She felt herself blush despite herself at the wanton image she presented, as if she were offering herself to a sex god—and in a way she was.

Zuko heard Katara moan at the same time he groaned as his eyes feasted on the sight of her swollen, glistening pussy. He would always find the contrast of her brown skin against her pink sex captivatingly arousing. He watched as her tiny hole clenched and unclenched before he swallowed hard as he watched her juices leak out of her and slide down the line of her ass. He almost came at the incredible, erotic sight.

Katara was panting hard as she looked away from her bare center to gaze at her suddenly silent husband. She felt her stomach tightened at the hungry expression on his face and the intense gleam in his amber eyes. At the sight of his delight, she felt her core spasm and she trembled when he groaned loudly. Her attention was diverted from his face when she saw his hand move between her legs. She gasped loudly and arched her back when his fingers began to play havoc on her oversensitive clit.

“Oh, gods,” she moaned. “Yes, yes…haaa…”

He stroked her a moment longer before he brought his other hand around her to cup her breast. She murmured his name as he kneaded and squeezed her mound at the same time he rubbed her nub. She watched his movements through the mirror as he caressed her a while longer before he reached his hand down to join his efforts in pleasuring her sex. Then to her shock and pleasure, he used the fingers of both his hands to spread her folds open, completely revealing her clenching pussy to their eyes.

“Mine,” he growled possessively.

“Yes, ohh,” the waterbender whimpered.

Zuko felt his heart swell and his shaft throb at her easy admittance. She belonged to him completely just as he belonged unreservedly to her. No other man had or would know the secrets of her body. No one but him. Just like no other woman could or would be able to touch his heart.

He moved his hands so that one of them was still spreading her open before he plunged two fingers of his other hand inside. Katara threw back her head and wailed in pleasure as her hips bucked up into his long fingers. He moved them rapidly inside, making her mind go insane with lust, before he pulled them out. Katara opened her eyes to see him smirk at her as he lifted his hand and brought his drenched fingers into his mouth. She heard him groan as he sucked his fingers clean of her essence.
and she squirmed above him in anticipation.

“Zuko, please,” she pleaded breathlessly as she rubbed against him, massaging his shaft tightly between them.

Zuko pulled out his fingers from his mouth and groaned at her movements. He grasped her hips and lifted her higher against him. His twitching length reared proudly between both their legs.

“Please, what?” he teased gutturally.

Katara did not respond and instead rubbed her aching center against his cock, coating him heavily with her overflowing fluids. Zuko hissed out a breath before he pinned her hips down to stop her movements. She groaned in frustration.

“What do you want, my love?” he asked in a husky tone as he steadied her with one arm.

He reached his other hand between them and tightly grasped his hard erection before massaging his large mushroomed tip along her dripping sex.

“Please,” Katara hissed as one of her hands tightly grasped his to urge him into her.

“You want my cock, don’t you, Katara?” he asked heatedly. “Your tight pussy aches for me, doesn’t it?” he asked as he ran his tongue along the column of her slim throat to her ear which he nibbled gently, eliciting a soft whimper from her.

Oh, La, yes, Katara thought as she felt her core clench, seeking to be mollified and to banish the empty feeling. Her mind was completely dazed with lust and she could not seem to find her words.

When she nodded and moaned at his statement, Zuko smirked as he allowed the thick head of his erection to penetrate her slowly as he watched her reaction through their reflections. When he saw the relief and eagerness in her blue eyes, he just as slowly pulled his shaft out. He suppressed a chuckle at her frustrated growl since he was torturing himself as well, but he wanted to impart to her the full impact of their bond—body, heart, and soul.
“Only my cock can be inside you. Only I can bring you to ecstasy,” he rumbled throatily as he locked eyes with hers and nuzzled his cheek against her head. “Only with me can you find completion. Just like I can only find completion inside your wet pussy, only in your arms.”

It did not take Katara’s hazy mind long to comprehend what her husband was truly trying to communicate with her. He was not just being possessive, but he was conveying to her once again that they were only meant for each other. That their bodies belonged solely to each other just like their hearts, and that no one, especially not Jianguo nor Mai, would come between them.

“Yes, Zuko, only you,” she told him firmly, softly and lovingly as she turned and lifted her head to kiss his firm jaw.

Zuko groaned softly at the knowledge that she understood what he was truly saying and he bent his head down to tenderly kiss her sweet, upturned mouth before he moved back and nudged her to return her attention to their reflections. She had answered his unspoken meaning, but she had still not told him what she needed from him.

“Tell me what you want, Katara,” he asked roughly, this tone thick with desire.

Katara knew what he wanted to hear, but she decided not to give him the satisfaction of begging after teasing her so long. Suppressing her smirk, Katara did not reply immediately and instead squirmed more insistently against him. Her legs were starting to shake a little from having them spread so widely so long, but she ignored the discomfort.

“You know what I want,” she retorted teasingly, her blue eyes shining in the reflection by the light of the fireplace.

“Minx,” Zuko growled playfully at her stubbornness.

Deciding to tease her some more, he moved his hand wrapped around her and slid it up her stomach. He felt more than heard her breathing accelerate as he moved higher before he cupped her breast and squeezed tightly, pressing his palm tightly against her nipple.

She whined and arched against him, silently begging him to end her torture. Although she had not vocally pleaded, her whimpers and mewls sounded like pleading to his ears, so he decided to indulge her a little.
Katara gasped when she felt him press his tip inside her again, deliciously stretching her walls to accommodate his large length, only to moan in disappointment when he stopped. She could see her juices leaking down his shaft.

“Tell me what you need, love,” he rasped commandingly, he could not wait anymore as he felt her walls clench around his head, beseeching him to plunged into her, to take her. “Tell me and I’ll give us both what we want.”

Katara could hear the need and desire in his tone and she could not deny him any longer because she desperately needed it too. She locked eyes with him again in the mirror and smiled sultrily.

“Please, Zuko. I need your cock inside me,” she purred seductively as she slowly moved above him, wanting to talk dirty to him as well.

She watched as his eyes became hooded and he groaned.

“I need to feel your big, thick cock stretching me,” she continued throatily, “I need to feel it impaling me so deeply I might just pass out from the pleasure. I want to feel it throbbing and thrusting inside my wet and tight pussy.”

“Oh gods,” Zuko growled as he grabbed her hips in both of his hands and slowly moved another inch inside her. He loved it when Katara talked dirty to him. He paused when he saw Katara close her eyes and throw her head back against his shoulder with a satisfied gasp.

“Open your eyes,” he murmured in her ear. “Watch yourself. Watch as my cock enters you. Watch as your breasts bounce with my every thrust. Watch as pleasure ripples across your beautiful face.”

There was more power in her husband’s voice as he tightly grabbed her hips. His demand ignited a blaze of fire deep inside her. Katara forcefully opened her eyes and she quickly stared down at the spot where they were joined. She heard Zuko murmur his approval. He moved her legs from the armrests and placed them over his thighs before he again grabbed her curvy hips. She watched intensely as he slowly lowered her hips down, and her stomach clenched, as she watched her small hole open and stretch at the invasion of his large girth. She moaned and her stomach tightened when his erection completely disappeared so deeply inside her that his heavy sac—just as drenched with her cream—pressed tightly to her ass. The sight was extremely erotic. No wonder Zuko always stared between their bodies when they made love. She heard Zuko groan as he pressed his cheek to the side of her face as he also stared at the place where they were intimately connected.
“Agni, Katara, you feel so good,” he rasped in a low tone.

“So do you, my love,” she purred seductively as she smiled at him through the mirror. “Your huge cock feels so good inside me.”

Growling lustfully at her words, Zuko grasped her hips, lifted her slightly, and then lowered her slowly back down over him. She groaned. He set a leisurely, steady rhythm, rolling his hips up into hers in shallow yet forceful thrusts as he watched their movement in the mirror. The sight was almost enough to make him come, but he held himself back. Not yet.

Katara was mesmerized by the sight of her firebender’s turgid cock entering and leaving her body. Every time he pulled out—with only the tip remaining inside—she watched at his thick length glistened with her juices before disappearing once more, stretching her widely. She felt him scrape his teeth on the sensitive skin of her neck and her breath caught in her throat as her eyes once again connected with his. His strong, firm jaw was clenched tightly, the muscles of his cheeks flexed, as he surged into her.

“Do you feel how your wet walls clench and cling tightly around my cock?” he asked throatily.

He pulled her wavy tresses aside to bare her neck and Katara watched as he affectionately licked and kissed her from her ear to her shoulder and back again.

“Do you feel how your pussy eagerly welcomes me inside?” he continued.

“Uhhh, yesss,” she hissed as a thrill shot up her spine before she added huskily, “My tight pussy hungers for more of you cock.”

She paused briefly when she again heard him moan and she smiled at him lustfully as she held his intense gaze. She wanted to drive him completely over the edge, she wanted to drive him crazy with need and arousal, she wanted him to take her like the insatiable beast he was. She thought she knew how to do it, or better yet, which words to use. Her mind was solely focused on the pleasure that the explicit words she was about to utter would bring her and the anticipation caused a thrill to shoot up her spine.

“I need you to fuck me hard, Zuko.”
“Oh, gods,” Zuko rasped as his eyes widened in both shock and arousal at the dirty word his waterbender had never uttered before.

He lost it.

Growling loudly, Zuko grabbed her more forcefully and impaled her swiftly and hard onto his cock—over and over again, causing her breasts to bounce wildly about. He could feel her tight passage beginning to tighten and throb around him, signaling her approaching release. He was again fascinated by the sight of her juices seeping out of her and soaking his heavy balls and upper thighs, saturating the towel he had placed on the chair beneath him.

“Ahh, mm, yes!” Katara screamed her pleasure. “Haa…Zu-Zuko…so good…”

She lifted one hand back to grasp his hair, damp with perspiration. She wrapped her ankles and feet around his muscular calves, using that leverage to raise her hips, following his movements and gliding herself fiercely onto his erection. She heard him growl behind her as he shifted to a furious pace.

“Play with you breasts, Katara!” he ordered with a growl as he watched them bounce, “Pleasure your lovely breasts!”

Katara’s hands immediately flew to her bouncing mounds and she began to squeeze and knead them, pinching her hard nipples, causing her to cry out in pleasure. Yes, she missed this. Missed Zuko’s passionate fire and she wanted all of that above, beneath, around, and inside her. She licked her suddenly dry lips and she heard him groan huskily into her ear.

Forcefully wrenching her eyes from between their legs, Katara looked up to see that he was staring at her face. A wicked and utterly sensual smile curved his handsome lips, causing her to shudder against him and clench around his pounding length. He shifted beneath her and her eyes widened when the angle caused his shaft to slide and stroke across that sensitive spot inside her that seemed to generate electric sparks all over her body. The incredible pleasure was overwhelming her and she could not help closing her eyes in expectation of her imminent release. There was a sudden tightening of his hands on her hips as he growled.

“Watch,” he commanded. “Keep your eyes open!”

“Please…I can’t,” she moaned breathlessly, “I’m…so close…”
“I know, I am too,” he said in a more soothing tone as he nuzzled her head before he added in a more strained voice, “I can feel you tightening around me, but I want you to see yourself. I want you to see how beautiful you are when you come.”

Katara forced her eyes open and she looked back at the mirror to gaze at the place where they were joined. The sight was almost her undoing and her breath hitched.

“She begged wantonly as she writhed frantically against him. “Please. Ohh!”

“Say my name, Katara,” he growled as he sucked on her earlobe. His muscles flexed and strained with his movements, rippling under his skin as he tried to desperately hold his orgasm at bay long enough to usher hers.

“Zuko,” she moaned as she grasped her breasts more tightly.

“Louder!” he commanded.

“Zuko!” she cried more loudly as she felt him throb inside her.

Zuko loved it when she lost herself in her passion. His waterbender looked up and their eyes locked and connected, and he felt as if she pulled him into her soul. She really was perfect for him. Feeling his own end approaching, Zuko reached down between them and began to roughly rub his fingers on her clit at the same time he thrust his hips up almost violently into her.

“Scream my name, Katara!” he roared.

“Zuko!” Katara screamed piercingly as fire erupted within her and her toes curled in ecstasy as an intensely powerful euphoria ignited her entire body.

Zuko looked away from intensely admiring the pleasure on her face as she arched, and he gasped as he watched her juices squirt out of her in a rush, coating his thighs and hers, and spraying across the mirror standing before them as she bucked and writhed against him as she continued screaming. The visual and the sensation of her pussy rippling and clamping tightly, almost painfully so, around his throbbing cock heralded his own release.
“Katara!” Zuko roared as his hips surged deeply into her, his sensitive tip colliding with the opening of her womb, and he erupted inside her welcoming heat, shuddering violently against her back.

Katara moaned as she felt big, thick jets of his seed splash hotly and continuously inside her. His loud groans and growls and his heavy panting breaths near her ear only caused her pleasure to increase as his hips jerked erratically up into her.

Zuko gasped at the intensity and amazing pleasure of it all before he sagged against the back of the chair, totally spent and satiated. His body continued to spasm and his cock continued to twitch and pulse inside her still clenching walls as he gently brought her sweat-slick back against his chest. She was moaning and trembling as she slowly released her breasts from her rough grasp and rested trustingly against him.

He lifted his eyes and was glad to see that she still had hers opened, although they were half-lidded. Panting harshly, heart pounding wildly in his chest, Zuko reached his hand up to smooth her hair back from her flushed face. She was breathing equally as hard as him as she stared at him with a pleased smile on her lips.

“La, that was incredible,” she sighed, her voice a little huskier because of her last scream.

Zuko smiled, both content and smug, as he caressed her cheek.

“Agni, I love you, Katara,” he crooned huskily, “That was perfectly amazing.”

“I love you, too,” the waterbender murmured lovingly as her smile widened a little.

“I want you to see one final thing,” he purred amorously before he demanded softly, “Look back at the mirror.”

Curious, she looked back, but before she could ask what he meant, he grasped her hips gently in his big hands and slowly lifted her off him. Katara watched as his semi-flaccid shaft slipped out of her and rested beneath her bottom. Zuko again moved his thighs so he could spread her widely. Breath hitching in her chest, Katara watched as he reached between her legs and spread her entrance open with his fingers, stretching her still quivering pussy wide. Katara’s eyes widened in fascination when she saw his whitish seed flow steadily out of her, leaking down the cleft of her rear and down his sac to mingle with her juices that had already soaked the towel beneath him. Ever since they got married,
she had noticed that after their lovemaking Zuko enjoyed watching his seed pour out of her core, dribble down from the corner of her mouth, or coat the skin of her stomach and chest. Now she could understand why he was captivated by the sight. It was tremendously erotic.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” he rasped against her ear as he dipped two fingers inside her.

She gasped and bucked at the sensation. Zuko curled his fingers, urging more of his semen to seep out before he pulled away. Holding her gaze, he lifted his fingers up to his face and licked them. Katara’s heart pounded.

“Mm, delicious,” he murmured before he brought his fingers up to her mouth as he rasped, “Taste the combination of our love, Katara.”

Katara felt her stomach quiver at his words. Keeping her eyes locked with his, she grasped his wrist as she engulfed her mouth over his drenched fingers. She heard him let out a guttural, animalistic sound as he watched her suck his fingers clean of their tangy and salty flavor, putting on a show by using her tongue to curl around and lick his fingers.

“So hot,” he groaned before he rasped, “You’re going to be the death of me, Katara.”

Katara pulled his fingers away and laughed at his words. It wasn’t the first time he had told her that and it made her feel powerful and sexy to know she affected him that much. Suddenly a yawn slipped past her lips and she blushed in embarrassment. Zuko chuckled as he hugged her affectionately to him.

“Come. You need to rest,” he said before he added teasingly, “You earned it.”

“Damn right I did,” she quipped playfully, only causing him to chuckle again.

Gathering her gently in his arms, Zuko rose from the chair and walked away from the mirror toward their large bed. Katara decided that she would clean the chair and the mirror from any evidence of their activities later. Zuko turned down the cover of their bed with one hand before he deposited her on the mattress. With a pleased sigh, the Fire Lord lay down next to her and pulled her against him. She nuzzled against his still sweaty chest before she lifted her face to smile at him.

Her azure eyes showed her fatigue. He would let her rest for a little while before he woke her up
again so they could eat something after missing dinner. Then he would make love to her again. He gave her a small smile in return as he brushed her slightly damp hair away from her face and lowered his head to press his lips on her temple.

Katara smiled sleepily at him and she raised her head so he could kiss her lips. She sighed softly against his caressing mouth before she pulled away to settled back against him and relaxed in his arms. It was always his arms that made her the feel safe, loved, and at home.

No words were said or needed to express their thoughts and feelings as they basked in the peaceful afterglow of their lovemaking, curled into each other and wrapped in each other’s arms. As she began to drift into a restful slumber, Katara was glad that they were both able to surpass this obstacle. Their bond was stronger and unbreakable, their love fierce and without compare. By helping each other and being there for each other, she was positive they would overcome anything that came their way.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Zuko sat silently on his throne as he watched his advisors murmur amongst themselves as they threw disapproving looks at Katara. His wife, dressed in elegant, formal red and golden robes, was sitting on an elaborate cushion embroidered with red, black, and gold designs he had custom made for her as her new throne. It was placed below the dais before the wall of fire next to the marble stairs that led to his throne and directly facing the advisors. Iroh was sitting next to Advisor Chao and they were frowning at the men. As soon as Zuko had helped Katara sit on her throne before he took his, he had voiced his opinion on having his Fire Lady participate in some of the meetings. The council members were not pleased to say the least.

“It is unheard of to have a woman participate in such discussions,” Wei spoke up gruffly.

Zuko glared at him.

“Besides, we all know that women do not have the capability to understand such difficult matters,” Wei added in a condescending tone as he eyed Katara with a patronizing look, “Especially women that come from uneducated and unsophisticated nations.”

Gritting his teeth in anger, Zuko was about to react in defense of his wife, but a look from his uncle made him pause. He remembered Iroh telling him that he should allow Katara to prove herself capable to withstand the advisors’ insults and rise above them if she was to convince them of her worth. Although it took everything in him to force himself not to immediately defend his wife, Zuko took a deep breath as he waited for Katara to respond.

Sitting on the large, elaborate cushion Zuko gifted her with, Katara inwardly seethed with anger and
indignation at the men’s supercilious words. It was difficult to remain calm and not immediately react in fury to their insults, but she kept her composure. She would prove them wrong.

The advisors watched in surprise when their Fire Lady smiled serenely at them all, though they could detect the blazing gleam in her cobalt eyes.

“Uneducated and unsophisticated nations, you say?” the waterbender spoke up with a deceptively calm, sweet voice, “I assure you that we are a literate and intelligent people. We are not a land of primitives and savages as you always try to make us seem. It just shows how ignorant and egotistical you are.”

Wei and the other men spluttered in outrage at the offense. Zuko rubbed his hand against his mouth to hide his amused grin while Iroh cleared his throat to hide his chuckles.

“Even so, you are still a woman and a woman always lets her emotions control her,” one of the oldest advisors spoke up angrily, “Women don’t think rationally.”

“Oh, is that so?” Katara replied in the same honeyed tone even as she raised a mocking eyebrow, “And men don’t allow their pride and egos to get in the way when it comes to a compromise? The first solution men resort to when dealing with a problem is violence and war. Is that really more rational?”

A few men opened their mouths as if to retort before they stopped and frowned at her words. A few others murmured amongst themselves. They all paused when the advisor rose angrily to his feet and pointed an accusing finger at her.

“You sit there as if you have a right, but we’ve noticed how weak you’ve become,” he growled out, “You are only a weakness to our lord and this nation!”

The fire wall blazed almost to the ceiling as Zuko clenched his hands into fists as he angrily glared at the man. He paused, however, when he noticed the advisor’s eyes widened in shock as he stared at Katara and not at him. Zuko turned to observe his wife.

The men watched as the Fire Lady remained tranquil on her throne as she stared at them evenly as she reached down and splayed her fingers outward over the floor. They gasped and stared in awe as ice began to form around the cushion she was sitting on before it began to spread outward on the marble floor, slithering toward them in intricate patterns like a spider web. They watched as ice
began to creep up the walls, quickly extinguishing the various torches that hung on them. The only fire that remained was the now calmly blazing fire wall before the Fire Lord’s throne as it threw ominous shadows around them. The men shivered when the air around them turned bitingly cold before they froze in fear as the ice slithering on the floor finally reached them and began to slowly crawl on the cushions they were sitting on. They could see their breath misting before them as their breath accelerated.

“Weak?” the blue-eyed waterbender spoke up in a calm, serene tone before she firmly added, “Not anymore.”

They stared at her with wide eyes filled with both fear and admiration. She stared at them steadily for a few more moments. With a flick of her wrist, the ice disappeared as quickly as it had formed and the temperature returned to normal. Placing her hands demurely on her lap, the Fire Lady gave them a warm, amiable smile and the men let out relieved breaths as they sagged in their spots. On his throne, Zuko mentally applauded his wife for her display. He could see that the men were beginning to take her more seriously.

“I only ask to participate in meetings regarding the problems of the common people as well as both Water Tribes,” she told them in a more congenial tone, “After all, I am more suited to understanding what both entail. I had vowed to help my husband in any way I can with his rule.”

The men quickly turned amongst themselves and began to discuss the matter with each other. Zuko smirked as he caught sight of the incredulous expression on Wei’s face as he watched his fellow advisors actually contemplate the Fire Lady’s request. Zuko looked away from his advisors and glanced down at his wife. As if sensing his intense gaze, Katara looked up at him and smiled triumphantly.

A long moment later—after much arguing—the men finally returned their attention to the royal couple.

“After much debate,” another of the oldest advisors spoke up, “we have decided to give Fire Lady Katara a chance to prove herself capable of handling such issues for a trial period of six months.”

Both Katara’s and Zuko’s eyes widened at the men’s decision before they looked at each other with smiles. Katara turned back to gift the men with a large, grateful smile that made them flush.

“Thank you,” she told them sincerely, “I swear that I will do my best.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
Panting as heavily as the moaning woman beneath him, Jet rolled away from her and lay at her side, staring at the ceiling silently as he waited for his body to come down from his release. A moment later, he felt her place a hand on his sweaty chest and he turned to look at her. There was a sated smile on her thin lips, her long, black hair fell over her pale shoulder to partially cover her small breast, and her dark eyes glinted in satisfaction. But Jet hardly paid attention since his thoughts had already turned to smiling, plump lips, chocolate hair, tanned skin, and lively, blue eyes. Eyes that had look at him in fear the last time he had seen them.

“What are you thinking?” Mai’s voice interrupted his thoughts as she caressed his chest.

“Nothing,” he responded with a shrug before he smirked at her as he reached out to fondle her small, pale breast, hoping to distract her from asking any more questions. His male ego grew at the thought that thanks to his incredible skills in bed, he was able to teach Mai to be a better bed partner. She was almost as insatiable as him.

Mai let out a small groan even as she stared sharply into his eyes. She knew he was thinking of the waterbending wench and the thought angered her, not so much because she cared about Jet, but because the waterbender was receiving such attention. Yet, she did not say anything to upset him. She did not want to lose him and find herself searching for another lover while she bided her time until Zuko called her back.

Ever since Zuko and the waterbender had unexpectedly returned to the Fire Nation, Mai had continued her trysts with Jet since their interests ran the same way. Jet was a great lover who held nothing back. She especially enjoyed it when he spent himself inside her when he lost control. It was fortunate that she was knowledgeable of ways she could prevent pregnancy. It would not do to become pregnant with Jet’s bastard child.

It always made her wonder how it would feel if Zuko did the same. The few times Zuko had allowed them to be together, he was always in control of himself, his only goal was to achieve his end, not really interested in anything beyond that. He never lingered after, but hastened to redress and leave to attend to one duty or another. And that was why her hatred for Katara grew, because Mai knew that Zuko was treating the waterbender in a way he never did her in the entire four years they had been a couple. And now she was seething that her plan on seducing Zuko while Jet did the same to Katara had gone awry because of their sudden return to the Fire Nation. She inwardly scowled.

“Do you have any ideas what we can do to separate Zuko and the wench—Katara?” she asked, quickly stopping the insult so as to not upset him.

At her words, Jet stopped his fondling and frowned. He moved away from her and sat up on the edge of the bed as he got lost in his thoughts. For the past few months, he had begun to question his actions and his plan to take Katara for himself. Admittedly, he still wanted her like he had not wanted
any other woman before, but his last encounter with her disquieted him. He had tried to convince her one last time to run away with him, but she had vehemently refused. Frustrated by her constant refusal, he had stepped forward to embrace and kiss her, but her reaction had shocked him. She had not angrily slapped him or shoved him away from her like he had thought she would, but she had backed away from him with wide, frightened eyes as if she thought he was going to maim and violate her. Before he could ask her what was wrong, her husband had arrived, wrapped her protectively in his arm, and ushered her away.

Katara’s expression and reaction to his approach had not only confused him, but it had pained him as well. Did she abhor his touch that badly? With a sigh, Jet ran his hand through his messy, dark hair. Silently, he stood up from the rumpled bed with the naked woman still on it and began picking up his discarded clothes.

“What are you doing?” Mai asked with a frown as she sat up, not bothering to cover herself up as she watched him get dressed. They were in her room, so they did not need to stop their tryst for fear of getting caught.

“I need to meet up with my friends,” he responded smoothly.

“You haven’t answered my question, Jet,” she said coldly.

Jet was silent a moment as he pulled on his trousers and tied them before he turned to look at her.

“I don’t have any ideas,” he began before he reluctantly added with a sigh, “because I don’t want to separate them anymore.”

“What?” Mai exclaimed in disbelief before she narrowed her dark eyes, “Why?”

“I’ve come to realize that Katara will never want to be with me,” Jet responded as he finished dressing before he added bitterly, “And I can see that she’s happy with her husband, though I can’t understand how she can stand him.”

“You promised to help me separate them,” she hissed at him.

“You shouldn’t trust everybody’s word, dearie,” he told her with a mocking grin as he turned to look at her. His eyes raked her naked form before he again looked into her angry eyes.
“You should give up on Zuko,” he advised as he scratched his stubbly chin, “Maybe find yourself a man who can care for you.”

“Oh, and are you such a man?” she asked sardonically.

“Me? Hell no,” Jet replied with an amused chuckle as he strapped his hook swords to his back.

His tone more serious, he added, “If I can’t have Katara, then I don’t want another woman. And since I can’t have her, I won’t sacrifice my freedom and bachelorhood for anyone else. I love the pleasures women can bring too much to tie myself to someone that’s not Katara.”

“My, such devotion,” Mai replied derisively.

Jet shrugged as he stared at her.

“You know the bastard’s not gonna run into your arms when he has a woman like Katara,” he told her frankly.

“Shut up!” she shrieked as she balled her hand into a fist. “I will take Zuko back!”

“You’re only wasting your time, Mai,” Jet drawled with a sigh, “It’s obvious the firebender’s madly in love with Katara, as she is with him. They’re not gonna throw each other away for somethin’ less.”

Even though he knew it was true, his heart hurt at the thought. He had spent all these years thinking of Katara, dreaming about her when he had been bedridden with pain after the fiasco in Ba Sing Se years ago, fantasizing about having her body, kindness, and love all to himself. It had angered him to know that she had married that damn scarred firebender and it killed him to think that the arrogant bastard was able to make love to her. But he had been determined to seduce her and take her away from Zuko nonetheless. However, he was done lying to himself, thinking he had a chance with her. It was time he let her go.

“Shut up!” Mai screamed again as she threw a pillow at him, which he easily evaded. “Zuko will be mine! And nothing, not even that stupid waterbending bitch, will stop me!”
Jet narrowed his eyes for her threat and insult to Katara and he growled. He was inwardly surprised that the usually calm and passive noblewoman was anything but at the moment.

“The Fire Lord will end you if you try to hurt Katara,” he warned before he added darkly, “And he won’t be the only one you’ll have to deal with.”

“Get out, you traitor!” she yelled as she again threw another pillow at him. “Get out!”

“You really should stop this obsession you have with the bastard,” Jet tried one more time to make her see reason. “Can’t you see he doesn’t care for you?”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Mai growled. “He will be mine!”

Jet shook his head at her stubbornness before he shrugged.

“Don’t say I didn’t try to warn ya, darling,” he drawled as he strode to her window and opened it. Just as he climbed onto the windowsill, he turned his head to regard her with a smirk.

“Well, our little trysts were fun while it lasted. Thanks, Lady Mai,” he said rakishly. He gave her a casual salute before he dropped down the window and disappeared.

Mai stared angrily at the window before she closed her eyes to compose herself. The egotistical rogue really knew how to get a rise out of her, whether in bed or in conversations. Damn him.

Once she regained her usual composure, Mai rose from the bed and walked toward the window. Without looking out, she closed it and drew the curtains together. She turned around and glanced back at the untidy bed where she had found her pleasure just a moment ago. With a shrug, she turned away and headed to her bathroom to bathe.

“I don’t care what Jet says,” she spoke to herself as she flicked her long, dark hair over her shoulder. “I don’t care what I have to do. Zuko will be mine.”
End of Part Seven
Amended Understandings

Before they knew it, one year had flown by since their wedding. Both the Fire Lord and his Fire Lady had grand birthday celebrations where all of Katara’s family and their friends had visited. Katara and Zuko had enjoyed an intimate dinner for their one year anniversary and reminisced about the pleasant times they had enjoyed together. Zuko had commissioned one of the best painters of the Fire Nation to create a portrait of the royal couple that now hung above the fireplace in their room and another of Katara standing under their cherry blossom tree which Zuko had placed in his study to admire.

After a long debate with himself, Iroh had decided to sell his shop in Ba Sing Se so he could permanently move back with his family, although he did open a new Jasmine Dragon in the Fire Nation capital. It became popular quickly and people from the Earth Kingdom even came all the way to visit because they missed his tea. They tried to convince him to come back to the Earth Kingdom, but he politely refused.

Despite her son’s protests, Ursa had visited Azula a few times, but she was welcomed with hostility from her daughter every time. After every failed attempt to get close to her daughter, Ursa would shut herself in her room for a few days and only came out when Katara or Jee finally persuaded her. Zuko tried to gently convince her to give up since he hated seeing his mother sad and in pain, but Ursa always retorted that she had hope that her daughter would one day forgive her and get better. Zuko did not have the heart to disabuse her hopes.

After a long and frustrating time, Katara was finally able to convince the Court Council members to allow her to fully participate in some of their meetings with the Fire Lord. She had proven how adept she was at giving suggestions and some reluctantly admired her skills. However, a few of the older advisors, such as Wei, always argued against any of her ideas. But she comforted herself with the knowledge that Zuko always agreed with her when he knew she was right. Unlike most of his advisors who only cared for power and prestige, Katara was compassionate and willing to make compromises, which made Zuko’s treaties with other nations run more smoothly. Zuko could not be more proud for having such a wife.

With much practice, Katara was now skillful in hand-to-hand combat and archery, both with the actual bow and arrow and with her waterbending, though it would take a few more years before she was truly proficient. She was also getting better at handling Zuko’s white fire and the sparring sessions always brought a sense of adrenaline and excitement to her at going against such high level firebending. Even though Zuko was still concerned he could accidentally hurt her, he looked forward to their sparring matches.

Although it still made her a bit apprehensive, Katara had mastered bloodbending—thanks to Zuko volunteering to be her test subject. Though she knew he enjoyed it when she used her bloodbending to manipulate him in the bedroom. She would use her bloodbending to hold him still while she took
pleasure from his body or keep his hips at a certain angle when he stroked a particular, pleasurable spot. The thought always brought a blush and an amused smile to her face. Thanks to her training she no longer had to use a full moon to bloodbend.

It was a year which had brought some worries and problems, but also much happiness for the royal couple. Their love was still strong and passionate, but sometimes they needed their space to enjoy time to themselves. Zuko would go to his study or to the practice arena and Katara would spend her time in the Fire Lady chamber, the grand library, or visiting some of the noblewomen that she was able to tolerate. Even if they sometimes sought a respite from their constant need of one another, they always came back to each other in their room when night came.

And like any normal couple they argued, especially considering their stubborn and hot tempers. After an argument, Katara would angrily retreat to the Fire Lady bedchamber and Zuko just as angrily would shut himself in their room or his study. They would stay like that for a few hours until one of them surrendered and sought the other to apologize. And of course, he or she would immediately be forgiven, making up with fierce and passionate lovemaking, but never lacking in love. They even joked to themselves that they liked arguing because it led to hot make up sex.

However, there still had not been one sign of Jianguo and the rebels’ whereabouts which placed a damper on their complete happiness. But Zuko did not give up in finding them and ending Jianguo’s life. He had even visited his father once again to see if he could give him any clues, but Ozai would not answer his questions and only taunted him. He did, however, ask how Ursa was doing to which Zuko coolly replied that she was happier than ever and left as he watched Ozai’s pained frown.

Sitting on the throne behind the wall of fire in the meeting room, Zuko watched impassively as one of the governors from one of the villages situated miles away from the capital entered and bowed before him before kneeling on the cushion as he sought an audience with the Fire Lord.

“You said you have something important to bring to my attention,” Zuko spoke unemotionally as he regarded the man.

The governor was rather short and stocky with a protruding belly, his graying hair falling in frizzy strands around his shoulders, though his slightly aged face seemed open and unassuming.

“Yes, my lord,” the governor replied as he inclined his head in reverence before he looked up with a worried frown, “First, I must apologize for bringing such distressing news to you this late, but you see, Your Highness, I—”

“What news?” Zuko interrupted, ignoring the lengthy and flowering speech he assumed the man was
The governor paused with his mouth opened at the command as if he did not know how to proceed now that his rehearsed speech was cut short. Composing himself, he cleared his throat as his frown deepened.

“The peasants in the village I have the privilege of looking after are rebelling, my lord,” the man finally said when the Fire Lord raised an impatient eyebrow.

“Rebelling? How so?” Zuko asked with a frown.

“Not only are they refusing to pay their taxes, but they are refusing to work and they have attacked my home!” the governor explained indignantly. “I’m afraid their actions might cause the same thing to happen here in the capital. I ask that you send soldiers immediately to stop their foolishness.”

The advisors sitting in their respective places immediately began to speculate and murmur amongst themselves. Zuko frowned deeply at the news since everything had been peaceful in the Fire Nation since he married Katara, although he was not surprised that a problem had eventually sprang up. But still, what was the reason behind the villagers’ revolt? Life in the Fire Nation was better than it had been years before.

“Why are they rebelling?” Zuko asked the governor calculatingly.

“Pardon me, my lord, but how should I know what the dirty peasants are thinking?” the governor answered with contempt.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the man’s discriminatory words. They reminded him of how he used to refer to Katara as the “water peasant girl” when she was much more than that.

Sensing his disapproval, the governor lower his head and fidgeted nervously. The advisors also shifted in their spots as they waited to see what their lord decided to do.

“I will look into this situation immediately,” Zuko finally spoke up in his usual passive tone.
“Oh, thank you, Your Majesty,” the man exclaimed as he bowed once again. After a few more exaggerated praises, the governor was escorted out of the room.

As soon as the door was closed after him, the advisors began to demand Zuko immediately send soldiers to stop the revolts. Zuko tuned out what his advisors were saying as he frowned, deep in thought. Did Jianguo have anything to do with this? Though, it would be hard for Jianguo not to be spotted since there were wanted posters of him everywhere. However, there was something in the governor’s words, or perhaps his attitude, that made Zuko distrust him. He would have to investigate before he decided to take action or not.

Resting in one of the sitting rooms of the palace, Katara and her mother-in-law discussed a new project Katara had proposed a few days ago regarding a more profitable trade between the Fire Nation and the Water Tribes. After they had all the details ready, Katara would present it to Zuko and the Council members. Jee was sitting silently next to the older noblewoman as he gave them helpful tips.

Katara was once again distracted from what Ursa was saying as the sound of baby giggles reached her ears. The waterbender glanced to where Jiao was sitting, tickling her five-month-old son, Ichiro. Katara could not help staring enviously at Jiao and her child since she still had not gotten pregnant yet.

When would it be her turn?

Zuko had not mentioned anything about it, but she knew he was worried, too. Katara could not stop herself from sometimes feeling sad and depressed at the thought that it was her fault she was causing Zuko problems with his advisors. She was faithfully taking the blend Yin-Min gave her, but she was still not with child. However, she comforted herself with the fact that their marriage was still new and there were many more years to come.

The waterbender was distracted from her thoughts when she caught Jee looking wistfully at the dark-haired princess as Ursa gracefully took a sip from her cup of tea. Katara mentally shook her head in exasperation. She had tried once more to convince Jee to confess his feelings, but he stubbornly refused. She had even asked Zuko again what he thought about his mother finding a new love and he had reiterated that he disliked the idea, which was why she did not pressure Jee that much.

Maybe she had been going about it the wrong way and was talking to the wrong people. Men. They were so pigheaded. She would have to give hints to Ursa instead and see what the woman thought.

For the third time, Katara was interrupted from her thoughts when Zuko appeared in the doorway.
Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him and a large smile appeared on her face when his gaze immediately landed on her. His dark, straight hair now reached down a little below his shoulder blades, his gold fire crown nestled regally on his head, and she could not stop herself from admiring the striking masculine image he made.

“Zuko,” she called out happily.

She watched as he gave her a small smile as he entered the room and approached them, but she frowned when she noticed his distracted expression.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked when he sat down next to her after he greeted his mother and Jee.

Zuko glanced at his wife, not at all surprised that she was able to detect his mood despite the cool expression he wore.

“One of the villages’ governors asked for an audience today,” Zuko began, “Apparently, the villagers are rebelling.”

“What?” Jee exclaimed gruffly just as Ursa gasped.

“Why?” Katara asked with a worried frown.

“I don’t know,” Zuko replied with a shake of his head, “The governor said that he didn’t know either and insisted I send soldiers to stop them.”

“But there has to be a reason why they’re revolting,” Katara said as her face took on a pensive expression. Then her eyes widened and she hesitantly asked, “Do you think it’s…Jianguo?”

A dark look appeared on Zuko’s face at the mention of the rebel’s name and the trepidation he could detect in Katara’s voice. Composing himself, he reached down to place his hand over her clenched fist that lay on her lap and squeezed comfortingy.

“I don’t know, but I will investigate,” he told her.
And if it is Jianguo, I will kill him, he growled mentally.

Giving her hand one last squeeze, Zuko released her and stood up. He glanced down to see his wife look up at him questioningly.

“There are some things I have to see to. I will see you later,” he told her before he shifted his attention to his admiral. “Jee, please follow me.”

“Yes, my lord,” the older firebender said as he stood up as well.

Frowning, the women watched them leave the room before they looked at each other. With a sigh, Ursa insisted they continue with what they’ve been doing and Katara reluctantly agreed even though her thoughts were on the news Zuko had brought.

Once they had the last details finished, Katara and Ursa relaxed and silently sipped their tea while Jiao quietly played with her son. Placing her teacup down, Katara regarded her serene mother-in-law with curious eyes and mused that this was the best opportunity to talk to her.

“I’ve been curious about something,” Katara began slowly as she pretended to choose a pastry from the plate on the table, “Have you ever thought of remarrying or finding another companion?”

Ursa frowned slightly at the question before she brought her cup down.

“No,” she replied without hesitation.

The waterbender suppressed a frown at the woman’s quick answer.

Like mother, like son, she mused with a mental sigh.

“Would you change your mind if you found a good man?” Katara asked carefully.
“Probably not,” the noblewoman responded just as assuredly as before.

“But why not?” the blue-eyed Fire Lady asked with a frown. “You’re still young. You don’t have to
live alone.”

A gentle smile appeared on the dark-haired woman’s face as she stared at her frowning daughter-in-
law.

“I’m not alone. I have Zuko, Iroh, and you to love,” she responded before she added with a smile,
“And any future grandchildren you and Zuko give me.”

Katara smiled at the last sentence before her frown reappeared.

“But that is not the same as having that one special person,” Katara insisted.

Ursa was silent a moment as she regarded the waterbender and processed her words before she let
out a small sigh.

“I was sixteen when I was married to Ozai,” Ursa recounted in a soft voice, “One year later I gave
birth to Zuko and I thought I’d never be happier. I was young and foolish, and Ozai was so
handsome and charming, so I could not help but fall in love with him without realizing what kind of
man he really was.”

Katara did not say anything as she listened to her mother-in-law tell her story. She could detect the
pain and sorrow in Ursa’s voice and her heart went out to this kind woman who had suffered so
much at the hands of a cruel man. She watched as Ursa took a deep breath before she let out a
quivering sigh.

“I…I don’t want to be hurt in such a way by a man ever again,” Ursa confessed quietly. “I don’t
want my heart to be broken a second time.”

“I understand what you must feel,” Katara told her gently before she added, “But you can’t
constantly live in fear of getting hurt because it’ll only stop you from your happiness. Trust me, I
know.”
A small frown marred Ursa’s delicate features as she thought over the waterbender’s words.

“You do make a good point, dear,” she said before she shook her head, “But I don’t think I will ever be able to love again.”

“You won’t if you refuse to believe you could,” Katara told her softly.

Ursa was once again silent as she contemplated her words and Katara’s hope rose when she saw that her mother-in-law was really thinking about the subject.

“Even if I was looking for a new relationship, no man has approached me with such intentions,” Ursa finally spoke up with a shake of her head.

“That’s because you haven’t been looking,” Katara replied with a tiny, mysterious smile, “If you did, you would’ve noticed you are wanted.”

Ursa’s golden eyes widened at such a possibility.

“And do you know by whom?” she asked curiously.

“No,” Katara lied.

She had promised not to reveal Jee’s feelings, but that did not mean she could not give hints to Ursa.

“But I’m sure there is someone,” she added, “After all, you are still a young, beautiful and wonderful woman. What man would not want you?”

*Even Ozai still does,* Katara added mentally. Zuko had told her Ozai would always ask about Ursa. It was obvious Ozai still cared for her, but that did not justify what he had done to her and their son.

Katara was silent as she let Ursa contemplate her words for a moment.
“If you don’t mind me asking,” the young brunette began carefully, “but would you prefer having a lover instead of a husband? I suppose a lover will be less complicated…”

Even before Katara finished her sentence, Ursa was already shaking her head.

“I will not disrespect my son by taking a lover so brazenly,” the noblewoman said firmly.

Katara suppressed a delighted smile. Jee would be so happy to know that. Now if only she could point Ursa his way without making it too obvious.

“Okay, so would you marry a man with a noble title?” Katara asked carefully. If Ursa said yes, then Jee would not have much of a chance.

“No,” Ursa responded firmly.

Katara could only gape at her quick and steady response.

“Truthfully, I would prefer a man with no noble title,” Ursa explained slowly as she twirled her teacup in her hands, “The noblemen only want to gain power and become family to the Fire Lord. I will be used much the same way Ozai used me.”

“I can see your point,” Katara agreed with a nod of her head.

Bringing her cup to her lips to take a small sip of the delicious tea, Katara brought it back down and cleared her throat softly.

“There are a lot of good men to choose from that don’t come from noble birth,” the waterbender spoke up casually, “Like physicians and scholars. And then those from the military like generals, admirals, guards…”

“Admirals?” Ursa whispered.

Katara paused and suppressed an excited smile. From all the others, Ursa focused on admirals? How
“Yes, admirals,” Katara repeated and then nonchalantly added, “Oh, that reminds me, Jee’s an admiral. He must have lots of women flocking to him.”

Katara watched as a frown appeared on Ursa’s face before the woman shook her head.

“How can he, if he is always guarding me?” she asked.

“That’s true,” Katara pretended to muse. “Zuko has not found someone else to replace him, so Jee hasn’t had time to look for a woman to marry. Or maybe he hasn’t gotten married because he has a lover?”

“Admiral Jee would never dare!” Ursa exclaimed.

Both women’s eyes widened at her outburst before Ursa cleared her throat and more calmly took another sip of her tea.

“Why not?” Katara replied as she eyed her mother-in-law before she gave a casual shrug, “Jee’s a grown man. He’s probably lonely and needs a companion. If he doesn’t have a lover or an intended at the moment maybe he will one of these days.”

Ursa frowned at her daughter-in-law’s words before she felt herself flush at her reaction. What did it matter to her what Admiral Jee did or whose companionship he sought? She was brought out of her thoughts when Katara continued speaking.

“I think Jee will make a fine husband for any woman, don’t you think?” the waterbender said smoothly as she nibbled on a cookie, “Always protective and loyal. Not to mention he is a good-looking man.”

Katara subtly glanced up and saw Ursa looking down at her tea with a pensive expression. Katara suppressed a grin. She was rather good at this. Hopefully she was able to push Ursa’s attention in Jee’s direction. If not his, then someone else’s. Though she preferred Ursa give Jee a chance, Katara would support her if Ursa chose someone else as long as she was happy and not lonely anymore. Despite her claims, Katara could tell her mother-in-law was very lonely in the palace. After all, her grown son was married and that meant he spent most of his time with his wife.
Drinking the last of her tea, Katara stood up and smiled at Ursa.

“I’m going to visit Yin-Min for a while,” she said, “I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Uh, yes, dear,” Ursa replied distractedly as she again returned her attention to her cooling tea.

Smiling, Katara walked toward the exit and motioned for Jiao to follow her so Ursa could stay behind and mull over her words without any interruptions. As the two of them rounded the end of the corridor, Jiao let out a small giggle.

“I think you did an excellent job, my lady,” she congratulated as she rocked her gurgling son in her arms.

Katara laughed quietly.

“I can now understand why some people enjoy being matchmakers,” she said. She grinned when the thought reminded her of Iroh and how he had tried so hard to bring her and Zuko together. Then more seriously, she softly added, “I just want to see two people I care about happy.”

“Well, even if Lady Ursa doesn’t chose Admiral Jee, at least she’s giving the thought of finding love a second chance,” Jiao said kindly.

“That’s true,” Katara replied with a nod before she smiled as she tickled Ichiro under his chubby chin.

Ichiro giggled as he tried to grab her finger and the two women laughed. They stopped when they noticed Kuo making his way toward them.

“My lady,” the guard greeted as he bowed his head to Katara before he looked up to smile fondly at his wife and son. “I’ve come to take my family out to the city. Fire Lord Zuko has dismissed me for the day.”
“That’s nice,” Katara replied as she smiled at them, “Well, have fun.”

“Thank you, my lady,” they replied as they bowed their heads at her.

Katara continued down the corridor as Kuo greeted his family. Glancing over her shoulder, Katara watched as Kuo leaned down to swiftly kiss Jiao’s lips before he took his giggling son into his arms. The waterbender turned back around and continued walking as she again felt that pang of jealousy in her chest. She shook her head and shoved the feeling away.

Wanting to distract herself, she thought back to what Jiao had said about Ursa giving someone else a chance. Katara frowned slightly. If Ursa did end up choosing someone else, that would surely break Jee’s heart. She hoped she was able to steer Ursa’s thoughts toward Jee. He loved Ursa and would protect her with his life. However, if the two of them did end up reciprocating their feelings, Katara would have to employ all her feminine wiles to convince Zuko to allow Jee to court his mother.

She cringed. She just hoped Zuko did not get too mad.

A dark figure darted into the quiet village and hid behind a pile of wood. Carefully scanning his surroundings in the dark of night, the individual waited silently for a few seconds before jumping noiselessly onto the roof of a house. The light from the crescent moon glinted off the hilts of two swords strapped to his back and shone on his blue and white mask as he stealthily jumped from rooftop to rooftop in search of any disturbances. As the hours passed, however, nothing happened in the small village. The only sounds heard were the rustling of leaves as the wind caressed the trees and the occasional bark of a wolf-dog.

Landing on the roof of the governor’s home without being caught by the sleepy guards, Zuko frowned behind his Blue Spirit mask. For the past several nights, he had come to the village to investigate the revolt the governor complained about, but nothing had occurred since then. He could see the damage to one part of the governor’s house and that the crops were not doing as well as they should.

A large river ran alongside the village where the people gathered fish, but Zuko also knew they had stopped fishing. Such evidence showed that the governor had not been lying. Yet, there had to be a reason why the villagers refused to work and had attacked the governor’s home. Try as he might, Zuko had not been able to find much information from the conversations he had listened to behind the safety of the shadows. He did not want to make his presence known if indeed this was Jianguo’s doing. He did not want to alert the rebel and have him escape.

Frown deepening, Zuko continued to silently roam the streets for a few more hours then decided to
return to the palace before Katara missed his presence if she woke up. Maybe he could rouse her and coax her into a quick round of lovemaking before they went back to sleep. Suppressing a grin at the thought, Zuko left the village and carefully entered the darkness of the forest, walking to the place he had left his ostrich-horse.

He had just spotted the animal grazing calmly beneath a tree when an arrow shot passed his head and struck a tree. Swiftly, Zuko pulled his swords from their sheaths and spun around in the direction the arrow had come from, his stance alert and defensive.

His eyes widened behind his mask and his stance almost faltered at the unexpected person that stood before him.

It was a woman. He could not miss the feminine curves hidden beneath the long, burgundy gown she was wearing. The gown was gathered at the center of her chest with some kind of brooch that resembled a seashell and silky cords, but it left her shoulders and upper arms bare under the moonlight. A red cloth covered her chest where the gown opened. His sharp eyes noticed painted lines on her arms and shoulders before his eyes darted to her face. He frowned since her features were hidden beneath a wide conical hat with a long, transparent white veil. A quiver of arrows was tied to her left hip. He took in her entire appearance in one second since his attention was caught mostly on the arrow she had pointed at him.

Who was she?

They both stood silent and tense, neither making a move as they observed each other. A cat-owl hooted somewhere in the forest and another night bird joined its song. A strong wind swept by and it plastered the gown against the woman’s body, clinging caressingly against her curves in a most enticing way.

Zuko’s eyes widened in disbelief when a shard of desire raced down his spine at the sight. How could that be? Katara was the only one who was able to quickly elicit such a response from him, and here this strange woman had done the same. For some reason, it made him angry.

With a silent growl, he sprang forward and brought the hilt of his sword down, but the woman easily jumped out of the way and spun to face him again, still pointing her arrow at him. Zuko paused as he eyed her warily. Why did she not shoot him?

He again lunged at her, but just like before, she quickly evaded him and resumed her previous stance. Confused and wary, Zuko slowly replaced his dual broadswords in their sheaths and was again surprised that she did not immediately shoot him now that he was left exposed. What was her
game? What did she want? He cursed her hat and veil that continued to hide her features from him.

Slowly, he began to circle around her, but she countered his move and gilded in a circle as she continued pointing her arrow at him. Impatient, he ran toward her again. Already expecting her move to avoid him, Zuko swiftly swerved around her. Her bow fell to the ground when he pinned her arms down with one hand, while he grabbed her around her waist with his other arm. When she began to struggle, he pulled her roughly back against his chest and ignored the pain of her quiver of arrows digging into his thigh.

His eyes widened once again when the feeling of her soft body made heat flare down to his groin and he growled angrily. He was about to shove her away from him when he noticed two things simultaneously. She had stopped struggling and was not fighting him, but what really caught his attention was that the curve of her waist felt familiar. He inhaled sharply in confusion before freezing when he caught a whiff of her scent, sweet gardenia hidden beneath a spring rain.

“Katara?” he whispered incredulously.

“Hello, Zuko,” she said coolly.

He removed his arms from around her and took a step back. He watched as she turned around to face him, her face tilted up to look at him. His eyes widened as familiar blue eyes locked onto his. He noticed that she had paint on her face, too. There were two red, curving lines on both her cheeks. Her eyelids were also painted and on her chin ran another thick line of the red paint. On her forehead rested a yellow crescent moon. Her hair was hidden beneath the hood of her strange gown.

He scowled. He was angry that she had left the palace and was now roaming around the forest. Didn’t she know it was dangerous?!

“What are you doing here, Katara?” he growled, then a bit mockingly, he added, “Or should I say, the Painted Lady?”

Katara narrowed her eyes at his tone and crossed her arms beneath her breasts in defiance as she glared at the grinning demon mask looming before her.

“Did you really believe I’m so stupid as to not notice you sneak away at night and come back to our room to place your things away, Zuko? Or should I say, Blue Spirit?” she asked just as mockingly.
Zuko narrowed his own eyes at her, though he knew she couldn’t see him, before he let out a resigned sigh. Pulling his mask over his head, he frowned at her.

“Sometimes I wish you weren’t so observant,” he muttered.

Katara let a smirk appear on her lips at his disgruntled tone before she placed her hands on her hips and frowned.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were out running around as the Blue Spirit?” she asked heatedly.

“I didn’t want to put you in any danger,” he replied unrepentantly.

Katara glared at him and huffed.

“Really, Zuko, do you purposely like to make me angry?” she hissed. “You know I hate it when you coddle me and try to keep me behind locked doors.”

Zuko scowled at her.

“And do you think I like it when you put yourself in danger just to defy me?” he growled. “Would you prefer I didn’t care about your safety and let any harm befall you?”

“Oh, come on!” Katara exclaimed exasperatedly as she threw her hands in the air. “You make it sound like I’m some dimwitted fool that rushes blindly into danger!”

“You know that’s not what I mean!” Zuko argued irritably.

“Then what’s the point of me learning to protect myself if you’re just going to do it for me?!” Katara retorted back just as angrily.

Zuko again opened his mouth to retort, but Katara did not allow him to say anything as she interrupted him with another angry hiss.
“If you didn’t want me to go with you, you should’ve at least told me what you were doing, instead of hiding things from me!” she growled loudly.

“I don’t have to tell you everything!” Zuko rumbled as he loomed over her.

Katara did not let him intimate her as she stepped closer to him to jab a finger into his chest.

“I’m not saying you have to tell me everything!” she shouted exasperatedly, “Just things that concerns me, concerns us!” She paused before she firmly added, “Basically anything important.”

“I don’t see why you’re so angry since me investigating the village doesn’t concern us,” he retorted as he stubbornly crossed his arms over his chest.

“Are you serious?!” the waterbender shouted incredulously and furiously. “You lied to me, Zuko! When I asked you this morning if there was something going on that you’d like to talk to me about, you lied to me and said no and that there wasn’t anything for me to worry about!

“You didn’t let me know what you were up to, you allowed me to wake up alone in the middle of the night for the past several nights while you were off investigating! You didn’t bother to ask me if I’d like to help you! I won’t let you treat me like a fool!”

Zuko clenched his jaw since everything she said made sense, but he stubbornly refused to admit that what he did was wrong. He did everything to protect her, how could that be wrong?

Katara narrowed her eyes when Zuko didn’t say anything and she crossed her own arms over her chest.

“It makes me wonder what else you hide from me,” she added bitingly.

The firebender narrowed his eyes and his nostrils flared.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he growled.
“You tell me,” she hissed.

“I don’t appreciate that you’re calling into question my honor,” he rumbled.

“Then don’t make me question it by lying to me,” she retorted.

Zuko let out a frustrated sound as he ran a hand over his pulled-back hair.

“Katara—”

“Don’t you ‘Katara’ me!” the waterbender snapped. “If you wanted a weak and fragile wife to protect and lie to make you feel more like a man, then you should’ve married a damn noblewoman!” she shouted.

Zuko stiffened at her accusation and Katara’s eyes widened at her own words.

“So you think the reason I want to keep you safe is to prove to myself that I’m a man,” he stated in a stiff tone. “Do you think I need to prove my manliness?”

“No,” Katara replied with a shake of her head before she sighed. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

She paused before she frowned again.

“But you have to see why I get angry that you always rush to my defense and that you keep things hidden from me. It makes me feel useless.” She paused before she added more sadly, “It makes me feel like you don’t trust me.”

Zuko’s eyes widened at her words, shocked that she would think he felt that way about her. Everything he did was for her safety and happiness. He would never purposefully hurt her. He had no idea that his actions would cause her to mistrust him.
“I don’t mean to make you feel useless or that you need my constant protection,” he replied quietly, “Nor was I keeping things secret to hurt you or because I didn’t trust you. You’re one of the few people I trust with my life.”

“I know, but you can’t keep me hidden from everything, Zuko,” Katara told him, her tone softening a little. “Don’t treat me like an inadequate wife that should be deceived in order to be kept safe.”

A deep frown marred Zuko’s brow at his wife’s accusations as his mind quickly evaluated everything she said and everything he had done and thought about their relationship.

“Do you know how I felt to wake up in the middle of the night to find you gone?” Katara continued in the same sad tone that caused an ache to form in the firebender’s chest. “I didn’t know where you were. When you would be back…If you would be back. How would it make you feel if you woke up and I was just missing?”

Zuko felt his heart clench at her words as it finally hit home why his highhandedness would upset her so much. He had not thought of his actions as dishonest, but he had to admit that she had a point. He had kept his actions secret from her as if she had no input whatsoever, as if she were only a possession to keep protected and not his partner in life who could make her own decisions. He was so focused on his concerns that he never thought that she would be worried because he was gone. He just never considered things from her point of view before.

“I know,” Zuko acknowledged as his defensive stance faltered before he sincerely added, “I’m sorry.”

He paused as he looked intensely into her eyes. Katara’s own aggressive stance wavered at the pleading and vulnerable expression on his face.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt,” he added quietly. “I don’t know what I’d do if…I were to lose you…You mean everything to me.”

Katara’s indignant mood quickly vanished at his quiet confession and she sighed. How could she begrudge him his feelings when she felt the same way about him? At least his actions were motivated by his love and his care for her. He had a reason for his actions and not because he wanted her out of his way like most noblemen did with their wives. Besides, she understood that what Jianguo tried to do to her had affected Zuko deeply and he did not wish for her to be harmed ever again.
“I know,” she relented softly.

She approached him silently and reached out a hand to cup his scarred cheek. Zuko let out a small sigh and leaned into her touch.

“I understand you want to keep me safe, Zuko, and I’m very grateful you care so much for me,” Katara began, “But you also have to see that I can take care of myself, that I’m not some weak person that needs others to look after her.”

Zuko frowned at her words and opened his mouth to refute, but she pressed her fingers against his lips and shook her head.

“I know that’s not what you’re trying to imply, but after what Jianguo tried to do in Omashu I can’t help but feel that way,” she continued as she pulled her hand away.

Zuko’s eyes blazed in anger at that horrible memory before he ordered himself to calm down so he could continue to listen to his wife. He watched as her blue eyes clouded with concern.

“Besides, do you know how it makes me feel to be the one left behind in the safety of the palace while you go into a dangerous situation?” she told him seriously yet anxiously. “Do you think I like it that you put yourself in harm’s way to keep me safe?”

The firebender frowned as he thought over her words. She was right. It was not fair that he should be the only one to believe himself capable of being a protector. Nor was it fair to behave as if Katara lacked the skills to do so herself. Of course, that is not what he intended to portray but he could understand why she would feel that way.

“I understand,” he replied quietly, sincerely. “I’m sorry for not seeing it sooner.”

Katara sighed silently before she gave him a small smile. She stepped closer to him and wound her arms around him. Zuko wrapped his own arms around her and held her tightly to him even though her straw hat got in his way.

“I want us to be equals, to be partners,” Katara said firmly yet softly, “and that means that you have to share important things with me, like what you’re doing tonight. I want to help you.”
“I know and I promise that starting tonight I will not keep such things secret from you,” Zuko vowed just as firmly.

“Thank you, Zuko,” the waterbender sighed as she tightened her hold of him.

They were silent for a long moment as each dwelled in their own thoughts. When they heard a cat-owl hoot again, they pulled apart to smile at each other in understanding. It might not be easy, but they both vowed silently that they would continue to make things work.

Zuko allowed his gaze to examine her attire once again and this time he was not disturbed when he again felt desire swell within him. It seemed his body had subconsciously known it was Katara even if his mind had not.

“You look like a beautiful spirit,” he remarked with a lusty grin.

Katara’s earlier irritation melted at his words, knowing that they were now on the same page. She smiled as she playful twirled before him so he could see her from all angles, the gown and veil floating gently around her form. Zuko’s eyes hungrily gazed at her bare shoulders and arms.

“Thank you,” Katara purred as she looked up at him with a coy smile, “I made the costume with cloth I bribed from the palace seamstress. And the paint, hat, and seashell I bought in one of my outings with Ursa and Uncle Iroh.”

“Very clever,” Zuko remarked.

“I figured that if you can run around as the Blue Spirit, then I can as the Painted Lady,” she replied.

Zuko smiled, but before he could reply she asked him why he was stalking the village and the forest. Zuko explained what he had been doing the past few nights and his lack of any information. Katara frowned as she glanced up into the night sky and spotted the moon.

“It’s late, maybe we should return to the palace,” she said.
She bent down to pick up her discarded bow and arrow. She placed the arrow back into the quiver at her hip. The bow she kept in her hand since the veil of her hat got in its way. The Painted Lady did not use such weapons, but Katara knew Zuko would have immediately recognized her if she had used her waterbending and she had wanted to deceive him for not telling her about his nightly exploits.

“We can come back tomorrow night and investigate some more,” she added.

“We?” Zuko asked with a frown.

“I’m coming with you whether you like it or not,” she told him firmly, “It’s your choice if we come together or I follow after you.”

Zuko opened his mouth to automatically refuse before he stopped as he reminded himself he had promised to include her in his plans, regardless of whether he thought he needed her aide. Part of him felt irritated at her persistence in putting herself in danger, yet another part of him felt pleased that she would always want to help him. Of course, there were some situations that he would have to deal with himself, but in others Katara’s skills would be a great benefit.

“Alright,” he relented.

When she smiled gratefully at him, he could not stop himself from returning her smile.

“Let’s go back home,” he said as he walked back toward his grazing ostrich-horse. He paused before turning back to Katara with a frown. “How did you get here?”

“I took another ostrich-horse and followed you at a distance,” she replied with a grin before she pointed to their left, “I left it tied to a tree a few feet away.”

A discontented frown appeared on Zuko’s face at her first sentence. He had let his guard down if he didn’t even notice he was being followed. That was unacceptable.

“Come, I’ll give you a ride to your ostrich-horse,” he told her.
Katara stepped up to him and Zuko quickly wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her onto the saddle. Pulling his mask down to cover his face again, Zuko mounted behind her and reached around her to grab the reins, deliberately brushing his arms against her breasts. He heard her moan softly just as he expected. Grinning, he rested his hands between her thighs and brushed against her covered sex. She gasped before she leaned closer against his chest, tilting her head back a little to look at him.

“This reminds me of what we did on that ostrich-horse after Uncle Iroh and Jun found us,” she whispered breathlessly.

Zuko groaned at the memory. Katara gasped when Zuko swiftly lifted her and turned her around so that she was straddling his waist. She looked at him with wide, blue eyes.

“It seems a repeat performance is in order,” Zuko breathed huskily as he pulled her closer against his stiff erection, eliciting an excited and aroused moan from his wife.

Needless to say, that repeat performance from a different position was just as exciting if not more so than the previous one.

Two nights later, the Blue Spirit and the Painted Lady, like two wandering specters, once again arrived silently and unseen at the edge of the quiet village. Nothing suspicious had risen during their search and they wondered if perhaps the villagers had no plans of destroying anything again, although they still refused to work. The governor had again asked Zuko to send soldiers to apprehend the villagers for their actions, but Zuko had stalled. Not only did they not know which of the villagers had destroyed the governor’s home, but they also did not know the cause for their revolt. Zuko knew Katara agreed with him that there had to be a good reason why the villagers were rebelling because they had discussed it last night. A reason that they sensed the governor knew, but pretended he didn’t. Zuko had to find out before setting his soldiers on the people.

Beneath the veil of her hat, Katara glanced at her masked husband crouching attentively beside her. Her eyes traveled over his muscled form encased in the tight black suit before settling on the blue and white mask. She smiled since she was reminded of those nights she used to walk with the Blue Spirit in Ba Sing Se. She focused back to their task when Zuko stood up and turned toward her, his mask glinting in the moonlight, as he motioned for her to move forward. With a firm nod, she made her way to the river while Zuko walked the opposite way. They had agreed to search separately with the hopes that one of them could find something.

Zuko was about to enter the dark village when out of the corner of his eye, he noticed balls of light weaving between the trees a distance away to his right. He watched for a moment before he glanced back to see that Katara had already disappeared. He hesitated for a second before he stepped back into the shadow of the trees and circled around in the direction of the lights. He moved silently as he
stuck to the shadows, keeping his sights on the lights and his senses trained for any noise or movement. As he neared, he realized the balls of light were torches and he frowned at what he came across as he took cover behind some bushes. If anyone had known where to look they would have noticed the face of a demon looming behind the foliage.

A group of men were gathered together near a bend of the river as they spoke in low voices. A few were carrying the torches while the others carried a variety of weapons from axes, pitchforks, knives, and hammers. Although the lower half of their faces was covered with black cloth, Zuko immediately identified them as villagers by their simple clothing and their accent.

“Da bastard took me woman!” one of the men growled out angrily, though Zuko was confused at the pain he could detect in his voice.

“Don’t ye worry, we’ll make ‘im pay fer it!” another man said as he laid a supportive hand on the first man’s shaking shoulder.

“Dat’s why we gotta do somet’ing to stop ‘im,” a third man spoke up and everybody immediately turned to him. Zuko surmised he was their leader. “We can’t let those coddled ar’stocrats treat us like shit an’ more!”

“Yah!” the others agreed vehemently.

Zuko frowned as he listened to them. He was fully aware that many of the common people despised the aristocracy for their power and wealth, but he could see that these villagers’ hatred ran deeper than that for some reason. A reason he was going to find out before they did any more damage.

The men began marching determinedly forward. Silence was heavy in the air except for the sound of their muffled footsteps. Their torches flickered wildly as a chilly breeze swept by, casting eerie shadows around them. Suddenly, something dropped down from a tree before them. They jumped and cursed in surprise, drawing their weapons before them. Quiet exclamations rose amongst them when they saw a masked individual blocking their path with swords drawn.

“Who ar’ ya?” the leader called out warily as he raised his sharp axe threateningly.

“Careful, Tai,” one of the men said as he moved one step back, “I think dat’s da Blue Spirit.”
The men again murmured in surprise and wariness as they stared at the silent man before them. Zuko could hear some of them wonder what he was doing and what he wanted. They fell silent when their leader stepped forward.

“I don’t care who ya ar’, but ya bett’r git out of me way if ya know w’ats good fer ya!” Tai growled.

Zuko tensed when the man suddenly launched at him with a raised axe. Zuko easily blocked his weapon and pushed him back. Tai cursed as he regained his balance before he attacked again. Zuko crouched low to evade the axe’s swing before he swept his leg forward and knocked the man onto his back.

Wanting to help their comrade, the other men jumped forward to join the fight. Zuko easily blocked their attacks. He did not want to hurt them since he could see they were no professional fighters, but men who seemed to want justice. A justice for what, he was still did not know.

Zuko had just thrown one of the men back when he felt someone behind him. He had barely turned around to block the axe aimed at his head when an ice arrow imbedded itself on Tai’s shoulder, effectively making him drop his weapon. Tai screamed in pain as he clutched at his bleeding arm and fell to his knees. The men paused in confusion as they stared at the ice arrow before they whipped around in apprehensiveness and warily scanned the area.

“Look!” one of the men exclaimed in horror as he pointed to the river.

The men spun around, their weapons held ready, before their eyes widened in disbelief when a thick fog began to crawl towards them from the riverbed, silently slithering to where they were standing. Fear skittered along their spines and the hair on their napes stood on end at the mysterious sight. They took a few steps back when the unnerving mist curled around their feet and tensed when they saw a silhouette hidden behind the fog move away from the river and head their way.

“W-what is i-it?” one of the youngest stammered as he backed away another step.

A loud gasp resounded around them as a woman in flowing robes stepped out of the fog with a bow made of water held in her hands. Her face was hidden beneath her wide hat and long veil, making them wonder what they would see underneath. They watched as the bow dissolved into ribbons of water that coiled around her arms. Seeing that she was weaponless and driven by fear of the unknown, the men sprang toward her with loud shouts.
Zuko had stood silent and still, and admittedly a bit in awe, as he watched Katara make her appearance, but when he saw the men move to attack her, he lunged forward to intercept them only to jump to the side when three men attacked him. Cursing, he raised his weapons in defense as he glanced back to his wife. He watched as Katara raised her arms, her delicate fingers spread, her gown and veil fluttering almost eerily around her. The men cried out in shock when their bodies were forcefully made to stop.

“W-what s-sorcery i-is tis?” an old man exclaimed fearfully as they all stared wide-eyed at the strange woman.

“Please, stop fighting,” she spoke, her voice soft and calm, “We mean no harm. We just want to help you and your village.”

Ignoring their incredulous words, Katara glided forward and almost smiled when they clamped their mouths shut. She walked silently to where the man she had injured sat cursing in pain as he grasped his bleeding shoulder. When he sensed her approach, his eyes widened in fear and he tried to scoot back on the ground to get away from her.

“What da ya want?” he growled.

Katara did not reply as she crouched gracefully beside him. Zuko immediately rushed to stand behind her in case Tai decided to attack her.

The men watched as the woman reached a hand out toward the ice arrow which melted into a bloody ball of water. She threw the dirty water aside before gathering one of the liquid ribbons on her arm onto her hand, forming a sort of glove. Tai gasped when the water on her hand began to glow before he flinched when she placed it on his bleeding wound. When she pulled her hand away a moment later, Tai looked down and gaped when he realized his wound was mended.

“It’s healed!” he exclaimed incredulously.

As the men murmured in awe and confusion, Katara released her hold of their blood. They breathed a sigh of relief, but stood tense and wary as they eyed the strange individuals with both fear and suspicion.

Katara glanced at her masked husband and smiled. The thought that it was now she who saved Zuko and not the other way around made her giddy with pride. Zuko caught her smile beneath her veil,
immediately understanding the meaning behind it, and smirked.

“I know who ye are!” one of the men exclaimed.

Zuko and Katara stiffened as they turned cautiously to face the wide-eyed man who was staring at Katara. Their minds raced as they tried to come up with a way to diffuse the man’s suspicions.

“Yes da Painted Lady!” the man continued excitedly. “A river spirit! I’ve ‘eard ‘bout ye from a friend who said ye saved his village years ago durin’ da war.”

Speechless, Katara glanced at Zuko who shrugged minutely, subtly telling her to go along with it. Straightening herself out, the disguised Fire Lady placed her hands elegantly before her as she gracefully inclined her head. At her silent affirmation, the men murmured in surprise and curiosity as they bowed their heads in reverence.

“I see this village has gone through some hardships,” Katara spoke up in a gentle tone meant to calm the men, “So why are you causing more trouble?”

The men glanced at each other before they lowered the cloths hiding their faces. Katara and Zuko glanced at Tai when he stepped forward.

“With da Fire Lord raisin’ da taxes so much, many of us ar’ in debt dat we can barely survive,” he growled out angrily.

Zuko stiffened at the accusation. Katara barely had time to stop herself from gaping in disbelief. Zuko did not raise the taxes! In fact, ever since he became Fire Lord, the taxes have been lower since there wasn’t a war he needed to fund.

Oblivious to the disguised royal couple’s thoughts, the men angrily murmured in agreement to Tai’s words.

“Yah, and since we can’t pay off da money, that good fer nothin’ gov’nor began usin’ other methods to get us ta pay off,” the oldest of them continued gruffly.
“What kind of methods?” Katara asked softly.

“By makin’ us his slaves and givin’ ‘im all we work fer,” a young man growled out.

“If da family doesn’t ‘ave anythin’ ta give ‘im, he…” Tai spoke up before he paused as he gritted his teeth in rage, “he takes da young women and forces ‘em ta…service his needs.”

Katara raised a hand to her lips and gasped in horror while Zuko mentally cursed.

“Why have you not gone to the Fire Lord for help?” Katara asked as she frowned beneath the shadows of her wide hat.

“It’s da Fire Lord’s fault we’re sufferin’ like tis!” Tai spat out angrily as he grasped his axe tightly, “‘Cause of da raise in taxes I wasn’t able ta save me two daughters from bein’ violated by dat bastard of a governor!”

“And now he has me wife!” the man Zuko had first heard talking when he came upon the men cried out in pain and rage.

“And me granddaughter!” the oldest man shouted.

Zuko tensed as the men continued to cry out their sorrow and anger. Was it really his fault for not paying closer attention to what his governors were doing behind his back?

Katara listened in both fury and compassion for what these villagers were going through because of the abuse of power of one man and his greed. However, she felt herself stiffen in anger when the men continued to blame Zuko. She did not need to look at her silent husband to know he was starting to blame himself as well. She needed to put a stop to this.

With a flick of her wrist, Katara doused the men with a small wave of water from the river and effectively silenced them as they spluttered and looked at her in shock.

“Fire Lord Zuko is not at fault,” she said, her previous gentle tone taking a hint of steel.
Zuko glanced at her in surprise. He had forgotten he was currently the Blue Spirit as he was about to defend himself. He decided to allow Katara to deal with the men since he knew she would be better at making them see reason. With his luck, he would probably make things worse.

“How da ya know that?” Tai asked with a raised eyebrow.

Katara bit her lip. Did spirits participate in politics? She couldn’t really explain to them the truth without exposing Zuko and her. What could she say to convince them of her certainty in Zuko’s innocence?

“Fire Lord Zuko’s wife is a waterbender and I, being a river spirit, am in a way connected to her,” Katara explained calmly, although inwardly she was struggling to find the words, “I know she would never have married a tyrant.”

The men murmured uncertainly as they glanced at each other before they looked at Tai for guidance.

“Well, if it’s not da Fire Lord’s fault, then why do we ‘ave ta pay such high taxes?” Tai countered gruffly.

“The governor has taken advantage of his position,” Katara continued assuredly as if she could see through the man’s actions and thoughts, “He has lied to you.”

“Da bastard!” Tai shouted in rage.

“Let’s kill ‘im!” the others roared as they raised their improvised weapons and turned to march toward the village.

They paused in surprised when the Blue Spirit suddenly appeared before them to block their path.

“You cannot take matters into your own hands,” Katara spoke up serenely.

They turned at the sound of the woman’s voice and watched as she gracefully glided forward, her
translucent veil and long robe floating gently behind her. They stepped aside to allow her to pass them before she stood next to the silent masked demon spirit.

“Violence will not solve anything,” she continued coaxingly, “You must go to the Fire Lord with this problem so he can deal punishment to the one who deserves it.”

The men looked at each other skeptically.

“I assure you the Fire Lord and his Fire Lady only want what is best for their people,” Katara reassured them softly, “But how can they help you if you do not ask?”

The men discussed the possibility for a few minutes, and although some of them were still skeptical that the Fire Lord would care about their problems, they agreed to ask for an audience with him to bring up the issue of the governor’s atrocities.

“You should return to your homes,” Katara told them gently, “Everything will resolve itself soon. Time will heal the wounds.”

“Thank you,” Tai spoke up after a moment, his gruff tone from before now sounding tired.

He bowed and the rest of the men did the same. With a nod, Katara made her way toward the river with Zuko walking silently at her side. Just as the fog swallowed their forms out of sight, they paused at the words that reached their ears.

“Hey, do ya think da Blue Spirit is really a spirit, too?” the youngest of them asked curiously. “He appears ever’where and hasn’t been caught.”

“‘Course he is!” another one said, “He was with da Painted Lady, wasn’t he?”

“Do ya think da Painted Lady has also chosen ta protect our village?” the man who had identified the Painted Lady asked.

“Maybe they’re lovers!” the youngest one spoke up again in a suggestive tone.
Zuko glanced at his wife and saw her grin at him. He quietly chuckled in amusement. People would always come up with romanticized stories to explain things they did not understand. Letting the fog Katara created cover them, they walked silently along the river’s edge. Once they knew they were a distance away from the village, they headed west to the place where they had tied their ostrich-horses.

“I can’t believe that governor had the audacity to go to you for help when he’s the one who’s causing so much pain,” Katara spoke up angrily before she let out a sympathetic sigh, “Those poor women.”

“Don’t worry, he will get his just reward for everything he has done,” Zuko assured her gravely.

“Do you think the villagers will come to ask for our help?” she asked with a frown.

“They will,” Zuko replied assuredly before he turned to look at her, “I’m sure they wouldn’t want to anger the Painted Lady, their new protector.”

Katara looked up to see the demonic mask staring at her. She could just hear the smirk in Zuko’s voice.

“Well, I didn’t expect them to recognize me and assume I’m a real spirit, that’s for sure,” she replied with a small grin.

“I couldn’t find a more perfect wife anywhere,” Zuko stated, his tone full of smugness.

“I’m glad you know it,” Katara responded with a pleased grin.

Zuko chuckled again before he suddenly reached for her and pulled her tightly against him, eliciting a surprised gasp from her. Wrapping one arm tightly around her waist, he gently grasped her chin with his gloved hand and lifted her head toward him.

Heart pounding in her chest, Katara stared wide-eyed at the fanged Blue Spirit mask, wondering what kind of expression lay beneath. She could feel the contours of her firebender’s muscled chest pressed tightly to her suddenly aching breasts as well as the warmth of his body wrapping around
hers. She shivered pleasantly.

“You know, watching you in such a way turned me on so badly,” he whispered huskily as he pressed her closer to him.

A small moan escaped Katara at his words as well as the feeling of his hardening erection pressing against her stomach. Zuko watched as her cheeks flooded with color as she looked up at him with darkening, blue eyes. A breeze swept by and lifted her white veil around them. Zuko let go of her chin so he could move the flimsy cloth aside only to have her slip away from his grasp at his distraction. Frowning, he watched as she took a few steps back and smiled coyly at him.

“Catch me,” he heard her whisper before she whirled around and raced away, her clothes and veil flying almost gracefully behind her.

Growling in enjoyment, Zuko quickly sprinted forward in pursuit of his wife. The pain in his groin spurred him on even more as his need to bury his aching cock inside her wet warmth increased. Her soft laughter teased his ears and her sweet scent tantalized his nostrils whenever he got close to her before she nimbly evaded his capture.

Finally, he caught her and he eagerly brought them down on the soft grass. Soon they were joined in the most intimate of ways and their voices echoed through the dark forest, ringing with their cries of pleasure and passion, conveying their love for each other. It was if they grew closer with every day that passed and learned, respected, and cherished more of each other.

If anyone had come upon the couple, they would have seen a powerful demon ravishing a willing beautiful spirit.

A moment later, they were exclaiming their amazing release with loud moans and groans. They lay shuddering on the grass, wrapped in each other’s arms for a long moment, as they waited for their hearts and bodies to calm down. Panting heavily, Zuko sat back and brought his sated wife to sit on his lap, smoothing her disheveled hair down her back. Her hat had been knocked aside in their frenzied lovemaking.

Murmuring softly, Katara nuzzled against his throat before she kissed his jaw. He had hastily taken off his mask in order to suck her breasts and kiss her lips as he sought to pleasure her. She lifted her head and they gazed at each other silently, their emotions reflected in their eyes. Then their lips met softly and they kissed each other tenderly as they sat together in silence for a moment. They pulled apart slowly and Zuko pressed his lips against her hair before Katara heard him sigh as he gently shifted her off his lap.
“We must leave now and return to the palace,” he reminded her before his expression darkened, “I will send for that despicable governor.”

The bliss and peacefulness Katara was floating on immediately vanished as the serious situation once again settled on their shoulders. With a grim expression, she agreed with a nod.

“We should hurry,” she said.

Zuko helped her stand up and they silently fixed their attire. The firebender suppressed a smile at the now smudged paint on his wife’s arms and face from his caresses and kisses before he bent down to pick up her discarded hat and handed it to her. With a murmured ‘thanks’, Katara covered her head with the gown’s hood before she placed the wide hat on.

Zuko surprised her by wrapping an arm around her and pulling her against him before he bent his head down for one last, lingering kiss. Katara sighed when he pulled away and she watched as he pulled down the Blue Spirit mask over his face. Without another word, they resumed their walk to retrieve their mounts.

Sitting on his large chair in his study, Zuko was pleased as he read over the report that ordered for the governor’s properties to be seized, his title stripped from him, and his immediate imprisonment for his actions against the people he was supposed to protect. A few days after the villagers had encountered the Painted Lady and the Blue Spirit, they had traveled to the Fire Nation palace to bring the Fire Lord the charges against the governor.

The man had tried to deny everything he was being accused of, but with the testimony of the overworked village men and the women the governor had forced to service him, everything had been against him.

The women had been too frightened and ashamed at first to reveal what had happened to them, but thanks to Katara’s comforting presence and words, they had revealed all his twisted perversions. The man’s innocence was even more difficult to find plausible as more evidence was brought to Zuko by the men he had sent to inspect the governor’s activities. Along with all the atrocities the villagers accused him of, the governor had been keeping some of the tax money to himself and was even planning on killing a neighboring governor from a bigger village in order to take his place.

It had not been difficult for Zuko to find the man guilty and have him immediately thrown in prison. Now he had to find a new governor to take care of the village, but this time he was going to be more
cautious in whom he chose. He even planned to have the other governors in both the Fire Nation and his colonies checked to see if any were doing things behind his back. For now Zuko promised to send aid to the village and Katara had assured the female victims that she would help them any way she could. The villagers had been extremely grateful and presented the royal couple with a gift.

Zuko smiled as he remembered all the escapades he and Katara had gone on as the Blue Spirit and the Painted Lady. They had again visited the village and, to their surprise, they found the villagers had built a small altar for their named protectors. There were rumors that both spirits were protecting the village because the Fire Lord had married a kind waterbender. The Blue Spirit, a Fire Nation spirit, and the Painted Lady, a river spirit, were lovers and with their union they approved of the Fire Lord’s marriage to a Water Tribe woman. Zuko could only chuckle at their imagination.

Zuko glanced to the wall at his left and smiled as he again admired the portrait of his wife. She was standing gracefully beneath the cherry blossom tree in an elegant formal robe of blue, black, and silver. Her long hair fell in soft waves around her while half of it was pulled back to hold her fire crown. The artist had captured her passionate spirit in her blue eyes, the kindness in her beautiful face, and the sweetness of her smile. Needless to say, the artist had been paid generously for his incredible work.

Turning back to his desk, the Fire Lord continued reading. As he finished reading over the report, Zuko placed it aside before he sighed deeply and leaned back in his seat as his current problem once again invaded his mind. He had begun to be pressured by his advisors because Katara had not yet conceived and given him an heir. He had not said anything to Katara so she would not worry, but they were becoming more and more insistent. Why was the council so adamant about it? They have only been married a year for Agni’s sake!

He understood their views and he knew it was his duty to sire an heir as soon as possible as a precaution, but there was a part of him that did not want to share Katara yet. He wanted to enjoy her all to himself for a while longer before their attention shifted to their child. And if he was completely honest with himself, he was a bit apprehensive at the thought of becoming a father, although he could not deny that the thought also brought a warm feeling to his chest. A knock at his door interrupted his thoughts and he frowned.

“Enter,” he called out absentmindedly as he shuffled through the piles of paper on his desk.

When the door opened he looked up to see a servant holding a tray with a teapot and cup bow her head respectfully and wait for his order.

“Place it on the desk,” Zuko told her as he again shifted his attention to the document before him.
The servant quickly walked forward and placed the cup down before pouring the steaming tea from the teapot before placing it down. Picking up the tray, she bowed her head again before leaving, closing the door quietly behind her.

Zuko let out a snort as he eyed the teacup. For the past few months, always at the same time before dinner, his uncle had insisted Zuko drink the tea. Although Iroh had not told him, Zuko had a feeling it was that aphrodisiac tea his uncle had tried to make Katara and him drink months after their wedding. He did not have the heart to tell his uncle it did not make a difference. With an indulgent sigh, Zuko reached for the teacup and took a sip. He frowned at the different taste, it was sweeter than before. What was his uncle trying to feed him this time?

With a shrug, Zuko finished the rest of the tea and grimaced at the excessive sweetness. The things he did for his witty yet beloved uncle. Placing the empty cup aside, Zuko resumed his work in silence.

Katara smiled as she stepped into the palace infirmary and spotted Yin-Min cleaning up. As she watched the silent woman working, Katara remembered how painfully shy the young woman had been before she opened herself up a little to the waterbender, eventually becoming friends. However, Katara felt she was not as close to Yin-Min as she was to Jiao especially since Ozai’s former concubine was still skittish and reserved.

“Hello, Yin-Min,” the Fire Lady called out pleasantly, “How are you?”

Yin-Min paused in her chores to turn toward the waterbender with a small smile.

“I’m fine, thank you, my lady,” she responded softly with a bow, “And yourself?”

“I’m well, thank you,” Katara responded before a small grin appeared on her face, “So have you had any progress with the man you like?”

A deep blush appeared on Yin-Min’s pale cheeks and she averted her eyes bashfully before she frowned sadly.

“He still doesn’t acknowledge me,” the yellow-eyed woman said dejectedly.

“Don’t give up hope, Yin-Min,” Katara encouraged her. “Maybe you should do something to catch
his eye and make him interested in you.”

“Perhaps you are right. Thank you, my lady,” the physician’s assistant said with a small, grateful smile.

They talked idly for a few minutes as Yin-Min went back to fixing the room. The sound of footsteps reached their ears and Katara watched curiously as Yin-Min’s eyes sparked to life and a soft blush appeared on her pale cheeks. Katara turned around just in time to see Shen enter the room. She turned back to look at Yin-Min, but the blushing woman had turned around and was now fixing Physician Toshiro’s desk.

“My lady,” Shen greeted as he gave her a small bow before he said, “Do you still plan on visiting the city this afternoon?”

“Oh, I forgot about that,” Katara spoke up with a frown before she smiled as she added, “I think I’ll stay home and rest today, Shen.”

“As you wish, my lady,” the personal guard responded with a small smile.

He gave another respectful bow before he turned around and left. Katara watched him go before she turned back to observe the silent physician assistant. She watched as the pretty woman subtly glanced after the guard before looking away. Shen and Kuo sometimes accompanied Katara into the infirmary, and occasionally they did so with Zuko when he was looking for his wife. If she remembered correctly, Yin-Min would always stammer whenever the guards were present. Was Shen the man Yin-Min liked? Why had she not noticed Yin-Min’s reaction before? Shen was a few years older than the small woman, but he was a good-looking man nonetheless and he was loyal, although he did not speak much. No wonder Yin-Min sounded so sad whenever she mentioned the man she liked. Shen did not even spare her a glance!

Poor Yin-Min, Katara thought sadly.

“Is there anything else I can help you with, my lady?” the small woman asked.

Remembering why she had visited the infirmary in the first place, Katara suppressed a blush from forming on her cheeks.

“Yin-Min, I was wondering if you could give me more of that herb mix,” she said quietly. “I’m
almost running out of the last batch you gave me.”

The dark-haired woman paused and turned to see the hesitant expression on the waterbender’s lovely face.

“You already finished the other bag I gave you?” Yin-Min asked softly.

“Yes,” Katara responded with a grimace.

“I’ll make more,” the woman promised helpfully.

“Thanks,” Katara said before she bit her lip anxiously as she gathered her courage to ask, “Do you know why I haven’t conceived yet? I’ve taken the blend of herbs regularly and…uh…my husband and I…indulge in each other…repeatedly…” Katara trailed off with an embarrassed blush before she continued with a frown, “Shouldn’t I have gotten pregnant already?”

A small frown appeared on Yin-Min’s brow.

“Every woman is different, my lady,” she explained kindly, “Some women become pregnant instantly and regularly while it takes years for others to have their first child and continue to conceive once in a long while. Don’t worry, my lady, you are still young and you’ve only been married a year.”

“I guess you’re right,” Katara said as she felt a bit of hope bloom in her chest.

“If you still want the mixed herbs, I can have them ready in a few days,” Yin-Min said softly.

“Thanks,” the waterbender replied with a smile.

A few minutes later, Katara, feeling more enthusiastic than a moment ago, headed to the royal bedchambers to get ready for dinner. She wondered what Zuko was doing at the moment and she smiled at her thoughts. Even after being married a year, she still craved his presence. She hoped it continued to be so even after many years passed.
On her way she came across Iroh, Ursa and Jee who were going to their rooms to freshen up before dinner. As Iroh talked to her, Katara noticed that Ursa kept glancing at Jee when the admiral was not looking. Katara was not sure but it seemed Ursa’s gaze was more adoring than before. Maybe Ursa would figure out Jee’s feelings soon and in the process realize her own. With a laugh at something Iroh said, they parted ways to continue to their rooms before they met again for dinner.

A frustrated frown appeared on Zuko’s smooth brow as the words on the scroll he was reading began to blur. He shook his head as he tried to focus once again, but instead he threw the paper on his desk when his head began to throb. He leaned back on his chair and closed his eyes when he felt the room spin a little. He pulled at the collar of his formal robes in discomfort since it seemed his body’s temperature was rising rapidly. Heat was coiling in his lower stomach and his flesh felt very sensitive.

Zuko struggled to form a coherent thought. He felt trapped in a cloudy fog, a red burning haze, and all he could feel was heat and a painful blazing inferno that heated and scorched his every nerve. It pulsed and throbbed through his body, leaving him aching. It was an ache he knew so well, yet it was so intense that it was painful. He squirmed before he gasped when the friction of cloth rubbing against his groin immediately hardened his cock.

Need, Zuko finally understood with a groan. It was an utter, striking, unadulterated need. It was an ache that craved completion and sought comfort in the body of another. His shaft pulsed and twitched and his sac tightened with a building heat. His entire body tensed as that heat left a scorching path through his veins to his groin. The feeling kept mounting and building and yet the relief of a climax eluded him. His body felt too restricted, too hot, in his clothes, his skin prickled as need beset his body. He longed for that bliss of satiation. He wanted, needed, the sensation of an orgasm so desperately it was practically killing him. His mind was so overwhelmed with lust everything else disappeared from his mind completely.

His mind hazy with desire, Zuko did not bother questioning why he was feeling such mindless need and lust as he surged away from his chair and unsteadily yet swiftly marched toward the door. Wrenching the door open, Zuko stepped out and quickly strode down the bright, golden corridor in a frenzied daze.

He paused when he saw a figure round the corner. Through his haze, he realized it was Physician Toshiro’s assistant and he watched as she walked timidly toward him. He vaguely remembered that Toshiro said he was going to send her with his ledgers. She was saying something, but Zuko could not focus on her words as more heat surged through his veins. He watched as she finally paused at his lack of response before she frowned in concern.

“My lord, are you feverish?” she asked worriedly as she shifted uncertainly, “Your face is flushed.”
She paused and swallowed as she nervously stammered, “I—if you follow me to the infirmary I can give you something to help your pain.”

Slowly, she reached her hand out to touch his arm. Zuko quickly avoided her touch and shook his head as he frowned impatiently at her. She was in the way of achieving his goal.

“All I need is my wife,” he rasped.

The thought of his waterbender only made his arousal flare to an impossible degree.

“Yes, Katara can help alleviate my condition right now,” he continued almost absentmindedly as he went around Yin-Min and left her behind, already forgetting about the woman.

As he rounded the corner and came upon another corridor, Zuko picked up his speed when his lower stomach clenched in need. Unable to withstand the pleasurable pain any longer, Zuko sprinted toward the western wing, uncaring if he came across anyone. Running with an erection was uncomfortable, but Zuko ignored it in his urgency to ravish Katara.

When he spotted the large, golden doors that led to their rooms, Zuko felt his heart lurch. He quickly opened the first set of doors, raced across the anteroom, before throwing the other doors open and slamming them close in his haste. Through his hazy mind, he watched his waterbender close her robe in alarm before relaxing when she realized it was him.

The blood in his veins seemed to boil at the sight of her and he felt his cock throb almost painfully. His breath was ragged and he swallowed thickly in lust.

“Zuko, you startled me,” she scolded lightly as she turned back around.

Katara had been about to take off her robe so she could take a bath before dinner. When Zuko did not respond, she turned back to him. Her eyes widened in concern at his flushed features and the slightly dazed look in his eyes.

“Zuko?” she asked in concern, “What—?”
She gasped in surprise when Zuko sprinted away from the door and lunged at her, wrapping her tightly in his arm and pulling her flush against him. Her breath was stolen when he crashed his lips on hers and immediately plunged his tongue inside her moist mouth. Gripping his arms to steady herself, she moaned in both pleasure and confusion at his frenzied assault.

He did not allow her to talk as his mouth pressed tightly against hers and his tongue plundered inside and roughly wrapped around hers. She gasped when he tore the robe from her body and swiftly lifted her into his arms. He quickly dropped her onto their bed and she watched in mounting lust as he hastily divested himself of his clothing, tossing them aside without a care to where they landed. His chest was heaving and he was breathing hard, but it was the dazed and almost wild look in his eyes that caused both concern and arousal within her.

“Zu…?” she began to ask, but she was interrupted when he pounced on her and again captured her mouth in a desperate kiss.

“Mmm,” she moaned and her hands immediately flew to the back of his head.

Another moan escaped her when her husband mindlessly began to rub his incredible hard body all over her heating one before she gasped when he grabbed her breasts and roughly squeezed them, causing her nipples to immediately harden at his touch.

“Zuko,” she groaned loudly against his mouth as liquid rushed from her clenching pussy.

Zuko felt his stomach clench and his painfully erect cock throb at the sound of his wife’s breathless voice. He attacked her lips with another needy kiss, sucking on her lips and plunging his tongue inside and sucking on her tongue, as his fingers pinched and pulled at her hardened nipples. With a growled murmur of her name, he dragged his lips away from her mouth and down to her slim neck, kissing and sucking on her smooth brown skin as he firmly rubbed his stiff shaft along her wet folds. He heard her murmur his name again and he pulled back slightly to look into her darkened, blue eyes as she panted beneath him.

“I need to be inside you,” he rasped deliriously against her lips, his words almost unintelligible with his guttural growls, “I need to *fuck* you.”

“Oh gods,” Katara gasped at his dirty words before moaning when he roughly pressed his weeping tip against her sensitive clit. “Yes…haaa…”
Panting, Zuko captured her mouth once again as he rubbed himself harder against her, loving the sensation of her wet folds sliding exquisitely along his hard shaft. He needed her, his body craved to be inside her so intensely, more powerfully than he had ever felt before, that he felt he would die if he didn’t take her soon. The fire was rapidly growing inside him, like a swift and fiery inferno, and he was delirious with need.

Without further warning, and with one particularly forceful thrust, he plunged his cock deeply inside her. Katara threw her head back and wailed her pleasure.

“Katara,” Zuko groaned, his eyes falling shut, his teeth tightly clenched, as his entire body shuddered with pleasure as her slick pussy clenched tightly around him. The pleasure was incredible, but it was not enough. His body and mind were clamoring for something more intense, for an orgasm.

He felt Katara’s legs wrap around his waist, and he growled when he sank deeper into her, his tip pressing tightly against the opening to her womb. Zuko reared back and roughly thrust forward, causing his waterbender to cry out and tightened her hold of him. Mind gone with his powerful lust, the firebender began to pound frantically into her, over and over again, grunts and growls the only sounds falling from his snarling lips.

Moaning and wailing, Katara thrashed her head from side to side as an intense orgasm erupted within her at her husband’s unrelenting, erotic assault. Part of her mind knew something about Zuko’s actions was a bit strange, but a bigger part was too focused on her pleasure to really care at the moment.

Her eyes flew open when she felt his hands grabbed her ankles from around his waist and spread her legs apart as he sat back. Her heart beat faster in her chest at the lustful expression on his face as he gazed at her. She had seen that look aimed at her many times before, but this time it was different, it was darker, merciless, and wild. Her stomach tightened in arousal and she clenched her inner muscles tightly around his plunging cock.

Zuko growled down at her in ecstasy before he spread her legs more widely apart, holding them straight out in the air as he impaled her ruthlessly, causing her eyes to roll back in her head.

“Ahh, yes, yes!” she screamed as his every thrust, “Oh gods, oh gods!”

Katara desperately grasped the sheets beneath her as immense pleasure burned every inch of her body. Her hips arched insistently as she felt him thrust deeply into her, stretching and caressing her walls satisfyingly. The forcefulness of his every plunge caused her toes to curl as she got closer to another glorifying end.
“Z-Zuko,” she gasped, pleadingly looking into his eyes, her pleasure robbing her of any more speech.

Luckily, she did not need to voice her desire because Zuko understood her need because it was what his body was craving as well. Growling, he increased his speed, causing her breasts to bounce and jiggle violently, and his attention was deliriously focused at the sight. His pelvis slapped loudly against her ass, and his cock pounding into her slick warmth produced loud squelching, wet sounds, increasing both their pleasure.

“That’s it, Katara,” he panted in a deep growl, “Come around my cock.”

Katara stared wide-eyed into his piercing, golden eyes as her passage began to tighten once again. She loved the sight of his clenched jaw and straining muscles as his pleasure consumed him. Zuko rolled his hips sharply and she gasped as he roughly pressed against that sensitive spot inside her.

“Zuko!” Katara screamed as she came for him once again.

Zuko hissed as her release shook her entire body and her pussy clutched almost painfully around his aching cock. He could feel his end approaching and he relished in it with a frantic anticipation as fire raced in his veins. He wrapped her legs around his waist once again and he brought his perspiring body on top of hers as he began to pound violently and mindlessly into her in a desperate attempt to fill her with his seed and end the mad need within him.

He thrust into her over and over again and then brought a hand down to firmly rub her clit, wanting to feel her tightening around him again. Katara threw her head back and screamed as another orgasm crashed into her, sending her to worlds of rapture.

Zuko’s breath hitched as her slick walls closed down on him almost ruthlessly as she wailed his name into the room. An almost painful fire raced down his spine and shot down his throbbing cock. A fierce roar tore from his throat as his seed erupted from him and spilled inside his wife’s shuddering pussy.

“That’s it, Katara,” he panted in a deep growl, “Come around my cock.”

Katara stared wide-eyed into his piercing, golden eyes as her passage began to tighten once again. She loved the sight of his clenched jaw and straining muscles as his pleasure consumed him. Zuko rolled his hips sharply and she gasped as he roughly pressed against that sensitive spot inside her.

“Zuko!” Katara screamed as she came for him once again.

Zuko hissed as her release shook her entire body and her pussy clenched almost painfully around his aching cock. He could feel his end approaching and he relished in it with a frantic anticipation as fire raced in his veins. He wrapped her legs around his waist once again and he brought his perspiring body on top of hers as he began to pound violently and mindlessly into her in a desperate attempt to fill her with his seed and end the mad need within him.

He thrust into her over and over again and then brought a hand down to firmly rub her clit, wanting to feel her tightening around him again. Katara threw her head back and screamed as another orgasm crashed into her, sending her to worlds of rapture.

Zuko’s breath hitched as her slick walls closed down on him almost ruthlessly as she wailed his name into the room. An almost painful fire raced down his spine and shot down his throbbing cock. A fierce roar tore from his throat as his seed erupted from him and spilled inside his wife’s shuddering pussy.

“Katara!”

His release was mind-blowing, staggering, and his vision blackened for a second. It felt as if he had ignited from the pure potency of his climax, his body shuddered uncontrollably, suspended in
agonizing pleasure. Electrifying sparks racked his entire body at each delicious throb of his orgasm. Once his hips stops jerking and his cock stopped spurting his sticky seed, he slumped forward, panting hard. He could feel Katara moaning and panting beneath him and he sighed as he waited for his body and mind to return to normal.

But to his utter consternation, the potent need that had plagued him moments ago returned with the same powerful urgency, causing his mind to become hazy and wild with lust. He shook his head, trying to make sense of the desperate, almost savage, need coursing through him, but the immense need already took control of both his mind and body.

Moaning softly as her body came down from her incredible orgasms, Katara clung tightly to her husband’s amazing body. She was not given the chance to relax and wonder about his strange behavior when she felt Zuko’s cock harden fully inside her still quivering pussy and he began to thrust into her frantically once again. Gasping, all she could so was cling to him as pleasure ignited in her body.

“Zu-Zuko!” she cried out.

“I’m...going to fuck you, Katara,” he groaned throatily, panting heavily, “Over...and over... again...I need you...”

A moment later, she was screaming her release followed by Zuko’s groan as he emptied himself into her. But not a moment passed before Zuko was once again hard and ready and was driving into her again and again. Katara could only gasp and moan his name, clinging with both need and bewilderment onto his body, at his unrelenting lovemaking.

The massive bed came in handy once again as he made love to her in varying positions for hours upon hours, but all with the same pleasurable and passionate outcome. She moaned and shuddered with each spasmodic spill of Zuko’s scorching seed against her low cervix. Katara struggled as she tried to keep up with him, but her body was too tired and over-sensitized with the many orgasms he had ruthlessly pulled from her body. She could not even count the many times they had climaxed anymore, her mind was too overwhelmed with both exhaustion and pleasure. All she wanted was to curl against Zuko’s body as he held her to him and allowed her to relax after such intense sex.

A small part of Zuko’s mind knew his wife was exhausted from his persistent lovemaking, but he could not seem to stop. His mind and body were still plagued by that controlling need and powerful lust. All he could do was continue to sensually and erotically torture her as he thrust himself into her body, causing her to moan, cry, and scream his name. Another low wail ripped from her swollen lips as another staggering release beset her thoroughly pleased body.
With a strangled snarl, the Fire Lord pressed his hips tightly against her, impaling his throbbing cock as deeply as he could go, and then he rasped his waterbender’s name as he again spilled himself into her satisfied and tired body. Muscles tensed rigidly as he continued thrusting into her hot tight pussy already overflowing with his seed. Helpless in the face of one of the strongest orgasms he had ever experienced, Zuko clenched his eyes shut and held onto her body as his hips continued to jerk as her clenching core milked him of his seed, just enjoying the excruciating pleasure as they held onto each other.

Once utterly spent, he collapsed atop her trembling, sweaty body as his own shuddered convulsively. Heart pounding wildly in his chest, breath coming out in quick, loud pants, Zuko closed his eyes with a groan and waited for that mindless lust to consume him once again.

When a long moment passed and that mad need did not reappear, Zuko relaxed as he rested his head between his wife’s soft breasts and wrapped his arms tenderly around her. He felt his waterbender tiredly kiss his head.

Now that that bewildering need subsided, Zuko enjoyed his climax—or multiple climaxes in this case—gratefully. He felt so pleased, almost peaceful, but also very, very exhausted and confused.

What the hell was that?

His need and desire for his wife was always great, but never to this overwhelming and wild extent. He had acted like a mindless sex-driven beast.

When the incredible sensations subsided, Katara slowly opened her eyes, her mind still a bit hazy from the immense pleasure she had experienced. Once she found that Zuko was not going to start another round of lovemaking and she could think straight again, she kissed Zuko’s head resting on her chest and wrapped her arms around him. He was still breathing hard, but she could tell that his body was as lethargic as hers felt.

He lifted his head and he looked down at her. His black hair fell around them and a few long strands clung to his sweaty face. She reached up to smooth his hair back and she smiled when she realized he still had his fire crown on, though it was askew. She loved tangling her hands in his long hair which fell around them when he made love to her.

Zuko scrutinized her closely as he took in the emotions in her blue eyes, and was immeasurably comforted to find that he had not hurt her in his mindless pursuit to possess her. He leaned down to kiss her gently and he smiled with relief and satisfaction when she sighed and kissed him tenderly back.
Pulling away after a moment, Zuko carefully extracted his now flaccid member from her sensitive passage and slowly knelt back between her spread legs. His eyes eagerly fixated themselves on his paradise. The golden color of his eyes darkened as he watched his white seed leaking out excessively from Katara’s pussy to drench the sheets beneath her.

Biting her lip at his expression, Katara felt her passage spasm since she now had an idea what erotic sight he was seeing. She smiled.

Zuko watched as his wife slowly reached a hand down toward her swollen folds and dipped one of her slender fingers inside her before trailing it along her slit. Zuko swallowed hard at the sight and he knew if he was not so tired and spent, he would have taken her again.

“You really like to see your seed pouring out of me, don’t you?” she purred.

The firebender’s eyes darted back to her face and he watched as she gave him a fatigued yet seductive smile. Zuko returned her smile with a smug smirk as his hands began to slowly caress her thighs.

“Yes,” he said huskily, “It shows that you’re completely mine.”

Katara smiled before her eyes landed on his now resting shaft. She grinned at the evidence of her own juices glistening on his impressive flesh.

“Your cock shows evidence of my own mark on you,” she replied throatily.

Chuckling in delight, Zuko moved back over her and languidly kissed her swollen lips before he pulled back.

“Are you okay?” he asked, just to make sure.

“I’m fine,” she replied with a smile before she purred, “I’m more than fine.”
“Good. I’m glad,” he responded with a smile.

With one more kiss, he lay down beside her with his elbow propping him up. When she wearily turned to her side to face him, he reached out to caress her flushed cheek.

“So what was that about?” Katara finally asked and cleared her throat a little at the huskiness of her tone. She blushed as she remembered how much he had made her scream in pleasure. “Not that I didn’t enjoy it, quite the contrary, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t normal for a man to experience multiple climaxes repeatedly and so soon right after the others.”

Lying on his back tiredly, Zuko turned his head toward his curious wife with a sigh.

“It seems Uncle Iroh raised the dosage of that aphrodisiac tea he gave us before,” he told her wryly before he huskily added, “I felt like I was going to burn alive if I didn’t bury my aching cock inside your tight, wet pussy.”

Katara smiled before she let out a small giggle.

“Maybe we should thank him,” she teased.

“I will not let my uncle think that I need his tea to perform my husbandly duties,” he growled out with a disgruntled sniff.

With a small laugh, Katara shook her head before she lifted herself high enough to kiss him soothingly on his lips. She smiled when he expectedly deepened the kiss and tangled his hand in her hair. They kissed slowly, languidly, not so much for sexual satisfaction but more out of closeness and satiation. When Zuko pulled away to allow them some air, Katara licked her lips with a sigh.

“The others were probably wondering why we missed dinner,” she pointed out with a grin.

Zuko glanced at the opened balcony and guessed that dawn was fast approaching. They had missed dinner hours ago. With a shrug, he grabbed her to him with a smirk.

“Let them wonder,” he said throatily as he kissed her cheek.
Katara laughed. When Zuko kissed her mouth again, Katara easily relented as she melted against his firm and sweaty body. They pulled apart when the rumbling of their hungry stomachs caused them both to chuckle. Exhausted, feeling like his entire body was sapped of energy, Zuko reluctantly got out of bed and placed on a robe so he could find a servant to give him the order of bringing food to the royal bedchambers.

They ate a light snack before they spent a few more minutes whispering to each other as they caressed and kissed one another in tender affection before they succumbed to their exhaustion and fell into a deep and restful slumber. It was moments like these that they vowed would not vanish despite Jianguo’s greed and promise of revenge. It was moments like these that they vowed to cherish forever.
Rising Frustrations

Blue eyes drowsily fluttered open. Groggy, Katara glanced around the room and noticed by the moonlight that spilled into their bedchamber from the opened balcony that it was still night. Since the night was hot, the fireplace had been extinguished, casting the room into dark shadows except areas illuminated by the light of the moon. Feeling something heavy on her chest, she glanced down and her gaze settled on the dark head of her husband. He was once again sleeping with his head pillowed by her breasts, his left arm wrapped snugly around her waist, and his leg curled around one of hers. They were both naked, having fallen asleep after making love hours ago, and she could feel every inch of his warm skin and muscular body touching hers. She felt hot, however, that was not what had woken her up but the cramps that were forming on her lower abdomen.

Please, La, no, she pleaded mentally. Her heart pounded hard in her chest with anxiety.

Gently lifting her firebender’s arm from her, she tried to carefully slip away from underneath him, but the movement immediately awoke Zuko in alarm and he instinctively tightened his hold of her. He raised his head to look at her worriedly.

“What’s wrong, love?” he asked, his tone husky from sleep and rough with concern.

“I just need to use the bathroom,” Katara muttered before she pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “Go back to sleep.”

Yawning, Zuko nodded before he lifted himself from her to allow her to move from beneath him. With a sigh, he slumped back onto the soft mattress. Jumping from the bed, Katara gathered her nightgown and a clean pair of undergarments. After a moment, she decided to gather the absorbing strips of cloth Jiao had introduced her to as a precaution before she quickly made her way to the bathing chamber and closed the door.

A few minutes later, she was suppressing tears of frustration and disappointment when her suspicions were confirmed. Her monthly bleeding had arrived.

Letting her face fall into her hands, Katara clenched her eyes shut as sadness filled her and made her heart ache. Why had she not gotten pregnant? She continued to take the herbs Yin-Min gave her, and even if she didn’t, Zuko and she were constantly at each other. They just had to be alone before they were practically ripping off each other’s clothes in their haste to come together.
With a dejected sigh, she cleaned up and dressed before she opened the door and slowly made her way back into the darkened bedroom, hoping Zuko had gone back to sleep. She paused when she saw that he had not when he shot a small spark at the candle near his nightstand. He was sitting up on the bed and looking at her with a concerned frown.

“What’s wrong?” he asked again as he eyed her now clothed body.

“Nothing,” Katara replied with a shrug as she made her way to the opened balcony. Staring out into the darkness, Katara added with a calm she did not feel, “I just started my monthly time, it’s all.”

Zuko heard her let out a little sigh and he quickly stood up from the bed. Smoothly, he closed the distance between them. Katara felt him slide his arms around her, pulling her gently back against his hard naked frame, enfolding her in a protective embrace, his warmth surrounding her. Zuko leaned his chin on her head and simply held her as they both stared into the starry night sky. Katara felt herself relax when he began to rock her in a slow, gentle sway.

“Don’t feel discouraged,” he murmured, “We just got married. We just began.”

She felt Zuko cup her cheek before he gently nudged her to look at him. His golden eyes were soft and understanding as he gave her a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry,” he told her softly before he bent down to give her a tender kiss.

Katara smiled at him when he pulled away. She leaned into his hand when his thumb began to caress her cheek and they stared silently into each other’s eyes. The waterbender closed her eyes as she relaxed back against him and he tightened his arms around her.

“Come, love. Let’s go back to bed,” he told her softly.

With a nod, Katara allowed him to lead her back to the comfort of their large bed. Once she was lying on it, Zuko laid back down beside her. He wrapped his arm around her and she cuddled close against his chest with a sigh. The feeling of him running his hand soothingly down her back, combined with his comforting warmth and masculine scent lulled her to a restful sleep.

Peering up from tending her rose bushes, Ursa surreptitiously glanced to her guard standing silently a few feet away. Jee was currently staring amusedly at a daring bird hopping and flapping on the
ground near his boot in search of worms. Ursa suppressed a smile at the sight before a small frown marred her pale brow. She felt guilty that Jee had to leave his post as admiral of Zuko’s fleet in order to be her personal guard. Although he had not complained once since Zuko gave him the job to protect her, Ursa was sure he must be bored following her around all the day.

*He must be longing to be out at sea,* she mused for the hundredth time.

She had tried to convince both him and Zuko that she did not need a personal guard, but they had refused to listen to her. Zuko told her he could not trust anyone but the admiral, and Jee had assured her that he did not mind the assignment.

Ursa glanced back down to clean the deteriorating petals of one of the roses as another thought crossed her mind. There was a part of her that felt relieved Jee remained near her. After Katara had asked her if she ever thought of being in another relationship, Ursa could not stop thinking about it. She thought she had been firm in her decision to remain single for the rest of her life. She did not want to be hurt again. She refused to give another man power over her and her heart. Yet, the appearance of Jee in her life had begun to make her falter in her resolve.

Her heart did a strange little flip in her chest when Jee quickly stepped forward to hand her the small gardening shears she was searching for. Thanking him, she smiled and again her heart fluttered when he smiled in return. Without another word, she returned her attention to her roses.

She had thought she would never feel such things for a man after Ozai, but when she was near the admiral emotions she thought long dead began to awaken. Jee may be silent and stoic most of the time, but he was also kind and gentle. He was strong and he was protective of her. But most of all, he was a good companion that gave her comfort and made her feel safe and respected.

Not to mention how attractive he was. A small blush surfaced on her pale cheeks at her thoughts. It had been a while since she had felt any sort of attraction to a man that she almost felt shy and embarrassed at her reawakening desires. She glanced back up at him and her eyes widened when she saw he was looking at her curiously. Quickly bringing her attention to the aromatic flowers, Ursa pretended to be busy as her heart leapt in her chest before she frowned.

However, she was wary of her sudden infatuation with the admiral. She did not want such feelings to develop into something deeper that might eventually lead her to more pain. And then there was her son to think about. She did not think Zuko would be comfortable with the idea of his mother having another man in her life. Besides, Jee never gave any indication that he might feel anything for her, whether it was affection or attraction. Perhaps it was best that she put a stop to her growing feelings. Yet there was a part of her that did not want to.
With a sigh, Ursa caressed one of the soft petals with a wistful expression.

“Lady Ursa, are you feeling well?” Jee’s concerned voice reached her ears.

“Yes, Jee, I’m fine,” she responded serenely before she added with a smile, “I think I’m finished here. Why don’t we have tea with Iroh?”

She watched as a frown began to appear on Jee’s face, but he quickly schooled his features into a pleasant expression.

“Of course, Lady Ursa,” he replied softly.

A low groan resounded in the otherwise silent study of the Fire Lord. Pressing his head against the back of his large chair, Zuko closed his eyes and clenched his teeth as pleasure skittered up his spine. The hand that rested between his legs, hidden beneath the shadows of his large desk, tightened its hold as his cock throbbed with incredible pleasure. His left hand tightly grasped the wooden armrest of his chair as his hips surged forward at a particularly pleasurable stroke. He opened his eyes and stared dazedly at the high ceiling as he briefly thought that there was no time for this since the advisors had called for a meeting that was to commence in a few minutes. The thought quickly flew away, however, when he felt his end approaching. Just a few more strokes and he would be erupting in ecstasy! He closed his eyes and threw his head back with an almost inaudible groan as his cock pulsed with his impending release.

“Nephew!” the sound of his uncle’s voice interrupted Zuko from his goal as the old man burst into the room and walked toward the Fire Lord’s desk.

Cursing, Zuko jumped in shock before he quickly leaned closer to his desk in order to hide the lower half of his body as he shuffled papers and pretended to read them while trying to calm his erratic breathing.

Damn it, he thought the door was locked!

Iroh sat down on one of the chairs facing the impressive desk and continued to babble on about something, but Zuko could not focus on his words because all he could think about was that his still erect shaft was straining for release. He needed to get rid of his old uncle before he went insane!
“Uncle, I’m busy,” Zuko interrupted gruffly as he looked up to glare at him, “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Why of course!” Iroh said as he stood up from the chair with a smile before he added, “But you should hurry up, the meeting is soon and the advisors are adamant about you attending it.”

Zuko frowned at his uncle’s words since he wondered, not for the first time, why the old advisors were so insistent about this meeting. He was brought out of his thoughts as he watched his uncle make his way to the door. Iroh opened the door and walked out, but just as he was about to close it, he glanced back with a cheeky grin.

“You should really make sure the door is locked next time, Nephew,” he said amusedly before he added, “And you should have your wife see to your needs.”

Iroh chuckled as his nephew’s eyes widened in shock before he finally closed the door. Zuko slumped against his chair and closed his eyes with a mortified groan.

“You should listen to your uncle, my lord, and have your wife tend to your needs,” a feminine voice teased from the shadows under his large desk.

Zuko opened his eyes and looked down at the blue-eyed woman kneeling between his legs with his cock wedged between her soft breasts. Her lips were plump and rosy, her wavy hair was a little disarrayed from his clenching fingers, and her cheeks were painted with a soft red blush.

“Then take care of my needs, wife,” he demanded with a smirk as he thrust his hips forward so that the tip of his shaft touched her lips.

Katara giggled before she pursed her lips to kiss his weeping tip. She darted her tongue out to trail it down his shaft before coming back up to lick around the head, flicking across the small slit. Panting loudly, Zuko’s hips tried to follow her movements, needing her to once again take him into the wet warmth of her skillful mouth.

The little minx had surprised him with this impromptu tryst, but he sure wasn’t complaining. A week had passed since Katara woke up to find her monthly bleeding had arrived, and although she had been sad that night, she had quickly returned to her lively spirited self the next morning.

Zuko watched as she pulled away slightly to give him a seductive smile before she opened her mouth wide and engulfed his length with a moan. He rasped her name at the amazing sensation of her hot mouth surrounding him and he brought his hand down to grab the back of her head.
Katara began to move her head up and down, her tongue swirling around his tip, as she massaged the rest of his hard cock between her breasts.

“Katara,” he called out again in a throaty groan as his hips surged up. “Damn, that feels… incredible… uuuuh.”

The waterbender purred around his shaft as she continued to bob up and down. She moaned when she felt her husband tightened his hold of her head and heard him groan her name once again. She loved it when she reduced him to such a state of utter bliss. She grabbed her breasts more tightly, pinching her hard nipples, and pressed her thighs together to try to relieve some of her own arousal. She could feel her juices seeping out of her, coating the insides of her upper thighs.

Zuko groaned more loudly when his wife began to suck his cock more firmly. The heat building within him was overwhelming. He was so close, but he didn’t want to come just yet. He pulled her away and she released his turgid shaft with a loud ‘pop’. Panting, he glanced down at her to see her giving him an adorably confused look.

“My turn,” he uttered in a deep, low tone.

“Mmm, yes, please,” Katara moaned as her hands tightened on his thighs.

He didn’t say anything else as he stood up and helped her crawl out from under his desk. When she was standing before him, his eyes raked her body hungrily. Her robes were hanging around her hips and her delectable breasts were bared for his perusal. He reached up to cup them firmly in his hands and Katara’s head fell back with a pleased moan as he kneaded her mounds and rubbed her nipples. A small gasp escaped her when he pulled her tightly against him and kissed her deeply.

Katara moaned and clung to him as her tongue battled with his. She rubbed her naked stomach against his hard length and smiled against his mouth when he groaned and bucked his hips against her. She opened her eyes when Zuko suddenly pulled away and began to quickly divest her of her clothing. When her robes fell around her feet, Zuko swiftly spun her around and pressed himself against her back.

“Mm, Zuko,” the waterbender moaned when he rubbed his shaft between the line of her ass.

Zuko smirked when his wife pushed firmly back against him, but he grasped her hips to stop her
when the amazing sensation of her flesh rubbing against his straining arousal threatened to usher his release sooner than he wanted. Before Katara could ask him why he had stopped, he lifted her and placed her on her knees on top of his desk.

“Get on your hands, Katara,” he ordered huskily.

Heart beating wildly in her chest, Katara quickly did what he demanded and pressed her hands against the wooden surface of the desk. She could feel Zuko’s intense gaze on her upturned backside and she shuddered in rising arousal, as well as the feeling of the chilly temperature in the room hitting against her wet folds.

“Don’t move, my little waterbender,” he ordered softly.

He walked around the desk and Katara watched as he moved toward the door and locked it before he slowly turned around. The blue-eyed woman watched with mounting lust as her firebender approached her with smoldering, amber eyes. Her eyes flicked down and she felt more of her juices seeping out of her aching core at the sight of his engorged cock bobbing almost mesmerizingly with his steps. She did not remove her eyes from him until he disappeared from her view when he rounded the desk. She felt him move behind her and her passage clench in need and anticipation. She could feel her juices sliding down her upper thighs at being left so exposed.

Zuko ran his hand slowly down her back and he watched with satisfaction as she shivered at his touch. He moved his chair closer to the desk and sat down on it. He smirked in delight to see that he was at the perfect height for what he planned to do.

“What a beautiful view,” the Fire Lord uttered in a deep baritone.

His eyes trailed down his wife’s smooth back and became riveted to that spot that he loved to touch, taste, and be buried in. It seemed he took too long in his appraisal because he heard Katara whimper his name in a desperate whisper.

“Touch me, Zuko,” she demanded throatily. She could not stand the wait any longer. She needed him! If he didn’t touch her soon, she was going to use her bloodbending to manipulate his body to give her the pleasure she craved.

Zuko grinned at her demanding tone. He loved it when she became desperate for him. The Fire Lord watched as his wife wiggled her bottom to entice him and his golden eyes darkened in lust. He firmly
gripped her hips and pulled her back towards his face.

“Bend forward a little,” he ordered huskily.

Katara quickly followed his order and lowered her upper body until she was resting on her forearms with her palms flat against the wooden desk. Her heart was racing in her chest and her breathing was ragged. She shuddered and moaned when she felt Zuko’s hands caress her waist and hips.

Zuko leaned his face closer to her as his hands moved lower to caress her backside. His tongue slipped out to stroke the sensitive dimples just above her lovely ass and she moaned. He trailed his tongue lower before he playfully nipped at her right cheek. She gave a startled gasp of pleasure as his teeth gently scraped the delicate skin of her rear before he placed a soothing kiss over the stinging spot. He enjoyed the shiver that raked her body before he grasped both pert cheeks firmly in his hands. He spread them open so his eyes could feast upon his treasure. His waterbender’s clit and pink folds were swollen and glistening with her creamy essence as were her thighs. Her little pussy clenched and quivered with her need.

“Zuko, please,” Katara whimpered as she again wiggled her ass in his hold.

The firebender leaned forward and inhaled a deep breath of the delightful scent of her arousal, then he stuck out his tongue to lick up the folds of her center, taking in the taste of her honeyed juices. Katara moaned and her hips jerked as her nails scratched the hard surface of the desk.

Zuko reached down and pulled the lips of her sex open with his thumbs before he leaned forward for more. His tongue slid up between the drenched folds from her throbbing clit to her spasming entrance. He repeated the process a few times, making sure to lap up all the warm fluids that leaked out of her, before he dipped his tongue inside her. Zuko flicked and stroked his tongue along her inner walls. Katara threw her head back and groaned loudly as her hips rocked back against his face. Zuko groaned against her, loving the way her wet passage quivered and squeezed around him.

“Haaa…Z-Zuko,” she called out huskily, “Mmm…oooh…”

Encouraged by her throaty moans, Zuko thrust his tongue repeatedly inside her, occasionally using his lips and teeth to suck and gently tug at her folds. Her moans and gasps were music to his ears as he lapped, flicked, and stroked his tongue at her core. He pulled back slightly to catch his breath and his golden eyes gazed at the engorged bud above her entrance gleaming with her liquid arousal. He rubbed his fingers against it and smirked when she arched her back and wantonly tossed her head back, her long hair flying around her, as she again moaned his name. He played with her clit and folds until his fingers were drenched before he replaced them with his mouth, sucking firmly on her
sensitive bud. He reached down to grasp his neglected, throbbing cock with his wet hand, smearing her juices along his length, and began to roughly stroke himself at the same time he pushed two fingers into her.

“Oh gods, yes!” Katara cried out as she rocked her hips back, spreading her legs a little more in order to angle her hips for a better penetration.

Groaning in pleasure, Zuko firmly stroked his cock, rubbing a thumb over his sensitive tip, at the same time he thrust his fingers rapidly into her pussy. He gently scraped his teeth on her clit just as he pressed against that spongy spot inside her that he knew made her go wild and he felt her stiffen before her walls tightened around his moving fingers.

“Zuko!” she shrieked as her legs tensed, her body arched, and her toes curled as her release shook her entire body. Her arousal gushed out of her and Zuko greedily lapped at it, causing her hips to jerk at the sensation.

Zuko pulled away when Katara slumped back onto the desk, panting and moaning. Licking his lips, he caressed her bottom soothingly with one hand, slowing down his strokes on his shaft with the other, as he waited for her to recuperate a little. His own chest was heaving with his arousal and his cock was straining for release. A few drops of his seed had leaked from his tip and had slid down his length. Unable to wait anymore, the Fire Lord stood up and pushed down his dark trousers so that they fell around his booted ankles. He moved forward but frowned when he realized that the desk was too high for him to enter her in the position she was in.

Katara’s dazed eyes opened and she moaned when her husband grasped her hips and helped move her legs over the desk so that her feet settled on the floor and her hands grabbed the edge. Then he settled against her back, grabbing her hips tightly in his large hands.

“Damn, I need to be inside your pussy so badly, Katara,” he rasped against her ear.

“Please,” the waterbender moaned.

“Mm, you need my cock, don’t you, my love?” he purred huskily.

“Yes…ohh…” she whined as she wiggled her ass against his groin before she throatily demanded, “I need your big cock inside me. Now.”
“Gods, I love you,” he groaned as he pressed himself tightly against her back.

Katara moaned throatily when he glided his erection against her slick womanhood before she gasped loudly when he slammed himself into her.

“Yesss!” Zuko hissed gutturally as her wet and warm walls embraced him tightly.

He pulled himself back, stroked the head of his cock along her walls, before he thrust himself back in and began to wildly pound into her. Katara arched her back and cried out his name. She lost herself in the erotic sensations as he plunged into her over and over again.

“Zuko, oh, Zuko!” she chanted with every pleasurable thrust. “Oh, yes, just…like that!”

Zuko growled at the sounds she uttered as he felt the pressure building in his balls which were slapping against her sensitive nub. His need for his wife had not dwindled in the slightest in all the months that he had taken her. He still craved and needed her with an intensity that would have frightened him if he did not enjoy it so much. He groaned harshly as he increased his pace. The pleasure was overwhelming but it wasn’t enough.

Katara’s eyes flew open when Zuko suddenly stopped, but before she could demand him to continue, she felt him lift her higher on the desk until the tips of her toes touched the floor and her breasts pressed against the cold surface of the furniture, then he continued his unrelenting thrusts. Katara threw her head back and wailed his name, her fingers gripping the other edge of the desk firmly, as he penetrated her more deeply and stroked that sensitive spot inside her.

Zuko growled loudly. She was so slick for him that his movements were almost effortless as the scorching heat between them increased. His movements grew more erratic and frantic as his climax began to simmer intensely.

Katara heard a low growl fall from his throat and her blood boiled in her veins. She ground against him, clenching her walls around his pounding shaft, with his every thrust, not caring that the edge of the desk was digging into her stomach and that her sensitive nipples were pressed too hard against its surface as her body prepared itself for another orgasm.

“Zuko, please,” she whimpered loudly as her hands clawed at the desk, “I’m close, I’m so close!”
At her words, Zuko growled her name and his hands grasped her hips tightly.

“Do it again, Katara,” he demanded hoarsely. “Come for me!”

His voice was loud and deep, suffused with need and desperation. He needed to have her moaning his name, throwing her head back and arching that luscious body of hers as she came for him, and he plunged himself faster and harder into her.

“Oh, oh, gods, yes!” she wailed her pleasure to the heavens as her orgasm came hard and fast, drowning her with its astounding intensity.

His wife was still in the throes of ecstasy when Zuko let out a roar as he thrust himself as deeply as he could inside her before he spilled himself into her, his shaft throbbing and hips jerking with every spray of his seed. Katara panted hard, their bodies tightly connected, as he held himself absolutely still above her. Zuko felt her body shudder beneath him in the aftershocks, against which he was as defenseless as she was before he finally relaxed against her back.

“Katara,” he breathed her name hoarsely as he buried his face in her hair and wrapped his arms around her.

With a satisfied groan, Zuko sat back on his chair, bringing his softly moaning waterbender down with him, his softening cock still embedded within Katara’s overfilled, warm core. Panting harshly, he kissed her head as he ran his hands soothingly up and down her arms as she softly panted and trembled against him. After a moment, he gave her a gentle squeeze before he cleared his throat.

“We don’t have time to clean up now. We must go to the meeting,” he told her.

With a sigh, Katara nodded her head. With his help, she moved off his lap, both moaning at the sensations of their flesh separating, before she stood up. Zuko followed after her and they quickly helped each other get redressed and presentable. Zuko could still smell her on his hands, taste her on his tongue, and he smiled at the memory of what they just did. Once they were ready, Katara slowly turned to face him and Zuko found himself enjoying the expression of utter satisfaction on her lovely features and in her ocean-blue eyes. They were dreamy, fatigued from their activities, and he smirked with male pride as he licked his lips to savor her lingering taste.

“We will definitely continue this later,” he said huskily.
“I’ll hold you to that promise,” Katara replied with a seductive smile as she ran her hand sensuously down her firebender’s chest.

With a shudder of desire, Zuko quickly grasped her hand when she teasingly moved it lower. He brought it up to his lips to kiss her knuckles as he playfully frowned at her.

“Stop teasing me, you minx,” the golden-eyed male groaned, “We’re already late to the meeting as it is.”

The brunette waterbender let out a small laugh. She loved it that she was able to distract her usually focused husband with just a light touch or an alluring smile, which she admittedly employed when he was stressed by too much work.

“Alright, let’s see what they want this time,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Chuckling, Zuko tucked her hand under his elbow and led her toward the door. Pausing before it, he looked down at her with an intense stare and an amused grin on his lips as he deliberately played with the lock of the door. A small blush spread on Katara’s cheeks at the reminder that they were almost caught in an intimate situation. Thank La Iroh did not suspect it was she who was pleasing Zuko and not Zuko himself or she would never be able to look at her uncle-in-law in the eye ever again. She would definitely make sure the door was locked the next time they decided to use the study for their lovemaking.

Ushering his wife out of his study, Zuko closed the door before they quickly made their way to the throne room. They were a few minutes late, but Zuko was not concerned. As they neared the room, Katara smiled when she noticed Shen and Kuo waiting for them. After they bowed at them, they returned her smile with small ones of their own and escorted the royal couple down the long corridor.

When they finally arrived, they paused at the entrance when the old advisors turned to frown at them. With a neutral expression on his face, Zuko led Katara into the room while she smiled apologetically at the impatient men. Shen and Kuo stood at attention against the wall. Katara spotted Iroh sitting next to Chao and she almost blushed when the tea-loving old man smiled innocently at her.

Once he helped his waterbender sit on her elaborate cushion, Zuko turned around, and parting the wall of fire, walked up the marble steps to his throne on the dais. Once he was sitting down, Zuko gazed at his advisors with a cool expression. He noticed some of them returned his look hesitantly while others averted their eyes. He mentally frowned.
“Why have you called Fire Lady Katara and me to this meeting?” he asked.

The Fire Lord’s dark eyebrow rose on his forehead when the men floundered for a moment on how to proceed. Some murmured amongst themselves, while others nudged their neighbor to take courage and answer their volatile lord. Zuko searched for Chao, Enlai, and Jian, his three most trusted advisors, and saw that they were frowning at the men disapprovingly and glancing hesitantly at Katara.

What was going on?

Sitting on her elaborate cushion, Katara frowned as she watched the men stutter and squirm. Whatever the advisors wanted to bring to their attention was something they knew her husband was not going to like. A small twinge of apprehension began to fester in her chest. Glancing up, Katara noticed through the fire wall that Zuko was frowning impatiently at the men.

“Oh, just shut up, you cowards!” Wei’s hard voice made everybody pause.

The large, old advisor made a frustrated and disgusted sound as he glared at his fellow councilmen before he rose to his feet. Zuko narrowed his eyes at his hated advisor as he braced himself. He knew that whatever Wei had to say was not going to be good at all.

Wei glanced at the silent Fire Lady before he lifted his gaze to the darkly frowning Fire Lord.

“More than a year has passed since your wedding and there is still no sign of an heir,” the old man began.

Katara flinched as if the man’s words had physically struck her and she clenched her hands on her lap. Zuko frowned darkly as he glared at the haughty, old man.

“Fire Lady Katara and I have only been married recently,” Zuko replied in a deceptively calm tone.

“That is no excuse,” Wei countered severely, “It is obvious Fire Lady Katara will not be able to conceive soon. And we all know it is imperative that you have an heir immediately, especially with the threat of those dirty rebels and a possible plot against you. You are already twenty-two years old!”
“We know what our duties are,” Zuko responded in a dark tone, “My wife and I will eventually conceive a child and—”

“What if you don’t?” Wei interrupted with a raised bushy eyebrow before he grimly added, “Maybe fire and water are not meant to mix.”

Zuko grit his teeth at the man’s words. Katara’s apprehensive feeling began to grow and she clenched her dress tightly with her fingers.

“What is your point?” Zuko asked harshly.

Wei remained silent. The other advisors shifted in their places as they murmured in low tones and glanced apologetically at the quiet Fire Lady. Noticing their looks, Katara felt her heart begin to pound in trepidation. Zuko frowned as he also noticed the men looking ruefully at his wife and his stomach clenched in uneasiness.

“What is your point?” he repeated with a growl.

His attention shifted away from Wei’s simpering expression as another of his older advisors stood up and cleared his throat.

“My lord, with the exception of Advisors Chao, Enlai, and Jian,” he began then paused to clear his throat again before continuing, “We, the Royal Court Council, have come to the consensus that you, Fire Lord Zuko, must sire an heir with another woman and soon.”

Katara felt as if the air was stolen from her lungs and she gasped sharply, unable to believe what she just heard.

“No,” she breathed in dismay before she clenched her teeth in rage.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Iroh exclaimed in shock and anger.
The advisors stiffened when the wall of fire flared and their lord sprang to his feet in fury as he glared murderously at them all. The light and shadows the flames cast over his face made his features appear intimidating and harsh.

“I will never divorce Lady Katara and marry another woman!” Zuko growled out fiercely as sparks flew from his nostrils.

“We didn’t say anything about you divorcing Fire Lady Katara to marry someone else,” Wei spoke up again in a nonchalant tone as he stared unaffectedly at the enraged Fire Lord. “The common people love her and they would surely revolt at the mere thought. Not to mention we may have a war on our hands brought by both the Northern and Southern Water Tribes if you divorce her.”

Zuko faltered in his rage as he stared in confusion at his hated advisor.

“Then what are you suggesting?” he growled out.

“A royal concubine can do the job,” Wei responded indifferently with a shrug of his shoulders.

“No!” Katara exclaimed in horror and anger as she balled her hands on her lap. No!

“What?” Zuko roared wrathfully.

Some of the advisors cowered back when the flames flared so high that they almost touched the ceiling. The advisor that was still standing next to Wei cleared his throat. When Zuko turned his furious glare on him, the man shrank back for a second before he straightened himself out. Normally, the councilmen could not dictate rules without the Fire Lord’s consent, but when it came to the safety of the Fire Nation and the royal bloodline, they were able to combine their vote to override his. And since this was such an occasion, they knew their Fire Lord would have to see they were right. Eventually.

“We have decided to let the noblemen know that because of Fire Lady Katara’s…unfortunate condition, a royal concubine will be chosen to bear the Fire Lord’s heir,” he informed them, “We asked that they start sending their single, female relatives to the palace for your perusal.”

“I will not disgrace my wife by taking a concubine, much less to bear my heir,” Zuko growled out angrily as he loomed intimidatingly before them.
It is for the sake of the royal bloodline,” the old advisor insisted pleadingly before he added pleasantly, “Besides, Fire Lady Katara will still rule as your wife and consort. The royal concubine will only serve to give you children.”

Katara felt her anger spike at the men’s insistence and demands. How dare they?! How dare they treat the matter of Zuko taking a concubine as if there was nothing wrong with it? How could they be so callous to her feelings and her culture? How dare they assume there was something wrong with her! The temperature in the room began to drop to an icy chill in her fury and indignation, completely opposite from the sweltering heat of her husband’s rage. The men squirmed and glanced nervously at her, shivering from the cold and fear that raced down their spines at the fire blazing in her blue eyes. Even through his anger, Zuko found himself once again impressed by his wife’s impact on the advisors.

“You can’t expect us to agree to this,” Katara hissed angrily as her fingers convulsed on her lap, itching to use her bloodbending to scare them into retracting their decree.

“We understand what you must be feeling, Fire Lady Katara,” Wei spoke up.

He paused when the waterbender’s eyes quickly shifted toward him, her glare as fierce and scorching as the Fire Lord’s fire wall.

“You know nothing of my feelings,” the enraged Fire Lady snapped. “If you did, you wouldn’t assume I would be complacent at the thought of my husband having another woman to bear his child.”

“We wouldn’t be forced to such a decree if you had birthed his heir already!” the old man responded harshly.

Katara’s eyes widened at his accusation, but before she could retort Zuko’s angry growl resounded in the room as the fire wall once again blazed.

“Don’t you put the blame on her!” Zuko roared before he heatedly added, “She’s your Fire Lady and you shall speak to her respectfully, Wei!”

“I was merely stating the truth,” Wei responded indignantly as he looked up at the angry Fire Lord.
He paused and the royal couple, Iroh, and Chao glared at him as the old man turned to look at his fellow councilmen, who were silently watching the events unfold before them.

“Is it such an unreasonable request to have our Fire Lord sire an heir as soon as possible?” Wei asked conversationally. “Would not an heir secure the royal bloodline, thus ensuring the peace and prosperity of our nation?”

The men murmured their agreement.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the men before he turned a piercing glare to Wei when the old man turned to look at him again.

“As I’ve stated before, Fire Lady Katara and I have only been married a short time,” Zuko growled. “It’s too early to rule out the possibility that we can conceive a child.”

“How long would we have to wait until she gives you an heir?” Wei asked with a raised eyebrow. “Months? Years? And what if she never conceives?”

Katara did not hear Zuko’s response because her mind was repeating Wei’s last words. What if he was right? What if she never gave Zuko an heir? A year had passed since their marriage and she still had not gotten pregnant. She was brought out of her thoughts when she heard Zuko growl.

“I will not be taking a concubine,” the Fire Lord stated firmly.

“What? Are you saying your wife’s feelings are more important than the wellbeing of the Fire Nation?” Wei asked gruffly.

Zuko clenched his jaw and balled his hands into tight fists at his sides. Katara’s feelings were more important to him, but he couldn’t admit that. She meant everything to him, he could never hurt her for he would only be hurting himself. But the advisors would never understand, their interest and concern were solely for the Fire Nation. And he understood that because his nation was important to him too.

“It is the only solution,” the old man added when the Fire Lord did not respond.
Katara licked her suddenly dry lips. Even if she argued and raved against the idea of Zuko taking a concubine until she was blue in the face, she knew she could not win. Zuko having an heir was more important to them than her or Zuko’s feelings. Her heart throbbed in her chest and she suppressed a scream of pain, impotence, and fury from escaping her lips. She felt as if she was suffocating. She needed to get out!

Zuko paused from cursing at the old man when he noticed Katara slowly stand up from her place. The men flinched when she looked at them all with pain-filled, angry eyes before she swiftly walked across the long room toward the doors. Zuko felt his heart clench as he watched her go. Although her shoulders were straight and her chin was raised high, he could detect the emotions raging inside her.

Katara, his heart called out to her.

Without a backward glance, the brunette waited until her personal guards opened the doors for her before she stepped out. Kuo and Shen turned back to angrily glare at the old advisors before they quickly followed after their departing lady. Zuko wanted to rush after her, but first he wanted to make things clear to the fools he called advisors. Returning his heated glare at the men, he straightened himself out to his full height.

“I will never take a concubine, especially to sire a child, when I have my wife,” he stated firmly and his amber eyes blazed in defiance.

His glare intensified as he shifted his eyes to Wei when the man scoffed.

“Fire Lady Katara may never give you an heir,” the rotund man sneered.

“It is still too early to come to such conclusions,” Zuko growled out between gritted teeth, “But my point is that I will not take a royal concubine!”

Before the men could continue arguing, the young firebender marched down the long flight of stairs and quickly parted the wall of fire. Stepping through, he firmly and swiftly strode toward the doors. He ignored the men’s exclamations for him to rethink his words and heed their suggestion as he left the meeting room.

Sitting next to Chao and another advisor, Iroh watched his nephew leave and he let out a sorrowful
sigh. When would Zuko and Katara ever catch a break? He shook his head as he slipped his hands into his long sleeves. There had to be another solution to this problem.

Striding quickly down the golden corridors, Zuko headed toward the west wing; he had a feeling he would find his wife in their room. As he finally approached the huge golden doors, he saw that his personal guards were standing attentively on either side of them. When they noticed his approach, they bowed their heads before they looked at him with deep frowns.

“Is my wife all right?” Zuko asked them as his brow furrowed in concern.

“Fire Lady Katara has not said a word since she left the meeting room, my lord,” Shen replied in his grim voice.

Zuko’s frown deepened as he moved toward the doors and opened one.

“You won’t really listen to the advisors, will you, my lord?” Kuo’s voice made Zuko pause, “It will devastate Fire Lady Katara if you were to take another woman to your bed, much less to conceive your children.”

Zuko looked over his shoulder to frown darkly at his guard.

“Do you think me so cruel to hurt my wife in such a way?” he growled out.

Kuo bowed his head apologetically.

Zuko did not wait for them to say anything else as he entered the antechamber and closed the door firmly behind him. He quickly crossed the room to the other set of doors that led to the bedroom. He paused briefly as he reached for the handle before he opened the door and stepped in, closing the door softly behind him. His eyes immediately found her sitting on their bed, her hands tightly clenched on her lap, her shoulders slumping a little, as she gazed dejectedly out of the opened balcony. The sight of her silent distress made his heart clench painfully in his chest. Quietly, he made his way to her.

“Katara,” he called her name softly as he sat down beside her.
“Will you do what the advisors want?” she asked quietly without looking up at him as she continued staring at the scene beyond the balcony doors.

“No,” he firmly replied, “I will not dishonor or hurt you by taking another woman to bed.”

Katara felt her heart ease a little at his resolute words before apprehension and fear once again consumed her. She wrung her hands together as she took a few shaky breaths.

“What…what if they’re right?” she whispered in a strained tone, “What if I n-never give you a child?”

“It’s too early to think that,” Zuko responded quickly before he grimly added, “The advisors are just being overly cautious. Besides, I’m sure Wei brought up this issue as another ploy to make my life difficult. However, I will not bend to his whims.”

Zuko bent his head a little so he could see Katara’s averted eyes. He frowned when she lowered her head and seemed to withdraw into herself. He mentally cursed his advisors for the pain and uncertainty his wife was going through at the moment. He understood the council’s concern, but he would never do what they wanted if it meant he would hurt those he cared about. Especially if it hurt Katara. Besides, he did not want to bed and impregnate another woman.

“Katara,” he softly called out her name once again.

He placed his hand over her clenched, smaller ones while he placed his other hand under her chin. He gently nudged it until she finally relented and lifted her head to look at him. Again, he was struck by the sadness and doubt in her azure eyes and he vowed that he would do the impossible to get rid of such negative feelings for good.

“I will never take a concubine. I promise you that I will never place you aside for another woman,” he vowed firmly as he stared intensely into her eyes, “You are the only woman I want and need.”

“Zuko,” Katara breathed shakily as she stared into her husband’s determined, golden gaze.

Before she could utter another word, Zuko leaned down and pressed his lips gently to hers. Katara sighed softly against his mouth as he brushed their lips together while he let go of her chin in order to run his fingers through her hair before cupping her head to deepen their kiss as he gently brought her
He made slow, tender love to her that night and Katara held tightly onto him, relishing in the pleasure he was giving her and the emotions she could see in his eyes. Once they had found their pleasurable end, they lay back down, wrapped in each other’s arms as they stared silently into the other’s eyes. Katara snuggled deeper into her husband’s embrace as sleep began to invade her mind, secure in the thought that nothing would come between them.

One whole month passed and Katara’s anxiety once again resurfaced as her monthly bleeding arrived. Zuko had again reassured her not to worry, but Katara could not heed his words no matter how hard she tried. What if she really could not give Zuko a child? Would it be too selfish of her if she denied him the chance of being a father with another woman? The thought brought a painful, clenching pain to her chest. The problem wasn’t just about Zuko having a child, but an heir. If he were anyone but the Fire Lord, they wouldn’t be in this situation.

“Katara dear, can you hand me that basket?” Ursa’s gentle voice brought the waterbender out of her thoughts.

“Oh, of course,” Katara replied distractedly as she reached for the basket near her feet before she handed it back to her mother-in-law with a small smile.

Ursa returned the smile, though Katara could detect concern in her golden eyes as she grabbed the basket. They were currently in the Royal Palace Garden and Katara was helping Ursa tend to her rose bushes as they waited to meet Zuko and Iroh for dinner. The sound of a giggling baby caught Katara’s attention. She turned in the direction of the sound to see Jiao playing with her son, Ichiro. The boy was beginning to learn how to crawl and Jiao had to be alert whenever he got too close to the flowers. As she watched the interaction between mother and child, Katara again felt that small twinge of jealousy before she mentally chided herself for feeling such a way. Looking away, Katara let out a sad sigh as she returned her attention to the roses before her.

“Katara, are you all right?” Ursa’s concerned voice reached her ears.

“I’m fine,” Katara replied quickly as she plastered a smile on her face.

When Ursa frowned and opened her mouth to say more, Katara straightened and dusted her hands.

“I think I will visit Yin-Min for a while,” she quickly said before she turned around and began to

down upon their bed.
walk on the stone path.

Ursa watched Katara leave with sympathetic eyes before she let out a sad sigh. Would her son and daughter-in-law ever have it easy?

When Jiao got up to retrieve her son in order to follow her, Katara kindly told her to remain with Ursa before she made her way back to the palace. The waterbender walked slowly down the many, long corridors as she again lost herself in her thoughts. Once she reached the hall where the infirmary was located, she quickened her pace until she stood outside the large room. Katara looked around and frowned when she noticed there was nobody in the room. She turned around to head back to the garden when she saw Yin-Min round the corner with scrolls in her arms.

“Fire Lady Katara?” Yin-Min called out with a smile as she quickened her pace to stand before the taller woman. “I just came back from the Fire Lord’s study so he could look over Physician Toshiro’s ledgers. Were you waiting long?”

“No, no, I just got here,” Katara replied assuredly.

Yin-Min smiled before she frowned when she finally noticed the waterbender’s distraught eyes. “Is there something you need?”

“Oh, well, yes,” Katara murmured as she looked around them.

“Why don’t you follow me inside where we can talk more privately?” the physician’s assistant said gently.

Katara nodded her head and she followed the short woman into the infirmary. Yin-Min walked into Physician Toshiro’s office to place the scrolls down before she turned around with a small smile.

“Why don’t you sit here and rest, my lady?” Yin-Min said as she indicated to the small chair that rested before Toshiro’s small desk.

Katara tiredly sat down on the wooden chair and let out a long sigh.
“I will get you some tea,” the yellow-eyed woman said.

“Don’t trouble yourself. I’m fine,” Katara quickly spoke up when the woman turned to walk out of the room.

Yin-Min paused before she turned around to face the Fire Lady.

“What can I help you with, my lady?” she asked with a concerned frown.

Katara hesitated for a moment before she squared her shoulders.

“I need more of that blend you make,” she said firmly, “That one that helps with fertility.”

Yin-Min’s frown deepened as she fidgeted in her spot.

“You have taken the blend since your wedding night…” she muttered tentatively.

“Yes, but it hasn’t work yet,” Katara spoke up in frustration.

“Uh, perhaps…it would be best…if you stop drinking it…since it seems not to be working,” Yin-Min stammered nervously as she wrung her hands before her.

Katara stubbornly shook her head.

“I’ll continue to drink it until I finally conceive a child,” she said obstinately as her frown deepened.

“I’m sorry, my lady, but I believe it is for the best that you stop drinking it,” Yin-Min spoke up firmly though with a slight tremor in her voice, as if she feared incurring the Fire Lady’s wrath.

“Why?” Katara asked desperately.
“Perhaps your body is not compatible with the blend of herbs and that is why it hasn’t worked,” Yin-Min tried to explain.

Katara was silent as she thought over the possibility. She focused back on the shorter woman when she noticed her shift uneasily on her feet as she averted her eyes.

“What is it?” the waterbender asked.

“I apologize if I overstep any lines, but…” Yin-Min began hesitantly before she continued. “Have you ever thought that maybe…you can’t conceive children…that you are barren?” she asked sympathetically.

Tears began to sting Katara’s eyes at the woman’s words. She bit her lip as she tried to keep the sudden tears at bay, but they poured out and ran down her cheeks before she could stop them. She brought her face down to her hands and cried quietly, an occasional whimper escaping from her throat as her body racked with her silent sobs.

“That’s what I’ve been thinking for the past few months,” Katara breathed out through her tears.

Yin-Min approached the distressed Fire Lady and timidly placed a gentle hand on her shaking shoulder.

“Do not give up hope, my lady,” she said softly, “You must have faith and wait patiently. Maybe one of these days you will be blessed with what you desire.”

Katara fought to control her emotions and regain her composure. Crying would not solve anything. Taking deep breaths to calm herself, she pulled out a beautifully embroidered handkerchief Zuko had gifted her with and quickly wiped her eyes and cheeks as she thought over the woman’s words. Yin-Min was right. She could not give up hope now. She had to stay strong in order to endure the disapproving looks the advisors aimed her way whenever she was present in a meeting.

“Thank you, Yin-Min,” she said as she looked up to smile thinly at the woman, “I’ll try to keep your words in mind.”
Yin-Min smiled before she moved away when the Fire Lady stood up.

“I believe it is almost time for me to meet my husband for dinner,” Katara said with a genuine, large smile at the thought of seeing Zuko.

