End of Ages

by the_mythologist

Summary

30 years into the new age, the world faces a new threat - a broken covenant with a forgotten people. Now, it is up to the Gaang and their children to save the world...yet old loves, hidden secrets, and spiritbending threaten to break them apart.

... Next gen fic. Zutara, Taang/Maiko, OCsxOCs. M for sexual activity, violence, Koh the Face Stealer, and language.

Notes

Moved over from my fanfic account
I don't own ATLA.

See the end of the work for more notes
Interlude 1: Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

End of Ages

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The First Interlude: 30 years ago…

…the Age of Firelord Ozai and the supremacy of flame came to its end. Defeated at last by the risen Avatar and his companions, the dream of peace that had suffered so long under the Fire Nation’s oppression was no longer merely a hushed myth, it was an expectation of the future. Yet 100 years of war cannot be undone by coup, retribution, or even death. The destruction caused by a century of warfare is not so easily pushed aside - only time can fully soothe the ravages of the past.

As their countries rejoiced around them, the leading men and women of each nation held councils in order to set the boundaries of the new world, and to exact damages from those who had destroyed so much of the old. Presiding over these was the Avatar, in order to ensure equality and harmony, especially in these early years of freedom. These were brutal days, where long repressed emotions came spilling to the forefront of the debates, and often it seemed warfare would break out anew. Yet the Avatar held firm, and eventually, compromises were reached. The new era would begin.

10 years of rebuilding followed the fall of the Phoenix King, later known as the Golden Decade. The Avatar and his companions grew to adulthood, and nations slowly began to heal themselves. Curiously, these ten years were of goodwill towards other nations, even, in proportion to the later years, to the Fire Nation; who took full responsibility for originating the war. Much of this may be attributed to the friendship between the Avatar and Firelord Zuko, and the latter’s willingness to personally answer for much of his country’s damage, his doing or not.

The next 10 years were the more difficult. Disease and malcontent blossomed against the developing harmony only 12 years into the new age, marring the earlier epoch of optimism, philanthropy, and hope. Insurgents in the Fire Nation called for the return of Ozai (only the most extreme would whisper Azula’s name, for almost all feared her madness) yet his death 3 months later of the sleeping sickness would quiet them, for a time. For the sleeping sickness was the true bane of the now free world – no one could predict its coming, just as no one could find a cure. Thousands fell to the malady, while pitifully few recovered. 18 years later, this had not changed.

30 years after the Fire Nation fell from their position of eminence, the world was on the brink of a second disaster. In his struggle to overcome the elemental tyrant, the Avatar had broken one of the oldest laws – one that had unfortunately long been forgotten. At the brink of the 30th Anniversary of freedom, the Avatar and all who stood by him would have to once again immerse themselves in the
perils of war. Yet this was not a war that would enmesh the physical world, it was a war fought in the shadows, in the nuance of emotion, and in the perilously thin line between hope and despair. It was conflict such as the world had not seen in millennia, a war between the elements and the human spirit, and the living and the dead.

30 years ago, Aang had, in following his strictures on the sanctity of life, failed his forebears. Now, he is presented with his last chance to make up for his grievous mistake. In a changing world where friend becomes foe and inner harmony is forever lost, he must make his final decision, for the war cannot be won – or lost – until the Avatar has faced his destiny.

Chapter End Notes

After years of working on this, I finally renamed it. It was simply too misleading, before. I hope you enjoy the edited version!

There are a fair amount of OC's, as this is technically a fic about their (Non-Korra compliant) children. There is Zutara romance in the chapters as well, but if you're only here for the parts about the original characters, I would stick to the interludes (starting with int. 3).

The Years reset after Ozai was defeated, so the year after Ozai defeat was Year 1. It was, so to speak, the beginning of a new Age.

I hope you enjoy!
Chapter 1: At the End of the Dragon

Chapter Notes

I don't own ATLA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1: At the End of the Dragon

He, whom we mourn
Whose fire lit the world with peace
We will remember, until the last petal
Of the White Lotus falls.

His humility and strength
Saved a world from darkness and flame
His people from themselves
And slaked the thirst of hope.

He, whom we mourn
Lives on and will not leave us
We will honor, until the last petal
Of the White Lotus falls.

In memoriam of Iroh, Grandmaster of the White Lotus Society

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“It has been only three weeks since Iroh, son of Azulon; hero of the Fire and Earth nations alike and longtime champion of peace has passed away, yet the world still feels the loss keenly. The Dragon of
the West had lived for almost a century before meeting his end, and no one could deny the richness and value of his existence. Yet for those he had left behind, the pain is still very real. Still very real… aghh, this is so stilted. Iroh, what do you think? Do I sound like an idiot?”

Iroh, eldest son of Zuko spared his younger brother a sardonic glance before returning his attention to their dinner. “Don’t you always?”

The younger brother in question huffed, pretending to take offence. “I do not. You're just stodgy. Besides, we both know this depressing eulogy isn't the best way of honoring Uncle.” He mused, pursing his lips and tapping his strong chin. “If it were up to him, he’d just ask that everyone drank a cup of tea in remembrance. While playing Pai Sho, preferably. And utter something cryptic from time to time.”

Iroh snorted. Frivolous as his younger brother generally was, he certainly was more in tune with certain aspects of his late, great-Uncle’s character. Stirring the stew overhanging the well-constructed fire pit Iroh repeated the oft-heard mantra, “It’s not just that Uncle passed on, Koru. Father, Aunt Katara and the Earth King are using his passing as a way for all the nations to commemorate the thirty years since the fall of Firelord Ozai. The somber speech is just one aspect of the ritual. There will be days of partying afterwards.” His lips twitched into a small, almost rueful smile. “Plenty of tea and Pai Sho then.” The smile died as Koru turned to adjust the willowy overhang that shielded their sleeping location from potentially dangerous prying eyes.

Not to mention nights of council meetings, Iroh thought, almost bitterly. At least Koru didn’t have to attend those. Being the second son was not entirely awful – Koru himself might not realize it, but the same chains that so efficiently bound Iroh would never choke Koru’s oft-flippant neck. He would see that soon enough.

Thoughts running along a very different path, Koru smirked at his brother, shooting him a much too knowing glance. How could his brother be so calm? Surely he had heard the same rumors…rumors of the beautiful women of Ba Sing Se, and, thanks to the festival, plenty of access to them. He himself was not interested - despite what his reputation as a very charming young man might lead one to expect - yet his brother, who by all accounts was an excellent (if extremely discreet) lover, should be showing more than his customary even temper. If anything, he seemed just a touch taciturn. Maybe some subtle teasing would lift his spirits?

“Perhaps during the day, my brother. I hear nights are reserved for more…pleasurable activities.” Laughing off Iroh’s dark glare, Koru began to once again practice his speech, this time to a knobbly section of the tree that was sheltering them. Therefore, he missed Iroh’s continuing glower.

Of course, Iroh conceded, his younger brother would be excited about that. At least Koru was careful. Iroh hadn’t heard any rumors about any passing attachments his brother might have formed, which was surprising and commendable. Yet Koru’s lack of interest in a long-term relationship (and his very careful avoidance of anything vaguely resembling a short one) was a minor source of concern for their father, and recently Aunt Katara as well. Flirt he would, but commit he would not. Oh well. He would have a little more time to grow up. He was only 20, after all. Besides - he wasn’t the one getting engaged.

That awkward recollection served as an interlude to equally unpleasant thoughts. As his brother practiced his inflection and grave visage, Iroh reflected on their “mission” and how it was very likely to be the last of its kind. Currently, they were less than two days east of Ba Sing Se, where the festival was to commence in a week. They had been traveling for weeks since they had left the Sun Temple, where they had informed the inhabitants and the last dragons of the death of he who had so long protected their secret. Neither young man had been to the Sun Temple since their initiation; Iroh at 17, Koru at 15, and both were slightly nervous about how they and their news would be received. Their worries were for naught as the temple dwellers welcomed them warmly, and with
foreknowledge. They had not asked how those at the Sun Temple knew of Uncle Iroh’s death which had occurred only days before, and their curiosity had been overshadowed by the magnificence of the funeral ceremony the temple guardians had arranged for Iroh. They counted him as one of their own, and the death ceremony of a dragon is beyond human experience.

*In fact,* Iroh thought, once again complacent and no longer thinking about the ungainly matter of marriage (he had long ago realized that marriage too seldom had anything to do with love, at least at his level in the social hierarchy, and had thereafter thought of both matters with mild distaste), *Father and Avatar Aang are probably going to be jealous they missed it. I’m sure it will outdo anything man could muster up for any of their kind – even one so revered as Uncle. The sheer hallowed quality of the Temple alone would—*

Iroh froze, ladle in hand as the previously unnoticed stillness of the outside world permeated his heart, mind; even his very spirit. If he had been capable of thought, he would have tried to label the sensation, describe it, understand it. Later, he would compare it to immersing oneself into an ocean—a silent and terrible body of water, one utterly incapable of passing sound from the opposing worlds of air and earth encompassing it. But that was later. In that moment, he could do nothing but breathe, and even that was a struggle against the unmoving miasma that wrapped his existence in some impenetrable and invisible substance. Yet in the stillness he could sense something moving against it (*with it?*)—something (or someone) that would bend his will to their own, if they caught him. He could not perceive them, but he sensed it/them coming closer. *Closer.*

Koru paused in his ramblings, about to remark on how the birds had finally quieted when he was interrupted by a quiet *thunk.* Looking to his left he noticed his brother, crouching over the fire pit and dangerously close to tumbling in. Furthermore, he was preternaturally still, wide-eyed, and ashen. It was only as he rushed over to pull his brother back from the fire (and hopefully out of his stupor, was his speech *that* bad?) that he noticed the cause of the noise—the ladle lay innocently upon a slab of rock, stew still cradled in its mouth.

“*Iroh!*” Koru shook his brother, more scared than he’d ever admit by the look in Iroh’s eyes. Or rather, by the absence of any look at all in his eyes. “*Iroh, snap out of it!*”

About to give another firm shake, he was spared the necessity by a low groan. Iroh blinked, shuddered, and barely had enough time to shove his brother out of the way before vomiting violently onto the ground. Koru winced at the display, and at the realization that there would be no dinner tonight. He had seen the trajectory of at least two spatters of once-digested food, and their final destination had unfortunately been the pot of stew, still simmering away. Koru waited until Iroh had sufficiently recovered himself before gingerly resting a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“Iroh, I hope that wasn’t from sampling the stew—“

“Did you feel it?” Koru blinked at the terseness of his brother’s already strained voice. Although the similarity between his brother’s and his father’s voice had been noted often before, for a moment it was as if his father was speaking through Iroh. Iroh reached for his water skin and commenced to clean off the vomit.

“Feel what? Nausea? No…”

Iroh shook his head impatiently and turned to face Koru, face sufficiently swabbed. Looking down, he realized that his shirt was another matter, and he impatiently yanked it off. He would have to wash it later. He bent down to rummage through his pack. “No. The…*sensation,* the…” Lost for words, Iroh paused, clean shirt in hand, eyebrows furrowed in mild frustration. He shook his head and sighed. “I can’t explain it.” Slipping his arms through the long cotton sleeves he paused before positioning the garment over his head. “You’d know it if you felt it.”
Koru raised his eyebrows. “Hopefully.”

Iroh shot him a look as he buckled on his sword belt, swiftly checking to make sure his twin swords were well in place. Koru watched with a slightly puzzled look on his face. Where did he think he was going?

“You’re not leaving me here to clean up your mess, are you?” Damned if he thought he was – it had come out of his stomach, and if you couldn’t clean up your own vomit at 23, you weren’t ever going to. And neither was your brother Koru.

“No. You’re coming with me.” Iroh frowned at the puddle, not yet beginning to congeal, yet still quite fragrant. “We’ll deal with that later. For now, we have to move.”

“Move, where? You just had an…attack of some sort, and now you’re all business as usual?”

“You honestly felt nothing?”

Koru hesitated. Maybe he had felt something, but nothing along the lines of what Iroh had experienced. Still, Iroh had his very best I’m-the-future-ruler-of-the-fire-nation face on, and so Koru felt compelled to answer. “It all went very still. It took me a few moments to really comprehend it, but I noticed that even the birds had quieted. I guess something felt wrong, but I didn’t feel ill.”

Iroh simply nodded, and then pushed past the overhanging branches and into the glade, leaving Koru to groan and scramble to catch up. Would it kill his brother to be a bit less efficient?

Yet Iroh had his reasons for moving quickly. It had hit him the moment he had peeled off his stained shirt – the terrible, draining sensation was gone, but in its place was a subdued tug, pulling him, if he would let it, towards what was perhaps the aggressor of the earlier mental incursion. At the risk of being a bit brusque with Koru, he would follow the route set by this foreign internal compass. He began to move fast through the shadowing forest as Koru kept pace on his heels. It was late afternoon now, with twilight right on its heels, but Iroh felt that their destination wasn’t far. Regardless, flame users never need fear the darkness. His amber eyes darkened as he reflected – he was close. And when he found who had done that to him, he would make them pay.

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The cessation had come without warning or preamble, as did her flight. One moment she was sitting in the Asha’s hut, frowning in concentration over a pile of herbs; pestle and mortar in her hands. The next she was running through the forest; desperate, gasping. He was gone. She could no longer feel him. 21 years of being so intimately connected – closer than lovers, their understanding stronger than a mother’s bond to her children – and he had been riven from her in an instant.

What had they done?
“As I am here today to represent the northern water tribe you must understand when I say that I am hesitant accept your proposal.” Men shifted as steely blue eyes glinted across the distance, attempting to intimidate their golden opponents into submission. It had already been a long meeting, and unfortunately for the tired dignitaries, this was a sticking point between two of the most powerful members at the table. “I, for one, can see the long term benefits, but both water tribes are unable to withstand the potential consequences of initial failure.” Energy crackled as the orbs under siege calmly stared back at the aggressors – Ambassador Katara was facing off with Firelord Zuko. Again.

“I know the risks are great, they are for all nations. But we must bring them together, Katara. Can we at least agree on that much?” Katara nodded minutely, wise now to the ways of diplomacy, and now mostly undaunted in the face of Zuko’s earnest passion. He continued. “And the exchange program is an excellent way to do it. Immerse young people in foreign cultures so we see that all are to be respected, commended, and perhaps even emulated. Their safety-“

She cut off his gentle yet insistent rasping before he could go too far down that path. “Zuko, I completely understand and agree with the reasons for the program, but the water tribes worry about the timing. Safety aside, the sleeping sickness outbreaks are at an all time high. And we still know as little about the epidemic as ever. We cannot assure the health of our own citizens, in their respective tribes. Displacing our youth into foreign nations to potentially die of it would only inflame matters further.” Katara looked stern and unyielding, even bathed as she was in the golden shaft of light streaming in through the wide double windows adorning the west wall of the council chamber in Ba Sing Se. The room had been renovated since the current Earth King’s rise to the throne (the King had flat out refused to hear petitions sitting on a throne, and the previous council chamber had been abandoned when it had proven laughably penetrable by the Dai Li 30 years ago), and the once grand ballroom was now a lavishly decorated council chamber (or “the prettiest damn room this side of the fire nation,” as their old friend Toph Bei Fong had once termed it in a fit of frustration-induced sarcasm). Yet it did the job. Easier to defend than the old, open-air council room, and certainly less intimidating than the great hall, over the years the debates had gravitated to the architecturally lovely room, which was large enough for 20 dignitaries to argue at ease, and cozy enough to diffuse tensions imperceptibly.

Perhaps Zuko was distracted by the late afternoon sunlight swathing his opponent, or was simply moved by the strength of Katara’s opposition, but he hesitated a moment before a reply rose to his lips, and in that moment, the matter was pushed aside. The dignitaries were exhausted.

“Lord Zuko, Ambassador Katara…perhaps this could be reserved as a topic of discourse during tomorrow’s meeting? It is growing late, and this is an exceedingly important matter. With a night to rest and clear our heads, the debate shall be more fruitful next we meet.” Spoken by the aged and venerable successor to King Bumi (who had died only about 16 years back), Kai Long, his edict was met with relief by the other dignitaries at the table. Milling out in twos and threes, discussing points or simply their plans for the rest of the evening, Katara and Zuko were left at opposite ends of the table, prepared to keep the debate going all night, if they needed to. Kai Long shook his head as he too exited the room. Those two. So dedicated to their nations’ cause that they neglected all else merely to further the effort by one step – true, their children were grown and their families all equal parts of the rebuilding effort, but in the past it was almost unsettling how dedicated they were to
matters of state. Especially when they both had families of their own to raise. Yet the felicity of their domestic lives was simply not their priority. Ever since the fall of Ozai, these two had been the most passionate in remodeling the world’s social structure. He closed the door on them, not missing the sweep of Zuko’s arm as he began, apparently emphasizing the point anew.

Zuko cracked a grin as Kai Long softly shut the door behind him. Katara still sat upright in her chair, back straight, but Zuko relaxed his long frame, and twisted his neck, delighting in the long needed cracks. His throaty voice broke the silence of the beautiful late afternoon. “Heh. I wondered how long they’d let us argue that one.”

Katara smirk’s reflected his own, unconsciously identical. “I know. Especially as we’d already debated the trade agreements, element festivals, and transportation crises.” She paused. “But yeah. I’ll buckle under pressure tomorrow, and in return you offer to lend men and supplies to rebuild the northern water tribe’s Moon Shrine, plus an apology on behalf of the fire nation, as well as a small, but public castigation of the deceased Admiral Zhang.”

Zuko did not need to hesitate – he hated the man as much as his country needed (they were far too proud and set in their ways – seeing the rest of the world would do them wonders) the exchange program. “Done.”

Katara smiled in relief. Of course business like this was as natural as breathing between the two, but still. She had been restricted by the stubbornness of the northern water tribe, who had refused to have any more interactions than was necessary with the fire nation, with whom their long, bitter grudge had resurfaced after years of uneasy neutrality. While the southern water tribe had been ecstatic about the opportunity of traveling to other nations (Katara winced when she thought about Sokka and Suki’s veritable herd of highly vocal offspring that would participate in the program) the northern tribe had been adamant. Unless the fire tribe swallowed their pride and apologized to them (something they deemed impossible) they would never support the exchange program. So Katara and Zuko had compromised, as they had all throughout their long and intricate friendship.

Compromise. Once it had been such a foreign concept to the headstrong girl. Before Ozai fell, she had seen the world in black and white, and fallen gods protect whoever stood in her way. Her inability to compromise had defined her friendship with Zuko early on, just as her acceptance of the concept regulated their relationship now. Shaking her head (it helped to dislodge uneasy memories) she looked up to see Zuko watching her, eyes unreadable, match as they did with the dying sunlight still illuminating them. A half-dormant emotion rose from her stomach to her face, and Katara thanked La, god of water, for her dark skin that hid her flush. They had not been alone together for a long time. Not in a place as beautiful as this… Her composure mysteriously lost, Katara cast about in her mind for a suitable topic to break the powerful silence. Abandoning subtlety, she broached a painful subject they had been reluctant to discuss.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for Uncle’s passing. It was decided that—”

“Hush, Katara. We’ll talk in a minute. Let me just…have a moment.” He had forgotten the feel of her very presence, so long had it been since last they crossed paths. He breathed lightly as he drank in her appearance, almost unwilling to exhale and break the spell of the interaction. The years, and birthing Sura, had been very kind to her. For a 44 year old woman she was lithe, surprisingly well formed, and graceful. He danced around the word in his mind, difficult as it was to even think that way, but she was beautiful. Her blue eyes had not dimmed, and while she may not possess the laugh lines her brother did, the faint wrinkles on her brow only served to endear her to him. After all, she had earned them with him, hadn’t she? The hair loops were gone, as she was a married woman now, but her dark hair was still ebony, although soon (judging from Sokka) the first few streaks of silver would touch her locks. She was not the girl she had been at 14, yet he could still see the woman she
had grown to be, and as long as he could see her, the compromise would continue.

Katara momentarily closed her eyes as his words faded in her ears. He had asked in that smooth crackle of a voice she still could hear in her mind, never mind how long it had been since she truly heard it last. He was her best friend, was he not? She remembered everything about him, whether she wished to or no. She opened her eyes, determination written on her features. She would not fear the sway of her emotions, her wayward thoughts. Look at him honestly, her mind told her eyes. Let me see him as he is now, not as he was. Zuko had never been youthful, although more than any of them, he had kept his health. He was still strong and fit, physically in the prime of his life. The scar still kissed the flesh of his left eye, acting, perhaps, as a talisman to keep age from settling in his skin. He too lacked laugh lines, yet his forehead was smooth. His hair was lightening at the temples, and more than anything, he looked tired. Katara fought down the impulse to run over and hug him, as she might have done when they were teenagers.

They looked away at the same time, a testament to their many years of friendship. Even though they had not seen each other for almost a year, they still knew just how far they could go. They were performing the dance they had crafted, years ago, on how to keep the peace between themselves and the world. It was curious, how they had learned to blend together – not just in battle, but in all things. Fire and water are opposing elements, yet in the two benders, the elements complemented each other instead of working one against the other. It was their gift, their blessing. It was also their bane.

Yet it was above all things their compromise – the overarching metaphor for what their lives had become.

As if the interlude had never occurred, Zuko broke the silence. “I know. Sura told me.” He hesitated, searching for the right words. “I knew they wouldn’t let you come. Uncle left you a scroll...I had it delivered to your chambers upon arrival.”

“Thank you.” Casting about for more words to pierce the silence, Katara plunged ahead. “About Iroh’s engagement…”

Zuko shook his head. “I know Iroh’s choice worries you, Katara, but he is adamant. He will marry for the good of the fire nation, whether or not he desires the woman herself.” He paused, smiling ruefully. “This is Iroh, Katara. He’s always immersed himself in matters of state, ignoring his personal wishes. At this point I believe they are his personal wishes. It’s not what you or I would like, but it is his choice.”

Katara frowned. “He’s going to be miserable. He says he doesn’t care about love, and only wants to create ties between the nations, but what is he going to do when he realizes just how...unhappy a loveless alliance can be?” She hadn’t meant to stumble over that word. Zuko’s eyes flashed, proving he too had caught it, but mercifully, he said nothing of it.

“We can do nothing until they meet. He and Koru will be here soon, and then we can discuss the matter with both of them. Especially after he and Tanh are introduced.”

Abruptly, Katara changed her tactics. “What would Mai have wanted?” She wasn’t sure if it was the smartest thing to bring up the boy’s long-deceased mother, but she was speaking from her heart now, not her mind.

Zuko tilted his head down to shade his eyes, and also to think. He spoke to almost no one about Mai, who had died giving birth to Koru 20 years ago. No one except Katara, Aang, and Uncle, who were the few people he loved other than his wife. Yet even then, it had been a long time. He and Uncle had clashed only once on the subject of Mai, yet both had agreed never to speak of it again. Aang had never been too close to Mai, and said not much, as is acceptable in the way of men. Yet Katara
had stood in as a surrogate mother for Iroh and Koru, and in a way, he knew the boys (especially Koru) thought of Katara as their mother. She was the only one who he would allow to bring Mai up now, especially in the context of their children.

Zuko looked across the table at the waterbender. “I don’t know, Katara.” He chuckled, dryly, sadly. “I was actually trying to think of what Uncle would say.”

“He would be against it.” Katara did not have to think before responding. “He would say something like: Zuko,” Katara pitched her voice low and gravelly, bringing a smile to Zuko’s face, “To not marry for love is like no marriage at all. Marriage is a partnership, a journey both must undergo together…” Katara paused to think, eyes sweeping up to the ceiling. Yet they had noticed something on their ascent, and swooped back down to identify what it was. It had been Zuko’s eyes: neither filled with mirth or sorrow at the reference to his uncle, but flickering with a flame she hadn’t seen this potent for years. Katara’s lips parted as painfully familiar and bittersweet emotions flooded her, no doubt reflecting in her eyes, and fueling his fervor. How had she forgotten how it was? How could they believe it would cool? He was a fire master, and he fully personified the characteristics of flame: intensity and passion. And saying what she had…oh Tui, oh La...

Zuko stood up, the madness of desire sparring with the cool logic of their situation, the compromise all but in shreds. She sat so still, eyes wide and fixed steadily and tellingly upon him, warring within herself as well; otherwise she would have diffused the situation with her domestic impulsiveness. All she needed to say was one word, one name, and he would stop. If she didn’t…Zuko’s heart leapt as the fire inside of him grew hotter. Oh please don’t say it now…Katara please.

The double doors flew open.

“Sparky! Sugar Queen!” Toph Bei Fong stood just past the doorway, hands on her hips, a mock frown stretching across her face. “What the hell are you guys still doing in my council chamber?”

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Sura’s deep blue eyes widened as Appa’s rapid descent revealed the village below her. Resting safely atop the sky bison’s furry back, she nervously scanned the skies looking for sign of her father. Although she supposed it was more likely he had reached the ground by now – he had taken off on his glider the moment his convulsions stopped. Still, the last few minutes had been hellish – she hadn’t known what was going on, what she should do, or even if her father had really activated his glider, or had simply fallen off the sky bison. She reassured herself otherwise, that he would be fine. He was not the Avatar for nothing.

When Appa was only 40 feet above the ground, she saw him - practically dancing in impatience to enter the village and see what had caused…whatever it was. Sura herself had not felt anything (nothing but a sudden lack of movement - like a pond with no ripples), but her father had nearly rolled off Appa in his agony. With a low hum, Appa’s padded feet met earth, and Sura slipped athleticism off the sky bison’s back. Running to meet up with her father, she shaped water from her pouch into an orb between her hands, ready for either attack or healing, as her mother had taught her. Of course, she would rather use it to heal, but she could read her father’s face well enough, and his
expression was dire. Sura snuck a glance at the small, unremarkable village. Outwardly there was no sign of anything wrong, but it was somehow connected to her father's pain scant minutes ago.