“I wish you a good rest of the day, my lady,” the short woman said.

With a nod and another farewell, Katara left the infirmary feeling a bit more optimistic if not completely satisfied. The thought of her firebender, however, once again made her heart flutter and she quickened her pace to their rooms so she could be in his comforting presence.

Katara’s hopes once again suffered a blow as another month went by and she still had not gotten pregnant. She had never abhorred the thought and sight of her monthly bleeding as much as she did now, for it was only a constant reminder of her failure. However, her distress and worry were much greater this time since she was no longer taking the blend of herbs Yin-Min created.

What if…she really was barren?

The thought once again brought a pang of pain to her chest as it did every time she thought about the possibility. What was she to do if it were true? What could she do?

Katara was so lost in her thoughts that she did not pay any attention to the exciting event that was taking place around her. She and Zuko were currently in the city sitting in grand chairs above an elegantly decorated dais as a group of traditional dancers performed their art before the royal couple. The common people surrounded the dancers at a distance and the sound of their excited and awed exclamations blended with the lively and loud music. The delicious scent of various foods floated in the warm breeze of the last few days of summer.

Katara created the event as a way for Zuko and her to be closer to the common people. Zuko had protested at first, but she had reasoned with him that if the people saw that he was making an effort to participate in their lives - however minimally it might be - instead of ruling them from the walls of the palace, they would come to appreciate him more. She had been planning this event for months, but sadly she could not muster the strength to enjoy it as much as she had hoped. She did not feel like celebrating with the problems she and Zuko were facing at the moment, though she did manage to smile at the people who greeted them.

Ever since the advisors’ announcement, Zuko had received countless requests from the noblemen for
him to choose their female relatives as royal concubines capable of giving him an heir. Despite their insistence, Zuko vehemently refused them all, though that did not stop them. News had spread that the Fire Lady was unable to conceive. Many had begun to believe the myth that fire and water could not mix and lamented the tragic story of the Fire Lord and his barren waterbending wife.

Katara tried to ignore the derisive and haughty looks of the older noblewomen that continued to visit her for tea or lunch. She endured the barely veiled, harsh taunts from the younger women and their shameless wish that the Fire Lord would choose one of them to take to his bed and sire his children. Now it wasn’t just an heir but children! Katara had fought down her anger, possessiveness, and despair and forced herself to tolerate this cruel trial life had thrown her way because she did not want to cause Zuko more problems. She would have continued the same way if Ursa had not had enough of the women’s cruelty and went to her son to tell him everything.

Zuko had been outraged at the noblewomen’s treatment of his wife and upset that she had not gone to him with the problem but instead decided to bear everything alone. He had ordered her not to meet with them again or to listen to their vicious words. Katara had been too glad to heed his orders, but still it did nothing to stop her from feeling like a failure as a woman. It depressed her that she might never bear Zuko a child and that she might never know what it was like to be a mother. She lived with fear and despair at the thought that one day she might lose Zuko to another woman. To make matters worse Zuko had been coming to their rooms late at night when she had already fallen asleep after staying up waiting for him. Worse of all, he had not touched her intimately since a few days ago.

Did he not want her anymore?

Granted, she was not helping matters by avoiding him either.

The warm feeling of Zuko’s hand touching hers immediately brought Katara out of her dark thoughts. Blinking rapidly, the brunette glanced up to see her husband’s worried eyes. The sound of music and laughter again reached her ears and she berated herself for losing focus. She decided to forget her concerns for the moment so she did not worry Zuko.

“Is something the matter, love?” he asked quietly.

“It’s nothing,” she replied with a smile before she looked away to stare at the dancers. “Aren’t they amazing?” she asked in order to distract them both.

Zuko’s frown deepened at his wife’s evasive answer. He had been sitting silently at her side as he observed her face. He had watched as sadness, anger, and fear flickered in her blue eyes, the
emotions occasionally slipping onto her facial features despite her efforts to hide them. He knew what was worrying her and the knowledge made rage and helplessness settle in his chest. He narrowed his eyes in anger. Damn the advisors and their stupid quest for him to sire an heir with a concubine.

A few days after that disastrous meeting, Advisor Chao had told him that Wei had brought up the issue to his fellow councilmen a few weeks after the royal couple’s first anniversary. Chao admitted that the men had been skeptical and reluctant to agree with Wei at first, but as the months passed without any sign of an heir, they became concerned. When Wei brought up the issue again, arguing more strongly and persuasively at the urgency of Zuko siring an heir soon, the advisors began to waver until they agreed that something had to be done to correct the problem. The most obvious solution in their minds was finding a royal concubine for their lord to bear the next heir.

Chao had then explained that he and Advisors Enlai and Jian had tried to argue against such a plan, saying that they could not claim Fire Lady Katara as barren with such certainty without first seeking the opinion of a physician. But Wei had again emphasized the importance of having their lord produce an heir as soon as possible and that they could not wait for treatments to be given to the Fire Lady. He then proposed that they immediately send announcements to the nobility that the Fire Lord was in need of a royal concubine. The other men had agreed at Wei’s impassioned speech and letters were immediately sent out.

Zuko’s temper had only flared at Chao’s account. His suspicions that Wei was the one to blame for this situation were correct. He wanted so badly to punish all his advisors, Wei especially, for causing his beloved sorrow, but he could not as he also understood their point of view. Continuing the family line was extremely important in Fire Nation culture, most especially the royal bloodline. But, even though he did understand their concerns, he would never betray Katara in such a way. He had hope that one day they would have a child and would prove the advisors wrong.

However, he had decided to summon the best physicians to check on Katara, just in case. It was strange that he hadn’t gotten Katara pregnant with the way they were constantly at each other, but he was sure there was a logical explanation for that. He did not think, not even for a second, that they weren’t capable of having children. He just wanted to alleviate Katara’s doubts and fears.

When Katara genuinely cheered and clapped at a particular move the dancers made, Zuko’s eyes softened a little as he watched his wife’s previous saddened expression change into a delighted one. She had worked hard to plan this event and she deserved to enjoy it. He would help her along by enjoying it himself as well.

Zuko brought his attention back to the dancers before he allowed his eyes to observe his surroundings. He was pleased to see that Katara’s hard work had paid off as he noticed the excited and happy expressions of the people as they enjoyed the various entertainment and food. Although most of the nobility still did not treat Katara with the respect she deserved, it pleased him to know
that the general population adored her. He just had to be patient and believe that the nobility will one day see her worth.

The sun was just setting, casting an enchanting atmosphere upon the scene. Katara’s eyes roamed the buildings surrounding the town square as she took in the decorations in satisfaction before a movement on one of the rooftops directly before them caught her attention. She squinted to make out what it was and frowned when she saw a man stand up near the edge. She wondered what he was doing up there before she glanced around herself to see if anyone else had noticed. Nobody seemed to be paying attention to the man, their sole focus was admiring the dancers before them. Katara quickly returned her attention to the stranger and saw him raise a bow with one hand while he pulled out an arrow from the quiver at his back. Katara’s eyes widened in horror as she watched the archer aim the arrow at Zuko.

“Zuko!” she screamed in horror as she quickly uncorked her waterskin and pulled out a long stream of water.

Zuko’s head snapped up at the sound of his wife’s scream only to see an ice shield suddenly appear before him a second before an arrow embedded itself into it with a sharp crackling sound. He looked at the sharp tip inches from his face in shock before the gravity of the situation took hold. Alarm and anger rose within him as he sprang to his feet with blazing hands. Who dared try to kill him?

He ignored the gasping crowd and the confusion of his guards as he scanned the area.

“He’s up there!” Katara yelled, pointing at the rooftop, as the ice wall melted and returned to wrap around her arms.

Zuko glanced up to where she was indicating only for his eyes to widen when he saw the archer already firing his arrow at Katara.

“No!” he roared in both anger and fear.

He threw himself at her and wrapped his arms tightly around her as he brought them to the ground, protecting her with his body just as the arrow embedded itself on the back of the chair where Katara’s head had been a second before. Katara’s heart pounding hard in her chest as she lay stunned beneath her husband’s larger body. She had been so concerned with protecting Zuko, she had not thought she could be in danger as well.
Gasps and screams were heard as the people exclaimed their shock at the near assassination attempt to their Fire Lord and Lady. Shen, Kuo, and more guards quickly rushed forward and surrounded the royal couple still lying on the floor as the Fire Lord still had his wife protectively pinned beneath him as he warily looked around them. The people again gasped and shouted when they saw the would-be assassin jumping to another rooftop before he swiftly climbed down the building in order to escape.

“Catch the traitor!” Zuko fiercely snarled the order at his guards.

A few guards quickly sprang forward while the rest remain behind to continue protecting their lord and his wife in case there were more attempts against their lives. To the Fire Lord’s amazement he watched as people were already chasing after the man. Dismissing the thought for the moment, Zuko looked down at Katara and worriedly searched her face for any sign of pain.

“Are you all right?” he asked frantically as he brushed her hair out of her face and caressed her cheek.

Katara shakily nodded her head as she took comfort in his voice and touch as she too ran her hand over his face.

“I’m fine,” she responded when he frowned in concern. “Are you all right?”

Zuko nodded, but he continued staring down at her in worry.

Trying to reassure him, she gave him a small teasing smile.

“Are you going to keep lying on top of me?” she quipped as she squirmed beneath him. “Or are you trying to give the crowd a show? I thought I made it clear that I’m not an exhibitionist.”

Zuko frowned but relaxed at her teasing. It showed she was more than okay despite the fact that she was almost killed. He sat back, and hauling her to him, he crushed her tightly to his chest.

“Thank Agni!” he exclaimed against her head. He inhaled her sweet scent and reveled in the feeling of her warm body in his arms.
He glanced up to look at her chair. The sight of the arrow protruding from the place where Katara’s head had been made his blood run cold. If he had been one second slower in reacting, he could have lost her! He would be at his moment holding her bleeding and dead body, just like he had done in that forest in the Earth Kingdom a year ago. He would be mourning his loss and losing his mind to despair! The thought made him shudder and he squeezed his eyes shut as a painful ache appeared in his chest.

He did not realize Katara was going through the same emotions and fears as she wrapped her arms tightly around him. Oh La, she almost lost him! If she had not noticed the archer, she would be at this moment crying hysterically over Zuko’s dead body. She shuddered at the thought and pressed closer against him.

“My lord, my lady,” Shen’s worried voice interrupted them from their anguishing thoughts. “Are you both all right?”

“We’re fine,” Katara spoke up when it seemed Zuko was unable to. She squeezed him in comfort. She could just hear Zuko tormenting himself and she could not let that continue. “Can you please help me up, Zuko? We should reassure the people.”

At her words, Zuko finally detected the worried voices of the crowd that was blocked from view by their guards. He was holding Katara tightly to him and he was sure his face was expressing his fear and worry, but he found that he did not care for his display of emotion. When Katara again asked him to let her up, he reluctantly let her go even though all he wanted was to keep her in the protection of his arms. He helped her stand up, and once he made sure that she was indeed uninjured, he ordered his guards to step aside.

“Fire Lord Zuko! Fire Lady Katara!” the crowd exclaimed their relief with cheers.

They were interrupted as the sound of a struggle and loud curses reached their ears. The crowd step aside to let the guards and a group of citizens passed by as they dragged a cursing and struggling man toward the angry Fire Lord. Zuko narrowed his eyes and his nostrils flared at the sight of him. He instinctively tried to push Katara behind him, but she did not budge and instead frowned at him. Zuko threw her a frustrated frown before he turned back to glare at the would-be assassin who was being roughly shoved to his knees by the guards. His old bow and worn quiver of arrows were being held by one of the guards as evidence.

“How dare you try to kill your Fire Lady and me?!” Zuko growled wrathfully as sparks flew from his mouth.
The middle aged man, whose worn clothes showed he was from the lower class, spat at the ground. Zuko’s nostrils flared at the crude action as he eyed the man. He was glad to know the man wasn’t a Yu Yan archer, for both Katara and he would be dead by now.

“She ain’t my Fire Lady!” the man sneered and his black eyes showed his contempt. “Unlike ye, I ain’t no lover of those Wa’er Tribe barbarians.”

Zuko’s angry growl was drowned by the indignant shouts of the crowd. Katara was equally angry and saddened at the disdain in the man’s voice, though it did not surprise her since she had seen the same look in some of the noblewomen’s eyes when they thought she was not looking. The golden-eyed lord raised a hand to silence the people as he leveled a livid glare at the man.

“Why did you try to take her life?” he again angrily asked. “She has done nothing against you, instead she has done much to help the Fire Nation.”

“Da Fire Nation has ta remain pure!” the man retorted stubbornly as he lifted his chin challengingly. “I don’t wish ta see it dirtied by such a woman!”

His last words were swallowed by the crowds’ outraged shouts.

“Luckily,” the man continued with a sneer as he ignored the angry people surrounding him, “she can’t even ‘ave children.”

Zuko heard Katara’s gasp at the same time his hands blazed with fire as he glared murderously at the cruel man. His face contorted into a fierce snarl, Zuko opened his mouth to respond, but he was interrupted by the deafening roar of the indignant crowd.

“How dare you talk about Fire Lady Katara in such a way?!” a woman shouted as she threw the pastry she had been holding in her hand at the man’s face.

The man was knocked sideways at the unexpected impact before he scrambled to stand up in rage. He did not make it to his feet for the guards harshly pushed him back down to his knees. Another projectile flew from the crowd and it struck the would-be assassin on his shoulder. He turned to glare at the shouting people.

“She is a kind and generous lady!” a man shouted.
“Thanks ta ‘er we are livin’ better lives!” someone else exclaimed.

“Yah, we no longer ‘ave ta worry ‘bout not bringin’ food fer our children!” another woman spoke up as she bent down to fling mud at him.

Katara’s eyes widened and her heart warmed in gratitude as she heard and watched the people defend her. Standing at her side, Zuko was both surprised and pleased at the way his people stood up for his wife so fiercely. He did not make a move to stop them when more people began to throw things at the man that was still kneeling at the ground before him. When someone threw a small rock at the man, striking his temple hard enough that it began to bleed, Zuko quickly restrained Katara when she instinctively moved forward to stop them. Zuko frowned at her before he sighed and grudgingly raised a hand to stop the angry crowd from harming the man further.

He did not even get angry when they did not immediately heed his command as they continued their assault for a few more minutes before they reluctantly stopped. The man was covered in various kinds of food, mud, and dirt and Zuko found a dark satisfaction at his state. Zuko returned his attention to his waterbender when she took a step forward as she looked down at the glaring man.

“I understand it must be difficult accepting a Water Tribe woman as your Fire Lady,” Katara began with a small frown, “But I am trying my best to help both the Fire Nation, my new home, and the Water Tribes, my homeland.”

“Ha! Ye ain’t no help to ta Fire Nation. Yer just trouble. Ye can’t even ‘ave children!” the middle aged man scoffed as he sneered at the blue-eyed woman.

“Silence!” Zuko roared as he took a menacing step forward with a raised, flaming fist.

The man turned to Zuko with another sneer on his thin lips as he again ignored the crowd’s shouts.

“And ye! Yer not worthy ta be Fire Lord!” he shouted, “Ye want ta dirty the great Fire Nation with this woman’s lowly blood! Ye deserve ta die!”

Swiftly, the man reached inside his boot and pulled out a dagger. The crowd gasped as he raised it, aiming at the Fire Lord. Before anybody could react, the man gasped in pain as his arm quivered in the air. The man looked up at his arm with wide, incredulous eyes as he again tried to move it.
“What’s goin’ on?!?” he shouted in fear.

They watched in amazement as his fingers twitched before the dagger fell from his grasp and dropped to the ground. Then his arm was painfully twisted behind his back in a grotesque, sharp angle. He howled in pain. The crowd erupted into confused and fearful murmurs.

Understanding immediately what was going on, Zuko turned to look at Katara. She had a raised hand and her wrist was twisted a little as her fingers trembled with her efforts. Her sapphire eyes were blazing with her anger and there was a fierce expression on her usually kind face. Again, he felt pride swell within him at his wife’s defense of him. She was as fiercely protective of him as he was of her. Everybody looked away from the groaning man and turned to look at their lady when she spoke.

“I will not forgive you for daring to harm my husband,” she told the man in an icy yet calm tone that sent shivers down the backs of all who heard her.

She curled her wrist a little more and the man cried out loudly in pain when his arm was twisted higher.

“He has been an honorable lord, more so than the past tyrants you’ve called Fire Lord,” she continued in that deceptively calm tone that caused fear to spread in the man’s chest more than if she had been screaming at him.

“P-please...m-mercy!” the man moaned in both pain and terror.

He cried out and clawed at the ground with his other hand, when his arm was raised higher, fearing it would be ripped from his body. Katara kept her hold of him, her rage clouding her mind at the thought that this man had almost killed her husband, that he had almost taken Zuko away from her. The soft touch of the Fire Lord’s hand on her shoulder brought her out of her murderous thoughts and she blinked. Zuko squeezed her shoulder, understanding her thoughts. Katara frowned and let out a sigh before she slowly let go of her hold on the man’s blood. She calmly placed her hand back to her side and the man fell to the ground, panting and moaning in lingering pain as he curled his arm against his chest.

“Take him to the prison tower to await his trial for treason,” Zuko ordered his guards in a cool tone.
The man’s eyes widened and the crowd murmured their approval. They all knew that the sentence for treason was a painful death and they thought it fitting for his attempt against the lives of their lord and lady. Two guards stepped forward to grasp the man’s arms so they could roughly haul him to his feet, but he quickly evaded their hands and lunged himself at the ground where his dagger had fallen.

Before anyone could guess his intent, he grasped the knife and placed the sharp tip to his throat. Zuko shouted for his guards to stop him, but they were not fast enough as the man slit his throat with the sharp dagger. Blood immediately spurted out from the deep cut and gushed down his chest. The crowd gasped in horror. The light in his dark eyes vanished before the man dropped to the ground. Dark blood quickly began to spread beneath him.

“Damn it,” Zuko growled under his breath.

The man must have quickly ended his life so he would not have to suffer a slow and painful death after his trial for treason was over. Zuko ignored the crowd as they continued to exclaim their shock. He turned to Katara to see her shake her head at the man’s actions before she lifted her head to look at him.

“I would like to go home,” she said softly.

“Of course,” he quickly acquiesced. He wanted to bring them home as soon as possible, though it upset him that all of Katara’s hard work had to be ruined because of one man’s prejudice.

Zuko turned back to his guards, who were attentively waiting his commands, and ordered them to remove the body. His guards bowed and quickly did his bidding. The Fire Lord then turned to the crowd who were now staring at the royal couple.

“It is a pity to see such a wonderful event end so quickly,” Zuko began in his usual cool tone, “but I wish to return to the palace with my wife.”

To their surprise, the people immediately expressed their understanding and promised that they would continue to enjoy the event their lady had created for them despite what happened. Katara could not stop the large, happy smile that spread on her lips at their sincere words.

“Thank you,” she told them sincerely, “For everything.”
She felt Zuko touch her back to guide her away from the dais, but her attention was caught when an old woman step forward.

“Don’t lose hope, my lady,” the woman spoke up in a confident tone, “I believe that soon you will give Fire Lord Zuko and the Fire Nation a strong, healthy heir.”

Katara again found herself smiling gratefully as she thanked the woman before she was ushered to the royal carriage by her husband. The short ride to the palace was silent and Katara frowned when she caught sight of her firebender’s cold, impassive features. She slowly reached for his hand and waited to see if he would reject her touch. She was a little unsure because he had not touched her in a while. She had been unsure of a lot of things lately. When he immediately grasped her hand, holding it tightly, she let out a small, relieved breath. She would wait until they were in their room to ask him what was wrong.

A few minutes later, the carriage stopped at the palace courtyard. Katara softly thanked Zuko when he helped her down. He placed her hand on the crook of his elbow before he led her toward the long flight of stairs that led into the palace. Kuo and Shen followed at a respectful distance. They were silent as they walked down the golden corridors before they finally arrived at the huge doors that led to their chambers. Zuko dismissed his guards with a curt word and they quickly left after they bowed at the couple. Zuko opened the door for Katara to go through first before he closed the door behind him. They crossed the antechamber before Zuko opened the second set of doors to let his waterbender in.

Katara walked into the room and made to remove her formal dress as she heard Zuko close the door behind him, but before she could complete the task, she felt her husband gently grasp her arm. He turned her around so she could face him before she found herself crushed tightly to his hard chest. He had removed his armor without her notice and she sighed as she wrapped her arms around him and melted against his warmth.

“Oh, Katara, Katara,” she heard him murmur huskily as he nuzzled against her hair, “I felt as if my heart stopped at the thought of that arrow hitting you. I would’ve gone mad with grief if I had lost you.”

Katara embraced him tightly.

“The same thing would’ve happened to me if I had lost you,” she told him gently.

“But what if this time I wasn’t able to save you?” he whispered agitatedly against her soft hair.
“But you did,” she reminded him as she ran her hands along his strong back, “I’m fine, so don’t worry.”

Zuko pulled back to give her a small smile as he caressed her soft cheek.

“And I’m fine because of you,” he said softly before he added, “Thank you for coming to my rescue.”

Katara smiled at his words.

“Always,” she replied as she snuggled against him and sighed when he tightened his hold of her.

Even though she said she was all right, truthfully she was still shaken with the knowledge that she had narrowly escaped death once again. She really hoped she did not have to go through a similar experience for it truly was frightening, though not as terrifying at the thought that she could have lost Zuko that day. Still, she knew it must be harder for Zuko since he had already held her dying body, and she did not want him to worry and suffer because of it.

Her thoughts again shifted to what that man had said and she bit her lip in distress. She was sure there were many other people who thought the same way he did. As if he could read her mind, Zuko leaned back to stare intensely into her eyes.

“Don’t let what that idiot said get to you, love,” he told her softly, “You saw how well loved you are by the people and the faith they have on you, though they don’t love you as much as I do or believe in you as much as I do.”

Katara smiled at his words before she reached up to place a soft kiss to his lips. Zuko bent down to capture her lips in a slow and gentle kiss as he tangled his fingers in her long, wavy hair before he again brought her close to his chest. Not a minute passed before he was divesting her of her clothes until she stood completely naked before him. He quickly stripped himself before he wrapped her in his arms, savoring the soft and warm feeling of her skin against his, as he swiftly brought them down upon their large bed. After a near death experience, his lovemaking was fierce, rough, and passionate, as if to affirm that she was there and his. Katara reciprocated in kind to his frantic lovemaking, overjoyed at the thought that he was making love to her again. She did not think to question why he had avoided her before as she held him tightly to her, pressing him deeper into her body as if she wished to fuse their bodies, their very souls, together.
All through the night, Zuko held her protectively to him as they slept and Katara was content. But no matter how much she wished to dismiss the thought, she could not help but wonder if more problems were headed their way.

Could this be a sign of more trouble to come?
Agonizing Uncertainties

In an unknown part of an Earth Kingdom forest, stood a small and insignificant mountain, mostly covered by huge trees and thick undergrowth. It was because of this heavy thicket that many travelers avoided that area, and for this same reason, a small gap in the mountainside went unnoticed. The small hole in the hill led into a long, dark tunnel. This tunnel led into a small cave made up of multiple tunnels that branched out into different dens of various sizes. In a few of the stone chambers, ragged tents were clustered together. The multiple lamps spread throughout the rooms revealed clothes, bedrolls, cooking items, crates, and other camping gear.

The sound of shouts and clashing of weapons echoed through the tunnels, emanating from another bigger cave where more lamps and torches surrounded the place to ward off the darkness and the permeating chill of the mountain.

Standing to the side with an unreadable expression, Jianguo silently watched as his men trained with their weapons. On other days he had the benders go outside to train with their elements.

Chang stood silent and still beside him, his hands hidden behind his long sleeves, his expression blank, his green eyes assessing his fellow Dai Li agents giving pointers to the other earthbenders. A moment later, his mind wandered, as was wont to do nowadays. He was once again thinking of the Fire Nation maid, Jiao, as he had been doing ever since she slipped from his grasp that day in Omashu. He wished he could see her again, touch her. Married or not, it did not matter to him. He wanted her. Besides, many women became widows during turbulent times. And he would help her obtain that status as long as he had her with him in the end.

Jianguo frowned as he continued to watch the training session and mentally cursed. They really were a pathetic bunch of fighters—as Zuko kept arrogantly pointing out. Many of them were former noblemen and commoners that had been banished from the Fire Nation when they had revolted against Zuko when he ascended the throne. Others were thieves and peasants from the Earth Kingdom that had joined him at the prospect of riches. They had never been trained as warriors before they joined him, so they lacked the skill to fight properly against an army of Fire Nation soldiers.

But Jianguo could not complain since they were willing to follow him in his quest for revenge and glory. Luckily, not all of them were hopeless, there were a few of his fellow military soldiers that rebelled alongside him against Zuko years ago. Then there were the Dai Li who had greatly helped in his plans, though none have worked so far. Jianguo narrowed his eyes in anger. He had to think of a new plan, a plan that wouldn’t fail this time. He was tired of waiting for what was due to him, but most of all, he wanted to bring Zuko down and take the waterbender for himself. Luckily, he had finally figured out what had happened to his informant in the capital after the Fire Lady told them—taunted them, to be more precise—so now they could move forward.
The firebender slanted his eyes to the side when he felt someone approach him with loud booted feet. He did not need to look directly at the man to know who it was. Hands clasped behind his back, Jianguo remained silent until Ping squirmed as he waited for his leader to acknowledge him. Chang did not glance toward the large earthbender, which only caused Ping to sneer at him.

“Well?” Jianguo finally asked in a cool tone. “What news did the men gather at the village?”

The nearest village was five days away. It wasn’t as large as a city, but it wasn’t small either, which was perfect for his needs. Nobody paid attention to some of the most inconspicuous men he sent to gather supplies or information from the gossipy villagers. He had stressed to his men that they should not raise the villagers’ suspicions and to be extremely careful when they returned to their hideout. He knew they were being searched for high and low by everybody in connection to the Fire Lord and Kings Kuei and Bumi, but so far they had been lucky to remain hidden.

However, they had a close call a few months ago when a stranger had become suspicious of two of his men and followed them out of the village. Luckily, his men noticed and lured him in another direction before they took him by surprise and killed him, taking anything of value from the man’s person before burying his body deep in the woods. When his men returned with the tale and the loot, they had noticed what seemed like a Pai Sho tile depicting a white lotus among his belongings, but since no one had any use for it as the rest of the set was missing, it was thrown away.

Ping cleared his throat, bringing Jianguo out of his thoughts.

“Well, they ‘eard dat both da Fire Lord and Fire Lady were shot at with an arrow ‘bout two weeks ago,” the earthbender began slowly.

“What?” Jianguo growled as he sharply turned his head to stare severely at his follower.

“But they’re both fine!” Ping quickly continued when his leader glared at him as if was his fault.

Jianguo hummed before he again turned back around to absentmindedly observe his men. Who else wanted the Fire Lord dead? He was glad, however, that whoever it was had been unsuccessful. Zuko would die by his hand and no one else’s! Narrowing his eyes, Jianguo reached up to distractedly touch face. Although all the bruises had faded by now he could not forget the insult of being marred by the Fire Lord. He smirked as he then brought his hand down to slowly rub his thumb across his lips at the memory of another pair of soft lips beneath his. The stunning waterbender could not die before Jianguo had his chance to have her.
“What other information did they hear?” he asked as he glided his thumb across his lips before he again grasped his hands behind his back.

Ping scratched the dark stubble on his large, squared chin.

“Well, it seems dat da council is looking fer a royal concubine fer the bastard ta give ‘im an heir,” the earthbender continued.

A dark eyebrow rose on the firebender’s pale forehead. He did not notice that Chang had a similar expression on his face.

“Oh? Why is that?” he asked.

He could not imagine Zuko setting aside such a beautiful, passionate, and exotic woman as the waterbender for a boring and fragile noblewoman just to beget an heir.

“There are rumors dat da Fire Lady can’t git pregnant,” the earthbender responded.

Another noncommittal hum escaped the former general. He could not believe the feisty waterbender was unable to conceive children. Her body was made for it, as was her nature, if the rumors of her kindness were to be believed. He was more incline to believe the problem lay with Zuko. The idle thought gave Jianguo pause and a cruel smile spread across his lips.

A shiver of fear raced down Ping’s spine at the sight and he shifted uneasily in his spot before he let out a breath of relief when his leader turned and walked away without another word. Chang watched him go from the corner of his eye before he returned his attention to the training men.

Silently, Jianguo walked away from the cave and entered one of the many tunnels. With a ball of fire in his hand to light his way, he made it to the small den where his tent was set up as an idea formed in his head. He lit a few lamps before he made his way to the small, low table placed in a corner and sat down before it. Grabbing a piece of the cheap paper he had purchased, he placed it on the surface before he reached for the old ink brush and began to write as his cruel smile widened.

It seemed that Zuko’s life was not going as smooth as he must have hoped it would when he married
the waterbender. Jianguo did not even have to come up with another plan to make Zuko’s life miserable for now since it seemed that it was being taken care of by the sad situation of him lacking an heir. Zuko would have no choice but to sire an heir with a concubine in order to ensure the line, though it would do no good since Jianguo planned to get rid of both Zuko and his descendants so they would not cause any problems for when Ozai took over. But before that happened, Zuko would lose the love of the waterbender once he took another woman to his bed to bear his child and he would be miserable because of it.

In the meantime, Jianguo would help increase Zuko’s misery by pricking at his male pride. He could just imagine Zuko’s reaction when he read his missive. Jianguo’s golden eyes glinted with a cruel satisfaction as he continued to write.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

White, hot flames licked clenched fists as Zuko spun around to blast a bright ball of fire at an imaginary attacker. He was alone in the arena as he angrily practiced with his white fire as a way to let out his frustrations. His anger only increased, however, when his heated emotions caused him to lose his ability to bend it accurately. The white flames flared high before they lowered down to their regular red color. Zuko tried to force the white fire back but to no avail.

Frustrated, he decided to give it up for the moment and instead he marched toward the bench resting on the side and grabbed his dual broadswords. He swiftly strode back to the middle of the arena and began a difficult series of swordplay. As he thrust one of his flaming swords forward, Zuko imagined he was cutting down all the problems he was facing and the people who were pressuring him into doing something he absolutely did not want. Did his advisors believe he would gladly jump at the chance to have more women into his bed? He was nothing like his father who had no qualms in having multiples concubines service him!

Yet, the councilmen could not understand his aversion at the prospect of having another woman. Siring children with concubines was a common occurrence among the nobility, although these children were seen as illegitimate and had fewer rights and privileges as the legitimate children did. If, however, a nobleman’s wife was unable to conceive or if she only gave birth to daughters and no sons, the oldest male child birthed by his concubine would become his heir. Even a few of the past Fire Lords had been birthed by their fathers’ royal concubines when their wives were unable to produce children, although they were usually raised by the Fire Ladies and prohibited from spending time with their real mothers.

As he spun in a flaming circle while he slashed his swords to the side, Zuko’s thoughts shifted to the events that followed weeks after the assassination attempt. Because of his near death, the advisors were now even more vehement in their demand that he sire an heir as soon as possible, some even going so far as suggesting he bed multiple concubines so as to ensure he could at least impregnate one of them. He had not taken that suggestion well, to say the least.

He had the most renowned physicians of the Fire Nation come to the palace to see if they could do
something regarding the lack of an heir. They had assessed Katara to the best of their abilities, but they had all agreed that they couldn’t find anything wrong with her, though they did admit current medicine made it difficult to prognosticate infertility with complete accuracy.

Zuko frowned. There had to be a way to get out of this situation! The anger was then replaced by fear as the memory of the assassination attempt on Katara’s life once again tormented him.

Weeks had passed without any other incident, but he had placed guards to silently watch over Katara without her notice in order to not upset her sense of independence. Of course, she had immediately suspected something and he had reluctantly confessed his actions when she confronted him about it. But damn if he did not do everything possible to keep her safe!

Katara’s family even sent him a letter a few days ago telling him they had heard about the Council’s demand for him to choose a royal concubine. Hakoda and Sokka had warned him that if he did not do something to ensure Katara’s complete happiness soon, they would not hesitate to bring her back to the Southern Water Tribe, using force if necessary. This was not what Zuko had envisioned their married life to be. He again hoped Katara was not regretting marrying him. His heart clenched at the thought as it always did.

No, he could not lose her! Not by an assassin, or by his advisors’ wishes, or even by Katara’s family. He would not lose her!

The sound of someone clearing their throat caught his attention and he spun around toward the sound. Panting slightly from his exertion, Zuko brought down his swords and raised a dark eyebrow on his perspiring forehead as he stared impatiently at the servant that had interrupted him. The servant trembled slightly at his lord’s dark look before he bowed as he held out a bound scroll.

“This letter arrived for you a few minutes ago, my lord,” the short man said quickly.

“Hm,” Zuko uttered as he held out his hand. He had ordered that any strange letters addressed to him should be given to him immediately.

The servant stepped forward and handed the letter to his lord. Zuko thanked him distractedly as he looked down at the scroll warily. The servant bowed before he quickly retreated. Zuko glared down at the scroll in his hand. He did not need to open it to know who it was from since it was just as indistinctive as the others he had received before. He quickly untied the dark string that held the scroll closed before he unfurled the paper cautiously, knowing that nothing good would come out of it. His eyes narrowed at the familiar writing before he began to read the short missive.
I heard the fools in your Council are looking for a concubine for you. Since it seems you have other things to worry about and soon will have another woman to ease your needs, why don’t you give me your wife? I would gladly take her off your hands. I already know how it feels to have her in my arms and I know she will be the perfect woman to satisfy my lust once I do have her in my bed. I heard you no longer have a need of her since she cannot give you an heir, so it shouldn’t be a difficult decision to give her to me.

However, perhaps the problem does not lie with her but with you. Perhaps you are the one who is sterile and you are taking away the lovely waterbender’s chance to bear children. Give me the waterbender and I will show her what a true man is like. I can do what you clearly cannot and plant a child in her. Perhaps even two or three.

Jianguo

A growl ripped out of Zuko’s throat and his eyes saw red as he clenched the paper in his hand. It burst into flames and quickly turned to ash.

Never! Katara is mine! Hell would freeze over first before Jianguo has a chance to harm her! he thundered in his head. And no one will father a child with Katara but me!

He knew Jianguo had sent the letter to taunt him and his hatred for the traitor grew to unknown bounds. With another growl, Zuko lifted his swords and imagined he was cutting Jianguo down as he slashed and struck the air in rapid successions. He continued even as his muscles strained with his efforts and sweat poured heavily down his face as he vented his rage, frustration, and helplessness.

All of these problems were putting a strain on his marriage to Katara. His wife rarely talked to him now and spent most of her time in the Fire Lady room. He knew he was not helping matters either since he no longer sought her out as much as he used to. He now tended to come to their rooms late at night when he knew she was sleeping after shutting himself in his study. He was ashamed to say that he had not made love to her for several days because he could not bear to see the depression and sadness in her lovely features, which was not helping with the issue of conceiving an heir. That was not to say he didn’t want her, crave her as he always had, but he did not know what to do to remedy this situation, which only increased his stress and anxiety.

He understood what his advisors were worried about since if he died without an heir, the royal bloodline would cease to exist and no one would be next in line to inherit the throne. There would be chaos as the noblemen fought to become the next Fire Lord unless Iroh decided to step up, but Zuko knew his uncle was not interested in becoming Fire Lord.
Zuko paused, panting heavily, as another thought crossed his mind that made his stomach clench painfully.

What if Jianguo was right? What if it was he that was the problem? What if...he really was sterile? The possibility stung his male pride so much that it almost brought him to his knees.

The Fire Nation was a patriarchal society, so if a couple was unable to have children, infertility was always blamed on the wife. It seemed he had followed along on his countrymen’s ideas because, although he did not believe Katara was barren, he had not thought the problem could lay with him.

Could he be the problem? Could it be because of him that Katara was going through a difficult time? Could it be he who was denying Katara the chance of becoming a mother?

But that still did not mean that he wanted to let her go! He did not want to give her up so she could bear some other man’s child! It would kill him if she were to be gone from his life.

With a vehement curse, Zuko threw his swords aside before he sat heavily down on the hard floor with his hands clenching the long, sweaty strands of his dark hair that had fallen from his topknot.

What should I do?

Azure eyes stared blankly at the darkening sky as the sun made its descent toward the horizon. A few stars were already twinkling as if they could not wait for the sun to completely disappear. A sad sigh escaped plump lips as the waterbender stared out the window of the Fire Lady bedchamber. The room was darkening at the fading sunlight, but she did not bother lighting the candles for the darkness seemed to accompany her gloomy mood.

For the past several weeks, she had been looked over by multiple physicians who all came to the same conclusion that they could not find the reason why she had not gotten pregnant yet. She was healthy and young, and her monthly cycle was fine. She did not suffer from any hormonal or sexual deficiencies. They recommended certain foods and teas that said helped increase fertility. Some had even recommended acupuncture. She had been reluctant at first to take any herbal blend since Yin-Min’s concoction had not worked, but Katara had tried them anyway in the hopes that these might work.

They didn’t.
Her monthly bleeding had just stopped two days ago.

She did not know what to do. She had not heard of any of the women of her family having problems conceiving. In fact, her Gran-Gran once told her that before the war their female ancestors used to give birth to numerous children. So what was wrong with her?

She sighed. Another day had passed where she only caught glimpses of her husband before he either retreated or she did, and her heart once again grew heavy with sadness, insecurity, and longing. She missed Zuko, she missed the times she would spend in his presence, but she was afraid of being near him. She did not want him to see the sadness that clung to her nor did she wish to see whether his eyes held pity or remorse. If she were to see those emotions in his amber eyes, she knew she would break.

She knew it was because of her that Zuko was having problems with his Court Council since he refused to heed their decree. And now that weeks had passed since the physicians assessed her and no heir was in sight, the advisors were even more insistent that Zuko take a royal concubine.

Katara pressed her forehead against the cool glass and sighed. She could not stop remembering Madam Fang Hua telling her that a Fire Lady’s most important duty was giving her husband an heir. It seemed everybody already thought she had failed that task.

By producing an heir, married Fire Nation noblewomen achieved prestige, financial security, and power. A barren wife was an unfortunate woman, for the inability of producing children not only denied her those privileges, but she had to watch as the son of her husband’s concubine was given the entitlements her own son would have been given. Jiao had told her that some women would secretly take on lovers to impregnate them and passed these children as their husbands’ own when they suspected it was their husbands who were infertile, just so they would not lose their positions and bring shame on herself and her family. But either way, they had no say when it came to their husbands’ concubines and illegitimate children. Another reason why noblewomen sought lovers of their own.

But that was not how Katara was raised. She could not agree to such heartless and vulgar deeds in a marriage. Although Water Tribe women were expected to give their husbands children, those who were barren were not mistreated or ridiculed because of it. Their husbands certainly did not cast them away for another woman. If a couple could not conceive a child, they would adopt an orphaned one or take in a youngest child from relatives who had too many children.

But her home was now the Fire Nation and things were different. And as Fire Lady she had a responsibility to carry out her duties as well as follow their traditions. She may be selfish for denying
Zuko the chance to have a child with another woman when she could very well never be able to give
him one, but she could not help it. The thought of Zuko being intimate with another woman, the
thought of him siring a child with another woman, brought a sharp pain to her chest and made
breathing painful.

However, Zuko rarely spent time with her now, much less touched her in any way whether
innocently or sexually. This only made her feel more insecure and afraid. Was he tired of her
already? Did he regret his promise of being faithful to her? Had a young, beautiful noblewoman
captured his eye already and he was beginning to resent his barren wife for getting in his way?

Katara choked on a small sob at the possibility and she pressed a clenched fist to her mouth to
suppress the sound. Then she narrowed her eyes and balled her hands beside her. She did not notice
the ice crystallizing along the edges of the window as her emotions raged within her.

No! She couldn’t lose Zuko! She wouldn’t be able to live without him!

She looked back at the darkening sky with desperate eyes.

What should I do?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A few days later found Zuko sitting dazedly behind his large desk in his study, the documents laying
on the wooden surface forgotten at the moment. His eyes glazed over as he recalled with perfect
clarity the few times he had made love to Katara in this room. Desire flared to his groin as he
remembered her flush features and cries of pleasure as she writhed beneath or above him. He wanted
Katara so badly. He missed making love to her. Missed being deeply buried within her tight, wet
body. Missed the sight of her blue eyes shining at him with equal emotions of passion and love.

Dammit, he just missed her! He missed her presence, her smiles and laughs, and her comforting
arms.

But fear and uncertainty made him hold back and he cursed his cowardliness. He was afraid that she
would tell him that she wanted to leave him, that she could not stand being with him any longer, that
she was unhappy with him.

And what if he really was the one who was sterile? Would Katara still love him, would she still want
to be with him, even if he could never give her children? He drew in a ragged breath at the pain he
felt in his chest at the thought.
He knew he should have himself checked to see if he was the problem, but he was too ashamed and afraid to be told he could not father children. Yet, he knew he would have to, especially if it meant he could help lessen Katara’s worries.

A knock at the door brought him out of his thoughts and he called out gruffly for the person to enter. He watched impassively as the short-haired maidservant appeared with the same aphrodisiac tea his uncle kept sending him every week at the same hour. If it was not for his reluctance to alert his uncle about his bedroom problems with his wife, Zuko would have told the old man to cease his meddling actions. Zuko impatiently gestured for the woman to take the tray away as he had done for the past weeks before he dismissed her. The servant bowed before she silently walked out of the room with the tea.

Once the door was closed behind her, Zuko looked back down at the pile of papers on his desk. He refused to drink the tea for it would only turn him into a lustful beast that would not be satisfied until he completely and repeatedly possessed Katara. At the moment their relationship was not going well enough for him to attack her with his persistent desires.

Zuko read a couple of lines on one document before another firm knock interrupted him. Frowning, he called out a curt ‘enter’ as he lifted his head to see who was interrupting him this time. He watched as the door opened and Shen walked in before closing the door firmly behind him. Zuko almost slumped in disappointment when he realized it was not Katara as he had hoped. He wondered at the dark frown on his personal guard’s grim face and his eyebrow rose in inquiry.

“What is the matter, Shen?” he asked as he placed the paper he was reading down.

The Fire Lord’s curiosity grew when his noticed his usually unperturbed guard shift slightly with his hesitation. Shen’s frown had deepened and his gray eyes probed his lord’s face. Zuko slightly narrowed his eyes at his guard’s scrutiny of him.

“Your…present has arrived,” Shen finally said and his words were cold and rough.

“My present?” Zuko asked with a confused frown before a small smile appeared on his lips as he remembered.

Oh, right, he had forgotten about it. He hoped it would solve some of his problems.
“I’m glad it has arrived,” Zuko said with a small amount of anticipation coloring his tone. “I was beginning to wonder when it would.”

Shen’s gray eyes seemed to widen in disbelief before his frown turned dark.

“Where should we place your…present?” Shen asked between gritted teeth.

Zuko frowned at his guard’s tone as he leaned back in his chair. He thought for a moment before he replied.

“You can place it in my bedchamber,” he responded curtly.

He did not understand his guard’s reaction, but it was irritating him. He noticed Shen stiffen and he wondered at the angry expression on the older man’s face.

“As you wish, my lord,” Shen finally responded coldly as he gave a stiff bow before he turned around toward the door.

Zuko frowned after him as the door was once again closed. He heard a soft, feminine cry followed by the sound of falling objects outside the room, but Zuko did not pay much attention to it since he knew his guard would take care of it.

However, why was Shen angry? If Zuko wanted to use what he had ordered brought to him there was nothing Shen or anybody else could say about it. He made to stand up so he could look at what had been sent to him, but he decided to look after a few more of his documents. He would go look at it once he finished here.

Barely containing the urge to slam the door shut, Shen had angrily stepped out of the Fire Lord’s study and promptly crashed into the woman who was about to knock at the door. She cried out softly as the impact threw her backwards, causing her to lose her hold of the scrolls she had in her arms.

Quickly, Shen reached forward and grasped her arm to steady her. She looked up at him with wide, yellow eyes from a delicate, pretty face.

He watched as her porcelain skin turned a dark pink. With her embarrassment no doubt, he thought. He recognized her as being Physician Toshiro’s assistant. He had seen the tiny woman a couple of times whenever his lord or lady visited the infirmary, but had not paid much attention to her. She was
too small and thin for his tastes. Besides, his eye had already been caught by one of the royal seamstress’s assistants, a tall, buxom woman with a sweet smile and a sharp wit, though she kept rebuffing all of his advances. Her resistance only made him want her more.

“I apologize,” he said as he let the small, young woman go.

“Ah, i-it’s o-okay,” she stammered as her blush deepened in color and she shyly averted her eyes before she again peeked at his face.

When he raised his eyebrow at her, she quickly looked down and he watched as her blush deepened and spread down her pale neck to disappear under the collar of her tunic. Indifferent to the woman’s shy reactions, Shen bent down and quickly picked up the scrolls she had dropped when he bumped into her.

“Ah, t-thank y-you,” she muttered as she grabbed the scrolls when he handed them to her after he straightened himself. She checked the scrolls carefully and sighed in relief once she realized they were not ruined.

“Physician Toshiro would have been displeased if I didn’t give these to our lord. Is Fire Lord Zuko busy?” she asked as she glanced uncertainly at the door.

The name of his lord brought Shen’s anger back to the forefront of his mind and he narrowed his eyes. He watched as the woman smiled timidly at him as her blush did not leave her skin. If he remembered correctly, this woman used to be one of Ozai’s concubines. That only made his anger spike.

“For the moment he is not too busy,” he said coldly.

He did not notice the woman flinch at his harsh tone as he turned away from her and headed down the corridor to do his lord’s bidding, despite his reluctance to do so.

Katara bid Uncle Iroh and her mother-in-law goodnight as she stepped down from the garden’s veranda. Dinner had been pleasant, but she would have enjoyed it more if Zuko had joined them, though she was not surprised that he did not show up. With a sad sigh, Katara made her way through the garden toward the palace. She paused as she turned her head to look at the cherry blossom tree beside the calm pond.
An ache formed in her chest as she remembered the times she had spent under the tree’s shade with her husband before her eyes glazed over when she recalled how Zuko had pressed her passionately against the tree as he kissed her senseless. With a shake of her head, Katara turned away from it and continued on her way to her room. There was going to be a full moon that night and she wondered how she was going to spend the hours until the moon’s energy waned enough for her to find sleep. She knew how she wanted to spent it, or better yet with whom, but she was sure Zuko would avoid coming to their room again.

The thought brought another ache to her heart before she narrowed her eyes determinedly. Then she would not wait for him to come to her and instead she would seek him out. She would seduce him, make him crave her again. She was tired of them dancing around each other. They needed to talk.

“Fire Lady Katara,” the sound of her name brought the waterbender out of her thoughts.

Katara looked up to see Jiao smiling gently at her.

“Hi, Jiao,” Katara greeted her maidservant with a friendly smile. “Where’s Ichiro?”

“I already put him to bed. He was very energetic today so he quickly fell asleep as soon as his head touched his pillow,” Jiao explained with a small laugh, her tone full of motherly affection for her son.

Katara ignored the pang in her chest as she laughed amusedly with one of the few women she considered a friend in the palace.

“I was actually searching for you, my lady,” Jiao continued with that same kind tone, “I was wondering if you would like for me to help you prepare for bed and keep you company for a while.”

Any other day, Katara would have decline the offer since it was usually Zuko who helped her out of her day clothes to ready for bed—though it definitely was not for sleep—but this time she would appreciate having a friend to keep her company until she gathered enough courage to go after her distant husband and bring him back to their room.

“I would really appreciate it, Jiao,” she responded.

Both women continued down the golden halls as Katara listened amusedly to Jiao’s stories of her son’s antics. They finally arrived at the long corridor that led to the royal couple’s rooms and Katara
smiled when she spotted Shen and Kuo standing on either side of the huge, golden doors.

“Shen, Kuo, good evening,” she greeted with a smile as she finally stopped before them.

“Good evening, my lady,” both guards simultaneously responded as they bowed.

When they straightened, Katara frowned since they did not return her smile with small ones of their own as they usually did. Instead, their faces were grim and they were looking at her with what seemed like sympathy. Jiao also frowned when her husband did not smile at her.

Not liking their expressions, the waterbender looked away and made her way to one of the doors, but she paused when Shen quickly blocked her path. She looked up at him with a questioning frown.

“My lady…maybe you would like to spend the night in the Fire Lady bedchamber?” he asked gently, though the question sounded more like a request.

Another frowned marred Katara’s brow as she stared up in confusion at her guards.

“Why?” she asked.

“Please, my lady,” Kuo spoke up almost pleadingly, “It is for your own good.”

Alarm and uneasiness swelled within the waterbender. What were they talking about? What were they trying to hide from her? Or better yet, what were they trying to keep her away from? She needed to know and they were not going to stop her from finding out.

“Step aside,” she commanded firmly, “I demand to enter my own chambers.”

Shen and Kuo glanced at each other briefly before they looked back down at the determined Fire Lady. They shifted uneasily, hesitant, before they stood firm and refused to move.

“My lady, please—”
“I said step aside!” Katara snapped as her fear and apprehension flared at their resistance.

Again both guards hesitated, but the determined and fierce expression on their lady’s face let them know she was not going to give up. Jiao wrung her hands in worry as she wondered what was going on. By her husband’s and Shen’s averseness to let their lady in, Jiao knew that whatever was inside was only going to cause her lady pain.

Slowly, reluctantly, the tall guards moved away and Kuo just as unwillingly opened one of the large doors to let the waterbender in. Katara glanced at them both with a frown before she swept past them and entered the anteroom only to freeze in shock at what she came across.

Kneeling gracefully on a large, elaborate cushion a few feet away from the door was Mai. Makeup adorned her usually simple face and her long, black hair was arranged into an elaborate coiffure with many golden hairpins stuck to it. It was what the young noblewoman was wearing, however, that made Katara’s eyes widened in shock. Mai was not formally dressed as she usually was, but she was wearing a light, red robe, so thin Katara could make out the outline of her small, bare breasts. A smile had been sitting on the woman’s thin lips, but it had vanished as soon as the waterbender appeared. Mai narrowed her eyes and tilted her chin up haughtily.

“I thought you were Zuko,” the dark-eyed woman said vacuously.

“What?” Katara uttered as her mind ran sluggishly with her confusion before she narrowed her eyes as she firmly demanded, “Get out of my rooms. Now!”

Mai scoffed as she smoothed the thin material of her robe down her chest. She ignored the glares of the guards and the disbelieving stare the maidservant were sending her as they stood attentively at the door.

“You can’t order me around,” the dark-haired noblewoman said passively before a mocking smile appeared on her lips as she added, “Especially since the Fire Lord already ordered the guards to bring me here.”

Dread began to seep into Katara’s chest and her fierce stance faltered a bit.

“What are you talking about?” she asked angrily, though a slight tremor could be heard in her voice.
The smile on Mai’s lips grew into a triumphant smirk as she stared arrogantly into the waterbender’s apprehensive, blue eyes.

“Zuko has ordered for me to wait here for his pleasure,” Mai explained slowly, vicious triumph dripping from every word, “I am to become his royal concubine in order to bear him an heir…since apparently you failed at the task.”

A pained gasp escaped Katara at her words and she clutched at her chest.

“No,” she said brokenly.

_No, it can’t be true! Zuko can’t do this to me!_

Katara straightened herself and narrowed her eyes angrily at the placid woman.

“You’re lying,” she said with certainty.

Mai raised a mocking eyebrow as her smile turned malicious.

“Am I?” she asked cruelly before she looked up to stare levelly at the angry-looking guards, “Why don’t you ask the guards?”

Katara spun around to stare hopefully, desperately, at her personal guards. Her eyes darted frantically from one to the other as she waited for them to refute Mai’s words and prove that Zuko would never betray her. When they did not immediately respond and averted their eyes from her, her anxiety grew to the point where she thought she might start hyperventilating.

“Shen? Kuo?” she whispered.

Shen cleared his throat before he lifted his gaze to look sadly at her.
“Fire Lord Zuko ordered me to place his…present in his room,” he admitted softly, as if his soft tone would lessen the blow.

An anguished moan fell from Katara’s lips as she took a step back as if she had been physically struck.

_No. No! This can’t be true!_ she cried out in dismay, _Zuko would never betray me! Especially with...her!

Her whirling mind focused on the sound of Mai’s quiet laugh. Katara turned around to glare at her. Her hands hovered over her waterskin and the dagger strapped on either side of her waist. She wished she could use both to wipe that smirk from Mai’s face. Or better yet, use her bloodbending to kick the woman out into the streets.

“It seems Zuko was unable to forget about me,” the thin noblewoman said with an arrogant and vicious tone as she stared at the waterbender’s pained and angry eyes. “I will give Zuko a child and he will love me more than he has loved you. Then he will divorce you and cast you aside. He will make me his Fire Lady and our child will become the next Fire Lord.”

Katara felt as if her legs were about to give up on her at the despair and pain that was festering inside. This was what she had feared was going to happen. The day had come that Zuko had decided to do what was demanded of him as Fire Lord. He had chosen a royal concubine over his own wife. And there was nothing she could do about it. She felt tears gather at her eyes before she forced herself to hold them back.

No! This had to be a mistake! Zuko would never betray her! She was positive he would not hurt her in such a way. There had to be some sort of explanation. Feeling more confident, Katara ordered herself to straighten her back and raise her head.

“I am sure this is all a misunderstanding,” Katara said firmly, though a part of her wondered if she was just trying to convince herself.

“You can choose to believe that if it would make you feel better,” Mai responded passively as she stared uninterestingly down at her nails before she looked back up to smile cruelly as she added, “If you don’t want to get more hurt, you should leave now before Zuko arrives to take me to his bed.”

“It’s _our_ bed,” Katara growled out angrily, “And I’m sure he would do no such thing, instead he will
throw you out. Zuko will never betray me.”

Without waiting for Mai to retort, Katara whirled out and walked out of the room before she attacked the woman. La, did she want to. She could not stand being in the same room with a barely clothed Mai while they waited for Zuko to appear to put everything back in its place. Jiao and the two guards glared one last time at the noblewoman before they followed after their lady. Katara felt Kuo and Shen stand worriedly behind her and she turned around to face them.

“Tell my husband that I will be waiting for him in the Fire Lady bedchamber once he throws…that woman out,” she told them before she turned around again and headed down the long corridor to the opposite end.

Jiao quickly followed after the silent waterbender. The servant frowned worriedly since she could see how tense her lady’s back was and how her hands clenched at her sides. There had to be a misunderstanding, there just had to! Fire Lord Zuko would not harm such a wonderful and loving woman as his wife!

They finally arrived at the Fire Lady’s quarters and Jiao rushed forward to light a candle to illuminate the slightly dark room. The sun was setting. She moved to start the fireplace, but the waterbender absentmindedly waved her away.

“Would you like anything, my lady?” Jiao asked softly as she watched the waterbender stand uncertainly in the middle of the large room.

“No, thank you, Jiao,” Katara spoke up, her voice sounding drained and anxious, before she said, “You can return to your son now.”

“But, my lady—”

“I would like to be alone,” Katara interrupted her softly before she added, “Please.”

Jiao hesitated a moment as she looked worriedly at the dejected Fire Lady before she gave a bow and reluctantly left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

As soon as she heard the door close, Katara began to agitatedly pace the room as she again got lost in her thoughts. She was sure Mai was lying. Somehow she had succeeded in entering the palace and
the royal rooms and convinced the guards that Zuko wanted her there.

But then why did Shen say Zuko had ordered him to place Mai in his rooms?

She paused as pain gripped her before she shook her head. There had to be an explanation. She should have demanded to have Mai removed from the room, but Katara preferred that Zuko should be the one to chase the woman out once he found out what was going on. Maybe that way Mai could finally get it into her skull that Zuko didn’t want her. With a firm nod, Katara made her way to the window and stared out into the setting sun as she had been doing for the past few weeks.

The golden sun slowly made its descent, creating orangey and purple hues. Those hues then turned dark blue as the sun completely disappeared and stars appeared in the sky. The bright full moon rose high in the dark sky as the night grew long.

Katara’s confidence began to waver as the hours passed without a single glimpse of her husband. The candle Jiao had lit had extinguished and the room was plunged into darkness with only the silvery light of the full moon to lighten the place. Katara did not bother lighting another candle as despair consumed her.

Where was Zuko?

As the time passed without any sound of footsteps outside her door, Katara’s despair turned to rage and she glared into the night scene outside the window where she had not moved since she entered the room. The anger then turned into a sense of betrayal and she choked back a sob as she pressed a trembling fist to her mouth. Then that feeling of betrayal turned into overwhelming sorrow and she could not stop the tears that poured relentlessly out of her eyes.

Her heart lurched painfully in her chest at the thought that Zuko had not come to retrieve her because he was at that moment spending the night with Mai. Was an heir that important to him that he would betray her like this?

Why?!

With a cry of agony and fury, Katara fell against the wall beside the window as she slammed her fist against the wall before she slowly slid down the cold surface to curl brokenly against it as she buried her face into her knees. Quiet, gasping sobs escaped her constricted throat at the thought that Zuko was pleasuring and loving Mai like he once did to her. She could not stop imagining Zuko kissing
Mai as their limbs entwined together and their bodies strained against each other.

“Oh, gods,” she sobbed as she clenched her eyes shut and rocked herself.

She did not think she could survive this. She felt like her heart was breaking. If Zuko indeed took Mai as his royal concubine, as his lover, Katara was sure she would die from the heartbreak. As the night lengthened, the waterbender’s quiet cries of anguish increased.
Earnest Consolation

The sound of booted feet echoed in the empty corridor of the palace as the Fire Lord hurried eagerly to his room. It was late, but he had been detained by an urgent matter with one of his generals telling him they had received news about a sighting of Jianguo in an Earth Kingdom village. Zuko had him immediately send men toward the continent, his inner fire flaring at the possibility of finally ending the traitor’s life. One problem was almost solved and another solution waited for him in his room. He could not wait to make use of it.

He finally rounded the corner to the corridor that led to his royal chambers and he increased his pace. As he approached the huge doors, he noticed that Shen and Kuo were still at their posts when it was so late at night. He wondered at the cold expressions on their faces as they glared at him. He raised an eyebrow at them, but decided to ignore them for something more important as he walked past them and reached for one of the doors.

“You don’t deserve a woman as kind as Fire Lady Katara,” the sound of Kuo’s angry voice stopped Zuko in his tracks and made him stiffen.

“Kuo,” Shen tried to shush him as he laid a restraining hand on the younger guard’s shoulder.

Kuo shrugged him off as he turned to glare at his fellow guard.

“You know you agree with me,” he said irately.

Zuko slowly turned around to glare indignantly at his guards. How dare they say such things to him? If he didn’t hold them in such high esteem for their loyalty to him through the years, he would have fired them on the spot or thrown them in jail.

“Why do you say that?” he growled out angrily.

“You’re a real bastard if you don’t realize you are making a mistake,” Kuo responded as he clenched his hands at his sides.

Shen’s eyes widened in horror at the insult his friend had just blatantly thrown in their lord’s face, even if he completely agreed.
Zuko took a menacing step forward, his face contorted in an infuriated expression, but he made himself stop before he killed his guard.

“I will deal with your insolence tomorrow,” the dark-haired lord growled out through gritted teeth before he turned around and quickly opened the door.

“Yeah, eager for your fun tonight,” Kuo muttered even as Shen painfully elbowed his side.

Zuko paused beneath the doorframe and was about to turn around so he could strike his impertinent guard’s face when the sound of rustling fabric coming from the anteroom caught his attention. Curious, he turned back to look into the room only to freeze at what he saw.

“Mai?” he asked confusedly as he stared down at her kneeling on a cushion a few feet away from him.

His shock and confusion then quickly turned into anger and wariness as he stared down at the woman who had tried to come between him and Katara in Omashu.

“What the hell are you doing in my rooms?” he demanded to know angrily.

He swiftly glanced around the room to see that, except for Mai, there was no one else there.

“Where is my wife?” he asked gruffly.

Mai lifted a hand to gracefully brush her rouged cheek as she stared at him with a small smile.

“The waterbender left to give us our privacy, Zuko,” she responded in a low tone.

“What?” the firebender asked as he stared at her incomprehensibly.

He finally noticed what she was wearing—or wasn’t wearing—and he frowned. He was not at all
tempted by what Mai was blatantly showing since Katara was the only one able to arouse him so completely. Even when she was wearing layers of clothing to hide her delicious curves. Again, he wondered where his wife was. A feeling of dread was beginning to grow in his chest.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her again in a cold and curt tone.

“I'm here to be your royal concubine and to give you an heir, of course,” she responded with certainty lacing her tone.

“The hell you are!” Zuko growled out as he glared down at her. Was this another of her schemes to separate him from Katara? He would never forgive her!

A frown appeared on Mai’s pale brow. After hearing news that the council was looking for a royal concubine to bear Zuko’s heir, she had immediately rushed back to the Fire Nation. If Zuko had to choose a concubine from the rest of the noblewomen, she knew he would choose her since he could not stand the other foolish women. She had arrived at the palace full of hope and presented her request to become his royal concubine. The servants and guards had looked at her distastefully as if they expected her request to be quickly denied. To their shock and to her delight, one of Zuko’s personal guards had appeared to reluctantly escort her to Zuko’s chambers to await his pleasure.

She had one of the servants she had brought with her immediately change her from her formal dress to the seductive, thin robe before she waited patiently for Zuko’s arrival. He had taken longer than she had expected, but what mattered was that he was finally here. However, she did not understand why he sounded so shocked and angry at her presence.

Dismissing the thought, she smiled as she gracefully stood up. The thin, red robe exposed her nudity beneath it and she pushed her chest out to entice him. Zuko, however, did not look away from her face and instead raised a mocking eyebrow at her. The noblewoman suppressed another frown when Zuko did not peruse her body as she had hoped, but she did not let that stop her.

“I am here for your pleasure, Zuko,” she spoke up as she tried to muster a seductive tone.

A snort escaped the firebender at her attempt.

“Why would I want you when I have Katara who, by the way, has given me the most incredible pleasure I have ever known despite her being a virgin when I first took her?” Zuko responded coolly.
Mai’s black eyes narrowed at his biting words. She did not want to hear him talk about his intimate moments with the Water Tribe bitch.

“You can say whatever you want, but you’re the one who asked for me to be brought here,” she retorted smoothly.

“The hell I did,” Zuko countered with a growl. He was sure he had banished her from the palace, much less from the private chambers he shared with his wife.

“Ask your guards,” the noblewoman told him as she indicated with her hand to the door. The movement caused the edges of her thin robe to part a little, exposing more of her chest.

“You’re lying,” the firebender said without taking his eyes off her face before he continued in a hard tone, “I don’t know how you managed to enter my rooms, but I will throw you out as soon as I find out what is going on.”

Spinning swiftly on his feet, the irritated Fire Lord stepped outside the room. He was relieved to see that his guards were still in their designated places, though they were still glaring at him.

“Why is Lady Mai in there?” he barked out the question.

The two guards’ angry expressions transformed into confused ones as they stared at the livid Fire Lord who was glaring at them as if they were at fault.

“You ordered for your…present to be brought into your room, and though I was reluctant to do so, I follow your orders, my lord,” Shen spoke up grimly.

Zuko’s brow furrowed into a deep frown at his guard’s words.

“I thought you meant another present I had ordered for my wife!” Zuko exclaimed through clenched teeth before he pointed a finger behind himself, “I did not request a concubine!”

He saw as relief spread across their faces and he narrowed his eyes at them.
“Did you really think I would betray my beloved wife?” he growled out furiously.

Shen and Kuo flinched and looked down, shamefaced, at their lord’s furious tone and expression. They were sure that if he wanted to he would have killed them at the moment for their doubts to his honor and devotion to his wife.

“I apologize for not specifying what present I was talking about in your study,” Shen spoke up guiltily as he gave a respectful bow. “If I did, this could have been avoided.”

Zuko sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose in his frustration.

“It’s not completely your fault, Shen,” the Fire Lord said gruffly, “I should have asked what you meant instead of assuming.”

“Please forgive our doubts, my lord,” Shen added contritely.

“We really thought you wanted Lady Mai to be brought to your rooms to…uh…” Kuo began before he trailed off meaningfully. Then in a more grim tone he added, “I also apologize for my rash words, my lord. I should never have spoken to you that way. I understand if I will be punished.”

Zuko frowned at him and the young guard straightened himself, his hands clenching in anxiety at his sides.

“You should be glad I hold you in such high esteem, Kuo, or you would have found yourself in a cell,” Zuko told him grimly. “I understand your feelings, so I will let it go because you showed loyalty and concern for my wife. However, if you dare act in a similar way again, I will not be lenient.”

Kuo relaxed slightly and bowed his head gratefully, knowing he had gotten lucky.

Zuko’s frown deepened as he remembered what Kuo had said before he apologized.
That feeling of dread grew within him as another thought formed in his head. If his guards truly believed he wished for Mai to be his royal concubine, did that mean Katara did as well? Mai said Katara had left to give them…privacy, but did Mai lie?

Agni, he hoped she lied.

“Please tell me Fire Lady Katara has not come to our rooms yet,” Zuko told them anxiously.

He felt his heart sink and he tensed when he saw his guards exchange glances and avoid looking at his eyes.

“Well?” he demanded with a growl as he felt panic swell in his chest.

“Fire Lady Katara arrived and discovered Lady Mai in your rooms dressed…like that,” Kuo finally spoke up.

“No,” Zuko breathed in denial.

He could just imagine what Katara must have gone through to discover another woman—his former girlfriend—dressed and waiting for his pleasure. Damn it! If their roles had been reversed, Agni knew he would have gone insane with rage.

“Why didn’t you make my wife stay and escort Mai out of the palace?!” he demanded to know angrily. He was so furious that he did not notice he took out the title to Mai’s name.

“As we said, we thought it was what you wanted, my lord,” Shen spoke up with a bit of a defensive tone. “We couldn’t disobey your orders…even if we wanted to.”

“Fire Lady Katara would have known that there was a misunderstanding, so why did she leave?” Zuko asked. He could feel his anxiety rising.

“The woman,” Kuo spoke up as he nodded his head insultingly at Mai who was looking silently at them from inside the room, “made Fire Lady Katara believe she has a right to be here, my lord.” He purposely did not add an honorific to the noblewoman to show how little respect he held for her. He
and Shen had never liked the woman.

Zuko frowned at his younger guard’s words before he turned to look at his other guard when he spoke next.

“Our lady seemed sure everything was a misunderstanding,” Shen continued, “She asked us to let you know that you can find her in the Fire Lady bedchamber once you clear this matter up.”

“The woman told Fire Lady Katara she should leave before she got more hurt when you arrived to take her to your bed,” Kuo added.

The Fire Lord felt his ire rise toward Mai before he felt dread and apprehension at what Katara might be feeling and thinking at the moment.

“How long ago did my wife leave?” Zuko asked in a strained voice.

He watched as his guards once again glanced at each other as they shifted slightly and that dread festered and grew that it caused his heart to pound in anxiety.

“A little after dinner,” Kuo finally muttered.

Zuko cursed vehemently.

That was hours ago! It was almost past midnight!

Enraged, his amber eyes blazing in fury, Zuko whirled around and strode toward Mai, who took a step back at the violent expression on his face. She cried out when he grabbed her roughly by the upper arm, his grip hard, his hand almost painfully scorching her skin, as he glared furiously down at her.

“This is the last time I will tolerate your interference in my marriage to Katara!” he thundered wrathfully.
“If it wasn’t for that bitch you would still love me!” Mai hissed stubbornly as she returned his glare. “I would have been your Fire Lady! I would have given you an heir by now!”

“Silence!” Zuko roared as he violently shook her.

“I won’t allow you to insult my wife!” he growled before he harshly reminded her, “I already told you I never loved you! I love Katara and I will only love her. And you are insane if you think I would throw Katara aside for you!”

She tried to pull her arm away, but Zuko only tightened his grip and shook her once again. He was beyond mercy now. His blood was boiling in his veins in rage.

“Do you know why I sought you out those few times when we were together?” he asked cruelly, his golden eyes hard as flint. “It was because I didn’t want to use the local brothel, not because I enjoyed being with you. I didn’t want to hurt your feelings before, but now I am sick and tired of you trying to come between Katara and me. You are terrible in bed and I always dismissed our encounters without a second thought.”

“You lie!” Mai screamed in denial. She had never heard Zuko speak so much in her life and his words were cruelly digging into her heart.

“Ah, but I am only speaking the truth,” Zuko continued with that same malicious tone before his voice turned deep and husky, “But with Katara on the other hand…Agni, she is incredible. I can’t get enough of her. I want her all the time, in our bed, in the garden, in my study, anywhere. Every time I see her I want to rip her clothes off so I can make passionate love to her.”

“Shut up!” Mai screeched as she slapped his face with her free hand.

Zuko’s jaw clenched as he turned back with blazing eyes as his fingers dug harshly into her skin.

“You better pray that you have not irrevocably damaged my marriage to Katara or so help me I will make your life a living hell,” he growled through clenched teeth.

Without waiting for her response, Zuko roughly pulled her after him toward the door. He paused briefly to pick up the dark cloak she had placed on the low table before he hauled her after him. Shen and Kuo, who had been silently listening and watching the scene with satisfaction, quickly moved
back. Mai resisted his hold as she dug her bare heels into the marble floor and pulled at his hand, but Zuko was relentless as he dragged her screaming and protesting out the door. Once they stepped out of the antechamber, the firebender thrust her out the door. Not expecting his actions, Mai tripped and fell on the floor. Not bothering to ask if she was okay, Zuko threw her cloak at her to partially cover her nudity.

The two guards watched the noblewoman fall without feeling any sense of sympathy before they looked up at their enraged Fire Lord whose golden eyes were blazing and his nostrils flaring in fury. They were reminded of their old temperamental prince from years before and they shivered. They hoped their Fire Lady forgave him or else there would be hell as their lord vented his anger at everybody and everything for his wife’s indifference to him.

Sitting up on the floor, Mai looked up with an indignant and livid glare. Zuko stood angrily above her as his body shook slightly in his rage.

“I don’t wish to see your face again as long as I live,” he told her coldly before he just as icily ordered, “Stay in Omashu.”

Dismissing her completely, Zuko turned to his guards who quickly straightened at attention.

“Remove her from the palace. She is never to be allowed in the palace again,” he commanded before he firmly added, “I am going to look for my wife.”

He did not notice his guards’ smiles as he turned away and quickly strode down the long, golden corridor.

“Zuko, you can’t do this to me!” he heard Mai scream, “Zuko!”

The golden-eyed firebender ignored her as he swiftly continued on his way. He hoped Katara had fallen asleep and had not noticed the time. As he entered the royal family wing, Zuko glanced out a window and froze. There was a full moon!

“Damn it!” Zuko cursed as he raced toward the Fire Lady bedchamber.

As he finally arrived, Zuko entered the dark antechamber and swiftly crossed it. He paused before the door that led to the bedroom, his heart pounding wildly with anxiety. He moved forward and
leaned his ear against the door as he tried to figure out what scene he would come upon. When he heard nothing, Zuko frowned deeply. He did not know if that was a good sign or not. Squaring his shoulders, he reached for the handle and slowly opened the door. He peered inside and saw that it was completely dark. He went in, gently closing the door behind him, and scanned the dark and silent room.

“Katara?” he called out softly as he shot a spark at the fireplace. Flames quickly sprang up and illuminated the dark room.

He barely had enough time to dodge to the side in order to avoid a book striking his face. He jumped to the side as more items were thrown at him by an angry waterbender.

“How dare you?!” Katara screamed in rage, “How dare you come in here when you were with her?!”

“Katara, wait! Please, listen to me!” Zuko tried to reason with her as he ducked his head when a vase was hurled his way before it crashed against the wall behind him. “Let me explain!”

“You lied to me!” Katara continued screaming. “You lied when you said you would never betray me! You lying...” she shouted as she threw another vase, “cheating...” another book was chucked at his face, “...bastard!” she hissed as she picked up a candlestick and hurled it at him.

“Katara!” Zuko growled out her name as he evaded the objects, her words wounding him. How could she think that of him?

The blue-eyed brunette ignored him as she continued to throw anything she could get her hands on to keep him away from her. When she ran out of things, she used a water whip to keep him at bay when he tried to advance on her. She was feeling so much anger and pain, she did not care if she hurt him. She wanted him to know how angry she was at him. She wanted him to realize that she would never forgive him for what he had done to her.

Why? Why did he do this to me?! she cried out mentally as her pain increased to the point she felt she could not breath.

Zuko felt a small spark of anger ignite in his chest as she continued to refuse to listen to him, but that emotion quickly vanished when he saw Katara suddenly stop. He finally noticed that her hair was disheveled, her dress wrinkled, and her eyes were red from crying. It seemed as if all the rage had
rushed out of her and was replaced by excruciating sorrow and pain. Her blue eyes began to glisten with unshed tears and her hands trembled at her side. Zuko felt his heart clench and he gasped sharply as if she had succeeded in physically wounding him.

“You promised to love me and only me,” Katara told him brokenly as she stared with anguish into his eyes. “Why did you betray me so?”

Her tears finally poured out of her eyes and trickled down her face. She began to cry silently as she continued to stare at him as if he had stabbed her in the heart with a dagger. More tears slid down her now colorless cheeks, wetting the enticing, soft skin he loved so much. Zuko felt his heart constrict with a painful ache at her heartbroken words. Her silent sobs were breaking his heart more than if she were to cry out loudly. He could sometimes detach himself to other people’s sorrow, but the sight of Katara in tears was something he could not bear.

He hated to see her in tears, but he especially despised it when he was the cause of those tears, of that sadness dimming her bright blue eyes. He felt bound to do anything and everything in his power, no matter the price, in order to stop her tears because he lived to make her happy.

As if her energy had been drained out of her, Katara fell to the floor on her knees where she continued to sob quietly. Her shoulders trembled slightly and her hands clenched tightly onto her robes.

“Katara!” Zuko cried out in alarm as he rushed toward her and dropped onto his knees before her.

He wrapped his arms around her shaking body and she desperately tried to get out of his hold.

“Don’t t-touch me! Leave me a-alone!” she sobbed chokingly.

Zuko felt his chest constrict painfully at her words and her aversion to his touch.

“No,” he told her firmly as he tightened his hold of her, albeit gently, in order to keep her from moving away from him. “You have to listen to me, Katara.”

She shook her head weakly as she continued to struggle to get out of his embrace. She knew she could make him let her go if she used her waterbending or her bloodbending, but the truth was that a small part of her, maybe a masochistic part, wanted to be held by him no matter how much he had
hurt her. And it only increased her anger.

“It’s all a misunderstanding,” he tried to explain as he strained his neck in order to catch a glimpse of her eyes, but she refused to look at him.

“You’re lying,” she whispered before she brokenly said, “You were gone for too long.”

“I was caught up in something else…” Zuko began but was interrupted by Katara’s scoff.

“In Mai, you mean,” she hissed bitterly as she pushed her hands against his chest to move him away from her.

“No!” the firebender growled out, resisting her actions, before he pleadingly continued, “I was in an unexpected meeting with one of my generals regarding Jianguo’s whereabouts and I didn’t know Mai was in our room until a few minutes ago. Please, Katara, believe me.”

“I want to believe you, Zuko,” the waterbender said in a strained voice as she dug her fingers painfully into his clothed chest, “But it was your former lover that was in…our room.” She stressed the word in a broken sob.

“Mai can never be termed as my lover,” Zuko said firmly, “She can barely be called my former girlfriend. She was a person I shared an insignificant relationship at one point. She is nothing but an unmemorable past. It’s not my fault she refuses to forget me and move on.”

Katara didn’t respond, and when she remained silent for a long while, Zuko’s heart began to race in apprehension.

What is she thinking? he thought anxiously. Agni, her silence was killing him!

Finally she let out a long, sad sigh as she dropped her arms away from his chest and turned her head away from him.

“I want to go home. Back to the Southern Water Tribe,” she said firmly.
Zuko felt his heart wrench painfully in his chest and his eyes widened in shock.

“‘No!’” he shouted as he crushed her tightly to him. “This is your home! Please don’t leave me, Katara! Listen to what I’m telling you!” he pleaded frantically.

He pulled back slightly and frowned when Katara again pushed against his chest as tears continued to roll down her cheeks. He gently grasped her chin and slowly tilted her chin up so she could look into his eyes. The pain in those blue eyes of hers made him feel as if a flaming dagger had stabbed his chest. She then narrowed them and jerked her head away from his grasp.

“Why don’t you believe me?” he asked desperately as his hand fell back onto his lap.

Katara stared into Zuko’s amber eyes guardedly, unsure if he was just saying those words to pacify her, but when he continued to stare determinedly and unwavering into her eyes, she felt her doubts falter a little. She wanted to believe him so badly, a small part of her still did, but a bigger part of her was afraid that he might be lying to her just to spare her feelings. If their situation had been different, she would not have doubted him for a second, but the issue of Zuko begetting an heir no matter how he did it was a huge problem. It was his duty and she knew how serious Zuko took up his responsibilities to his nation.

“You’re accusing me of being unfaithful to you when it’s not true,” Zuko continued with a frown when she didn’t reply. “I can’t accept that you doubt my fidelity and love for you.”

“What am I to think when you rarely make love to me anymore and you avoid coming to our bed?” Katara responded heatedly, her blue eyes blazing.

“There’s a logical explanation for that,” Zuko replied with a deeper frown. “That isn’t a reason to jump to such conclusions.”

“Oh, really?” Katara retorted angrily with narrowed eyes. “What other explanation could there be for you to stop making love to me? I know just how passionate you are, Zuko, and if you aren’t coming to me, it’s obvious you would look for it with someone else. So why not with Mai?”

“We may have not made love as often, but why would you think I would be unfaithful to you? And with her?” the firebender growled out.
“What was I supposed to think when Shen told me you ordered him to place Mai in our room?!” the brunette hissed furiously as she glared at him. Her nails pierced her palms as the urge to strike him overwhelmed her at the memory. “What else am I to think when I find that half naked ...woman...in our room waiting for you?! Especially after she flaunted herself, right in front of me?”

Zuko’s frown deepened at her angry words and he felt his chest tighten in indignation at her questioning of his honor, but he told himself to try to see things from her point of view. She did not know what had been on his mind these past weeks, nor did she know what happened with Mai, and it wasn’t her fault his absence had made her distrust him. It was his for not having talked to her sooner.

“I didn’t order Shen to place her there,” he began to explain rapidly when she tried to get up, “He came to my study to tell me the present I had ordered had I arrived, so I told him to place it in our room. I thought he was talking about something else, not Mai!”

“Oh, really?” the waterbender asked skeptically.

“You can ask Shen and Kuo to tell you what happened when I arrived to find her there,” he told her confidently.

“How do I know they won’t lie because you told them to?” she asked hotly.

Zuko clenched his jaw, but again forced himself not to snap at her for her doubts.

“You know I don’t lie, especially not to you,” he growled. “Besides, if I wanted Mai as my concubine I wouldn’t have had her thrown out of the palace.”

When Katara continued to remain unmoved, Zuko frowned. He needed to convince her of his loyalty and of his love for her. Or, he could lose her.

“Katara,” he said firmly, and when she lifted her head to look at him warily, he softly added, “there is only one woman for me, and that woman is you. Have I not demonstrated it to you all this time?”

Katara stared unwaveringly into his golden eyes as her mind raced with his words. Memories of
everything he had done for her, of his sweet gestures, his defense of her against the royal court, of
how he had comforted her after Jianguo’s attack, of his support when she wanted to make herself
stronger, even their heated discussions, flooded her mind.

“If it wasn’t Mai, what did you think was being delivered to you?” Katara asked cautiously, though
she felt a bit of optimism at his words.

She wiped at her wet cheeks and Zuko quickly pulled out his silky handkerchief and handed it to
her. She stared at his offering for a moment, feeling his intense stare on her face, before she slowly
reached for it. When she grabbed the handkerchief, she heard his small sigh of relief. She quickly
dabbed her eyes and cheeks. She hated it when she cried in front of him.

“It’s a book I ordered from the University of Ba Sing Se that’s said to have advanced medical
techniques,” Zuko explained as he tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. “I’m hoping that there’s
something in it that would help us conceive a child.”

Katara’s hand froze at his words. A part of her wanted to remain angry and indignant for the hours
she had suffered through uncertain agony, wondering what Zuko and Mai were doing, wondering
why he had betrayed her. To her shame, another small part of her even wanted to make him suffer a
little so he could understand what she had gone through. She wanted to lash out at him and at
everything. To scream and rage until she had no more energy left, until everybody could understand
her anger and pain. But her logical side told her that Zuko was telling her the truth and he had not
known what was going on until a few minutes ago. He had not meant to hurt her and she did not
want to purposely hurt him just to spite him. Yet, she still did not understand why he had not touched
her in a while and that made her both sad and wary. And she hated feeling that way.

When it seemed his wife was lost in her thoughts, Zuko reached up to wipe her tears away with his
thumbs before he gently cupped her face as he continued to hold her gaze. It made him more
optimistic that she had not pulled away from his touch as she did before. He could see that Katara
was beginning to believe him and he prayed to Agni that he could convince her to trust him again.

“Katara, if only you knew how much you mean to me, how much I love you,” he told her softly,
earnestly, as he caressed her wet skin with his thumbs, “Please, don’t cry. I’ve never lied to you. I’ve
never betrayed you and I never will.”

He paused briefly as he again tried to find the words to express his ardent feelings for his
waterbender. Even after this whole year of being married, he still found it difficult to vocally express
the tender, sentimental feelings he had for his wife. But he knew he had to if he wanted to make
Katara believe him.
“Don’t renounce my love, Katara,” he continued gently, “Being with you is what makes me happy. I only love, want, and need you. No other woman makes me feel the way you do. Making love is something I’ve only done with you and no one else, especially not with Mai. It doesn’t matter what she says. We had sex a few times and that is it.”

He paused again as his gaze turned soft and passionate, and Katara could not look away. Her heart yearned to understand and wanted reassurance.

“But with you…gods, there are no words to describe it,” he groaned softly, “I’ve made love to you more times than I can count and yet I can remember every incredible encounter, each amazing moment, with perfect clarity. Please believe me. The feelings and sensations my body and heart experience with you is something that has and will never occur with anyone else.”

Katara felt her heart swell with every word Zuko uttered. She stared deeply into his golden eyes as her heart and mind warred with her anger. When Zuko continued to hold her gaze, almost pleadingly, doubt immediately vanished and was replaced by relief. With a small cry, she threw herself at him and he immediately wrapped his arms fiercely around her.

“Oh, Zuko, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me for doubting you,” she whispered remorsefully against his neck as she tightly clung to him.

“I understand why you would come to such conclusions after what happened,” Zuko told her softly as he soothingly ran his hand up and down her back.

He was mentally thanking all the gods that his wife still believed in him. He did not know what he would have done if he had lost her trust in him as well as her love. His wife pulled back slightly and Zuko reluctantly let her move away a little. He stared down into her face, but she averted her eyes as she stared at his chest.

“It’s just…I didn’t know what to think or believe anymore,” Katara said quietly. She licked her suddenly dry lips before she continued, “You’ve been coming to our room late at night when I’m already asleep. And you haven’t…made love to me in a while. I was beginning to think you didn’t want me anymore.”

Zuko frowned guiltily as she repeated her doubts. He could not blame her brief moment of doubt in him for it was his fault for making her feel as if he no longer wanted her in his life, even though it was unintentional. Zuko cupped her cheek gently and she looked up into his eyes once again.
“I apologize if it seemed like I was neglecting you,” he told her sincerely, “I just had so many things going on in my head and I didn’t know what to do to make you feel better with this whole situation about an heir. I’ve been trying to find a way to help us conceive. That’s why I thought the present Shen was talking about had arrived and I told him to place it in our room. I never thought the present he was talking about was Mai.”

Zuko almost spat the noblewoman’s name in his anger at her schemes.

At his explanation, Katara felt her stomach twist with remorse for doubting him. How could she have thought that he would hurt and betray her?

“I feel so horrible for judging you so quickly,” she said shamefully as she again averted her eyes. “How can you love such a doubtful wife?”

Zuko smiled as he lifted her chin up.

“How can you love such a neglectful husband?” he retorted gently.

Katara smiled at him as she leaned into his touch before a small frown marred her brow when Zuko removed his hand and cleared his throat as he looked away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked worriedly.

“There is another reason why I’ve been avoiding you…” he began in a quiet tone.

He was silent for a long moment that Katara began to feel her anxiety rising again. She watched as Zuko shifted uneasily as he again cleared his throat before he continued.

“I am ashamed at the thought that…I could be the one who is…sterile.”

“I don’t believe that!” Katara exclaimed assuredly as she cupped his cheeks so she could turn his face toward hers this time.
Zuko wondered why she sounded so assured of the fact that it was not him who was the problem.

“But I don’t want to find out if it’s true by you impregnating another woman,” she hissed out, her blue eyes flaring.

“I understand how you feel because I sure as hell don’t want to find out if you can become pregnant by some other man,” he growled out. He frowned darkly when he remembered Jianguo’s words from that letter.

“Why would I want to be impregnated by some other man just to see if I wasn’t barren?” Katara asked with a frown.

“You won’t,” Zuko ground out, “I will kill any man who tries to take you away from me.”

Katara smiled at his possessiveness. That was the man she loved and married. Her smile wavered and she shifted slightly, reminding her that they were still sitting on the cold floor.

“Would you…?” she began softly, hesitantly, as she stared into her firebender’s eyes, “Would you still say that even if I never give you a child?”

“Of course,” Zuko responded without any hesitation, “Besides, it is still too early to determine if we really could never have children.”

Katara let out a relieved breath and she relaxed her tensed muscles as she smiled at him. She watched as he returned her smile before he smirked wickedly at her as he stared intensely into her eyes. Katara shivered as her stomach clenched with need. She missed seeing that lustful look on his face.

“We aren’t helping matters either if we don’t make love constantly,” he rumbled huskily.

Katara shuddered in desire before she returned his smirk with a sultry smile.

“Then why don’t you make love to me right now, my lord?” she breathed out as she leaned against him.
Zuko felt heat flare to his groin. He loved it when she called him that when they were alone because it meant she wanted sex.

“Oh, I will, my lady,” he replied throatily.

He slipped his hand behind her head before he swooped down to kiss her lips in a fervent and loving kiss. They both groaned against each other’s lips as desire erupted within them. Mouths pressed hungrily, teeth grazed lips, and tongues stroked and twirled together. It was what both had been longing for, what both needed to reassure themselves of their affections and trust.

As he pulled away to catch his breath, Zuko moved them to their feet. With a smile on her lips, Katara slid her arms around his neck and pressed close against him as she lifted her face up to his. Zuko bent his head down and pressed his mouth back to hers. He grabbed her tightly about her waist, securing her close against him, as he savored the sweet taste of her lips. He took his time in claiming her mouth, unashamedly taking all she willingly offered to him, feeling every inch of her curves, from her breasts to her thighs, pressed tightly against his hard frame, her belly cradling his swelling shaft. He released her waist to trail his hands down her hips, sliding them around until he firmly cupped her lush backside. He heard Katara moan against his mouth as he squeezed and kneaded her firm globes before he lifted her to him so that his cock pressed tightly against her sex.

“Zuko,” she murmured huskily as she wantonly sucked at his tongue.

She drew back slightly from his mouth, not completely away, but enough so that her lips barely touched his, caressingly and teasingly so that their ragged breaths mingled together as passion ignited between them. She smiled as Zuko tried to capture her mouth once again, but she teasingly evaded him as she pulled slightly away from his embrace. She slid her hands away from his neck and ran them down his hard chest before she began searching for the ties that held his robes closed.

Zuko knew what she was trying to do, but it took him a while to force his wandering hands from touching her, from pulling her tightly against him. He watched her through hooded eyes as she quickly divested him of his clothing, pleased at the determinedly eager expression on her face as his flesh became exposed with the removal of each article of clothing. Once he was completely uncovered, she paused a moment to admire all she had exposed. Feeling his heart pounding and his cock throbbing, the firebender again forced his hands not to haul her toward him when her eyes hungrily touched every inch of his naked body.

With a satisfied smile, she stepped closer and kissed him at the same time she tightly grasped his painfully erect shaft. Groaning loudly, Zuko reached for her, but she caught his wrists and stepped back.
“Ah, ah,” she chided him seductively as she let go of his hands.

He watched as her hands began to slowly divest her of her clothing and his breath accelerated as her brown skin became enticingly exposed to his greedy eyes until she was completely bare before she stepped back into his arms. Unable to wait any longer, Zuko scooped her up and quickly carried her to the four-poster bed. He brushed aside the white, gauzy canopy curtains and pulled back the bedcover with one hand before he laid her down upon the bed.

Katara wrapped her arms around his neck as soon as he pressed his body against hers and slowly brushed her lips across his, barely touching them, before she slipped her tongue out to lick his upper lip. As soon as he opened his mouth for her, she slid her tongue inside. The energy of the moon was electrifying every inch of her body, causing heat to gather in her core in a molten pool.

Zuko groaned as Katara touched and caressed every inch of his mouth and his arms tightened around her. He moved his hand down and his fingers pressed against her pussy. He smiled when she moaned into his mouth and he began to firmly rub his fingers against her damp flesh.

“Mm, you’re so wet for me, Katara,” he purred huskily.

The waterbender whimpered against his devouring mouth at the maddeningly delightful touch of his skillful fingers.

“Always,” she purred before gasping when his fingers found her sensitive clit.

The firebender shut his eyes and groaned at her cry as he rubbed up and down her slit, spreading her folds with his fingers, before he began to firmly press circles on her swollen nub with his thumb.

“Yes!” she moaned as her hips arched into his touch.

His touch was incredible, but it only seemed to intensify the raging storm wreaking havoc through every inch, every nerve, of her body. Any other day, she would have gladly let him do with her what he will, but at that moment she needed so much more. She needed him—all of him—and she was going to have him.
Zuko was about to reach down to spread his wife’s legs when she suddenly pushed against his shoulders and rolled over on top of him. He stared up at her as he lay flat on his back while she straddled his stomach with a seductive smirk on her lips. He felt his cock twitch when her wet pussy slid against his skin. He was usually the one who was more dominant in their encounters, but he loved it when she was on top and in complete control, for she touched him in the best of ways and gave him immense pleasure.

Katara smiled down at her husband as she ran her hands down his muscled arms. She crawled down over him, letting his straining length slide against her stomach while the chilly air teased her drenched folds. She could feel him straining for her, his shaft was hard and hot against her sex, but she wasn’t going to satisfy him that quickly. No, he needed to know something first. She was going to torture him with pleasure until his mind was completely overwhelmed with desire, with need for her and her alone.

Panting in anticipation and lust, Zuko gazed up at her, amber eyes rooted on luscious breasts before locking with darkening blue eyes. The Fire Lord groaned and closed his eyes when she leaned down and started to kiss and suck on his neck. She moved another inch down and she trailed her wet tongue down his chest. She sat back up and he watched as she lifted a hand up to her mouth.

She let out a cool breath against her fingers and a thin layer of ice coated them. Zuko gasped when she pressed her ice-tipped fingers against his hot chest, then he jerked when she circled them around his small nipples. She teased them for a moment before she pulled away, then she leaned down to engulf one of his nipples into the warmth of her mouth. Zuko’s head fell back at the amazing contrasts of temperatures and the sensation of her lips and tongue caressing him. She pulled away and trailed her lips across his chest before she captured his other chilled nipple into her hot mouth.

Katara smiled when her husband groaned her name. She continued to tease him for a moment before she continued to crawl down his body. His fingers clung tightly onto her hips and she arched her spine, stretching like a puma-cat over his prone body. His cock jerked and throbbed, trapped between her warm thighs, pressed against her slick folds, and she grinned down at him as he groaned from such sensual torture. She pressed against him, but moved quickly down when he tried to angle his hips in order to slip inside her.

“Not yet,” she murmured sensually, grinning when he let out a frustrated sound.

She trailed her lips down his chest and paused to press light kisses on the scar marring his abdomen, knowing how much it touched him when she caressed his scars, before she continued down her erotic path. She sat back between his parted legs and hungrily eyed his length straining for her touch. Looking back at his face, she saw that he was looking at her with lustful anticipation, his golden eyes dark and gleaming. Gazing back at him just as lustfully, she reached out and tightly grasped his turgid erection and pumped firmly.
“Hm, you’re so hard for me, Zuko,” she purred, repeating his earlier sentiment.

“K-Katara,” he groaned and his hips jerked into her touch.

The brunette basked in the glow of triumph at the groans and growls she elicited from her firebender. She continued stroking his length, switching from a slow, torturous pace to a fast and hard rhythm, before she brought her head down and licked his wet tip, savoring the salty taste of his essence. Another groan fell from his lips. Katara trailed her tongue along his length before she swirled it around the mushroomed head as a plan to make him insane with need surfaced in her mind.

“Mine,” she purred before she parted her lips and engulfed his hard shaft.

“Yessss,” Zuko growled at the amazing sensation of her wet, warm mouth.

He watched as his waterbender lifted her blue eyes and locked them with his before she opened her mouth wider and pushed him deeper into her mouth that he felt his cock pass the back of her mouth and into her throat.

“Oh, gods!” he rasped loudly, his eyes wide and his chest heaving at the incredible pleasure. His hand instinctively cupped the back of her head to keep her in place. She had never taken him that deeply into her mouth before and he could only thank his lucky stars for her passionate nature.

Katara paused for a moment to adjust. She ignored her body’s natural reaction to dislodge the foreign invader as she pushed the mushroom tip further and further back into her mouth before moving her head back up. She heard Zuko groan her name and she sucked on his head, swallowing the drops of his seed that seeped out before she engulfed his entire length into her mouth and down her throat.

“Kataraaa,” he growl, his tone deep and guttural.

His hands grasped the back of her head more firmly, fisting her long hair tightly with his fingers, as she eagerly sucked his cock. He gasped when she increased her pace, striking him against the back of her throat before coming back up and repeating the excruciatingly pleasurable process. His eyes rolled back and he groaned her name when she again took the entire length of his girth down her throat that her soft lips tickled the hairs of his groin. He grasped her hair more tightly, unwilling to leave the warm wetness of her mouth, and she responded by pulling and massaging his balls. He had to clench his teeth to stop himself from coming right then and there.
Agni, could she be any more perfect? His wife’s hot, tight holes surely were gateways to paradise, the young Fire Lord thought dazedly. She was passionate and bold in their intimacy, which only heightened his pleasure and need. The blue-eyed waterbender who had shoved his shaft so far down her throat was surely a sex goddess. Truly, no mere concubine would be capable of eliciting such desire in his body nor capturing his heart so securely as Katara. He was completely and irrevocably devoted and infatuated with his waterbending wife.

Groaning and grunting as she continued to move her mouth over him, Zuko lifted his head to shoot a small flame from his mouth as he grabbed the bedsheets beside him tightly in order to release some of the tension building within him. The moaning and mewling sounds his wife made caused an exquisite blaze to shoot down his erection and his hips jerked up as his climax rushed to the surface. Suddenly his hips were pulled down by an invisible force and Katara quickly slipped her mouth away from his straining arousal before he could erupt in rapture.

“Wait...what?” he panted in frustration as he tried to force his hips to follow her, but he could not move them at all. He frowned at her, knowing she was using her bloodbending to keep him still.

She giggled huskily at his expression and he glowered at her. He just knew she was paying him back for all the times he teased her by stopping when she was about to orgasm. The vengeful but delicious minx.

Letting go of his hips, Katara licked her lips before she gave him a sexy smile that caused her husband to growl her name. Slowly, teasingly, she crawled back up his body, trailing her tongue on his heating skin as she went. Once she was straddling his hips, she lifted her head to gaze lustfully into his eyes before she kissed him hard.

Zuko groaned as he tangled his tongue around hers. Deliberately, his waterbender pressed her body against his so that their skin touched erotically and a strangled moan escaped his throat. Her skin was like flaming silk as she used her entire body to caress his. He felt as if his inner fire was going to rage out of control and incinerate the entire palace if she did not take him inside her soon. His heart started to pound as she reached a hand down to grasp his cock and pressed it to her opening.

He groaned a strangled, “Katara.”

Katara paused briefly at his desperate plea before she grabbed a fistful of his hair and angled his face up to hers as she stared deeply into his golden eyes.
“You are mine, Zuko” she stated firmly, throatily, “Forever mine and no one else’s.”

Then she swooped down to capture his mouth in a fiercely passionate kiss that stole his breath away. The possessiveness of her words and tone only intensified Zuko’s lust and need tenfold. He understood now what she was doing, what she needed from him—not just physically but emotionally as well—because it was how he had felt towards her many times before, and he was going to give himself completely to her need. He ravaged her mouth as hungrily as she did his, urging her silently to take him inside her, to make him hers.

Moaning, Katara pressed his tip inside her before she paused, then she slowly, very slowly, impaled herself on him inch by delicious inch, taking him in, relishing the sensation of being stretched, in the feeling of complete fullness. She heard Zuko groan his pleasure and her stomach clenched in lust. She continued easing herself on him until she was completely impaled and she squeezed her wet walls tightly around him.

Zuko’s tongue thrust deep into her mouth and his hips surged up into her, eliciting a pleased gasp from her. The feeling of her body welcoming him almost lovingly inside her was sheer bliss. They immersed themselves in the absolute connection of each other. The intense sensation overwhelmed them both as much as it had the first time they were joined.

Needing to touch her, the Fire Lord reached out to grab her hips, but he frowned when he found that he couldn’t move his arms. His eyes flew open when he realized that he couldn’t move his entire body from his neck down at all. He pulled away from her mouth to look at her questioningly and he saw her smirking wickedly at him.

“No touching just yet, my sexy firebender,” she purred as she ran her hands down his muscular arms.

“Katara,” he groaned as his heart pounded hard in his chest. Since it was a night of a full moon, he knew Katara would be more energized and aggressive in her lovemaking and he loved it, but dammit he needed to touch her.

Slowly, Katara lifted herself before she slammed back down over him. They both cried out at the pleasure. The waterbender pressed her hands on his shoulders and began to ride him hard and fast. She moaned loudly at the amazing friction of his cock sliding against her walls and his upper thighs slapping against her ass. She could feel her juices pouring out of her and onto her husband.

Unable to move, his body in utter control by his wife, Zuko could only watch as Katara rode him as if her life depended upon it. He watched as she threw her head back, her hair flying around her, her face contorted in pleasure, and wailed his name. His fingers twitched, needing to touch her, but even
in her passion, Katara firmly kept hold of his blood. He could only admire her concentration and power. His eyes fell away from her face and became riveted at the delectable sight of her breasts bouncing at her movements before he trailed them down her body. He became mesmerized by the sight of his cock, glistening with her cream, disappearing and reappearing from her pussy. He could feel her juices sliding down his cock and coalescing on his groin. He panted harshly at the pleasure building and scorching within him.

Once she had established the rhythm she preferred, Katara let go of her hold of his blood, wanting him to participate in their lovemaking, needing him to enjoy the pleasure and connection with her.

“Touch me.” Her command came out as a hiss, which caused Zuko’s groin to tighten in lust.

She moaned his name when his hands immediately flew up to touch her. His large, calloused hands were like velvety fire—stimulating, rough, and reckless. They roamed all over her body all at once, stimulating, squeezing, and caressing her breasts, hips, and backside, kindling millions of electrifying sparks that slowly fused into a wild, immense inferno.

“Z-Zuko,” she panted and moaned, her breathing erratic and loud.

She leaned back over him until her breasts touched his sweaty chest and quicken her pace. Zuko growled out her name as she slammed down on top of him over and over, causing the mattress to shake and tremble. Neither one of them noticed nor cared, too lost in each other, in the moment, and their pleasure. Only with each other could they give this much. No one else could touch and hold, no other could so brazenly claim. No other could tear them apart.

As their bodies joined unreservedly, profoundly, in complete harmony, Zuko grabbed tightly onto his wife’s firm rear cheeks and pushed her harder onto him at the same time he surged his hips up into her. They both cried out at the pleasure, the sound of their skin slapping loudly resounded in the room, intermingled with their ragged breathing, and the rustling of the bedsheets.

Katara captured his mouth once again, melding her lips with his, just as her body did his. As their mouths and tongues touched, the waterbender let all the troubles from the past, the problems of the present, and the uncertainty of the future disappear to make way for the moment she was sharing with her husband, giving herself completely to him as he was to her.

“Uhhh,” Zuko groaned against her luscious mouth as his grip tightened on her ass.
This was what he had wanted this night, the absolute, unrestrained giving of each other. His hands touching, relishing on her soft skin, her beautiful curves. Her hands on his own flesh, her body—wet and hot—clinging securely onto him, embracing him, welcoming him deep into her body, into her heart.

Over and over, and over again.

Katara gasped loudly as she felt her orgasm approaching, her stomach tightening, and her passage spasming in anticipation for that glorious end. She pulled away from her firebender’s fiery kisses and gazed down into his piercing golden eyes with passion and need written across her flushed features.

“You are mine, Zuko!” she growled throatily, assuredly, her tone firm and commanding. “Mine!”

She impaled herself harder onto him at the same time he thrust his hips up and undulated under her.

“Ahhhhhh!” she screamed, arching her back, digging her fingers onto his sides as she felt herself shatter into a million pieces.

She heard him growl her name and felt his hands clamp tightly onto her hips, but all she could focus on was the devastating tidal wave that was ruthlessly drowning her in scorching ecstasy.

As his waterbender continued screaming her pleasure, Zuko shifted her through her orgasmic stupor and swiftly flipped her onto her back, planted his knees between her parted legs, and plunged himself again and again inside her as his sac began to tighten.

“My turn,” he growled out.

The sound of his baritone, rough and deep with desire, and the sight of him still thrusting into her, caused the fire of need inside her to flare back to life. She wrapped her legs around his pounding hips and threw her arms around his neck. When he seized her lips at the same time he brought a hand down between them to furiously rub her clit, Katara arched into him as another orgasm rolled through her like a rampaging hurricane.

“Oh gods, Zuko!” she wailed his name in utter euphoria.
Zuko gasped as her slick pussy tightened almost painfully around his throbbing cock. As she shattered in his arms, her scream muffled by their kiss, he let go, unwilling to break the connection that melded her pleasure with his. He pushed his shaft as deeply as he could go inside her and exploded into a blaze of ecstasy, relishing at the passion fusing their hearts and souls together.

“Katara!” he roared her name as his hot seed splashed continuously into her, his cock pulsing and twitching with the pleasure of it all, as he held tightly onto her, unable to let her go.

Moaning, the waterbender watched the almost pained expression on his face, enthralled at the sight of his tightly closed eyes and bared teeth, as rapture overwhelmed him. He held himself still and shuddering over her, and her heart pounded hard in her chest at the emotions swelling within her. At that moment, being witness to his vulnerability, watching the state to which she had reduced him to, made it more clear to her that he was completely and utterly hers. He was hers. Hers to hold, protect, touch, and most of all, love.

“Mine,” she murmured as her arms tightened around him.

“Yours,” Zuko rasped as his body finally relaxed from his incredible orgasm.

He gazed intensely yet tenderly into her azure eyes as he breathed her name between soft pants. When he bent down to brush his lips reverently, lovingly, along her face before kissing her lips, she knew he understood for it was how he felt as well. When he leaned slightly back to look at her, a few tears escaped her eyes.

“Don’t ever leave me,” she whispered, “Don’t ever stop loving me.”

“Never,” he intoned endearingly, ardently, as he reached up to cup her cheek, brushing one tear away with his thumb. “The day I stop loving you is the day I cease to exist.”

He leaned down to press his lips to hers, a kiss both tender and impassioned. She returned his kiss just as fervently.

“I love you,” she breathed against his mouth.

“And I you.”
The night was dark and the stars sparkled brightly in the sky. Since it was a full moon, they took advantage of the energy coursing through the waterbender to catch up on the time they had lost. She was like a night goddess, seductively calling out to him, making him lose his mind to need and desire, commanding he give her everything she wanted.

Throughout the entire night, the sounds of their lovemaking sounded in the room, proving again and again their unbreakable bond.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Did ya hear ‘bout how da Fire Lord angrily kicked Lady Mai out of da palace yesterday when she tried to throw ‘erself at him?” a stableman asked the servants working in the huge kitchen as he ate a piece of bread with cheese.

“Yeah, I heard Shen and Kuo dragged her out kicking and screaming,” a short-haired maidservant spoke up with a small laugh.

“I knew Lady Mai was full o’ shit when she said da Fire Lord wanted ta make ‘er his royal concubine,” the old cook spoke up as he added more wood to one of the blazing ovens. “I didn’t believe ‘er for a second.”

The servants had never liked the haughty noblewoman. She had ordered them to do her every bidding and always treated them coldly and harshly as if they were animals and not human beings. They had been too glad at the news that the Fire Lord ended his relationship with her in order to pursue a better woman. Although they had been apprehensive at first with their new Fire Lady, wondering how she would treat them, they were happy to realize that the waterbender had a caring and compassionate heart. She treated them with kindness and for that they respected and adored her despite the fact that she was a waterbender from the Southern Water Tribe.

“Fire Lord Zuko would never throw out such a wonderful woman as Fire Lady Katara,” an older woman of the higher staff said as she carefully polished the wine cups. “It is so very obvious how much he loves his wife despite his taciturn personality.”

The stableman nodded, the short-haired maid frowned thoughtfully, the cook grinned before everybody immediately agreed.

“Speaking of which, has Fire Lord Zuko finally let Fire Lady Katara out of their rooms yet?” another young servant asked with a waggle of his eyebrows. “The Fire Lord canceled all his meetings and they’ve been locked up in there all day.”
The male servants gathered in the kitchen chuckled suggestively and the female ones giggled as they imagined what the royal couple was doing holed up in their rooms without bothering to make an appearance. Jiao had been sent for to take them a late breakfast and then lunch. The head cook was already preparing a large tray of food to be sent to them for dinner, which the short-haired servant and a younger maid were to take because Jiao had been given the day off to enjoy with her family since the Fire Lady didn’t need her.

“Well, I’m just glad that they are happily together again,” the older woman said with a smile.

The servants immediately agreed before they quickly rushed to their posts when a stern head servant entered the kitchen to check on them.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The servants, Iroh, Ursa, and Jee were glad to see that, although the royal couple returned to their duties the following days, they made time for each other at meals before retiring early to their royal chambers. They were all relieved that it seemed that whatever had troubled the Fire Lord and his wife had gone away and they were enjoying each other like newlyweds.

Zuko finally had the physicians check him to see if the problem might be him, which shocked and scandalized the Council when they found out. But the physicians had found nothing wrong with him and stated that he seemed capable of siring children. He had been skeptical of their response at first, thinking that maybe they were just saying so in order not to put the blame on their Fire Lord, but they had assured him they were being truthful. They had even bet on their lives that if he would bed a concubine at that moment, he would impregnate her immediately. Zuko, of course, had refused to take on that bet and believed their words. Unfortunately, the attention was focused once again on Katara.

One nice and warm day, after her practice with Ursa and Jee, Katara quickly made her way to the room she shared with her husband to bathe and changed for dinner. Zuko had promised to give her a romantic dinner for the two of them in the Royal Palace Garden’s veranda and she could not wait to be with him. It seemed as if going through those weeks of unwilling separation had made them crave being around each other constantly like the first few months of their marriage. She loved how attentive he was being and she was sure he equally enjoyed how much she showered him with her love and affection.

Her thoughts shifted as she remembered her lessons with Jee and Ursa that day. She had noticed that they kept stealing glances at one another when they thought the other wasn’t looking. She had been too preoccupied wallowing in her sadness and depression to pay them much heed, but now that she was feeling better she finally focused her attention on them. Her hopes rose for their mutual happiness that she could not help but give subtle hints about Jee’s feelings and Ursa’s possible acceptance to a new romance.
“Fire Lady Katara,” the sounds of Jiao’s voice and baby giggles brought Katara out of her thoughts.

The waterbender turned and smiled when she saw her maidservant quicken her pace to catch up to her. Ichiro, her son, bounced giddily in his mother’s arms.

“Hello, Jiao,” Katara greeted cheerfully.

When Jiao finally stopped before her, Katara reached out to tickle Ichiro’s chubby chin. The dark-haired baby squealed and laughed as he moved his arms in his delight.

“I haven’t seen you and Ichiro in a while,” the waterbender said after she cooed at the baby for a while.

“I apologize for being absent, my lady,” Jiao said as she smiled at her son’s antics, “Ichiro was sick for a few days and I couldn’t leave him in the care of anyone else. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Katara responded, “I’m glad to see Ichiro is fine.”

“Thank you, but I really do feel bad for neglecting my duties,” the servant replied as she gave a small bow in apology.

“Again, don’t worry about it,” the brunette waterbender said as she waved her apology aside before a small blush surfaced on her cheeks as she muttered, “I’ve been too distracted to really notice anyway.”

La, she could not wait for more of those distractions—distractions caused by Zuko. Katara felt her lower stomach clench in need once again and a small grin appeared on her face.

A small, amused giggle escaped Jiao as she rocked her son in her arm.

“I know, just like the entire palace knows,” she said with a smile.
“Really?” Katara asked in mortification.

“Yes, but we are all glad to see both you and our Fire Lord happy again,” Jiao responded sincerely.

A small sighed escaped the waterbender as she began walking down the corridor, motioning for her maidservant to follow her.

“Things are better, but not as much as we wish because of the lack of an heir and the demand for Zuko to choose a royal concubine,” Katara said sadly.

“Do not lose hope, my lady,” the older woman said kindly before she softly added “And never fear that your husband would betray you. He loves you too much to hurt you in such a way.”

“I know,” Katara replied with a smile and her heart lightened in her happiness.

“Besides, there are other ways for Fire Lord Zuko to have an heir,” Jiao continued thoughtfully as she shifted her fussing son to her hip.

“There are?” the waterbender asked curiously.

“Yes, although the Court Council will continue to push for Fire Lord Zuko’s heir to be his own flesh and blood,” Jiao began before she continued, “But there is the option of adoption. Or perhaps Lady Ursa could have another child and Fire Lord Zuko can name his half-sibling his heir.”

Katara frowned thoughtfully as they continued walking slowly down the empty corridors. She had never thought of those options, though she was sure the Court Council will keep insisting Zuko sire an heir. She glanced at Jiao when the woman chuckled softly and she saw a grin had appeared on her friend’s face.

“Maybe General Iroh could sire another son,” Jiao said, “He still charms many women despite his age.”

Katara laughed and Ichiro gurgled happily when both women giggled for a few more seconds. The waterbender paused in her amusement when she felt Jiao leaned in close to her with a conspiring
expression on her face.

“Kuo told me what happened that night with the misunderstanding about Lady Mai,” Jiao began in a low tone in case anyone heard her, “though he told me not to say anything to anyone.” She paused to roll her eyes as she continued, “He should know I would immediately tell my lady.”

The waterbender was grateful for her loyalty and she smiled.

“What happened?” she asked softly.

Katara had been curious ever since Zuko came to find her, but she had decided not to pester him too much once he reassured her of his love and passion for her. Jiao cleared her throat as she prepared herself before she began to talk. By the time they arrived at the royal bedchambers, Jiao revealed everything. Once Jiao finished by telling her how the Fire Lord threw Mai out of the room before he went in search of his wife, Katara felt her heart swell with love for her husband and the way he had defended their love and marriage. She wished she could have punched the arrogant noblewoman’s straight nose before she was thrown out.

“I hope Mai has learned her lesson,” Katara spoke up as they entered the bedchamber.

“One can only hope, my lady,” Jiao responded.

They laughed and Ichiro giggled and babbled with them. Jiao laughed as she cooed at her baby and Katara could only hope that she could one day hold her and Zuko’s child the way Jiao did her son.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Another week later found Katara and Zuko lying on their bed with her head resting on his chest and his arm wrapped around her middle. Unlike other times, they were both clothed, their coverlet drawn up to their chests to ward off the chill of fall. With his other hand, Zuko squeezed her smaller one, which she had laid upon the scar on his abdomen, in comfort. He heard her let out a small sigh. He could feel her disappointment and sadness, and his heart tightened in his chest with helplessness.

Her monthly bleeding had arrived that morning.

Another month of frustration.
Although she had tried to keep her mood up throughout the day, Zuko knew she was feeling discouraged, especially since the advisors had called them into another meeting later in the day to once again demand they stop being stubborn and do what was right for the nation. When they had attacked his honor and called him a disgrace, he had jumped up to his feet in anger and almost spat fire from his mouth at their words. Their argument had escalated to such a degree that the room had turned into a large furnace with everybody’s heated emotions. Katara had to intervene by dousing them all with water and scolded them. All the men, including himself, had felt properly chastised, but refused to relent. He knew if it had been any other situation, Katara would have laughed in their faces and defied their demand. But since this affected the welfare of an entire country, Katara was taking their demands really hard.

She had been silent since they had lain down on the bed and he wondered what she was thinking. Slowly, caressingly, he ran his hand down her side before he moved it up to play with her unbound hair, wrapping the soft curls around his fingers as he breathed in her scent.

Katara let out a soft sigh at her husband’s caressing hand and his warmth, but she could not silence her inner thoughts.

*I hate being the cause of Zuko’s problems with his advisors and courtiers because he still hasn’t sired an heir. Or since I haven’t given him one.*

She frowned as her heart ached at the last thought.

*Since it seems as if I wouldn’t be conceiving children soon...or at all...I...can’t dismiss the idea of Zuko siring a child...with another woman.*

She bit her lip. It might pain her to even think of having to share her husband with another woman, but she knew when she married him, she was not only marrying the man but his position too. And that position demanded a child, an heir.

*If I didn’t have to see that...other woman...If he kept her far away from our rooms, I could almost pretend she didn’t exist. I could possibly bear it, if it meant that he would no longer have to be harassed by his people, his counselors.*

Her frowned deepened and her chest tightened.

*As long as it’s Zuko’s child, I would love it as my own. But once the woman gives birth to his heir,*
that woman would have to be gone from the palace…

But would that be fair? Could she live with taking a child away from its mother? She knew she could not bear the pain of being ripped away from a child she carried for nine months. Could she be that cruel to someone else?

And what of Zuko? If she allowed this to happen, would she begin to resent him? Would she start to hate him when she saw Zuko love a child that was supposed to be hers?

She sighed as she knew that was exactly what would happen. She would never be okay with the thought that Zuko had been intimate with another woman, that he had created something, shared something deeply, with another woman.

He was hers and she refused to give him up.

“Zuko?” she called out in a low, soft tone.

“Hm?” he murmured as he continued touching her hair.

“I’m…sorry…”

Zuko’s fingers froze in her hair. Frowning, he brought down his hand to wrap it around her middle once again.

“Katara, there is nothing to be sorry for. This isn’t your fault.”

“I…this isn’t about…that’s not why I am apologizing,” she began. “I know your duty to your country. I know what you must do…even if it is without me. But…I can’t, won’t be okay with you taking a concubine. It’s selfish, I know, but the thought of sharing you with someone else…It kills me inside,” she explained in a strained voice.

Zuko rolled them over so he was staring down at her. Katara stared back into his warm eyes.
“I don’t think it’s selfish,” he told her, “It’s understandable.”

Katara frowned at him and opened her mouth to refute, but Zuko did not let her continue as he firmly shook his head.

“I’m glad that you want to help me, Katara, but I wouldn’t appreciate it if you were willing to throw me into another woman’s arms,” he said firmly.

“La knows I don’t want to!” the waterbender exclaimed heatedly before she paused, and in a quieter tone, she added, “But...I also don’t want to ruin your chance of fathering a child.”

“If you’re not their mother, then I don’t want children,” the Fire Lord replied adamantly, his eyes piercing and intense.

“But—”

Zuko swiftly leaned down and kissed her firmly, pressing his lips hard against hers to silence her. Katara stiffened at first, stubborn and upset at the whole situation, but gradually she relented and kissed him back. He kissed her softly, caressing her lips and tongue in a slow, tender dance as his hand roamed softly along her curves.

Zuko realized that Katara was saying these things because of her disappointment of waking up that morning with evidence of her monthly bleeding. But he wanted to dispel her doubts once and for all. When Katara sighed softly against his mouth and reached a hand up to grasp his long hair, the Fire Lord slowly pulled away and gazed down at her. The waterbender opened her eyes to look at him and her heart fluttered at his warm, intent gaze.

“Katara,” he said softly, his voice now a quiet plea, “can you see my point of view? Although I love the Fire Nation, I don’t want to bed another woman and father a child on her. The mere idea sickens me.”

Katara felt her mind ease at his words.

“I only want you, so no matter how much trouble and hassle the advisors and courtiers give me, I’m not going to do what they want,” he said firmly.
Katara sagged in relief beneath him before she smiled at him. Zuko was hers and the world would come to an end before she allowed him to be taken from her.

“I know,” she replied confidently, her blue eyes shining brightly.

“Good,” Zuko said as he returned her smile, glad to know he was able to lift her spirits.

He moved so he was lying beside her once again and brought her close to him. Katara sighed contentedly as she laid her head on his upper arm and wrapped her arm around his middle.

“I won’t give up without a fight, Katara,” he told her as he squeezed her waist, “I’m sure we will find a solution one of these days.”

Katara smiled at his confident tone as she allowed her fingers to absentmindedly trace the muscles of his abdomen. Her fingers softly caressed the scar etched onto his skin as her mind wandered to that day under the Catacombs of Ba Sing Se where she had proposed to heal Zuko’s scar with the healing water of the Spirit Oasis. She had not visited the Northern Water Tribe in a few years. Her fingers froze as another thought popped into her head.

“Why didn’t I think of that before?!” she exclaimed in disbelief.

“Think of what?” Zuko asked curiously.

The waterbender lifted herself so that she could look down at her confused husband. Her eyes were wide and excited and a large smile spread across her lips.

“The Northern Water Tribe is known for its healers!” she said excitedly. “I know of few healers from the time I visited the North Pole with Sokka and Aang. Maybe I can ask one of them for help. They might have a solution!”

Zuko’s brow furrowed as he thought over her words. The best Fire Nation physicians had been unable to find the problem and fix it, but perhaps they needed another type of healer with different medical methods.
“You’re right,” the firebender finally said as a smile curled his lips. “Maybe we can even make the trip to the Northern Water Tribe, just to escape court for a while.”

“Yes,” Katara replied enthusiastically. “I’ll send a letter with the request.”

Katara settled back against him and Zuko wrapped his arm tightly around her.

Could a possible solution be found soon?

Would they finally be able to hold their child in their arms?

As they laid wrapped in each other’s arms, their hearts felt much lighter as they thought of the possibilities.

Wary eyes darted around the kitchen, assessing the situation before making a move. The sounds of pots and plates being handled, combined with the head cook’s loud command for the kitchen staff to move faster, resounded in the huge kitchen. Other servants scurried back and forth, carrying trays with food out the door toward the family dining room where the royal family was waiting.

Nobody paid attention to the woman that innocently approached the teapot. It was always the same. No one spared a glance her way whenever she moved about the kitchen, nor did they mind when she sometimes helped them out with the food, and she was thankful for that for it made her task much easier. Someone called out to her and she looked up to give them a small smile as they passed her.

She looked surreptitiously around once again before she casually reached into the hidden pocket inside her tunic and extracted a small pouch. She quickly untied the strings and poured its contents into the tea before quickly hiding the empty pouch once again, watching as the contents mixed perfectly. She did not glance around again so as to not make others suspicious, and when nobody confronted her, she picked up the teapot and placed it on the table next to everything else that was to be taken up.

She suppressed a smile as she again glanced down into the teapot.

Soon.
Soon everything she hoped for would become a reality.
Two weeks of contentment—if not utter bliss—passed by for the royal couple as they waited for the book Zuko had ordered from the University of Ba Sing to arrive. After stalling for a while, Katara finally sent a request for aid to the healers of the Northern Water Tribe. Although she knew the old healers could help determine if there was a problem with either of them, Katara could not help feeling a little embarrassed to have them know she might be infertile. But she was willing to do anything that might help her and Zuko.

Although they spent more time with each other, the constant reminders of the Court Council and the requests of the nobility for Zuko to choose a concubine made their happiness incomplete. Despite that, however, they tried very hard not to let that bring them down. It certainly did not affect their more intimate moments and they were constantly at each other like they had been months before. They especially looked forward to that day of the week when Zuko drank Iroh’s aphrodisiac tea that forced them to spend half the day shut in their rooms enjoying each other’s bodies until the effect left Zuko’s blood.

Katara hummed in satisfaction as the sweet, soothing jasmine tea slid down her throat. She was currently drinking tea with Iroh in the private garden’s veranda as she listened amusedly to a tale of his youth. She loved the old man as her own uncle. He had been a great listener and companion during these past few, trying weeks.

“How is your plot to get Ursa and Jee together coming along, Katara?” he asked with a knowing grin.

The brunette’s eyes widened at his words.

“How did you know about that?” she asked incredulously.

Iroh laughed as he stroked the small beard on his chin.

“I am a very observant person, my dear,” he replied amusedly before he cheekily added, “Besides, I have experience because of Zuko and you.”

Katara shook her head as she grinned at him before she sobered up.
“Ursa and Jee are being very stubborn,” she muttered as she crossed her arms over her chest, “Jee’s madly in love with her, but he refuses to tell her, and Ursa refuses to believe she could have a second chance at love.”

“That’s understandable,” Iroh said in his usual calm tone, “Ursa is above Jee’s station, so it is logical he might think he doesn’t have a chance with her. And with her experience with Ozai, it’s also understandable why Ursa might feel hesitant to start a new relationship.”

“I know, Uncle Iroh,” Katara said sympathetically before she added hopefully, “But if she could only see that Jee is a good man and he loves her, she will be much happier.”

“I understand you want to help them, my dear, but you must remember that the heart is what counts,” Iroh advised her gently, “You should not be disappointed if they do not end up together, as you hope.”

“I know,” the waterbender replied with a nod as she took another small sip of her tea.

Iroh also took a sip of the jasmine tea, one of his favorites, and gazed attentively at his niece-in-law as she debated what cookie to eat next. He was extremely glad to see that both she and Zuko were content again, but he noticed that they were not completely happy. He had tried to talk to his nephew about their troubles, but Zuko had refused to say anything, just as Iroh had expected, so he had tried to comfort his niece-in-law as best as he could. Taking another sip, Iroh let out a pleased sigh at the delicious hot liquid before he placed his teacup down and looked back at the waterbender, who was now nibbling at an almond cookie.

“How are things nowadays, my dear?” he asked softly.

Katara took a quick sip of her tea to clear her throat before she looked up to give her uncle-in-law a small smile.

“Everything is better,” she began before she sighed as she continued slowly, “but I still feel bad that Zuko is getting harassed by the advisors because he refuses to take a royal concubine.”

She paused as she grasped the warm teacup in her hands and stared out into the garden.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’m being selfish for refusing Zuko the chance to have an heir with another
woman when I might not be able to give him children,” she said quietly, sadly, and her hands clamped around the teacup.

Reaching across the small table, Iroh gently patted her hand.

“It is a complicated situation and an even more difficult decision, my dear,” he acknowledged sympathetically before he gently added, “But it is understandable to not want your spouse to bed someone else, especially since you come from a very monogamous culture. But you should not worry. Zuko would never heed the advisors if their ideas go against his morals and he would never sully his honor by dishonoring your marriage. Zuko loves you too much to hurt you in such a manner. He will find a way, you’ll see.”

She smiled at him and nodded before she had to suppress a grin as his last words reminded her of what Jiao had told her. She wouldn’t be surprised if Iroh were to father a child at his age, though the thought was both adorable and a little disturbing. She shook the thought away as she again smiled at the old man.

“You’re right,” she added, “And maybe because of your tea, Zuko and I will one of these days create a child.”

“Is my tea really helping that much?” Iroh asked with a surprised, raised eyebrow.

A small blush stole across the waterbender’s cheeks as she looked down at the yellowish liquid in her teacup as memories of those frenzied, passionate moments with her almost deliriously aroused, insatiable husband rushed to her mind.

“Thanks to your…uh…aphrodisiac tea, our, uh, intimate moments are…more intense and…well, let’s just say it really works,” she muttered bashfully.

“Oh? What—?” Iroh was beginning to ask, but he was interrupted when his nephew strode into the veranda.

Iroh and Katara glanced up to greet him, but their words failed them and their eyes widened at the huge smile of triumph on his usually impassive face.

“What is it, Zuko?” Katara asked curiously as she tilted her head to the side.
Zuko quickly walked toward her and sat down beside her as he placed a large, heavy tome on the table before them. Its green covering was a little tattered and the pages yellow, indicating how old the book was.

“The book I borrowed from the University of Ba Sing Se Library finally arrived this morning. This book is said to contain the most extensive knowledge of the human body,” he replied coolly, though his excitement could be detected in his tone. He opened the book where a tied piece of red silk marked the page and he pointed at a particular paragraph.

His smile widening, he added, “It has an entire section on reproduction. I’ve been going through it for a few hours and I found a section that mentions a concoction that can help with fertility. It is said to be highly effective.”

“Here, let me see,” the waterbender said as she motioned for the book.

Zuko passed it to her and she eagerly read the contents. Katara’s hopeful expression quickly disappeared as she finished reading and she sighed sadly. The mixture looked very similar to the herbs Yin-Min had given her before.

Zuko’s smile dropped at his wife’s sullen reaction and he frowned.

“What’s wrong, Katara?” he asked.

“It won’t work,” she said quietly as she handed him the book back.

Zuko’s frown deepened at her sad words and Iroh glanced at his niece-in-law curiously.

“Why do you say that?” the Fire Lord asked.

“The physicians gave me similar teas they were sure would work, but it obviously didn’t,” she muttered before she added, “Besides, I had been drinking a similar herbal blend to help with fertility that Yin-Min gave me months before.”
She sighed as she stared at her hands. She did not want Zuko to see her disappointment and wretchedness.

The frown on Zuko’s face only deepened more. Why did she not tell him?

“Since when have you been taking it?” he asked.

“Since our wedding night, before I agreed with Yin-Min a few months ago to stop taking it when it was obvious it wasn’t working,” Katara muttered sadly.

Zuko’s shoulders slumped and he gripped the thick book tightly in his hands after he closed it slowly. He had been sure this would have been the solution to their problem, but it seemed they were back to the same place as before. Mentally shaking his head, Zuko straightened his back, unwilling to give up. He was determined to find another solution.

Glancing briefly away from his suddenly silent wife, Zuko noticed that his uncle seemed to be deep in thought and he wondered what the old man was thinking about. His attention again shifted to his waterbender when she gracefully stood up and he glanced up at her with a frown.

“I just remembered that I promised to help Yin-Min today,” she said softly.

Before they could say anything, she quickly made her way to the opened doors and stepped down the veranda. They silently watched her go and Zuko let out a dejected sigh as he ran his hand over his pulled back hair. A few long strands fell over his shoulder at his action.

“What is on your mind, Zuko?” Iroh asked after a moment of heavy silence as he observed his frowning nephew.

Zuko was silent for a moment longer as he tried to keep his thoughts to himself before he let out another sigh as he looked up at his uncle. He needed to talk to someone and he knew his wise uncle was the best person to give him advice as well as some assurance.

“I don’t for a second believe that Katara could be barren,” Zuko began resolutely before he forced himself to continue, “But perhaps the problem lies with me.”
“What do you mean?” Iroh asked with a frown at his beloved nephew’s despondent tone.

“What if I’m the one who is…sterile?” the young man forced himself to say the dreadful word through clenched teeth.

“Nonsense!” Iroh exclaimed loudly as he waved his hand aside to dismiss his nephew’s words. “You are young, strong, and virile! The men of our family are known for their fertile seed. If it wasn’t for contraceptive potions, the world would have been overrun with our line by now,” the old man jested.

“Then why haven’t I gotten Katara pregnant?” Zuko growled out, ignoring his uncle’s poor joke.

“There must be a reasonable explanation,” Iroh said musingly.

Zuko frowned since he did not know what other explanation there could be.

“There is something else on your mind, isn’t there, Nephew?” Iroh asked when Zuko had remained silent for a long moment.

The Fire Lord frowned as he tried to give voice to his real great fear. He clenched his jaw and balled his hands as he continued to remain silent before he finally relented.

“Maybe…” Zuko began before he paused as he swallowed thickly. Clearing his throat, he continued in a low tone, “Maybe I’ve been too selfish in my desire to make Katara my wife, and now she is suffering for it. I…fear she will regret marrying me.”

Zuko watched as his uncle shook his head before the old man looked at him confidently.

“Katara may be going through a difficult time now, as are you, but I’m sure if she could choose between you and getting her old life back, she would definitely choose you,” he said calmly.

“How can you be so sure, Uncle?” the younger firebender asked exasperatedly as he again ran his hand over his head in his frustration.
“Because she loves you, Zuko,” Iroh responded simply.

Zuko paused at his uncle’s words before he sighed a little in relief as he felt his fear and uncertainties lessen. He looked at his uncle when Iroh gripped his shoulder and squeezed comfortably.

“Do not worry, Nephew,” Iroh said wisely, “There is still hope. After all, where there is life, there is hope.”

Zuko sighed again and nodded his head as he ran his hand down the elegant covering of the thick tome resting before him. It seemed he would have to return the book now since it was going to be of no help.

The Fire Lord and his uncle were silent for a long moment. The only sounds heard were the rustling of the trees’ leaves as a breeze swept by and the distant quacks of the turtle-duck family in the pond. The sudden sound of his uncle clearing his throat brought Zuko out of his thoughts and he glanced up at Iroh with a raised eyebrow.

“Katara told me my tea is working wonderfully,” Iroh spoke up.

Zuko frowned before he sighed.

“Yes, it works well,” he reluctantly admitted before he mumbled, “So well I always have to run to the royal chambers in search of Katara.” Then he dryly added, “I’m glad you only give it to me once a week or else I would not let Katara leave our bed at all.”

Zuko glowered at his uncle when Iroh chuckled loudly. After a few more chuckles, Iroh frowned as he scratched his head.

“Did I already give you the tea this week?” he asked in confusion, “I can’t recall.”

The Fire Lord gave him a look.

“You did,” he responded, “You always send the tea on Wednesdays.”
“Oh, yes, of course!” Iroh exclaimed, “How could I forget? I must be getting old!”

Zuko quirked a dark eyebrow as a response to his uncle’s comment.

“Anyway, you should definitely drink the tea next week, Nephew,” Iroh continued with a smile before he cryptically added, “I have a feeling that this time it will solve your problems.”

Before Zuko could ask his uncle what he meant, Iroh quickly stood up as he finished his tea.

“I think I will look for Katara and maybe cheer her up with a game of Pai Sho,” he said before he quickly retreated after he smiled at his frowning nephew.

Iroh stepped down the veranda and walked swiftly through the beautiful garden his nephew had commissioned for his wife. Stepping into the palace, the old man walked down a couple of corridors before he finally arrived at the infirmary. He paused when he found Katara laughing with Jiao and Physician Toshiro’s assistant. With a cheerful smile, Iroh walked into the room and the women immediately turned to smile at him as he greeted them charmingly.

“Katara my dear,” he said as he turned to his niece-in-law with a smile, “I was wondering if you wanted to play Pai Sho with this old man.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Iroh, but I’m busy at the moment,” Katara said apologetically as she indicated at the supplies stacked on the tables.

Katara’s lips twitch in amusement when Iroh actually pouted at her. Jiao hid a giggle behind her hand and Yin-Min pretended to fix the items on the table to hide her smile.

“I will only relent to leave you alone if you promise to go shopping with me next week and visit my tea shop,” he said as he slipped his hands into his long sleeves. Then with another charming smile, he added, “It has been a while since I’ve gone on a trip with my favorite niece-in-law.”

“Uncle Iroh, I’m your only niece-in-law,” Katara said with a small laugh.
“And aren’t I glad for it?” Iroh replied as he returned his affectionate smile at the waterbender. “Please say you’ll come shopping with me.”

“I’d love to go visit your tea shop and go shopping with you, Uncle Iroh,” the brunette quickly agreed before she added firmly, “But you must promise not to go crazy with your purchases.”

“I shall endeavor to curb my impulses, my dear,” the old man said with a chuckle as the women laughed.

When they calmed down, Iroh turned to smile at Jiao.

“Would you mind telling the kitchen staff that the Fire Lady and I will not be here to eat lunch next Wednesday?” he asked charmingly.

Jiao smiled as she bowed her head.

“Of course, General Iroh,” she said.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed.

After a few more jesting remarks, the tea-loving, shopaholic old man left the room. With another laugh, Katara returned her attention to the supplies she had been cataloguing in Toshiro’s ledger while Jiao and Yin-Min stacked and stored the items.

“If you go out shopping with General Iroh, you might come home late,” Yin-Min remarked quietly.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Yin-Min!” Katara exclaimed as she turned to frown at the shorter woman. “I forgot.”

She had promised to teach Yin-Min some of the healing techniques she had learned in the Northern Water Tribe that did not involve waterbending.

“It is alright, my lady,” the pretty, tiny woman quickly assured, “You need to go out and distract yourself.”
“Thank you for understanding,” the waterbender said with a smile before she added, “Being out of
the palace all day might distract me from everything.”

Yin-Min nodded sympathetically and Jiao smiled kindly. They were interrupted when Physician
Toshiro and Advisor Chao entered the room as they bantered with each other. Katara smiled. She
was sure if Iroh had stayed a few more minutes the three old men would have left the infirmary to
badger each other some more.

Another week passed quickly with the royal couple enjoying more time together now that their
misunderstandings had been dealt with. Sitting silently in his study, Zuko carefully read over the
report of one of his generals regarding the progress of the newest recruits in the military. Although
they were no longer at war, Zuko wanted to be prepared for any threat to his nation and family. He
wanted his army to remain vigilant so they did not become lazy during this time of relative peace. A
soft knock at the door brought him out of his thoughts.

“Enter,” he called out passively as he smoothed the papers on his desk.

He looked up and watched a servant enter with a tray holding the same teapot his uncle always sent
him during this time of the week. Silently, he indicated for her to place it on an empty spot on the
large desk before he resumed reading the document before him. The maidservant quickly placed the
tray on the wooden surface before she bowed respectfully when he thanked her. She walked quickly
toward the door and closed it behind her.

Zuko finished the paragraph he was reading before he glanced up to stare intently at the teapot. He
remained unmoving for a while as he continued to carefully regard the innocent porcelain container.
What did his uncle mean by saying if he drank the tea this time it might solve their problem? As
much as he tried to come up with an answer, Zuko did not know what to make of his uncle’s cryptic
words.

He gave a small shrug. Well, it did not matter for now. The tea did help maintain his virility
throughout the night so that he was able to make love to Katara many times, more than was possibly
normal. Just thinking about the night ahead, about having Katara come undone in his hands in
pleasure, about him achieving multiple incredible orgasms with her, made his groin tighten and a
groan escape his mouth.

Swiftly and eagerly, the firebender reached for the tray and pulled it toward him. He lifted the teapot
and poured the steaming, sweet-smelling liquid into the small teacup. He grabbed the teacup in his
hands and brought it to his nose, inhaling the aroma for a moment, before he brought the rim to his
lips. He took a sip and frowned when he detected a slight difference in the flavor before he dismissed
the thought. In a few quiet sips, he finished drinking the tea before he placed the cup back on the tray.

Sitting back on his chair, Zuko closed his eyes and waited for that almost mindless lust to consume him. He waited for a few minutes before he opened his eyes and frowned in confusion when nothing happened. On the other occasions, the effect of the tea had been almost instantaneous.

Was his uncle messing with him?

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the thought before he quickly stood up from his large chair and strode toward the door. He did not need any aphrodisiac tea to make love to his wife and that was what he was going to do! He swiftly left his study and marched determinedly down the corridor toward the royal chamber he shared with his waterbender. He had barely made it to the guest wing when he saw Katara and his uncle round a corner. Shen and Kuo were following behind, their arms full with bags and colorful boxes.

“Zuko!” Katara exclaimed happily when she saw him approach them and she eagerly walked forward to meet him.

Zuko extended his arm and she quickly wound her arms around his and leaned against him with a large smile. He could see that she was excited and lighthearted and it made his heart ease at the sight of her enjoyment. He had become used to seeing the melancholic and distressed emotions in her eyes recently and he detested it.

“Where do you come from?” he asked curiously with a small smile.

“Uncle Iroh begged me to go drink at his teashop and then go shopping in the capital. I told you last night, remember?” Katara explained before she grinned at her uncle-in-law who chuckled. “But we returned earlier than we planned because Uncle said he had something important to look into.”

A small frowned appeared on Zuko’s brow. He had completely forgotten Katara had told him and wondered if their outing was the reason why Iroh did not give him the aphrodisiac tea because he knew Zuko would have gone insane waiting in his desire to possess his wife until she returned. He narrowed his eyes when his uncle winked at him.

“Did Mother not go with you?” the Fire Lord asked them.
“She did, but she decided to visit the garden for a moment,” Katara responded with a smile.

Zuko nodded to acknowledge her words.

“We should place our things in our rooms, my dear,” Iroh addressed his niece-in-law.

“You’re right!” Katara agreed as she turned to smile apologetically at the guards carrying their things.

They quickly returned her smile to let her know they did not mind.

As the small group resumed their walk toward the royal wing, Zuko wondered what his uncle needed to see to so urgently that he cut his shopping spree short. Zuko listened silently as his wife and his uncle continued to talk about their outing. Although he had been eager to lock himself and Katara in their room for the rest of the day, he was pleased to see she was having fun and debated whether he should escort her back to the city so Katara’s enjoyment could continue. Maybe they could visit the prestigious restaurant he had taken her to before. Or they could take a ride to the countryside to escape the bustle of the city for a few hours.

They paused at Iroh’s room to deposit his things before they continued down the long corridor toward the royal chambers. As they finally approached the huge golden doors, Zuko stopped in his tracks and stiffened. He lifted his arm to the side to stop Katara from moving forward. The others immediately stopped and turned to look at him curiously. Zuko narrowed his eyes as he saw that one of the doors was slightly ajar. His doors were always closed, his guards and servants made sure of that.

“Zuko, what’s wrong?” Katara whispered as she scanned their surroundings but could not find the problem. Her hands shifted to her waterskin and dagger at her hip.

“The door is open,” he explained in a hushed tone.

Shen and Kuo immediately, but silently, placed their burdens on the floor before they took positions on either side of the royal couple while Iroh silently stood behind them.

“Stay here,” Zuko told Katara as he glanced down at her.
“I’m going with you,” she responded defiantly as she placed her hands on her hips.

Zuko suppressed a sigh at her stubbornness, but knew he could not force her to stay behind when she wanted to help. Besides, he would feel more at ease if she was at his side. With a nod of his head, Zuko moved forward and cautiously opened the door, his stance ready for any surprise attacks. When nothing happened, he stepped into the anteroom and the others followed quietly behind him. They scanned the area, but frowned when they found nothing out of the ordinary.

Zuko pressed a finger to his lips to indicate they should continue their silence before he motioned at the other set of golden doors that led to the bedchamber. Zuko glanced at his guards briefly and he knew his message was understood when they subtly shifted closer to their lady. Zuko turned back around and walked warily toward the doors. He paused for a moment as he tried to figure out if he could distinguish any strange noise coming from inside, but everything was silent. Zuko quickly pushed the door open and walked inside only to stop cautiously before he quickly moved Katara behind him when she tried to enter after him. The room was completely dark, the curtains of the balcony were tightly closed and even the fireplace had been extinguished.

Could this be Jianguo’s doing? Zuko stiffened at the thought and he felt his heart start to pound with adrenaline. He pressed back against his wife and she pressed herself against him as if she had thought the same thing.

Before he could command whoever was inside to show themselves, Zuko tensed when he heard something rustling in the direction of the bed. Narrowing his eyes, Zuko willed all the candles to light up before he shot a spark of flame toward the fireplace. Flames immediately sprang up, illuminating the room.

Zuko’s and the guards’ eyes widened in shock at the unexpected sight that greeted them. Since Katara was shorter and standing directly behind Zuko, she could not understand their reaction and she glanced at Iroh when she realized he could also not see what was going on, but it seemed like he knew anyway.

“What the hell?” Zuko exclaimed as he extinguished the flames in his hands in his confusion.

Sitting at the edge of the bed was Physician Toshiro’s young assistant, but what confused Zuko the most was her appearance. She had on a loose yellow robe that parted slightly in the middle to show her chest and a little of her small cleavage, her black hair was loose, and her legs were completely bare. She was smiling at him before she gasped softly when Katara finally stepped beside Zuko to see what the commotion was. Katara’s eyes widened and she gasped in surprise.
“Yin-Min?” the waterbender exclaimed.

“You should still be out shopping with General Iroh!” Yin-Min blurted out before she could stop herself.

“What?” Katara asked with a confused frown. What was going on?

“What are you doing in our room and sitting on our bed?” Zuko asked the small woman angrily.

Yin-Min’s yellow eyes began to water before she buried her face in her hands and began crying quietly. Her small body shook with her sobs.

Katara automatically moved forward to comfort her even though she was still confused, but her husband quickly grasped her arm to stop her. He turned to Shen and Kuo.

“Take her away,” he ordered them with a growl.

Iroh cleared his throat and everybody, with the exception of the still crying woman, turned to look at him. Katara again got the impression that the old man knew what was going on.

“Take her to the throne room,” Iroh said in his usual calm tone, “The advisors are already gathered there by my request.”

Zuko frowned but did not say anything as they watched Kuo and Shen step toward Yin-Min. They each grabbed one of her arms before they began escorting her out of the room.

“You can’t take her out with her just wearing that,” Katara spoke up with concern for her friend. Her mind still did not comprehend why Yin-Min was in their room.

“Believe me, my dear, you should not care,” Iroh told her enigmatically.
Before Katara could ask him what he meant, she watched as the guards took Yin-Min out before she and Zuko turned inquisitively toward the old man.

“Why did you summon the advisors?” Zuko asked with a frown, “Did you know this was going to happen?”

“I was not completely sure, but I had my suspicions,” Iroh responded as he stroked his small beard and stared into his nephew’s eyes before he added, “After all, I wasn’t sending you an aphrodisiac tea to your study all these months, but a calming tea.”

“What?!” Zuko and Katara exclaimed simultaneously.

Iroh nodded gravely at their disbelief.

“If you weren’t the one giving me that aphrodisiac tea, then who was?” Zuko asked with a frown.

Iroh was silent for a moment as he stared at his anxious nephew and niece before he let out a sigh.

“It seems that it was Yin-Min,” he finally responded.

Zuko frowned and Katara’s eyes widened in incredulity.

“No, that can’t be!” the waterbender said with conviction, “Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know, my dear,” Iroh replied calmly before he added, “When you mentioned that Yin-Min had been giving you a blend of her herbs that have been ineffectual and then when Zuko mention the aphrodisiac tea, I wondered at the possibility of a connection. It seemed too connected to be a just coincidence.”

“I thought I had seen her a couple of times,” Zuko spoke up with a thoughtful frown, “But I never paid attention to her or cared.”

Iroh nodded and Katara again frowned.
“I wanted to see if Yin-Min would do anything if she knew I was taking Katara out of the palace when she thought you had drunk her tea, Zuko,” the old man continued, “So I had Jiao change your tea last minute before it was brought to you.”

“That is why the tea was ineffective,” the young firebender observed.

“And why we returned early to the palace,” Katara spoke up as she thought things through.

“Yes, I wanted to see if we could catch her,” Iroh said with a nod.

“But why would she do that?” the waterbender asked with another frown.

“Only she can tell us,” the old man said.

There was a brief pause as the royal couple tried to understand what was going on. They returned their attention to the retired general when he cleared his throat.

“So going on a hunch, I had a servant boy follow her for the past week,” Iroh continued to explain as he slipped his hands into his long sleeves. “And…” he paused and cleared his throat again with a grim frown.

“And what, Uncle?” Zuko asked impatiently.

“The boy discovered that Yin-Min would put something in the tea we drank for dinner before the oblivious servants left the kitchen,” Iroh finally revealed and his lips pressed into a thin line to signify his concern and upset. “If my hunch is correct, it would do nothing to Zuko and me, and while it may have affected Ursa, I believe the true target was Katara.”

“What?!” Zuko growled out angrily and Katara’s eyes widened.

Iroh produced a small bag from one of his sleeves.
“The boy took the bag Yin-Min used to sprinkle the contents into the tea from her medicinal box,” Iroh continued. He opened the pouch and lifted it toward the waterbender as he asked, “Is this the same kind of herbs you took for the past year?”

“It…it looks identical,” Katara said slowly as dread began to form in her chest. What was going on? What did this all mean?

“What is it?” Zuko both impatiently and worriedly asked his uncle as he stepped closer to his confounded wife.

_Could it be poison?_ Zuko felt his stomach revolt painfully at the thought.

“I am not completely sure,” Iroh murmured before he added with narrowed eyes, “But I have an idea.”

Before they could asked him what he thought, Iroh interrupted them as he closed the pouch and placed it back inside his sleeve.

“Do you still have that book from the University of Ba Sing Se, Zuko?” Iroh asked.

Still frowning, his anxiety rising, Zuko moved across the room to pick up the book he had placed on the small table between the two chairs resting before the fireplace. He had continued to look through it for any possible remedy that could help them before he had to return it. He quickly walked back to his uncle and handed him the large tome.

Iroh took it and immediately began to search through it as the young couple waited anxiously for his explanation. They watched as he stopped at a particular page with a deep frown. Looking grimly at his nephew, the old man handed him the book. Feeling his chest tighten at the look on his uncle’s face, Zuko grabbed the book and began to read the page. His eyes widened and his stomach clenched as he finished reading.

“Why do you think this is the purpose of the herbs?” Zuko asked in a strained tone interlaced with rage.

Katara wondered at his reaction and she bit her lip nervously. What did Zuko read?
“In order not to get pregnant, concubines and prostitutes have ways,” Iroh spoke up seriously.

Katara became worried as she watched Zuko’s face darken. He clenched his hands so tightly around the book that she feared he might set it on fire and destroy it.

“What’s wrong?” she asked impatiently.

Without responding to her inquiry, Zuko tightly grabbed her hand while he held the book in the other.

“Follow me,” he said through gritted teeth as he pulled her after him before he turned to look at his uncle. “Have Ozai’s former concubines come to the throne room,” he ordered.

“I already had Jee look into that,” Iroh replied.

With a firm nod, Zuko quickly strode out of the room, tugging Katara after him while Iroh followed. Katara followed her tensed husband silently as her mind whirled with questions. Why had Yin-Min been in their rooms? What were Zuko and Iroh talking about concerning concubines and prostitutes? Yes, Yin-Min used to be Ozai’s concubine, but what did that have to do with anything? Her trust in her friend would not let her make the obvious connections.

They finally arrived at the throne room and they paused briefly when they saw that the advisors were already waiting inside. Zuko resumed his quick march and Katara quickly followed to catch up to his long strides. Zuko helped her sit down on her throne before he walked up the steps to the dais and sat before the roaring fire wall. Katara turned back to the advisors and she watched as they murmured curiously amongst themselves. She again wondered what was going on.

Zuko nodded at a guard standing at attention next to another set of doors that led into a small room. The guard bowed and quickly opened the door. The men quieted down when Shen and Kuo appeared with Yin-Min walking timidly between the larger guards. Katara frowned when she noticed that Yin-Min was still wearing that flimsy robe and she felt sympathy and a flare of indignation that the young woman was forced to remained dressed in such a way before a room full of men. Shen and Kuo finally arrived below the dais and made the woman kneel before their lord. Yin-Min trembled and looked around fearfully and Katara felt sorry for her. The waterbender looked up at her husband and she saw that he was looking at Yin-Min with an unreadable expression before he looked up to address his advisors, coldly dismissing the woman for the moment.
“I understand that you wish I take a royal concubine to give me an heir since my wife has not been able to conceive yet,” Zuko began.

Katara wondered why he had brought up this issue at this time and not asking Yin-Min why she had been in their rooms.

“Yet?” they heard Wei scoff before he continued with a sneer, “She might never be able to conceive.”

When his wife flinched at the man’s words, the Fire Lord glared darkly at Wei and this time the old man remained quiet at the murderous look.

“Again, I will say that it is too early to jump to such a conclusion,” the golden-eyed lord continued before he firmly added, “Either way, I will not be taking a concubine.”

The advisors immediately began to protest and argue, but Zuko raised a hand to silence them.

“I do not need one for I plan to explore every possibility for my wife and me to conceive an heir,” Zuko began smoothly before he added, “But the plan is moot as I have discovered what has been going on.”

The men murmured in confusion until Zuko returned his attention to the woman before him. Yin-Min blushed at his attention before cowering.

“Yin-Min, correct?” he asked and his cool tone seemed to be mixed with anger.

“Y-yes, my l-lord,” the woman stammered nervously.

“My wife has recently told me that you have gifted her with a blend of herbs to help with fertility since our wedding night,” the Fire Lord began.

“That is evidence enough that the Fire Lady is barren!” Wei spoke up as he stared accusingly at the
Katara glared at him even though those words pierced her heart and she clenched her dress tightly in her hands. She wished she could throw a ball of ice at his face to shut him up once and for all.

“Keep your mouth shut, Wei! Speak again and you shall be punished,” Zuko growled out angrily, deliberately leaving out the old man’s title as advisor, before he turned his gaze back to the small woman. “Well?” he barked with barely restrained impatience.

Yin-Min jumped at his angry tone and she bowed her head.

“I-I did give my l-lady the h-herbs,” she began hesitantly, “B-but I stopped g-giving it to her when it was o-obvious it wasn’t w-working.”

She glanced briefly at the silent waterbender before she looked up at the intimidating Fire Lord.

“The h-herbs should have helped her c-conceive,” she continued before she looked down and wrung her hands nervously in her lap, “Although I know it will be difficult to a-accept it, I also believe that Lady Katara is b-barren.”

Katara gasped softly at her words and the men murmured quietly to themselves. The waterbender looked up at her husband with uncertain eyes. She saw that Zuko was looking at Yin-Min expressionlessly as he remained silent after the woman’s proclamation.

“Tell me,” he finally spoke up in a deceptively cool tone, “why did you give my wife such a gift?”

“Because I wanted to repay your kindness for rescuing me from my cruel family by giving you an heir, my lord,” she quickly replied with a bow of her head.

Zuko’s blank expression suddenly transformed into one of pure rage.

“If that is true, why were you preventing my wife from bearing me a child?!” he roared angrily and the fire wall flared up.
Gasping, Yin-Min cowered down and trembled in fear. All the men gasped in confusion.

“Zuko!” Katara exclaimed with wide eyes. How could he be accusing her friend in such a way when she was just trying to help?

“I-I n-never did s-such a thing, m-my l-lord!” Yin-Min stammered with a fearful whimper.

“Then what were you pouring in the tea my wife drank for dinner?” Zuko snarled.

Yin-Min’s yellow eyes widened.

“I-it is only a b-blend to help, m-my l-lady s-sleep,” the tiny woman tried to explain desperately, “I k-knew h-how stressed she h-has been and I-I only wanted to h-help.”

Zuko grabbed the book he had placed beside him, and momentarily parting the wall of fire, he threw the book down so that it landed on the cold floor before the woman.

“Open it to the marked page,” he ordered through gritted teeth.

Hesitantly, Yin-Min picked up the book and opened it to where the red string was placed between the pages. She began to read and they watched as her eyes widened and she blanched.

“I-it’s not t-true!” she yelled as she dropped the book as if it had scalded her.

“You dare lie to me?!” Zuko roared and again the flames sprang up in his rage.

Both Katara and the men were confused as to what they were talking about.

“My lord,” Katara finally spoke up as she looked at her husband, “Would you mind explaining what is going on?”
Zuko reined in his anger and he looked down at his confused wife, his eyes softening a little as he gazed at her. He knew what he was going to reveal was going to hurt his kindhearted waterbender and he mentally cursed the vile woman that continued to deny her wrongdoings.

“The reason why you couldn’t conceive,” he began in a much calmer tone, “was because *this* woman was not giving you a blend of herbs to help you conceive but one that *prevented* it.”

Katara’s eyes widened at his words before she looked at Yin-Min in shock.

“That is not true!” Yin-Min cried out, “I w-would never b-betray my l-lady in such a w-way!”

“We shall see if that is true,” Iroh finally spoke up in a neutral tone as he pulled out the small pouch from his sleeve and held it out for all to see.

Yin-Min gasped as she stared at it.

“W-where did you get t-that?” she stammered.

“Oh, so you recognize it?” Iroh asked with a raised eyebrow. “It was found in your medicinal box.”

The small woman’s eyes widened.

“You gave this mixture of herbs to Fire Lady Katara to make her believe you wanted to help her,” Iroh continued assuredly, “But you stopped giving it to her personally, not only to prevent any suspicions coming back to you, but also to make the Fire Lady believe she was truly barren and that nothing could help her.”

“That is not true!” the tiny woman again denied desperately. “Please, y-you must believe m-me!”

Her last words were drowned out by a firm knock at the doors. With a wave of Zuko’s hand, the guards posted beside the doors quickly opened them. Jee entered the room followed by four beautiful maidservants who looked around the room nervously. The admiral led them toward the Fire Lord’s
dais and they all bowed before him as they stood beside the still kneeling Yin-Min.

“Were you all once Ozai’s concubines?” Zuko asked in a passive tone as he stared at them.

“Yes, my lord,” the four women replied as they kept their heads bowed down respectfully and with slight fear, for they all knew how temperamental their young lord could be.

“We are a few of the ones who decided to stay as servants when you gave us the choice,” the oldest one of the group added.

“Do you know this woman?” the Fire Lord asked as he glared down at Yin-Min.

The women finally glanced to the side to observe the trembling woman and they nodded.

“Yes,” the same woman from before replied, “She was one of the youngest among us.”

“And thus, one of Ozai’s favorites,” another woman added.

At their words, Yin-Min began to cry quietly. Katara frowned as she stared sympathetically at Yin-Min as she remembered the small woman’s account of her suffering under Ozai’s hands due to his depraved lust. How could Zuko humiliate Yin-Min in such a way in front of all these men? Yin-Min had only helped and comforted her, and now Zuko was blaming Yin-Min for her inability to conceive. She was a gentle and timid woman. She would never do such a thing to her. She was her friend.

“Please, my lord, stop,” Katara spoke up pleadingly as she again returned her gaze at her husband.

Zuko again looked at her and frowned.

“I won’t until everybody realizes that you have no fault in any of this,” he said firmly before he again turned his attention to the confused women. “Do you recognize this combination of herbs?” he asked.
Iroh stepped toward the women and showed them the contents in the bag. The women studied the herbs before they nodded.

“We do,” the youngest of them spoke up.

“Do you know what it is?” Zuko asked as he stared at them expectantly.

The women glanced at each other in confusion before they again nodded.

“It is a blend of herbs that all concubines take in order not to become with child,” the oldest one explained before she added, “Unless our…master wishes otherwise.”

Katara and the entire group of advisors gasped at her words and Zuko cursed darkly as his suspicion was confirmed.

Yin-Min sprang to her feet and pointed an accusing finger at the women who stared at her wide-eyed.

“They’re lying!” she screamed. “They never liked me! They have always hated me!”

Katara felt sorry for Yin-Min, but she was distracted when the other four women gasped in indignation at the yellow-eyed woman’s accusation.

“If you ask any woman in a brothel, she will recognize the blend of herbs!” the oldest woman hissed.

At the truth of her words, Yin-Min’s eyes widened and she froze in her spot. Katara felt her stomach ache at the woman’s reaction. No, it could not be. She could not be so blind as to not notice Yin-Min’s deceitful intentions. Katara had opened up to this woman. She had offered her friendship and understanding.

“Yin-Min?” Katara spoke up in a strained voice before she asked hopefully. “It’s just all a misunderstanding, right?”
Yin-Min remained silent and still before she straightened herself and slowly turned to look at the waterbender. Katara gasped at the woman’s sudden transformation from timid to fierce and angry.

“Shut up, you stupid Water Tribe bitch!” Yin-Min screamed furiously.

Katara’s eyes widened at her outburst and Zuko jumped up wrathfully from his elaborate cushion at the woman’s insult to his wife, but Yin-Min did not notice as she continued shrieking.

“If it wasn’t because you had bewitched my lord, he would have been mine!” Yin-Min accused heatedly as she glared hatefully at the speechless waterbender.

Zuko growled angrily, everybody else gasped, and Katara froze at the woman’s words.

“What?” Katara choked out.

“What did you say?” Zuko demanded angrily through clenched teeth.

At the sound of his voice, Yin-Min gasped before she turned around to drop herself before the Fire Lord and bowed her head.

“I only did it for your own good, my lord!” she explained fervently.

“My own good?!” Zuko roared disbelievingly before he darkly reminded her. “When I allowed you to become Physician Toshiro’s assistant, you promised me that you would never betray or hurt me.”

“And I haven’t hurt you!” she insisted pleadingly as she glanced up at him.

Zuko had to stop himself from gaping incredulously at the ignorant woman before he glared at her furiously.

“When you hurt Lady Katara, you hurt me,” he declared angrily.
“The waterbender doesn’t deserve you!” she responded stubbornly as she glanced briefly at the astounded Fire Lady to glare at her before she returned her pleading gaze to the handsome Fire Lord. “I wanted to help you see that you had made a mistake by marrying her! I could not let you taint the royal bloodline with that dirty Water Tribe woman!”

“And you made sure of that by giving the herbs to my wife so she wouldn’t conceive!” Zuko growled out as he glared at her.

“Yes,” Yin-Min unabashedly confessed before she rose to her feet.

They watched incredulously as her timid persona vanished right before their eyes. Her demeanor was replaced by a haughty and confident woman as she stared up at the Fire Lord with determined eyes and a raised chin. Katara could only marvel at the sudden transformation. Had Yin-Min’s uncertain and nervous behavior been an act all this time?

“Why would you do that?” Katara spoke up in a strained tone, “I thought you were kind and honest despite what happened to you. I…I thought you were my friend.”

Yin-Min let out a soft, mocking laugh and it made the waterbender flinch at the harsh sound.

“I knew if I played the role of the shy and emotionally scarred victim you would have felt sympathy towards me,” the woman sneered as she glared at the waterbender, “I knew that by telling you about my tragic past you would offer me your kindness and friendship. My behavior wouldn’t have made you suspicious of my true feelings or intentions.”

“So everything you said was a lie?” Katara asked with a growl.

How could she have believed her lies so easily? Sokka had once joked that one day her compassionate heart was going to bring her trouble and Katara was ashamed to admit that her brother had been right. She had given this woman her friendship just to have it thrown back in her face.

*How could she?* Katara thought with both anger and sadness. *How could she do this to me when she knew how much I wanted a child? How could she let me believe she was my friend?! How could I have been so stupid?*

Yin-Min was silent for a moment as she got lost in her thoughts before she responded.
“No, everything I said about my life was true,” she said in a cold and angry tone, “But I was never skittish and timid when Ozai still reigned. I knew that if I wanted to survive, I had to please him in any way he demanded, even if inwardly I loathed it.”

Katara watched as Yin-Min turned back to address Zuko. The blue-eyed woman gasped softly when she noticed the blatant lust and desire in Yin-Min’s eyes as she stared at Zuko and suddenly Katara understood.

“With time,” Yin-Min continued as she addressed the firebender in a soothing tone, “you would have seen that you made a mistake and the waterbender is not the right woman for you.”

“But you think you are?” Katara asked in a heated tone.

All this time she had thought that the man Yin-Min mentioned she loved was Shen, but it had been Zuko all along! And she had unknowingly encouraged Yin-Min to pursue him! But how could she have guessed that the woman was after her own husband?

Yin-Min whirled around at the waterbender’s question and she again glared at her.

“Yes, I am a better choice!” she exclaimed arrogantly, “I am from the Fire Nation and I come from a noble family even under my current circumstances.”

Then she turned back to the glaring Fire Lord and her expression softened as she gazed up at him in admiration and an obsessed longing.

“I’ve loved you for years, ever since I met you when you were still a prince,” she stated lovingly.

Zuko frowned at her words and he stared at her calculatingly as he tried to remember when he could have met her. He could feel Katara’s surprised stare, but he did not feel any alarm since he knew he had never slept with any of his sire’s concubines. When he noticed Yin-Min smile seductively at him a faint memory appeared in his mind. It was indistinct because it had not been of importance to him...

A few days had passed since he returned to the palace after that fiasco in the Catacombs of Ba Sing...
Se. He could not seem to be able to get the image of Uncle’s betrayed look and the Water Tribe girl’s hurt and angry expression from his mind.

He was making his way through the public garden one night when he heard a feminine cry and a few male chuckles. Curious, he followed the sounds and came upon two young noblemen and a young woman. One of the men was holding her against him, his large hand covering her mouth, while the other one was suckling at her breasts as he fumbled to untie his trousers. It was the sight of the woman crying and struggling violently against them that made Zuko realize he had not stumbled upon a secret tryst, but upon an attempted rape.

Angered at their dishonorable actions, Zuko coldly demanded the men to let the woman go. At first, the men scoffed at the command, but when they realized they were in the presence of the Crown Prince, they immediately dropped the woman and hurried away. Zuko tentatively approached the crying woman and asked if she was okay. The style and lavishness of her clothes and the heavy, though ruined makeup on her face let him know she was one of his father’s concubines. She nodded and thanked him and Zuko ordered her to immediately return to the harem. She gathered her ripped clothes around her and hurried back into the palace.

As he returned to his room to find rest the following night, he heard a soft knock at his door. Thinking it was a servant, he called for the person to enter. To his surprise it was the woman from the other night. Narrowing his eyes, he asked her what she wanted. She smiled seductively at him as she said that she wanted to repay his kindness for rescuing her from those men by pleasuring him that night, then she dropped her loose robe and stood naked before him.

His young body had been tempted by the sight, but he did not accept her offer since he refused to bed a woman his father used, so he impatiently dismissed her. She tried to persuade him by seductively walking up to him, but a dark glare from him let her know that he was not interested and was getting annoyed. Disappointed, she clothed herself again as she walked back to the door, but before she closed it behind her she purred at him that she would always be available for his pleasure. However, Zuko forgot the incident and the woman the next day since his mind was occupied with more important things...

“Ah, yes, I remember you,” Zuko finally spoke up with contempt dripping from every word, “You tried to seduce me one night when I was still Prince Zuko, but I refused you.”

Katara relaxed at his words while Yin-Min flinched at his cold bluntness.

“Once you became Fire Lord I quietly served you,” Yin-Min continued as she tried to plead with him with her eyes before she angrily added, “I tolerated Mai’s presence because it was obvious you felt nothing for the cold bitch, but then the waterbender had to come and ruin everything. She took you away from me!”
Yin-Min shook with her rage before she composed herself.

“But I said nothing and bid my time until you finally noticed me,” she added.

“You were the one who was giving my husband that aphrodisiac tea,” Katara realized with narrowed eyes, “You thought I would not return home until late, so that was why you were in our room today, in the dark, waiting for him to arrive.”

“Yes, I thought I could entice him to bed with me when he was under the powerful drug,” Yin-Min confessed as she again smiled seductively at the Fire Lord.

Zuko looked at her in disgust before he narrowed his eyes when a thought appeared in his head.

“That is why you would always appear outside my study whenever that tea was brought to me,” Zuko observed.

“Yes, but you proved to be stronger willed than I expected,” the small woman admitted as she balled her hands, “The aphrodisiac drink shouldn’t have allowed you to know what you were doing or care with whom!”

A small smirk appeared on Zuko’s lips at the woman’s frustration.

“That is because I only desire my wife,” he responded smugly.

She narrowed her yellow eyes before she smiled.

“If you had taken the tea today, you would not have noticed it was me in the dark,” she said assuredly before she added with a purr, “Once you realized how much I could please you, you would have left your good for nothing wife. You would have demanded I take a place in your bed. I would’ve become the only woman you’d come to and the only one you’d need.”

Her tone became more seductive as she ran her hands teasingly down her body. She did not care that
the Fire Lady was glaring at her or that many of the men sitting behind her were looking at her lasciviously as she continued to stare lustfully at the glowering Fire Lord. Ever since he had saved her that night, she had loved him and when he had given her the choice to remain in the palace instead of forcing her back to her family—a family that did not want her—she knew she needed to make him hers. Unlike all the men she had crossed paths with, Zuko was the only one not to mistreat or hurt her. He had protected her. How could she not love him?

“I’d make you crave me like you’d never craved any woman before,” Yin-Min continued throatily as she cupped her small breasts and moaned before she ran her hands down her sides, “And with the waterbender not being able to conceive it would have been much easier to comfort you as your relationship deteriorated. I’d give you an heir, you’d banish the waterbender, and I would take her place by your side and our children would become the next descendants of the great royal bloodline. You would love me more than the waterbender.”

Both Zuko and Katara stared at the woman as if she had lost her mind while everybody else in the room murmured in shock.

“You really believe I would want you when I have a woman like Lady Katara?” Zuko asked with a scoff before he added, “Your aphrodisiac tea didn’t work to make me want you. I would never want someone like you. You pale in comparison to my wife. Besides, I would never bed, much less marry, a woman that my father has used as nothing more than a sex toy. You are nothing more than a deceitful whore. The lowliest prostitute would have more appeal to me than you.”

Yin-Min flinched as if he had physically struck her.

“How could you say that?” she exclaimed painfully, “I love you!”

“That is not my concern,” Zuko replied coldly before he angrily growled out, “And because of what you have done, I despise you. The very sight of you disgusts me.”

A gasp of pain escaped the small, pretty woman.

“Why?” she asked as tears began to gather in her eyes.

“You still dare ask?” Zuko replied incredulously before he furiously roared, “You made our lives miserable by making us think we would never have children! But worst of all, you hurt my wife by making her believe she was responsible and a failure! You hurt her by making her feel like I would
cast her away for another woman in order to beget an heir. For that, I despise you and I will make you pay tenfold for every tear you made my wife shed with your stupid schemes.”

Katara felt her heart swell with love and gratitude for her firebender’s fierce defense and protectiveness toward her before she looked back at Yin-Min who was crying silently as she stared imploringly up at the vengeful Fire Lord.

“Why didn’t you give up when you saw it was hopeless you’d get my husband?” the Fire Lady asked with a raised eyebrow.

Yin-Min again spun around to glare hatefully at the suddenly calm waterbender.

“This is your entire fault, you stupid bitch!” she screeched as she pointed accusingly at the blue-eyed woman.

“Watch your tongue, you deceitful snake, or I will cut it off! You will not speak to the Fire Lady in such a manner!” Zuko bellowed in rage.

Yin-Min ignored the Fire Lord as she continued to glare daggers at the waterbender before she brought her hand daintily to her mouth, tilted her head back, and laughed shrilly. The royal couple, Iroh, Jee, and the rest watching the scene unfold stared bewilderingly at the crazed woman. Yin-Min paused in her laughter to smirk haughtily at the frowning waterbender.

“At least I will console myself with the fact that you will feel like dying at the thought of losing all your children,” she said cruelly.

“What do you mean?” Katara asked demandingly even though she felt her stomach drop with unease.

Yin-Min turned to look at the four former concubines and laughed again at the horrified expressions on their faces as her meaning dawned on them.

“The blend of herbs not only helps prevent pregnancy, but it also terminates an unwanted one,” Yin-Min explained with another harsh laugh. “It’s possible that you have killed your own children by taking that tea for an entire year.”
“No!” Katara screamed in pained denial.

The flames flared to scorch the high ceiling as the Fire Lord trembled in his rage.

“You bitch!” Zuko roared wrathfully.

Everybody was more surprised when the usually calm Fire Lady cursed vehemently as she leapt to her feet with rage in her cobalt eyes and ran toward the still amused Yin-Min. Before anyone could stop her, Katara raise her arm as she raced toward the suddenly nervous woman and struck her face with a clenched fist covered in ice. Yin-Min howled in pain as the painful impact threw her to the ground. Without skipping a beat, the furious waterbender leapt toward her, straddled her chest, and began to repeatedly strike the pretty woman’s face with ice-covered fists.

Everybody looked on in shock as they watched the enraged Fire Lady attack the woman before their attention was caught by their lord walking unhurriedly down the marble steps and stepping through the wall of fire. He reached the women, and after watching his wife hitting Yin-Min a couple more times, he finally grabbed the screaming Katara around her waist and pulled her away. Katara continued to tremble in rage against him, but she allowed him to press her against his chest.

Zuko looked down at Yin-Min and had to fight the urge to break the woman’s neck as she moaned in pain below them. Her face was almost unrecognizable with the bruises, cuts, and blood that adorned her once beautiful features. Zuko felt his blood boil in his veins with his rage at the thought that his children could have been killed, but what worried him the most was the thought that Katara would suffer more emotional pain once she calmed down from her wrath. He glared murderously at the crying former concubine. He would make her pay for the suffering she had caused them!

“You will be punished in the most excruciating ways for your deeds before you are given a public execution for treason and sabotage against the royal bloodline,” Zuko growled down at the woman.

A gasp escaped Yin-Min at his words and she painfully crawled toward him. She grabbed at his leg as she weakly looked up pleadingly at him. One of her eyes was almost swollen shut as tears ran down her cheeks.

“P-please, m-my l-lord,” she moaned with pain and fear, “H-have m-mercy.”

Zuko angrily kicked her away from him and she fell to her side with a pained cry.
“You do not deserve any mercy!” he thundered, “Did you have any mercy on my innocent wife and our possible children?”

Yin-Min began to sob and Zuko turned away from her with disgust as he held a suddenly subdued Katara tightly against his side.

“Take the vile creature away and lock her in the prison tower for her punishment before she is taken to her execution,” Zuko ordered his guards.

Shen and Kuo bowed their heads as they looked worriedly at their Fire Lady before they roughly hauled Yin-Min by her arms. She began to struggle weakly against their hold as she strained toward Zuko.

“You can’t do this to me!” she cried out, “Everything I did was for you!”

Zuko ignored her as he tucked Katara closer to him when he felt that she had gone suddenly still and quiet. He needed to take her to the sanctuary of their room. He looked up at his advisors who were watching the screaming woman being dragged out of the room. He flared the fire wall once again and the men quickly returned their attention to their lord.

“As you can see, my wife is not at fault for not giving me an heir yet,” he spoke up firmly, “I will never take a concubine. Now you know that everything had been that deceitful woman’s fault. Fire Lady Katara will be likely to conceive one of these days.”

He looked at the men darkly, daring them to argue with him. His advisors—with the exception of Wei who crossed his arms over his chest and sniffed—immediately agreed with his words before they looked apologetically and worriedly at their silent Fire Lady. It was not as if they disliked her, quite the contrary, many of them admired and respected her, but their concern for an heir had been more important.

“As you can see, my wife is not at fault for not giving me an heir yet,” he spoke up firmly, “I will never take a concubine. Now you know that everything had been that deceitful woman’s fault. Fire Lady Katara will be likely to conceive one of these days.”

He looked at the men darkly, daring them to argue with him. His advisors—with the exception of Wei who crossed his arms over his chest and sniffed—immediately agreed with his words before they looked apologetically and worriedly at their silent Fire Lady. It was not as if they disliked her, quite the contrary, many of them admired and respected her, but their concern for an heir had been more important.

He trailed off when their lady winced. Zuko frowned, but before he could say anything the sound of hurried footsteps caught their attention. They turned and saw Physician Toshiro hurrying toward the royal couple, his aged face distorted with concern and pain. When he finally reached them, he threw
himself at their feet, not caring that the painful impact could injure his old knees as he pressed his forehead to the floor.

“My lord, I just heard the news about my treacherous assistant when I saw the guards dragging her away, and I can barely live with my guilt. My lord, my lady, please forgive this blind, old fool,” he apologized and his aged voice cracked with his remorse, “If I had not chosen her as my assistant, this would not have happened!”

Zuko motioned for Jee, who had been silent and grim during the entire incident, to help the old man up. Toshiro reluctantly allowed the admiral to help him to his feet, though he refused to meet his lord’s eyes.

“It’s not your fault for either Yin-Min’s and Kuro’s treachery,” Zuko told him confidently. “You could not have known about or prevented their schemes.”

Zuko saw pain flash across the old man’s face at the mention of Kuro, his former assistant whom he had treated as a son and had betrayed them. Toshiro bowed his head before he finally glanced at his lady when she did not kindly reassure him as she would normally do. The old physician frowned at the blank expression on her usually lively face. Before he could speak, his lord tucked his wife closer to him.

“I wish to be alone with my wife,” the Fire Lord said.

Without waiting for them to say anything else, he gently nudged Katara to walk with him toward the doors. He turned back to send his uncle and admiral a worried look before he turned back to his wife as his worry increased. They walked down the corridors in silence, both dealing with shock, anger, and sadness, until they finally reached their bedroom. Gently, Zuko led Katara to their bed and helped her sit on its edge. He knelt down before her and gazed up into her pained eyes as he tenderly grabbed her small hands with each of his large ones. The despairing look in her expressive eyes made his heart clench.

“How are you feeling, love?” he asked her softly as he caressed her delicate wrists with his thumbs.

Katara was silent a moment as she stared at him before she averted her eyes to their clasped hands.

“Does…does it make me a bad person for wanting Yin-Min to die for everything she’s done?” she asked in a faint whisper.
Zuko shook his head as he continued to soothingly caress her soft, brown skin.

“With that question it shows you still are too kindhearted, Katara,” Zuko responded in the same soft tone.

Katara shook her head quickly and she licked her suddenly dry lips as she held tightly to his hands.

“I…I wanted to kill her,” she confessed in an angry whisper, “I wanted to hurt her so badly when I attacked her. I wanted her to suffer just as we suffered these past months…I wanted to kill her with my own two hands.”

Zuko was a little surprised at her confession, but not disturbed by it. If it had been him, he would not have thought about it twice before he killed the woman.

“I wanted to kill her with my bare hands, too,” the firebender spoke up, and his calm voice shook with his anger, “But she does not deserve a quick death for what she did to us, to you. It is only just that she suffers the consequences for her actions.”

Katara took a deep breath before she nodded in acknowledgment to his reasoning before she tightened her hold of his hands almost painfully as she stared miserably into his golden eyes.

“Oh, gods, Zuko, I could have been killing our children by drinking that blend of herbs every day!” she cried out with a small sob.

Zuko quickly stood up and sat down next to her, pulling her shaking body tightly against his chest. Katara sobbed and whimpered as she clutched onto him desperately, burying her face tightly against his throat.

“None of this is your fault, Katara,” Zuko told her firmly as he held her tightly to him, “You didn’t know. You only wanted to give me an heir. Besides, since the herbs prevented pregnancies, there was very little chance that you would’ve been pregnant at all. I’m positive the herbs didn’t even give you a chance to conceive, so please don’t torment yourself, love.”

“It is my fault,” Katara whispered brokenly, “I’m the one who insisted you accept Yin-Min as
Toshiro’s assistant. I’m the one who believed in her lies.”

“There was no way you could’ve known what she was like,” Zuko said assuredly, “Besides, she could have still done what she did as a servant.”

Katara continued to cry quietly against his neck as the events of the day overwhelmed her mind.

“We could have had a child by now,” she whispered sadly.

Tenderly, Zuko placed her on his lap and held her tightly against him.

“Everything will get better, you’ll see,” he told her resolutely as he gently caressed her back. “We’ll have a child soon. I promise that I will give you a child to hold in your arms.”

Katara moved back a little to give him a watery smile before she again buried her face on his neck as her sadness once again consumed her. Zuko held her against him as she continued to grieve over their would-be children, for the suffering and pain of these past months, until she finally cried herself to sleep. Zuko pulled back the covers and gently placed her down on the bed. He walked to their large wardrobe and pulled out a simple nightdress and his sleeping pants before he returned to his wife’s side. He carefully disrobed her from her elegant dress before he placed the nightdress over her. She frowned and murmured softly in her sleep, but did not wake.

Zuko quickly undressed himself and put on his sleeping pants before settling himself beside her. It was still early for sleep, but he did not care. He wanted to be alone with his wife and be there for her when she woke up. He pulled the blankets up to cover them before he brought her close to his chest. He leaned his head down and placed a lingering kiss on her head before he pulled away with a sigh.

He stared at her sleeping features and gently wiped the lingering tears underneath her closed eyes with his thumb. He had thought that by marrying Katara, he would be able to keep her safe and protected, but she had only suffered because of him. If he wasn’t so selfish, he would let her go so she could have a life that was not filled with so many hardships and so much pain. But he was selfish. He did not want to let her go, ever. He would not be able to live or survive without her.

All he could do was vow that he would try his hardest to help her through all the troubles, be at her side to protect her, support her in anything she needed him to, offer his comfort and strength, and ardently love her like no one else could.
Standing on a wooden dais in the main town square of the capital, Zuko watched with an impassive expression as the executioner stepped toward the wailing woman kneeling on a dirty mat made of dried grass in the middle of the marketplace. Thick red ropes were tied tightly around her torso and legs to prevent her from escaping. Zuko looked away and glanced to his side. Katara stood beside him, silent and rigid, as she stared passively at Yin-Min. Though he knew she tried to hide it, he could tell that it still saddened her that the woman she had thought was her friend would die that day for her betrayal. After a long debate with herself, Katara had decided to be present for the execution to see Yin-Min meet her just punishment. On Zuko’s other side stood Iroh with an equally impassive expression. Ursa had declined being at the execution and Admiral Jee had stayed behind in the palace with her.

A large crowd had gathered expectantly to watch the execution. News had reached the entire Fire Nation about the woman’s treachery against their lord and lady and they angrily threw insults at her.

After a week of painful punishment, the day had arrived for Yin-Min’s execution.

“Please, my lord!” Yin-Min begged desperately as she recoiled at the burly executioner’s approach.

Zuko ignored her pleas as he nodded at his guard standing below the dais. The guard cleared his throat as he unfurled a scroll before him and began to read in a loud voice.

“By the decree of Fire Lord Zuko,” the guard announced and the crowd hushed to hear his words, “this woman shall be executed for her treachery against Fire Lady Katara and sabotage against the royal bloodline! Her name shall be erased from the records of nobility and shall, from now on, be known as a treacherous witch! Her punishment will be drinking poison. A fitting punishment as she had used drugs on our Fire Lady.”

The crowd vociferously expressed their approval and Yin-Min cried out a denial.

“Please, my lord, don’t do this!” Yin-Min again pleaded as tears ran down her bruised face, “All I wanted was your happiness! Everything I did was because of my love for you!”

Zuko’s lip curled in revulsion and his eyes blazed in anger. If she really loved him like she claimed she did, she would not have made his life miserable by hurting Katara. Ignoring her pleas for mercy, Zuko nodded at the executioner. The big man wearing a dark costume and a grotesque mask stepped
forward with a cup filled with poison and handed it to the crying woman. Yin-Min shook her head as she tried to back away, but the ropes impeded her movements.

When she continued to refuse the cup, the big man grabbed the back of her head and forcefully shoved the rim of the cup between her lips. He ignored her struggles as he tilted her head up and forced the dark, bitter liquid down her throat. Once the cup was empty he placed his large hand against her mouth to prevent her from spitting out the liquid. Once he was sure she had swallowed the poison, he let her go and stepped back.

They watched as Yin-Min coughed violently as she tried to claw at her burning throat, but the ropes stopped her. She screamed and doubled over in pain and thrashed her head from side to side.

Katara watched for a few more minutes as Yin-Min wailed and thrashed in pain before the waterbender looked away as she felt bile rise to her throat. She clutched onto Zuko’s arm and he looked at her.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly in concern.

“I thought I could stay and watch her die, but I c-can’t,” she whispered as she stared at him, pleading him to understand.

Zuko nodded his head to show her he did.

“I will find you once this is over,” he told her.

Katara nodded since she could not find her words when Yin-Min’s pained screams and cries became louder. Zuko looked at Kuo and Shen and they immediately stepped forward. Katara slowly walked down the steps of the dais and the guards quickly took position on either side of her as they escorted her back to the royal carriage. As soon as she was settled, they headed back to the palace. Zuko watched his wife go.

Once she was out of sight, Zuko returned his attention to Yin-Min’s suffering. Dark blood began to pour out of the woman’s mouth and she writhed and screamed in pain on the ground. A few minutes later, she gasped one last time, stared imploringly at the uncaring Fire Lord, before she fell, limp and unmoving. The executioner stepped forward and pressed his fingers against her throat. A moment later, he stood up and nodded at the Fire Lord. The crowd cheered at the proclamation of the traitor’s death.
Without a word, Zuko turned away and stepped off the dais with his uncle following behind him. Guards immediately surrounded them as they marched toward the palace. Once they were alone inside the building, Zuko spoke up as they strode down an empty corridor.

“How did you know Yin-Min was behind this?” Zuko asked his uncle.

“I noticed that since you became Fire Lord that the woman always lingered wherever you were,” Iroh explained as he slipped his hands inside his sleeves. “Did you never notice?” he asked.

“No,” Zuko bluntly replied before he continued, “I didn’t even know she existed until Toshiro brought her to my attention, but even then, I never thought of her.”

He paused before he added softly, almost to himself, “I only have eyes for Katara. She occupies most of my thoughts.”

Iroh suppressed a chuckle at his nephew’s uncharacteristic admission and instead he smiled broadly.

“Yes, it is as plain to see as the sun rising in the east,” Iroh said amusedly.

Zuko glanced from the corner of his eyes to glare at his uncle who, as always, was unaffected by his ire. Iroh’s smile dropped and he frowned.

“Do you think Katara is okay?” he asked.

Zuko sighed heavily as he remembered her departure from the execution. He understood that Katara could not stand seeing another person suffering despite the hatred she felt for them. He was different. He had found a dark satisfaction in watching Yin-Min suffer as she died a slow and excruciating death. He was still experiencing a rush of satisfaction of knowing that the person responsible for Katara’s suffering was dead, so he decided to wait until he composed himself before he went to Katara. When his uncle cleared his throat, Zuko finally spoke up.

“No matter how much I say otherwise, Katara still feels partly at fault for taking the herbs,” he said with a frown.
Iroh shook his head and sighed.

“She just needs time to come to terms with what just happened,” the old man said wisely before he added, “I am sure she will put it behind her soon and will come out stronger for it.”

“I hope you’re right, Uncle,” Zuko replied.

Iroh’s serious mood suddenly shifted as a grin appeared on his aged face. Zuko cocked an eyebrow at him.

“I cannot wait to hear the delightful news that I will be a granduncle soon,” Iroh said with an excited chuckle.

Zuko smiled as he returned his gaze before him.

“I can’t wait either,” the young lord murmured softly.

Ursa watched sympathetically as her daughter-in-law left the private garden and returned to the palace. Katara had sought her out when she returned from the public execution and Ursa had gently held the young woman to her, as if she were her real daughter, while Katara silently lamented the events of the past months and hours. With a soft sigh, Ursa left the veranda and wandered absentmindedly toward her rose bushes as she thought about the problems her son and his wife had been facing. Hopefully things would be better now. She wanted nothing more than to see her son truly happy with the woman he loved. A small smile appeared on her lips as she thought about her future grandchildren. She had been forced to miss her children’s childhoods, and although it pained her that she could not do anything for Azula, she hoped she could make up for it by being there to watch Zuko’s children grow up.

Standing a few feet away from the pondering noblewoman, Jee watched as Lady Ursa distractedly caressed the petals of her roses. His eyes drank in her elegant beauty; her milky white skin, her long dark hair, and her womanly figure. He felt his heart pound in his chest as it always did when he was near her before he chastised himself when he felt his lower stomach tighten in desire. He had tried, determinedly, to stop any feelings for his lord’s mother from developing, but it had been in vain.

He had fallen in love with her and he knew nothing could change it. He had tried to hide his feelings from her, from everybody, and that was why he was sometimes distant from her. He knew she
wondered at it, but he also knew he could not explain it to her. Yet, he was unable to be completely indifferent to her. Whenever she was sad, he tried to comfort her and whenever a nobleman approached her with greedy and leering eyes, he had scared them away. He could not stop both his protective and possessive feelings from showing, but luckily nobody had been the wiser—except for Fire Lady Katara. He had planned on living the rest of his life as Lady Ursa’s protector, secretly loving her without her knowledge, but his mind had changed with the recent events.

He had been deeply moved by the royal couple. Despite all the obstacles life had thrown their way, despite all the uncertainties and sorrows, the Fire Lord and his wife were able to overcome anything because of the intense love they held for each other. If, by some miracle, he were able to have a love as great as theirs with Lady Ursa, he wanted to do everything possible to have it.

Life was unpredictable. Perhaps one day something would happen to him, something fatal. He would give his life to protect Lady Ursa, without hesitation, and if he died saving her, he would be content. But he worried that she might never know of his devotion to her and how much she meant to him. It saddened him to think that she might never know just how precious she was, how wonderful a woman she was, and never know what it was like to have a man love her completely, honestly, and passionately. She might not return his feelings, she might even be disturbed by them, but he was prepared for her rejection. Although it would sadden him, he was even prepared to walk out of her life. He was even prepared with the possibility of incurring his lord’s wrath.

Squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin proudly, Jee determinedly approached her.

Ursa was brought out of her thoughts when she felt a presence behind her and turned around. She relaxed and smiled when she saw it was Jee, but she frowned curiously when she noticed the strange expression on his face. He was determined, resolute, but it was his eyes that rooted her to the spot. They were very intense as he stared deeply into her eyes—she had never seen such a look on him before—and it caused a strange sensation to run down her spine.

“Jee?” she asked hesitantly.

“Lady Ursa, there is something that I would like for you to be aware of,” the admiral began, his deep voice in a serious tone, “But first I would like you to know that I have valiantly tried to keep this a secret for a very long time.”

“Alright,” the dark-haired woman replied as she nervously clasped her hands before her.

“I know that I have no right in saying this,” Jee continued in the same tone, “I know that my station in life forbids me to feel anything but respect for you, you who are a princess and my lord’s beloved
mother, but it has all been in vain.”

Ursa felt her heart start to pound in her chest as she listened to her protector, whom she had come to see as a friend, and whom she, just recently, began having feelings for. Feelings that went beyond just friendship.

“Jee…what are you trying to say?” she asked softly as she stared into his eyes.

She gasped softly when Jee moved forward and gently grabbed her hands and held them to his broad chest. Wide-eyed, she stared at their hands before she looked into his sincere golden eyes.

“I love you, Lady Ursa,” he confessed softly, “More than I thought I could love a woman.”

Another surprised gasp escaped the beautiful noblewoman.

“W-what?” she stuttered in disbelief.

“I love you,” he repeated, his tone more gentle than she had ever heard from him before. A rueful smile appeared on his lips as he stared down into her golden eyes.

“I know you cannot return my feelings,” he murmured sadly, painfully, “But I have come to accept that, and if you still wish for me to be your personal guard, I will continue to protect you with my life. I will not expect you to treat me differently because of my feelings for you. However, if my sentiments bother you, I will leave and never seek you out again, though it will pain me to do so.”

Ursa came out of shock the more she listened to him and her heart swelled in her chest with tentative joy and pleasure. However, it was the painful sadness in his tone at his last words that finally made her come out of her stupor completely. When she felt Jee begin to let go of her hands, she quickly grabbed his. It was his turn to look down at their hands in surprise before he stared curiously at her. He watched as a shy smile curled her lips and she stared into his eyes.

“It will pain me as well if you were to be gone from my life,” she said softly before she averted her eyes bashfully.
Her almost maiden-like shyness endeared her even more to Jee and he felt his heart ache in his chest with love for her.

“Lady Ursa…what are you trying to say?” he asked hesitantly, unknowingly asking the same question she did a moment ago.

Ursa was silent a moment as she tried to voice her thoughts and feelings before she finally gathered enough courage to speak.

“I…I also tried to fight against my heart,” she began softly, “I was afraid of exposing myself. I was afraid of being hurt again.”

Jee tightened his hold of her hands as if to protect her from whatever was distressing her. Ursa smiled at the gesture and it gave her enough courage to continue as she stared into his eyes.

“I have come to care greatly for you, Jee,” she began before she moved their hands so that this time they were pressed against her chest where her heart was beating wildly, “And if you give me more time, I am sure that one day I will come to love you more than I have loved any other man.”

Jee’s eyes widened impossibly large at her words. She was asking him to give her time so her feelings could solidify for him? It was more than he had hoped for! His heart expanded with joy at the thought that she could love him with the same intensity he did her, but then his happiness vanished to be replaced with sadness.

“Even if you do come to love me, it would all be in vain,” he murmured sadly.

“Why do you say that?” she asked as her pleasure diminished a little at his sudden change of mood.

Jee hesitated for a moment as he debated with himself whether he should tell her his biggest desire, but when she continued looking at him expectantly and with worry, he decided to brave on.

“I will only accept your feelings if you become my wife and nothing less,” he said firmly yet with a hint of uncertainty at her reaction.
Ursa felt her body relax with relief at the same time her heart jumped in delight at his words. She smiled at him.

“I am glad you feel that way because that is how I feel as well,” she told him softly, “I will not degrade myself to become any man’s mistress. I deserve better than that.”

“And you do,” Jee agreed with a firm nod.

Ursa’s smile widened a little before she frowned when she realized his mood had not lifted at her subtle acceptance to his roundabout proposal.

“What is the problem, Jee?” she asked with sudden nerves.

“Fire Lord Zuko would never allow a simple admiral to marry you,” Jee responded somberly, “And I respect him too much to go against his wishes, even if it would pain me that I would have to admire and love you from afar.”

Ursa frowned since she knew her son would not be happy at the thought of his mother remarrying and would not accept it. She loved her son and she did not want to upset him, but she was tired of being lonely, she wanted to love and be loved. If she rejected Jee, she knew she would never find such a wonderful man again, and the thought of losing him pained her.

“Zuko will not accept the situation at first, but once he sees how happy I could be with you, I am sure he will eventually relent,” she assured him.

Jee thought about her words for a very long time before he finally smiled and gave a small nod.

“I will try my hardest to make him see I will do everything possible to make you happy,” he replied fervently.

Ursa blushed in both shyness and pleasure. No one had ever looked at her so tenderly before—not even Ozai in the first few years of their marriage—and she found herself at a loss for words. The sudden thought of her first husband, however, made her frown before she stared diffidently at Jee.
“You do not mind that I have been previously married?” she asked tentatively.

“No,” he responded quickly and sincerely before he growled out, “Ozai doesn’t even have the right to be called your former husband. He didn’t deserve you.” He paused before he added in a gentle yet passionate murmur, “I will make sure to show you see what a true husband is like. I will treat you like the princess you are and worship you in every way.”

“Oh, m-my,” Ursa stuttered, blushing deeply as his ardent words made her think of moments filled with passion and heat. She felt her stomach tighten in long suppressed lust and she almost felt self-conscious. Trying to distract herself, she quickly asked another question.

“What about my children?” she asked, “Will you accept and respect them even though they are not yours?”

“I cannot truly answer for Princess Azula,” Jee responded slowly, carefully.

Although it pained her to acknowledge the fact that many people feared and hated her daughter for her atrocious actions, Ursa could not hold it against Jee. She accepted his response with a sad nod.

“As for Fire Lord Zuko,” Jee continued more easily once he knew she understood his sentiments regarding the crazed princess, “I already respect and care for him. Besides, with our positions, it is more if Fire Lord Zuko would accept me.”

Ursa smiled and nodded since she had already witnessed the mutual respect between her son and the admiral. It spoke well of Jee because there were precious few Zuko respected in that way. Jee smiled softly at her before he frowned when he saw her smile falter as she nervously shifted before him.

“Would you still wish to marry me if I told you that I don’t wish for more children?” she asked anxiously though firmly. “I do not think it fair for Zuko and Azula and I don’t want to hurt them anymore than I have.”

Jee was silent a moment as he contemplated her words before he finally came to a conclusion.

“Although it would please me for you to bear my children, I will accept your decision,” he told her sincerely before he added with a small chuckle, “Besides, I think I’m too old to be a father.”
Ursa released the breath she had been holding and laughed softly with him. Jee was only a few years older than her, and although they were not young, she believed that they weren’t that old either.

“If Fire Lord Zuko would not mind, it would please me to be a stepfather to him,” Jee continued with a thoughtful expression.

Ursa smiled at his words and hoped that Zuko could come to care for Jee just as much, even if he could never see him as a father. She would never force him to do so if he did not wish it. She was brought out of her thoughts when she heard Jee chuckle again as he gently tightened his hold of her hands.

“Besides, I think the palace will be filled with enough children once Fire Lord Zuko and Fire Lady Katara begin having them,” he said with a wink.

Ursa laughed in pleasure at both his words and his uncharacteristic playfulness. She quickly sobered up when Jee stopped and stared gently yet intensely into her eyes.

“I really do hope you come to love me just as much as I do you,” he said before he tenderly added, “My dear Ursa.”

The noblewoman felt her heart skip a sudden beat at the way he said her name without her title and she felt almost as shy as a young maiden being shown true affection from her suitor. In a way, she almost was. She held her breath when she noticed Jee slowly lean his face toward hers as if to give her time to move away if she wished, but she did not retreat, and instead raised her face toward him herself.

Jee smiled happily at her acceptance before he finally closed the distance between them and gently pressed his lips against hers for the first time. His tender kiss made her melt against him more than if he were to have passionately possessed her mouth. The sensation of her soft, trembling lips against his sent a shard of both warmth and pleasure down Jee’s spine. He felt as if he were a young man, wooing his young, innocent sweetheart. And in a way, it felt almost exactly like that.

A month passed after Yin-Min’s execution. After learning what happened, the Fire Nation people sympathized with the royal couple and what they had gone through. They were glad to know that the one responsible for preventing Fire Lady Katara from having children was dead. Many sent gifts and letters of good wishes to the palace while others went to the Fire Temple to pray for their Fire Lady to give their Fire Lord an heir soon to secure the royal bloodline. Feeling properly chastised, the
Court Council had formally apologized to the royal couple for their part in the events and promised to wait for the birth of the heir for a few years if possible. Much to the disappointment and anger of the nobility, the council had also decided to retract their decree for the Fire Lord to choose a royal concubine, though that still did not stop the noblewomen from hoping the Fire Lord would choose one of them anyway.

Partaking in tea and pastries in the royal family sitting room after dinner, the Fire Lady watched in amusement as Iroh and Jee played Pai Sho. As usual, the older man was smiling while the admiral frowned deeply as he stared intently at the game board. Katara glanced to her side to see that her mother-in-law was also smiling amusingly at the men’s antics. Though, much to the waterbender’s pleasure, she could not help but notice that Ursa and Jee would steal quick glances at each other every once in a while, sending each other little smiles.

As winter approached, the climate in the Fire Nation had become chilly so they had agreed to sit inside the palace instead of the garden’s veranda. Katara could not help being a little amused at their small complaints to the cold weather. Although it was chilly, she was able to tolerate it very well since she was born in one of the coldest regions in the world. Katara tuned out what the others were talking about as she got lost in her thoughts.

After learning about what the Fire Nation people were doing to show their support, Katara found her depressed mood lifting and her guilt lessen. She could not dwell in the painful past any longer. She had to continue living and look forward to the future. But most importantly she could not continue to make Zuko worry. He had been patient with her for the past month and understood her when she told him she was not up for sexual intimacy at the moment, though she knew it was hard on him to not be able to make love to her. It was hard for her too. But she had also wanted to make sure that the effects of the contraceptive herbs were completely out of her system. She could not stand to be discouraged again. Her monthly bleeding had finished a few days ago and she was sure it was now safe for Zuko and her to have sex.

Now she craved it, she craved him. She missed being wrapped around his powerful body, she missed being the recipient of his ardent passion, and she missed the tender moments after their bodies were sated. She would not stress about getting pregnant anymore. She decided that she would just leave it up to the gods, even if that meant that she would conceive until years later.

She was determined to seduce her husband that night and give them both what they wanted—each other. Katara felt her stomach tightened in need and she bit her lip to suppress a moan. She surreptitiously looked up to regard the people around her with an embarrassed blush, but was relieved to see they were not paying attention to her. She needed to leave so she could start on her plan of seduction.

Clearing her throat delicately, she was able to gain the others’ attention. Smiling innocently at them, she stood up.
“I think I’m going to retire early today,” she told them, “Good night.”

The other three smiled affectionately at her as they bid her a good night. Forcing herself to walk in a normal pace, the waterbender glided across the spacious room toward the exit. Once she was outside, she quickened her pace down the corridor in search of Jiao. Zuko had left a few hours ago to inspect the capital’s military base and she knew he would be returning soon. It was still early in the day and she wanted Jiao to tell Zuko that she would be waiting in their rooms so that way he could go straight to their chambers and not be detained by their family or other matters. She smiled when she spotted Jiao heading toward the sitting room with more tea and cookies. After quickly giving the servant her message, Katara continued on her way with an excited smile and anticipation in her eyes. She was too busy imagining what the night was going to bring that she did not notice the knowing smile on Jiao’s face.

Katara approached the doors that led to the royal chambers in record time. She was relieved to see that Shen and Kuo were not at their post since they had gone with Zuko. She opened one of the doors that led to their bedroom and quickly closed it behind her.

She smiled when she saw that Jiao had already started a nice, blazing fire in the fireplace. The curtains were closed in order to keep the chill from outside at bay. The room was a little too dark for her liking. Searching for the long wooden sticks that were stored in the bathroom, Katara walked back into the room and approached the roaring fire. She lit the stick and carefully lit the candle resting on the mantelpiece. Throwing the stick into the fire, the waterbender picked up the lit candle and began lighting other candles around the room. Once she was satisfied that there was just the right amount of light, she moved toward the bed and turned down the covers.

Biting her lip, she began to slowly strip her clothes until she was completely naked. Folding her clothes neatly, she placed them in the basket in the bathroom to be washed before she walked back to the room. Taking off her fire crown, she gently placed it in the box she and Zuko shared. She picked up her hairbrush and carefully brushed her locks until her chocolate tresses fell down her back in soft waves. She looked at herself in the mirror of her dressing table and smiled at the sight she made. The only adornments on her nude body were the necklace and ring Zuko gave her.

Slowly she slid onto the bed and moaned softly when the cool sheets touched her heated flesh. Fixing her pillows, she leaned back against the headboard, placing her hands beside her and spreading her legs a little. Trying for a more seductive pose, she angled one of her legs up. When Zuko walked in she wanted him to see how willingly she was offering herself to him and he would know that she was ready and desperate for him to make love to her. She imagined the lust that would darken his amber eyes at the sight of her and she felt her heart pound. She could feel wetness rush out of her aching core and she again bit her lip. Anticipation and need curled in her stomach as she imagined Zuko touching every inch of her body with his strong, sword-calloused hands. She closed her eyes as she imagined him caressing her thighs, her hips, her sides, until he finally reached her aching breasts, she could almost feel it.
Her eyes flew open when she realized it was her own hands that were cupping her breasts. Slowly, she began to massage her mounds and she bit her lip, then she wedged her hardening nipples between her forefingers and middle fingers and pressed them together. She gasped and moaned at the spark of pleasure it ignited in her belly. She continued to rub her breasts and pinch her nipples until her heart was pounding in her chest and more of her aroused cream seeped out. Deciding that she needed more stimulation, more pleasure, the waterbender slowly, teasingly, ran her right hand down her flat stomach the way Zuko did. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips as she dipped her hand between her parted legs, feeling her drenched curls come into contact with her fingers, before she firmly cupped herself.

“Oh,” she moaned softly.

She paused for a brief moment before she began rubbing her palm against her wet sex, gasping and moaning at the sensation. She then ran her fingers along her folds, imagining it was Zuko’s long fingers, before she touched her swollen clit. Her hips bucked and she gasped before she began rubbing her now soaked fingers against her nub in furious circles. Her left hand was still cupping her breast and she began kneading it and rubbing her hard nipple in the same rhythm as her fingers buried between her straining legs. Panting softly, she slowed her pace and her fingers again ran along her wet folds, the sensation causing her stomach to quiver in pleasure, before she quickly inserted her middle finger inside her clenching pussy.

“Ah!” she cried out softly at the pleasure as her left hand tightened its hold on her breast.

She circled her finger along her tight, wet walls and she almost understood why Zuko loved to bury his thick cock inside her. Moaning and panting heavily at the thought of her firebender buried deeply within her, Katara moved her finger in and out of her wet core. She frowned when she found it was not enough stimulation and she buried a second finger inside her while she continued pulling at her nipple with her other hand. Her hips surged forward and she threw her head back with a long moan. She frowned slightly when she found that two of her slim fingers were not the same width as two of Zuko’s. She debated whether to insert a third finger, but decided against it. Her mouth opened to allow her moans to escape as she continued to pump her fingers inside herself. Pleasure simmered in her belly and under her skin.

Oh, she hoped Zuko arrived soon!

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Zuko quickened his pace once he arrived at the outer doors to their royal rooms. After having dinner with two of his generals at the fort to discuss the recruits’ progress, Zuko arrived at the palace a few minutes ago only to have Jiao intercept him as he made his way to his study before he met with his wife and family. The maidservant told him Katara was waiting for him in their room. Frowning in worry, Zuko had asked her if she knew why his wife asked for him so urgently, but Jiao had just said
she did not know. He barely noticed the knowing smile on the woman’s face as he brushed past her and headed to the royal family wing.

The young lord quietly entered the antechamber and wondered what Katara was up to. If only she were waiting for him for a night of lovemaking, he thought with a mental moan as he crossed the room. He shook his head to get rid of the hazy feeling of his lust. Katara had asked him to be patient until she was ready for intimacy again. She had wanted to make sure that the effects of the contraceptive tea were out of her system for good, so he was not going to rush her. He silently opened the door that led to their bedchamber and opened his mouth to call for her when he paused at the sound of Katara moaning softly. His eyes immediately darted to the bed and he froze in surprise at the vision of his lovely wife pleasuring herself.

Damn. What an incredible sight!

Zuko felt his cock immediately harden and push against the restraint of his pants. Did this mean she was ready for him to make love to her or was she just relieving some of her sexual tension as he had been secretly doing as he held her to him while she slept? He flushed at the memories before he shook his head as a wicked smirk curled his lips.

Closing the door quietly behind him, Zuko slowly walked across the room, careful of not making a sound and alerting her to his presence. He did not want her to stop what she was doing. He quietly stripped himself of his armor, clothes, and swords and soundlessly laid them on the floor. He quickly took off his fire crown and shivered when his long hair tickled his back. He placed his crown on their small tea table as he passed it. Katara had still not noticed his presence as she continued moaning and whimpering softly in her self-pleasure. His body was tense with his arousal and his cock throbbed as the slightly chilly air in the room hit him. He finally made it to the foot of the bed and stood silently, yet shaking slightly with need as he stared down at his wife.

She was leaning against the headboard and her eyes were closed, her face a beautiful contortion of pleasure. Her left hand was roughly kneading her breast and pinching her lovely nipple while her right hand pumped vigorously into her pussy. As he continued to watch the erotic sight, the firebender slowly ran his hand down his muscular stomach before he fiercely grasped his hard shaft. His mouth opened on a silent groan, pleasure skittering down his spine, as he began to stroke himself with slow, yet firm strokes. He watched as Katara bucked her hips when she pressed the heel of her palm against her clit and he pressed his thumb on his weeping tip before he spread the whitish liquid around the spongy head. He bit back another groan.

“Zuko,” he heard Katara moan.

He groaned mentally when she called his name in such a soft, desperate tone. He watched as a moment later a small frown appeared on her brow before she growled softly in frustration. Zuko
could not suppress his smile as she tried to bring herself to release but could not achieve it. When Katara whimpered again in frustration, Zuko decided to help her along so in the long run they could both be satisfied.

“Are you imagining it is me touching you, Katara?” he asked her in a deep and husky tone.

Katara’s eyes flew open and she gasped in surprise at the sound of her husband’s voice. She had planned on watching his reaction when he first entered the room to see her naked and waiting for him, but it seemed that she got carried away. Panting softly, she paused in her actions and lifted her head to look at him. She moaned softly when she saw that he was naked and he was slowly stroking himself as he stared at her with an intense, passionate gaze. She slowly began to remove her hands from herself, but the sound of his disapproval stopped her immediately.

“Ah, ah, don’t move your hands away, my water nymph,” he commanded huskily.

The flush that had accumulated on Katara’s cheeks due to her pleasure darkened in hue at both his words and expression full of lust. Zuko knelt on the edge of the bed and crawled toward her, spreading her legs further apart as he stopped between them. His cock stood erect before him and a thin wet line of his whitish arousal ran down his long length.

“Were you waiting for me, love?” he asked. His tone was rough and filled with pleasure and need.

“Yes, desperately,” she responded breathlessly as she smiled coquettishly at him.

Zuko groaned at her earnest admittance. He did not need her to tell him in words that she was ready for him to make love to her; he could see that for himself. And he planned on making love to her all night long. It had been too long since they have been intimate and he craved it with his entire being. But first, he wished to see her finish what she had been doing.

“Touch yourself again, my naughty little wife,” he commanded her throatily. “I want to watch you bring yourself to ecstasy.”

Katara’s heartbeat picked up and her tight passage clenched around her fingers at his command. Without a second thought, she resumed her activities, but with more vigor this time as she tried to pleasure both her and her watching husband. She pulled roughly at her nipple and pumped her fingers rapidly inside her grasping center.
“Uhh,” she moaned and closed her eyes at the pleasure. “Ahh, mmm.”

“Open your eyes, Katara,” Zuko’s deep baritone demanded, “I want you to look at me while you pleasure yourself.”

The waterbender forced her eyes open and she locked them on his impassioned face. She noticed that his right arm was moving and she quickly darted her eyes down to where he knelt between her spread legs. She moaned and increased her speed as she watched her firebender roughly grasping his turgid shaft.

“Stroke your big cock harder, Zuko,” she demanded huskily as she smiled seductively at him.

Zuko groaned as pleasure ignited in his stomach and his shaft throbbed painfully when he saw that his wife was just as fascinated by watching him pleasure himself as he was by watching her. His half-lidded eyes looked down at her chest to see her frantically kneading her breast before his eyes trailed down her body to land on her furiously pumping hand. Her upper thighs were glistening with her juices as she coaxed more of the warm liquid from her body. Her moans combined with the wet sound of her fingers plunging into her warm depths made Zuko’s heart pound wildly in his chest and his shaft throb in excruciating need.

“Do you like that, my little waterbender?” he asked with a growl as he increased his pumps on his aching cock. “Are you imagining it is me kneading your breast, pinching your hard nipple, and fingering your tight, wet pussy?”

“Yes, Zuko, oh!” Katara mewled as she threw her head back against the headboard but continued to keep her eyes open just as he had demanded of her. She could feel her walls clenching with her impending release. “Zuko, I’m...so, uhhh...close!” she cried out as she plunged her fingers deeper and pressed against her swollen clit.

“Then let yourself go, Katara! Let me see you come!” the firebender growled as he grasped his cock almost brutally in his anticipation of seeing his waterbender achieve her climax.

Katara screamed as the dam broke and waves of pure ecstasy rolled through every inch of her body. Watching Zuko and being watched by him excited her so much that she was finally able to climax when she couldn’t before. Her hips bucked and her head thrashed from side to side as pleasure consumed her. She felt a rush of her juices coat her fingers as her walls convulsed and she moaned loudly. A moment later, she slumped back down on the bed, panting erratically and moaning softly.
Zuko had stopped his movements for he did not want to spend himself too early, but his breathing was equally as ragged. With a pleased and aroused smile, he admired Katara’s trembling, perspiring body beneath him. She had slid down in her writhing so that she was now half reclined against the headboard. He smiled in satisfaction at her when he realized she had managed to keep her eyes open and she was staring dazedly at him.

“Very good, my lovely wife, you did wonderfully,” he rumbled amorously, “I will forever cherish the erotic sight you provided me.”

Katara let out a small sigh of satisfaction and smiled at him.

“I’m glad I was able to please you as much as I pleased myself,” she said teasingly.

She felt her stomach clench once again when she saw a wicked smirk pull at her husband’s lips.

“Now, suck your drenched fingers, Katara,” he rasped huskily as he ran his left hand down her thigh. The rough sensation of his leather wristband caused her to shudder. His smile turned more lustful when she stared at him wide-eyed. “I want you to taste yourself. I want you to clean your fingers of every trace of your delicious juices.”

Katara felt her still sensitive core clench once more around her still buried fingers. Wanting to please her husband after keeping him at bay these past weeks, she slowly pulled her fingers out and brought them up to her face. They both gazed at her glistening fingers as she spread them a little, watching as her cream clung between them, before they looked at each other again. She gave him a small seductive smile and she heard him groan as he watched her expectantly.

His body almost rigid with expectation, Zuko watched as his wonderful wife parted her lips, stared passionately into his eyes, and slowly licked her wet fingers. His eyelids became heavy and his stomach tightened in arousal. She licked her two fingers one more time before she placed them entirely inside her mouth and sucked.

“Oh, gods, so hot,” the firebender groaned and he again pumped his straining shaft as he watched Katara suck her fingers clean of her essence.

She slowly slid the fingers out of her mouth before bringing them up to his lips. Zuko immediately opened his mouth and allowed her to slip her wet fingers inside. He groaned at her lingering taste. He ran his tongue seductively around her slim fingers as he stared into her darkened eyes. He could
not take it anymore. He needed her to touch him and bring him to orgasm or he was going to go insane. He needed to have his cock in the paradise of her mouth next.

Katara could almost hear his need and she smiled sexily up at him as she pulled her fingers from his mouth. Then with those same two fingers, she beckoned him toward her.

“Put your cock in my mouth, Zuko,” she purred.

She watched as Zuko eagerly moved over her so that he was kneeling on either side of her. She looked up sultrily at him as he towered over her reclining body, his eyes dark with passion. He thrust his hips forward and her eyes darted down to his hard shaft pointing insistently at the fullness of her mouth.

The waterbender eagerly lifted her hand and caressed the reddish head, spreading the gleaming liquid leaking from the slit around the spongy tip, causing him to moan. She grasped his shaft and began to stroke the velvet hardness appreciatively. Before he could speak, she leaned forward and engulfed him in her mouth as far as she could go, swirling her tongue and moaning around his length.

“Yes, Katara,” Zuko whimpered lowly as he placed his hand upon his wife’s head. “So damn good.”

Gods, it felt wonderful. He felt her smirk as she swirled her tongue around his head, and he gently thrust himself into her warm mouth with a growl. He could almost feel her amused triumph at his reactions as she backed away a little before she sucked him deeper into her wet mouth. He let out a small groan as one of her hands cupped his heavy balls and began massaging and tugging at them, alternating from gentle to almost rough caresses. He hissed her name when she began to bob her head over him and he placed his other hand on her head to keep her in place at the incredible pleasure.

Katara felt her stomach tighten in lust at the noises she was able to elicit from her passionate husband. With her tongue still pressed against the tip of his cock, she lifted her eyes up to his, and moaned at the incredible sight above her. His shoulders were tensed and the muscles of his upper body were rigid, except for his heavy pants and the soft rise of his chest as he breathed erratically. His mouth parted slightly, his head bent down toward her, his amber eyes gazed at her from under his lowered lids with an ardent intensity that stole her breath away. He looked so magnificent in his rapture that she felt her pussy tighten in need. With a loud moan, she began to suck him more firmly.

“Oh, gods,” the firebender growled as his spine tingled at the increasing pleasure.
He felt her other hand, the one that was not occupied cupping his sack, slide its way up his thigh and around to stroke one of the cheeks of his backside before she pushed firmly against it to press him deeper into her mouth. He felt his groin twitch and his heart pound wildly in his chest.

He frowned slightly when she let go of his balls before he felt her slide her hand lower down between his thighs, caressing the skin below his sac. He froze when he felt her firmly rub two fingers on that sensitive spot at the same time she pushed his entire cock down her throat. Gasping, Zuko grabbed her head firmly, grasping almost painfully onto her hair, the pleasure almost too much to bear, as his cock jerked between her soft lips.

“Katara!” he roared loudly as his pleasure erupted down his spine and into his shaft.

The waterbender’s eyes widened when his hot seed burst into her mouth with such violent force that she could barely swallow it all as it slid down her throat. She continued sucking him off and rubbing her fingers on the sensitive spot below his straining shaft in order to prolong his pleasure and she smiled when he kept jerking his hips and chanting her name. Then he held himself still over her as he finished with two more spurts of his seed before he relaxed, panting heavily as he braced himself on the headboard behind her. She slowly pulled away and his still semi-hard cock slipped from her mouth, a thin string of her saliva trailing between his mushroomed tip and her swollen lips.

“Damn,” Zuko groaned as he dropped himself beside her, his eyes staring dazedly at the ceiling, his chest heaving with his pants, and his groin tingling with the aftershocks.

Smirking, Katara moved over him and placed a soothing hand on his sweaty chest, allowing him a moment to recover himself. She had been determined to seduce him and she wasn’t going to stop until they were both satisfactorily sated. When his eyes darted to hers a moment later, she gave him a sultry smile before she deliberately ran her tongue over her lower lip and moaned.

“Mm, you taste so good, Zuko,” she purred as her hand ran down teasingly down his chest to his abdomen.

At her words and touch, Zuko felt his cock harden once again. He smirked when his wife’s eyes immediately landed on his reawakening erection and she bit her lip. He was going to take advantage of this night to make up for the past month of reluctant abstinence.

Without warning, he rolled over and pushed her down beneath him, pinning her hands on either side of her head. His eyes hungrily roamed over her flushed face and breasts and Katara felt her breath accelerate at the almost feral gleam in his golden eyes. Intertwining their fingers together, Zuko leaned down and ran his lips along her forehead, cheeks, and jaw, savoring the softness of her brown
skin, before he pressed his lips to hers. His mouth captured her moans and sighs as his fingers caressed her wrists and trailed down her arms before he slipped his tongue into her awaiting mouth to battle with hers.

Katara panted softly in mounting arousal when Zuko broke their kiss to skim his lips down her throat. The waterbender watched with darkened blue eyes as he moved lower, trailing his tongue along her skin before he cupped her breasts and kneaded them firmly in his sword-calloused hands.

Zuko slid his tongue and grazed his teeth around the curve of one breast while his hand squeezed and plumped the other. He enjoyed the softness of her skin and the delicious moans and mewls he elicited from his wife. As he continued to kiss and suckle at her breasts, his hand trailed slowly, teasingly, down her side before he reached between her legs. He relished in her moans when his fingers pressed against her swollen clit. He rubbed against it, causing her to buck and writhe beneath him, before he pushed two fingers into her wet warmth.

“Uhh!” Katara cried out as she threw her head back onto the pillow beneath her and her back arched into his touch. “Haaah!”

He pumped his fingers in a steady rhythm, forcing more of her cream to flow out to coat his fingers as his tongue and lips continued to caress her chest. He felt his chest swell with satisfaction when her shuddering breaths and moans reached his ears and her body trembled and writhed against him. He felt his cock throb in arousal and the need to bury himself inside her welcoming body almost overwhelmed him.

He pulled his fingers out of her and smirked when she growled her displeasure. He raised his head to gaze at her and when he saw her eyes lock with his, he lifted his hand and stuck his wet fingers into his mouth. He groaned at the delicious taste of her and he watched as her breath accelerated. Once he had cleaned his fingers of her juices, he forced her thighs further apart and settled his hips between them. They both groaned at the delicious friction of their groins pressing tightly together and they both thrust their hips in pleasure. Zuko bent his head down to once again kiss her chest. Katara angled her hips and moaned when his spongy head rubbed against her wet nub. She arched her back and moaned his name as her hands grabbed the back of his head to push him closer to her.

“Zuko, haah, please,” she pleaded breathlessly.

She sucked in a sharp breath when his lips closed around her hard nipple at the same time he pushed his cock into her. Hissing in pleasure, Katara surged her hips up, forcing his hard and thick length to sink deeper into her willing body.
“Agni, Katara,” Zuko groaned against her breasts as his hips jerked in rapture when she tightened her pussy around him and wrapped her legs tightly around his hips. It had been so long since they made love and she was even tighter than he remembered.

“Zuko, please,” she begged wantonly as her hands pressed tightly onto his backside at the same time she thrust her hips up. Her body was shaking with her intense arousal and she feared she would go insane if he didn’t bring her to orgasm. “Take me!”

Her desperate words made his blood boil in his veins and caused his shaft to jerk within the tight embrace of her wet passage. He could not thank the gods enough for allowing him to find such a wonderful and passionate woman for his wife. He loved everything about her, even her flaws. Although in his eyes she was pure perfection. He loved her mind and her personality, as much as he adored her exquisite body. Her soft lips, her round breasts, her curvy hips, her parted thighs and the damp curls that protected her wonderful sex all contributed to his infatuation, to his powerful libido. It called out to the primitive part of him, to the sexual animal deep within him that clamored for its mate.

The sound of her breathless call of his name and the sensation of her small hands pressing against his ass, her legs tightening around his hips, and her pussy clenching almost painfully around him quickly destroyed the last remnants of his control and made him focus solely on what was happening between them. Growling, he swooped down and seized her lips in a fierce and hungry kiss, which she returned just as passionately. When the need for air became too great, the firebender pulled back and gazed down into her beautiful features. The sight of her passion, need, and love written across her face, in her half-lidded blue eyes, made his chest tighten.

Agni, he loved this woman.

With a loud growl of her name, he slammed his mouth onto hers and began to thrust himself almost wildly inside her, needing to satisfy the intense feeling within him. He swallowed her mewls and cries of pleasure as her nails dug into his shoulders and her hips surged up to meet every one of his relentless thrusts.

“Zu-Zuko, ohh!” Katara cried out at the profound pleasure crashing into her. “Yes, yes!”

Her eyes took in the sight of her husband in his revelry as he used her body to pleasure him, just as she did his. She watched as his long black hair fell over his straining shoulders, a few strands sticking to his sweaty forehead and throat. His jaw was tightly clenched, his teeth slightly bared, his eyes screwed shut as he pounded her in a rhythm that was meant to usher their orgasms quickly to the surface. She knew he needed that release desperately because it was what she needed too and she tightened her limbs around him to hold him close to her. When he opened his eyes to gaze down at her, she gave him a loving yet sultry smile.
“I love you,” she breathed out throatily.

“Gods, Katara!” Zuko gasped as her words only intensified the powerful emotions sparking between them.

Grabbing her ass, he pulled her up higher so he could impale himself deeper inside her, plunging harder and faster until his muscles strained with the effort. He needed to fill her completely, to possess her entirely. To imprint the feeling of his body, his scent, his touch so powerfully into her skin, into her body, into her heart that she would remember him for all time. It seemed as if she knew what he was feeling for she pulled his tongue into her mouth and entwined it with hers, curling it around his as if she wished to fused them together. His breath hitched when she tightened her wet walls in an almost painful vise around his pounding cock, almost as if she was ravenously milking him for all she was worth. Groaning against her mouth, he kissed her back as fiercely as she did him, plunging himself mindlessly into her contracting warmth.

Katara moaned deeply into their kiss when she felt her husband thrust with an abandon that made her toes curl and stars appear before her eyes. She loved to have both Zuko’s cock impaled deeply within her core and his tongue shoved into her mouth at the same time. The feeling of having him doubly within her was devastating beyond description. When he angled his hips so that it touched that sensitive spot within her, she cried out as her thighs clench around his pounding hips and her pussy pulsed with her impending release. Flames erupted within her as his thick shaft continued to stroke that delicious spot. Clinging to him almost desperately, Katara knew he was close to his own climax because his movements became erratic, his hands tightened on her ass, and his groans became loud, deep growls. Then the world imploded and she was arching her back and writhing wildly upon the bed as ecstasy burned every inch of her body, rendering her mind blank except for the pleasure rushing through her.

“Zuko!” she screamed.

She heard Zuko rasp her name as he pressed his hips tightly to her, pushing his cock as deeply as he could go before he cried out as he exploded within her convulsing passage. The sensation of his shaft throbbing and jerking within her, of his hot seed splashing against her walls and overflowing her womb, and his amber eyes gazing deeply, intensely, into her eyes, as if touching the very depths of her soul as he came, triggered another small orgasm in her.

Zuko’s breath caught in his throat when his wife’s hot pussy contracted and spasmed more tightly around him as she climaxed once again, causing his hips to jerk as he finished spilling his seed into her welcoming body.
“Katara!” he moaned before he collapsed on top of her before he could catch himself.

He felt Katara cling tightly onto him and he relaxed against her, panting harshly against her throat as his body continued to tingle and shudder from his intense orgasm, just as hers was beneath him. Once his body calmed itself, the Fire Lord slowly pulled out of her and lay at her side, wrapping her tightly in his arms as he pressed her close to him.

They luxuriated in each other’s arms for a long moment, both enjoying the intimacy. Katara sighed softly and nuzzled against her husband’s strong chest as he gently ran his fingers through her soft hair, occasionally pressing his lips and murmuring softly against the crown of her head.

“I’m sorry,” she heard him whisper in her hair at the same time he tightened his arm around her.

“For what?” she asked softly as she lifted her head to give him a small frown.

He stared intensely yet sadly into her eyes and her heart ached at his silent suffering.

“I’m sorry for causing you pain,” he continued in the same low, dejected tone, “When I asked you to be my wife, I promised you that I was going to protect you, that I was going to make you happy… but you have only suffered.”

Katara quickly pressed her fingers against his lips to stop him and she gently shook her head. He frowned at her and the guilt in his amber eyes made that ache grow in her chest.

“Please, don’t think like that, Zuko,” she told him softly yet firmly, “Yes, I’ve gone through many hardships and much anguish this past year—we both have—but I knew life wasn’t going to be easy when I chose to become the wife and consort of the Fire Lord. And haven’t I come out much stronger through all of that?”

“Yes,” he agreed sincerely, though his mood had not changed at her words. “But you shouldn’t have to have gone through all those things at all.”

“Then, would you have preferred we didn’t marry?” she asked him quietly.
“Of course not!” Zuko immediately replied as he crushed her tightly against his chest as if to prevent her from being taken from him. “I can’t imagine not having you in my life. I enjoy having you by my side. I love you too much to let you go,” he told her fervently before he more darkly added, “Which just shows how selfish I really am.”

“But I don’t want you to let me go, Zuko,” Katara told him softly as she again lifted her head to look into his eyes, “I won’t be able to live without you. Yes, I’ve been hurt, but it wasn’t you who intentionally hurt me. Life is unpredictable and you can’t always stop me from getting hurt. What matters is that you are there to give me comfort, to help me become stronger, to remind me of your love for me.”

“And I will always be there for you,” Zuko promised firmly as he gave her a gentle squeeze.

Katara smiled before she leaned down to press a small, loving kiss on the grim line of his lips.

“Besides, the pain and hurt are almost inconsequential compared to the great happiness I experience being married to you,” she continued gently as she reached a hand out to softly caress his scarred cheek, “You make me happy, Zuko, more than I thought any man could, and I will never regret choosing you as my husband.”

Zuko felt his remorse ease at her words before he felt his heart expand in happiness and tenderness for his strong and understanding wife. If she had been any other woman, she would have left him at the first signs of trouble, but fortunately Katara was different, and for that he would always thank the gods for bringing them together. He vowed to cherish her until the end of his days.

Bringing his hand up, he cupped her cheek. She leaned against his touch and smiled at him, her ocean blue eyes gazing lovingly into his, before he lifted his head and kissed her with all the love and gratitude he could convey from his heart. Their kiss soon changed into one full of need and passion, and soon their bodies were once again joined and moving rhythmically together. This time they took their time to explore each other’s bodies, tantalizing one another until their pleasure flared to scorching heights, before they exploded into worlds of immense ecstasy.

Panting and moaning softly, they stared into each other’s eyes as their hearts slowed from their fast pace. They spent a few minutes just bestowing tender kisses on each other while their hands softly caressed one another’s bodies. It was a moment of gentle intimacy to express their innermost, affectionate feelings. With a soft sigh, Zuko pressed one more kiss on his wife’s moist lips before he gently pressed her against his chest and ran his fingers through her tresses once more. She sighed softly as well as she cuddled against him.
“Katara?” he spoke up softly after a moment of companionable silence.

“Mm, yes, Zuko?” she asked.

“Would you like to travel to the Southern Water Tribe to visit your family?” he asked her.

Katara again lifted her head to stare hopefully at him.

“Can we really?” she inquired excitedly, her eyes shining in her enthusiasm.

“Yes,” Zuko responded with a pleased smile at her happiness, “You need a break from everything.”

“So do you,” she replied.

“If we stay for the next month, I can finally see the Winter Solstice Festival you love so much,” he told her with a grin.

“Oh, yes!” the waterbender exclaimed, “You’ll love it, too!”

Zuko was silent as he listened contentedly to his wife describe one of her favorite holidays until she finally wound herself down.

“I love you,” she whispered as she curled her body once again against his powerful frame.

He smiled at her words and leaned down to kiss her forehead.

“As I love you,” Zuko sighed against her hair.

They fell into a peaceful silence as they held tightly onto one another. In their minds, they both thought that they would remember this night for the rest of their lives as a night where they came to the understanding that they would not let anything tear them apart.
Darkness may find a way to shadow their lives, but it would always turn to light, just as night always made way to dawn. And they knew, in the very depths of their souls, that for the rest of their lives, they would bathe in the splendor that dawn could bring. It was a night that emphasized the undying love they held for each other despite the obstacles life threw their way, and they gloried in the fact that they would do so, together.
The sound of happy chatter and enthusiastic laughter combined harmoniously with the lively sound of Water Tribe music, creating an exciting and jovial atmosphere. The full moon was large and bright, and millions of twinkling stars shared its space on the inky, dark sky. The Winter Solstice Festival was in full swing and there was added excitement to the event thanks to the presence of the Fire Lord and his wife, the Water Tribe Chief’s precious daughter.

Two months had passed since the incident with Yin-Min. Vacationing in the Southern Water Tribe, and visiting Katara’s family, really helped the royal couple cope with the terrible events that had happened to them. They would be returning to the Fire Nation the following week and decided to take this time to enjoy themselves before they had to return to their duties. The relaxed and amiable environment of the snowy city and its people made their worries lessen and provided them with a tranquility the royal couple was rarely able to enjoy in the strict and demanding environment of the Fire Nation Court. Katara and Zuko had mutually decided that they would not stress about an heir and would only enjoy each other for the moment.

Sitting around the marketplace, the royal couple watched the acrobatic feats of some waterbending performers in admiration. People all around them cheered and exclaimed their awe at the spectacle, while others enjoyed the various stalls selling delicious foods typical of the festival. Katara was sitting between Zuko’s long legs on top of some thick furs, her back resting against his solid chest, his arms around her waist, his hands clasped against her stomach. His relaxed posture and the fact that he was embracing her in front of her people, made her realize with happiness that he was more relaxed in her homeland than at his royal court. She had to find a way for them to have more vacation time so Zuko could relax more. He worked too hard for someone so young. Katara smiled and then clapped enthusiastically at a particularly complex move of one of the performers.

Zuko smiled down at his wife’s excitement. He was glad he had suggested they visit her homeland where she was more carefree and unperturbed by the troubles of court life. He wrapped his arms a little more tightly around her smaller frame and smiled contentedly when she leaned closer against him. They were sitting around a large table with Ursa, Jee, Sokka, and Suki. Hakoda was once again showing off his twin granddaughters to his friends. Jing and Ting, now a little over a year old, were a pair of energetic and mischievous girls that had their parents simultaneously amused and exhausted. Aang and Toph were playing at the games booths with the other youths. At another quieter part of the marketplace were Iroh, Pakku, Kanna, and other older members of the tribe reminiscing about their younger days as they played Pai Sho.

At another incredible move from the performers, the blue-eyed Fire Lady gasped in delight and squirmed excitedly in her place between Zuko’s legs. The waterbender felt her husband stiffen before he tightened his hold of her as he brought his face close to the side of hers.

“If you don’t stop squirming so much, my little water nymph, I’m going to carry you to our room in
front of all these people,” he rumbled huskily in her ear, his breath warm against her chilly skin, before he pressed her closer to him and teasingly nipped her ear.

Katara’s eyes widened and she moaned softly when she felt his hardness pressing against her backside. As if to solidify his small threat, the firebender subtly shifted behind her, slowly rubbing his growing arousal against her. Katara stifled another moan that managed to sneak upon her. It was so hard to think straight and keep from squirming in desire while her delicious, manly firebender continually found reasons to brush that delightfully sexy body of his against hers. Her mind was getting a little fuzzy with arousal, but they were both distracted when they noticed Sokka and Suki stand up.

“We’re going to go check out the food stalls,” the blue-eyed warrior said, oblivious to the sexual tension radiating from the royal couple as he looked down and grinned at them.

“Uh, I’ll go with you guys,” Katara spoke up quickly, thinking that she needed to keep some distance from her husband before she dragged him to their rooms. It was too early for them to retire for the night.

She was about to stand up, but she gasped quietly when Zuko quickly pulled her back down and held her firmly against him.

“You better stay unless you want to embarrass us both, love,” he whispered hoarsely in her ear.

Katara felt herself blush, but she quickly cleared her throat and smiled innocently at her oblivious brother and not so oblivious sister-in-law.

“Uh, never mind,” she said.

Suki raised an eyebrow as she smirked knowingly at them; she and Sokka had been in the same situation before. Chuckling quietly, the auburn-haired woman winked at them which only caused Katara to flush even more. Sokka caught Suki’s actions and he frowned at her in confusion before he turned to look at his sister and brother-in-law. He noticed the deep blush on Katara’s face and the way Zuko was holding her tightly to him and his eyes widened as he finally grasped what was going.

“Ew, gross!” he groused as he dramatically covered his eyes with his hands. “Can’t you guys get a room?!!”
“You’re hardly one to talk, Sokka,” Zuko retorted dryly.

The women suppressed their laughter when Sokka spluttered and his cheeks deepened in color. Suki and he had been caught in one of the sitting rooms a few nights ago. Fortunately, they had been hidden by some furniture so the only thing that gave them away was their discarded clothes. Sniffing, the brown-skinned warrior crossed his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes at the Fire Lord.

“Yeah, well, excuse me for not wanting to see you paw at my baby sister in front of everybody!” he groused.

“Oh, Sokka, please,” Katara said with a roll of her eyes. “Zuko’s hardly doing that. Compared to you, he’s subtle.”

“Ha! Subtle my ass!” Sokka guffawed. “When everybody can hear both of you screaming at night! You’re so loud the Northern Water Tribe must be able to hear it!”

“Sokka!” Katara and Suki exclaimed in unison and Zuko’s eyes widened in mortification.

Both Katara and Zuko felt themselves flush in embarrassment.

Sokka smirked at his embarrassed brother-in-law and Zuko narrowed his eyes at him before a small smirk curled his lips. Sokka braced himself.

“Well, at least you know the advice you gave me before our wedding worked and I’m able to please your sister so thoroughly that—”

“Ah, la, la, la!” Sokka interrupted loudly as this time he covered his ears with his gloved hands. “Shut up! I don’t wanna hear it!”

Hands still clasped over his ears, the warrior turned and practically ran away. Suki shook her head at Zuko as she placed her hands on her hips.
“Thanks, now I’m going to have to hear him complain about how the Fire Lord is corrupting his baby sister,” she accused, though there was an amused grin on her face.

The royal couple chuckled as they watched the female warrior go after her embarrassed husband. Zuko pulled Katara closer, pressing her against his semi-aroused flesh with a small sigh as he placed his chin on her shoulder. Katara bit her lip to stifle her amused laughter. Without another word, they returned their attention to the entertainment.

Shifting her gaze around their table for a brief moment, Katara's attention quickly turned to where Ursa and Jee were sitting together. Her eyes widened in surprise when she watched Jee pluck a small, white flower—one of the few varieties that grew in the wintry area—from the small vase on their table and tucked it imperceptibly behind Ursa’s ear. A faint pink hue surfaced on the noblewoman’s pale cheeks as she smiled shyly up at the admiral, who was looking down at her with a tender look.

Wait. What? When did that happen? Katara asked herself in shock, unable to look away from the scene.

Well, she had been preoccupied with many other things over the past few months, so she had not paid much attention to them. But did it mean what she thought it did? Her hope for a budding relationship between her kind mother-in-law and the silent admiral grew. She needed to speak to Ursa immediately. The curiosity was eating at her!

She was distracted from her thoughts when she saw a Fire Nation soldier approach Jee. The admiral quickly moved away from Ursa and composed himself as he looked at the young soldier with an unreadable expression. The guard said something and the admiral gave him a brief nod. Jee whispered something to a frowning Ursa before standing up. He walked around the table and approached Zuko, whose attention had been focused on the performance. Sensing his presence, the Fire Lord glanced up with a raised eyebrow and Katara listened curiously.

“I messenger hawk has arrived at the flagship, my lord,” Jee informed him, “Would you like me to fetch it?”

Zuko frowned, wondering what it could be about. He hoped it was nothing serious. Before they left the Fire Nation, he gave orders that he was not to be disturbed unless it was an urgent matter.

“No, I’ll go look at it right now,” Zuko replied coolly.
He finally released Katara and made to stand up before he stopped and sat back down when he realized his body was still too excited from its earlier interaction with his waterbender. When Jee gave him a puzzled look, Zuko cleared his throat.

“Give me a few minutes and I’ll join you on the flagship,” he said stoically.

With a respectful bow, Jee turned around and headed to the docks.

“Is something wrong?” Katara asked as she looked up at him with a frown.

“I don’t know, but I hope not,” Zuko responded grimly.

Once his body finally calmed down, he squeezed her hips and brushed his lips against her ear.

“I can’t wait to have you alone in our room tonight,” he purred huskily.

He smirked when he felt the shiver that racked her body. With another squeeze of her hips, he stood up, smiled down at her, and then walked away. The crowd quickly made way for him.

Katara bit her lip as she watched him go. She admired the way his long dark hair swayed down his back and how striking his body looked in her tribe’s clothes. This time instead of being red, his parka and pants were a dark shade of blue and the fur lining it was dark gray like his boots. A thick sash of the same color wound around his waist. His parting words only made her more eager for the night to end so they could indulge in each other in the room that used to be hers. Blinking, the brunette shook her head to come out of her daze. Even after all this time, he still managed to leave her stunned and aroused. She glanced back at her mother-in-law, who was once again observing the performers, and she grinned.

It was the perfect opportunity.

Standing up, Katara walked around the table and sat down where Jee had been sitting. The older woman turned to smile at her. The waterbender returned the smile, though she was sure it showed her curiosity and excitement.
“So…you and Jee, huh?” the waterbender asked innocently.

Ursa’s cheeks flushed once again before she laughed softly.

“Oh, don’t act all surprised, dear,” Ursa replied amusedly, “Jee told me you knew how he feels about me for some time now.”

A large grin appeared on Katara’s lips.

“I did,” the younger woman confessed with a small laugh.

“Then why didn’t you tell me instead of throwing hints at me?” Ursa asked with an exasperated sigh.

“It wasn’t for me to tell,” Katara replied simply.

Ursa let out another sigh and nodded.

“You’re right,” she agreed. Finding out about Jee’s feelings from him personally was definitely much more romantic.

“I know how Jee feels about you, but what do you feel about him?” Katara asked softly.

Katara watched as a smile appeared on her mother-in-law’s lips and her golden eyes became equally soft and bright.

“I love him,” Ursa confessed sincerely.

“Really?” Katara asked with wide eyes.

Ursa nodded, the happy smile still on her lips.
“I would not have realized my feelings for Jee if you had not brought him to my attention, but I do,” Ursa continued, her tone soft and bemused, “I love him like I’ve never loved anyone before. Jee is a kind, patient, and strong man. He protects me, respects me, and makes me feel safe and cherished. He offers comfort when I need it, without expecting anything in return. I can see that he loves me for who I am and not for what he could gain by being with me…”

“Unlike Ozai,” Katara added, knowing what Ursa implied when she trailed off.

The golden-eyed woman paused before she nodded. Jee was completely different from Ozai. Although he was not as handsome as Ozai nor was he royalty—or even a nobleman—he was a better man than Ozai ever would be. His feelings for her were true. Her lips lifted in a smile—a genuine, blissful smile that lit up her gentle features.

“I have come to realize that what I once felt for Ozai was the love of a young girl for an idealized image of a dashing young man,” she explained in a thoughtful voice before her tone again turned tender as she continued, “But what I feel for Jee is something much deeper, much stronger, more complex and intense.”

Katara smiled happily and nodded for her to continue. The older woman smiled gratefully at the waterbender’s sincere understanding. It was nice to have another woman to talk to about such things. The sound of the excited crowd barely reached them as the two women focused on their conversation.

“I felt hurt when Ozai forced me to leave the palace,” Ursa continued with a frown before her hands clenched on her lap as she continued, “But if I were to ever lose Jee, I would not be able to bear it. I wouldn’t just be hurt, I would be devastated.”

“Jee will never hurt you,” Katara spoke up confidently as she pressed her hand on Ursa’s arm.

Ursa smiled and patted her hand in gratitude.

“I know,” she replied assuredly.

Katara watched as another soft blush stained the woman’s cheeks.
“Although Jee’s not as handsome as Ozai, he’s very good-looking…and an amazing kisser,” Ursa confessed shyly but delightedly.

The waterbender suppressed a grin at her mother-in-law’s bashfulness. It made her happy to know that Ursa was experiencing all the wonders of what true love can bring. She deserved it.

“Some say an amazing kisser is a prelude to their expertise in bed,” Katara teased with a wink.

“Katara!” Ursa exclaimed in shock as she glanced around them to make sure no one was listening, though there was a smile on her lips.

“What?” Katara replied innocently, though her large grin ruined the effect.

Ursa shook her head, but continued smiling, because, truthfully, she could not stop thinking about that moment when Jee finally made love to her. She had never thought about the subject of lovemaking so much before, not even when she had been married to Ozai, that it sometimes baffled her at how frequently her thoughts shifted to having Jee’s body pressed intimately with hers.

“So when did you two confess your feelings to each other?” Katara asked, snapping Ursa out of her thoughts.

“After the execution of that horrible woman, Jee approached me and said that he realized anything could happen and he’d regret it if he never told me what he felt for me. So he did. He confessed he fell in love with me as he guarded me,” the older woman explained with a soft smile.

Katara listened attentively as Ursa told her what else they said and how Jee understood when Ursa asked him to be patient with her until she could sort out her feelings. Then weeks later, when she was absolutely sure her feelings for him were more than just affection, she confessed she loved him too.

“That’s so romantic,” Katara said with a smile before she frowned as she carefully asked, “Are you two going to continue hiding your relationship?”

“Jee plans to ask Zuko if he can court me soon,” Ursa responded with a smile.
Katara grimaced slightly.

“Jee’s going to have a hard time getting Zuko’s approval,” she muttered.

Ursa winced at the truth of that statement. She knew her son would not be pleased with the news. A deep, dejected sigh escaped her as she glanced down at her clasped hands.

“I might have to give up on Jee if my son opposes our union,” Ursa said sadly but resolutely.

“But why?” Katara asked incredulously and she frowned.

“My children are the most important thing to me and I will not do anything that might distress them if I can help it,” the older woman said decisively before she more sadly added, “It will be hard to break things off with Jee, but I will do it if I have to.”

The waterbender’s frown deepened. She did not doubt that Ursa would sacrifice her happiness for her children. Did Ursa not follow Ozai’s order to murder Azulon and leave the comfort of the palace in order to save her son? Did she not continue to visit Azula in her prison even when the insane princess insulted her?

“I won’t let you do that,” Katara told her firmly as she reassuringly grasped Ursa’s hand, “I’ll make Zuko agree to your courtship with Jee even if I have to tie him to a chair.”

Ursa shook her head and gave the younger woman a small smile as she patted her hand.

“We both know how stubborn Zuko can be,” she said.

“I can be equally as stubborn as he,” Katara retorted.

*Besides, I’ll not allow him to make love to me if it comes to that. He’ll agree to anything as long as he can have me,* she thought with an inward grin before she frowned. Well, it’d be a sacrifice on her part too, but she would endure it as long as she could help Ursa and Jee.
Katara was brought out of her thoughts when she felt Ursa squeeze her hand briefly before she straightened. The waterbender followed her gaze and noticed that Zuko and Jee were making their way to their table. The two women exchanged a brief, understanding look before Katara stood up and sat on the spot she had been sitting on with Zuko previously. Jee smiled as he sat down next to Ursa while Zuko elected to sit next to Katara instead of behind her.

“Was the message urgent?” Katara asked with a worried frown at their unreadable expressions.

Zuko glanced down to smile reassuringly at his wife.

“One of my men wrote that they’ve found some signs of the rebels after all this time. They are going to continue to investigate,” he explained before he added more grimly, “I hope they have luck and Jianguo is careless, so they can finally capture him.”

Katara watched as his eyes grew dark with repressed anger. They had not heard one word of Jianguo and the rebels in so long, which only caused them to wonder what they could be planning.

“Fire Lord Zuko! Lady Katara!” a little girl’s voice interrupted their conversation.

Zuko glanced over in time to see a small body lunge itself at his chest. He almost toppled over onto his back in surprise before he caught himself. He glanced down in bewilderment to see large blue eyes and a wide smile on a small familiar face.

“Lien,” he greeted with a small smile even as he heard people gasp and murmur around them. He waved his guards away when they moved forward.

The little girl he had saved the last time he visited the Southern Water Tribe grinned at him, oblivious to the impropriety of addressing the Fire Lord so familiarly, as she sat beside him and began chatting to him as if they were the best of friends. It reminded him of Katara during the beginning of their friendship. Zuko glanced at his wife to see her grinning at him before he returned his attention to the little girl.

Katara suppressed her giggles as she watched Zuko try to follow Lien’s one-sided conversation. She could see that he felt a bit awkward, but even so, he gave the little girl his complete attention and was quick to answer her questions. The waterbender looked up to see Ursa and Jee smiling amusedly before she returned her gaze to the odd pair. A warm feeling spread to her chest at the sight of Zuko interacting with the little girl. It made her think of how he would act with their own children if they
were to have them. She was interrupted from her thoughts when Lien included her in their—or more accurately, Lien’s—conversation.

A few minutes later, Lien’s worried parents finally appeared and apologized for their daughter’s actions, but they were reassured by the Fire Lord that he did not mind. They thanked him before they finally retreated with their daughter after she bid the royal couple a happy farewell.

When Zuko turned to look at her, Katara gave him a smile—a warm, soft smile that made her azure eyes glow. Mesmerized, he wrapped his arm around her and brought her close to his side. She let out a sigh as she relaxed against him as they returned their attention to a new form of entertainment composed of young women, dressed in ceremonial clothes, dancing to the beat of tribal music in honor of the winter solstice.

The celebration continued throughout the night with much cheer and enthusiasm. It was not until a few hours before dawn that the revelers finally made their way to their homes. After bidding their family a good rest of the night, Zuko firmly grabbed Katara’s hand and quickly steered them toward her old room. He had been holding his hunger for her all through the night and he was desperate to finally indulge himself in her body. Katara suppressed a smirk at his obvious intent, her heart pounding in anticipation, and she quickened her pace so that it was she who was pulling him after her. She grinned when she heard him chuckle huskily behind her at her eagerness. When they finally arrived, Katara swiftly opened the door and walked in with Zuko enthusiastically following her, closing and locking the door firmly behind them.

Just as Katara spun around to face Zuko, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her toward him, clasping her tightly against his hard frame. Their mouths crashed together as their hands roamed each other’s bodies, hurriedly taking off the other’s clothes in a desperate attempt to press their hot skin together. Once they were both completely naked, Zuko pulled her roughly up to him, grinding his hard cock against her wet sex as she sucked on his lower lip and rubbed her breasts against his chest. The chilly air in the room only heightened their pleasure as it hit their hot flesh. He growled as he made to move them to the fur-covered bed, but Katara wiggled in his hold and he reluctantly let her go. They were standing on the large white fur rug placed before the small fireplace in her room and he watched as she sunk to her knees before him and grabbed his cock.

“Katara!” he rasped when she took him into her mouth and sucked him firmly.

He brought his hand to cup the back of her head and his fingers tangled in her soft hair as his hips jerked into her touch. His head fell back as she stroked him continuously into her mouth and her hand pulled and massaged his sac. When she moaned and pressed him more deeply into her hot mouth, he pushed against her shoulders to pull her away before he came much faster than he wished. When she looked up to frown at him, he ran his thumb over her swollen lips.
“It’s my turn,” he growled, his voice low and rough by desire. “I need to taste you.”

Katara felt flames of arousal flare within her at his words, but she shook her head. She wanted to pleasure him until he lost control of the sensations running through him. She wanted to see him stiffen and shake with pleasure. She wanted to hear him growl and moan her name.

“I’m not done with you yet,” she said.

Zuko smiled when she pouted at him, a sexy yet adorable pout. He gasped when she grasped his shaft and stroked him temptingly. He frowned slightly as he contemplated what to do to please both of them before a thought entered his head and he grinned eagerly.

“Not to worry, my sexy waterbender,” he murmured throatily as he gazed down at her, “We can have what we both want.”

Katara tilted her head to the side and looked up at him questioningly yet enthusiastically as she squeezed and caressed his erection. The sight of her still kneeling before him with his cock pointing at her face only increased the firebender’s lust.

“What do you mean?” she asked as she squeezed her thighs together to relieve some of the pressure in her core.

Instead of answering, Zuko lowered himself onto the rug and laid down upon his back, then he reached for her arms and gently pulled her up, urging her over him. Curious, Katara lifted herself on her knees and straddled his chest as she looked down at him in askance, wondering if he wanted her to ride him.

“Now turn around,” he demanded huskily.

Katara obeyed and carefully moved over him until she did what he wanted, still wondering what he had planned, yet anticipating whatever was to come, knowing it was just going to bring them more pleasure. Zuko grabbed her hips before she gasped when he suddenly dragged her back so that she was straddling his face. Her eyes widened as she stared down at his incredible body, his turgid length pointing at her face.

“Oh, gods,” she moaned once she realized what he planned and she felt her juices seeping out of her
She felt herself suddenly blush at the new position, though she knew it was irrational since Zuko’s face had been buried between her thighs many times before. She glanced over her shoulder, but she could barely see his eyes peeking around her backside as he caressed her hips.

“Zuko,” she whimpered as she wiggled her ass in his hold.

“Mm, perfect,” the firebender murmured as he pulled her closer to him.

His eyes hungrily drank in the sight of his waterbender’s swollen pink folds and engorged clit, watching as her juices leaked out of her contracting pussy. He would never get tired of such a sight as long as he lived. He pushed down slightly on her hips, forcing her to spread her thighs wider so she could be close to his face and he took a deep breath of her scent before he exhaled with a delighted sigh. With a husky purr, he stuck out his tongue and slowly slid it along her drenched folds to taste her musky sweetness. Her taste was simply delicious. He needed more. He heard her moan his name and felt her thighs shake on either side of his head. Smirking in pleasure, craving more of her, wanting to hear her breathless sighs and pleasured moans, Zuko held her hips tightly and trailed his tongue more firmly from her swollen bud, through her folds, before impaling it into her quivering entrance.

“Yes!” Katara mewedled at his erotic kisses.

“Zuko, mmm,” she moaned, her hips rocking back onto his face for more as her walls tightened around his tongue, trying to pull him deeper into her.

Zuko murmured her name against her wet pussy as pleasure erupted in his stomach at her calls. His cock throbbed, wanting her touch, but he was enjoying eating her out too much to be able to voice his need.

Katara’s body trembled and her heart pounded wildly in her chest as her husband’s skillful tongue and mouth lapped, licked, and sucked at her folds. When his lips touched her clit, she fell forward with a loud cry at the pleasure before she caught herself on his muscular thighs. Moaning and panting at the pleasure building fiercely within her, the brunette opened her eyes only to fix them on her firebender’s cock standing firmly before her. She watched in excitement as it twitched and bobbed and she licked her lips when she noticed his whitish arousal ooze out from the slit, evidence of his hedonistic delight for what he was doing to her.
Moaning, she grasped his shaft in one hand and squeezed. When he groaned and his hips jerked into her touch, Katara leaned down and engulfed him into her eager mouth, wanting to devour him as vigorously as he was her. She felt the muscles of his thighs quiver and jerk under her fingers just as hers were beside his head. She bobbed her head over him before she firmly sucked on his length, groaning when a flow of his arousal fell onto her tongue as her reward for her efforts.

Groaning against her wet flesh, Zuko’s hips surged up at the immense pleasure. “Yesss, just like that,” he growled huskily as he furiously slurped at her pussy. “Gods, you taste so damn good.”

He was lost in the sensation of her soft skin sliding against his, of her warm mouth surrounding his aching shaft, of her scent permeating his nose, of her sweet taste saturating his mouth, that he could think of nothing else but her. He wanted to tease her until she was begging for him. He knew she was going to reciprocate even more vehemently throughout the night since there was a full moon, so he wanted to take advantage before he surrendered to her exquisite torture. When her movements became more frantic, he spread her legs wider and clamped his hands to her thighs to keep her in place against his mouth, holding her helpless and trembling with the pleasure surging through her. His large hands slid up to grasp both of her luscious ass cheeks, kneading them roughly before he firmly spread them open as his tongue delved deeply into her pussy, rubbing insistently against her wet walls and sucking roughly on her folds, before moving furiously on her engorged clit.

“Oh, gods, ohhhh,” Katara groaned long and low as her hips pushed closer to his wonderful mouth. Her mind was too overwhelmed with the pleasure that she temporarily forgot to pay attention to his straining cock in her hands.

Zuko brought her neglect to her attention when he lightly smacked her bottom and thrust his hips up.

“Put my cock back into your mouth, love,” he growled against her drenched folds.

Moaning, Katara quickly brought her head back down and took him into her mouth. She let out a relieved moan when he rewarded her by sucking furiously at her sex.

Panting and groaning, Zuko kissed her folds before he pulled back slightly and reached a hand up between them. He thrust two fingers deeply into her spasming core and he watched in fascination as her pussy tighten around them just as she let out a loud gasp around his cock. He swallowed thickly, thinking that he might just come from the sensation of her walls contracting around his plunging fingers and from forcing her to voice her pleasure. As he continued to push his fingers into her, making sure to stroke her walls, he leaned forward to lick and suck her bud to rush in her orgasm. He could feel his own release building within him and he clamped his other arm on her lower back to keep her in place. Just the thought of her swallowing his seed as he came and the thought of her coming into his mouth at the same time caused a scorching fire to erupt within him.
Katara moaned around his length and she sucked on it almost mindlessly in her rapture. The pleasure was overwhelming and she was sure she would expire from the incredible sensations. Her muscles drawing taut, she writhed and undulated above him, firmly grinding her sex against his face as her hands tightened on the base of his cock, silently begging him to give her the released she needed. Katara’s breath hitched when she felt him curl his fingers inside her, stroking that sensitive spot within her that caused electricity to spark along her every nerve.

“Mmm!” she wailed around his throbbing shaft as her orgasm crashed into her, her body jerking and trembling above him.

She felt her juices rushing out of her to coat his plunging fingers, which only increased her ecstasy. Helpless in the face of such pleasure, Katara ground her hips uncontrollably onto his face just as she pushed his hard cock deeply into her mouth and down her throat.

As his wife went wild above him, her thighs clamping tightly around his head, her juices gushing into his mouth, Zuko moaned loudly against her contracting pussy as his hips thrust uncontrollably as his orgasm exploded from him. Letting out almost animalistic growls of untold pleasure against her sex, he felt his cock throb and jerk inside her hot mouth as his seed burst out of him and down her throat. His vision darkened for a moment at the intensity of his euphoria, unaware of the flames of the fireplace leaping with his heated and intense climax, and his arm tightened around his trembling waterbender. Once the intensity subsided, he slumped onto the fur rug while his wife collapsed on top of him after she released him, both panting and shuddering.

After a moment, Katara sluggishly rolled herself away from him and dropped down at his side, unable to form a coherent thought at the incredible pleasure she had just experienced.

“Wow,” she said breathlessly as she stared at the ceiling above her. “That was amazing.”

Chuckling huskily, Zuko nodded as he licked his lips clean of any remnants of her essence.

“Definitely,” he replied huskily.

Once coherent thought returned to him, he finally noticed the chill of the room biting onto his cooling skin and was sure Katara was feeling it as well. He smiled at her dazed look. She seemed unable of moving, her body lethargic and thoroughly satisfied, so with an endearing smile, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He placed her on it before he slipped in beside her.
When she hummed contentedly, Zuko moved so that he could look down at her. He was pleased to see the satisfied smile she gave him. Her large, blue eyes were shining with her pleasure, happiness, and love. He could only stare back at her in wonder at the immense feelings she created within him. He reached out a hand to caress her flushed cheek before he cupped it gently.

Katara felt her heart throb in her chest at the way Zuko was staring at her, as if she were the most precious thing in the world, and she reached up to caressed his cheek while running her thumb lovingly under his scarred eye. Golden eyes gleaming and intense, he brought his head down and pressed his mouth tenderly against her. She opened her mouth and moaned when he slipped his tongue inside to caress hers. Zuko groaned as he deepened their kiss, their mouths, tongues, and lips touching each other sensually, mingling each other’s taste that still lingered.

It did not take long for their arousal to resurface as they pressed tightly against each other, wanting to experienced that intimate closeness, that passionate intensity, that they had only felt with each other.

The energy of the moon revitalized the waterbender and the young lord found himself the recipient of her passionate lovemaking. She was relentless, demanding, as she sought her pleasure and his, using her waterbending or bloodbending to increased their sexual enjoyment, reveling in the deep groans and loud growls of her name. When Zuko thought he had completely exhausted himself, Katara proved him wrong. It was as if she was his aphrodisiac, one more powerful than any manmade love potion. Katara made sure to keep her husband completely overpowered by her sensuality and her skills until he was a mass of pleasured male flesh beneath her, smug in the knowledge that his body was absolutely addicted to her touch.

A couple of lovemaking rounds later, the royal couple lay panting and trembling after their incredible climaxes, their minds and bodies still overwhelmed with the intense emotions and sensations they experienced every time they came together. Turning his head to the side, Zuko saw that Katara was still recovering from her pleasure. Agni, she was incredible. If only his countrymen knew of the many advantages they could have with a waterbending wife, they would have overran the Water Tribes in search of one, he mused with a grin. Noticing that his wife was shivering from the cold, he covered them both with the many blankets and furs and wrapped her in the warmth of his embrace.

With a satisfied sigh, Katara snuggled closer to her husband’s warmth and body, relishing in their intimacy, glad to know that he craved her body as much as she craved his. After everything they had gone through, their bond seemed stronger than ever. She pressed a kiss against his chest and smiled when he responded by pressing her closer to him. They were silent for a moment as they basked in the afterglow before Katara felt Zuko’s chest trembling against her as his low chuckle reached her ears.

“What’s so funny?” she asked curiously.
“I think Sokka might be right,” he said, humor coloring his baritone.

“About what?” she asked.

“With the loud noises we just made, even the Northern Water Tribe must have heard,” he replied as his chuckles deepened.

“Oh, gods,” Katara groaned in mortification.

Now that she thought about it, her father tended to avoid making eye contact with her nowadays while he glared darkly at Zuko. Oh, her poor overprotective father. He must wish to be rendered deaf at those moments.

A soft laugh escaped her and the sound of their amusement echoed in the room as they shared more amusing and embarrassing tales of their childhoods. They talked long into the night until they both surrendered to the soothing embrace of sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Katara smiled amusedly as her nieces tried to pull the golden ring from her finger before they gave up and waddled away to find some other form of entertainment. The rest of her family laughed before they resumed their conversation. Her father and Gran-Gran had been concerned by the news they had heard from the Fire Nation, but after she reassured them that everything was well, they had relaxed. Hakoda, Sokka, and Pakku had been pleased by the news of Yin-Min’s execution. But it was Gran-Gran and Suki that had brought up the issue regarding the next heir, saying that now it was only a matter of time before they heard the good news. Katara had only smiled and hoped they were right. Their conversation shifted to other things as they spent their morning together as they have done before Katara married Zuko and moved to the Fire Nation.

She really had missed all of them—even Sokka’s annoying antics. Jing and Ting were growing so big and were beginning to talk in small words. Suki had told her that Sokka had been hurt and had sulked for days when the first words his precious little girls had said and repeated for weeks were ‘mama’, ‘no’, and ‘yummy’ despite his efforts for them to say ‘daddy’. It was weeks later that they started calling him ‘dada’ and Sokka could barely contain his pride and smugness, much to Suki’s annoyance and amusement. Katara shook her head and chuckled. Her little nieces were spoiled rotten by their father, but luckily, Suki was there to keep them—Sokka included—in check.

When the elders began to talk amongst themselves about the friends they had talked to during the Winter Solstice Festival, the younger members reminisced about the entertainment and the food.
“Zuko really enjoyed himself during the festival,” Katara told her brother and sister-in-law with a smile. “I hope we can make it a tradition and visit every year.”

“Oh, gods no!” the warrior exclaimed. “I need my sleep!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the waterbender asked with a scowl.

“We had to listen to you and Lord Jerkbender going at it all night!” Sokka groused and shuddered dramatically. “I thought I was gonna be sick!”

Katara’s eyes widened in shock before she turned to look at Suki who was grinning amusedly and nodding. The waterbender glanced at her other family members in embarrassment. Luckily, her father, Gran-Gran, and Pakku were too distracted with the twins to overhear their conversation. Katara felt herself flush, though perhaps she shouldn’t be so surprised since Sokka had already brought up the issue before. She had not thought much about it when in her throes of ecstasy just as she was sure Zuko hadn’t. She did not think they were that loud. Well, it did not help that her old room was close to Sokka and Suki’s room.

“I thought my ears would start bleeding!” her brother exclaimed dramatically.

“He acted like they were,” Suki quipped in amusement. “I had to stop him multiple times from barging into your room to beat Zuko up.”

“Someone needed to shut him up!” Sokka growled as he crossed his arms over his chest. “La knows what things he was doing to my little sister!”

“May I point out that it’s none of your business,” the waterbender sniffed before she added, “Besides, whatever he does to me is because I let him—”

“Eww, Katara!” the warrior interrupted as he clamped his hands over his ears.

“What?” Katara said and grinned evilly when her brother told her to shut up.
If only her brother knew that the noises she and Zuko had made were because of the things she had done to her husband. Well, it was nice to know she was able to please Zuko that much, she mused with an inward laugh.

“Besides, take it as payback for the one time I almost walked in on you and Suki at the end of the war,” she added impishly. She laughed when Sokka turned a deep shade of red and gaped at her.

“You should’ve been sleeping!” he stuttered in mortification.

“With all that noise? I thought an animal was wounded and I wanted to help it,” she replied amusedly, though at that time she had been mortified to find out it wasn’t an animal making those noises. Luckily, she was spared from seeing something that would have scarred her for life when she had heard Suki moan Sokka’s name.

Her brother spluttered and stuttered in embarrassment and indignation, but Suki interrupted with a loud, amused laugh. Sokka crossed his arms over his chest and huffed.

“Whatever,” he sniffed before he sarcastically added, “I’m gonna see if we can build a separate house for when you and Zuko visit again.”

“Why, thank you, dear brother,” Katara replied with another small laugh.

Before Sokka could retort, their father asked what they were talking about.

“Nothing!” the two siblings blurted out.

Hakoda raised an eyebrow at their quick response, but Katara was quick to change the subject after she threw a small glare at her brother who in turned shrugged and grinned. Suki shook her head and pressed her lips together to hide her amusement. They spent a few more minutes talking and then decided to go their separate ways before they met up for lunch.

Humming happily, Katara walked absentmindedly down one of the ice corridors. She could not stop grinning at her brother’s complaints for having to hear his little sister and her husband ‘going at it’ the previous night. Now he knew how she felt having to hear Suki and him the past few years.
“Katara,” the sound of a smooth baritone brought the waterbender out of her thoughts and caused a shiver to race down her spine.

She turned around quickly and smiled when she saw her husband approaching her with a matching smile of his own.

“How was your time with your family?” Zuko asked as he finally came to stand before her.

“It was great!” she exclaimed.

She began to give him small details as she grasped his arm and they started walking down the corridor. He was both mortified and amused when she told him what Sokka had told her. Zuko had spent the time she was with her family with Iroh, which made her wonder where his mother and Jee were. She had thought of bringing up the subject of those two with Zuko last night, but she had been very distracted by other pleasurable things.

Katara was once again distracted when they saw Aang and Toph walking down the corridor.

“Hey, guys!” Aang greeted cheerfully, a wide smile almost splitting his face.

“Someone is in a good mood today,” Katara observed with a smile as she watched the airbender almost skipping with his happiness.

“He should be after what we did last night,” Toph piped in with a wicked grin.

“Toph!” Aang exclaimed as he clamped his hand over her grinning mouth. His whole face turned red.

The royal couple’s eyes widened in surprise before they chuckled at the young airbender’s embarrassment and the earthbender’s amused satisfaction. Toph pushed Aang’s hand away as she smirked.

“What? It’s not like we actually had full-on sex,” Toph retorted wickedly.
Aang placed his hands over his flushed face and groaned in mortification, knowing Katara and Zuko could guess what Toph meant. But he sure did not regret the heavy petting and makeout session with Toph the previous night. It only made him more sure that they were ready to consummate their relationship in every sense of the word. But that did not mean he wanted the whole world to know it, gees!

“I was sure everybody would’ve guessed,” the small woman quipped before she asked the royal couple, “Didn’t you guys notice?”

“No, we were busy making our own commotion,” Zuko retorted arrogantly, “Which we were told was so loud we didn’t let others sleep.”

“Zuko!” Katara hissed. It was embarrassing enough that her brother knew.

She shook her head and smiled when Toph chortled loudly, Aang laughed, and Zuko smirked at her. Well, it was nice to know that they could joke about such things.

“Well, we’ll see ya guys later,” Toph said as she grabbed Aang’s arm and pulled him after her.

“I have a feeling it’ll be much later,” Aang quipped as he turned to throw a grin at the amused royal couple before he eagerly followed after Toph.

“Hm, why don’t we follow after their example?” Zuko murmured huskily as he grinned at Katara.

The waterbender laughed and shook her head.

“Insatiable,” she said.

“I didn’t hear you complaining about it last night,” he teased.

“Who said I was complaining?” Katara retorted throatily as she ran a hand slowly down his stomach and teasingly played with the edge of his parka covering his manhood. She stepped back with a grin
when he groaned and reached for her.

“Later,” she said teasingly.

“Minx,” Zuko groaned before he added, “Fine. I’ll let you go only because I have other things to see to.”

“What other things?” she asked curiously.

“I’m on my way to meet Mother and Jee,” he responded coolly. “Jee asked if he could speak to me after the noon meal, but I decided to talk to him now. I wonder what he wants to tell me.”

Katara’s blue eyes widened. Was Jee going to ask Zuko’s permission to court Ursa? She hoped everything went well and she really hoped Zuko did not become too upset. As they approached one of the sitting rooms of the grand house, they slowed down and glanced at each other. They were heading to the room where Zuko had seen Katara and Aang embracing more than a year ago, thinking she had agreed to marry the Avatar.

Katara grabbed his hand and gave it a loving squeeze. Zuko looked down to smile at her as he squeezed her hand back in reassurance that the memory no longer bothered him. They resumed walking and soon they were stepping into the room, only to freeze in shock at the sight that greeted them. Zuko’s eyes widened and Katara gaped.

Sitting on the bench, covered in furs, was Ursa in Jee’s embrace, but what was more shocking was that Ursa had her arms tightly wrapped around the admiral’s neck while he had her head tilted down, his hand tangled in her hair as he kissed her deeply. Zuko shook himself out of his shock and marched furiously into the room.

“Get your hands off my mother, you traitor!” he roared angrily.

Jee and Ursa quickly jerked away with loud gasps before jumping to their feet with horrified expressions.

“My l-lord!” Jee stammered, his eyes wide in both alarm and mortification.
“Zuko!” Ursa exclaimed as her entire face turned pink in embarrassment.

With a growl, Zuko lunged himself at Jee and punched him across the face, knocking him down against the wooden bench. Jee winced at the painful impacts, but did not defend himself or retaliate. Both Ursa and Katara gasped and shouted for Zuko to stop. The young lord ignored them as he grabbed the older man by the front of his parka and hauled him to his feet, bringing him close to his angry face.

“This is how you show your loyalty to me? By seducing my mother?!” Zuko growled angrily as he glared into the admiral’s eyes.

Jee narrowed his eyes and he straightened himself out as much as possible within the angry Fire Lord’s grasp.

“I would never betray you and I would never do such a dishonorable thing to Lady Ursa,” he said firmly.

Growling, Zuko shook him and again ignored the women’s protests.

“Then why were you kissing her?!” Zuko shouted furiously.

Ursa stepped forward and tightly grasped her son’s arm, trying to make him let go of the admiral.

“Zuko, release him this instant!” she ordered him as she pulled at his arm.

Without looking at his mother, Zuko narrowed his golden eyes at his admiral.

“I am not going to let another bastard hurt you,” he said darkly.

“I don’t want to seduce Ursa,” Jee said firmly as he grasped Zuko’s wrists.

“Then what do you want?” the younger man asked through gritted teeth.
“I want to court her,” Jee replied in the same calm tone, yet there was a softness to it as well.

Zuko’s anger vanished and was replaced with shock. He stared disbelievingly at the older man who stared unwaveringly back at him. He let go of Jee’s parka and took a step back as his mind whirled with questions and misgivings. He had not been prepared for that answer.

Ursa quickly went to Jee’s side and Katara stepped next to her husband.

“You what?” Zuko asked incredulously as he stared with wide eyes at the older man and the way his mother and Jee grasped each other’s hands.

“The reason I wished to speak with you was to ask for your permission to court your mother,” the admiral said calmly as he clasped Ursa’s hand with both of his.

Zuko’s shock quickly turned to mistrust and anger. He grabbed tightly onto his mother’s arm and pulled her protectively behind him, away from the admiral who curled his now empty hand.

“Court her?” the young firebender sneered cynically as he narrowed his eyes at Jee. “What, you wish to be royalty? I didn’t know you were that ambitious, but I suppose most people would kill for the opportunity. But marrying my mother would sure make things much easier.”

“Zuko!” both women exclaimed.

Jee’s nostrils flared and his frown deepened at the young lord’s accusation, but he understood why Zuko would think such things. He knew convincing Zuko about his true intentions wasn’t going to be easy. He just hoped he wasn’t banished for his audacity to wish to marry the Fire Lord’s mother.

“Of course not,” the admiral began firmly, “Her status has nothing to do with it.”

“Sure it doesn’t,” Zuko replied sardonically before his glare intensified as he added, “You best forget your plans to raise yourself on the social ladder because I will never allow you to marry my mother. I won’t allow you or any other man to use and hurt her.”
“I will never hurt her,” Jee responded fiercely as he stared determinedly into the younger man’s wary eyes. “I am not Ozai.”

Zuko’s aggressive stance faltered for a moment at the admiral’s words. Those were the same words Zuko had repeated to those who mistrusted him when he first took the throne. Was he placing Ozai’s faults on Jee just as others had done to him?

“If it would make you trust that my intentions towards Lady Ursa are honorable, I won’t ask for my title to change,” Jee added assuredly. “I can retain the title of a simple admiral, if only I can be called her husband.”

Zuko stared at him incredulously. Katara mentally applauded Jee’s words, knowing he meant them. Ursa smiled as she stared lovingly at Jee who turned to stare sincerely back at her. Before he could stop her, Zuko watched as his mother stepped around him and once again clasped Jee’s hand.

“What?” Zuko asked as he returned his gaze to the calm admiral. “I don’t understand. Why else would you want to court my mother if it’s not for a royal title?”

He watched as the older man turned to look at Ursa and smiled tenderly at her.

“Because I love her. With all my heart,” Jee replied softly, sincerity ringing in his tone.

Zuko stared at him in disbelief, then at their joined hands, before he looked at his mother in bewilderment. Katara bit her lip to keep from pleading to Zuko to give them a chance. Ursa glanced at Jee briefly before she turned her gaze to her shocked son.

“Zuko, my son, I know this is unexpected,” she began softly, “but I love Jee and he loves me. It would make us very happy if you were to accept our courtship.”

Zuko stared at his mother, at her golden eyes pleading for him to understand, for a long moment before he slowly shook his head and backed away another step. He felt Katara touch his arm and he stilled.

“I…I need to think,” he murmured before he turned on his heel and rushed out of the room.
The three sighed as they watched him go before they turned to look at each other. Ursa reached out a hand and lightly touch the red mark on Jee’s cheekbone. Jee winced slightly, but smiled to reassure her as he placed his hand on hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said sadly.

“There is nothing to apologize for,” Jee assured her tenderly as he gently grabbed her hand, “I understand how he must have felt to come upon his admiral kissing his mother.”

Clearing her throat lightly, Katara gave them a small smile when they turned to look at her.

“I’m going to look for Zuko,” she said.

Before they could say anything, she strode swiftly out of the room in search of her errant husband. That surely was not the best scenario to ask for Zuko’s permission and acceptance, she thought wryly. She went to her old room they were sharing during their visit, but found that it was empty. She explored the rest of the house and asked her family if they had seen him, but he was nowhere to be found.

Frowning in worry, she left the house and stood outside. She surveyed the snowy streets and the people who were going about their business until she spotted a group of young women chattering and giggling softly amongst each other as they stared down one street. Narrowing her eyes, she quickly walked up to them. When they saw the waterbender approach them, the women’s chatter ceased immediately and they flushed and stared at her with wide eyes.

“Have you seen my husband?” she asked sweetly, though the sharp look in her blue eyes made them aware she knew they had.

“Ah, he went that way, Lady Katara,” one of the women quickly replied and they all pointed down the street.

“Thank you,” Katara told them with a smile as she turned away. She grinned when she heard them let out relieved breaths as she walked away.

She quickly realized this was the path that led to the small arena where she used to teach the children waterbending. Quickening her steps, she walked down the street, pausing briefly to reply to the
people who greeted her. When she finally arrived at her destination, she scanned the area only to
frown when she did not see Zuko. She took a moment to reminisce about the past as her eyes once
again took in her surroundings before she continued on her search.

She paused briefly when she noticed a large set of footprints leading in the opposite direction. She
smiled when she realized Zuko was heading to where the penguins lived, to the place where they
had played with the children two years ago. She quickly followed after the footprints, her boots
sinking slightly in the snow in her haste. She paused when Zuko finally came into view.

He was standing atop the small snowy hill where they had rolled down when he had caught her after
that snowball fight. He was standing straight, his shoulders stiff, his hands clasped behind his back.
He was once again wearing a red parka and black pants and boots—his dark clothing and hair
making him stand out strikingly in the white landscape. The golden fire crown nestled on his topknot
glinted brightly in the noon sun. A soft breeze swept by and ruffled his long hair for a moment before
it settled perfectly down his back. Katara admired his masculine physique for a moment, pleased to
have such a fine male specimen as hers, before she made her way to him. She saw him stiffen when
he sensed her approach before he relaxed when he realized it was just her.

“How do you feel?” she asked softly as she reached out a hand to touch his arm.

Zuko was silent a moment as he continued staring out into the distance before he let out a sigh.

“I don’t know,” he admitted gruffly. He looked down and narrowed his eyes at her. “You knew
about them and that’s why you kept making all those hints,” he grumbled. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Katara frowned at him.

“It was their secret to tell,” she told him, “Besides, I barely found out they confessed their feelings to
each other last night.”

Zuko frowned at her words.

“Do you really think he meant it?” he asked after a moment of silence.

“What?” she inquired softly.
“That...that he loves her,” he responded.

“He does,” Katara replied assuredly.

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve been observing him for the past year,” Katara finally confessed after a pause, “I noticed his reactions to her and to the noblemen who would approach her with leering eyes. I’ve seen the way he looks at her, when he thinks no one is watching him. It shows how much he loves her. He respects her and he’s completely devoted to her.”

Frown deepening, Zuko was silent as he thought over what his wife had said.

“Zuko,” Katara began before she let out a small sigh, “To be honest, I encouraged him to confess his feelings to her.”

“What?!” the firebender growled.

“I also encouraged Ursa to give love a second chance and hinted to her of Jee’s feelings because I knew she was also developing feelings for him.”

“You what?” Zuko shouted.

“I know I should have told you—”

“Then why didn’t you?” Zuko interrupted her angrily.

Katara placed her hands on her hips and frowned at him.

“Because I knew you wouldn’t have given Jee a chance and would’ve sent him away,” she responded unrepentantly. “Or am I wrong?”
Zuko opened his mouth before he shut it and pressed his lips together as he frowned at her, knowing she was right. He probably would not have listened to what Jee had to say and would have immediately dismissed him as his mother’s guard.

“But Jee refused to tell her what he felt for her at first,” Katara continued, her tone softening a little since she knew this wasn’t easy for her husband. “He didn’t want Ursa turn him away and he didn’t want to upset you.”

Zuko remained silent as he thought over her words. Now that he thought about it, he could remember instances where Jee’s feelings for Ursa were subtle but noticeable. How could he have missed that? Letting out a small growl, Zuko rubbed his face before he sighed deeply once again.

“I just got my mother back and now someone else is trying to take her away from me,” he spoke up in a low tone.

“First and foremost, Ursa is your mother and she would never cast you away for a man. She has told me as much,” Katara replied gently, “Second, you can’t be selfish. Is it okay for you to have a loving spouse while Ursa has to live alone? She is still young. She deserves to live happily with the man she loves and who loves her in return.”

Zuko remained silent as he thought over what his wife had said. She was right. It was selfish of him to want his mother to be only at his side. Besides, it wasn’t as if he were a child who needed his mother’s constant attention and care.

They remained that way for a long moment—the only other sounds that could be heard were the chirps of the penguins at a distance. Finally, Zuko sighed and his shoulders slumped a little.

“I just don’t want her to get hurt,” he said with a frown.

Ozai had hurt his mother deeply with his unfaithfulness and his indifferent treatment of her. And worse still, he had used her to do his dirty work in order for him to become Fire Lord before he forced her out of the Fire Nation to live alone in a dangerous place such as the Abandoned Fort. His mother had been through enough. He would never allow another man to harm her.

“Jee will never hurt her, especially after knowing what she has been through, he loves her too much,” the waterbender replied confidently, “He’ll take care of her. But he also understands how
you would feel about his feelings for your mother, so that’s why he wanted to ask for your permission to court her. Jee is very loyal to you and he wouldn’t do anything that would displease you.”

Katara paused as she let her husband think about what she said. Zuko was silent as he mused over her words. He could not deny that Jee had been completely loyal and committed to him for years, even after the harsh way he had treated him and his crewmembers when he had still been a banished prince.

“I’m sure that if you oppose their courtship, Jee would back away,” Katara continued in a softer tone, “Jee would stop interacting with her and she would do the same in order not to hurt you…But then they would both be miserable.”

A frown marred Zuko’s brow as he thought over everything his wife had said. He knew Jee was a good man and he appreciated and even cared for the admiral. He did not want to be the cause for either his mother’s or Jee’s unhappiness. But still, the news was just so unexpected and he did not know how to feel about it.

“Besides,” Katara continued, “Jee asked to court Ursa, not marry her right away. That would give them more time to know if they are truly good for each other.”

“You’re right,” Zuko agreed quietly before he let out another sigh, “It would just be strange to have a…stepfather.”

“You and Jee have had a good relationship,” she replied, “Why would that change things?”

“I suppose that’s true,” the firebender murmured with a frown, “But I’m still not sure.”

“At least hear Jee out before you make a decision,” the brunette advised.

Zuko took a moment to think before he gave a brief nod. It would only be fair, besides, that way he could judge Jee’s sincerity. When his wife smiled gratefully at him, the young lord wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer to him with a disgruntled expression.

“You must enjoy it when you always make me do what you want,” he grumbled as he glared halfheartedly at her.
Katara grinned up at him as she slipped her arms around his neck.

“You know you only do so when I’m right,” she replied amusedly.

She tugged his head down and kissed him soundly, nipping at his bottom lip and soothing it with her tongue, before pulling away to smile at him. Zuko licked his lips as he stared down at his waterbender, his golden eyes smoldering. He admired the way the cold brought a pink blush to her cheeks and her blue eyes glittered in the sunlight. Again, he felt the familiar stir in his loins at having Katara in his arms. His mind conjured the image of pushing Katara on the snowy ground and taking his pleasure of her and pleasuring her in return. The thought was intriguing, but he knew it would probably not be comfortable for either of them. He pressed a quick kiss to her lips before he reluctantly let go of her. He grabbed her hand and began walking them down the snowy hill.

“We better return to the grand house,” he spoke up, “Mother is probably worried sick right now. And I need to speak to Jee…and apologize…”

Katara squeezed his hand and smiled before she leaned against his arm.

“I’m glad I didn’t have to resort to desperate measures for you to agree to hear Jee out,” she said impishly.

“What desperate measures?” Zuko asked with a wary frown.

“I was willing to withhold sex until you agreed,” Katara replied simply.

Zuko stopped abruptly and turned to stare at her wide-eyed.

“You wouldn’t dare!” he exclaimed with a growl.

He scowled when Katara chuckled.

“I would if it meant the happiness of Ursa and Jee,” she responded truthfully.
She let out a soft gasp when her husband grasped tightly onto her hips and pulled her roughly against him. He lifted her slightly and she moaned lowly when he rubbed his groin against hers just as his lips touched hers in a hard, passionate kiss.

“You are lucky I want you so damn much, minx,” he growled huskily against her soft lips.

“I know,” Katara replied with a pleased grin as she pressed slow, sweet kisses against his mouth.

Zuko enjoyed her attentions for a moment before he sighed and placed her back on her feet, once again reluctantly letting her go from his embrace. After he talked to Jee and somehow figured out what to do, Zuko planned on absconding with his wife in her old room for the rest of the day.

“Come on,” he said as he grabbed her hand.

A few minutes later, the royal couple arrived outside the sitting room once again. When Zuko paused, Katara gave his hand an encouraging squeeze before she slipped her hand from his. Taking a fortifying breath, Zuko schooled his features into a passive mask and stepped into the room. He paused in his steps when he saw his mother leaning dejectedly against Jee’s chest. The admiral had a grim expression on his face as he rubbed her back consolingly and murmured softly to her. Clearing his throat, Zuko watched as they stiffened before they quickly separated and turned to look at him. Ursa’s eyes were large and hopeful, and Jee’s were resigned and cautious.

“Mom, why don’t you go outside with Katara for a bit?” Zuko asked. His tone was impassive as he stared at the older man. “I need to speak with Jee in private.”

Ursa opened her mouth as if to say something, but decided to heed her son’s words. She looked up at Jee and he smiled reassuringly.

“I will be waiting outside then,” Ursa said as she turned back to gaze at Zuko.

The young lord gave a small nod of his head at his mother’s words. Ursa moved gracefully forward, and as she passed her son, she touched his cheek briefly—a gesture of apology, supplication, and affection. Zuko’s expression softened and he reached up to gently grasp her hand. She gave his hand a squeeze before she let him go and followed Katara out of the room. Once the two women were out of sight, Zuko returned his full attention on the admiral, his eyes sharp and assessing.
Jee remained perfectly still, calm, and collected—though inwardly, he felt a nervous wreck. He had not planned for Zuko to find out about his wish to court Ursa by coming upon him kissing the young lord’s mother. Now he would have to work even harder to convince Zuko that his intentions toward Ursa were honorable. His cheek was still aching from Zuko’s strike, but Jee was glad that was the only injury his temperamental lord had inflicted on him.

“Since when have you had…feelings for my mother?” Zuko began in a neutral tone.

“Since a few months after you assigned me as her personal guard,” Jee confessed sincerely, without hesitation, “But I only acted upon my feelings for her recently.”

“Why is that?” Zuko asked skeptically as he raised one dark eyebrow.

“I tried to stop my growing feelings for her, for I knew it was not proper,” the admiral began, “But it was in vain. It seemed that the harder I tried, the more I grew to love her.”

Zuko relaxed a bit and nodded in understanding. The same thing happened to him when he had tried to forget Katara and the love he held for her only to have his feeling become more intense. The Fire Lord was silent a moment as he mused over everything Katara had told him before and what Jee was telling him now. He also took into consideration his mother’s pleading gaze and voice. Zuko acknowledged to himself that Jee was a good man, loyal and strong, but was he worthy of his mother? He just did not want his mother to get hurt, but he also did not want to get in the way of her happiness—if Jee turned out to be part of her future.

“Are you truly accepting of the fact that my mother had a previous marriage and has children from that union?” Zuko asked cautiously.

“Her previous marriage is in the past,” Jee responded without any misgivings. “Besides, I know Lady Ursa loves me more than her…first husband. I fell in love with her knowing her children were the most important things to her.”

Jee paused and Zuko watched his expression soften.

“You’re already important to me,” Jee added honestly.
Zuko stilled in surprise as he stared at the older man. His surprise only increased when he saw Jee was completely serious. Zuko frowned. The only true father figure he had had since his youth was Iroh, but if Jee married his mother he would become another father. Zuko did not know how to feel about that. His real father despised and mistreated him, after all. Mentally shaking his head, he decided to put that thought to the side for now.

“How do I know you wouldn’t hurt my mother?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“I would do anything to keep her from harm and to keep her safe,” Jee again responded without any hesitation. His expression turned slightly dark as he continued, “She has suffered so much because of Ozai and I refuse to allow her to go through such horrible trials again. I will strive every day of my life to make her happy.”

Zuko inwardly approved Jee’s words, but remained silent as he continued to observe the older man before him.

“Although my mother understood it was acceptable for Ozai, as a prince, to make use of concubines, it had hurt her greatly,” Zuko began in a dark tone before he asked, “Would she have to expect sharing you with other women as well?”

“I will never betray her or cast her aside for another woman,” Jee answered quickly and firmly, his brow etched with a deep frown.

“Would you really not make use of the local brothel as your fellow officers do?” Zuko asked cynically.

Jee’s golden eyes narrowed irately and he clenched his hands at his sides.

“Why can you be the only one capable of faithfulness?” Jee asked through gritted teeth.

Zuko frowned before he grudgingly nodded at Jee’s logic. They stared intensely at each other for a long moment before the Fire Lord sighed.

“I can’t really force my grown mother not to pursue a serious relationship, as much as I’d wish otherwise,” Zuko muttered. With another sigh, he added, “I give you my permission to court my mother until either of you decide to go your separate ways or decide to do something permanent
Zuko watched as Jee smiled exuberantly before the older man caught himself and resumed his usual serious expression. Jee pressed his fist to his open palm and bowed gratefully.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely and he straightened himself out to smile at the younger firebender. “I will make Lady Ursa happy, I promise you.”

The Fire Lord gave a regal nod of his head before his expression turned solemn and intense.

“I will hold you to that promise, but if you hurt my mother, I will personally kill you,” he threatened darkly.

Instead of taking offense, Jee only looked amused.

“I’d expect no less, my lord,” Jee replied with a small smile.

Zuko’s threatening expression vanished and he grudgingly returned the smile.

“We should go tell the women before they go crazy with worry,” Zuko said with a grin.

Jee chuckled as he followed the young man out of the room. He was thanking the gods that that meeting went better than he expected. Now he just had to prove to both Ursa and Zuko that he would make the Fire Lord’s mother a good husband, and hopefully, he could marry her soon.

As they stepped out of the room in silent understanding, Zuko thought that if he and Jee had an easy and respectful relationship now, maybe it would not be bad if Jee became his stepfather. Of course, it was still too early to tell, but it was a nice thought, nonetheless.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A few days later, the Fire Lord’s and Chief Hakoda’s families, as well as Aang and Toph, were enjoying a mid-morning picnic at the edge of the cliff that separated the ice city from the wintry wilderness. The Fire Nation family was heading back home later in the day and they were all enjoying the last few hours they had together before they had to separate once again. They were sitting on large, thick furs with baskets containing bread, cheese, and containers filled with a warm
Zuko stood at the edge of the cliff as he watched their interaction. Katara’s attention was completely placed on her Water Tribe family as they surrounded her, reminiscing about hilarious childhood antics of both Sokka and Katara. Zuko had gracefully surrendered his wife’s company to them to give her more time with her family without him being in the way.

Zuko’s focus shifted to his mother and Jee whose attention was solely on each other for the moment. He watched as the admiral gently tucked a strand of Ursa’s hair behind her ear and she smiled gently at Jee as she gazed into his eyes. Zuko frowned slightly. He really needed to get used to the idea of them being together. The young lord looked away and returned his gaze to the expanse of the bare, snowy landscape. His mind returned to the incident of two years ago when he had saved Lien from the panther-wolves and Katara had saved him in return. A small smile curled his lips since it was that moment that made Katara finally realize her love for him. Good things did seem to come out of near tragic events.

His gaze once again returned to his wife and his expression softened as he watched her laugh—her blue eyes sparkling in her mirth—at something his uncle and Toph said. Zuko had never been more happy, satisfied and content in all his life than as he was at that moment. He was surrounded by family and friends who cared for him as much as he did them. And it was all thanks to Katara. He would forever be grateful to the gods for bringing her into his life.

Feeling someone approaching him, Zuko turned to see Hakoda stand beside him with a soft expression on his face as he also stared at his family. Both men did not say anything for a while before Hakoda spoke.

“Although I had my doubts about my daughter marrying you, especially after these trying months,” Hakoda began, “I can see that you do make her happy.”

The chieftain turned to smile briefly at his son-in-law before he returned his attention to his laughing daughter. Zuko was not offended by Hakoda’s first statement, and smiled at his last declaration and his trust in him.

“I will always strive to make Katara happy,” Zuko said softly yet firmly as his eyes drank up the sight of his waterbender. “She means everything to me.”

Hakoda’s smile widened, pleased to see how much the young Fire Lord loved his daughter. His smile faltered for a moment and he sighed wistfully as he stared out into the horizon.
“I understand how you feel, for that is how I felt for Kya when she was still alive,” the blue-eyed chief said melancholically.

Zuko reached out a hand to briefly squeeze Hakoda’s shoulder in silent support and apology before he let go. Hakoda gave him a nod of gratitude before he cleared his throat and shook himself out of his dark mood. The two leaders stood together in companionable silence—something that would have been impossible years ago—as they watched their family. After a moment, Hakoda chuckled at his son’s antics before he turned to smile affably at his son-in-law.

“Well, I better head over there before Sokka eats all the meat,” he said amusingly as he walked back to his family, snatching a piece of meat from his son’s hand as he passed him to sit next to Iroh.

The firebender inwardly grinned when Sokka protested his father’s thievery much to the amusement of his twin daughters. Zuko again returned his gaze to his wife, who was mercilessly teasing her older brother.

One day I’ll give you a family of your own, Katara, Zuko mentally vowed with a determined smile.

A few weeks had passed since the Winter Solstice Festival, and after a joyful and tearful farewell from Katara’s family, the royal family was once again in the Fire Nation. Much to Katara’s delight and Zuko’s reluctance, Ursa and Jee’s courtship seemed to be going well. Many of Zuko’s advisors and courtiers were surprised by the unexpected couple, but they did not argue against it since the Fire Lord had given his consent. The royal couple continued to enjoy each other despite the murmurs of the council concerning the lack of an heir.

Katara shivered slightly when a cool breeze swept past her as she stepped into the royal garden. Although the climate was not as cold as her arctic homeland, the Fire Nation’s winter season was still reasonably chilly. Katara took a deep breath of fresh air and sighed contentedly. She had had a busy morning dealing with a few charity proposals and she wanted to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet before she met her family for dinner. She had not seen Zuko since he woke her up that morning with a kiss that led to a quick yet sweet round of lovemaking. She had laughed when Zuko playfully told her she had made him late for his meeting. Smiling happily at the memory, Katara continue on her way on one of the stone paths lined with trees on one side. As she stepped onto one path, Katara froze before she darted behind a tree.

Catching sight of Ursa and Jee sitting on a stone bench under the thick leaves of a large tree, locked in a tender embrace, Katara broke into a wide grin. She watched as Jee leaned down slowly and placed a gentle kiss on Ursa’s lips before pulling away. The noblewoman blushed and smiled happily up at the admiral.
Aww, they are so adorable, the waterbender gushed mentally.

It was all Katara could do to stop herself from doing a little victory dance for her role in getting those two together. Rubbing her hands together in glee, she considered ways in which she could help their relationship progress faster.

“Katara.”

The low whisper made her jump in surprise, just before she felt her husband’s chest press against her back as his strong arms wrapped around her.

“What are you doing hiding behind a tree?” he murmured as he pulled her back against his hard frame.

“Nothing,” she responded quickly, even as her spine tingled in pleasure at his touch.

“Oh? Were you about to join my mother and Jee?” he asked teasingly.

He tried not to glance at the older couple looking softly into each other’s eyes, still oblivious that they had an audience.

“I was just passing by,” she explained innocently.

“Oh, really?” he said sarcastically, his low tone amused. “It seemed to me as if you were spying on them.”

“I just wanted to see if they needed more of my help,” Katara protested.

Ignoring her arguments, Zuko began to gently drag his wife away from the still unaware couple and back toward the palace.
“I think you’ve helped them enough, water nymph,” he said amusedly.

“Why must you ruin my fun?” Katara pouted as she tried to pull against his firm hold, planting her feet on the grassy ground.

“Leave them alone,” the firebender told her with a suppressed chuckle, “We wouldn’t want anyone to spy on our private moments, would we?”

Katara frowned, but before she could protest further he gently tugged on her arm, causing her to lose her balance and fall heavily against him. She glared into his amused, golden eyes and she halfheartedly smacked his chest.

“Why you domineering tyrant,” she scolded as she struggled in his grasp—even as she laughed quietly.

Smirking, Zuko restrained her struggles by pinning her arms between their bodies and capturing her lips in a heady kiss. When she moaned against his mouth, Zuko growled as he felt his body immediately respond in arousal. He leaned back only when his wife melted against his chest and struggled for breath. He licked his lips, savoring her delicious, sweet taste, and smiled wickedly down at her when she opened her eyes.

“It doesn’t seem like they need your help at the moment,” he said casually as his released her only to run his hands over her curves, causing her to muffle her moan by biting her lip. He smirked roguishly at her as he added, “I, on the other hand, need your immediate help with a very big problem.”

“Oh? What sort of big problem are you referring to?” she asked innocently as she pressed her stomach to his growing erection in a wanton manner.

Zuko groaned quietly and his hips bucked against her belly.

“We’ll have to go to our bedchamber for you to find out,” he replied huskily, amused by their playful flirtation. “If you don’t help me with this huge problem right this instant, I’m afraid I’ll go insane.”

“Right now?” the waterbender asked in a mock scandalized tone, even as her blue eyes glittered up at him.
“Right now,” the young lord declared in a serious tone, though the corner of his lips twitches with a grin.

Katara laughed as her husband eagerly grasped her arm and swiftly led her away from the garden and into the palace. With the manner in which they were constantly at each other, she could only hope that they would soon conceive a child.

Gray eyes watched as the light of the campfire cast shadows across the frowning face of his pretty girlfriend. Aang absentmindedly stroked Momo’s fur as he stared at Toph in wonder across the fire. They had currently set up camp on a clear spot of a mountain on their way to a village nestled within an Earth Kingdom mountain range. He had noticed that something seemed to weigh on Toph’s mind ever since they left the Southern Water Tribe weeks ago and he wondered what it could be. He had tried to convince her to talk to him, but she would brusquely tell him that she was fine and to mind his own business. Instead of being hurt by her words, he only grew more concerned.

Did he do something wrong to make her upset with him? He tried to recall if had done something that could incur her displeasure but he could not think of anything. Did she…maybe…not…love him anymore? His chest constricted at such a thought. He would be devastated if that were the case. If Katara’s refusal had hurt him, he was sure Toph’s rejection would kill him. He did not want to lose her. He loved her too much.

Frowning more deeply, the young airbender set Momo to the side. The small lemur chirped at his master questioningly before he flew toward a sleeping Appa and nestled on the bison’s head. Squaring his shoulders, Aang stood up and walked determinedly to where Toph sat staring unseeingly into the flames before sitting close to her side.

Toph stiffened when she felt Aang’s warmth and presence next to her, but she pretended not to notice as she continued twirling the four small balls of rock between her fingers. She hoped Aang didn’t ask her again to tell him what was wrong with her because she might just punch him.

Who was she kidding?

She loved him too much to hurt him…which was the reason she was avoiding him. Damn it. She hated feeling weak and emotional and that’s how she felt when she was around Aang. He made her feel vulnerable, soft, sentimental…female. And she hated that she didn’t completely hate feeling such a way with him.
“Toph?” Aang said softly as he stared into her scowling face. “Would you please tell me what is wrong? Please?”

Toph’s scowl deepened and she twirled the dirt balls more quickly. The soft manner in which he spoke to her always caused her cheeks to heat up and her heart to flutter annoyingly in her chest. Damn him and his stupid, wonderful voice.

“Please, Toph?” he asked more softly as he scooted closer to her so that their thighs touched. “You’re worrying me. I want to help you. Please?”

The small earthbender’s fingers stopped their rapid movement at the touch of his body, even though it was innocent and light. The balls of dirt fell from her control when she felt Aang press closer to her so he could cup her cheek and turned her face toward him. Although she could not see him, she could tell that he was looking worriedly into her face as he stroked her skin.

“Did I…do something wrong?” he asked anxiously.

“No!” Toph blurted before she could stop herself before she sighed. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then what’s the problem?” he asked with a frown.

Toph slowly pulled away from his gentle grasp and sighed. She was silent for a long moment as she debated with herself whether to let him know what was on her mind or not. What if he got angry with her? Worse, what if he decided he didn’t want anything to do with her? She scowled. She was no coward. And if he decided he could not forgive her and wanted to leave, then good riddance… though her heart would probably bleed with the pain. She grinned wryly at her melodramatic thoughts.

“Toph?” Aang’s voice once again brought her out of her musings.

The earthbending woman sighed before she straightened herself out. She turned in his direction and stared at the spot she sensed his face might be. Gathering her courage, she raised her chin.

“I was one of the reasons why Sugar Queen broke up with you and ended up with Sparky,” she confessed bluntly.
Aang frowned.

“What are you talking about?”

Toph let a puff of air escape her lips, causing her bangs to fly up her forehead.

“I helped Iroh bring Katara and Zuko together,” she continued more rapidly, her words tumbling out like a rock avalanche, “Me and Iroh did everything we could to make them realize their feelings. We knew they had feelings for each other, but they were too confused, afraid, or stupid to admit it, so we decided to help them along. Maybe I shouldn’t have intervened, but I wanted to help them. But I also know that because of that, you came out hurt in the end.”

Aang only stared at her in surprise for her outburst.

“So I guess what I’m saying is that...I’m sorry…” Toph mumbled as she clenched her hands on her lap, “I’m sorry for betraying you like that…”

When Aang remained silent for a long moment, Toph bit her lip and frowned.

“Is this what was worrying you?” he asked her calmly.

“Yeah,” she muttered.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about it anymore,” he told her soothingly as he reached out for her clenched fist. “I kinda had my suspicions.”

“You did?” she asked incredulously.

The grey-eyed airbender chuckled.

“You and Iroh weren’t exactly subtle about it,” he told her amusedly.
“You aren’t angry?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll admit that I felt betrayed and angry at first,” Aang confessed slowly before he continued more calmly, “But I knew that either way, with or without your and Iroh’s intervention, Katara and Zuko would have ended up together. Their love for each other is something powerful. Nothing could have stood in the way of that.”

“But maybe…if I didn’t intervene…you would probably be married to Katara right now…” she muttered. Her voice was strained in the end.

Her eyes widened when she felt Aang pressed a finger against her lips before he cupped her cheek.

“I don’t think I would be,” he interrupted her. “As I said, they would have ended up together either way.”

Aang paused briefly as his thumb caressed her soft cheek. Toph was so funny, strong, brave and smart. She was loud and blunt, but he loved her for it because it showed her honest heart. And even if she wasn’t traditionally feminine, she was beautiful to him. He felt like his heart would swell when she allowed herself to be vulnerable and soft with him, and it made him feel special. It made him wonder how he could not have seen how much he loved her before.

“Besides, I can’t imagine being married to Katara any longer,” he told her softly, truthfully, “I can’t imagine being with anyone that isn’t you, Toph.”

Once again, Toph found herself at a loss for words—a rarity for the brash earthbender. Love really did make people foolish, she mused. Her breath hitched when she felt Aang’s lips press gently against hers. Electricity raced down her spine and she pressed her lips more firmly against his. She smirked inwardly when he let out a low groan. He pulled away and she could feel his soft breath on her lips. It was moments like these that she wished she had her vision so she could stare into his eyes and see what emotion was behind them. However, she did not particularly need her sight. She could sense Aang’s emotions by the timbre of his voice, the beating of his heart, and his soft touch.

Aang stared into Toph’s lime-colored eyes, his heart beating wildly in his chest, before he leaned back down toward her face. He needed to kiss her again.