“Stay here.” Aang did not look down at his daughter as he spoke. Although he couldn't tell what it was, he could feel it here. Something or someone was still generating massive amounts of power, although it felt different than the initial attack. He couldn't tell why, neither if it was more or less dangerous than before. Until he could, he wouldn't let Sura anywhere near it.

“Father, I-“

“Sura, if I let you in there and something happened to you your mother would end me.”

Pursing her lips in frustration (a habit she had long ago picked up from Koru), Sura sighed, then nodded. Although most water benders lauded benevolence and adaptivity as traits to live by, her mother demonstrated a certain fierceness that some might consider downright fiery. Maybe it had something to do with fighting alongside the Avatar during the war against Ozai. Or maybe it was losing her own mother to a fire raid when she was young. Either way, Katara was infamous for protecting her brood, whether they be strictly family members or not.

Sensing his daughter's distaste at staying put, he gave her a quick smile, and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Murmuring one last set of instructions (don’t follow me or I’ll die), he took off, gliding through the air to quickly reach the apex of the village. Sura sighed again, and shook her shoulders to release tension. When she had been young, she had dreamed of being an airbender, but fate had made her a waterbender, like her mother. She supposed it made sense – after all, save for a subtle difference in eye shape, and slightly lighter skin tone, she completely took after Katara, not Aang.

Waiting a few more moments to make sure her father wouldn’t come careening back out to her for one more admonition to stay out of the village (he certainly had been known to do so before), Sura decided on her plan of action. She would circle the village counterclockwise, following the stream to where it surely connected with the larger river they had passed earlier, flying overhead several miles to the east. After all, her father had said nothing about circumnavigating the village. With a small, determined nod, she started off. Or at least, she was about to, before Appa’s agitated lowing stalled her eastward movements. He had wandered off westwards, almost out of her line of sight, and had apparently found something. Curious yet wary, Sura cautiously made her way over to her father’s hulking friend. What she found there caused the breath to catch in her throat. Kneeling in front of the village’s main entrance was a young woman, who at first glance seemed to be carved from some strange rock, she was so still and awkwardly positioned. Her palms were face up, as if in supplication, but her arms had fallen so her hands were nearly at her sides. Sura inhaled a gasp as she inadvertently curled her fingers around Appa’s comforting wooly hide. Her father had been wrong – what he feared was not in the village. It was here.

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It was here. Her feet had brought her here, to her village, as she had known they would. The mindless certainty that had fueled her flight had sunk to the lower echelons of her ego, and now her conscious mind was taking hold again. She knew the spirits would not let her enter the village, not with the ritual still taking place and so she did the one thing she could think of doing. She challenged
them. Screaming her defiance to the heavens, she sank to her knees and bade them come. She would let them enter her, strengthen her, if they would have her. She, who had never connected with the spirits, never seen the spirit world. She knew it was foolish, and would most likely lead to her death. She didn’t care. They had done the unthinkable – had taken him away from her. Away from himself. So let them come. Let them devour. Let them diminish.

Let them avenge.

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Chapter End Notes

I do not have a beta, so please forgive my mistakes. Also, some of the writing is years old. It's been edited from the original (on ff) but a complete overhaul is too much for me, especially when I'm not halfway through the fic yet...

:)
Chapter 2: The Story of Worlds

Chapter Notes

I do not own ATLA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2: A Story of Worlds.

In a beginning, all words were one. Then they became two.

Then three.

Then one hundred.

To guide the ever-multiplying horde of themselves, they created the gods.

They fashioned a world to hold them.

In that beginning, all worlds were one.

Then they became two…

-Monk Gyatso’s bedtime story-

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Aang muttered to himself as he flew from home to home, mentally taking inventory of the village. It was very small and isolated, and could not have housed much more than 50 people at one time. It was at least two days journey away from the nearest city, and seeing as every home had a rather extensive garden, he assumed the village was self-sufficient…and temporary. From his cursory investigations, he could see no sign of snow, ice, or cold weather equipment, and winter tended to hit this region hard. His blood quickened. He had been searching for nomadic tribes for years…perhaps they had adapted into a pseudo-sedentary life?

One thing was obvious. The village was deserted. People had been here recently, within a day, at least, but they were not here now. Everything was tidy – animals were still sitting complacently in their unlocked pens, no dishes with half-eaten food littered tables; all was perfectly in its place, except for the missing inhabitants.

Aang had slowed to a walk now that it was obvious there was no one left in the village. Since he had entered its confines, the voice inside screaming danger! had calmed, and now no longer said
anything at all. Apparently, the threat had moved on. Aang felt rage rise up within him. Who -or what- had dared to do this? Something had wiped clean this village of its life. Someone had irreparably diverted, if not ended, the lives of innocent, rural, and very likely unsuspecting people. He could not exactly explain why he was jumping to that conclusion, save his instinct. The people had nothing, and their huts looked to be undisturbed by robbery. There was no blood, no bodies, no sign of a struggle. Yet he knew. The people of this unnamed village were no longer in the living world. And, as the Avatar, he wouldn’t stand for this. As the Avatar –

His diatribe came to an abrupt halt as his eyes fell upon the drawing. It was in the hut on the banks of the river, on the far east of the village. He had just finished his quick glance into all the huts and observing no immediate signs of surviving life was about to move on, but for whatever reason, this time, his eye traveled lower. Half hidden in the early shadows of twilight, the drawing had been a child’s creation, painstakingly etched in red, blue, and green dye. It portrayed a long line of people, dwindling down into what seemed to be a purple semi-circle. The child had possessed a fair eye, and a steady hand. Aang knew exactly what they had wanted to show, even with his modest knowledge of the village. Manipulating a spinning globe of air, he propelled himself to the northernmost portion of the village, where several of the huts were propped up against what looked to be a minor, oddly colored mountain. If Aang were pressed, he would describe it a mottled purple.

So intent was he in feeding his hope that someone might have survived the attack (maybe they even knew what it was) Aang did not realize that he was overlooking the simplest explanation – that the someone (or something) that had caused all this was still there.

Throwing a rock at the woman wasn't the best thing she could have done, especially with a pouch of liquid weapon at her hip, but in her panic it was the only thing she could think of. As soon as it left her hand she regretted her decision. Still, she assumed it would be effective, and at least it would bring the woman out of her trance. Yet that was not the case - now she no longer had only a strange, potentially evil, catatonic woman on her hands, she had a strange, potentially evil, catatonic, bleeding woman to deal with.

Great. Now she felt kind of guilty.

After Sura had lobbed the rock at the woman - grazing her scalp and causing immediate blood flow - and the woman hadn’t reacted save to fall over on her side, Sura had lost her fear. Her first thought had been that the woman was already dead – that perhaps she too was a victim of the attack. That (and her guilt over throwing the damn rock in the first place) had spurred her on, and she had rushed over to the prone woman. The slowly seeping blood proved her first hypothesis wrong, but Sura was undaunted. Something was still very wrong with the woman. Thinking abstractly of the sleeping sickness, she bent some water out of her pouch and used it to adjust the woman onto her back. Once positioned, Sura promptly fell back on her butt in surprise. This woman couldn’t be from the Earth Kingdom. Not with her coloring...
Sura had learned about racial diversity when she was young, and in an age where such a thing was just becoming possible once more. Throughout the Hundred Year War, people had been segregated by country, and therefore possessed fairly similar traits. Even today, it was still easy to identify Fire Nation from Earth Nation, and very easy to differentiate both from the Water Tribes. Yet her father had denied all these categories, and when asked, he had regaled her with tales of the Air Nomads, who belonged to all lands and none. Racially they were also somewhat distinguishable from the other races, although they favored the Earth natives. They were generally paler skinned, hazel-eyed, and although her father had dark brown hair, he had claimed that many at the temple had naturally lighter hair. A few even had hair the color of sunlight, and rarer still, the color of flame.

The woman’s hair wasn’t the color of flame or sunlight, Sura thought excitedly, slowly rising back up to get a better look at the woman. It was a dark honey color, with lighter streaks throughout. Still, it was the lightest natural color she’d ever seen in her life, and for a moment, she let herself drift in the same cognitive direction as her father. This could be an air nomad – a link to what Father has been searching for-

Her train of thought died as she fully hoisted herself to a kneeling position. She had thought the woman’s hair striking, yet from her previous position, she couldn’t see her eyes. Sura’s excitement died as her fear rose once again to the fore. In La’s name, what was wrong with this woman?

The woman’s eyes were not hazel. They were, Sura thought disjointedly, no color at all. Gray, she supposed. She had thought the woman to be dead, injured, or in some sort of coma but her eyes were wide open, sparkling with animation in stark contrast to the stillness of her face. Sura felt the blood freeze in her veins, and her body become heavy as lead. There was something in her eyes that seemed inhuman.

Trembling, Sura forced herself to stay where she was. She shakily exhaled. The woman had not moved through all of this, and so Sura snuck a glance at the prone figure before her. She couldn’t tell whether she was taller than her or not, but the woman was stronger, more athletic. Sura’s shapely curves were a constant source of vexation, a frustration this woman obviously didn’t have to put up with. She looked to be around Sura’s age, or perhaps a little older. Her face (disregarding the terrifying eyes) seemed pleasant enough; stronger featured than Sura’s delicate visage, yet cleanly molded and symmetrical. Tangling, light colored curls fluttered across the woman’s face in the breeze. After taking several deep breaths and reviewing her catalogue of the woman, Sura felt her heart rate calm. Settling herself, she reached her hands out to hover the woman’s face, acting on a sudden impulse. Her mother had once mentioned one could partially heal brainwashing. Maybe she could forge a connection, and catch a glimpse of what ailed this woman.

Sura leaned in as she focused all her attention on the woman. Initially it felt the same as she had while riding over the village –nothing, wrapped in emptiness, lying amongst silence. Picture a pool, she instructed herself. Shape it to your expectations. Sura bit her lower lip as she congruently concentrated harder and let herself drift on the sensation. There. There was the pool, the dark mirror surface reflecting her face back at her. But there was no movement on the surface, or even below. Even with her inexperience, Sura instinctively felt that the woman was no longer there.

Sighing in defeat, Sura was about to relax her control when out of the nothingness, a desperate face pressed itself up against the dark underbelly of the surface. It was the woman, wide-eyed, and struggling. Swallowing her fear at her sudden appearance, Sura stretched her hand to delve beneath the cold surface, yet recoiled when from all around her came the command.

**LEAVE, WOMAN.**

The words were voiced by one and many, and the impression they left behind wrought havoc on her
skin and senses. Sura was plunged into the madhouse of her mind – one moment there were thousands of stinging insects on her skin; the next, blood rushing from her ears, eyes, and mouth. The impetus to leave consumed her, and in pain, terrified, and sure she was about to die, Sura took one last look at the woman trapped beneath the glassy liquid. She no longer looked terrified. Instead, her eyes were closed in concentration, arms treading water to keep her steady, even under the surface. Snapping her head up to stare directly at Sura (she saw her true eyes now and they were gray, not the colorless monstrosity they were in her physical body) and pointed directly at her. Sura caught her lips move.

Go.

Yelling in surprise as she was catapulted to the surface, Sura looked down to see murky shadows surround the pool, effectively blocking the woman from sight. Realizing what had happened, Sura struggled to go back. Why had the woman saved her? That was her job! She had to get back and help, she had to-

“She’s still there! She’s still alive!” The voice was a beacon from the physical realm, where she knew she had to return to, but the woman…she had to…

“Sura!” Now the call was a rope twining around her midsection, hoisting her back to light and air…!

Sura opened her eyes as a familiar voice berated her, familiar arms held her, and a familiar face blocked out the quickly dissipating light. Oh. Koru.

“No, Iroh! She’s still in there! She’s still alive!” Sura extricated herself from Koru’s grip and attempted to talk sense into the man she had lovingly called her older brother for all of her childhood.

Iroh frowned. How did she know? Although it would explain the change of energy pulsing around...
them… “Sura, if it’s inside her, then it’s too late. Stand aside. I will end this.”

“Iroh!”

Iroh couldn’t explain his haste – something told him that if the woman wasn’t killed now, everything as they knew it would end. Kill her now. He raised his sword. Kill her now. Just as it was becoming a mantra and evolving to a point he could not turn back from a calm, old, yet insistent voice broke through his trance, scattering cold water on his thoughts. “If you kill her, you are all doomed.”

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Toph Bei Fong had ascended to the throne of Ba Sing Se in quite the unconventional manner. It was all made possible by the erraticness of King Kuei’s reign - and the people’s lingering fear of the Dai Li. Kuei eventually returned from his stint in the circus, although the death of his beloved Bosco lead him to ultimately resign once again. At this point, the people of Ba Sing Se had had enough - there were to be no more Kings, no more rampaging Dai Li, no more secret societies built on lies, brainwashing, and physical partitions. The people were ready for change, and they demanded it in the form of democratic elections.

The first election had been held 8 years ago, and after drunkenly announcing at a party that if no worthy candidates applied she would rule them all, Toph found herself championed by the people. She was well known for her no-nonsense, down-to-earth manner, and as noblewoman and best friend to the Avatar, she became the only choice in the people’s minds. That year, she beat out seasoned politicians to become the first elected ruler of Ba Sing Se. She had been horrified. 7 years later, after 2 subsequent “re-elections,” she was only marginally less so.

Of course, there were perks. Ruling the country had allowed her to break down the machinations of the Dai Li, as well as the walls that had segregated the city. She was also allowed to hang out with King Bumi without scheduling beforehand, and their earth bending battles became the stuff of legends. Lastly, she finally had a legitimate, political way to boss Sparky and Twinkles around, not to mention Chief Sokka.

(That was her favorite. Even after all these years, she took a special pleasure in making Sokka squawk.)

Ruling a country was much harder than her pre-teen experiences had led her to believe, however. Since she had stripped the Dai Li of its power, she was now in charge of everything. She quickly realized she had to instate a council of advisors, even though she still thought that was a recipe for disaster. If Uncle hadn’t been at her side that entire year, sipping on tea and advising her with steady, seasoned advice, she probably would have fallen flat on her face and that would have been the end of constitutional monarchy in the Earth Kingdom.

Yet she had survived, and more than that - emerged victorious. By the third year of her reign, she was so firmly instated in her people’s minds that no other candidate had a chance. By the fifth year, she had raised the city’s export levels by 15%, and the poverty level had slipped below 5%, the lowest it had been since Ozai’s fall. Prosperity bloomed at her fingertips, and if she had grown
slightly more caustic with age, she was forgiven. After all, it was hard to doubt the efficacy of a ruler who could sniff out lies and truths simply by judging the fluctuations in their heartbeat.

Toph’s favorite aspect of ruling the most powerful city in the world (take that, Sparky) was foreign relations. This was partially because her best friends had gravitated into the most powerful positions their homelands had to offer, or in Katara’s case, easing communication between them. It was also because she enjoyed enforcing her iron will upon unsuspecting opponents, and watching grown men grind their teeth in frustration.

What she did not enjoy doing, even when it was in the name of preserving the relations between the Earth and the Fire nation, was matchmaking. Toph leaned back on the bed, listening to her younger second-cousin-once-removed prattle about the bedroom. Siyi Tanh was a good girl; honest, hard-working, and intelligent. She was also deeply concerned with change and the state of the world, and had involved herself in Gaoling politics since she was a teenager. Lastly, she presented herself well, especially among foreigners. Although that could be attributed to - as Toph was informed - her incredible beauty.

“...and it’s such an honor to be here, King- er, Aunt Toph. I realize that everyone is busy preparing for the Remembrance Ceremony, so please direct me to assist in any way possible…”

Toph swallowed back a sigh, and wondered if she could get away with giving herself a foot rub. Tanh was a genuinely nice person, hopeful and happy and looking for the best in everyone. Yet that earnestness clashed with Toph’s considerable snark, and it made social interactions strained. Although Toph couldn’t see it, she could feel the perky smiles, and it was enough to make her skin crawl – she just couldn’t handle that level of sincere sweetness. Even Sugar Queen -by far her nicest friend - knew how to sharp, or as Sparky would say, dark. “For now, just worry about getting settled in, Tanh. And it’s kind of you to offer, but you should stick to preparing yourself on Fire Nation culture. The boys will be here in a few days, and you’ll want to be ready for them.” And here it comes in three, two…

Tanh’s heartbeat increased, and it was the only indication of her excitement. “They are? Will I finally be able to meet Prince Iroh? Forgive me for being forward, but if it is true that the negotiations are settled…” She trailed off, heart keeping up that quick, indicative rhythm in her chest.

The marriage negotiations between Iroh and Tanh - the first international union among royalty for over 100 years - had been settled a week ago. Tanh had passed through an elite selection process, passing tests instated by Zuko, Katara, Toph, and several other advisors. All that remained was for Iroh to physically sign what he had already given his verbal assent to. “They should be here any day now - Unless the Avatar picks them up along the way. They were supposed to check in at Shi Hen, but knowing them they decided to push on right through it. You’ll meet Prince Hot Stuff soon enough, don’t you worry.”

Tanh chattered on, her happiness painfully obvious. Toph wondered just how long that frame of mind would last. Iroh was terribly handsome, a mixture of Zuko and Mai at its best. Toph could understand Tanh’s infatuation, formed from a fairly detailed sketch and word of his intelligence and skill. Yet there was zero romance in the boy, and while Toph couldn’t blame him for that, she was not married. She suspected Tanh was in for a shock when she met Iroh and realized that her vaunted beauty was of no help at all.

When Tanh began outlining standpoints on the recent economic recession in the struggling Earth Colonies – the girl was nothing if not thorough- Toph’s thought turned inevitably towards Zuko and Katara. No matter their protestations, there was no way they were simply arguing matters of state -
their heart rates were through the roof, and Toph knew guilty evasion when she experienced it. Gods above, this was the last thing they all needed - especially now that Uncle was dead, and the sleeping sickness was hitting especially hard.

The past is the past, she had told Katara, walking her back to her chambers after the incident. You guys made your choices. You can’t get that time back.

Katara had walked at her side, back ramrod straight. Although she had smiled, one eye had been focused on the present and the other in the past. I know. But when will it end, Toph? When will it all just change?

Maybe when we do, Sugar Queen. Toph couldn’t say the alternative: or perhaps when we die. Or perhaps it’s when we let go.

And if we can’t let go? What do we do then? Her friend had turned to her then, and Toph could hear the sorrow in her shaking voice. Toph pitied them both profoundly, although she would never admit it - to be in their position for twenty years? It was unthinkable, had she not once drank from the same cup.

She spoke before she realized the import of her words. Then perhaps you need to make change. ‘Cuz nothing lasts forever, Katara.

The contrast between her talk with Katara and this one-sided conversation was jarring. Once, they had all been like Tanh -young and hopeful and ready to change the future. Now, there were times when Toph felt like all they could do was hold on, and hope for change to come. Right now, she merely hoped it wouldn’t be too long in coming.

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The three benders stared in surprise as an old woman emerged from the forest, moving quickly and stopping only when she reached the head of the prone woman, close enough to intercept Iroh’s blade. She was gray and withered, with gnarled hands and a heavily lined face, yet her back was straight, and her bearing proud. When her gaze moved across Sura, she could see her eyes were hazel. The crone bent to address the unconscious woman, speaking with a strange lilt that the benders had never heard before.

“Poor dear. For one that has never felt the touch of the spirits to be suddenly made their mindless vehicle? I would not have had it come to this.”

Sura found her voice as Iroh tightened his grip on his sword. “Who are-“

“I would not do that, firebender.” Iroh loosened his knuckles. He had made no movement, no noise. How had she known? The woman’s next words addressed Sura’s query. “I am her mother’s mother.” She paused, seeming to consider something. “And unless she wakes, I am the last of the spirit tribe.” Breaking off her train of thought, she looked directly at Sura, and Sura felt the strength behind her gaze. “I am Asha.”
Koru coughed, effectively breaking the power of the moment. “I’m sorry, you’re what?”

Asha transferred her painfully direct gaze at him, but Koru was undaunted. “What’s going on here—”

He was cut off by the woman’s silent dismissal. Tilting her head down, she spoke just above the woman’s forehead, hands gesturing over her nose and mouth.

“Anicca. Come up to the light. Come to my voice. The spirits will not bind you. You are strong. Move past them.” Asha spoke slowly and clearly, as if her granddaughter could hear every word she said, yet there was no response from the woman below her. The spirit bender rubbed her granddaughter’s temples and muttered something indecipherable. Still no response. For a moment all was still. Then Asha abruptly stood, jarring Iroh, who had been watching intently for the woman to make a false move. He was still wary, mainly because none of this made sense. A small part of him wanted to kill the woman and have done with this tense situation. Yet if Sura was here, than so was the Avatar. Iroh grimaced. What was he doing? Was there a way to reach him before this strange woman enacted more damage?

“I was too late. She is too deep, although…thanks to you, waterbender, she is not fully beyond reach yet.” She hesitated, looking mournfully down at the girl. She shook her head. “I can spend no more time here, I have wasted too much already.” Asha’s eyes glared, as if looking into herself. “There are steps I have to take to slow the damage. If I don’t get there in time…” For the first time, she looked directly at Iroh. “Protect her.” Her eyes flicked over his tense form, wry seriousness in her eyes. “You’re a bit too excitable, and think entirely too much, but you’ll settle down.”

Koru’s eyebrows rose. Iroh? Excitable? His stodgy older brother, who had laden himself uncomplainingly with responsibility since he left the nursery? Against the seriousness of the situation, a small, irreligious part of him whispered oh, I like her.

The quick churning of Iroh’s mind halted as her words penetrated. “Protect her? Old woman, unless you give me damn good reason I’m going to kill her.”

Asha paused. She had turned back to the forest but she looked back over her shoulder. “The plague that has spread to the outside world…what do you call it? The sleeping sickness?” Sura and Koru glanced at each other, identical looks of surprise and interest on their faces. The old woman nodded. “She will know what causes it. And unless she’s alive, it will continue to decimate your people. She is the last who could heal them.”

Iroh’s eyes widened against his will. How many people died because of the sleeping sickness each year? And this woman was the cure? Scowling, he sheathed his sword in a fluid movement.

“What if she doesn’t wake up?” Sura broke in, breathless. “I tried to reach her before but…they…what holds her?”

The woman looked at her grimly. “Dark spirits.” She looked up to the sky, as if called by something no one else could hear. “Then it is up to the Avatar. But I’m sorry. I must go.” She spared one last parting look at Iroh, terse and unfriendly. “If you let her die, you and all your ancestors will suffer in the spirit world for all eternity.”

Iroh opened his mouth to retort but the woman was gone. A moment passed in total silence, each bender partially stunned, or attempting to take in the full ramification of the encounter.

Koru was the first to master himself. He clapped his hands, startling his two companions out of their stupor. “Well!” He steepled his fingers. “I liked her. She was sassy. How about you? Well, maybe not you Iroh. She didn’t seem to like you much.” Iroh shot him a dark glance at this, but Koru continued, undaunted. “Thoughts? Comments? Concerns?” He spread his arms, as if to invite his
companion’s thoughts. “Anyone else think they’ve gone completely mad?”

Sura furrowed her eyebrows in his general direction (sometimes Koru could not read the mood) but never took her gaze from the woman. Asha had said she was too deep, but Sura remembered the power of her command, and how she had been unable to fight against it. The woman was strong. Maybe…maybe it wasn’t too late…

“Sura. Is your father here?”

Sura started, taking her eyes from the woman. “Oh. Yes. He was investigating the village to find…” Sura trailed off, staring wide-eyed at Iroh. Oh for the love of Yue and La she had forgotten all about her father! Iroh’s eyes rolled to the sky. Women. Slipping into comfortable habits, they began to bicker – he to chastise, she to defend, and so it was Koru, sitting apart and musing with his chin in hands, that saw the woman first begin to move.

It was the fourth finger on her left hand. It twitched. Koru sat up straighter, previous thoughts on the attractive flush decorating Sura’s face banished. It had moved, hadn’t it? So intent was he on confirming his suspicions, he didn’t notice the presence of another. There! Her whole hand had clenched this time! He was leaning forward obviously now, and too excited to realize that Sura and Iroh had fallen silent, their argument forgotten. And now…her head was twitching! She was moving!

“You guys, she’s-“

Koru was cut off rudely as felt his body roughly pushed aside by the very air surrounding him. Tumbling to his side, he turned to face his attacker, ready to do damage, but it was Sura’s father. Sura’s enraged father.

The blood draining from his face, Iroh reviewed his options. Here was Avatar Aang, drawing the same conclusions he himself had, and ultimately more capable of carrying out his resolutions than he had been. Aang was in a pseudo Avatar state- something he had never seen before, and had no idea on how to stop him even if he had. His Aunt Azula had once stopped the Avatar with lightning, but Iroh couldn’t bring himself to summon the cold fire. Not against the Avatar, and certainly not when he himself was bombarded by confusion and indecision. Aang was going to kill the woman – and there was nothing he could do about it.

Before her father could come between her and the woman, Sura moved. Throwing herself in front of the prone woman (and oblivious to the rustlings behind her, betokening movement) Sura stretched her arms out to protect the woman. This was no longer merely a personal motive – for not only had the woman saved her, she could stop the sleeping sickness.

“Father, no!”

Koru moved before Iroh could, shielding Sura’s body with his own, and so he absorbed the impact of the blow. Aang had bent a block of earth to tumble them from his path; heedless of the damage he could have caused them. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Iroh drew his twin swords, determined to do what he could. Committing himself to desperate measures; to call down the cold lightning from the skies if he needed to, he found himself frozen by the suddenness of the tableau in front of him. As the Avatar reached out a hand over the woman, she flung herself up to a sitting position, as if pushed from the earth itself.