This time when Aang touched her lips, Toph wrapped her arms around his neck and brought him
closer to her, slanting her mouth against his passionately. They moaned simultaneously as their mouths opened and their tongues danced together. They had shared passionate kisses many times, going so far as pleasuring each other with their hands without doing the whole act, which only aroused their desire for each other more. They fell back onto Toph’s sleeping bag, their arms wrapped tightly around each other, their mouths fused together.

“I love you, Toph,” he said breathlessly against her mouth. His lower regions were aching something fierce.

“I love you too, so make me yours. Now,” she moaned loudly as she brazenly pressed closer against him in order to relieve some of the ache in her intimate parts.

Aang’s breath hitched at her words—words he had dreamed Toph would utter so many times before. He pulled back to stare at her flushed face.

“Toph,” he groaned, “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t damn sure, Twinkletoes,” she growled as she pulled him back down with her. “Now shut up and make love to me before I hurt you.”

He could not help but chuckle at her command and threat. Yes, this was the Toph he loved and desired. He had no clue how to go about doing such things except for the basics, and he was sure Toph didn’t either, but he would make sure to make this a night she would never forget. Smiling, he bent down again to kiss her senseless.

Needless to say, it was a night of love…and lots of exploration and experimentation.

End of Part Eight
Joyous Tidings

Soft humming filled the Fire Lady bedchamber as Katara arranged the bouquet of winter flowers in the porcelain vase placed on the small table near the large window. A little more than a month had passed since their visit to the Southern Water Tribe and her days were once again filled with all her duties and responsibilities. She enjoyed the work, especially since she was able to help so many people, and as time passed, she felt more confident in her role as Fire Lady. Even the Royal Council members were impressed with her abilities. Some of the noblemen and—women had begun to grudgingly accept the fact that the Fire Lord was not going to cast her away, so they were now trying to get into her good graces—much to her amusement and annoyance.

She was free for the rest of the day, so she decided to place fresh flowers in the Fire Lady bedchamber to pass the time before dinner. Ursa was with Jee once again and Katara did not want to disturb them. The blue-eyed Fire Lady rearranged one of the white flowers and stepped back to admire her work. A smile of satisfaction began to curl her lips, but a gasp of surprise fell from her mouth when strong arms wrapped around her from behind and pulled her into a hard chest. She immediately relaxed when she recognized the intruder’s touch and the scent of smoky sandalwood reached her senses.

“You should be careful sneaking up on me like that because next time I might react faster and accidentally end up hurting you,” she teased with a playfully huff.

She smiled when she heard and felt Zuko chuckle amusedly as he wrapped his arms more tightly around her.

“I know you will always recognize my touch, so I have no fear,” he retorted arrogantly as he kissed her ear and caressed one of her breasts over her royal robes.

Shivering in pleasure, Katara pushed her chest closer to his hand before she turned around in his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck, a small grin lighting up her features. She rose on her toes and kissed him softly. Zuko sighed contentedly against her mouth and pressed her closer to his chest. They pulled away and smiled at each other.

“I didn’t expect to see you until dinner,” she said as she played with a long strand of his dark hair.

Zuko leaned down to continue placing small kisses on her soft face and lips.
“I finished all my duties of the day earlier than expected,” he explained distractedly before he added, “I wanted to spend the rest of the day with you…if you’re not busy, that is.”

Katara smiled happily up at him. They haven’t had time to spend an afternoon together for a long while, and she was looking forward to it.

“I’m not busy, I was just rearranging some things in here, but I would rather spend my time with my handsome husband,” she purred excitedly.

Zuko returned her smile before he kissed her again. He tightened his hold of her for a second before he let her go, placing her arm through his as he walked toward the doors.

“I was wondering if you wanted to have some tea with me in the veranda. The weather is nice today,” he remarked.

“I’d love that,” the waterbender assured eagerly as they left her chambers and walked toward the Royal Palace Garden.

The weather had been chilly and cloudy for the past few days. The sun had finally made an appearance that morning and they wanted to take advantage of it. There were still a few months left before spring arrived, which would mark another year of their marriage. They paused briefly to direct a servant to bring them tea and refreshments to the veranda before continuing on their way. As they stepped onto one of the stone paths winding through the garden, the royal couple stopped to admire the patches of flowers that still bloomed during the milder winter climate. They paused near the large pond under the cherry blossom tree to watch the turtle-ducks play in the water and enjoyed the warm sun on their skin. They stayed there for a short moment in companionable silence before they made their way to the veranda. As they approached, Zuko wrapped an arm around Katara’s waist and brought her close to his side, leaning his head down to breathe in her delicate scent.

“Oh,” Katara uttered breathlessly and her eyes fluttered in desire.

She felt her inner walls clench and dampen as if preparing to accommodate his wishes. She loved it when the usually reserved and proper Fire Lord said naughty things to her. It just showed how much he desired her, how much he wanted and needed her.
“Only if you let me return the favor, my lord,” she purred sweetly as she deliberately ran her tongue across her full lower lip. “I suddenly feel the need to suck on something.”

Zuko groaned as he felt his groin tighten. He really could not have chosen a better wife.

“You can return the favor as many times as you wish, minx,” he replied throatily against her hair before he wickedly added, “And once we’ve satisfied our thirst, I will bury myself deeply inside you, just like I did on that rainy day a year ago, remember that?”

“Oh, La, yes,” Katara moaned, simultaneously replying to his question and voicing her need.

They were engrossed in each other so deeply as they arrived at the veranda that they did not notice that the doors were closed. They were always left open to let in the fresh scents of the garden.

His need for possessing Katara becoming more urgent, Zuko swiftly opened one of the sliding doors aside, while he kept his other arm around her, and eagerly guided her inside. They both froze in shock, however, at the sight that greeted them. Zuko’s eyes widened and Katara’s mouth fell open.

There on the floor, next to the low tea table, were Ursa and Jee kissing each other passionately. That was not the shocking part, but the fact that Jee was lying on top of her with one of his hands grasping her breast while Ursa’s hands were gripping tightly onto his hair, one of her legs wrapped around his waist. They were too busy devouring each other’s mouth to realize they were not alone.

At least they’re fully clothed, Katara thought absently when she turned to look at Zuko. She winced at the expression of shock and fury on his features.

“What the hell is going on here!?” Zuko bellowed angrily.

Ursa and Jee gasped loudly and they scrambled to pull away from each other.

“Zuko!” Ursa cried out in mortification.
“My lord!” Jee exclaimed in shock at the same time.

The admiral quickly helped the blushing noblewoman to her feet and they fumbled to fix their rumpled clothing as they stared wide-eyed at the scowling Fire Lord. Ursa moved to stand before Jee in order to hide the bulge of arousal in his pants. Her son did not need to see more than he already had.

“How dare you disrespect my mother in such a way when you’re not even married?!” Zuko growled loudly at he glared heatedly at the older man.

“I would never disrespect her—” Jee began indignantly, but was got off by Zuko’s scoff.

“Well, your intentions looked different from where I was standing,” the younger firebender accused.

“Zuko,” Ursa spoke up softly, though she was frowning, “We just got carried away a little, but we were not going to continue beyond that. Besides, I’m a grown woman and I know what I’m doing.”

Zuko spluttered since he could not refute her words.

“But you’re my mother!” he blurted out.

Katara could see that Zuko was still in shock and would have a difficult time processing what just happened and what might happened in the future between his mother and his admiral. She grabbed his arm gently, and when he looked down to stare at her, she gave him a reassuring squeeze.

“Zuko, you know Jee will never do anything to harm Ursa,” she told him firmly.

Jee stepped around Ursa (the embarrassing situation of them being caught by Zuko had quickly killed his arousal) and straightened himself out as he stared unwaveringly at his lord.

“I apologize for shocking you, but well…” Jee paused to clear his throat before continuing, “I couldn’t stop myself from expressing my feelings for Lady Ursa…in such a way.”
Zuko stiffened and spluttered angrily, but before he could say anything Jee continued speaking.

“I didn’t plan for things to escalate,” Jee confessed sincerely.

Not wanting to upset his lord even more and have him retract his permission to court—and hopefully marry—Ursa, the admiral assured him by saying, “I will respect you and Lady Ursa and will not take her to my bed until it is made official we will marry.”

“Until it’s made official?” Zuko growled out.

“There is no reason to feel offended, Zuko,” Ursa interjected, even as she blushed at Jee’s promise. “I am a mother. My virtue does not need to be protected. Once Jee and I are officially betrothed, we are free to express our feelings…more intimately.”

“Mother!” Zuko spluttered once again as he stared at her in shock.

Ursa’s blush deepened at her son’s reaction. She did not want to cause her son any pain or embarrassment, but she was a full grown woman who was no stranger to sex and she wanted to experience it with the man she loved. She knew it was just her son trying to protect her that had shocked him so much, since such things as sex outside of marriage were not uncommon among the Fire Nation nobility.

“I’m sorry, Zuko, but I love Jee,” Ursa said as she stared at her son, “I hope you can try to understand since you are married to the woman you love.”

Katara watched as her husband continued to stare wide-eyed at the older couple, his face red from both anger and embarrassment, then he sighed and ran a hand down his face.

“I need to leave,” he muttered, and without saying another word, he turned around and quickly walked away.

Ursa watched her son go and sighed sadly.

“I didn’t mean to upset him,” she said in a low tone.
Jee wrapped his arms tenderly around her and brought her close to his chest where she laid her head dejectedly.

“It is understandable why he reacted in such a way,” the admiral told her soothingly before he added contritely, “Perhaps it’s best that we use more private places for our...activities.”

“Yes, that would probably be best.”

“I’m sorry, we got a little, umm...carried away.”

“Don’t worry,” Katara finally spoke as she smiled reassuringly at them both, “I will talk to him.”

They thanked her quietly and Katara made her way down the steps and back onto the stone path. She walked through the garden quickly, but she could see that her husband was not in the garden any longer. She remembered also looking for him in the Southern Water Tribe after he caught his mother and Jee kissing and she hoped it wasn’t going to be a regular occurrence. She hurried back into the building and made her way to their room where she had a feeling she would find him brooding. Once she was standing before the second set of golden doors, she slowly opened it and went inside, closing the door softly behind her. Just like she predicted, she found Zuko pacing the floor before the fireplace, a deep scowl on his face.

“You should try to be a little understanding,” Katara spoke up as she moved toward him.

Zuko paused at the sound of her voice and looked up to frown at her before he continued pacing.

“It’s my mother we’re talking about,” he muttered as he again ran his hand down his face, “I don’t like the thought of her and another man…any man, being intimate. And I can’t unsee what just happened!”

Katara suppressed a sigh as she crossed her arms.

“You shouldn’t be upset with Jee for his actions toward Ursa,” she told him softly, “He’ll never hurt her or do anything she wouldn’t want.”

Zuko whirled around to glare at her.
“He was trying to seduce my mother while being unmarried to her!” he shouted angrily. “My mother!”

Katara raised an eyebrow at his words.

“If I recall correctly, and I _do_,” she began with a bit of exasperation in her tone, “you touched me and gave me pleasure _before_ we were married.”

Zuko stared at her with wide eyes before he shook his head and frowned.

“But...but she’s my mother!” he exclaimed stubbornly.

“And she’s also a grown woman,” Katara retorted as she placed her hands on her hips. “Do you expect them to live a celibate life while married?”

Zuko paused at her question before he scowled.

“Of course not,” he muttered. “I just don’t want to see it…” He shuddered and shook his head in disgust.

Katara bit her lip to keep from smiling at his sulking expression. She could not help but feel a bit amused at Zuko’s reaction. He acted like a father worrying over his daughter’s innocence. The thought made her pause. She wondered if Zuko would act the same way with their own daughter—if they ever had one. She sighed wistfully as warmth spread through her chest at the thought. She heard Zuko sigh loudly and she focused back on him to see him rubbing his face with his hand.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at his wife, who was obviously laughing at his expense. “How would you like it if you walked into a room and found your father on top of a woman and looking like...like he’s trying to eat her face?!”

Katara’s eyes widened at the thought. She had seen several of the older ladies—and some of the younger ones—eyeing her father. He hadn’t shown any interest in them, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t one day find someone he cared for. The thought that she could walk in on him and some woman made her feel slightly nauseous. Zuko was right. Although she knew her father would
always hold a special place in his heart for her mother, she didn’t mind the idea of him getting remarried, but having to witness something like that with her father... She shuddered at the thought.

“He had his hand on her…” Zuko continued as he cupped his hands in front of his chest before he dropped them to his sides. “And her leg was wrapped around…” He shook his head. “I really can’t unsee that!” he growled as he rubbed his temples.

“Okay, you have a point,” Katara responded, still a little amused at his reaction.

“But you still think I’m being an idiot, aren’t I?” he asked gruffly.

Katara let out a soft laugh as she moved toward him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He immediately wound his arms around her as he stared moodily into her smiling face.

“Only a little, my love,” she replied amusedly.

Zuko grumbled under his breath at her teasing grin, but did not push away from her.

“I should probably apologize to them,” he said.

“That would make them feel better,” she agreed as she gave his waist a squeeze. “Ursa doesn’t want to disappoint you and Jee doesn’t want to hurt you either.”

Zuko was silent a moment before he gave her nod. Suddenly, he scooped her up into his arms, making her squeal in surprise as she clutched onto his neck.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he strode swiftly toward their large bed.

Zuko smirked down at her as he pressed her closer to his chest.

“I believe we were interrupted from our pleasurable plans of the veranda,” he told her huskily. “I also wish to reenact all those instances we both recall so well where I touched you before we were married. And then I’ll make love to you now that we are.”
“Oh, are you going to make me scream, my lord?” she asked coyly.

Zuko’s smirk grew as he laid her on the bed and moved to straddle her.

“All night long, my enticing wife.”

A few weeks later found Zuko going through his paperwork in his study. After placing his seal on one of the documents, the young Fire Lord tiredly rubbed his temple and leaned back on his chair with a sigh. Maybe if he wasn’t so wary of being betrayed again, he would look for a personal scribe to help him. Standing up from his large chair, Zuko stretched his back and rubbed the back of his neck before turning around to stand at the huge window behind his desk. He stared absentmindedly at the scenery before him as he got lost in his thoughts.

Jee had approached him a week ago to officially ask for permission to marry Ursa. Zuko had only thought about his request for a minute before he gave his admiral his consent to marry her, since he could no longer deny that they both made each other very happy. Zuko did not care if Jee wasn’t a nobleman but a simple admiral, for Jee was a good and loyal man.

So once he and Jee worked out the details, Jee had happily thanked him before he enthusiastically went in search of Ursa to officially propose to her. His mother’s happiness and gratitude the following day made Zuko realize he had done the right thing. His mother may have another man in her life now, but she would always love and care for her son. Besides, Katara was right. Ursa deserved to love and be loved in return. The only thing that would have made his mother’s happiness complete was if her daughter could share in her joy, but sadly that seemed impossible with the hostile way Azula reacted every time Ursa went to visit her.

Zuko may have come to terms with the thought of his mother being married to another man, but he did not know how to feel at the thought that in a way he would be gaining another father. He had accepted the fact years ago that Ozai, his own sire, did not care for him and had come to think that he did not need a father in his life. Besides, he had Iroh. However, he did appreciate Jee. The man had been loyal and respectful of him for years, and Zuko had to admit that he did care for the admiral. But perhaps he was worrying over nothing. Maybe Jee did not even want to see him as a son nor wanted to be a father. The thought surprisingly pained him.

Zuko frowned.

_I don’t need a father_, he told himself as he had been doing for years.
A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Straightening himself, Zuko sat back down on his chair and called out a firm ‘enter’. The door opened and he looked up to see Jee walk in. Once the older man gave a respectful bow, he smiled at the Fire Lord.

“What is it, Jee?” Zuko asked as he set aside his paperwork.

“I was wondering if you would like to train in the arena, if you weren’t busy,” Jee replied.

Zuko looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before he nodded. He almost smiled when Jee visibly relaxed.

“I think firebending training would clear my head,” Zuko said as he stood up. “Let me change and then I’ll meet you in the arena.”

“Yes, my lord,” Jee responded quickly.

A few minutes later, the Fire Lord and the admiral were sparring in the large arena. Fire burst brightly between them as they tried to outwit the other, though Jee knew Zuko was going easy on him. Zuko forgot about his previous thoughts and worries for the moment, enjoying the exercise as they have done so many times in the past, before another thought appeared in his head.

Now that I think about it, Jee has sparred with me and taught me about my firebending more than my own father has, he mused as he evaded a fiery kick from the admiral.

An hour or two later, they finally decided to stop so they could bathe and change for dinner. They were commenting about each other’s moves as they wiped the sweat from their foreheads with the towels the servants rushed to give them. When Zuko was about to return inside, Jee cleared his throat and Zuko turned to look at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Actually, I was hoping to discuss something with you,” the older man said in a passive tone.

Zuko’s eyebrow lifted even higher before he gave him a nod to continue. Jee was silent a moment as he gathered his thoughts and tried to find the right way to say what had been on his mind for a long time now.
“Once I marry your mother,” Jee began carefully, “we’ll become family.”

“Yes,” Zuko replied cautiously as he masked his expression.

Jee once again fell silent as he stared seriously at the younger man and Zuko stared at him warily.

“Although I would understand if you continued to look at me as your admiral,” Jee continued slowly, “I wish that one day you could come to see me as a…father of sorts.”

Zuko’s eyes widened in genuine surprise.

“What?”

“Not only would it please your mother to see her son and her new husband get along well,” Jee explained softly, “I would also like to treat you as a son…if you would allow me to.”

Zuko, still shocked and unsure, continue to stare at him as he tried to gather his thoughts.

“Do you really?” the younger man asked, his tone wondering.

“I would not presume to interfere with your life and decisions, nor would I expect you to bow to my demands as a son should to his sire and call me father,” the admiral continued, “But I do wish to give you my support and give you my advice and guidance when you need it.”

Jee paused again as he stared sincerely into the young man’s uncertain eyes.

“I already care for you as a son,” he said truthfully.

Zuko stared at Jee wide-eyed. He felt like that small part of him, the neglected child in him, still wish to have a father to guide him, be proud of him for his achievements, care for his happiness, and love him. Yet, the cynical part of him, the hardened youth in him, was wary and certain he did not need
such things. However, seeing the subtly hopeful and sincere expression in Jee’s eyes made the child part in Zuko exclaim more loudly.

“I…I appreciate your…thoughts,” Zuko finally said hesitantly, “but I’ve been living my life without the true influence or support of a father for so long, that I don’t know if I really want or need one. Besides, Uncle Iroh has always filled that role.”

Zuko watched as Jee’s hopeful expression fell and was replaced with disappointment and sadness that he was quick to mask with a blank look. Jee gave a single, understanding nod as he straightened himself out.

“I apologize if—”

Zuko shook his head to interrupt the older man.

“Don’t apologize for your sentiments,” the Fire Lord told him before he added, “Perhaps with time I will get used to the idea of seeing you as a…father. After all, I already respect you and looked up to you when I was younger.”

Jee’s careful smile, both hopeful and pleased, had Zuko smiling despite himself. If Katara was there, Zuko was sure she would be smiling proudly at him for giving both Jee and himself a chance.

“Thank you,” the admiral replied, “I look forward to it, my lord.”

A small smirk curled Zuko’s lips.

“If we wish to become closer as a family, you will have to call me by name, at least when not in public,” Zuko told him with a bit of humor in his voice.

Jee’s eyes widened before he smiled.

“You are right, my lor—uh, Zuko,” Jee corrected himself with a laugh. “That will take some time to get used to.”
Zuko chuckled. Talking much more lighthearted than before when their relationship had just been that of a lord and his subject, both men made their way to the palace to wash up before they met the others for dinner.

Off to the side, where they had been standing unnoticed for a while, Katara and Iroh watched them go with smiles on their faces.

“I’m glad to know Zuko is giving Jee a chance to be more than just his mother’s new husband,” the waterbender said happily.

Still smiling, Iroh slipped his hands inside his sleeves and gave a nod of his balding head.

“Although Zuko has me, he really needs a true father in his life to fill that empty spot in his heart that he tried to ignore for so long,” the wise old man stated softly.

Katara smiled before she frowned when she heard Iroh heaved a huge sigh.

“It saddens me to know Jee has replaced me,” he replied as he dramatically placed his hands over his chest.

The waterbender laughed softly as she wrapped her arms around her beloved uncle-in-law’s large middle.

“No one can replace you,” she assured him with a smile, “You’re still Zuko’s true father figure. Jee would just be another one. Besides, Zuko loves and cares for you more than anyone else.”

Iroh chuckled, causing them both to shake, and he patted her back warmly.

“No as much as he loves and cares for you,” he retorted as he grinned at her.

Katara let him go and flushed with pleasure at his words.
“I feel the same way about Zuko,” she replied with a smile before she teasingly added, “Though you
come a close second.”

“Your grandmother would have my head if she heard you say that,” the old man replied amusedly.

They laughed, causing the servants and guards stationed in the arena to glance at them with both
curious and affectionate smiles. Instead of exercising as they had planned, the Fire Lady and her
uncle-in-law returned to the palace for a game of Pai Sho before dinner.

Katara suppressed a soft yawn as she woke up. Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she sat up and
groaned. She felt a bit dizzy and tired. Maybe she should tell Zuko to limit their lovemaking for the
following night so she could catch up on some sleep—though both her mind and heart protested at
the thought. The waterbender stretched her arms over her head only to scramble out of the bed when
her stomach roiled.

Covering her mouth with her hand, she rushed to the bathroom and barely made it to the garderobe
in the corner before she threw up in the water closet. Once the sickness passed, she heaved and
panted as she placed her hand over her sweaty forehead. With a groan, she stood up shakily and
made her way to the bathtub to fill it with water to take a much needed bath. For the past few
mornings she had raced to the bathroom to vomit every time she woke up. Luckily, she had been
able to keep it from Zuko since she did not want to worry him and have people think she was
becoming ill from all her work.

Once she finished bathing and entered the bedroom to change into her clothes, Katara dismissed
what happened from her mind since she had many things to do that day. Jiao appeared a moment
later to help her get dressed. When the servant finally placed the Fire Lady fire crown on her head,
Katara admired her appearance in the full-length mirror with satisfaction before she made her way to
the doors. As she stepped into the antechamber, she paused when she saw that another servant was
preparing the table with food. Jiao went to help and the other maidservant bowed respectfully at the
waterbender.

“Fire Lord Zuko wishes to eat breakfast with you this morning,” Jiao explained softly as she gestured
at the table.

“Really?” Katara asked with a smile as she walked into the room.

Zuko and she had been very busy for the past few days, so they had not seen each other for most of
the day until they retired to their rooms late at night. The doors that led outside opened and Katara’s
smile widened when Zuko stepped in.
“Good morning, wife,” he greeted evenly since the servants were still in the room, though Katara could see the warmth in his eyes.

“Good morning, my lord,” the waterbender responded softly as she sat beside him on the low table.

Once Jiao and the other servant left them alone with knowing smiles on their faces, Zuko turned to Katara and kissed her deeply before pulling away to smirk at her. Katara grinned at him before they returned their attention to their meal. Zuko eagerly began to eat, but Katara looked at the food placed before her with a wary expression. She picked up her spoon, but the strong scent of the soup made her feel queasy and she leaned back, placing the back of her hand to her mouth to calm herself.

Zuko frowned as he saw Katara pale. He watched as she pushed her dishes away and only grabbed a piece of bread. He immediately stopped eating to look at her worriedly. He placed his hand on her shoulder and squeezed comfortingly.

“Are you feeling well?” he asked. His voice was deep with his concern. “They told me you’ve been eating only bread and tea for the past few mornings.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him with a smile as she reached up to squeeze his hand, “I’m just a little tired and stressed.”

Zuko’s frown deepened as he let go of her shoulder to caress her cheek.

“Maybe you should stay in our room today and rest,” he told her.

Katara shook her head vehemently and frowned.

“I can’t ignore my duties just because of a little fatigue,” she argued firmly.

The young Fire Lord could not help but smile at her proudly, though he still felt concerned that she might not be taking care of her health properly. He could see, however, that Katara was going to be stubborn and would not listen to him. Sighing, he returned to his meal with less enthusiasm. He would just have to ask his mother and Jiao to keep an eye on Katara for him.
Once they finished eating, they stood up and made their way to the door. They paused briefly to give each other a kiss before they stepped into the long corridor and headed their separate ways.

As the day progressed, Katara felt her tiredness increase, but she continued to ignore it as she went about on one of her charity projects. She planned on establishing a school for illiterate adults on one of the remote islands of the Fire Nation that consisted mostly of fishermen and their families. If everything went well, the school would be completed in a few months. Some of the councilmen had protested her idea, but she had managed to bring them to her side in the end. A few hours before dinner, Katara and Ursa were making their way to the garden for a break as Ursa recounted the outing to the river in the outskirts of the city Jee had taken her on the night before. Shen and Kuo were walking a few paces behind them to give them privacy.

“I’m really happy that you gave love another chance and gave Jee a chance, too,” Katara told her with a genuine smile.

A small, blissful smile appeared on the beautiful noblewoman’s face.

“I’ve never cared nor loved a man the way I do Jee,” she admitted softly, “Nor have I ever felt so happy...well except for when my children were born.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Katara replied with a smile.

Ursa smiled at her kindly.

“I want to thank you, Katara, for opening up my mind and putting Jee in my path since I never would have thought there was a possibility,” the Fire Lord’s mother said softly.

“I just want both of you to be happy,” the waterbender replied sincerely.

They were just arriving at the garden when they met Iroh. He smiled brightly at the women when he saw them and he hurried in their direction. They returned his smile as they waited for him to reach them. He was holding a small pouch in his right hand.

“What do you have there, Iroh dear?” Ursa asked with a smile as she eyed the pouch curiously.
“It’s a new blend of tea I’ve wanted to try to see if I should serve it at the Jasmine Dragon,” he replied in his cheerful voice.

He untied the strings and opened the top to show them the tea leaves. Smiling indulgently at her uncle-in-law, Katara leaned down to gaze into the pouch. The strong scent of the tea made her suddenly dizzy and she placed her hand to her temple with a groan. She shook her head when her vision became a little blurry.

“Katara dear, are you all right?” Ursa asked with a frown when she saw her stumble back.

Iroh looked up in time to see Katara sway before her eyes rolled back. Gasping in alarm, he dropped the pouch, causing a few tea leaves to spill onto the marble floor, and grabbed her before she fell.

“Katara!” Ursa shouted anxiously.

Crying out their lady’s name, Kuo and Shen rushed forward in panic. Kuo, being much younger, took the waterbender from Iroh’s hold and lifted her unresponsive body into his arms.

“Quickly, let’s take her to her room!” Iroh ordered the young guard before he turned to Shen and added urgently, “Go fetch Physician Toshiro.”

Face grim and furrowed in concern, Shen bowed his head before he quickly headed in search of the palace physician. Ursa fussed worriedly over her daughter-in-law as they headed swiftly toward the royal bedchambers. Iroh quickly opened both set of doors to allow Kuo to walk in with the still unconscious waterbender in his arms.

“Place her on the bed,” Ursa instructed the young guard.

Kuo did as directed and stepped back once the Fire Lady was safely placed on the bed. Iroh stepped forward to remove her fire crown from her hair while Ursa hurried to the bathroom to grab a damp towel. When she stepped back into the room, Ursa rushed toward Katara and began to gently press the towel on her face. They watched as a moment later the cool water revived the waterbender, eliciting sighs of relief from the trio.
Katara groaned quietly in pain as she tried to focus on her surroundings. When did she get to her room? When she finally spotted Ursa, Iroh, and Kuo gazing worriedly down at her, she frowned at them in confusion. What were they doing in her room?

“Katara, how are you feeling?” Iroh asked her in a soothing voice as he pressed the back of his hand to her forehead.

“I’m fine, just a little tired and queasy,” she responded as Iroh pulled his hand back with a satisfied nod.

Ursa and Iroh stared at her for a moment before they glanced at each other, hope shining in their golden eyes. Katara did not notice their silent communication as she again pressed her fingers to her temples. Kuo gave a respectful bow before he retreated to stand post outside.

“What happened?” Katara asked.

“You fainted, dear,” Ursa replied with a gentle smile.

Katara frowned at her words before her cheeks flushed in embarrassment. She wasn’t the type of woman prone to fainting spells. What was wrong with her? She tried to sit up, but Iroh gently pressed his hand to her shoulder to push her back down. She frowned at him.

“Just rest, my dear,” Iroh told her gently, “Physician Toshiro is on his way to check you.”

The waterbender tried to protest, claiming that she was fine, but they would have none of it and insisted she remain lying down. Katara crossed her arms over chest and sulked. The other two smiled at her pout before they were interrupted when Toshiro rushed in with his medicinal box. Once he stood beside the bed, he placed the box to the side and gazed at his lady in concern.

“I’m going to inform Zuko about what happened,” Iroh spoke up as he moved toward the door to give Katara and the doctor some privacy.

“Please, Uncle Iroh, don’t tell him and disturb his important meeting with the Earth Kingdom dignitaries,” Katara spoke up, “I’m sure it’s nothing serious. I don’t want to worry him over nothing.”
A small frown appeared on Iroh’s wrinkled brow as he turned to regard his niece-in-law.

“‘I’ll tell him after the meeting then,’” he consented before he added, “Zuko would like to know what happened. I will see you later and I hope you feel better soon, my dear.”

Before Katara could speak up, the retired general walked away and closed the door behind him. Katara returned her attention to the old physician when he cleared his throat. Once he had her attention, he gave her an encouraging smile.

“Now, my lady, I would like to ask you a few questions,” he began.

The waterbender nodded.

“Have you been feeling ill before today?” he asked.

“I’ve been feeling tired recently,” Katara responded reluctantly.

“Just tired? Nothing else?” he inquired as he checked her pulse.

“Well, I do start feeling dizzy all of the sudden,” she muttered before she added with a grimace, “And sometimes I wake up with the urge to vomit.”

Toshiro paused as he stared at her intently.

“I see,” he said as he rubbed his chin. He was silent a moment before he asked, “How long have you had these symptoms?”

Katara frowned as she tried to remember. There was something nagging at the back of her head, but she ignored it.

“A few days, I think,” she finally answered.
“Hmm,” the physician uttered. “Have you been eating well?”

Katara averted her eyes and fidgeted with her fingers.

“I’ve only had an appetite for tea and bread in the mornings,” she confessed quietly. “But my appetite returns to normal later in the day.”

Toshiro was silent a moment before he glanced back at Lady Ursa. The noblewoman’s eyes were shiny with wonder, her lips curved into a small smile, and she nodded at him when she caught his eye.

“I believe my wife would be of more help in this case,” the white-haired physician finally spoke up.

“What case?” Katara asked, but the old man was already opening the bedroom door to ask Kuo to fetch his wife.

“Why did you ask for your wife?” Katara asked curiously when Toshiro returned to her side.

The physician smiled kindly down at her and Katara found herself relaxing despite herself, especially when Ursa patted her hand with a serene smile on her porcelain face.

“I cannot examine you...uh...more thoroughly since you are the Fire Lady and it is improper,” Toshiro explained.

“Why not?” the waterbender asked with an irritated frown. Why was he being vague?

Toshiro cleared his throat before he continued.

“Do you remember when your last monthly cycle was?” he asked politely.

Katara frowned at the sudden question before she thought about it. She tried to remember if she
already had it this month, but she realized that she had not. She traced the days carefully. She gasped and her eyes widened. It was two months ago when she had her last monthly bleeding! A month after Yin-Min’s execution. How could she have not noticed? She frowned. All those months of disappointment had made her pessimistic. But could it be? Could she be…pregnant? After all this time? She could feel excitement swell within her before she ordered herself to calm down. She did not want to jump to conclusions and be disappointed in the end once again.

“It was two months ago,” she finally responded, her voice both hopeful and cautious.

Ursa and Toshiro smiled at each other, then at the blue-eyed Fire Lady.

“My wife can confirm our suspicions once she arrives,” the old physician said.

“Why do we need her?” Katara asked curiously.

“My wife is the royal midwife,” Toshiro explained proudly.

“Lady Yoon Hee helped me bring my children into this world,” Ursa spoke up with a fond smile.

They were interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Toshiro walked toward the door and opened it. He smiled and bade his wife to enter. Once he closed the door behind her, he bent toward her ear and spoke quietly to her. Yoon Hee’s small smile widened when her husband finished talking and pulled away. The grey-haired woman moved forward and bowed at the reclining waterbender who was looking at her expectantly.

“Good afternoon, my lady,” the old woman greeted. “My husband has just informed me about your possible condition. Would you allow me to examine you?” she asked kindly.

A faint blush appeared on Katara’s cheeks, but she gave a firm nod.

“Oh course,” the waterbender replied. She could not stop her heart from racing in anticipation, hope, and apprehension.

“Would you please wait outside?” Lady Yoon Hee asked the other two occupants in the room.
Ursa and Toshiro smiled and nodded as they headed toward the door. The old man closed the door behind them and Ursa went to sit on a cushion beside the low table in the antechamber. She pressed her hands together as they waited for their suspicions to be confirmed or refuted. Oh, she hoped they had happy news. Her son and Katara would be so happy and their life would be so much easier without having to hear the council’s complaints about the lack of an heir. The advisors had started grumbling about the need for an heir when Advisor Wei brought up the issue once again.

*I can’t wait to hold my first grandchild in my arms,* she thought with a wistful smile.

Ursa was brought out of her thoughts a few minutes later when the door opened and Yoon Hee bade them enter with a smile. As they stepped into the room, Ursa rushed toward her daughter-in-law to grasp her hand and look inquiringly down at her. Katara shrugged and smiled at her before she returned her gaze expectantly to Lady Yoon Hee.

“So would you tell me now what you found out?” Katara asked anxiously and she grasped more tightly onto her mother-in-law’s hand.

A wide, happy smile spread on the old woman’s thin lips.

“Congratulations, my lady, you are pregnant,” she said delightedly.

Katara’s eyes widened impossibly large and her heart skipped a beat at those words. Words she had despaired of never hearing. She stared intensely at the old woman, trying to see if she was joking, but Lady Yoon Hee continued to smile happily at her. The Fire Lady’s eyes began to fill with happy and relieved tears.

“I’m…pregnant? Truly?” Katara asked breathlessly.

Yoon Hee nodded and her smile turned kind and understanding.

“Yes, and by my estimation, you are two months along,” the old woman continued.

Katara’s head fell back onto her pillow, her tears finally falling, as she silently thanked the gods. After all this time, after all the disappointment and pain, she was finally pregnant. She was going to
be a mother. She was going to give her beloved husband a child. She closed her eyes, a few more tears trickling down her cheeks, and she sniffled and laughed joyfully as she wiped at her cheeks.

*I’m pregnant!* she mentally chanted, still astounded at the news. *Thank La!*

“Congratulations, my dear!” Ursa exclaimed happily as she bent down to embrace her still stunned daughter-in-law.

Katara laughed softly as she returned Ursa’s hug, her mind racing with thoughts of her pregnancy and upcoming motherhood. Ursa pulled away when Toshiro cleared his throat. He smiled when they turned to look at him.

“Fire Lord Zuko will be ecstatic at the news once we tell him” he said.

“I’d like to be the one to give him the happy news,” Katara spoke up quickly with a smile.

The other three returned her smile and readily agreed to keep the secret until the royal couple decided otherwise.

“Thank you,” the waterbender said sincerely.

“It has been a long while since there has been a royal birth,” Lady Yoon Hee mused with a small laugh, “The Fire Nation will be overjoyed to know you and the Fire Lord will finally have an heir.”

They spent the next hour with Lady Yoon Hee telling Katara what was expected of her during the next few months and what to expect before her baby was born. Katara could not stop smiling as she listened attentively to the old woman.

“If you have any questions or concerns do not hesitate to seek me out,” Yoon Hee added gently.

“I can also provide answers and advice when you need them,” Ursa spoke up as she smiled at Katara.
“Thank you,” the waterbender replied, smiling at them all.

Katara raised an eyebrow when she saw a mischievous smile spread on Lady Yoon Hee’s lips.

“Before you and your husband ask, yes, you can still be intimate until you come closer to the date of the birth,” the midwife said with a grin.

The small woman turned to smile knowingly at her husband, who actually blushed, but was quick to cover it with an amused chuckle. Ursa placed her hand to her mouth to hide her smile.

Katara’s cheeks flushed with color, but she smiled inwardly since she knew that would be one of Zuko’s concerns. Oh, but she could not wait to give Zuko the news! How would he react?

“Well, we’ll leave you to your rest, my lady,” Toshiro said with a smile.

“Please don’t exert yourself too much,” Yoon Hee added with a bit more seriousness in her tone, “The first few months are crucial to the baby’s wellbeing.”

“I will be careful,” Katara promised firmly, her eyes blazing in determination and protectiveness.

“I will see you tomorrow morning, my dear,” Ursa said softly as she patted Katara’s hand before she added with a small laugh, “I can’t wait to see Zuko’s reaction when I see him.”

Katara smiled. They bid her a good night before they left, closing the door quietly behind them. Once the room was completely silent, a large, joyful smile lit up Katara’s features.

A mother! In just a few months, I’m going to be a mother! she exclaimed blissfully.

Smiling in wonder, Katara glanced down her body and placed her hands on her still flat stomach. She barely knew of the new life within her and already her heart swelled with happiness, protectiveness, and love.

“Hello there, baby,” she cooed softly, “It’s your mama. You have no idea how much we’ve waited for you. I can’t wait to see you.”
She was so happy. After so many months of disappointments and crushed hopes, she did not know how to handle such intense joy. She ran her hands over her stomach a few more times before she sat up. Carefully, she stood up, and when she was sure she wasn’t going to fall back on the bed with dizziness, she made her way to the balcony. She pushed the curtains aside and opened the doors. Sighing contentedly as a sweet-smelling breeze swept past her, Katara stepped onto the balcony and allowed the warm sun to bathe her skin.

She once again wondered how Zuko would react to the news that he was going to be a father. She could not wait to tell him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After leaving the throne room, Zuko made his way to his study with a deep frown on his face. The Earth Kingdom ambassadors had brought news that a couple of villages had been destroyed by the rebels, but they had not had any luck catching them. Knowing it was partially his fault, Zuko had promised to send those villages aid. The ambassadors had been pleased and grateful for his generosity. After all these years, they were coming to respect and admire the young Fire Lord.

Cursing mentally, Zuko wondered what Jianguo could be planning next. What was his aim in attacking those Earth Kingdom villages? Was Jianguo trying to make the Earth Kingdom turn against the Fire Nation after these few years of shaky peace?

*Damn him*, he growled.

He could not let Jianguo destroy all Zuko had worked for to regain his nation’s honor and to gain peace with the other nations. He could not let Jianguo’s plan bring any harm to Katara and their family. But the bastard was being careful in keeping himself well hidden and Zuko’s men had not had any luck finding him and the other rebels.

*I should have killed him when I had the chance, damn it!* he cursed for the millionth time as he opened his study’s door and walked in.

He was brought out of his thoughts when he noticed his uncle sitting on one of the chairs before his large desk. Masking his frustrated expression into an impassive one, Zuko closed the door and walked further into the room.

“Is there something you need, Uncle?” the young lord asked tersely.
Iroh stood up from his seat and walked toward his nephew with a small smile on his face.

“Now, Nephew, don’t be alarmed with what I’m about to tell you,” the old man began.

The Fire Lord stopped before his uncle and frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Zuko asked.

“Katara…”

Iroh was unable to continue for Zuko had grabbed him tightly by his upper arms and loomed over him.

“What’s wrong with her?” Zuko asked in alarm.

“Calm yourself, Nephew,” Iroh said calmly as he pushed Zuko’s hands away. “If my suspicions are correct, she is more than fine.”

“Stop with your cryptic words, Uncle!” Zuko growled out, “Tell me what’s wrong with Katara!”

“Katara was carried to your room after fainting in the corridor…” Iroh began.

Zuko did not wait to hear what else his uncle had to say as he raced toward the door and wrenched it open. The door bounced against the wall, but Zuko did not care as he ran down the hall toward the western wing of the palace. His heart was pounding hard in his chest as fear spread through his body. What was wrong with Katara? Was she terribly ill? Was she hurt? Katara was strong and healthy. She wasn’t the kind of woman who fainted at the smallest provocation. So that meant it must be something serious. No! He could not lose her! There must be an explanation.

*Please be okay, Katara,* he pleaded mentally as he rounded the corner to the royal wing.

He neared his rooms and saw that Shen and Kuo were stationed outside. They looked at him worriedly and his fear spiked. Shen quickly opened one of the golden doors for him. Zuko gave him
a nod of thanks, but did not say a word to them as he quickly stepped into the anteroom. He was just approaching the other set of doors when he saw his mother, Physician Toshiro, and Lady Yoon Hee leaving the bedchamber. He wondered why Lady Yoon Hee was there as well.

“What’s wrong with my wife?” he asked desperately as he looked at each of their faces to see if he could figure out how serious the situation was.

“There is nothing for you to worry about, my lord,” Toshiro spoke up in a calm tone, a small smile on his lips. “Fire Lady Katara is fine.”

Zuko immediately felt his relief and his tensed shoulders relaxed. He let out a long breath and ran his hand over his pulled-back hair. Before he could ask any more questions, his mother stepped forward and patted his cheek. He wondered at the twinkle in her golden eyes and the happy smile on her lips.

“Go to your wife, my son,” Ursa told him gently, “She needs to tell you something.”

Zuko gave her a nod even though he eyed her curiously. They stepped aside to let him through and Zuko quickly entered his room and closed the door behind him. He immediately looked toward the bed, but frowned when he saw it was empty. He scanned the room, but Katara was nowhere in sight. He was about to make his way to the bathing chamber to see if she was there, when he noticed that the balcony doors were opened. He walked toward them and immediately relaxed when he saw her standing on the balcony with the coming twilight as the background. He stared silently at her back for a moment, admiring the feminine curves of her frame, before he swiftly made his way to her.

“Katara,” he called her name softly so as not to startle her.

He watched as she turned around to face him. His eyes widened and he was rendered speechless at the beatific smile on her lovely features. The setting sun behind her caused her chestnut-colored hair to turn reddish-gold.

“Zuko,” she said softly.

He mentally shook himself from his stupor as he walked closer to her.

“Are you all right?” he asked worriedly. “I heard you fainted.”
“I’m fine,” she assured him.

Zuko relaxed slightly, though he was still curious as to why she had fainted. He watched as she took a deep breath and placed her hands on her stomach.

“Zuko...I’m pregnant,” she breathed softly with a gentle smile, “I’m going to have your child.”

Zuko’s breath caught in his throat at her words, at the love and happiness he could perfectly see in her warm, blue eyes. Stunned, he stared at her for a moment as he processed the news. She was...pregnant? After all this time, their prayers were finally answered? His shock made way to a tentative joy. A wide, elated smile appeared on his lips.

“You’re pregnant?” he asked slowly as he continued to stare intensely at her. “I’m…going to be a father?” he breathed, mystified.

Katara nodded and her smile widened.

“Yes,” she responded softly.

At that simple word, Zuko’s chest tightened as a different kind of warmth spread through him, one of happiness and wonder. In a few, quick strides he was in front of her, cupping her face gently as he stared in fascination into her eyes. When Katara’s smile turned soft and tender, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closely to his body. Katara laughed quietly, joyfully, as she returned his embrace just as fiercely. His reaction had not only pleased her, but it had also made the small fear she had harbored at his possible displeasure to disappear.

“Oh, Katara,” he sighed against her head.

Zuko pulled away slightly so he could gaze down into her eyes. Her azure eyes were shining with happiness and he felt his heart constrict with his powerful feelings for this woman. He reached his hands up to gently cup her face once again before he bent down to tenderly kiss her soft lips. They sighed against each other’s mouths before Zuko leaned back to smile at her. He wrapped her in his arms and held her tightly against him. Katara smiled as she rested her cheek against his chest, the sound of his heartbeat soothing to her ear.
They spent a few minutes of silence, wrapped in each other’s arms, to bask in the joyous news—a situation they had despaired of never coming true months ago. Zuko took a moment to reflect how happy he was at the news—not because the Royal Council would finally stop bothering him and Katara, but because he had made his waterbender happy, because he would also have someone else to love and protect. Pressing his lips against her hair, Zuko again leaned back to look at her face. Katara watched as a concerned frown marred his features.

“But you are truly all right?” he asked worriedly as he caressed her cheek, “How is the baby? How far along are you? Do you need anything?”

Katara laughed softly and she patted his hand.

“I’m fine, the baby is fine, I’m about two months pregnant, and at the moment I don’t need anything,” Katara responded to his rapid questions.

“I’m glad,” the firebender said with a smile before he added, “If you need anything, please let me know. I wish to help you as much as I can...even though I have no clue what to expect with a pregnancy.”

The waterbender laughed before she threw her arms around his neck and rose on her toes to kiss him deeply.

“Thank you, love,” she said as she pressed more kisses to his mouth.

Zuko smiled against her lips as he brought her body closer to his. He had no idea of what help he could be, but he was determined to be there for Katara and their child during this time. Their mouths opened simultaneously and they sighed when their tongues immediately twirled and caressed each other in a gentle dance. They pulled away and Zuko pressed her back to his chest.

“Didn’t I tell you I would give you a child to hold in your arms one of these days?” he reminded her softly.

“Yes,” Katara replied happily as she snuggled into him.

“Let’s go inside,” Zuko told her when a chilly breeze swept past them. “I want to hear what else Lady Yoon Hee said.”
Katara gave him a nod and a smile, and with his arm wrapped around her, they walked back inside to their warm room. A soft knock at the door caught their attention and they glanced at the large doors.

“I’ll go see who it is,” Zuko said as he let go of her.

He walked toward the door and opened one to reveal a smiling Jiao and another servant carrying trays with a teapot, cups, and plates with food. She bowed her head.

“Lady Ursa asked me to bring some food to my lady,” the maidservant said when the Fire Lord inquired of her presence.

“Thank you, Jiao,” Katara said with a smile. Now that she thought about it, she was very hungry after only eating bread and tea for breakfast and lunch.

“Please place the things on the table,” Zuko ordered as he indicated the table resting between their two reading chairs.

The two servants quickly arranged the things on the small tea table, and once they were done, they bowed once again at the royal couple before retreating to the doors. Before she closed the door behind her, Jiao turned to smile at them.

“Congratulations on the wonderful news, my lady, my lord,” she said sincerely.

She bowed her head when they smiled and thanked her before she closed the door softly behind her.

Katara made her way to the table and quickly sat down on her chair as she eagerly looked at the food before her. Zuko chuckled when she immediately dug in without even waiting for him to finish sitting down. As they ate, Katara told him everything Lady Yoon Hee had told her to expect of her pregnancy, plus things she had observed while Suki had been pregnant. Zuko would smile at some of the things and frown over others. Pregnancy was starting to sound even scarier than he had thought.

When Katara yawned a few minutes later, Zuko smiled at her as he stood up from his seat.
“Why don’t we go lie down?” he asked as he held his hand out for her.

Katara returned the smile and placed her hand in his, allowing him to help her up. She had not wanted to tell him she was tired, but he had noticed anyway. They washed up and changed into their sleeping attire before they lay on their large bed, still basking in the wonder of such wonderful news.

Katara sighed softly as Zuko ran his right hand gently up and down her arm. She felt his other hand caress down her body until it reached her midsection. She opened her eyes and held her breath when he placed the palm of his hand over her flat belly, where their babe rested. The action caused her heart to burst with intense emotions. She smiled as she reached down to cover his hand with her own. She looked up at him and saw that he was staring at her with a warm and awed expression.

“I never thought you could become more precious to me, Katara,” Zuko breathed tenderly, “but you have. More than you can know.”

Katara’s eyes softened at his soft words and she smiled lovingly at him. She knew what he was telling her without him having to explain. She was giving him a family, a loving home, something he had never experienced and thought he would never have or deserve. She raised her hand to caress his scarred cheek before she lifted herself slightly so she could press her lips to his in a soft, gentle kiss. Zuko cupped the back of her head and returned her soft kiss, safe in the knowledge that she understood him.

They pulled away and stared silently, yet intensely, at each other. Katara watched as a pensive expression came upon Zuko’s features and she wondered what he was thinking.

“I just thought of something interesting,” he finally spoke up.

“Oh?” she uttered curiously as she languidly caressed his muscular chest.

“You said you’re about two months pregnant, right?” he asked.

When she nodded, a smug smirk curled the firebender’s lips.

“Then I must’ve gotten you pregnant that night we made love after you stopped drinking Yin-Min’s
herb tea, a month after her execution,” he told her assuredly, the smug smirk still sitting on his lips, “My seed must be that powerful and your womb that fertile for it to have taken root so quickly.”

The waterbender’s eyes widened at his observation before she smiled blissfully.

“You’re probably right,” she agreed and then teasingly said, “Which would just add more to your inflated ego, huh?”

Zuko chuckled at her words as he playfully tickled her side, causing her to let out a loud giggle. Katara squealed laughingly and squirmed beneath his ticklish touch as he increased his playful torture until her sides ached and tears rolled down her cheeks. Panting, she opened her eyes and looked at him when his fingers stopped. His sudden serious expression made her pause.

“Zuko? What’s wrong?” she asked quietly, worriedly.

“If that…woman hadn’t intervened in her ludicrous plot,” Zuko growled in a hard tone, “we would already be holding our first child.”

The hatred and sadness she felt by Yin-Min’s betrayal once again consumed Katara for a moment before she forcefully shoved the ugly feelings away. Yin-Min was dead and she could not hurt them anymore. Besides, Katara refused to dwell on painful past events and wanted instead to focus on a happy future with her husband and their child. With a soft sigh, Katara reached out a hand to smooth Zuko’s dark hair out of his brooding, golden eyes.

“There’s no point in thinking about that,” she told him softly, “What matters now is that we’ll welcome our first baby into the world in a few months.”

Zuko was silent a moment before he let out a deep sigh as he placed his hand over hers and pressed it to his cheek.

“You’re right, love,” he agreed with a smile.

The waterbender returned his smile, but a soft yawn escaped her before she could stop it. Zuko smiled at her affectionately.
“Let’s sleep,” he murmured.

Nodding, Katara pressed a soft kiss on his lips which he returned with equal tenderness. Smiling, Katara rolled to her side so her back was pressed against him. Zuko sighed contentedly and he wrapped his arms around her. He spooned her smooth back and tucked his thighs underneath her bottom as he got lost in his thoughts about future events. A moment later, Zuko heard Katara’s soft breathing, indicating she had succumb to her exhaustion. He smiled as he brought her body closer to his. He held her gently as he continued to softly, reverently, stroke her stomach housing his first child.

Before, he used to wonder how he would react when he finally learned he was to become a father. Now he could see why Sokka had looked so ecstatic when he learned Suki was pregnant. It was an amazing thing. Zuko could not explain the immense joy, pride, and satisfaction he was feeling at the moment.

A thought suddenly sprang in his head and his hand froze over Katara’s belly. He frowned when his joy was suddenly replaced by fear and apprehension. He did not know anything about being a father nor how to take care of a child. What if he was a horrible father? What if he made a mistake?

He vehemently shook his head and he brought Katara closer to him, his hand pressing protectively against her flat stomach. His wife murmured softly in her sleep before she pressed herself closer to him. Zuko gently stroked her skin and she let out a soft sigh.

Katara would help him. He was not alone. He would strive to make his growing family happy.

His family.

The thought once again brought warmth to his heart and he sighed as he nuzzled against Katara’s hair.

“I will make both of you happy. I promise,” he vowed silently into the night as he allowed sleep to finally claim him, safe in the knowledge that everything was going well.
The energy of the dawning sun slowly woke up the Fire Lord from his restful slumber. Zuko sighed softly as sleep began to leave him and he smiled as he pressed his body closer to Katara, nuzzling his face against her hair and breathing in her sweet scent, as he did every time he woke up. His hand was leisurely caressing her side when memories of the night before began to surface in his mind. His eyes flew open as he remembered the wondrous news that Katara had given him.

She was going to give him a child!

He was going to be a father.

Zuko tightened his hold on his wife and he looked down at her sleeping face with a small smile curling his lips. They had moved during the night and they were now lying on their sides facing each other with Katara’s hands curled against her chest between their bodies. Zuko continued to gaze at her face, taking in the sight of her fluttering eyelashes and her slightly parted lips, and he thanked the gods for giving her to him. So much kindness, strength, beauty, and passion in one woman and she had assented to be his. He lifted his arm from around her waist and he reached up to gently tuck her hair behind her ear before he softly caressed her cheek. Katara sighed and murmured in her sleep and she nuzzled against his hand. Zuko smiled at her endearing actions before he brought his hand down to rest it on her belly.

Nestled safely in his wife’s womb was a child they had created together. He still couldn’t believe it. After all this time, they were finally going to be parents. In just a few months, they would be welcoming their first child. He ignored the dark voice that whispered in his mind, wondering whether he could be a good father, and instead focused on happier thoughts.

As he continued to watch Katara, he promised himself that he would not let any harm come to her or their child for as long as he lived. They had gone through much pain and sadness this past year, but they came out stronger through all of it, their love was stronger. And now that love and strength would be transmitted to their child.

Zuko watched as a moment later Katara gave a soft sigh before she sleepily fluttered her eyes open. Once she was coherent, she stilled when she realized he was awake. They gazed silently and warmly into each other’s eyes as their thoughts returned to the events of the previous night. Katara could see the subtle happiness and satisfaction in her husband’s amber eyes and her heart thumped elatedly in her chest. Gazing into her ocean-blue eyes, Zuko saw the same happiness within hers and he smiled.

“You look so happy,” he said quietly.
“I am,” she replied softly.

“So am I,” he told her sincerely.

Zuko watched as a serene smile curled the sides of his wife’s full lips, those lips he loved to kiss, lips he loved to feel when they caressed his skin. At the thought, Zuko bent his head down and pressed his lips against hers, kissing her softly, un hurriedly. Katara sighed against his mouth and she raised her hand to cup his scarred cheek. Her soft, loving touch on his damaged skin only intensified Zuko’s emotions. With a husky groan, the firebender moved over her and deepened their kiss, pushing his tongue swiftly between her lips to caress every inch of her mouth as his morning erection throbbed with need.

Agni, he wanted her. He pressed closer to her when a thought crossed his mind that made him pause. Could he still make love to Katara? What if he ended up hurting their child and Katara with his amorous actions? He hated when he had to wait to make love to her, but he would bear the sacrifice determinedly in order to not cause either any damage.

Sensing his restlessness, Katara pulled back to stare wonderingly into his face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked softly.

“Would making love hurt our child?” he asked tentatively, a small frown on his brow.

The waterbender smiled at his concern and she reached up a hand to smooth his frown.

“Our baby is strong,” she assured him. “It’s fine.”

“Are you sure you can take all of me in?” he asked, still unsure. “Are you sure I won’t hurt either of you?”

“I’m not some weakling, Zuko,” Katara replied with a bit of exasperation before she added more gently, “Lovemaking isn’t going to cause any harm, to either the baby or me. As long as we’re careful.”
Staring into her warm eyes, Zuko smiled in relief before he bent his head down to press his mouth to her awaiting lips. They moaned softly as they pressed their bodies closer together, their hands gently caressing each other’s skin.

Suddenly, Katara was pushing against his chest with all her strength. Startled, Zuko moved away in time for her to scramble from the bed. He stared after her in bewilderment as she ran to the bathing room. Did he do something wrong? Did he perhaps harm her despite what she had said? The sound of her retching reached his ears and he quickly jumped from the bed in alarm.

“Katara?” he called out in concern as he raced toward the bathroom.

He froze at the sight of her heaving above the bowl of the water closet before she slumped onto the marble floor, panting and moaning. She looked completely miserable and his heart constricted in his chest. She was only wearing a thin nightdress and he was sure lying on the cold marble floor was not good for her or the baby. Snapping out of his stupor, Zuko quickly gathered a washcloth and dipped it into the washbasin before he strode toward his wife. He gathered her trembling body onto the warmth of his lap and wiped her sweaty brow and mouth with the damp towel. Katara moaned and sighed as she curled into him.

“Are you all right?” he asked worriedly as he brushed her damp hair aside.

“I’m okay,” she assured weakly as she pressed her hand to her roiling stomach, “Many pregnant women have the same symptom.”

“How long does it last?” he asked curiously and in concern.

“It depends,” she replied as she summoned a bit of water from the washbasin.

Zuko waited as she washed her mouth out before throwing the dirty water into the garderobe bowl.

“It depends on what?” he inquired as he tightened his hold of her.

“On the woman, I guess,” Katara explained, “Some women don’t feel the sickness at all. Others only have it for the first few months, while others continue to have it throughout their whole pregnancy.”
“I hope you aren’t the latter,” he murmured.

“I do, too,” Katara responded with a feeble laugh.

“Was today the first day you felt this sickness?” he asked.

He raised an eyebrow when Katara averted her eyes and fidgeted with her fingers.

“Katara?” he pressed as he tilted her chin up.

“Um…I’ve been dealing with this for the past week,” she muttered quietly.

A frown appeared on Zuko’s brow and his chest constricted at the thought that his wife had been dealing with this alone.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked her.

“I didn’t want to worry you when I thought it was nothing but a stomach bug,” she confessed with a small shrug.

Zuko’s frown deepened before he sighed. He passed the moist towel over her face one more time before he slowly stood up, lifting her carefully into his arms. He carried her out of the bathroom and to their bed where he gently placed her. Katara looked up to see him giving her a stern look.

“You will rest for the remainder of the day,” he told her firmly.

“What?” she exclaimed as she sat up on the bed to give him a small glare. “I’m perfectly fine!”

“You’ve been too busy lately,” Zuko told her as he frowned down at her, “You need to rest.”
“I told you that I’m fine!” Katara protested heatedly, “I don’t need to remain in bed.”

“I want you to take a day off,” he continued sternly.

When she continued to glare at him, Zuko’s expression softened and he sighed.

“Please, Katara, do it for your sake as well as for mine and our child’s.”

Katara’s irritation melted away and she felt warmth spread through her chest at his concern. This was just as new to him as it was to her and she could understand his anxiety for her safety and health.

“All right,” she consented with a sigh as she laid back down, “I’ll take the day off to catch up on some sleep.”

The relieved and pleased smile her husband gave her was worth it. Katara watched silently as Zuko walked to their large wardrobe. She admired his powerful, semi-naked body without any reservation, and when Zuko caught her looking, she grinned at him. She heard Zuko chuckle as he searched through her clothes. He pulled out a comfortable nightdress and walked back to their bed. He helped change her into the soft clothing before tucking the comforter up to her waist. She loved Zuko’s fierce and passionate side as well as his softer side—especially since he only showed it to her.

“Are you hungry?” he asked as he sat down beside her.

Katara grimaced when the thought of food made her stomach churn in protest.

“I think I’ll just eat some bread and tea for now,” she said.

The young lord frowned.

“That doesn’t sound sufficient enough for a pregnant woman,” he told her.

“For now that’s all I can handle,” she explained before she teasingly added, “But I’m pretty sure that further along my pregnancy, I’ll eat more than even Sokka does in one sitting. You’ll be disgusted by
that as well as by the sight of me getting as big as a cow-pig.”

Zuko chuckled at her pout and he leaned down to kiss her lips before pulling away.

“You’ll still be beautiful,” he assured her.

Katara smiled at him.

“I really am lucky I’m married to a man with such a silver tongue,” she teased.

“Yes, I know how much my tongue _pleases_ you,” he retorted with a smirk.

“Insatiable,” Katara said with a laugh.

Another chuckle escaped the Fire Lord before he bent down to kiss her with all the love and happiness he felt in his heart. They pulled apart to gaze affectionately at each other. Zuko tucked a strand of her chocolate hair behind her ear before returning his gaze back to her blue eyes.

“I’m going to see that our breakfast is brought to the anteroom before I have to meet up with the ambassadors again,” he said with a small, apologetic smile.

“I understand,” Katara assured him.

“We’ll announce our happy news to the council tomorrow,” he told her. Then with a smug smile, he added, “I can’t wait to see their reactions as well as the great disappointment of the noblemen. I hope it gets them to stop pushing their daughters and sisters at me.”

Katara laughed at his eager expression since she was also excited to see the how the catty noblewomen would react at the news that they would now be unable to become Zuko’s royal concubine because his wife was going to bear him his heir in a few months.

“You sure sound happy,” she said amusedly.
Zuko’s grin turned into a genuine smile as he stared down at her. He grabbed her hand and lifted it to his lips to caress her knuckles before he brought it down and stared at her intensely.

“I am and I wish for the whole world to know that my beloved wife will bear me a child,” he said sincerely.

The waterbender smiled happily at him and she squeezed his hand. Zuko leaned down toward her and Katara lifted her head to meet his lips. They kissed a few more times before Zuko pulled away with a sigh. After getting dressed in comfortable trousers and a tunic, Zuko went in search of his personal guards or a servant to tell them to bring them their breakfast.

Once her husband left, Katara thought she should write a letter to her family to give them the happy news before they found out from someone else. Pulling the blankets aside, Katara got off the bed, and when she felt sure she wasn’t going to get dizzy, she made her way to the small writing desk they shared placed in one corner of the room.

Well, Gran-Gran, you will be happy to know that I will be giving you another great-grandchild to love, she mused as she remembered her grandmother’s words from not so long ago.

Her smile did not disappear as she composed her letter, thinking only of the happy news she would impart to her beloved family.

The following day Katara and Zuko regally entered the throne room where the advisors were expectantly waiting for them. The royal couple had enjoyed a lively meal with their family that morning. Iroh, Ursa, and Jee had continued to exclaim their happiness with the upcoming birth of their first child, though Iroh proclaimed that he had always believed they would be expecting an heir sooner rather than later.

As the Fire Lord and Fire Lady walked toward the dais, the advisors murmured quietly amongst themselves as they wondered at the reason for the sudden meeting. Instead of helping his wife sit on her grand cushion before he took his place on the throne, Zuko pulled Katara to his side so they both stood before the curious men. Only when the men began to fidget at the continuing suspense and silence did Zuko speak.

“I have called you all to this meeting to personally give you the good news,” the young Fire Lord began in a steady tone.
The men murmured their curiosity as they shifted their gazes between the royal couple. Sitting silently amongst his fellow advisors, Chao smiled delightedly since Iroh had already told him the news.

“What is the good news you would like to tell us, my lord?” Enlai, another of Zuko’s trusted advisors, spoke up.

Before Zuko could continue he was interrupted by Wei’s chuckles.

“Did you finally relent to take a royal concubine to bear you an heir?” the old advisor said with a suggestive leer.

Glaring angrily at the irritating man, Katara elegantly lifted her hand. She watched with satisfaction when the old man’s eyes widened in sudden fear and wariness and she knew he remembered the last time she had demonstrated her powers in the room. Amusedly, she slowly rested her hand on her husband’s tensed arm as if that had been her intention all along. Looking away from Wei, she glanced up at Zuko to see he was glaring hatefully at the old advisor. His jaw was clenched and his nostrils flared slightly with his annoyance.

“I have already made it perfectly clear that I will not dishonor my wife in such a way,” Zuko reminded them in a cold tone before he added more calmly, “Besides, I will not need a royal concubine now or ever.”

“What do you mean by that, my lord?” another advisor spoke up.

The men watched them with both curious and apprehensive expressions. They watched as a sudden smile appeared on their usually reticent lord’s face as he brought his wife closer to him and smiled down at her.

“Lady Yoon Hee has confirmed that my wife is currently carrying my heir,” he informed them.

Katara smiled at the happiness and pride in both his voice and eyes.

The advisors immediately began to exclaim their delight and relief and sincerely congratulated the
“We must announce the upcoming birth of the heir to the entire nation as soon as possible,” Chao spoke up enthusiastically.

As the men continued to express their relief, Zuko watched as Wei sat back and shrugged his shoulders indifferently. Zuko ignored the man as he focused his attention back to the other men as they started asking Katara how far along she was and when did she find out.

“Now that my wife will bear my heir soon,” Zuko interrupted them in a firm tone, “there is no need for a royal concubine. You will retract your decree about me needing one so the noblemen and their female relatives can finally stop bothering my wife and me.”

The men quickly agreed as they continued to exclaim that the Fire Nation throne was once again secure with the impending arrival of the next heir. Zuko again interrupted them to say he and Katara would be taking their leave. The advisors bowed to them respectfully and continued to congratulate them. Zuko quickly led Katara toward the doors, and once they were walking several corridors away from the throne room, the waterbender laughed.

“Well, that went well,” she said amusedly, “They were so happy they acted as if they were the ones who were going to be fathers.”

Zuko chuckled before he smiled down at her.

“True, though none are as happy as me,” he said.

Katara smiled warmly at him and she tightened her hold of his arm. Zuko stopped them and they stared intensely into each other’s eyes as they seem to usually do, studying each other’s emotions and thoughts without words being spoken between them. They did not know how long they were lost in each other’s gazes until they were interrupted by the sound of Jiao politely clearing her throat. They looked away from each other and turned toward the maidservant. Katara was smiling sheepishly and Zuko was again sporting his blank mask.

“What is it, Jiao?” Zuko asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Avatar Aang’s sky-bison has been spotted and will be landing soon, my lord,” she informed them.
“Aang and Toph are here?” Katara asked excitedly. “I can’t wait to tell them our news.”

“Then we should go greet them,” Zuko said with a smile.

They made their way to the courtyard and arrived just in time to see Aang and Toph finish climbing the long flight of stairs. Chirping happily, Momo trailed behind them. The airbender had his arm wrapped around Toph’s slender shoulder and was whispering in her ear. He laughed when Toph playfully punched his chest. Katara and Zuko glanced at each other and wondered at the blush on the usually unruffled earthbender’s cheeks. Sensing their audience, Toph’s eyes widened and she shoved Aang away from her, which only caused the airbender to chuckle more loudly.

“Toph! Aang!” Katara called out their names animatedly.

Before Zuko could stop her, she raced toward the younger couple.

“Katara!” Zuko exclaimed in alarm as he rushed after her, afraid she would hurt herself in her condition.

He quickly caught up to her and pulled her back tightly to him. Katara squealed in surprise and Aang and Toph gaped in shock as they quickly approached the struggling couple.

“What is your problem, Zuko?!” Katara growled as she squirmed in his grasp.

“You should be more careful!” Zuko admonished as he turned her around to look at her sternly.

Katara let out a soft snort and she placed her hands on her hips.

“A little running isn’t going to do any damage,” she groused.

Zuko frowned, but before he could retort Aang interrupted them.
“What’s wrong?” the airbender asked worriedly as he glanced between the royal couple. Momo chirp as he landed on his shoulder.

His eyebrows rose on his forehead when Katara blushed deeply and Zuko smiled smugly. The three of them turned to regard Toph curiously when she started chuckling.

“You finally knocked up Sugar Queen!” Toph said with a grin. “It’s about time. Nice going, Lord Hotman!” she exclaimed as she impishly punched Zuko’s arm.

Zuko smirked as he wrapped his arm around Katara’s waist and brought her close to his side while Katara’s blush deepened.

“I was going to impart the news more delicately than that,” the waterbender replied dryly.

The other three chuckled at her disgruntlement.

“Congratulations,” Aang spoke up sincerely as he smiled at them both. “I know how long you’ve been waiting and hoping for this.”

“Thanks, Aang,” they replied happily.

“Yeah, congrats,” Toph piped in with a grin, “Enjoy your last months of freedom.”

“Geez, thanks, Toph,” Katara responded wryly.

Toph only grinned more widely. The earthbender lifted an eyebrow when she felt her boyfriend wrap his arm around her shoulders once again and lean closer to her.

“We can’t let Zuko and Katara outdo us, Toph,” Aang said both teasingly and suggestively.

“Shut it, Twinkletoes, before I crush something of yours that will guarantee you won’t have kids!”
Toph growled.

“But, Toph, you’ve told me many times before that you loved that part of me,” Aang said innocently, though his gray eyes were twinkling mischievously.

“Aang!” Toph shouted as she punched his arm in embarrassment. Ever since they started having sex, Aang had turned naughty. He really was a perverted monk. Not that she was complaining, Toph mused with a mental grin.

Zuko chuckled in amusement as Aang laughed and brought a scowling Toph closer to him.

“I don’t even want to know,” Katara said as she laughed and shook her head.

“Why don’t we sit on the veranda and have some refreshments?” Zuko spoke up when he noticed Toph aim a mischievous smirk at Katara.

“That sounds great!” Aang said excitedly.

He grabbed Toph’s hand and started following the royal couple. Toph grumbled under her breath, but allowed Aang to keep holding her hand. A few minutes later, the two couples were sitting on the spacious veranda, partaking in tea and a late lunch. Momo ate a few pieces of fruit before he flew toward the garden to explore. Aang and Toph recounted their adventures in the Earth Kingdom, occasionally making the royal couple laugh. During a more serious discussion, Aang told Zuko that they had not luck spotting Jianguo and the rebels, much to the Fire Lord’s disappointment. A while later, Zuko and Katara told them about the events of palace life.

“I’m glad the issue about the lack of an heir has finally been resolved and that horrible woman was caught before she could do any permanent damage,” Aang spoke up sincerely.

Katara swallowed and she glanced down at her teacup as the image of Yin-Min smirking cruelly at her flashed through her mind. Understanding her thoughts, Zuko grabbed her hand underneath the table and squeezed in comfort. The waterbender looked up to smile gratefully at him as she squeezed his hand back. It would never cease to amaze her how in tune Zuko was to her emotions as she was with his.

“Well, the bitch got what she deserved,” Toph said as she loudly chewed on a cookie. Then grinning
impishly, she added, “Now Sparky’s gonna have a different kind of trouble dealing with a pregnant Sugar Queen. May the gods protect you.” She laughed.

“Hey!” Katara protested as she glared at the earthbender.

Zuko and Aang chuckled.

“I’ve dealt with war and vengeful enemies,” Zuko spoke up with amusement in his tone, “I’m sure I can handle this.”

Katara turned to fiercely scowl at him as Aang continued to chuckle.

“Dealing with a super cranky Katara and a crying baby is sure gonna take all your patience...as small as it is now,” Toph continued with a grin.

This time, Zuko frowned at her words since admittedly it was something he could not stop thinking about. He really didn’t have any experience with infants or how to be a father. As if sensing his unease, Katara squeezed his hand in support.

“So, how long do you plan to stay?” Katara asked, changing the topic.

“We’re thinking a week,” Aang replied, “But we’ll return when it’s time for your baby to be born.”

“That’d be fun,” Toph said with a chuckle before she added, “Hopefully Sparky doesn’t faint like Snoozles did, though that would be hilarious.”

As the others laughed, Zuko squeezed Katara’s hand in gratitude for the change in subject and she squeezed it back. However, he could not stop his fears and uncertainties from resurfacing.

What if he really was bad at being a father? What if he made a mistake? What if he turned out like Ozai?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Have you heard the news?” a bubbly feminine voice asked.
“What news?” another feminine voice inquired with curiosity.

“About the Fire Lord and his wife, of course!” the first voice exclaimed excitedly.

Placing the exquisite fan back down on the display table, Mai straightened as she unconsciously tilted her head in the oblivious women’s direction. She was currently shopping for a new fan in one of the prestigious shops of Omashu, though she was mostly doing it to relieve her boredom and not because she needed another fan. Ever since Jet stopped their trysts, Mai had found herself with too much time on her hands and dark thoughts in her head.

The two women had been gossiping together when Mai had entered and had not notice her as they were standing behind a small stand with their backs turned to her. Mai was always attuned to any gossip that brought her news of Zuko. It was the only way she found any information about him with her living in Omashu with her parents, especially now that Zuko had banished her from the palace.

She clenched her hands and her eyes narrowed in suppressed anger at that humiliating moment when she had offered herself as his royal concubine. She could still not believe he refused her—and so vehemently! How could he still prefer the waterbender? How could he want a woman with no prestige or noble blood? A woman who many believed could be barren?

“What about them?” Mai heard the second woman ask.

A small smirk appeared on Mai’s thin lips. Did Zuko finally decide to forsake the waterbending wench? Was he now looking for a royal concubine to bear him an heir? Even possibly a new wife and Fire Lady? Mai pretended to keep looking at the items before her as she moved closer in order to hear the other woman confirm her thoughts.

“You still haven’t heard? Why, it’s all everybody is talking about!” the other woman said with enthusiasm, deliberately stalling in order to prolong the suspense.

Mai felt her temper rise. Why couldn’t the idiotic woman get to the point?

“I wouldn’t be asking if I knew, now would I?” the woman’s friend said with a loud giggle.
Mai glared at the women’s heads that were visible above the short stand. After living all this time in Omashu, Mai could not stand the frivolous Earth Kingdom noblewomen, and did not try to hide her contempt for them, which in turn, made them dislike her.

“Well, I just heard from my father, who is one of King Bumi’s advisors, if you recall,” the first woman began with a haughty giggle, “that Fire Lady Katara is finally pregnant with Fire Lord Zuko’s heir!”

Mai’s incredulous gasp was drowned by the second woman’s delighted squeal.

“Really?” the second woman finally replied.

No! Mai mentally exclaimed in dismay.

“The Fire Lord must be so happy,” the woman continue, “Everyone could tell how much he loves his wife the last time they were here, although he tried to hide it. It was so adorable.”

“I know, right?” the first woman replied, and then with another giggle she added, “Who wouldn’t notice, what with the loud noises they made at night? It’s no surprise she’s pregnant!”

No! Mai hissed angrily.

It could not be! It had to be a false rumor. Zuko cannot be having an heir with Katara! Mai grasped onto the small table before her as she felt her stomach squeeze painfully in horror, anger, and disappointment. She was the one who was supposed to bear Zuko’s child! She was the one who was supposed to be married to him! Not Katara!

How could Zuko do this to her? How could he ignore the love she had for him? How could he not see she was a better choice?

A soft gasp made Mai snap her head up. The two women had rounded the small stand and were now staring wide-eyed at her. Schooling her features into her traditional blank expression, Mai slowly straightened herself and stared indifferently at them. The women quickly composed themselves and fake, sweet smiles appeared on their powdered faces.
“Oh, Lady Mai, we didn’t see you there,” the first woman with light green eyes spoke up pleasantly. “I suppose you have heard the wonderful news? The Fire Lady isn’t barren after all and she will be giving the Fire Lord his first child. Isn’t that nice?”

“Yes, they must be so happy,” the other shorter woman added with a little smile, “And they’re both so good looking. Their children will be just as beautiful.”

Mai knew they were trying to get a rise out of her, but she would not give them the satisfaction. Instead, she brushed her hair away from her shoulder, the movement causing her long sleeve to fall a little and reveal the weapons hidden underneath. A small smirk stretched her thin lips when their eyes widened in slight fear.

“They would be if their blood weren’t tainted with the barbaric and primitive blood of their Water Tribe mother,” Mai replied dispassionately.

The women gasped indignant, but Mai ignored them as she turned away and gracefully walked out of the store. She ignored the people on the streets as she made her way to the grand house where her family resided. How she wished her father would resign his position as ambassador so they could return to living in the Fire Nation where she could be close to Zuko.

Although outwardly her appearance looked the same, inwardly she was seething with the news she had just heard. She did not believe—she refused to believe—that Zuko truly loved the waterbender. He was just infatuated with the exotic looking wench and nothing else. Once he grew bored of Katara, he would come to realize that the only woman for him was Mai.

But now the bitch was pregnant. Why couldn’t Katara really have been barren? Damn it. It would be harder for Zuko to cast Katara aside now that she was carrying his heir. Mai knew his honor would not permit him to do that.

So she hoped.

Hoped that by some chance Katara lost the brat.

And her life in the process.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“The men say they heard some interesting news at the village.”
Golden eyes flickered to the tall Dai Li agent and the large-jawed earthbender standing patiently to
the side. Jianguo slowly rolled up the letter he had just finished reading. He could feel Ping shift
impatiently at the entrance of his tent at the stretched silence, though he knew Chang was standing
perfectly still without him looking at them. He placed the scroll inside the small chest where he kept
his correspondence and locked it. He scowled as he thought about what he had just read. He did not
want to keep stalling from taking Zuko’s life and woman, but for now, he would have to wait for
further instructions. At least he made sure Zuko knew he was still out there by attacking those
villages. Once he finished what he was doing, Jianguo finally looked up to stare levelly at the
earthbenders.

“What sort of news?” Jianguo asked with a raised eyebrow.

The bulkier earthbender coughed and shuffled his large feet. Chang remained impassive, his green
eyes steady, his stance unruffled.

“They ‘eard dat da Fire Lord finally planted a brat in the wa’erbenda’s belly,” Ping finally informed
his leader.

Jianguo’s eyes widened before he narrowed them pensively. Well, that was to be expected after the
news spread that the Fire Lady wasn’t actually barren, but had been given a contraceptive tea by an
insane maidservant that had been obsessed with the Fire Lord. And the servant had been Ozai’s
former concubine, no less! Ha, life sure was amusing.

“So Zuko finally managed to impregnate the lovely waterbender, hm?” Jianguo mused to himself.

He wasn’t surprised at the news. Who would be able to resist bedding the gorgeous Water Tribe
woman? Hell, even he, Jianguo, could not get the waterbender out of his mind and he had barely
touched her that one time in Omashu. Zuko sure was one lucky bastard to have such a woman in his
bed every night. And now Zuko’s wife was carrying his offspring.

It was perfect.

Now there was something else to threaten Zuko with. Not only would the bastard have to worry
about the safety of his wife, but now he would worry about keeping his heir safe. And if Zuko was
given a choice between the two to keep safe, who would he pick?
His wife?

Or his heir?

A cruel smile curled Jianguo’s lips, causing Chang to frown and Ping to shift nervously.

Life sure was interesting.

The sound of rushing feet echoed loudly in the silence of the empty streets. The cloaked individual looked warily around him as he tried to stick to the shadows. His breathing was coming out in harsh panting breaths due to his exertion and terror. He needed to reach the Fire Nation Palace. He needed to inform the Fire Lord about what he had accidentally discovered a few minutes ago.

Pushing his long white hair out of his eyes, the old man breathed a sigh of relief as the palace came into view. He was about to dash out of the alley and out into the main street when something dropped down in front of him, blocking his way. A gasp escaped him and he jumped back in fear and anger as he stared at the lithe man standing before him. A dark cloth hid the much younger man’s lower face and in his gloved hand he held a long and sharp knife.

“Now what do we have here?” a new voice sounded from the other end of the long alley.

The old man whirled around to face the newcomer. He saw that it wasn’t just one other person, but two and they were also masked and holding knives. Thieves? The old man brought the hood of his cloak down to better hide his face. His eyes darted around for a way to escape, but he knew he was trapped. He just had to hope that they did not know who he was and what he was doing.

“What do you want?” he asked the younger and taller man in a calm tone.

“You know what we want,” the man that spoke before replied as he casually ran his gloved finger along the edge of his knife.

“If it’s money you want, then I’ll give you whatever sum you tell me,” the old man said, his tone deep and composed, though inwardly he was afraid.
He would give them his entire fortune as long as they let him go so he could warn the Fire Lord.

“Money is not what we’re looking for,” the masked man responded as he continued playing with his weapon.

“Then I don’t understand what is it you want,” the white-haired man replied with a bit of exasperation.

“Tsk, tsk,” the young man mocked as he waved his knife from side to side. “Did you really think we didn’t notice you spying on our master and that you’re on your way to warn the Fire Lord…Advisor Chao?”

Chao’s eyes widened in terror as comprehension dawned on him. Damn it, he had been found out! He had thought no one had noticed him as he slipped from the prestigious club the upper society of the city frequented. It was so late most of the patrons had been roaring drunk or too engrossed in their gambling games to pay attention to their surroundings. It was for this reason that Chao had accidentally come upon a drunken conversation detailing the next move against the royal family. Chao had been too concerned with reaching the Fire Lord in order to expose the real traitor that he had not been careful, and now that mistake was going to cost him dearly. His heart began to pound wildly in his chest and cold sweat ran down his face.

“You really should have minded your own business, old man,” the speaker said with a sigh of mock pity as he and his partner advanced.

The old advisor opened his mouth to scream for help, but before the sound could escape a gloved hand covered his mouth in a hard grip as the third man that had blocked his path rushed forward. Chao struggled against his hold, but the man was younger and stronger than him. Chao froze in fear when he felt the edge of a knife press against his neck.

“Tsk, tsk, old man,” the same speaker mocked with a chuckle as he stood before Chao. “I promise if you don’t struggle, we’ll make this quick and painless.”

Chao felt his chest heave in great pants as his terror mounted as he heard the men laugh. He knew he was going to die and there was nothing he could do. His fear was suddenly replaced with anger at the fact that he had been caught before he could reveal the real traitor, that bastard, then it was followed by anguish at the thought that he could do nothing to prevent his lord and lady from being harmed.
Life was so cruel.

He prayed to Agni that his death could be avenged one day and that the traitors could be punished for all the harm they have caused and continued to cause Fire Lord Zuko and his family.

As the men closed in around him, Chao bravely squared his shoulders. He closed his eyes, cleansing his mind, wondering if he would be reunited with his loving wife, as he felt the knife slit his throat.

Zuko frowned as he found himself walking along a long, dark tunnel. He could see a light straight ahead of him, but as much as he walked toward it, he could not seem to reach it. Just when he was about to give up the light suddenly appeared closer to him. Zuko paused before the exit to the dark tunnel in bewilderment. He could hear cheers coming from the other side of the white light. Curious, he straightened his shoulders, and without any hesitation, he stepped through.

He winced as his eyes adjusted to the sudden light of many torches. He surveyed his surroundings and noticed that he was standing on a rectangular arena with thousands of spectators shouting from the stands on either side. He frowned at the familiarity of the place before his eyes widened in horror. He noticed the crowd’s attention was focused at the center of the arena and he knew what he would find before he followed their gaze.

There, on the floor, was a younger version of him with tears streaming down his anguished yet unblemished face. He could hear himself crying, pleading for his father’s forgiveness. Frozen, heart twisting painfully in his chest, Zuko wrenched his eyes away from the boy and focused on the silhouetted form of his father. It was a nightmare he had had many times after the incident, yet every time he relived it, he could still feel the pain and terror.

“Please, Father,” the boy pleaded as the larger silhouetted form advanced slowly on him, “I’m sorry I spoke out of turn!”

“You will fight for your honor,” the deeper voice of the Fire Lord spoke up coldly.

The younger Zuko pressed his forehead to the hard ground and trembled.

“I meant you no disrespect. I am your loyal son,” Zuko heard his younger self repeat the words.

“Get up!” Zuko screamed angrily at his younger self, “He doesn’t deserve your pleas! He doesn’t
deserve your respect! He’s not worth it!”

But it did not matter how much he shouted, his younger self did not listen to him and continued pleading to his father, his hands and knees pressed painfully against the hard floor.

“You will learn respect…” they heard the deeper timbre growl.

Zuko’s heart began to pound in anxiety at the words he knew by heart and the pain that was going to follow.

“Get up!” Zuko roared again.

He watched as the boy raised his tear-streaked face to his father and Zuko followed his gaze as he anticipated seeing his sire’s cruel, cold eyes.

They both watched as the still silhouetted Fire Lord, bare-chested and massive, advanced intimidatingly toward the young boy. Then the man stepped away from the shadows, the flames harshly illuminating his hard features, and stood a few steps away from his crying son.

Zuko sucked in his breath. He felt as if had been punched in the gut and his body stiffened, for standing there was not Ozai but an older version of himself—the scarred side of his face menacing, unforgiving, and unmistakable.

No! Zuko thought in disbelief and horror as he watched himself approach the boy—the boy who must be his son.

No! This was his fear! His fear of becoming like his father! His fear of hurting his own child!

“Please, Father,” he heard his son whimper in fear.

Zuko watched in dread as the older version of himself approached the boy with a cold expression on his scarred face. Zuko tried to jump forward so he could block his older self from advancing, so he could protect the boy, but he could not move. His feet seemed stuck to the floor. He could only watch in mounting horror and helplessness.
“No! Stop!” he screamed, but they did not hear him.

“…and suffering will be your teacher,” older Zuko finished harshly as he raised his flaming fist and brought it down toward his frightened son…

“No!” Zuko roared.

“Zuko! Wake up!” a feminine voice cried out in concern.

His eyes flew open and darted wildly around, his heart pounding frantically in his chest, his stomach painfully clenched in horror. His breathing was loud and harsh, his hands were tightly clenched at his sides, and he could feel sweat beaded on his forehead. He relaxed slightly when he finally realized he was not in the arena, but in his bedchamber.

“Zuko,” he heard the voice of the person he loved the most in the world and he closed his eyes and exhaled shakily.

He focused on her soothing voice and touch as she caressed his face and hair before he again opened his eyes to look at his wife. She was leaning over him, her brow furrowed and her blue eyes filled with worry as long strands of her hair fell onto his chest.

“Katara,” he breathed out in relief as he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to him.

He rolled them over so he was lying over her and he buried his face on her chest, the sound of her heartbeat soothing to his ear. She crooned to him softly as she caressed his hair and pressed a kiss to his head.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked quietly.

Zuko did not say anything immediately. He squeezed his eyes shut as the nightmare resurfaced in his mind along with his fear, uncertainty, and concern. How could he tell Katara what was on his mind? What if he scared her? He clutched her closer to him, pressing himself tightly against her, letting her warmth and sweet scent surround him.
Katara remained silent as she held her husband to her and waited for him to speak. Zuko rarely allowed himself to be vulnerable with her. He always strove to be strong for her, but she appreciated the moments when she was the one who gave him comfort and strength. Finally, after what seemed like forever, Zuko’s harsh breathing returned to normal and his heartbeat slowed down, but he still did not relax and instead remained tensed. Finally, he relented and began to quietly recount his nightmare with his head still pressed against her chest. Katara could only listen to him in horror and concern.

“Then, when he turned around,” Zuko continued, his voice becoming more anxious, “it was not my father that stood before the boy…It was…me.”

He paused and shuddered, pressing himself closer to her as if he could escape the nightmare.

“I was the one who was punishing…my son,” he whispered hoarsely. “I was the cruel father.”

The frown that had appeared on Katara’s brow when Zuko began to recount his nightmare deepened at the distress in his voice as he finished. She could feel his tensed muscles beneath her hands and the rapid beating of his heart. She mentally cursed Ozai for emotionally scarring his son as deeply as he did physically. Slowly, lovingly, she ran her fingers through his messy, dark hair.

“Don’t worry, Zuko,” she told him softly, “It was just a nightmare. It’s not real.”

Zuko frowned as he tightened his hold of her. Would she still say the same thing in the future?

“What if…?” he began quietly before he let out a shaky breath, “What if it was a…forewarning? What if I’m not a good father? What if I…hurt our child?”

“You won’t,” Katara responded firmly, assuredly.

At his wife’s confident tone, Zuko raised his head from her breasts and looked intensely into her eyes, searching for reassurance in her blue depths.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked in a low tone.
“Because you are nothing like your father,” she replied as she reached out a hand to cup his scarred cheek, “Because you are a good and honorable man. Because you love me and will never make me unhappy by harming my child.”

She paused briefly to reach down for his hand and placed it gently over her slightly swollen stomach, right where their babe rested. His hand immediately curled protectively over her belly and she smiled mentally.

“And because I know you will love our child, Zuko,” she finished softly as she stared unwaveringly into his golden eyes.

Zuko was silent a moment as he mused over her words. She was right. He was nothing like his father. Ozai was cruel, unloving, and selfish. Zuko was not like that, especially because of Katara. His child was not even born yet and Zuko already loved him or her. How could he hurt something he loved?

At those thoughts, Zuko let out a deep sigh and his body relaxed as he gazed down wonderingly down at her.

“You’re right,” he murmured before he whispered softly, “What would I do without you?”

Katara smiled at him, and instead of responding, she lifted her head and kissed him. Zuko sighed softly against her tender mouth as he lifted his hand from her stomach to caress her smooth cheek.

They made slow, sweet yet passionate love that night. Their bodies pressed tightly together, their mouths tasting each other’s souls, their arms holding each other close until they reached that glorious end together.

A few minutes later, Katara was sleeping peacefully against his side, her head on his upper arm and her hand over his chest, as Zuko kept watch over her. One arm wrapped around her and his other hand placed over hers on his chest, Zuko glanced down to gaze at her belly where a small bump was now visible. That was the place where his child was sleeping—a child that he would love, guide, and protect.

A sudden fierce protectiveness and love for his unborn child surged through him and he splayed his fingers over Katara’s stomach. Katara and his child were the most important things to him now.
Zuko allowed himself to relax—his nightmare completely forgotten—and he pressed a kiss to Katara’s head before he allowed sleep to take hold of him with his arm curled protectively over his wife’s belly.

He would protect his family.

He would do everything possible to keep them from any harm.

He would even give up his life to keep them safe.
Sitting behind the wall of fire in the throne room, Zuko listened attentively to the reports of his advisors. Trade with both Water Tribes and the Earth Kingdom were better than ever. The colonies were prospering admirably. The Fire Nation people were ecstatic with the news that their beloved Fire Lady was carrying the next heir. Things were progressing well and peace seemed to be reigning, yet Zuko knew better than to let his guard down. Jianguo and the rebels were still out there and would not stop making trouble until they were caught. The fact that they had not heard from them only made his apprehension grow. What could they be planning next?

“My lord,” one of the advisors spoke up when it seemed the meeting was about to conclude.

“Yes?” Zuko replied with a raised eyebrow, wondering what issue the man wanted to bring up next. He had learned to be wary every time someone spoke up when he was just about to leave.

“We were thinking of beginning a search for caretakers and tutors for the future heir,” the old man said. “We need to start interviewing all those who apply for the position before the heir is born.”

A frown appeared on Zuko’s brow. He should have expected this issue to be brought up. Ever since he began to walk, he had been thrown into the care of various caretakers to keep him out of trouble and tutors to teach him about Fire Nation culture, history, and traditions as well as court etiquette and his duties as prince and heir. Not to mention training to be a great firebending warrior. However, not once had his father made time for him; to teach him anything or to get to know him. Zuko had learned nothing from his sire. If it wasn’t for his mother, who loved and cared for her children, just as Iroh did, Zuko would have grown up in the care of total strangers, as was tradition. The only function of the heirs to the throne was to insure the royal bloodline. They were meant to be seen but not heard.

Zuko did not want such a lonely upbringing for his son. Yes, his son. Ever since that horrible nightmare Zuko had begun to refer to the child growing in Katara’s womb as such. He could not explain it, but he was positive Katara was going to give birth to a male heir, though he would be equally happy if he was wrong and it turned out to be a girl. He wished for a daughter one day, one that would look like her beautiful mother. She would be the most pampered princess in the world if he had his way.

He did not want any of his children to grow up neglected and have a hard and lonely childhood. He did not want to be a distant figure in their upbringing—he wanted to be part of their lives. He also knew Katara would never hand over the care of their children to strangers.
The sound of someone clearing their throat brought Zuko out of his thoughts. Mentally shaking his head, Zuko focused back on the old advisors who were looking at him expectantly. Zuko mentally scowled at the almost bored expression on Wei’s wrinkled face. Looking away, he observed the other men. He frowned when he noticed that Advisor Chao, his most trusted advisor, was not present. He rarely missed these meetings. Could he be sick?

“I have decided that my heir will only need one caretaker for the times that Fire Lady Katara and I are too busy,” Zuko spoke up coolly, “I am sure my wife will want to take care of our heir like a mother should.”

The men immediately murmured in disapproval.

“Once my heir is old enough,” the Fire Lord continued, “the tutors can begin teaching him about Fire Nation history, culture, and court etiquette. However,” he paused briefly to fix a serious look at the men, “I will teach my son about his duties as heir to the throne and I will also be the one to train him to be a warrior and a firebender.”

_If he turns out to be a firebender, Zuko mentally added._

There was a possibility his son could turn out to be a waterbender and Zuko was sure Katara would want to teach their son everything she knew. However, as much as he wished otherwise, he knew there would be problems if his heir turned out to be a waterbender. Chao had told him a few days ago that a few of the advisors—Wei specifically—were already expressing their displeasure at the possibility. He was sure the councilmen and the royal court would argue vehemently against having a waterbender as their future Fire Lord. He frowned.

There was also a possibility the child Katara carried was a girl. The advisors could refuse to allow his daughter to be his heir because of her gender. But Zuko planned to bring up their past acceptance to Azula becoming Fire Lord, to try to ensure his daughter’s position. But even if the councilmen argued and ranted about either outcome, he would fight for his heir’s rights no matter what.

He was looking forward to his impending fatherhood and the things he could teach his heir. He did not have a solution for the possibility his son or daughter turned out to be a waterbender, but he was determined to find one.

The men again murmured in shock.
“Such a thing is unheard of!” Wei exclaimed, scandalized. “It goes against our traditions!”

“There are some traditions that need to be changed,” Zuko spoke up coolly.

A long moment passed as the advisors continued to argue against his decree, Wei being one of the most unyielding. Zuko wished Chao could have attended this meeting since the advisor would have backed him up and at the same time would have persuaded his fellow advisors to change their views. However, the men finally agreed—reluctantly—since Zuko was adamant about his idea and would not change his mind.

Satisfied with his plan, Zuko stood up and dismissed the men. Zuko had just stepped down a few steps from the dais when the doors were suddenly opened and a guard hurried in. A deep frown appeared on Zuko’s brow just as he felt his stomach clench in dread. There was always bad news when somebody barged into the throne room unannounced.

“My lord,” the middle-aged guard greeted as he knelt on one knee with a fist against the floor before the fire wall.

“What is it?” the Fire Lord asked impassively.

“A corpse has been discovered a few hours ago,” the man continued in a serious tone, “The body has been identified as...Advisor Chao.”

“What?” Zuko exclaimed in disbelief.

The other advisors gasped loudly and started speaking over each other until Zuko barked at them to be silent.

“We have brought the body in case you wish to take a look, my lord,” the guard added solemnly.

Zuko’s frown deepened before he gave a firm nod. They watched as two more guards walked into the room with a stretcher between them. The men murmured as they stared at the body covered in a white sheet. Zuko quickly stepped down from the dais and parted the wall of fire just as the guards stopped before it. He stared down at the outline of the body before he reached for the sheet and pulled it down. Zuko inhaled sharply as he stared at the gory slit along the man’s throat. Dried blood clung to the pallid skin and at the corner of his mouth. He had harbored the hope that perhaps the
guards had confused Chao with the dead man, but he could not mistake the identity of one of his most trusted advisors.

No, this could not be. Who would want to kill Chao? The advisor was a good and peaceful man.

The Fire Lord clenched his hands tightly in anger before he forced himself to calm down. Regrettably, he slowly pulled up the sheet and covered the lifeless face once again. He bowed his head over the body and said a prayer for Chao’s soul before he looked at the guards with a grim expression.

“Where was his body discovered?” Zuko asked gruffly.

“He was found in a gutter in an alley close to the palace,” the guard replied.

“Who killed him?” Zuko growled out angrily, “Do you know?”

“It seems Advisor Chao was robbed on his way from one of the prestigious clubs in the city sometime last night. A few witnesses have come forth to testify that they had seen him at the club late into the night, though they could not be sure at what time he left.” The guard continued, “His clothes and shoes were stolen, and he was left with only a simple cloak as cover. Any money or jewelry he might have had is gone.”

“Damn it,” Zuko cursed as his hands once again clenched into fists.

Was Chao really killed by thieves? But then, who else would want him dead? Chao did not seem to be a man who had enemies nor was he a violent person who provoked others.

The old men began to talk amongst themselves with deep frowns on their faces and lamentable shakes of their heads. It wasn’t uncommon for thieves to come upon unsuspecting noblemen on their way home in the middle of the night.

“Did you find anything else?” Zuko asked, “Any clues that might lead to the murderer?”

“We found three different pairs of footprints that indicate that it was not done by one thief alone, but
unfortunately, we were unable to find anything that could give us a lead,” the guard responded and bowed his head apologetically.

Zuko ran a hand down his face and let out a long, sad sigh. He ignored the lamentations of the old advisors. Chao did not deserve to have his life ended in such a way. How was he going to give Iroh the news? His uncle and Chao had been very good friends. Luckily, Chao was a childless widower with no other family members, so Zuko did not have to impart the sorrowful news to his family. That was always the hardest part.

“Make sure the body is prepared for a proper funeral,” the Fire Lord finally spoke up with another weary sigh.

“Yes, my lord,” the guard said with a bow of his head.

Zuko again ignored the men’s conversations as he got lost in his thoughts. He was not looking forward to imparting the tragic news to his uncle.

With sorrowful eyes, Iroh stared down at the body of one of his closest friends. Chao had been prepared for his funeral, his body clothed in a formal white robe, the slit in his throat hidden by the high collar. His skin was devoid of any color, but his expression was almost serene. If he didn’t know any better, Iroh would have thought his friend was sleeping.

When his nephew had imparted the news to him a few days ago, Iroh had been unable to speak for a few minutes, unable to believe his friend of so many years was dead. He had still harbored the hope that perhaps there was some sort of mistake, but once he came face to face with Chao’s corpse, he knew he needed to accept the truth.

Why was life so cruel? Chao was a good man. He did not deserve such a fate.

He heard a sad sigh coming from his side and he glanced up to see Toshiro wiping at his eyes. Both he and Toshiro had decided to spend a few minutes alone with Chao, reminiscing about their past and friendship before the funeral started. He was the one who went in search of the palace physician to give the man the sad news. Toshiro had been shocked as well and had asked to be left alone to mourn his old friend. Iroh had only nodded sadly as he watched Toshiro lock himself in his small study.

“I am still in shock,” Toshiro spoke up softly, almost angrily. “If only he had stayed at home that
night, if only he hadn’t gone to the club, he would still be alive.”

“Fate can be a cruel mistress,” Iroh responded somberly. “How could he have known what awaited him?”

“I know,” Toshiro responded with a sigh. “He wasn’t supposed...He didn’t deserve to die like this.”

Iroh did not say anything. What was there to say? Chao could not be brought back to life and they could not turn time to prevent his death. They were silent for a long moment before Iroh spoke again.

“All we can do know is remember him with fondness and hope he is happy in the afterlife,” the retired general said.

“Yes, you’re right,” the physician murmured.

Silence once again fell on them. They remained watching over Chao’s body until it was time for the funeral.

Life sure was unpredictable, Iroh mused as he stared down at his friend’s lifeless body.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A few weeks later found Zuko and Jee in the Fire Lord’s study. Chao’s funeral had been a sad event to the few closest to him, and disappointingly, nothing was found of the thieves that had murdered him. Iroh had been saddened at the news of his old friend’s unfair death, and he and Physician Toshiro had a private moment over their friend’s body to recall the past and their youthful days. The loss affected them greatly, but life had to move on. Zuko only wished he could find the thieves and enact revenge against Chao’s murderers.

Currently, the Fire Lord and the admiral were looking over a new report about Jianguo and the rebels, though nothing new was given. Zuko angrily slammed his fist on the large desk.

“It’s as if the bastard is taunting us,” Zuko growled as he threw the document on the wooden surface. “He lets himself be sighted before he completely disappears.”

“Maybe Jianguo is just letting us know that he is still out there and hasn’t given up,” Jee spoke up
calmly, unfazed by the Fire Lord’s temper.

Zuko growled angrily. Not for the first time did he wish he could have killed the bastard in Omashu a year ago when he attacked Katara. Zuko quickly dismissed the thought for he did not want to remember what both Katara and he went through during that time. He had to find Jianguo and end life miserable life. His growing family would not be safe until the rebel was dead.

The men were interrupted from their discussion when the door was suddenly thrown open. They quickly looked up to see Katara march in with Ursa trailing worriedly after her. Jee caught Ursa’s eye and they smiled briefly at each other before they returned their attention to the irritated waterbender.

Zuko sat still as he watched his wife move swiftly toward him. She was wearing a tight blue tunic and dark fitted pants that she usually wore when she practiced her waterbending or archery. It was always such a pleasure to watch Katara’s generous breasts slightly bounce as she approached him—it was just as magnificent as watching her lovely backside when she walked away from him. He shook his thoughts away when his wife finally stood before his desk in a rigid stance and glared down at him with blazing, blue eyes. Zuko stared at her silently since he knew perfectly well what had her so upset.

Jee stood up from his seat and bowed to the Fire Lady, but Katara only spared him a quick nod as she continued glowering at her husband—her pigheaded, arrogant, controlling husband.

“Good afternoon, Katara,” Zuko greeted calmly as he sat back on his chair, “Is something wrong?”

“You know perfectly well what’s wrong,” Katara hissed angrily as she placed her hands on her hips.

It was a stance Zuko had become used to for the past several weeks. His wife had been very hormonal lately. Her moods shifted so rapidly that it left him bewildered and uncertain most of the time.

“I just found out that you have prohibited me from waterbending!” Katara growled out loudly. “The guards wouldn’t even let me enter the training arena!”

“I just don’t want you to strain yourself in your condition, Katara,” Zuko tried to explain himself.
“I was just going to do a little exercise!” the waterbender shouted as she crossed her arms under her breasts, “It isn’t like I was going to fight anyone!”

Zuko watched as she took a deep breath to calm herself, but continued to glare at him. He loved the way her eyes flashed with temper, which reminded him of how they looked in more passionate moments. Agni, he could become forever lost in the azure depth of her eyes that would greet him every morning and gaze up from beneath him almost every night. But he knew now was not the time to think of such things with his angry wife glowering at him. He was sure that if he said the wrong thing, she would freeze him to the ceiling. He was brought out of his thoughts when he heard his mother delicately cleared her throat.

“Zuko, a little exercise is good for both mother and child as long as it is moderate,” Ursa explained gently.

The Fire Lord frowned deeply. Maybe he was being a bit too cautious, but he never had to deal with this before, he did not know much about pregnancies and was still learning. He just did not want Katara and their son to get hurt if he could help it.

“I’m sorry...” he began but was cut off by his wife’s angry huff.

“Don’t think a simple apology will save you,” she said heatedly.

Zuko’s temper flared a little at her words and the fact that she had interrupted him. The royal couple did not notice that Jee and Ursa had backed away a little to give them privacy.

“Katara—”

“You made a decision that concerns me without discussing it with me first!”

Frowning, Zuko opened his mouth to retort, but Katara once again did not let him speak as she agitatedly slashed a hand in the air, her eyes still holding his in an indignant glare. Her cheeks were flushed with her anger and her chest heaved with her high emotions.

“You have no right to dictate what I can and cannot do, Zuko,” she reminded him firmly before she loudly hissed out, “Especially when it involves something extremely important to me, such as my waterbending!”
“I…” Zuko began before he paused as a deep frown furrowed his brow.

As he mused over her words, he realized that she was right. He had been high-handed in his decision. He had not stopped to think about her feelings or about what she thought. When she had confronted him that night as the Painted Lady, he had promised her that he wouldn’t do so again; that he wouldn’t make decisions without her input. But it seemed that he had failed.

He was just still not used to including other people into his plans because he had been alone for so long. He had never had anyone to be there for him, to help him out. Even after a year of marriage, he was still making mistakes, and falling into old habits, but he thought he was getting better. He hadn’t excluded her from his decision out of malice or because he thought she couldn’t make her own decisions. He had just wanted to keep her safe. But he could see why she would be angry. He would be too if someone told him he couldn’t firebend. He let out a sigh and ran his hand down his face before he looked up into Katara’s eyes with an apologetic expression.

“I’m sorry, Katara, truly,” he said sincerely.

Katara eyed him warily for a long moment, refusing to forgive him so easily. He needed to understand that it was not okay for him to think that he could dictate her life, that she would meekly accept his decisions regarding her life and her person without questioning him. Before she could explain it to him, he spoke first.

“I didn’t mean to be overbearing,” the Fire Lord said quietly, “I didn’t think my actions would be taken that way. I was just trying to keep you safe.”

The waterbender was silent as she wondered about his sincerity and found that his eyes did not lie as he stared unwavering back at her.

“So you can understand why I’m angry?” she asked tentatively.

“Yes,” Zuko responded with a nod before he more softly added, “I just…Agni, Katara, I don’t want to lose you or our child. It would kill me.”

Katara’s anger quickly vanished at her husband’s heartfelt, quiet confession and his worried frown. She felt her heart give an almost painful squeeze at the slight tremor she had detected in his voice. He wasn’t trying to be a jerk nor was he trying to be high-handed. And she could also understand that
Zuko was still learning to be more open in their relationship. It wasn’t as if she never made mistakes either. He was just worried about her health and that of their baby. How could she be angry at him for that?

Smiling, Katara walked around the desk and hugged him to her. Even though they were not alone, Zuko wrapped his arms around her waist and held tightly onto her to take comfort.

“I promise I’ll take things easy so you won’t worry,” she told him sincerely.

“Thank you,” he replied through a relieved sigh before he added, “And again I’m sorry for not talking to you first. I didn’t think.”

“I know. It’s okay,” she said softly.

The Fire Lady leaned down to press a quick kiss on her husband’s dark head before she let him go. Zuko looked up to see her smiling at him before she patted his cheek and walked around the desk.

“All of the sudden I’m craving something sweet,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes, “I’ll see you at dinner.”

And just like that, the pregnant waterbender breezed out of the room with an amused Ursa following after her. Zuko looked after his wife in bewilderment before he shook his head and smiled indulgently. His wife’s quick mood swings sure kept him on his toes, but for once it seemed her emotional instability was working in his favor. Jee chuckled as he sat back down.

“Pregnant women are something else,” the admiral commented amusedly as he grinned at the young lord, “You’re going to have your work cut out for you, Son.”

Jee paused and his eyes widened just as wide as Zuko’s at the word he had accidently uttered. They stared silently at each other for a moment, each trying to gauge the other’s thoughts and reactions, before a small smile appeared on Zuko’s face.

“Indeed,” the young lord replied.
Jee visibly relaxed and he returned the smile. No words were needed to convey the acceptance and understanding between them.

“Have you and Mother set a date yet for the wedding?” Zuko asked curiously.

The young firebender no longer had any problems with the upcoming event. He could see how much his mother and Jee loved each other. He was sure Jee could make Ursa happy.

“Ursa and I have decided to get married after your heir is born,” Jee responded in a calm tone, though Zuko could detect the anticipation in his tone. “She wants to focus on Lady Katara’s pregnancy first.”

Zuko nodded and smiled again. He raised an eyebrow when the admiral started chuckling again.

“Who knew I would be gaining a son and a grandchild in the same year?” Jee mused with a grin.

The younger firebender let out a low chuckle.

“And that I would be gaining a son and a stepfather as well?” Zuko added amusedly.

Their chuckles resounded in the study for a few more moments. Life was strange, indeed.

Katara was pleasantly woken up by the feeling of Zuko caressing her body and gently kissing her lips. With a soft sigh, she slowly opened her eyes and she graced her husband with a sweet smile. He returned her smile as he moved his fingers up to caress her smooth cheek. Zuko had woken up a few minutes ago, but instead of getting up, he continued lying on the bed as he watched his wife sleep. Now that she was finally awake, he allowed his morning arousal entire control. He wanted her again.

He was feeling really good this morning and making love to his water nymph was going to make him feel even better. He leaned his head down and kissed her passionately, slipping his tongue inside her hot mouth. Katara moaned and she wrapped her arms around his neck, causing his need to rise. Murmuring against her lips, he moved over her just as his hand grasped her naked breast. Suddenly, she forcefully pushed against his chest and jumped from the bed.
Falling back on the mattress, Zuko sighed wistfully when he heard the vomiting sounds coming from the bathing room. His son really knew how to thwart his father’s fun, he mused wryly. It was rare now for them to make love in the mornings because Katara always got morning sickness. Fortunately, she was always up for sex when they retired to their bedroom after dinner. Hopefully, their activities could resume that night before he went insane with need. A small smile on his face, Zuko stood up from the bed and followed after his wife without bothering to put on some clothes to cover his nudity.

When he entered the bathroom, he saw her retching in the water closet, her smooth legs curled under her. She was naked and he was sure the floor was cold. As he approached her quickly, the scent of her sickness assaulted his senses, but he ignored the smell since he was partially responsible for her condition. He held her long hair away from her face with one hand while with the other he ran calming circles on her naked back until she finally stopped a moment later.

“Are you okay?” he asked her softly when she leaned back and panted.

“Yes,” she croaked as she placed the back of her hand against her sweaty forehead, “For the moment.”

Zuko waited to see if there would be a repeat performance, but when it didn’t appear he went to their bedroom to grab a cup and fill it with water from the nightstand, then he grabbed a box of cleaning powder before returning to her side. She was still sitting and trembling on the floor when he handed the cup to her. Katara gratefully took the cup and rinsed her mouth a couple of times. She pinched a bit of the crushed powder and rubbed it over her teeth in order to clean them and freshen up her breath. She really loved this invention. The powder was made up of crushed rock salt, mint, and other ingredients. She made sure to rub the powder thoroughly before she again rinsed her mouth.

“Are you ready to get up from the floor?” he asked once she set the cup aside, “It’s cold.”

She gave him a weak nod. Zuko quickly scooped her up into his arms and gently sat her down on the edge of the bathtub. He picked up a washcloth and dipped it into the washbasin before returning to her. Sitting beside her, he pushed her hair back and began wiping her face with the damp cloth.

Katara sighed gratefully at the cool sensation. She really disliked feeling so weak in the mornings. And she especially hated it that Zuko had to see it.

“I’ll get your bath ready,” the firebender said a moment later.
He stood up and began to prepare the bathtub, filling it with water from the faucet and warming it with firebending. When he reached for her, she shook her head.

“I can do it,” she muttered.

“I know, but I want to help,” he replied softly.

Without waiting for her to say anything else, he stepped into the tub and helped her in before placing her on his lap. Katara sighed contentedly at the warm water touching her skin and her heart warmed at her husband’s tender care. He had been patiently taking care of her each morning when she was sick, and even though she had tried to dissuade him, he had been persistent in helping her. She really was a lucky woman.

After they finished their bath and dried themselves off, Zuko carefully carried his wife back to their room and gently sat her down on their large bed. Katara looked up to smile at him.

“I must be the most pampered, pregnant woman ever,” she said with a grin.

Zuko let out a chuckle as he sat down next to her.

“You would be if you’d let me,” he replied in amusement.

She laughed as she noisily kissed his jaw. Zuko cupped the back of her head and kissed her mouth properly before pulling away to smile at her.

“What’s your schedule for today?” he asked her.

“I have another lesson with Madam Fang Hua regarding proper care of the heir,” she responded before she added with an eye roll, “And then I have to meet with a few noblewomen.”

A small frown appeared on Zuko’s brow.

“I’m not sure I want you to continue seeing them after the things they said to you when they were
vying to be my royal concubine,” he said. Disgust dripped from his voice at the last word.

Katara let out a small sigh and shrugged.

“Not all of them are bad,” she amended, “Besides, if I slight them their husbands might take it out on you.”

“I don’t care for them. I care for you and your feelings,” he replied seriously as he reached up to caress her cheek.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured him as she placed her hand over his, “I’m sure they will behave.”

Before he could say more, she distracted him with a kiss.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A few hours later, Katara was regretting not listening to Zuko as she listened to the noblewomen’s subtle insults. There were four older women and six younger ones. They were currently drinking tea and eating light refreshments in the public garden. Now that they did not have a chance to become Zuko’s royal concubine (not that they had the slightest chance in the first place), they seem to be taking out their disappointment on her. Katara, however, refused to let their mean comments get to her and retorted just as sharply. Their conversation shifted to other issues before they started asking her about her pregnancy. Katara proudly replied to their curious questions as she caressed her stomach. While she was not showing yet, her clothes hid her very small bump.

“Fire Lord Zuko must now keep his distance from you due to your condition,” one of the older women mused.

The waterbender did not miss the way the woman glanced at her young daughter sitting next to her. Katara knew they were thinking that now was their chance to snatch the Fire Lord’s attention. She almost rolled her eyes at their foolishness; instead she smiled brightly at them.

“Quite the contrary,” Katara told them smoothly, “my husband is very attentive to my every need and comfort.”

The married women gasped at her words.
“Truly?” one of them asked incredulously.

Katara nodded and could not suppress a smug smile from curling her lips. She tried to hide it by taking a sip of her tea.

Baffled, the older married women glanced at each other. Their husbands avoided them during their pregnancy and sought their sexual needs to be met by their concubines. But the Fire Lord still refused to take a concubine, ignored propositions from many women to be his lovers and mistresses, and only wanted his waterbender wife. It was unheard of! The young women could not help but be jealous of the Fire Lord’s deep devotion to his wife. What was so special about her?

One of the young women cleared her throat delicately. She had tried everything in her power to make the handsome Fire Lord notice her, but all her efforts were in vain. She could not understand why. She was considered to be one of the most beautiful women in the capital. She had dozens of lovers fighting for a place in her bed, and yet the Fire Lord never spared her a glance. It infuriated her. She faked a sweet smile when the blue-eyed Fire Lady turned to look at her.

“Would Fire Lord Zuko really appreciate a child of mixed blood?” the woman asked maliciously even as her smile held on her gorgeous features, “Could it even be a firebender?”

Katara felt herself stiffen slightly at the young woman’s words. Seeing the waterbender’s reaction, the woman’s smile turned cruel.

“Maybe it will be born abnormal because of its mixed blood,” she said with a mock sad sigh as she picked up her teacup.

She gasped when she suddenly found herself unable to move. Her hands shook when it seemed as if an invisible force was trying to move her arms. She cried out when her arms moved without her consent and she splashed her tea onto her chest. The other women gasped in shock before they turned to see a deceptively polite smile on the Fire Lady’s face, though there was a dangerous glint in her azure eyes that made them stiffen in fear. Suddenly, they all felt their bodies being forcefully held still.

“Be careful about what you say about my child,” Katara told the woman calmly, though there was an edge of steel in her tone.

The women gulped in fear, finally understanding that they had finally tested the limits of the usually
peaceful Fire Lady.

“If all of you do not change your attitude, I will be sure to discuss with the Fire Lord proper punishments for such treasonous comments about the heir to the throne,” the waterbender threatened evenly.

The women stared at her in speechless wonder. They let out small whimpers when her grip on them tightened a little more.

“After that punishment is doled out, you will face a protective mother,” the Fire Lady added in a hard tone, her blue eyes flashing dangerously at them as she stared at each of their terrified faces. “Believe me when I say, my wrath is something you should be scared of.” She narrowed her eyes at them as she forced the entire group into stiff, upright positions, their arms pinned to the sides of their bodies.

The women cringed in fear, and if they could have, they would have cowered under the waterbender’s angry glare. One of the younger women started to sob in terror.

“Do I make myself clear?” Katara asked more firmly.

They all quickly nodded, even the sobbing woman and the drenched noblewoman still holding her cup in her captured hands. They had no doubts that the Fire Lady would be unmerciful if anybody dared to insult or harm her child.

“Good,” Katara said with a sweet smile before she finally let go of their blood. “If you’ll excuse me, ladies, I have other duties to attend to.”

“Of course, Fire Lady Katara!” one of the women quickly spoke up and they all deferentially bowed their heads to her when she stood up.

With a regal nod, Katara turned around and walked away from the garden. A few paces away, Kuo and Shen stepped up on either side of her as they made their way back to the building. Katara felt satisfaction swell in her chest that she had finally put the petty women in their place. A moment later, her mood suddenly changed and she frowned as she thought over the beautiful woman’s words. Would Zuko be okay if his heir couldn’t firebend? Or that it turned out to be a waterbender?

She continued to agonize over the thought as the day progressed, even though she tried to stop
thinking about it. They had been too preoccupied with just conceiving an heir they had not discussed other issues. She needed time to herself to think things through, so she went to the Royal Palace Garden and sat under the cherry blossom tree near the large pond.

That was where Zuko found her hours later when his wife did not show up for dinner. He let out a relieved breath to see she was all right as he quietly approached her. He felt his heart expand with different good emotions as he admired her form.

Due to his state of joy and pride, Zuko was in a good mood. His beloved wife was pregnant with his child. Nestled in the safety of her womb was a precious little life, evidence of their love for each other. He could still not believe his fortune and he constantly rubbed his hand over the small bump on Katara’s belly to reassure himself he was not dreaming. His entire purpose was centered on his wife and their child. He was obsessed with their safety and happiness. But along with his concern and elation there was another unpredicted outcome due to her condition, it robbed him of his thoughts and control.

He wanted her.


It was both disconcerting and enjoyable.

Zuko shook his head to clear his thoughts as he focused again on his wife. He frowned when he finally noticed the expression on her face.

“Katara,” he called out her name softly.

Katara jumped and she looked up to see her husband looking down at her worriedly. She smiled at him as he arranged his royal robes and sat down beside her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in concern.

“Nothing,” she muttered, her smile faltering a little.
“Katara,” he stressed with a frown.

The waterbender sighed at his tone, wondering why she kept trying to hide things from him when she knew he would eventually pry it out of her. When he continued to gaze at her expectantly, she reluctantly told him what the women had said. Once she finished she glanced up at her husband to see an angry expression on his face.

“I don’t want you to see those women again,” he growled out heatedly.

“It doesn’t need to come to that. They won’t bother me again,” Katara assured him firmly. “I made sure of it.”

“Good,” he replied with a firm nod.

He saw her fidget nervously again and he reached out a hand to gently grasp her hand.

“What is it?” he asked.

Katara hesitated for moment before she straightened herself as she looked Zuko in the eye.

“Can you really accept our child even if he or she turns out to be a waterbender and not a firebender?” she asked quietly.

A deep frown marred Zuko’s brow at her words. Katara felt herself flush at the disapproval and hurt in his eyes.

“How can you ask me that?” he asked as he narrowed his eyes at her.

Katara glanced away in shame.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.
Zuko reached for her and pulled her swiftly onto his lap. He held her tightly with one arm while with the other he grasped her chin and gently raised her head so they could look at each other.

“I love you, Katara,” he reminded her firmly yet gently. “What makes you think I would not love the child you bear me?”

Feeling her eyes water a little at his tender words, Katara relaxed against him. With a happy sigh, she wrapped her arms around him and pressed a kiss of both apology and joy on his strong jaw. Zuko again raised her head and he bent down to kiss her softly. Their mouths and lips caressed each other tenderly for a moment, silently communicating their thoughts without words. When they pulled away, they stared quietly into each other’s eyes.

“But what will happen if our child turns out to be a waterbender?” she asked hesitantly, knowing they had to discuss this issue sooner rather than later. “What would the advisors say?”

Zuko let out a sigh as he turned his gaze to the serene pond. He had thought about the issue a lot the last couple of weeks, but as much as he tried, he could not come up with a solution. The royal council had already obliged him in a lot of things, such as allowing him to marry a Water Tribe woman and make her his Fire Lady. But he was sure that they would draw the line when it came to a waterbending Fire Lord. It would just go against everything that made up the Fire Nation. A firebending Fire Lord was the symbol of Fire Nation pride, power, and tradition.

“I was meaning to talk to you about that,” he said quietly before he continued in a careful tone as he turned back to look at her, “Before his death, Chao had told me that some of the advisors are already against the idea of a waterbender as heir to the throne.”

A frown marred Katara’s brow as her hands went to protectively cradle her stomach.

“So what does that mean?” she asked.

“If our first child turns out to be a waterbender, the most likely solution would be that the throne would go to our second or third child, whichever one turns out to be a firebender,” he replied slowly as he gauged her expression.

Katara bit her lip. Although she didn’t like it, she understood why it would have to be that way. It only made sense for a firebender to rule over the Fire Nation.
“But what will happen to our first child if he or she turns out to be a waterbender?” she asked quietly as she ran her hand gently over her belly.

The Fire Lord placed his hand over hers, curling both lovingly over the tiny swell of her stomach.

“He or she would still be prince or princess of the Fire Nation,” he told her reassuringly. “Even if they don’t become heir, they will still have all the privileges of being the Fire Lord’s child. They will lack in nothing, especially not love.”

Despite the sadness in her chest, Katara smiled at his last words. Their firstborn would always be loved by his or her parents no matter what. Even if they weren’t the heir, they would still be important.

Zuko relaxed slightly when he saw her small smile. He kissed her mouth gently before he tucked her to his chest and placed his chin on the crown of her head while Katara snuggled into him. They remained silent, enjoying their companionship as they stared at the frolicking turtle-ducklings and koi fish in the pond. Caressing Zuko’s hand that was now resting on her stomach, Katara smiled as she visualized him doing the same when her belly was more round.

“Do you prefer a girl or a boy?” the waterbender asked curiously, her tone soft and wistful.

“Ever since that awful nightmare, I’ve been referring to our baby as our son,” Zuko admitted with a small chuckle.

“Really?” she asked.

She felt Zuko nod against her head and she pulled back slightly to look at his face. The anticipation and warmth in his expression caused her heart to flutter in her chest.

“For some reason, I am positive the baby you carry is a boy, but perhaps that is because I want a son that I can care for and guide as I was not,” Zuko continued, his tone soft and wondering as he tried to explain his feelings.

Katara hummed at his words as she caressed his large hands wrapped around the small bump on her stomach.
“Would you be happy if it turns out to be girl?” she asked carefully.

“Of course,” Zuko immediately responded with a smile. “I want a daughter as beautiful, kind, and fiery like her mother.”

Katara smiled happily up at him and again kissed his chin. He smiled down at her as he caressed her cheek.

“I hope this baby is a boy who will grow up as handsome, honorable, and strong like his father,” she said warmly.

A large smile appeared on Zuko’s face and he tightened his hold of her, one of his hands caressing her small bump as he was wont to do since its appearance. His wife’s waist was still narrow, but he could not wait to see it expand as their child grew in her womb.

“Hopefully he doesn’t inherit your personality,” Katara added with a teasing grin.

“Hey, you married me, didn’t you?” he growled playfully as he attacked her neck with loud, wet kisses.

Katara squealed at the ticklish feeling and laughed as she squirmed against him.

Stopping, Zuko leaned down to kiss her lips once again. As he pulled away to gaze into her face, he was almost blown away with the radiant smile she bestowed on him before she burrowed herself into his chest. Wrapping his arms protectively around her, Zuko reveled in the moment and the sensation of having the woman he loved, who was carrying his first child, in his arms. He never knew he could be this happy, this content, with his life. And he had to thank Katara for giving him that.

He did not know what he would do if he ever lost her or their child.

Katara felt as if she were floating on a cloud. She was nearing the end of her third month, and so far, everything was perfect. After being made to believe she was barren for so long, she was finally going to give Zuko an heir and she was soon going to be a mother. Ever since he had learned of her pregnancy, Zuko was even more gentle and attentive toward her. She could not help but find it
adorable how he fretted over her health and comfort and their baby’s wellbeing.

She was on her way to the city to visit the remodeled orphanage. She was looking forward to spending some time with the children. They were always so happy to see her when she visited them that they practically crawled over each other so they could sit next to her. However, Takeo, the green-eyed little boy from before, always remained attached to her side. She could not understand how some people could be so heartless as to abandon their innocent children. She could not imagine ever abandoning her own child. At the thought, the waterbender pressed a hand to her belly and immediately felt her heart warm up.

“Are you ready, my lady?” Jiao’s voice brought her out of her thoughts.

Katara looked up to see her maidservant smiling at her action. She returned the smile and nodded.

“Where’s Ichiro?” she asked.

“I left him in the care of one of the older servants,” Jiao replied as she shifted the small boxes in her arms. “He sees her as his grandmother and loves spending time with her.”

“Aww, that’s nice,” the waterbender said. She watched as Jiao tried to balance the boxes and she quickly reached out to take a few.

“Here, let me help.”

“No, my lady, I can do it,” Jiao exclaimed quickly as she tried to take the items back.

“Don’t worry, they’re not heavy,” Katara responded assuredly as she evaded the woman’s hand.

Jiao stopped herself from shaking her head and smiled instead. She still needed to get used to the fact that her lady was not a pampered noblewoman who did not lift a finger to help others. Luckily, Kuo and Shen had already placed the rest of the boxes in the carriage, so she and her lady did not have to carry too much. The packages contained pastries of various kinds that the Fire Lady wished to gift the children of the orphanage. She had even gone so far as to help the cook as he made the treats, which only endeared her more to the servants for her efforts and her kindness.
With a smile, they made their way down the long flight of stairs to the awaiting carriage in the courtyard. They could already see Shen and Kuo waiting for them on their komodo rhinos. The huge metal doors opened and they watched as several men rode in.

Katara paused in surprise when she saw Zuko arrive on his huge, black mount with a few of his guards. He was supposed to return late in the night from his inspection of a nearby village. She smiled in delight as she hurried down to greet him.

Zuko dismounted from his komodo rhino and a stableman stepped forward to take the reins and lead the animal away. He greeted Shen and Kuo with a nod and they returned the gesture with a bow of their heads. Zuko turned toward the stairs and smiled when he saw his waterbender descending them quickly with Jiao following a few paces behind her. It seemed he arrived just in time before his wife left for her duties. His heart skipped a beat when he noticed she was smiling brightly at him. He walked forward and began to climb the marble steps so he could meet up with her halfway and help her with whatever she was carrying. He wanted to exchange a few words with her before she left to see to her duties.

Katara’s smile widened when she saw the smoldering look Zuko was aiming at her as she came closer. She was just a few feet away when the step she had just stepped on suddenly crumbled under her. She cried out when she felt her ankle twist painfully as she lost her footing and tumbled forward, the boxes flying out of her hands.

“Katara!” Zuko shouted in horror as he saw her fall.

“My lady!” Jiao screamed behind her as she dropped the items in her fear.

Zuko rushed forward and caught Katara as she bounded on three steps with a pained cry. The boxes fell and bounced around them. The pastries rolled down the steps or splattered, staining the white marble. Terribly shaken, Zuko held her tightly to him as Jiao, Kuo, Shen and a few other servants rushed toward them in alarm.

“Katara, are you okay?” the young lord asked worriedly as he frantically ran his hand down her back.

He tensed when he heard her let out a pained moan as her fingers tightly clutched his clothes.

Trembling, Katara sucked in a sharp breath. Her side and back hurt from where she had struck the
hard marble stairs. Suddenly, a piercing pain in her lower stomach made her cry out. Pressing against Zuko’s chest, she curled into herself as she clutched onto her stomach when the pain increased. Her eyes widened and her heart clenched painfully in her chest with fear and anguish.

*No!* she mentally screamed.

“What’s wrong, Katara?” Zuko asked her worriedly, his tone strained and frantic.

“It h-hurts!” Katara cried in pain and terror as she pressed her hands to her stomach. “My b-baby! Please, save my baby!”
“Please, save my baby!”

Zuko sucked in his breath at the anguished cry of his pregnant wife sobbing in his arms.

No!

They could not lose their child!

“Bring Lady Yoon Hee to my room, now!” he barked to the people who were worriedly surrounding them.

They jumped at the Fire Lord’s thunderous voice and a few servants immediately went in search of the midwife. Gazing back at his wife, Zuko cupped her cheek and turned her so he could see her face. The pain and fear in her wide blue eyes made his heart constrict in his chest.

“Hold on, love,” he told her softly, though the quiver in his voice betrayed his own anxiety. “Lady Yoon Hee will know what to do.”

Katara did not respond as she continued moaning and clutching at her stomach. The pain was unbearable, but it was the fear of losing her baby that robbed her breath and caused dread to fill her heart.

Zuko carefully picked up his crying wife into his arms and glanced down briefly at the spot where she had slipped. He frowned at the crumbled step before he quickly carried her back up the stairs. Jiao, Kuo, and Shen worriedly followed close behind him. The sound of Katara moaning distracted him from his suspicions and he climbed rapidly up the steps, trying not to jostle her too much. He felt his heart constrict at her every moan of pain and sob of fear.

When they finally arrived at their royal rooms, Zuko rushed through the antechamber with Jiao following behind, while his guards waited anxiously outside. Once inside the bedchamber, Jiao rushed to pull down the bedcovers. With a grateful nod, Zuko carefully placed Katara on their bed and sat down next to her hip. He watched frantically and helplessly as she curled to her side.
Tears ran down Katara’s cheeks as she moaned at another sharp cramp. She could not lose her baby! She already loved him so much. Her heart was breaking at the possibility that she might lose him or her. Should she use her waterbending? Would it work? What if she caused more harm than good? No, she could not risk it. Lady Yoon Hee had to know what to do! Oh La, what if she already lost her child?!

“Please, Zuko, save our baby!” she cried as she looked up desperately, wildly, into his anxious eyes. She knew there was nothing he could do, but it was as if her tormented mind sought assurance either way. “Save him! Please!”

Zuko grasped her hand as his heart wrenched in his chest at her distraught plea. He did not know what to do! But he did know that her distress might cause more harm to their babe.

“Try to calm down, love,” he told her softly as he reached out his other hand to caress her hair. “Don’t worry. Lady Yoon Hee is on her way. She will make sure to save our child.”

*She better, Zuko* thought grimly as he squeezed his wife’s hand.

He could not lose his son, not after all his dreams of taking care of him, not after they thought they would never have a child. But most importantly, Katara would be devastated. Then another fear surfaced in his mind that it robbed him of his breath. What if he lost Katara too? He had heard many women died of complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

*No! he roared in denial. I can’t lose her! I can’t lose either of them!*

His grasp on her hand tightened so much the distraught waterbender looked up to stare at him.

“Don’t lose hope, Katara,” he told her beseechingly before he whispered, “Please.”

Through her pain and worry, Katara could see Zuko’s anguish and she squeezed his hand in comfort and understanding. The gesture made Zuko clenched his eyes shut and he bowed over her hand.

Where was the midwife? Just when he thought he was going to go insane with worry, there was a quick knock at the door.
“Enter!” Zuko barked.

He frowned when he saw that it wasn’t Lady Yoon Hee who entered but Physician Toshiro.

“Where is Lady Yoon Hee?” Zuko demanded to know.

Toshiro bowed his head apologetically, his thick eyebrows scrunched together.

“I’m sorry, my lord, but my wife is not in the palace at the moment—”

“What?!” the Fire Lord roared when Katara whimpered in pain. “Where is she?!”

“She went to visit our daughter and grandchild,” the physician stammered at the Fire Lord’s anger. “If I had known she would be needed today, I wouldn’t have let her go.”

When the Fire Lord’s face contorted into an expression of both rage and anxiety, and the Fire Lady whimpered in pain even more loudly, the physician hurried to assure them.

“If you would allow it, I can examine Fire Lady Katara—”

He was interrupted when there was another knock at the door. Zuko growled out a loud ‘enter’ as he held tightly onto Katara’s clenching hand. They watched as Lady Yoon Hee hurried into the room with her supplies. A servant followed behind her, carrying a tray with a teapot already filled with hot water. Jiao, who had been hovering close to the Fire Lord and her lady, hurried to take the tray, which she set on the small table before the fireplace. She looked expectantly at the midwife, hoping there was something she could help do for her lady. The other servant glanced worriedly at the royal couple before she bowed and exited.

“Yoon Hee!” Toshiro exclaimed in surprise before he added in a more relieved tone, “I didn’t expect you to come back until tomorrow.”

“I decided to return early,” the old woman responded absentmindedly as she hurried to the table and placed her things near the teapot. The woman poured the hot water into a cup and then opened her medical box. She pulled out a pouch and sprinkled a small amount of powder into the water before
she quickly walked to the anxious Fire Lord and his wife.

“Lady Yoon Hee, you have to save my wife and child,” Zuko ordered her fiercely as the older woman approached the bed.

She nodded her head firmly as she stepped to Katara’s side. Reluctantly letting go of each other’s hands, Zuko stood up to give the old woman room.

“My lady,” she said coaxingly as she brushed her hand across the waterbender’s forehead, “Please, drink this. It will help with the pain.”

With a nod, Katara took the teacup and carefully sipped the concoction until the older woman told her it was enough. The waterbender fell back on the mattress and groaned. She could feel small beads of sweat accumulating on her forehead with her stress and pain.

“Can you tell me what you are feeling?” Lady Yoon Hee asked gently.

“My lower stomach,” Katara breathed in both pain and terror. “It…it hurts.”

Lady Yoon Hee frowned, but did not say anything else as she began to gently probe Katara’s abdomen. Her actions caused Katara to wince and moan in pain and a few tears trickled down her cheeks.

Standing silently to the side, Zuko clenched his hands in helplessness as he heard and saw his wife’s pain.

“Do you feel any rush of wetness between your legs?” Lady Yoon Hee asked methodically.

Katara shook her head. “No.”

“Was there any excessive bleeding after the fall?” she asked again.

Katara glanced at Zuko and he answered in the negative. The woman nodded and relaxed a little.
“I need to check you to see if there is any damage,” the gray-haired woman added before she told Jiao, “You will assist me.”

“Of course!” Jiao replied immediately as she stepped forward.

“I will wait outside,” Toshiro spoke up. He bowed to the royal couple before he hurried to the door, leaving his wife to work.

Lady Yoon Hee turned to the agitated Fire Lord and said in a calm tone, “If you could just step out for a moment, my lord, I—”

“No,” Zuko growled out defiantly as he stepped forward to grab Katara’s hand. “I am staying with my wife. I will not leave her to deal with this alone.”

Through her pain, Katara felt her heart swell with love for her husband. Would he still say the same thing if she lost their baby? The thought made more tears trickle down her wet cheeks. No, she couldn’t lose her baby. Her child had to live! Suddenly, she started feeling faint and tired, and her eyes began to shut. She panicked as her vision began to become hazy. What was happening?

Lady Yoon Hee relented to the Fire Lord’s demand since she did not have the time to argue with her stubborn lord. Besides, she knew he was deeply worried. It was endearing to see how much the fierce Fire Lord loved his family. She knew he would not be the same if he were to lose either his wife or child, and the Fire Nation would have to pay for that. She had to save the Fire Lady and their heir.

Zuko watched as Katara’s eyes fell shut and her hand suddenly went limp in his grasp. He felt his heart stop cold in his chest. What was wrong?! He was reminded of her doing the same when she had died briefly in his arms in that shallow river. His breath accelerated with panic and fear.

“Katara!” he cried out in alarm as he fell to his knees beside the bed and desperately clutch her hand even more tightly.

No! He could not lose her! He would not be able to bear it! Then he whipped his head to the side to glare at the midwife.
“What is wrong with her?!” he asked both furiously and fearfully.

“Calm yourself, my lord,” the old woman responded soothingly. “The tea I gave her was to make her sleep so she would not harm herself or your child further with her high emotions.”

Closing his eyes, Zuko slumped in relief and pressed his fist to his mouth to suppress a sudden sob.

Thank Agni.

“I need to examine her,” Lady Yoon Hee spoke up gently.

Zuko nodded as he glanced back at Katara. Slowly, he stood up and moved back so the midwife and Jiao could work. He stood rigidly as he watched the old woman examine Katara. He kept his gaze on the midwife’s face to see if he could gauge anything from her expression, but he could not decipher anything. He felt his anxiety grow to the point he felt he might go insane with worry and fear as the time passed. He did not know how long it had been since Lady Yoon Hee began her examination, but the Fire Lord felt like it had been hours.

When the midwife finally moved away to clean her hands once again, Zuko let out a shaky breath and ran his hand over his head. Restless, he grabbed one of the chairs before the fireplace and placed it beside the bed. Then he sat down and grabbed Katara’s small hand in his as he waited for the midwife to tell him how his wife and child were. When she returned, Zuko glanced into her face anxiously.

“Is my son all right?” he rasped.

_Please say he’s all right_, he mentally pleaded.

The old woman smiled reassuringly and Zuko felt some of his tension lessen.

“The baby is fine, my lord. Thankfully, he has not become unattached from his mother’s womb, so with a bit of rest and time, he will become strong again.”

Zuko nodded, though he did not really understand much. The only thing that mattered was that his son was fine. With a sigh of relief, he looked back at his sleeping wife and caressed her hand with his thumb. A moment later, he helped Jiao remove Katara’s formal robes and fire crown. He winced at the bruises already forming on her skin from her fall. Lady Yoon Hee had Jiao place an ointment
on the bruises and Zuko again helped her place Katara into a comfortable nightdress before tucking her back into the covers.

“I will let you both rest, but I would like to be called when Fire Lady Katara wakes up so I can give her further instructions,” Lady Yoon Hee said.

Zuko nodded agreeably.

“Thank you, Lady Yoon Hee,” he told her sincerely.

She smiled, her wrinkles appearing more pronounced around her dark eyes.

“I’m just glad I decided to return early,” she said softly.

Zuko did not want to think about what would have happened if she had not. He turned to the silent Jiao who was staring worriedly at her lady. “And thank you, Jiao.”

Jiao bowed her head.

“My lady is a strong woman,” she said with an encouraging smile. “She will pull through this.”

Zuko glanced back to regard his sleeping wife and nodded.

“I know,” he breathed before he looked back at the maidservant. “Please have someone send a message to the orphanage that my wife won’t be able to visit today.”

“I will, my lord,” the servant responded.

“Your family is waiting outside. Would you like them to enter?” the midwife asked softly.

Zuko shook his head.
“No. Please tell them that my wife and the baby are fine and are resting. I will see them tomorrow.”

The midwife nodded. She understood he wanted to be alone with his wife for the moment.

“Do not worry, my lord,” she told him with a gentle smile. “Your family will be fine. Very soon you will be holding your firstborn in your arms.”

The thought caused warmth to spread through the firebender’s chest and he graced the old woman with a small smile.

“Thank you.”

The woman smiled again, and with a bow, she grabbed her things and left the room, followed by Jiao who closed the door gently after her. Before Zuko could do anything else, there was another knock at the door. Frowning at the interruption, he called out curtly for the person to enter. He watched as Jee stepped into the room and closed the door softly behind him. He glanced in concern at the motionless Fire Lady before he returned his attention to the frowning Fire Lord.

“I’m sorry for intruding, but there is something I must discuss with you,” the admiral began in a grim tone.

Zuko had a feeling he knew what Jee wanted to discuss and his frown deepened. He took one look at Katara’s sleeping face before he walked toward the older man so their voices wouldn’t disturb her rest.

“It’s about what happened earlier,” Zuko spoke up, his tone hard, “The step crumbling underneath Katara wasn’t an accident.”

Jee reached up a hand to rub his knuckles against his sideburn before he sighed.

“Yes,” he replied somberly, “There is no possible way the marble step could have crumbled so easily and at the precise moment she stepped on it. Someone must have tampered with it. But who, we don’t know.”
“An earthbender,” Zuko hissed out, his eye narrowing. “Who else could have done it at so far a distance?”

“I thought of the possibility,” the older firebender responded as his eyebrows furrowed, “But why would an earthbender want to endanger the Fire Lady’s life?”

Zuko’s frowned deepened. One possibility could be that the Earth Kingdom was seeking to start a new war with the Fire Nation by harming the Fire Lord’s wife and heir, but he was sure that wasn’t it. The trade and relationship between both countries were better than ever. It had to be the rebels’ doing. Who else could want to bring harm to his family? However, as much as he hated the thought, Jianguo would not want to kill Katara because he was determined to have her for himself. Zuko gritted his teeth at the thought before he frowned pensively. Did Jianguo perhaps decide Katara no longer interested him and decided to get rid of her just to hurt Zuko? Or was he merely trying to harm the baby to drive a wedge between them?

There were so many questions and not enough answers.

“Did you find anything leading to the possible culprit?” he asked gruffly, though he already knew the answer to that.

Jee shook his head slowly and frowned.

“The only people in the courtyard at the time where a few guards, servants, and stablemen,” the older man began. “I had them questioned, but they all said they knew nothing and none of them are earthbenders.”

“He must have hid himself among them,” Zuko thought as he rubbed at his forehead before he growled out, “And in the confusion he must have made his escape.”

Jee did not say anything as the Fire Lord silently raged, knowing there was nothing he could say that could fix things.

“Double the protection of the palace. No one is to enter or leave without being inspected first. Any suspicious people or activities should be immediately brought to my attention.”
“Of course,” Jee replied with a bow of his head.

“They will not get away with trying to harm my wife and child,” the Fire Lord growled low in his throat.

After a few more directions from the Fire Lord, the admiral bowed before he quietly retreated. Once the door was closed, Zuko clenched his hands tightly against his sides, smoke curling between his fingers as his anger flared.

How dare they target Katara while in her condition? The bastards were heartless monsters and they needed to be put down. But they would not stop until he released Ozai from his prison and gave up the throne to his sire. He could not let that happen. Perhaps he should have Ozai executed? Wouldn’t their plan fail if the man they wanted to put on the throne were dead? But he had a feeling it would only make things worse. They had made it clear they did not want him as their Fire Lord.

He sighed and rubbed his face as the emotional strain of the past few hours settled heavily on his shoulders.

He turned back to the bed and sat down on the chair, his eyes immediately landing on his waterbender’s features, caressing every inch of her face with both anxiousness and tender care. He glanced down to the small bump on his wife’s stomach, imagining the little baby within her, clinging to life despite what happened, before he glanced away. He reached inside the covers and gently pulled Katara’s arm out so he could grasp her hand. He brought it to his lips and closed his eyes when they pricked with unshed tears.

He could have lost them both.

The thought tormented him for a few long moments. He could save Katara from flying arrows and lightning, but he would not have been able to save her from a miscarriage. He was useless. He quickly shook the dark thought away.

But he had not lost them! Relief and happiness appeared on his face a moment later. They were both safe, albeit fragile at the moment, but alive. He thanked Agni as he took vigil over his sleeping, pregnant wife, waiting for the moment when he saw her blue eyes again, waiting for the moment when he would hold his child in his arms.

“You idiot!” a masculine voice growled into the dimly lit room. “You shouldn’t have waited so long
to execute our plan! Now everything is ruined!"

“How was I supposed ta know da Fire Lord was gonna show up early?!” another voice replied gruffly as he shrugged off his cloak.

The earthbender, a short man with indistinguishable features, sniffed when the scent of animal manure floated to his nose. Pretending to be a stableman was harder than he had realized. Luckily, no one had questioned him as he worked, and in the confusion of rushing toward the Fire Lady’s help, nobody had noticed as he slipped away.

“Damn it, we were so close!” the first voice growled. “If the Fire Lord hadn’t showed up early, the waterbender would’ve lost the brat for sure.”

“It was a stupid idea in da first place,” the earthbender retorted with a snort before he added, “‘Sides, ya know Jianguo wouldn’t have been happy if da waterbenda had died.”

“I don’t give a damn about what Jianguo wants,” the other voice hissed. “He has done nothing but fail. He almost got himself caught in Omashu because he couldn’t wait to make use of the waterbender. If he had let the head on his shoulders and not the other one guide him, the plan to kidnap the Fire Lady to ensure Zuko released Ozai in exchange for her would have worked!”

The earthbender watched disinterestedly as the other man continued to rant. He really didn’t give a rat’s ass about their plans or their dream of putting Ozai on the throne. All he cared about was the money. Once the man paid him, he was hightailing it out of the Fire Nation and back home in the Earth Kingdom before somebody recognized him. If they fought amongst themselves, it really wasn’t any of his business. They could kill each other, for all he cared.

“Anyways,” the earthbender cut in, “I did what ya wanted, so I’d like me money now.”

The other man stared at him in disbelief before he started cackling. The earthbender frowned.

“Do you really think I’m going to pay you after failing in making the waterbender miscarry?” the man sneered.

“Hey, it ain’t my fault da little brat decided ta keep living,” the earthbender retorted, “I did what I was told, so give me my money!”
He narrowed his eyes when he saw a smirk appeared on the man’s face.

“Oh? Even if you have succeeded, do you really think we can let you live?”

“What’s dat supposed ta mean?” the earthbender growled as he raised a menacing fist.

“You aren’t loyal to our cause, so you can easily reveal our plans if you get paid well enough,” the other man replied casually as he flicked imaginary dust from his pristine clothes.

Before the earthbender could move he felt someone grab him from behind. His eyes widened when he felt something sharp slit his throat. He gasped and his hand flew to his neck as blood gushed out before he fell onto the floor. Gurgling, he watched as a tall figure in dark clothes stood over him with a bloody dagger in his hand before everything went dark.

“What a fool,” the first voice spoke up with an unaffected tone as he watched the earthbender bleed to death.

Now it was going to be more difficult to get rid of Zuko’s heir because everybody was going to be in high alert to keep the Fire Lady protected. No matter, they could always use the brat against Zuko once it was born. Yes, perhaps that would best. He smirked as a plan began to form in his mind.

Then glancing toward the dark-clad individual, he waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Get rid of the body.”

“Yes, Master.”

With a soft groan, Katara slowly opened her eyes and was met with the dawn’s light streaming gently into the room. Disoriented, she made to raise her hand to press it against her head before she realized someone was holding it. She glanced to her side and saw that Zuko was sitting on a chair, his upper body resting on the bed, her hand securely grasped within his. He was still wearing his royal robes and his fire crown. He looked very uncomfortable in that position. Why was he sleeping like that instead of next to her on the bed?

She lifted her free hand to press against her temple. Her mind felt hazy and she could not understand
why. Bringing her hand back down, she reached over and caressed Zuko’s dark hair.

“Zuko?” she called softly and squeezed his hand.

At the sound of his wife calling his name, Zuko’s eyes snapped open and he immediately straightened himself. He looked at her frantically and with concern.

“Are you okay? How do you feel?” he asked worriedly as his eyes darted to every inch of her face to observe her expressions.

A small frown appeared on the waterbender’s brow. Did something happen? She searched her mind for the answer, and when she finally recalled what happened, a loud gasp escaped her. Her hands flew to her stomach and she clutched it desperately, her hands pressing against the small bump with shaky fingers.

“My baby! Is he okay?” she asked frantically as her eyes locked anxiously onto her husband’s golden eyes. “Did I...lose him? Oh gods, Zuko, tell me I didn’t lose him!”

“Shh, love, calm down,” Zuko softly hushed her as his hands reached up to gently cradle her cheeks. “Our baby is fine. Just a little weak at the moment, but he’s still alive.”

“Truly?” Katara whispered as she stared at him with anxious and hopeful eyes.

“Lady Yoon Hee assured me it was so,” the firebender replied reassuringly, “But she said you should still be careful and that you must rest until the baby is strong again.”

At his words, Katara slumped back onto the pillows beneath her. Unable to contain her relief, tears pooled in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

“Oh, Zuko,” she breathed shakily.

Zuko gently wiped her tears with his thumbs before he wrapped his arms around her and bent his head down to kiss her trembling mouth. He pulled away and buried his face against her throat, silently thanking the gods that she was truly all right.
“I was so afraid I would lose you both,” he murmured against her skin, his voice both soft and husky with his emotions, before he roughly ordered, “Don’t scare me like that ever again.”

He knew what he was saying didn’t make any sense since it wasn’t as if it what happened was her fault, but damn, he loved her too much to be able to live without her.

Katara smiled softly against his hair, understanding what he truly meant and what he was going through. She wrapped her arms around his strong shoulders and nodded.

“I promise I won't scare you like that again,” she said, knowing it would ease his worries just to hear her say so.

Without any more words, they held each other close, mutually giving comfort and reassurance to one another. A moment later, Zuko slowly pulled back and caressed her smooth cheek as he stared into her azure eyes.

“I have to let Lady Yoon Hee know you’re awake,” he said.

Katara nodded and allowed him to move away from her embrace. She watched as Zuko walked toward the doors and stepped outside before she again ran her hands over her stomach in relief and joy.

Zuko stepped out of the antechamber and was relieved to see that Shen and Kuo were standing one either side of the doors. They turned to regard him with worried expressions, which transformed into relieved ones when their lord assured them their lady was all right.

“Please find Lady Yoon Hee and bring her here,” he said.

Kuo bowed his head and hurried down the corridor to follow the Fire Lord’s orders. With a nod aimed at his other guard, Zuko closed the door and walked back toward the bedroom. Once he stepped inside, he returned to Katara’s side and sat on the chair, taking her hand once again in his larger one. He returned her smile and squeezed her hand.

The waterbender noticed Zuko’s tired, red eyes, the dark circles under them, and the light stubble
“Did you sleep on the chair all night?” she asked with a frown.

Raising a hand to smooth his hair back, Zuko gave a slight shrug.

“I don’t even remember falling asleep,” he replied. When he saw Katara’s frown deepened, he squeezed her hand as he added, “But I don’t care about my discomfort. You and the baby are the only things that matter.”

Before Katara could reply, she was interrupted by a soft knock on the door. When Zuko ordered for them to enter, they watched as the midwife opened the door and stepped inside. Seeing their expectant expressions, the old woman smiled gently at them as she walked toward the bed.

“How are you feeling, my lady?” she asked softly.

Katara took a moment to study her body.

“A little tired and sore,” she admitted.

“Do you still feel pain?”

“Only a little.”

Lady Yoon Hee nodded and smiled reassuringly when both the Fire Lady and her husband looked worriedly up at her.