Her eyes were ablaze, but they were no longer filled with the power of the spirits. Iroh could see Sura poke her head over Koru’s still shoulder, so she at least was all right, but Iroh didn’t spare them much thought, so desperate was he to see the altercation between the woman and the Avatar. The
Avatar pulled his hand back, instincts flaring into life. Something had changed…

“Take my life, Avatar, and your spirit shall be called to fill the balance.” Her voice was a growl, a whisper, tinged with power and an accent Iroh could not name but would be unable to forget for the rest of his life. “You who transgressed on your promise – you are not fit to judge the sins of my people.” She paused, weak and woozy. She had used all her power to fight off the spirits holding her, now she barely had enough strength to speak. Head lolling to her chest, she mumbled before she fell back to the earth in honest unconsciousness, “It is done. I have avenged him.”

Chapter End Notes

And that is that. Are you intrigued? Damn, I hope so...
Chapter Notes

I do not own ATLA. I only own the original characters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Second Interlude: Boiling Flame (Of Identity and Despair, part 1)

(Mid Year 30)

They say that sins will catch you out

Whether they be yours or no-

A lover’s embrace will light the dark

Where once there was nothing to show.

My love for you will always remain

True as a candle, steady as wick

No breath shall end that gasping flame

My passion burns me to the quick

You left me all alone today

Weeping of sorrow and of sin

You claimed I’d never change my ways

You’d found them-oh, my sins.

~Fire nation love song, “Of Sin and Sorrow”
“Well he’s certainly not into women, that’s for sure.”

“I heard that he had his first sexual experience as a boy with a soldier and it’s turned him for life.”

“No, not the prince! But he’s so handsome!”

“I know, a pity isn’t it? But they say even Firelord Zuko is beginning to question his own son’s desires…”

“Well why else would he never take up on what we’ve all been offering for years? Hasn’t even touched a maid, and he’s 20!”

Sura stood motionless as the trio of brainless beauties of the Fire Nation trailed past, chattering all the while. Koru… Koru was gay? And they were talking about it now, when Uncle was on his deathbed? Had they no reverence for the great man? Or for the truth? It had been almost half a year since Sura had last visited the Fire Nation, but she had come to represent her family as Uncle was soon to make his passage from the living to the spirit world. So it was understandable that she would be behind on the latest Fire Nation news but this was Koru, her best friend since birth. She knew all his secrets. All of them. And he had never, ever intimated to her that he was interested in men.

But…now that she stopped to think about it, he had never shown real interest in anyone at all… panic opening her eyes, Sura began to make frantic connections. She had said it herself – she was closer to him than anyone. If he had been interested in any of the countless women who found ways to thrust themselves into his path, he would have at the very least revealed something to her, even if he was too cautious to act on it. Despite his flippant character, he knew his duty would be to marry for the good of the Fire nation. But at least before the marriage, he was supposed to dabble a bit, even if just to gain experience. Iroh certainly had, if rumor was to be believed… And of course, there was that incident several years ago…

Shuddering, Sura sought to dispel the image from her mind. Koru had been kidnapped by former Ozai enthusiasts who sought to make him their puppet in their planned coup d’etat. Of course, he was able to fight free (with the help of Iroh and Sura, who although 5 years younger were both still quite formidable) but not before he was placed in certain compromising situations, to ensure his compliance. While the whole truth of the matter was never made clear to Sura, rumor ran rife throughout the Fire nation that the enthusiasts had even attempted to sodomize the teenage prince. Koru never confirmed or denied these allegations. He merely stated that the situation was never beyond his ability to cope with.

Sura had suspected before that she was in love with Koru, but that was the infamous event that decided it. She could clearly remember the moment her world stilled, and her heart spoke, perfectly legible in the silence. Iroh had just melted the hinges of the door and kicked it down, and she had just used her water to snake around the ankles of the two firebenders just inside the door, causing them to trip, and fall unconscious. Koru had been sitting in a chair surrounded by men, but from the moment he lifted his shaggy head, (he never cut his hair unless he could help it) Sura knew. Opposites as they
might be in both power and personality, he defined her. She loved him. She loved him.

Yet it had been a long five years since her realization. He had never made any sort of romantic
eroulette to her, and she knew that he saw her only as his oldest and best friend, and (far worse)
perhaps even as a pseudo-sister. Iroh certainly did. Yet Sura was not in love with Iroh, and thus it did
not sting the same way Koru’s unspoken rejection did. And of course, no one questioned Iroh’s
sexuality either…

If Koru was attracted to men, she had to know. Moving with the purpose and blindness of the
broken-hearted, Sura did not stop to calm down, or even think how potentially painful the
approaching encounter was going to be. She knew that he would still be in his bedroom, as he and
his brother had been sitting with Uncle and their father until late into the night. So she headed in that
direction, and tried not to think coherent thoughts. She was hurt on two levels – not only was her
heart breaking, as this certainly ended her dream of somehow making him see that she was the one
for him, but also on a more platonic level. They were best friends, weren’t they? He couldn’t even
tell her this much? This was important! Didn’t he know that she would support him no matter what
he decided, no matter what trouble he got into? She was torn between rage and tears as she threw
open the doors to his bedroom, knowing he would still be in bed although it was an hour before
noon. Ignoring the painful drumming of her heart as her eyes drank in his sleeping face and form,
Sura took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She had to remember her anger – she was his friend,
before she was a heartbroken woman. She would demand the truth, calmly. She would not yell,
scream, or hit him. But most importantly, she would not cry. She absolutely, positively, would not,
could not cry-

“…ra?”

Oh blast. Sura looked down towards the now awake Koru, sleepy confusion and concern etched on
his stupid, beautiful face.

“Sura, why are you crying?” Koru attempted to sit up, so that he could better discern what was
wrong with the girl. Koru’s eyes widened as it hit him. “Uncle…he’s passed, hasn’t he…” He sighed
deeply as his head sank to his chest.

“No, it’s…” Sura paused, berating herself for causing him a worry, even as her anger regrouped and
arranged itself into attack formation. Uncle was a separate worry from her anger, however, and she
couldn’t bring that into this. “Uncle is fine. I’m sorry for worrying you.” Her voice was rough and
clipped as she made the concession, caught between sobs and screams. “This is about something
else.”

Koru raised his eyebrows. It was good that Uncle was ok, but Sura was seriously upset. He had
never seen her in quite this state before. She was angry rarely, but when she was it was just like Aunt
Katara – passionate and often physical. Now she was almost vibrating with tension, but he couldn’t
define the emotion coming off her in waves…

Sura thought she was strong enough to look him in the eye as she accosted him, but she couldn’t.
“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Koru deadpanned. “Tell you what?”

Sura finally found the strength and lifted her tear-stricken face to meet his gaze. “That you desire
men!”

Koru’s mouth dropped. She…it…what? Yet before he could say anything else, Sura’s emotional
dam broke and it all came pouring forth.
“You’re my best friend, Koru, and I’d tell you anything and we **promised** to always tell each other everything but you never told me this! I had to hear this from those stupid whores that always try to throw themselves at you and you can’t even trust me enough to tell me this? Koru! Don’t you know that I’ll always support you no matter what you do? Why couldn’t-" Sura’s voice broke as she began to sob, “Why couldn’t you **tell** me? Don’t you trust me? I-"“

“Sura, *enough.*” Koru’s voice was rough and his face grim as he pulled her onto the bed. She squeaked as she caught her balance, straddling him so that she would not fall over. He was sitting up now, so they were the same height, and his arm around her back and his hand on her face made her look directly at him. Sura closed her eyes, crying in earnest now. Why in Tui’s name did she love him so much?

“Sura, please. Why are you crying?”

“Because I’m upset!” She wailed like a little girl, attempting to hide her face behind her hands. But Koru would have none of that.

“Sura.” Koru’s hand began to stroke her face, collecting her tears on his fingertips. His voice was charged with an energy Sura had never heard before, something close to excitement. “Tell. Me. Why. You are. Upset.”

Sura couldn’t take this anymore. “Because I love you, you idiot!” She struggled to get away from his grasp, the bed, and this entire situation but the muscular arms surrounding her effectively cut off her escape. “Koru please let me-“

“No.” And then, without warning or preamble, Koru sank down on the bed, and pulling her down with him, kissed her.

It took Sura three heartbeats to realize that Koru’s lips were warm against hers. The kiss was utterly without finesse, but in Koru’s defense, he was attempting to pacify a weeping woman. Yet in Sura’s passion-driven madness, she divined another reason for Koru’s desperation to keep her lips from moving. Shoving herself back up, she vaulted herself off his prone form.

“No, Koru! I don’t want your pity. I can’t-“

That was all she had time for, as Koru flung himself out of bed, moving faster than his muscular frame would suggest he was capable of. He caught her by the waist as she attempted to turn and bend water from the carafe on his nightstand, but Koru was quick to act against that. Pinning her wrists above her head, he pushed her back the two feet separating her back from the wall.

Thunk. Sura made a little noise as the back of her head knocked against the wall. Why was he doing this to her? Couldn’t he just leave her alone? He knew that she loved him, why couldn’t he just go away? Or at least stop holding her against the wall…

“Sura.”

She angled her head down so that she didn’t have to look at the warm amber eyes, or the sweep of his cheekbones that she knew so well, or the lips that had so recently taken hers.

“Sura, look at me.”

But she wouldn’t, she wouldn’t look up…to look up was to remember the feel of him against her and she couldn’t become a pity woman, she couldn’t, she couldn’t…

Koru sighed. He hadn’t planned on confessing to a woman made of stone, but as he had made her
that way, he supposed it was all his own fault.

“Sura. You said we were best friends, and that I should tell you everything. So I will. I honestly do not know whether I am more attracted to women or to men.”

Sura’s heart, erratic before, stopped its beat entirely. Oh. Oh.

“I have never felt overly uncomfortably at the thought of male or female flesh next to mine, and frankly, I know it doesn’t matter to me.”

She hadn’t known that truth tasted like bitterness. Exhaling, she attempted to raise her head, and at least acknowledge his attempt to salvage their friendship, when his next words froze her solid.

“If pressed, I suppose I would have to admit preferring women, but as I’ve desired only one creature my entire existence, I’m unclear as to whether it is her sex I desire, or herself.”

Sura could not even process simple thoughts now. So she made no noise or resistance when Koru lifted her chin with his fingers, and looked her straight in the eye.

“I was going to ask your father first, Sura, but I can’t wait any longer. Sura, I love you. It has always been you. Since we were children I…” he shook his head as he stumbled over the words, “…I knew it was only ever going to be you. I want you to marry me.” He took her shocked silence for assent and continued. “I know…I know it may be difficult to finagle politically, but I think it could work. Father is obsessed with binding the nations together, and he wouldn’t refuse me you. He loves you practically like a daughter already! He won’t refuse…and if you love me… the Avatar won’t either. So Sura, please. Will you be with-“

Koru’s planning was cut abruptly off by Sura who flung her arms around his neck, her body against his, and pressed her lips against his own. Her mind had finally caught up with the situation, and she decided to let her actions answer for her, knowing he would understand. His arms wrapped around and pressed her close to him, as if he would never bear to let her go. As they kissed, her mind opened to exultation. She had never dreamed it would happen this way – she never had allowed herself to even dream beyond the moment of a stolen kiss. To know her love was returned and to lose herself in his passionate embrace was overloading her brain and all too soon, she broke away from him, gasping and flushing. Any trace of doubt she might have harbored about his impromptu confession was eased by hazy look in his eyes, and his hands that sought to bring her back to him. Her smile eased the tension however, and he managed to smile back at her; pulling back for a moment simply to look at her. It was fortunate that he did so, for they were interrupted in the next moment.

“My lord Koru?”

The two benders took another step back from each other as the harried looking messenger poked his head through the door.

“Your father requests an audience.” Relief dawned over the messenger’s face. “Oh good, the Lady Sura is here as well. We’d been looking all over for you…Please, follow me.”

The two lovers looked at each other, and smiled like children for whom a festival had come early. It was good that the messenger had turned smartly on his heel the moment his proclamation was delivered, otherwise he would have noticed the aura of jubilant excitement that permeated them. The followed him, slowly, basking in the inane joy of the moment. They walked close, as they were accustomed to, but instead of filling the silence between them with old jokes, animated debate, or even solemn talk of Uncle’s failing health, they let silence simmer between them, like a bridge from
one heart to another. At least until the messenger strode out of earshot.

“Ummm, Koru?”

He looked down at her, never breaking stride. He smiled, and his eyes warmed her heart. “Yes, love?”

Sura let out a ragged breath. She was too happy. She wasn’t going to be able to handle any serious encounter for at least a month. All she wanted to do was laugh, cry, (hopefully not at the same time, but the way she was feeling she couldn’t be sure) hold this boy to her and run away from him at the same time. She settled for the middle ground, which was smiling like a monkey. “Well I was just wondering. Why does everyone think you’re gay now?” Her eyes widened at the Koru’s sheepish look. “Koru?”

“Well…ok. About a month ago, Lady Tila bribed the guard and snuck into my bedchamber. Well, more accurately, my bed.” His eyes darted to the side to observe her countenance.

“And…?”

“Naked.”

“Oh.” Sura almost blushed at the impertinence, even as her anger flared. How dare that whore? How DARE-

“I was…fairly upset about it, and after she realized I wasn’t going to be seduced, she accused me of not being a true man.”

Sura’s jaw dropped. That was…that was borderline treason! After a moment’s reflection, Sura flushed for real this time, remembering her proof that Koru was a “true man,” discovered only minutes ago.

“I told her that regardless of my masculinity, I would not take what was so distastefully offered. I asked her, politely, to leave.” He sighed. “Then…she said something about you.”

“What? Me? Why?” Sura asked, even as her heart leapt in her chest.

“She accused me of-“ here he paused, and nodded to several courtiers who they crossed paths with, “well. Of loving men.”

Sura’s eyebrows shot up. “She called me a man?”

Koru shook his head, slightly frustrated at his inability to accurately portray the situation. “No, not at all. She implied that since I had never made a move on even you, who I’m always with, then I must like men.”

Sura’s heart stilled, confused. But he was smiling at her, that huge, child-like smile that he must have gotten from his great Uncle, for no one else in his honor-driven family could smile like that. “And so that’s how the rumor started?”

“Well…” He hesitated, clearly embarrassed.

“Koru.”

“Ok, ok. After she said that, I got so angry, I forgot to be smart. I mean, I’ve loved you – and known it – since I was 10, Sura.” Sura blinked, amazed. He had loved her that long? She hadn’t known
until she was 13! She had thought it was rough hiding it for the last 5 years, but he had hidden it for twice that…

Koru continued. “I had been trying to ignore it, or at the very least hide it for the last decade and this woman is sitting on my bed, calling me out about it? I was so mad I couldn’t think, Sura. So I said that I would never, ever, want your kind. She took that to mean women, I suppose. I mostly meant anyone who was not you. The next morning, it was everywhere.” He gave Sura a small grin. “I was beginning to worry about men in my bed.”

Sura laughed. She was irrationally mollified by his taking her hand, as now they were in the final hallway leading to his father’s council chamber and would not be seen by anyone not belonging to his family. He pulled her behind a pillar a few feet away from the door.

“But now it doesn’t matter. Sura. I asked before, but I need to hear you say it. Sura, will you marry me?”

Sura looked up into his earnest, searching face. What Iroh would give to see his younger brother now – he always complained about how flippant and silly his brother could be. “Koru. I have loved you and known it,” she smiled as she saw his grin, recognizing that she was using the same words as he to confess, “since I was 13. Not as long as you, but believe me, it felt long nonetheless.” She paused to draw in breath. “I will not marry anyone other than you.” The air was promptly crushed out of her lungs as he embraced her, hard, and she could feel his arms shake.

“Thank Ag- Thank Tui. Thank Yue. Thank La.”

Sura stiffened as she heard him thank the God of Water, and Goddesses of the Moon. Hearing him address them was as if he were personally thanking them for giving him their daughter – for waterbenders were of the water and the moon. She rested her head on his broad chest, and listened to the rapid pace of her heartbeat. She was his. He was hers. A sudden thought cut through her euphoria.

“Koru, we have to wait.”

He picked his head up from its perch atop of hers. He looked puzzled. “Wait? Why?”

“Because of Uncle. We can’t get married now…it’s too close.”

“That’s why we should. So he can know. So he can be there.”

Sura shook her head. “We are the children of war heroes, Koru. The whole world knows who we are, who our parents are. We can’t just get married anytime we feel like it.” She sighed, and tried to smile. “And we still have to ask my father.”

Koru dropped his head, so he could nuzzle her hair with his nose and lips. “I know. When is your father coming?”

Sura frowned. “He should be here in a week. He dropped me off and then said he had business on one of the smaller Fire islands. Something about old friends who needed him.”

“Well, your mother? When is Aunt Katara coming?”

Sura looked at him, confused. “Well, she said she would come, but Father said she wouldn’t. He said she had to stay in Ba Sing Se…” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know why she wouldn’t…”
Koru frowned too. “Father thinks she’s coming…and Uncle wants to see her. I wonder if…” Footsteps resonating down the hall broke them from their clandestine reverie. Sura stuck her head out, and saw Iroh making his way up the corridor, reading a scroll, thankfully distracted. With one last kiss, the two broke from the pillar, leaving their lovers’ persona behind the pillar, where they met up with the namesake of the dying hero.

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Iroh, son of Azulon, died in his sleep two nights later. They never had a chance to tell him of their love. If they had, he might have told them of boiling flame, and a truth of love. Told them of duty, and of identity. Told them of despair.

They were so in love.

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Chapter End Notes

This is the chapter/interlude I am least happy with. It feels so old to me, and I think I didn't change it enough. Oh well. Hope you enjoyed it!
Chapter 3: Sunlight, Forest, and Sky

Don't own ATLA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3 – Sunlight, Forest and Sky

We do not race the running stream
We do not dance within the flames
We do not sleep inside the earth
We do not dream between the trees.

... 

In all that we are, we are ourselves
We keep the truths, hold tight the dead
We guard the curtain between the worlds
Our souls our strength, we are ourselves.

-Children’s rhyme from the Spirit Tribe (translated)-

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Until the woman came, she remembered only darkness. Long ago there might have been pain; nerve rending, searing, ripping pain, but that had ended long ago when her body had stilled its protestations and her soul had sunk too deep to be found. They thought she had surrendered and had relinquished her soul, but they were wrong. She had not cared about the pain, just as she had not cared about her destruction; yet now that it was over, she had not released her spirit. All that should have mattered was that it was done – he was avenged, the ritual would never be replicated. Why should she struggle, now that her life was complete? She could rest here among the shadows of her ancestors, rest among those who had done her will, or had used her to do theirs. It did not matter. So why should she hold onto the one last thing that was hers alone? Had she not given up everything already? Her life, her hopes, her future? She should just let go...
But then the woman came, stumbling in the darkness, for a moment scattering the spirits who surrounded her. In that moment, she remembered there was another world: a world of sunlight and forest and sky, and in that instant she felt life and desperation again, to know that existence one last time. She approached the woman to see if she knew how to get back to the world above when suddenly she felt the spirits move, and her perception shift. She was underwater now, and the spirits were readying their attack on the woman. They had been wary of the intruder, but seeing that she was no spirit bender, they planned to double their captives. She could see they had begun the assault – the strange woman from the living world was in pain, and terrified. Yet this was unacceptable - this woman had done no wrong. They should not hurt her. Finding strength in knowledge – she had given up all sense of self for so long she had forgotten she was someone – she coiled the power deep within her and released it towards the woman.

Go.

As the woman flew towards the surface, she felt the spirits swarm around her, angered that their prey had escaped, and that she still retained her essence. She could feel them biting and hacking away at her – determined to make her theirs. Yet something was different now – before she had willingly submitted to them, and now she no longer wished for them to be a part of her. She no longer wanted to retreat. She wanted to fight.

So fight she did. They invaded her, again and again, in waves of despair and emptiness. Time and time again she feared she was lost, yet still she held on. She had forgotten so much, but if she were to die here, she would not lose it again. She had done what she had to do; lost what she must, but now she would end as herself. She would-

The spirits paused in their onslaught. Moving as one, they turned their faces to where she now remembered the outside world to be, and with a sound like a sigh, passed from her back into the spirit world. For a moment, she felt nothing, and weakly rejoiced. She began her ascent to the upper world, her exhaustion making her move slowly. She was not yet halfway up when she felt what had made her captors flee.

The Avatar.

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She woke up before dawn in a strange tent with the woman from her dream hovering over her, water shifting in her hands. Her first reaction, unfortunately for the water bender, was to jerk upright, and scream his name. In that moment between waking and sleep, she had forgotten he was dead. Perhaps worse than dead. The flickering lamp hurt her eyes, and the siren call of sleep made it hard to think. Before the woman at her side could speak, she rubbed her eyes with her hand. The healer was going to think she was crazy or something. She had to make sense. Ignoring her headache and the seductive urge to succumb to healing rest, she tried again. “Who are you? Where is the Avatar?”

Sura looked at her patient in wide-eyed confusion. The language she spoke was unfamiliar, but one word was recognizable - Avatara? She was looking for her father? Attempting to placate the woman, Sura put her hands on her patient’s shoulders and attempted to gently push her back down. “Rest, rest. You are still very weak. Sleep.” She mimed with her hands folded under her cheek, portraying a pillow. “You are safe.”
Annica felt foolish for not realizing this strangers would not speak her tongue. Thank the spirits she had been forced to learn theirs. She shook her head obstinately, and attempted to get up. “No. Where is the Avatar? I must...I must...”

A tall, grim faced man who had been lounging unseen in the far corner of the tent spoke up. “I told you she spoke our language.”

Sura half-turned to glare at Iroh, but her patient never looked at him. “I speak the language of elemental benders, yes.” She kept her eyes trained on Sura. Her eyes were unfocused, and the fever that had wracked her frame through the first few hours was still glistening on her skin, just waiting for weakness to come so it could move back in. They had to get her back to sleep; otherwise she’d kill herself before she could help them!

“Sura,” Sura blinked at the subtle, exotic pronunciation of her name, “That is your name, yes? Mine is Anicca. Thank you-” She paused as she rocked to her side – if she hadn’t been sitting, she would have toppled over. “Thank you for now, and for earlier, in my soul.” Sura’s eyes widened. The woman was aware of what had transpired between them? More so, she had been in her soul? Anicca was looking at her again, with pleading eyes; tired and sick, yet not to be forsworn. “But please. Is he here?”

Sura realized that pushing her to desperation was only going to make matters worse. “No, he left. He should be back by morning.”

Anicca exhaled, an unreadable look on her face. Sura wasn’t sure whether it was relief or disappointment. Whatever it was, it would have to wait until the dawn. Sura caught her as she fell back, unconscious before her back hit the ground.

“If Koru dies, I hold her responsible.”

Sura paused before she continued her healing ministrations. “That’s foolish, Iroh. He's not in danger of that. Besides, if you must blame anyone other than your brother for his own actions, you should blame me.”

Iroh stood up, hunching over to make his way closer to the women. “If not for her, none of this would have happened.”

Sura stood up as well. Her mouth opened to retort angrily, yet when she looked up at Iroh’s face, she found she had nothing to say. Turning on her heel, she left the tent, tense voice trailing after her. “She’s not feverish anymore. You watch her. I’ll be right outside.”

Iroh groaned quietly. He hadn’t meant to anger Sura, especially if it resulted in him having to stand guard over the woman. He frowned as he watched her chest rise and fall, mouth parted slightly to let her breath escape. He had never before felt an aversion like this – even knowing that she was the only hope anyone had in the last two decades of healing the sleeping sickness, he still felt the impulse to simply walk away from her and never look back.

And what was behind this uncharacteristic dislike? Iroh prided himself on his calm, and on his sense of justice. As heir to the Fire nation throne, he had learned to be many things, and diplomatic was one of them. Yet his knee-jerk reaction to this woman was difficult to fight down – his instincts still deemed her evil, even when the truth of the matter was obscured. Logically, he knew he didn't know enough about her to decide, yet in his heart he expected the worse. Perhaps it was in reaction to the strange attack he had suffered through at the campsite, but-

“Rama…” Iroh looked down sharply, expecting her unsettling eyes to be open, and grew still. Her
eyes were closed; she had been murmuring the foreign word in her sleep. Yet by the drawn look on her face, the dream had not been pleasant. He inhaled deeply, attempting to still himself, to find the calm that so empowered him.

This woman – *Anicca*, his mind supplied dryly - apparently held the key to stopping the plague that was still sweeping across the four nations. Yet she was an enemy of the Avatar. By Agni’s flame, how were they supposed to trust her?

“Iroh.” Jarred from deep thoughts that often intermingle with sleep, he looked up at Sura.

“Yes?” His voice was rougher than normal. Maybe he had dozed for a minute or two…

“Father’s back. I’ll sit with her. You go and talk to him.”

“How is Koru?”

“He’s fine. Apparently he woke up briefly before they got to Ba Sing Se. He certainly didn’t *die.*”

“Good.” He rested a hand on Sura’s shoulder as he stepped past her into the cool, early morning. They had set up tent (transporting that from its previous campsite had been a hassle, although it negated the need to clean up his sick) in a clearing to the left of the road, just out of sight. Not that it mattered, Iroh reflected grimly. What the woman had done had proved the futility of prudence. How could they guard themselves against what she had done? How could one protect their soul?

The Avatar was facing the village, his robes swirling around his ankles as he clutched his staff. The sky was lightening in the east; the deep purple of night giving way to lighter eddies of clouds misting over the horizon. Daybreak was less than half an hour away.

“Avatar.” Iroh took care not to bring himself alongside Aang – his respect for the Avatar approached reverence. “How is my brother?”

Aang looked back at his friend’s son, and his face and posture relaxed. “He will be fine. Appa and I made it to Ba Sing Se in under 2 hours, and Katara saw to him immediately.” His lips twitched in an attempt to smile. “A few broken bones, it was nothing too serious. Katara said the ribs were only cracked, not wholly broken. She said Sura had done well with the initial healing, and that she didn’t have too much work to do.” His visage grew serious again. “What about the woman? Sura told me she awoke over an hour ago.”

Iroh frowned. Had it been that long ago? It couldn’t have been an hour…maybe he really did doze off while watching her. “She came to consciousness. I hadn’t thought it was that long ago.

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Aang looked sharply at Iroh from under hooded lashes. He was obviously exhausted, and there was a curious glazed look in his eye that Aang had never noticed before on him. He looked almost…lost?

Aang’s eyes narrowed. If this was caused by the woman as well…

“Yes, she woke up well over an hour now. Almost two, actually. She was asking for you, father.” Both men turned to face Sura, who had approached them unheard. One of her decorative hair loops had come undone, and the blue bead rested on her shoulder, rolling when she moved. She looked at Iroh, as if to remonstrate him. “And her name is Anicca. We don’t have to keep calling her ‘the woman.’”

Aang looked at his daughter with a mixture of anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion in his gaze.

“Don’t get friendly with her, Sura. You don’t know what this woman has done. She may or may not be the key to providing an antidote for the sleeping sickness,” he nodded in the direction of the tent, and Iroh realized he *must* have fallen asleep, for how could he have not heard Sura explaining all this
to her father? “but you have not seen the people of the village. You don’t know--“

“Father I touched her. I’ve interacted with her. She was held captive by spirits…they hurt her. They hurt me! There was nothing she could have done!”

“Sura, everyone in this village is dead except for her. With her claim that she has ‘avenged him’, she is our only suspect.”

Sura’s mouth opened soundlessly. Her eyes searched her father’s for a frenetic moment, but they soon dropped to the ground, unable to argue against his stone-faced resolve. Iroh gazed at the village.

“So you’ve found them, then?” He had thought the village eerily quiet before, and was glad that he hadn’t known before now. Give him a foe of flesh and blood, but supernatural enemies had always unduly disquieted him. “She killed them?”

The Avatar opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted.

“They ended themselves.”

All three spun to face Anicca, pale yet determined, clear-voiced yet still unsteady on her feet. The fever had left her, but she was still weak. There was a scab above her left eye, where Sura’s rock had hit her. Sura had stopped the bleeding long ago, but the cut remained. Below the scab were her smoky eyes, which she fixed on the Avatar, and took a step forward.

“Oh, did they?” Aang’s answer was terse, as if he could not bear to spend any extraneous time on debate with the woman. “They all stopped breathing, all by themselves?”

Anicca’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, but then she shook her head. “I do not know the manner in which they died. I only know they chose to.” Anicca knew that her language skills were good, but if she couldn’t make herself understood now, she would be in trouble. She saw anger pass like a storm cloud over the Avatar’s face, and she realized that he must have seen them. His mind was closed to her. She would have to try something more dramatic.

“It is thankful they are only dead, and that what they did was not done unto them.” Her throat threatened to close in on itself, the grief still too near. “What they did was forbidden, yet they still have souls.”

Sura and Iroh stood on the sidelines of the conversation, shut out by the strength of Aang’s rage, and Anicca’s painful earnestness. Sura looked back and forth from the Avatar and Anicca, torn between her father and standing up for the woman she already begun to sympathize with, if not respect. She had saved her life, after all. Iroh looked only at the woman, in his exhaustion—at least, he hoped it was only exhaustion - feeling her despair smudge the air between them, like soot on dark alley walls.

Aang stood perfectly still, torn between the desire to destroy the woman in front of him and the quiet, cold voice of reason begging him not to. Unlike Sura and Iroh he had seen with his own eyes what had happened to the villagers, and antidote to the sleeping sickness or no, whoever had done this was a monster…

“Your mind is closed to my words. You will not see truth.” She looked down, and exhaled deeply. She could see if she even tried to proclaim her innocence, it would not be believed. She had not wanted to do this, was not even sure she could, but if the Avatar was there… “I will take you to the ritual chamber. I will show you what they did. What the spirits made me avenge.” She would take him there, and pray she was emotionally strong enough to face the people of her village one last time. At least she could apologize to him…for not being there the one time that he needed her.
For the first time, Aang’s eyes met hers.

“Show us, spirit bender.” His eyes narrowed, and Iroh and Sura were both struck by the dark flame crackling in his hazel orbs. “Show us everything.”

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The Asha bent nearly double as she leaned on her staff, her breath coming in huffs as she silently cursed her advanced age. It had taken her almost 2 hours to make the hike up the sacred mountain, where one of the Great Agreements between the spirit benders and the Avatar had taken place, long ago. This was one of the 3 most sacred sites among the spirit benders, who, when they locked away the majority of their strength, agreed to remember and keep safe the pact. Artifacts were stored here, ancient symbols of the past that still held great power. She had to make sure they were still here, still safe. She had failed her granddaughter, but she could not fail now. Not when he was still loose.

She had not told the three elemental benders of her fears. They would not have understood, and explaining would take too long. Yet even if she had time, she would not have condescended. There was still a chance Anicca would wake up. If she did, she would have to face the truth on her own. There was nothing that she could tell her to make it easier. She would have to find the shrine under the mountain something the spirits had never allowed her to do before, and discover the meaning of her sacrifice. Yet that was her life now. Now that Anicca knew the touch of the spirits, she would have to walk the path of a spirit bender.

At the mouth of the cave, the Asha’s blood chilled in her veins. She was not a strong spiritbender, which had constituted her being trained as the tribe's Keeper in the first place, but even she could sense the presence of someone of immense strength further up the mountain. She could feel the power emanating into the early morning light, and was glad that she had spent the night sending off messages in both the spiritual and physical realm, warning the other tribes of the disaster and what she feared it signified. To face this demon in the night was beyond her power. The only hope she had was in her knowledge, which she knew must be greater than the intruder’s. After all, she wasn’t the keeper of knowledge and bridge between the elemental world and the spirit tribes for nothing.

She picked her way carefully as she climbed onto the overhang, and let out an almost audible sigh of relief as she noticed the artifacts were still in place. Cradled in the embrace of three hands carved from the rock walls were three statues, each depicting a beautiful woman, holding in her hands an object that represented an aspect of the original promise. The three figurines were protected by both earthly and spectral devices, which kept them from being used or even glimpsed by outsiders. The artifacts, although their true nature was obscured by the relentless flow of time, were central to spirit benders’ survival, especially in these late days. Spirit benders possessed only a fraction of their earlier strength, and these artifacts could, if used correctly, bless the user with power from their zenith. Yet they were protected by the elements – the cave was impossible to climb if one was not an earth bender, or made familiar with the hidden path she had trod hours earlier. The air was thin at this level, and without proper training one could pass out quickly. For hundreds of years the cave had been protected by a waterfall, and after it had dried flame had moved in to take its place. The scrub lining the sides of the mountain were extremely flammable, and on hot days were known to spontaneously burst into flame. This was to say nothing of the spiritual protections guarding the
That was why one of her first duties after being inducted into the hallowed ranks of the Keepers had been to learn how to bypass the protections. It hadn’t been hard. She had always been a strong and fit woman, and had melded well with elemental benders. She was able to learn certain tips on surpassing the elemental barriers when ascending the mountain. To bypass the spiritual protections were a little more difficult, but in this she had (as she assumed her granddaughter would someday do) used her unflinching honesty and sincerity. All she had to do was to incorporate a sense of reverent protection whenever she approached the statues. As she meant it wholeheartedly, she never had a problem in approaching such hallowed artifacts. Yet this time, these traditions were mingled with a sense of urgency, as she knew these powerful artifacts would be his targets.

The intruder must be further down the tunnel leading into the mountain, but his power was still strong, and she knew that he must be close. Moving quickly, she picked up the Eastern and Southern artifacts and was about to turn and grasp the Northern when she heard the scuff of a boot against stone, directly behind her.

In her last living moments, she realized that she had vastly miscalculated the strength of the intruder. He had been in the room the entire time, cloaking himself in his power. Knowing there was not enough time for her to turn and face her attacker (and be assured of their identity, at the very least) she clutched the artifacts tightly, and prayed they would give her the strength and speed necessary to transport her soul to the spirit world before she was-

Asha crumpled to the floor, dead. Blood spurted from her neck and pooled about her fallen form, as well as dripping off the short blade of her attacker. She had fallen forward with her arms folded beneath her, trapping the artifacts beneath her aged, birdlike body. Her murderer callously kicked over her body, blood still seeping from the wound. A hand closed around each of hers, and tore from them their treasures. A smirk twisted his face as he dropped them into a tightly woven sack, and settled back into the dark recesses of the cave as he waited for the one who would come – must come – to gift him with the third artifact.

He hoped she wouldn’t be too long.
understand. By ‘monster,’ I believe you mean spirit bender. If so, then yes, they all were.” She hesitated, gaze turning inwards. “But I am not a spirit bender. Before yesterday the spirits never answered my call. And even then, I do not think it was truly my will they bent under.” She sighed as his sardonic glare remained unchanged. Sweeping her arm in a welcoming gesture, she continued, “Everyone in this village, even if very weak could enter the spirit world. Some needed help, but they all could interact with the ancestors there. Stronger people like—she choked, unable to say his name—‘some of my family could…could influence human souls on the earthly plane, and I assume that is what you mean by monster.” Iroh nodded, slightly interested against his will. Finally, someone was explaining what the hell had happened...if her words could be taken truthfully, that was.

“But since I was a child, I have been unable to interact with the spirits on any level. I am the only one in the village that has never seen the spirit world. The spirits actively denied me their knowledge, their power. The only reason I know them at all is because they used me to avenge the sins of my people. If I had been a monster,” now she spoke with vehemence, now looking at Iroh with a barely contained rage that sought to burn the backs of his eyelids, “I might have been able to stop them.” She calmed, considering. “Or at least kept the spirits from causing so much damage.” She stopped again, confused. “But I still do not understand how you knew anything happened at all. You should not have been able to feel their retribution…save the Avatara, you are not spirit benders. What they made me do should have not affected any others, only those who were in the ritual chamber.”

The Avatar spoke for the first time since he had challenged her to prove herself. “Then tell us, spirit bender. What was their ‘sin’?” He turned to face her as he placed a hand on the mottled mountain, which they had finally reached. Anicca saw the rough-hewn door to the tunnel that led down to the ritual chamber was still open. To her, it felt like the mouth of a monster that had haunted her dreams. She had never seen the ritual chamber, although she had longed to for all of her childhood. Now, she wished she never would.

She looked up at him with sad eyes, already imagining the scene that awaited them. She answered as she took the first step into the darkness beyond. “They enacted the forbidden ritual. To ensure his obedience, they murdered my brother’s soul.”

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They descent was awkward, to say the least. After her dramatic proclamation at the surface, Anicca had refused to say anything else. The Avatar led the way, a flickering flame cupped in an outstretched hand, and Sura shivered as she made her way downward. She had always hated going underground – and anyways, wasn’t this a mountain? Why had the path been carved down into its roots? Her thoughts turned to Koru, whom she missed with a sharp twinge in her heart. It had been hard enough to shift him off of her, knowing him to be injured because of her, but healing him afterwards had been worse. She could feel the broken ribs shifting in his torso as she knelt over him, and although she had healed both he and Iroh countless times, it was 100 times worse when the one you healed was the man you loved. She couldn’t even discreetly kiss him goodbye before her father airbent him onto Appa. She held the memory of their last kiss as a precious moment, a flame flickering in both her mind and heart. Until they met again, it would have to be enough. Until they–

Sura walked into Anicca, who had stilled suddenly. Yet neither girl could speak, nor could they tear their eyes off of the carnage in front of them. The ritual doors were open, and bodies were everywhere. Men, women, and children lay, bloodied and scattered along the colorful mosaics lining
the stone floor. Sura could see no weapons, but blood was everywhere. Oh La, how could anyone have that much blood inside of them?

“Now tell us, spiritbender. What did you do to these poor people?”

Anicca did not answer. Her eyes were wide, but it was not the lifeless stare of possession. She merely looked on, shocked to her core. Tears did not fall, protected as she was by the expectation of large-scale death, and the shock of actually witnessing it. Yet the enormity of the truth threatened to overwhelm her, and for a moment she could only look, and fight to retain herself against the spirits (or madness…they feel so alike) that waited for her weakness.

“Answer me-“

“This is wrong.” Iroh’s voice brought Anicca out of her trance, and Sura from her horrified musings.

“What do you mean?” Anicca’s voice cracked. Now that he mentioned it, perhaps something did seem wrong…not that she would know. She had only recent experience in spirit matters, and had only read about the theoretical aspects of this ritual, and its ultimate consequence. The forbidden rite in front of them had not been performed in millennia, so no one remembered exactly how it would end. Yet perhaps she was merely succumbing to a false hope – maybe he hadn’t meant to question the validity of the vision, but of the morality of her actions…

“The blood is too fresh. It should have dried by now. It’s practically still dripping. Something is wrong.” Iroh had stared impassively at the scene since he had reached the landing, and from the first a sense of inequity had tugged at him. Yet until he spoke he had been unable to realize it. Sura pushed past Anicca in order to get a closer look, shoving aside her earlier queasiness. If people were still bleeding, perhaps they were still alive…

“Sura, get back from there-“

Thunk. Sura slipped and fell backwards onto her butt, clutching the side of her head and grumbling. Aang stepped forward to help her up, yet before he could make contact he looked up to see what Sura had hit her head on, and realized that the Ritual Chamber was gone. In place of the large, spacious room full of the recently deceased members of Anicca’s village, were two large doors, the obstruction Sura’s head had knocked against. Aang straightened slowly as his eyes widened in confusion.

Surprise turned to suspicion as the situation rearranged itself. The doors were part of the mountain around them, and they certainly would have heard them open or close. Had all that been an illusion? For the first time in years, Aang felt out of his depth. He had remembered hearing wondrous tales of spirit benders as a boy, but only as myths from long ago times. Since his re-emergence into the world a century later, he had undergone almost no spiritual dealings – at least, not on this level. In fact, the only time he had ever relied on his spirit powers were to communicate with past Avatars (an elementary procedure, especially in desperate times) and to seal Ozai’s powers away, thirty years ago… Now he was faced with his inexperience, and the grip of panic settled on him. Sura. Sura had to get out of there. Iroh could handle himself and the spirit bender, if need be, but Sura could not be harmed.

He reached for his daughter, in the process pushing Anicca back towards Iroh, but fate had already moved past the moment of prudence. Sura had been less surprised than the others, drawing upon on her pain to center herself, and had decided that the time had come to see the truth. Before her father and Anicca could squabble again, (and before Iroh passed out; he looked uncharacteristically weak, Sura had noticed) she decided that she would attempt to open the doors. As she gripped her hands around one of the foot long vertical handles, she reasoned they probably wouldn’t open anyways.
Especially if they were protected by some illusory defense mechanism. Regardless, she was tired of the stagnation, and wanted events to progress. After all, every step she took led her one step closer to Koru…

Aang was a heartbeat too slow – her hands tugged open the door just as he reached her side. With a *shun-chunk* the left door began its outward descent, faster than Sura expected. Then it came upon them. Not the spirits this time, or any illusion, but a true vision. The last moments of those who had attempted the taboo – the Ritual of Sundering.

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Chapter End Notes

Yes yes things are about to get well mysterious in here. Also, I enjoy using onomatopoeia. That is all.
Interlude 3: The Secrets Koi Keep

Chapter Notes

Don't own ATLA
Here is the (chronological) beginnings of the Zutara!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude 3: Celebrations and Prophetic Doom.

(Early Year 6)

When I dream, I dream of you, of you and you alone,
And when I wake, alone and cold, my heart becomes as stone.

I long for you, yet cannot tell, my secret I will take,
To my end, my dearest friend; until then joy I'll fake.

You are the sun, the moon, and stars, the glittering night sky,
Your words resound in me so deep, they are my lullaby.
Everyday I tell myself: someday my chance will come,
Yet even then I know I lie, for I am not the one.

I see the way you smile at him, and kiss his privileged lips,
I see the hand that grasps your own, and holds your slender hips.
When you dance, I lose my breath, my heartbeat starts to fade,
I long for death, the last sweet rest, from your sunlight to shade.

-Love song of Ba Sing Se Nobility: “I Dream Of You”-

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After the dinner and delicacies, speeches and wine; there came the dancing and that was the beating heart of the fête. Among the nobility, fire nation lady spun round only with corresponding fire nation elite, but those of lesser rank were less picky in their choice of partner and it made Zuko’s heart swell to see flashes of blue and green, and green and red blending together on the grand ballroom floor. It would have done him even better good to see a water tribe and a fire nation member dancing together, but as Sokka was engaged with his wife and Ty Lee was spinning around with her fiancée, the mustachioed Haru, the only conceivable water and fire tribe couple would have to wait. Ah well. In the last 5 years they had accomplished so much, more would be sure to follow.

Zuko inclined his head with just a hint of a smile as King Bumi passed by, giggling young fire ladies clutching each arm, enthralled (or perhaps just pretending to be) by a tale of his youth. The eccentric earth King had quickly bowed before Zuko’s earnest passion for rebuilding the world, and had done all he could to help the assimilation of their two nations. If he enjoyed a perk or two, who was to blame him? Yet the pleasant recollections could not hold sway over Zuko’s subtle mind; his introversion won out as he traced the edges of his wine goblet, thoughts already turned from the celebration in front of him to the earning of it. It had taken years – 5 long, hard years – but nearly all the statues, edicts, propaganda, temples, and false teachings stemming from, for, and of his father and grandfather had finally been eradicated. The physical remainder of his father’s rule had long been a stumbling stone to Zuko’s dream of combining the four elements and nations into one powerful, blended, peaceful society. Of course, it was easier to knock down statues and rededicate temples than it was to reform the schools and holy clergy, but that was essential to the eventual re-education of the fire nation as a whole. And earlier this week, the leaders of the religion of flame came together, and publicly agreed that Ozai’s previous teachings (and therefore they, themselves) had been totally and utterly wrong in preaching themselves as superior to any other nation.

It had been a wondrous victory. Zuko had fought against the school system, but that had been completely reshaped quickly enough; completed about 3 years after his father had fallen. He had high hopes for the youth of his nation, and prayed their young minds would be strong enough to help him when facing the older, inflexible minds of the battle hardened fire nation warriors, who had lost the war after a century of battle. Their families rejoiced that the war was over, but they themselves had fought hard, and lost everything. He had spent the last five years attempting to fill them with a sense of purpose, along with Uncle’s help.

Zuko smiled, seeking out the old man on the dance floor. Ah, there he was. Laughing uproariously with a noticeably pregnant Suki, who also was chuckling helplessly. Zuko’s eyebrows lifted in approval. Not only was Uncle still the life of the party, Suki was looking pretty good – after all, she was in the second term of her second pregnancy. Even so, he wondered if Uncle would consider asking a water tribe matron to dance? He would never admit it, but in his heart of hearts, he longed for better relations between the people of fire and water more than anything. He knew it would be hardest to gain, but his deep friendships with Sokka and Katara galvanized him. They and their cultures were very different, but if their nations could achieve a similar relationship to the one he and Katara shared, he felt that world peace was within grasp.

Speaking of which…where was Katara? The last he had seen of her was a half hour ago, when she was dancing with Aang (Zuko had not realized until then that there was a reason for being dubbed
'Twinkletoes') to the admiration of all. He frowned slightly as his eyes combed the crowd for the lithe, dark-skinned young woman. Her hair and skin usually served as a beacon, but tonight he couldn’t find her. He frowned. She should be out there on the floor, soaking up the attention and well wishes. Tonight was technically her night – for not only were they celebrating a great step in their new Ozai-free era, this was primarily her engagement party. And if tonight’s celebrations were a far cry more elaborate than Suki and Sokka’s, well, not every woman can get married to the Avatar. Who, Zuko finally noticed, was also missing.

A strange knot twisted in Zuko’s stomach, causing him to slam his goblet down a little harder than necessary. Of course they would step out for a dance or two…they were only a few months away from their wedding, and they had been in love with each other for how long now? 6 years? To distract himself from the uncomfortable gnawing in his stomach, Zuko did the math. Aang had turned 18 only a month ago, and of course was eager to test his virility. With his wife-to-be, obviously. Who was-

“Zuko, I know that moping is one of your most impressive skills, but is now the best time? Really?”

-Agni above right behind him. Shaking away the unwelcome thoughts, Zuko stood to embrace his best friend who was leaning playfully over his shoulder. “Katara. I was just looking for you.” He paused to look down at her as they broke away from each other. “Also, I will have you know that looking vaguely displeased is only my second best skill.”

Katara grinned, catching the rhythm of his banter. “It follows your super sneaky catch-the-Avatar abilities?”

Zuko nodded gravely. “And is followed only by my Uncle impressions.”

Katara laughed, knowing that Zuko’s distinctive voice would never do justice to Uncle’s. Or anyone else’s, for that matter. She snagged a glass of champagne off the tray of a passing waiter, and Zuko realized he was happier now than he had been all day. Not wanting to speculate why he shook his head, and Katara took charge of the conversation.

“So you were looking for me?”

“Yes. Well, you and Aang, really, but I’m sure he won’t mind if I use you for a moment.”

Katara’s eyebrows rose. “Use?”

Zuko smiled devilishly, a smile that women found insanely attractive, and therefore it was a smile he used very rarely. He never used it on Mai as she found it inappropriate, and he wouldn’t use it on any other woman, because of its inexplicable sexiness. So he used it on Katara. Not only did it often fit the nature of their dealings (his smirk broadened as he remembered the incident of the Fire Ambassador’s trousers) but because she was also, like Mai, curiously immune to it. He found it a bit odd that the women he cared for the most found it the least appealing. “Do you mind dancing with Uncle?”

Oh Yue, Zuko had that look on his face again. Katara remembered every time he had ever smiled at her like that – not only because his smiles were rare to begin with, like rain in the desert, but because this one caused the most devastation. When he smiled like this, she understood why women swooned in his presence, and why Mai had become so intractable in her jealousy that the only two ladies allowed to be alone with Zuko (and only great duress) were Ty Lee, and herself. Toph, of course, was not a threat, and it went without saying that not only could she be alone with Zuko, she could place herself in the most compromising positions and even Mai didn’t bat an eye. Not only was she blind, but she was like a non-homicidal sister to Zuko, and for whatever reason (Katara
suspected blackmail) she always got away with just about everything.

But he had asked her something, hadn’t he. Shaking her head to clear away uncomfortable thoughts, Katara tried to replay his words in her head. “Does Uncle need my help with something?”

Zuko’s smile was genuine now. “Ah, yes. Yes he does. Why don’t we just go find-“

No need, for Uncle had made his way to the gallery and stretched his arms high to make an announcement. “Ladies and Gentlemen of all the nations! We are here today to celebrate not only Fire Lord Zuko’s achievements, but also to congratulate the Avatar and Lady Katara on their upcoming marriage!” He paused for polite applause, and turned back to smile happily at the two confused benders behind him. Perhaps he sensed a bit of tension between them, a spot of confusion; for the prankster in him reared its capricious yet venerable head.

“And, in the absence of the Avatar himself, what better way is there to start the ceremony right but a dance with the Fire Lord?”

Fuller applause now, accompanied by loud brays of approval from Sokka who knew an embarrassing situation when he saw one. Judging by the looks on Zuko and Katara’s faces, he’d have fodder for jokes for years.

Katara bit her lip and tried to smile as Zuko did the same. Neither minded dancing with each other – they had been practice partners before, and through battle had become quite in tune with each other. Mai wouldn’t like it, but she would understand. Besides, she was almost 6 months pregnant, and couldn’t dance herself. So there were no true objections on either part but the vague misgiving that this dance might somehow, someday hurt them…

Zuko silently led Katara from the gallery onto the dance floor as the orchestra stirred, scaled, and played the first introductory bars of the popular Fire Nation ballad, “Sin and Sorrow.” They took their positions facing each other, mirrored by a dozen other couples, and the distance between didn’t crackle with their customary, friendly energy. It hummed with something far more seductive and insidious. Their hands reached for each other, marring the perfect stillness in the space between, followed by their bodies a moment later. The first step, the second; a slow slide to the left followed by an intricate clasping of hands. They had danced before, but tonight it felt so different – it felt purposeful, and precise, as if every step, every movement was important and quite possibly their last. Their usual mirth was lost, leaving them both with a curious aching fixation upon each other and their shared movements. Perhaps it was because Katara had never looked so beautiful as she did tonight – Zuko was dazzled by the depth of her faceted blue eyes, the musky promise of her smooth skin, and the allure of her pitch-dark hair. And in Katara’s estimation, Zuko outshone fire itself tonight: his hair was no darker than hers but it was softer, and provided an intriguing contrast against his paler skin; his body was so strong yet so graceful, and of course the warmth flickering in his eyes – damaged and perfect –had never drawn her in so much as they did tonight. As they danced, Katara and Zuko discovered a sensuous intimacy with each other, and haltingly explored of it what they could. Neither would find this intrinsic connection with anyone else, yet not for a moment did they forget their obligations, and of course would not put a name to this pressure building within them. The next morning, they would awake and partially forget this whole experience and partially assign the emotional strength to other factors. Yet during these few, fleeting, precious moments, as hands would twine together and their bodies would brush, just so, their hearts knew what their minds would not.