“That is normal. If the pain had gotten worse, then that would be a cause to worry,” she explained before she added, “Now I need to examine you just to make sure everything is all right.”

Katara nodded at her and Zuko stood up so he could give the midwife room. Lady Yoon Hee spent the next few minutes examining her and smiled reassuringly at the worried couple once she finished. She moved to once again place ointment on the waterbender’s bruises, but Katara stopped her and
said she would heal them with her waterbending. Zuko voiced his concern that she might overexert herself, but Katara assured him it wasn’t hard and the bruises would heal much faster. Zuko didn’t argue since he didn’t want to see her in pain. As she healed her bruises, Katara wondered if she should use her waterbending to help her baby before she decided not to. She had never done such a technique before and she didn’t want to risk accidentally hurting him.

Once Katara was changed into a new nightdress and Lady Yoon Hee had moved away to wash her hands, Zuko sat back down on the chair near the bed and stared at Katara wonderingly. She smiled at him reassuringly before they turned to look expectantly at the midwife.

“Nothing seems to be out of the ordinary,” she told them as she dried her hands with a small towel. “It is fortunate that the Fire Lord was able to catch you quick before you got really hurt. If you had tumbled down any more steps...the situation could have been worse.”

Zuko swallowed hard at the woman’s words. If he had not decided to return home early, he would not have been there to save Katara. He would have probably come back home to the news that his wife had fallen down the stairs and lost their child. Katara seemed to be thinking the same thing because she looked at him and reached out to take his hand, squeezing it reassuringly. He squeezed her smaller hand back and they smiled at each other in relief.

“The baby is still not out of danger yet,” the midwife added in a more serious tone as she stared firmly at the Fire Lady, “You will need to repose for a few days, perhaps a few weeks, in order for the baby to become stronger. You cannot do any strenuous activities and should avoid anything that might cause you any stress.”

“I will make sure she rests,” Zuko spoke up determinedly as he stared intently at his wife.

Katara opened her mouth to retort, but let out a resigned sigh instead. She would have been annoyed at any other time at her husband’s overprotectiveness, but this time she decided not to let it bother her since she knew he was worried for both her and their child. Besides, she would not do anything that would endanger the life of her baby.

“I promise that I will take it easy until you deem it prudent for me to continue my activities,” Katara told the midwife as she pressed her free hand over her belly.

“I will come to examine you every day to see your progress,” Lady Yoon Hee said as she began to prepare another tea. “Hopefully you will be able to leave your rooms soon.”
Once the tea was ready, she handed the teacup to the Fire Lady and told her to drink it. It was a calming tea that would also help with the pain. As soon as Katara finished the tea, the midwife bowed at the royal couple and quietly left the room after telling them to call her if anything came up. Once the older woman left, Katara slumped back onto the pillow beneath her and sighed.

“I’m going to be bored out of my mind,” she grumbled.

A small chuckle escaped the Fire Lord at his wife’s small pout. Now that they were assured their child would live, Zuko felt like the heavy weight that had settled on his chest since the previous day had been lifted off him.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you company. And I will ask Mother, Uncle, and Jiao to keep you company when I have to see to my duties.”

“Fine,” Katara replied with another long sigh.

Zuko chuckled again at her unenthusiastic response. He understood her reluctance. His wife wasn’t one to sit idly, she enjoyed going about doing one thing after another, and having to suddenly be stuck in their room would be torture. He would just have to make sure she enjoyed herself when he was by her side. He squeezed her hand and grinned at her when she turned to look at him.

Katara once again noticed the dark circles under her firebender’s eyes and the weariness she could see in his expression. With her free hand, she patted his side of the bed.

“You need to rest too,” she told him softly. “Come and lie down.”

“I don’t want to disturb you,” he said with a small worried frown.

“You won’t hurt me by lying down next to me,” she responded as she again patted the bed invitingly. “You need to catch up on some sleep.”

Zuko easily relented. He did need some sleep and he also did not want to leave Katara’s side. Standing up from the chair, he walked toward the doors. After telling his personal guards to send a message to the councilmen that he was postponing their meetings until the next day, he returned to the bedroom to change into some sleeping pants. Then he moved to his side of the bed and slid inside the blankets beside his waiting wife.
Katara sighed as Zuko slipped one arm beneath her shoulders and carefully brought her close to him. She placed a hand over his warm chest, feeling his heart beat softly underneath it, and smiled when he nuzzled her hair. They remained pressed close to each other, neither of them saying a word, letting the silence soothe their worries and lull them to sleep, feeling like this near tragedy brought them even closer than ever.

Katara frowned as she critically eyed the frame hanging before her. It was a painting that depicted a pair of dragons, flying gracefully close to each other, their long tails intertwined together. Zuko had explained to her that the dragons were a mated pair and they were communicating their happiness by performing a ritual dance. She thought it was adorable, so she decided to exchange it with another painting so she could see it better. She was standing barefooted on one of the chairs so she could take down the painting.

She was bored out of her mind.

She had been confined to her bed for a few weeks and until recently Lady Yoon Hee had only allowed her to move around the room. Ursa, Iroh, and Jiao kept her company whenever Zuko was busy, but she was restless. She hated being inactive. She wanted to go outside and feel the sun on her skin. She had been able to do some of her work that only required paperwork and it was frustrating. She missed going about her duties as Fire Lady and exercising with her waterbending. Fortunately, the midwife had told her that she might finally be able to leave the room and go about her activities in a day or two now that her child was out of danger. Katara felt happiness blossom in her chest as she reached down to rub her swelling belly. In about five months she would finally hold her and Zuko’s child in her arms.

Smiling at the thought, she returned her attention to the painting before her.

That was how Zuko found her and he felt his heart stop in his chest at the sight of her standing on top of a chair, trying to pull a painting down from its place on the wall. He was about to shout her name, but at the last minute he stopped himself so he wouldn’t startle her and have her lose her balance. Grumbling mentally at her stubbornness, he quietly marched up to her and grabbed her firmly around the waist.

Katara squealed in surprise before she was turned around to see a displeased frown on her husband’s face. She hadn’t heard him come in. She placed a hand over her rapidly beating heart and scowled at him.

“Zuko! Don’t startle me like that!” she yelled.
Zuko ignored her scowls as he narrowed his eyes at her.

“Do you like to give me heart attacks with your propensity to put yourself in danger?” he growled out softly.

Katara huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I was perfectly fine,” she retorted before she added grumpily, “I needed something to do before I went crazy with boredom!”

“You could have asked me or a servant to help you,” he replied gruffly as he swiftly scooped her up into his arms and carried her back to their bed.

“I’m pregnant, Zuko, not an invalid,” she grumbled, but made no move to struggle from his grasp.

“I know that,” he consented. “But you are only now healing from a slip from a single step. Can you imagine my fear in seeing you balancing on a chair trying to lift something heavy?”

Katara sighed as she realized that he was only worried.

“I know that you are independent and like to do things for yourself, but there is no need to move this yourself when the palace is full of servants!” he continued, getting agitated again.

“I don’t want to turn into one of those pampered noblewomen!”

“No one is asking you to, Katara,” Zuko said exasperatedly before he more softly added, “Think of the baby. All it would take is being a little off balance and you could have fallen over. Isn’t his safety worth being a little more careful over the next few months?”

“Of course, it is…”
“Then please don’t be so stubborn about this!” Zuko said heatedly. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “I...I can’t go through that again. I can’t lose you two,” he added in an anguished whisper.

Katara’s vexation left her immediately at his words. He wasn’t trying to be overbearing like when he tried to stop her from waterbending; he only wanted her to take extra care with herself and the baby. She also realized that he was right; it would only have taken a single moment of clumsiness for her to have fallen from the chair with devastating results.

Maybe she had been stubborn in trying to prove that she could still do everything she used to. Was her sense of independence worth her baby’s health, his life? She would do anything to protect her child. Even swallow her pride. Besides, it was only to be for five months.

“Alright, I won’t climb any more chairs and will ask the servants to help me move the painting. I promise to be more careful.”

“No more lifting heavy objects?”

“No more lifting anything heavier than a scroll,” she said with an eye roll.

“And you’ll cut back on your duties as Fire Lady?”

Katara narrowed her eyes and drilled a finger into his chest. “Don’t push your luck, Fire Lord.”

Zuko chuckled at her. He knew she wouldn’t consent to the last one, but he had to try.

As he settled her on the mattress, the waterbender once again crossed her arms and glowered at him. He returned her intense stare before he let out a soft sigh.

“I know my overprotectiveness may seem extreme, but I just can’t help it,” he tried to explain himself in slow, careful words. “I’ve realize that for everything else in life, I have a say. I can change things to my satisfaction, but when it comes to my pregnant wife I feel...useless. If fate were to decide to...take our child away from us,” he paused for a moment to take a shaky breath before he continued in a strained voice, “I won’t be able to do a single thing to prevent it.”
Katara felt her heart constrict in her chest at his distressed words and the anguish in his amber eyes. Even after weeks have passed, Zuko was still traumatized by the near miscarriage and he was even more protective of her. It wasn’t just their child’s life that he worried over, but hers as well. The thought of losing them both must have been doubly stressful and terrifying for him. And the fact that he had admitted his fear, his vulnerability and insecurities, only made it more real how much he loved her and their child and how determined he was to keep them from harm.

“I just don’t want anything to hurt you or our baby,” he said in a quiet tone as he stared adamantly into her eyes. “I...I don’t want to go through that fear ever again.”

Katara’s eyes softened at his words and she opened her arms invitingly to him. Zuko quickly took off his boots and royal robes before he crawled into the bed with her. He lay down carefully against her, resting his head on her chest and curling one arm over her belly as she wrapped her arms soothingly around him.

“You’re not going to lose either of us, Zuko,” she assured him softly yet with a firm tone to her voice. “As long as I take care of myself, the baby and I will be well once he’s ready to be born.”

Her husband was silent for a long moment as he held her tightly against him. Katara could feel that there was something else troubling him and she frowned.

“What’s wrong, love?” she asked.

He did not immediately respond to her question, but when he did, his arm tightened even more around her.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about the possibility that I could...lose you during childbirth,” he confessed almost in a whisper, as if he spoke any louder it could become a reality. “I was so eager to put my child in your womb that I didn’t stop to think that you could...die giving birth to—”

Katara quickly placed her fingers over his mouth to stop him. When he pressed his lips together, she moved her hand away and ran it caressingly through his long, dark hair.

“Stop thinking such things,” she told him firmly before she more softly asked, “Or would you prefer that our child never came to be? That he never be born?”
“Of course not!” Zuko exclaimed loudly. His heart ached that she would think so. “I don’t want to lose our baby either.”

“And we won’t,” she assured him. “I’m strong and healthy. I’ve gone through many hardships and I will overcome this as well. Women have been giving birth for centuries and will continue to do so for centuries to come.”

Zuko relaxed against her at her words and he nuzzled his face against her soft breasts.

“You always know how to put me at ease.”

Katara grinned.

“Someone has to drag you from your dark corner,” she teased.

Zuko chuckled, his mood much lighter than it was a moment ago, before he sighed as she continued to stroke his head, her nails gently scratching his scalp.

“I will still continue to worry, though,” he mumbled.

“I know.”

Zuko lifted his head and they stared silently at each other. He reached up a hand to caress her smooth cheek.

“I can’t help you carry our baby, but I can keep you safe,” he said firmly, “I will keep you both safe.”

Katara smiled as she gently touched his hand.

“I know,” she replied before she added in a more casual tone, “I was thinking of asking Gran-Gran to visit and help me with my pregnancy as well with the birth. I’m sure Lady Yoon Hee is a gifted midwife, but I’ll feel even more at ease if I had my grandmother’s help too.”
“Of course. That’s a great idea,” the firebender quickly agreed. With the help of two experienced midwives, Katara would be better taken care of when it came time for her to give birth.

When she smiled at him, Zuko moved forward and kissed her softly on the mouth before he pulled back to see her azure eyes twinkling back at him. He observed her glowing face and soft lips as he thought of how much his waterbender meant to him. His eyes traveled down and paused attentively on her breasts. There were slightly bigger due to her condition and very sensitive. They had indulged in each other once the midwife had told them it was safe for them to do so, as long as they were careful. He could not help himself from caressing and kissing her swelling mounds whenever he had the chance. He could not wait to touch and suckle them when they became fuller and heavier as her pregnancy advanced.

He felt his desire flare to life and he looked back to his wife’s eyes to see that they had darkened a little and her lips were slightly parted as she stared intensely at him. With a soft groan, the Fire Lord kissed her hungrily, pushing his tongue past her lips, relishing in her sweet taste. He slowly untied the strings that held his wife’s light robe closed and slipped a hand inside to gently cup her naked breast. He grinned when she softly moaned his name. He pulled back slightly to catch his breath when he heard her gasp sharply, but not in pleasure. He looked at her in concern as he noticed her wide eyes and he wondered if he had hurt her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as he backed away a little.

Katara did not respond as she frowned a little in confusion. For the past two weeks she had begun to feel a gentle fluttering in her stomach, almost like butterfly wings. She had felt it again, but this time, the feeling was a little stronger. When she felt something nudge against the side of her stomach, her eyes widened in awe once she understood what was going on. She could feel her baby moving!

Zuko watched in curiosity as joy spread across his wife’s face as she placed her hand on her swelling belly. He raised an eyebrow when she swiftly parted her robe to reveal more of her nude body. Smiling, she grabbed his hand and placed it over the left side of her stomach. He glanced at his hand and then back at her, not understanding what she wanted, but then he felt something nudge against his hand. A surprised gasp escaped him and his eyes quickly darted to where his hand rested against Katara’s stomach.

Katara’s smile widened when she felt her baby move again and she felt elated tears gather in her eyes. Now it seemed even more real that there was a little life inside her, nestled below her heart, evidence of the love between her and Zuko. She watched as Zuko’s surprised expression turned into one of wonder as he gently rubbed his hand against the hard bump on the side. She smiled happily when a large smile curled his lips when their son pressed against his father’s hand.
Zuko could not describe the happiness and awe that swept through him at the thought that his child rested within his beloved wife’s womb. He felt his fear subside a little at the knowledge that their child was truly alive and moving, and he rubbed the spot tenderly.

“Hello, baby,” Katara spoke up warmly as she stared at Zuko’s caressing hand, “Can you feel your papa?”

Zuko felt a bolt of pleasure, pride, and contentment coursed through him at the title. Scooting down, he leaned his face close to Katara’s stomach.

“Hello, little one,” he greeted softly, “Your mama and papa are eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

He chuckled lowly when he felt the baby nudge against his hand.

At his tender words, Katara once again felt tears pool in her eyes. She shouldn’t be surprised to see this new side of her husband. She had no doubt that Zuko would love their child more than his own life. Zuko crawled back up to kiss her softly, caressing her lips tenderly with his, silently communicating his happiness.

“I love you so much, Katara,” he breathed as he stared intensely into her eyes.

Katara smiled.

“I do too. With my whole heart.”
Katara smiled indulgently as she watched Zuko fuss over her as he helped her settle down at the low table in the veranda. She waited patiently as he carefully propped and arranged the pillows and cushions around her, so she would be more comfortable. Now in her sixth month, her belly was more pronounced and she was always exhausted lately. It was also difficult for her to move around, which only caused her emotions to flare from angry, to sad, to frustrated, and back again. And it hadn’t helped when she had found out Zuko had placed even more guards to watch over her. It was only after he explained his suspicions of what happened at the stairs that she saw his reasoning and calmed...slightly. If someone was out to cause her and her baby harm, then she would accept the added protection.

But really, she had not expected her pregnancy to turn her into...well, a hormonal bitch, as Toph had bluntly called her when she and Aang visited last month. Katara was a little embarrassed to admit that she cried over the smallest things, and she lashed out at Zuko for no reason or sometimes woke him up in the middle of the night because she craved something to eat, which was usually something that could only be found in the Southern Water Tribe. At first her extreme mood swings and weird cravings had bewildered him—even frightened him a little—but Zuko became used to them and tried very hard to be patient and understanding with her, even though she knew he sometimes wished he could rant back. It only made her love him even more, during those moments she wasn’t annoyed with him, that is.

Sighing softly, she glanced to the other people sitting around the table. She was having tea with her mother-in-law, Uncle Iroh, Gran-Gran, and Pakku, who had arrived about a month ago to lend her support. The old woman had been extremely worried when she had found out Katara had fallen and almost miscarried. She had even scolded her granddaughter for not calling for her sooner. Katara had really missed her grandmother and was very grateful for her steady and loving presence. Hakoda and Sokka had sent her messages stating that they couldn’t leave their duties in the Southern Water Tribe during the rest of her pregnancy, but they assured her they would visit when her time came closer for her to give birth.

The sound of Zuko’s voice brought the waterbender out of her thoughts.

“Do you need anything else before I leave?”

Katara turned to give him a smile.

“No, I’m fine,” she assured him. “You should leave now before you’re late for the meeting with King Bumi’s dignitaries.”
The firebender gave her a brief smile and a nod.

Sitting on the waterbender’s left side, Kanna observed her granddaughter’s husband with both amusement and awe as he fussed over his pregnant wife. He either seemed oblivious to what he was doing or he did not care that he had an audience. Who would have thought the taciturn, temperamental, almost frightening Fire Lord could be so sweet and attentive? Her granddaughter really could not have chosen a better man. She glanced to the side to see her own husband nodding approvingly at the young Fire Lord and she suppressed another amused smile. Maybe she shouldn’t be surprised to see Pakku’s reaction, seeing that she had also married a reticent man who also turned out to be very sweet. It delighted her how protective Pakku was of his favorite student and step-granddaughter.

Sitting across from Pakku, Iroh watched with equal amounts of amusement and delight at his nephew’s uncharacteristic actions. Katara had really changed him from the harsh, almost uncaring man he used to be before. Iroh had given up his room, which was closest to the royal chambers, so it could be used as a nursery for the baby. The remodeling was coming out well, though Katara wanted to keep her baby in their room until she or he was older. Zuko agreed, even though it went against tradition. Seeing the way they gazed and interacted with each other, the old prince had no doubt that their deep love for each other would transfer to a fierce love for their own child.

Oblivious to the others’ thoughts, Zuko reached out to run his hand gently over Katara’s rounded belly before he rose to his feet with a satisfied nod. He bid his wife and the rest of their family farewell before he left the veranda to go about his business. Once he was out of sight, Katara turned to grin at her mother-in-law.

“Maybe now I can take a look at those requests for charity works,” she piped up enthusiastically.

Ursa laughed softly and shook her head as she reached for a small pastry.

“Katara dear, you should take it easy.”

The waterbender laughed as she wiggled into her pile of pillows and cushions.

“You should tell that to your son,” she replied amusedly with a roll of her eyes, “He worries so much, I’m afraid he’ll collapse any moment now.”

The older ladies chuckled, Pakku cracked a grin, and Iroh laughed loudly.
“That’s what men do when they find out they’re going to be fathers,” the Dragon of the West explained as he poured more ginger tea. “We can’t help but worry and fuss over our pregnant wives. I was the same way, if not worse, when my wife was pregnant with Lu Ten.”

He sighed melancholically as his fingers curled around his teacup and his shoulders slumped a little. Even after all these years, their absence still brought a pang to his heart. “May their souls rest in peace.”

He smiled thankfully when Ursa squeezed his arm in comfort.

Kanna nodded as she took a sip of her tea before she said, “Women worry over their health and men become obsessed with becoming providers and what they can offer to their legacy.”

Ursa could only smile as she listened to the older generation provide their wisdom. She could not add anything to their views since she didn’t have experience with such devotion. Ozai certainly did not bother with her comfort or health during her two pregnancies. He mostly ignored her and sought his pleasure with his concubines. He had barely even spared a glance at his newborn children. She mentally shook her head. She did not want to think about the past or about her former husband. What mattered now was that she had finally found a good man who truly loved her. She knew that if it had been Jee she was married to while she was pregnant, he would have acted differently. She smiled at the thought. But she was glad to see her son was a good husband and expectant father.

Smiling, Katara nibbled on a cookie as she listened to the elder’s words, caressing her swollen stomach with her free hand. She knew she was a lucky woman to have a good man like Zuko as her husband. He was so attentive, gentle, and affectionate. He was also very curious about her pregnancy and the development of her body and that of their child. And the sex was amazing too, especially since it seemed as if her sensitivity had increased with her wants and needs. She was insatiable and Zuko enthusiastically took advantage of that.

He especially loved to touch her swelling breasts, using any and every excuse to fondle them with both his hands and mouth. Yes, the sex was great.

Uncle Iroh asking her a question brought her out of her thoughts and Katara blushed lightly before she cleared her throat and took a sip of her ginger tea. Hm, maybe Zuko’s meeting could end early today…?

She grinned.
The following week found Zuko and Katara lying sated in each other’s arms after a couple of rounds of lovemaking. Fortunately, the waterbender no longer woke up to any morning sickness, so they were able to enjoy such mornings more often—and afternoons, and evenings, and nights. Zuko was supposed to have left their room an hour ago to attend the monthly meeting with his generals, but instead he had been entrapped within his wife’s possessive and lustful clutches for most of the morning, buried beneath silky sheets, limbs tangled together, skin pressed intimately close.

Zuko did not want to admit it, but Katara was wearing him out a little with her increased libido—and that was saying something considering his own sex drive. She wanted him all the time, anywhere and everywhere. She had even gone so far as to come into his study at random times of the day and pulling him out of his meetings, demanding he satisfy her immediately. His advisors quickly learned never to intervene unless they wanted a frustrated, lust-driven pregnant waterbender freezing them to the ceiling. Wei was the first to learn that the hard way, much to Zuko’s sadistic satisfaction and amusement. He never would have imagined that pregnant women would be so crazy for sex, but his wife certainly sought it whenever she could. He had even gone so far as to hide from her so he could get some rest, much to the amusement of Uncle Iroh and Gran-Gran. But even though he had sometimes lost feeling in his legs after she was done with him, he would not deny he enjoyed their every encounter.

Katara languidly drew imaginary patterns on her husband’s muscular chest as she rested against his side. She was utterly satisfied for the moment and she could not help but grin at the way Zuko had gulped when she had straddled his hips as soon as he had woken up and told him to brace himself. It was equally amusing how he had laid there beneath her as if his bones had melted once she finished them off. She sighed contentedly as her firebender ran his fingers through her hair as they basked in comfortable silence, watching the morning sunlight spill into their room.

“Have you thought of a name for our baby?” the waterbender asked curiously as she continued caressing his chest.

“I’ve thought about it, but I haven’t been able to come up with a good name yet,” the Fire Lord responded, his tone both husky and soft from their morning activities. “Do you have something in mind?”

“Not yet,” Katara responded with a small frown before she continued, “Maybe we could name our baby after your cousin Lu Ten, or if it’s a girl, after my mother Kya?”

Zuko was silent a moment as he thought over her suggestion before he shook his head, his hand still playing gently in her long hair.
“No,” he replied before he added more slowly, “I do appreciate the idea of keeping their memories alive, but I’d like for our son to have his own name, unique to him alone, so he won’t have to live up to his ancestors’ standards.”

Katara thought about it before she smiled.

“You’re right,” she agreed before she added teasingly, “You sure are very confident it’s a boy. I almost wish it’s a girl just to prove you wrong.”

Zuko chuckled as he reached down to gently caress her rounded belly.

“I wouldn’t mind if I turned out to be wrong and we have a daughter, but I’d bet my fire crown this first child is a boy,” he said confidently.

A soft laugh escaped the waterbender.

“We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Chuckling, Zuko lifted her chin and bent down to kiss her soundly on her grinning mouth. Katara’s giggles soon turned into soft moans as Zuko’s tongue slipped past her lips and slowly, teasingly, began to explore her mouth. Their breathing increased and their bodies pressed close together as desire exploded between them. Katara let out a breathless moan when Zuko pulled away from her mouth so they could catch their breaths. Even after all this time, they could not get enough of each other.

Panting, cock erect and throbbing in lust, Zuko moved so that he was hovering over his wife who looked up at him from half-lidded eyes. He could not believe he still had the energy for another round after the way his wife had pounced on him earlier, but the bewitching water nymph was too tempting for him to ignore. He admired the image she presented, the way her chocolate-colored hair spread beneath her on the pillow, the way her cheeks flushed from the pleasure, the way her chest heaved as her passion rose.

“Are you ready for me again?” he asked huskily.

A small snort escaped the brunette.
“Make love to me before I hurt you,” she replied firmly before she reached up to pull him down and captured his smirking lips.

They kissed each other hungrily, their lips and tongues making loud, wet smacking sounds before they pulled apart to catch their breaths. He bent down and pressed slow, soft kisses along his wife’s jawline before he trailed his lips down her smooth neck. He licked and gently nibbled the lines of her collarbones just as he reached both his hands up to cup her breasts, enjoying the increased fullness of her soft mounds as her pregnancy advanced. Her normally large breasts were huge and he loved it! Agni, his waterbender was perfect.

Katara suppressed an amused chuckle as her husband once again became wholly focused on her breasts before a soft moan left her when Zuko latched his mouth onto her right nipple, flicking his tongue insistently at the sensitive tip. She groaned and her hand fisted in his long, dark hair as he sucked a little roughly on the hard peak while he pinched the other one between his fingers.

“Zuko, mmm, uhh,” she panted as her body shifted restlessly beneath him. Her wet core was aching and throbbing, demanding to be filled and thoroughly pleasured once again. “Zuko.”

The firebender suckled more fiercely at her hardened nipple at the breathless, yet commanding sound of her voice calling his name. Her rounded belly brushed against his abdomen, once again reminding him that he had to be more careful in his passion for his wife in her current condition. Even though they couldn’t be as rough in their lovemaking as before, it was still just as intense and pleasurable. He gasped then groaned when Katara insistently rubbed herself against his hard shaft.

“Katara,” he rasped as he bucked his hips against her, wanting, needing more of her flesh against his own.

Impatient now to be inside her, to feel her soft body welcome him in a wet, tight caress, Zuko nudged her thighs further apart and quickly settled himself between them. Bending down to kiss her hungrily once again, Zuko grasped his stiff erection and rubbed it slowly against her slick folds. She was already so wet from their earlier orgasms, so foreplay was unnecessary, but he still made sure to press his weeping tip against her swollen nub a few times, causing her to moan and whimper in pleasure against his mouth, before he slowly slipped his swollen head inside her.

With an impatient hiss, Katara lifted her hips at the same time she pressed her hands against his ass and impaled herself on him until he was buried to the hilt, heavy balls pressed tightly against her backside. They both groaned their satisfaction at their joining and Katara reached up to grabbed his head so she could kiss him more fiercely. Zuko growled her name as she sucked his tongue and nipped his lips, her body straining desperately against him. Without any more stalling, Zuko pulled
his hips back until only his mushroomed tip remained within the heaven of her core before he slowly plunged forward.

“Ahh, ohhh,” Katara mewled as she threw her head back and clutched tightly onto his shoulders as he moved within her in a steady rhythm. “Yes!”

“Agni, you feel so good, Katara,” he groaned in a deep, husky growl that made the waterbender’s toes curl.

Zuko panted heavily as he continued to impale himself within his wife’s lovely body. The sensation of her wet walls clinging snugly around his cock never ceased to amaze him. He made sure to keep his body from crushing her as he pleasured her by pressing his hands on the mattress on either side of her. He became mesmerized by the sight of her breasts gently bouncing and jiggling with his movements. With a low growl of her name, he leaned down to engulf one stiff nipple into his mouth while one of his hands stroked and caressed her soft, tanned flesh while his other arm held him up.

“Haah, uuuuuuhhh.”

Eyes falling closed, Katara arched her back in pleasure as his mouth teased one overly sensitive breast while his other hand fondled the other mound with gentle, titillating squeezes. She had already orgasmed multiple times that morning, but his warm, sword-calloused hands on her soft skin stirred her body, despite how sensitive her nerves were. She loved these moments of slow, tender passion. Her hands roamed his back, admiring the lines of his skin, the broadness of his shoulders, the sensation of his muscles flexing underneath her hands as he impaled himself within her, her name falling from his lips in a tender, amorous plea.

Zuko closed his eyes and clenched his jaw when he felt his end approaching more quickly than he had anticipated. Electric sparks seemed to be regenerating all over his body as his pleasure mounted and his movements became a bit more desperate and fast. Reaching down, wanting to bring Katara to release first, he gently rubbed his fingers against that sensitive nub that made his wife go crazy.

Katara gasped as her husband’s ministrations began to pitch her over the amazing brink of orgasmic euphoria. She kissed him hard, moaning against his warm, skillful tongue before she shattered into a million sparks of pure bliss. Feeling utterly consumed, she threw back her head and loudly cried out Zuko’s name as his arms pressed her closer, tighter against his body as his hips moved desperately against her.

“Katara!” Zuko growled as he drove himself deeply within her as he exploded in ecstasy.
The waterbender gasped as the sensation of her husband’s hot sticky seed spilling within her still convulsing passage elicited another small orgasm out of her. Crying out his name again, she arched her back, swollen belly pressing against his navel, as she clutched his strong shoulders as her pussy clenched tightly around his throbbing cock.

“Zuko, oh gods!” she screamed as her hearthammered wildly in her chest before she slumped back onto the mattress.

Heaving, Zuko held himself completely still over his panting wife as his orgasm shuddered through him before he relaxed, barely catching himself from falling atop of her in a boneless heap. He carefully pulled out of her before he dropped himself beside her equally pleased body, draping one arm over her belly and resting his head on her breasts, waiting for their minds to come back from their blissful clouds.

After a moment of comfortable silence, Zuko let out a sigh and squeezed her middle gently.

“I should get ready for my meeting with the generals,” he finally spoke as he made to leave the bed.

Katara’s fingers tangled in his dark strands as she held his head close to her breasts, unwilling to let him go.

“Not yet,” she almost whined. She knew she should let him go to his meeting now, but she was too comfortable at the moment.

He shifted against her and lifted his head to look at her with an arch brow.

“You know I have to go attend to my duties,” he murmured softly.

“I know,” Katara replied with a sigh as she finally let go of him and carefully rolled to her side, facing away from him. “I should get up too and go about my own duties...as limited as they are right now.”

Zuko chuckled quietly as she looked over her shoulder to pout at him and he leaned down to press his lips against her pouty ones. Pulling away, he gently patted her bare bottom before he got out of
their messy bed. When she rolled onto her back to continue pouting at him, the young Fire Lord chuckled.

“We both know you’re going to seek me out anyway,” he pointed out amusedly.

Katara’s good mood returned and she grinned at him.

“Better be prepared, dear husband.”

Waking up spooned to Katara’s body was always an incredible feeling for the young Fire Lord. It made him wonder how he ever slept without her before she came into his life. He rested silently against her back, listening to her soft breathing as she continued her slumber, just enjoying the peaceful moment. He lifted his head a little and his eyes took in the more obvious differences in Katara’s body.

She was on her eighth month now and her stomach was more extended. They now limited their lovemaking for fear that he would hurt Katara and their babe with their passion, but also because it was sometimes uncomfortable for Katara. And although it did not bother him in the slightest, her increased girth made her self-conscious. He thought her body was beautiful, especially since it was changing to make room for their child. Katara got much more tired easily, because sitting and sleeping were uncomfortable for her and she never got much rest. The baby seemed adamant to make himself known with painful kicks, and her mood swings were almost terrifying. But despite that, he could see how much it excited and warmed her to have their child growing within her. He tried to help her out as much as he could, though it upset him that there was nothing he could do to take away her pains and discomforts.

He reached down to softly caress her rounded belly and smiled gently when he felt a small pressure against his hand a moment later. It still amazed him to see the development of his unborn child within his wife’s womb. It was a fascinating, awe-inspiring thing. And to think that he had a part in it. He paused when he saw his wife’s small, brown hand settle upon his paler, larger one. Smiling, he intertwined their fingers together as they rested them gently over her swollen stomach. He lifted his head to see her looking at him over her shoulder with a small, tender smile upon her soft, plump lips. The sparkle and warmth in her azure eyes had him bending his head down to press his lips against hers. When he pulled away, he saw that her smile was still in place.

“Waking up with you in the morning is the best feeling in the world,” Katara breathed happily.

Zuko smiled. It was as if she had read his mind. He leaned down to kiss her again before he pulled away from her and rose from their bed. He grinned when she rolled to her back and frowned at him.
“Let me get our bath ready,” he told her.

The radiant smile she gave him made him chuckle and caused warmth to spread through his chest. The water nymph really had him wrapped around her finger. He could only imagine what a daughter of theirs would reduce him to.

As her husband turned and walked toward the bathing chamber, Katara relaxed back into the soft mattress. Her hands automatically went to caress her large stomach and she cooed at her baby. The sensation of Zuko’s hand on her belly and their child stirring within her had woken her up from a restful sleep that she was thankful for. Sleep was often uncomfortable these days and she needed to relieve herself more often than usual. So when she did finally fall asleep, she would often wake a short while later to use the water closet. Her ankles were very swollen and her lower back was killing her. But she was determined not to let any of that destroy that happiness and excitement she felt at the thought of having her first child in her arms.

When she heard her husband walk back into the room, her eyes drank in the sight of his perfect naked body, caressing every ridge and flex of muscle and inch of alabaster skin, before she looked back to his handsome face. She grinned when she saw he was smirking at her.

“Ready for your bath?” he asked as he approached her.

“Yes!” the watebender exclaimed as she slowly rose from the bed.

She squealed when Zuko swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bathroom.

“Zuko!” she exclaimed with a scowl, “I can walk perfectly fine!”

“I know, but this way is much faster,” he teased as he looked down her.

“Are you saying I’m slow?” she growled.

The only response she received was a quiet chuckle, which increased when she indignantly smacked his bare chest. She soon forgot her irritation, however, when he stepped into the steaming bathtub and carefully sat down, bringing her gently upon his lap. They both let out simultaneous sighs of
pleasure as the warm water touched their skin. They remained sitting in silence, just enjoying the warm and pleasant atmosphere, breathing in the calming scent of the bathing oil Zuko had poured into the water.

A moment later, the firebender stirred and reached for the soap and sponge on the shelf carved into the wall. Katara let out a low, contented breath as Zuko began to gently run the lathery sponge along her shoulders and arms. She smiled, her heart doing a little flutter in her chest, when Zuko passed both the sponge and his soapy hand along her extended belly. Once he was satisfied that he had cleaned her body, he began to wash her hair. Another small groan of pleasure escaped Katara’s throat when she felt him gently scratch her scalp.

Really, he was the best husband a woman could wish for and he was all hers. Although she knew his temper was sometimes tested, he was always patient with her as her pregnancy advanced. He tolerated her erratic mood swings and the strange cravings. He had even asked Gran-Gran and Lady Yoon Hee for any advice on what he could do to make her more comfortable. Gran-Gran had advised him to massage her ankles, feet, and back, which he did determinedly, eager to please and help his pregnant wife. A fact she appreciated immensely.

Once he finished bathing her and himself, Zuko carefully helped her out of her tub. Katara stood patiently as he made it his purpose to dry every inch of her with soft dabs of the towel. She grinned when he frowned at her when she used her waterbending to dry her hair. With a huff, he rose his body temperature to dry himself off and Katara watched as steam rose around him before she laughed when his long hair puffed up a little before it settled back down. This time he did not protest when she refused to be carried and walked—or rather waddled—back into their room.

“Ugh, I’m starving,” Katara exclaimed as she quickly looked through her clothes. She made a face as she pulled out a large and flowy robe. It seemed she had to have the palace seamstress make new clothes every few months to accommodate her growing belly. She didn’t fit in her old clothes anymore, much to her chagrin.

“Jiao knows she should have our breakfast ready unless she wants an angry waterbender chasing her down,” Zuko replied with a chuckle.

“Oh, ha, ha, Zuko,” Katara responded sarcastically as she threw him a halfhearted glare, “If you don’t shut up, it’d be you having an angry waterbender chasing you down.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” the firebender muttered as he pulled on his dark, pointed boots.

“What was that?”
“Nothing.”

“Hm, I thought so.”

Zuko shook his head and grimaced. He could just hear Sokka laugh and say “Totally whipped.”

Once they were both dressed, they made their way to the antechamber, where sure enough, Jiao already had their breakfast laid out. They greeted the maidservant and she replied happily with a smile and a bow before she retreated to give them their privacy. As soon as they sat down, Katara reached for her chopsticks and began to eat enthusiastically. Eating more sedately, Zuko watched with both amusement and contentment as his wife exclaimed her delight with their meal.

“Ah, this tastes so good,” she moaned as she bit into some spicy eggs.

Zuko smiled behind his teacup. He had noticed that Katara craved spicy food more than she ever had before. His mother had told them that she had been the same way when she had been pregnant with him. Zuko allowed that to confirm his suspicions that Katara was carrying a firebender and hopefully a son.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

A large smile spread on the waterbender’s lips as she watched the children from the newly rebuilt orphanage swarm around her and Zuko as soon as he helped her down the carriage. The woman in charge of the orphanage hurried over and bowed respectfully to the royal couple as she escorted them to the new little garden in front of the building. They had come to visit the children as well as bring them some treats. It was the third time Zuko had decided to come with her and Katara had a feeling it was mostly because he feared someone might try to target her again. But for the past months since that terrible incident, nothing suspicious or untoward had occurred. Zuko had even told her than there hadn’t been any sightings of or word from Jianguo. It worried her to think of what the vile man could be planning, that coupled with the questions of who could have tried to have her lose her child caused her some anxiety. But she was determined not to let that rule her life or her thoughts for long as she focused most of her attention on the coming birth of her first child.

Katara grinned at the way Takeo, the little green-eyed boy, followed Zuko around, just as he had been doing since the first time the Fire Lord visited. As soon as the Fire Lord had been introduced to them, Takeo had attached himself to the firebender’s side and began asking him a multitude of questions that had the taciturn Fire Lord looking at the small child in wide-eyed confusion, but Zuko had soon relaxed and was answering the boy as best as he could. When they saw that the scarred Fire Lord wasn’t as intimidating as they had first thought, the rest of the children had gathered around him to the bewilderment of the firebender and the amusement of the waterbender.
They spent an hour with the children where Katara told them a story to their insistence before they decided to head out. The children whined at their departure, but perked up when they were promised another visit later in the future, but this time with the newborn heir accompanying them. As the royal couple made their way to their carriage, where a group of guards kept watch, Zuko turned to smile at Katara.

“Would you like to have dinner at our favorite restaurant?” he asked.

“That sounds great!” the brunette exclaimed just as her stomach gave a loud growl.

She blushed and cleared her throat while Zuko chuckled under his breath.

Once Zuko told the driver of their new destination, they settled in the carriage as it traveled toward the capital. A moment later, they were seated in a private area of the restaurant with the short owner once again bowing and exclaiming profusely over their patronage. Now that Katara was the Fire Lady and carrying the heir to the throne, the owner practically tripped over himself to make sure everything was to her satisfaction. A few servers immediately rushed forward to pour them tea. Katara was amused when the proprietor gushed over her pregnancy before fretting over her comfort, going so far as to asking if she wished for them to bring a more comfortable chair, which she politely declined. Once the royal couple was left alone, they looked at each other with amused expressions.

As they waited for their food to arrive, Katara took a small sip of her tea as she glanced around the prestigious restaurant, observing the people who were seated a few feet away from them. Instead of the glares and condescending expressions she had received the first time she had been in the restaurant, the nobles seemed more accepting of her, some even tried to get a curious glance of her pregnant stomach.

“It seems like it was just yesterday you brought me here for the first time,” she remarked with a smile as she brought down her teacup on the table.

“And yet many things have happened since then,” Zuko responded as he grabbed her hand in his, intertwining their fingers together, as he glanced down warmly at her protruding belly.

Katara smiled at him, squeezing his hand. The moment was interrupted when the servers arrived with their food, causing Zuko to pull his hand back and clear his throat as he slipped his passive mask back in place. Laughing inwardly, the waterbender turned her attention to their meal with relish.
They ate in comfortable silence with the occasional comment about one thing or another. Zuko was once again pleased when he observed Katara going for the spicy dishes. Soon they had finished their meal and they were being ushered out by the enthusiastic owner of the restaurant. Not wanting to end their day so soon, Katara proposed they walk a little through the marketplace. Zuko did not like the idea at first, worried someone would try to harm her once again, but Katara told him it would only be for a few minutes and they were surrounded by guards. With a resigned sigh, Zuko agreed. He really couldn’t say no when she looked at him with her large blue eyes shining so hopefully.

When they spotted the royal couple making their way through the marketplace, people immediately swarmed around them, congratulating them on their upcoming parenthood and complimenting and cooing over Katara’s rounded belly. The Fire Lady smiled and blushed at their zeal while the Fire Lord looked on with pride before the guards began to usher the excited crowd away. Zuko walked silently beside his wife as she admired the items presented at the various stalls and smiled at the flustered vendors as they fell all over themselves. It was only until she began to feel tired that Katara agreed with Zuko to head back to the palace.

They were just rounding a corner to head to their carriage when three people almost bumped into them. Katara’s eyes widened and Zuko’s narrowed into slits when they recognized the individuals. Standing with Longshot and Smellerbee on either side of him, Jet looked at the royal couple in surprise before he coughed and straightened himself out, running his hand through his messy hair.

“Fancy meeting you here,” the freedom fighter commented with a roguish grin, though it was obvious he was trying to avoid looking directly at Katara.

Zuko brought up his hand when Shen, Kuo and a few of his other guards stepped forward to remove the strangers. The guards looked at him uncertainly, but stepped back, although they remained alert and wary.

“What are you doing here in the Fire Nation?” Zuko asked with a dark frown.

Pulling out his wheat stalk for a moment, Jet shrugged as he motioned for his companions to give him some privacy. Smellerbee and Longshot frowned at him before they reluctantly walked a few feet away.

“I’m actually here on a job,” the freedom fighter leader said casually.

“A job?” Katara asked.
“Yeah, this Fire Nation bastard stole some jewelry from some pompous, filthy rich noble from the Earth Kingdom. I came in search of the guy to take the stuff back for a big reward,” he responded as he placed the wheat stalk back to his mouth.

“Did you find the man?” the brunette asked.

An arrogant smirk appeared on the freedom fighter’s face. “Not yet, but the bastard won’t know what hit him when I do.”

Jet finally looked at the waterbender and he felt his chest tightened at her loveliness before he mentally scolded himself. He was adamant about forgetting her and his feelings for her and that was what he was going to do, dammit. His eyes lowered and landed on her pregnant belly, visible despite the dark red, formal robes she was wearing. Sadness and wistfulness assaulted him for a moment before he squashed the feelings. A small smirk appeared on his thin lips when he saw the firebender place a possessive arm around her middle and glared at him.

_Some things never change, huh?_

“Congratulations,” he said.

Zuko and Katara were surprised at his sincerity. They glanced briefly at each other before they returned their attention to the freedom fighter. They could only assume he had given up on the waterbender since he hadn’t once tried to flirt with her since they had been talking. Katara placed her hand on her stomach and smiled widely while Zuko stood next to her with a proud aura.

“Thank you,” they both replied.

They watched as Jet’s smirk vanished and a more solemn expression appeared on his face.

“You guys should watch out for Mai,” he warned them in a low tone, “She’s set on gettin’ Zuko back.”

“And how do you know that?” the firebender asked with a raised eyebrow.
They watched as Jet shifted uncomfortably and rubbed the back of his neck as he glanced at Katara before looking away.

“I...Back in Omashu...I tried to help her separate you two,” he admitted with a small shrug before he cleared his throat and added, “And we were...lovers for a while.”

“Huh,” the waterbender uttered before she glanced to her husband.

Zuko arched an eyebrow as he stared at the uncharacteristically abashed freedom fighter. Mai claimed to love him and yet she had no qualms about having lovers while she chased after him? Not that he cared, for Katara was the only women that mattered to him. But that showed exactly how superficial her feelings were towards him. But maybe one of her new lovers could finally make Mai see that she was better off with someone else? However, Jet’s next words dispelled those hopes.

“She’s obsessed with Zuko,” Jet continued before he muttered under his breath, “Though I can’t understand what’s so good about the bastard.” He shrugged when he noticed the firebender glaring at him. “She’s set on taking you back no matter what it takes. The woman’s crazy, I tell ya.”

Zuko let out a snort.

“I’d like to see her try taking Zuko away from me,” Katara spoke up with a low growl as she crossed her arms below her breasts. She did not notice the amused looks both men gave her at the image she presented with her large belly.

“You know there is nothing she can do to take me away from you,” Zuko responded as he pressed her close to his side.

“Too bad that fact doesn’t sink into her stubborn brain,” the irritated waterbender retorted.

Jet watched as the firebender gave her middle a gentle squeeze and Katara looked up to smile at the Fire Lord. The freedom fighter frowned at the ache the image of them interacting caused in his chest. His eyes once again settled on the waterbender’s swollen stomach and he clenched his fists. If only he had not allowed his vengeance against the Fire Nation take hold of so strongly that he was willing to kill innocent people, Katara would not have been disappointed with him and he would have had a better chance of winning her heart. It could have been his child she was carrying and him holding her to his side.
But it was too late. He could see how much she loved her husband—the word made his gut roil—just as he could see how much the scarred firebender loved her, and now she was going to give him a child.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, Jet cleared his throat and the couple turned to look at him as if they had forgotten he was even there. He suppressed a scowl at being ignored and instead smirked.

“Well, then, I’ll be on my way. Still need to catch that thief,” he drawled. “See ya around.”

“Hopefully not,” the firebender retorted.

The freedom fighter let out a laugh as he raised his hand in a casual salute and turned around. He glanced over his shoulder to look at Katara wistfully one last time before he forced himself to turn back and walked away. He was joined by his comrades and they disappeared around another corner.

“Well…that was unexpected,” the waterbender commented.

“Hm,” was Zuko’s only response as he thought over everything Jet had said before he refocused his attention on his wife.

“Don’t you have someone else to bother?” an annoyed Fire Lord asked wryly as he leaned back against his large chair in his study.

“You should be grateful I’m giving you such great advice!” Sokka exclaimed with a sniff across from him.

“Sounds more like horror stories than advice to me,” a paler-than-normal Avatar muttered from the chair next to the Water Tribe warrior.

“What? I’m just telling you guys how childbirth is and what to expect!” the blue-eyed man retorted.

“But didn’t you faint when Suki was giving birth? How would you know?” Aang asked with a
Zuko watched in amusement when his brother-in-law spluttered in indignation. Aang and Toph had arrived about a week ago and Hakoda and the rest of Katara’s family had arrived three days ago in order to be present for when Katara gave birth. Currently, the Water Tribe Chief was playing Pai Sho with Iroh and Pakku in the Royal Palace Garden while the women of the family accompanied Katara to another lesson with Madam Fang Hua. Jee had accompanied Ursa to once again visit Azula, though Zuko knew his mother’s efforts to reconcile with her daughter were going to be in vain once again. There were times when it seemed as if Azula was warming up to their mother before she lashed out. He had offered to go with her, but his mother had refused since having them visit Azula together seemed to anger her more.

So now he was stuck listening to Sokka recount the horrors of childbirth. He really did not need to hear about it. He was already a nervous wreck, worrying over Katara and the baby’s well-being. But he could not deny Sokka’s antics—as annoying as they could sometimes be—and Aang’s calm and cheery personality did make him forget his worries a bit.

“Well, who wouldn’t get a little queasy when they see a head coming out of—?”

“I really don’t need the visual, thank you,” Aang interrupted quickly.

“Ha! And you’re mocking me about my reaction when you can’t even hear about it!” Sokka guffawed before a mischievous grin split his face. “Just imagine when you knock up Toph and she’s ready to pop out your baby and—”

“Ahhh, I’m not listening!” the airbender said in a sing song voice as he pressed his hands to his ears.

Chuckling, Zuko could only shake his head at their antics. Sokka was interrupted from his detailed descriptions when they heard a loud commotion outside the door. They looked up just in time to see the door flung open as Katara walked in with Gran-Gran, Suki, and Madam Fang Hua following agitatedly behind her. Toph strode in after them with a grin on her face.

The Fire Lord’s eyes roamed over his wife’s form, heavy with his child now at her ninth month, and felt pride and satisfaction settled on his chest before he returned his gaze to Katara’s face when she finally stood before his desk. A frown marred his brow at the anger he could see in her expression and became worried. She was close to her time now and Lady Yoon Hee had said that extreme emotions or stress could cause Katara to go into an early labor. He turned a dark look on the short Fire Nation noblewoman who bowed stiffly at him as the rest of the women gathered around his desk. Sensing things might turn messy, Sokka and Aang stood up from their chairs and slowly
slinked into the background. They had both been on the receiving end of Katara’s temper before and neither wanted to repeat the experience.

“Katara, please try to calm down,” Zuko told her softly, pleadingly. “You know it’s not good for the baby to get too upset.”

Katara glared at him for a moment and she watched as he gulped, but she took a deep breath as she placed a hand on her lower back. Her feet were swollen, her back was killing her, and she had a feeling she would have to once again go relieve herself soon. As if on cue, a compressing force slammed into her bladder and she grimaced. She could not wait for the baby to be born. But now Madam Fang Hua was annoying her with her damn, stupid traditions.

“What’s wrong?” Zuko asked as he turned to look at Gran-Gran.

The older tribeswoman had been of great help these past couple of months—even if she enjoyed teasing him unceasingly and embarrassingly most of the time. But he endured it since it made his wife happy to have her grandmother with her. And admittedly, he found Kanna’s teasing amusing as well.

“Madam Fang Hua wants Katara to start looking for a wet nurse for the child,” the blue-eyed old woman spoke up with indignation.

“But I want to breastfeed my own baby!” Katara added heatedly as she defiantly crossed her arms and glared at the noblewoman.

Zuko squirmed in discomfort at the topic since he had never had to think about it before. Vaguely, he heard Aang and Sokka cough uncomfortably. He glanced to the side and noticed that Toph was smirking in his direction, no doubt enjoying his discomfiture. Suki stood next to the short earthbender with her arms crossed over her chest in silent support of her sister-in-law.

“It is tradition for the Fire Lady and noblewomen to have wet nurses,” Madam Fang Hua argued, her tiny body stiff and unyielding.

“That is because those women care more about ruining their figures than they do their own children,” Kanna replied with a huff.
Madam Fang Hua opened her mouth to retort against such harsh words, but she did not have a chance to speak because the Fire Lady interrupted her.

“In my tribe, breastfeeding is a sacred bond between mother and child,” Katara said with pride and determination. “I will not have another woman take care of my child’s most basic need.”

“You tell her, Sugar Queen!” Toph piped in.

The blind earthbender grinned when she felt the old noblewoman turn to glare at her. Ah, how she loved riling people up.

Madam Fang Hua continued to argue about what Fire Nation tradition dictated while the two Water Tribe women retorted with the benefits of breastfeeding with side comments added in by an amused earthbender and an annoyed Kyoshi warrior. Zuko wisely decided not to intervene and just sat uncertainly on his chair, watching the women argue back and forth. He glanced to Sokka and Aang, but they just shrugged. He scowled at them. They were completely useless! It was only when the old noblewoman turned to him pleadingly, did he decide to say something.

“We will not need a wet nurse, Madam Fan Hua,” he said calmly yet firmly.

“But, my lord! It’s tradition!”

“If it is what my wife wishes, I will not go against her,” Zuko continued firmly. “I will not take away her privileges of being a mother and I’m proud that she wishes to take care of our child herself instead of hoisting the responsibility to some other woman.”

Katara beamed at him happily. Gran-Gran and Suki nodded their heads approvingly and Toph gave him a thumbs up.

“Now that we’re on this subject,” the waterbender added as she stared at her husband, “I don’t want a stranger to be my child’s nanny, so I propose to have Jiao to take on the job.”

The old noblewoman gasped in shock.
“But she’s just a mere servant!” she exclaimed. “It’s tradition for a high class nanny to take care of the royal heirs!”

“I don’t care for that,” Katara replied hotly before she again addressed Zuko, “I trust Jiao and I know she would do a great job looking after our son while we have to attend to our duties.”

Zuko was silent a moment as he contemplated Katara’s words before he nodded.

“I agree. Perhaps you should ask Jiao what she thinks.”

“I will,” Katara replied with a satisfied smile.

Madam Fang Hua sighed in defeat.

“Very well. If it is what you both wish,” she reluctantly conceded.

With a bow, the small old woman made her way out of the room.

Kanna let out a chuckle as she looked teasingly at her granddaughter’s husband.

“Very smart of you to agree with us, young man,” she said amusedly.

“I do value my life,” Zuko responded in a serious tone.

Katara giggled while Kanna and Suki let out a loud laugh.

“Take note, boys,” Toph replied with a chuckle as she smirked at Aang and Sokka.

“Geez, Lord Jerkbender, you just had to one-up us, huh?” Sokka groused.
“It’s not my fault I’m a better husband,” Zuko responded seriously, though a smirk curled his lips.

“Ha! You wish!” the blue-eyed warrior exclaimed before he turned to his amused wife. “We all know I’m the better husband, right, Suki?”

“I really don’t want to get involved in this,” the female warrior responded.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

With a laugh, Suki turned around to head out of the rooms.

“I’m going to check on the twins,” she said as she threw a last grin at her frowning husband.

“Come on, Suki, you’re really crushing my ego here!” Sokka groused loudly as he quickly followed after his wife.

“Ah, the joys of marriage,” Toph said with humor.

“I think I’ll be the best husband ever, right, Toph?” Aang piped in cheerfully as he wrapped an arm around his girlfriend.

Toph let out an amused snort before she shrugged off his arm.

“I don’t have time for this,” she drawled as she marched toward the door.

“Toph! Are you saying I won’t?!” Aang called out with a small whine as he quickly rushed after her. “Toph, wait up! You have to explain yourself!”

Kanna and the royal couple watched them all leave with amused chuckles.

“Well, I’ll leave you two youngsters to yourselves,” the old woman said as she smiled at them. “I’m
going to look for my errant husband. I have a feeling I will find him with that wicked uncle of yours.”

The royal couple laughed as they watched her make her way to the door. With one last smile and a wink, Kanna close the door after her. Katara turned back to smile at her husband.

“Thank you for supporting me on this, it’s important to me, Zuko,” she said warmly.

“You know I always will.”

Returning her smile, Zuko stood up and walked around his desk toward her. He wrapped his arms around her and embraced her to him. He smiled when her rounded belly got in the way before he pulled back to gently caress it. Katara placed her hand over his and she lifted her head for a kiss. Chuckling, Zuko leaned down and pressed his lips to hers in a slow, soft kiss.

“Besides, how could I deny my son anything?” he whispered in a low tone.

Smiling, Katara reached both her hands up to cup his face before she brought him down to kiss him more firmly.

~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*
be silly talking to her stomach, but she could not help the elation she felt at the thought that she would soon hold her child in her arms. Sure, she was nervous at the upcoming event, but her happiness eclipsed that.

A small gasp escaped her when two strong arms encircled her from behind and large hands rested above hers.

“Hello, beautiful,” her husband’s velvety baritone murmured against her ear.

Suddenly conscious once again of her figure, Katara tried to hide her body from his gaze by wrapping her arms around herself. She felt so ungainly and huge in front of him, but Zuko did not allow her to move away from him and instead placed his chin on her shoulder so they could look at each other through the mirror. The waterbender huffed.

“How can you call me that when I’m as fat as a cow-pig?” she pouted.

Zuko lifted an eyebrow at her.

“You’re not fat, you’re pregnant,” he replied matter-of-factly before he added with a smile, “And you’re the most beautiful pregnant woman ever.”

Katara’s sudden dolefulness uplifted and she laughed joyfully as she snuggled back into his hard frame.

“It’s too bad you can’t be rewarded at the moment,” she said playfully.

“Why not?” he asked with wide eyes. “Lady Yoon Hee said it was okay for us to keep having sex as long as we’re careful.”

“I’m not really in the mood right now. Your son’s constant kicking has tired me out.”

_Not to mention my feet are aching and my back is killing me,_ she thought to herself.
Zuko let out a dramatic, mournful groan.

“He must hate me,” he sighed.

Katara laughed.

“Oh, come now, Zuko. Don’t exaggerate,” she told him amusedly as she lifted her head to press her lips against his jaw.

Smiling, Zuko leaned down and kissed her mouth. He pulled back and his hands lingered over her stomach, as they always did, before he released her. He helped her into a flowing, soft nightdress before he went to take a quick bath, which ended up taking a little longer because he had to release some of his sexual tension with the help of his hand. The sight of her naked, even large with child still turned him on. Once he was finished with his bath, completely dried, and with black sleeping pants on, the firebender walked back to the bedchamber. He saw that Katara was sitting before her vanity and she was slowly brushing her hair. Quietly, he made his way toward her until he stood behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. Their eyes connected in the mirror and they smiled at each other.

“Here, let me brush your hair,” he said softly as he took the brush from her hand.

Zuko swept her long, brown locks aside and bent down to press a lingering kiss to the nape of her neck. The sensation of his warm lips brushing softly over her skin sent shivers through her and she sighed in pleasure. Satisfied, Zuko let her hair sift out of his hands and began brushing the chestnut-colored tresses.

Katara hummed as he ran the brush slowly along her hair while his other hand caressed and smoothed it down. She relaxed at the soothing sensation, the gentle and firm strokes, and let out a contented sigh as she closed her eyes. They remained in comfortable silence, letting the tranquil and pleasant moment surround them. He brushed her hair until it was a glistening mass of chocolate waves cascading down her back. Then to the waterbender’s surprise he began to braid her hair into a long plait, making sure not to let a single strand be out of place, before he tied the end with a ribbon.

“There,” he said as he took a step back to admire his work before he gave a satisfied nod.

Katara pulled the braid over her shoulder to examine it before she grinned up at her husband through the mirror’s reflection.
“Who knew you would be such a good handmaid?” she teased with a chuckle.

Zuko let her laugh for a moment before he pulled gently on her braid until she fell backwards against him. He nudged her head up and then he kissed her until all thoughts of laughter fled from her mind. When he pulled away, he grinned when he saw that Katara had been rendered senseless with his kiss. With a low chuckle, he lifted her into his arms before she could protest and carried her to their bed.

A contented sigh left the waterbender when she was laid down upon the soft mattress. Her lower back hurt and her ankles and feet throbbed in pain, but she decided to turn her focus on her husband instead as he slid in beside her. She snuggled against him when he wrapped an arm beneath her shoulders. She asked him about his day and she listened attentively as he gave a brief account of his duties, laughing amusedly when he grumbled irritably about whoever had annoyed him this time, which admittedly, were a lot of people. When he asked her about her day, Katara launched into an enthusiastic narrative about the baby items she and Ursa had commissioned and the blanket Gran-Gran was weaving for her great-grandchild.

Zuko watched silently as his wife continued her animated chatter. He glanced down at the swollen belly pressing against his side, and again his chest tightened with both excitement and concern. Any moment now, Katara could go into labor and he could not help feeling worried at the thought that something might go horribly wrong. He made sure to remain at the palace at all times now so he could be by her side in an instant the moment their child decided to enter the world.

Katara paused in her story as she saw her firebender’s face turn soft as he reached a hand down to rub her extended womb. She watched in silent wonder as he scooted down to gaze intensely at her stomach. She felt tears pool in her eyes at the devoted way his hands tenderly cradled the sides of her belly before he leaned down to press a kiss right on the center of the mound. Even through the silky cloth of her nightdress, his warm breath seeped through to caress her skin, causing her to shiver pleasantly. Despite his taciturn personality, his temper, and emotional scars, her husband could be so sweet sometimes and it only made her love him more for it. Despite his insecurities and doubts, his dark past and his relationship with Ozai, she was positive that he would be a great father for their children.

“Katara?”

The sound of his baritone brought her out of her thoughts and she looked back to his face. His golden eyes were gleaming with quiet pride and happiness, but she could also detect that fear and worry he tried to hide.
“Yes, Zuko?”

It was not hard to guess what he was thinking about by the slight furrow of his brow and the tension of his jaw. He had already expressed his fear of losing her or their child during labor before and she knew he would not stop worrying. Reaching for him, she smoothed her hand over his head, twining the long, dark strands through her fingers before she cupped his face.

“Don’t worry, Zuko. Everything will be fine.”

His frowned deepened a little before he let out a quiet sigh as he leaned toward her touch.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her quietly.

“I’ll admit I’m a little scared and nervous,” Katara replied sincerely, knowing she couldn’t lie to him. “But I’m more excited than anything. After all this time, after being made to think I would never have children, the thought of giving birth to this baby of ours makes me very happy.”

Zuko was silent a moment as he contemplated her words before he gave her a small smile which seemed to warm her heart. Katara returned his smile, noticing how the tension lessened from his face and shoulders.

Kissing her rounded stomach one more time, the firebender moved back to lie beside her, gazing silently and intensely into her blue eyes before he leaned forward to kiss her lips. Sighing softly, Katara’s eyes fluttered closed at the sweet kiss he bestowed on her and she slid her arms over his strong shoulders and around his neck to press him closer to her. Wrapped in a warm and tender embrace, their tongues slowly tangled together, their breaths intermingling, as their lips brushed caressingly against each other. Both enjoyed these kinds of kisses when there was no other intention but to simply feel connected to one another. As much as they relished the sexual aspects of their relationship, there was just something about the simplicity of just kissing, of just holding each other close, that made their bond much more real, much stronger.

Their soft moans of gentle passion turned into sighs of quiet contentment as their lips disconnected. They gazed silently into each other’s eyes as Zuko brushed the back of his fingers along one of her rosy cheeks before he tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. When she smiled at him with a gentle warmth, Zuko felt his heart constrict in his chest. Golden eyes once again fixated themselves on his wife’s belly. He placed a tender yet protective hand to her stomach, caressing the place their son rested, curled safely within his mother’s womb. Everything had to come out well. He had to believe that.
Katara smiled when Zuko tucked her close against him as he did every night and she let out a small sigh of pleasure as she snuggled, as much as her pregnant belly allowed, close to his warm side. With a flick of his wrist, he snuffed out the candles and they were plunged into semi-darkness as the light of the moon streamed into their bedchamber. It was the middle of summer now and it was too hot to have the fireplace lit.

“Sweet dreams, love,” she heard him whisper as he brushed his lips against her temple.

Her heart fluttered.

“Sweet dreams,” she responded as she placed her hand on his chest, over his steady beating heart.

Two days later found Katara sitting among a large pile of cushions beneath the cherry blossom tree in the garden, enjoying the warm weather. She was having a picnic with Gran-Gran, Ursa, Iroh, Toph, and Suki. Jiao was with them, watching over Jing, Ting, and her son Ichiro. Jiao had happily accepted the position of the heir’s caretaker since she would also be able to take care of her own son and the position paid better since it was highly sought after. She was very grateful to her lady.

Katara felt very happy having her family at her side, supporting her and helping her as much as they could during the final weeks of her pregnancy. She would be even happier once she had her baby in her arms. Zuko was extremely anxious but excited as her time approached. Caressing her large belly, she wondered when that time would come.

Laughing at something Iroh and Toph had said, the waterbender grimaced when she felt another small pain along her abdomen before she relaxed when it went away. She had been woken up by a similar pain, but since it hadn’t appeared again until that moment, she had not been alarmed by it. She rubbed her stomach as she thought of Zuko’s promise to spend the rest of the day with her after his meeting with his advisors and the Water Tribesmen regarding the peace treaty concluded. She had wanted to be present, but to her embarrassment she had fallen asleep a few minutes before it started. Zuko had not wanted to disturb her rest, so he had decided not to wake her up. She grumbled, but decided not to let it bother her.

Another small cramp rippled across her stomach. Thinking a little walk would help, Katara tried to stand up, but to her annoyance, was having a bit of difficulty. She smiled in gratitude when Jiao rushed forward to help her up. Just as she turned to thank her maidservant, she felt a sudden rush of water slide down her legs.
Everybody froze as they stared down at her suddenly wet robes in surprise.

“Um, I think my water broke,” Katara said, finally shattering the silence.

“No shit, Sugar Queen.”
“The baby is coming!” Kanna exclaimed excitedly, and a little worriedly, as she quickly rose to her feet and rushed to her grimacing granddaughter. Placing an arm around her for support, Gran-Gran turned to a wide-eyed Jiao. “Quickly, go get the Fire Lady chamber ready.”

Jiao nodded quickly and rushed off after Suki promised to look after Ichiro.

“Toph, go fetch Lady Yoon Hee,” the old woman ordered.

“Yes, ma’am!” the earthbender said as she marched back toward the building, but not before sending an encouraging grin toward the Fire Lady.

Katara let out a small gasp as she felt her first contraction before she relaxed. Ursa and Iroh crowded worriedly around her.

“Are you in a lot of pain, dear?” Ursa asked softly as she took hold of her daughter-in-law’s other arm.

“Not at the moment,” Katara replied as she took a deep breath, her hands clutching her stomach. The tightening on her belly had lessened already.

“Can you walk to your room?” Gran-Gran asked. “It might take a while for the baby to be ready to be born. Walking will help ease the pain a little.”

“I...I think I can,” the waterbender responded with a nod.

Oh La, the moment had arrived for her baby to be born! Nervousness suddenly consumed her and it took all she had not to panic. She had to be strong.

Kanna and Ursa both took hold of each of her arms to support her and they slowly made their way toward the Fire Lady bedchamber where it was the custom for the Fire Ladies to give birth. They paused a couple of times to wait until Katara’s contractions subsided before continuing. Iroh and Suki, towing the twins and Ichiro with them, followed after the three women. Iroh kept the
waterbender distracted with his chatter and Katara focused on his calm yet cheerful voice.

Finally, they arrived at the Fire Lady’s chambers. Suki stayed in the anteroom with her twins, who were curious by the adults’ reactions, and Ichiro, who looked wonderingly at the new people he had been left with. Eventually, the two-year-old twin girls ignored the adults and decided to explore their surroundings and Ichiro, a year younger than them, tagged along. In the meantime, Katara, Ursa and Kanna, with Iroh following behind, entered the bedchamber where they saw that Jiao had pulled back the bedcovers, tied the canopy curtains to the posts, and had placed clean sheets on the bed. She also had water heating in the fireplace in a large pot.

Katara gasped and groaned quietly when another contraction hit her.

“We should get you into more comfortable clothes,” Kanna said as she ran a soothing hand along her granddaughter’s lower back.

“I believe that is my cue to leave,” Iroh spoke up. Smiling encouragingly at his niece-in-law, Iroh gently grasped her hands and squeezed. “Be strong, my dear. I look forward to getting my first glimpse of my first grandnephew or niece. One of many I hope!”

He winked and Katara could not help but laugh as she squeezed his hands back.

“I should let Zuko know his child is about to be born,” Iroh added.

“Perhaps it’s best we don’t disrupt his meeting when it might take a while for the baby to arrive,” the waterbender mused. Another sharp pain hit her and she grimaced. She really wanted Zuko to be there with her, however.

“Nonsense!” the old man exclaimed as he allowed her to squeeze his hands more tightly as the pain coursed through her. It reminded him of his departed wife doing the same thing when she was giving birth to Lu Ten. “Zuko would rather be here with you than in some boring meeting. Besides, he will be upset if we didn’t let him know as soon as possible.”

With another reassuring smile, the old man released her hands and walked back towards the doors. Ursa and Kanna quickly helped the pregnant waterbender out of her wet robes and into a comfortable nightdress before helping her settle onto the bed. A few minutes later, Lady Yoon Hee bustled into the room.
“How are you feeling, my lady?” she asked with a kind smile.

“How are you feeling, my lady?” she asked with a kind smile.

“Fine...at the moment,” Katara replied with small grimace.

“I will examine you to see how things are progressing, alright?”

“I will examine you to see how things are progressing, alright?”

“Yes,” the waterbender answered with a nod.

“Yes,” the waterbender answered with a nod.

As Lady Yoon Hee moved to wash her hands and asked Kanna how long ago the water broke, Ursa stepped to her daughter-in-law’s side and smiled gently at her.

As Lady Yoon Hee moved to wash her hands and asked Kanna how long ago the water broke, Ursa stepped to her daughter-in-law’s side and smiled gently at her.

“I will let them to their work, but I will keep coming back to check up on you,” the Fire Lord’s mother said softly as she brushed the waterbender’s hair aside.

“I will let them to their work, but I will keep coming back to check up on you,” the Fire Lord’s mother said softly as she brushed the waterbender’s hair aside.

“Thank you,” Katara responded with a smile.

“Thank you,” Katara responded with a smile.

With an encouraging squeeze of her shoulder, Ursa quietly left the room. Lady Yoon Hee moved back toward the bed and carefully pulled up Katara’s nightdress so she could examine her. She and Kanna had come to an agreement of who was going to do what as they prepared for the birth, but it was decided that Gran-Gran would deliver the baby since she was related to both the mother and child. Once she had concluded her examination, the midwife covered Katara’s legs once again and smiled gently.

With an encouraging squeeze of her shoulder, Ursa quietly left the room. Lady Yoon Hee moved back toward the bed and carefully pulled up Katara’s nightdress so she could examine her. She and Kanna had come to an agreement of who was going to do what as they prepared for the birth, but it was decided that Gran-Gran would deliver the baby since she was related to both the mother and child. Once she had concluded her examination, the midwife covered Katara’s legs once again and smiled gently.

“I believe that it would be a long while before the baby is ready to be born,” she explained. When she saw the Fire Lady frown, she added, “You must best be prepared for a long labor, my lady. This is your first birth, and from my experience, first birthing can be long and tedious.”

“I believe that it would be a long while before the baby is ready to be born,” she explained. When she saw the Fire Lady frown, she added, “You must best be prepared for a long labor, my lady. This is your first birth, and from my experience, first birthing can be long and tedious.”

Another contraction hit Katara and she grit her teeth, nodding that she understood. When the sensation passed, she slumped back onto the bed with a soft pant. She could only imagine how much more painful it would be once the baby was truly ready to leave her womb.

Another contraction hit Katara and she grit her teeth, nodding that she understood. When the sensation passed, she slumped back onto the bed with a soft pant. She could only imagine how much more painful it would be once the baby was truly ready to leave her womb.

“Would you like to walk a little?” Gran-Gran asked gently.

“Would you like to walk a little?” Gran-Gran asked gently.

“Yes,” Katara replied with a small nod.
Yoon Hee and Kanna helped her to her feet, standing on either side of her as they paced around the room.

Katara once again ran her hands over her stomach. Soon she will finally hold her first child in her arms. How would Zuko react when he found out she was in labor? Another contraction hit her a few minutes later and she exhaled sharply before the sensation passed. She hoped it didn’t take too long.

Sitting behind the fire wall in the throne room, Zuko listened with satisfaction as one of his scribes listed the revisions that had been done to the peace treaty between the Fire Nation and the Southern Water Tribe. Sitting across from the row of councilmen, Hakoda gave a nod of approval once the man finished speaking. On his right sat Sokka with a grin on his face and on his left sat Pakku with arms crossed and expression solemn as always. Aang sat next to the Water Tribe men in calm silence while Momo dozed off on his lap. Jee stood at attention near the doors.

“Are these revisions to your satisfaction, Fire Lord Zuko, Chief Hakoda?” the old scribe asked as he looked up from the scroll.

Before either man could voice their approval, one of the doors was opened and Iroh entered with hurried steps. Everybody turned to look at the old prince in curiosity. Up on his throne, the Fire Lord raised an eyebrow when he noticed the excitement in his uncle’s eyes and the concern on his face.

“Uncle, is something the matter?” Zuko asked in a calm tone, even though his chest was constricting in worry. Did something happen to Katara?

A large smile curled the old man’s lips as he slipped his hands into his long sleeves.

“Your wife has gone into labor a moment ago, my lord,” Iroh replied calmly, “Your child is about to be born.”

Iroh had barely finished speaking when Zuko sprang up to his feet and dashed down the steps, parting the wall of fire with a swift flick of his hand, before running out of the room. The men stared after his quickly retreating figure in surprise before the room erupted into loud exclamations of excitement.

“The heir is coming!” one of the advisors shouted.
“It’s about time,” Wei sniffed, which earned him a glare from the Fire Lord’s family.

“Quickly, we must let everybody know of the good news!” another exclaimed and a few of the men hurried out of the room.

Iroh watched them go with chuckles of amusement before he cheerfully dismissed the other men still chattering amongst themselves. He turned when he felt a presence behind him and found Hakoda frowning down at him.

“Is my daughter okay?” the blue-eyed chieftain asked in concern.

“She seemed perfectly fine when I saw her,” Iroh replied soothingly. “She was laughing at my poor attempts at humor.”

Hakoda relaxed.

“That’s because I’m the master of jokes, but I am willing to take on an apprentice,” Sokka said to Iroh.

Iroh grinned, either from the comment or from the elbow Aang shoved into the warrior’s side, only he knew. Sokka yelped in a rather high pitch that caused the airbender to laugh.

“I can’t wait to meet my third grandchild,” the chief announced proudly and puffed out his chest, ignoring his son.

“I’m going to be the coolest uncle ever!” Sokka piped in arrogantly as he punched a fist into the air.

“Nope, I’m going to be way cooler!” Aang replied with a grin.

“Ha! You wish! I’ve already had two years of practice being the best dad ever,” Sokka exclaimed with a haughty sniff.
“Yeah, but I’m the Avatar,” Aang replied with grin, “He or she will be more impressed having the Avatar as an uncle!”

Sokka opened his mouth before it shut close with a click as he frowned.

“Yeah, well...I’m still more awesome!” the blue-eyed warrior huffed.

Rolling his eyes at their antics, Hakoda shook his head with a smile before he turned toward the door with Iroh, Pakku, and Jee following quickly behind him.

“Hey, wait for us!” Sokka cried out as he and Aang hurried after them with Momo chattering excitedly above their heads.

Running as quickly as he could toward the royal bedchambers, Zuko felt his heart race in both anticipation and concern. It was time. His child was ready to born! Was Katara all right? He hoped he had not missed anything. When he neared the double golden doors, the firebender threw one of them open, raced across the anteroom, before opening the other set of doors a little more carefully. As he walked into the room, he froze in his tracks when he saw it was dark and completely empty.

“What?” he muttered in confusion before he felt his heart stop in his chest.

Where was his wife? And the baby? Did something wrong happen?!

He pressed a fist to his mouth as horrible scenarios flashed before his eyes. Oh gods, he couldn’t lose them! Panicking, Zuko raced away from the royal chambers in a desperate search for his wife. Just as he was running down the long corridor in growing anxiety, Iroh and the rest of the men rounded the corner.

“Zuko, what’s wrong?!” Hakoda asked in a panic when he saw his son-in-law’s wild eyes and desperate expression. He grasped the agitated firebender’s shoulder and squeezed shakily. “Oh La, did something happen to Katara?!?”

“She isn’t in our room!” Zuko shouted as he made to bolt down the corridor.
“What? What happened to her?!” Sokka exclaimed in shock.

Aang’s eyes widened in anxiety while Jee and Pakku frowned darkly.

Iroh quickly stepped in front of his nephew and firmly grasped his upper arms before he could sprint away.

“Zuko, calm yourself,” Iroh told him calmly yet firmly, “Everything is fine. Katara is in the Fire Lady bedchamber. It’s tradition for the royal heirs to be born there.”

At his uncle’s words, Zuko took in a deep, shaky breath and ran a hand over his head. He felt his tense body immediately sag in relief. Of course. He had forgotten. Agni, he was just nervous. He never had to deal with this before.

Nodding his head in understanding, Zuko waited until his uncle released him. Without waiting for the others to say anything else, the Fire Lord hurried toward the Fire Lady rooms with the others following quickly behind him. As he stepped into the antechamber, Zuko saw his mother, Toph, and Suki sitting around the low table with the twins and Ichiro playing at a corner.

“How is Katara?” Zuko asked his mother as he walked further into the room.

“She is fine, just in a little pain at the moment,” Ursa responded quickly when she noticed her son’s worry.

Nodding, Zuko did not wait for her to continue as he walked swiftly toward the other set of doors, knowing she would answer the questions from the other men who had piled into the room. He needed to see Katara for himself in order to calm his fears. He needed to make sure she was truly all right. Throwing the doors open, Zuko burst into the room, startling the older women and causing Jiao to almost drop the teapot she was holding.

Kanna and Yoon Hee turned to the Fire Lord and scowled at him, but he ignored them as he stared at his wife leaning against the headboard. He did not even notice that Jiao rushed forward to close the door behind him. Katara’s eyes were closed and she was grimacing in pain, and his heart constricted. A moment later, she relaxed and opened her eyes with a loud sigh. When she finally noticed him standing at the entrance, a bright yet slightly pained smile spread across her face.
“Zuko,” she said softly.

At her call of his name, the Fire Lord immediately rushed toward her and wrapped his arms around her despite her large belly getting in the way.

“Katara,” he murmured in relief before he pulled back slightly to look worriedly into her face, his eyes scanning her expression as he sat at her side.

“Don’t look so glum, Zuko,” she teased him with an exhausted smile, “Our baby is ready to greet us. We’re about to be parents.”

At her words, the firebender relaxed and gave her a large smile as his chest expanded in satisfaction and excitement. He leaned toward her and pressed a soft kiss to her smiling lips. He pulled back quickly when he heard Kanna clear her throat loudly. Zuko turned to frown up at the old woman whose hands were placed on her hips.

“You should wait outside until the child is born, young man,” the tribeswoman said firmly.

“I will not leave Katara alone,” Zuko responded firmly, his expression stubborn and firm.

Lady Yoon Hee stepped up next to Kanna as she also looked down sternly at the young firebender.

“A birthing is no place for a man, my lord,” she said calmly yet just as firm as the other woman while Jiao stood silently in the background.

Zuko opened his mouth to retort, but a small groan of pain coming from his wife interrupted him.

“Katara!” he shouted her name as he turned back to look at her in concern.

He grasped her hand and she squeezed it tightly as she stiffened. The two old women glanced at each other. They knew the sight of his wife in pain was only going to agitate the Fire Lord, which would in turn agitate Katara, something she needed to avoid at this time. They watched as the waterbender relaxed back into the pillows and panted softly while her husband worriedly asked her if she was okay.
“Please listen to us, Zuko,” Gran-Gran spoke up firmly, “Lady Yoon Hee and I will take care of things.”

Zuko once again opened his mouth to deny their request, but Katara squeezing his hand had him turning his attention to her once again.

“I’ll be fine,” she told him soothingly as she stared reassuringly into his golden eyes. “You should listen to them.”

The waterbender watched as her husband frowned. Her grandmother and Lady Yoon Hee were very traditional and it would only make them uncomfortable if Zuko remained while they worked. She wanted him to be with her as she brought their first child into the world, but she also did not want him to witness her struggles since it would worry him and there was nothing he could do to ease her pain.

“But I don’t want to leave you to deal with this alone,” he told her softly as he squeezed her hand and brushed a sweaty strand of her hair behind her ear.

“There’s nothing you can do,” Kanna spoke up bluntly, “You will only get in the way.”

Jiao and Yoon Hee gasped at the way she addressed the Fire Lord, but Zuko was not offended since he was used to her bluntness. Besides, she was family.

“Gran-Gran,” Katara admonished gently when Zuko frowned at Kanna.

The old blue-eyed woman sighed at the young couple’s expressions before she dropped her arms to her sides.

“Fine,” she relented, “You can keep her company until her time comes.”

Zuko’s tensed shoulders relaxed and he smiled at the old woman.
“Thank you, Gran-Gran,” he said sincerely.

Both Katara and Kanna grinned. He had been referring to her with the affectionate name ever since the older woman arrived months ago.

Silently, Zuko rose from the bed and took off his royal robes until he was only clad in a light tunic and pants. He then grabbed a chair placed in a corner before carrying it back to Katara’s side. The fire was burning low since the summer evening was hot and the windows had been opened to cool down the stuffy chamber. Placing the chair down next to the bed, the firebender immediately grabbed Katara’s hand, which earned him a tired smile from his wife.

Katara groaned when a painful contraction ripped through her body, causing her forehead to become drenched in a fine sheen of sweat. Panting and moaning, she could barely hear Zuko’s soothing baritone and feel the caress of his hand on her messy hair. She could not wait for this baby to be born.

For the next few hours they talked about this new point in their lives, their upcoming parenthood, and their hopes for their firstborn and their growing family. Other times Zuko would read to her, their hands always clasped together, which Katara would tightly clench when a contraction hit her. Zuko would wipe the sweat from her forehead and neck with a damp towel or helped her walk to relieve the tension and pain. As the night dragged on, Katara would doze off fitfully, but would always be awaken by another contraction. Occasionally, Ursa or Suki would step in to check up on Katara before leaving to update everybody else waiting anxiously outside.

The young Fire Lord did not notice the pleased and awed smiles from the older women, his thoughts focused entirely on his laboring wife. Nor did he notice their exasperated but amused expressions when he asked them multiple questions when something new happened.

“Have you seen the new nursery yet?” Katara asked her husband as she clutched at his arm as they once again walked slowly around the room.

Dawn was just a few moments away.

“Yes,” Zuko responded with a smile. “It came out wonderfully.”

“I’m glad y—ahh!” Katara’s loud, pained cry interrupted her and she hunched over, placing a hand on her lower stomach and clasping tightly onto Zuko’s arm until her nails were digging into his flesh.
“Katara!” Zuko exclaimed in alarm as he wrapped an arm around her to steady her.

Kanna and the midwife immediately rushed toward the waterbender.

“Quickly! Place her on the bed!” Kanna ordered.

With a nod, Zuko swiftly scooped up his groaning wife into his arms and hurried over to the bed, gently depositing her on the mattress. She immediately latched onto his hand and he ignored the pain of her tight grasp when another contraction hit her just as Yoon Hee stepped forward to check her. When Katara slumped back with a pained groan, he watched as the midwife lifted Katara’s nightdress up and prodded between her legs before giving a firm nod of her graying head.

“It is time,” Yoon Hee announced, “The baby is ready to leave its mother’s womb.”

At the midwife’s words, Katara’s eyes flew open and she gazed down upon the large dome of her belly. She felt overwhelmed with relief, happiness, and fear. Her baby was coming! But what if something went wrong?! She felt her heart pound in both anticipation and terror, but when she sensed Zuko staring worriedly into her face, she forced herself not to let her fear show. She did not want to worry him more than she knew he was. Looking up to his anxious eyes, she smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

Zuko returned the gesture. He was equally torn between feeling ecstatic at the thought of finally holding his firstborn and feeling afraid that something terrible could happen. Spirits, he did not know what would become of him if he were to lose either Katara or the baby. Or heaven forbid, both. But he had to have faith that everything would come out well. Agni could not tear his family away from him. Besides, Katara was a strong woman. She had endured many hardships and came out triumphant in the end. Childbirth will just be another of those moments.

“It is time for you to step out, young man,” Gran-Gran’s soft, understanding voice reached his ears. “Lady Yoon Hee and I will handle things. Everything will be fine.”

Zuko wanted to argue to let him stay with Katara, but he knew his attitude would not help matters. Besides, he did not want to add any more stress on Katara or upset her in any way. Resigned, Zuko leaned down and pressed his lips against his wife’s sweaty forehead as he squeezed her hand before he pulled back slightly to gaze into her pained, blue eyes.
“Please be strong, love,” he whispered as he brought her hand to his lips. “For our child. For me.”

Katara felt tears pool in her eyes at his softly uttered words. She knew he was still worried he could lose both her and their child. She felt her heart swell with love and affection as she stared into his burning, golden eyes.

“I will,” she finally replied, her tone reassuring, firm, and determined, “You will have your firstborn in your arms soon and I will be fine. I swear it.”

Zuko smiled at her resolute words. Even while still in the pains of her approaching labor, his wife was as strong and fierce as always. Agni, he loved this woman. Leaning down to kiss her briefly yet tenderly on her mouth, he reluctantly rose to his feet.

“I will be waiting for both of you,” he said with a firm nod.

With one last squeeze of her hand and a lingering look, Zuko turned and walked toward the door. Katara watched him go through pained eyes, and once the doors were closed behind him, did she let out the anguished moan she had been holding back as another contraction slammed into her, forcing out the air in her lungs. Gritting her teeth, Katara panted loudly as she leaned back against the pillows and stared dazedly at the canopy of the bed.

“It won’t be long now,” Gran-Gran assured her kindly as she patted her moaning granddaughter’s knee as she stood between them, while the midwife and Jiao readied themselves to help bring in the heir.

Just as Kanna spoke, another painful contraction rippled across Katara’s lower body and forced a loud cry from her throat. The contractions were now coming faster and they left her with little chance to recover between them. She was entirely focused on the furor of the birth that all thoughts fled from her mind as she endeavored to pull forth all her strength into bringing her first child safely into the world. There was a part of her, however, that was petrified at the thought that all her efforts would come to nothing. Gritting her teeth, she banished the thought from her mind. She could do this. Both she and her baby would pull through and they would greet Zuko together soon.

“That’s it, Katara,” Gran-Gran’s soothing voice penetrated the fog in the waterbender’s mind. “You’re doing fine. You will need to start pushing when the next contraction starts. Remember to pull your knees close to your body and push for a count of ten.”
As she felt another contraction coming, she did as instructed, a cry of agony the only sound that escaped the Fire Lady’s mouth. The contractions were approaching even faster now and she had little time to rest between pushes. Even though she had helped many women in childbirth, she had not really understood what they were experiencing. But now she truly did and it was overwhelming. Everything centered on bringing forth the new life within her at all cost, even her own life.

In the Fire Lady antechamber, the anxious family waited for news as they watched the Fire Lord paced in agitation. Every time Katara’s pain filled shouts resounded through the doors, he would wince and clench his hands or rub at his face in frustration and concern. Almost everybody had dozed off as the night progressed. But Zuko had not so much as sat down as soon as he was forced out of the bedroom a few minutes ago and he had been awake with Katara the entire night. Ursa and Suki had tried to reassure him that everything would be fine, but he would only nod absentmindedly. Sokka, Toph, and Aang had tried to engage him in their banter to distract him, but he had ignored their attempts. Iroh had brewed tea for all of them as they waited, but Zuko did not even touch the teacup his uncle had tried to give him.

“Come, Zuko, why don’t you sit for a moment?” Hakoda asked as he watched his son-in-law stare intensely at the closed door as if he could force them open by sheer will.

“I can’t.” the young firebender responded with a shake of his head.

“It might take a while longer for the baby to be born,” his mother added softly, “Why don’t you have some tea with us?”

Zuko again shook his head and stubbornly resumed his vigil before the closed doors. Ursa sighed and turned to frown worriedly at Jee who gave her a reassuring smile.

“Was I this bad when Suki was giving birth?” Sokka whispered to Aang and Toph.

“Yeah, but at least Sparky looks manly in his panic,” was the earthbender’s amused reply. “Not to mention he was able to stay on his feet the entire time.”

“Hey!” Sokka groused indignantly while Aang and Suki laughed quietly.

“She’s right, though,” the airbender said with an amused grin.
“Shut it, Aang,” the blue-eyed warrior growled as he glared at his friend before a smirk appeared on his face. “Just wait until you’re the one waiting for news while Toph pops out your baby.”

Aang stammered and his entire face flushed a deep red color. Sokka guffawed before he cried out in pain when Toph smacked the back of his head.

“Shut up!” the small earthbender hissed even as her cheeks tinted pink.

Suki could only shake her head at their antics and chuckle in amusement as she glanced at her daughters who were sleeping on a pile of cushions at a quiet corner. Kuo had arrived hours ago to pick up his sleepy son while they waited for Jiao to be done with her duties. The older people watched in amusement as Toph bashed Sokka’s face with a cushion when the warrior made another teasing remark.

Zuko, however, did not pay them any attention. Another scream from Katara had Zuko clenching his hands and grimacing. He squashed down the urge to rush in there to assist his wife. He was tense with worry. Katara was in pain, and he wished with an intense desperation to go to her, but he knew he would just be kicked out of the room by the older women. Tradition dictated that his place was to wait outside since childbirth was the women’s domain. So all he could do was wait in anxious impatience until he was allowed to enter.

While logically he knew that the troubles and pain Katara was going through at the moment was natural since it meant the birth of the child they had conceived with the love they held for each other, the irrational part of him did not care. His beloved wife was in pain and he hated anything that caused her pain. Katara was a strong woman and hearing her agonized cries and screams made him want to retch, or set something on fire, or punch someone, or...anything as long as he could do something! He hated the fact that there was nothing he could do, that he had no control over the situation. All he could do was wait while his wife labored to bring their child into the world. And he hated it because she was the only one suffering.

The dawning sun was just rising over the horizon, tinting the dark sky with soft golden and violet colors, when suddenly Katara let out a loud, long scream. Zuko froze, the sound causing his back to stiffen. Then there was only silence and his heart stopped in his chest when his ears did not pick up any other sound. What happened? Right when he felt he was about to break, the shrill wail of an infant pierced the air and his body almost sagged in relief.

He released the breath he had been holding and his heart raced at the sound of his child’s first cry. He quickly stepped toward the door and waited anxiously to be let in while everybody else in the room began to talk all at once. The baby continued to squall and Zuko could not help but simultaneously grimace and grin at his heir’s lusty cries.
“The child has quite the pair of lungs,” Pakku commented wryly.

“Must’ve inherited it from Sugar Queen ‘cause I can’t imagine Sparky howling like that,” commented Toph with a chortle.

“Oh, you’d be surprise how much Zuko cried,” Ursa spoke up with a fond smile. “He was especially loud when he wasn’t fed on time.”

“Mom,” Zuko groused when everybody else laughed.

He ignored everybody once again and he fixed his golden eyes on the wooden door as he waited. It felt like hours had passed before he saw the door finally opening.

He watched as Kanna, Lady Yoon Hee, and Jiao stepped through. Jiao was carrying a basket with what he assumed was soiled sheets and cloths. His heart stopped when he saw that some of them were stained with blood. Alarmed, his eyes immediately scanned their expressions, needing to know that both his wife and child were all right. The women smiled at the expectant Fire Lord as he waited for news.

“Congratulations, young man,” Kanna was the first to speak, her voice proud and soft, “You’re the father of a healthy baby.”

Zuko’s breath hitched in his throat.

_I’m...I’m a father!_ he mentally exclaimed.

“Is my wife okay?” he asked anxiously.

“She is fine,” Kanna assured him. “She did well. However, she is in a lot of pain, as to be expected, and she is really tired. The birth was long and it took a toll on her, but fortunately, there were no complications.”
Zuko again felt his tension lessen.

“Can I see them now?” he asked while everybody else celebrated behind him.

“Of course, my lord,” Yoon Hee said with a gentle smile.

Smiling, the women stepped aside to let him through. Zuko, unmindful of the others, rushed past them and closed the door behind him. He knew the others would want to see Katara and the baby, but he needed this moment alone with his new family before he had to share them with everybody else.

His eyes immediately darted toward the four-poster bed to where his wife was resting. She was reclining on some pillows and her eyes were closed. He almost panicked and his heart squeezed painfully in his chest when she did not open her eyes, but he relaxed once she looked up at him with a tired smile.

“Katara,” he breathed through a constricted throat.

Approaching the bed silently and carefully, Zuko did not remove his eyes from the sight before him. Soft rays of the morning sunlight spilled into the room and illuminated Katara sitting upon the bed. She was clad in a fresh nightdress and her long hair had been neatly braided. Her cheeks were still flushed and her hairline was still a little damp from sweat. Her azure eyes and the lines of her face reflected her slight pain and exhaustion, and yet, she had never been more beautiful to him than at that moment and the sight of her struck him to his very center. Now, seeing her survive childbirth, seeing how she exuded pride and joy over her accomplishment, only reinforced the depth of his love for her. He was so overcome with emotion than he felt choked up. Was this how all men felt after their wives gave birth?

“Katara,” he repeated her name reverently.

“Zuko,” she answered, still smiling tiredly.

Once he finally made it to her side, he reached out a shaky hand to brush her smooth, flushed cheek before tucking a strand of still damp hair behind her ear. He leaned down and kissed her softly, before pulling back to press his forehead against hers.
“Thank you,” he whispered hoarsely, “Thank you for keeping your promise to come back to me safely.”

Katara felt her heart squeeze in her chest at his heartfelt words.

“I promised we were going to be fine,” she replied in the same hushed tone.

Unable to contain the relief and joy he was feeling, Zuko pressed his lips to hers, vaguely noticing that she had opened her mouth to say something else. He had planned on only giving her a short, sweet kiss, but the rush of emotions he was experiencing made him deepen the kiss until they were kissing each other passionately. He kissed her thoroughly and would have continued tasting from her lips if it wasn’t for a soft sound coming somewhere from between them that penetrated his mind.

Pulling back immediately, he looked down and finally noticed the small bundle in his wife’s arms. Agni, how could he have forgotten? He sat down on the mattress beside Katara and looked down at the bundle expectantly before he glanced at his smiling wife.

“We have a son, Zuko,” Katara whispered softly, her tone conveying her euphoria and wonder.

“A son,” Zuko repeated in awe and his eyes widened as he again stared at the bundle. He had been right?

He watched with bated breath as Katara pulled back one edge of the blanket and revealed a small, red face. A small tuff of raven-black hair covered the tiny head, but it was the bluish eyes staring back at him that caused Zuko’s breath to hitch as all his worries seeped out from him and in its place was only elation. This small little person was his son...their son and he was beautiful.

“He’s perfect,” Zuko whispered in admiration. He felt pride and warmth spread through his chest.

Lifting his hand, Zuko slowly, hesitantly reached toward his son before carefully touching the soft baby curls. Eyes still wide, the firebender traced a finger down the smooth slope of the baby’s skull before rubbing the soft cheek. His son wiggled slightly as he continued to stare up at him. Zuko remembered Kanna saying that all babies were born with the grayish-blue eyes and he wondered if the color would stay blue or if they would change into his own golden color. He hoped they stayed blue like Katara’s.
Katara smiled. Now that her husband was there with them, she decided to thoroughly check her son. Carefully, she unwrapped the blanket so that she had an unobstructed view of her firstborn. Just like every new mother before her, she subjected her baby to a thorough examination as she counted all ten fingers and toes, smoothed her hand over his pinkish skin she was sure would turn as pale as his father’s, and checked his ears, mouth, and nose.

Zuko watched as his wife inspected their newborn and he found himself following her examination with equal attention.

Once she was satisfied, Katara quickly wrapped her baby snuggly in the blanket so he wouldn’t be cold and looked back to his face. The sight of her son staring into her eyes made her heart constrict in her chest. Silently, she stared into the bluish eyes in wonder as she ran a finger along his soft cheek before she tenderly touched his dark hair that was so much like his father’s. It seemed her son had inherited most of her husband’s characteristics and it made her happy. She wished, however, that her son retained his blue eyes.

She was in awe. She was now a mother. The birth had been extremely painful and she had at one point almost thought that she was about to pass out from the overwhelming agony. But now that she had her son in her arms, the pain, the fear, and everything else was like a distant memory. She had only met her son for a few minutes and she already loved him with all her heart. She felt a deep connection to him that she had never felt before and a fierce love for him erupted in her chest.

Snapping from her thoughts, Katara looked up to see her husband gazing at them in quiet pride and satisfaction and she smiled.

“Here, you should hold him,” Katara said softly as she lifted her arms toward her fascinated husband.

Zuko hesitated as he reached for his son, afraid that he would drop him or hurt him, but he could not deny the fact that he wanted to hold him. He listened intently as Katara told him how to hold the baby. As soon as his son was in his arm, Zuko immediately brought him close to his chest as emotions once again swamped him.

He stared down in awe into the little face of the baby he and his wife had created together. His son stared intently back at him through large eyes and Zuko lifted one hand to once again rub the smooth cheek. He felt his heart swell in joy when his son nuzzled against his finger and cooed.

“Aww, he likes you,” Katara murmured softly before she cooed at the baby. “Say hello to your papa.”
Zuko’s heart fluttered at the name. Now that he was holding his son in his arms it only made the fact
that he was someone’s father become much more real. And soon his son would be calling him
“papa”. The emotion that was coursing through him at the moment was something he had never felt
before. The love he held for his wife was one thing, but the love he felt for his own child was
something so vastly different. He had only met his son for a few minutes and already he had become
the most important person in his life. Zuko vowed to protect and love him always.

“Hello…son,” he murmured softly and his voice broke with emotion as he stared into the bluish
eyes.

A soft sound from his wife had him looking up to see her smiling at them, tears gleaming in her
large, cobalt eyes. Looking back down at the precious bundle in his arms, Zuko smiled when he
realized his son was still staring at him. Unlike the loud wails from moments before, the baby was
now silent and calm.

“My son…Kazuhiko,” he said and he again looked at his wife, waiting for her reaction to the name.

“Kazuhiko,” Katara repeated softly, testing the word. “First, harmonious prince.” She nodded in
approval and smiled at her son. “It’s perfect.”

They smiled at each other before laughing quietly when the baby cooed loudly.

The newly named Kazuhiko suddenly scrunched up his little face and he began to fuss in his father’s
arms. Zuko glanced down at him in alarm before he looked at Katara in concern.

“I think our little prince is hungry,” Katara said with a soft smile aimed at them both.

Zuko carefully placed Kazuhiko on his wife’s chest and kissed her cheek before sitting back. He
watched as Katara opened her nightgown and placed their son against her now bared breasts. The
baby rooted around until he finally found her nipple and latched onto it before he began to drink
greedily. Zuko saw Katara wince a little, but she just smiled at the hungry baby. Kazuhiko’s tiny
hand kneaded his mother’s soft breast as he ate, his eyes drooping a little. Zuko felt awed at the sight.

Silence permeated the air as the new parents proudly watched their son. When the baby finally had
enough, Katara carefully burped him against her shoulder. When she brought him back into her
arms, they saw that he had already fallen asleep. They smiled indulgently down at their son.
The sound of Katara’s soft yawn made Zuko look up at her and he frowned in concern at the exhaustion in both her eyes and face. And although she was not showing it, Zuko knew she was in pain.

“You should rest,” he told her quietly as he reached up to smooth down the damp hair at her temple. “You deserve it after all that.”

“But the baby—”

Zuko quickly interrupted her protest as he gently placed his thumb on her lips.

“He’s sleeping now,” he said softly, “And he has me and all his family here to keep him safe.”

At his words, Katara finally allowed the tiredness to wash through her and she lay back against the soft pillows with a fatigued sigh. She smiled when Zuko carefully picked up their son from her straining arms and brought him close to his chest. It made her heart warm up at the gentle manner in which Zuko handled their child. Her husband carefully leaned down and kissed her gently before smiling at her.

“I love you,” he whispered, his tone both tender and intense.

“I love you, too,” she replied with a smile.

Relaxing into the pillows, Katara sighed and closed her eyes. Not a moment later, she fell into a deep slumber. Zuko watched her for a moment, unable to take his eyes away from her. After placing a kiss on her forehead, he forced himself to stand up so he could show off his son to the rest of their family he knew would be waiting anxiously outside.

As soon as he stepped into the anteroom, everybody jumped up, eager to meet the new addition to the family. They began to ask questions, but a stern look from the Fire Lord had them toning down their excitement once they realized the baby was asleep.

“I would like for you to meet my son, Kazuhiko,” Zuko said in a low tone so as to not disturb the baby’s rest, but everybody could hear the pride in his voice.
They approached quietly and surrounded the proud father and his son. Hakoda nodded his head in approval while the women exclaimed softly over the baby’s cuteness.

“He looks just like you when you were born, Zuko,” Ursa spoke up with a gentle smile as she stared down into her first grandchild’s sleeping face.

Zuko smiled as his eyes once again became riveted to his son’s face.

“It seems like he might have Katara’s blue eyes,” he said.

He chuckled quietly when Katara’s family beamed with pride. For the next few minutes, Zuko allowed them to fuss over the sleeping baby. Ursa was the first to hold Kazuhiko and Jee watched her with a small smile. Then it was Hakoda’s turn and he smiled widely down at his first grandson. When it was Iroh’s turn, they all watched as a melancholic smile curled his lips as he stared down at the tiny baby.

“My grandnephew will surely grow up into quite a handsome man,” Iroh mused before he added with a grin, “Just like his granduncle!”

Everybody chuckled quietly at his words. When Iroh moved toward Zuko to hand the baby back to him, the young Fire Lord stopped him from moving away. Iroh glanced up curiously at his young nephew.

“You know you will be more of a grandfather to my children than an uncle,” Zuko told him sincerely, “After all, you are like a father to me.”

Zuko watched as tears gathered in his old uncle’s eyes and he smiled when Iroh smiled widely at him.

“Thank you, Zuko,” Iroh said happily.

A few minutes later, Zuko returned with Kazuhiko to the quiet bedchamber. Agni, today just had his emotions all over the place. He walked toward the bed and smiled down at his sleeping wife. He cradled his slumbering son for another moment, still marveling at the fact that he was now a father.
After everything that had happened, after all the hardships, even after Yin-Min’s treachery, Katara and he were finally parents. His child seemed so tiny, so delicate in his large arms, but Zuko vowed to help him grow big and strong, and if Kazuhiko turned out to be a firebender, Zuko would train him to be a firebending master just like him. And one day this little person would take his place and become Fire Lord to a mighty nation.

Staring silently into Kazuhiko’s face for a moment longer, Zuko carefully placed him on the crib that he was sure Jiao had moved close to the bed. It had been created by one of the best carpenters in the capital, made of an exquisite mahogany wood, and had already been placed in the room weeks ago for this precise moment. Zuko held his breath when his son whimpered a little before relaxing when Kazuhiko let out a little sigh and went back to sleep. Carefully moving the chair closer, the young Fire Lord sat and exhaled deeply as the past day finally caught up with him. He had not slept for an entire day and yet he could not seem to take his eyes away from the two people that he held closest to his heart.

It was at the moment, as he watched over his small family, that Zuko realized he had done the right thing in going against his father during the war and defying his country’s traditions by marrying a Water Tribe woman, a woman he married for love and not one for convenience. And this—his wife, his son, his family—was his reward for his efforts. They were the most valuable of treasures and he vowed to love, cherish, and protect them until his last dying breath.
Katara smiled at Jiao as the maid made sure everything was perfectly in place on the elaborate royal robes the Fire Lady was wearing. It was a dark maroon silk, trimmed with black and golden designs, but it was looser than what she usually wore in order to hide her still rounded belly. Her stomach wasn’t as pronounced as when she was still pregnant, but it had yet to return to its normal size.

Three weeks had passed since Kazuhiko’s birth. Zuko had wanted to wait until she was recovered before they formally introduced the heir to the Fire Nation, as was tradition. She and Zuko had been awake since dawn to make sure everything was in order for the celebration. Katara still felt twinges of pain and soreness, but they were not as bad as the first few days. Her waterbending had been able to heal some of the damage, but her body had to do the rest of the work.

In her time at the Northern Water Tribe, she learned that the water’s healing power can treat abnormalities or injuries to the body, but couldn’t really do much for a normally functioning body. Despite the stress she had put on hers by carrying Kazu for nine months, female bodies were designed for that purpose, and reacting exactly as it should after giving birth. Thus, there was nothing ‘wrong’ with her that her waterbending could fix.

There was still some bleeding and cramps as her womb contracted to its normal size. Her breasts filled with milk to feed her growing baby, her nipples raw and overly sensitive, often uncomfortable when they were too full. Not to mention taking care of a newborn was exhausting. She knew it would take some time to return to normal and get used to taking care of a newborn. But despite all that, she could not be happier.

Hearing a soft coo coming from the crib next to her side of the bed, Katara smiled as she immediately made her way toward it. She smiled fondly as she stared down at her son, who waved his chubby arms in the air when he saw her leaning over him. Reaching down, she caressed his smooth cheek and rubbed his belly. He had woken up and already been fed, which was why she was finally getting ready for the event.

Jiao, along with her other duties, had been of great help the last few weeks, giving her advice and help without being overbearing or intrusive. Katara knew the maid would make a great caretaker for Kazuhiko once he was a little older.

Katara laughed softly when Kazu, the nickname they had taken to using instead of his full name, grabbed her finger and held on tightly. Her heart swelled with love as she gazed down at him. At just a few weeks old he already looked so much like his father, and she knew he was going to grow up into a handsome man. She would have to make sure to keep the horde of young women from throwing themselves at him, she mused with both amusement and distaste.
Kazu shook her finger and she smiled as she stared into his bluish eyes. She really hoped that as he got older, his eyes would remain the same shade as her blue eyes, which would show her mark on him. But she knew that with mixed heritage babies, eye color wasn’t set at birth as it was when a child had two parents from the same background. No matter what his eye color, she loved him more than she ever thought possible.

She had despaired of ever having children, of never knowing the joys of motherhood, and because of that fear, her son was even more special and precious to her. She did not know what she would do if anything were to happen to him.

“My lady, I need to fix your hair. It’s almost time for the ceremony,” Jiao’s voice sounded behind her.


Jiao smiled softly.

“I understand. I couldn’t keep my eyes off Ichiro when he was born,” the maid said wistfully before she added with a small laugh, “Although he didn’t want to admit it, I’m sure it made Kuo jealous.”

Both women laughed at her husband’s antics before they started comparing their sons’ qualities and exclaiming over their cuteness with motherly pride. With one last caress of Kazu’s tuff of dark hair, the waterbender walked toward her vanity and sat down on the plush stool while Jiao picked up the brush and began to work. From the reflection of the mirror, Katara could see her son still waving his hands in the air.

A moment later, they heard one of the large doors open and they looked over to see the tall Fire Lord walk in. Katara eyed him appreciatively in all his finery. He was wearing a black formal robe trimmed in gold, a thick sash in deep burgundy wrapped around his waist, and his golden fire crown nestled neatly in a small topknot. The rest of his long dark hair fell smoothly down his broad back. His eyes darted to the crib before he glanced back to her.

“Are you almost ready?” Zuko asked his wife as he watched Jiao work on her hair.

“Almost,” Katara replied.
Seeing that the women were occupied, Zuko walked toward the wooden crib and looked down. He smiled at Kazu when the baby finally noticed him, and began waving his arms and kicking his tiny feet in excitement. His wife’s blue eyes on their son’s face made his heart warm with affection and he hoped they stayed blue, though he would not mind if they turned golden like his own. However, from what he had seen, eye colors seem to be connected to the element a person could bend, so he was beginning to wonder if he should perhaps hope Kazu’s eyes changed to gold.

Although he would not mind whatsoever if Kazu turned out to be a waterbender, Zuko hoped he was a firebender, just so his son would not have to deal with the royal council and the Fire Nation citizens opposing his right to the throne. Fire was the element of the Fire Nation, which was why its rulers were called Fire Lords. He was sure the citizens would not be pleased with having a waterbender rule over them, especially since not many years had passed since the end of the war.

Zuko frowned darkly at the thought, wishing there was some way he could go against their opposition, but knowing there was nothing he or Katara could do. It was just the way the world work. Either way, Zuko planned to train Kazuhiko to become a magnificent warrior, a great heir to the throne, and an honorable man. Zuko could not wait until Kazu was old enough to be trained for all those things. It was still too early to tell which element the little prince would be able to bend or if he was a bender at all, so for now he decided to worry about the issue when it presented itself and just focus on his time with his newborn son for the moment.

He was still adjusting to being a father. The many nights where Kazu would wake them up with loud cries and wails were exhausting for both Katara and him. It was harder for him to distinguish why their son was crying, but Katara seemed to instinctively know if he was hungry, needed a diaper change, or just wanted to be held. When it seemed as if he had finally settled down and they could go back to sleep, Kazu would only start crying again. But despite the sleepless nights, they could not be happier with their son.

He was especially excited, however, at the prospect of being able to play with Kazu once he was a little older. Zuko remembered how he had wished to play games with his father when he was young. He recalled one time in particular, when he was about five years old, when he had run to his sire to ask him if they could play a game. Ozai had pushed him away and sneered at his childishness before ordering him to return to his caretakers. From then on, Zuko had learned not to bother his father with such things. He did not want his own son to have the same sad childhood.

Zuko promised himself that Kazu would never have to worry about getting his attention or approval, or wonder if he was cared for and loved. He would definitely never have to worry about being forced into an Agni Kai. Smiling, Zuko reached down to run his finger softly along Kazu’s cheek before grinning when his son immediately grasped his finger within his small fist. It still amazed him to know he had been part of creating something this precious, something this sweetly innocent. He almost wished that Kazu would never grow up so he would never know of the ugliness of the world, of pain, fear, and horror, but alas, life did not work that way. Besides, there was also much wonder, joy and happiness in life if one were to look for it, or as was his case, if he had someone to share it with. He wanted Kazu to have such happiness one day.
Silently watching from the mirror’s reflection, Katara felt her heart expand as she saw her taciturn husband chuckle softly as he picked up their son with tender care. She loved how gentle Zuko was with the baby. He held him to his chest as if Kazu were the most fragile, the most valuable, of treasures. She knew Zuko still thought he was going to make a mistake and he wasn’t really confident about his parental skills, but his efforts were what truly mattered. He actually cared about being part of their son’s life. And the love and protectiveness he felt toward Kazuhiko was obvious to anyone who saw him interacting with his son.

“Katara?” her husband’s baritone snapped her from her thoughts. “Are you ready to leave?”

She finally noticed that Jiao had already left after she finished styling her hair and had already placed her fire crown on her head. Smiling, the waterbender stood up and walked toward her two favorite men with slow, careful steps. She wasn’t completely healed as of yet.

“You look beautiful,” Zuko told her with a smile as he watched her approach.

Katara let out a small laugh.

“That’s probably because I’m no longer as huge as a komodo rhino anymore,” she teased.

“You’re exaggerating,” he said passively before he teasingly added, “You were only as big as a cow-pig.”

“Shut up,” Katara mockingly growled as she playfully slapped his shoulder, which caused him to chuckle.

Laughing, Katara leaned up on her toes and he leaned down to take her offered lips in a deep kiss. They pulled apart to grin at Kazuhiko when he gurgled between them, flailing his fists in the air.

“Shall we go?” Zuko asked his wife as she cooed at their son and tickled his chin.

“Yes,” Katara replied with a firm nod.
Soon they were walking down the palace corridors with Kuo and Shen following silently behind the royal family. Although they had tried to remain stoic during their job, Katara had, on several occasions, caught the two guards making funny faces or cooing at the heir when they thought nobody was looking. Seeing Shen, the more serious of the two, making goofy expressions to humor the little prince made the Fire Lady chuckle.

Just as they neared the grand balcony that overlooked the city, they met up with their families, Aang, and Toph. Having them all together during the announcement was a display of the peace between all nations to the citizens of the Fire Nation. Iroh and Hakoda immediately stepped forward to hold the baby and frowned at one another when they ended up bumping into each other because of their eagerness. The small group laughed as the baby’s maternal grandfather and his paternal ‘grandfather’ seized each other up.

“Come on, everybody is waiting,” Zuko said as he brushed past the two men with Kazu in his arms.

Smiling, Katara immediately fell into step with him while everybody else followed after them. Before stepping out onto the balcony, Zuko handed Kazuhiko to Katara. Schooling his features, Zuko placed a hand on his wife’s lower back and they walked steadily forward while the others followed their lead. As soon as they stepped to the railing of the great balcony, they gazed down at the crowd waiting to get their first glimpse of the new heir. As soon as they were spotted, the multitude of people immediately began to cheer. Kazu fussed a little at the sudden noise, but quieted when his mother rocked him soothingly in her arms.

Zuko raised his arm and waited until the clapping and cheering slowly began to dwindle into a quiet hush.

“Good citizens of the Fire Nation,” he proclaimed in a loud voice so he could be heard. “I, Fire Lord Zuko, proudly stand before you today to present the much awaited addition to my family. My beloved wife, Fire Lady Katara, has gifted me with a healthy son.”

He paused when a cheer rose up from the crowd, which increased in volume when their Fire Lady smiled widely at them. Turning to Katara, he carefully picked up his son from her arms before turning back to the awaiting crowd. Zuko continued speaking once everybody was silent again, knowing that they were waiting to hear the heir’s name.

“I present to you my heir and your future Fire Lord, Prince Kazuhiko!” he announced loudly and proudly.

“Long live Prince Kazuhiko!”
The gathered crowd immediately exploded into uproarious cheers and applause that had the little prince fussing in displeasure at the loud noise. Inwardly chuckling, Zuko once again handed the baby to his wife before addressing the cheering crowd.

“Go forth and celebrate this most glorious day!”

Satisfied with the people’s reaction as they continued to applaud exuberantly, the royal couple turned away and walked back inside the opulent palace with their family following behind.

“That went well,” Katara said with a smile as she soothingly rocked Kazu in her arms until he settled once again.

“Now we just have to introduce him to the royal court,” Zuko replied dryly.

“Let’s see how many people suck up to us this time,” the waterbender quipped with a laugh.

“I’m not looking forward to that,” the Fire Lord muttered as he casually flicked a long dark strand of his hair over his shoulder, causing Katara to grin at him.

Soon they were standing at the dais in the already crowded banquet hall. The nobility craned their necks and elbowed each other out of the way so they could have their first glimpse of the heir. The Fire Lord raised a hand to motion them to silence and the people immediately quieted in curiosity. Standing amongst the crowd, the royal couple’s family watched on with pride and joy. The nobility watched as their Fire Lord turned to their lady, who carefully handed the child to him, before turning to face the room.

“I come before the Royal Court of the Fire Nation to present to you my son and heir,” he announced in a strong, loud voice as he carefully held up the baby for everyone to gaze upon. “Prince Kazuhiko.”

The crowd bowed their heads respectfully before applauding, some enthusiastically and others politely. Zuko suppressed an amused eye roll and Katara smiled widely when Sokka, Toph, and Aang whistled and cheered boisterously, ignoring the disapproving frowns the older nobility sent their way. Holding his son close to his chest with one arm, Zuko took Katara’s hand in the other and helped her down the dais.
As soon as they reached the bottom, the crowd surged forward and surrounded the small royal family. They enthusiastically congratulated the royal couple and exclaimed over the heir’s cuteness. Zuko felt pride swell within him at how his son was completely unfazed by the gathered crowd and instead just stared at them. He would occasionally coo, which caused the noblewomen to fawn over the little prince, much to Katara’s amusement. After a few more minutes of their exuberance, Zuko finally excused himself and his family so they could take a much needed breath of air.

As they made their way to where their family was sitting, the royal couple smiled when Lady Yoon Hee and Physician Toshiro approached them. The older couple bowed respectfully before smiling once they straightened themselves.

“Congratulations my lord, my lady,” Toshiro began amicably before he turned to the waterbender. “How are you feeling, my lady?”

Katara smiled at his concern.

“Much better, thank you.”

“My wife told me it was an easy birth,” the old physician added kindly before he frowned, “That is good. It would have been devastating if something had gone wrong.”

“Yes, but fortunately everything came out well,” Yoon Hee spoke up as she smiled reassuringly at the younger couple.

“Yes, and now you have a beautiful baby boy,” Toshiro agreed with another smile as he glanced down at the baby resting in his father’s arms. He chuckled when the royal couple beamed with pride.

After conversing for a short while, the physician and his wife bowed their heads and excused themselves so the royal couple could greet their other guests. Zuko and Katara were stopped a few more times by other members of the nobility wanting their first glimpse of the heir before they finally made it to the area where their family was sitting.

As she held Kazu in her arms, Katara could not help grinning at everybody’s antics. She did not know who was more proud of the baby—Zuko, her father, or Uncle Iroh as they fought over each other to get Kazu’s attention. She exchanged an exasperated and amused look with her mother-in-law and Suki, who returned her look with a smile and a grin. Sokka was once again teasing Aang
and Toph about the possibility of their future babies as he stuffed his mouth with food from the banquet table. Aang was beet red and kept shifting in his seat while Toph—almost equally as red—narrowed her eyes into dangerous slits. When Sokka made another embarrassing remark with subtle suggestions on how the Avatar could get his earthbender with child, Toph finally had enough and grabbed the back of the tribesman’s head and smashed his face into his plate.

“Ow!” Sokka cried as he held onto his sore nose and turned to glare at the short earthbender, ignoring how everybody else laughed at the food plastered all over his face. “Geez, maybe you shouldn’t have kids. You’d be such a violent mom!”

“As long as they don’t act like your stupid ass, I’ll be a great mom,” Toph sniffed.

“Ha!” the blue-eyed warrior exclaimed as he wiped his face with a napkin. “Those poor kids. I feel sorry for them already.”

“Shut up!” Toph growled as she again smashed his face into his food.

“Ack!” Sokka choked before he lifted his head to once again glare at the earthbender as pieces of food dripped down his chin. “Stop doing that you crazy woman!”

“I’ll stop when you stop being an idiot,” Toph retorted as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Sokka once again cleaned his face, muttering about all the delicious food that had been wasted, before he turned to the still blushing Avatar.

“Run while you still can, Aang,” he said seriously, “Maybe it’d be best if you embraced your traditions and become a celibate monk. Save yourself the trouble.”

“What did you say?!” Toph growled as she raised one fist up threateningly.

The others laughed at them while Zuko shook his head and grinned. One would think Sokka would have learned his lesson not to tease and embarrass Toph if he wanted to avoid any physical pain. Before Sokka could reply to the earthbender, however, he was interrupted by Aang’s shy yet sincere voice.
“I can’t be a…celibate monk. I’d die without Toph,” he mumbled then flushed even more when he realized everybody had heard him. When his girlfriend’s eyes widened and her whole face turned red, the airbender hurriedly added, “And Toph would be a great mom…just sometime later… in the future…”

He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck nervously when everybody gaped at him, but he was more interested in Toph’s reaction. Would she accept his indirect proposal of their future together? The short woman snapped her mouth shut as she stared in his direction for a moment, and Aang felt his heart start to pound in anxiety, knowing she was gauging his sincerity through his vibrations. A moment later, Toph grinned as she wrapped an arm around his neck in her version of an affectionate hold and Aang immediately relaxed.

“You’re stuck with me now, Twinkletoes,” she said with a chuckle that Aang found endearing, but sounded evil to everybody else.

“You guys are made for each other, alright,” Sokka muttered with a roll of his eyes, but was luckily ignored by the younger couple as they grinned goofily at each other, not that Toph could actually see his grin.

“Leave them alone, Sokka,” Suki told him firmly as she stared at her husband intensely, though her lips twitched in amusement.

“Fine!” the young man groused as he threw his hands dramatically in the air. “No sense in wasting more food anyway.”

The others laughed as they resumed with their meal. Glancing at each other, Zuko and Katara smiled. The Fire Lord discreetly placed his hand on his wife’s thigh, not as a sexual overture, but as a form of contact meant to convey and receive comfort and contentment. Katara carefully cradled their son with one arm as she reached down to gently squeeze her husband’s hand with the other before returning it to its previous place to help her hold Kazu.

A few hours later, Katara noticed that her son was becoming restless and she knew he was getting hungry and sleepy. She thought it was best if she made their excuses and leave before Kazu began to demonstrate his displeasure with loud squalls and wails for everyone to hear. Leaning closer to her husband, she quietly told him she was retiring to their room for the night and to please explain her absence to their guests. Zuko glanced down to see Kazu beginning to fuss and he nodded his head in understanding.

“I’ll join you once I’m finished here,” he told her quietly.
Nodding, Katara smiled at him before she turned to bid goodnight to their family who repeated her sentiment with indulgent smiles aimed at the baby boy. Zuko helped her stand and he watched as his wife and son made their way to the doors. Shen and Kuo appeared immediately by their lady’s side to escort her and the baby to their royal chambers. Once they were out of sight, Zuko decided to quickly say goodbye to the guests so he could be with his family in the privacy of their room.

He went around to once again thank the most prominent of the nobles and his advisors for attending his heir’s presentation while biding them a good rest of the day. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes or snort at the obvious flattery many of them employed to get into his good graces. Just as he was about to head toward the exit, a round figure stepped in front of him. Zuko felt his irritation flare when he realized it was Wei. The advisor had not done anything suspicious as of late, but he was still annoying and a pain when he argued against any of Zuko’s ideas.

“Congratulation on your son, Young One,” the old advisor began with a bow and a smirk on his thin lips. “It is a blessing your wife wasn’t really barren and finally gave you an heir. She really makes beautiful babies.”

“Oh, of course,” Zuko responded in a smooth tone that hid his annoyance with the advisor. “She’s a beautiful woman. I’m sure my heir will inherit his mother’s other qualities not just her physical beauty.”

“Ah, but of course,” Wei responded easily.

Before the old advisor could say anything else, Zuko interrupted him with a sharp, “You will excuse me, I have other more important matters to attend to.”

Without another word, Zuko strode past Wei, who was scowling, and resumed his sedate walk toward his destination. Wei was still a thorn on his side and did not hesitate to irritate and anger him, but unfortunately, the old advisor had not done anything bad to merit him to be dismissed from his post. And although Zuko still had his suspicions of Wei consorting with the rebels and their plot to set Ozai free, there still had not been any evidence that would indicate his involvement and treason.

A deep frown settled on the young Fire Lord’s face as he made his way toward the royal chambers. Months had passed and there still had not been any word about Jianguo or his whereabouts. The traitor had not even sent him another letter to taunt him like he had done before. What could Jianguo be planning? The silence only made Zuko’s sense of impending doom to heighten, for he was sure the bastard had not given up on his plans to infiltrate the Fire Nation.

After Kazuhiko was born, Zuko had woken up a few times in the middle of the night with a muffled
shout, an enraged snarl on his lips or a horrified expression on his face, as nightmares of Jianguo sneaking into the room to harm his family haunted him. He would immediately check to see if Katara was still sleeping next to him before he would swiftly check on Kazu to reassure himself that the boy was safe before he would return to Katara’s side to press her tightly against his body. Sometimes Katara would wake up at the sound of his quietly distressed moans or his movements and she would wrap him in her arms to comfort and reassure him. It only infuriated him more that there was nothing he could do and that he had been unable to capture Jianguo after all this time. It made him feel like a failure.

Shaking his head, Zuko dispelled his dark thoughts once he realized he was standing in front of the golden doors that led to their chambers. He opened the doors and crossed the anteroom. Once he stood before the other set of doors, he knocked lightly to alert Katara to his presence before quietly opening one of the doors. He stepped inside, closing the door softly behind him, and immediately searched for his wife. When his eyes landed on her, a smile stretched his lips as she gave him a welcoming smile. She was sitting on their bed with her back against the headboard, holding their son to her exposed chest. She had changed from her formal robes and was now wearing a comfortable, flowing nightdress.

Silently, the firebender walked toward them. However, his smile faltered a little at the exhaustion he could detect in his wife’s eyes. Either because she had to wake up to comfort or feed their son in the middle of the night or because of her discomfort and pain from the birth, Katara had not been sleeping well. He had tried to rush to Kazu’s side whenever he started to fuss before he woke up Katara, but Zuko was not always successful, especially when it wasn’t his chest that the baby wanted to latch onto. But most of the time, it was because some innate motherly instinct always alerted Katara that her son needed her at the smallest sound Kazuhiko made.

“I thought you would’ve stayed at the celebration a little longer,” she spoke up softly.

Zuko shrugged as he reached up to remove his fire crown before placing it next to hers in the ebony box.

“It became boring once you and Kazuhiko left,” he replied as he smoothed down his long dark hair. “Sokka was starting to get drunk, though, and I decided it was best I left before his teasing brought down a bloodbath from a vengeful Toph.”

Katara laughed quietly at his playful tone before quieting down when Kazu fussed a little and scrunched up his nose as he suckled at her breast. The waterbender watched as her husband removed his royal robes and searched through their large wardrobe to pull out a pair of dark sleeping pants. Her eyes roamed over his lean, muscular frame before glancing back down to her feeding son to distract herself from the path her mind was leading to. She looked back up when she felt Zuko settling onto the bed next to her and she reveled at the warmth that radiated off of him and the masculine scent that reached her senses. She smiled at him warmly before she once again looked
down at her son when he began to knead her breast with his tiny fist as his gummy mouth sucked more furiously at her nipple.

Zuko chuckled at the concentrated expression on Kazu’s small face as he drank up his mother’s milk. Sitting closely side by side, the new parents gazed down affectionately at their son, still awed that they had created this adorable, little being. Once he was satisfied, Kazuhiko detached himself from his mother’s reddened nipple and yawned softly. Smiling, Katara lifted him up to her shoulder where Zuko had already place a soft cloth, and she gently patted his back until the boy burped. Once that was finished, the waterbender gently brought him down upon the mattress between his parents and tenderly rubbed his belly to lull him to sleep. A moment later, Kazu’s eyelids grew heavy and he let out a little, contented sigh as he fell asleep against his father’s hip.

Smiling, Zuko looked up in time to see Katara stretch her arms and back as she gave a tired yawn. His breath hitched as his eyes landed on her swollen breasts, heavy with milk, and he could not help as he stared ravenously at them. He felt his arousal spike as her soft mounds bounced at her movements, the dusky peaks teasing him, and he felt his mouth water. He tried to steer his thoughts to something else, but he could not help himself.

It had been a while since he had made love to his waterbender. Felt her writhing beneath him or rocking sensually above him. Her wet silky walls enveloping him as they wrapped themselves around each other as they strove for that glorious end. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath as the memories just made his arousal even harder. He needed to stop. He had to wait until Katara was ready to make love to him again. After Kazuhiko’s birth, his wife had not been amenable to being touched because her body was still recovering. She was exhausted, irritable, and uncomfortable most of the time. The constant demands of a newborn and her duties as Fire lady took a toll on her. Even though Zuko really tried to help there was only so much he could do, and he understood sex was the last thing on her mind. She had insisted on pleasing him a few times with those wonderful hands and that amazing mouth of hers whenever Kazu had been looked after by their other family members or Jiao. Most of the time, however, Katara was so exhausted that she would immediately fall asleep when her head touched her pillow and one time, much to her embarrassment, when she started to jerk him off. He had not had the heart to wake her up, so he had to shut himself in the bathing room to finish what she had started.

But damn, he wanted her so badly.

Once he felt he was in control of his desires, the firebender opened his eyes to see Katara tuck her breasts back into her nightdress, a part of him lamenting their disappearance. In an attempt to calm his thoughts and heated blood, Zuko stared down at his sleeping son and gently caressed his soft dark hair.

“I’ll put him in his crib,” he said quietly as he carefully picked up the slumbering baby.
Katara slowly knotted the ties back in place and smoothed her clothes down as she watched Zuko walk toward the wooden crib. He gently deposited their son in the crib, a small smile on his lips as he stared proudly down at Kazu. Carefully, Katara slid down so she was lying on her back in order to ease her strained muscles and suppressed a tired groan. She felt like all her energy had left her that day, which she knew was common for women after giving birth.

Katara sighed as she stared at Zuko. She had seen the lust in her husband’s golden eyes and was glad that he had not acted upon his desires. Oh, she wanted him, but she was not completely healed and she was not yet comfortable with her body to stand naked before him. Her stomach was bigger and not as firm as before and she felt self-conscious about it. Not to mention the stretch marks that now marred her once perfect skin. She knew Zuko would not mind, he had told her many times during her pregnancy that he found her beautiful, but she could not help it. She wanted to exercise first in order to restore her body to the way it was, at least as much as possible, before she was comfortable enough to once again let Zuko see her naked again.

She knew the wait was affecting him greatly, so she had insisted on using her hands and her mouth to relieve him of his sexual frustrations. He had protested at first and felt a little guilty that he was the only one receiving pleasure, but she did not mind. Pleasuring him pleased her immensely. She loved it when she was able to make him go crazy when she stroked him with her hands or pushed his throbbing cock deeply down her throat. It made her feel extremely smug and powerful when she reduced him to a mess of thoroughly pleased male flesh, causing him to utter incoherent, half formed sentences that were made up of her name, the pleasure she was giving him, and how he could not wait to take her over and over again. Her cheeks would flush and her body would tingle when he began to utter dirty, naughty words about how he would take her. Katara shook her head and took a deep breath, calming her thoughts. Just a few more weeks and then she could have him.

She let a smile touch her lips when Zuko walked back toward the bed and climbed in next to her. He propped himself on his elbow as he lay on his side to smile down at her as he lifted his other hand to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Kazuhiko’s presentation was a success,” the firebender spoke up coolly, though pride and pleasure colored his tone.

Katara smiled up at him.

“How could anyone not be affected by Kazu’s adorable cuteness?” she said with a quiet laugh.

“That’s true. Even Wei admitted our son was a beautiful baby,” Zuko replied smugly, although he decided not to repeat the rest of the old advisor’s words.
“He must be jealous he could never create such beautiful babies like us,” the waterbender said with an impish chuckle.

“We should thank the gods Wei has never reproduced. At least, as far as we know,” he responded passively, though humor danced in his eyes, “Can you imagine?”

The brunette laughed. They talked more in length about the presentation and what people had said about the little prince. Zuko could not help chuckling when Katara groused that thanks to him, Kazu would grow up just as handsome as his father, and she would need to keep an eye for salivating fangirls ready to sink their claws into him.

“Just wait until we have a daughter and she starts being surrounded by amorous suitors,” she retorted teasingly. She grinned when Zuko immediately frowned darkly at the thought.

“I will throw them in prison before they can get near her,” he growled, his eyes narrowed at the thought of any man panting after a daughter of his.

Katara rolled her eyes and laughed at him. Zuko glowered at her for her amusement, but soon he was laughing along with her.

“Now you know how my father must feel about you!” she teased.

She grinned when he grimaced at her words.

“As much as I would love another child, I’d rather we wait a few years from now,” Katara told him truthfully with a grin. “One crying baby is enough.”

“I completely agree,” Zuko replied with a low chuckle.

Sighing softly, he caressed her cheek once they calmed down and stared at each other.

“I hope we have a daughter next,” he said in a soft tone, “One as beautiful, strong, and smart like her
The blue-eyed waterbender’s smile turned tender and wistful at his wish. It made her heart swell and warm at the knowledge that Zuko wished to have more children with her, even though she had already given him his heir. He didn’t just want to do his duty to their nation, but truly wanted to build a family with her. How could she not love this man? She was the luckiest woman in the world.

Zuko observed the love and tenderness in his wife’s blue eyes and he leaned down to gently press his lips to her sweet, soft ones. When he pulled back, he caressed her cheek.

“Thank you,” he said, his tone low and affectionate.

“For what?” she asked.

“For accepting to be mine, for making me yours,” he replied, “For giving me a family.”

A smile appeared on Katara’s lips as she reached up to cup his scarred cheek. “I’m grateful to you for the same reasons and much more.”

Unable to help himself at her words and the look in her eyes, Zuko leaned over her to capture her mouth in a deep, passionate kiss. He meant to kiss her briefly, especially since he could see that she was tired and needed sleep, but when she opened her mouth to him while her hands tangled in his long hair, he deepened the kiss and pressed himself tightly against her. When she moaned softly and licked at his lower lip, the firebender’s need became too great, too urgent, that he forgot his promise to wait for her until she was ready for him. His hands began to feverishly roam along her curves while he sucked on her tongue and lips, murmuring her name.

Katara was enjoying Zuko’s kisses and caresses as her body warmed in desire, but she was snapped from her daze when she felt him begin to pull up the hem of her nightdress between their bodies. With a gasp, she moved away from his lips and placed a hand on his chest to stop him when he tried to follow her mouth.

“Zuko, wait,” she panted softly. “I can’t…Not yet.”

Zuko immediately leaned away from her and looked down at her guiltily. He had completely lost control.
“I’m sorry,” he rasped and winced at the roughness of his voice.

“Don’t be,” she told him firmly, “You didn’t do anything wrong.” She paused before she added with a grimace, “I just…”

“I know,” Zuko assured her, “I know I need to be patient. You just gave birth and you need time to heal.”

Katara bit her lip as she distractedly drew imaginary designs on his naked, muscular chest.

“It’s not just that…” she trailed off before she added, “By body…is not the same as it was before.”

“That doesn’t bother me,” he replied with a small frown, “Especially since the changes in your body are due to you bringing our son into the world.” Then more softly, he added, “I will always love you and your body no matter what. But I’ll be patient until you feel comfortable.”

“Thank you, Zuko,” Katara told him with a soft smile before she slipped her hand between their bodies so she could cup his semi-erect shaft, causing her husband to groan almost inaudibly. “But if you want, I can—”

“No,” Zuko forced himself to say and he shook his head.

He wanted it, gods, he wanted her touch on him, but he did not want to be selfish. Even if she was willing, he could not dismiss the fatigue in her eyes nor the dark circles under them. She was barely getting any sleep as it was and demanding she see to his needs wasn’t going to help matters at all.

“You need some sleep,” he told her softly, “Today was a busy day.”

“I can sleep once I’ve pleasured you,” she purred quietly, steadfastly.

Before Zuko could protest again, she rubbed his erection more firmly through his clothes, smiling when he gasped her name and he grew harder in her hand. His hips automatically rocked into her
touch while his breathing accelerated and she knew she had him where she wanted him. She appreciated his concern, but she missed being intimate with him. Even if they could not actually go through the whole act of lovemaking, she wanted to give him at least this. Murmuring his name, she lifted her face and he immediately leaned down to capture her mouth in a desperate kiss as she continued to stroke his covered length. When she finally slipped her hand inside and grasped him, the firebender moaned quietly at the touch of her soft skin.

Smiling, Katara gently stroked him for a moment, listening to his quiet panting breaths and strained callings of her name. She glanced down between their bodies to see that their movements had caused the mushroomed head of his cock, red and swollen, to peek out from the edge of his sleeping pants. Licking her lips, she pressed her thumb along the weeping tip and gently rubbed it along the small slit, spreading the moisture along the entire head, causing Zuko to let out a loud groan of pleasure as he jerked in her grasp.

They froze instantly when a soft sound came from the crib and they held their breaths, waiting to see if Kazuhiko woke up with loud cries. When no other sound reached their ears, they relaxed and smiled wryly at each for forgetting they were not alone. With a sigh, Zuko moved to lie back down next to Katara, but she did not let him pull away from her. He looked down both questioningly and hopefully into her eyes. The few times she had pleasured him had been when Kazu had been in the care of someone else and they were alone because she—and him as well— did not feel comfortable engaging in such intimate acts with their son in the room. He watched as she gave him a small, sultry smile and he instantly felt his shaft jolt in lust.

She pressed against his chest and he moved away with a small frown when she carefully slipped from the bed. He watched as she stood up and turned to him with that same seductive smile before she held out her hand for him. Zuko immediately grasped her hand and slid from the bed so that he was standing next to her. He groaned softly when she pressed her entire body along his entire frame and pressed a kiss against his throat. She was torturing him.

“Can you grab one of the bedsheets, please?” she asked softly as she pulled slightly away from him.

Swallowing thickly, Zuko nodded his head before he quickly pulled one of the sheets covering the bed and placed it over his arm. She smiled as she once again grasped his hand and walked away from the bed. Intrigued, and painfully aroused, Zuko followed her without question. They paused briefly to make sure Kazu was still sleeping before moving again. The firebender grinned when Katara led them to the doors toward the antechamber and finally understood what she was doing. When they stepped into the other room, Zuko quickly set out to light a few candles while Katara carefully closed the door. She made sure to leave it slightly ajar so they could still hear the baby in case he woke up. When she turned back around, she laughed quietly when she realized her husband had already gathered a pile of cushions and placed the sheet over them as he waited eagerly for her.

Her eyes drifted lower, taking in his magnificent physique, before landing on that part of his body
that she craved but still could not truly have for the moment. She let her lips curl into a smile at the sight of him hard and bulging prominently in his pants.

“Katara,” he rasped her name in a strained tone.

The waterbender glided toward him, both smug at his great need for her and eager to pleasure him. When she finally stood before him, Zuko quickly wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her flush against him as he bent down to crash his mouth against hers in a heated kiss. As their tongues curled around each other and they sucked each other’s lips, the dark-haired male slowly rubbed his throbbing erection against his wife’s stomach, needing more stimulation to satisfy his raging desires. He moaned approvingly into her moist mouth when her hands reached for the hem of his sleeping pants, caressing the skin of his hips, before she quickly pulled them down so that they fell around his ankles. As he stepped away from them, Katara gently pushed against his naked chest and he fell upon the covered cushions with an excited groan.

Katara moaned at the sight of her husband panting in arousal, sprawled on the pile of cushions in all his naked glory, his golden eyes dark and intense as he stared up at her, imploring her to touch him and bring him to orgasm. Again, her eyes drifted to his cock to see the thick length protruding almost proudly from his groin, straining for her as a thin line of his liquid arousal slid down the shaft. She glanced back to his face to smile sultrily at him.

Heart pounding in his chest, Zuko watched with bated breath as his enchanting water nymph lowered herself slowly to her knees and he parted his legs eagerly so she could crawl between them. He moaned softly when she placed her hands, soft and warm, on his knees before slowly, almost teasingly, running them up his thighs, so close to his throbbing shaft needing her touch. He found it erotic that there he was, nude and almost vulnerable, while Katara was fully clothed as she built up the suspense.

“Mm,” she murmured softly as her fingers gently kneaded his upper thighs, “You’re so hard, Zuko.”

“Please,” he could not help but moan almost pitifully.

Damn, he needed her touch and fast. He could not take the suspense, the need coursing almost violently in his veins, any longer. If he wasn’t afraid of hurting her in her current condition, he would have already taken control and taken his pleasure from his lush wife. But he also could not deny how aroused her actions made him as she took her time. He cried out when her hand finally grasped his length in a tight hold and stroked him firmly a couple of times.

“Shit,” he moaned, unable to stop the curse from slipping from his mouth.
Katara chuckled quietly. She loved it when she reduced the proper and refined Fire Lord to a moaning, desperate man as she overwhelmed him with pleasure.

“What do you want me to do, Zuko?” she asked in soft purr.

“Take me into your mouth,” he demanded hoarsely.

“Mm, with pleasure, my lord,” she purred with gleaming azure eyes.

She stuck her tongue out to lick up the wet line of his seed from the base of his shaft up to the head before engulfing him snuggly into her mouth and began to suck him firmly.

“Yessss,” Zuko hissed as he reached down to place his hand on the back of her head. “So good.”

Damn, why did he even bother protesting in the beginning? Panting softly, he glanced down to see her looking intently at his face as she bobbed her head up and down, her right hand stroking the base of him as her tongue swirled around the rest of his length submerged in her wet, warm mouth. He groaned when she pulled back a little, watching as his cock, slick with her saliva, slid from between her plump lips. He gasped when she gently sucked on the swollen head before he choked when he felt the tip of her tongue tease the slit, causing a few more drops of his seed to leak out. Then she engulfed him into her mouth as far as she could and his eyes rolled back at the immense pleasure.

“Yes, yes, just like that,” he growled lowly, a part of his brain knowing they needed to be quiet.

Katara moaned around the hard length as she used her tongue to press against the underside of him. The immense pleasure on her husband’s face and his suppressed groans and growls were making her body heat up in arousal. She squirmed and pressed her thighs together to relieve the throbbing of her clit. She could feel her aroused juices seeping from her and saturating her silky undergarments as desire slowly raced along her veins. She whimpered, in both need and disappointment, that she had to wait a couple more weeks before she could actually feel the pleasure of Zuko penetrating her, filling her to the brim.

When Katara began to move her mouth over him faster, Zuko glanced back to her flushed face in rapture before his eyes drifted down her neck to her covered chest. Remembering the sight of her breasts, swollen with milk, made his arousal flare and caused his groin to tighten. He wanted to see them, but he wasn’t sure if Katara would be comfortable since she had told him she was still self-
conscious with her body. Slowly, he removed his hand from the back of her head and slipped it down toward her chest. His action made Katara pause before she pulled back, slipping his still hard shaft from her mouth, to look at him.

“I want to see your breasts while you suck me,” he groaned as he stared lustfully into her eyes as his fingers twitched, “Can I?”

Katara hesitated for a moment, but when Zuko continued to look at her pleadingly, she felt her resolve crumble and she gave him a silent nod. Only when she gave him an encouraging smile did Zuko’s fingers quickly went to work to unravel the ties holding the top of her nightdress closed before pulling the edges aside just enough to reveal her chest.

Zuko’s breath hitched as her breasts spilled out, tempting him in their full softness and delightful bounce. Murmuring her name in quiet reverence, he reached out with both hands to gently cup the mounds and carefully knead them, wanting to be gentle with them since they were currently the source of nutrients for their son. His eyes became riveted to the hard, swollen nipples and he swallowed thickly as the thought of latching his mouth to them made his cock throb. He wondered, not for the first time, what her milk tasted like before he quickly dismissed the thought. He was not sure if Katara would be okay with him suckling on her while she was breastfeeding their son. Yet, he could not stop thinking about it. Maybe he could ask her once she was fully recovered.

His thoughts immediately scattered when his waterbender began to caress his shaft in her hand with swift, firm strokes.

“Gods, Katara!” he exclaimed loudly before immediately cutting himself off, earning a grin from her. With a low growl, he bent down to capture her mouth in a fierce, passionate kiss as his hands squeezed her breasts a bit more firmly, eliciting a soft moan from her that he swallowed into his mouth. Mind hazy with lust, Zuko pulled back and swiftly grabbed her about the waist before hoisting her up and turning them around so that she was lying back on the cushions beneath the silky sheet with him leaning over her. Before she could utter a word, he once again kissed her, sucking on her lips almost wildly as he pressed his body closer to hers. He hissed when his bare chest touched her sensitive breasts. Pulling away once again, Zuko slowly crawled up her body until he was straddling her sides, his fully erect cock, still slick from her earlier ministrations, pointing at her face. The firebender grabbed each breast within one large, warm hand and looked down at her with obvious need and lust.

“Can I?” he asked again, his voice rough and husky, as he stared down into her eyes. “Can I pleasure myself with your breasts?”
With a small moan, Katara nodded her head as she placed her hands on his hips before sliding them around to his ass to pull him closer to her.

“Yes, oh gods,” the waterbender mewled as heat erupted in her belly at the thought.

Groaning, Zuko spread his knees a little more so he could lower himself closer to her chest. He held her gaze for a moment before looking down to admire the sight of her breasts once again. He would never tire of the sight and touch of them as long as he lived. Grasping each mound more firmly, he placed his cock between them before pushing them tightly around his shaft. With a soft groan of her name, Zuko began to move his hips. His eyes rolled back at the sensation of his erection rubbing against such warm, soft flesh. Forcing his eyes open once again, the firebender looked down to watch as his swollen tip disappeared before popping back out to point at her throat. He gasped when he felt Katara grab his ass more tightly and helped him rock himself between her breasts.

“Damn, Katara,” he cursed again between clenched teeth as he felt his end approaching. He could not hold out for much longer. He needed the release so badly.

Pressing her breasts even more firmly so that they created a tight vise around his cock, Zuko began to jerk his hips wildly, sweat running down his face and body at the effort, the pleasure building within him. He heaved great pants as a tingle began to grow at the base of his spine and he knew it wouldn’t be long before he achieved that glorious ecstasy.

“Ka-Katara…” he panted roughly, brokenly, his pleasure robbing him of any coherent speech, “I’m…going to…”

“That’s it, my love,” Katara purred as her hands tightly grasped onto his backside, “Come for me.”

At her words, Zuko stiffened as a massive euphoria erupted in his groin and all over his body. He bit his lip roughly to keep himself from roaring his pleasure as he shot his seed onto her chest. Releasing one hand from her breast, he reached down to roughly stroke himself as his cock continue to throb and spurt whitish liquid, coating her throat and her breasts with the copious amount of his incredible release. His pleasure only increasing when his wife actually opened her mouth to capture a few stray sprays of his seed.

“Katara, gods, Katara,” he chanted as he wrung his shaft for all it was worth until the sensation of his strokes became almost painful on his sensitive flesh. Then with a deep groan and an intense shudder, he collapse beside her, heaving and panting as if he had been sparring.
Swallowing the few drops she had been able to catch, savoring his taste, Katara watched as her firebender drew one arm over his face as he tried to keep his heavy pants from becoming too loud. Mm, the sight of him looming over her as he used her breasts to pleasure himself, combined with the enraptured expression that had contorted his face as he came, had been wonderful to witness. She glanced down at herself and could not help but moan as she remembered seeing big spurts of his whitish fluids splashing continuously all over her chest. She reached up a finger to trail his seed along her chest and noticed how thick and sticky it was and realized her poor husband really needed that release, before she glanced back to him. Waiting patiently for him to calm down, ignoring the cooling sensation of his release on her skin, she reached over to soothingly caress his heaving chest.

At his wife’s soft touch, Zuko removed his arm from his face and turned his head to look at her watching him with pleased, hooded eyes. His focus shifted to her still exposed chest to see her wonderful breasts coated in his seed. By the large amount that he had released, he realized how desperate he had been. He could not help admiring the sight of her brown skin covered in his whitish semen, finding the contrast of colors erotic. Relaxed and thoroughly pleased, Zuko shifted to his side and pressed his lips softly against hers as he tenderly placed his hand on her waist.

“Agni, you’re amazing,” he breathed against her caressing mouth. “I want to return the favor so badly.”

Katara moaned softly against his lips and squirmed as she found her arousal flaring at his words.

“Can you, please?” she pleaded throatily.

Zuko leaned away to stare eagerly into her eyes.

“Can I?” he asked.

“Well…I can’t be penetrated right now,” she said slowly, a little abashed all of the sudden, “But…maybe…”

“With pleasure,” he immediately replied with a husky groan, understanding what she meant.

Capturing her mouth once again, he slowly traced his hand down her body, feeling her tense up a little. He knew she was not ready to completely bare her body to him, so he made sure to only slip his hand beneath her nightdress.
Katara’s breath accelerated when she felt him trail his hand up her thigh, over her pelvic bone, and across her lower belly. Before she could feel self-conscious, her husband slid his hand down so that his fingers touched her curls before moving another inch lower. She gasped into his mouth when he pressed one finger on her swollen bundle of nerves.

“Zuko, haaah,” she mewed as her hands grasped onto the back of his head so she could kiss him more fiercely.

She cried out softly when he pressed more firmly before he began to rub gentle circles on that extremely sensitive bud. She was too focused on the pleasure building within her that she forgot about the slight twinges of pain in her core. She moaned his name when he began to gently suck on her tongue before she arched her back when he rubbed his fingers more firmly. Pleasure immediately exploded throughout all her nerve endings and she cried out into his mouth as she came.

Zuko’s eyes widened in surprise at how quickly his wife had come undone and he pulled his head back to watch her thrashed her head and writhe against him. He continued to stroke her to prologue her orgasm before stopping when she grasped his wrist as her hips jerk almost uncontrollably. Then with a soft gasp, she collapsed back onto the cushions with soft pants and moans. Pulling his hand away and covering her legs once again, Zuko continued to watch her, mesmerized by the pleasure writ all over her beautiful face, as he waited for her to open her eyes once she came down from her high. Once she did, she looked at him with a languid and satisfied smile.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” she murmured drowsily. “That was wonderful.”

Zuko smiled as he caressed her cheek. Now that his mind wasn’t clouded with lust, he could once again see how exhausted she was. Stubbornly, she lifted her head so he could kiss her. Chuckling, he obliged her.

“I can’t wait for when you’re ready for us to make love again,” he growled softly, passionately, as he continued to press kisses on her moist lips. “I can’t wait to touch every inch of your body, to taste your sweet juices on my tongue, to bury my cock deep inside you.”

Katara moaned, her heart racing in her chest, as she pressed kisses to his amazing lips at the ardent words he uttered.
“Keep in my mind, by beautiful water nymph,” he murmured huskily, “nothing will stop me from making love to you when you are completely recovered.”

He gasped and moaned when Katara nipped at his lips as she ran her hands sensually down his back.

“Believe, my love, nothing will stop me from taking pleasure in satisfying my need and desire for you and your amazing body,” she whispered throatily against his lips.

Zuko felt his groin twitch at her promising words, her caressing mouth, and the desire in her sapphire eyes. He kissed her deeply once again before he forced himself to calm down his raging need before he lost complete control once again. With a soft murmur of her name, he softened their kiss until they were just caressing each other’s lips, their lust simmering down.

He pulled away when his wife let out soft yawn. He smiled when she gave him a sheepish smile. It reminded him of how truly exhausted she was. Zuko kissed her once again, softly caressing her lips, as his hand slowly rubbed her side. Katara moaned softly since the rhythm of his slow and gentle kisses stirred a low flame in her body.

Silently, Zuko stood up and put on his sleeping pants once again. Then he reached down to wrap Katara in the bedsheet and picked her up, smiling again when she yawned as she burrowed into his chest. Extinguishing the candles he had previously lit, Zuko quietly entered the bedroom, careful of not waking up their still slumbering child. He gently deposited Katara on their bed before making his way to the bathing room so he could grab a damp towel and a dry one. Returning to the warmer room, he cleaned up the mess he had made on Katara’s chest and was unable to stop the smug smirk on his face. He suppressed a chuckle when Katara rolled her eyes as she tied her top before letting out another yawn as she made herself comfortable on the soft mattress. Depositing the dirty towels in the bathroom, Zuko quickly made his way to the bed and slipped in beside his wife, pulling the blanket over them.