The dance ended, as everything must, and for the first time since it began, Katara remembered what it was like to breathe. She curtsied, and Zuko bowed low. Yet before he rose completely, he looked up and fixed her with his golden eyes that were just beginning to smolder.
“Another?” He asked huskily, and without thinking, Katara gave him her hand.

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The koi swam gracefully in intersecting shapes, and Aang wondered dismally if their movements could possibly be construed as a metaphor for life, love, or marriage. If Uncle were to step outside the grand hall where all the dancing was currently taking place, Aang was sure he would be able to tell him. But perhaps not. Aang had a feeling that in his case, the expectations of life, love and duty would never be fully compatible again.

“Good evening Avatar.” Mai’s low voice brought Aang out of his reverie, and he spun and rose to greet her, betraying all of his boundless, youthful energy.

“Good evening, Fire Lady. Have you decided to take a rest from the festivities?” Aang’s mild depression had lifted swiftly at the sight of her. Something about her long, sorrowful face always made him strive to improve her mood, and even the noticeable bump under her flowing, tasteful robes would not change that.

Mai waved away her attendants and settled herself carefully down next to the Avatar. She looked at him closely, a guarded and alert look on her normally uninterested face. She, as always, wasted no time on preliminaries. “It does not bother you that they’re dancing together?”

Aang’s open face was still battling off the vestiges of boyhood, and his confused expression was almost comical. “What? Who?”

“My husband and your fiancée,” Mai replied, clearly annoyed. “Entwined in each others arms. Together, when you and I are not in attendance.”

Aang snorted. He hadn’t meant to belittle Mai’s confidence, especially in her condition, but the thought of Katara and Zuko in an amorous situation had long lost its terror, along with its plausibility. No, it had been many years since anyone or anything had driven Aang to jealousy. “Mai, they are close friends. Like you and Ty Lee. Why should I worry about something like that?” He considered for a moment. “And besides, you know Zuko. He’s probably just using this as a way of improving relations between the water tribes and the fire nation.” Aang flicked a pebble into the koi pond, disrupting the patterns of the swarming fish. He did so partially to cover repressed memories: earlier post-war years where knitting together the different nations was essential, and radical suggestions – including inter-nation marriage – had been voiced.

Mai watched him in silence, one hand resting on her belly. There was no solace in the beauty of the evening for her, tonight. The koi pond was surrounded by wooden gazebos, graceful arches that delineated the gardens into outer and inner sanctums of green, black and red resplendence. Yet she was distracted by the turmoil within. She knew she was being ridiculous, but she couldn’t silence the fears that threatened to smother her every time the laughing water tribe peasant danced within view of her husband. She knew nothing would ever happen. Zuko had proved himself the most honorable of men. Yet still she feared. Most of the time she was able to convince herself it was the pregnancy influencing her moods, but tonight...Tonight one glance was all it took to convince her that there
was something more between the two friends. Was something or soon would be. Every ounce of Zuko’s fierce concentration was focused on Katara as he spun her around the ballroom floor, and between them simmered something that Mai was an unhappy stranger to. She attempted to banish the word from her mind, but it was ever present, always mocking her. Passion. Whenever the two benders came together the encounter was always passionate, and it was an emotion she had never known with Zuko.

Later that night, after the revelries were over and all the celebrants were lying in bed, a long shadow moved purposefully and skillfully through the hallways. The shadow sometimes paused for no reason, and laid a hand with pale, tapered fingers across their midsection before moving on. If the other hand would occasionally explore the tucks and folds of its robes to reassuringly touch a shuriken, who can say? The figure moved steadily to the main hall where two figures stood outlined by the embers of the dying fire. Once it recognized them, however, it stopped. The Avatar and his lady were deep in conversation, he calm and composed, she gesticulating wildly. Both spoke in hushed undertones, but certain words – generally from the waterbender – were loud enough for their unseen observer to overhear.

“Responsibility….Aunt Wu…won’t marry…concubines…!”

The intruder cocked their head and concentrated, but the Avatar’s response was muted by the crackle of the dying flames, and the roaring of the wind outside. The only indication of the Avatar’s raging emotions, he would never take out his displeasure on another human being, especially his wife to be. For the once placid wind to be howling at this rate, the Avatar must be upset indeed.

The shadow nodded firmly, almost dislodging the hood that hid their silky hair. If the Avatar was taking charge, then she wouldn’t have to. The waterbender really was far too dangerous to confront outright, especially in her condition. If her fiancée handled the situation, then she wouldn’t have to risk-

“Lady Mai?”

Mai spun, shuriken in hand before she realized it might be better to feign innocence. Uncle Iroh, however, was undaunted, and continued speaking as if Mai had not pulled out her weapon of choice on him.

“You should not be prowling the halls so late. It is better for both the baby and you to get some rest.” As always, his voice was incredibly soothing, and Mai relaxed slightly, against her will. She forced herself to stride haughtily past him, as if he had not caught in her an extremely compromising position. Women did not go traipsing about the palace in the dead of night, wearing a long black cloak to hide their features. As assignation of some sort was in order, obviously, and she hoped that for once the meddling old man would simply let her go about her business and not try to feed her some meaningless lecture.

“I wonder what kind of business you might have with the Avatar so late. Or is it Lady Katara you
wished to see?”

Mai cringed, more out of annoyance than guilt. She was the Firelady, for Agni’s sake, she didn’t have to listen to-

“And with a shuriken so quick to hand as well. I wonder indeed.” He paused as Mai stopped. His voice sounded tired. “Are you jealous, Lady Mai?”

Mai found that her throat was far too tight to answer immediately, so she settled for gracing him with her most bored look to stall for time. “Jealous? Of who, the water bending peasant? Please. Zuko has better taste than that.”

“Zuko has more honor than that.” Mai turned around completely now, to see that Uncle had assumed his counseling stance: arms across his belly tucked into his wide sleeves, look of wise complacency across his face. “He would not dishonor you by taking up with another woman. Surely you know this much about my nephew?”

“I don’t care about if and when he takes fire nation concubines,” Mai hissed, all pretense of hauteur gone. “I know it will happen, have always expected it to happen, and in a way…” \textit{It will be a relief when he does}, Mai finished silently, aware enough to shield \textit{some} of her thoughts from the walking wisdom dispenser. She shook her head and continued. “As long as he never takes up with \textit{her}, I won’t care.”

Uncle’s eyes dimmed as he realized she must have seen them dance earlier this evening. He had thought them invisible under the sight of so many, their blossoming attraction for each other masked by their friendship and earnest desire for binding together their nations. Yet he had seen the way Zuko’s eyes had rested upon her, and the desire that simmered in them. Apparently, so had Mai. He sighed, and attempted to reassure her while he himself was sick at heart. “Zuko will always put matters of state before the desires of his heart. No matter what he feels for anyone, that will always be so. Lady Mai, as his wife, I can assure you that he loves and honors you above all other women, and will do so all the days of your life.” Even as he uttered the words Iroh knew – as he had suspected from the beginning - that Zuko’s love would ultimately be wasted on her. She loved him back, certainly, yet she was not a flower that blossomed in love. She did not give back nearly as much as she took. She was a woman that closed tightly upon all the love it was given, jealously hoarding every scrap, and attacking any she deemed to be a threat. With a woman like this there would be either affairs or misery; Zuko would have to choose between happiness and his honor. Iroh sighed, deeply as the Fire Lady turned to go. He hoped it would not come to this. Perhaps matters would change – especially when he would not see Katara so often once she was married...

As he turned in to rest, he offered up an odd prayer - that the truth might lie uncovered, and Zuko might never realize his budding feelings for his best friend.

…

…”

…”

…”

…”

…”
Well that was vaguely unpleasant, one could say. I wish I could tell you there'd be light and sweetness in your interludial future, but I would be lying.

Look it's bound to get sexy soon, thought, so no worries.
Chapter 4: Dreams of the Dead

Chapter Notes

Don't own ATLA
I do own Koru, who is by far the most upbeat character. Toph is a close second, but her snark sometimes brings down the mood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 4: Dreams of the Dead (The Ritual of Sundering)

What is death?
Is it a journey? A doorway? A river?
Or is it a long sleep before the break of a new day?
I dream of green pastures and deep waters, and I am not afraid.

…

What is hope?
Is it the sunrise? A war cry? A promise?
Or is it the still and silent strength one finds within?
I remember the darkness; yet have not lost my way.

…

What is happiness?
Is it a smile? Laughter? A goal achieved?
Or is it the drift of a lotus on the waters of my heart?
In you, I know my answer.

-Uncle’s Prayer-

…

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...
For all his flippancy, Koru was a warrior trained, and therefore did not immediately open his eyes upon awaking. He registered that he was in a soft bed, and as the last thing he remembered was shielding Sura from her father’s attack, he wasn’t entirely clear how he got from then to now. Yet a moment of concentration erased his fears. He had an amazing sense of smell, and recognized the scent of Ba Sing Se’s palace, a soothing mix of cool stone and loamy earth almost immediately. Added to that, a dry palm cupped his brow, ostensibly checking for fever. He knew that hand. He was in the Earth King’s palace at Ba Sing Se, and Aunt Katara was looking after him.

Yet when he opened his eyes, it wasn’t his Aunt looking down at him, it was someone else.

“Yeep!”

Someone squeaky, apparently. She pulled her hand back quickly, as if she had been doing something inappropriate, instead of checking his temperature. Or perhaps she was merely startled to find her patient suddenly awake. He could see her scrambling for her composure.

“Ah-ah, you are awake. Do you feel all right? Should I go fetch Lady Katara?”

It took a moment for him to respond; it wasn’t everyday that he awoke to such a captivating woman. And by Agni, she was beautiful. Apart from Sura, very likely the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her hair was long and black, and it fell in waves around a petite body that most men would commit murder for, if not personally start another war. A figure like that was rare in the four nations, yet it was her face that drew the eyes. Perfectly symmetrical, with deep, brown, almond-shaped eyes; it was a soft, almost child-like face and it practically begged for all men to protect her. The only indication that she possessed a will of own was her strong chin that found ways to assert itself while still jutting attractively from such an exquisite face.

Regaining his composure, Koru smiled his late great-Uncle’s disarming grin. “Of course. I feel fine, thank you.” He stretched under the blankets, as if to prove the validity of his words. “Sorry to be rude, but may I ask who…?” He trailed off, hoping she would satisfy all his questions.

The woman smiled graciously, unconsciously in response to Koru’s charm. She used her wiles in much the same way he did, and on a deeper level they realized they were kindred spirits. “I am Siyi Tanh, niece to King Toph Bei Fong. Lady Katara asked me to keep an eye on you while she conferred with the Avatar and your father.” She smiled more naturally, as she moved to the door, initial discomfort forgotten. “They should be done soon, I’ll go and see.”

“Thank you.” Koru settled back into the bed as she gently shut the door behind her. His thoughts turned to Sura. She must have been all right, otherwise she would be here with him, yet why had Iroh not returned to Ba Sing Se? Perhaps they were guarding the woman. Yet why would not the Avatar have stayed behind, then? Koru shook his head, trying to clear his mind. Throughout his sleep he had dreamed, and his dreams had been fevered and confused. His mind still felt sluggish, and it was difficult to piece together the last few minutes before the Avatar had attacked. He thought he remembered seeing the woman’s hand twitch, but he had no idea whether she had woken up or not, or if it had all been a part of his jumbled dreams.

A sudden thought stuck him, and he sat up abruptly, jarring his aching ribs. The woman had to be alive. If she were dead, Sura and Iroh would be here now, and if they had been, they would have been in his chamber instead of the lovely Siyi Tanh. Koru had nothing against her, but she was no Sura. They must have been left behind to guard her.

“Koru?” His father stood at the doorway, pale yet composed. Koru wondered just how bad his injuries were to make his father look like that. He supposed the fear had more to do with how he had been attacked. After all, Aang had been the closest he had come to going Avatar since his Aunt had
shut that part of him down (he had been told the Avatar had accessed it once more to defeat his grandfather, but he had never been very clear on that point), and although it wasn’t technically the Avatar state, it was close enough.

Koru smiled at his father, thankful he had not inherited his father’s serious demeanor. “Hello father.” He held up a hand before Zuko could speak again. “I would just like to say that Iroh and I successfully completed our mission to the Sun Temple, and that we found a woman who can potentially stop the sleeping sickness, and I protected Sura from child abuse.” He took a deep breath, and cracked a sardonic grin. “Just about in that order.”

Zuko shook his head, but did not reprimand his son. He was sure his flapping mouth would get him into trouble someday, but he could not chastise his son’s instincts. Then he realized what his son had just said.

“Child abuse.”

Koru looked at his father, slightly concerned at his blank look and tone. He had repeated the words as if he hadn’t known exactly what they meant. Hurriedly, Koru sought to correct his mistake – Zuko had always been extremely protective of Sura, stemming from the amount of time she had spent in the Fire Nation in her youth, and his own lack of daughters. “Well, not exactly, I mean, I’m sure Uncle Aang had no intention of hurting Sura…it all happened so quickly.” Frowning, Koru tried to cover his own protectiveness and anger at the Avatar’s actions. “He was practically in the Avatar State, and he probably couldn’t tell who else was in front of him.” Hopefully, his father wouldn’t notice that he himself was rigid with a mixture of anxiety and anger.

His father stared back at him for a moment, gaze utterly unreadable. If not for the thin trail of smoke that wafted from one nostril, Koru might have assumed that his father was simply reflecting on a more neutral topic – the tea to be prepared for Uncle’s funeral, perhaps. Koru was not fooled. His father was furious.

“Don’t tell Katara this, Koru.”

“Wh- you mean she doesn’t already know? How does she think that I was injured?”

Zuko looked surprised. “Didn’t you protect the spirit woman? Aang said you dove in front of her…”

Koru’s mouth dropped, hard earned diplomacy forgotten. “I dove all right, dove for Sura! Sura was trying to protect the woman, because she had gone inside her head or something and said she was good, and that the spirits were controlling her. I protected Sura from Aang’s attack, and although I’m not ashamed to have saved Sura’s spirit woman, she wasn’t what-“ Koru choked himself off, afraid of finishing his sentence. She wasn’t what I moved so desperately for.

Zuko’s head fell to his hands, and he mumbled something suspicious like TuiYueLa, TuiYueLa, a phrase he had picked up from Katara.

“Why can’t I-why didn’t…Aunt Katara should know. This is about her-“

His father shook off his frustration and looked him in the eye. “Koru, listen. She will, I promise. Just not now. Matters are already…strained, and, well…” He shook his head, pulling at the leather cord that held his now long hair. “Regardless, we shouldn’t say anything until Sura comes home. Seeing that she is perfectly safe will help smooth matters over.”

Koru grudgingly assented, although the urge to protect her (on overdrive since the day they confessed their mutual affections) still clamored loudly against his ribcage.
“Anyways, I have something else to tell you. I had meant to talk at a more appropriate location and time,” Zuko looked around and smiled wryly, “but due to the circumstances, I suppose this is the best we’ll get. Especially if this spirit woman poses trouble later on.”

Koru’s heart stopped. This couldn’t be what he feared, could it? His father had adopted his most serious expression, and that meant only one thing – someone else had died, or he was initiating the get-your-serious-flirt-on talk again.

“So what did you think of Siyi Tanh?”

Koru’s mouth worked like a fish’s, grasping at words. The erratic, deafening pound of his heart didn’t help matters. “She was uh…nice. Squeaky.” Too late, Koru realized he should have given a glib, noncommittal response. He blamed Sura. It was impossible to even think about other women now, and their secret engagement made him jumpier than Aunt Ty Lee. Now his father would know something was wrong, and unless he was very careful, he was going to end up breaking his promise to Sura. He had promised her he’d talk to her father first, but really, he had protected her with his life, and he was sure the aggressor would have absolutely nothing to say against their union.

Zuko noticed his discomfort, and jumped to entirely the wrong conclusion. For 20 years, Koru had shown interest in no one, and now he was gaping like a toddler? Zuko sighed. Could the day get any worse? “Koru…Miss Tanh is – well, will be soon – engaged to Iroh. They’ll sign the papers here, and then will undergo the traditional engagement ceremony and marriage rites in the Fire Nation, perhaps 6 months from now. She’ll go back to the Fire Nation with us after the Celebration, in order to learn our customs- Koru, are you all right?”

He was better than all right. He was blissful. As soon as he heard “Iroh”, he slumped back against the bed, sleepily relieved smile lighting his face. So it wasn’t he that was engaged, it was Iroh. Poor girl…

“Quite all right, I assure you. I just suddenly got a little tired.” This was a little at odds with his growing grin; suddenly, all the world was right again. Yet he was tired. All the anxiety dissipating so suddenly had tired him out, and after he rendered his congratulations, he was ready to sink back into healing rest. “I liked what little I saw of her very much. Determined chin. Beautiful and self-aware. I’m sure Iroh will like her.”

“Oh?” Zuko knew the boys would be close in ways he wouldn’t fully understand, but he thought he knew his eldest son better than that.

“Well…as much as he’ll ever care to like anyone.” This was a lie. Iroh would not like her, although he couldn’t exactly explain why. Part of it was Iroh’s personal unsuitableness for being a husband – he was aworkaholic, and Koru knew he thought of romantic love as distasteful, perhaps even dishonorable. The rest of it was vague and unsettled, yet Koru thought it had something to do with Tanh herself – she was too small and vulnerable looking, even if her personality proved to be otherwise. There was something in her person that signaled protectiveness in men, and Koru knew Iroh was not a man to appreciate that. If he allowed past experience to dictate, Koru would say Iroh was a man that actively avoided that. Perhaps all this would change when they were married, but Koru would not bank on Tanh’s happiness in marriage. He wouldn’t say any of this, though. After all, what if they decided to simply marry her to him?

Zuko looked carefully at his son. He knew that there was more than he was admitting, but he also knew Koru would not be tricked into giving it up. He was too much like Uncle, for all his open vivaciousness, he knew how to keep his secrets. “I see. Well then. I’m glad to see that you will welcome her as a sister then.”
“Of course.” Koru smiled genuinely, he was nothing if not welcoming. “I’ll be excited to see how Iroh leads the nation with Miss Tanh at his side.”

The world pulsed as the people chanted, excitement and fear in equal amounts; everything homogenous, all inevitable. The spirit benders had arranged themselves in a spiral; every man, woman, and child determined to take their place in this ancient ritual. They held their upraised hands, spoke forgotten words, and projected every last ounce of energy towards the central dais where the ceremony was taking place. In the center, two elders held a tall, handsome young man upright. They chanted along with the people, even though they themselves were directors of the energy. The leader of the village, marked by his beaded, braided headdress, held his arms aloft and spoke against the people, transmutating their raw energy into something he could use, could fashion against the young man he was opposite.

Far away, in a world not yet in existence, Iroh felt the woman twitch, and then slump, as if she had been shot with an arrow. Without knowing what he did he pulled her close to him, arms crossing protectively (whether to protect the woman or everyone else, he himself could not say) over her chest. The fear had overcome the excitement, now, and all those who looked on were filled with despair. This…this was incomprehensible horror.

Some people in the spiral were crying, others were alight with joy. Some looked on with fear, and others with vindication—whatever their personal thoughts, they all heard and obeyed the call to be here, supplying their energies to the great tapestry of power their leader wove. Only one was not a part of the ceremony, the young man who had the not the strength to stand, and whose eyes were being closed by the man leading the horrifying euphoria.

And now his words made sense, even to those who could not have understood, in other worlds, languages, and times. They made sense and gave a name to the fear that the people had not yet understood, and the cries that sounded from the spiral augmented the evil of his words.

“You whose actions undermine our tribe, our people, our way of life…you whose arrogance and stubbornness would weaken our people even further…you who should have died at birth. Would you damn all our souls? Would you allow your perverted desires to infect us all? Would you doom our tribes with your inaction? No. Although powerful, you are only one man against many. And unless you turn back now, and change your ways, you will meet your end. What do you say, Rama? Repent, and change. What do you choose?”

The young man said nothing. His head hung to his chest, so the man with the sad visage on his right shook him gently. Even this small action was enough to jar him from his stupor, however. His parched lips parted, and uttered a word.

“Anicca.”

In that faraway world, she attempted to run to him, to stop this horrible tableau, yet the man holding her did not let go. She clung to his forearms as if she could pull them away from her, but the madness
before her eyes caused her soon to forget even her body, and he relaxed his hold on her when she stopped resisting. Yet before he relaxed his grip he felt a tear fall, one on each arm.

_The leader’s face glittered with something like rage, and one hand dropped to his leather belt. The chanting grew to a fevered pitch, a crescendo of cries, and sobs, and words that they now understood all too well. He had promised them a ritual to right the wrongs, to preserve order. He had not told them of death, of what was worse than death. As he pulled the knife from his belt, and kissed both sides of the well-polished blade, the sacrifice picked his head up, and as the blade rushed down to meet him, whispered words of his own._

“Save-”

As blade pierced flesh unholy screams resounded within the chamber, and one by one, the people in the spiral died. To Sura, it looked as if they merely sighed, and whatever defining force there is within us that makes us human and alive – our souls – went out, without so much as a candle’s flicker. Once or twice she saw a dark, momentary smudge, yet it moved too quickly to be properly seen and identified. Iroh saw nothing but the woman he restrained, pale and trembling, mouth open in horror, yet far too horrified to speak.

Aang and Anicca saw it all. They saw the vengeful spirits descend from the walls of the domed chamber, and as they made contact with every living human, drew out their souls. Aang’s stomach tightened as he saw the souls of the children carried off, senseless and unknowing, into the spirit world. The men and women were much the same, although some met their end with their eyes opened, and one or two seemed to struggle against the spirits that dragged them into the dark. Anicca had eyes only for the people on the dais, although her vision was blurred by the tears that she could not wipe away. She saw her brother fall, and her father – the man who had nudged him into wakefulness, and whose heart she prayed must have rebelled against this atrocity – bend down to help him, but it was too late, and in the next instant, he was gone. Her uncle on the other side of her brother did not last much longer. The last man alive was the leader, who had fallen to his knees, clasping the bloodied knife to his chest. He tilted his head back as the spirits converged on him, opening his mouth in a soundless howl of rage? Exultation? Fear? It was impossible to tell, and now, as the tableau closed around them, would never matter. It was over.

The four watchers now saw the room as it truly was – the villagers still standing in spiral formation, save for a few (mostly closer to the center) who had fallen over, marring the perfect symmetry. The men in the center had all fallen on top of the sacrifice, who could not be seen. As if his strength were nothing, Anicca finally broke free of Iroh’s grip, and walked slowly to the double doors. She turned at the doorway, and was about to speak, when a terrible shuddering tore through her and the Avatar. Anicca collapsed against the doorframe, shaking and whispering in her native tongue, and although Sura could not see the spirits that had surrounded her father and Anicca - she did feel something coming from them, a coldness perhaps – she took charge once again. Darting past her father’s restricting hand, she threw herself at the massive doors, forcing them to creak inwards, and close.

The onslaught stopped as suddenly as it began, and even Aang let out a small sigh of relief. Yet there was barely a moment to catch their breath before Anicca tore past Sura, down one of the dark passageways that wound an easterly path through the mountain. Before he could think twice, Iroh ran after her, registering that Sura was close on his heels, and not doubting that the Avatar would be following closely after. So this was the truth. Anicca was overcome by guilt at whatever she’d done, and was attempting to run away. Iroh wasn’t surprised. A little chagrined, perhaps. After all, she probably knew the mountain paths like the back of her hand, and they’d have a hard time now finding her. Of course they would eventually bring her back, for the Avatar was hell bent on justice. They’d find her, _and then he’d have to protect her_, he realized with a start, for Sura would undoubtedly be overly empathetic, and who else would remember her true purpose? Iroh had never
doubted the Avatar or his judgment, but it was apparent that something was very wrong here – he had never seen the Avatar this angry and unbending. So it would have to be him who would keep cool, and remember that this woman could possibly hold the key to curing the sleeping sickness. Let Sura pity the woman, let her remember that she had lost everything, and was quite possibly heartbroken. Likewise, Aang would pursue vengeance enough for all, all the while hopefully overcoming this momentary darkness that was distorting his just and gentle character. As for himself, although she shook and unsettled him, he realized now that he had no real vendetta against her. He tried not to remember the crone’s warning. He was not protecting her because of any gaes laid upon him. He was just doing what he knew he must.

The path was wider now, and the light he had been using to follow after her lit the walls into variegated, amorphous shapes that reminded him of an underground grotto. He heard the woman’s footsteps echo up the passage in front of him, and although he felt he had to be gaining, he felt a ripple of unease. Why had the Avatar not caught up with him yet? There was by far enough room in the passage to ride the winds and surpass him and Sura, and to catch up to the wayward Spirit bender. He heard Sura gasp behind him, and he assumed the Avatar had made his appearance until he nearly slammed into the wall directly in front of him. A sharp turn and then he realized what had made Sura react – who would have thought the mountain could have housed a veritable lake?

The water-filled cavern opened before them suddenly, and for a moment Iroh was struck by the size and grandeur of the space – a quick, initial glance told him that man had done its part in increasing the beauty of the cavern, judging by the columns, unlit lamps, and the shrine located in the center of the lake – before he caught the woman’s movements, and bounded after her.

Sura was far more affected, and she was slower on the uptake. By the time she had fought past her amazement, Anicca was halfway across the bridge leading to the shrine. She grimaced. She didn’t want Iroh to be the one who caught her, although she would admit he’d be a better choice than her father. Dashing to the water, she allowed herself a small grin. Let Iroh run after Anicca. She’d travel in style.

Iroh frowned as Sura rushed past him, gliding along the surface of the preternaturally still waters of the glassy lake. Did she think this was some sort of game? The woman was obviously dangerous, and here Sura was, practically smiling with glee. Didn’t she know-

Iroh nearly stumbled as the woman in front of him fell to her knees, prostrating herself before the statue of a robed woman with outstretched arms, and a mysterious yet oddly comforting smile. He heard her whisper to herself, in the tongue that he did not know, but one word caught at him: Asha, Asha. A few steps and he was close to her, close enough to reach out and put a hand on her shoulder (whether to console or to police he did not know, that was how confused this woman made him) when suddenly Sura was there too, dropping to her knees next to the woman, and throwing her arms around her. Iroh’s lips formed the warning, but his heart did not let it sound. Soft, he informed himself. Why are you so weak? His hand lowered towards her, and for just a moment, he let it rest in the space just above the too-large tunic that threatened to slide off her shoulder. He would not touch her; not yet. The Avatar will be here soon enough, he answered back. There is no dishonor in letting her have a moment to grieve.

“You called?”

Iroh spun, fire blazing in both hands at the sound of the intruder’s voice. He had heard no footsteps, and although he recognized the voice – her curse was still ringing in his ears – her silent approach was enough to rouse the warrior in him.

The fire died immediately. There is nothing the living can do to the souls of the dead.
“Asha! Ty mihebr-“ Anicca scrambled to her feet, unconsciously clutching the scowling one in front of her in her haste to see her grandmother again. The light in her eyes dimmed as she looked upon her grandmother closely. “Asha…yehpa-“

“Speak so that everyone can understand, dearling.” Her smile matched that of the statue behind them, but it faltered when Anicca sank back to the floor, overcome by the death of her last loved one. Asha closed her eyes and shook her head sadly. “Here. I had meant to do this all together, but I hadn’t realized you would relive their last moments…I’m afraid it will take her some time to find herself. She has lost everything. And what is more, she has gained their curse, their bane. Their strength. She does not know how to use it yet, and it is compounding her misery. The spirits are still taking advantage of her.” She knelt down and cupped Anicca’s face with her pale, flickering hands, bringing her granddaughter’s eyes up to hers. “It will not always be so. I will give you one last thing, dearling. One last gift.” She bent down to place a kiss – it felt, if such a thing could be experienced, like cold starlight – on her granddaughter’s lips. “Look at me.”

Sura found herself in the private garden of the King of Ba Sing Se, her (fearsome) Aunt Toph Bei Fong. She had been there only once before, several years ago, when her mother had left her at the palace during a sleeping sickness epidemic. In her boredom, she had wandered around the public gardens, marveling at the rock formations, the elaborate pools and ponds, and the massive Zen garden with stones so large only Earth benders could shift them. She had sat at the edge of a surprisingly dilapidated pool – why had this pool been neglected, surrounded as it was by so much beauty?- lazily feeling the water ripple and shift beneath her, when she realized there was a space between the waves, and what she assumed was the earth. Intrigued, she recklessly fell back against the pool, and into the private gardens. She had never told anyone what she had found there, nor did she like to think upon it. It was a private place, full of Toph and her memories, and she thought it was callous to intrude. She had never forgotten its serenity, however, or its surprising beauty; so at odds with how she (and the world) perceived the great King.

Now she was back, and couldn’t remember how she had gotten here. In fact, the last thing she remembered was staring into the ever-expanding eyes of the dead Asha…

Sensing another presence, she spun to greet it, calling upon a thin whip of water from the passageway. Yet it was only Asha, as she had been in life. She smiled disarmingly and sank to the ground, calm and peaceful. Sura sat opposite her, irrationally mollified.

“Why are we here?” It was dangerous to be here, Toph could come at any moment, and Sura hated the thought of intruding in such an intimate place.

“Because you brought us here. To you, this is a place of strength and serenity. Unless you mean why are we here, together; in which case I would tell you: simply to have a bit of a talk.” She smiled again, and Sura was reminded of Uncle – he always smiled like that just before he offered someone-

“Tea? I have a cup of jasmine and of –I believe – pouchong. Unless you would like to brew a quick pot of something else?” Sura shook her head no, and reached for the jasmine already at her feet.
“Good, I thought not. Now. Where to begin?”

Sura blew across the hot liquid, knowing it to be a futile gesture. This was her dream, was it not? She assumed it wouldn't burn her, and it didn't. “How can I help Anicca recover? You said she was lost?”

Asha paused before answering. “Of course you would begin with that. So compassionate and empathetic. Be just as you are, dear. That will be more than enough to ease her way back to herself.”

Sura felt a twinge of guilt. Although she sympathized with Anicca, and felt her father was wrong when he considered her a monster, she had also been thinking about curing the sleeping sickness. She opened her mouth to explain herself – honesty seemed ridiculously important, here – but the Asha cut her off.

“Yes, yes, the soul sickness. Your prudence does not undermine your empathy, you know. But you have to understand, we did not choose the repercussions. All this was decided long ago, at the dawn of the Avatar and elemental benders, and the twilight of the Spirit benders. Anicca knows the stories. What you need to know is that the only one capable of ending the sickness is the Avatar. How he does that is up to him. What Anicca knows will help him, and I believe she will even clear the way for him. But the rest is beyond you, or I, or even her. He must face his actions, dear, and become the man he was meant to be.”

Sura stared in shock, tea forgotten, mind reeling. Man he was meant to be? But he was the Avatar. He had ended the tyranny of the Fire nation, and even faced down the Phoenix King Ozai…

“But enough of that. We have limited time, and more important topics to touch upon. And I have a gift for you.” Asha looked pointedly to their left, where a tree (which had not been there a moment before, yet had always been there) stood, near enough so that the leaves of its weeping branches brushed against Sura’s head and shoulders. She calmly extended her hand, and for a moment, Sura could see right through it, and she wondered for moment if she should be accepting a gift from one of the dead. The moment passed quickly, however. She had to trust in her, in this, for the Anicca’s sake, and the countless others who could possibly benefit from this…

The tree shook briefly, unprompted by any force Sura could identify, and dropped what looked to be a polished walnut, save for it’s perfect smoothness and spherical shape, into Asha’s hand. She nodded in the tree’s direction and it seemed to draw off, knowing itself to be no longer needed. She looked at Sura, and the teacups (if they had ever truly been there in the first place) were gone, leaving Sura’s hands free. Asha placed the nut gently into Sura’s cupped palms.

“This is a nut from a breed of tree found in the spirit world – once, it grew in life as well, but now only one remains, and it flowers in death. Do not plant it; its purpose is not to grow. It is to contain.”

Asha looked at Sura appraisingly, yet with sympathy.

“Contain? But it’s so small…”

“What it holds is not a tangible entity of the physical world. You need not worry about that yet, for the time for it to open has not yet come. Remember, it is your choice what it is eventually to hold, no one else’s.”

Sura nodded, rubbing the nut with her fingers. It was so glossy and beautiful…and right now, the thought of it containing something unreal didn’t seem ridiculous. It felt fitting.

“One more thing. You have witnessed the end of our tribe, the last of the Spirit benders. Anicca should be the only one left to harness the spirits, but I fear that she is not.”
“Someone survived?” Sura broke in, heartbeat accelerating. She didn’t know how someone could have survived *that*, but perhaps…maybe a child? Someone weak? Strong?

Asha’s eyes closed, as if to guard against painful memories. “I don’t…know, exactly. I do not even know if they-he is living or dead. Yet he is powerful, and commands dark spirits. I fear he has made a pact with a demon-spirit - Chac Mool, or perhaps even the Face-Stealer himself. Regardless, he will seek Anicca’s demise, for she knows of the tools that could battle him.

“For your father, his other enemy, he has found a more expedient way of dealing with - he simply turns your father’s dark regrets and hidden, half-forgotten fears against him, blinding him to truth and what he must do.” She opened her eyes and looked at Sura, and Sura felt the dream fading away from all around her, trapped as she was in Asha’s eyes. Asha’s last words echoed along the path between her and her waking self as she traveled the bridge to consciousness.

“You are the child of his heart. If your light cannot turn him from his darkness, then all you can do is find the one who can.”

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Iroh was always struck by the majesty and the sense of time interrupted of the Sun Temple, yet this time something felt different. Where the temple had never bustled with life and energy, he had never seen – or felt – it to be this empty before. He could sense neither the temple guardians, or Ran and Shao, the original fire benders. That he could sense life at all did not seem strange to him, in the ephemeral half-lucidity of dreams. He walked across the paved courtyard, knowing that the stairs leading up the mountain should be in front of him, but not seeing them nonetheless. His footsteps clicked over the cobbled stones, and he realized he knew what was wrong. There *was* a presence here, he just hadn’t expected it. Following the feeling just as he had followed the woman’s trail, he found himself reflecting on the surprising expressiveness of her eyes, and her height. She was nearly as tall as Koru, and almost a head taller than her grandmother and Sura. Wonderingly, he realized he could envision her smile, although he had never seen it in life. It was crooked, with the right side rising higher than the other. She wouldn’t smile for him, but she might for Sura, and for Koru, if they ever met. He thought-

Blinking hard, he clamped down on the thought. It was not his. He would not choose to think of her. Someone was influencing his thoughts, and making him think of her. That meant someone was here.

“Ahem.”

Iroh felt it before he had fully turned, a presence close to Ran and Shao’s, yet not quite right. That was only natural, for Ran and Shao had never spoken to him out loud.

“I was wondering how long it would take for you to orient yourself. It is interesting how you found me.” The sleek, gray dragon - too small to be full grown yet judging by the intelligence in its eyes no juvenile either – spoke again, flicking its tail energetically, almost like a pleased cat. Iroh took a deep breath, suspecting he knew who the dragon really was, but not sure enough to risk being impolite and wrong.
“I followed the line of your thoughts, to you. What is my purpose here?” Straightforward as always, Iroh strove to keep civility in his tone. He figured it would do him no good to anger the “dragon” in this dream, especially as he wasn’t exactly sure who was in charge here.

The dragon playfully smirked. “Ah, so you know who I am, then? Forgive me my little deceit, but I rather like this form, and since you equate it with respect and power, I believe I will keep it.” Dragon-Asha bowed to him, and continued. “My purpose here is connected to the line of my thoughts, as you so aptly described it. You are here to understand the connection between yourself and my granddaughter, so that the bond does not choke you later on. I assume it has already begun to take effect.”

“You mean your curse? To protect her?” Iroh’s inner flame leapt, and his palms tingled in anticipation. She was right to have assumed the form of a dragon; otherwise he would have already attempted to make her intimately acquainted with a fireball or two.

“I did nothing more than bring your attention to what was already there. Destiny exists, I am sorry to say. But no, I was not speaking of my curse. Are you not aware of the leash between you and her? You feel nothing strange about her, in her, around her?”

Iroh opened his mouth to disagree (on principle, automatically) but he realized there was something strange about her. How else could he have seen her rage, felt her sorrow, and soften when faced with her despair? She confused him, and he dislike that. He had put it down to exhaustion, and the strangeness of the entire situation, but now that someone else knew about it? He shut his mouth.

“So you have noticed it, the mirror of her experiences. If you don’t accept it, you'll go mad eventually. You’re tied to her, and she to you, unfortunately. While the two of you have to like it, you both have to come to terms with it. Otherwise, he will win, and the line of the Avatars will cease, and you can imagine the repercussions that will ensue.”

Iroh felt for his inner flame, and used it to ground himself. It was easier than he expected. After all, the whole situation was fairly dreamlike, and he had always had the talent of cutting through the chaff of stressful situations. “He? Someone who threatens the existence of the Avatar? Is he connected to the epidemic?”

Dragon-Asha sighed. She slid sinuously across the courtyard, and Iroh found himself staring into her eyes. “Here. This will work for both purposes.”

Iroh found himself falling forward, pitching into a dream of an entirely different caliber. It took him a moment to realize that he was back where he had started, the shrine under the mountain. Yet he had not awoken – he and Sura were nowhere to be seen. Only the woman was there, with Asha as she truly was, a spirit. He realized that Dragon-Asha had taken him here, and distantly approved: he felt no compunction witnessing the woman’s dream, and he needed to know what the hell was going on. Luckily, he found he could understand their words; Dragon-Asha had done that much for him.

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Asha moved close to her granddaughter, and embraced her. She stroked her hair. Whispered, “Hush, hush my love. He is gone, you must let him go. Thanks to you, they were unable to complete the ritual, and you will see him again in the spirit world.”

Anicca looked up through her tears, with eyes both fierce and lost. “Why, Asha? Why did they do that to him? Why would they try to break his spirit like that?”

Asha chose her words carefully. “I don’t know, dear one. They did not speak with me about this.
Like you, I did not know they would resort to such an atrocity. But I believe that he had disagreed
with them on the subject of…marriage, and they overreacted.”

Anicca moaned, and hid her face in her grandmother’s collarbone. “He would not marry her, I know,
but that is wrong, they are wrong, he was not perverted…” Trailing off, she sighed deeply and
abruptly switched topics. “Asha, why…what is happening to me? I can feel something about them;
Sura, and the Avatar, and the angry one. I think it is their spirits. But I should not…why? Why?”

“Dearling, Rama returned your birthright. You were born with the capability, don’t you remember?
He must have found a way to return it to you. Anicca, look at me.”

Anicca picked up her head, and was stilled by the empathy and love in her grandmother’s eyes.

“Accept his gift, love. It is the last of him, and like always, he would share it with you, his twin.”

Anicca took a deep breath, and tried to calm herself. She had been lost in grief and all that had
transpired, but deep down she knew that she had to find a moment of peace so as to process her
emotions. Otherwise, she would waste this last chance to be with her grandmother. She visualized
her grief as a tempest; a storm of water, wind, and lightning that had already ravaged her life. Yet all
storms had a moment of calm, and she must find hers. She concentrated on pushing through the
storm, and it slowly took the form of a great spout. By degrees she felt it grow wilder, and choked
sobs escaped her throat. But this was good, for it would only get worse before it could get better.
Then, quite suddenly, she felt the resistance lessen, and walked into the metaphorical eye of the
storm. Sniffling, she looked up at Asha with relatively clear eyes.

“Asha…how did you die?”

As if knowing Anicca had reached a place of temporary emotional strength, she spoke quickly, yet
with calm, measured tones. “I fear that our tribe, in undertaking the Ritual of Sundering, accidentally
unleashed something from the spirit world into your world. It is controlling the dark spirits that have
attacked you and the Avatar, and is aggravating the spread of an epidemic that has been circulating
for the last two decades. It is after the artifacts – it murdered me when I sought to protect them.
Anicca, this spirit – or man, I am not sure as to the true nature of the evil—seeks to destroy the spirit
benders, and having succeeded with that, will move on to the elemental world. Do you remember the
tale I taught you? The tale of our downfall, and the great promise?”

Anicca nodded. “So it is true, then? The tokens are real?”

“Yes. They will gift the bearer with power and understanding. You must not let them fall into his
hands. You know the location of one, and how to reach it. For the others, you must go to the other
villages. Seek out the Keepers, they will set you on the right path.

“One more thing, love, and then I will give you your gift. Rama is gone, but you are still connected
to someone. Do you feel it?”

Anicca concentrated. After a moment, she turned to look directly at Iroh, who did not exist in her
dream but was there nonetheless. She grimaced. “I do not like him. He does not like me.”

“Neither of you have to. Perhaps that makes it easier, truthfully. But he will protect you. You cannot
collect the artifacts without him.”

“Why not Sura? She is also strong, and she is not so…” Anicca searched for the right word.
Somehow, she found the fire bender cold, detached, and unfathomable. More than that he was
dangerous, and ready to turn that danger onto her. “…Uncomfortable.”
“She has her own part to play. The Avatar will need her more than you.” Asha sighed. “Regardless of your dislike, the two of you will have to come to terms with each other, otherwise the bond will destroy you both. You just have to accept him. Know that you both are separate, but find how you are the same.” She shook her head, smiling faintly. “But there is time for that later, and the current time runs short. Come here.”

She gestured to the shrine statue, and the woman now held a chalice. Anicca stepped towards the statue, and after glancing questioningly at her grandmother, picked up the golden cup.

“As children, talented spirit benders are taken to the spirit world, and they are taught the basics of spirit bending by their ancestors. You are older than most, and the situation is dire. We have decided, in the interests of time and the danger at hand, to give you this instead.”

Anicca looked dubiously down into the cup, entranced by the darkness and light swirling together. “What is this?”

“It is the elixir of spiritual knowledge. It will fill in for your lack of experience, and give you the means of understanding your spirit powers. You will have to exercise them to make them useful and strong, but they will no longer overpower you. It is an instant lexicon, of sorts. Anicca. Drink and then awaken.” She stepped close to her granddaughter, and kissed her cheek. “Stay strong as you walk the path of the spirit bender. And always remember that I – that we – love you.”

Anicca felt the tears threatening to unravel her, so she closed her eyes, and drank.

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Over an hour after they entered it, Sura, Iroh and Anicca left the confines of the mountain. The Avatar awaited them. He noticed that the spirit bender walked unrestrained, of her own volition. His daughter walked very close to her, as if to lend her support. Iroh walked several paces behind, and would not look at the spirit bender, but Aang could feel all his attention was on her. Clearly, something had happened to the three of them, something that bound them together.

He turned his back to them, and gestured to Appa. “I hope you said your goodbyes. You’ll never see this place again.”

“Father-“

“Sura, get on Appa. Iroh, keep close to her. Don’t let her jump.”

“She’s not going to-“

“Where are we taking her?” Iroh kept his voice calm, even as he escorted her to the sky bison. The air around her no longer played tricks on his eyes, but every time he touched her he could practically feel the little tendrils of fate that bound them to each other. He couldn’t tell if the sensation was better or worse than before.

The Avatar’s mouth thinned to a grim line. “Ba Sing Se.” He looked for the first time at Anicca, who
tried her best to stare impassively back at him. “You will be legally tried. The King will find you guilty. Then I will take away your bending.” He turned his back to her. “You will spend the rest of your life in the prison of Ba Sing Se. Plenty of time to repent for your sins.” He turned back to her and gripped her arm. He pulled her close to him, and Iroh had to force himself not to come in between them. “I know the truth, spirit bender. You cannot stop the sickness. Roku told me as much.”

Anicca looked up at him with eyes both empty and all-encompassing. Her stare seemed to unnerve him, and he dropped her arm as if she had the power over flame to scald his hand.

“Do you come to Ba Sing Se of your free will? Otherwise preventative measures will be taken.”

Anicca glanced over at Sura, and then at Iroh. For a moment he saw her resolve waver – she knew what she must do, but she also knew that she could not hope to fight off the angry Avatar. She ducked her head in thought, or despair.

“Lead on, Avatar. I will follow you.”

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Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:
On O.C.’s coloring – I tried to follow the Asian-esque setting from ATLA, but at the same time I wanted to set apart the spirit (and wind) tribes. In my opinion (drawing upon early book 3 when Aang grew hair to go incognito) Aang looked pretty Caucasian to me, and had hazel eyes. I figured I’d go a little further with that, and seeing as there were very few (if any) blondes in the show, I decided to make Anicca, Rama, and Asha (before it went grey) blondes.

On names – again, following the Asian-esque themes. Asha and Rama are Indian names, meaning Hope/Desire and Pleasing/Supreme, respectively. (With Rama especially there’s quite a bit of history behind the name, and if you’re interested I would suggest looking into the Ramayana.)

The title of the work also draws upon Indian Mythology, but I’m not explaining that yet ;)

Lastly, Anicca. I am drawing this name from one of the three marks of Buddhism: anicca, dukkha, and anatta. Anicca literally means “impermanence” and indicates that the world/everything is in a constant state of flux. To me, this represents the notion that everything is ever changing, and that is the mire from which this character was born. Incidentally, as I am not Buddhist, I’m not quite sure how one would actually
pronounce anicca, so I’m going with “AH-nih-ka,” but you can imagine however you please.
Interlude 4: The Language of the Self

Chapter Notes

I do not own ATLA.
For a more perfect enjoyment – please locate “On the Nature of Daylight” or “This Bitter Earth/On the Nature of Daylight” from the Shutter Island soundtrack, and then continue.

This may be a difficult chapter to make it through, especially for anti-Kataaengers. This is an unhappy interlude but the Zutara at the end of it will hopefully offset that...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude 4: The Language of the Self

(Mid-Year 6)

I have learned of a self between the throes of pleasure and pain, of fear and safety, of life and death. At the threshold of this new self I exchanged my language for an unknown one, one that built upon and tore down all I had previously known.

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I am new now, new and broken, pure and lost, perfect and bound. I found this self because of you, but it not a place you can go. It is of you, and apart from you, loving and hating and letting go of all you have done to me.

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This self has changed me; in this self I change the world.

I am strong here, so strong, and so susceptible to the weakness in your touch.

Yet I will never lose myself – for in this self my fortitude is found. I shall rise above what you have created me to be, and someday, I will make a new self, a new language, a new me.

-Lost marriage rite of the Eastern Wind Temple –

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The day of their wedding, only hours before the ceremony that would bind them together as man and wife for the remainder of their earthly lives, Aang took Katara flying on his glider over Ba Sing Se. He had been offering to take her with him for years, but she had always refused, fervently agreeing with Toph (for once) that the sky was simply not the place to be, especially as the only thing keeping her from grisly death were Aang’s lamentably skinny arms and a pole. That day, however, she gave in. After all, flying with her soon-to-be-husband couldn’t be more terrifying than the act of marrying him, love him or no.

They met at Appa’s stable at dawn, and Katara hadn’t slept a wink the night before. This was partly because of the impromptu bachelorette party Toph, Uncle Iroh, and an extremely pregnant Suki (who was expecting to go into labor any day now) had thrown for her the night before. Logistically speaking, there was not much sleep to be had between the hours of talking, drinking (Suki stuck with tea), singing and sobbing (Uncle Iroh somehow managed to out-blubber them all, claiming that his participation in their party made up for missing Zuko’s). Yet Katara spent a substantial part of the evening reflecting on the unvoiced fear that had permeated her sleeping and waking moments since the engagement party nearly two months earlier. Katara sometimes thought that Toph might know what she was feeling, although that was silly – at 18, Toph was still the baby of the group, and had next to no romantic experience. Sillier still that Iroh, the most experienced member of the girly party, seemed oblivious to her hesitations, half smiles, and uncharacteristic lack of mood swings. A Katara that wasn’t overly emotional and constantly swinging between mothering everything that moved, arguing passionately, or attempting sarcasm was simply not the Katara they knew and loved. The Katara that spent far too much time staring out of windows and violently rubbing her hands together wasn’t either.

Perhaps that was why Uncle and the girls had worked so hard to persuade Katara to take Aang up on his offer. Suki and Uncle thought it was wildly romantic, and even though Toph agreed that it was very likely a deathtrap, she also conceded that Twinkle Toes was just about the last person who would allow his fiancée to die (she suspected that Sparky would probably work pretty hard to keep Gloomy alive, as well). At this point, Katara was slightly too intoxicated to point out the discrepancy in her first point of logic, and soon found herself out argued. If she couldn’t entrust her safety to Aang, how could she entrust her entire life? So she met him, hours before anyone else would wake and far more quickly than she would like, she found herself strapped to Aang, and flying to the launch point on Appa’s back.

Katara found herself reflecting on trivialities as Appa ascended into the sky. The color of the rapidly lightening sky around them, the caress of the cool wind on her skin, the barely noticeable pounding of her heart directing the flow of blood within her body. It was fortunate that Aang kept silent as well, for Katara had been far too distracted to answer him intelligibly – the tightly woven ribbon of her thoughts demanded her complete attention. Later, she couldn’t describe what she had been thinking, or how she had been feeling, save for the notion that she had been so desperately enmeshed in the moment – and herself - that it was almost painful. She supposed she might have been afraid, although of what she could not have articulated. Whatever the reason, her attention was focused so deeply inside herself that the transition from Appa to air was jerky and surreal. One moment she was falling into herself, the next she was falling through the sky.

Yet once she was flying, everything changed. Although she had not wanted to be pulled away from herself, she couldn’t deny the sensation was exhilarating – the gentle wind was now powerful, and the sensation made her gasp. Her stomach flipped and spun, yet the sensation was not unpleasant, and not wholly unfamiliar. She had a novice’s experience of flight from riding on Appa’s back,
although she was quick to realize that flight with Aang was of a whole new level. Aang dipped and
turned gently, being careful not to frighten his passenger, all the while reading the wind currents.
Katara turned her eyes outward to the world below them, and was stunned by the beauty of it all.
She realized that flight was only partially about the sensation, as well as the freedom of being a
separate entity, a moving piece of the world. Yet another part was simply the breathtaking wonder of
looking down at all below you... As they circled the town of Ba Sing Se, Aang tilted his head down
so he could whisper in her ear.

“Look, Katara. What do you see?”

“Everything,” she whispered, breathless, giddy, and utterly terrified. Later she would wonder at her
temperity, but for now she could only breathe, and look, and hope she wouldn’t die with all that
lurked within her recently discovered depths unplumbed. “I see everything.”

“Do you know what I see, Katara?” His voice is lower and huskier than she’s ever had previous
experience with, but that will change in the coming days and the onset of true lovemaking.
Katara forgets how to breathe until she opens her mouth. “What?”

Aang exhales in her ear, and she can feel the effect all around them as they lift slightly. “I see you,
Katara, and only you. And like you, I see everything. Katara. Everyone thinks I saved the world, but
they’re wrong. You saved the world, Katara, because you saved me, and still are. Every day. You are
my everything, Katara. As much as the world reveres me, I will always revere you, because without
you I am nothing. I love you, Katara. So much. So, so much. I asked you months ago, years ago, to
always stay with me, and I mean it everyday, more than ever. I know we were shaken up by what
Aunt Wu told us, but when I hold you, I don’t believe in what she said. When I’m with you, I know
she’s wrong, and that it will all work out. Do you trust me, Katara?”