A soft sound coming from the crib had them freezing and holding their breath, waiting for the inevitable squalls of an angry baby, before relaxing when Kazu let out a soft sigh and did not utter another sound. They laughed softly as they looked up to grin at each other at the luck of having a few more moments of peace. With one last kiss, Zuko moved away so he could lie back down at her side, wrapping an arm around her and pressing her to his side. Katara sighed softly as she snuggled close to him as a comfortable silence descended upon them. Wrapped in each other’s arms, they fell into a restful slumber.

Unfortunately for the pair of lovers, fate had other plans. Four weeks after Kazuhiko’s birth, Zuko had received a message from King Bumi informing him that all of the other world leaders had agreed to converge in Omashu for a meeting to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the end of the war, discuss events of the world, and to draw up a new peace treaty. Zuko had been reluctant to give
orders for the airship to be readied for his departure toward the Earth Kingdom city. His son had barely been four weeks old and his wife was still recovering, so Zuko had been reluctant to separate from his family so soon, but he had no choice.

Despite what had almost happened in Omashu the last time they were there, Katara had wanted to go with him, but Kazu had gotten a fever—a mild one, fortunately—and she had to stay behind to look after him. There was a part of him that was glad Katara was unable to go because the thought of her returning to the place that had traumatized them both was almost unbearable. However, he knew that if she had been able to join him, Katara would have demonstrated that she was stronger and she no longer lived in fear of that horrible moment in their lives.

After a sentimental farewell with his wife and young son, whose fever seemed to have lessened a little, Zuko had determinedly boarded the airship with Hakoda and Aang—who had also been summoned—and they left the Fire Nation. Sokka had decided to accompany them as future chief of the Southern Water Tribe. Zuko wanted to settle things quickly and return to his family. After several days in the air, Zuko, his father-in-law, Sokka, and Aang finally arrived in Omashu where they were immediately greeted by the mad king of Omashu, Chief Arnook, and King Kuei.

The following weeks were spent in arguments, debates, and discussions about the remodeled peace treaty. Several Earth Kingdom dignitaries had declared the peace treaty the Fire Lord and the Southern Water Tribe Chief had signed when Zuko married Katara a potential threat. If war were to erupt once again, the Fire Nation would have a strong ally with the Southern Water Tribe. Which could then bring the Northern Water Tribe to aide their sister tribe, which would leave the Earth Kingdom at a great disadvantage. This accusation had immediately angered both Water Tribe Chiefs and the Fire Lord. It wasn’t until Zuko had fiercely stated that he would never start another war and that was why he was in agreement of drawing up a new peace treaty with all nations that had the others backing down. Aang, King Kuei and King Bumi had immediately spoken up in his defense and stated that they believed him. After that, things had gone much more smoothly.

A few days ago the issue of Jianguo and the rebels had been brought up and Zuko had to push down his rage and humiliation when he had to admit that he had still been unable to locate the rebels’ whereabouts. They had then discussed the matter for a while, each making suggestions and stating theories, but nothing concrete had come out of it. Especially since months had passed since the last time any of them had heard anything of Jianguo and his men.

A deep frown settled across the Fire Lord’s face as he once again wondered what the bastard could be planning. Currently, he was having dinner with everybody else, but he was honestly not paying attention. Before he had left the Fire Nation, Zuko had taken precautions with the safety of his family. He had appointed additional warriors to guard both the palace and prison tower where Ozai was being held. He did not want to leave anything to chance while he was not there to protect his family.
A small sigh escaped his lips as the thought of his wife and son once again brought a small pang to his chest. A month had passed since he had to leave them behind and he missed them terribly. This was the longest he had gone without being at Katara’s side since their wedding night two years ago. He had become so used to having Katara sleeping next to him, her warm, soft body pressed to his side, the sound of her soft breath reaching his ears. He had even gotten accustomed to waking up in the middle of the night to Kazuhiko’s loud cries and rocking the baby in his arms to calm him down or bringing him to Katara so she could feed him. But now that he was sleeping in the guest room by himself, the silence was almost depressing and he sometimes stayed awake at night at the sudden overwhelming loneliness that settled over him.

He had not wanted to miss a single moment of his son’s growth. It fascinated him whenever Kazu did something new and he could not help the surge of fatherly pride that would swell in his chest. Although at first he had been unsure of himself, Zuko found himself being more confident in his interactions with Kazuhiko. He loved holding his son’s little body close to his chest, looking down into the bluish eyes that seem to gaze into his with wonder, feeling the love and protectiveness that would surge in him when Kazu would coo and smile (even though Katara had told him it was probably gas). Zuko never would have thought that he would embrace fatherhood so well and he looked forward to when his son was old enough to be taught new things. Katara and he had sent each other several messages and he devoured her letters, memorizing everything she had to say about Kazu’s growth, which caused both happiness and regret that he was missing it.

And then there were those erotic dreams he had of his wife when he was finally able to find some sleep only to have to pleasure himself in order to relieve his sexual frustration so he could fall back to sleep. It had been months since he had made love to his wife and he was desperate for her. Gods, he wanted her, craved her. He missed having her moaning and writhing beneath or above him in her pleasure, missed being deeply buried in her sweet, welcoming body. But it was more than that. He missed the connection they shared in those intimate moments, the closeness and the feelings the surged between them.

He missed his family. Maybe he should have been pleased to finally have time some time for himself, away from the ‘constant demands of a wife and infant.’ The other men in attendance did not make it a secret of how much they were enjoying being away from their homes, nagging wives, and rowdy children. Some had blatantly showed off their concubines or the mistresses they had brought with them. Others had boasted of their time spent in a few of the prestigious brothels of the city, exclaiming their delight over sampling new and young flesh.

But for Zuko, it was the complete opposite. Perhaps it was because he had been alone for most of his life, but finding himself away from home was almost unbearable. Now that he knew what it was like to have a loving family to love and protect, whom he knew returned the sentiment, he found it difficult being away from them. And although his body was craving sex, Zuko could not stomach the thought of bedding a woman that was not Katara. Besides, he refused to disrespect her and break the trust between them for a brief moment of physical pleasure. Agni knew how devastated and enraged he would be if he were to ever find out Katara had sought pleasure with another man while they were away from each other. But that would never happen. He trusted his wife completely.
He sighed as an image of Katara came to him and he was suddenly filled with longing. In his mind, he could see Katara rocking a sleeping Kazu to bed while singing him a Water Tribe lullaby, the setting sun illuminating their silhouettes.

Agni, how he missed them both.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Seriously, I don’t understand how you can stand living with Snoozles,” Toph’s irritated voice made Suki and Katara grin, “He’s such an idiot.”

“Ha, did you forget that you had a crush on him years ago?” Suki teased as she cleaned her metal fans with a cloth. The sound of baby coos reached her ears and the female warrior glanced to where her daughters were playing with her nephew. “Girls, be careful with your cousin.”

“Yes, Mom!” the twins girls exclaimed quickly. They were leaning over the baby’s crib, which was placed on one side of their Aunt Katara, as they showed off their toys to him. Not that the month old baby was interesting in them. He seemed to be focused more on the girls’ faces and the sounds they made.

“Yeah, I don’t know what I was thinking,” Toph replied with a grin, “Luckily, I came to my senses.”

Katara laughed while Suki rolled her eyes good-naturedly as she continued with her task. The three women and the children were currently spending their time on the veranda as they waited for dinner to approach. Ursa, Jee, Iroh, Kanna and Pakku had been invited to attend a small gathering at one of the houses of an older gentleman of nobility that Iroh considered a friend. Even after months had passed after Chao’s death, everybody could see how much the old prince missed his closest friend, despite his cheerful attitude. It was unfortunate that they never found Chao’s murderers.

Katara was leaning over the low table, looking over some of the petitions from the people as well as other projects she was working on. So far, all the charity works she had proposed, such as the schools and remodeling of the city orphanage were showing much progress, which in turn, made the people appreciate their Fire Lady even more. Toph and Suki were keeping her company and lending a hand with Kazu while his mother worked.

A little over a month had passed since Zuko and the other men had left for Omashu. The earthbender and the female warrior had wanted to go with Aang and Sokka to the summons, but had agreed to stay behind to keep Katara company and help her out as much as they could. It made Katara appreciate them even more.
As she rolled one of the scrolls up, a small sigh escaped the waterbender. She missed Zuko. She wanted him to be there with her and their son, especially in these first months, but she knew he had to leave. If he had disregarded the summit, he could have been accused of rejecting the proposal of a new peace treaty and the alliance with the other countries would be threatened. So with a sad and encouraging smile, she had bid him goodbye and watched as he reluctantly boarded the airship with her father, Sokka, and Aang while she stayed behind to look after Kazu. Luckily, his fever had been mild and he had recovered quickly.

The sound of her son cooing in his crib, made her glance at him once again, a smile spreading on her lips. She reached over to touch his waving hand. She could not take her eyes off of him or stop the need to hold him close to her bosom, wrapped in the protection of her arms. She loved his sweet baby smell, the warmth of his baby soft skin, his quiet coos, and his unconscious attempts at smiles. Although she knew that was probably due to gas, as she had told Zuko, she mused with a mental chuckle. She could not wait until the time came when he really smiled or laughed, which she was told wouldn’t occur until he was a little older. She could not wait for when he was finally able to call her “mama”.

Her smile faltered a little. She knew Zuko had not wanted to miss a moment of being with Kazuhiko and it only brought a pang of sadness to her chest. But she reasoned that he still had the following years to spend with their son. Smiling once again, Katara caressed the little prince’s hand a moment longer before she focused back on the table and produced a clean sheet of paper. With a wistful smile, she began to compose another letter for her husband, hoping he was well and longing for that moment when he returned to her and their son.
Tenacious Longings

Silently, Zuko moved around the bookshelves of the Omashu Palace’s library in search of a book to read. It was late at night and he could not sleep despite the busy schedule he had that day, so he had decided to read for a few hours or until he succumbed to sleep. Sokka, Aang, and he had agreed to wake up early the next morning to train before the next meeting after lunch, but Zuko knew that he would be the first one up even if he only had a few hours of sleep. After all, he did rise with the sun, he mused with a smirk. Katara certainly knew that fact very well. He also knew that both men were missing their own women and children (except Aang in the latter) as much as he missed Katara and Kazu, and that they found it difficult to sleep. Of course, unlike him—who kept his longing to himself—Sokka would not stop sighing pitifully or whining about how much he missed Suki and his daughters. All he, Aang and Hakoda could do was listen to him in slight amusement as the warrior dramatically voiced his longing—which was usually when he had too much to drink during dinner.

Zuko once again focused on the volumes before him, but found none of the titles interested him. He continued to walk along the shelves until he came to one end. Absentmindedly, he pulled out the last book on the shelf that was level to his face and pulled it out, opening it to browse idly through its contents. Finding it uninteresting, Zuko moved to place it back only to notice that something was wedged all the way to the back of the shelf against the corner.

Curious, the firebender reached inside and grabbed the object, finding that it was made of smooth leather. Pulling it out, Zuko looked down to see that it was a book. It was slim compared to all the other tomes and, by the creases at the spine, it looked like it had been handled a lot. It was wrapped in a dark mulberry-colored leather with no title written along its surface. Intrigued and wondering what it could be about, the golden-eyed man placed the larger book back before making his way to one of the plush chairs in the room where a candlestick was lit on a small table beside it. Settling on the seat, Zuko opened the first page.

His eyes widened and his mouth fell open in shock at what greeted him. There before his eyes was an image drawn in ink of a couple engaged in a sexual act. He quickly shut the book, his heart racing, intending on putting it back in its place, before curiosity won the better of him. He looked around quickly to ensure he was alone before he slowly opened the book again. The man was on top of the woman who had her legs wrapped around his waist. The image was amazingly detailed; from the man’s genitals to the woman’s womanhood, even their facial features, although simple, expressed the pleasure and passion they were experiencing. Feeling his skin prick in sudden arousal, Zuko shifted his eyes to the page beside the image to see there was writing. Curious, he began to read and his eyebrows rose when he realized it was an explanation of the image, detailing what such a position entailed and what to do for each partner to achieve ultimate pleasure. He flipped the next page to find another image of the same couple, but with the woman sitting on top of the man this time while he lay back. More writing covered the next page.

“Huh, it must be one of those erotic instructional manuals I heard the crew talk about,” Zuko mused as he finished reading the entire passage. He had never actually seen one before and he found it both amusing and disturbing that he found such a book in King Bumi’s library.
Unable to help himself, Zuko began to study the following pages, aware that the more he saw and read, the more aroused he became. His cock was straining in his trousers and he had to shift several times to relieve some of the pressure, which only caused sparks of pleasure to shoot up his spine at the sensation of the cloth rubbing against his over sensitized flesh. He found that Katara and he had engaged in several of the positions already and memorized the ones they haven’t done yet for future reference. Gods, he was torturing himself, especially since he could not do any of those things without Katara, but he was too intrigued to stop.

As he flipped to another page, Zuko froze and his eyes widened at the new image. The man was sitting with the woman on his lap with her back pressed to his chest, but it was where the man’s shaft was placed that had Zuko’s groin tightening almost painfully. Instead of being in the woman’s core, the man’s length was buried in her other, tighter hole. He had heard a few things about anal sex, but it wasn’t talked about as much since it was said to be painful and uncomfortable for the one receiving it. Instantly curious, Zuko began to read the following description. It gave advice as to how to first introduce the act by starting with inserting smaller things, such as fingers, to stretch out the area and that for the first penetration a woman should sit on the man’s lap in order to control the penetration and speed as she adjusted to the feeling. It also greatly emphasized using a lot of lubrication or else it would be too painful for the woman and might even cause damage.

Zuko glanced back to the image, imagining it was him with Katara on his lap, impaling her tight ass on his cock. He felt his hard shaft throb at the thought and he lifted his eyes to the dark ceiling to calm himself, but found he could not banish the image. Shuddering, Zuko reached down to slowly rub himself through his clothes.

He couldn’t help but wonder, would Katara be adverse to the act? Would she let him breach that forbidden entrance? How would it feel for both of them?

He had to ask her. She might say no, and he would completely understand and respect her decision, but he needed to bring up the subject and see what she said. Hopefully, she would be willing to give it a try. Damn, just the thought had him almost coming in his pants.

Breathing heavily, Zuko placed the book on the table next to him, opened to that stimulating image, and looked around himself again, listening for any late-night wanderers that might be sneaking along the corridors. Once he was satisfied that he was alone, he glanced down to the obvious bulge in his pants. Biting his lips, he hesitated for a moment. Maybe he should leave the library so he could indulge himself in the privacy of his guestroom. Granted, it was the middle of the night and everybody must be asleep, but one never knew if someone else decided to look for something to read because they could not fall asleep either. It would be beyond embarrassing if someone walked into the room and accidentally caught him masturbating.
He looked back at the book and hesitated a moment longer before deciding to take it with him to his room. Picking it up, he swiftly rose from his seat and winced slightly at the uncomfortable constricting sensation of his erection. He adjusted his pants before putting out the candles, then he quickly left the library with the book held tightly in one hand as he headed to his guestroom, feeling his arousal increasing, his blood still racing in his veins as anticipation of what he was about to do tingled along his body. He breathed a sigh of relief when he didn’t come across anyone. It would have been difficult to hide the bulge in his pants or the flush he knew had surfaced on his face. Once he was in the privacy of his room—the same guestroom he had shared with Katara on their last visit—he placed the book down on the mattress as he willed a few candles to light.

Slipping his tunic over his head and taking off his boots, Zuko quickly threw them aside and climbed onto the bed, settling himself against the headboard. Grabbing the small book, he quickly flipped through the pages until he came to the one that had captured his attention and imagination. He placed it back down next to him, opened to that intriguing page. He looked away self-consciously, suddenly feeling like a teenager delving into something he shouldn’t. He snorted. He was a married man, for Agni’s sake.

He glanced back to the book, his eyes becoming riveted to the erotic image, which caused another fantasy of Katara and himself in such a position. Images of her danced in his mind—of her sultry, blue eyes, inviting smile, and exquisite naked curves—and he found that he could not wait, knowing it was pointless to fight his arousal at this point. His need was painful, almost aggressive. It had been far too long since he had found release with his wife and this would have to do until he could slip inside of her.

Groaning almost inaudibly, he continued to stroke himself though his clothes. His knees bent a little at the growing sensation, as blood continued to swell in his shaft, while every part of his body tensed and strained for satisfaction. His breath coming faster, heart pounding, he quickly reached down to his waist to undo the ties that held his trousers up before pulling down the edge so that his shaft sprang out. Panting, he reached down to grasp his painfully erect cock. By the minimal light of the candles, he could already see his swollen tip glistening with his arousal.

Without further preamble, the firebender grasped onto his shaft in a tight fist and began to slowly pump the length.

“Gods…yes…” he groaned hoarsely.

As he dragged his hand back up, he drew a circle around the tip with his thumb before dragging the foreskin away to reveal the reddish, mushroomed head that throbbed with his excited arousal. His breathing grew ragged, low groans and growls erupting from his clenched teeth, as he stroked himself over and over. He pulled away a moment later so he could grasp onto the hem of his trousers to pull them down his hips before kicking them over the bed with his foot. Impatient, he grabbed his shaft once again and fisted it tightly as he continued with his strokes.
Stretching out his legs and spreading his knees apart, he reached down with his other hand to firmly squeeze and massage his heavy balls as he continued to drag the other up and down his thick length. He noticed a bead of his precum seeping from his tip and knew it would be over soon. Letting go of his sac, he bent over the bed to grab his tunic from the floor as he continued to stroke himself with his other hand and frantically searched through an inner pocket before pulling out a silky handkerchief. He glanced at it, his eyes taking in the designs of red and blue flowers, his wife’s name stitched at a corner. She had given it to him before his departure along with a loving kiss. He brought it up to his nose. He could just make out the sweet perfume she sometimes wore on special occasions and breathed it in deeply, imagining she was there with him, touching him, whispering sultrily in his ear, gazing at him with both love and lust.

He dropped his head back against the headboard, arching slightly and jerking his hips, as he changed his rhythm to a faster, almost furious speed, as he lost himself in the heat of the moment and allowed his imagination go wild. He closed his eyes as he pictured Katara straddling his hips, crying out his name, her breasts bouncing as she repeatedly impaled herself on him, perfectly in rhythm to his hand’s vigorous pumps. He imagined her cobalt eyes dark with wanton hunger, her long, wavy hair swaying around her, her brown skin glistening in the candlelight as she rode him with absolute abandon.

“Ka…Katara…uuuhhh,” he rasped in a low moan of longing and rapture as he pressed his wife’s handkerchief to his gasping mouth. “Yes…yesss…”

Dark strands of hair stuck to his temples and neck with his sweat as he struggled to muffle his growls and groans of pleasure, even if he was in the privacy of his guestroom. Then he pictured them once again, positioned like the image in the book, his shaft buried deeply in her rear entrance, her bouncing herself on his lap, hearing her gasps and cries of immense ecstasy, his name falling from her lips like a prayer.

“Katara! Oh gods, Katara!” he hissed through gritted teeth as his hips arched and his body convulsed at the intense pleasure.

He barely had enough time to cover his tip with the handkerchief as he spurted his hot, sticky seed into the silky fabric, imagining he was emptying himself in his wife’s tight ass. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as waves of almost excruciating ecstasy erupted within him in a few powerful jolts that robbed him of his breath as he basked in the aftermath of self-gratification. Once the intensity subsided, he collapsed against the headboard, moaning and gasping in large gulps of air.

Slowly, his heavy pants subsided and his heartbeat returned to normal as the illusion he had created faded away, leaving behind only glowing embers, as his mind returned to reality. Opening his eyes, he glanced back to see that his semen had sodden the handkerchief.
“Damn,” he cursed as his eyes quickly scanned the dark room, though he knew he was the only one in there.

Loosening his grip on his now flaccid member, he grimaced slightly as he carefully lifted the soaked fabric, heavily saturated with his seed. He would definitely wash it himself, and once he saw his wife, he would definitely thank her for her gift. Careful of not letting any of the fluid drip, Zuko rose from the bed so he could clean up in the bathing room and took a moment to steady himself as his legs shook a little.

His attention once again shifted to the slim book, the cause for his lapse of control, and he stared at the erotic depiction a moment longer before he shut the book with his unoccupied hand. He debated of whether he should return it to its hidden spot before deciding to keep it with him for the moment. There were still a few weeks before he could return to the Fire Nation, so he had plenty of time to finish the book. The new knowledge he had gained made him even more impatient to return home.

He smirked.

He could not wait to enlighten Katara.

Zuko frowned as he left his guest room and headed toward one of the gardens of Omashu’s Palace for a breath of fresh air. The meeting that day had been nothing but petty arguments amongst a few Earth Kingdom governors, which had given him a headache, which then caused his mood to darken so noticeably it made the men sitting near him fidget uneasily. Fortunately, King Bumi had noticed as well and decided to call for a break, but not before making a jesting remark about preventing bloodshed. Zuko had frowned and a few men had chuckled nervously, but Hakoda, Sokka, and Aang had laughed uproariously along with the mad king.

Dismissing the thought, he took a deep breath of fresh air before exhaling loudly as he allowed the evening sun to warm his skin. He only had about an hour to himself before he had to make an appearance for dinner before he could retire for the night. Another meeting was to be held tomorrow to review the revised peace treaty. If everything went well, they would probably be able to return to their homes in another week at the latest and perhaps in a few days at the earliest. Hakoda had told him that he would accompany him back to the Fire Nation to pick up the rest of his family before returning to the Southern Water Tribe since he had been away for too long. Zuko had assured him he would take his family for a visit once Kazu was old enough to travel. The blue-eyed chieftain was excited at the thought of showing his first grandson the wonders of the wintry country.

The sound of light footsteps caused Zuko to turn sharply to see who was intruding upon his precious quiet moment. His eyes widened and he stiffened at the person that was standing calmly before him
before he quickly composed himself and resumed his usual passive air.

“Mai,” he said dismissively.

It was not the first time they had crossed paths since he had arrived in Omashu, she had always accompanied her father whenever the ambassador sought an audience with the Fire Lord to report how the relationship between the Fire Nation and Omashu were going. Zuko, however, had barely spared her a greeting, much less a glance and now it was the first time they had been alone. He was still upset with her over what she had done months before when she had entered the royal chambers, seeking to entice him to take her as his royal concubine. It still angered him whenever he remembered Katara’s fury and anguish when she had thought he had taken Mai as his concubine. He had come so close to losing his wife and he found he could never forgive the noblewoman.

“Zuko,” she greeted softly.

“What are you doing here?” he asked impassively, ignoring the way her dark eyes roamed his frame.

“I was hoping to talk to you,” she replied.

Zuko frowned. He had had a feeling he knew what she was going to say and why she had sought him out.

“There is nothing you have to say that would interest me,” he told her firmly.

“Zuko, please,” she beseeched him as she spread her arms a little for understanding. “Please don’t be upset with me anymore.”

“Can’t you see that because of what you did, I almost lost Katara’s trust?” he asked her, anger slipping into his passive tone as he glared at her. “She could have left me, thinking I had betrayed her.”

“It would have been for the best,” Mai responded in her usual monotone, unrepentant of what she had done and uncaring of what could have happened.
“How can you even say that?!” the firebender growled angrily, his teeth clenched tight, his hands balled into fists.

“She doesn’t deserve you if she would leave you for something so insignificant,” the noblewoman replied as she took a step closer to the tall Fire Lord. “I, on the other hand, would forgive you for anything. I would not have faulted you for you seeing to your needs with other women. You are a virile man, after all. It’s only natural that your appetites be large and varied.”

Zuko could only stare at her in incredulity. A snort escaped him at her attempt on flattering him to get on his good side. It seemed she was agreeable to how most marriages of the nobility worked, where affairs were common and even expected. But she really did not know him at all if she thought that he had the same views. He did not want such a farce of a marriage nor did he want to be like his father, who cared little for his wife. To him a marriage was supposed to be a partnership, were the couple strove to help each other out, to give each other comfort, support, and affection. Trust and faithfulness were vital for such a marriage to work. That was why Katara was the perfect wife for him. Because she shared his views, because she understood him, and wanted the same things he did.

“Oh, is that because you, yourself would have found your own lovers to dally with?” he finally asked sardonically.

“Oh really?” Zuko replied, his tone hard and sarcastic, “Because isn’t that what you’re doing now while you claim to love me?”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she hissed angrily even as she shifted guiltily.

“There’s no reason to lie when I know the truth,” the golden-eyed man told her as he casually crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her with a raised eyebrow. “Jet confessed that while he was scheming with you in your pathetic attempts at separating Katara and me, he had been one of your lovers.”

The noblewoman stumbled back a step as if his words had physically struck her and her dark eyes widened in mortification.

“T-that…that bastard!” she hissed indignantly, “He’s lying!”
“And what reason would he have for lying about such a thing?” he asked her passively. “It doesn’t matter because I don’t care who you sleep with or what you do with your life.”

Hurt flashed across Mai’s face and her hands clenched into shaking fists at her sides.

“Truly, Mai, you can have all the lovers you want, I really don’t give a damn,” Zuko continued smoothly before his tone turned hard, “But I will not sit idly by if you ever try to come between Katara and me again. Especially now that she had given me a child. I won’t have you destroying my family.”

At the mention of his son, Mai seemed to perk up, which immediately put the firebender on high alert. He watched as she slowly took a few steps toward him and he looked at her warily.

“Ah, yes, I suppose I should congratulate you on your heir,” she said in a quiet tone as her slow steps finally brought her within arm’s reach of the Fire Lord, “Even if he’s a half-breed.”

“Watch your tongue,” Zuko growled furiously as he glared angrily at her, looming almost menacingly over her. “I won’t have you insulting my son.”

Mai paused and quickly closed her mouth at Zuko’s fierce reaction, sensing that the topic of his son was sensitive and would only go badly for her if she continued to insult the new heir’s mixed ancestry. Truthfully, she was a little surprised at the protectiveness and pride she detected in Zuko’s tone in regards to the child. She had thought that he did not like children and only begot one because it was his duty, not because he actually wanted one.

She did not like children and had no use for them. She barely tolerated her own little brother. If she had married Zuko, she had planned to give him the heir he needed and then hoist it off to caregivers and tutors while she and Zuko focused on each other and their roles as rulers of the Fire Nation. It seemed she had been wrong. She refused to think Zuko’s sudden attentiveness to his fatherhood was all because of Katara.

Suppressing a sneer, the noblewoman bowed her head slightly as if to acknowledge his words, but she did not take her eyes off his as she gave him a small smile. An idea formed in her head.

“I’ve heard women take a while to recover after giving birth,” she said instead.
Zuko frowned at the sudden change of topic, though he had a feeling he knew where she was going with it. She would find out soon enough that he would not tolerate it.

“How long has it been since you’ve been with a woman?” Mai asked, her tone low.

She took one step closer, watching his reactions to her words, to her proximity, but to her frustration, his expression revealed nothing. He may talk about fidelity and all that nonsense, but he was a man, and what man could resist temptation when it was presented so brazenly? She would entice him to her bed, make him forget the water wench’s touch, make him go crazy for her and only her. Then he would take her back to the Fire Nation to make her his royal concubine. Now that he had his heir, he had no more use for Katara, he no longer needed to seek out the bitch’s bed. And if she played her cards right, she could even have him annul his marriage to the waterbender and marry her instead. She would make a much better Fire Lady.

“Your body must be craving sex,” she continued, trying to moderate her tone into a seductive purr just like that arrogant Jet had taught her during their trysts. “I can give you what you want. Just take me to your guest room and I’ll make you feel good. Just imagine the things I could be doing to you.”

“Unfortunately, I remember all the things you could do to me and trust me, it wasn’t very good,” the firebender responded cruelly, as he looked down at her with an almost bored expression on his face.

He was sick and tired of her pathetic attempts to entice him into bed. It was small of him, but he took some pleasure in watching her get upset at his response. Wanting to make his position perfectly clear, a thought came to mind.

“Or do you have something new you think would sway me? Something new you learned thanks to all those lovers you’ve taken?”

Mai had never been good at seduction and her current attempts were not doing anything for him. Besides, after two years of marriage, Katara was a master of seduction and he knew that no other woman could compete with her. And although masturbating wasn’t as good as the real deal, the erotic book he had found before and secretly sneaked into his room, did help take the edge off as he imagined various ways of making love to Katara.

At his words, Mai frowned deeply, pushed aside her anger and embarrassment, and quickly replaced it with a sultry smile.
“Why don’t you just let me show you?” she asked throatily as she reached out a hand to stroke his chest. “I promise you’ll enjoy yourself.”

Sneering, Zuko quickly grasped her wrist and jerked her arm away from him, causing her to wince slightly at the sudden move as she stumbled a little.

“I never knew you were this stubborn,” he growled out as he released her wrist as quickly as if it were a poisoned object.

“I will never give you up!” she hissed at him as she straightened herself out.

“When will you get it into your head that I don’t want anything to do with you?” Zuko exclaimed in exasperation before he added, “After having experience such immense pleasure with Katara, after receiving her unconditional love and comfort, nothing you have to offer will make me betray her.”

“You were mine first,” she repeated stubbornly.

“I already told you I was never yours,” he growled. “And if I had known you were going to be this way, that you would bring me so much trouble, I never would have accepted you as my girlfriend.”

“How can you say that?!’ Mai gasped in pain, “Why can’t you see that I love you? That I can’t give you up?!”

Zuko sighed and resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration. She had asked the same thing so many times already and he always gave her the same answer regarding his feelings for Katara. He really was out of patience with the noblewoman. Not even their past friendship, if it could even be called that, could make him feel sympathy for her now. He did not understand why she kept chasing after him after everything he had told her. He had said cruel things to her and had even manhandled her out of his royal chambers to get her to back off. Yet, nothing worked. How he regretted ever being in a relationship with her.

“Enough. I don’t have time for this,” he said curtly as he stared at her darkly.

“How do you really think Katara is faithfully waiting for you?” she replied with a sneer.
“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“Do you really think she’s waiting eagerly for your return?” she continued, “Think about it. You’re away from home and she’s alone. She could be easily welcoming another man into her bed in your absence. Or multiple men. There are, after all, several handsome noblemen who could satisfy her every pleasure and—”

“Silence!” Zuko roared as he took a menacing step toward her. “I won’t have you saying such things about my wife! She’s an honorable woman and she would never betray me.”

“Can you be sure about that? You’re not there with her to see what she’s doing,” she said and then with a cruel smile, added, “Don’t tell me the thought hasn’t crossed your mind?”

“Not once,” he replied quickly, although inwardly his confidence faltered a little.

The thought had never occurred to him before, but now the possibility that Katara could be easing her sexual frustrations with someone else began to fester in his mind. Men weren’t the only ones capable of infidelity when they were away from home; women could seek their own lovers while their husbands were away. And it had been months since Katara and he had fully engaged in sexual activities. He was sure she must be feeling frustrated since they had been unable to make love while she had been healing after the birth. He was the one who had benefitted from their foreplay, he mused guiltily. The thought of his wife betraying him with someone else while he was away brought an immense rage and excruciating pain that it caused his chest to tighten and his breath to freeze in his throat.

No.

He mentally shook his head and frowned at himself. No, Katara would never betray him. How could he think she would for even a second? She loved him too much to hurt him in such a way. Her character would never allow her to commit such dishonesty. She was unwavering when it came to her ideals and honor. He knew she was keenly longing for him as he was for her.

Agni, he missed her.

And he missed Kazuhiko.
Yearning for his family once again strongly assaulted him, but he took a steadying breath and squared his shoulders. Soon he would see his family again, but for now he needed to focus on his duties as Fire Lord before he could return to them.

“You can say whatever you want,” Zuko finally spoke in a much calmer tone. “It doesn’t make a difference since I know the truth.”

Mai opened her mouth to say something else, but the firebender did not let her speak.

“I will be returning to my family soon,” he added firmly, “And while I wait for that moment, I will certainly not waste another minute with you, so don’t bother looking for me again.”

He turned on his heel to leave her and return to the palace, but Mai quickly latched onto his arm to stop him. Growling, he turned his head back to glare at her for her audacity.

“Please, Zuko, just give us another chance,” she pleaded.

Zuko sharply jerk his arm to break her hold of him as he continued to glare at her over his shoulder.

“No,” he told her firmly before he added, “Just give up, Mai, before you hurt yourself even more. Why don’t you allow yourself a chance with one of your lovers or perhaps start anew with someone else?”

“Never,” she hissed.

“Then it’s your loss,” he replied blankly as he once again turned away and swiftly headed back to the building without a backward glance.

Mai watched his retreating figure in silence even as her hands clenched at her sides. No, she could not lose him. She had invested so much of her time—four years of her life—in him and she was not about to lose him or the title of Fire Lady because of a mere Water Tribe wench or even a mutt of an heir with veins tainted with his mother’s primitive blood. There had to be a way to win Zuko back.

Lifting her chin high and smoothing down her dark hair over her shoulder, the noblewoman calmly
walked away from the garden and back toward the house her family was staying in in Omashu. So preoccupied with her thoughts she was, she did not notice the pair of eyes that watched her go from the cover of the shadows.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me!” Jet growled out angrily as he stomped his way through the streets of the Fire Nation capital.

He ignored the people that threw angry glances at him when he rudely brushed past them as he made his way to meet up with his companions. He had been inquiring nonstop about the man that had stolen from the rich Earth Kingdom noble, but he had been unsuccessful after all this time. Where could the elusive bastard be? Maybe Longshot and Smellerbee found something. He had been in the Fire Nation for far too long for his liking and he wanted to return to the Earth Kingdom. He was surrounded by too many damn firebenders and Fire Nation citizens that it set his teeth on edge. But the nobleman had promised him and his friends a huge reward if they caught the thief and brought him back whatever he had stolen. It must be something extremely valuable or sentimental for the nobleman to pay such a heavy reward.

He was brought out of his thoughts when the excited buzz of a crowd drew his attention. He looked around himself and finally noticed that a crowd had gathered a few feet away from some kind of fancy restaurant. Curious, he walked closer and elbowed his way through the sea of people, ignoring the curses they threw at him as he made his way to see what the commotion was about. He stepped to the front and glanced around. There was a group of guards surrounding an impressive carriage and he watched as an older soldier with thick sideburns, probably one from a higher rank judging by his uniform, opened the carriage door. The man handed down a beautiful woman with dark hair that was graying at the temples and they smiled at each other. It took him a moment to realize it was Zuko’s mother and admiral, whom he had seen the last time they were all in Omashu. He watched the woman turn toward the interior of the carriage to carefully cradle a baby that had been handed to her. Jet’s eyes widened when he saw Katara step out of the carriage with the admiral’s help before she turned to her mother-in-law to grab the baby and press the child close to her chest.

He felt his heart clench at the sight of Katara staring down lovingly at the baby’s face. It was her child. And Zuko’s. The heir to the Fire Nation. He had not been in the capital when the royal couple had presented their heir to the citizens, so he had not thought much about it. But seeing them now only brought home the fact that he had lost any chance with Katara completely.

He had heard the Fire Lord had to leave to Omashu on some business and he wondered if Katara was feeling lonely. Maybe he could secretly pay her a visit and keep her company? He quickly shook his head to get rid of the thought. Katara had made it perfectly clear she would not betray her husband for him. Besides, he did not want her to hate him for causing her trouble with his persistence.

He barely paid attention as the master earthbender and the Kyoshi warrior and her twins stepped
down from the carriage since his sole focus was on Katara and the lovely image she presented of motherhood. When they took a few steps toward the opulent restaurant, the crowd waved excitedly and called out to the Fire Lady. Jet watched as Katara turned to smile amicably at the people. His breath hitched when their eyes locked and he watched as she gave him a small smile and a polite nod before returning her attention to her son and her companions. They entered the building and she did not glance back.

Jet let out the breath he had been holding before he turned away and once again fought his way out of the throng of people, needing to get away. If he had not made that mistake so many years ago, all of that could have been his. He mentally shook his head and hardened himself, reminding his stupid heart that he had to let her go and he had to move on with his life. Katara belonged with Zuko now and she had given him a son. Although he loathed admitting it, they belonged together and they were happy.

He wondered if one day he could be too.

In a hidden cave, somewhere in the Earth Kingdom wilderness, a man with unremarkable features waited almost nervously for his leader to speak once he had finished his report.

“Interesting,” Jianguo finally spoke with a low chuckle, “So Lady Mai is still chasing after the infuriating whelp.”

The other man, dressed in black clothes and a wide straw hat painted in black, nodded his head. Standing perfect straight next to him was Chang, whose expression revealed nothing despite what they had heard.

“Yes,” the spy replied, “The woman had tried several times to approach him before he returned to the Fire Nation, but he always rebuffed her advances.”

“How pathetic. I kind of feel sorry for her,” Jianguo said with another mocking laugh.

The spy laughed nervously while Chang remained silent.

“Go have some food and a drink with the other men,” their leader said as he dismissed the smaller man with a casual wave of his hand.
With a bow, the spy quickly turned around and left the stone cave that served as Jianguo’s room where his tent was set up. Chang watched him go out of the corner of his eye before he returned his attention to Jianguo who seemed to be deep in thought.

“Interesting indeed,” the firebender murmured absentmindedly.

How fortunate for him that he had sent out his spy as soon as word reached him that Zuko had arrived in Omashu. Jianguo had decided not to leave his hideout to make his way there, knowing that with so many world leaders around with their multiple guards, it would be hard for his small army to breach the protected city just so he could get to Zuko.

Even though he really wanted to kill Zuko and reinstate Ozai on the throne, and in the process make the waterbender his, Jianguo knew he needed to come up with something good. Which was why he had not made a move in a long time nor had he sent any taunting letters to Zuko. He knew the silence must be getting to the bastard and he reveled at the thought that Zuko was afraid, wondering what was going on and when he would strike next. And now that Zuko’s heir had been born, there was something else to hold over Zuko’s head. Who should he use against Zuko? His wife or his son? Or perhaps both?

Ah, the possibilities.

But first, he needed to come up with a plan that would not fail him this time. He wanted to end this once and for all. He was sick and tired of waiting for what was rightfully his. Jianguo stroked his chin, ignoring Chang standing silently behind him.

“Do you have a plan?” the former Dai Li agent finally asked.

“Hm, not yet,” Jianguo replied before he turned to grin at the man, “Don’t worry, Chang. You’ll get the pretty maidservant under you soon.”

He laughed when the earthbender frowned at him. Jianguo knew Chang was as obsessed with the Fire Lady’s maid as he was of the waterbender, though the Dai Li agent hid it much better. Sobering up, the former general frowned.

“However, after what the spy has said, an idea is starting to form in my head,” he confided as his mind worked through the problem.
“I should hope so,” Chang responded bluntly, “The men are starting to get restless.”

“I know,” the firebender growled as he narrowed his eyes.

A few men had marched up to him, demanding payment and threatening to expose his whereabouts, but he had quickly gotten rid of them with a sword through their chests and had Ping dispose of their corpses before the other men were aware of what had happened.

He may not have gotten lucky in capturing Zuko in Omashu this time, but he had learned something interesting.

“So Lady Mai is still trying to get Zuko to take her back, hm?” he repeated.

A woman scorned was said to be feared, but a woman obsessively in love with a man could be just as terrifying. He smirked as he absentmindedly rubbed his chin.

And he planned to take of advantage of that.
A soft smile appeared on Katara’s lips as she stared at her son with a warm, gentle gaze. Kazuhiko, who was lying on a blanket spread out on the grass (the same blanket Gran-Gran had made before his birth), stared back at her with a wide smile of his own. His little hands flailed in the air as he cooed and gurgled contently, before his focus shifted to Ichiro, who was holding a rattle up to the baby’s face to get his attention. Katara and Jiao chuckled when Ichiro looked up proudly at his success. The now almost two-year-old boy seemed fascinated by the little, babbling creature and enjoyed making Kazu laugh or prompting him to imitate any funny facial expressions he made. Ichiro did a sort of growling sound and the baby tried to mimic him.

“Look, Mama!” the little boy exclaimed excitedly.

“He’s a smart baby, isn’t he?” Jiao replied with an indulgent smile aimed at her son.

“Yea!” Ichiro agreed before he pouted.

The women laughed quietly at his pout, knowing it sometimes exasperated the boy that Kazu couldn’t play like him. Smiling, the waterbender reached down to rub Kazu’s stomach.

“In a few months, he’ll be able to play with you more,” she assured the little boy.

That statement seemed to perk Ichiro up and he returned to making funny faces at the little prince.

The two women looked away from their children and smiled at each other. They were spending their time in the Royal Palace Garden after lunch with Katara’s family and Toph. Jee had accompanied Ursa to once again visit Azula while Iroh, Kanna, and Pakku decided to spend the rest of their day playing Pai Sho. Suki and her daughters went to explore the capital shopping district with Toph grudgingly following behind.

At the moment, Katara had a rare break from her Fire Lady duties, which also included a few things that she had to oversee during the Fire Lord’s absence, and she wanted to spend it with her son. Enjoying the shade the cherry blossom tree provided, she sighed in contentment as a fresh breeze swept through the garden. She glanced briefly toward the tranquil pond where she could just make out the koi fish swimming languidly in the clear water. Ichiro had excitedly fed the turtle-duck family a few minutes ago, so the little creatures were now resting in their nest hidden within a bush.
Now at three months old, her little prince enjoyed playtime more and she basked in his delighted smiles and babbles. She no longer had to support his head as much and when he was on his stomach, he was able to lift his head and chest. In a month or two, he would be able to roll over and move around more. Kazu liked to grasp anything within his reach and he loved shaking his toys or swatting at objects dangling in his face. Katara had also noticed that he closely tracked objects that interested him and focused intently on faces. Her heart always squeezed with pride and affection, he was able to recognize her every time she came to pick him up from Jiao’s care after she had completed her duties for the day. She loved singing to him or reading to him, the sound of her voice seemed to please him.

Her smile faltered a little. Kazuhiko was three months and her husband had missed two months of their son’s early stages of life. She knew it had been inevitable since Zuko, as Fire Lord, had responsibilities that he could not ignore.

It had been almost two months since she last saw her husband and she missed him. Missed his quiet companionship, his steady support, and his rare playful banter he only let her see. And La, she missed his body. It had been months since the last time they had made love and she craved him with a desperation that was almost embarrassing. She was sure he was suffering as much as she was, which, much to her shame, made her occasionally wonder if he was easing his sexual frustrations with another woman while he was away. Then she would berate herself for her thoughts, telling herself to trust him and that he was an honorable man that would never betray her. He loved and respected her too much to hurt her like that.

She was completely healed now from giving birth and she had begun to waterbend again. She had also continued her lessons in archery with Ursa and she was proud to say she was a fairly good shot now. She also had hand-to-hand combat matches with Jee or Suki and bending spars with Toph, who enjoyed taunting her with annoying phrases more than challenging her with her earthbending. Once, Toph had teased her by asking if she was being more aggressive with her waterbending because she couldn’t jump Zuko’s bones whenever she wanted. Katara had retorted by asking the same question since Aang was also gone. She had laughed when Toph’s face turned red and she spluttered before she growled for the waterbender to shut up.

Thanks to the exercise, Katara was able to trim off the fat she had gained during her pregnancy and firmed her skin. She lessened the visibility of the stretchmarks that had appeared with her waterbending and had also done some exercises that Lady Yoon Hee had recommended to strengthen and tighten her vagina. Except for a little widening of her hips and fuller breasts, she looked the same as before she became pregnant. She now felt more comfortable and confident about her physical appearance and she could not wait to show it off to her husband and make love to him when he finally arrived.

A small sigh escaped her lips as longing once again sprang in her chest as she caressed Kazu’s dark hair. Zuko had sent her a message to let her know they had concluded the summons and he was finally on his way to the Fire Nation and would arrive soon. She hoped he did not take too long to come home to her and their son.
“Katara.”

The sound of that familiar and beloved baritone caressing her ears made her heart skip a beat before it started pounding rapidly in her chest with hope. Was her longing making her imagine things? Snapping her head up, her eyes widened in delighted surprise. Walking toward her was Zuko with a small smile curling his lips, his golden eyes warm and intense as he held her gaze.

“Zuko,” she breathed.

He opened his arms and she quickly sprang to her feet before she rushed forward to embrace him tightly. He wrapped his arms just as tightly around her and when she looked up, he leaned down to press his mouth against hers. With an elated moan, she pressed herself closer to his chest.

The soft clearing of a throat and a quiet childlike giggle interrupted their moment and they quickly drew apart. While Katara smiled sheepishly, Zuko coughed awkwardly as he caught the smiles Jiao and Ichiro were trying to hide. He had not noticed their presence since his entire focus had been on his beautiful wife gazing so affectionately at their son. Thinking of his son, Zuko’s eyes darted to the baby gurgling and babbling atop the blanket and he felt his chest tighten in anticipation of having his son in his arms once again.

Knowing the royal family must wish to be alone, Jiao stood up as she gently grabbed her son’s hand to urge him to stand with her. With the Fire Lord’s arrival it meant her husband had returned as well and she was excited to go to him. Ichiro pouted as he reluctantly allowed his mother to pull him up, he wanted to keep playing with the little prince, but he knew better than to throw a tantrum before the regal Fire Lord.

“Welcome back, my lord,” the maid said with a small bow and then with a smile she added, “Ichiro and I are eager to see Kuo again.”

“Thank you and I believe Kuo went in search of you and Ichiro in your rooms,” Zuko said in a cool tone.

At the mention of his father, the little boy’s pout disappeared and he smiled widely. With another soft smile, Jiao bowed at the royal couple before she and her excited son took their leave in search of Kuo. Once they were out of sight, the waterbender melted into her husband’s warm embrace once again.
Her throat tightened when she felt his strong arms wrap tightly around her to bring her close to his firm frame, his warmth seeming to seep into her body. She breathed in his smoky, sandalwood scent and held him even tighter as she pressed her face into his chest. La, she missed this.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered, “I missed you so much.”

“Katara,” Zuko breathed her name in a soft murmur as he buried his face in her soft hair, relishing in her sweet scent and the feel of her body in his arms. “You have no idea how much I missed you.”

He leaned away and Katara glanced up to look at him. They stared silently into each other’s eyes, reading and analyzing what they could see from each other’s expressions, before their faces closed the small distance at the same time. The contact of their lips, of the sweet, chaste touch after being away from each other for so long, brought a shudder and sighing breaths from both as happiness surged between them. A loud coo from a few feet away caught their attention and they pulled away to glance at the wiggling baby with affectionate smiles. Smiling down at his wife, Zuko grasped her hand in a gentle hold as he stepped closer to their son. They each sat on either side of the blanket and Kazu immediately gurgled happily at having attention once again.

When his son’s eyes locked with his, Zuko’s breath caught in his throat. Two months had passed since he had left and already he could see some changes from the small infant he had held in his arms before. Not only was Kazuhiko bigger, but he seemed more active as he waved his tiny hands fiercely in the air and kicked his feet vigorously, but most astonishing was how aware he seemed. Zuko could see how Kazu’s eyes seemed to examine his face as they stared at each other and the firebender wondered if his son somehow realized he was staring at his father.

Pride swelled in his chest along with sadness and a pang of regret for having missed watching his son grow in the past two months. As if sensing his thoughts, his wife reached out and gently caressed his scarred cheek. Zuko glanced up to see her smiling softly, if a little sadly, at him and he returned her smile before he again looked down at their son.

Seeing he had the man’s attention again, Kazuhiko cooed loudly before a large smile broke on his small face. The sight of that genuine smile caused warmth to spread in Zuko’s chest and his lips to curl in a grin of his own. Dispelling his sudden melancholy, the firebender reached forward to gently caress his son’s hair and cheek before chuckling when Kazu grabbed his finger and shook it vigorously with a happy gurgle.

Katara smiled as she watched her husband interacting with their son and she felt her heart swell with happiness and love. Zuko was back and now their little family was complete once again. She could not help the immense joy that spread through her whole body. Still chuckling at having his finger
tightly caught, the firebender reached with his other hand to lightly tickle Kazu’s stomach. The dark-haired baby let out a squeal of laughter and Katara’s eyes widened in surprise and wonder.

Hearing her small gasp, Zuko glanced to his wife with a curious expression.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“No, nothing’s wrong,” Katara quickly replied as she smiled at him, “It’s just it's the first time I’ve heard Kazuhiko laugh.”

“Really?” Zuko asked excitedly as he glanced back down to smile at his son. “I’m glad that I was here for his first laugh at least.”

Smiling in understanding, Katara placed her hand over his where he still had it resting gently on Kazu’s belly. They were silent for a moment as they watched over their son, whose attention shifted to one of his toys that tinkled when he shook it. A moment later, Zuko asked his wife about anything he had missed while he was away and she told him everything from when Kazuhiko first began to smile to her Fire Lady duties. Then they began to discuss Zuko’s journey to Omashu and what had transpired during the negotiations. She became as indignant as he and Hakoda had been at the Earth Kingdom representatives’ accusations.

“I wish you could’ve been there,” Zuko chuckled at her angry huffs, “You would’ve put them in their place.”

“Damn right I would’ve,” Katara sniffed with a firm nod of her head. “The arrogant idiots.”

Another chuckle escaped the Fire Lord at his waterbender’s annoyance. He loved how defensive and protective she was of him and he knew she would be even more so when it came to their son. May the gods protect any who dared mess with Kazu, for they would not only find an enraged Fire Lord in their hands, but a fiercely protective waterbending master.

“So did anything else happen in Omashu?” Katara asked curiously as she tickled Kazu’s chin, causing the baby to let out another laugh that caused her to grin in delight at the new sound.

When her husband did not immediately respond, the blue-eyed woman looked up at him with a small frown.
“Zuko?”

“I…well…” he began before he let out a sigh.

Katara felt her heart begin to pound in anxiety as she waited to hear what Zuko had to say. Different scenarios flew through her head, some more horrible than others, and she swallowed thickly, but decided to let him speak before she jumped to conclusions.

“What happened?” she asked quietly, though she could not completely hide the apprehension in her tone.

Zuko detected that she was becoming upset and he quickly sought to remedy the situation.

“No, nothing bad happened,” he firmly stated as he held her gaze. Only when she relaxed slightly, did he continue, “I just thought I should be honest and tell you that I was accosted by Mai.”

“Again?” the waterbender growled angrily.

“Jet was right when he told us Mai is determined to break us up,” he said as he tiredly rubbed his temple.

He decided not to bring up Mai’s accusation that Katara was unfaithful to him, since he knew it would never happen. He trusted his wife more than anyone else in his life.

“Did she try to seduce you again?” Katara hissed with blazing azure eyes.

“Yes,” Zuko confessed truthfully, “But she didn’t succeed.”

Katara stared into his unwavering, golden eyes before she gave a nod, knowing he spoke the truth. Despite her trust in him, the small part of her that had harbored her doubts relaxed. While she trusted him, it was nice to hear his assurances for herself. Her thoughts shifted to Mai’s actions and the waterbender clenched her teeth. If she had gone to Omashu with Zuko, she would have probably
pulled the noblewoman’s hair out of her head for trying to seduce her husband! Again!

“Why can’t she get it into her head that you’re mine?” Katara growled with narrowed eyes.

Zuko shook his head and sighed.

“I never imagined she would be this obsessed,” he said with a frown, “She just doesn’t seem like the type of person to care much about things. I figured that she would’ve moved on to search for something better.”

“Well… I can’t say I blame her,” the brunette mumbled, “I don’t know if I would be able to let you go either.”

“But I wouldn’t want you to let go of me ever,” Zuko replied steadfastly. “I’m yours as much as you’re mine.”

A smile spread on Katara’s lips at her husband’s resolute words since she had the same sentiment. She leaned forward to press a kiss to his firm lips, smiling when she felt him immediately soften at her touch. Another coo from Kazu had them pulling apart to grin at each other before they returned their attention to their son who waved and kicked from where he laid between them. Zuko shifted so he was lying down on his side, propped up on his elbow, so he could play with his son better. Picking up the rattle Ichiro had been using before, the firebender shook it before Kazu, which caused the baby to laugh as he attempted to reach for the fascinating toy. The next few minutes were spent discussing the few things that had sprung up during Zuko’s absence that needed his attention and Kazuhiko’s antics during the last two months.

Kazu once again held tightly onto his father’s finger and Zuko chuckled. He had never thought he would one day be sitting there playing with his son nor did he think he would embrace fatherhood so easily. Granted, there were still many things he needed to learn, but he thought he was doing a fairly good job so far. It still amazed him to see this small being—who resembled him so much—this little life he and his wife had created with their passionate and intense love. It humbled him to know he was part of it. For years, he had thought he didn’t need a family, but now he could see that he could not live without them. And his family, his happiness, was all thanks to Katara.

His heart swelled with intense love for his waterbender. He lifted his head to look at her leaning against the trunk of the cherry blossom tree, only to realize that she was already staring at him, her ocean-blue eyes soft and gentle. They gazed silently into each other’s eyes, their feelings for one another swirling in their depths and charging the air between them, as they were wont to do. They were interrupted from the sudden spell by their son’s sudden loud fussing and angry squalls. Katara
smiled and Zuko chuckled as they gazed down at their fussing child.

“I think he’s hungry,” the firebender stated amusedly.

Sitting up, he swiftly picked up his crying son from the blanket. He smiled when Kazu quieted a little as he gently rocked him in his arms. The baby stared up at him for a moment before his small face scrunched up and he let out another angry cry. Zuko could not help but chuckle.

“His appetite is just like his father’s,” Katara teased with a giggle as she quickly untied the top part of her robe so she could free her breast.

“Better than the insatiable one of his Uncle Sokka,” the Fire Lord retorted in amusement as he handed the baby to Katara when she held out her arms to him.

Once she had taken hold of the baby, Zuko moved over so he could sit beside her, resting his back against the tree trunk.

“So true,” the waterbender laughed as she brought her fussing son to her chest.

Kazuhiko’s cries immediately subsided as he found his mother’s nipple and latched onto it, sucking furiously, trying to get her milk to let-down in order to drink her milk. His sucking slowed as her milk flowed and satisfied his hunger. As her son grew older, her breasts produced more milk, which made it uncomfortable as they swelled before his normal feeding times. Katara gazed down at her hungry son with a loving smile as she reached up to caress his soft cheek. She loved holding him to her, to press him close to her heart. The moments when Kazu would stare into her eyes as she held him caused a pang of love and protectiveness to swell in her chest. With a fond smile, Katara began to hum softly in contentment.

Zuko smiled as he watched their son feed, who would occasionally make satisfied little sounds as he kneaded his mother’s breast with his tiny hand, his brow furrowed in concentration. Caressing the baby’s hair with one hand, he leaned down to kiss his son’s head before pulling back to continue observing his family. There was nothing as fascinating or endearing as watching a mother feeding her child. Kazuhiko really was a beautiful baby, with dark hair and almond-shaped eyes like his father. Reaching out, he held Kazu’s small foot while he ate and he smiled in amusement when the baby lazily kicked his foot. Returning his gaze to his son’s face, Zuko felt his heart expand when he saw that Kazu was staring at him and he stared back, enthralled. A moment later, Kazu’s eyes shifted to the rustling leaves above them as he continued to nurse.
Now that he didn’t have his son’s attention, Zuko’s gaze shifted to Katara’s other exposed mound as she lowered the other side of her top in order to switch Kazu from one breast to the other. It was fortunate that they were the only ones in the private garden for he sure as hell did not want anyone else to gaze upon what was his. He swallowed at the sight and quickly glanced away before his thoughts carried him to other less innocent paths. He loved his son, but he could not wait until he had Katara’s breasts all to himself again. Once again, the image of him placing his mouth to his wife’s nipples to see what her milk tasted like surfaced in his mind before he tried to shake the thought away. It had been so long since they had been intimate and Zuko could not help wanting to run his hands all over her body, exploring her new curves and caressing her softness as he sheathed himself inside her. He cleared his throat.

“I love our son, but he has taken my place too much recently,” he found himself confessing out loud.

“Why, Zuko, are you jealous of your own son?” Katara replied with an amused giggle.

“No,” Zuko quickly replied before he quietly mumbled, “Well…a little.”

The Fire Lady could not stop the grin that appeared on her face at Zuko’s confession. She could hear the pout in his tone and it was amusing to hear it from the usually stoic Fire Lord. She chuckled quietly before a mischievous smile curled her lips, which Zuko missed since he was once again gazing at Kazuhiko. A plan was forming in her head that involved finding someone to look after Kazu for the night so she could show her husband how much she had missed him. She could not wait.

Oblivious to his wife’s thoughts, Zuko watched as his son’s eyes began to droop a little as his sucking became slower. Kazuhiko really was a gorgeous baby. A comfortable silence settled over them and Zuko wrapped an arm around Katara’s lower back as they continue to watch the little bundle of joy they had created. The firebender contemplated on how content he felt at this moment with just his wife and their son, sitting beneath the cool shade of the cherry blossom tree in the tranquility of their private garden. This was what he had missed and longed for during those two months he was separated from them in Omashu.

A few minutes later, Kazu detached himself with a soft coo and Katara gently brought him up to her shoulder to burp him before bringing him back down against her chest. The Fire Lord smiled indulgently when their son let out a contented little sigh as he cuddled against his mother’s warm chest before promptly falling asleep. Zuko watched as Katara smiled and lifted the baby’s curled fist to kiss it as she stared tenderly down at him. The sight caused warmth to spread through Zuko’s chest and he thought about commissioning a family portrait to immortalize such a sweet scene.

“It’ll be dinner time soon,” Katara spoke up softly, so as to not disturb the baby’s slumber.
Zuko nodded as he glanced briefly at the setting sun.

“I haven’t seen my mother or uncle since my arrival. No one else,” Zuko stated just as quietly. “I was eager to see you and Kazuhiko.”

The waterbender looked up to smile at her husband whose arm was still wound around her.

“They had things to do, but they’ll be happy to see you returned,” she said.

Another nod was Zuko’s response.

“Sokka and Aang were also impatient to see Suki and Toph,” the firebender added with a chuckle.

“If you had let us know ahead of time you were arriving today, everybody would’ve been here to greet you,” she stated.

“Blame that on Sokka. He wanted it to be a surprise.”

They chuckled quietly.

“Do you have anything planned after dinner?” the waterbender asked a moment later as she gazed at him from under her lashes.

If he had looked up to see her expression, Zuko would have understood her meaning.

“I planned to look through some paperwork before my meeting with the advisors tomorrow,” he replied, “But other than that, the rest of my day is free.”

“Can you meet me in our room once you finish?” the waterbender asked and smiled when he looked at her.
Zuko returned her smile and agreed, wanting to spend more time with his small family. He missed his wife’s impish expression as he caressed his sleeping son’s hair before he pressed a quick kiss to Katara’s temple, not realizing that his wish to possess his waterbender once again was going to be granted very soon.

Katara inwardly smirked, knowing that her husband would have left his work for another time if he knew what she was planning for them. But duties came first and she also had to prepare. Perhaps she could ask her mother-in-law if she could look after Kazu for a few hours since she knew how much Ursa loved spending time with her grandson. She would have asked Jiao, but Katara didn’t want to interrupt her time with Kuo so soon after his return. Same thing with Suki and Sokka. And she really couldn’t ask Toph either for the same reasons and also because the small earthbender would protest being saddled with the job of babysitter. Once Kazu was older, he would be placed in Zuko’s old childhood bedchamber that would solely be his.

“Here, I’ll hold him,” Zuko’s voice brought her out of her thoughts as he reached for the slumbering baby.

Once he had carefully taken a hold of Kazu, Katara quickly retied her top before grasping his hand so he could pull her up. She gathered the baby’s toys and put them inside the small basket that had been placed aside before picking up the blanket and folding it neatly and putting it on top of the toys. Once done, she looked up to smile at her silent husband.

“Ready?” he asked.

Katara nodded with another inward smirk.

“More than ever.”

Zuko walked swiftly down the golden corridor as he headed to his room, eager to spend more time with Katara and Kazu. After a jovial dinner with the entire family, including Toph and Aang, Zuko excused himself to retreat to his study in order to look through some of the documents that urgently needed his attention. It had taken longer than he had wished, but he had eventually finished and was now making his way to the royal chambers. Hopefully, Katara was still awake, though he would understand if he found her sleeping, the demands of both their son and her Fire Lady duties were exhausting.

During dinner, he had caught Katara giving him teasingly, alluring smiles, the intensity of her azure
eyes as they locked with his golden ones setting him on fire and making him clench his wine cup tightly. But just as quickly she would look away to talk to the others as if her eyes had not burned him to cinders and left him aching and bewildered. Now that he was by her side again, his desire for her had increased to the point that he had been unable to stop the fantasies that sprang in his head while in his study. One reason why it took him so long to go through his paperwork.

Agni, he wanted her.

He wondered when they could finally make love again. Once again, images of what he had seen and read in that erotic book (which he had reluctantly returned to its hiding place) sprang in his head. The vision of him and Katara engaging in anal sex surfaced in his mind, as it had repeatedly over the past two months, and he stifled a groan as the thought made his groin tighten. He shook his head and took a deep breath to calm his arousal. He planned on asking Katara about the possibility of them finally making love if she was still awake, if not he’d just ask her tomorrow and hope that time came soon. He didn’t even know if she was fully healed yet.

As he reached the royal chambers, he found the two nights guards that Jee had personally appointed at their posts. Since they needed their well-deserved rest, Shen was dismissed to spend the day as he pleased while Kuo spent the rest of the day with his family. After quietly dismissing the night guards, Zuko quickly opened one of the golden doors and crossed the antechamber before opening the other set of doors more carefully, not wanting to wake Kazu if he was sleeping. He quietly closed the door behind him before turning around to survey the room, noticing that the fireplace and some candles were illuminating the room, making him realize that his wife was probably still awake. His eyes shifted to the massive bed and he froze, his breath hitching in his throat at the sight that greeted him. Katara was reclining against the headboard, completely naked, her long chestnut hair unbound and falling around her shoulders. Her lovely legs were splayed open as she stared intensely at him through half-lidded eyes. Her delicate fingers slowly rubbed and circled her swollen bud while her other hand massaged her full breast and pinched her dusky nipple. Her pink sex was entirely bared for his perusal. The sight reminded him of the other time he had found her like this and he groaned quietly. Her folds and upper thighs were completely wet with her juices and Zuko swallowed thickly as he felt his cock immediately harden in arousal. The Fire Lord stood in silent fascination, a fierce hunger thundering through him as he watched his wife move her hand down to slip one finger into her dripping entrance.

“Oooh,” she moaned as she added another finger and slowly pumped them in and out of her. “Mmm, Zuko, that feels so good.”

The sound of her breathless moan spurred Zuko into action and he quickly began to divest himself of his clothing as he continued to watch Katara pleasure herself as she stared at him with a wanton gleam in her blue eyes. Zuko reached for the ties of his trousers before he froze and his eyes darted to the spot where Kazu usually rested only to find that he and the crib were not there.
“Kazu?” he inquired in a strained voice as he turned back to his tempting wife.

“Ursa agreed to look after him for a few hours,” Katara responded before she breathlessly added, “I need you, Zuko. So, so much.”

“Gods,” Zuko groaned heatedly at the desperation in her tone.

His hands almost ripped at the ties that held his last article of clothing up in his eagerness to join his wife. When his pants fell around his ankles and his cock sprang free, the waterbender moaned louder as she increased the pace of her fingers. She licked her lips as she stared hungrily at his turgid flesh.

“You little minx,” Zuko purred huskily as he began to slowly crawl up the bed toward her. “You were planning this all along.”

“I wanted your welcome home gift to be a surprise,” she crooned sensually as she watched him move closer to her, “Surprise.”

“Best surprise ever,” he growled throatily.

He raked his eyes all over her lush body, taking in her fuller breasts and hips with fascination. The sight of such womanly curves only caused his shaft to throb painfully. Agni, he needed her. His body, tight as a bowstring, burned to bury himself inside her wet, welcoming heat.

Panting softly in both pleasure and anticipation, Katara watched her husband stalk toward her on all fours, a predatory glint in his golden eyes, causing her wet walls to flutter against her pumping fingers. He spread her legs wider apart so he could settled between them before he pressed his hard body flat against her smaller form, causing them both to groan at the sensation of skin against skin. He thrust his hips once and it caused her fingers to sink deeper into her. He smirked when she let out a small gasp.

The waterbender watched with bated breath as her husband stared down at her for a moment before he quickly cut the distance between them to capture her lips. With a loud moan, Katara moved her hand away from her sex so she could clutch his long hair tightly with both hands, her fingers digging deeply into the strands as he kissed her hungrily. She returned his ardent kisses just as fiercely, and when he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, she wantonly sucked at it and curled hers around it. She groaned his name into his mouth when he wrapped his arms tightly around her and massaged his
thickly engorged cock along her wet folds, so close to where she wanted him to be.

La, she missed this, she missed him. She wanted him like never before. It had been months since he had touched her and she craved him so desperately. She had pleasured herself a few times while he was away, but it was never enough and only left her longing even more for him. She felt him slip a hand between their bodies and she cried out when his fingers began to play with her sensitive clit.

“Ohh, haaa, mmm,” she moaned as she moved against his skillful fingers. “Yes, so good.”

Then he thrust two fingers inside her and began to pump them slowly, but firmly, pressing against that sweet spot inside her, making her bow her back in immense pleasure.

“How!” she whimpered loudly as she wiggled beneath him, undulating her hips so that his fingers sank deeper and her thigh pressed firmly against his shaft, “Please. I want you inside me.”

Zuko groaned at her words and he almost succumbed to what they both wanted, but he held himself back—barely. He had not touched her or tasted her in months and he wanted to reacquaint himself to her amazing body, to her delicious taste, before he finally took her. Forcing himself away from her mouth, Zuko closed his eyes and panted hard as he tried to rein in his straining arousal. He reopened his eyes when he felt Katara touched his scarred cheek and he stared down into her darkened eyes.

“I want to taste your sweet pussy first before I bury myself inside you,” he growled throatily as he gave her a wicked smirk.

“Oh, yes, yes,” the waterbender purred enthusiastically as she arched against him, his dirty words causing her stomach to tighten as they always did.

Groaning, Zuko leaned down to kiss her one more time before he pulled away to latch his mouth onto the fluttering pulse of her neck, causing her to mewl his name. He breathed in the sweet scent of her hair, realizing that she had taken a bath before he arrived, and he greedily lapped at her clean skin as he continued to move his fingers within her. He moved down so he could plant moist kisses and gentle nips along her throat, shoulder, and collarbones. Removing his fingers from inside her, he slipped them into his mouth and moaned at her taste as he wrapped his tongue around them. He heard Katara call his name and he slipped his fingers out with a loud, wet sound. He kissed down her skin once again until he arrived at her wonderful, heaving mounds. He cupped both within his large hands, pushing them together and up, and he licked her cleavage before deciding to worship them more thoroughly later; he was desperate to bury his face between her luscious thighs.
He continued his descent down her body, stopping briefly to kiss and lave her navel. He could feel Katara squirming in anticipation beneath him and he knew that if he did not hurry she would take matters into her own hands and take her pleasure of him regardless of what he planned. Before he continued further, however, his mind once again flashed to that book he had read and thoroughly studied. Perhaps now, while Katara was completely aroused, she would be more open to his suggestion about incorporating anal sex into their intimate moments. Gods, he hoped she was amendable to the idea.

Katara had been biting her lip as she waited breathlessly for Zuko to bury his face between her thighs only to frown when he crawled back up her body. He looked down at her with an intense expression that caused heat to flare throughout her nerve endings. Before she could ask him what he was thinking, her firebender cupped her face and leaned down to take her lips in a passionate kiss that left her breathless and aching beneath him.

“K-Katara,” he rasped huskily before he swallowed, “Before we continue…I wish to…discuss the possibility of us…trying something…different.”

“Like what?” Katara asked breathlessly.

She always loved it when they tried new things and she felt her core clench in both arousal and eagerness. However, there was something in his tone along with the slight hesitancy in his eyes that reached her dazed mind that warned her that what Zuko had in mind was probably something she would not be agreeable to. A small frown appeared on her brow.

“I’m willing to try new things with you,” she told him sincerely. “As long as it doesn’t involve us hurting each other physically or….sharing each other with a third person,” she added in a hard tone.

During one of their visits to the palace to have tea with Katara, a couple of the younger noblewomen had boasted about their sexual exploits, even when she frowned at them. One woman had said she had a lover who loved to inflict pain by striking her with his hand or using a blunt object such as a cane on her. A few other women had even talked about how their husbands loved to bring in one or two of their concubines into their intimate moments with their wives. Another woman had even boasted that she had attended an orgy a rich noble had hosted at his house. Katara had only stared at them in incredulity. She knew everybody had their sexual preferences, but there were just some things she definitely did not wish to try.

“Hurting you is definitely not a turn on,” Zuko replied with a deep frown before he growled, “And I will never agree with us sharing each other. You are mine and I am only yours.”
“Good,” Katara purred as she cupped the back of his head and brought him down to kiss him. When they pulled away to catch their breaths, she asked, “So what do you have in mind?”

Zuko swallowed again as he stared down into her inquisitive eyes. Gods, she was so beautiful and he needed her so very badly. He wanted to make every part, every inch, of her exquisite body his and there was still one place that he had not touched yet. Would she let him? Would she give her everything to him?

“Zuko?” she asked in a strained moan and she shifted beneath him.

“I…uh, well…” he began slowly before he continued a bit more strongly, “One night, while I was browsing Bumi’s library, I came across one of those erotic instructional manuals I mentioned to you before. And well, I came across something interesting that I thought would make our sex life more… thrilling.”

“Oh?” Katara asked softly as she sensually ran her fingers down his back, smiling when her husband groaned softly at her touch. “Did you come across a new position for us to try?”

“Uh, well, you could say that,” Zuko replied slowly as he continued to watch her expression, admiring the flush on her cheeks caused by their earlier ministrations, “I’m referring to… anal sex. And I was wondering if you would be okay with us trying it…”

“Anal sex?” Katara repeated slowly, a small frown appearing on her brow as she thought about what Zuko had said.

She had heard about it, but it was mostly about how unpleasant and painful it could be. Some people even though it was taboo or gross. She really didn’t know much about anal sex, honestly, to say what she thought about it. Would it be painful if she and Zuko tried it? But then again, she had been told losing her virginity would be extremely painful, and although it did hurt, it wasn’t as bad as they had made it out to be. Maybe if she and Zuko tried it, it would be pleasant? She bit her lip.

How would it feel? To have Zuko’s shaft inside that part of her body? Would it feel good or would it be too painful? After all, her husband was a well-endowed man.

She shifted again in uncertainty as she thought about the issue. Yet, she could not deny that she had been curious about the act ever since she had first heard about it. A couple of the noblewomen had talked about their experiences with anal sex. A few had heartily enthused about how enjoyable the
act was and how much pleasure they had achieved from it. She had felt herself flush in embarrassment, less from their frank discussion but more at her interest at their words. But she had dismissed the thought since she didn’t think Zuko would be interested in it and she didn’t know how to introduce that to him. But now that he was, she found herself more and more excited by the idea.

She focused again on Zuko and realized he was still looking at her. There was an intense, hot gleam in his golden eyes that demonstrated his eagerness and arousal, but he was patient as he waited silently for her reply. She relaxed a little as she made her decision. She was willing to try it. If it did hurt and she didn’t like it, she knew Zuko would immediately stop and she trusted him to be gentle with her as they forayed into this new adventure. Besides, Zuko always strove to bring her the most pleasure possible and she knew this would not be any different. That last thought, about the immense pleasure she could experience if only she allowed it, was what finally made her speak her thoughts.

“Um, okay, we could try it,” she replied as her fingers moved restlessly over his back, suddenly unsure on how to proceed, “So…how do we start?”

Zuko felt his entire body flare with heat, his cock throbbing in lust, at her acceptance and it was all he could do to stop himself from devouring her mouth and sinking his body inside her warmth with his exuberance. Instead, he leaned down to gently, sensually, kiss her lips as he slowly rocked his hips against hers. Simultaneous moans rose between them at the amazing sensation the friction caused. He appreciated that she was willing to try new things, but it was the complete trust she placed in him with her body, with her heart, that made him love her so much. Pulling away from her skillful mouth so he could finally answer her question, Zuko panted heavily as their bodies continued to rock erotically together.

“I actually won’t be penetrating you today,” he told her huskily before hurriedly adding when he saw her frown, “The book stated that lots of preparation was important before actual anal sex in order for the experience to be enjoyable.”

“Okay, so what do we have to do?” Katara asked breathlessly as she sensually rubbed her body against him, her stomach tightening every time the ridge of his cock slid against her bud. She felt her sex clench when she saw a wicked smirk overtake her firebender’s handsome face as he slowly rocked back against her.

“You just relax,” he growled throatily, “I’ll make sure you feel good.”

Before Katara could ask him how he planned to do that, she was distracted with the passionate kiss he bestowed on her that left her mind dazed and her body tingling in arousal. All too soon, however, he pulled away from her lips, causing her to groan her disappointment, but not a second later, his mouth was attached to that sensitive spot on her neck that made her squirm and gasp against him. He
continued to press more sensual, soft kisses down her body and her stomach quivered when he moved closer to her moist heat.

“Zuko, please,” she could not help but moan in frustrated arousal.

Instead of replying to her plea, Zuko settled himself between her legs, pushing her thighs further apart to reveal his sweet haven, the place he most desired to be. He hungrily eyed his wife’s swollen folds, glistening with her arousal, before he glanced up her body to see her watching him over her heaving breasts. He suppressed a smirk when he noticed her breath speeding up as he moved his mouth closer to her sex. He inhaled deeply before letting out a loud sigh at her heady scent, feeling his mouth water and his cock throbbing at the thought of tasting her.

Then without further preamble, he slipped his tongue out and slid it up from her clenching entrance to her sensitive clit.

“Yes!” Katara cried out, her body jerking at the amazing sensation.

Pressing his palms against her upper thighs to keep her widely open for his pleasure, Zuko began to rapidly and roughly lap and suck at her swollen folds. He made sure to apply more pressure to her opening and her swollen bud by using his tongue and lips. His efforts were rewarded by his waterbender’s moans and cries and the writhing of her hips as she tried to move closer to his face.

“I’ve thought of nothing but throwing you down and eating you out while I’ve been gone,” he growled throatily as he gave another firm suck of her clit. “And once I’ve drunk up your juices to my heart’s content, I will bury my thick cock deep inside your tight, wet pussy and fuck you until you can’t walk for days.”

“Yes, please, haah,” Katara moaned at both his dirty words and the anticipation of him following through with his promise.

“Ohhh, gods, Zuko!” she cried out her husband’s name when he covered her slick folds entirely with his mouth as he thrust his tongue as deeply as he could inside her. Her eyes rolled back when she felt him rub against her walls, the sensation of his hot breath and wet tongue only causing the fire in her lower stomach to flare to dangerous levels. She bucked and undulated under him, trying to gain more pleasure and usher in that delicious ecstasy. La, she needed him so badly!

Pulling back to catch his breath (only a few inches since Katara’s hands were deeply buried in his
hair), Zuko licked his lips to savor her taste as he watched as a fresh gush of her cream seeped out from her and leaked down her bottom to lubricate the puckered hole he had been fantasizing about for months. He could not wait any longer. He needed to touch that part of her.

Katara’s eyes opened and she gasped when she suddenly found herself being flipped onto her front. She could feel her stomach quivering and core throbbing with the sudden loss of stimulation, but her arousal flared at the anticipation of Zuko entering her from behind. She moaned deeply when she felt his large hands grab her hips and pulled them up so she was on her knees.

“So lovely,” Zuko growled throatily as his eyes lustfully roved over the curve of his waterbender’s ass as if she were presenting all of its lush glory for his viewing pleasure.

Katara moaned and shuddered when she felt him run his hands up and down her back before sliding them under her as he pressed his chest along the length of her back. She heard him murmur her name as he moved her long hair aside and pressed desperate kisses along her neck and shoulder. He leisurely moved his hands over her stomach before moving them up, slowly, teasingly, until she felt she was about to burst with the anticipation. She arched her back and moaned when he finally grabbed her breasts and squeezed them firmly.

“Oooh, mmm,” she moaned deeply as she pressed her ass against his cock, wanting to have him inside her already. She smiled in triumph when he bucked his hips against her and groaned. A frown appeared on her brow a second later, however, when she felt him suddenly move away from her. She looked over her shoulder questioningly and she watched as a roguish smile curled his lips.

“You’ll have me inside you soon, Katara, but not yet,” he purred huskily as his hands continued to stroke her rear cheeks.

Before Katara could voice her disappointment, a throaty moan escaped her throat when Zuko swiftly leaned back down and plunged his skillful tongue back inside her wet passage. Her fingers dug into the mattress beneath her and her eyes rolled back when Zuko latched onto her clit and began to roughly suck on it. The amazing sensations caused her belly to tighten and her thighs to shake.

“Y-yes, yes, Zu-Zuko, oh!” she whimpered.

Zuko pulled back as Katara’s cries and moans intensified. His eyes became riveted by the sight of her ass. His wife’s backside was perfect and he loved to touch it as much as he did her breasts. Her cheeks were round and firm thanks to her waterbending training, but still fleshy that he could grab and fondle them. He also loved the tantalizing little dimples at the base of her spine. His attention shifted to her swollen folds, wet with her juices and his saliva. The sight of her pink pussy
surrounded by the rich, brown skin of her ass cheeks always fascinated him. Licking his lips, he continued to stare for a moment longer before his gaze traveled and settled on the little puckered hole nestled between those exquisite round cheeks. He felt his shaft pulse with his arousal at the thought of one day slipping himself inside there. He took note of the large amount of his precum that was leaking down his turgid length and coating his heavy sac and he knew his body was desperate for orgasm after so long without making love to his waterbender.

When Zuko didn’t continue, Katara let out an impatient little hiss. She wiggled her butt to entice her firebender to continue giving her pleasure, knowing how much he loved it when she did that. A smile stretched her lips when she felt him kiss her right cheek and then her left before the sensation of his hot breath on her drenched skin caused her muscles to tense in anticipation of his mouth pleasuring her sex again. Instead, she felt a tentative flick of his tongue on her anus. Her eyes widened and she stiffened, suddenly uncertain.

“Are you okay?” he asked. His tone was soft, but his voice was rough with need.

He was caressing her rear cheeks and thighs, and she knew he was waiting for her to give him a sign that he could continue. Katara forced herself to relax. She had told him she would give anal sex a try and she would. Even if she ended up not liking it, she could say she at least tried. Besides, she was really curious.

“I’m fine,” she replied before she sultrily purred, “Touch me, Zuko.”

At her words, Zuko relaxed and slowly let out the breath he had been holding as he waited for her response. He had been prepared to back away if she decided not to continue, but he thanked his lucky stars that his wife was willing to see where things went. He vowed that he would pleasure her so thoroughly that she would beg him not only to take her pussy but her ass as well.

He caressed her lush cheeks once more before he spread them widely as he leaned back down. He heard her gasp his name as he slid his tongue from her clit, through her folds, and then back to her anus. The juices he had coaxed from her body earlier had coated the puckered hole nicely, which would make this first foray into anal sex go more smoothly. He flicked his tongue a little more firmly against the tight bud and he felt her tense again.

“Relax, Katara,” he purred reassuringly, “I’ll make you feel good. I promise.”

Katara once again forced herself to relax, telling herself that instead of thinking of how unpleasant anal sex could be, she should think about the pleasure she could derive from it. She bit her lip when she felt Zuko once again lick her ass, pressing the tip of his wet tongue even harder. The sensation
was strange and unfamiliar, yet not displeasing. It might have been crude, but it felt good. It was wet, soft, and oh so hot. He continued to lick her there longer until her body gradually relaxed before he returned to pleasuring her clit and her pussy with his tongue. He continued to alternate between the three until the pleasure began to make her moan loudly and insistently rock back against his mouth for more.

Just when she thought the sensations couldn’t get any better, Zuko slipped two long fingers into her pussy and began to pump them furiously while he probed eagerly at her smaller entrance with his tongue.

“Ahhh, gods!” Katara screamed as an orgasm crashed into her, sending her spiraling into a world of ecstasy that blanked her mind from everything except the pleasure she was experiencing. Her eyes rolled back when Zuko continued to finger her core until everything below her waist, from her groin to her thighs, were completely drenched in her juices.

Then she collapsed back on the mattress, panting heavily and moaning incoherently as her body shuddered uncontrollably, her mind blank from the euphoria she had just experienced. Wow, Zuko had only used his mouth to stimulate her ass and it was incredible. How much more pleasurable would it be when he used his fingers or cock? A moment later, as her body eventually relaxed, she became aware that Zuko was gently caressing her backside and murmuring against her hair.

“Good?” she heard him ask.

“Amazing,” she groaned quietly as she looked over her shoulder to stare at him. “More,” she demanded sultrily.

Zuko grinned down at her, her eagerness only causing his arousal to blaze higher. Gods, he loved this woman. He would never tire of giving her pleasure if she would always look at him with such desire and love in her large, blue eyes.

“Get on your knees again, Katara,” he ordered huskily as he pulled away from her back.

The brunette swiftly did as he asked, her core clenching in wanton anticipation of what else her husband would do to her. Resting her upper body on the mattress, she once again wiggled her ass in the air to entice her firebender to continue giving her pleasure. She jumped and cried out loudly when Zuko crashed his face into her soaked sex and began to eat her out as if he were dying of thirst.
“Oh, La, Zuk-o-o, mmm!” she moaned as her fingers clenched the sheets beneath her.

When his tongue moved to once again probe her tighter opening, Katara enthusiastically rocked back into him. A gasp escaped her when she felt a gentle smack on the left cheek of her rear. She loved it when he spanked her. He always made sure to do it firmly, not enough to be painful or to leave red marks or bruises, but enough that it left a pleasant sting. She pushed back against his face and was rewarded with another smack that only made the pleasure mount higher. She knew he was telling her to remain still, but what he was doing to her felt so good, it was hard not to move. She was forced to comply to his wishes when he stopped licking her, but as soon as she remained still he rewarded her by taking a long sweep of his hot tongue from her clit to her anus, which he probed with the tip of his tongue.

“Ooooh, g-gods, so good,” she hissed and her mouth dropped open in immense pleasure.

The sound of Katara’s moans only increased Zuko’s pleasure. His body felt ready to burst as his desire to bury himself in his wife’s tight, wet heat grew into an inferno of lustful need. He continued to devour her before he reached his hand between her legs. Without removing his mouth from her, he began to stroke her slick folds with his fingers until they were completely drenched with her juices. Then he slowly slipped them up and pressed them lightly on her anus. He felt her tense once again, so he did not move his fingers and focused instead on sucking roughly on her clit. Once she was moaning and straining against him, he began to gently circle the forbidden hole.

Katara’s eyes widened at the strange sensation. But just like with his tongue, the feeling—although unfamiliar—was pleasurable. He was stimulating new nerve endings she had not realized she had before and it felt damn good. Her firebender continued to gently rub against her anus for a moment longer, while he sucked and licked at her bud and folds, and it took her a moment to realize he wasn’t teasing her but was actually concerned of hurting her.

“It’s fine. Go ahead,” she whispered breathlessly.

Zuko pulled his face away and swallowed hard. He really hoped he did not hurt her, not only because he feared she would never want to try anal sex again, but because he hated to cause her any sort of pain. He made sure to gather more of her juices on his long digit before he slowly began to insert his index finger inside the previously untouched opening. He heard her suck in her breath. Just as he expected, she was so incredibly tight that it made his entry difficult. But luckily, her natural lubrication was extremely helpful, the second time he pressed forward he was able to slip his finger in.

Katara groaned lowly and bit her lip. The sensation was odd, but not at all painful as she had been expecting, so she was able to relax. She felt Zuko slowly pull his finger back and she held her breath. When he pushed inside her once more, her breath escaped her in a loud moan. After a few more
slow strokes, his finger began to move much more smoothly. Having his finger moving in that part of
her body was strange, but she could not deny it felt really good.

“Zu…o-ooh, Zuko,” she moaned gutturally as her fingers clenched restlessly at the bedsheets and her
body trembled. “More, please, uuhhh, more…”

Pulling away from flicking her clit with his tongue, Zuko pressed his mouth against her right cheek
as he continued to move his finger within her.

“Does that feel good?” he growled huskily, “Do you like my finger inside your ass, my naughty
water nymph?”

“Y-yes, gods, yes!” she mewled as she pressed back against his finger.

Zuko groaned at her quick and honest reply. Reaching up with his other hand, he massaged her
entire sex with his palm until he was completely covered in her warm cream then he brought it down
toward his painfully erect shaft. A deep growl escaped him as he began to roughly stroke his turgid
length from the base to the mushroomed tip. The combination of Katara’s juices and his own fluids
increased his stimulation. Panting heavily from the pleasure, Zuko pulled out his finger to collect
more of her juices. Just as he brought his mouth back on her clit, he gently inserted two fingers inside
her tighter back entrance.

Katara let out a high-pitched cry at the sudden increase in pressure and pleasure. The multiple
sensations her body was experiencing were quickly marshaling her into another orgasm. Her toes
began to curl and her lower stomach began to coil tightly as she waited almost desperately for that
release. It only took a few more thrusts of Zuko’s fingers and a few more licks and sucks of his
tongue to send her over the edge.

“Ahhhh!” she screamed as her body convulsed as pleasure rushed all over her body.

Zuko slowed the strokes on his cock as he watched the way Katara’s pussy clenched repeatedly, as if
trying to grasped onto something, while her anus clamped tightly around his pumping fingers. What
an incredible sight. He could only imagine how amazing it would feel when it was his length
wedged in there instead of just his fingers. When Katara began to whimper, he stopped and carefully
removed his fingers, knowing how sensitive she sometimes became. Instead of collapsing back onto
the mattress, his wife held her lovely backside high in the air. She was moaning softly and panting
slightly, so he decided to wait until she was ready to go at it again.
He began to tenderly caress her ass, hips, and thighs. It seemed like she really enjoyed his touch on her forbidden ring and he could not wait for them to experiment until the moment finally came when he could plunge his cock deep into her ass. He was distracted from his thoughts when he noticed Katara look over her shoulder to give him a seductive smile.

“Zuko,” she throatily called his name.

“Yes, love?” he replied huskily.

“Fuck me,” she demanded in a purr, “Now.”

Another surge of burning need coursed through his veins and the firebender felt his cock throb at her dirty words. He loved it when she lost all inhibition and spoke to him in such a manner because it showed how much she wanted him. She must have been as starved for sex as he had been for the last couple of months.

“With pleasure,” he rumbled deeply as he settled himself on his knees.

He watched as his naughty waterbender once again wiggled her ass teasingly, invitingly, at him. His eyes drank in the sight of how her juices had poured heavily out of her, leaving shiny, wet trails down the insides of her beautiful thighs. He grabbed her hips and she wiggled in his hold. He softly smacked her right cheek once again and chuckled deeply when she only moaned and pushed herself back against him. Groaning, he rested his cock against the line of her ass cheeks and ground himself against her wet flesh.

“Can you feel how hard I am for you?” he growled and smirked when she moaned in response.

Moving closer, he leaned over her and covered her back with his chest as he buried his face in her hair. He continued to grind his erection against her as he began to gently suck on her neck before he moved to lick the shell of her ear. He felt as if his entire body was on fire and he knew the only thing capable of quenching such fierce need was his wife.

“Now, Katara,” he rasped huskily, “I’m going to fuck you.”

Katara threw her head back and wailed her pleasure when Zuko thrust his cock deep inside her wet pussy. Simultaneous moans of pleasure fell from their mouths after being so long away from each
other. Then he began to pound roughly into her. Her earlier orgasms had slicked her passage
wonderfully so that her husband’s fierce thrusts only heightened her pleasure. She moaned when
Zuko began to suck at the sensitive spot on her neck and she knew he was going to leave a mark. He
licked the area a couple of times before he dragged his lips up to graze her earlobe with his teeth,
sending delicious shivers down her back.

“Ka-Katara…uhhhh, I missed being inside you so damn much,” he grunted roughly as he slammed
his hips against her ass, causing a slapping sound to sound around the room.

“So good, so good,” Katara chanted. Her eyes clenched shut and she moaned at the spectacular
sensation of his heavy balls striking against her clit. She began to rock her hips back against him,
wanting to feel more of him, to feel every inch of him penetrating her.

Zuko’s eyes widened as he felt his orgasm approach more quickly that he had anticipated, but before
he could slow down, he felt Katara clench her wet walls tightly around him as she came once again
with a loud wail.

“Katara!” he shouted as he found his release.

His eyes rolled back at the incredible pleasure as his hips continued to jerk. His cock throbbed and
pulsed as large spurts of his seed heavily coated his wife’s tightening pussy. He glanced back down
as he continued to slowly pump into her.

“Damn, you made me come too fast,” he growled as he gave her ass another gentle smack at the
same time he gave one final hard thrust.

Katara gasped and her back arched as her core contracted more tightly around the thick length at the
double sensations. She shuddered and moaned at the pleasurable feeling of Zuko emptying himself
inside her.

Once the mind-blowing pleasure subsided a little, Zuko slowly pulled himself out. He was not at all
surprised that he had not completely softened even after he orgasmed. He had gone a long time
without his wife and his body was ready for another round. But this time, he would take his time
making love to Katara now that he wasn’t as desperate for release.

Mind still hazy from her earlier orgasm, Katara noticed that Zuko was no longer pressed to her back.
“Turn over, Katara,” she heard him purr huskily, “I want to see your face when I bury myself into you again.”

Katara quickly rolled over onto her back and smiled sultrily up at her husband, eager for another round. It wasn’t even a night of a full moon, but she was feeling very energized. She spread her legs enticingly and ran her hands down her body.

“Fuck me again, Zuko,” she mewled wantonly.

The firebender crawled back over her and leaned down to capture her mouth in a slow, sensual kiss that had them moaning softly against each other. Zuko continued to caress her lips for a moment, alternating from gently nibbling on her lower lip to curling his tongue around hers as he felt his shaft once again harden fully. When Katara’s breath accelerated and her moans escalated, Zuko pulled away from her delicious mouth to smile at her, admiring the way the light of the fireplace danced along her delicious brown skin. He kissed the tip of her nose, kissed each of her cheeks then her mouth before he trailed his lips down her throat. He pulled back slightly to once again admire the fullness of her breasts. He felt his mouth water and he licked his lips. Would she be adverse to him sucking at her nipples? To him tasting her milk?

When her husband buried his face on her breasts before he cupped them firmly in his hands, Katara moaned his name and arched her chest into his touch. A loud gasp escaped her when she felt Zuko’s hot breath against her hard nipples before he engulfed one into his mouth. She groaned and her head thrashed from side to side as he suckled her firmly, using the tip of his tongue to press against her sensitive peak, which caused a sharp tingle to shoot down to her clenching pussy.

“Zuko,” she whimpered as her hands buried themselves into his long dark hair. The feeling of the silky sheets beneath her and his sensual touches on her sensitive breasts and nipples only intensified the sensations rolling through her.

Groaning, Zuko opened his mouth more widely, covering the whole areola, and sucked gently. Katara’s back bowed and Zuko’s eyes widened as a warm liquid seeped into his mouth. Leaning back, he licked his lips and found that the slightly creamy substance tasted delicious, delightfully sweet.

“Z-Zuko…do that again,” Katara whimpered as she squirmed beneath him. She missed having Zuko suckling at her breasts. It was definitely a different and much more arousing experience now that her breasts were so sensitive. It was odd that the feeling was so similar to breastfeeding, but with her body fully aroused, his mouth on her breast only fueled her desire.
Panting in arousal, Zuko moved himself so that he was lying between her thighs, spreading them open further so she snuggly cradled his hips. He hissed as his aching cock slid against her folds, slick with both her juices and his seed, and it was all he could do to restrain himself from plunging into her. Not yet.

With a groan, he clamped his mouth around her entire nipple and sucked more firmly as if he were dying of thirst. She cried out and jerked into his touch, her hands holding tightly onto his head. The firebender moaned loudly as more of her sweet milk hit his taste buds, and he eagerly swallowed every drop. There was no part of his wife that wasn’t delicious, he dazedly mused. Wanting to prolong the intimacy, he slowed down until his mouth was caressing both her exquisite mounds and nipples while his hands ran teasingly over her curves as he slowly rubbed his shaft along her folds, making sure to press the head of his cock against her sensitive clit, until she was writhing wildly, restlessly beneath him.

“Zuko, please!” she cried out as her hands moved down to tightly grasped onto his backside, trying to force him inside her.

With a loud ‘pop’, Zuko let go of her other nipple and lifted his head, licking his lips to savor her sweet taste. Then he fiercely kissed her mouth before he trailed his lips along her cheek. He gently nibbled her earlobe before he softly sucked it as his hands reached up to roughly squeeze her breasts and pinch her nipples, causing a few more creamy drops to leak out, which he fervently licked clean.

“Please what, my wanton waterbender?” he purred against her breast.

“I need your cock inside me!” she demanded, as she lifted her hips to press insistently against him. She grinned when he rasped her name and bucked against her. Even when he was being the more dominant of the two, she was still able to control him.

“As you wish,” he growled amorously as he ground his turgid erection against her before he huskily demanded, “Lift your legs, Katara. Spread yourself wider for me so I can sink my cock inside you.”

With a groan, Katara immediately did what he told her, lifting her legs and pressing them tightly on his shoulders, moaning when she felt him slide his length along her wet slit, occasionally rubbing against her sensitive bud.

Zuko glanced down between them and watched as the large tip of his shaft stretched her clenching entrance. He slipped another inch deeper, slowly entering her, wanting to draw out the moment as much as possible. Once he was entirely immersed within her wet warmth, Zuko leaned forward and pressed his forehead against her, murmuring her name.
“Mm, doesn’t that feel good?” he asked huskily as he pulled his head back slightly so they could look into each other’s eyes, their panting breaths intermingling between them. “Nothing can compare to that incredible feeling when I first enter you. The way your pussy, so wet, hot, and tight, clenches around my cock…” he paused as he gave a shallow thrust, which caused her to moan, jerk her hips, and tightened her inner walls, “Uuh, yes, just like that. Incredible.”

Then without further ado, he rammed his aching shaft so forcefully into her willing body that a loud slapping sound resounded in the room along with her loud gasp and his husky groan. She arched her back and he grabbed her thighs to keep her in place as he slowly withdrew, teasingly rubbed her entrance with his mushroomed head, before he slammed himself back in.

“Yes!” Katara screamed as she threw her head back and her hands grasped on the sheets beneath her to anchor her from slipping into the raging storm brewing within her.

“Damn, Katara, your wet pussy clenching my cock feels so damn amazing,” Zuko growled out as he rammed himself inside her over and over again.

Gods, the way he talked while he took her with wild abandon was almost enough to make her come again. His pupils were dilated so much only a ring of gold was visible around them as he stared down at her.

“Faster, Zuko, harder!” she demanded as she wildly bucked her hips.

Obeying her command, Zuko growled when Katara began to thrash her head and jerked her hips up to his as she wailed his name. Grasping her legs, he moved them away from his shoulders and lifted them high over his head as he pounded into her with a fast, powerful rhythm. His breath came out in ragged pants as he felt her pussy cling tightly onto his throbbing length as if unwilling to let him go. The erotic wet, squelching sounds that sounded from between only made him speed up. Agni, he could not get enough of her. She was like a powerful drug that he could not live without.

Katara’s heart was pounding rapidly in her chest as pleasure surged throughout her entire body. Zuko’s hands grabbed her hips tightly as he continued to move within her and she relished the sensation of his thick shaft deeply penetrating her, of her sex pressing intimately against his pelvis, of his ragged breaths echoing in her ear. Calling out his name, she pressed back against him at the same time she clenched her walls tightly around him, knowing she drove him wild when she did that.

Gasping, Zuko felt his end approaching and he grit his teeth to stave it off for just a moment longer.
He slowed his movements, intent on prolonging his waterbender’s pleasure and driving her to the highest pinnacle of ecstasy. Each time they came together, he had feared that the almost delirious desire she inspired within him would weaken or disappear, but he had come to realize that the more they learned of each other and the more they shared their bodies with each other, the greater the flame of passion, of their love, became.

He leaned down to once again suck at her right nipple, drinking in the sweet milk, as he made deep, hard thrusts within her drenched core. Her moans became wails and broken pleas for him to go faster, to end her torture and give her that wonderful release her body was craving. No matter how much he tried to be strong, hearing her beg always crumbled his resolved. He could deny her nothing, especially when it would bring his own pleasure.

“Ka-Katara,” he rasped heatedly as he felt his sac begin to tighten with his impending orgasm. He quickly slipped a hand between their straining bodies and began to roughly rub her engorged clit. That was all it took for the waterbender to tumble into the scorching waves of ecstasy. Zuko growled when he felt his wife stiffen beneath him before a piercing wail escaped her throat as she chanted his name. Even as he felt her pussy ripple around him and her body jerk, he could not stop himself. He needed to wrench every drop of her rapture out of her before he surrendered to his own. He continued pounding into her at the same time he firmly pressed against her oversensitized clit, prolonging her release. His wife sobbed and writhed wildly underneath him in an almost desperate need to escape the sensual torture he was inflicting on her until her body once again tensed as another orgasm crashed through her.

“Oh, gods, Zuko!” she wailed as her hands clawed at his back, her body writhing violently beneath his larger frame, before she slammed her hips against him so that he sunk deeply into her.

With a hoarse cry of her name, Zuko stilled above her before he spilled his seed almost violently inside her with jerky movements of his hips. He shuddered as spurt after spurt of his semen burst from his body to heavily flood Katara’s clamping core. He felt as if the whole world had gone up in flames with the force of his orgasm.

Katara moaned as she clung onto her firebender’s perspiring back. Every time her pussy constricted, she felt him groan hoarsely as he ejaculated more of his hot seed inside her until she was so full his semen was leaking out of her. She felt as if her womb was warmer than usual with the amount of his fluids pouring into her. It felt very thick and sticky, clinging to every inch of her walls, and she knew how much her husband had needed that release.

Once his pulsing cock stopped spurting his hot essence into her, Zuko moved her legs back down against his hips before he relaxed against her soft chest. He nuzzled his face against her throat and soothingly kissed her neck, feeling her frantically beating pulse as he shuddered and moaned
beneath him. Once his body relaxed, he leaned back slightly to smile down at her, watching as she return it with a dazed one of her own.

“Have I ever told you how beautiful you are when you come?” he panted as he reached up to brush a few sweaty strands of her hair behind her ear.

“Many times, but I’ll never get tired of hearing it,” she quipped as she ran her hands soothingly down his back.

Zuko chuckled as he bent down to press a gentle kiss on her swollen lips.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“And I love you.”

With an angry hiss, Mai slammed the door to her room shut. She had just come from a social gathering of Omashu’s nobility and she had to endure hearing more gossip about how lovely a family the Fire Nation royal couple and their newborn son made. It had angered her the first time she had heard news of Zuko proudly presenting his heir to the Fire Nation citizens and she hated hearing more about it. How could Zuko claim any kinship to a brat born of that Water Tribe wench?! Why couldn’t the bitch have died at childbirth and taken the brat with her?

Now it would make it more difficult for her to take Zuko back. And she could not do much after being banished from the palace. At least she was still allowed in the Fire Nation, she thought bitterly. How was she supposed to make Zuko take her back if she could not get near him to entice him into her bed and make him leave the waterbender for her?

Angrily, she threw a few shuriken against the wall to the right before she took a deep breath to regain her composure. A true noblewoman did not allow emotions to control her. Yet, it seemed as if the tight control she had over her emotions that she had been taught since childhood was slipping more and more. She hated it. She hated what she had become. Hated how her life had turned into. She had everything planned out; she would marry Zuko and enjoy the privilege of becoming Fire Lady. But it had all crumbled to the ground when the waterbender returned into their lives. It was all Katara’s fault and Mai despised her.

With angry jerks, she pulled her hair free from its buns and walked toward her wardrobe to change for the night. If only there was a way that she could take back all that was supposed to belong to her.
“What can I do to get Zuko back?” she asked herself as she frowned into her room.

“Perhaps I can help you get what you want,” an unfamiliar masculine voice said cajolingly.

The noblewoman narrowed her eyes at the unexpected voice and she whirled around with weapons in her hands as she eyed the intruder in her room. It was a middle-aged man with broad shoulders and a strong frame. He was leaning casually against her windowsill as he eyed her silently. But it was the smirk on his lips and the gleam in his eyes that caused the woman to tighten her grasp on her weapons.

“Who are you and what are you doing in my room?” she asked blankly, though a slight tremor betrayed her uneasiness. “Get out or I’ll end your life.”

The man chuckled at her threats as he moved away from the window to take a couple steps further into the room.

“You could try, but I assure you, you would be dead before you so much as move a muscle,” he stated arrogantly as he casually produced a flame in his hand. “Or you could choose to listen to me instead and not be harmed.”

Mai narrowed her eyes suspiciously as she studied the man standing in her room with a confident smirk on his face. Something clicked in her brain and her eyes widened when she realized she had seen his face before. Not personally, but in the many wanted posters that were spread through the Fire Nation and its colonies, as well as in Omashu.

“You’re Jianguo. The wanted rebel leader,” she stated with a frown as she shifted uneasily. What did the traitor want with her?

“Ah, how observant of you, Lady Mai,” he responded with a chuckle before he gave her a mocking bow, “I am Meng Jianguo, former general of the great Fire Nation.”

“I can’t believe you have the audacity to return here after you attacked that village near Omashu,” Mai said, ignoring his introduction as she tried to move closer to the door.
“Ah, well, circumstances brought me back,” he responded with a shrug and a nonchalant wave of his hand.

“You do know I can have the authorities arrest you, right?” she spoke up as she took another step to the door, but froze when the man raised a mocking eyebrow at her attempts.

“Oh, but you won’t do that,” he replied with another assured smirk, “Not after you listen to my proposal.”

Intrigued at his words despite herself, Mai eyed him calculatingly as she debated whether to listen to him or find a way to call her household guards to capture him. Maybe if she succeeded in capturing the rebel, Zuko would be so grateful to her that he’ll lift her punishment and allow her to return to the palace.

“What kind of proposal?” she inquired in a neutral tone.

Another mocking smirk appeared on the man’s face.

“It has come to my attention that you desire to have Zuko back,” Jianguo began as he nonchalantly ran his fingers through his hair, “I’ll help you get him if you help me in return.”

Mai frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“We are trying to reinstate Ozai on the throne as our true Fire Lord and dethrone Zuko.”

Stiffening, the noblewoman narrowed her eyes at his words.

“Why would I help you do such a thing?” she asked tersely. “I, after all, wish to be Zuko’s Fire Lady.”

With another shrug, the man casually began to walk around the room, occasionally picking up
trinkets as he passed. Mai watched him both warily and confused as the silence stretched on. Her fingers twitched as she tightened them around her kunai. Perhaps she could kill him now while he was distracted. She made to move, but froze when the man looked over his shoulder to grin mockingly at her as if he knew what she had been thinking. She clenched her teeth. Damn it, she should have acted faster. She watched as the firebender dropped one of her fans disinterestedly on her vanity before he slowly made his way to her.

“Truthfully, we had planned to kill Zuko at first to get him out of the way,” Jianguo replied coolly, “But if you help us, we are willing to let him live if you take him far away and make sure he doesn’t cause any trouble. If not, we’ll just kill him as soon as the chance presents itself.”

Mai clenched her hands around her weapons and frowned.

“Think about it,” the rebel continued, his tone coaxing and smooth, “Zuko will live and you will have him all to yourself after all this...as long as you make sure he never returns to the Fire Nation.”

The dark-eyed noblewoman shifted uncertainly as she listened to his words and imagined the possibilities. Surely Zuko would rather run away with her than be killed.

“What about Katara and the heir?” she asked.

He smiled. A sadistic smile that caused a shiver to run down the woman’s spine.

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’ll take care of the waterbender and the brat.”

Mai remained skeptical as she processed everything the firebender had told her. What should she do? Should she believe what he was telling her? She stiffened when he frowned deeply at her.

“I don’t have all day to wait for your response,” he growled before he added a bit more smoothly, “Will you help us, yes or no?”

If she refused, would he kill her? She shifted uncertainly before she could stop herself. When he raised his eyebrow once again, she forced herself to relax and not show her uneasiness. She could go along with their plans for the moment and see how things panned out. Perhaps something would happen to get rid of both the rebels and Katara. She smiled inwardly. That way she could keep both Zuko and the title of Fire Lady. And she would do anything to get him back. After a moment, she
gave a silent nod of acceptance as she retracted her kunai back into her sleeves.

“Very well. What is your plan?” she asked blankly.

Jianguo smirked. What a foolish woman. Her obsession with Zuko was really making her desperate that she was willing to side with them. His spy had been correct when he had informed him of how the noblewoman had accosted Zuko when the insolent whelp had visited Omashu and how she had stubbornly tried to get Zuko to take her back even when he kept rejecting her. Jianguo really couldn’t blame Zuko for dropping her. She was nothing compared to the exquisite beauty that was the blue-eyed waterbender. But after hearing his spy’s report, a plan had formed in his head that he was sure would finally make them succeed in their ultimate goals.

Oh, he knew the noblewoman was in no way loyal to them and was probably planning to double-cross them, but it did not matter since he needed her for his plan to work. How surprised would she be when she found out he would immediately kill Zuko when he had him before him?

His smirked widened.

He could not wait.

End of Part Ten
A few days after the men’s return from Omashu, the royal couple, their families, and friends were enjoying a light lunch in the private garden’s veranda. Katara smiled as she watched Zuko entertain Kazu with the baby’s favorite rattler while he continued conversing with Iroh and Hakoda about the new peace treaty. Sokka was busy playing with his twin daughters and sending silly grins at Suki, who would roll her eyes but returned his grins with affectionate smiles. Aang and Toph were huddled together, whispering and chuckling under their breaths, not really paying attention to anybody else. Ursa and Jee were talking quietly together and smiling at each other. Kanna and Pakku just watched everybody with amused smiles as they silently drank their tea.

At the sound of Kazu’s laugh, Katara returned her attention to her son and husband. Kazu tended to laugh and smile more these days and everybody had made it their purpose to produce those precious sounds as much as possible. Since his return, Zuko had been very attentive to their son’s needs and moods, and although he did not say it, she knew he was trying to make up for his absence. Though most of the time he could not figure out why Kazu would cry or fuss, he tried his best and determinedly learned for future instances. Zuko was exceedingly pleased with his son—it was obvious to anyone who saw them together—and it warmed her heart to watch how her reticent husband interacted with their baby.

Oblivious to his wife’s thoughts, Zuko glanced down and smiled at Kazuhiko when his son grasped the toy out of his hand and vigorously shook it with a joyful squeal. He loved making Kazu laugh and he hoped he would always be able to make his son happy. He looked up when he heard Jee suddenly clear his throat and he watched as his mother smiled bashfully at everybody. Although it seemed she was addressing all of them, she was looking directly at her son.

“Jee and I have decided to marry a month from now,” she announced with a pleased smile.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Katara exclaimed happily as she reached across the low table to grasp her mother-in-law’s hand and then Jee’s.

Everybody else immediately congratulated them. Iroh and Kanna even exclaimed it was about time. Ursa thanked everybody, but her attention was still solely focused on Zuko as she anxiously waited for his reaction. He smiled as he also reached across the table to grasp her hand.

“Congratulations, Mom. I wish you much happiness,” he said sincerely before he turned to give Jee a serious look, “You better make her happy or else.”

“I think that’s what I told you when you married Katara,” Hakoda remarked with a chuckle that had
“Are you practicing for when you have a daughter, Zuko?” Iroh asked amusedly and he turned to wink at Katara.

The waterbender laughed while Zuko gave his old uncle and father-in-law glares, which did not bother either man as they grinned back at the Fire Lord.

“You should start preparing for when the twins grow up, Snoozles,” Toph piped in with an impish grin.

“Ha! My girls are too good for any man,” Sokka sniffed arrogantly. “You’ll always stay with Papa, right, girls?” he cooed affectionately at his daughters, which caused them to giggle.

“That’s what you say now,” Suki spoke up with a chuckle, “Just wait until they hit puberty and you have to deal with all those emotions and hormones and—”

“Suki!” Sokka shouted as he covered his ears and stared at his wife in horror.

“What? Don’t tell me you expect them to remain toddlers forever,” Suki said in amusement.

“No, but geez, come on! I don’t need to hear about it!”

“Well, you’ll be hearing about it soon enough,” she teased her husband and then smiled at her daughters. “Right, girls?”

“Yes, Mama!” the blue-eyed twins immediately replied, even though they really didn’t understand what their mother had said.

Sokka pouted at their fast response and then yelped when the twins tugged playfully (painfully for him) at his hair. “Ouch! Careful there, I don’t want to be bald before my time like your uncle Aang.”

“Hey!” the airbender exclaimed indignantly even as Momo chattered excitedly on his master’s bald
head. “We all know that’s by choice!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Sokka replied with a casual wave of his hand while he tried to fend of his daughters with the other and ignored the others laughing at his expense.

“I will make Ursa happy, Zuko,” Jee finally spoke up after everybody had calm down.

Zuko looked at him and nodded seriously before both men smiled.

“A month won’t be enough time to plan a party, uh, wedding,” Sokka piped in and then pouted when his daughters left him in order to go play with Momo.

“We decided we want a simple ceremony with only close family and friends,” Ursa explained as she looked up to smile at Jee.

“Then we can stay until the wedding,” Hakoda said before he smiled sadly at his daughter, “But we will have to return home soon after that. I’ve been away from the Southern Water Tribe too long and I can’t neglect my duties any longer.”

Katara smiled softly as she reached over to squeeze her father’s arm.

“We’ll come visit you once Kazuhiko is a little older,” she promised him and Zuko nodded beside her.

“I’ll have to see about building you and Zuko your own home, so the rest of us can sleep,” Sokka remarked teasingly in order to lighten up the mood.

“Sokka!” Hakoda snapped while Katara simultaneously shouted, “Shut up, Sokka!”

“What?” the blue-eyed warrior asked with mock innocence before a mischievous grin curled his lips, “Seriously. Nobody needs to hear that shi—”

A slap to the back of the head by Suki cut off his words, causing the twins to giggle and Momo to
chatter loudly.

“Ow!” he yelped as he turned wounded eyes toward his wife, “That hurt!”

“Really, Sokka, you’re one to talk,” Suki told him bluntly, though there was a twinkle in her eyes.

Sokka’s face turned red while everybody else once again laughed at the young man’s expense.

Zuko sat back and watched his mother, his wife, and the other women talk about the upcoming wedding preparations while the men made small talk, mostly throwing teasing remarks at Sokka. He could see the happiness between his mother and Jee, and Zuko was sure that the admiral would make her happy. She deserved it after the misery of being married to Ozai. His sire would never understand what he had lost due to his greed.

The young Fire Lord once again glanced at his son, who was lying on his blanket between his parents. When Zuko caught his attention, Kazu gave him a big toothless smile. Returning the smile, Zuko tickled his son’s chin and the baby cooed and gurgled happily as he waved his arms in the air.

Never in his life had Zuko felt this content as he spent time with his wife, his son, and their family in such a peaceful moment. He was pleased at the happiness that surrounded those he cared for the most. It was times such as these that made it feel like everything was right in the world, even when he knew it wasn’t so. He frowned. Jianguo was still out there, and until the traitor was dead, Zuko would never feel at ease.

Shadows danced along the dark, cold walls and the sound of booted feet echoed almost harshly throughout the silent passageway. Zuko arrived outside Ozai’s prison cell and frowned, wondering why he bothered coming when he knew it was just going to waste his time. But the captain of the prison guards had sent him a message stating that Ozai wanted to speak with him and wouldn’t stop his demands. Curious about why his father wished to see him, Zuko decided to oblige, and after finishing with his meetings for the day and letting Katara know where he was going, he made his way to the prison tower with his group of personal guards.

Nodding to the prison guards posted on either side of the entrance, Zuko produced a key and unlocked the steel door. He didn’t need to look back to know Shen and Kuo were standing at attention. Entering the darkened room, Zuko slowly closed the door behind him and waited for his eyesight to adjust to the one torch burning near the door. He heard rustling coming from across the room and he warily stepped forward toward the bars that divided the space. Impassively, he watched as Ozai stood up from his thin pallet and sneered at him.
“Ah, so good of you to heed my message so quickly,” the former Fire Lord greeted mockingly as he casually flicked a strand of dirty hair over his shoulder.

Zuko ignored his sneer as he stared coolly at his disgraced father.

“Get to the point,” he spoke up passively, “I’m a busy man and don’t have time to waste on the whims of a criminal.”

Ozai narrowed his eyes and growled at him before he closed his eyes and breathed deeply to compose himself. Zuko watched him with a raised eyebrow. Looking at his son once again, Ozai shrugged as he nonchalantly strolled along his cell.

“The guards won’t stop talking about your…heir,” the older man said.

Zuko narrowed his eyes and stiffened slightly.

“What about him?” he asked gruffly.

Ozai looked up to glare at him briefly before he gave another shrug.

“Although we have our…differences, the child is still my grandson,” he began.

Zuko scoffed loudly.

“Your past words were clear enough that you feel differently,” he growled out.

The former Fire Lord’s response was another shrug as he once again brushed his long hair back.

“I may have objected to your marrying the waterbender, but now that she has given birth to your child there isn’t anything that can be done about it,” he responded simply.
“Why are you bringing up my son?” the younger man asked warily.

Ozai turned to pin his gaze on Zuko.

“I want to see the boy,” he stated firmly. “He is, after all, my first grandchild.”

“I will never let you near my son,” the firebender growled out and straightened himself to his full height to glare menacingly at his father.

“I have every right to see him as the boy’s grandfather!” Ozai hissed.

“You lost that right a long time ago when you scarred your own son and banished him from his home just because he stood up for those poor soldiers that were going to be slaughtered like cattle,” Zuko ground out fiercely.

It was Ozai’s turned to scoff and he waved a hand in the air as if what Zuko had said was inconsequential.

“You’re still whining over that?” he asked.

The firebender’s nostrils flared at his words.

“Could you not see it was for the best?” Ozai continued with a frown. “We became rulers of the mighty Fire Nation! I don’t see why you’re so hurt. I provided you with all the luxuries of a prince, didn’t I? You should be grateful I just burned you to teach you a lesson instead of killing you.”

Zuko clenched his jaw so hard it almost hurt as he resisted the urge to punch his father across his face with a fiery fist just so he would know how painful the experience was. Just so he would see that what he had done against his own son was horrific. How could his father not see how much he had hurt him? Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. He had only been a pubescent boy when it all happened. Not only did he have to deal with half his face being in excruciating pain, but he had to face the fact that he had been thrown out of the only home he had ever known by his own father. He was only ‘teaching him a lesson’ because Zuko had been disrespectful. And yet, he lavished Azula with praise when she did something cruel.
“Why couldn’t you be more like your sister?” Ozai asked with a sneer. “Now she was someone I was proud to call my child.”

The younger man stiffened at such callous words.

“Can’t you see I grew up wondering what was wrong with me because of your preference for Azula and your indifference of me?” Zuko growled out, his eyes blazing in ire and hurt.

“So?” Ozai scoffed before he added in a hard tone, “I grew up the same way when Azulon preferred Iroh and loved him more, but I did everything possible to become greater!”

“By rejoicing in your brother’s defeat and the loss of his son?” Zuko stated just as harshly, “By killing your own father to ascend the throne?”

“If you wanted my approval you should’ve been a more competent son,” Ozai retorted instead, “You should have vied for my approval at all costs against Azula.”

“I couldn’t. Not at the expense of others.”

Another scoff escaped Ozai’s throat.

“That is why Azula had my approval,” he said cruelly, “She wasn’t a weak, sentimental fool like you.”

“And that is why Azula is the way she is now,” Zuko growled.

“I made her into one of the greatest warriors of her generation!” Ozai shouted.

“A warrior who had a complete breakdown! You brought up your own daughter to be a cruel and ruthless psychopath!” Zuko roared as he stepped closer to the cell bars to pin his father with an angry glare. “Parents aren’t supposed to be like that. They aren’t supposed to cause rivalry between their children.”
He paused briefly to gather his composure, cursing himself for allowing Ozai to rile him up. Why, after all this time, could he not let go of the pain and rage he felt at his father’s indifference? Gathering himself up, the firebender’s expression became passive.

“I will never allow any of my children to feel like they are less than their siblings,” he firmly vowed, “I will love them all equally because they would all be unique and special in their own way.”

The older man scoffed as he muttered under his breath about sentimental fools.

“I refuse to allow you to meet my son,” Zuko stated coldly, “I don’t want him near a cruel man like you.”

Ozai’s face contorted into an angry snarl as he stalked toward the cell bars so he could also glare at Zuko.

“The boy needs a true warrior in his life, not some pathetic, weakling like his father.”


But Ozai ignored him and sneered.

“The boy already shares his mother’s dirty Water Tribe blood, what could be worse?”

The words had barely left his mouth when Ozai had to duck out of the way when a fireball was hurled at the spot where his head had been a second before.

“Do not insult my family!” Zuko roared angrily. “My son is perfect, even if he turns out to be a waterbender and not a firebender.”

“Ha!” Ozai scoffed, “But would the Fire Nation welcome a waterbender as their Fire Lord?”
Zuko’s jaw clenched, but he forced himself not to ball his hands into fists and give his father the satisfaction of knowing how his words had affected him. He would love his son no matter what element he bent, but he knew it would be difficult to convince the council, the nobles, and the citizens to pledge loyalty to a waterbender.

“If there is nothing else, I’ll be taking my leave,” he said instead, his voice carefully void of any emotion. “I have things to do.”

“Wait!” Ozai shouted quickly.

When Zuko turned back to frown at him, Ozai neared the cell bars. The younger man had expected to see him glaring, but instead he was surprised to see his father’s expression soften a little.

“Ursa. Bring her to visit me. I want to see my wife.”

“She is no longer your wife,” the firebender stated and then with a smug smirk, he added, “She is too busy to bother visiting a pathetic, dirty prisoner of war.”

“What is she busy doing?” the older man asked with narrowed eyes.

“She is preparing for her wedding to my most trusted admiral,” Zuko stated smugly.

“What?!” Ozai roared furiously as he clenched the steel bars and pressed his face against them so he could glare at his son, “You lie!”

“It’s true,” Zuko responded passively, “In a few months, she will be marrying a good man who will treat her like she deserves and appreciate the wonderful person she is. Someone who truly loves her and wants to make her happy. She’ll be happy with Jee.”

“Jee?!” Ozai screamed angrily, “That miserable nobody?!”

“Jee is a good man and he truly loves Mother and wants her happiness. He even wishes to be a sort of father to me.”
“I will not allow it!” the former Fire Lord raged as he shook at the unmovable steel bars, “Ursa is mine!”

“Not anymore,” Zuko replied impassively as he stared at his enraged father behind the cell bars. “You lost your right to be her husband when you ordered her to kill your father and banished her from home, making everybody believe she had died.”

“She is still my wife since she’s alive,” Ozai insisted.

“No, she isn’t,” Zuko replied coldly, “I made sure your marriage was terminated the moment I brought her back to the Fire Nation.”

“How dare you?!” the older man growled.

“It is what she wanted,” Zuko continued.

“I need to speak to her! Bring her to me now!”

“She won’t come visit you.”

“I’ll find a way out of here to take her back!” Ozai roared furiously, “And then I will kill the rest of you before I regain my rightful place on the throne! Mark my words, boy! I will find a way!”

“You will do no such thing,” Zuko growled as he stepped closer to glare menacingly at his sire, “I will kill you before you hurt any of my family and friends.”

Without another word, the young man turned on his heel and made his way back to the large door.

“I demand you bring Ursa to me this instant!” Ozai screamed after him, but when he did not receive a response, he shouted, “I should have killed you when I had the chance, you ungrateful bastard! You are no son of mine!”
Zuko stiffened, the words cutting deep, but he forced himself not to show it, to dismiss the hurt such a rejection caused, as he looked over his shoulder stare coldly into his sire’s eyes.

“And you are no father of mine. You are nothing. You have been replaced as the ruler of the Fire Nation. Replaced in the hearts of the people. Replaced in the heart of the woman you still pine for. No one cares about you,” he growled in a low tone. He did not care if his words were cruel. There was a part of him that wanted to hurt the man back. “Don’t make any more demands to see me because you are no more than a lowly prisoner to me.”

He ignored his father’s shouts and curses as he opened the door and stepped through. He could still hear the screams as he closed the door and locked it. He turned to the silent guards positioned on either side.

“If he makes any other demands, ignore them. He doesn’t deserve anything.”

“Yes, my lord.”

A moment later, Zuko and his group of personal guards were riding back to the palace. He could feel Kuo and Shen staring curiously at his back as they rode behind him, but he ignored them. His emotions were raging and it was all he could do not to command his komodo rhino to move faster. Instead, he held a tight grip on the reins and sat straight as they rode at a steady pace. Once they reached the palace courtyard and the stable hands rushed to take their mounts, Zuko dismissed his men and swiftly climbed the steps toward the elegant building.

As Zuko walked down the long, decorative corridors, Ozai’s words continued to resound in his mind. He paid no heed to the sound of his boots’ heels hitting against the marble floor or the servants that scurried out his way at the sight of their obviously angry Fire Lord as he made his way to the royal chamber. He needed to change and calm down before he met his family for dinner.

How could Ozai not see how much he had hurt his family? How could he not acknowledge the wrongs he had done? How much more selfish and cruel could he be?

Once he entered his room, he paused when he saw that Katara was there. She was sitting on her cushioned stool in front of her vanity and she was brushing her hair, wearing a light robe, and he realized he had just missed her bath. He had thought she would be back later since she had been overseeing the construction of another school, this time for illiterate adults. The advisors had once again been against the idea because they believed the common people being illiterate would stop them from rising above their station. Katara, however, had insisted that everybody should be given the chance to learn and better themselves. Besides, she had added, an educated people made for a
better country. He could not be more awed and proud of his wife’s ideas.

Katara turned in her seat and smiled at him as she continued to brush her long, chocolate-colored tresses. Something must have shown in his expression because her smile faded and she placed her brush down.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “How did it go with Ozai?”

“Not good, as always,” he growled out as he finally moved away from the doors and made his way to the stand where he usually placed his armor.

“What did he want now?” the waterbender asked with a frown.

“He had the audacity to demand I bring Kazuhiko to him so he could meet him,” Zuko replied with a scoff.

“What?!” Katara hissed. “I will never allow that…man near my baby!”

“Those were my thoughts exactly. He also wanted Mother brought to him. When I refused both requests, he became angry.”

Something in his tone alerted Katara that there was more to it and her frown deepened.

“He said insulting things, didn’t he?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied quietly as he took off his breastplate, though he could not disguise the anger in his tone.

“Zuko…”

With harsh, jerky movement, Zuko tugged at the ties that held the lower part of his armor on as he interrupted her by angrily saying, “I can’t believe such heartless men like Ozai exist.”
“I’ve thought the same thing as well.” Katara responded quietly, a tinge of bitterness touching her tone.

The firebender turned around to see her clench her hands as she stared off towards the balcony and he knew she was thinking of her mother’s murderer. He frowned darkly and his jaw tightened. The ire he was feeling toward Ozai only seemed to increase at the thought that it was essentially his father’s fault his beloved Katara had lost her mother. Ozai had hurt so many people, besides his own family, and the former Fire Lord did not give a damn. Zuko once again felt shame that they shared the same blood.

Katara blinked and shook her head, dispelling her dark thoughts. Zuko was the one who needed her at the moment. She finally noticed that her husband’s frown had deepened and he had paused in his task after placing his swords in their place. Concerned, she stood up and made her way to him to help him put his armor away, thinking of ways to make him feel better. Maybe they could spend some time with Kazu in the garden before dinner.

Zuko watched intently as his wife approached him, observing how the thin robe she wore molded enticingly to her every curve, admiring the manner in which her unbound breasts bounced and her hips swayed, and he licked his lips as he felt his lust flare within him, fueled by his already high emotions. When she was finally standing in front of him, Zuko grabbed her hips and pulled her roughly to him, eliciting a surprised gasp from her. His mouth crashed roughly against hers, cutting off the quiet sound. It was a kiss fueled entirely by dark emotions—angry and unashamedly greedy. He kissed her fiercely, hungrily, needing some comfort, needing her as a balm to his hurt, resentment, and anger.

Katara fisted her hands in his long hair, grabbing the back of his head to firmly pull him down to her, as she returned his kisses just as ardently. She smirked when he let out a low groan as she nibbled at his lower lip and wantonly sucked on his eager tongue. She did not question his need nor did she bother to stop him to remind him dinner would be served soon since she wanted him too. She could also feel that he needed this and she would always do everything in her power to make him feel better, to pull him from the darkness that sometimes surrounded them. They pulled apart to catch their breaths and Katara moaned when he licked the shell of her ear before he leaned away to stare at her.

“Kazuhiko?” he asked, even as his hands roamed along her waist and hips.

“He’s with our family,” she replied breathlessly as her hands hurriedly grasped and pulled at the ties that kept the last of his armor on him until it landed at their feet with loud clanging sounds.
Assured that their son was being looked after, Zuko was painfully eager to make love to his wife and he kissed her once again. Suddenly, his father was forgotten and the anger and hurt he had been feeling disappeared, as more primal desires surfaced to take their place. He kissed her fiercely, but it was the almost savage way she kissed him back that caused him to rip her robe from her body before pushing her back against the wall. They barely missed crashing against the stand in their frantic passion.

They pulled back slightly to catch their breaths. Panting harshly with arousal, Katara watched as his amber eyes, dark with his lust, took a long sweep of her naked body, lingering on her swollen breasts, before his mouth was devouring her lips again. She let out a loud moan when he pressed his hard body tightly against her softer one. Her breath seemed to leave her when his chest crushed her sensitive breasts and his erection pressed against her stomach, causing a rush of wetness to gather at her core. Fire raced through her veins, her heart pounded wildly in her chest, and it was all she could do to cling onto his shoulders at the lustful hunger that was drowning her in its sweet inferno.

Zuko suddenly pulled away from her mouth and Katara opened half-lidded eyes to see him staring down at her with such a dark intensity that caused her stomach to clench in need. She knew it wasn’t going to be a gentle loving, but hard fucking. She could sense that Zuko needed this. He needed an outlet for his anger and pain. He needed to feel in control and she would give it to him by letting him manipulate her body as he desired. And although he wouldn’t say it out loud, she knew he sought to feel needed, to feel wanted. And oh, how she wanted him. Was already so wet for him. She was so hot for him, needing to feel him so badly, that she’d let him do anything to her.

He must have read her compliance and eagerness because his eyes soften for a moment before they darkened once again. A small cry of pleasure left her mouth when she felt his hand cup her sex.

“Mm, you’re burning up for me, aren’t you, Katara?” he whispered huskily, his warm breath coasting along her wet, swollen lips as his fingers glided against her slick folds. “You’re so wet and I’ve barely touched you.”

The waterbender cried out again when he slipped a finger into her. Her legs automatically moved further apart to give him more access and she was rewarded with another finger, which caused her to arch her back and moan his name.

Zuko watched in satisfaction as his wife’s head fell back against the wall and her hips rocked against his thrusting fingers. She was so wet, warm, and tight as always and he could not wait to be inside her. His eyes once again fixated themselves on her glorious breasts and he leaned down to take one dusky nipple into his hot mouth. He felt her jerk against him as she let out a long moan and he began to roughly suck at the peak. He groaned loudly at the wonderful taste of her sweet milk coating his tongue and he opened his mouth wider to suck her more fiercely to taste more of her.
“Zuk-oo, please,” she moaned brokenly as her hips rocked desperately against his fingers, “I need you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you what you need,” he murmured throatily against other nipple, “I’m going to fuck your sweet, little pussy. Is that what you want? You want me to fuck you?”

Katara was so overwhelmed with need that she found it difficult to answer him. The only thing she could do was moan and nod her head vigorously as she undulated her hips against him, wanting his fingers to go deeper. But when she felt him about to pull out, she cried out a loud “Yes!”

Humming his satisfaction, Zuko pressed his thumb against her clit and rubbed firm circles over the swollen bud as he increased the pace of his fingers. He felt a gush of her fluids coat his hand and he rasped her name. He moved back to her face and pressed his mouth against hers once again.

“You’re definitely…going to get fucked tonight…my naughty waterbender,” he growled between panting breaths, “But first, I need to feel you come…on my fingers. And once you do, I’m taking you to our bed…and while I look into your eyes I’ll make you come with my hard cock.”

His dirty words and his fingers’ movements were all it took to send Katara over the edge. She screamed and her body convulsed, her hands gripping tightly onto Zuko’s upper arms as pleasure erupted all over her body.

Breathing harshly, Zuko felt his shaft throb painfully in his pants as he watched his beautiful wife’s face contort in varying degrees of pleasure. He swallowed thickly at the sensation of her slick walls clenching around his still pumping fingers. When Katara slumped against him, Zuko kissed her soothingly. But it wasn’t long before they were kissing each other fervently. When he felt Katara’s hand grab his covered length, Zuko couldn’t wait any longer and he hauled her away from the wall and into his arms. He was barely aware that she was trying to rip his tunic off, her own desires captivating her, as he moved them to their large bed.

He deposited her onto the mattress and began to tug at his tunic while he kicked off his boots. Katara sat up and helped push his trousers down his legs, eager to have him within her arms and body again. Once he was completely nude, he pounced on her. He molded his body tightly to hers, relishing in the deep moan that the contact of their naked bodies and sensation of warm skin produced from her. He grabbed her hands to press them on either side of her head, interlocking their fingers intimately, loving the way her hips cradled his, even as he continued to attack her lips with kisses.

“Zuko,” Katara demanded as she raised her hips wantonly. “I need you, now.”
Usually, Zuko liked to tease her until she was moving desperately beneath him, her blue eyes glaring at him to give her what she wanted. But not now. He was in no teasing mood. He was overcome with passion and lust. He needed to sheathe his aching shaft within the welcoming heat of her body.

“As you wish,” he purred huskily.

Zuko moved back onto his knees and he quickly spread her legs widely to accommodate him. Rocking his hips, his turgid length prodded the glistening opening of her wet pussy, nudging against her clit a few times, before returning to her entrance. He moved her legs so one was propped over his shoulder and the other daggled over his arm. Zuko thrust into her, hard and deep. Her back arched as she received him and she cried out her delight as his thick shaft stretched and filled her. He pulled her body closer and began a fast rhythm that elicited loud, broken whimpers from his waterbender.

It was hard, raw, and needy. There was a desperate need to be consumed by her passionate fire, and to be equally soothed by her loving heart. He needed to find solace and he knew the only place he would find it was with Katara. Only she—his wife, friend, and lover—could make him feel better. Be better.

Zuko leaned over her, making her curl her body, and Katara watched through dazed eyes as he looked deeply at her face. Then he kissed her with such a passionate fury, with a desperate need that was almost bruising, and yet only made her feel loved and needed. Cherished. She responded to him with equal fervor, kissing him just as violently, letting him use her body as he wished.

“Haah, mm, yesss,” she panted.

The firebender felt his heart clench at the open honesty and understanding he could detect through Katara’s kiss and her body’s movements, and he felt the need to be even closer to her. Moving her legs down and wrapping them around his pounding hips, Zuko pressed his chest against hers. He buried his face in her neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive spot below her ear as he continued to drive into her. She gasped and moaned her pleasure, thrusting and undulating her hips, her hands grabbing at his backside and pressing down, to meet his merciless plunges.

Like stormy waves crashing against the shore, their bodies moved—persistent and fierce. The need, the lust, consumed them entirely that it quickly brought their release to the surface.

“Oh, gods,” she whimpered as she dug her nails into his perspiring, flexing back, before she chanted disjointedly, “I need… I need…”
“Is this what you need?” he asked roughly as he drove so deeply into her he could swear he had breached into her womb.

A keening sound erupted from her lips and her limbs tightened almost painfully around him.

“Yes, oh gods, yes!”

There was something about her voice, about her body, when it responded to what he was doing to her that always drove him crazy with shameless hunger.

“Zu-uko, I’m going…to come!” she panted breathlessly.

“Come on my cock, Katara,” he growled fiercely, “I want…to feel your warm cream…all over me.”

“Zuko!” she whimpered as she stared desperately into his eyes.

“I know,” he rasped as he continued to pound into her, “Squeeze me tight…gods, yes…just like that.” With a loud growl, he buried himself deeper, his sac pressing tightly against her backside.

With a piercing wail, the blue-eyed brunette found her release. Zuko’s breath hitched as her drenched walls constricted around him and soon he was following her into his own climax. He erupted into a myriad of almost devastating shudders, groans, and emotions as her rippling passage sucked every last drop of his seed. With one more jerk of his hips and a final spurt of seed, Zuko collapsed onto his side, bringing Katara with him. Panting harshly, bodies still twitching, they held onto each other tightly, feeling the other’s pounding heart against their chests. They were spent, but they basked in the moment of the strength of their bond and the need they had for each other.

It wasn’t long before Zuko was kissing her again—not as desperately as before, but still as passionately—and Katara knew he was still trying to forget what had happened in the prison tower. She returned his kisses, her hands running soothing circles along his back, as she murmured his name, a quiet inquiry of concern that he quickly silenced by pressing his mouth more firmly against her lips. The act only made her want to help him even more, to make him forget his troubles, to please him. A thought sprang into her head that would do just that and it made her stomach quiver in anticipation for the pleasure that could await them both. Cupping his cheeks, Katara pulled away from his ravaging mouth, breathing heavily as she looked into his suddenly frowning face. She kissed him sweetly once, twice, and then pulled back to see his eyes had glazed over once again.
“Zuko,” she said breathlessly before her voice lowered into a seductive purr, “how about we do something you have fantasized about for a very long time?”

Zuko’s eyes widened and he sucked in his breath.

“Are you talking about…anal sex?” he asked before he huskily added, “Please say you are.”

“Yes,” she replied throatily, “We both want it, after all.”

Zuko’s breath caught in his throat at the words his wife uttered, which he had dreamed of hearing ever since he had found that erotic book.

“A-are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it if I wasn’t,” she responded with a wicked grin.

With an elated groan, Zuko crashed his mouth to hers, sucking at her kiss-swollen lips, and plunging his tongue inside to tangle with hers. Her words had hardened his erection to an almost painful degree and it was all he could do not to pounce on her and take her ass. He wanted it—gods, did he want it—but he did not want to hurt her with his eagerness. Instead, he slowed his kisses until he was caressing her mouth with tender touches while his hands worshiped the fullness of her breasts and the luscious curves of her hips until she was moaning softly against him. He gave her a few more kisses before he leaned away. He almost smiled when she growled as she tried to follow his mouth and pull him back to her. He gave her one more kiss to satisfy her before gently untangling himself from her wonderful grasp.

“I’ll be right back,” he told her in a deep, raspy voice.

She gave him a confused look, but nodded anyway. Smiling wickedly at her, the golden-eyed man slid from the large bed and swiftly walked toward their large wardrobe. Rummaging around in an inner drawer, he grabbed the bottle of oil he had purchased a few weeks ago for this very occasion. The erotic manual had given a few suggestions on which oils or lotions would be best for lubrication and he was able to find this one. Taking a quick breath to steady his erratically beating heart, he closed the doors and turned around. He moved toward the bed and gazed down upon his gloriously naked wife who was staring equally as lustfully at his naked body. He hesitated for a moment as he debated how to start this, mentally going over the information he had gathered from the book, before deciding on a position the manual had suggested that would make things easier for a woman for her
first time having anal sex.

Katara was wondering what was going through her firebender’s head when she saw him turn on his heel and once again walk away from the bed. Frowning in confusion, she propped herself up on her elbows so she could see where he was going. She watched as he walked toward the full-length mirror in its corner. He picked it up before quickly returning to her. He placed the mirror on the floor toward the end of the bed before he turned to her with lust-filled, amber eyes.

“Come here,” he purred as he gently grabbed her ankles and dragged her down toward the edge of the bed. “Turn around and get on your hands and knees.”

Heart racing frantically in her chest, body tingling in anticipation, Katara quickly complied and moved so that her knees rested on the edge of the bed with her backside upturned to his hot gaze.

“Hm, so lovely,” Zuko murmured as he cupped her round cheeks, giving them gentle caresses.

Knowing how much she loved it when he spanked her, Zuko splayed one large hand across her backside, lightly slapping the enticing flesh. He watched as his wife rocked her hips back to his touch with a soft moan.

“More,” she purred.

Complying with her wishes, the firebender raised his hand and brought it back down to one cheek and then the other. When she moaned, he smacked harder, causing her to bow her back with a pleasured cry. He watched as her rich, brown skin reddened prettily under his palm. Zuko groaned quietly at the sight of her glistening pink pussy becoming an even more soaked mess with her fresh juices and his dripping seed.

“Zuko,” she sighed delightedly as she wiggled her bottom in the air before she looked over her shoulder to smile at him.

Her long hair fell like chocolate waves around her and her cheeks were a lovely shade of red as she stared at him in an enamored daze. Agni, she was wonderful. The way she gazed at him always made him feel as if he were the best lover in the world. He held her stare for a moment before he lowered himself so that he was kneeling on the floor, his face in level with her sex.
Katara turned back around and bit her lip when his hands rested on her thighs, before she felt his breath on her drenched sex. His hands caressed her up and down her thighs before he moved them further up to squeeze and knead her round cheeks. Her eyes fluttered and she moaned when he spread her folds with his thumbs before his tongue dipped into her quivering core. She let out another louder moan when he then flicked and lapped at her sensitive nub before sucking it into his mouth.

A deep groan erupted from Zuko’s throat at the taste of their mixed passions and he roughly lapped and sucked at her folds. He then began to rub firm circles on her anus which caused her to cry out and bucked her hips back into his face. Unable to contain his need any longer, Zuko kissed each of her cheeks before he stood back up, reached down for her, and flipped her onto her back. Feet still planted on the floor, he lowered himself over her, spreading her legs wide as he plunged himself inside her aroused body.

“Ohhh!” Katara gasped as he filled her completely, feeling his heavy sac slap against her backside before she moaned when he began a relentless rhythm. “Mmm, uuhhh!”

Zuko grunted his pleasure as he speed up his thrusts, loving the way her slick walls, filled with his warm seed, clung to his aching cock at the same time her hands grabbed his ass to drive him deeper into her as she pushed back, matching him stroke for stroke. Wet, smacking sounds rang loudly into the bedroom to complement their moans and groans.

“Oh gods, t-that feels…so good,” she panted breathlessly, her voice conveying the pleasure that was overwhelming her.

She removed one of her hand from his backside and the firebender felt her fingers reach between her legs and touch the place where they were joined before she went lower. The pads of her fingers touched his sac as he slapped against her and he felt his breath hitch, but then her fingers moved up again to coat them in her cream. When he felt her walls squeeze him and heard her small gasp he knew she was rubbing her sensitive bud.

“Zuko…Z-Zuko…I’m about to…”

“Not…yet,” Zuko grunted amorously, “Not until I’m…inside your ass.”

A gasp escaped the waterbender when her husband suddenly lifted them and turned them around before he sat at the edge of the bed with her straddling his hips. He didn’t miss a beat as he continued to drive up into her at the same time he brought her down upon his thick shaft. Katara grabbed onto his shoulders as she whimpered her pleasure and need. Just when she thought she was about to hit her peak, Zuko pulled out of her with a harsh groan.
They panted hard against each other and Zuko almost smiled at the glare his wife was giving him. He had to pull out. He had felt her passage rippling with her oncoming climax and he knew he would have finished too soon if he had remained inside her. He kissed her lips passionately to appease her and leaned away only when he felt her melt against his chest. Grabbing the bottle he had set aside on the mattress, Zuko opened it and quickly poured a generous amount of the slippery oil onto his straining cock. He reached down to smear it all over his length and around the thick head, making sure not to miss a spot, until he was completely slick with the combination of the oil and their own fluids. Watching over her shoulder at their reflection, Zuko admired the image they made, before he reached down between her cheeks to rub more oil on the puckered hole. Once that was done, he leaned forward to kiss her before pulling back.

“Okay, take me inside you,” he groaned.


“The book had many different positions for anal sex, but it said that this position would make things easier the first time,” he explained as he caressed her hips before he added with a throaty growl, “Plus, I want you to be the one to take me inside your ass.”

“Um, okay,” the waterbender said uncertainly before she squared her shoulders. She could do this! Holding onto his shoulders, she lifted herself a little by pressing her knees on the mattress. She moaned when Zuko grabbed onto both her rear cheeks and spread her open. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw her bare sex, dripping with his semen, and she licked her lips. Zuko shifted and she gasped when the tip of his shaft nudged against her smaller opening.

“Katara,” Zuko rasped, “Please, take me inside you before I lose my mind.”

Suppressing a smirk at his desperate plea, Katara reached between them to grab his turgid length. Taking a few quick breaths, she carefully pressed the head into the tight ring of muscles at the same time she lowered herself down. She bit her lip and her features pinched a little at the twinge of discomfort, but she did not let it deter her. Feeling Zuko’s fingers lightly kneading her cheeks, she took another breath before she pushed herself down until the large tip breached her entrance. She stiffened and closed her eyes at the sudden twinge of pain, but it disappeared as soon as it happened and she relaxed.

“Are…you okay?” he asked softly as he kissed her temple.
“I’m…fine,” she replied as she lower her head against his neck, trying to ease the discomfort.

It didn’t hurt now, but it definitely felt strange, so she took another moment to gather her bearings. Zuko was still pressing kisses along her face and murmuring equally sweet and dirty words, and she appreciated that he was giving her the opportunity to go about this new adventure at her own pace.

Kissing her cheeks and gently massaging her ass cheeks, Zuko breathed heavily at the feeling of his tip inside her. Just having that part of himself there felt amazing and he could only imagine how much better it would feel when he was buried all the way in. His muscles were tense from anticipation and concern that he would hurt her or that she would regret it. His thoughts scattered when he felt her move another inch lower and his breath stopped when he felt her walls tightly constrict his engorged length.

Katara eased herself down her husband’s thick shaft little by little until she had finally lowered herself all the way down to the base of his cock. She grunted a little and held still, trying to adjust to the sudden fullness, hoping that after she got used to the feeling the experience would be amazing.

Zuko, on his part, clenched his eyes tightly at the amazing sensations. She was so warm and tight and it felt so good, even with them not moving. Panting, he reopened his eyes and looked at the mirror as he spread her cheeks wider. His breathing accelerated at the sight of his cock buried deeply in her tight ass, his heavy balls pressing tightly against her sticky sex. His fantasies didn’t come close to the reality.

Breathing deeply, Katara lifted herself a little before sliding back down, vaguely hearing Zuko’s groan as she focused on what she was feeling. She then moved her hips back and forth, side to side, experimenting with her movements. She squeezed her inner muscles around his hard shaft, and she gasped at the highly pleasurable sensation as it stimulated her anal passage. She lifted herself and then lowered herself back at the same time she once again squeezed. Zuko let out a loud groan and she felt a spark of pleasure ripple up her back, which caused her to increase her movements slightly.

“Ka-tara…uhhh, you feel…so amazing…” he moaned hoarsely before he tentatively asked, “Do you feel the same?”

“Yes,” she whispered passionately, her voice low with pleasure and wonder. “It’s strange…but good.”

Zuko’s groin tightened at the sensations as she once again moved up and he gasped when he
returned to the tight warmth of her ass. When she squeezed him again, more tightly, his eyes
widened when he felt a bit of his seed leak out as his orgasm surfaced too quickly. He grabbed her
hips firmly and held her still, his heart pounding wildly in his chest.

“Wait…I need…a minute,” he groaned as he dropped his face to her shoulder before he huskily
added, “Or else…I’ll be coming in your ass.”

Their previous foreplay and the tight feeling of her muscles around his painfully hard cock, not to
mention the thought that he had finally claimed all of Katara’s orifices, only brought forth his climax
faster than he wished. He wanted to enjoy the moment longer and he refused to have it end before
Katara could really enjoy it.

Katara groaned at his words and felt fire erupt in her stomach at the thought of Zuko emptying
himself in her once untouched hole. She loved it when he came in her core and she could only
imagine how much she would enjoy it if he did so in her back entrance.

“Go ahead…it’s okay,” she purred against his scarred ear, nibbling wantonly at the shell as her arms
wrapped around his neck.

The firebender swallowed thickly, her words almost undoing him, but he grit his teeth and held
himself back by sheer will.

“The book doesn’t recommend it,” he replied breathlessly, thankful that the distraction had made his
release recede. “It’s harder to clean up.”

He felt Katara pull away and he looked up to see her raising an eyebrow at him.

“Did you forget who you’re married to?” she asked. “I’m a waterbender, so…” She trailed off
meaningfully.

She watched as Zuko flushed sheepishly.

“Oh. Right.”
Katara laughed softly at his expression, which she found endearing. Even at their most heated, passionate moments, her husband was still able to make her laugh with happiness. It only increased the love and lust she felt for him.

Zuko frowned. He was not sure if he should feel upset or pleased that his wife was amused, even when she had his hard cock up her ass. As he watched her giggle, he felt both his shaft and his heart throb at her clenching, tight walls and her wonderful laugh. She cupped his face and kissed him sweetly, and he sighed against her mouth.

“You are so adorable.”

Zuko scowled and opened his mouth to argue, but Katara decided to cut him off by grinding onto him and once again squeezing her muscles firmly.

“K-Katara,” he moaned long and low before he gasped an “Oh, gods, yes.”

Katara felt her arousal flare at the pleasure written on his face and she slowly began to slide up and down his length. Her mouth dropped open as the friction caused nerve endings she didn’t know she had to burst into a myriad of feelings of intense pleasure. There was no pain, only the wonderful feeling of being so full, of having a part of Zuko inside another part of her that no one had touched before.

“Zuko…” she whispered sultrily against his panting lips, “I want you…to come in my ass.”

Growling at her words, Zuko grabbed tightly onto both her cheeks as he slowly thrust himself up into her, following her movements, and causing her to throw her head back with a low cry.

“I will fill you up nicely, wife,” he growled wickedly, “Don’t you worry.”

He heard her gasp and felt her push back down against him harder, causing him to grunt sharply. Agni, it was incredible. He would always love burying himself in her wet pussy, but her ass felt good too. Grabbing her butt more firmly within his large hands, he spread her open and helped her bounce up and down his cock. His eyes watched, fascinated, at the vision of her brown cheeks shaking with every thrust, of his shaft—glistening and slippery with the lubrication—slipping from her tight hole before disappearing once again. It made a couple more drops of pre-cum leak inside her with every pleasurable stroke. Gods, he was not going to last much longer.
Wanting to usher Katara’s climax closer to his, Zuko lowered his head and hungrily latched onto the entirety of her right nipple, sucking roughly and furiously, causing her to cry out his name and increase her pace, alternating from bouncing and grinding on him. He groaned when her deliciously sweet milk flowed into his mouth and he swallowed greedily. He felt as if he were burning with a fever, sweat ran down his back and stuck his hair to his neck, as he thrust his hips desperately.

Katara grabbed his head as she chanted his name over and over again. La, she felt like she was going to explode. She then switched from moving up and down to grinding back and forth, and she mewed when his thick cock scrapped against her nerves endings and the walls of her anus. She was so close in achieving her ultimate pleasure, but she was not quite there yet.

“Zuk-oo…p-please,” she moaned incoherently as she looked down.

Her firebender raised his eyes to hers without removing his mouth from her breast and the sight of the lustful hunger in his eyes, which were so dilated she could barely see the gold, caused the empty walls of her core to flutter.

“Please…haaah…” she begged again. “Uuhh.”

She felt him remove one hand from her backside before a loud cry fell from her lips when he reached between them and began to roughly rub her clit. Then he swiftly inserted two fingers inside her drenched pussy and began to move them inside her in a fast and hard rhythm.

“Ah, ah, ah!” she cried at every thrust of his fingers, of every stroke of his cock inside her ass, and every suck of his mouth on her nipple.

The new sensations were almost too much, her mind and body were overwhelmed with so much pleasure it was almost painful, but she never wanted it to end. Her fingers dug deeply into his shoulders and she bounced vigorously on top of him. The sound of her cheeks slapping against his thighs and the wet sounds of their sex only spurred her on. A particular powerful thrust of his hips directed a bolt of pleasure searing through Katara’s body that it caused her to wail his name in a broken plea for more.