Katara felt something inside her turn alternately hot and cold before breaking completely. “Yes.”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes.” Now there were tears falling alongside them, fat drops that dripped off her face and into the
cold morning air. Katara had never known heartbreak like this, nor could she tell why her heart was
breaking in the first place. Perhaps this wasn’t heartbreak at all, but something else—a mixture of
sorrow, joy, and empathy all laced together with something uncomfortably like suffocating guilt.
Maybe this was simply a different aspect of love. Maybe this was an early gift of marriage, a
connection she hadn’t previously dreamt of.

Minutes later, her feet touched the ground, and still weeping, she attempted to free herself from the
belts that bound them. Aang gently stopped her, and undid the bindings himself. As soon as she was
free, however, he pulled her into his arms. For once, he did not panic over her tears. He simply let
her cry on his shoulder, great, wracking sobs that used up the rest of her energy. The sun had risen
by the time she stopped, and it was with great pride that he led her back to the palace, to the alarm
and amusement of Suki and Toph, respectively. Thankfully her tears had stopped by then, and her
two friends put her eerie calm down to pre-wedding jitters. After all, she had acted much the same a
certain momentous morning 6 years ago. Toph, who entertained a passing thought that something
untoward might have just happened, was distracted by the duties undertaken by the maid of honor,
likewise Suki with her second pregnancy. Iroh said nothing at all, but prepared a special pot of tea
for her regardless. Even he was not positive as to the nature of her current emotional state, and he
was not altogether convinced it was a good thing.

So the fortification tea was made, drunk, and heartily appreciated. Its properties—a curious blend of
energy, focus, and mental clarity—seemed to do the trick. Within moments of drinking down the
brew, Katara seemed to snap back to herself, and was back to her bossy self with minutes. From that point on, she fell into a trance of efficiency, leaving herself no time to think, or to acquaint herself further with that aspect of herself she discovered en route to the sky. She spared a kiss to Suki and Sokka’s child Kya, and one last hug to Toph, Suki, GranGran, her brother, father, and Uncle Iroh, (Ty Lee was running the Kyoshi in Suki’s absence, Zuko was busy putting down a rebellion in the southern fire islands, and Mai was far too upsetting and pregnant to come by herself) and then proceeded down the aisle, meeting her fate with her head held high.

It was not the happiest day of her life. That distinction was awarded to the first day of peace spent with all her friends and family, in the sun-dappled halls of the Fire Nation, admiring Sokka’s awful artwork. Yet it was close. Aang was handsome and happy, she was beautiful and determined, and she could feel his adoration mingling with the love and affection of all their friends. It was an emotional, exquisite moment, but it wasn't happy. There was too much at work inside and around her for it to be simple and pure, the way she had always dreamed of it being. Yet she did not regret it, nor would she have stopped the ceremony for the world. She loved him. She felt she always would. Now, she was his wife, his everything. And while he was not her everything, and feared that he might never be, she had found something unexpected on their flight.

She had found faith, and she had to believe in it. That, and believe that someday, she could learn to view him as her everything, too.

That night, as they made love beneath the stars, Katara realized that even in this primal, act, their elements were defined. He was like the wind above her, kissing and touching haphazardly, sporadically; intense one moment, fleeting the next. She was as sinuous and playful as ocean waters; lapping against his restraint one moment, and relaxing against his inflamed passion the next. There were marked differences, but she felt that was normal. While her physical attentions were as varied and energetic as his, she needed a steady buildup to bring her to the breaking point. Aang needed no such routine – his passion was largely mental, not physical like hers, and such was his love for her that he did not need to engage in the same amount of foreplay that she did. In time, he would learn endurance, for both his pleasure and hers. Tonight, however, he could not wait, and Katara, seeing his need, did not ask him to.

He pushed himself inside her slowly, almost hesitantly. Once inside, he held himself completely still, and for the first time all day Katara was able to label precisely what she was feeling: annoyance. She was a passionate warrior woman whose hymen had broken long ago, and now that he was fully
inside her and the momentary sharp pain was over, she wanted him to move. She rocked her hips, urging him to do the same, yet he did not give in.

“Do you love me, Katara?”

She moaned her agreement, but he still did not move.

“Say it. Say that you’ll love only me. Forever.”

The innate passion of her people overtook her then, and she gave herself over to madness. They were slick with sweat – it was a warm, humid night – so it was the work of a moment to manipulate her husband’s body and push him over onto his back. Smirking, she readjusted herself atop him, and initiated the sweet, ancient dance. Aang gasped and gripped her hips, closing his eyes against the sensation. Yet they were open in the next moment as he attempted to sit up and bring their bodies closer together. Katara knew his game, however, and held him down, never stopping the grind of her hips against his.

“I love you, Aang,” she whispered into the night air, her hands splayed against his smooth, hairless chest. “You are my husband. I love you.” She gasped as she not only found her rhythm, but also because Aang had flipped her over onto her back, taking back the control. Apparently, her concession had been enough for him, and soon he established a pace of his own.

As her husband moved above and inside her, Katara was reminded of how she had felt just before their flight that morning. She knew they were physically connected now, more intimately than she had been with anyone else in her life. So why was she feeling the way she had earlier, obsessively aware of herself in ways she never had been before? Every breath, every heartbeat, every thought and vague, unfocused emotion was magnified, and she thought if this continued, she might never resurface again. Her first time having sex was not about pleasure or pain to Katara, it was about finding herself in ways she had never imagined, a self born of her congress with her husband, yet separate from him as well.

The disparity of who she once had been and this new self she was becoming consumed her to the point of being unable to feel more than a vague displeasure when Aang found his release far more quickly than she could. He collapsed against her, lost inside her, and she found that she could not be angry with him. Not when she was so lost within herself. So she waited for him, staring up at the stars, wondering at the tears (of joy or sorrow, she could not know) that did not come. Soon, he would stir and attend himself to her pleasure, taking her again and with a more pleasurable result for both. Yet for now…she was content to lay there and gently probe within herself, acquainting herself with these nearly incomprehensible emotions, thoughts, and blossoming beliefs that made up her new self.

As she waited, her fingers slipped up to her collarbone and toyed with the necklace that lay askew on her slender neck. It was then that she felt the peace she so longed for. No matter who she might become, she would always be a part of all the others as well. She would never be truly alone. She smiled. She was in the process of learning this new language, but some aspects could not change – what she had with her friends, family, and her element could not be distorted, no matter how it was voiced.

Aang stirred in her arms, and soon Katara had no more time for thoughts. She had found a plateau of self-recognition, and was now able to better participate in the moment. They made love once more before they both drifted off into slumber, cradled in the embrace of the earth below, the sky above, the moisture in the air around them, and the fire in their hearts and bodies. Tomorrow the sun would find them entwined, and Katara would find it in herself to laugh again, to smile and to love. Aang would believe that he had found his true happiness, his reason for being. He knew they would spend
the rest of their lives together, and if he was lucky, the rest of his lives as well.

...This may or may not be true. Who can say what happens after death? Yet here is a truth, of his lifetime and hers: Katara never fell through the skies with him ever again.

...Underneath Iroh’s merry façade, he hid the slow ebb of sorrow in his heart. The party around him had escalated to almost painfully joyous heights, even though the couple had absconded nearly an hour ago. Everyone was drunk; too drunk, and soon they would reach the point of anger, sadness, or sex. He knew what emotion his evening would encompass. And for once, it was not Lu Ten he would sorrow for.

He knew he was the only one to have noticed the new necklace Katara wore around her throat. Even Aang would not have noticed. After all, hadn’t she forbidden him from carrying on the traditional betrothal necklace ceremony and making one himself? It helped that the choker looked precisely the same from the outward side; it was only on the inside that things differed. Iroh bowed his head in remembrance.

...It had been towards the end of the betrothal party, months ago in the Fire Nation Palace. Aang had come in from the gardens to reclaim his fiancée, and had danced with her for hours. Whether or not Katara was disappointed at the change in partner, Iroh was afraid to guess. Zuko danced only once more, with a noble lady from Ba Sing Se, yet had spent the majority of the rest of the evening very carefully not looking at his best friend, Iroh could tell. Even so, he couldn’t imagine anything would happen between them, not now, not here. So it was with complete surprise and a hot flash of panic that he noticed Zuko signal Katara discreetly amongst the thinning crowd, and the two of them disappear into the gardens. He glanced over at the Avatar, but he had been distracted by an impromptu elemental battle with the mischievous Toph Bei Fong. Sighing, he stole after his nephew, wondering at the immaturity (and blindness) of youth. Mai saw the threat, why did not the Avatar? Or Zuko? He came upon the two suddenly, and had to call upon all his years of training to remain unseen.

They stood underneath the gazebo, and spoke quietly enough that Iroh had to strain to hear them. At
least it was only that, thank Agni. If they had been doing anything else, his poor heart would have
been broken.

“Zuko, what’s going on? Why did you drag me out here?”

He looked down before answering. “I have to give you my betrothal gift, don’t I?”

Iroh’s heart plummeted down into his stomach. Oh no…he couldn’t…!

Katara huffed in annoyance. “Zuko, you threw this party for us! That’s more than gift enough!
Really. You don’t need to give anything else…” She trailed off as Zuko reached into his pocket and
held out a necklace identical to the one she held around her neck.

Katara’s hand flew to her neck as if she doubted she wore a necklace at all. Iroh wondered at their
sudden, impenetrable silence. He remembered hearing something about how Zuko had once
attempted to bribe her with her mother’s necklace, when she had been his captive. Was that what
they were remembering? Yet why would he be referencing that?

“Take it. It’s for you.”

Katara’s shocked eyes searched his face. “But…I…Zuko, do you even…do you know what this
means?”

Iroh certainly did. What was Zuko thinking, making a betrothal necklace when he himself was
already married, and the lady engaged?

“Look at the back.”

He turned the pendant over so that she could see, and Iroh saw her frown in concentration. After a
moment of perusal, however, her face relaxed and she smiled. Slowly, she folded her fingers over the
necklace.

“It’s from all of us. Or at least, the markings on the inner side represent all of us. It’s not…a typical
betrothal necklace, and I – well, Toph and I, we’re the ones in on it – we knew that Aang might not
like it, but we knew it was important. Katara, you and I both know that there’s something…
something dark in you. In I. In both of us. I mean, our time together hunting down Yon Rha proves
that. And I know that you – that we – have the strength to overcome that darkness, but I don’t want
you to ever think that you’re alone. Even if Aang never accepts all of what you are — and believe me,
I’ve been talking to him and trying to make him really see you — I will. We all will. So just…keep us
close to your heart. I know it will be hard contending with his constant goodness,” here he smiled
and she laughed softly, and Iroh realized this was an inside joke between them, “but we’ll always be
with you. No matter what you do.”

Their smiles were so simple and beautiful, that Iroh’s heart broke at the sight. He had never seen
Zuko so at peace, so blissful. Neither had he Katara, although he admittedly had far less experience
with her emotions. He no longer feared that they knew of their deep-seated attraction for each other.
Clearly they didn’t. Yet just as obviously, they were in love.

“Thank you.” Katara hesitated for a moment after accepting the necklace, and then hurriedly thrust
it back at Zuko.

“What-?”

“Hold it for a moment.” She hastily untied her mother’s betrothal necklace from around her neck,
and after clutching it tightly for a moment, kissed it, and handed it to Zuko.
“Katara, what…?”

“Well I can’t wear both, can I?” She smiled and put her mother’s necklace into his hands while retrieving his. “Besides. If your necklace is to remind me that I’m never alone, whether I walk in darkness or in light, then my necklace is now yours. It’s the same promise – you said it yourself; you’ve succumbed to your darkness as well. And I was the one who had the most trouble trusting you. But not anymore.” She folded his fingers around her old necklace, smiling at the chaotic swirl of emotion in his eyes. “As much as you believe in me, I believe in you. I always will, no matter what you do. Besides,” she laughed gently as he looked down at his hand in wonder, “you need a mother too. And I think if my mother had known you the way I do, she would have been proud to pass down her necklace to you.”

Iroh could watch no more. He stumbled away from them, feeling tears wet his cheeks, and a blanket of sorrow descend. How could they not know? Not suspect? Did they think that friends felt this way for each other? How could they not compare what they felt for each other to their spouses? No. He would not despair. He would trust in their fidelity, their honor, and their love for their partners. More than that, he would trust in Mai and Aang, to hold their interest and their hearts. He would pray that circumstances would never push Katara and Zuko together, for he had seen the beauty of their hearts, and the purity of their understanding of each other.

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“Hey Pops!”

Iroh’s attention was claimed by the call of inarguably his favorite earth bender, Toph Bei Fong. The girl was sitting alone on the steps, content to “watch” the merriment from her perch. He noticed a half imbibed bottle of sake next to her, and he clucked his tongue. A drunken, stumbling Toph was a blind Toph, and so Iroh made his way over to the young lady, dodging a rampaging cabbage vendor as he did.

“A good evening to you, most venerable Lady Bei Fong.”

“Shove it, Pops. And pull up a seat. Tell me how the party’s going.” She took a swig from the bottle, and was just intoxicated enough not to notice that she set it down onto Iroh’s waiting hand. “Are the newlyweds still here? Or did they skedaddle already?”

Iroh chuckled. “Aang and Katara left over an hour ago, Lady Toph. Or should I say, the Honorable Blind Bandit?”

Toph swayed. “That’s more like it, Pops. And good for them. They waited far too long to get some – now maybe Sweetness will stop acting like a half dead monkey sloth and get back to her bossy self.” She must have sensed Iroh’s arch amusement, for she almost sputtered, and very nearly blushed. “Not that I have any experience in the getting of any. I’m only just saying what I’ve heard. From Suki. And Sokka. And their Grandmother.” She cocked her head to the side, and Iroh could tell she was remembering something impressive. “I like her. She tells it how it is. And talks about getting some. All the time.”
Iroh wondered how on earth Pakku was dealing with all of this. His long lost love had certainly become no easier to deal with in her advancing age…

“And from what I have heard going all the way and doing the sexy is a whole lot better than just making some kisses. Releases stress and all that. So they’ve both got to be better now, otherwise I will personally become the next threat to world peace.”

“Oh?” Iroh didn’t have to do much to keep the conversation going. Clearly, the Bei Fong heiress did not need much encouragement to vent.

“You heard me, Pops: I will go Ozai, no offense. Katara pulling a freakin’ Zuko is one thing. You know, being all silent and moody and talking about useless emotions like honor and duty and expectations. I mean, it’s practically to be expected, with how close they are. But Aang getting all determined is just weird.”

“Determination does not sound like an undesirable trait, young friend.”

Toph grimaced. “Huh. You’d be surprised. Instead of getting all wishy-washy like normal, and being unable to make up his mind and running away from emotional things, he’s too solid now. Intractable.” She turned her face directly on line with Iroh’s, and he wondered (as he always did) how she managed to do that. “Pops. He’s becoming me.”

Iroh was unable to respond. He had noticed how the Avatar’s confidence increased with age, but hadn’t assigned any negative connotation to it.

“He’s dominating things now, Pops. Like any indecision on Katara’s part, he just makes a decision, and then doesn’t let her think about it anymore. Like…this morning, with the flying thing. She didn’t want to go, Pops, and frankly, I don’t blame her. But she didn’t not want to go because she’s afraid of heights or anything; it’s because she knows what the flight means to Aang. She found it in one of the scrolls of the Western Air Temple a long time ago – it’s part of their “marriage” rite, and it signifies the woman giving up her freedom to rely solely on her husband. That’s why Aang wanted her to fly with him: to prove that she belonged to him. He had been arguing with her about it for weeks, Pops, and she didn’t say yes until she was drunk and even you said it would be a good idea. And you saw how sad she was when she got back! Eugh.” Toph shook her head in disgust. “Twinkles knows just what to do to make her feel guilty, Pops. He knows how to manipulate her emotions. He’s going to try to make her feel bad for not being perfect, and he’ll expect her to change just as he does. But she can’t – no one can change like an air bender.” Toph sighed, and took back the bottle of sake out of Uncle’s unresisting hand. “Ah well. I guess it’s a good thing Katara’s so damn bossy…and that he loves her too much to make too big a deal of her flaws.” She smirked. “That, and apparently how all water tribe women are so damn passionate and good at sex…Katara just has to show Aang who’s the boss in bed, and then I think they’ll be ok.” She grinned cheekily at Uncle. “Now if you don’t mind, I have a sober scribe to find – I promised to send Ty Lee and your nephew an account of the ceremony. Later, Pops!” She leaned over to plant a kiss on his weathered cheek before tottering off, stumbling only minimally.

Iroh watched her go, slowly turning the empty bottle in his fingers. Perhaps he had been wrong, earlier. He seemed to have underestimated the strength of the gang’s friendship. Both Zuko and Toph understood there was a disparity in Aang and Katara’s relationship, but he had assumed that both would only support Katara, when he knew Aang would need help too. Yet he was wrong. After all, Toph understood the worst of Aang, and did not judge him, and wanted him to be happy too.

Iroh leaned back against the doorway, vaguely mollified. His earlier assessment was correct – he would trust in Zuko and Katara to never realize their love for one another. After all, they would
never be alone, and with friends like this, how could they go wrong?

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Chapter End Notes

Buh. Writing Aang having sex was so hard. I mean, even tho in the fic he’s 18, he’s still 12 in my mind. Oh man. Never again. Never again. Also, I promise that the whole fic isn't going to be this upsetting. Many characters will have happy endings! Maybe even most! ;)

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Chapter 5: The Last Step on Dry Land

Toph's 10 Rules of Ruling Ba Sing Se:

1) You are the boss, but only let the people closest to you know it – let everyone else think Ba Sing Se is a Republic. That way, if you really mess up, you won't be the one executed.

2) Bears are absolutely not allowed in the throne room. This is punishable by death.

3) Pay attention to the Dai Li. Now, pay even *more* attention to the Dai Li.

4) The only one who is allowed to mope is King Sparky. Once every 5 years or so, Avatar Twinkles may have a small pout as well. Shut down anyone else who tries.

5) Exile is no longer a viable form of punishment, no matter how tempting it may be.

6) It is also unacceptable to metalbend annoying dignitaries/lawyers/visiting royalty/family/friend's children into impromptu prison-boxes when they get annoying (exception: Ty Lee, who is apparently into that kind of thing.)

7) Review Rule 3.

8) Every 3 months or so, engineer a small, contained, non-fatal disaster so Twinkles does not get rusty.

9) When you catch one of your advisors being dishonest for their personal gain, do not immediately confront them. Play with them. Praise them privately, to their faces, and then systematically distance them from your presence. When they finally realize what has happened, slap them in the face with the evidence of their dishonesty and deliver them to the Dai Li. Keep all this as public as possible, and never have to worry about it again.

10) Most importantly: take no one's shit. You've got enough to handle as it is.

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Toph could not remember the last time she had experienced this much excitement before noon. Well, excitement not of her causing: in her years on the throne, she had learned that there was a distinct difference between trouble she’d caused and trouble she’d had to set to rights. Yet even in all her years of mischief making she’d never come across something quite like this.

Aang had dragged the young spirit woman into the palace several hours ago, so intent on seeing justice done that he didn’t even search out Katara first. That had been the first sign that some serious shit was about to hit the fan. Secondly was how he had so tersely ordered Sura away from the council room, along with Iroh’s pointed, almost pained silence. Clearly, there was something going on there…perhaps some dissention within the camp? Thirdly had been the woman herself. She was obviously not in the physical condition to be dragged around so violently; judging from the sickly weak thrum of her heartbeat, she was feverish at the least. Her actual interview with the woman had only confused Toph further. She was clearly in shock, and Twinkle Toes was far too eager to deal out punishment. What on earth had happened between the two of them to merit such uncharacteristic brutality?

Toph had actually been in the council chamber for once, pretending to listen to a young scribe’s feeble attempt to detail the King on the passing of a new bill. She had recognized Aang’s footsteps even before he opened the doors, and guessed that Iroh and Sura were with him, although she had been confused when one set of feet stomped away, and then realized that there had been another set of uneven steps with them all along. Intrigued at her unexpected guest (and their dwindling entourage), Toph interrupted her scribe by standing just as the doors flung open, and Twinkle Toes – feeling angrier than Toph could remember – strode in.

The scribe took one look at the situation and bowed hastily, retreating out the servant’s door. Toph didn’t blame him. Twinkles felt like he was just one small step away from going Avatar.

“What are doing, Twink-“

“Earth King, here before you is a woman I demand you pass judgment against. She has murdered the entirety of her tribe with the use of her spirit bending ability, and I believe those same powers will be used against us as well. I have seen the demise of her tribe with my own eyes, and as Avatar, I have already made my decision. But I await your judgment. Give me permission to remove these powers.”

Toph was shocked by the steady beat of his heart, practically thrumming with energy and purposefulness. Clearly he thought he was pursuing the course of justice. Toph wondered if he – or the world – had recently gone off the rails without her noticing.

She was blind, after all. Bound to miss a thing or two.

“I understand that you’ll want to question her. So go on, spirit bender. Tell her what you’ve-“

“Enough.” Toph’s powerful voice rang out over the chamber before the woman could speak. Her shoulders heaved and she pointed with unnerving accuracy at Aang. “Avatar. I fully understand the position you hold. And now I would like you to leave the room.”
She felt Aang’s flare of anger, and guessed (by the flicker of pain she picked up from the supposed spirit woman) that Aang had tightened his hold on her. “Toph you can’t-“

“Can’t what, Avatar? I am the King here, in case you forgot. I’m the one whose permission you need to strip someone of their power, when they are under my jurisdiction. And I don’t care for people telling me what to do, even when they’re my friends. Besides. Your mind is very clearly made up, and I’m not going to listen to you again until I hear her say, without your interference.”

“Toph, I am the Avatar! I uphold the justice and balance in the universe! Why aren’t you listening to me?”

Toph ground her fingers into her temples. When would Aang just grow up? His immaturity had repeatedly hurt Katara over the years, and the earth be damned if she was going to let it get in her way. She knew this side of Aang – this stubborn and unyielding side of him that was convinced he was right because of who he was. It had never reared its head for something like this, though. Something was wrong, and unfortunately, she would have to talk to the woman to hopefully get to the bottom of it.

“I will listen to you when you start making sense. You are indeed the Avatar, and as such, I am ashamed of the path you are promoting. Haven’t you always said that revenge is not the way? Now. If you do not wish to anger me further,” here, Toph caused all the pillars in the room to rattle ominously, demonstrating that she was still his earth bending Sifu and could still kick his skinny little ass, “you will go and tell your wife you have returned to the Palace.”

Aang set his jaw firmly, and Toph could feel his pigheadedness rising from him in waves.

“You will also tell her how it was that Zuko’s younger son became injured. None of that earlier bullshit you tried to feed me. Tell her the truth this time, Aang. You don’t want her to hear it from Koru when he wakes up…”

A growl, a rush of wind, and he was gone. Toph snorted, not only at Aang’s swift departure, but at the surprise she sensed from the two people left in the room. Now. To work.

“All right then. What is your name?”

Anicca turned her wide, faintly glazed eyes towards the unconventional king. Clearly, this question was not directed at the scowling one behind her. “Anicca, Earth King.”

Toph snorted again to cover up her uneasiness. Something was wrong with the girl. Either she was very ill, or someone had drugged her. Toph didn’t like to think about her options as to whom. “None of that, now. Just answer the questions without the damn honorific. Are you a spirit bender?”

Anicca hesitated, taking a moment to overcome the habit of answering in the shameful negative. “I think so, yes. Now, yes.”

Toph squinted. Truth, yet vaguely muddy… “Oh? You are unsure?”

Anicca took a deep breath. Fought for coherency. “I have been unable to bend the spirits until yesterday. I did not grow up with these…abilities.”

Toph glanced at Iroh, who shrugged, then nodded. She decided she would get into the details later and moved on to the important. “Anicca, the Avatar has accused you of murdering your tribe. What do you say to this?”

Iroh held his breath. This was it. He knew that she wouldn’t-lie, and through their tenuous
link he could feel that she was on the verge of collapsing. Her mad dash through the mountain had caused her to relapse, and although she had entered a trancelike state on the ride to Ba Sing Se, it hadn’t been enough to stave off the fever. Iroh doubted she would have the energy to extrapolate, or even explain the bare bones of the ritual. If she couldn’t do at least that, then there was no chance of garnering any sympathy. She was doomed.

“I was the instrument of their deaths.”

Toph frowned. What in Shu’s name did that even mean? “Let me rephrase: Did you kill any or all members of your tribe?”

Anicca’s mouth worked soundlessly as she tried to phrase her response. It would help if her brain would work – everything was so fuzzy and the sounds were distorting. At least she was still able to comprehend this infernal language! She knew she was sick again, but this was simply not the time. “Yes.”

An untruth. Not quite a lie, not really the truth. Toph hated it when people answered in shades of gray. Years of experience had taught her how to get to the bottom of it, however. “How?”

“I…I felt them do something that is forbidden to us, and then I-”

“How did you feel them if you didn’t have spirit powers before?”

Anicca blinked. “Because they hurt him. My brother-twin. I have always been able to feel him, because he was so strong.” She shook her head. “It was not that I felt what they did, but I felt him be taken away from me.” She swayed slightly, and exhaled raggedly, forcing herself to a final rally. “I don’t know what I did to them, or how I did it. I just called for the spirits to stop them, to save him, and if they could not, to revenge him, but after they came to me, I don’t know. I did not know anything else until Sura came.”

Toph raised a curious, delicate eyebrow at that, but decided she’d get that later. The woman was about to drop. “Did you want them to die?”