Panting roughly as he sucked her other nipple, Zuko increased the pace of his fingers as he felt his sac begin to tighten in preparation for orgasm. He was so close, he knew he would not be able to hold back. Lifting his head up, he caught Katara’s gaze, her blue eyes dark and half-lidden. They stared at each other, their breaths intermingling as they moved against each other. The intimacy of their position only increased their arousal and their mouths pressed hungrily together.
“Come for me, Katara,” Zuko whispered at the same time he pressed his thumb on her clit, curled his fingers, and firmly brought her down on his cock with the other.

“Zukoooo!” the waterbender screamed when her orgasm crashed into her with the immense force of a tsunami. All the sensations caused her body to writhe and shudder wildly.

Zuko watched as she arched her back, her hair flying behind her and her breasts jutting up, as her orgasm ripped through her. His breath caught in his throat at the sensation of her tight passage squeezing almost painfully around him. It was too much. With a roar of her name, he grabbed both her ass checks as he surged into her, pumping his seed heavily into her still clenching walls as his vision blackened at the intense pleasure his body was experiencing.

Katara’s eyes rolled back and she whimpered as she felt his seed, hot and sticky, spurting inside her ass. The sensation was new and amazing since she was feeling the familiar touch of his warmth filling up a place previously unknown. It was incredible, the way his cock pulsed and throbbed within her, that it caused her to climax a little once again.

Zuko gasped when he felt her tighten around him like a vise, as if she were trying to pull every last drop out of him. His hips jerked when the sensation wrenched a few more gushes of his semen, causing a little to leak out of her and down his balls. With a strangled moan, he dropped his head back onto her shoulder while he felt her collapse against him. Their heavy pants echoed loudly in their ears, their warm breaths tickling each other’s flushed, perspiring skin, as they tried to catch their breaths and calm their racing hearts. It was a long moment before their bodies finally relaxed.

“Are you okay?” he found himself asking for the second time as his hands gently massages her round cheeks.

“Uhh, yes,” was Katara’s dazed reply. Her body was still tingling from the magnificent orgasm she had just had. She could feel Zuko’s seed inside her as his semi-hard shaft still stretched her anal walls. It was so warm and she felt so full. But it was the manner in which he held her to him that made her heart flutter in her chest.

Relieved that she had enjoyed it as much as he had, Zuko nudged the side of her head with his nose. When she lifted her head, he pressed his mouth to hers and kissed her languidly, slipping his tongue to gently curl around her own. Wanting to feel her tighten around him one more time, he smacked Katara’s ass hard. She gasped and jolted, and he groaned when her tight passage clutched him strongly before she relaxed.
“Mmmm, that was good,” she hummed against his caressing mouth.

“You love getting your ass spanked, don’t you, my lovely wife?” he rumbled as he nibbled at her lower lip.

“I love everything you do to me, my sexy husband,” she purred rapturously.

“Hm, well, your sexy husband wants to see how much you loved him inside you,” he growled huskily.

With a soft moan, Katara wiggled against him and he spanked her once again before he grabbed onto both her cheeks and carefully lifted her up. They both let out simultaneous moans as his cock slipped out of her little by little. They both look back at the mirror and they watched with equal fascination as her anus contracted and a little of his essence peaked out.

Zuko held his breath when he saw Katara reach down and dip a finger inside to coax more of his seed out, eliciting a quiet moan from her at the sensation and a growl from him at the visual. Still spreading her ass cheeks widely apart, a thick stream of his whitish fluid poured out of her and slipped down to coat her swollen sex before dripping down onto his lap.

“Damn, I can’t wait to do that again,” he rasped.

“Mm, me too,” Katara replied dreamily before she turned back to him, smiling at the dazed expression on his face as he continued to look at their reflections. She deliberately clenched her anus and she grinned when he swallowed thickly.

He reached for her again and she giggled when he growled as she quickly slipped onto the bed beside him. Huffing, he laid down next to her, but reached out to brush her hair away from her face.

“We need a bath,” she stated.

She almost smiled when he frowned.

“We have to meet everybody for dinner,” she reminded him, “And I have to feed Kazu.”
The thought of their son going hungry snapped Zuko from his amorous thoughts and he quickly sat up, about to move them toward the bathing room. But before he could do so, Katara grasped his arm and pulled him back down next to her. She cupped his cheeks and he looked at her to see her eyes had softened in concern.

“Do you feel better now?” she asked.

Her question reminded him of why he had prompted this impromptu lovemaking session and he hummed when he realized he had completely forgotten his visit with Ozai. He no longer felt angry or hurt, but rather sated and content, all thanks to his waterbender. She was like a safe haven, a light in this world of darkness. For that reason and much more he treasured her. Leaning forward, he kissed her softly before pulling back to stare into her azure eyes.

“Yes,” he replied sincerely before he added, almost reverently, “What would I do without you?”

He pulled her into his arms and they remained in comfortable silence as they just held each other close. He sighed softly as she snuggled into him. He always found pleasure in just holding her to him, soaking up her warmth, feeling her hands caress him with touches that were not meant to arouse, but to convey how much she loved touching him, how much she loved him.

“I love you so much,” he said quietly, “You know that, right?”

“Just as much as I love you,” was her soft reply.

Zuko tightened his arms around her as his mind wondered back to his sire’s words. If Ozai had not taken Ursa’s feelings and presence for granted, he would not have lost her. He would have seen that life could be good if you shared it with someone special. But Ozai did not see that in his blind pursuit for power and now it was too late. She had found a better man in Jee.

He felt Katara press her lips to his chest. His father may despise him, but he had the love of a wonderful woman. Not only that, but he had a son he was sure would love him too. Because Zuko would love and care for Kazuhiko like Ozai never did him.

And that was what really mattered.
Staring expressionlessly at the servants bringing in her trunks, Mai stood in the middle of her room as her mind raced with thoughts, ideas, and plans for the future. But most of all, she kept hoping she had made the right decision. Once everyone but one person had left, she turned expectantly to the man standing silently near the windows. Dressed in the uniform the guards of her household wore, with a helmet covering his face, no one would have guessed they were looking at a traitor. Mai watched as the man removed the helmet and smirked at her.

“Well, that was easier than I had thought,” Jianguo said as he brushed back his dark, graying hair.

Still smirking, he made his way to where the noblewoman was standing, staring at him blankly. He stopped only when they were close enough that their chests almost touched. Even if the woman did not show it on her face, Jianguo could see the apprehension in her eyes. His smirked widened.

“I should have sought your help much earlier,” he cooed as he reached forward to brush the back of his hand against her cheek.

He laughed when she knocked his hand away and glared at him. Shrugging, he moved away from her to stare outside the window once again, taking in the empty streets.

“Maybe you should have,” Mai finally replied to his earlier comment before she added with a hiss, “If you had, Zuko would’ve been mine sooner and wouldn’t have married and impregnated that Water Tribe wench.”

The rebel leader’s plan had been much simpler than she had thought. He had asked her to pass him and some of his men as her guards and servants and return to the Fire Nation. No one would think of inspecting the people of her household once they landed in the Fire Nation. Her father was a respected nobleman and no one would suspect his daughter to be smuggling rebels inside the country.

Although she had been banished from the palace, she could still remain at her townhouse. And because it was so close to the palace, it would make things easier for Jianguo’s plan to work. She inwardly frowned. He had not exactly explained his plan in great detail, but all she cared about was securing Zuko for herself. And if Jianguo did something she wasn’t agreeable to, she would immediately hand him over to the authorities. Maybe then Zuko would thank her for capturing the rebel and he would forgive her.

She was distracted from her plans when she sensed Jianguo moving toward her once again, the sound of his borrowed armor echoing in the room. He had done so a couple of times during the journey to the Fire Nation, standing so close to her they could almost touch, but he never did
anything beyond that. It unnerved her, which she had a feeling was what he wanted. He stopped in front of her with a satisfied smirk on his lips. She eyed him warily, her hands itching to pull out her weapons.

“Do not worry, Lady Mai,” he said smoothly, “If everything turns out well, we will both have what we want.”

“And the waterbender is one of those things you want,” she sneered.

Jianguo’s smirk widened.

“A man would do anything to have a beautiful woman such as the waterbender as theirs,” he said lecherously.

Mai’s eyes narrowed and she grit her teeth, suppressing an angry hiss from escaping her mouth. She could not see what the waterbending bitch had that drew men to her.

Staring down at the glaring woman, Jianguo chuckled at her jealousy. There were few things that seemed to get a rise out of the impassive noblewoman, but the waterbender definitely was one of them. And she should be jealous since she could never compare to the exotic, blue-eyed brunette. With another chuckle, he turned away from her and made his way to the door.

“I could stay and tell you the reasons why I desire the waterbender, but I have more important things to see to, like meeting my informant.”

A small frown appeared on Mai’s brow.

“Advisor Kang has been caught a long time ago and he’s dead,” she reminded him.

Jianguo looked over his shoulder to grin at her.

“Ah, that’s the beauty of it,” he replied, “Even I had been ignorant of the truth for a while.”
“What do you mean?”

Jianguo turned back to open the door.

“It’s really none of your business,” he responded casually as he walked out.

Mai glared after him. Before he closed the door, the man looked at her.

“I’ll keep in touch with you to explain your next part in the plan,” he said smoothly before he closed the door.

Mai’s hands clenched as her glare intensified.

“Arrogant bastard.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Dark, golden eyes watched as the old man walked around his room, getting ready to retire for the night, but he was not alone as a woman helped him into his sleeping robe. The individual wondered if he should perhaps return another day when the old man was alone, but then he saw the woman leave after kissing the man on the mouth. Quietly, he opened the window and stepped down into the room. A breeze swept in, causing the thin curtains to sway for a moment, before the window was closed once again.

“Nice to see you again,” he greeted mockingly.

He watched as the old man stiffened before he whirled around with a gasp. Then he straightened himself out and glared.

“Jianguo!” he hissed in a low tone, “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to wait in the colonies!” He glanced back toward the door with a worried look before turning back to glare at the younger man.

“I was tired of waiting,” Jianguo growled as he took a step further away from the window. “Almost three years have passed since we threatened Zuko and yet he’s still Fire Lord!”
“Whose fault is that?” the old man scoffed as he crossed his arms over his chest. “You had many chances to capture him, to force him to our demands and you failed in all because of your obsession with the waterbender.”

Jianguo growled and he took a menacing step forward, which caused the other man to take a step back out of reflex.

“What about you?” Jianguo asked angrily, “You are in his presence most of the time and you haven’t done anything either. Instead, you have others do the dirty work for you! They’ve all lost their lives because of it and you would have too if you weren’t so good at hiding your tracks.”

The other man shrugged and waved his hand carelessly.

“Someone has to keep an eye on the whelp, besides if it wasn’t for me you would still be living in the streets and wouldn’t have the chance to regain everything you’ve lost.”

The firebender growled. The old man turned away and walked toward the low table on one side of the room. He sat down and poured himself some tea, ignoring the impatient man standing a few feet away.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked and took a sip.

“No, I don’t want any fucking tea,” Jianguo growled scathingly, “You should’ve told me sooner that you had used some other aristocrat, Kang or whatever his name was, to take the blame for the failed message instead of letting me think you died.”

The other man shrugged as he took another sip of his tea.

“Zuko was being suspicious of everybody. I had to be careful. I couldn’t send you messages until it was safe to do so,” he explained. “And by placing some evidence in Kang’s home, all suspicions fell on him.”

“Well, after all that,” Jianguo said, “Why didn’t you tell me about your plan to make the waterbender lose her child?”
The old man sipped again and sighed.

“It was a desperate attempt, but now I see it was a bit too hurried and foolish. We could now use something else besides the waterbender to make Zuko obey us.”

“She could have died!” Jianguo shouted angrily.

“A pity if that had happened,” the man replied with a shrug, “But she didn’t die.”

“She can’t die yet,” the rebel leader growled, “Not until I’ve had my chance to enjoy her.”

A tired sigh left the old man’s lips and he rolled his eyes.

“Well, now you’re here, it’s best we finally finished this,” he said. “Once and for all.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Jianguo smirked. “And I have the perfect plan.”
Standing silently at the construction site, Katara smiled proudly as the school for illiterate adults she had proposed months ago went underway. If everything went according to plan, the school would be ready in a few weeks or so. She could see a few of the villagers from outside the capital stare in awe as the building was constructed. She still smiled at the memory of their surprise and gratitude when she had arrived months ago to let them know they would have the opportunity to learn.

Her smile turned to a frown when her neck pricked with that sensation people sometimes got when they felt as if someone was watching them. She scanned the small crowd that had gathered, but she could not see anything suspicious. Her hand moved discreetly toward her waterskin, feeling her heart accelerate a little in sudden adrenaline, as her eyes once again took in her surroundings. She was accompanied by a large group of guards, but still she remained on high alert.

When nothing happened, she forced herself to relax so she could talk to the one in charge of the school’s construction. Perhaps it was nothing and she was just being overly suspicious.

```
~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Are we almost there yet? I’m starving!”

“You already had a snack!”

“But that was half an hour ago!”

Katara and Zuko suppressed their amused laughter as Sokka continued to whine and Suki continued to scold him. The waterbender sometimes thought that Sokka got chastised by Suki more than their daughters did. When her brother made a sudden teasing remark toward his wife, Suki playfully smacked his chest. It caused Kazu, who was currently being held by his father, to let out a loud giggle, which caused his parents to finally succumb to their amusement.

Kazuhiko and the two couples were riding in one of the royal carriages toward their favorite restaurant. The rest of their family was riding in other carriages. Sokka had pouted when Jing and Ting had left him in order to ride with Aang and Toph so they could play with Momo.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the prestigious restaurant Zuko and Katara liked to frequent when they wanted to leave the palace for a while. Zuko handed Kazu to his wife so he could help them down, but also so he could make sure his guards were already on guard around them before his family exited the carriage.
Once she stepped down, Katara smiled at her husband before she cooed at her gurgling son while the rest of their family alighted. Zuko took her elbow and they walked toward the large building. As they made their way, the waterbender stiffened slightly when she once again felt as if she had someone’s eyes on her. She paused, causing Zuko to stop and look at her curiously. Katara brought her son closer to her and she glanced around.

“Is something the matter?” Zuko asked in concern as he also began to scan their surroundings.

Except for the usually excited crowd that stood on the sidelines at the sight of the royal family, there didn’t seem anything out of the ordinary.

“I don’t know,” Katara murmured quietly, her brow furrowed slightly. She didn’t know how to explain herself. There were a lot of people staring at them now, so she didn’t understand why she felt strange.

Why did she feel so paranoid?

Suppressing a tired yawn, Katara softly closed the large door behind her as she slowly made her way further into the bedchamber. She had stopped by Kazu’s nursery to breastfeed him and to play with him a little before reluctantly leaving him to Jiao’s care. The nursery was where Kazu spent his days when his parents were busy, but he still slept in their room during the night. He had gone down for a nap, so Katara decided to relax a little before she had to continue with her duties for the day. The past few days had been hectic with all her projects, but that did not bother her. She loved what she did. But it was that odd sensation of being watched that continued to plague her that made her tense all the time. She had thought of telling Zuko about it, but she did not want to worry him. Especially since nothing unusual had happened.

A sound coming from the bathing room reached her ears and she froze. Narrowing her eyes, one of her hands hovered over her waterskin while the other fingered the dagger strapped to her side. She felt her heartbeat race as the strange feeling of dread she had been feeling recently resurfaced. Before she could demand whoever was in her chambers to show themselves, she saw Zuko step into the room dressed only in dark trousers, a damp towel hanging over his shoulders. Zuko paused and raised an eyebrow when he noticed her offensive stance. Relaxing, feeling her heartbeat ease, Katara continued forward with a wry smile.

“Weren’t you supposed to be in a meeting with the advisors?” she asked. “I thought you were a thief sneaking around.”
“The meeting was postponed until later today, so I trained instead,” he responded as he watched her make her way to the bed. “I just finished taking a bath.”

“That’s nice,” she replied distractedly.

Zuko’s eyebrow rose again at her nonchalant reply. He watched as she threw herself onto the bed and buried her face in her pillow with a groan. The firebender frowned. Katara had been up very early over the past few days to oversee the construction of another orphanage in a town a few miles away from the capital and also attend to several of her other projects. It didn’t help matters that Kazuhiko had kept them up the previous night due to an upset stomach. But he knew she enjoyed what she did. However, he had noticed that she seemed edgy and distracted recently and it made him wonder why. He had tried to ask her, but she had responded that it was nothing.

“Are you done for the day?” he asked as he made his way to her side of the bed and sat down next to her hip.

“No,” was her muffled response. “I have to go through the citizens’ petitions and then I have teatime with several of the noblewomen.”

Zuko suppressed a chuckle at her unenthusiastic tone at the last part. Even after all the time they’d been married, Katara still barely tolerated the noblewomen. She had made a few friends, but for the most part, she only endured the others’ presence. He couldn’t blame her since he, himself, could not stand most of them. Or their husbands. The thought of being married to one of the women made him shudder, but luckily he didn’t have to worry about that horror anymore now that he was married to Katara. The sound of her letting out another groan again brought him out of his thoughts and he focused on her lounging form.

His eyes roamed down her body, from her head, down her back, and settled on her lovely backside. He licked his lips as he recalled all those instances that Katara had let him play with her ass. They had only engaged in anal sex twice so far and he found his body heating up at the thought of her letting him inside her back entrance again. But he was not sure if Katara would be up to it at the moment. He glanced up to see that she had her eyes closed, but she was frowning. Once again, he could not help but feel as if she had something heavy on her mind. He opened his mouth to ask her to talk to him before he closed it. He didn’t want to add any more stress with his insistence. Hopefully she would come to him with her problems soon. For the moment maybe he could make her feel better by massaging her back instead, just as he used to do when she was pregnant. They had a few minutes to themselves before their next meetings. He had checked up on Kazu before his shower and his son seemed content being in the company of Ichiro and Jiao.

Katara cracked one eye open when she felt Zuko’s large hands on her shoulders. Before she could ask him what he was doing, she let out a pleased moan when he began to knead at a particular sore
spot. She closed her eyes and sighed when his hands massaged down her back, pressing down as he went, before moving upward to once again knead her muscles.

“Mm, that feels nice,” she groaned.

Zuko felt his groin twitch at her moans, but he firmly shook his head and focused on massaging her back. He paused briefly when an idea formed in his head.

Katara’s eyes opened when she felt her husband suddenly tug at her clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll be able to massage your back better if you take off your clothes,” was his smooth reply.

“You’ll use any excuse to get me naked, huh?” she replied impishly.

She laughed when he threw her a wicked smirk as he continued to pull at her formal robes. Lifting herself slightly, she helped him pull her clothes down so her back was exposed. Before he could ask her, she removed her breast binding, flinging it to the side, before settling back onto her stomach. A massage definitely sounded nice. Perhaps it would help her mind relax.

“I’ll be right back,” she heard him say and she lifted her head to see him walk to the bathroom.

Zuko quickly made his way to the built-in shelve next to the marble tub. He searched through the bottles of soaps and bathing oils before grabbing the one he was looking for. While he had every intention to only give her a massage, this lubricant would be useful should the mood change. He walked back into the bedroom and toward the bed, the glass bottle in his hand. A grin stretched his lips when he saw that his wife had completely divested herself of her clothing and was lying on her stomach completely nude. Now that she was naked, Zuko knew she would be receptive to sex. He stopped next to the massive bed and he let his eyes rove over her bare body, traveling down her smooth back, her round backside, and down her tone legs. His golden eyes wandered back to her upturned ass, lush and glorious, and he licked his lips. He couldn’t get enough of his waterbender’s perfect curves.

“Well? Are you going to massage my back or just stand there?”
At his wife’s playful question, Zuko’s eyes moved toward her face to see her smiling sultrily up at him, her cheek resting on her folded arms. Grinning, he placed the bottle aside before going to the ties that held his pants up.

“It’s not fair if you’re the only one naked, right?” he asked as he pushed them down.

“My thoughts exactly,” she replied as she smiled at him.

Her eyes roamed down his muscular chest and stomach, admiring his perfectly sculpted body, before settling intently on his shaft. She licked her lips when she saw that he was semi-erect, knowing it would not take long or much for him to become fully hard. She knew that with them both being naked the massage her firebender had planned would turn into something even better. She couldn’t wait. Not only did she need the sexual release, but she wanted her thoughts to focus on something else than her sudden paranoia. Her husband was definitely something she loved to focus on. And she knew he wouldn’t need much convincing.

Stepping out of his trousers, Zuko climbed onto the bed, resting his knees on either side of her legs while she moved her long hair aside. He grabbed another pillow and placed it under her ankles, thinking she would be more comfortable that way. He settled over her and once again admired the smooth skin of her back, bottom, and thighs before he picked up the bottle. He was no professional masseuse, but he had a vague idea of what to do. Besides, he knew his wife would enjoy it no matter what he did as long as he touched her. Pouring a small amount of the bathing oil onto his palm, Zuko rubbed his hands together to warm the oil before placing them on the bottom of her back.

“Mm,” Katara let out a small moan as Zuko began to lightly knead her muscles and rub her flesh.

The sensation of the bathing oil coating her skin only heightened the pleasurable feeling of her husband’s hands on her body. Using the whole of his hands, he started from her lower back and moved upward, applying slight pressure, and slowly bringing his hands down the outside of her back with a light touch. He alternated between rubbing the back of her neck and her shoulders, pressing down along her entire back, and even massaging her arms which she had placed at her sides. He repeated the gliding, even strokes for a few minutes, increasing the pressure a bit, until she felt entirely relaxed and content. Then he increased the pressure by using shorter, circular strokes, kneading and rolling her skin and muscles with his fingertips, palms, and knuckles. The sensations were so wonderful, she could not help letting out a few, soft moans.

Zuko felt his breathing accelerate and his body warm up as he continued to touch his waterbender’s body, but it was the sounds she was uttering, those moans that resembled the ones she made during lovemaking, which caused his length to harden fully. By the relaxed manner her body rested beneath
him, he thought he had massaged her back sufficiently, so now it was time to pleasure her body in a different and more satisfying kind of way.

Picking up the bottle once again, Zuko poured a generous amount of the sweet-smelling oil along her spine, causing her to gasp softly at the cool contact. Squirting more of the liquid onto his palm, he rubbed his hands briskly before placing them on her round backside. He began rubbing the oil all over her back and luscious ass until her brown skin was slick and glistening under the candlelight.

“So lovely,” he murmured.

The visual was too much. He needed her so badly that he knew he could not prolong their foreplay.

As if reading his thoughts, Katara looked over her shoulder to smile sexily up at him at the same time she gently wiggled her ass underneath his kneading hands.

“I need you, Zuko. Touch me,” she moaned.

With a low growl, Zuko moved down her legs and quickly grabbed her about her waist, but before he could pull her up, she had swiftly moved onto her knees herself so that her backside was upturned to his hot gaze.

“Rather eager today, aren’t you?” he asked huskily.

“When aren’t I?” she retorted with a throaty laugh.

“A fact I’m forever grateful for,” he replied with a chuckle, which died in his throat when he felt her grab onto his turgid erection and give him a firm stroke.

“Same here,” she purred.

Zuko allowed her to give him a few strokes, feeling his lust mount higher, before he moved her hand away. He moved himself lower until his face was in level to her ass. His eyes drank up the sight of her swollen, pink sex and glistening backside before he leaned down to kiss each of her cheeks. He kissed the back of her thighs, slowly making his way to where she wanted him most and buried his
Katara moaned loudly at the amazing sensation of his tongue and lips licking and nibbling her folds and engorged clit. Her hands grabbed the pillow beneath her as she pushed back insistently against his face. She gasped when he gave the left cheek of her ass a gentle smack to make her hold still. She ground against him one more time out of defiance before complying, which immediately earned her a long sweep of his skillful tongue from her sensitive bud to her puckered hole. She moaned and shuddered at the pleasure her body was experiencing. Her eyes rolled back when Zuko pressed his tongue more firmly against her anus and gently teased the tight opening.

“Oh gods, Zuko,” she cried out when he grabbed both her cheeks and spread them wider for easier access.

She moaned and gasped when he alternated in teasing both her ass and her hot, eager pussy, which was completely soaked in the juices he was coaxing from her. Then he slipped two fingers into her slick core and pumped slowly but firmly. She was so focused on her pleasure that she didn’t realize he had moved onto his knees until she felt him pour more of the oil onto her ass. She gasped when she felt the cool liquid slide down the line of her backside to coat her anus and drip down her slit to his pumping fingers.

“Z-Zuko, uuuhh,” she mewled.

The Fire Lord rubbed the extra oil all over her ass before he trailed his slippery hand up her back. He slid it around to grab her breast, giving it a gentle squeeze as he continued to slowly stroke his fingers against the clenching walls of her passage. He teased her nipple for a moment before he moved his hand across her chest to gently stroke and pinch her other nipple until both peaks were hard as pebbles. He smiled when she let out a loud moan.

He slipped his fingers out of her clenching pussy, smirking when she let out a frustrated growl. Gathering more of the oil and her natural lubrication, he trailed his hand up her drenched slit until he reached the tight ring of her back entrance nestled between her lushly enticing cheeks. Feeling his cock aching and dripping pre-cum, Zuko began to rub firmly against her anus with his finger. Using his thumb, he pressed it against her clit at the same time he push his finger past her tight opening. He felt her jerk against him as she gasped his name.

“Oooh, Zuko, so g-good!” the waterbender moaned into the room.

A small cry of pleasure fell from her lips and her body arched when she felt him slip his finger another inch into the puckered hole of her ass. She closed her eyes and panted softly in mounting
pleasure as she felt him drape himself over her back.

Zuko groaned huskily at the sensation of her slippery and smooth back sliding against his chest and stomach. He pressed eager kisses along her neck as he continued to slowly pump his finger. When she began to rock her hips against him, he inserted another finger, thrusting them firmly. She brought her head back, exposing her throat to him as she looked at him with half-lidded eyes. He leaned down to bestow hungry kisses on her plump lips, along her jaw, and to her ear.

“You really like my fingers in your ass, don’t you?” he asked with a husky growl as he nipped her earlobe before soothing it with his tongue.

“I like… your fingers anywhere on…and in me,” was her passionate response as she ground herself harder against his hand that it caused his fingers to slide deeper into her ass. “But I love your cock more.”

Zuko growled as he increased his rhythm.

“Don’t worry, my naughty waterbender,” he whispered throatily against her ear, “When we have more time I’m going to plunge my cock into your tight, little ass. I’m going to fuck it so good that you’ll beg me to do it again and again.”

“Mm, I could beg for it right now,” she replied seductively.

“Gods, you’re going to be the death of me,” he groaned.

He wanted to succumb to his desire of possessing her ass once again, but they did not have the time. They had to get ready soon to continue with their duties of the day and he wanted them to have lots of time for them to enjoy anal sex.

Katara smirked at the words her firebender had uttered so many times before during their passionate lovemaking. Her smirk disappeared and her mouth dropped open in pleasure when he began to play with her clit with his other hand. She closed her eyes and bit her lip when she felt the tell-tale sign of her impending climax. She frowned when he suddenly pulled both his hands away, but before she could demand he continue, she felt him grab her hips at the same time the tip of his shaft pressed against her pussy. He quickly thrust his shaft inside her, slamming his hips against her ass so hard that it caused loud slapping sounds to echo in the room.
“Oh gods!” she screamed her pleasure as her fingers dug into the pillow beneath her.

She felt him place his hand between her shoulder blades, urging her to press her upper body to the mattress so that her bottom lifted higher in the air as he continued to pound into her. The friction of his thick, hard shaft sliding against her walls caused her stomach to clench and tighten as the fire of lust rushed through her veins.

Panting harshly, Zuko glanced down between them, watching as the plump cheeks of her beautiful ass jiggled and bounced with his frantic thrusts. His cock, slick with her cream appeared and disappeared from within her pink sex while her anus clenched with his every thrust. The visual caused his cum to leak out of his cock to coat the inside of her tight, hot pussy with his every stroke and he knew he would not last long. Wanting to give her more pleasure, Zuko slowed his pace slightly and he pressed his finger back against her puckered hole. He slowly slipped it inside and he smirked triumphantly when her loud moans reached his ears as her tight ring relaxed. He continued to drive his engorged shaft into her tight passage as his finger moved to the same rhythm of his hips.

Katara gasped and her hands tightly clenched the pillow beneath her at the incredible pleasure, loving the wonderful friction. She began to push back against him, wanting to meet his deep strokes, needing the stimuli on both her entrances in order to bring on the orgasm she could feel hovering on the edge.

“Zu-Zuk-oo,” Katara moaned incoherently, “Please, I’m…so…close.”

Wanting to please her, Zuko slipped his other hand around her hip and began to firmly rub her slick clit at the same pace of his thrusting cock and finger.

Katara’s eyes rolled back and she let out a scream as her orgasm ripped through her body, causing her to writhe wildly beneath her husband’s unrelenting body.

“Zuko!”

“K-Katara.”

Zuko’s breath caught at the incredible sensation of her walls clenching tightly against his length. He pushed her down so that she was lying on her stomach and began thrusting deeply inside her as he felt the pressure draw up in his heavy sac. Just as he felt his climax approaching, he pulled out and placed his cock between the valley of her ass cheeks, pressing them against his length with both
Katara, still in the throes of her earlier orgasm, moaned and gasped his name repeatedly when she felt the ridge of his shaft rub pleasurably against her sensitive anus. She felt her ass rock violently as he picked up speed and slammed his hips against her as he continued to furiously rub himself between her cheeks.

Zuko, mind hazy with lust, felt his cock tighten almost painfully as his wife’s plush ass cheeks, slick with the bathing oil, her juices, and his pre-cum, provided a wonderful massage. He gasped when he felt Katara firmly grab his backside, her nails digging into his flesh, as she slammed her ass against him. That was all it took. Roaring her name, he stiffened and pressed both her round cheeks firmly against his pulsing shaft as spurt after spurt of his seed left him. His orgasm was long as thick jets of his semen coated her beautiful, olive skin.

Katara moaned and shuddered as she felt her husband’s hot, sticky seed spatter between both her cheeks. She could feel every twitch and spurt of his cock as his hips jerked against her. Then with a gasp of her name, he collapsed against her back, which was glossy and very slippery with their perspiration and the bathing oil. She felt him nuzzle against her hair before peppering her ear and cheek with languid kisses as their panting breaths resounded in the otherwise silent room.

“Mm, that was wonderful,” Zuko heard her sigh once they caught their breaths before a small yawn escape her, “But now I’m very sleepy.”

He brushed her hair aside and pressed kisses along her neck and shoulder as he raised his body a little so he wouldn’t keep crushing her. She looked over her shoulder to regard him with a sleepy smile and he leaned down to give her a soft kiss.

“Sleep,” he muttered gently, “We have some time to ourselves before we have to attend to our duties. I’ll wake you up so we can bathe.”

“Okay,” she mumbled.

Not a moment later, Zuko heard her soft, even breathing. He frowned. She must have been more tired than he realized. He had thought of once again asking her what was on her mind, but it seemed he would have to wait for another time. Smiling affectionately, Zuko lifted himself so that he was kneeling between her legs. His eyes took in the erotic sight of his whitish seed coating his wife’s rear cheeks, her anus, and her glistening folds and he felt his groin twitch.
We’ll continue this later, he told himself with a smirk.

Carefully getting up from the bed so he would not disturb her, Zuko went to the bathing room to grab a damp washcloth and cleaned himself off. Grabbing another one, he returned to his sleeping wife’s side. He gently wiped her sex before he cleaned off his seed from her backside, so she could be more comfortable while she slept. If he thought she would allow it, he would wish to leave the evidence of his pleasure on her forever. But if he kept seeing her covered in his semen he would be waking her up for another round when he knew she needed a well-deserved nap.

Depositing the dirty cloth in the bathroom, Zuko climbed into the bed and lay down beside her, spooning against her back. He smiled when she sighed and snuggled back against him.

This was the life. He had a wonderful wife who loved him and an endearing son he adored.

What more could he ask for?

“Aww, he’s so cute!”

“Look! He smiled at me!”

“Our cousin is smart!”

Katara smiled as Jing and Ting grinned proudly at Takeo and the rest of the orphaned children who were cooing over the little prince. She was sitting on a chair in the tiny garden with Kazuhiko in her arms, surrounded by the enthusiastic children. Ursa and Suki were standing behind her, chuckling at their actions. Kazu would stare widely at the new faces and when he smiled or laughed, it sent the other children into their own bouts of laughter.

It was the second time they had visited the orphanage and it seemed like Kazu was still fascinating to them. Zuko had accompanied them the first time, but he had to inspect a disturbance in one of the military grounds on the outskirts of the capital that day. She hoped it wasn’t anything serious.

Her thoughts immediately shifted as she once again felt as if she were being watched. She lifted her head slightly and warily scanned the area surrounding the building. But, just as the last couple of times she had done so, she could not spot anything suspicious. She brought her son closer to her chest while one hand hovered over her waterskin. She had brought a large group of guards to
accompany them to the orphanage and she knew it would be hard for their group to be defeated what
with a master waterbender and a Kyoshi warrior along with the guards, but the children could be hurt
if they were attacked.

She frowned at her thoughts and once again scanned their surroundings, taking in the trees on all
sides. If only Toph was with them, she would have been able to detect if there was someone lurking
in the shadows. But the earthbender and Aang had gone off together with Appa and Momo to have
some fun. Iroh, Kanna, and Pakku had gone to visit his teashop. And her father and brother had
decided to accompany Zuko and Jee.

“Is something wrong?” Suki asked. “You seem distracted and tense.”

The waterbender did not need to look back to know the female warrior had her hand to her metal
fans, ready for any trouble.

“Katara dear?” Ursa questioned in concern.

Katara shook her head and looked up to give them a reassuring smile.

“It’s nothing,” she replied calmly, though inwardly she still felt a sense of unease.

She frowned. Perhaps it would be wise to have her guards check the area just to be safe. She caught
the eye of the captain and nodded her head to indicate she wished to speak to him. The guard quickly
stepped forward at his lady’s bidding, pausing only briefly for the distracted children to make way
for him, before standing by her side. Once she gave him the order, the man nodded before he called
for a few guards to follow him to inspect the area while he had the others stay behind to guard the
royal family.

A loud gurgle from Kazu had her looking down at her son and she brought him protectively to her
chest, even as she put on a happy face for the other children who smiled and talked to her with their
childlike innocence. Perhaps now that she was a mother she was being paranoid, but she still kept a
close eye on the forest. Kazu began to fuss a little, as if he could sense his mother’s unease, and she
immediately cooed at him to soothe him.

Maybe it was nothing and it was all in her head, but no harm would fall on her child while she lived.
Hidden in the shadows of a large tree’s thick foliage, Jianguo silently watched as the exotic waterbender rocked her child in her arms and cooed at him. Motherhood sure became her. Too bad the little brat would have to go. He was not going to take care of some other man’s offspring. Perhaps if the waterbender really pleased him, he would keep her and give her more brats to dote on.

He was rudely ripped from his fantasy when he saw a guard approach the Fire Lady. He watched as the guard nodded before he called for a few of the other men to follow him to the edge of the forest. He cursed under his breath.

He had noticed the blue-eyed brunette glance to the place where he was hiding, but when she had not raise the alarm, he had decided to remain and watch a little longer. But now it seemed as if she was sending her guards to check the area. It was not the first time he had spied on her when she left the palace and he had noticed that she seemed to sense his presence. So he had had to be extra careful not to be caught. He would only stare at her for a moment before he retreated. Oh, he was obsessed with her, but that did not mean he would allow himself to lose his head.

He stealthily dropped from the tree, making sure to stay close to the ground and hidden within the bushes. He cursed his luck as he moved further and further away from the noise of the searching guards and the laughing children. She was heavily guarded and with her waterbending, he knew he would have a hard time capturing her by himself. It was for the best anyway since he had somewhere else to be at the moment.

But he would only need to be patient a bit longer. Soon he would have her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The Fire Lord and his group rode steadily through a path in the wilderness, the sounds of their mounts’ hooves hitting the ground and the banter between Sokka and Hakoda were the only things breaking the silence. Zuko suppressed a smirk when Hakoda made a teasing remark about his son’s toddler years that had the young warrior blushing brightly and yelling at him to stop. Zuko glanced to his side to see that Jee was trying to hide his amused smile by brushing his hand across his mouth. Shen and Kuo rode in front of the Water Tribe men and Zuko could just make out the younger guard’s shoulder shaking a little with laughter. The rest of his guards rode behind their Fire Lord and the admiral.

They were on their way to inspect one of the military bases. It wasn’t far and they could still see the capital behind them from a distance. They were also close to the prison tower. His lip curled in barely suppressed anger at the reminder of what had happened there the last time he visited.

Shaking his head, Zuko’s thoughts once again returned to the missive he had received the previous day. The captain stationed there had sent him a message that some strange things have been happening and he would like for the Fire Lord to check it out. A frown appeared on his brow as he wondered what it could be.
“The Fire Nation has some nice countryside,” he heard Hakoda remark.

Sitting up straight, Zuko nodded.

“It does,” he replied proudly.

“How’s it different from any other forest in the Earth Kingdom?” Sokka piped in with a scoff before he dramatically pointed to his left, “Look, there’s a tree! And another one! Oh, and look! Another tree!”

Zuko was unable to stop himself from rolling his eyes. He could just feel his guards glaring at the bored warrior’s head. The Fire Lord watched as the chieftain look over his shoulder with an apologetic grimace.

“I apologize from my son’s idiocy,” he said seriously.

“Dad!” Sokka exclaimed.

“No worries. I’m not the one who has to live with him,” Zuko responded coolly.

“Hey!” Sokka groused as he looked over his shoulder to glower at his brother-in-law and the chuckling guards. “Well, I’m glad I don’t have to live with you either! What with the way you and Katara go at it! Luckily, the rooms at the palace are soundpr—Ow!”

“That’s enough!” Hakoda growled as he once again smacked the back of his son’s head, almost causing him to topple over his ostrich-horse.

Zuko felt himself flush a little as he glanced at the chieftain from the corner of his eye, ignoring his men’s amused chuckles.

“What? I was just saying!” the blue-eyed warrior whined as he rubbed his stinging head.
“You’re one to talk with the way Suki and you carry on,” Hakoda sniffed. “I’m surprised Suki hasn’t given me more grandchildren.”

“Dad!” Sokka exclaimed with a mocked scandalized gasp before he grinned as he added, “Why do you think Suki and I are at each other all the time?”

“I walked right into that one,” Hakoda groaned, causing the group to let out a few more chuckles.

The sound of approaching komodo-rhinos had them immediately cutting off their laughter and they straightened on their mounts, their postures alert. A moment later, four large animals appeared with riders on their backs. The group relaxed when they recognized the captain of the base and three soldiers.

“My lord,” the captain greeted with a bow of his head once he and his men had stopped before the Fire Lord’s group. “We came to escort you to the military base once we received word that you were on your way.”

Zuko gave him a nod of acknowledgment as he urged his komodo-rhino forward, the others quickly mirroring his move.

“What is going on that you need my presence?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Things have been disappearing from the base storage,” the captain immediately explained as he rode on the other side of the Fire Lord.

Zuko frowned, wondering why that would need his presence. The captain or someone of higher rank could see to that issue.

“What has gone missing?” he asked.

“It was food at first, but nobody paid it much mind. But then we noticed that a week ago weapons and armor began to disappear as well.”

His words caused everybody to frown.
“That is not all,” the man continued and he shifted uneasily on his saddle, “Three days ago, a few of the men on patrol went missing…and they were found dead yesterday.”

“What?” Zuko growled.

“Their throats were slit open and they were left out in the open,” the captain recounted grimly.

“Out in the open?” Sokka asked with a frown

“It is as if whoever did this wanted us to find the men,” the captain added. “They were completely stripped of their armor. Not only that, but we found cloths bearing the Fire Nation emblem stuffed in their mouths…”

“What could that mean?” Hakoda asked.

“A warning?” Jee asked grimly.

Zuko felt his body tense as a foreboding feeling swept through him. Agni, could it be the rebels? But how? There were wanted posters everywhere, they could not stepped into the Fire Nation so easily, especially Jianguo. Or could it just be another group of people just wanting to cause trouble? He clenched his jaw.

Something whizzed by his head and a second later he heard one of the captain’s men give a pained cry. Zuko’s head whirled to the side to see an arrow protruding from the man’s eye and out the back of his skull, blood pouring heavily down his face. A heavy silence followed as they watched with shocked eyes as the body slowly slid to the side before it fell limply to the ground.

“Ambush!” the captain yelled.

“Protect Fire Lord Zuko and Chief Hakoda!” Jee ordered with a loud roar as he unsheathed his sword.
The guards quickly surrounded the two leaders and the Southern heir just as a small group of men, dressed in black with cloths bearing the Fire Nation emblem covering their faces, fell from the trees and sprang from thick bushes. They rushed forward with swords and flaming fists and loud cries. The two groups collided and the battle ensued.

A few of the guards were pulled from their mounts and killed with swords to their chests, but for the most part the Fire Lord’s group easily dispatched the attacking band of unknown men. The captain sent a flare of fire high into the air, hoping his base or even the prison tower would see and send reinforcement. Hakoda and Sokka, the only non-benders were holding their own perfectly, using weapons and fists to knock out their attackers.

Zuko had run a man through with one of his flaming swords when he was suddenly tackled from behind. He grimaced when he fell hard on the ground, but he quickly recuperated and sent his attacker flying back with a large fire blast to his chest. Quickly jumping to his feet, he swept his flaming broadswords to the side and calculatingly eyed the new men that had approached him. They hesitated a moment before they sprang at him.

“Long live Fire Lord Ozai!” they roared as they attacked.

Zuko did not show his surprise at their words as he countered their attacks. With a few intricate moves, he was able to cut off one of the men’s heads and slashed another’s across his stomach. He did not stop to think of the carnage as his only focus was his survival and that of his men. A few men were already lying dead or dying on the bloody forest floor. He would growl in anger whenever one of his men was felled and swore vengeance.

Could they be the rebels from the colonies? Could it be Jianguo’s doing? But where was he and the earthbenders that usually accompanied him?

He did not have time for more questions when two men lunged at him. Just as he was able to defeat them, he felt someone sneak up on him from behind.

“Zuko!” he heard Sokka and Hakoda yell his name right as he jumped sideways.

But he was not quick enough and a sharp dagger slashed across his upper right thigh, the only part unprotected by his armor. He grimaced and grunted, but did not let the pain affect him as he spun around, his swords flaming brilliantly, and cut the man down. Once the man fell, Zuko whirled around to fend off another attacker, ignoring the pain and blood seeping from his wound that didn’t feel that deep.
“Retreat!” one of the attackers suddenly yelled.

The men immediately turned and ran back deeper into the forest with loud exclamations of “Long live Fire Lord Ozai!”

“After them!” Zuko roared as he raced forward, “Don’t let them escape!”

He and the rest of his men gave chase, keeping a close eye on the retreating backs of the rebels. A second later they disappeared. Zuko and his men slowed down once they realize they had lost them.

“Damn it,” Zuko cursed. “They must have had earthbenders waiting to take them underground.”

“But why didn’t the earthbenders attack us?” Sokka asked, his breath labored from the fight. “Really, what was the point of attacking us if they were just going to leave right away!”

“We should go see if any of our men are still alive,” Jee spoke up. “Maybe we can find one of their men alive and we can bring him in for interrogation.”

Zuko was about to reply when he suddenly started feeling dizzy and the wound on his thigh began to throb excruciatingly. He shook his head, trying to clear his suddenly hazy thoughts. He blinked when his vision became blurry and the world started to spin and become darker. What was wrong with him? A simple cut should not affect him that much. His legs began to tremble beneath him and he stumbled a little, causing the men to immediately pause in what they were saying and doing to look questioningly at him.

“Zuko?” Hakoda called out.

“Hey, man, are you okay?” Sokka asked worriedly as he watched his brother-in-law sway on his feet and shake his head.

He cried out and quickly stepped forward to catch Zuko when he suddenly collapsed. The men immediately rushed toward them, shouting their Fire Lord’s name. Sokka was forced to lower Zuko to the ground and they crowded around him, worried and wondering what was wrong since they could not see any serious injuries.
“Something is terribly wrong,” Hakoda remarked as he stared into Zuko’s extremely pale complexion and his labored breathing.

His eyes landed on the small wound on the younger man’s thigh, watching the blood stain the red fabric a darker red. He frowned and then his eyes widened as a thought entered his head.

“Oh La, I think that dagger was laced with poison!” he rasped.

His words caused the men to exclaim in horror and panic.

“We have to take him back to the palace!” Jee said urgently as he helped Sokka lift Zuko up.

“I’ll take him on one of the ostrich-horses!” Kuo spoke up quickly. “Fire Lady Katara would surely cure him!”

“I’ll go with you to protect your back,” Shen spoke up firmly.

“Yes, take a few more men with you in case those men try to attack the Fire Lord again,” Jee added.

The men quickly agreed and Kuo rushed to mount Sokka’s ostrich-horse. Sokka and Jee handed him the unconscious Fire Lord and helped place him over the animal’s back in front of the young guard, while Shen and a couple of guards mounted their own animals.

“Hurry!” Hakoda urged.

With a firm nod, Kuo pressed his heels onto the animal’s side and was soon swiftly racing back toward the palace with the other guards following him, while those left behind stared worriedly after them.

“We have to gather our fallen men,” the captain spoke after a moment with a mournful sigh.
They had just arrived back to the scene of the small battle when another group of riders appeared. Their armor indicated they were prison guards.

“We saw the signal and rush over as quickly as we could,” one of the soldiers spoke up as he and the new arrivals scanned the bloody scene with solemn faces.

Jee stepped forward and explained what happened, causing a few men to frown at the news that their Fire Lord had probably been poisoned. A few minutes later, the captain and the prison guards had agreed to remain behind to take care of the dead bodies while Hakoda, Sokka, and Jee rode back to the palace.

“This was obviously their plan,” the southern chieftain spoke up with a dark frown. “All they wanted was to get close to Zuko to poison him.”

“But that just doesn’t make sense,” Sokka said, “They could have just kill him instead of just wounding him…unless they wanted his death to be very painful so they poisoned him…which still doesn’t make sense.”

“And what about the missing things and the dead men the captain mentioned?” Jee spoke up.

“For now all we can do is hope Zuko comes out okay,” Hakoda replied with a deep frown. “Not only would the Fire Nation, maybe even the world, suffer for it, but it would devastate Katara.”

Sitting on a thin pallet and leaning against the cold, stone wall, the former Fire Lord frowned at the commotion he could barely hear from behind the thick steel door. He wondered what was going on, but shrugged. It wasn’t like he cared. Absentmindedly, he flicked a long strand of hair away from his face as his mind once again wandered to what his life used to be like before his defeat under the hands of that child-Avatar. With nothing else to do but stare at the same four walls, his memories circled around his head over and over.

Where did it all go wrong? He had everything planned out. From taking the throne from Iroh, to disposing of his father, to managing the war better than his ancestors. All he had to do was wait for Sozin’s Comet to arrive in order for its power to enhance their firebending so they could burn the Earth Kingdom to the ground and finally rule over the world. He had miscalculated though. The Avatar was still alive, but he had been assured when Azula told him Zuko had disposed of the boy. And that had been his mistake.
He gritted his teeth and his nostrils flared. He could not get over the humiliation of him, the mighty Phoenix King, being brought down by a snotty-brat. And to make matters worse, his firebending was stripped from him! Oh, because of that, he would admit he lost his mind for a couple of months, unable to cope with his loss of power and his foiled plans, but eventually his mind returned to its former clarity. Which was both a blessing and a curse since he was able to think rationality but was also lucid enough to realize he was stuck in a prison cell, treated like a lowlife criminal.

And the only person to visit him, except for the guard that brought him his food, was the disgrace he called a son. He sneered. How he regretted not getting rid of Zuko when he saw what a pathetic weakling he was. If he had, Zuko would not have betrayed him to join the Avatar to dethrone him. If he had, he would be ruling the world as the Phoenix King.

But he had been a fool and allowed Zuko to live. And the only reason he did was because of Ursa. Because he knew she would hate him forever if she ever found out he had killed her beloved son. He sighed as his thoughts once again settled on his wife, the only woman he could admit—at least to himself—he had ever loved. She was unlike the women he was used to. When their marriage had been arranged, he had been captivated by her beauty and her sweet, kind nature. Nobody had looked at him the way she did during their courtship and their early years of marriage nor had anyone cared for him like she did. So he had been unable to stop himself from falling in love with her. Granted, his kind of love wasn’t perfect and he had not been a good husband to her, but in his mind she was his and he had the right to use her as he saw fit.

Knowing she would do anything to keep her precious son alive, he had proposed for her to kill his father in exchange for Zuko’s life. He had wanted to make sure nothing could be traced back to him if it were discovered that there had been foul play. After the deed was done, he had sent her to the Abandoned Fort. Even if nobody believed him, he had done so to protect her. If it had been suspected that she had murdered Azulon she would have been executed, so he kept her away from the palace. And the Abandoned Fort was the last place anyone would have looked for her. He had planned on bringing her back in a few months, but other things had caught his attention, such as being crowned Fire Lord, ruling the Fire Nation, and planning a war against the other countries.

He had not realized so much time had passed since he had also been distracted by his concubines. That was another issue he had with his wife. He cared for her, but she never understood or accepted his need for other women. Which only made him seek them out more when she suddenly stopped allowing him into her bed. Her indifference had hurt and her absence had been felt, so he had taken it out on his concubines throughout the years.

But now Ursa was no longer his wife. Zuko had seen to it. Ozai narrowed his eyes. And now she was preparing to get married to some other man! A growl escaped his throat and he punched the floor on either side of him. No, she couldn’t! She was his! Just like the Fire Nation was his! And he would not let anyone else take them away from him!
The sound of the steel door being unlocked caught his attention and Ozai immediately schooled his features into a calm expression, staring coolly at the door. It was about time his meal was brought in. He watched as the door opened and a figure stepped through before quickly closing the door. Ozai frowned when he saw the guard was not carrying a tray with food, but what seemed like an extra set of armor.

“Where is my food?” he asked coldly.

“Ah, always so demanding, my lord,” the other man replied with a chuckle.

The former Fire Lord frowned at the words, but also at the familiarity of the voice. Curious, he stood up and casually walked toward the cell bars separating the room to get a better look of the man’s face. He watched as the guard walked closer and his eyes widened once he recognized him.

“Meng Jianguo,” he stated.

“It’s been a while, my lord,” Jianguo greeted as he gave a slight bow.

“What’s with the commotion outside?” Ozai asked.

“Just a little distraction to make things easier for your escape.”

“My escape?” Ozai said with raised eyebrows before he smirked. “Ah, now it makes sense why Zuko was asking me about you. I’m glad to know I still have loyal subjects.”

“Of course, you are, after all, the rightful ruler of the Fire Nation,” Jianguo replied smoothly before he handed the extra armor over. “We must hurry now that the guards are distracted.”

Ozai grabbed the offered clothes, wondering what kind of distraction the former general had caused to be able to sneak into his cell. But now was not the time for questions.

“I will be forever in your debt, Jianguo,” he said as he began to divest himself of his dirty prison clothes. “I would grant you anything you wish once I regain my rightful place in the throne.”
Jianguo smirked.

“All I ask is that I be reinstated to my previous station in life and the military…Oh, and Zuko’s wife,” he began.

Ozai’s eyebrow lifted at his request, while Jianguo’s smirk turned into a sinister smile.

“And the chance to end Zuko’s life.”
Dedicated Vigilance

People scrambled out of the way with startled exclamations or angry curses as the two ostrich-horses raced through the streets. The two riders ignored the insults that were hurled their way as they rode by, their entire focus on the injured man they were protecting. The Fire Lord’s personal guards breathed sighs of relief when they finally arrived at the gates of the palace.

“Open the gates!” Shen shouted at the guards patrolling along the wall as he pulled on the reins of his agitated mount. “Quickly!”

Recognizing the two guards and noticing it was their lord that was injured, the sentinels quickly signaled for the doors to be opened.

Kuo worriedly glanced down at his lord, whose breathing seemed to become more labored and his skin paler. He hoped they had not arrived too late for Fire Lady Katara to extract the poison. He did not want to think about what would happen—not only to the kind Fire Lady and the little prince—but the entire country if Fire Lord Zuko died. He could not stop himself from feeling guilty. It was his job to protect his lord and he had failed.

“Don’t blame yourself,” he heard Shen speak up gruffly.

Kuo glanced toward his partner to see the older man frowning darkly.

“It’s both our jobs to keep him safe, so it isn’t just your fault,” Shen added when Kuo was about to protest. “Don’t lose hope. Our lord is healthy and strong and he has a waterbending healer as his wife. She will save him.”

“You’re right,” Kuo answered with a firm nod.

He was comforted by the words, having seen the waterbender do miraculous things with her healing. The younger guard glanced back down to observe the Fire Lord’s condition. They had to believe their lord would survive.

The gates were finally opened and Kuo urged his mount forward with Shen following close behind. People were already standing around the courtyard, curious about the commotion. The two guards stopped near the long flight of stairs that led into the grand building. Loud gasps and exclamations
rose from the gathering crowd of servants and guards as they recognized their lord lying unconscious over the ostrich-horse’s back.

“What happened?!”

“Is he still alive?!”

Multiple questions were asked as the people crowded near, causing the agitated animals to shy away.

“Stand back!” Shen ordered firmly as he waved them impatiently away while he tried to calm his mount, “Give us some space! We need to get the Fire Lord to Fire Lady Katara!”

Dismounting quickly, the older guard hurried over to Kuo to help him with the unconscious firebender with the assistance of another soldier.

“Kuo! Shen!”

Both guards looked up to see Jiao pushing her way through the crowd of worried servants. Ichiro was holding her hand and his eyes were wide in alarm at the sight of the unconscious Fire Lord.

“Jiao, have Fire Lady Katara meet us in their royal chambers!” Kuo urgently told his wife.

The maidservant glanced in concern at the Fire Lord before she picked up her son and rushed off in search of her lady.

Placing one of Zuko’s arms over each other’s necks, Kuo and Shen quickly carried their lord up the long flight of stairs. The gathered crowd watched them go, murmuring worriedly and wondering what had happened, unaware of the upcoming chaos.

Katara smiled amusedly as Kazu cooed up at her while he tried to put her onyx pendant into his mouth. She gently pried his fingers off the pendant before he chewed on it, causing him to frown up at her. Chuckling at his indignant look, she distracted him by waving his rattler near his face. Immediately forgetting the shiny stone, the little prince giggled as he reached for one of his favorite toys. Once within his grasp, the boy began to wildly shake the toy, causing his other family members
“He’s getting more active these days,” Pakku spoke up while Iroh and Aang made funny faces at the happy baby.

“Just wait till he learns to crawl and walk,” Kanna said to her granddaughter with a low chuckle. “You will be ready to pull your hair out.”

“Is that what Dad made you want to do?” Katara asked amusedly as she rocked her son in her arms.

“Yes, but you and your brother were almost as bad,” Gran-Gran added.

“I can just imagine them causing havoc in the tribe.” Toph piped in with a grin.

“Yes, it’s the reason why I have so much gray hair!” Kanna exclaimed with a laugh.

“That explains my graying hair,” Iroh spoke up with an amused chuckle as he turned to wink at Ursa. “Your son had me chasing him everywhere to make sure he didn’t hurt himself.”

“That’s just old age,” Pakku replied dryly.

“Old age says the old man,” Iroh replied with a mock humph that caused everybody to chuckle.

Katara, Ursa, and Suki had come back about an hour ago from the orphanage to find Iroh, Pakku, and Kanna playing Pai Sho. Aang and Toph arrived only moments ago, and by the secret smiles they sent each other, Katara had a feeling she knew what kind of fun they had gone in search of that morning. It still amazed her that Aang was having sex now. Even when they had been together, she could only see him as that young boy she had released from the iceberg. But he had definitely grown up if the satisfied grin on Toph’s face was any indication. Shaking her head with a smile, she returned her attention to her son, who was now being entertained by a curious Momo.

They were waiting for the men to arrive so they could have dinner, but it seemed Zuko’s business at the military base was taking longer than expected. She hoped it was nothing too serious. She had already fed Kazuhiko, and was enjoying her time with her family without the feeling of being
watched. Although, she had kept it from him she thought it was best she told Zuko her concerns just in case. Perhaps it was really nothing, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“How are the preparations for the upcoming wedding coming along?” Suki’s question brought Katara out of her concern. “Girls, let your cousin play with Momo,” she gently admonished her daughters.

The twin girls—who were about to grab Momo away from where he was sitting and chirping at the cooing baby—drew their hands behind their backs and smiled sheepishly at their mother and amused aunt.

“Everything is coming out well,” Ursa replied with a smile.

“Jee is impatient to get married, huh?” Toph asked with a waggle of her eyebrows.

When Ursa’s smile widened a bit, the rest of the group chuckled.

The sound of hastening feet had them looking toward the veranda’s doors to see Jiao rush inside with Ichiro running at her side. Katara felt herself stiffen at the worried expression on her maid’s face and she brought her son protectively to her chest.

“What’s the matter?” the waterbender asked with a small frown.

“My lady,” Jiao began breathlessly as she made a short bow which her son mimicked, “Kuo and Shen have just arrived. They are carrying the Fire Lord, who seems to be injured and unconscious, to your chambers.”

“What?!” Katara exclaimed in horror while Ursa gasped loudly.

“What happened?” Iroh and Aang asked at the same time.

“I-I don’t know,” Jiao stuttered as they all stared intensely at her.
“I must go to him!” Katara said as she quickly stood up, handing Kazu over to a shocked Suki. “Please look after him!” she shouted over her shoulder as her heart pounded in fear and concern. Ursa followed quickly after her.

Everybody else looked on worriedly, wondering what had happened. The Fire Lady vaguely heard them voice their concern as she and Ursa rushed away from the veranda and toward the building.

“I hope it’s nothing serious,” her mother-in-law said agitatedly.

“Me, too,” Katara replied as she felt her chest constrict at the thought of Zuko suffering a fatal wound.

How had he gotten hurt in the first place? How long ago did he get hurt? She needed answers, but most of all she needed to see him to assuage the festering concern and dread rising within her.

They rounded a corner and immediately stopped when they almost bumped into Wei and two other advisors.

“Where is the Young One?” Wei growled as he placed his hands on his hips, his large belly sticking out. “We have been waiting for him for hours to start the meeting! He just made us waste our day!”

“My husband didn’t make it to the meeting because he was injured,” the Fire Lady replied in a cold tone as she narrowed her eyes at the old advisor.

The other two men took a step back at her look before they frowned as her words registered, but Wei crossed his arms and let out a humph.

“Well, I supposed we’ll have to wait until he recovers,” he grumbled and shrugged.

Katara did not reply as she walked around them. She did not have time for them or for Wei’s impertinent manner. She had to see her husband. The two women arrived at the royal chamber just in time to see Kuo and Shen placing Zuko on the bed where he remained unmoving.

“Zuko!” they both cried out as they rushed toward him.
The guards moved aside to make room for the women. Katara immediately sat next to Zuko and cradled his face in her hands as she softly called his name, worried when he did not respond. She grew more anxious as she took in his complexion and the way his chest rose and fell quickly with his labored breathing. Snapping herself from her rising panic, the waterbender stood up so she could examine him thoroughly. She needed to heal him.

Her eyes quickly scanned his body for injuries and landed on a strip of cloth bound around his upper thigh. Blood had soaked the dark fabric. She untied the cloth and opened the thin rip on his trousers, caused most likely by a dagger. She frowned. The cut was not that deep, and although he had lost blood, it wasn’t enough for him to look this bad.

“What happened?” she asked as she reached for her dagger strapped to her hip.

“We were ambushed,” Shen replied gruffly as he watched her work.

“We don’t know who they were, but they were intent on getting to the Fire Lord,” Kuo replied just as seriously. “There were so many and we were unprepared for an attack…We believe the weapon used to injure him was laced with poison.”

“Oh no,” Ursa gasped as she stared worriedly down at her unconscious son.

Heart in her throat, Katara did not respond as she had ripped the fabric further apart so she could see his wound better. She sucked in her breath at the sight of the dark veins spreading up his thigh. The poison was making its way to his heart. She wasn’t sure if the poison had already affected other organs. She could not lose him! She had to extract all traces of the poison before it was too late.

She bit her lip. She had never done something like this before. What if she failed?

She straightened herself and ordered herself not to give up. She would try everything she could to save him. Poison was another form of liquid. If she could bend water, snow, sweat, and blood, she will be able to manipulate poison as well. She just hoped it wasn’t too late.

“She straightened herself and ordered herself not to give up. She would try everything she could to save him. Poison was another form of liquid. If she could bend water, snow, sweat, and blood, she will be able to manipulate poison as well. She just hoped it wasn’t too late.

“Help me remove his clothes,” she ordered the two guards, who quickly moved forward to do her bidding.
While the men did their work, the waterbender turned to her worried mother-in-law.

“Please go and get the washbasin,” she said.

With a nod, Ursa made her way to the bathing room. She was consumed with worry for her son’s life. She knew what poison could do to a person, and depending on the kind used, Zuko could die an excruciating death. But she had faith in her daughter-in-law. Katara was a great healer and her love for Zuko would prompt her to do everything in her power to save him.

Katara picked up Zuko’s hand as she gazed down worriedly at his pallid face.

“Please be strong, Zuko,” she whispered fervently.

Letting go of his hand, she moved toward his legs. Gathering some water onto her hands, she placed them over the festering wound. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she willed her healing powers to come forth. The water covering her hands began to glow as she concentrated.

A knocked sounded at the door and everybody but Katara turned toward the sound. Kuo quickly moved forward to open the door. Physician Toshiro stood outside, worry creasing his already wrinkled face.

“I came as soon as I heard about my lord,” he said as he entered with his medicinal box. “Where is he injured? Or have you already healed him, my lady?”

“He was poisoned,” Katara responded just as Ursa returned to the room with the washbasin.

When the old man’s eyes widened before his eyebrows furrowed in concentration, Katara knew he was trying to come up with a way to combat the poison.

“I will use my waterbending to extract the poison,” she added when the physician moved to search through his medicines.

Toshiro nodded as he closed his box.
“It will probably be faster that way.”

“I will ask for your assistance if I need it,” the waterbender told him as she turned back to her silent husband while Ursa looked on hopefully behind her.

The guards and the physician reluctantly retreated outside to give the waterbender space to work and concentrate.

A deep frown marred Katara’s brow as she focused on distinguishing the foreign substance from his blood. It took a moment for her to finally differentiate the liquids. The poison was thicker and it was moving slower through his veins. She frowned when she realized it was spreading in multiple directions. She needed to work fast before the poison reach his organs, especially his heart.

Pulling one hand back, a thin line of a black liquid flowed out of the wound. She vaguely heard Ursa’s small gasp as she turned quickly to deposit the poison into the washbasin. She stared at the dark liquid in anger, wishing whoever was responsible for hurting her husband would fall dead. Shaking her head from such vengeful thoughts, she turned back to Zuko.

Sweat beaded her forehead as she worked to extract every last trace of the poison from Zuko’s system. Since he had arrived unconscious, it could only mean the effect of it had been quick, but since he was still alive, she could only hope she got it out of his system soon enough. She was also afraid that it may have already caused damage to his immune system.

It was only after she could not detect any more poison did she finally pull back, feeling a little lightheaded for concentrating so hard. Surrounding her hand with clean water, she used it to quickly seal the cut on his thigh before depositing the water into the basin. She watched as it mixed in with the dark poison before she looked away to smile faintly at her agitated mother-in-law.

“Would it help if I brew him an antidote?” Ursa asked quietly as she stared at her son.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think it’d hurt,” the brunette replied.

The older woman gave a firm nod as she picked up the dirty washbasin.
“I will throw this out and then I will make him the antidote. It would be so much easier if I knew what kind of poison was used,” she murmured. She would just have to make an antidote that worked against most poisons and had healing properties.

She watched as Katara watched Zuko, her brow furrowed deeply and her teeth worriedly biting her lower lip. She looked exhausted.

“You did your best and Zuko is strong. We must have confidence that he will pull through.”

“You’re right,” Katara said, although part of her was not as confident. What if she had not done enough? What if she had missed something? She shook her head. She had to believe everything would come out well.

“I will let the others know,” Ursa added as she hurried toward the doors with the washbasin.

Once the older woman closed the door, Katara sank down onto the bed next to Zuko’s side. She once again picked up his hand, hating the slightly cooler feeling of his normally hot skin. As she stared at him, at his almost lifeless expression, she felt her breath hitch and her eyes sting as worry once again consumed her. What if she lost him?

“Please, Zuko,” she whispered desperately as she stared into his closed eyes. “You have to live. For Kazuhiko. For me.”

Later that night, on the streets of the capital, people speculated about the rumor going around that the Fire Lord was injured. No one knew exactly how he had gotten hurt or how serious it was. Some rumors even said that he was on the verge of death. In their speculations and concern, the citizens did not pay attention to the two men walking among them.

Both wore ragged cloaks with traveling bags over their shoulders, and straw hats covering their faces. They kept their voices low, even though one of them was gesticulating angrily with one hand.

“Zuko can’t die yet,” Ozai hissed as he glared at the man next to him from beneath his hat. “Not until he hands over the throne to me.”

“Don’t worry, my lord,” Jianguo responded smoothly as he guided them through the streets where it was less crowded. “The poison wasn’t powerful. Even a simple antidote could help him. Plus, I
know the waterbender will heal him. We just needed to incapacitate him for a while. With Zuko ill, everybody would be more worried over him than searching for you.”

“Hm, I doubt it,” Ozai said gruffly as he took in their surroundings.

It had been years since he had stepped out of his prison cell and it was nice to be free again. Although, he knew it was too soon to count victory yet, much less enjoy it. But he swore that he would never go back to that dirty cell.

“Where are we going?” he finally asked.

They had not said much as they made their escape from the prison tower and toward the capital, but as soon as they knew they would not be caught, Jianguo had told him everything, except for where they were heading.

“We found a good hiding place for now,” the former general replied absently as he stared at a group of young women chatting on the other side of the street. When Ozai made a displeased sound, he turned back to grin at the former Fire Lord. “With the woman who was supposed to be your daughter-in-law.”

“Oh, really?” Ozai hummed in mild surprise before he sneered mockingly, “Mai is willing to betray him? My son sure has good taste in women.”

“He sure does with the waterbender,” Jianguo responded before he mentally added, *Which is why I’m going to take her from him.*

Ozai made a noncommittal sound since his thoughts had once again returned to Ursa. He would get her back along with the throne. A miserable nobody like Jee did not deserve her. She was meant to be his and only his. He just had to convince her of that and together they would rule the Fire Nation and the world. He just had to come up with a way for Zuko to die without getting blamed for it, for he knew Ursa would never forgive him for hurting her precious son.

“We’re here,” Jianguo’s whisper reached his ears.

Ozai looked up to see the home of his former governor. He turned slightly and was immediately greeted by the sight of the palace just a few feet away. How he longed to live there once again. To
enjoy the luxuries of royalty, sleep on a real bed and not on a filthy pallet on the floor. He could not wait to regain his power and rule the world with an iron fist.

Jianguo motioned for him and he silently followed the other man to the back of the large house. They entered through the servants’ door and Ozai sneered at the thought that he, the once and future Phoenix King, had to sneak in in such a manner. Fortunately, they did not come across any servants or guards as they made their way through the halls.

A moment later, Jianguo opened a door and they walked into a sitting room. Ozai glanced around the opulent room before a movement caught his eyes. He turned around to see Mai looking at them blankly before she gave a small bow.

“My lord,” she greeted emotionlessly.

“Hm,” he hummed passively as he looked her over.

She had not changed much from the last time he had seen her. Uninteresting, really.

“You were right, Jianguo,” he said as he turned to the other man with a raised eyebrow.

Jianguo immediately caught his meaning and grinned.

Mai, not understanding the implication, frowned before she schooled her features back into place. She had forgotten how intimidating Zuko’s father could be. She hoped she wasn’t making a mistake.

“Anyway, when is our friend arriving?” Ozai asked as he threw his hat and cloak toward a chair.

“Later tonight,” Jianguo responded, “He did not want to raise suspicions if he was found missing.”

“Very well,” Ozai replied as he walked toward the window to gaze out toward the palace.

Soon. Soon he will get everything he rightly deserved.
And he will punish those who had defied him.

In the following three days, Katara remained by Zuko’s side. He had not woken up and it seemed the poison had still affected him since he had a high fever. Toshiro had come in a few times to check on his lord. He had given Zuko a potion to induce him to throw up any residue of the poison. Zuko had vomited a couple of times after that, but not recently, so it made Katara hope any trace of the poison had been expelled. Toshiro then advised her to feed him light broths to keep him hydrated and nourished, but that would not upset his stomach.

Sweat plastered Zuko’s dark hair to his forehead and coated his entire body. She had braided his long locks to keep it away from his neck and she kept him mostly exposed except for a sheet to cover his groin. His face was extremely flushed, completely different from the pallid completion it was when his guards had brought him in. She made sure to keep him cool by misting his body with waterbending or by wiping him down with cold, wet cloths.

His fever was raging and she hoped that was a sign that his body was fighting the lingering effects of the poison. However, she was also afraid the long fever would damage his brain. She had seen it happen a few times when she had been a child and she did not want that for her husband. So she did everything she could to keep him cool and comfortable.

Even though she had tried not to think about it, she felt what had happened to Zuko could be her fault for not saying anything about feeling as if she were being followed and watched. She did not know if the two even correlated, but she felt that if she had voiced her suspicions Zuko would have taken better precautions.

She had not left his side since he was brought in and ate and slept sparingly only because her family urged her to do so. Her worry was too great to think about herself. She feared she would lose him if she left his side for a moment.

Jiao would bring Kazu in to be fed and spend some time with his mother for a few hours. Ursa and Iroh also spent a lot of time with her and Zuko, their worry just as strong as hers. Aang, Toph, and her family sometimes came in to keep her company and help in any way they could.

Her father and Sokka had explained the ambush in more detail and it only frustrated her more to know such men were out there. Who could they be? Another rebel group? They already had enough to worry about with Jianguo and his men. Her eyes widened. What if Jianguo was behind it? And if it were, how did he even enter the Fire Nation without being seen. Her eyes narrowed and she clenched her hands. Either way, they will pay for daring to hurt her husband and almost make her son grow up without a father.
Iroh had told her that Jee, Shen, and Kuo had gone out several times to look for the men who had attacked Zuko, but hadn’t had any luck finding them. However, she had a feeling there was something else, but Iroh and Jee were hiding it from her. The only reason she could think they were doing so was because they wanted her to focus on Zuko’s health.

The night before she had been startled awake by Zuko’s shouts. The fever was strong and he was plagued by nightmares. He had thrashed around and cursed incoherently. She had to grab onto him, talking to him soothingly and caressing his hair, until he finally calmed down. She could not help worrying that the fever did not seem to go down. She hoped it broke soon.

She wanted to see Zuko’s golden eyes staring at her with that combination of love and passion he held just for her. She just wanted him to be himself again. She hated seeing him so ill.

The sound of Kazu babbling immediately snapped her from her thoughts. She looked away from Zuko’s face and turned around to see Jiao standing near the chair with Kazuhiko in her arms. She had been so lost in her thoughts, she did not hear them enter the room. Her son smiled and reached out his arms for her.

“It is time for his meal, my lady,” Jiao said softly.

“Oh, yes,” Katara replied as she glanced quickly at the window to see it was already afternoon.

She opened her arms and Jiao walked forward. The baby cooed happily as he reached for his mother and she cradled him in her arms.

“Thank you, Jiao,” she said as she smiled down at her hungry child.

“I will return later with your dinner,” Jiao responded kindly.

At Katara’s nod, the maid walked away and softly closed the door behind her. The waterbender opened up her top and placed Kazu to her chest. He was certain to fall asleep soon, but she enjoyed having her son in her arms. He would not remain an infant forever, so she cherished these moments as much as possible, especially with everything that was happening. As her son continued to eat, Katara looked back at Zuko, feeling her throat tighten and her heart constrict. She grabbed onto his hand, hot and limp within her grasp, and she squeezed.
Everything would come out well.

She had to believe that.

“You have to save my wife and child!”

The loud shout immediately awoke Katara from her restless sleep and her head jerk up from where it had been resting on the back of her chair. Her eyes flew toward the bed to see Zuko thrashing about, an angry expression on his face. She quickly jumped from her seat and rushed toward the bed. She grabbed onto his arms, trying to keep him from harming himself. He kept shouting and it took a moment for her to realize he was remembering that time she almost miscarried. He was ordering Lady Yoon Hee to save them.

“Zuko, shh, it’s okay,” she called to him soothingly, “Kazu and I are fine.”

But he did not hear her as he continued to scream and curse. She watched as a moment later his expression morphed into an anguished one.

“Please…I can’t lose them,” he whispered in agony.

Katara felt her eyes prick with tears at his distressed tone, but firmly held them back as she tried to calm him down. This had happened many times since he had been injured and she was despairing. In his sickness, Zuko kept having dreams and nightmares about the past. He would sometimes recognize Katara and apologize for his mistakes. Other times, he would ramble about their happy moments and the pride he felt for their son. Other times, he would say that he needed to get up to protect his family, which was when she would need Kuo or Shen’s help to restrain him.

There had been a couple of times, however, that he seemed lucid enough to talk to her or interact with Kazu. Those times were the worst because it would raise her hopes up, thinking that he was finally better, only for him to revert back to sleeping fitfully or having nightmares. She did not understand why the fever had not broken yet. She had tried everything, but nothing seemed to be helping.

There were times when she just wanted to break down and cry from the fear, worry, and exhaustion. But she held back. She was stronger than that. Besides, Zuko and Kazu needed her. For them she could endure anything.
Katara hummed softly as she wiped down Zuko’s body with a damp cloth. He was still restless while he slept, but he hadn’t had any nightmares the previous night. His skin felt a little cooler, so she hoped that meant his fever was breaking. Even though he was lying right there before her, she missed him.

She pushed down the sheet covering him so she could wash his lower parts. She started with his feet first and slowly moved up his legs. When she moved toward his upper thighs and groin, his length twitched and became semi-erect. She ignored it since it had happened a few times before. It was just his body reacting naturally to the touch.

Her thoughts returned to her conversation with Iroh that morning and she frowned. He had told her that Wei had begun to stir trouble again. This time he was telling the other advisors that it would be best they start looking for someone else to rule the Fire Nation as regent until Prince Kazuhiko came of age.

Katara narrowed her eyes angrily, knowing he had dismissed her as a candidate because of her heritage. But what angered her most was that Wei already thought Zuko was going to die and was already making plans. She growled under her breath.

Zuko wasn’t going to die. Not if she could help it. She won’t let him die. He couldn’t die. He was young and he had so much to live for. Their son could not grow up without his father. And she needed him too. She did not know what she would do if she were to lose him.

Oh gods, I can’t lose him. I can’t, she thought despairingly.

She was snapped out of her thoughts when she felt her hand being grabbed. She looked down to see Zuko’s larger hand enfolding hers. Her eyes flew toward his face to see him looking intensely at her.

“Zuko,” she whispered, unsure if he was lucid this time.

“I won’t leave you or Kazu,” he rasped softly.

It was then she realized she had been talking out loud and he had heard her. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she sniffed and held them back as she smiled down at him, squeezing his hand in acceptance and comfort. She watched as a moment later a smirk curled his lips as he moved her hand toward his stiffening erection. Her eyes widened as she looked down at their hands before she looked at him with an uncertain frown.
“I’ll prove to you I’m not ready to die,” he purred huskily as he wrapped her hand around him.

Automatically, she tightened her grip a little and he let out a quiet groan. He pulled her closer so that she was hovering over him, his breathing coming a bit more erratic. He frowned when he realized he was too weak to do much, but damn he had been woken up by Katara touching him and hearing her words. He needed both the release and to reassure her that he will live.

“Zuko, no,” Katara murmured as he weakly tried to lift her dress up her thigh with his other hand, “You’re ill. You shouldn’t strain yourself.”

“I want you,” he groaned hoarsely as he squeezed her hand tighter around him. “Make love to me, Katara.”

Katara tried to ignore his pleas and protested that he should rest, but the feeling of him in her hand, of the passion and need in his eyes and voice, eventually destroyed her resolve. She wanted to forget her troubles for a moment, to lose herself in mindless pleasure. She wanted—needed—the comfort of being intimate with him.

Heart beating rapidly in her chest, and stomach tightening in lust, the waterbender swiftly stripped herself of her clothes before she leaned forward to press her lips to his. He opened his mouth for her, and with a quiet moan, she dipped her tongue inside to tangle it with his. He whispered he loved her through their kiss and she felt her heart ease with his words and her troubles melt away from her.

A moment later, she felt his mouth slacken beneath her and she pulled back a little to catch her breath, but when she looked to his face, she realized he had fallen back asleep. His face was relaxed and his breathing had evened out. She stared at him incredulously before she shook her head and smiled. He had aroused her to the point she had wanted to climb on him and ride him hard, uncaring of his current state, and he fell asleep on her. Well, at least it seemed he was getting better now if he had wanted to have sex with her.

She straightened herself and resumed cleaning him, trying to make her body relax and forget her arousal. Once finished with her work, she glanced back to observed Zuko’s peacefully sleeping face. It was the first time she had seen one on him since before he was poisoned and she felt hope swell in her chest.

Wanting to be close to him, she moved around the bed and climbed on, lying against his side. She reached forward to caress his hair and cheek. She smiled in relief when she realized his skin was no
longer burning up. She pressed a quick kiss to his lips before snuggling close to his side. She heard him murmur her name in his sleep and she felt her smile widened.

Everything would be okay.

The sensation of fingers caressing her cheek slowly brought Katara out of her deep slumber. She blinked slowly as her mind returned to the waking world only to find herself staring straight into Zuko’s face. The early morning sunlight illuminated his sharp features nicely and she felt her heart throb in her chest. He was awake and was staring at her as intently as he had the previous night. Once he realized she was awake, a small smile curled his lips as he grazed his fingers gently over her lips. She pressed a kiss to his fingers and smiled at him.

“You’re back,” she breathed happily.

Her heart felt lighter and her body, which seemed to have been constantly tense during the week, relaxed back onto the soft mattress. La, she did not know if she should cry or laugh at knowing he was all right, that he had survived, and that he would not leave them. She could not wait to tell the others.

Zuko watched as a myriad of emotions crossed his wife’s face before she scooted closer to him to bury her face against his neck. He slowly wrapped his arm around her, enjoying her sweet scent and soft, curvy body. He frowned, however, at the feeling of weakness that beset his whole body. His head felt a little hazy as well. What happened to him? And what did Katara mean by her words? His frowned deepened as he tried to remember. His eyes widened when flashes of the ambush rushed through his mind.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice cracking a bit at the dryness of his throat. He coughed a couple of times and grimaced.

“Hold on,” Katara said as she moved away from him and stood up.

Zuko weakly lifted his head to watch her fill a cup with water before she returned to his side. He reluctantly allowed her to help him drink when his hand shook at the effort. Once he was done, she placed the cup down before she helped prop him up against the headboard, fluffing the pillows and making sure he was comfortable. He gave her a small smile, although inwardly he was frowning at the feeling of helplessness. Why was he so weak? How long had he been ill to have his muscles feel so stiff?
“What happened?” he asked again.

Before Katara could answer him a knock sounded at the door.

“Just a minute!” Katara called out.

Zuko watched silently as she threw a sheet over his lower half before she rushed to don a nightdress. He was disappointed to see her delightful naked form disappear, but perhaps it was for the best since he wouldn’t be able to do anything about it with how terrible he felt. He would just have to content himself with the thought that he would be able to make love to her once he was better. Hopefully soon.

A moment later, one of the large doors was opened. Jiao walked in quietly with Kazu in her arms. She paused when she saw her lord was awake. She smiled at him and at her lady, whose previous distressed face was now smooth with relief and happiness. She walked forward and the waterbender met her halfway to take the little prince in her arms.

Kazu let out a happy squeal at the sight of his mother and Katara smiled affectionately as she pressed a kiss to his cheek. She looked up to smile at Jiao.

“Can you bring us breakfast? Something light,” she said, “Oh, and please let our family know my husband is finally awake.”

“Of course, my lady,” Jiao replied with a smile.

With a bow, she retreated to the door. Kuo would be happy to know the Fire Lord was better.

“Can you bring Kazu here?” Zuko called out. “I want to see him.”

“Let’s go greet your papa,” Katara cooed at the baby as she hurried over to Zuko’s side.

Holding her son carefully, the waterbender climbed back onto the bed to rest beside her husband. Kazu smiled at the sight of his father and waved his hands in the air before blowing bubbles with his lips. Zuko chuckled as he reached up to playfully tap his nose, which caused the baby to blink before
he tried to grab the long digit. They chuckled loudly when Kazu tried to chew on it before his face scrunched up and he began to make small fussing noises.

“Time to eat,” Katara said as she opened up her nightdress enough to expose her breasts.

She pressed the baby to her chest and he immediately latched onto the nipple, sucking hungrily. While he ate, Zuko caressed his hair and smiled at his wife. They were silent a moment, enjoying the quiet family time. Katara then briefly recounted what had happened since he was brought in and Zuko could not help feeling both guilty and grateful for her constant vigilance.

“When the fever didn’t go away… I was afraid,” she admitted quietly as she stared into Zuko’s eyes. “I just couldn’t fathom the thought of losing you.”

“You won’t lose me,” he replied firmly yet softly. “I can’t leave you and Kazuhiko.”

Katara smiled at him and reached out to grab one of his hands. He intertwined their fingers and gently squeezed. She only let go to burp Kazu against her shoulder once he finished.

A moment later, Jiao and another maid arrived with their breakfast. Once everything was settled, the servants left the royal family alone. As they ate, Katara told him what Iroh had said Wei had been telling the advisors.

“The idiot,” Zuko growled before he added pensively, “But that is an important issue. I will have to see to have you appointed regent until Kazu comes of age if anything were to happen to me.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Katara responded before she firmly added, “You will not die on me anytime soon, you hear?”

“Yes, my lady,” Zuko replied with a low chuckle which then turned into a small laugh. “I can’t wait to see Wei’s reaction when he sees I’m still alive, though.”

Katara chuckled and shook her head. Kazu giggled from his spot between them before he began to chew on his fist. Zuko watched as a moment later his wife’s happy mood changed into a somber one as she absentmindedly rubbed their son’s belly.
“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I…can’t help feeling like this is…my fault,” she finally responded in a low tone.

“What do you mean?” Zuko frowned.

“For the past several weeks, I felt as if I was being watched,” she explained slowly, “Like I was being…followed. What if whoever seemed to have followed me was the same person or people who attacked you? What if I had told you about it sooner, we could have prevented all of this? You wouldn’t have gotten hurt…”

Zuko shook his head and grasped her hand gently.

“It’s not your fault,” he told her firmly before he added with a little growl, “But I’m upset you didn’t tell me sooner you felt you were being watched and followed. What if you had gotten hurt?”

“But it was you who was hurt,” she whispered bitterly as she glared down at her lap, “And I could have prevented it—”

“Katara,” Zuko interrupted her firmly as he grabbed her chin and nudged her head up so she could see him, “It’s not your fault. We don’t even know for sure if they even relate. But either way, we will take the proper precautions for when you go out.”

“The same goes for you,” she said just as firmly.

Zuko nodded. Another knock sounded at the door and Katara called out for them to enter. They watched as Jee walked in before closing the door behind him.

“I am glad to see you are better,” Jee said with a small smile.

“Thank you, Jee,” Zuko replied before he turned to look at Katara, “I’m sure that has a lot to do with my wife.”
“You are correct. Lady Katara had not left you side since that day,” Jee responded with a nod of his head.

Zuko smiled at her before he frowned.

“Promise me you will take a much needed rest today,” he said softly.

“I will,” Katara replied since she was suddenly feeling all the restless nights catch up to her.

“The rest of the family is on their way,” Jee spoke up when they turned back to look at him. Then in a more serious tone, he added, “We were unable to find the men who attacked us, but I think I know why they did.”

Zuko frowned and he felt Katara tense beside him.

“The day of the ambush, the captain of the prison guards was found dead,” Jee began slowly before he growled, “Ozai’s cell…was empty.”
“I’m perfectly fine,” Zuko growled as he stubbornly crossed his arms over his chest. “I can go back to work.”

Sitting against the headboard with a few pillows propped up against his back, Zuko glowered at his wife. Katara was standing next to their bed, her hands on her hips, her features unmoving, as she glared resolutely back at him. Zuko frowned more deeply. He was sick and tired of lying in bed like an invalid. He wanted to leave the room and get back to work; he could not neglect his duties any longer.

“You’re not leaving this bed until you’re fully recuperated,” she told him firmly. “I will not have you getting sick again from exhaustion and stress just because you didn’t take care of yourself.”

Zuko grumbled as he glared at her, but she did not relent and glared right back, challenging him to defy her. They both knew she could make him stay by using her bloodbending, but she was giving him the chance to make the choice. With another low grumble, the firebender uncrossed his arms and leaned back against the pillows.

“Fine,” he muttered reluctantly, although he knew she was right.

He wanted to think he was all right, but he knew his body was still weak from the fever. He just hated being cooped up with nothing to do. Now he knew how Katara must have felt when Lady Yoon Hee confined her to the bedroom after the near miscarriage. He winced at the memory before he firmly shoved it away. When Katara smiled at him in satisfaction, he automatically smiled in return. He wanted to be stubborn about it, but knew he should listen to her because she was the healer (not to mention his wife) and she knew what was best for him.

“I’m going to see about dinner before I get Kazu from Jiao,” the waterbender said. She leaned forward to press a quick kiss to his lips before straightening herself with a grin. “Have I told you you make an adorable patient?”
“Please don’t call me that,” Zuko groaned which caused her to laugh and playfully pinch his cheek.

“Then stop pouting,” she teased.

“I do not pout!” he growled.

Katara laughed before she squealed when he grabbed her arms and pulled her swiftly down to crash his mouth to hers. She moaned when he sucked on her lower lip before his tongue swept along the seam. But before she could deepen the kiss, he pulled back and let her go. A smug grin curled his lips at her flushed face.

“You’re adorable when you blush,” he purred huskily. “Especially when I make you blush when I’m sucking your breasts. Or how red your face gets when I’m fucking you.”

He grinned when his dirty words only caused her to become even more flustered. She shook her head and smiled at him before trying to step away. He pulled her in closer and from his angle on the bed, easily nipped her breast, his teeth grazing her nipple. Her eyes closed automatically to enhance the sensation.

“I can’t wait to have you under me, so I can watch your face when I make you come. Or maybe I’ll bend you over, so I can pound that perfect ass of yours.”

He moved his hand down her back, caressing her bottom gently before pulling back and giving her a firm smack. Katara moaned and shivered. She was so tempted to strip right then and there and straddle him. She took a deep breath and stepped away from him.

“Stop distracting me,” she said with a shake of her head and a husky laugh as she moved away from him and headed toward the doors.

Damn, she was hot and bothered. Her core was already wet, causing her silky undergarments to stick to her slick skin. It had been so long since they had sex and she wanted him bad. But now was not the time. She opened one of the golden doors, but before she stepped out, she turned around and firmly added, “And don’t you dare leave this room!”

“Are you going to drag me back if I do?” he asked amusedly as he once again reclined back on the pillows.
“Don’t think I won’t,” Katara replied with another laugh before she added, “I’ll be back soon.”

When she closed the door behind her, Zuko shook his head and smiled. It seemed she was even more overprotective and cosseting now that she was a mother. Not that he minded her attentions toward him or her concern for his welfare. What he did mind was that he could not go out to search for Ozai. Yet.

Glancing toward the opened balcony, he frowned darkly at the sky. He could not believe Ozai had escaped. It seemed while everybody had been worried for his life and looking for his attackers, someone had broken Ozai free in the confusion. The captain of the prison and the guard responsible for taking Ozai his meals were found dead. The latter had been stripped of his uniform, not doubt to serve as a disguise for Ozai.

Jee and the others were now looking for him, but they had found nothing to lead them in the right direction. It was as if he had just vanished. Where could he be hiding? And who helped him escape?

His hands balled into fists.

He was so angry and it was mostly because he felt powerless. He had been unable to stop Ozai from escaping and he had no idea where he could be. They had to capture Ozai and those who helped him. Zuko had to keep not only his family, but the Fire Nation safe. And with Ozai on the loose something horrible could happen.

The sound of the door opening brought him out of his thoughts and he turned away from staring unseeingly at the balcony. He watched as his wife entered with their son in her arms. Behind them followed a few servants carrying trays of their dinner. He remained silent as Katara directed the servants where to place the items while she rocked Kazuhioko who had begun to fuss a little, letting everybody know he was hungry.

As soon as everything was settled and the servants left, Katara sat down on the chair next to him to breastfeed their hungry son. He smiled when she simultaneously reached for a dumpling with her chopsticks while she held Kazu to her with the other arm. He watched them for a moment, his own chopsticks held loosely in his hand, until Katara noticed he wasn’t eating.

“Are you not hungry?” she asked with a small frown.

Shaking his head, Zuko reached for some noodles as he smiled at her.

“I am,” he replied simply.
Katara leaned back a little as she stared at him inquiringly.

“Is something the matter?” she asked softly.

“No,” he replied quickly, not wanting to worry her.

When she raised an eyebrow at him, letting him know she didn’t believe him, he let out a sigh as he placed his chopsticks down.

“I’m just worried about what Ozai could be planning,” he confessed as he stared darkly down at his plate before he looked up at her. “I need to get better quick. I need to find him, so I can keep you and Kazu, and everybody else safe.”

“I understand,” the waterbender said softly as she grasped his hand and squeezed gently, offering him her support and comfort. “But just remember you’re not alone and you have lots of people who will help you, including me. We will find them, you’ll see.”

“I hope so,” he replied in a low tone before he added with a smile, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, returning his smile before she teasingly added, “Now eat if you want to be big and strong.”

Zuko rolled his eyes playfully as he picked up his chopsticks once again.

“You should be saying that to our son,” he said as he took a bite of a spicy dumpling.

“It works for his father just as well,” she laughed before she looked down to coo at her nursing son, “Isn’t that right, Kazu?”

Eating more noodles, Zuko watched his wife kiss their son’s head and caress his cheek with her fingers while Kazu stared up at her adoringly. Zuko felt his chest constrict and his hand clenched the chopsticks tightly.
They were why he needed to get stronger, they were what he needed to protect, what he needed to fight for—his son, his wife, their family and their country. He needed to protect the Fire Nation, so that one day his son might grow up to lead and protect their people when he no longer was able to. He needed to ensure that Kazuhiko and any future children he had with Katara not only survived but thrived.

They had to find Ozai and the men who helped him escape as soon as possible. He needed to keep his family safe.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Once Katara deemed him fit enough to leave their bed, Zuko immediately took up his duties once again, zealously trying to find a way to capture his father. Two weeks passed since Ozai’s escape, and although Zuko had men searching all over the Fire Nation, they hadn’t had any luck finding him.

On the first meeting with his advisors Zuko brought up Wei’s suggestions about finding a regent. While the other men groveled and swore they had been against the idea, Wei had shrugged and asked what was wrong with making plans for if the worst happened. Zuko had glared at him, although he begrudgingly admitted he was right, before he declared that if anything were to happen to him his wife will become regent until his son was old enough to rule. The men had quickly agreed since the Fire Lady had proven herself capable of handling such responsibilities for the past year.

Currently, the royal family and their friends were in the large dining hall, enjoying their dinner, although their usual jovial mood was subdued due to what had occurred the past weeks. The only ones who were untouched by the worry in everybody’s minds were the twins and the little prince who were being entertained by Momo.

“Are you and Jee still going to go ahead with your wedding?” Kanna asked when there was a lull in the conversation.

At the tribeswoman’s question, everybody turned to look at the couple sitting by each other. Ursa and Jee glanced at one another before they nodded.

“Yes,” Ursa responded quietly. She felt Jee squeeze her knee comfortingly under the table and she looked up to smile at him before she turned to regard her son and his wife. “But we decided to get married sooner than we planned.”

“How soon?” Katara asked.
“In a week,” the golden-eyed woman replied softly.

“Wow, that is soon,” Sokka remarked around a mouthful of chicken.

“Who knows what Ozai has planned and we want to get married before...anything happens,” Jee added, “Once we heard of his escape, we decided to get married as soon as possible. We were only waiting for Lord Zuko to be well enough to attend.”

Everybody turned grim since it was what everybody had been asking themselves. What did Ozai plan to do now that he was free? The suspense of not knowing had everybody on edge. Zuko frowned darkly. His mother’s wedding should be a joyous event, but now it was clouded by Ozai’s disappearance. Would his father ever stop hurting his family?

Iroh cleared his throat and smiled when he had everybody’s attention.

“Well, either way, we won’t let Ozai ruin our daily lives,” he said calmly as he poured himself more tea. “We will go ahead with the wedding and it will be wonderful.”

Iroh smiled at Ursa as he poured her more tea. Ursa returned his smile, though inwardly she could not stop herself from feeling uneasy. Ever since she had learned of Ozai’s escape, she had been unable to stop remembering his words the last time she saw him.

“This is not over, Ursa. I will reclaim you and the throne, one way or the other. Mark my words.”

Her fingers gripped the warm teacup tightly as she felt a shudder run down her spine. She didn’t think his true objective was her, after all, he sent her away from his life. Yet, she could not stop worrying that he would do as he had said. He was the type of man that would never let someone else have what was ‘his’. And while she was sure he didn’t love her, it didn’t matter as he would ruin her happiness out of spite because he thought he had the right.

She glanced at Jee to see him pause in eating to return her stare. He gave her a questioning look before he smiled reassuringly. She again felt him squeeze her knee comfortingly. His touch relaxed her and brought a rush of warmth and affection to her chest.
She wanted to marry Jee as soon as possible, not just only as a precaution, but because she loved him and wanted to be tied to him for the rest of her life. She knew he felt the same and it only reinforced the fact that they were meant to be together. She reached her hand down to squeeze his hand gratefully.

She would not let Ozai ruin her happiness ever again.

Wandering the streets of the capital, Jet frowned as he listened to the news. Apparently, the Fire Lord had been attacked and had been gravely ill after being wounded. There were many different speculations as to what truly happened and he wondered how it had happened and who had attacked Zuko.

He honestly didn’t care if the scarred bastard had been killed, but he knew it would sadden Katara if Zuko were to die. That and there was the possibility a tyrant – or Ozai himself – would try to take over the Fire Nation while the grieving widow and her orphaned son were vulnerable. So he supposed he should feel glad Zuko had survived.

It was still difficult not wanting or longing for Katara, but it was getting easier as time passed by. It helped a little that he was focused on the mission to capture the jewel thief. And it really helped when he got drunk and spent time with women at the brothel before Longshot and Smellerbee forced him away.

Unfortunately, he had still not captured the thief, which infuriated him. He wanted to return to the Earth Kingdom, he was tired of being surrounded by all these Fire Nation assholes but he had to finish this business first. Luckily, they had found out that the thief had gone to the capital and was hiding somewhere. All they had to do was flush him out and capture him.

Jet rounded a corner, barely avoiding bumping into a group of old men who cursed at him, and realized he had gone in the wrong direction when he came upon the palace. He slowed down as he neared the large building, his eyes scanning the high walls surrounding it and the little he could see of the red tiled roof. He wondered which part of the palace Katara was in at the moment.

In his distraction, he did not notice there was someone standing in his path, also gazing at the palace, until he crashed into them. He moved back with a curse and a glare, which turned into a smirk when he realized who it was.

“Ah, Lady Mai,” he greeted her charmingly even though she had turned to give him a blank stare. “I didn’t expect to see you in the Fire Nation.”
“The Fire Nation is my home,” Mai replied simply as she glanced back briefly to gesture to her house. Her face did not show her surprise at seeing her former lover near her home.

The freedom fighter raised an eyebrow when he noticed her house was so close to the palace. Was she still trying to get to Zuko?

“Still haven’t given up on the bastard, huh?” he drawled as he lazily chewed on the wheat stalk between his teeth.

“It’s none of your business, now is it?” she replied with bored eyes.

“You’re just wasting your time,” he reminded her with a careless shrug of his shoulders. “You should really focus on finding someone else. You’re only gonna hurt yourself.”

“I don’t need you to tell me what’s best for me,” she hissed angrily. “I know what I’m doing.”

Before he could say anything else, she brushed past him and walked toward her house. Jet stared after her with a pensive frown on his face. He watched as she paused briefly to stare at the palace once again before resuming her walk.

His frown deepened.

He did not know why, but he suddenly got a bad feeling.

Mai entered her house and immediately headed to her room. She passed the room where Ozai was hiding and glared at the door. The man was insufferable whenever she had to be in his presence, so she tried to avoid him as much as possible.

Ozai and Jianguo convened almost every day in the room to plan their next steps and she was always left out, except to be told what part she would play in. She still did not completely understand what they were planning to do to take back the throne, and she hated not knowing. It made it much more difficult of whether to choose to keep helping them or go to Zuko to tell him everything. She still wasn’t sure which would be to her favor. What she did know was that Ozai could not be Fire Lord again.
Once she stepped into her room and firmly closed the door behind her, her thoughts returned to her unexpected encounter with Jet. She narrowed her eyes angrily as she started to remove her weapons.

How dare Jet lecture her? He was just as obsessed with the water wench and was just trying to hide it. Why else would he be roaming outside the palace? She did not feel comfortable having her former lover so close to the man she was trying to win back. She was sure it would upset Zuko if he found out about her trysts with Jet or any of her other lovers. She narrowed her eyes. Jet better not blabber about their past encounters to anyone.

Once she had removed all her weapons from within her sleeves, she carefully began to take out the pins from her dark hair, making herself forget her intimate moments with Jet. He wasn’t important, after all, even if she had found pleasure in his arms.

Her thoughts return to what had happened before she ran into the former freedom fighter. She was angry that she could not step into the palace because she was still banished. She had gone to see if she could enter the grounds and was stopped by the guards and asked to leave. Other nobles had stopped and stared at the scene, some of the bitchy noblewomen whispering about her to each other, and even hidden behind their fans she could see their smirks. She had been so humiliated, but she did not let that show as she walked away with her head held high.

She could not believe Zuko was still punishing her for something so inconsequential. Most likely Katara was forcing him not to lift her banishment. The petty bitch.

But soon, she would get everything she wanted.

She just had to be patient.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The day before Ursa and Jee’s wedding had everybody scrambling around, preparing for the small ceremony. Only a few of Ursa’s close friends from the nobility and friends Jee made in the military had been made aware of the sudden change of the wedding date. Zuko had made sure to have his guards on alert for any disturbance the following day. No one was to enter the palace except those who were invited to the wedding.

“Has anyone seen Zuko?” Katara asked as she playfully tickled Kazu’s stomach.

Everybody was gathered in the garden, sitting near the pond, taking a break from the wedding
preparations. Well, everybody except for Zuko. She knew his meeting with a few governors must have ended already, so she wondered where her husband could be. He had been so busy catching up with everything he had neglected while he was sick that she worried he was pushing himself too hard. Even so, she always admired his drive and the fact that he didn’t let anything deter him from his responsibilities.

Her son let out a few giggles as he tried to grab her fingers. She smiled affectionately, the sound of his laughter and the sight of his smile always brought a rush of love and warmth to her heart. He was just a few months old and she already loved him so fiercely. There was nothing she wouldn’t do for him. Zuko had told her he felt much the same, so she could understand his anxiousness to find Ozai and those who sided with the former Fire Lord in order to keep Kazu safe.

“I think I saw him heading toward the training arena,” Hakoda responded as he smiled down at his grandson.

“Hm, he’ll miss dinner,” Iroh remarked as he sipped on his tea. He had brought his favorite teapot and a few cups to share the new sweet jasmine tea he discovered. “He sometimes forgets the time when he trains, especially when he has something on his mind.”

“Yeah, he’s desperate to find Ozai,” Sokka spoke up from his spot next to Suki, who was watching their daughters play by the pond, “Not that I blame him. Who knows what Ozai could be planning?”

Aang, who was sitting next to his friends, clenched his hands. Was this his fault for deciding to spare Ozai’s life? He felt Toph nudge his shoulder and he turned to her to see her frowning at him before she mouthed the words “Stop blaming yourself”. It still amazed him that she could sometimes tell what he was thinking without him having to say anything. He nudged her back to show he understood and she grinned at him.

Katara frowned as she caressed her son’s soft hair. Iroh was right. Zuko would keep on training until he dropped from exhaustion if nobody stopped him. She needed to go check on him and make sure he was all right. They had not spent much time together since he had been well enough to leave their room since they have been so busy. This was a good opportunity to correct that.

“I’m going to look for him,” she said before she addressed her mother-in-law, “Do you mind looking after Kazuhiko for a little while?”

“Of course I don’t mind. I always love spending time with my grandson,” Ursa replied with a smile as she reached for the gurgling baby.
“So do I,” Hakoda added with a grin.

“Don’t forget about me,” Iroh and Kanna piped in simultaneously.

“And Pakku and Jee and everybody else,” Toph drawled before she grinned at the waterbender. “Go find Lord Hotman. I’m sure what he really needs is a different kind of training.” She waggled her eyebrows.

Everybody (except for Hakoda and Sokka) laughed and Katara shook her head, although she could not help the small smile curling her lips. Zuko wasn’t the only one who needed a little physical exertion.

Once she was sure her son would be looked after, the waterbender made her way to the royal chambers. She changed quickly out of her formal robes and into her training clothes. Gathering her hair into a braid, she left the room and headed toward the training arena. She arrived to see Zuko training vigorously with his white fire. She stood in awe for a moment, admiring his strong form and his firebending skills. It still amazed her to see him bend at such a high level of firebending, although he always made sure to use it only sparingly. He did not want others to know how well he could bend white fire in case news reached Jianguo’s ears somehow.

A worried frown appeared on her brow a moment later when she observed how hard he was pushing himself. Sweat ran down his naked chest and back, veins popping along his arms at the strain he was putting on himself. She knew he was still stressed over the whole Ozai situation. She walked forward silently and watched as he paused when he spotted her, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

“Would you like a sparring partner?” she asked with a grin as she uncorked her waterskin, using one hand to bend a string of water out of it.

Still panting from the exercise, Zuko smiled at her. He had thought she had arrived to stop him and tell him he needed to rest. But it seemed she knew he needed an outlet for his frustrations and anger, and he appreciated that she wanted to help him with that.

“I would like that,” he replied with a nod. “It’s been a while.”

“Well, don’t think you can beat me or that’ll take it easy on my little patient,” she taunted as she
twirled the tendril of water around her form.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he responded with a chuckle.

His laughter was cut off when his wife snapped her water whip at his chest so suddenly that he barely had time to dodge it. He heard her laugh as she prepared herself for his retaliation. He grinned. He loved it when they sparred.

For the next hour or so they sparred like old times, their movements almost fluid as they danced around each other, yet powerful as they tried to make the other surrender. When they paused to calculate their next move and catch their breaths, Katara noticed he appeared exhausted, which made sense since he had been training hours before she arrived.

“We should continue this another time,” she spoke up through panting breaths, “It’ll be dinner time soon and I need to feed Kazu.”

Zuko relaxed his stance and nodded. He was getting tired, but he had not wanted to end their time together, but she was right. Although, he had a feeling she had noticed his fatigue and was also trying to spare his pride. She knew him too well. Though that didn’t mean she didn’t like to tease him about his ‘overblown ego’ sometimes, he thought with a small grin.

As they made their way to their rooms to bathe and change for dinner, they talked about the progress in the search for Ozai, or lack thereof. They also discussed the issue of Jianguo and the rebels. They had not heard from them in a while and it caused them uneasiness at the lack of news. They had talked about the possibility of Jianguo’s silence and Ozai’s escape being correlated and it only increased their worry and confusion. A silence fell between them as they lost themselves in their thoughts.

“Ursa and Jee look excited for their wedding tomorrow,” Katara remarked, wanting to lighten the mood, if only a little, as they finally entered their chambers.

Zuko nodded and then smiled.

“They are good for each other,” he said, “Mother deserves to be happy.”

Reaching out for Katara’s arm as she passed him, he pulled her swiftly to him, causing her to let out
a surprise gasp at the sudden move before she eagerly pressed herself to him with a smile.

“Just like us,” he purred as he bent down to kiss her.

Katara let out a small laugh as she returned his kiss, teasingly nipping his lower lip and smiling when he groaned. When he tried to deepen the kiss, she pulled back with a grin.

“Go get the bath ready,” she said as she playfully pushed him toward the bathroom.

“Fine,” he replied with a mock sigh before he wickedly added, “Only because I want to have your wet, naked body against mine.”

“My thoughts exactly,” the waterbender responded with a chuckle as she followed after him.

She watched as he filled the large tub with water before heating it with firebending. She slowly stripped herself of her sweaty clothes as her eyes roved the strong muscles of his back, licking her lips at the way they flexed as he moved. It had been a while since they had made love, having to wait until he recovered from his illness and then having to catch up to the responsibilities they had neglected.

Once the water was steaming nicely, Zuko turned back to his wife to see she was already naked and her long hair falling loosely around her. He watched as she gave him a sultry smile before she moved toward the marble tub, her delectable breasts bouncing with each sway of her hips as she went. He felt his groin tighten in arousal and he swallowed hard. Even after all this time of marriage, he could not get enough of his waterbender’s glorious, naked body or the pleasures she gave him. She stepped into the warm water and sat down with a pleased sigh before she turned to smile knowingly at him. She raised one hand and beckoned him forward with a finger.

Zuko hurriedly stripped himself of his pants and stepped into the tub behind her. As he sat against the marble edge, he spread his legs so he could cradle Katara between them. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back to his chest. With a sigh, she snuggled up to him as she placed her hands over his arms. Zuko dropped his head to place a soft kiss on her neck and another on her shoulder. He had missed having these moments with her and he cursed Ozai and whoever helped him for making him lose time with his wife and son. He frowned. They even invaded his thoughts at the most unwanted moments.

“What’s wrong?” he heard Katara asked as she ran her wet hands soothingly along his arms.
He was silent a moment, debating whether to keep his concerns to himself, before remembering his promise that he would not keep things from her. His fingers twitched against her skin.

“I can’t help feeling as if something bad is going to happen,” he confessed in a low murmur.

Katara turned her head so she could see him.

“You have made sure to have the wedding ceremony heavily patrolled in case Ozai shows up at our gates,” she reminded him softly.

“I know,” he responded as he absentmindedly reached for the soap and began washing her shoulders and back. Then in a more husky tone, he added, “How about we focus on more pleasurable things instead, hm?”

“I won’t say no to that,” Katara responded impishly before gasping softly when his hands cupped her breasts.

Wanting to distract both of them from the worry and stress, she turned around to wrapped her arms around his neck, straddling his lap in the process. He let out a soft groan as she pressed her hot center against his growing arousal. She swallowed his moan into her mouth when she kissed him hungrily.

“It’s been a while,” she murmured wantonly against his caressing lips. “I need you.”

Zuko let out another groan at the amazing sensation of her soft, wet skin sliding against his. His hands reached down to tightly grab her glorious ass and pulled her roughly against his straining erection.

“Gods, Katara, I need you so badly, too,” he growled huskily.

Without another word, their mouths crashed hungrily together while hands roamed desperately over each other’s bodies. Their moans, groans, and sighs combined with the sounds of splashing water as they made love as if it were the last time they would have a chance to do so.
Once finished, they rested against the tub, wrapped in each other’s arms, luxuriating in the soothing, steaming water, reveling in the pleasure still thrumming through their bodies. After a while, they roused themselves enough to finished bathing. When they stepped out of the tub to dry themselves off, Katara wrapped her arms around Zuko’s middle. The firebender returned her embrace.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered softly as she stared into his golden eyes, “As long as we have each other, everything will be fine.”

Zuko stared into her soft, blue eyes before nodding. He did not say anything as he leaned down to give her a small kiss, although inwardly, he could still not stop worrying that something would go wrong.

Mai narrowed her eyes, one of her hands fingering the hidden weapons beneath her sleeves, as she listened to Ozai mock her about not being to hold his son’s affections. She had been summoned to their meeting in one of the farthest sitting rooms in her house, and Ozai had lashed out at her for her remark about his failed marriage to Ursa. She knew she should have held her tongue, but his antagonism against Zuko had flared her normally passive temper. When she did not respond to his taunt, Ozai shrugged.

“Even so I don’t understand your obsession to such a weakling,” he said gruffly.

Mai grit her teeth while Jianguo laughed. She could not stand the former Fire Lord. He was so arrogant and cruel. She almost wished she had not agreed to let Jianguo hide Ozai in her house. But she endured it as long as she got Zuko in the end.

“No wonder Ursa is marrying another man,” she found herself muttering, unable to stop herself from firing back.

“Watch your tongue,” he snapped as he glared at her.

When news had reached them that the Lady Ursa was marrying the Fire Lord’s trusted admiral the following day—sooner than was previously planned—Ozai had flown into a rage. He had destroyed the room he was staying in so badly it was unrecognizable. Mai was sure that if he had his firebending, he would have burned her house down and killed everybody in it.

“Do you remember your part of the plan?” a new voice interrupted before the former Fire Lord lost more of his temper.
At the question, Mai turned to the old man looking at her with a raised eyebrow. She returned his stare with a look of contempt. She was still surprised to know he was the traitor behind everything. When he had first arrived in her home late that night, she had frowned at the white-haired man in confusion, trying to understand why he was there. When he had asked after Ozai and Jianguo, she had been unable to stop herself from gaping at him in shock. No wonder he was never caught, for Zuko never would have suspected him. She had to hand it to the old man—he knew how to manipulate those around him by portraying himself as a kind-hearted, old man.

“I know my part,” she replied simply, her tone and facial expression showing nothing of what she was thinking.

The white-haired man nodded derisively at her before he dismissed her and addressed the other two men in the room.

“Good. Hopefully everything goes as planned,” he said meaningfully.

He threw a pointed look at Jianguo. The former general glared at him.

“As if you haven’t made any mistakes,” Jianguo growled, “You’re lucky your plan to have the waterbender lose her child and her life failed. You knew I want her and you risked her life multiple times. I also heard about that man who shot at them with arrows during that festival she organized and he failed.”

The old man shrugged.

“That honestly wasn’t my idea. The crazy fool, whoever he was, acted on his own,” he confessed.

“Too bad he didn’t kill Zuko,” Jianguo sneered.

“Zuko can’t die yet,” Ozai reminded them firmly, “He needs to surrender the throne first. We don’t have enough men to overthrow him or start a war.”

At his warning look, the other two men stopped their argument and bowed their heads.
“Luckily, the waterbender didn’t lose her child,” Ozai continued as he rubbed his chin, “We have something else to use over Zuko. Grandson of mine or no, it doesn’t matter.”

Mai shivered at the cold and cruel tone of the former Fire Lord. It was hard to think Zuko was related to such a monster.

“It won’t be too hard,” Jianguo responded gruffly.

“Do not underestimate them,” the old man warned, “Especially the waterbender. She knows bloodbending. I’ve seen her use the power a couple of times and it is incredible. We have to be careful.”

Jianguo grunted, knowing the old man was right. He would just have to make sure he kept the waterbender’s chi suppressed when he captured her. It wouldn’t do to be killed by his own sword because she could manipulate his blood.

“Get ready,” Ozai said firmly as he gazed out the window to observe the palace behind the protective walls. The sun was setting and it made the large building almost shine. He narrowed his eyes. “We have a wedding to stop.”

He looked away from the palace and turned to regard their informant. The man had done wonderfully in fooling Zuko and everybody else. Even he had not suspected the old man was on his side. He really thought the man disliked him for burning Zuko’s face since the man had voiced his outrage at the outcome. He supposed he could not blame him for having a soft spot for an injured boy. Yet his greed did not stop him from wanting to overthrow Zuko in order to stay wealthy.

“I hope you have everything ready,” he said commandingly as the old man returned his solemn stare, “Physician Toshiro.”

A smiled spread across Toshiro’s wrinkled face.

“Everything is ready, my lord.”
“It wasn’t easy to procure these uniforms,” Toshiro said calmly as he watched the small group of men look down at the skull helmets in their hands.

They had already donned the rest of the palace guard uniforms Toshiro’s men had been able to steal from the barracks. They had been sneaking the uniforms out one at a time for the past weeks. They had come quite close to getting caught once or twice, but his men were trained in the art of stealth and deception, so they had been able to leave the palace grounds undetected.

“They will do for our purpose,” Ozai responded as he glared out the window of the storage room they had sneaked into. “We have to stop this ridiculous wedding and finally finish this once and for all.”

“Do you know where they will keep the heir during the wedding?” Jianguo asked as he casuallystroked the skull mask. “Our plan won’t work otherwise.”

“Yes, I overheard the waterbender tell her maid to spend the time of the ceremony in the garden,” the old physician responded.

Jianguo was the only one who noticed the look of eagerness that flashed across Chang’s face before the former Dai Li agent schooled his features. Jianguo suppressed a smirk. Chang had scolded him countless of times over his obsession with Katara, but he himself desperately wanted the pretty maid. But soon they would both get what they want.

“Are ya sure the Avatar and his woman won’t cause trouble?” Ping spoke up, his gruff voice wavering in his uncertainty as he shifted uncomfortably in the borrowed armor that was a little too small on his large frame. “Wat if it doesn’t work?”

“One of my men assured me he poured the sleeping potion in their morning tea. He was extra careful, considering what happened with the waterbender’s tea months before, the food has been closely monitored. But because of the wedding everybody was distracted in the kitchen today,” Toshiro assured him. “They won’t cause you any trouble. Just make sure you find the right room.”

“I ain’t stupid,” the earthbender growled at the old man, but settled down with a muttered curse when Jianguo gave him a sharp look.
Toshiro ignored him as he addressed the former Fire Lord.

“Zuko placed multiple guards around the perimeter of the palace and the banquet hall, so I’m sure a few extra guards roaming the halls won’t be noticed,” he continued before he addressed the others, “Just try not to give yourselves away before it’s time.”

Before the others could respond with a scathing remark, Ozai spoke up.

“I thank you for your loyalty through the years, Toshiro. You will be greatly rewarded once I’m Fire Lord again. A noble title sounds about right. You and your lovely wife won’t have to work ever again.”

Toshiro bowed gratefully, although he suppressed a wince at the mention of his wife. If Yoon Hee found out about his role in this entire scheme she would leave him or hate him forever. She was a good woman who did not condone any kind of violence or disloyalty. She would be horrified of the things he had done, of the many people he had disposed off. That was why he had done everything possible to keep her blissfully unaware of the happenings. He had almost panicked when Jianguo had unexpectedly showed up just after Yoon Hee had stepped out of their room.

It had been difficult to watch her get close to the royal couple after helping bring the heir into the world, but he had needed the royal couple’s complete trust in him and his wife’s midwifery skills accomplished that. He knew Yoon Hee would be saddened at the news of the royal family’s demise. His wife was too kindhearted. But, soon they would be able to enjoy the remainder of their days living the luxurious life of nobility. He was respected for holding the position of Palace Physician, but he was still beneath the nobles. He wanted a higher position and the respect a noble title would bring him. Their children, grandchildren, and future descendants would benefit from his cunning.

“I thank you, my lord,” he responded smoothly. “All I did was bid my time and make Zuko and the others trust me.”

It had not been hard since they had no reason not to trust him. And it helped that Zuko immediately suspected Wei of everything thanks to the animosity they had for each other because of Wei’s previous alliance to Ozai.

“I heard you came quite close to being discovered when you got drunk at the club,” Jianguo spoke up with a sneer.
Toshiro frowned at his words. That had been a lapse of judgement on his part. He usually did not partake in alcoholic drinks, but he had been frustrated with their constant failures and he had wanted to enjoy himself a little. And because of his mistake, he had lost a close friend. He swallowed at the guilt that assaulted him before he forced the feeling away. Chao’s death was unfortunate, but he had discovered too much and had to be sacrificed for the greater good. He could feel Jianguo’s smirk mocking him.

“I would think you of all people should know we all make mistakes,” he retorted in a cool tone.

Jianguo growled and took a step forward, but Chang place a restraining hand on his shoulder, which he shrugged off sharply.

“Enough of this,” Ozai said harshly as he placed the helmet on his head, sliding the skull mask in place to hide his face. “We have to end this farce of a wedding. It’s time for our just rewards.”

While the other men put on their helmets, Ozai once again glanced out the window as he lost himself in his thoughts.

Soon, Ursa, he mentally vowed, I will have you and the throne back. And nothing will stop me.

Katara smiled as she watched Zuko pretend to eat one of Kazu’s toys, causing the baby to cry out indignantly before he laughed delightedly when it reappeared in his father’s hand. Now at five months, Kazuhiko was able to sit up for a couple of minutes. He had already mastered keeping his head up and rolling over.

At the moment, he was sitting on Zuko’s lap, his back resting against his father’s arm as he tried to snatch his toy back with happy squeals of laughter. Katara loved watching her husband interact with their son since he showed a soft, playful side she had rarely seen before. It was good to see him have a little fun after the stress and worry over the past few weeks since Ozai’s escape.

She had just fed Kazu and was just finishing getting ready for the wedding ceremony. They had eaten their breakfast in their room while everybody else got ready for the event. The small ceremony was going to be held in the banquet hall in a few hours and only their family and a few close friends of Ursa and Jee were going to be present.

Zuko had made sure not to invite any of the other nobility nor the advisors since he didn’t trust Wei. Although they had tried to keep the event as quiet as possible, they knew servants talked, so Zuko
had made sure to have guards patrolling the area and the main gate. They didn’t think Ozai or Jianguo would dare to enter the palace to stop the wedding without an army behind them, but he had wanted to take the extra precautions.

“He’s getting more active these days,” Zuko said as he quickly caught Kazu when the boy lunged himself toward his other arm so he could grab his toy.

“I know,” Katara responded as she smiled proudly at her son who was now chewing on the toy when his father relented and gave it back to him. “Soon we’ll be chasing him down the hallways and making sure he doesn’t eat bugs.”

“Is that what you did as a kid?” Zuko asked with a low amused laugh as he took a sip of his tea.

“No!” Katara huffed and playfully smacked his arm as she passed him. “But Sokka did!”

She laughed when he spilled the tea, which would have gone all over the tea table if it wasn’t for her waterbending. She made a show of twirling the liquid in front of them before depositing it back in his cup. Zuko quickly placed it on the table while Kazu laughed excitedly. Smiling at her firebender’s playful glare, Katara sat down on the other chair and took a sip of her own tea.

“Why am I not surprised?” Zuko chuckled before he added, “Well, I guess that’s better than the bugs Azula used to incinerate and all the flowers she used to stomp on as a child.”

Noticing his mother, Kazu raised his arms toward her and she reached forward to take him into her arms. She gazed down into his smiling face. She once again felt a pang of disappointment as she stared into his eyes. They were starting to change from the deep blue from when he was born to a more murky color. Ursa and Kanna had mentioned that he would probably end up with golden eyes like his father. It was not that she minded her baby having golden eyes, but she had hoped he would have her blue eyes since he already took on more of Zuko’s features than hers. Although she did still held out hope that he would have her hair. His soft, dark hair was becoming curlier the longer it grew. It really didn’t matter though, she loved him with all her heart, no matter what he looked like. She cuddled Kazu close and kissed his cheeks, making him giggle happily.

“You cuddle him too much,” Zuko said as he took another careful sip of his tea. “How would he ever learn how to walk?”

“You’re just jealous,” she teased.
“You know me too well,” he responded with a low chuckle.

They laughed together, for a moment forgetting the dread that hung over them. A knock at the door caught their attention and Zuko called out for them to enter. They watched as Jiao walked in with a smiling Ichiro trailing beside her. She bowed to the royal family, the little boy clumsily imitating his mother.

“It is almost time for the ceremony,” Jiao reminded them with a small smile.

“Thank you, Jiao,” Zuko responded as both he and Katara stood up. “Are the guards already in place?”

“They are waiting outside, my lord,” she responded.

“Good.”

The royal couple walked toward the maidservant and her son. The waterbender handed the little prince over to his caretaker.

“I fed him a few minutes ago, so he should be good for a couple of hours. But just in case, smashed bananas are his favorite,” Katara informed her.

Kazu was now able to eat certain soft foods as an introduction to eating other things than just breastmilk or as a temporary substitute for when she could not immediately breastfeed him. Jiao nodded that she remembered.

They had decided to have Kazu spend the ceremony in the garden with Jiao and Ichiro. They were sure the two boys would get bored during the event and fuss. Zuko had arranged for three guards to accompany them and keep them safe. They had invited Jing and Ting to spend time with the boys, but the twin girls had wanted to see the wedding and Suki had allowed them to stay as long as they behaved.

“Once the ceremony is over, you can join us for the wedding feast,” Zuko added.
“Yes, my lord, my lady,” Jiao replied with a smile. “Don’t worry and enjoy yourselves. I wish the new couple a very happy life together.”

“Thank you.”

Katara leaned over to kiss Kazu’s cheek before moving aside so Zuko could do the same. As they passed them, Zuko reached down to playfully ruffle Ichiro’s hair.

“Make sure Prince Kazuhiko behaves,” he told the boy with a chuckle.

“Yes, my lord!” the young boy exclaimed before he seriously added, “I take care of lil’ prince!”

The adults suppressed their amusement at the toddler’s seriousness. Katara tweaked his nose and his serious mood was forgotten when he laughed. They left the royal chambers and nodded at the masked guards waiting outside for the prince and his caretaker. As they walked closer to the banquet hall, Katara looked up to smile at Zuko.

“When I went to see Ursa this morning she was looking very beautiful in her wedding robes,” she mentioned happily. “She sounded so excited when I talked to her before Gran-Gran reminded me I had to go feed Kazu.”

“I’m sure she looks wonderful,” Zuko agreed with a smile.

He had talked to his mother the night before and she had been saddened at the thought that she could not share the day with Azula. It did not help that her previous visit with her daughter had not gone well. Zuko wondered how Azula would react if she knew their father had escaped. He shook his head. Now was not the time to think dark thoughts.

“I went to see Jee for a moment and he was both excited and nervous…especially because I threatened him that he better take care of her.” At the arched look from his wife he only shrugged and added. “He better take care of her.”

The Fire Lady let out a small laugh.
“Just like my dad did to you, huh?”

He chuckled. “Where do you think I got the idea?”

Zuko let out a snort and mumbled something under his breath, causing the waterbender to laugh some more. Grinning, she wrapped her arms around one of his and leaned against him.

“It’s good that you’re practicing now for when our daughter marries,” she said teasingly.

Zuko frowned down at her.

“I would rather not think of that so soon,” he muttered.

Then with a wicked grin, he placed his hands firmly on her hips and pulled her close to him.

“We should keep trying for that daughter, though,” he murmured as he bent down to kiss her neck.

Katara let out a giggle as she allowed him to press more kisses along her throat before he pressed his lips to hers. The sighed simultaneously as their mouths caressed the other’s and their tongues danced sensually together while their bodies pressed intimately close. The sound of someone clearing their throat immediately made Zuko let her go as if she had scalded him. The waterbender looked up with a sheepish expression while the Fire Lord cleared his throat. They watched as Iroh and Toshiro grinned amusedly at them.

“You know, I’m not even fazed about catching them like that anymore,” Iroh said amusedly as he grinned at his friend.

“I don’t think anybody is,” Toshiro responded with a low chuckle.

“We aren’t that bad,” Zuko grumbled.
“I beg to differ,” Iroh laughed.

“We should hurry up,” Katara interrupted as she felt her cheeks heat up.

“Oh yes!” Iroh exclaimed as they started walking toward the banquet hall once again. “I’m so happy for Ursa and Jee!”

“Today will be a day to remember,” Toshiro added with a small smile.

Katara found his statement odd since the wedding ceremony wasn’t going to be a big event, but dismissed it as unimportant. The royal couple watched as Iroh turned to knowingly grin at them over his shoulder.

“By the way, I’m glad you two are working on giving me more grandchildren.”

He laughed at their flushed faces.

Ah, how he loved to tease the young people.

“Come on, Toph, we have to hurry up,” Aang yawned as he slowly finished putting on his shoes.

Toph, already dressed in her formal robes, dropped herself back on the bed, causing Momo to startle at the sudden dip of the mattress. The earthbender pulled the blanket up to her chin and rolled to her side. A large yawn escaped her. Momo chirped as he crawled on top of her, his bat-like ears twitching as he cocked his head to the side.

“I’m still sleepy,” she mumbled. “Give me five more minutes.”

As soon as she finished the last word, she began to snore. Aang shook his head and frowned. Why did he feel so tired and sleepy? Sure, he and Toph had made love a few times the night before, but they made sure to get plenty of sleep for the ceremony and the feast. They had breakfast in their room a few minutes ago, so they shouldn’t be so sleepy so soon.
His eyes widened. Had someone slipped something into their tea or food? He wouldn’t put it past anyone in the palace, not after what happened to Katara and Zuko with the physician’s crazy assistant.

Shaking his head, heart pounding in sudden alarm, he tried to rush toward the door to call for help. But after a couple of steps, he felt his body suddenly become sluggish and his vision blur. He leaned against the chair Toph had been sitting on before, trying to keep himself up, trying to keep his eyes open, but instead he slid down toward the floor, causing the chair to scrape against the floor with a loud screeching sound.

From a distance, Aang heard Momo chatter worriedly near his head, but he did not pay him much attention since his focus was on the door that was slowly being opened. He watched dazedly as two pairs of dark boots appeared. As if from a long distance, he heard the murmur of male voices as he watched the boots slowly approach him before darkness took him.

“Look, Mama!” Ichiro cried out delightedly, watching the dark-haired baby follow him by scooting on his bottom.

Jiao smiled as she watched her son interacting with the little prince. They were so adorable. She had begun to think about having another child, a little brother or sister for Ichiro. As she watched, she was sure he would make a wonderful older brother. She smiled at the thought. She would bring up the subject to Kuo later that evening once the wedding ceremony and feast were over, perhaps after they made love in the privacy of their room.

The children and she were sitting on a blanket underneath the cherry blossom tree. The weather was pleasant, the sun shining brightly in the clear blue sky. They had fed the turtle-ducks for a while before the children were distracted by other things.

She looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps to see one of the guards walking toward them. The three guards had stood near the entrance to make sure no unwanted visitors stepped into the garden. She frowned. Was he coming over to tell her something wrong? The wedding ceremony couldn’t be over already.

The tall guard stopped a few feet away from the edge of the blanket she and the children were sitting on. Jiao became unnerved when the man did not say anything and just stared at her behind his expressionless skull mask. Feeling anxious, Jiao picked up the giggling prince into her arms and stood up to face the silent guard. Her son stood up next to her in confusion.

“Is something the matter?” she asked softly, trying to keep the trepidation from her tone. He was one
of the palace guards meant to protect the royal family, so she knew he was trustworthy. But for some reason, she couldn’t help but feel like something was wrong?

The guard did not reply immediately and she felt herself tense. As if sensing her unease, he spoke.

“I need you and the prince to come with me,” he answered calmly, his voice slightly muffled by the mask.

Jiao frowned. Was her lady calling for her to bring Prince Kazuhiko to her? But no, that could not be it. They would be interrupting the wedding ceremony. No, something was definitely wrong. She backed away a step, making sure to keep her son next to her side. She could feel Ichiro looking up at her questioningly, but she did not look down to reassure him as she stared uncertainly at the guard.

Sensing his mother’s unease, Ichiro hid behind her and peeked at the man as he held onto her skirts.

“We will go in now,” Jiao said. “You don’t need to escort us.”

Protectively holding the prince in one arm and grabbing her son’s hand in the other, Jiao made to move around the guard. She tensed when he quickly blocked her path.

“You will come with me,” he said firmly.

Jiao swallowed. Something was definitely wrong. She tried once again to move around him, but this time he reached forward and grabbed her arm, making her lose hold of Ichiro. She gasped when he pulled her against him. She instinctively tightened her hold of the baby so she wouldn’t drop him. The prince began to fuss at the jolting movement.

“What are you doing?!” she hissed angrily as she tried to break his hold of her arm. “Let go of me!”

“No,” was his firm response as he tightened his grip.

Seeing his mother’s distressed face and her struggles against the stranger, Ichiro became frightened. What was happening? He began to cry as he rushed toward his mother, fistling her skirts, trying to pull her away from the mean man.
“Let her go!” he cried.

“Be quiet, brat!” the masked man growled as he tried to pull Jiao and the prince after him.

“Don’t call my son that!” Jiao shouted as she struggled even harder.

Ichiro’s sobs and Jiao’s angry tone made Kazu start crying. Jiao looked desperately in the direction to the entrance to the palace. Why were the two other guards not coming to see what the commotion was about?

“Son?” she heard the man hiss.

She looked back to see him rip his skull mask off to reveal narrowed, green eyes. She gasped in horror at the familiar face before her.

“You!” she exclaimed in dismay.

It was the earthbender from Omashu. The one who had been fighting the other rebels in order to rape her. She shuddered in disgust and fear.

“How did you get in here?! What do you want?!” she cried out as she renewed her struggles, but it was difficult since she was trying not to hurt the wailing prince.

“I’m taking you and the prince with me,” Chang replied, ignoring her struggles as he stared darkly at the crying little boy tugging at her clothes.

“Help!” Jiao began to scream at the top of her lungs. “Help us!”

She desperately glanced toward the palace building as the man began to drag her. What happened to the other guards?
Chang ignored the woman’s screams as he pulled her tightly against him. He needed to escape before the loud noises caught someone’s attention. The whole plan would be ruined then. He wrapped his arms around her back, effectively trapping her and the sobbing prince between their chests.

“I finally have you,” he whispered in her ear.

Jiao gasped when she felt the ground open up beneath them before they dropped down. The last thing she heard was her son screaming for her before darkness surrounded them.

“Mama!” Ichiro cried out again when he saw the hole close up just as suddenly as it had appeared.

He dropped himself to the spot where his mother and baby Kazu disappeared. Big tears ran down his cheeks and sobs racked his small body as his mind tried to understand what had happened.

His papa! He had to get him! He would know what to do!

Ichiro jumped to his feet and ran back into the building as fast as his small legs could carry him. Papa would bring Mama back. And Kazu too. He had to!

As he approached the entrance to the palace, he noticed two of the guards from before lying on the floor. Their eyes stared at the ceiling as red liquid spread beneath them. Frightened at the sight, Ichiro ran past them and down the long corridor. He rounded a corner and stopped, broken sobs escaping his lips as he frantically looked around. He was lost. He did not know which way to go to find his father. He tensed when he felt someone approach him from behind. Frightfully, he slowly turned around to see another guard looking at him.

“What do we have here?” the man asked.

Before Ichiro could feel relief at finding help, the man reached forward quickly and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, lifting him roughly from the ground. Ichiro’s eyes widened in fear and large tears ran down his cheeks as the man chuckled evilly.

“You, boy, will be our way to escape.”
Sitting in the front row, with his family members beside him, Zuko smiled at the happiness that surrounded his mother as the wedding ceremony progressed. Jee looked smitten as he returned his bride’s smile, his eyes unable to move away from her face, which caused both Zuko and Iroh to grin at each other.

They did not notice the distracted look on Toshiro’s face, who was sitting next to Iroh. However, his wife noticed, and Yoon Hee nudged his arm questioningly. He gave her a reassuring smile before he returned his attention to the ceremony. He could not afford to make others suspect his behavior or everything he had worked so hard for would be ruined.

The crowd laughed softly when the fire sage had to repeat his question to a distracted Jee, who flushed deeply as he muttered a quick apology.

Zuko thought about how he had not liked the thought of his mother remarrying because he felt like he was going to lose her again when he had just gotten her back. But he could see that had been selfish of him. His mother deserved someone special to spend her life with, someone who would make her happy. And she would be with Jee. Now she would marry a man that truly loved her and respected her like she deserved.

He frowned as he once again glanced at the two empty seats next to Sokka and Suki. He wondered briefly where Aang and Toph were and if they would show up late. He had asked a servant to go look for them in their room, but the servant said it had been empty. He would not be surprised if the couple had decided to go to the marketplace before the wedding started and simply lost track of the time.

He returned his attention to the ceremony. A moment later, he felt Katara grab his hand as the fire sage linked Ursa and Jee’s fingers. The Fire Lord glanced at his wife and returned her smile as he squeezed her hand, also remembering their own wedding. The fire sage removed the intertwined strings and placed them in a golden bowl as another fire sage handed him a candle.

Before the flame could touch the linked strings, a spark of fire hit the bowl, causing it to fly from the startled fire sage’s hands. The bowl fell to the ground with a loud bang that was accompanied by the crowd’s shocked exclamations.

“That’s enough of such foolishness,” a deep voice spoke up from the back of the room.

Everybody quickly turned around to see a small group of guards standing by the doors. Zuko and a few others sprang to their feet in outrage at the interruption. What was the meaning of this?! Zuko would fire them for such insolence! They watched as the man in the middle took a step forward and
removed his helmet, while the man to his right did the same. Shocked exclamations rose from the crowd when Ozai and Jianguo’s faces were revealed.

Ursa gasped loudly and her eyes widened at the sight of her former husband. She heard Jee curse before he moved to stand protectively in front of her. But she could not look away as her heart sank in dread. How did Ozai even get here? What did he want? She clenched her hands angrily. Why did he have to ruin such a joyous moment for her?

“Guards, apprehend them!” Zuko roared at the guards standing near the windows as he made to move forward with flaming fists, Katara close at his heels. Sokka, Suki, Hakoda, Iroh, Pakku, and the other guards followed them.

“Ah, ah, you don’t want the boy to be hurt, do you?” Ozai told them as he motioned behind him, causing them to stop in their tracks.

Two men stepped aside and another of the men lifted a struggling Ichiro into the air to the horror of everybody else in the room. His cries were muffled by the cloth tied around his mouth.

“Ichiro!” Kuo cried out in panic as he rushed forward, but Shen quickly grabbed his shoulders and held him back. “Let my son go, you bastard!” he shouted furiously at the man restraining the boy.

“How dare you!” Zuko growled angrily as he glared at Ozai and Jianguo.

“He’s just a boy!” Katara hissed as her fingers twitched at her sides, but she hesitated only because she wondered where Kazu and Jiao were if these men had Ichiro.

“Kazu,” she heard Zuko whisper beside her, feeling him stiffen at the same time she did, and she knew he was thinking the same thing.

“You need to hear me out before you do something you will later regret,” Ozai said smoothly as he stared levelly at an angry-looking Zuko. “I’m here for a…compromise.”

“A compromise?” Zuko sneered as his fists tightened in sudden dread.
“This little scheme has taken too long,” the former Fire Lord continued as if he had not been interrupted. “All I want is for you to willingly hand over the throne to me.”

Zuko scoffed as he glared at his father. He could hear the people murmuring uncertainly around him. What was Ozai’s game? How did they enter the palace without being caught?

Katara ignored the disgusting leering looks Jianguo was throwing at her. How she wished she could wipe that arrogant smirk from his face and make him suffer for everything he had done. She could end everything right now. All she needed to do was use her bloodbending to subdue them. She moved her hands, concentrating on their blood, intent on bringing them to their knees, when Ozai shifted his attention to her.

“I wouldn’t try that, waterbender,” he said in a cool and superior tone. “You think we’re such fools as to make ourselves vulnerable to your bloodbending?”

Katara’s eyes widened. Behind her and Zuko, Sokka was cursing under his breath while Suki quietly asked where Aang and Toph were. The royal couple exchanged a quick glance. How did they know about her ability?

Ozai allowed a small smirk to appear on his lips.

“In exchange for the throne, I will not harm your precious son,” he informed them.

The royal couple froze, fear raising up their spine at his words.

“Where is he?!” Katara screamed furiously as she took a step forward.

Water rushed toward her outstretched arm from the large flower vases decorating the hall as she readied herself to attack, her mind only focused on getting her son back. Zuko grabbing her arm and Ichrio’s cry of pain as the man holding him shook him made her stop.

“One more step and the boy dies,” Jianguo spoke up cruelly.

“I have my grandson in my custody,” Ozai continued with a casual wave of his hand, “As well as his
pretty nursemaid. No harm will come to them…yet.”

“Jiao,” Kuo gasped.

“I’ve also captured the Avatar and his earthbender.” Ozai said before he added with a sneer, “I will make the brat pay for what he did to me. I can’t have the Avatar ruining my plans again.”

“Let them go,” Zuko growled, even though he knew such a command was worthless. Ozai had the upper hand, as much as he loathed admitting it. He had a feeling he knew where Ozai was going with this.

“I will release them if you forfeit the throne permanently and name me the rightful ruler,” Ozai commanded firmly as he stared at Zuko. “Or else your son and the others die by the end of the week.”

Zuko growled as he moved to attack, but he froze at another cry from Ichiro and Katara’s warning grip on his arm.

“If any harms come to me, my men have orders to kill your son,” Ozai added gruffly before he said with a sinister smile, “That means you will let us leave without a fight.”

The royal couple glared at him in mounting rage and helplessness.

Smirking, Ozai took a few steps forward and paused as he set his eyes on an angry Ursa.

“I have come back for you, Ursa,” he told her firmly, “Just like I promised I would.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you!” Jee growled as he moved closer to the noblewoman. “I won’t let you hurt her ever again nor will I let you take her away from me.”

Ozai narrowed his eyes at the admiral, his teeth almost bared in an angry snarl before he turned back to his former wife.
“Ursa, come with me now or our grandson dies.”

At his words, Ursa stepped away from Jee, evading him as he reached for her arm. She moved stiffly toward Ozai, knowing he would be true to his word. She would not let anything harm her grandson if she could help it, even if it meant her own safety.

“Mother!”

“Ursa!”

She heard Zuko and Jee call after her as she walked down the aisle, feeling everybody’s eyes on her as she made her way toward a now smug Ozai. She ignored his smile and his outstretched arm as she stopped next to him. She stiffened when he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her tightly against his side.

“Much better,” he murmured, pleased.

She could not stop the disgusted shiver that ran up her spine.

Ozai looked up to smirk at the furious expressions on Zuko, Jee, Katara, and Iroh’s faces.

Jianguo’s mocking laugh caused everybody to look his way. A sneer rested on his mouth as he stared at Zuko.

“I tried to warn you that your happiness would come to an end,” he taunted.

He ignored the younger firebender’s glare as he shifted his attention to the glowering waterbender. A leering smile appeared on his face that caused the royal couple to stiffen.

“One final condition, if you want your son back, you have to give me your wife,” Jianguo told Zuko in a smooth, expectant tone.

Katara’s eyes widened at his words, feeling her chest tighten in sudden fear as memories flashed in
her mind, before she forcefully shoved them away. She would not be afraid. She was stronger than that. She was stronger than before, and she would not let him make her fear him ever again. But she would do anything in order to keep her son safe, even if it meant surrendering herself. Her hands clenched at her sides in impotence. She felt Zuko stiffen next to her, heard him curse angrily under his breath, knowing that he knew what she was thinking and knowing that he would refuse to sacrifice either Kazu or her.

As if knowing what they were thinking, Jianguo’s smirk turned triumphant, his dark eyes promising horrible things as he looked into Katara’s wary eyes.

“You have until the end of the week to get everything ready for my taking back the throne,” Ozai interrupted as he brought a rigid Ursa closer to his side. He could feel her locking eyes with Jee, making him tremble in anger. He wanted to take her away quickly. “If you don’t heed my words, you will find your son’s body at your doorstep.”

“Bastard,” Zuko growled as his body shook with impotent fury. How he wished he could attack them, break their necks with his bare hands, run his swords through their dark hearts, but the threat to Kazuhiko’s life forced him to remain rooted to his spot. He could not risk it.

Katara’s fingers shook at her sides as she forced down the urge to take control of their blood, make them suffer for daring to take her child away from her. How could Ozai be so cruel to his grandson, to a mere baby? Then again, he had been cruel to his own son when he had been just a boy. The gods could not let such a monster win.

Once he knew he had made his point, Ozai moved himself and Ursa toward the door. Ursa looked back with panicked eyes to watch her son and Jee looking desperately after her. She could not bear the anguish in their eyes, so she tried to send them a reassuring smile, even though she knew they would not believe it.

Jianguo and the other men followed after them. Ichiro was still being held by one of the men, causing Kuo to lunge forward only to have Shen pull him back once again.

“Ichiro!” he shouted, “Let my son go!”

“We will take the boy with us,” Ozai said uncaringly, “As assurance that we will not be attacked. If we are followed, he will die. But to show our good faith, we will leave the boy behind once we leave the palace.”
Kuo growled as he struggled against Shen’s firm grip.

Somehow, Ichiro managed to loosen the cloth around his mouth as he desperately looked back at his father.

“Papa!” he cried in fear, “Papa!”

His fearful cries seemed to rip through everybody’s hearts as they watched helplessly as the small group backed away from the large hall, closing the large doors behind them. Kuo hung his head as he slumped in Shen’s hold. His partner could only look at him in pity while the other guests murmured uncertainly as they watched the royal couple and their family still staring at the closed door.

“Oh gods, Zuko, what do we do?” Katara whispered in despair as she clutched his arm.

Zuko placed his hand over hers as he looked at her.

“We will find a way to bring them back, I promise you,” he told her firmly.

He grasped her hand tightly and she squeezed his just as tight.

“We will find them,” Zuko said grimly as he glanced back at the doors before he added darkly, “Ozai and Jianguo will regret this.”
Taking a sip of her tea, Mai disinterestedly glanced around the large sitting room she had started to frequent since her arrival in the Fire Nation. It was slightly dark since she had ordered her servants to close the heavy curtains, only a couple of candles and the fireplace lit the room. She wanted to enjoy her solitude now that Ozai and Jianguo had finally left. She wondered if their plan on infiltrating the palace had succeeded or if they had been captured. If so, she was prepared to come up with an alibi in case they decided to divulge the fact that she was helping them. She even had one of her trusted servants on the lookout to see if palace guards were heading toward her home.

A frown appeared on her usual passive face, part of her realized that she was beginning to lose her composure. Usually, she would have just moved on from a problem and not let it affect her so much, but she was incapable of letting Zuko go. A part of her hated her weakness, yet another part of her was determined not to lose him and the plans she had dreamed of for their future, admittedly ever since she was a child sneaking adoring glances at the young prince.

She took another sip as her mind wandered to the past, remembering the time Zuko had once visited her home all those years ago. He had barely returned from his exile and he had still seemed unaccustomed to his new life, as he was unsure on how to react with her servants' eagerness to please him. He had seemed distracted even then. She should have realized sooner that his interest was beginning to wane. If she had, she would have tried harder to make him love her as deeply as she did him.

She narrowed her eyes as her fingers tightened around her teacup before she relaxed them, smoothing out her features once again. It didn’t matter. This time, she would try harder to tie him to her. All she had to do was wait for Jianguo’s plan to work in her favor. She was still debating if it would be to her advantage to continue to help the rebels or if she should tell Zuko their plans. The only reason she had not gone to Zuko immediately was because she knew there would then be no one to dispose of Katara and her mutt.

A commotion from outside the room had her glancing blankly at the closed doors. The sound of a baby’s cry had her frowning as she gracefully set down her teacup. A moment later, one of her most loyal servants hastily opened the doors to admit the Dai Li agent that seemed to shadow Jianguo. Mai’s attention was then focused on Zuko’s most trusted maidservant, who was carrying a crying baby in one of her arms, while Chang tugged her after him with the other.

“Please!” the maidservant pleaded above the child’s wailing, “Let us go back! He needs his mother. He’s hungry!”

“I won’t take you back,” Chang replied gruffly as he moved them into the room, “So you better find a way to quiet the boy.”
Mai watched passively as the Dai Li agent made her servant scurry out of the room with a dark look before he returned his attention to Jiao, who was looking at him in both fear and anger as she tried to calm the baby down. Once the doors were closed, Chang turned to regard the silent noblewoman.

“I trust you have everything ready?” he asked in an emotionless tone.

Jiao looked in the direction to where their kidnapper was facing, fear of the unknown making her stiffen. She had not recognized the large building since they had come in from an unfamiliar garden. Their mode of travel had been disorienting as darkness and the scent of dirt surrounded them. She never wanted to experience it ever again.

She let out a gasp of disbelief as she watched Lady Mai stand up, carefully smoothing down the edge of her dark robe as her dark eyes landed on the little prince in her arm. Jiao finally managed to rip her arm from the man’s grip as she instinctively brought Prince Kazuhiko closer to her chest to protect him. She knew the problems the noblewoman had caused between her lord and lady, so she did not trust her. But she never would have thought Mai would be on the rebels’ side.

“How could you betray our lord?” Jiao asked in desperation.

A small sneer appeared on Mai’s face before she blatantly ignored the woman as she turned her attention to the child. She did not need to explain herself to a mere servant.

The baby let out another loud cry and Jiao rocked him soothingly in her arms, cooing to him softly, hoping to calm him down.

Unable to curb her curiosity, despite her animosity, Mai moved closer toward the servant and the baby. She ignored the manner in which Jiao took a step back as she cradled the child protectively against her chest. She stopped in front of them and raised an eyebrow, daring the woman to defy her. She watched as Jiao hesitated before she reluctantly allowed her to see the child’s face, which was sweaty and red from crying, small patches of dirt smudged his face and clothes.

“So this is Zuko’s son and the water tribe wench’s,” Mai stated passively as she gazed down at the fussing baby.

Noticing her presence, the child’s crying slowed, a few hiccups and sobs remained as he stared at her curiously. Mai could see the resemblance to Zuko, the raven hair, light skin, and the almost golden
eyes, and it brought a pang to her heart. But she could also see the marks of Katara with the way his hair curled at the ends. It was likely he would have his mother’s wavy hair and not straight hair like his father.

She sneered. This could have been the heir she could have given Zuko if only he had not let himself be bewitched by Katara. She clenched her hands at her sides, trying to ignore the way her stomach twisted with her anger and sadness.

As if sensing her dark emotions, the baby scrunched up his face before he began to cry once again, loud and piercing wails that made Mai wince.

“Shut him up!” she hissed commandingly at the maidservant.

“He’s just a baby and he’s hungry,” Jiao responded with a small glare at the cold woman as she rocked the little prince in her arms and spoke soothingly to him. If she could, she would have fed him herself, but she had weaned Ichiro of her milk a few months before he turned a year old.

“Perhaps we can find some milk in the kitchen,” Chang spoke up in his neutral tone when he saw that the noblewoman’s glare intensified. He stared fixedly at Mai when she glanced his way. “The boy can’t die yet.”

At his last word, Jiao brought the child closer to her chest as she stared fearfully at the man who stared passively back at her. Even though his expression revealed nothing, she could detect something intense in his eyes that made fear rise within her.

“Take them to the kitchen then, before they alert the whole household and the neighbors,” Mai ordered with a dismissive wave of her hand as she turned back toward the tea table.

Chang turned toward the door and motioned for Jiao to follow. Jiao hesitated, not trusting him in the least, but the sound of Prince Kazu’s whimpers prompted her to move reluctantly toward the man. Her thoughts returned to her family. She hoped Kuo had found Ichiro and she hoped they could be rescued soon.

As soon as the doors were closed behind them, cutting of the child’s cries, Mai closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. She poured more tea into her cup as she lamented the way things had turned out. Everything would have been perfect if only Katara had not visited that summer two years ago. How she hated that bitch! Katara took everything from her and she would pay.
Once Katara and her brat were eliminated, Zuko would need some consoling and Mai would be there for him. He would come to see that she was the only one he needed and that she was best for him. She once again ignored the voice inside that mocked her weakness.

A moment later, she heard the door open again and she glanced up, already identifying who it was by his self-assured footsteps. She stared impassively as Jianguo walked toward her, his stolen armor making loud clanking noises, and a part of her lamented the fact that he had not been captured. She hated his arrogance and the patronizing manner in which he treated her with.

“Is everything in place?” he asked as he dropped himself on the cushion beside her, taking a long drink of her tea without permission.

She suppressed a disgusted sneer as he placed the teacup down carelessly on the table.

“Yes,” she replied calmly, “I sent my most trusted servants to my country house to accommodate Ozai and Ursa. I also told my guards which rooms would be best to hold the prisoners.”

“Good,” Jianguo responded as he brushed his graying hair back. “I will be making my way there tonight. You will remain here with the heir, in case we are followed. Make sure to keep him hidden, and please, try not to bring attention to yourself.”

A scoff escaped the noblewoman before she could stop it.

“I’m not stupid,” she hissed.

He waved her words aside as he poured himself more tea.

“Wait two or three days before making your way to your country house with the brat,” he said before shrugging.

A smirk curled his lips and Mai tensed.

“Soon. Everything we want will be ours.”
Ursa stared placidly before her, her back straight, her hands placed rigidly on her lap, as she felt the carriage jolt for the fifth time since she had been forced into it. The curtains were drawn, so she could not see where they were headed, but by the state of the road and the silence outside the carriage, she had a feeling they were heading toward the countryside.

As soon as Ozai had taken her from what would have been her wedding, she had been rushed toward the garden. Two guards had laid dead at the entryway as they passed by and she had sent a silent prayer for their souls. As soon as they stepped into the garden, the man holding Ichiro had let him go, which had surprised her since she had not thought Ozai would have kept his word. She had stared into the little boy's frightened face before an earthbender had submerged them into the ground, to her consternation.

They emerged somewhere near the outskirts of the capital where two more men waited with a non-descriptive carriage. She had hesitated, sudden fear of what Ozai planned to do with her making her wish to flee. If only she had not stopped carrying her bow and arrows. But then again, these were men trained in combat and she did not have a chance of defeating them. But still, she had to find a way to escape and return to her son and his family. To Jee.

It seemed Ozai had read her intentions because he had firmly grasped her arm and forced her into the dark carriage. She sat as far away from him as she could manage in the small space, but that had not deterred him as he sat down next to her. She had not spoken a word to him since then and refused to even glance his way. Fear and anger made her hold her silence.

She couldn’t help but wonder what was going to happen. What did he plan to do with her? And how was her grandson? And Aang, Toph, and Jiao? She would never forgive Ozai if he harmed Kazu or any of her family. She still had not forgiven him for what he made her do, for what he had done to Zuko, and for the way he had raised Azula. Her hands clenched in her lap.

She hated him.

She had hoped never to see him again after her last visit to his prison cell. She had believed that he could never again harm her or her family. She had been wrong. She dreaded what he planned to do to them.

Ozai once again glanced at his former wife. No, not former. She was still his wife despite what the law said. He would never accept Zuko as Firelord so any declarations made by him were moot. He once again took in the small differences the years had brought on, the slight graying at her temples and the barely visible lines near her eyes. But she was still beautiful, poised, and graceful. A true lady worthy to rule at his side.
She had been a loving wife during the first few years of their marriage. She had been so gentle and caring toward him, something he had not been used to before. His father had been a cold man and his mother had not really bothered to spend time with her two sons. So he had basked in the love Ursa showered him with, and soon enough, found himself falling in love with her. But he was an ambitious man with a large appetite and he found it perfectly reasonable that he would seek out pleasures with other women. Ursa had not understood and soon began to withdraw from him. He had made the mistake of making her leave the palace, but now he would not let her go. She was his.

“I know you’re angry about the things I’ve done,” Ozai finally broke the silence, making her stiffen even more, “But I will make it up to you. Once I become Fire Lord again, I will treat you like a queen.”

Ursa resisted the urge to scoff at his words. They were only false promises. She was no longer the naïve young woman he had known before. She now knew the kind of man he was and she did not trust him. She remained silent, refusing to acknowledge him.

“You cannot possibly want to marry that lowly admiral,” he growled angrily at her continued silence.

“Jee is a better man than you would ever be,” Ursa retorted sharply, his insults making her angry as she glowered at him.

Ozai glared at her, but she returned his glare even as she waited for his retaliation. She would not put it past him to strike her. Their eyes remained locked—his commanding her submission, hers challenging him. Ursa saw his gaze soften a little, reminding her of how he used to look at her in the beginning of their marriage, and she immediately looked away. That expression caused more fear within her than his anger.

“You’ll see that I’m the only man for you,” Ozai said, his voice softer and cajoling as he leaned closer as he had done when they were younger, when she still loved him and was receptive to his advances. He needed to get her back. “You belong to me.”

“Not anymore,” she replied in a firm and cold tone as she looked back at him, “You lost that chance when you bedded other women. When you made me murder your father to save my son. When you banished me from home. When you scarred our son. When you drove our daughter crazy trying to live up to your expectations. I don’t belong to you.”

Ozai clenched his jaw at her words and the hateful gleam in her once gentle eyes. She turned away
from him again and it caused a bitter taste to his mouth. He was not used to her contempt. He missed her warm and loving personality. He wanted that back and he would get it one way or another.

“Where is my grandson?” her sudden question snapped him from his thoughts.

The former Fire Lord leaned back against the carriage wall as he returned his gaze in front of him.

“Don’t worry. The boy is fine,” he assured her with a wave of his hand. “You will see him soon.”

Ursa narrowed her eyes. How could he act so nonchalant about kidnapping their grandson, a baby not even a year old? Kazu needed his parents.

“Please, Ozai,” she forced herself to plea in a soft voice as she tentatively laid a hand on his arm, “For the love you once held for me, please let us return home.”

“No,” he growled firmly even as he gently grasped onto her hand. He tightened his grip when she tried to pull away. “I need the boy as leverage to make Zuko hand over the throne. And you are mine. I’m not letting you go.”

Ursa managed to break his hold and she frowned at him.

“What is your plan if Zuko were to do as you ask?”

Ozai was silent a moment and her heart quickened in fear.

“I will banish Zuko, Iroh, and all their little friends from the Fire Nation,” he responded smoothly.

Truthfully, he was planning to have them all killed so they would not try to rebel against him, but Ursa did not need to know for he knew she would never forgive him for it. She gave him a skeptical look, which he returned with a neutral one.

“What about Katara?” she asked.
The former Fire Lord shrugged.

“She will be given to Jianguo as a gift for his help,” was his casual response.

“I won’t let you do that to her!” Ursa hissed angrily.

“I have to keep my men happy,” he replied uncaringly, “Besides, she’s just a lowly water tribe woman.”

“And you’re just a heartless bastard,” she cursed him.

She knew she had surprised him when his eyes widened. She had never uttered such words in his presence before. But he needed to see that she was not the same person, that she would not just stay back and let him do what he wanted. And he was gravely mistaken if he thought Katara would meekly surrender to any man’s wants.

“Zuko will come up with a way to save his family and his country,” she vowed.

Ozai scoffed.

“He’ll have to catch me first and he doesn’t know where we are,” he told her, “So he will hand over the throne and the waterbender will hand herself over in order to save their son. Then I will rule the Fire Nation once again.”

He paused and looked at her intensely.

“And you will be my Fire Lady, so you better get used to the idea.”

Ursa looked away and balled her hands into tight fists.

She hoped Zuko was able to find them and deal with Ozai once and for all. As awful as the thought
was, the world would be a better place if Ozai wasn’t in it.

Dazed, gray eyes opened slightly as pain exploded in his head. Aang let out a groan as he felt his stomach roll in sudden queasiness. His disorientated mind registered the fact that he was slung over someone’s broad shoulder, his eyes staring at the back of whoever was carrying him. He turned his head to the side, watching as he was carried down a dark corridor and then down some stairs. The light from a torch caused dancing shadows along the walls and he felt himself become dizzy. He closed his eyes and groaned, feeling sick. What was wrong with him? What was going on? He could not move a muscle.

He heard the sound of a wooden door creaking open. He barely made out that they were in a dark room before he was roughly thrown to the ground. He let out a grunt of pain as he struggled to make sense of what was happening. Why did he feel so horrible? So weak?

The sound of mocking laughter reached his dazed mind. Slowly, Aang rolled to his side and looked up to see a large, bald man leaning over him with a torch in one hand. He did not remember ever seeing the man before, but he could not mistake the evil glint in his eyes.

“Look at da mighty Avatar now,” the man said with another loud laugh as he reached down to poke the airbender right on the center of the arrow tattoo on his forehead.

Aang swallowed an angry curse at such disrespect as he tried to get his bearings. Who was this man? What did he want? He tried to blow a gust of wind at the man’s face to get him to back off, but to his bewilderment, nothing happened. His eyes widened. Why wasn’t his bending working?

Ping laughed at the pathetic attempt.

“Don’t botha tryin’,” he sneered, “Yer bending has been suppressed. Can’t have ya ruinin’ everythin’.”

Aang felt dread rise within him at the stranger’s words. He immediately tried to call forth the three elements, but to his horror, nothing happened. He swallowed hard, feeling his chest constrict, as he once again felt that horrible sensation of having his chi blocked, like it had been all those years ago. But this was much worse. Then he couldn’t reach the avatar state, now he couldn’t bend at all! No, this couldn’t be happening. It must be just a terrible nightmare. But he could feel his panic rising as he found himself unable to call forth his bending abilities once again. Another mocking laugh from the man had Aang looking up with a dark glare. He glanced down toward his trembling hands to see stone manacles encircling his wrists.
“W-hat…do you…w-want?” he croaked through a dry throat, his words slurred as if he were drunk.

A grin appeared on Ping’s face.

“Ye’ll find out soon enough,” he responded with a shrug, which caused the flames on the torch to jump. “In da meantime, ya should be good if ya dunna want yer pretty girlfriend ta get hurt.”

Toph! Aang cried out mentally and struggled to get to his feet.

He yelped when the man kicked him back down with swift kick to his side. Aang panted through the pain before he looked up to glare at the man.

“D-don’t touch her,” he growled.

Ping did not respond and instead grinned maliciously, causing the airbender to stiffen in sudden dread.

Without another word, Ping turned on his heel and walked back toward the door. He did not look back as he slammed the door shut, effectively cutting off the light. Aang heard the sound of the door being locked and he cursed under his breath. He was left to seethe and worry in the dark room.

What was he to do now?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The day following the disastrous wedding ceremony, news had spread about Ozai’s escape, the little prince’s and his grandmother’s kidnapping. The capital was in an uproar, from the marketplace to the outskirts of the city, from the nobles’ townhouses to the commoners’ homes, people wondered what would happened now.

There were rumors that Ozai was demanding the throne in exchange for Prince Kazuhiko’s life. Some wondered and feared that Fire Lord Zuko would give in to Ozai’s demands. They were happy with Zuko’s reign and were afraid to return to the rule of a cruel, power-hungry lord. A few, however, old loyalists to Ozai’s rule, rejoiced at the thought of their nation returning to its former supremacy. The two opposing sides had a few arguments that led to fights that were then broken up by the royal guards.
It made the royal family wonder how the people knew what had happened since they had tried to keep the events a secret as not to cause chaos and hoping they could resolve things before word spread. Obviously, their plans had failed since everybody knew. It was obvious there was a rat among them, but who could it be? One of the servants or guards that saw the whole thing? Zuko had those that were present during the ceremony interrogated, but they all denied having spoken.

Their biggest question, however, was: how had Ozai, Jianguo, and their men managed to enter the palace without being caught?

The royal couple and their family were gathered in the Fire Lord’s study. Since they could not all gather at his desk, they were sitting on cushions in the middle of the floor. Kanna had decided to keep an eye on Sokka and Suki’s twin girls while the others convened. They had been in the privacy of the study for hours, discussing their next steps.

“My men and I were out all night looking for any tracks, but we found none,” Jee spoke up, his face and voice grim.

Zuko and Katara glanced at each other and frowned. They had found out the same thing after they had roamed the streets of the city in their alter-egos in search of any clues of where their son and the others could be. To their disappointment and anger, they were unable to find anything. It was as if Ozai and his men had disappeared into thin air.

“They have to be somewhere,” Zuko growled as he glared down at the nation’s map spread before them.

“And it must be somewhere close,” Sokka said as he studied the map with a serious frown on his face. “It would explain why they were able to disappear so quickly.”

“They have former Dai Li agents with them,” Katara added as her hands clenched on her lap, “They’re able to tunnel their way through the ground and appear elsewhere.”

Sokka frowned as his mind worked through possibilities while everybody else murmured.

“That could mean they could be miles away,” Hakoda said gruffly.
“Or they could be hidden somewhere close,” Iroh spoke in a contemplating voice as he stroked his small beard.

“Why do you think so?” Zuko asked him expectantly.

“We’re all wondering how they were able to infiltrate the palace,” the old general said, “And we’re all thinking that they must have had helped to do so…What if whoever helped them enter, is hiding them at their home?”

“But who?” Suki and Pakku asked at the same time.

“If it’s true, then it has to be someone from the nobility or from a high position,” Zuko replied with a dark frown, “Most servants and guards live palace on the grounds are in the barracks.”

Silence covered them as they all turned to look at Zuko as it dawned on them who could do betray them.

“Do you think it could be Wei?” Katara asked. “We all know he has done many things to make our lives difficult.”

Zuko’s frowned deepened.

“My suspicions immediately fall on him, but I’ve had men watch him for months and they haven’t found anything incriminating,” he responded.

“He could just be really good at hiding his tracks,” Sokka suggested.

“Or it could be someone we least expect,” Hakoda added.

They fell silent again as the chief’s words resonated within them. Who could the traitor be?

“Something must be done,” Zuko finally broke the silence with a low growl. “We have to bring my son and mother home. And we can’t forget Aang, Toph, and Jiao. Who knows what Ozai is doing to
them. He has so much resentment against Aang for defeating him and talking away his bending.”

Katara’s hands clenched so tightly, her nails dug painfully against her palms as rage and impotence assaulted her once again, as it had when Ozai made his demands. She had to get her baby back. He needed her. She didn’t care what she had to do in order to get him and the others back to safety.

“We have to think of something soon,” Iroh said grimly, “There are only a few days left and if you don’t hand over the throne, Ozai is very likely to keep his promise and…dispose of them all. We can’t let either thing happened. Everybody would suffer.”

Zuko and Katara flinched at the thought of their son, a bright-eyed, happy baby whose laughter warmed their hearts, being killed so ruthlessly.

After a few more discussions, they decided to convene again after lunch, hoping this time they could come up with a plan.

With a heavy silence between them, the royal couple decided to return to the privacy of their room. Zuko opened the door for them and Katara walked inside while he closed it behind him. The waterbender walked toward their bed without a word. She picked up the blanket Kanna had made for Kazu and she sat down heavily on the mattress. She placed the blanket on her lap, rubbing her fingers along the soft edge before she placed her head on her hands.

Zuko felt a lump in his throat as he looked at her anxiously from where he stood near the fireplace, unsure of what to do and say to lessen her sorrow. He had held her to him the previous night as she cried for their missing son. He had told her countless times that they would get their son back, but they both knew there was a possibility they wouldn’t, which only made their hearts feel heavier.

As soon as Ozai, Jianguo, and the others were out of sight, he and Katara had gone in search of Kazu and Jiao, hoping Ozai had been bluffing and Jiao managed to hide them. But, just as they had expected, they didn't find them anywhere in the palace so they raced toward the gardens with the others following. Two of the guards meant to keep them safe were found dead at the entryway, making them guess that the third one must have been one of Jianguo’s men. How could they have missed that?

Fortunately, Kuo found Ichiro at the spot the boy said his mother and the prince had disappeared from before. By his limited description of the man who took them, they knew it had been Chang, which only made Kuo cursed angrily before he stopped himself, needing to hug his crying son protectively to his chest.
Jee had looked forlornly at the ground, his wedding robes useless as he whispered Ursa's name.

Bringing himself out of his thoughts, Zuko looked into the fire, his hands balling at his sides. He had failed in keeping his son safe. His wife, son, family and country were in jeopardy because he did not kill Jianguo when he had the chance. He should have had Ozai executed as soon as the war ended. All of this could have been avoided. But now it was too late.

His dark thoughts scattered when he felt Katara wrapped her arms around him and hugged him from behind, pressing her cheek on his back. Her warmth, softness, and sweet scent made his body relax a little and he pressed back against her.

“It’s not your fault,” she whispered softly yet with a firmness to it.

“I can’t help but feel it is,” he murmured darkly as he continued to stare at the dancing flames.

“You made sure the palace was protected,” she reminded him. “You took every precaution possible. We had no idea Ozai and…Jianguo,” she growled the name, “could sneak into the palace so easily. They must have had someone help them.”

Zuko soaked up her words, feeling his guilt lessen a little if not completely. He still thought he could have done something to protect Kazu, his mother, Aang, and Toph. But she was right about them having had help. How could they have entered the palace without anyone suspecting something? Granted, they were wearing armor, but they had to have snuck into the armory to have taken them. Unless they stole it from actual guards. He frowned. Could they have killed them too? He would ask his captains to make sure all the palace guards were accounted for. He did not look forward to imparting more bad news to grieving families, as he had to do to the relatives of the guards found dead near the garden.

"You're right," he finally spoke up when he felt her squeeze him gently.

He turned around and wrapped his arms around her as he stared into her eyes. He could see that her worry had not lessened, but she had still wanted to offer him comfort, which he appreciated. What would he do without her? He could not lose her too. He could not give up either Kazu or Katara. It would devastate him. They needed a way to thwart Ozai's plans.

He frowned. "But who could have helped them?"
He reluctantly let her go when she pulled away from his embrace, a deep frown marring her features.

"I don't know," she groaned in anguish and ran her hand through her hair.

She moved away from him to once again sit dejectedly on their bed, pulling Kazu's blanket to her and pressing it against her lips. This time Zuko followed her and sat quietly beside her, feeling the pain and fear just as strongly as she did. He took her other hand and she intertwined their fingers together, needing comfort as well.

"I feel like there’s a vise is squeezing my heart," she whispered, her voice cracking a little in the end, "What if Kazu is cold, hungry, sick? What...if they are hurting our baby? Oh La, Zuko, I would die if anything happened to him. And I would feel so guilty if anything happened to Ursa, Jiao, Aang, and Toph, too."

"I know," Zuko responded sadly as he squeezed her hand, "I feel the same way."

"Perhaps..." she began and paused to let out a shaky breath. The words she was about to utter next made fear and disgust spring in her chest, "Perhaps...if I turn myself in...Jianguo would let them go —"

"No!" Zuko growled loudly.

"I would if it meant their safety," Katara argued firmly, even though her voice shook a little.

"I know," he responded more quietly before adding desperately, "But I can't lose you too. I can't lose any of you. I can't."

He ran a hand over his head and growled in frustration, his golden eyes reflecting his conflict.

"Just like I can't hand over the throne to Ozai. He will destroy the world."

He let out go of her hand to clutch his head.
"I don't know what to do," he whispered anxiously, admitting his shame.

Katara wrapped her arms around him and he let go of his head to return her embrace, both trying to offer and receive comfort.

"There has to be a way to save them all," the Fire Lady said softly.

"I hope so," he responded somberly as he laid his forehead on the crook of her neck, "Hopefully we can find a solution before anyone is hurt."

Katara felt him pull away and she looked up to see him staring at her with a determined glint in his amber eyes.

"Once we find them, I will make Ozai and Jianguo pay for daring to put our family in harm's way," he vowed in a dark and fierce voice that Katara had no doubt he would.

"They will feel my wrath, too, if any harms falls on Kazu," Katara vowed just as fiercely before her worry once again assaulted her. But what if they didn't make it in time to save their son and family?

Reading the worry and fear in her, Zuko pulled her closer to his chest and rocked her gently in his arms. In the time since their wedding, they had shared a wonderful companionship, an ardent love, and immense happiness, which increased tenfold at the birth of their son. However, it was moments such as these that served as a cruel reminder that they could not take their happiness for granted. He felt his chest tightened and he brought her protectively to him.

The reality of the situation overwhelmed him. Any wrong move from him and Katara and Kazu could be gone. They would be taken from him forever. His heart clenched and he swallowed thickly at the thought of a life without his wife and son. Without his family and friends. He had come close to losing Katara twice and he never wanted to feel that unbearable anguish ever again. He knew it would be worse if he lost his son.

It would break him.
Aang woke up with a start, his heart pounding hard in his chest, his eyes darting around in search of danger. His nightmare receded slowly, leaving him disoriented and confused. When his panicked mind finally registered the fact that he was in a dark room and he was alone, he forced himself to relax. In his nightmare, he had been facing off against Ozai, as he had done years ago, but this time Ozai was the one taking away his bending abilities. Showing no mercy, his gold eyes showing his intent to kill.

Aang shook his head vehemently, trying to forget that image, but groaned instead when the movement made his stomach roil. He pressed a hand to his mouth to keep himself from throwing up. His forehead was sweaty, but his palms felt cold and clammy. And his vision seemed to swim before him. At least, it felt that way since he couldn't really see in the dark room. Had they slipped him something else to keep him sedated while he wasn't aware? He felt worse than before.

The fact that he couldn't feel his chi or summon his bending made things even worse. He frowned. However, his main concern was Toph. Was she okay? He feared the things they could be doing to her. If only he could escape and go look for her, but without his bending he could not do anything. He had never felt so weak and powerless before.

The previous night, after the earthbender had left him, Aang had tried to break down the door with his own strength, which wasn't much considering his weakened state. The only thing he managed to do was bruise his shoulder against the thick, wooden door. He was hungry and thirsty and he wondered if they planned to starve him to death.

Not wanting to fall into a depressed mood, the airbender forced himself to his feet. He swayed a little as dizziness assaulted him, making him press his hand to his mouth again and take deep breaths. Once the feeling passed, he took a few steps forward, wanting to keep himself awake. His mind raced with different ways to escape, but his muddled head could not seem to focus. He paced around the room for what seemed like hours before he heard the lock at the door being opened.

He whirled around, assuming a defensive stance, even though his vision swam in front of him and his legs trembled. He watched as the man from before entered the room with a torch in his hand. The sudden bright light made Aang flinch as pain exploded in his head. He blinked a few times before he was finally able to see.

Ping had a smirk on his face before he moved aside.

Aang glared at him before his eyes shifted to the door when another movement caught his attention. His eyes widened when he saw Ozai standing under the doorframe, looking at him with a passive expression, his golden eyes cold and hard. He looked older than he remembered, but still the same. Aang found it disconcerting to see such resemblance between Ozai and Zuko, but he knew the resemblance was only physical. Their personalities, not to mention their morals and honor, were completely different.

He narrowed his eyes and he flexed his fingers.

"What do you want?" he rasped angrily. He had to swallow hard to keep himself from coughing from a dry throat.
The former Fire Lord's own eyes narrowed.

"So the child-Avatar is all grown up," the older man said mockingly as he looked him over before a slight sneer appeared on his face as if he were unimpressed. "How I lost to you, I will never know."

"What do you want?" Aang repeated firmly.

"I can't have the Avatar ruining my plans," Ozai spoke up in a smooth yet menacing tone and it brought Aang back to their fight years before. "I won't let you ruin my chances of taking back the throne in case Zuko decides not to give into my demands and it comes to a battle."

"You won't win," the airbender croaked assuredly.

Ozai glared at him before he allowed a small, cruel smile to touch his lips.

"How does it feel to suddenly find yourself unable to bend?" he asked.

Aang pressed his lips tightly together, unwilling to let the man know how disconcerting the feeling was and how much he hated it.

"It feels horrible, doesn't it?" Ozai said heatedly as he took an angry step forward, "Now imagine that, but ten times worse. So much worse, you almost would wish you were dead." He ground his teeth together as he wrathfully growled, "I will make you suffer for what you did to me."

Aang felt himself stiffen in sudden fear, his mind flashing back to his nightmare.

Ozai took a deep breath to compose himself.

"But I am willing to compromise," he said, his tone once again passive.

Aang gave him a skeptical look that Ozai ignored.

"I will let you and your woman go, if you give me back my firebending."

Aang's eyes widened at the request before he frowned deeply.

"I don't know if that's even possible," the airbender responded with a shake of his head.

"You were able to take it away," Ozai growled angrily, "So you can certainly give it back to me."

"Why?" Aang asked bluntly.

The former Fire Lord was silent for a long while that it caused Aang to frown more deeply and shift uneasily.

"I can rule the Fire Nation without firebending, but it's the ultimate sign of strength to the people," Ozai responded simply.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Aang said sarcastically, "With or without your firebending, you have no right to the throne."

Ozai hissed as he took a few menacing steps toward him.

Aang forced himself to stand his ground and prepared himself to be struck, but then Ozai stopped and pivoted around. Aang watched warily as the older man paused with his back to him, not saying a word. Then Ozai turned around to regard him silently, his face a cool mask, a stark difference from
the anger he had shown before. Aang frowned, unable to read his intent. Without saying anything, Ozai motioned for the other man with a lazy wave of his hand.

Ping moved swiftly forward, and before Aang could react, punched him in the stomach without warning. The airbender gasped for breath as the painful blow forced him to his knees. Panting and clutching his stomach in pain, Aang watched as booted feet stopped in front of him. He looked up to see Ozai staring unmercifully down at him.

"Even if I never regain my firebending, I will still rule the Fire Nation as Azulon’s rightful heir," he said confidently, "There are some who are still loyal to me." He paused briefly to glare down at the younger man. "You better find a way to return my firebending if you don't want your earthbender to be hurt beyond repair."

Aang lunged at him, but Ozai skillfully sidestepped him. Aang whirled around to throw himself at the man in a rage, but he was met with a punch to the face from the large earthbender. Aang crashed to the ground with a pained grunt, disoriented from both the drugs and the blow. He tried to get up again, but Ping pushed him back down with a foot pressed to his back. Aang coughed and wheezed when Ping pressed his foot even harder, almost enough to cut off his breathing.

"Don't…you touch her!" Aang screamed through the pain.

Ozai smiled cruelly down at him.

"Then you better find a way to restore my firebending...Avatar." 

Katara, you should eat something," Zuko tried to cajole his wife into touching her food, "Do you want me to ask for the cook to make you something else?"

"I'm not hungry," was the waterbender's solemn response as she poked at her food with her chopsticks while she simultaneously petted a dejected Momo on his back.

Ever since Aang had been taken, Momo had followed Katara and Zuko around. His usually energetic spirit was gone as he worried over his friend. Even Appa, who was being kept in the stables, was morose. They would sometimes hear him moaning sadly in the middle of the night. It was heartbreaking. Sokka and the twins made sure to visit the large sky-bison every day, but it was obvious that Appa wanted Aang.

Zuko frowned before he glanced at Hakoda who was frowning just as deeply. They were all eating their meal in the royal couple's anteroom, wanting their anguish and plans to remain private.

"Please, Katara," Zuko insisted pleadingly as he stared at her worriedly.

Katara could hear the concern in her husband's voice and feel the worried looks their family members were giving her, but she just could not bring herself to eat. She had lost her appetite since Kazu had been taken from her. She could not stomach the thought of her eating a good meal while her child went hungry. Besides, Zuko had barely ate anything either. She frowned as she glanced at him worriedly, to see he was doing the same.

Another day had passed since Kazu, Ursa, and the other's kidnapping and they had not found a single clue as to where they were or where Ozai could be hiding. The week was almost over and they had begun to despair. Underneath the table, her hands bunched her dress tightly on her lap as she once again felt her sorrow, fear, and guilt resurface. She paused when she felt a large, warm hand cover one of her fists and she looked up at Zuko.
The Fire Lord had been watching his wife since they sat down. He could read her thoughts through her silence and the expressions that sometimes slipped onto her face. During their meeting the previous night, Zuko had wondered if it would be best he hand over the throne in order to have his son and mother back, but Iroh had convinced him that Ozai would probably break his deal even if he were to do so. After all, Pakku added, Ozai would want to get rid of any obstacles to the throne, and being the legitimate heir to it, Kazu would have to be removed. Zuko and Katara had winced at the old man's blunt words. Sukú had then mused that since Kazu was already being an heir to the throne, Ozai might decide to keep him and raise him as his own. And if he were to win back the throne, he would either banish or kill Zuko and Katara and they would never see Kazu again.

Zuko found that idea to be even worse, for he knew Ozai would try to raise Kazu to be as cruel and uncaring as him. Without any love or affection. He knew from experience how painful that could be. He carried around scars from the way his father raised him, beyond just the obvious physical one. It wasn’t a life he wished his son to have.

They had agreed that they needed to continue to find a way to capture Ozai, Jianguo, and their men. But how? And who was the traitor amongst them? They needed to be careful.

A knock sounded at the door, causing everybody to pause what they were doing to glance at it. Zuko bid whoever was outside to enter. They watched silently as Physician Toshiro walked in, a kind smile on his old lips and a tray with a porcelain teapot in his hands.

"Here is the calming tea I was talking about, my lord," Toshiro spoke up softly and moved forward when Zuko nodded at him. "This should help with any insomnia."

Zuko thanked him as the old man knelt beside Katara to offer the tea to her. Katara briefly frowned at her husband, but turned back to smile gratefully at the old physician. Zuko had told him about her trouble sleeping and eating and the physician had promised to brew a medicinal tea to help with both. Zuko had not eaten or slept well either, not with the constant fear and worry he was in.

"Thank you, Physician Toshiro," she murmured before she pointedly added, "I'm sure my husband would like some as well."

Zuko did not bother protesting at the look in Katara's eyes. She was determined he would drink the tea as well and he knew it was because she was worried for his health too. Silently, he nodded and the physician poured him a cup. Toshiro had been very helpful over the last two days and he was grateful for the old man's help and encouraging words.

While he and Katara sipped their tea, Zuko watched as their other family members around the low table continued their meal. The mood was subdued, even Sokka and his twin daughters were sitting quietly, their boisterousness restrained by the circumstances. He glanced at Jee to see him looking expressionlessly at his plate. Zuko placed the teacup down and frowned darkly. They were all worried at what Ozai could do to Ursa now that she was in his clutches. He balled his hand into a fist. Ozai would pay with his life if he hurt his son, his mother, or his friends.

He needed to find a way to get his family back.

But what would happen if he were unable to do so by the end of the week?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"Hello?! Is anybody paying attention? I said I'm hungry!" Toph shouted obnoxiously and pounded loudly at the door for the tenth time that day.
She paused a moment to see if she could hear any approaching footsteps, but to her irritation she heard nothing. She was being ignored once again. She cursed under her breath as she gave the door a hard kick out of anger and frustration. She winced and bit her lip to keep herself from yelping at the throbbing pain exploding in her bare toes. She continued to curse as she reached down to massage her foot.

When she had woken up, feeling as if she had the worst hangover ever, she found herself in total darkness. Not the darkness that she was used to, but one much more terrifying. She had realized in the most horrible way that she didn't have her earthbending. Not only could she not escape wherever she was, but she was completely blind. She hated the feeling since it brought back dark memories of her childhood from before she found the badger-moles. She hated feeling so lost and vulnerable. After exploring the area, she found she was in a room with no windows and random boxes and items placed everywhere. She guessed it was a storage room.

What was going on? Where was she? And where was Aang? He had been the last person she had seen back in the guest room in the palace. Was he all right? Feeling her frustration and fear rise within her, making her feel as if she were suffocating, Toph began to yell at the top of her lungs and pound at the door more frantically until her fists began to throb in pain.

Suddenly, the door was thrown open and the unexpected force flung her back. She landed on the ground with a grunt of pain, but immediately sprang to her feet at the loud sound of booted feet angrily approaching her.

"Shut yer trap!" she heard a man growl.

Even though she did not have her bending abilities, she refused to be cowed. Toph squared her shoulders and faced the direction where she heard the man talking from. She jutted her chin out and narrowed her eyes.

"Maybe I would if I knew what was going on and was fed while at it!" she snapped.

"Yer in no position to demand things, girly," Ping grunted as he glared at the short woman who was glaring back at him, though looking at a spot over his shoulder.

"Don't call me 'girly', asshole," she hissed.

She tensed when she heard him take a step toward her.

"If ya don't comply we'll hurt yer boyfriend," he threatened.

Toph's eyes widened in sudden panic. So they did have Aang? Why?

"What did you do to him?" she demanded to know. "Where is he?"

"He's alive…" he began before he cruelly added, "barely."

Toph could just hear the smirk in his tone. With a curse, she lunged at him with a raised fist, but he knocked her back with his hand. He laughed mockingly when she stumbled backward with a vehement curse.

"If ya make any more noise, I'll hurt yer boy worse than before," Ping warned as he smirked at her.

Toph clenched her hands tightly and grit her teeth, resisting the urge to rub the sting on her cheek where he had smacked her. She wished she had her bending, she would crush him with boulders until every last one of his bones broke for daring to hurt her, but especially for hurting Aang. His
laugh had her growling under her breath.

"Yer so pretty when you're quiet," he cooed.

Ping laughed when she spat in his direction. Without another word, he walked back to the door and closed it loudly behind him.

Toph's shoulders slumped when she was once again left in the oppressing darkness and silence. She hoped Aang was okay. Her eyes widened. Were the others captured too? She hoped not. She had to find a way to escape.

She had to find Aang.

And kick some bastards' butts.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

In the silence of his study, Zuko grimly set aside the parchment he had been reading before he lost focus. He was too worried about his son and his mother to pay much attention to his work. He glanced at the piles of paperwork on his desk and felt the weight on his shoulders increase. He knew that as Fire Lord, he had responsibilities that he needed to see to for the good of the country. But as a father, son, and friend, he just could not find it in himself to concentrate on his duties. Which made him feel guilty for putting his personal affairs before the greater good of his people. But, his worry for his family, especially his son, overrode that.

Even though he had tried to remain firm in his decision to never surrender the throne to Ozai, he had begun to waver in his resolve when no sign of Kazuhiko, Ursa, and the others appeared. His advisors had begun to ask the same question countless times. Would he really give up the well-being of an entire country for the sake of rescuing his son?

Even though he had evaded the question by firmly assuring them it would not come to that, inwardly he knew the answer was yes. He would give up anything for his family. He would even give up his own life if it meant keeping Katara and their son safe. Which is why he was trying everything in his power to find everyone and bring Ozai and Jianguo to justice.

And Katara was determined to do so as well. He had been worried about her the last two days, she had taken their son's kidnapping harder than anyone, but the previous night, after telling her about his guilt and worry, her resolve seemed to strengthen. She was even more determined to find Kazu, Ursa, and the others as well as keep the Fire Nation safe from Ozai's cruel clutches.

At her insistence, they had dressed as the Blue Spirit and the Painted Lady and left the palace in the middle of the night. Just as they had the first night of the kidnapping, they roamed the city and the outskirts in search of any clues as to their son's whereabouts. They had silently visited every seedy place, from taverns to brothels, and abandoned cabins in the woods. But to no avail. They had even snuck into Wei's home since Zuko still believed him guilty. But they had only found the old advisor snoring loudly in his opulent room.

They had returned home when dawn began to approach, empty-handed and disheartened. But it was Katara that had assured him they would find their family, her tone both firm and hopeful. It turned dark and cold as she vowed to make Jianguo and Ozai pay for taking them in the first place. He had never been more in awe of his wife's fierce determination, at the way her blue eyes blazed with such powerful resolve. She had always been a strong woman, but motherhood had made her even more protective of those she cared for, especially Kazu. He had no doubt she would make anyone regret hurting him.
Thinking of his wife and son had him glancing at the two paintings decorating his large study. The one of his waterbender smiling prettily at him hung on the same wall, but although he loved that painting, his attention fixated on their family portrait. Katara was smiling serenely, yet her happiness was unmistakable as she held their son in her arms who was smiling toothlessly. The painter had even captured Zuko's pride as he sat next to his wife in their matching red royal robes, his hand placed on her thigh.

He felt his heart wrench in his chest before he narrowed his eyes in determination. That would not be the last image he ever saw of Kazu.

Turning back to his paperwork, the Fire Lord decided to continue reading, knowing he could not neglect his duties. He had a meeting with the advisors in a few minutes and he knew he would be hearing from all sides on what he should do about Ozai's demands. Although they had not straight out said so, he knew the majority of them wanted him to refuse Ozai's demands, even if it meant sacrificing his son, Ursa, Aang, and Toph. He clenched his teeth before he forced himself to calm down. It was moments like this when he wished Chao was still alive. The advisor would have sided with him completely and tried to make the others see his point of view.

Surprisingly, during the last meeting, Wei had backed him up and even agreed it would be a bad idea to let Ozai win for he would destroy the Fire Nation and kill every last one of them. Of course, he had ruined it by saying offhandedly that he and Katara could just beget another heir. Zuko had almost lunged at the man in rage, but managed at the last second to maintain his composure.

He had asked Katara to join him for this meeting, so he was waiting for her. Even through her constant worry and sorrow, Katara had continued with her duties and let him know she would be listening to a few of the people's petitions. Surprisingly, or not so surprisingly because the people loved both Katara and Kazu, the people had wished them luck in finding their son and believed them capable of defeating Ozai as they had done years before. Zuko hoped their good wishes and trust were not in vain.

A knock on the wooden door had him looking up from the paper in his hand. He frowned. Who could be disturbing him? Katara would have just walked in. Could it be good news? Or bad? Curious, he called for them to enter. He watched as a guard opened the door and bowed before walking in.

"What is it?" he asked.

"My lord," the young guard began as he shifted uncertainly, his armor clanging softly with his movements, "Lady Mai wishes to see you. She is waiting at the gates."

Zuko's frown deepened. He had not even realized she was back in the Fire Nation. He rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. What did she want now? He was in no mood to listen to her. Before he could order the guard to deny her entrance, the man spoke.

"She insists on seeing you, my lord," he added quickly, "She says she has some important information."

At his words, Zuko immediately straightened.

"Information? What kind?" he asked rapidly, feeling hope grow a little in his chest.

The guard shook his head.

"She says she will only impart the news to you."
Zuko frowned.

If she truly had information for him, then he wanted to hear it. Could it be possible she knew where Kazuhiko and the others were? Or perhaps where Jianguo and the other rebels were hiding?

"Bring her in," he ordered simply.

The guard bowed and immediately left. Zuko steepled his fingers together, hoping she had real information and wondering how she could have come across it. A few minutes later, another knock sounded at the door before it was opened, revealing Mai in an elegant, black outfit. Her face, as usual, expressed nothing of her feelings or what she was thinking.

Zuko watched her enter and close the door behind her with a passive silence. The last time they had seen each other, he had angrily thrown her from his room. He had still not forgiven her for what she had done. He could have lost Katara’s love and trust because of her. But he was willing to momentarily let it go if she did, indeed, have the information he was looking for.

"What kind of information do you have?" he asked directly, his tone impassive.

Mai frowned inwardly. It seemed he was still angry with her since he did not even bother with a greeting. She looked around the room without a response. She paused when she noticed the portrait of the waterbender. She suppressed a sneer before she glanced back to Zuko sitting behind his desk. She could not help admiring his imposing frame and handsome features, feeling her body react to him.

She had decided that perhaps it would help her win Zuko’s favor back if she told him where his son and mother were and what Ozai and Jianguo planned to do. She hated both men and did not trust them. She just had to make it seem like she was a victim in all of this. That she was willing to risk her life to help Zuko find his son. Surely, he would be grateful for that? Then it would be easier to get him back.

"I don't have all day to wait for you to talk," Zuko spoke up gruffly at her silence. "What information do you have for me?"

"It's good to see you again, Zuko," she said instead as she took a couple of steps closer toward the desk.

"That's far enough," the firebender warningly told her.

Mai paused, but she did not let his curt words deter her.

"That's far enough," the firebender warningly told her.

"I've missed you," she added in an uncharacteristic soft tone.

"I don't want to hear it," Zuko responded gruffly, his eyes narrowing.

"Please, Zuko, just hear me out," she continued as she stared unwaveringly into his glowering, golden eyes, "All I ask is that you give me a chance. Give...us a chance…"

"If this is why you're here, then I will ask you to leave. Now," Zuko interrupted her firmly.

Mai bit her lip, her hands clenched at her sides, deciding if perhaps she shouldn't push him too far at the moment. But it was hard. She was tired of waiting.

Suddenly, the door opened. They turned to see Katara pause in the doorway with Momo perched on her shoulder. Zuko looked at her anxiously as he watched her staring blankly at them. He hoped she
did not think anything was happening between Mai and him since he knew how it must look to have his obsessed ex in his study.

Still rooted at the entrance, Katara silently observed the scene before her. She could feel Mai glaring at her, but her focus was on Zuko who was looking at her worryingly. Anger rushed through her body toward the noblewoman before she forced herself to calm down. There were more important things to worry about, like finding her son, than getting jealous over something that had happened years ago. Besides, she trusted Zuko and knew he would never betray her. So there must be a reason why he had allowed Mai to enter the palace once again and she was curious to know what that reason was.

"Katara," Zuko called out to her, still unsure as to what she was thinking.

He wanted to blurt out that she had nothing to worry about since he loved her, but he did not want Mai to witness their interactions. He was relieved when Katara gave him a small smile after she closed the door behind her. She walked gracefully forward, barely glancing at Mai as she passed her, before she stopped to stand proudly beside Zuko's large chair. They glanced at each other briefly, but that quick moment conveyed their connection and understanding before they silently glanced back at the noblewoman.

Mai returned their stares with a neutral one of her own. She had seen the look in their eyes when they glanced at each other, saw the trust in the waterbender and the tender relief in Zuko. She felt sick. But she did not let any of her thoughts show, even though inwardly she was seething that her chance to speak to Zuko privately had been destroyed.

"I'll ask you again what kind of information you have," Zuko spoke up, not missing a beat even as Momo jumped from Katara's shoulder to land on his.

Momo's large, green eyes stared warily at the tall woman. The flying-lemur had not left the royal couple's side since Aang's disappearance.

At his words, Katara perked up and she felt hope expand in her chest.

"Is it about our missing family?" she asked as she stared intensely at the dark-haired woman. "Do you know where Kazuhiko is?"

Mai looked into the waterbender's hopeful eyes and felt her chest tighten a little in sudden sympathy despite herself. She could not imagine what it would feel like to have her child taken from her and have his life threatened. However, she quickly hardened her heart. She would never know since Katara took away any chance of her having a child by ensnaring Zuko.

But she could have everything she wanted back. If only Ozai and Jianguo won. They would take care of Katara and her brat. She just had to make sure she was able to escape with Zuko and then she would have him for herself. She would give him another child to replace the one he had lost. Ignoring Katara's question, Mai looked back at Zuko.

"I lied," she responded smoothly, "I don't have any information. I just wanted you to see me and I knew you would only do so if you thought I had any news."

She was unfazed when she was met with two pairs of glaring eyes.

Zuko gritted his teeth, feeling anger swell within him at her ploy. How dare she play with them like that? Before he could growl at the woman to leave, he heard his wife speak.

"Get out," she ordered in an icily calm tone, her blue eyes blazing in her rage as her fingers twitch at
her sides.

How dare she? How dare she raise their hopes up? How dare she try to seduce Zuko while they were grieving over their missing son? She had never hated the noblewoman as much as she did at the moment. Her hands itched to smack the unrepentant expression from Mai's face.

"You heard my wife," Zuko added darkly as he glared at Mai, "Leave."

"Zuko, wait-"

"I don't want to hear it," he cut her off angrily as he finally stood from his chair.

Momo chattered at the sudden movement, but settled down as he wrapped his tail around the firebender's neck while he and the blue-eyed female glared at the other woman.

"I already lost what little patience and consideration I might have had for you," Zuko growled bluntly. "You were banished from the palace and I looked passed that, was willing to lift the banishment if you were willing to help us find our family."

His amber eyes darkened as his hands balled into fists on his desk.

"I had hoped you would have changed, become less selfish, but I see that is not the case. I can't believe you would be so cruel as to use this horrific circumstance for your own gain," he said in a cold tone before continuing when Mai tried to speak, "Do not darken my doorstep again. Come back and I will banish you from the Fire Nation, not just the grounds."

Zuko was beyond enraged. How dare she dangle hope in front of them and then act as if nothing was wrong?

Mai's eyes widened at his words, but she continued to return their glare, feeling angry and humiliated for being forced out of the palace once again. Yet, she knew she would be unable to change his mind with Katara in the room. She was running out of patience, but she knew she had to be careful and not be hasty if she wanted to win in the end. Without another word, she turned around and walked toward the door. As she opened it, she told herself that Zuko would feel differently when he lost everything and all he would have left would be her. Then he would see she was all he needed. She closed the door loudly after her.

Once the noblewoman was out of sight, the royal couple turned to each other. Zuko pulled Katara tightly to him as he sat back down on the chair, arranging her comfortably on his lap. Momo flew to land on the table when Katara wrapped her arms around her husband's neck and pressed her forehead on his scarred cheek, trying to fight the tears of frustration and disappointment from falling. Crying will not help things.

"What...what if we never get Kazu back?" she whispered after a moment, finally voicing their fears.

Zuko pressed his lips against her head as he ran a soothing hand down her back.

"We can't give up now," he told her softly, "We have to keep trying...for both our family's sake and the Fire Nation's."

*Mia's eyes widened at his words, but she continued to return their glare, feeling angry and humiliated for being forced out of the palace once again. Yet, she knew she would be unable to change his mind with Katara in the room. She was running out of patience, but she knew she had to be careful and not be hasty if she wanted to win in the end. Without another word, she turned around and walked toward the door. As she opened it, she told herself that Zuko would feel differently when he lost everything and all he would have left would be her. Then he would see she was all he needed. She closed the door loudly after her.

Once the noblewoman was out of sight, the royal couple turned to each other. Zuko pulled Katara tightly to him as he sat back down on the chair, arranging her comfortably on his lap. Momo flew to land on the table when Katara wrapped her arms around her husband's neck and pressed her forehead on his scarred cheek, trying to fight the tears of frustration and disappointment from falling. Crying will not help things.

"What...what if we never get Kazu back?" she whispered after a moment, finally voicing their fears.

Zuko pressed his lips against her head as he ran a soothing hand down her back.

"We can't give up now," he told her softly, "We have to keep trying...for both our family's sake and the Fire Nation's."

Mai walked calmly down the golden corridors of the palace as she made her way to the exit. Inwardly, she was consumed with her anger and frustration with the whole situation that was now her life. Perhaps it would be best if she gave Zuko up now. A frown slipped onto her passive face as
she mulled over the idea. She hated being ignored. She hated feeling rejected. She was worth more than that.

She thought back on Zuko’s last words. Perhaps she had ruined her chances with her hasty visit.

She straightened herself out. She refused to admit defeat, however, and let Katara take everything that rightfully belonged to her. She just had to remind herself that all these obstacles and hardships will be rewarded in the end. She just had to be patient a bit longer.

As she passed one of the unoccupied sitting rooms, she heard her name called and paused. She turned around to see Toshiro walking toward her, a guileless smile on his face she now knew was a farce. Had he been following her?

"Lady Mai, how nice to see you," he greeted in a kind voice Mai knew was fake, "I have not seen you in a long while. I trust you are well?"

Even though his smile and voice conveyed a sweet, caring old man, his eyes told a different story. He was glaring at her, trying to gauge her reaction. She knew what he was really asking. He was trying to see if she had told Zuko anything. She smothered a sneer. She would bet he would be running in panic to save himself if she had. Instead, she politely nodded her head as a servant passed them.

"I am well, thank you," she said blankly, "I am getting ready to take a vacation to my country estate."

"Oh, that's nice," he replied and she could just make out the way he relaxed, "Well, have a pleasant trip."

He bowed and she reluctantly returned the gesture. When they straightened, he smiled at her before he moved forward.

"Betray us and you die," he whispered harshly as he moved past her.

Her face did not show any reaction to his words as she continued down the hallway as they parted ways.

The two of them did not notice the pair of eyes that watched from the shadows of the dark sitting room.
Jiao hummed softly as she rocked the little prince in her arms trying to soothe him even as her eyes constantly darted toward the locked door in apprehension. Prince Kazuhiko had been fussing for a few hours, unable to find rest, even though it was past his nap time. He had at first refused the milk and bananas she had found in the kitchen until his hunger finally made him eat. She knew he missed his parents and his mother’s milk.

As she gazed down at the baby now dozing in her arms, her mind once again returned to her son. She hoped he was okay, sleeping and eating as he needed even without her there to be with him. And she worried about Kuo, too, knowing he was probably out looking for her as desperately as she knew the royal couple was looking for their son. She prayed he wouldn’t do anything rash, their son needed him if she wasn’t going to make it. She knew the prince was the important prisoner and she was merely here on a whim, and thus expendable. No matter what, she would try to keep Kazu safe, even if it caused her her life. Not because he was the prince and she had sworn fealty to the Fire Lord and Lady, but because she loved him, almost as much as she loved her son, and she couldn’t live with herself if she did any less.

She and Kazu had been taken to a room at the far end of the grand house and locked inside for two whole nights with Chang bringing them food and water on occasion. She had been given a uniform the household servants wore, which she reluctantly put on because hers had been stained, and after two days was starting to smell and feel sticky. They had also been given a small basin with water and a small bar of soap to clean themselves. She had barely slept because of the baby’s cries, but also because she feared the former Dai Li agent sneaking inside and catching her unawares.

She was not ignorant to what the man wanted from her and it made fear spread through her at what he could do. It brought back memories of the horrible day in the mountains near Omashu. She shook her head. She refused to go through that ever again, knowing this time the man would probably stop at nothing to have her. She shuddered in disgust.

If only there was a way they could escape or a way for her to contact someone for help. But the heavy, wooden door was locked as was the window. Once they had been left alone the first day, she had rushed to the window to see if she could catch someone’s eye, but unfortunately, the window faced a wall and she had not seen anyone pass below. And by the darkness that was seeping into the room, it seemed they would be spending another night there. She felt despair creep up on her. What were they to do?

Prince Kazu began to stir from his restless sleep and began to make small whimpering sounds. Jiao rocked him more gently in her arms and hummed more soothingly. She relaxed a little when he began to fall back asleep. A sudden knock on the door had her tensing up. The door opened slowly
and she stood up from the chair she had been sitting on near the window. She backed away closer to the wall, bringing the baby close to her chest. She watched as Chang walked in and she felt her heart race in fear.

Chang paused as he stared at the woman that plagued his thoughts. He frowned at the apprehensive look in her golden eyes. He did not like to see her cowering away from him.

“Come. It is time for us to go,” he ordered.

“Please let us return home,” Jiao pleaded before she hurriedly added, “I’m sure Fire Lord Zuko and Fire Lady Katara will reward you greatly if you take us back to the palace.”

The man remained silent for a moment and Jiao felt a sliver of hope that he was considering her words.

“No,” he replied firmly.

Jiao felt that hope vanish and she looked at him desperately.

“Why not?”

“If I remain in the service of Ozai and Jianguo, I will be rewarded more richly. They promised to give me a noble title,” he told her simply before he added in a huskier tone, “Above all, I will have you.”

Jiao felt a spark of anger at his disregard for what was right and his insistence of having her. He didn’t even know her! He did not know her true self like Kuo did. Chang only saw her resemblance to his past love and she refused to be placed under someone else’s shadow.

“I am not your dead lover!” she blurted out angrily.

Chang’s green eyes widened at her outburst.
“How did you know about Aiko?” he asked quietly.

“It doesn’t matter,” she responded with a hiss, “I won’t replace her because I am not her!”

He moved quickly toward her and she backed away with a gasp until she bumped against the wall at her back. He stood close to her and she stared at him wide-eyed. He reached forward to cup her cheek, but she angrily moved her head away. Her actions did not deter him as he reached forward to cup each side of her head with his hands, effectively trapping her and forcing her to look at him.

“I know,” he murmured softly as his thumbs caressed her cheeks. “You may look similar in appearance to her, but you are very different in personality.”

“If you can see that, why not let me go?” she asked tentatively, his closeness making her sudden bravado disappear. She pressed the still sleeping baby closer to her, keeping him safe. She wanted to rip herself from the man’s unwanted touch, but she was afraid of his retaliation and of hurting Kazu in her struggles.

“I like your sweet and caring nature,” he responded as he glanced down pointedly at the sleeping baby in her arms. He looked back into her fearful eyes and more softly added, “If you give me a chance I will make you very happy. You will see that you are meant for me.”

His words once again made anger rush through Jiao’s chest. With one hand, she pushed hard against his chest. When he took a startled step back, Jiao took advantage to escape his invasive presence and moved away from him. Her sudden movement, however, woke up the baby and he began to fuss a little. Jiao cooed at him even as she glared at Chang. When he made to move toward her again, she took a step back.

“Stop,” she hissed before she firmly added, “I am happy with my husband and our son. And I want to go back to them.”

Chang’s eyes narrowed angrily at the mention of her husband. How he wished he could have killed that firebender when he had the chance.

“The boy I can tolerate for you, but the firebender will have to die,” he growled. “You are mine. You will see that soon.”
“Never,” she hissed, even though the thought of Kuo dying had her heart clenching in her chest.

“We’ll see,” he replied.

They glared at each other for a moment before Chang took a breath to compose himself. Now was not the time to discuss this. They will have plenty of time later. Once everything was settled, he would do everything in his power to seduce her, to make her love him.

“We have to leave,” he said.

He made his way to the door and opened it, motioning for her to follow. Jiao hesitated, unsure of where he was taking them, but thinking she could probably have a better chance to escape if she left the room. She looked down at the baby in her arms to see he was looking at her before he began to squirm in discomfort. She shifted him in her arms so that he could look over her shoulder.

Slowly, she moved toward the door and stepped out. Before she could even think about making a run for it, Chang firmly grabbed her upper arm and guided her down the dark hall. They remained silent as they walked down several corridors until they stepped into the sitting room Jiao had seen before.

Mai stood in the middle of her sitting room, directing two of her servants to place the remaining luggage into the carriage waiting outside. Hearing their approach, the noblewoman turned to regard them with a bored glance. She ignored the way the maidservant glared at her as she focused on Zuko’s son, who was looking around curiously at the commotion. She sneered before she looked away to look at Chang.

“Must you bring so many things?” the former Dai Li agent asked in his usual calm tone.

“I need to make it look convincing that I’m staying at my country house for a vacation,” she replied flatly, “in case anyone sees me leave my house.”

Mai’s attention once again settled on the dark-haired baby who was now chewing on his fist with a small frown on his face. She was still seething over the interaction with Zuko and Katara. She wanted to make them suffer for their treatment of her and what better way than keeping their son away from them? She looked away from the child and focused on making sure she had not missing anything.
She thought back to her encounter with Toshiro. It had been foolish of her for forgetting that the old man worked there. She had not counted on coming across the traitor. She had to be careful since she had no doubt they would kill her if she betrayed them. She frowned, wondering if perhaps she should have refused to help them. But it was too late now.

“The carriage is ready, my lady,” one of her loyal servants spoke up quietly.

Mai waved her away as she looked back at the other two.

“It is time to go,” she said passively as she moved toward the doors.

There were only three more days for Zuko to decide to heed Ozai’s commands. Would he let Ozai take over the throne in order to save his son’s life? Or would he instead choose the throne to save the Fire Nation from Ozai’s cruel power?

It didn’t really matter to her as long as she got Zuko in the end.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Aang groaned out in pain when Ping punched him in the stomach once again. He could feel blood leaking from a cut on his forehead and a split lip. One eye was almost completely swollen shut. He was hanging from the ceiling, metal chains wrapped around his wrists above the stone manacles that were suppressing his bending. The strain of holding up his own weight pulled painfully on his arms and shoulders. If he had his bending abilities, he could have blown the man away with one breath.

A few hours ago, he had been pacing the room, wondering what they planned to do to him. Now he knew. Ozai, Jianguo, and Ping had arrived and the latter had chained him up, ignoring his questions about what they wanted and about Toph’s well-being.

Then the first blow came.

He had lost count of the time and punches. Instead, he tried to focus on calming his mind, thinking mostly of his friends and especially Toph, trying valiantly to ignore the pain throbbing through his whole body.

“Stop,” Ozai’s command cut in like a knife.
Ping immediately stopped and backed away, panting from the exertion and rubbing his raw knuckles.

Aang swallowed, even though his throat was dry, and licked his chapped lips as sweat and blood stung his eyes. He heard Ozai’s footsteps before his boots came in sight to his still good eye. He winced when Ozai grabbed his chin and forcefully lifted his head up.

“Are you now ready to return my firebending to me?” he asked in a cold tone.

The chained airbender glared at him through his good eye, breathing hard through the pain wracking his body.

“I...I already told…you,” he rasped painfully, “I don’t...know how.”

Ozai’s eyes blazed and his lips curled back in disgust and rage. Without warning, he snapped his hand forward and backhanded the airbender across the face.

Aang gasped in pain as his head snapped to the side at the force of the blow. Pain exploded from his cheek all the way to his head, causing his vision to darken for a moment.

“Then you better try,” the former Fire Lord growled as he turned away. “Keep at it until he decides to cooperate,” he ordered Ping.

“Yes, my lord,” the large earthbender quickly replied.

“Even if...I did...I will never give it back to you,” Aang managed to hissed out through the pain, “You would destroy the world.”

Ozai paused before he looked over his shoulder at the suspended airbender glaring at him from one eye.

“Oh?” Ozai responded with a mocking raised eyebrow, “Even if it means your little woman’s life?”

A cruel smile curled his lips when the young man bit his lip and remain silent.
“Think about it,” he said before he continued toward the door that Jianguo had opened for him.

Without another word or backward glance, they stepped out and firmly closed the door behind them. Aang did not stop glaring at Ozai’s back until they disappeared before he slumped tiredly, wishing nothing more than to fall into a deep sleep and forget the pain and torture. Never had he imagined he would be suffering such pain nor that it would be Ozai, whom he had defeated years ago, be the one to be inflict it on him. He had naively thought peace would reign after Ozai’s defeat. How wrong he was.

Panting in pain and exhaustion, Aang found himself wondering if perhaps it would have been best if he had killed Ozai all those years ago. He closed his eyes and hung his head in shame at his thoughts. He welcomed the respite from the blows and he hoped Toph and everybody else were okay.

A dark chuckle snapped him from his drowsiness and he lifted his head up to look at the earthbender that had remained behind.

“We’re not finished yet, Avatar,” Ping said mockingly as he cracked his knuckles.

Aang’s gray eyes widened before he again let his head fall forward, closing his eyes once again.

He just needed to rest.

Jet silently wandered the dark streets of the capital, focused more on his thoughts than on the path before him. It was late at night and there weren’t many people around, and if he happened to pass any, they ignored him as they scurried to their homes at the change of the weather. Dark clouds had settled in the sky, blocking the moonlight and the stars. A cold wind had picked up, indicating that it might rain.

He had heard the news about the prince’s kidnapping and the rumors going around about Ozai’s demands. He could only imagine how devastated Katara and Zuko must be feeling at having their son’s life threatened. But would Zuko hand over the throne in exchange for his son? Or would he do what was best for the world and refuse? Either way, both decisions were difficult. He was glad he wasn’t in the scarred bastard’s situation, though he did feel bad for Katara.

He shook his head and decided to think of something else. He had been on the jewel thief’s trail all
day, but it had run cold, so he had decided to try again tomorrow. He was tired and he was starving. However, there was another reason why he was roaming the streets of the upper class instead of heading back to the seedy tavern he was staying at with Smellerbee and Longshot.

For some reason, he could not stop thinking about his encounter with Mai. There was just something about the encounter, perhaps the determined manner in which she had gazed back at the palace that made him think something was wrong. Why he felt that way, he didn’t know, but he had decided to check out her house just to satisfy his curiosity and quiet his suspicions. He had long ago learned to trust his intuition. It had saved his life more than once.

Once he came in view of the noblewoman’s impressive home, the freedom fighter paused near the shadows of an alleyway to take in his surroundings. Most of the other houses were quiet and there were only a few people hurrying down the deserted streets. Looking around to make sure he wasn’t being watched, he stealthily moved toward the house, making sure to keep to the shadows. As he got near, he could hear voices and the sound of a moose-dragon on the other side of the tall wall.

He went around until he came to the back of the house before silently jumping onto the edge of the wall. He nimbly landed in a garden, quickly running toward the cover of a tree. He glanced around warily, confused as to why they weren’t any guards around. He moved silently forward until he reached the edge of the large house. He climbed onto the roof, and crouched low as he made his way toward the front where he had heard the noises. As he got nearer, he could see the light of torches as the sounds reached his ears once again.

Lowering himself onto his stomach, he peeked over the edge of where the roof curled up into an elaborate design. It was the courtyard and a few servants were strapping boxes and other items on a carriage tied to a moose-dragon that shook its head impatiently. He frowned. Did Mai decide to return to Omashu?

He shrugged as he observed the commotion below him. It seemed it had all been in his head and he had blown things out of proportion. What did he expect Mai to do? He shook his head. He had wasted his time while he could have been back at the tavern with a warm meal in his belly and maybe a comely wench in his bed. He was about to crawl back the way he had come, but he paused when he saw Mai exit the house.

He frowned once again as he watched her a moment before shrugging. Seeing nothing unusual, he was about to move back when the sound of a baby’s cry caught his attention. Curious, he looked back to see a maidservant carrying a baby and trying to calm it down by rocking it in her arms while Mai watched them. Jet’s eyebrow rose in surprise.

Was that Mai’s kid?
His eyed widened when a distressing thought entered his head. That couldn’t be his child too, right? He looked more intently at the fussing baby, but he couldn’t make out any features from such a distance and the darkness didn’t help. He felt a little panic starting to form at the thought that he could be a father. He had never really given much thought to it, but he felt like he couldn’t just abandoned a baby if it was his, even if it was unplanned and Mai was its mother.

He narrowed his eyes. Why didn’t she tell him they had a kid when they saw each other? He frowned once again. Unless it wasn’t his, but another of her lovers. Relaxing a little at the thought, he observed the baby more closely. He was no expert, but he was pretty sure it was too young to be his since his last tryst with Mai had been more than a year ago. He nodded in satisfaction.

He didn’t think Mai would have kept a bastard child with her, though. She just didn’t seem like the motherly type. And with her trying to get Zuko back, Jet would have assumed she would get rid of her indiscretions to achieve that. He shrugged. Oh well, not his problem.

The baby’s crying increased and he watched as the servant desperately tried to calm it down.

“Shut the brat up!” he heard Mai snap.

Jet frowned at her coldness. Poor kid, stuck with such an uncaring mother.

“He needs his parents!” he heard the maidservant exclaim in what he assumed was exasperation, “Please, let us go!”

He watched as Mai glared at the woman. His frown deepened at the servant’s words, raising his curiosity. So the child wasn’t Mai’s? Who were his parents then and why did Mai have him? He focused more on the maid, his eyes scanning her features by the minimal amount of light from the torches. She looked familiar. Where had he seen her before?

“Please, let us go back to the palace!” the woman pleaded desperately.

His eyes widened once he realized who she was. She was Katara’s maid! He had seen her following Katara in Omashu’s Palace. He frowned. What was she doing in Mai’s house? He was distracted from his thoughts when he saw a tall man with a long braid take the maid’s elbow and firmly yet carefully lead her toward the awaiting carriage.
“We already told you we’re not letting you and the prince go,” the man said gruffly.

Jet’s eyes widened as it finally clicked into place. The prince?! Then the baby was the missing son of Katara and Zuko! He narrowed his eyes. What the hell was Mai doing with him? He should’ve trusted his gut instinct sooner. He didn’t know what the fuck was going on, but he needed to let Katara and Zuko know Mai had their son.

Just then the dark clouds finally opened up and a heavy rain started to fall. He watched as the man quickly helped the maid enter the carriage before he moved aside to let an indignant Mai enter. As the servants hurried to tie the last belongings, the tall man entered the carriage and closed the door, shutting out the rain.

Jet blinked away the water from his eyes as the rain quickly soaked his hair and clothes. He remained still as he watched the carriage move forward and the gates were opened. Once the carriage passed through, the gate was shut behind it. Quickly, Jet moved from his hiding place and dropped down from the roof, racing toward the wall.

Once he has dropped down on the other side, Jet moved silently through the dark alleyway, water splashing under his feet and falling down his face. Just as he was about to near the other side, something dropped down in front of him. Jet managed to jump back at the last moment before he crashed into whatever had blocked his path. He pulled out his hook swords as he watched a hooded man straightened himself out, a short sword in one hand. Jet tensed when he heard someone else dropped down behind him, effectively trapping him. He glanced quickly over his shoulder to see the other man hidden beneath a hooded cloak.

“What the hell do you want?” Jet growled as he turned back around and narrowed his eyes at the man standing before him. His hands tightened on his swords as he moved into a defensive stance.

“Seems our master was correct in having the cold woman’s house watched,” the stranger said with a casual drawl, “Although, we were watching to see if she was gonna betray him. We weren’t expecting a spy.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Jet asked gruffly.

The men laughed and he growled under his breath, clenching his teeth in anger, as his fingers twitched on his swords’ hilts.
“That man that’s going to kill you,” the man replied as he nonchalantly glanced down at his sword. “You know too much...so you must die.”

“I’m not that easy to kill,” Jet drawled before he lunged forward first, swords at his sides.

The man quickly parried his strikes before lashing out with a swipe of his sword. Jet easily moved aside and raised his hook sword only to jump back when the other man attacked him. He cursed when they began to simultaneously drive him back and it took all his concentration to deflect their strikes. He cried out when one of them managed to slice his thigh.

He jumped away and grit his teeth as pain raced up his spine. He ignored the sensation of warm blood seeping down his leg as he attacked once again. He grinned when he ripped through the arm of one of the men, who cursed vehemently under his breath. Gaining confidence, Jet began to drive them back, occasionally throwing in insults when they failed to land a blow. He was doing well defending himself as he tried to move around them so he could escape the alleyway, but then another man showed up and joined the other two. Jet began to panic when he began to lose ground.

He cried out when one of them sliced his back and another ran his sword through his side. One of his hook swords was knocked from his hand, but he spun around fiercely, determined to keep fighting with the other, but he was met with a fist to the face. The blow knocked him down and he fell on the hard floor with a loud grunt of pain.

“Master Toshiro will be pleased to know the spy has been disposed of,” he heard one of them say.

“We must finish this quickly,” the first man said.

Jet blinked when black spots danced in front of him before staggering back to his feet. Another slice at his leg brought him to his knees with an anguished yelp and an angry curse. He forced himself to stand back up and keep fighting. He would not die on his knees!

The sound of the heavy rain and thunder blocked the sounds of clashing swords and pained cries as red blood and dirty water ran down the dark streets.

Staring out the window, Ursa watched the rain fall. She had remained near the window for what felt like hours, trying to come up with a way to escape, but so far none of her plans had worked. As soon as they had arrived at the country house (she still didn’t know who it belonged to), Ozai had forced
her into the opulent room. A trunk had been brought in with expensive clothes for her. She wondered where he had gotten them. He would stay with her for hours and had meals brought in for them, but she would not acknowledge his presence. He would then leave the room angrily at her rebuffs to his advances and sweet words.

Her thoughts once again focus on her family and Jee, worried for their distressed minds. She could not help worrying over Kazuhiko. Every time she asked about her grandson, Ozai would only tell her not to worry and that he was fine. His uncaring tone made her so angry and made her want to lash out at him. But she refrained from doing so because she knew his retaliation would be more painful and then she wouldn’t be able to escape and find Kazu if she were injured. Worse, she feared he would retaliate and hurt Kazu.

She frowned as she thought about her son. She just knew he was probably blaming himself for what was happening. And no doubt Jee was doing the same. She wanted to return to them. She wanted to forget that all of this had happened. She just wanted her and her family to be safe and happy.

She heard the door open and she tensed. She turned around warily, already knowing who it was. She stiffened further when she saw Ozai. It was late and she feared she knew what he wanted to do and why he was in her “guest room”. She did not say anything as he closed the door firmly behind him. He approached her slowly, his eyes looking at her intensely. She clenched her hands beside her while she tried to discreetly see if there was something she could use as a weapon. Unfortunately, she had already found out that anything she could pick up had been removed.

Ozai frowned. He could see her thoughts and it hurt. He missed seeing her pleased expression whenever he would come to her in their early years of marriage. He wanted her, but he had not touched her since her capture because he didn’t want her to resent him. He had wanted her to fall into his arms because of her own passion and need. But all his seductive efforts and romantic gestures had been ignored.

He was tired of waiting. It was time he got what he deserved and take what was rightfully his. She may fight it at first, but he was sure that she would surrender to her pleasure and enjoy his touch as she had once has many years ago.

Wanting to break the silence, Ursa spoke up.

“What do you want?” she asked coldly.

“You know why I’m here,” he responded huskily.
She narrowed her eyes.

“I do, but you must also know my thoughts about that,” she replied icily.

Ozai moved swiftly toward her, crowding her near the window as she tried to back away from him. He cupped her cheek, but she quickly knocked his hand aside and glared at him. He frowned.

“Why can’t you see how much I love you?” he asked with a low growl.

A small scoff left her lips.

“You have a strange way of showing your love,” she said sarcastically.

“My way is just different.” He shrugged.

“If your kind of love is to bed other women, make me kill your own father to save my son, banish me from my home, and kidnap me and our grandson, then I don’t want it,” she replied scathingly.

“I won’t believe you prefer a nobody like Jee,” he growled angrily.

“I do,” she replied firmly, “He is a better man than you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and she tensed, but did not stop glaring at him. Then a smirk appeared on his face. She gasped when he grabbed her and roughly pulled her to him, one of his hands grasping the back of her head so that she wouldn’t look away from him. Her body tensed since she could feel his breath on her lips.

“I’ll have you changing your mind once I remind you of how good our intimate moments were,” he groaned throatily.

He crashed his mouth to hers and kissed her hard. She began to struggle against his hold, trying to
push at his chest with all her strength, as she fought to keep her mouth closed to his invasive tongue. Ozai ignored her struggles as he dragged her toward the bed. He eagerly threw her on the mattress and quickly settled on top of her when she tried to escape.

“Let me go!” she screamed at him as she tried to kick at him and buck him off her.

Ursa managed to slip a hand out and she slapped him angrily. He blinked at the pain before he glared down at her.

“I am not one of your whores!” she hissed furiously, her eyes blazing.

“I know, which is why I haven’t bedded any since my escape,” he responded smoothly as he grabbed both her hands and pinned them next her head. He groaned at the sensation of having her beneath him. Her struggles were only making him more aroused as she rubbed against him. “I want you more than I ever did them.”

“I don’t want you!” she screamed, “Let me go, Ozai!”

“Oh, you’ll want me soon enough.”

He bent his head down and again roughly covered her mouth with his. Ursa eyes widened in fear when he began to rip at her clothes, his hand roughly grasping one of her breasts, making her wince in pain, before he grabbed her backside. As she struggled against his unrelenting mouth, he slid his hand down and began pulling her dress up. No, he couldn’t do this to her! She began to panic since she could not throw him off of her. Tears of frustration and fear gathered at her eyes.

Ozai drew back to catch his breath and looked down to see her. Her clothes were ripped around her and her long, black hair was in disarray, but she was glaring at him with watery eyes filled with hatred.

“If you rape me, I swear to Agni, I will never forgive you,” she said in a cold and hateful tone, “I will hate you more than I do now.”

Ozai frowned at her words. He was going to ignore her as he bent down to kiss her again, but when she moved her head away he paused. He decided not to risk it. He wanted her love him again, not hate him. He wanted her so badly, his body was aching with lust, but he wanted her affection more.
He glared down at her, angry that he couldn’t have her...for now.

He moved away from her and stood back up. He watched as she quickly drew a bedsheet to cover herself as she sat up.

“You will change your mind,” he said assuredly.

“Never,” she hissed.

Before Ozai could retort, a knock sounded at the door. He looked up to glare at the wooden door and whoever dared to disrupt his time with his wife.

“What do you want?” he growled out.

“The heir has arrived, my lord,” Ozai heard one of Jianguo’s men say.

Ursa immediately rose from the bed and rushed toward the trunk with new clothes.

“I will see my grandson,” she said firmly as she glared at him over her shoulder.

Ozai shrugged as he smoothed down his graying hair. He decided not to tell her that the boy would have to die eventually. She continued to glare at him and he knew she wanted him to leave so she could redress. He did not bother telling her he would see her naked soon.

“I will have the man outside escort you to the sitting room once you’re presentable,” he said as his eyes unashamedly raked her form.

When she did not reply, he turned away and headed toward the door. Once he was gone, Ursa pressed a hand to her mouth and shuddered in disgust, thanking all the gods that he had stopped before...She shook her head. She quickly washed her mouth and neck where he had touched her, but had no more time to completely wash herself. She was anxious to see her grandson. She hoped he was all right.
Once she was dressed, she left the room. As expected there were two men waiting for her outside. Lifting her head high, she walked down the corridor and they quickly followed after her. They guided her through a few more halls before she was escorted to the sitting room Ozai had mentioned. She froze when she saw Mai standing in the middle of the room, while Ozai and Jianguo sat on a sofa. Ursa stared at the noblewoman in confusion.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Mai’s eyes had widened when Zuko’s mother had appeared. Before she could respond with an excuse, Ozai spoke up.

“Why, this is her home, my dear, and she was kind enough to let us stay for the moment.”

Ursa gasped in shock before she clenched her teeth in anger.

“You traitor!” she hissed as her hands clenched at her sides, barely resisting the impulse to slap the younger woman in anger. Instead, she coldly said, “I knew you weren’t good enough for my son. I’m so glad he found a much more worthy woman as Katara for wife.”

Mai narrowed her eyes at such words, but remained silent. There was nothing she could say to mollify the older woman. Besides, her opinion did not matter to her.

Ursa’s attention shifted when she heard the sound of a baby’s soft whimper and she turned toward the entrance. She watched as a man ushered Jiao in with Kazu in her arms and she felt her heart ease.

“Kazu! Jiao!” she exclaimed as she rushed toward them.

Jiao smiled at her in relief before handing the baby over to his grandmother when she lifted her arms toward them. Kazu smiled happily at the familiar face and he snuggled close to her with a happy gurgle. Ursa felt her heart clench at his innocence. How could Ozai wish his grandson, such an innocent baby, harm? She rocked Kazu in her arms as she looked at the maidservant.

“Are you both okay?” she asked softly, ignoring the stares from the others in the room.
“We’re unharmed,” Jiao responded as she glanced hesitantly at the Dai Li agent before she returned her attention to the Fire Lord’s mother, “But the prince hasn’t eaten much or slept well.”

“He must miss his parents,” Ursa murmured sadly as she reached up to caress his soft hair.

She glanced back to Ozai to see he was talking to Jianguo while Mai stood near a window, looking blankly out into the dark, rainy night.

“Ozai won’t win,” Ursa whispered so only Jiao could hear her, bringing Kazu closer to her chest. “We will find a way to escape.”

If she had to kill Ozai herself in order to keep everyone safe, she would. After all, what mother wouldn’t do anything to protect her family?

Katara stared sullenly at the rainy sky from one of the veranda’s small windows, feeling her anxiety rising as the day came to a close. They only had two more days to give in to Ozai’s demands in exchange for Kazu and the others’ return. No matter what they did, they were unable to find them. She didn’t know what to do! Not knowing how her baby was faring was killing her.

She blinked when she felt someone touch her shoulder and she turned around to see Zuko looking worriedly down at her.

“You weren’t in our rooms, so I got worried,” he said softly, rain soaking his hair.

“I needed to get away for a while,” she replied in a low tone.

Their room held so many memories of Kazu and she could not stomach the thought of never seeing him again.

“I understand,” he responded.

Katara stared into his face, seeing the same pain in his eyes she knew he must see in hers. She felt herself crumbling a little, despite her wish to remain strong, and she leaned into his chest, wrapping her arms around him and clutching at his damp clothes.
“I am afraid,” she whispered.

“I know...so am I,” he answered just as softly as he held her tightly to him. Then in a broken tone, he added, “I don’t know what to do.”

Katara tightened her hold on him and closed her eyes, wishing she knew the answer to their problem. They remained in silence for a moment as the rain continued to fall heavily outside, beating at the wooden roof.

A soft sound near the closed shoji doors caught their attention and they tensed. They broke apart and glanced at the shoji doors when the scratching noise sounded again. They glanced warily at each other before they moved cautiously forward, ready for a fight.

Zuko lit his fist on fire before looking back at Katara, who already had a waterwhip at the ready. She gave him a firm nod and he turned back around. Reaching out slowly, Zuko grasped the edge of the door before quickly sliding it to the side. They jumped back when a wet and bloodied figure slumped onto the floor. They stared down at the individual in shock and confusion, but before they could move, the person lifted his head and gave them a pained grin.

“Finally found ya,” he rasped.

“Jet?” Katara asked in alarm as her eyes scanned his beaten body while at the same time Zuko frowned down at him. She looked up at her frowning husband. “Help me sit him up.”

Despite the animosity between Jet and him, Zuko immediately did so and they managed to lean Jet against the wall, water and blood spreading on the matted floor.

“Oh, La,” Katara whispered in horror as she saw more of his wounds. How he was able to move around at all in such a state was perplexing. Without another word, she gathered water to her hands and immediately began healing the worst of his wounds.

Jet groaned in pain and he pressed his bloody hand against his bleeding side where he had received a deep cut before sighing in relief when Katara’s healing water soothed the pain.
“What are you doing here?” Zuko asked gruffly. How did he even manage to enter the palace without being detected? And why was he so injured?

Jet’s dark eyes stared at him before he looked at Katara.

“I...know who has your son...”
“Who has him?!” Katara cried out anxiously, forgetting for a moment about Jet’s wounds as she clutched desperately at his bloody tunic. When he did not respond immediately to her question, she shook him. “Who has my son?!” she asked more loudly.

“Katara,” Zuko interrupted firmly as he gently grabbed her arms. “He passed out.”

Finally noticing that Jet’s eyes were closed, Katara’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, letting out a distressed groan, before she slowly released his tunic. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she tried to regain her composure. She had almost finally known the whereabouts of her precious son, but it seemed like they would have to wait some more. Why were the gods so cruel?

“We’re going to have to wait for him to tell us,” the firebender sighed in exasperation as he rubbed at his face. Why were things never easy? Narrowing his eyes, he darkly added, “He better not be lying…”

“We should move him to one of the guest rooms, so I can heal the rest of his wounds,” the waterbender said quickly as she stood up to face her frowning husband. “The faster he recovers, the faster he would be able to tell us where Kazu is.”

With the help of Kuo and Shen, Jet was safely placed on a guest bed a few minutes later with Katara immediately working on healing the rest of his injuries. She frowned and winced at all the cuts and bruises she discovered. She was amazed that Jet was still alive and was able to move at all in his condition. The loss of blood alone should have killed him. She supposed she shouldn’t be surprised since he had survived that horrible incident in Ba Sing Se years ago. Nonetheless, she was grateful for his resilience for now they would have an idea where Kazu and perhaps the others could be.

“Whoever attacked him wanted to kill him,” Zuko observed quietly as he watched his wife use her waterbending to close a particular deep cut on Jet’s side. If it had been years before, Zuko would not have cared if the rogue died, but now he hoped with all his might that Jet survived. They needed to know where to find Kazuhiko. He wondered if Jet perhaps also knew where his mother, Aang, Toph, and Jiao were being kept.

The Fire Lord glanced at the window and stared at the darkness beyond, the sound of the heavy rain disrupting the silence in the room. They did not have much time left. They needed to rescue Kazu, Ursa, and the others now before it was too late. He clenched his hands. He would make Ozai and Jianguo pay for putting his son, a young infant with no fault whatsoever, in harm’s way.

It seemed like hours had passed before Katara finally moved back as she wiped at her forehead with her arm. Gently lifting Jet’s head a little, she used her waterbending to coax some water down his throat to keep him hydrated. Once finished, she placed his head back on the pillow and let out a tired sigh. Zuko glanced down at the unconscious man before he looked questioningly at his frowning wife.

“I have healed all his wounds, but he has lost a lot of blood and needs time to recuperate. We will have to wait for him to regain consciousness,” Katara explained as she placed a damp cloth over Jet’s forehead. “I will have a servant bring him some food and more water.”

Biting her lip, she turned to look at her husband. The firebender felt his chest constrict at the almost timid hope in her azure eyes.
“Could it be real? Have we finally found the answer to our prayers? Will we finally have our baby back?” she asked. Her voice was just above a whisper as she started intensely at Zuko as if she were afraid speaking any louder would make their chances disappear.

Zuko quickly moved forward and pulled her gently to him. She pressed herself against his chest, her hands clutching at his back as she let out a shaky breath. Zuko tightened his hold and he closed his eyes.

“I hope so,” he responded softly into her hair, feeling his chest constrict once again. “I would forever be thankful to Jet for helping us find our son.”

A knock sounded at the door and they pulled apart. They frowned at each other, wondering what it could be this time. Zuko called out for them to enter and they watched as the door opened and Shen took a step inside.

“My lord, someone wishes to speak with you in private,” the guard announced in a solemn tone.

Zuko and Katara frowned. Who could be asking for a meeting so late at night?

“Have them make an appointment. I am busy at the moment.”

Shen cleared his throat, causing the Fire Lord to raise a dark eyebrow.

“They insist to meet with you now,” he stated before quickly adding when he saw his lord narrow his eyes, “They say they have important information that you must know before it is too late.”

The royal couple glanced at each other. Could it be about Kazu and the others? Katara gave a firm nod as she placed her hand on Zuko’s arm. They needed to know, even if it turned out to be about something insignificant. They could not afford to miss any opportunity for any news. Zuko’s frown deepened before he also gave a slight nod.

“Bring them in,” the Fire Lord ordered.

Shen bowed before he retreated. A moment later, an individual entered the room, a dark, heavy cloak hiding their identity. The couple looked at the hidden person warily, their bodies tensing at the possibility of danger even as Shen and Kuo entered after the individual and stood at attention. Before they could ask the person to reveal themselves, they lifted the hood away from their face. Katara’s eyes widened in surprise and Zuko frowned darkly as Wei stood silently before them.

“What do you want?” Zuko asked gruffly. Was he here to gloat about their sorrow?

“My, such manners,” Wei tutted.

When he saw the Fire Lord’s eyes narrow and the waterbender frown darkly, the old advisor sighed before he straightened himself out. He might not get along well with the young lord, but now was not the time to antagonize him. He did not miss the fact that Zuko’s personal guards were standing behind him, ready to attack or apprehend him at a word from the royal couple.

“I know who the traitor is,” Wei stated without preamble.

“What?” the Fire Lady asked.

“What?” the Fire Lady asked.

“Do you now?” Zuko bit out sarcastically.

Wei narrowed his eyes and puffed out his chest.
“I am here to prove once and for all that I am not the traitor as much as you want to believe,” the old man growled out.

Zuko glanced at Katara and she looked at him equally perplexed before he returned his stare at the advisor. He did not know what to make of this sudden situation. He had suspected of Wei for years, but he had never found any evidence against him. He had thought the old man was just really good at hiding his tracks, but could it be that he was truly innocent after all? Or was he trying to fool them in order to throw off their suspicions? Or, after all this time, would they finally know who the real traitor was?

“Alright,” Zuko finally spoke. He was still suspicious, but he was willing to listen in case Wei was telling the truth. He would do anything in order to rescue his family. “Who is the traitor?”

A small smirk appeared on Wei’s face, making the numerous wrinkles around his sagging jowls to become deeper.

“It’s someone close to both of you and you never realized it…”

“Just get on with it!” Katara hissed in exasperation at the same time Zuko growled, “Out with it!”

The old man huffed before he straightened himself out.

“Toshiro,” the advisor said simply. “The traitor is Toshiro.”

A couple of miles away, Jianguo stared unseeingly at the rainy night outside the window. He was in the room he was temporarily using in Mai’s country house. It was definitely an upgrade from the disgusting tavern rooms he had been forced to sleep in after his exile. The rain became stronger and he sneered.

He hated rain. Fortunately, the Fire Nation was only plagued with the accursed weather for a month or two.

It felt good to be back in his homeland and he could not wait to return to his previous extravagant life. He would definitely take advantage of the riches, food, and leisure once Ozai regained the throne, but most of all, he would greatly enjoy the waterbender in his bed.

He was interrupted from his thoughts of the future when the door was suddenly thrown open. He turned around with a glare, but quickly schooled his features when he saw Ozai stepped into the room. Ozai was scowling darkly and Jianguo knew he was in a foul mood. He had a feeling Lady Ursa had rebuffed him again. He did not say anything, however, as Ozai stalked forward to stand angrily next to him, glaring out the window. They were silent for a moment before Jianguo decided to be the first to say something.

“Zuko has two more days to make a decision. Would he really give up the throne?”

“He will,” Ozai responded gruffly, “He is a sentimental fool. He will hand over the throne in order to get his son and friends back. Once he sees that he has no choice, he will proclaim me as the true ruler of the Fire Nation and step down. Once everything is settled and every precaution taken to ensure the throne is truthfully mine, I will make a show of setting them all free to appease those loyal to Zuko.”

Jianguo grinned.

“But then they meet a tragic accident as they leave the country,” he added.
Ozai nodded, but did not verbally respond. Ursa would not be able to blame him since he technically would not be killing Zuko himself.

“Is everything prepared for my coronation?” Ozai asked.

“Yes. All we need is Zuko to make it official.”

“Good.”

Ozai turned around and made his way to the door. Before he opened it, he looked over his shoulder.

“Once everything is over, dispose of Mai,” he ordered in a neutral tone. “She is an annoyance and not truly loyal to us and our cause.”

Another grin spread across Jianguo’s face.

“Gladly, my lord.”

Ozai nodded, but did not verbally respond. Ursa would not be able to blame him since he technically would not be killing Zuko himself.

“Is everything prepared for my coronation?” Ozai asked.

“Yes. All we need is Zuko to make it official.”

“Good.”

Ozai turned around and made his way to the door. Before he opened it, he looked over his shoulder.

“Once everything is over, dispose of Mai,” he ordered in a neutral tone. “She is an annoyance and not truly loyal to us and our cause.”

Another grin spread across Jianguo’s face.

“Gladly, my lord.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Toshiro?” both Zuko and Katara repeated in confusion as they stared at Wei.

The Fire Lord narrowed his eyes and took a menacing step forward.

“Are you trying to make fools out of us?” he growled angrily. “Toshiro is a loyal man who has been of great help to us. Unlike you, who has antagonized me whenever possible.”

“You are a fool for not seeing what is in front of you!” Wei hissed heatedly, his double chin quivering in his agitation.

He ignored the Fire Lord’s furious glare and the Fire Lady’s icy glower as he puffed out his chest. He knew his words could have been punishable, but he also knew that the royal couple was curious as to why he would accuse Toshiro when they did not immediately advance toward him. He looked at the young lord straight in the eye.

“Think about it! One of his assistants tried to kill you and the other tried to seduce you and keep the Fire Lady from bearing you an heir…” Wei continued in a calmer manner, “Don’t you find that strange?”

The royal couple frowned at his words and glanced silently at each other, trepidation suddenly gripping them like a vise.

“It can’t be,” Katara spoke up with a shake of her head. “He has helped us so much…”

“That is how he gained your trust,” Wei retorted gruffly before he continued with a disgusted sneer, “By playing the caring and kind old physician. I’m sure he was privy to many things others were not as he was close to both of you.”

Zuko’s frown deepened as he went over Wei’s words, his thoughts flying from one place to another. On one hand, he did not trust Wei and believed he was trying to steer their suspicions on someone else. Yet, on the other hand, Wei brought up some good points. Two of Toshiro’s assistants tried to target them and when they were discovered, they were quickly disposed of. Kuro had been killed in his prison cell just as soon as the man had relented to let them know who was behind the plot to kill the Fire Lord. Yin Min had been executed shortly after her treachery was discovered. Did the physician really not know their plans, especially Kuro’s, whom Toshiro said he saw as a son? Did he
not know what concoctions Yin Min was making in his infirmary? He frowned when more disturbing instances began to slowly enter his mind.

Toshiro was close to them, he was present to many private conversations and plans that they had only spoken amongst themselves and then suddenly the entire country knew. If he remembered correctly, Toshiro was there when Wei began to insinuate his infatuation with Katara at his birthday celebration years ago, which reached Jianguo’s ears, which led to the rebels using Katara’s safety against him.

There was something else. Something that had been nagging at the back of his mind for some time now ever since he found his mother… Zuko’s eyes widened.

Now he knew why the letter that his mother had shown him at her cabin at the Abandoned Fort looked so familiar as did the letters in the chest found in Advisor Kang’s home. It was Toshiro’s handwriting! Yes, he was positive the writing styles were the same. He had seen the writing many times from going over Toshiro’s medical ledgers! How could he not have realized it sooner?

His eyes narrowed before he slowly shook his head. Still, there had to be an explanation. He just could not believe Toshiro would betray them in such a way. He had trusted the man so much…

“Zuko?” he heard Katara call out as she grabbed his arm.

He looked down to see she had a disturbed expression on her face. Her blue eyes were wide and distressed. Was she also linking the possibilities? Could it be true or was Wei lying and trying to make them doubt Toshiro’s loyalty? It was moments like these that he wished Toph was present so she could use her skill in detecting lies.

“He’s tellin’ the truth,” they heard a voice rasp.

They turned quickly toward the bed to see Jet slowly sit up as he coughed a few times. Wincing, he absentmindedly placed his hand on his side where the deep gash had been previously before it was sealed. Realizing his wounds had been healed, the brown-haired man hummed before he looked up to grin at Katara.

“Thanks, gorgeous,” he purred.

“Don’t start,” Katara warned with a frown while Zuko glared at him.

Jet raised his hands in surrender.

“Sorry. Force of habit.”

Ignoring his words, Zuko moved toward the bed so he could better gauge Jet’s reactions.

“What did you mean by he’s telling the truth?” he asked.

“The men who attacked me…” Jet began slowly, “They mentioned somethin’ about their master Toshiro being pleased to get rid of the spy. They were so sure of their victory ‘cause they were caught off guard when I renewed my attacks and managed to kill two and knock the other one out.”

Everybody’s eyes widened at his words.

“Why did they attack you in the first place?” Katara asked as she tried to make sense of all the information being thrown at them all of a sudden.
Jet shifted on the bed and cleared his throat.

“I went to Mai’s house,” he began to explain.

When Katara and Zuko raised their eyebrows, he held his hands up.

“It’s not like that!” he exclaimed, “I went to investigate!”

“Investigate what?” the firebender asked.

“Well, I bumped into Mai a few days ago outside the palace, and well…I don’t know how to explain it, but there was somethin’ about her manner that made me suspicious. I don’t know why, but I decided to go to her house tonight and check it out,” he continued with a frown. “I watched from a roof as she loaded her stuff onto a carriage and then I saw the servant girl that followed you around in Omahu.”

He looked at Katara as he said the last sentence and he watched her eyes widen.

“Jiao?” Katara asked and Jet nodded. The watebender glanced behind her to see Kuo looking hopefully at Jet and she could tell it was taking everything the guard had not to start bombarding Jet with questions.

“She was carryin’ a baby,” the freedom fighter continued, “who I heard a man mention as the prince…”

A loud gasp escaped Katara’s mouth while Zuko let out a low curse.

“Mai has our son?” Zuko asked furiously, his hands clenching tightly at his sides.

Before Jet could respond, Wei interrupted with a loud cough that made the other three turn to frown at him.

“The reason I started to suspect Toshiro is because I overheard him and Lady Mai exchange some words when she was at the palace a few days ago,” the old advisor stated, “I heard him threatened her if she betrayed them. I assume he meant the rebels.”

“That bitch!” Katara raged icily with blazing cobalt eyes, unaware that the other four men took an unconscious step back as she turned to look at her irate husband. “She knew all along about the rebels’ plans when she came to see you! She has Kazu! And she didn’t say anything!”

“We will make them all pay for betraying us,” Zuko vowed fiercely, his jaw clenching tightly as he tried to rein in his rage. Mai especially will regret her betrayal. He will show no mercy. He returned his attention to Jet. “Is she still at her house? Do you know where they are headed?”

“They were about to leave when I decided to head here before I was attacked,” the dark-eyed man responded before he slowly shook his head, “I don’t know where they are heading, though”

“If Toshiro is truly helping the rebels, he would know,” the waterbender stated.

“I am going to call for a meeting, no matter how late it is,” Zuko proclaimed with narrowed eyes. “Toshiro will be interrogated and will be tried if he truly is the traitor amongst us.” He looked at Jet and then at Wei, “You two will be our witnesses.”

“Guards should be sent to retrieve the bodies of the men who attacked Jet,” the Fire Lady spoke up, “Surely one of them could be recognized.”
“The man I knocked out,” Jet spoked up, “If he has not woken up yet and escaped, he could also be used as a witness or something.”

“You are right,” Zuko hummed before he gruffly added, “I will have men retrieved them before the traitor finds out what happened. I will have Jee retrieve the evidence we were able to find so far and have Shen and Kuo escort Toshiro and Lady Yoon Hee to the palace with the excuse that we need their medical skills.”

“You think Lady Yoon Hee is also involved?” Katara asked with a frown.

“I don’t know, but it’s best we cover all the possibilities,” the Fire Lord said, “And if they both turn out to be traitors…they will pay dearly for hurting our family.”

Several loud knocks awoke the sleeping physician and his wife. Toshiro opened his eyes and frowned. Who was interrupting their sleep so late? Yoon Hee murmured next to him as she slowly sat up.

“What is it?” she asked as she rubbed at her eyes.

“I don’t know,” Toshiro replied as he rose from the bed and moved toward the door. “What is the matter?” he asked whoever was on the other side.

“It is I, master,” replied one of the three servants they kept, “The Fire Lord’s personal guards are waiting outside.”

“Why?” Toshiro asked warily.

“They said it is a medical emergency,” the servant responded nervously, “They said you and Lady Yoon Hee are needed immediately.”

“Oh no,” Yoon Hee murmured as she quickly got up from the bed and began to look for formal clothes to put on.

Toshiro grumbled under his breath. He was tired and he did not appreciate being awakened in the middle of the night to go attend the royal couple. However, if he refused, they would become suspicious since he was supposed to be a “loyal” subject and all.

After telling the servant to let the guards know they would be out in a moment, Toshiro followed his wife’s example and began to dress. Once they were ready, they left their room and headed toward the entrance of the house. As they stepped outside, they were quickly ushered into a carriage by the guards. Did the younger guard glare at him? He must be imagining things.

“I hope it’s nothing too serious,” Yoon Hee spoke up softly as she stared out into the darkness.

Toshiro did not respond as he suppressed a tired yawn. He wondered if the men he had sent to watch Mai’s house found anything suspicious. He did not trust the noblewoman, especially after he found her leaving Zuko’s study. For that reason it was best he told Lord Ozai and Jianguo that they should get rid of her before she betrayed them.

He was confident that they would succeed in their plan. Although Zuko loved the Fire Nation and would do anything to protect its people, he would never sacrifice his son for it because he loved his son even more. He will hand over the throne to his father in exchange for the young prince. Toshiro had not doubt about it.
Once they arrived at the palace, the old couple stepped out of the carriage and headed up the long flight of steps into the building. Toshiro headed toward the royal chambers, but stopped when the older guard stepped in front of him. The old physician looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“They are expecting you this way, Physician Toshiro,” Shen said as he extended his arm in the opposite direction.

Toshiro frowned, but before he could ask anything, his wife immediately headed in the direction the guard pointed to and he had no choice but to follow. A few minutes later, they were standing before the doors that led toward the throne room. An apprehensive feeling seized Toshiro, but before he could think of an excuse to leave with his wife, the guards opened the doors and ushered them into the throne room.

The old physician’s eyes widened when he immediately saw the Fire Lord and Fire Lady sitting on their thrones with Iroh, Jee, and their other family members (minus the twin girls and the waterbender’s grandmother) next to them. He frowned when he saw that Wei and the other advisors were also present. There was a young man with messy, dark hair he did not recognize sitting languidly next to a glowering Sokka, a barely discernible smirk on his lips. He swallowed thickly when he realized they were all staring silently at him. He took a deep breath and told himself to calm down and not to jump to conclusions. He needed to act the kind, innocent old man. He and Yoon Hee moved forward and bowed before the royal couple. Toshiro discreetly lifted his eyes toward the Fire Lord in order to gauge his mood, but the wall of flames impeded most of his view. Before they could say anything, the Fire Lord spoke.

“A have a question for you, Physician Toshiro,” Zuko began in a deep voice that carried throughout the great throne room. “Are you a loyal servant to me? To my Fire Lady and family? To the Fire Nation?”

“Of course I am, my lord,” Toshiro immediately responded with another bow. “I am your humble physician. You and the Royal Family have my unwavering loyalty.”

There was a long pause after his words and Toshiro frowned slightly. He could feel the waterbender’s cold stare and the Fire Lord’s intense glare from the other side of the wall of fire. Chief Hakoda and Master Pakku were staring at him blankly while Sokka and his Kyoshi wife were glaring at him. He glanced briefly at Iroh to see the former general looking directly at him with an unusual blank expression. The old physician could feel beads of sweat beginning to form on his forehead as the apprehensive feeling increased before he looked away.

“How did they figure it out?! They must be bluffing!” Zuko motioned to Jee and the Admiral stood up, setting down the chest that had been recovered from
the deceased advisor’s house and opening the lid to reveal the letters within.

Toshiro opened his mouth, closed it, and then frowned. He cleared his suddenly dried throat as he tried to come up with an explanation.

“Some people’s writing can be similar and—”

“Really?” Sokka interjected with a cynical laugh, “What a lame excuse.”

“Excuse me?” Toshiro sputtered indignantly as he glared at the Water Tribe warrior. “Why you little —“

“Why did you send men to watch Lady Mai’s house?” Zuko interrupted, quickly changing the topic and causing the physician to falter.

Toshiro felt his hands begin to shake as his fear rose. How? How did he know about that? He slid his hands into his sleeves to hide their shaking as he tried to come up with a way to get out of this situation.

This could not be happening! He had been so careful! Was he perhaps dreaming? All his careful planning could not be failing him now!

“I-I did no such thing,” Toshiro stammered, “Why would I do such a thing? I don’t know Lady Mai that well!”

“Really?” the Fire Lord responded gruffly, “Advisor Wei says that when Lady Mai came to the palace last time, he heard you say to her that she will die if she betrayed you. Why would you say that to her if you don’t know her that well?”

“That’s a lie!” the old man shouted as he turned to glare at Wei, “Advisor Wei is trying to incriminate me when we all know he is the one plotting against the Royal Family!”

Wei hmphed loudly and the other advisors murmured amongst themselves. Yoon Hee stared uncertainly at her suddenly agitated husband.

Sitting next to Jee, Iroh was frowning deeply, not wanting to believe his longtime friend was a traitor, but his nephew had been sure of it when he knocked on his door a few hours ago and told him everything. It could not be true…

“We have another witness who is sure of your treachery,” the Fire Lord continued darkly as he motioned for the dark-skinned man to stand up.

Everybody in the room watched as Jet stood up casually and brushed his hands down the borrowed tunic he had been given as if to make himself more presentable. Without further preamble, Jet launch into his story and recounted what had happened at Mai’s house a few hours ago. When Jet got to the part that he forced his injured body toward the palace, Toshiro interrupted loudly.

“You don’t look injured at all!” he blurted out as he pointed an accusing finger at the young man.

Jet scoffed as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Did you forget the Fire Lady’s a waterbendin’ healer?”

“It is my word against those of an unknown ruffian,” the old physician sniffed.

The freedom fighter shrugged uncaringly at the insult.
“Why don’t we ask one of your men?” Jet asked nonchalantly. “We retrieved the bodies of the ones I managed to kill. I’m sure someone would be able to recognize them.”

Toshiro frowned as he glanced at his wife. Yoon Hee would immediately recognize them as well as the men who frequented the club since he used them as both servants and bodyguards. But the men were dead and could not betray him. He could give the excuse the men had been plotting without his knowledge.

“Oh, and one of them is still alive,” Jet added casually when the old physician did not respond. “I’m sure he can prove my story once he regains consciousness…if he values his life.”

Toshiro’s eyes widened in sudden panic as he returned his gaze toward the Fire Lord and then toward the silent Fire Lady as his mind raced with excuses.

“I believe the young man is speaking the truth,” Yoon Hee spoke up in a broken tone.

Toshiro whipped his head around toward his wife in shock while the men murmured in surprise.

“What do you know of this?” Katara asked softly, her brow furrowed deeply. She hoped that Yoon Hee was innocent. She did not know if she would be able to handle another betrayal.

The older woman closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. She could feel her husband staring at her, but she did not return his gaze as she looked back at the Fire Lady.

“One night…I heard a man talking to my husband in our room. I paused at the door to listen. I could not really make out what they said, but I found it strange. When I finally entered the room, the man was gone and Toshiro acted like nothing was out of place.” She paused and took another shaky breath as she clenched her hands together. “I tried to ignore it. I didn’t want to believe my husband was doing anything treacherous…”

Toshiro’s eyes were wide in surprise. He had not thought his wife had known Jianguo had been in their room. As soon as they heard the door opening, Jianguo has quickly slipped out the window and he had tried to pretend as if nothing was amiss. Yoon Hee has not said anything as she stepped into the room, so he had thought they had not been discovered.

“Were you aware of your husband’s treachery?” Katara asked in a solemn tone. “Were you also a part of their betrayal?

“No! My wife is innocent!” Toshiro exclaimed loudly as he whipped his head toward the royal couple and blurted out, “She didn’t know what I was doing!”

Yoon Hee gasped loudly and everybody stared at him in shock. Toshiro’s eyes widened at his outburst. He could feel everybody’s accusing glares, but he could not look away from his wife’s pained expression. He closed his eyes and bowed his head in resignation, knowing he had practically admitted his deceit. He knew that if he wanted to prove his wife’s innocence, he would have to confess his crimes.

He clenched his teeth in anger and powerlessness. How could this be happening? They had been so close to their ultimate goal!

“It is true,” he finally admitted, “I had been conspiring with Jianguo to release Lord Ozai from prison and reinstate him on the throne…”

Iroh and Katara’s eyes widened in shock while Yoon Hee and the advisors gasped. Wei’s triumphant exclamation that he was correct was ignored as everybody turned to look up at the Fire Lord sitting
behind the wall of fire.

At the old physician’s words, Zuko narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands into tight fists, a few sparks flying out in his anger. How could Toshiro betray them like this? How could he have deceived them in such a way? However, most of all, how could he have been so trusting and blind to the man’s schemes?

They listened in silence as Toshiro told them about the letter he had sent Ursa all those years ago in order to keep her at the Abandoned Fort and how he had planted the box with letters from Jianguo in Advisor Kang’s home to redirect suspicions on him. He recounted how he had told Jianguo about the Fire Lord’s feelings for the waterbender in order to use it against him, and how he had enlisted Kuro, his former assistant to help him kill the fake messenger from the colonies and dispose of Advisor Kang. He still did not know how Kang found out about his schemes, but he knew he had to get rid of the advisor before he talked to the Fire Lord.

“I had not been lying when I said that I had thought of Kuro as a son,” Toshiro continued, his voice sounding resigned, “I had planned on rewarding him greatly if everything went according to plan. I had a feeling that suspicions would immediately fall on me when it was found out the messenger died of poisoning, so I had Kuro lie and say that Advisor Kang had enlisted his help and promised to release him from prison in exchange. However, I found out he was about to confess the truth, so I had no choice but to have him killed…”

“Did you also know about Yin-Ming?” Katara spoke up in a detached tone when the old man paused.

“Yes,” Tohiro responded, “I had found out about her obsession with the Fire Lord and about the contraceptive tea she had been giving the Fire Lady, so I subtly began to encourage her actions, thinking that perhaps the lack of an heir would sway the Court Council to choose a new ruler.”

“Like Ozai,” Zuko stated darkly.

“My near…miscarriage at the palace steps…” the Fire Lady began in the same detached voice, “Were you responsible for that…?”

Toshiro lowered his gaze at her questions, feeling his wife’s horrified stare.

“I…yes. I hired an earthbender and…” he trailed off. “It was a mistake…”

“You will pay for putting my wife and our child in danger,” Zuko growled out furiously.

“You’re a monster,” Katara hissed, her blue eyes blazing, her hands clenching tightly in barely suppressed rage.

Toshiro had been partially responsible for those months of misery when they thought she could not conceive and he was responsible for causing her to almost lose her son. He even had the audacity to act as if he had been worried when Zuko had carried her to their bed when she was in so much pain and full of fear. She could not stomach the sight of the old physician. She had trusted him!

“Were you also responsible for Chao’s death,” Iroh’s soft voice broke the silence after the waterbender’s words.

Toshiro winced as he reluctantly moved his eyes towards one of his closest friends. He swallowed at the expression of disgust on Iroh’s face.

“That was a mistake,” the old physician rasped, “I didn’t want to kill my friend, but he had
discovered my true identity. He had to be silenced before he reached the palace with the news…”

Iroh closed his eyes and slowly shook his head, unable to believe one of his closest friends was the traitor all along. He would never forgive him for Chao’s death, but most of all, he would never forgive him for what he had done to his family.

Zuko could see his uncle’s pain before he returned his attention to the traitor, his own mind whirling with anger and questions.

“What is Mai’s part in all of this?” he asked heatedly, “Why does she have Prince Kazuhiko?”

Toshiro explained everything and each word caused both the Fire Lord and Fire Lady’s rage to mount higher and higher against the noblewoman’s actions.

“Where are they headed?” Zuko asked angrily, his golden eyes blazing in fury.

When Toshiro did not immediately respond, the wall of fire pulsed and the room turned sweltering hot.

“Tell me where Ozai and Jianguo are hiding unless you wish for your execution for your treachery to be extremely painful,” Zuko growled out, his dark tone implying a painfully, torturous death.

At his wife’s quiet sobs, Toshiro closed his eyes and relented. What was the point of keeping silent now? He had been found out and he doubted Lord Ozai or Jianguo would come and rescue him after all he had divulged. If anything, he would try to spare his wife any more pain for what he had conspired to do.

“Lady Mai is heading to her county house with the prince,” he finally said, “That is where Lord Ozai and Jianguo are hiding and where they are keeping Lady Ursa, Avatar Aang, and Lady Bei Fong.”

Katara let out a deep sigh of relief. Now they knew where their son was! Now they could go get their family back! The waterbender looked up to stare at her silent husband through the blazing flames.

“Why did you do it?” the Fire Lord asked in a hard tone.

“I…” Toshiro stammered and his face flushed, “I was tired of working for others. I wanted to live the life of nobility and wanted my daughter and grandchildren to have the same.”

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the old man’s words. He caused all this pain for such a petty wish? How…pathetic.

“If you have petitioned it to me, I would have gladly given you a noble title for all your years of service,” he said coldly before he added with a growl, “But now you will pay for the things you have put my family and innocent people through.”

In a loud and resounding tone, the Fire Lord declared, “I, Fire Lord Zuko, condemned you to death for the crimes you have committed against the throne. May Agni have mercy on your soul, for I will not.”

Toshiro paled and Yoon Hee slipped slowly to the floor, sobbing brokenly. The physician moved to console her, but she shied away from with him, causing him to stop and drop his arms beside him in defeat.

Motioning for the guards that stood at the door, Zuko ordered loudly, “Arrest him, but keep him
secretly hidden in the palace until we capture Ozai, Jianguo, and his men. Nobody is to leave the palace either, until they have my permission.”

He ignored the advisors protests as he watched his guards escort a suddenly quiet Toshiro out of the throne room, who only turned around enough to look regretfully at his wife who could not bear to look at him. He had his other guards escort a still crying Yoon Hee and the advisors to guest rooms, still ignoring their protests. He could not risk Ozai and Jianguo finding out they knew where they were hiding, and thus, give them a chance to escape.

The throne room became silent when everybody was removed except for the royal couple, their family, the Fire Lord’s personal guards, and Jet. Zuko stood up and quickly walked down the marble steps, parting the wall of fire with a single wave of his hand. As soon as he stepped through, Katara was in his arms, her body shaking in barely controlled anger.

“I can’t believe he betrayed us in such a way,” she hissed.

“He will regret his actions,” Zuko responded in a grave tone, his eyes narrowed before he added softly, “We can finally have Kazu back.”

“Yes,” Katara responded resolutely as she looked up to stare unwaveringly into his eyes.

They stepped back from each other when everybody crowded around them.

“What is our next move?” Hakoda asked what was in everybody’s mind.

“We bring our family back,” Zuko replied determinedly, his amber eyes blazing as he looked at everyone’s resolved expressions. “Tonight, we will make the rebels pay for taking to them away from us.”
Hello! Once again, I apologize for the super late update! It's been a pretty hectic and eventful couple of months. I know I said there were going to be two more chapters left (including the epilogue). However, this chapter turned out longer than expected, so I decided to split it and upload what I have so far, so I don't keep you guys waiting longer.

Enjoy!

Dark clouds hid the moon from view and heavy rain continued to drench the Fire Nation as the royal couple, along with some of their allies rode through the woods. As soon as Toshiro had been arrested for his crimes, the royal couple, their family, and several guards had immediately gotten ready and left the palace grounds on ostrich-horses toward Mai’s country house. Although Katara had advised against it because of his previous injuries, Jet had insisted on accompanying the group. Sokka and Suki had asked Hakoda and Pakku to remain in the palace to watch over Kanna and the twins. They didn’t want to leave them unprotected and knew the two men would do anything to protect their family. The men had agreed, also promising Zuko to make sure nothing untoward would happened while they were away from the palace.

Grim silence and anticipation settled heavily among the group as they rode swiftly forward. When they were a few miles away, Zuko ordered the group to stop. Once he knew he had everybody’s attention, he told the guards to stay back for a few minutes while the rest of them continued. He did not want to alert the rebels of their presence and they would mostly likely notice them if they moved as a large group.

Jee and several of the guards frowned at the command, not wanting to let the royal couple to be left unprotected when they faced the rebels. Seeing their unease, the Fire Lord explained that he preferred to come upon the rebels unawares in order to reduce the chance of the hostages coming to harm. He and the Fire Lady will go first with Iroh, Sokka, Suki, Jee, Shen, Kuo, and Jet. The guards eventually agreed to take care of anyone who got by them and would also serve as backup.

“If we need immediate assistance, I will send a signal,” Zuko continued in a grave tone, his golden eyes glinting as he looked in the direction of the country house before he looked at his wife and the others. “Let’s get our family back.”

Without another word, the smaller group urged their ostrich-horses forward. A heavy silence settled among them as the group rode on, determination blazing within them in their desire to rescue their loved ones.

A white blur suddenly dropped down on Katara’s ostrich-horse’s head, causing the waterbender to let out a startled gasp and to unintentionally jerk back, while Zuko and everybody else jumped in surprise. They stared down into big, green-eyes and large ears.

“Momo?” Katara muttered in confusion.

“What’s he doing here?” Sokka asked as he frowned at the lemur who only cocked his head to the
side. “I’m pretty sure I left him in the girls’ room.”

Katara opened her arms and the lemur immediately flew forward and cuddled against her chest with a chirp before he disengaged himself in order to land on Zuko’s shoulder. His fur was soaking wet, but that did not seem to bother the little creature. The Fire Lord frowned, but still reached out to scratch Momo’s chin.

“He must have escaped and followed us,” the firebender mused with a sigh.

It wouldn’t be convenient to have Momo accompany them in this mission, but they did not have time to turn back around to take him back to the palace. Besides, he felt a little bad for the little guy. Both Momo and Appa seemed depressed ever since Aang was kidnapped. Momo jumped away from his shoulder to once again land in Katara’s arms where he curled up against her.

“Well, keep moving,” Katara spoke up as she flicked her reins, urging the ostrich-horse to quicken its pace. Zuko and the others quickly followed her.

Katara’s hands tightened on the reins of her mount as she forced herself not to rush forward, absentmindedly brushing Momo’s fur as she focused ahead of her.

She wanted to punish those who had dared to take her baby away from her, but she knew that a hasty move could cause the life of Kazu and the others. She would not put it past Ozai and Jianguo to harm them in order to save themselves. She worried that any of them could be hurt, especially Kazu, whom Ozai saw as a threat for the right to the throne, and for Aang, whom she knew Ozai hated for defeating him and stripping him from his firebending all those years ago.

She refused to think that they could come upon them not being alive. Just the thought of losing her son made her chest tighten painfully. Kazu had to be alive! They all had to be alive. She had to believe that they were for she would not be able to bear it if they were otherwise…

“Well, Katara,” her husband’s low voice brought the waterbender out of her thoughts and she turned her head to look at him, blinking the rainwater from her eyes.

Zuko had been silently watching his wife since they had separated from the guards, watching as her hands clenched and unclenched around the reins, a frown on her face as the rain plastered a few strands of her hair to her cheeks. When she turned to him, he could almost see the despair in her blue eyes. He wanted to reach over and pull her to him to offer his comfort, but he knew now was not the time. They needed to reach the country house while it was still dark and time was of the essence.

“We will find them,” he said instead as he felt the others in the group turn to look at them. The determination in his tone and the gleam in his eyes gave Katara strength and hope.

“I know,” she responded just as determinedly as she held his gaze, “And we will bring them home.”

Looking back ahead of them, Katara felt the pull of the rainwater around them pulse through her, feeling its soothing energy dispel her fears, and she allowed her element’s power to course through her body. If they had dared to hurt her son, Ursa, Aang, Toph, or Jiao they would feel her wrath.

The rain continued to fall as the group continued silently in their path, unaware that a pair of eyes watched them from the shadows before disappearing underground.

Deftly twirling one of her shuriken with her fingers, Mai stared unseeingly outside the window of her
lavish room, absentmindedly listening to the sound of the rain. She had not bothered to light any candles as she stood by the window, ignoring the chill of the darkened room. She was still dressed in the traveling robes she had been wearing since she left her town house, her weapons still hidden within her sleeves, as she remained vigilant.

It was late, but she could not seem to be able to fall sleep. She had been on edge ever since she had arrived at her country house with the boy and his nursemaid. An apprehensive feeling had begun to fester in her chest when she had caught Ozai staring vacantly in her direction while Lady Ursa had greeted her grandson earlier that night. Although his expression revealed nothing, the fact that he had been looking at her made her hackles rise. The uneasy feeling had only grown as the night went on and she could not seem to dispel her disquieting thoughts.

Once again, her thoughts returned to the decisions she had made and where they had currently led her. She knew her love for Zuko had steered her toward making some irrational decisions, especially siding with Ozai and the rebels. She had justified her actions by telling herself that everything she did was in order to have Zuko return to her so they could be happy together. Now, however, she was beginning to regret her decision in not telling Zuko everything when she had last seen him at the palace. If only Katara had not shown up to ruin everything.

A small sigh escaped her as she continued to absently twirl the sharp weapon. All she could do now was wait and see how things played out. She just hoped that everything came out the way she wished so she could finally have what she deserved…so she could finally be happy…

A movement from outside her window caught her attention and the shuriken froze in her hand. She watched as a figure emerged from the shadow of the trees and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. Although she could not see very clearly in the dark, the individual’s clothing identified him as one of the former Dai Li agents now in Jianguo’s employ. He moved quickly toward the house and she knew by his rapid movements that something was wrong.

A small frown appeared on her brow before she straightened herself out. She replaced her shuriken back into its place within her sleeve and silently made her way toward the door. She needed to find out what was going on. This was, after all, her house.

The feeling of dread seemed to seep into her bones as she left her room and headed down the dark hallways.

“They what?!” Jianguo’s angry shout made the former Dai Li agent wince and take an involuntary step back.

“Are you certain?” Ozai asked in a calmer tone, although an edge of steel could be detected in his voice as his eyes narrowed.

Standing on the side with a bleary-eyed Ping, Chang frowned deeply at the Dai Li agent’s report. Chang had been woken him up a couple of minutes before with the bad news and once he had heard the report, Chang had immediately rushed to give the news to Jianguo. It was fortunate that he and Jianguo had ordered several men to keep a perimeter near the house, in case they were found out. Chang’s eyes shifted toward the door of the sitting room as it was opened. He watched as Lady Mai entered without a sound and silently surveyed the room. He looked back toward the others, but they were not paying any attention to her.

“Yes,” the other earthbender replied quickly to Ozai’s question. “We spotted the Fire Lord…” he trailed off and cleared his throat at the man’s glare, “uh, the usurper and several guards heading this
way. His uncle and his waterbending wife were with them, along with several of her family members, if I am not mistaken.”

At the man’s words, Mai’s eyes widened in sudden panic. Zuko and the others were on their way? Did he know she was involved with the rebels? No, this could not be happening!

“Dammit!” Jianguo cursed as he rubbed at his face in frustration. “How did they know where we were?!”

His attention was caught by Mai’s figure near the doorway and his nostrils flared.

“You told them, didn’t you?” he accused her heatedly. “I knew we couldn’t trust you!”

“I did no such thing,” Mai replied coldly before she added with a calm she did not feel, “Why would I still be here, if I had betrayed you?”

Ozai narrowed his eyes and Jianguo growled under his breath.

“Perhaps Toshiro was discovered,” Chang spoke up when it seemed Jianguo was going to advance angrily toward the noblewoman, giving the other men pause at his words. “He is the only one who knows where we are hiding.”

“Perhaps,” Ozai finally spoke before he turned to regard the firebender, “However, now is not the time to speculate. We have to escape before they reach the house.”

“How long before they get here?” Jianguo asked the former Dai Li agent.

“Less than an hour,” the man replied, which earned a curse from the firebender.

“I will gather Ursa and the boy right now,” Ozai said gruffly, a deep frown on his face, “Prepare to depart in a few minutes.”

“Of course, my lord,” Jianguo responded grimly as he watched Ozai walk quickly toward the door.

Mai shivered involuntarily when Ozai gave her a hard look as he passed her. What should she do now? Should she try to make a run for it?

Jianguo turned to Chang, Ping, and the other earthbender and frowned. He should have ordered more of the earthbenders to remain near the house. There were not enough earthbenders to be able to submerge them all in the ground. They will need to escape using the few ostrich-horses they had.

Turning to the other earthbender, Jianguo ordered, “Have the men engage Zuko and the others in battle. Whoever manages to kill the bastard and capture the waterbender, will be greatly rewarded.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said with a slight bow before leaving the room.

Chang frowned at the order. He had a feeling Jianguo knew the men were probably going to be defeated, but needed them to serve as a distraction in order to give the others enough time to escape and be far from reach.

“Chang, Ping, make sure some ostrich-horses are ready and enough provisions are gathered to last us for a few days,” Jianguo ordered them as his mind raced to come up with ways to turn their situation around. “Oh, and Chang, do bring along the pretty maid. We will need her to look after the brat…for now.”

The green-eyed man’s frown deepened at his words, but he gave a nod as he moved toward the door
with Ping following behind him. He had placed Jiao in his room, and although he had wanted to make her his, he had decided to give her more time when she had looked at him with fear and hatred in her eyes.

Once Chang and Ping were out of the room, Jianguo turned to regard Mai.

The noblewoman forced herself not to show her trepidation as she returned his stare with a blank one, her fingers itching to retrieve her hidden weapons. She half expected him to accuse her of betraying them again, so she was surprised when he smiled.

“You should get your things ready if you’re coming along with us,” he said as he moved toward the door.

Mai started at him incomprehensively.

“You want me to come with you?” she asked with a raise eyebrow.

“If you’d like,” he responded with a casual wave of his hand, “Or you can remain here and try to explain your presence to Zuko.” He shrugged. “I’m sure that will go over well.”

Mai frowned and her hands convulsed slightly at her sides. She did not trust him, but at the same time, she knew she could not remain in the house. She would go with them for now and find a way to escape or perhaps make it seem like she had been kidnapped and had no part in any of this…She hoped.

“Very well,” she responded dispassionately, even though inwardly she was perturbed by the whole situation as she watched the man leave the room.

As soon as he was out of the woman’s sight, a slight smirk appeared on Jianguo’s face as a plan formed in his head that would not only aid them in buying them some more time, but would also finally rid them of the noblewoman.

Ursa watched anxiously as Chang handed a sleeping Kazu up to Jiao, who had been placed on top of an ostrich-horse. Jiao immediately brought the child to her chest and looked toward the older noblewoman. Before Ursa could even think of ordering Jiao to escape with the baby, Chang swung up behind the maidservant, effectively trapping her as he grabbed the reins.

Jiao stiffened noticeably, her arms tightening slightly on the baby. She hunched forward to move slightly away from the man, but also to keep the infant from becoming soaked from the rain. She heard the little prince fuss a little before quieting down.

Ursa stared worriedly at her grandson, hoping he did not get sick. Shifting her attention to Ozai, she frowned as her hands clenched helplessly at her sides. Ozai stood silently next to her while Jianguo ordered some men to place several bags on four ostrich-horses. His barked orders, the men’s hurried steps, and the fact that it was the middle of the night made it obvious that something was amiss.

Ozai had refused to tell her anything when he had hastily woken her up a few minutes ago. He had ordered her to dress and gather Kazu, who had been sleeping next to her. She had been firm in having her grandson stay with her when it had been time for bed. She had wanted to make sure Kazu was safe by having him at her side since she did not trust Ozai or Jianguo.

Once she had finished dressing and had wrapped Kazu in several warm blankets, Ozai brought them out to the courtyard, where Jiao had been waiting anxiously for them with Chang and Mai. Ursa had
glared at the cold noblewoman, but Mai had only stared at her inexpressively before looking away.

She was not sure what was going on, but Ursa had a feeling that somehow their whereabouts had been discovered and now Ozai and Jianguo were trying to escape. Hope surged in her heart at the thought that Zuko, Jee, Katara and the others were on their way to rescue them. However, would they make it in time? She tried to think of a way that would help Zuko and the others know where they were going, but she didn’t even know where they were heading.

“Everything is ready, my lord,” Jianguo’s voice brought her out of her thoughts.

“Good, let’s leave immediately,” Ozai responded.

He did not give her time to move away as he grabbed her arm. He paused to whisper something to Jianguo, who nodded, before he lifted Ursa up on the ostrich-horse, quickly swinging up behind her before she could think about escaping. Ursa stiffened as she felt the touch of his chest against her back and his thighs against hers as his arms went around her to grab the reins. If it had been years before, her body would have reacted in pleasure to his closeness. Now, however, his presence made her stomach churn in disgust.

Jianguo and Mai mounted their own ostrich-horses, but before they moved forward, the former turned toward the large, bald earthbender waiting with the other men.

“Ping, retrieve the Avatar and meet us at the nearby port,” he ordered.

“What about da blind girl?” the man asked gruffly.

“Dispose of her,” the firebender ordered uncaringly.

“Allrighty,” Ping answered with a sinister grin.

Simultaneous gasps escaped Ursa and Jiao at his words, their eyes wide in horror, but they were unable to say anything else when the men harshly pressed their heels against the ostrich-horses, prompting the animals to race forward into the silent, dark woods.

As the royal couple and the others rode closer to the estate, the Fire Lord ordered them to dismount and walk the rest of the way. The heavy rain suddenly slowed to a light drizzle before it completely stopped. A few minutes later, the clouds parted slightly and moonlight dimly shone on their path. Like silent shadows, they moved stealthily through the woods before stopping at the edge to survey the large house.

It was quiet and dark, no visible light could be seen within the building nor was there any sign of anybody nearby. A cat-owl hooted somewhere close to them, but there were no other sounds to disrupt the night. Zuko’s eyes scanned the ground, the walls, and the rooftops, but could not see any movement.

“Something doesn’t seem right,” Katara’s low whisper echoed his thoughts as her eyes narrowed.

Uncorking the waterskin tied to her side, she weaved the water around her arms. Momo perched on her shoulder, his ears twitching back and forth, his nose wildly sniffing the air as if he sensed the sudden tension.

Jee, Shen, and Kuo were standing at attention behind the royal couple, their bodies tensed and ready to fight. Jet hummed as he casually chewed on a single stalk of grass, even though his hands moved
to quietly pull out his hook swords.

“It’s too quiet,” Sokka observed with a frown.

“Shouldn’t they have placed some men to keep watch?” Suki added as her hands tightened on her metal fans.

“Could Toshiro have lied to us?” the waterbender asked, a frown marring her brow as she looked at her husband.

“Perhaps they knew we were coming,” Iroh murmured while Jee and Jet frowned grimly at his words.

Zuko remained silent as he again scanned their surroundings. Something definitely seemed off...It felt like they were being watched…His eyes widened.

“They know we are here,” he whispered harshly as he slowly pulled out his dual broadswords at his side.

He had scarcely finished his sentence when a whizzing sound disrupted the silence. Katara barely had enough time to bend water into an ice shield to block the arrow that was aimed at Zuko’s chest. A loud crackling resounded as the arrow imbedded itself into the ice. Momo let out a screech and flew up into the cover of a tree’s branches. Katara’s heart raced in both fear and anger. They could have killed him!

Zuko blinked and the group had only a moment to stare in shock at the arrow before Katara quickly melted the ice to form a waterwhip, flinging the arrow far away into the foliage.

“Stand ready!” Zuko ordered as he brought his swords forward after he shot his wife a grateful look.

So much for the element of surprise, he thought irritably as he quickly scanned their surroundings.

The group rapidly moved into a tight circle with their backs against each other, moving into defensive stances, as they stared out into the dark woods around them. They stared warily into the darkness where the arrow had come from, their muscles tense, and their weapons at the ready.

Silence permeated the air for what seemed like a long moment before it was suddenly broken by loud shouts as men started to race from the trees or spring up from underground.

The small group stood their ground as the rebels advanced forward before meeting them head on. Iroh, Jee, Kuo, and Shen managed to send several men flying back with large blasts of fire while Katara lifted others into the air with water tentacles before flinging them to the side. Zuko, Sokka, and Jet cut several of the rushing men with their swords, with the Fire Lord occasionally using firebending to attack and defend.

Suki flipped and swerved among the rebels, disarming or injuring those who dared to attack her with her metal fans or swift kicks of her feet. She dropped low to the ground when a firebender punched a fireball at her before springing back up, throwing one of her metal fans at his face as an idea popped into her mind. He cried out at the painful impact and Suki took advantage of his momentary distraction to flip over his head and land behind him.

With quick jabs of her fingers, she struck several of his chi points just as she remembered learning from Ty Lee when the acrobat has joined the Kyoshi Warriors years ago. She grinned in triumph when the man crumbled in a boneless heap at her feet, his eyes wide in both fear and confusion. She was not as proficient in chi blocking as Ty Lee, but Suki used the technique whenever she could as
more men appeared. She smirked when she caught her husband smiling dazedly at her when she passed him before he had to quickly jump back with a curse when a rebel tried to lop his head off. She rolled her eyes good-naturedly when he gave her a sheepish grin after he defeated the man before she attacked another rebel. She had missed the rush of battle, and although motherhood had kept her busy, she had never stopped her training. It was definitely paying off now.

Zuko destroyed a boulder that was hurled his way with a fire blast before spinning around to cut down a man with a flaming sword, ignoring the rebel’s cry of pain as he spun around to counter a fire attack from another firebender. If he was not mistaken it appeared as if many of the rebels were wearing Fire Nation military armor, he had a feeling were the ones previously stolen from the military base. He glanced briefly around him to see how everyone in his group was doing and was glad to see they were holding their own. Jee, Shen, and Kuo were working together to defeat several firebending rebels, while Sokka, Suki, and Jet worked together to engage some earthbenders in battle. Iroh was, as usual, a one-man army, taking on a bunch of firebenders and earthbenders on his own. The Dragon of the West was definitely in full form tonight.

Gritting his teeth in frustration, the Fire Lord kicked a rebel in the chest before blasting an earthbender back with a fire blast. He could not see Jianguo, Chang, or Ozai among the rebels. He was sure they had sent these men out to attack them as a distraction while they escaped. They could not afford to waste time while the lives of his son, mother, and the others were at risk!

Raising his arm, he shot a fireball high into the air, hoping his waiting guards would see the signal and hurry to assist them. The light from the fire cast a red glow over the fight before it faded, casting them in the moon’s silvery radiance once again.

Slashing a man’s torso with his flaming sword, Zuko watched as Katara incapacitated several men by aiming ice spikes at their legs. He knew his wife was focused solely on saving their son and family because she would usually try not to cause physical harm to anyone if she could help it. He could not help admiring her form as she fought with blazing blue eyes, bending her element gracefully yet fiercely.

Bending the large amounts of water available to her due to the rain, Katara raised her arms, eyes narrowed, and formed an intimidating wave that made several of the rebels pause to gawk at it in terror before it slammed into them, knocking them back to the ground or against trees. In the same breath, Katara froze the water, effectively trapping them. Without wasting any time, she gathered more water to her and prepared for the next attack.

“Poor bastards,” she heard someone drawl next to her and she turned her head to see Jet grinning at her, his wild hair plastered to his head with sweat.

“I know just how that feels,” he said with a slight chuckle when she raised her eyebrow at him. Then with a wink, he added, “I’m just glad it’s not me this time!”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned around and raced away to continue fighting.

With a wry smile, Katara returned her attention to the rebels. She cursed under her breath when a few firebenders managed to melt the ice encasing them and charged at her with angry roars. She countered their attacks and drove them back with her waterbending or, if they got too close, with strikes of her palms or feet as she had learned in her training.

A moment later, she found herself standing back to back with Zuko as more men suddenly appeared.

“There are too many,” Katara hissed as her eyes darted to the men approaching them, “We don’t have time for this! We need to find Kazu!”
Before Zuko could respond, the sound of thundering steps reached their ears before their guards burst from the trees with loud battle cries. The rebels froze briefly before they tried to regroup as they shifted their attention to the newcomers. Steel rang against steel, fire collided with both fire and earth, and pained cries filled the air. The soldiers started pushing back against the rebels who were beginning to either flee or fight with a terrified desperation.

“Zuko! Katara!” Iroh’s shout above the deafening sound of battle caught the royal couple’s attention.

They watched as the retired general did a series of firebending moves, punching fire blast after blast to destroy several boulders that were being thrown at him by who appeared to be a former Dai Li agent. Before Katara or Zuko could move forward to help, Jet suddenly appeared behind the agent and ran him through with his hook swords before he was off to disarm a large man who was wielding a club.

“Go inspect the house while we finish the rest of the rebels,” Iroh told the couple as he finally approached them. Sweat ran down his brow and there were several smudges on his face and clothes, but, otherwise, the old man was unscathed. “Perhaps we are lucky and Ozai did not have a chance to escape.”

“We’ll come with you,” Sokka added as he and Suki stopped next to his sister.

“Hey, what’s Momo doing?” Suki’s sudden question had them looking in the direction she was pointing.

They watched as Momo flew toward the house, circled a spot a few times, before landing on the wall bordering the building. He chattered for a moment as he stared at them.

“I think he wants us to follow him,” the waterbender said as she looked at her husband.

They gave each other a simultaneous nod before they raced toward the house, keeping an eye out in case any of the rebels slipped through the guards and attacked. Luckily, the soldiers, Iroh, and Jee, along with Jet, Kuo, and Shen kept them occupied.

“Hey, wait up!” Sokka called out as he and Suki ran after them.

*Please be okay,* was the thought that crossed the royal couple’s minds as they ran toward the house.

The sound of clashing weapons and loud shouts made Toph perk up from her restless sleep. She cocked her head to the side with a frown. Was there a battle going on outside or was she imagining things? How long had it been since she’d been trapped? It felt like it had been weeks and her worry over Aang and her own situation made things worse.

She sprang to her feet, eyes narrowed as she tried to strain her hearing to make more sense of the noise. Although it was faint, she was pretty sure those were the sounds of battle. Although it had been almost six years since the end of the war, she would never forget those sounds as long as she lived.

But who was fighting against who?

Was it perhaps Zuko and the others against the rebels?

Ugh, if only she had her earthbending! Not only would she know for sure, but she would also be able to help fight the bastards who dared to take Aang and her as hostages!
She paced agitatedly in the darkness and cursed when she almost tripped on the metal bowl she had been given with her meager meals. She gritted her teeth and clenched her hands. If she had her bending, she could have metalbent the bowl and shoved it down that idiot earthbender’s throat…

The sound of hurried booted feet alerted her to someone coming to the locked door and she tensed. She knew by his heavy footsteps that it was the idiot earthbender that brought her meals and taunted her with Aang’s safety. Her hands curled into tight fists as her eyes narrowed in sudden apprehension.

She had to do something in order to escape and find Aang!

Stretching her arms out, Toph walked carefully yet quickly toward a stack of crates she had previously discovered. With nothing else to do, she had explored her dark surrounding in the hopes of finding something to help her escape and had only discovered several useless boxes. Touching the wood, she silently walked around the edge until she was sure she was standing behind the stack to hide from view. She held her breath when the door slowly opened, creaking in an almost eerie manner, before it was closed. She heard the man step in before he paused and cursed, most likely because he couldn’t immediately see her.

“Where are ya little gurl?” Ping called out in an almost singsong tone.

He moved his torch from one side to the other as he surveyed the dark room with the crates and boxes piled neatly everywhere before he placed it on the wall sconce beside the door. When she did not immediately respond, he let out another low curse. He did not have time for this! He needed to retrieve the Avatar and escape before the royal guards made it to the house.

“You can’t escape, ya know,” he taunted as he moved slowly closer to the center of the room where the girl usually slept. “Why don’t ya come out now? I won’t hurt ya…much.” When the girl didn’t respond, he growled impatiently, “I don’t have time for this shit! I need ta meet da others at the port.”

Toph narrowed her eyes when she heard him walk closer to where she was hiding. It was now or never! Pushing with all her might, she pushed against the crates, fearing for a second that her plan would not work when they did not budge. However, they finally gave way and began to tumble forward. Hearing a surprised curse followed by a pained cry above the crash, Toph knew they had fallen on the idiot. Without waiting another second, she scrambled through the mess, blindly finding her way toward the door.

She cried out when a hand clamped painfully on her ankle before she was pulled down. Gasping, she crashed down on the hard floor, which knocked the breath out of her when her chin struck the ground. She shook her head as the impact made her ears ring and her head throb.

“Ya little bitch,” she heard him growl.

Ping angrily pushed the boxes away from him with his free arm as he held onto the girl’s ankle. Luckily, the boxes weren’t filled with heavy things or else he would have been in trouble. Still, how dare she try to ruin his plans!

Regaining her wits, Toph’s eyes widened when she felt him dragged her toward him.

“Let me go, asshole!” she growled as she kicked her other foot out.

She grinned when her foot connected with his face, hearing just as much as feeling as she broke his nose with a loud crunching sound. The man howled in pain as his grip loosened. She didn’t waste any time and scrambled to her feet as her heart raced with adrenaline.
She needed to escape!

She made it a few steps before she crashed onto a crate, which knocked her onto her back. Cursing, she made to stand up when she suddenly felt a heavy weight settle on top of her and large hands gripped her throat. She gasped for air and her eyes widened in panic when the pressure increased.

“You’ll pay for that!” he wheezed through his broken nose, but she barely heard him as she struggled to intake oxygen as he tried to crush her windpipe.

She coughed and gasped as she thrashed about against him, her nails scratching at his hands and arms, before she started punching at his face. He laughed cruelly at her struggles and it only fueled her anger and desperation.

No. No! She could not die like this!

She was Toph! The greatest earthbender and only metalbender in the world and she would not let some idiot be the end of her!

One of her hands searched blindly on the ground, desperately searching for something, anything, that could help her get him off her so she could breathe. Her lungs burned fiercely and her head felt heavy. Somewhere in her desperate mind, she thought she could hear an animal’s frightened squawks. Was she going crazy? Suddenly her fingers brushed against metal. Without thinking, she grasped onto it.

She brought the metal bowl forward and struck the man on the side of his head with all her might, just as she felt herself about to lose consciousness…

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It had been easy to infiltrate the country house since it seemed that all the rebels were fighting outside instead of guarding it. However, that only increased the royal couple’s urgency to find their family. The fact that no one had tried to stop them once they entered the building reinforced their fears that Ozai and Jianguo had managed to escape. They had decided to split up and search the large house in the hopes that one of them could reach their family much more quickly than if they looked together as a group.

Zuko’s frown deepened when he came upon another empty room, feeling his hope dwindling and his anger and fear rising. Those bastards had better not hurt his son or mother. Turning on his heel, he left the room and headed back toward the main sitting room. It was obvious that no one was in the house and that Ozai had escape. He needed to meet with Katara and the others. They could not waste any more time. They had to see if they could figure out which way they had gone. However, who knew where that could be? They could have gone in many different directions and if he and the others went the opposite way, they could lose their family forever…

His dark thoughts were interrupted when he saw Katara round a corner. He saw the apprehension in her eyes increase when she saw that he was alone before she walked quickly toward him.

“They are not here,” he said anxiously before she could speak, “We’re too late.”

“They couldn’t have gone too far,” she responded softly yet steadfastly, her expression hopeful, “We can probably catch up to them if we head out now.”

“Yes, but which way could they have gone?” he asked as he ran his hand through his hair as he felt his desperation grow, “What if we never find them…”
"Zuko," Katara called out firmly as she reached out to grab his hands.

He blinked at her firm tone before staring into her unwavering eyes, feeling her warm, soft hands gently squeeze his.

"We can’t lose hope now," she told him softly, "We will find them."

"You’re right," he replied determinedly as he squeezed her hands back, pushing his dark thoughts away as he stared resolutely into her eyes.

They could not give up now. Not without a fight.

"Hey you guys," Sokka’s voice made the royal couple release their hold and turn to look at him.

"Did you find them?" Katara asked hopefully.

"No," Sokka replied with a sigh. When he saw his sister and brother-in-law frown in defeat, the blue-eyed warrior quickly added, "But I think Momo found something in the kitchen! Come on!"

He didn’t wait for them to ask any question as he turned around and quickly headed down the way he had come. Zuko and Katara gave each other a brief glance before they swiftly followed him.

They met up with Suki on the way, who also did not to find anyone, and the four headed toward the kitchens. Soon they were entering the big, empty room to find Momo chittering loudly as he hopped from side to side and scratched at a large wooden door. When he noticed the group staring at him, the lemur flew toward Katara and landed on her shoulder. He made a series of quick squeaks and chatters as he tugged at her hair before he flew back to the closed door.

"I found him doing that a few minutes ago," Sokka spoke up.

"It seems he wants us to go through this door," Zuko said as he moved forward, prompting the others to follow him.

Momo paused his chatter when he saw the firebender stand next to him before jumping up to land on the man’s shoulder.

Zuko unsheathed one of his swords as he reached for the door handle while Katara got her water ready and Suki and Sokka pulled out their own weapons. Bracing himself for an attack, the firebender pulled the door open only to be met with a flight of stairs leading down into darkness. Before any of them could stop him, Momo jumped off Zuko’s shoulder and flew down, quickly disappearing from view.

"Let’s follow him," the Fire Lord said grimly. Could their family be hidden somewhere down there?

Lifting his hand and producing a flame, he moved forward and started descending the stairs with Katara following close behind him. Sokka and Suki followed silently behind the pair, carefully stepping on the steps with the minimal amount of light provided. They had barely reached the bottom when the sound of Momo’s loud, panicked screeches caught their attention. They raced forward down a long, barren corridor with several closed doors before they found Momo desperately scratching at a door.

"What’s he—?" Suki’s question was cut off by the loud sound of a metal thud followed by a man’s pained cry.

Without another word, Zuko thrust the door open and they rushed forward only to pause in horror at
the scene before them. Toph was curled on the floor with her hands clutching her throat, coughing painfully and wheezing as she tried to breathe. Crumbled in a heap next to her was Ping, who seemed to be bleeding from a wound on his head and a broken nose.

“Toph!” they cried out as they rushed forward, Katara’s hands already glowing in healing water.

They knelt down around her and stared anxiously at her while Katara’s hands hovered worriedly over her. Momo chittered as he patted Toph’s cheek.

Hearing their voices, the small earthbender rolled onto her back and cracked a small, pained grin as she felt her body relax, relieved that she had been able to defeat the man who tried to kill her and glad to her friends had found her.

“Hey guys,” she coughed fitfully before she croaked, “Took you long enough.”

“Are you badly hurt?” Zuko asked worriedly as he helped her sit up, noticing the stone manacles around her wrists. So that was how they must have subdued her.

“Did he…?” Katara spoke up slowly before trailing off, unsure how to ask what Ping had done to her. She shot a glare at the unconscious man, her fingers twitching in anger, even as she wrapped her healing water around Toph’s throat.

“Nah,” Toph responded as she brushed her hair out of her face, sighing at the soothing water. “The asshole just tried to strangle me before I bashed his head.”

“Served him right,” Sokka sniffed as he and Suki glared at the man.

“Is Aang not with you?” Katara asked in concern as she scanned the dark room.

Toph’s shoulders slumped as she shook her head.

“I haven’t seen him since I woke up here,” she replied before she growled out, “They better not have hurt him…”

Before they could ask her any more questions, Momo started chattering again and jumping up and down near the entrance of the door to get their attention.

“What’s he hollering about?” Toph asked with a frown since she could not ‘see’ what was happening. Her right hand automatically touched the stone manacle around her left wrist where she could feel it chaffing her skin.

“I think he wants us to follow him again,” Suki responded before she asked, “Do you think the others could be locked up down here, too?”

“Let’s find out,” Zuko responded grimly before he turned to Toph. “Can you walk?”

“Yup, I’m fine,” she replied with her usually brazeness as she rose to her feet with Katara’s help. Her brashness faltered slightly and she grabbed tightly onto the waterbender’s arm. “I…I can’t see where I’m going though…” she muttered angrily.

“Don’t worry. I got you,” Katara responded. Before Toph could protest or feel indignant, she added, “It’ll only be temporary until we can get an earthbender to take off the stone cuffs.”

Toph was silent a moment before she nodded.

“Fine,” she huffed. “Let’s go find the others.”
“Hold on,” Sokka piped up.

They watched as he quickly rummaged the crates before finding some rope. They immediately understood his intent when he began to tie Ping up. The bald earthbender groaned in pain, letting them know he was still alive, before he quieted down once again. Once he knew he had tied the rope securely so the man would not be able to escape, Sokka nodded at the others after he picked up the torch that Ping had hung near the door earlier.

Once he realized the humans were following him, Momo gave a chirp before flying down the dark corridor once again. The small group, with Katara leading Toph, left the room and walked down the cold, silent hall. They had walked by a few doors when they once again heard Momo’s calls before coming upon him jumping excitedly in front of a door.

Once again leading the group, Zuko stepped forward and opened the door, stepping quickly through with a sword at the ready, only to abruptly halt at the gruesome sight he encountered.

The others paused when Zuko suddenly stopped before he let out a low curse, but they could not see since his tall frame was blocking their view. Momo had immediately flown inside once the door had been opened.

“What is it?” Katara asked anxiously. Her concern only increased when he did not respond, but instead let out a disturbed shout of “Aang!” as he rushed forward. Her eyes widened in dismay when she finally saw what had agitated her husband.

“Oh, La,” she gasped in horror, her hand flying to her mouth, while she heard her brother and Suki sharply suck in their breaths.

Hanging from the low ceiling by chains wrapped around his wrists was Aang. Even with the minimal amount of light, they could see his bloodied and bruised face. His eyes were closed and his chin fell toward his chest, making Katara fear the worse.

“What is it?” she asked before trailing off. She could not finish the sentence.

Zuko felt his stomach tightened in worry when he finally reached Aang, frowning at the multiple, visible bruises and cuts on his face and wrists. As if sensing his master’s injuries, Momo had landed by Aang’s feet instead of his shoulder or head as he was prone to do. Letting out a sad chip, the lemur reached out to pet one of the airbender’s legs. Shakily, Zuko pressed his fingers at Aang’s throat, holding his breath as he tried to feel for a pulse. He relaxed when he felt it, although it was slow and almost faint.

“He’s alive,” he said as he looked over his shoulder at the worried group.

“What is it?” Toph asked loudly, although her tone wavered slightly in fear at Katara’s initial horrified exclamation. She frowned when the waterbender didn’t respond to her as she asked her to hold on to Suki so she could check on Aang. “What’s wrong?” she asked as she squeezed Suki’s arm once she felt Katara walk away.

“Aang’s been…” Sokka began before his words got stuck in his throat.

“Injured,” Suki finished for him, although the word ‘tortured’ seemed to hang in the air.


Zuko moved to the side to allow Katara some space so she could examine the unconscious airbender.
while he critically eyed the chains holding Aang up. He looked over his shoulder to address Sokka.

“Can you see if Ping has the key with him?” he asked the frowning warrior. “If not I’ll try to break
the chains.”

Sokka nodded before he quickly left the room with the torch in hand. While they waited, Zuko
grasped Aang’s middle to support his weight, while Katara examined the rest of the airbender’s
body. She murmured that she didn’t think he had any broken bones, but she worried at the amount of
blood coating the front of his shirt. They could hear Suki murmuring reassurances to a suddenly
silent Toph.

A few minutes later, Sokka returned, waving a key in his hand, as he moved swiftly toward them
after handing the torch to Suki. Zuko held Aang up while Sokka worked in unlocking the chains.
Once the chains were removed, they both eased Aang down to the floor so Katara could continue
healing him. Suki guided Toph closer and they both knelt down next to Sokka.

At the back of the royal couple’s mind, they despaired at the thought of their son and Ursa slipping
further away from them as time passed, but they also could not leave Aang while he was injured and
unconscious. When Katara pressed her healing water on Aang’s head, he suddenly let out a pained
moan, his brow furrowing slightly.

“Aang!” Toph exclaimed at the sound as she blindly searched for his hand. She sighed in relief when
she felt him squeeze her hand, although the grip had been weak.

Hearing her voice as if from far away, Aang groaned again before he slowly opened his eyes,
wincing at the pain that exploded in his head.

“T-Toph?” he called out feebly.

He blinked when his vision finally focused, although one eye was almost completely shut. He
blinked again when he saw his girlfriend and the others staring worriedly down at him. Was he
imagining things? The last thing he remembered was the pain from the big earthbender’s relentless
blows. Did he lose consciousness? He felt a small, furry paw touch his cheek and he turn his head to
see Momo’s large, green eyes peering into his.

“Hey buddy,” he rasped, still disoriented and almost positive he was hallucinating. He focused back
on his friends and smiled shakily. “Hey guys. I knew you’d find us.”

“Of course,” Zuko responded as he lightly squeezed his shoulder before he asked in a low tone,
“Was this my…Ozai’s doing?”

Aang swallowed as memories of beatings flashed through his mind before he firmly shoved them
away.

“He wanted me to give him back his firebending,” was his simple response.

“The bastard,” Zuko growled low in his throat as his hands clenched.

“Did you capture Ozai and the others?” Aang asked the firebender.

He turned to Katara when he felt her hands stop. He saw her bite her lip and frown before she
continued healing the cuts on his face.

“Something’s wrong,” Toph stated as she cocked her head to the side.
“They have Kazu and Ursa,” Katara responded, her tone sounding almost defeated, “We searched the building, but weren’t able to find them.”

“You have to go look for them now!” Aang exclaimed as he tried to sit up only to collapse with a pained gasp.

“We can’t leave you like this,” Katara replied even as her heart yearn to go look after her son.

“I’ll be fine,” he said as he grabbed her hands to stop her healing. “You guys need to go rescue your son and Lady Ursa.”

“Aang,” the waterbender said as she felt her eyes prick with tears at his selflessness before she told herself to calm down. “We don’t know where they have gone,” she said in almost a whisper.

“I think I know where they’re headed,” Toph spoke up with a pensive frown, “The asshole that tried to kill me said something about how he needed to meet with the others at the port.”

She ignored Aang’s horrified question of “who tried to kill you?” as she turned her face in the direction she had heard Zuko speak.

“Does that help?”

“Yes,” the firebender responded as he stood up, his eyes narrowed. “The closest port to here is about two days away.” He turned to his wife, his golden eyes blazing in anticipation. “If we hurry, we might be able to catch them before they board a ship.”

Katara was about to follow his example before she looked back at Aang’s bruised and bleeding face. The healer part of her told her she needed to look after the injured, while her maternal instincts told her to look for her son.

As if sensing her conflict, Suki placed her hand on Katara’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry. Sokka and I will stay and look after Aang and Toph,” she said softly.

“Yes,” Sokka agreed before he urged, “You should hurry and catch up to them!”

“Thanks, guys,” the waterbender said as she stood up next to her husband.

After telling each other to be careful, the royal couple left the room and raced back up the stairs. Just as they stepped out of the house, they came across Iroh, Jee, Shen, Kuo, Jet, and a couple of guards.

The group frowned when they saw the couple shake their heads. They briefly explained that they found Aang and Toph, although the former was badly injured, and Sokka and Suki had stayed behind to help them. Jee explained that they and the soldiers were able to subdue the rebels. Zuko ordered the guards to take the injured Avatar and Master Bei Fong to the palace to have their injuries seen to. Then he ordered them to apprehend Ping and force him to remove Toph and Aang’s stone restraints as soon as he regained consciousness.

“We believe that Ozai and Jianguo have taken Kazu and Mother with them toward the port,” Zuko continued.

“We’re going after them,” Katara added.

“We’ll come with you,” Iroh said, his usual jolly face sporting a deep frown.

“Let’s finished this,” Zuko said in a dark tone as he and Katara headed toward their ostrich horses
with the others following behind them.

They would rescue their son and Ursa.

Ozai and Jianguo could not get away. They needed to be punished for what they had done.

Once and for all.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!