The spirit bender looked at her with pained incomprehension, and Toph couldn’t tell if the spiritbender was attempting to portray her innocence or if the woman simply couldn’t understand the question. The longer she spoke, the more pronounced her accent became, and Toph wondered where on earth this woman had come from. Nowhere in her kingdom did people speak like that. “I said, did you want them to die?”

“No! Aharem melsonara- my family…yehkar…I can’t-“

She interrupted herself by dropping gracelessly to the floor. Iroh attempted to catch her as she fell – Toph raised another brow at that – but he had been too far away. As he reached her, Toph stepped forward as well.

“Are you faking this?”

The weak yet steady thrum of her heart attested her innocence, as well as her unconsciousness. Toph sighed. What to do…the girl needed immediate medical attention, which was easy enough. Harder was to keep Aang at bay. Putting her in one of the higher-level dungeons would appease him, along with being sanitary enough to let the girl heal. Anicca had mentioned Sura, maybe she would be willing to go and work on the spirit bender? Toph sighed heavily. A king’s work was never done. Fucking Avatar, bringing in prisoners from who knows where. Disrupts her peace, it does.

“Iroh, go tell the Avatar that I have decided to imprison her until she can finish her testimony. Inform
him that while she has plead guilty, I have not yet made up my mind, and that attempting to strip her
of her powers – or even breathing on her funny - in this state would very likely kill her.” Toph could
not imagine that even in his current dark mood that he would be willing to bring death to anyone.
Not after he couldn’t kill Ozai. “After that...go find Sura. Unless you think she’d not want to help
her?” Toph tilted her head towards the unconscious woman.

Iroh huffed. “Not at all. She’d be quite willing.”

Well, that explained the set of footsteps stomping off earlier. It also complicated things further...but
then again, perhaps not in the long run. Iroh bowed, and then turned to go but Toph stopped him at
the door.

“Hey Hot Stuff, what do you think I should do?”

Iroh tried not to cringe at the affectionate nickname. Only the Earth King would make fun of his
unwanted good lucks, and subsequent popularity. “I think it is wise to wait, Earth King. Especially
as there is reason to believe that she is not the true threat.”

Toph glowered at him. Pushing aside her annoyance at his outdated courtesy (she imagined that
Zuko had been like that, before he had tramped all over the world chasing them in their youth), she
raised her eyebrow and growled.

Iroh shrugged his shoulders and gazed longingly towards the door. Every moment he stood near the
woman, he could feel her infection. He could feel how hard it was to breathe, and his need to find
Sura to fix this was steadily mounting. “It is her story to tell, Earth King. I don’t think I fully
understand it. It is not an immediate threat, however, and can wait until she is healed – as long as it’s
done quickly.”

Toph’s glower was unrelenting. “No one is telling me the truth, Hot Stuff. Even Sickly here wasn’t
all that truthful, although she appeared to be trying. Then there’s Koru, who doesn’t mention
anything about this woman killing off her tribe and Aang who doesn’t mention anything about how
she can heal the sleeping sickness. I still don’t know what exactly it is that she can even do, and Shu
knows why you’re on her side instead of Twinkle’s. And now there’s another baddie out there?
Bigger and badder than this lady?” She glanced over at the woman, and was reminded of her
purpose. “Something serious is going down, and I’ve been bored for far too long.” She grinned
evilly, and even Iroh, stoicism incarnate, felt uneasy.

“Now. After you’ve gone and ran your errands – remember, Aang then Sura, and don’t mention
anything about Sura to Aang – stay in touch, but out of sight. I know you’re raring to meet your
fiancée, but all that will have to wait until we’ve got all this sorted out. Actually, it might be better if
you avoid her entirely – she doesn’t know anything about this, and for now I’d like to keep it that
way. Not that she's untrustworthy, simply an unnecessary complication. Anyways, I have a feeling
you’ve got a pretty good idea of what’s going on, and I don’t want to lose you to Aang’s prejudice.

“Now be off with you, I have things to do.”

Iroh nodded stiffly, bowed, and then departed without a glance to the woman whose fever made him
feel vaguely ill himself. He tried very hard to think only of what he would say to the Avatar, and
where Sura might be. He did not want to ponder what the Earth King had said about him being on
the spirit woman’s side rather than the Avatar’s. This was largely because it was true. He had
reflected deeply on his course of action the whole trip back, and had come to the unfortunate
conclusion that he believed Asha. That the woman – Anicca, his consciousness scolded him again,
you’re going to have to say her name someday- hadn’t known what she was doing was obvious, as
well as was her aversion to death. She either hadn’t meant to kill them or hadn’t wanted to, and he
was unsure if one was better or worse. Either way, it outlined her character well enough for him, especially considering there was another force at work behind the scenes. She was no hardened murderer, and therefore was the lesser of evils, at least.

Yet all that was neither here nor there, really. To him, it didn’t really matter whether she was a sociopath or a saint, she was the means to an end. He believed that the true threat was whatever dark force her people had brought into this world. According to the Asha, she was the only one who knew how to move against him. If she needed the use of her spirit powers to do so, then he would have to protect her until the greater evil had been stopped. Then, she could face the consequences of her actions. To him, it was that simple. That the Avatar couldn’t see this only seemed to accentuate the importance of hunting down this dark spirit, for who else could cloud the Avatar’s clear mind?

“Iroh!”

He spun to see Aunt Katara (even he could not consider the woman as anything other than Aunt) suddenly start running over to him, bare feet (she must have ditched her slippers somewhere, Iroh noticed) flapping against the polished floor. He tried to smile.

“Hello Aunt Katara. Is everything all right?”

She was breathing heavily by the time she reached him, but she was still impressively in shape for her age and position. Not many ambassadors engaged in strenuous water bending practice at least once (if not four or five times) a day. “Yes, yes, I’m fine. I just saw Sura on her way to Koru’s room, and she said that you had brought the spirit woman, and that she was very ill. I thought she’d be with Toph in the council chamber, but no one was there – do you know where they went?”

Had Toph somehow forgotten Katara’s longstanding obsession with healing the sleeping sickness? Koru must have told everyone about how the spirit woman could potentially heal the sickness, although he probably hadn’t known if she had recovered or not. No wonder Toph and Katara had been so open minded and excited – they at least were considering the wider possibilities the spirit bender presented.

He opened his mouth to tell her about the higher-level dungeons, closed it quickly. Toph had only gotten the Avatar to leave the room by warning him to tell his wife something, and obviously he hadn’t done it. For the Avatar’s sake, he should do as Toph commanded. But he could feel the woman’s weakness, and it was driving him insane. …No, he must do his duty. Yet when he opened his mouth out came: “The higher dungeons. She is not well. Have you seen the Avatar? I have a message for him.”

“Are you sure? But um, no. I haven’t seen him since he brought in Koru.” Katara worked hard to keep her voice neutral. As far as she knew, neither she nor Zuko had seen her husband since the frantic, hurried drop off yesterday night. She hadn’t seen Zuko either, thank La. In all the excitement she hadn’t had a chance to really think about what her and Zuko’s persistent attraction meant, if it meant anything at all. At the moment, all she knew was that she and Zuko were still very much in love, and she was in as much danger of betraying her husband as she had been as a much younger woman. Wasn’t age supposed to cool passions, dim ardor?

Iroh looked down at his aunt, wondering at the strange look on her face. Now there was a guilty, distracted look if he’d ever seen one…could she possibly know something about the Avatar’s current bloodthirstiness? Or was there a legitimate reason Aang hadn’t found his wife, namely, that she was avoiding him? “Ah. Well, I believe he’s looking for you…so don’t be too long in the dungeons.” He trailed off as a recognizable yet unfamiliar shape backed into view. He had never seen it in life, but the sketch had been quite detailed…there, at the end of the hallway, was the fiancée he was supposed to avoid. For once, duty and desire aligned, and with a whispered adieu, he took off down
an adjacent hallway, thankful that Siyi Tanh had not yet turned around. Later, he would reflect on his
eagerness to escape the woman he would undoubtedly spend the rest of his life with. For now, he
would leave her in the capable hands of his Aunt.

Now. To find the Avatar.

“Koru!” Sura burst through the door and was in his arms before she could realize that he may be
indisposed or unconscious. Thankfully he wasn’t, and as Tanh had left only moments before, all his
attention was free to spend on the woman who so suddenly flung herself into his arms. Before she
could say anything else, he captured her lips with his, making it known to her how much he had
missed her. When he was fairly sure she had gotten the message, he continued on with how much he
currently desired her.

Sura giggled and playfully shoved his hand off her upper thigh. Not that she didn’t want that or
anything, but there was a thing or two they should discuss first. Such as his wounds, and whether or
not she should be straddling his waist like so. “Koru, are you all right?”

“Mmmhmm.” He pulled back and pouted. Sura giggled again, and it was all the sunshine and
sweetness that had been lacking over the last few days.

“Thank Yue. I was so worried that I hadn’t healed you properly-” Katara glanced down, casting
cursory hands over Koru's arm and chest. His arm had healed nicely, and apart from residual
inflammation would be up to snuff in a matter of days. Yet the crack in his rib was still not
completely healed, and there was a minute danger of infection.

Koru caught her hands in his own, bringing them to his lips. “I’m fine, beloved. Your mother patched
me up right away. But I’m dying of curiosity – what happened to the spirit woman?”

Anicca.

Gasping, Sura pulled away again. How could she have forgotten? Practically babbling she told Koru
everything: the Ritual, their visions at the Mountain Shrine, Iroh’s oddness and her father’s anger.
The only thing she held back was Asha’s gift, but why, she couldn’t really say. Something told her
that it was her secret alone. Besides, although she loved and trusted Koru implicitly, they had far
larger issues to worry about.

The last thing she told him was something that she thought even Iroh wouldn’t know, although it
was possible through his tenuous connection to Anicca. It was something that had happened only
moments ago, and the only thing that could even momentarily dispel her guilt at forgetting about
Anicca for even a moment.

“And then Father told me I couldn’t go in with him; that I had to go find Mother. I was about to
argue with him, but then she just looked at me, and I could hear her telling me to go find you. And
maybe I shouldn’t have left because she looked so ill, but I was so surprised when I felt her speak to
me about you, and then she…she reminded me of how I felt for you, and suddenly I was running. I
saw Mother on the stairs coming up and thankfully she didn’t want to do anymore than hug, because I just missed you so much.” She sighed. Smiled. “And I think that’s all of it.”

Koru stared at her in shock. Granted, it had been a lot to comprehend, and he was sure he was going to have to hear it all about three more times, but he knew what he’d like to start off with. “Care to explain that last part again?”

Sura sighed in mock exasperation. “Koru. If you’re asking for a demonstration to show how much I missed you…”

He shook his head, uncharacteristically serious. “No. Well, yes, but not now. Sura. The part about where she spoke without actually speaking.”

Sura knitted her brows in thought, but didn’t appear worried. “It was like before, in a way. When I was in her soul, and she told me to go. Except this time I could hear and feel her – the connection was a lot stronger without the evil souls in the way. The reminding part was a bit weird, but I could feel that she didn’t mean anything bad by it – she simply wanted me to obey my father, and she knew I would miss you.”

“And how did she know that?”

Sura had the grace to blush. “Ah. Well uh…the ride here was kind of long…”

“I thought you said your father didn’t let you talk to her.”

“Uhhh yeah. About that.”

Koru shook his head admiringly. How else could he react? It wouldn’t do to let Sura know he worried so much about her. She prided herself on her strength and independence, and if she trusted this woman, he would have to as well – at least until he met her and could form his own opinion. After all, Sura and Iroh were two of the people he respected most, and if they both thought Anicca was all right – or from Iroh’s standpoint, no longer an obvious threat – he would as well. “So you’ve been practicing this mental communication a little longer than you first let on?”

Sura twisted her lips in a manner that was so adorable that Koru had trouble breathing for a moment. “Please don’t tell Father? I think Iroh suspects, but he knows that Anicca is at the very least important, and won’t do anything rash.” She settled her shoulders, anger rising. “Urggh, Koru! Father is being so dumb about all this! He refuses to listen to anyone’s opinion other than his. He has it in his head that Anicca is evil and did all this on purpose, and that we’re all lying about the evil spirit her people awoke. He thinks she’s trying to trick us. But I’ve seen her intentions, Koru, and I know what her grandmother told her and Iroh! She’s not evil. She’s not. She’s upset and lost and confused and hurt, but she didn’t mean to kill anyone.”

“I know, I know. I believe you.” He brought his lips to her forehead in an effort to reassure. “Hush, love, hush.” He kissed her softly, marveling at her compassion and empathy. They were hallmarks of the woman he loved, and would always cherish. There could be no one else for him.

Sura managed a shaky smile as he drew back. “I like her, Koru. She’d just lost everyone, and she found the strength to let me in. It was almost like…” She cocked her head to the side, deep in thought. “I felt like the more she worried about me and my life, the easier it was for her to accept herself. Like when she cared for me, she was more at peace, or something. And I think that’s a good thing, right? Finding your strength through caring for others?”

Koru nodded absently. “It’s like you.” He chuckled even as he brought his hands back to her hips.
“It’s a lot like you.”

Sura giggled as his hands began to rub gentle circles on her thighs. “You’re not listening to a word I say, are you.”

“Not for lack of trying. But I have ten years of unresolved passion driving me.”

Sura leaned in to lay a soft kiss on his thin, expressive lips. “You are incorrigible. Honestly, how have you lived this long—”

She was cut off by the sound of the door swinging open behind them. She whipped her head around so quickly it cracked.

“Oh!” There was a sharp intake of breath. “Oh you must be Sura!”

The lady in question pulled away from her love so jerkily she half-jumped, half-fell to the floor. Oh gods. They had been seen. And by…?

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to…to interrupt. Or to - are you all right?” Siyi Tanh was not having an easy time of it. Admittedly, she had been a little late checking up on her patient, but with all the suppressed excitement in the palace that was only to be expected. She had hoped that she might get glimpse of her fiancée (or better yet be introduced) but the guards told her he had left the palace immediately after having an audience with Aunt-King Toph. Apparently, he had been charged with a task so important that he couldn’t even stop and speak with his Father, let alone his yet to be met fiancée.

Tanh understood, although she couldn’t fight off a faint twinge of displeasure. Duty before desire, and all that. Still…she had been waiting for so long…

But that was neither here nor there. The beautiful girl in front of her was clearly ready to bolt, and even Koru, whose company Tanh thoroughly enjoyed (so fortunate, as future siblings!) was looking rather disjointed. Time to reassure. After all, it’s not like she hadn’t known – or at least, suspected - of their attachment…especially with the way Koru had been calling out Sura’s name during his convalescence!

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. And just then! My name is Siyi Tanh…cousin to Toph Bei Fong. I’d been helping Lady Katara check up on Koru since the accident.” She gave her deepest curtsy and noticed that Sura had begun to look between Koru and herself, as if trying to divine the connection. Yet Koru still looked on edge. So. Their engagement was a secret, then?

“And don’t worry…I won’t say anything to anyone. I gather your relationship is a secret?” Her brow furrowed unintentionally. “Although I doubt anyone would do or say anything at the moment. They’re all rather distracted…for some odd reason.”

If anything, Sura looked even more uncomfortable, and Tanh was beginning to wonder if she hadn’t seriously misread the situation. Yet Koru then laughed and pulled Sura so that she stood next to the bed, an action that dispelled the tension.

“Thank you, Tanh, for your assurances. And here we are, standing here like gaping children. Well. Let me remedy this. You of course know who I am, but give me leave to honor you with the presence of Sura, daughter of Lady Katara and the Avatar, my unannounced fiancée, and the love of my life. Sura, likewise, let me addend Tanh’s introduction: you are gazing at the lovely woman who will, gods willing, become your sister-in-law.” Sura belatedly smiled and murmured something polite as Koru chuckled. “That being said, where is my brother?”
Sura shrugged, thinking she had a good idea of where Iroh might be, but ended up saying nothing. After all, she couldn’t know for certain that Iroh was still holding congress with the Earth King. On further reflection, it seemed just as likely that he had left the palace, either trying to find a way to break their connection or to enjoy his last bit of freedom. And as she couldn’t feel Anicca at the moment, she couldn’t ask her...

Her eyes traveled back to the woman still standing in the doorway. Yue and La, but she was beautiful. This was a woman straight out of love ballads! Sura sighed. Even knowing that Koru had only ever loved herself, she had still felt a long, sickening moment of fear when she saw how easily they interacted. Yet this woman was Iroh’s. Judging by the faint flush in her cheeks and flash of intense interest at Koru’s question, Tanh didn’t mind her future husband at all. Iroh was a handsome man, Sura allowed. Yet would he ever belong to Tanh in return?

Not the point. The point was that Tanh and Koru are as siblings, and there is nothing here to worry about.

Deciding to be brave, and to trust in Koru’s judgement, Sura leaned down to kiss him on the cheek, and then crossed the floor to Tanh. She hesitated a moment, wondering if she was the kind of woman to worry about mussing her clothes or ethereally perfect hair, or too reserved to appreciate the intended gesture. Yet Tanh read Sura’s indecision and slightly raised arms, and made up her own mind. She threw her slender arms around Sura, and squeezed tightly.

“I am so glad to have met you, Sura. Koru has told me a lot about you...and I am especially happy that we may be sisters.” Tanh whispered, so that there would be something like secrets between them. She pulled away and smiled up at the waterbender, hoping that she wouldn’t be subjected to the familiar jealous hatred that had always followed her like a shadow. It was one thing to experience it with women who could withhold only the joys of friendship, but in her future sister-in-law it would be worse...

Sura felt the hint of desperation in the hug, and wondered if Tanh was lonely. She seemed so friendly and charming, but Sura knew the ways of jealous women, and could see exactly why she might be ostracized. So she smiled back, and demonstrated her trust in the most potent way possible.

“Thank you, Tanh,” she whispered. Raising her voice so that Koru could hear as well, she winked broadly at her new friend. “Well then. I’m glad to leave Koru in such capable hands. I have to get back to Mother, though...I’ll be sure to tell her you’re on your deathbed.”

Koru snorted and Tanh stepped away, warmly thankful that Sura had not been repulsed. Sura grinned cheekily at the smaller woman. “And if I see a certain firebender wandering around the palace...I’ll be sure to send him your way.” She leaned in close to Tanh so that Koru couldn’t hear.

“Take care of him. As one sister to another. Please?”

Tanh grinned immoderately for the first time since she came to the palace. Someone liked her, someone liked her, someone liked her! She almost babbled with excitement. “Of course! Absolutely. Always.”

Sura laughed as she left. Tanh might be a little odd, and possessed a frighteningly perfect façade, yet she had been so sweet and awkward at the end. Also, Koru was an excellent judge of character, and he had clearly trusted her. Sura hummed to herself as she padded down the hallway. For the first time since Uncle’s death, she felt like everything could end well. Sure, the sleeping sickness had been growing steadily worse, and there was her father’s immovability to deal with, but-

Sura was yanked unceremoniously through an open door before she had time to scream. Strong arms encircled her, yet she was far from helpless. Summoning water from the flask at her belt, she fashioned a barrage of ice daggers to attack her foe...
…that promptly evaporated the moment before they touched his skin.

“Sura! Stop it! It’s me.”

“Iroh?” Sura gasped as he let her go to rub at the red marks on his arms and neck. Oh, so the daggers had landed. She was faintly proud of herself, but more so angry and curious. “What are you doing? Why in La’s name are you abducting me?”

“I had to get a hold of you secretly. Toph wants me to stay out of the palace, but I had to talk to you first.” Iroh scowled, a gesture that made him look unsettlingly like his grandfather. “What were you and Koru doing that took so damn long? Braiding each other’s hair?”

Sura flushed, but was fairly sure he couldn’t see it in the dim light. “I was meeting your fiancée, actually. The one you seem hell-bent on avoiding.” She had only guessed, but from his hesitation it seemed she was right. Ha! That she’d live to see the day Iroh was rendered uncomfortable! But then she remembered Siyi, who had been flushed and excited at the prospect of meeting Iroh, and felt bad. Sura had the unfortunate suspicion that all of Siyi’s beauty might not be enough to win Iroh’s duty-bound affection…

“I am under orders from the Earth King to avoid her – to avoid everyone. She does not want the word of the spirit bender’s existence to spread beyond those who already know.”

Sura raised a sardonic brow at that. She suspected there was another reason Iroh was supposed to remain tucked away, and she assumed it had to do with her Father. Once again, Sura wondered just what had happened when Anicca had been brought before Aunt Toph. Yet she knew Iroh well enough to know that begging wouldn’t avail her; he either would or wouldn’t tell her, and said nothing. At the very least, the change of topic meant that she didn’t have to think uncomfortable thoughts about Siyi anymore.

Iroh noticed Sura’s restraint, and internally thanked Agni. After all, the more time he spent arguing with Sura, the more opportunity there would be for him to run into certain someones... “Regardless. This is about the spirit woman.” Now he had her attention. “The King has partially questioned her, but the woman passed out before she could finish. Her interrogation is therefore put on hold until she heals.” He looked at Sura pointedly. “The King was wondering if you would like to expedite the process?”

Unexpectedly, Sura hesitated. Iroh had assumed she’d leap at the chance to help the woman. On the way back to Ba Sing Se, Sura’s concentration had been utterly fixed on the spirit woman, and although he had attempted to ignore the connection, he could feel the woman’s energy fixed just as firmly on Sura. He couldn’t tell exactly what they were doing, but he knew they were doing something. His suspicions had been confirmed when they had stood outside the doors leading to the throne room. The woman had somehow communicated something to Sura, non-verbally and without the Avatar’s knowledge. He knew this in the unsettling way he knew that the woman was still unconscious, partially healed by Aunt Katara, and located one floor down and several hallways to the left of them. When Sura had abruptly turned to go, he had felt the woman’s relief and spasm of weakness, and to his surprise, he realized that the spirit bender had been worried for Sura.

That was the end, of course. With her empathy, Sura would realize all this, and would then have no choice but to care for the spirit woman in return. Best friends, for the rest of the spirit woman’s limited existence.

“And if I heal her…her sentence will be passed more quickly?”

Ah. So that was it. “Sura…you know the Earth King. Your father, in full-on Avatar mode,
demanding that Toph execute *his* justice? I’m surprised she didn’t fight him then and there.” His eyebrows raised at her noticeable relief. “Regardless, you know what that means.”

Sura nodded firmly. She looked down at her hands, and then at Iroh. “But just in case…”

Iroh led her to the door. He waited for her to say it.

“What did my Father say her sentence should be?”

“To strip her of her powers. You knew that.”

“That can’t happen, Iroh.” She looked up at him, her most serious expression firmly in place. “I can’t let it happen.”

Iroh raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He figured she would know it was his way of conceding without actually agreeing. Finally, he spoke. “Then let me take you to her.”

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Aang had been taught to see the world as it was, and appreciate all it’s vagueries and shades of grey. Yet it ran opposite to his nature, which was to understand a situation in blunt facts. The answer was either yes or no. The world could only be dressed in black or in white. Most of the time, he was able to fall back on training, and accept everything as a monk should. Yet in times of stress and anxiety, nature won out. This, coupled with the blind madness of almost entering the Avatar State was the reason that he had very nearly “attacked” his daughter whom he loved so, so much, and had brought back the light of hope into his life.

His wife was similar, in nature if not by training. Blunt by nature and by her native culture; she had only learned subtlety since the fall of Ozai. Yet unlike him, she owned her personality, and instead of viewing it as a defect, she lauded it as a strength. Unfortunately for him, she was now using that strength against him.

“You. Attacked. *Sura.*”

Aang didn’t know how she could have known. Toph had seemed sure that she didn’t already know, and the grim-faced Zuko at her side couldn’t have told her, as he hadn’t known either. Unless… unless Koru had woken up already. Then it didn’t matter who had told whom. Either way he was screwed.


“Katara, I had the situation perfectly under control. Sura was in no danger—“

“No danger?! *No danger?* She was facing down the *Avatar* and you claim she was in no danger?” Katara knew she was practically hissing, but she couldn’t do anything about it. At the moment, she had two volumes, and the other would have deafened them all. “No danger. Yeah. So then why did Koru need medical attention?”
She watched the flash of emotion diffuse her husband’s stoic face. Aang was extremely expressive until he was either very angry, or very in trouble, and then it was like arguing with a stone replica of himself. Where had such immovability come from? Katara darkly suspected that it was Toph.

“He acted in a way I did not expect, and I had to react. It was instinctive. I am sorry for that.” He turned to Zuko, and struggled to unbind his tight face into something that resembled contrition. He was sorry. He hadn’t meant to hurt Koru, just as he hadn’t meant to hurt Sura. Truthfully, he didn’t really know why he had reacted the way he did. The hatred he had felt for the spiritbender had surpassed all common sense, and when he had viewed her there, lying helpless on the ground, all he could think was that this was his one chance to end it all, end whatever madness might come before it even began. Yet that chance had passed, and now he had to deal with the fallout.

“I’m sorry, Zuko. Until I made contact, I couldn’t even tell who it was that was moving – I feared it was another like her.” He bowed deeply from the waist, and held the position. “It was my mistake. I handled the situation badly. I’m sorry.”

A muscle in Zuko’s cheek twitched, and it was the only indication of his anger. Save for the emphasis on that last sorry, Aang’s apology had been made as the Avatar. Not that Zuko blamed him. He had indirectly made an attempt on the life of the second prince of the Fire Nation, and if word got out the political repercussions could potentially start another war. They both knew that. They all did. So, with a quick glance at Katara (by her grimace he could tell she agreed with him, but didn’t like it one bit) he gripped his friend by his shoulders, and pulled him upright.

“It’s all right, Aang. Both Koru and Sura are fine.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “So tell us about this…spiritbender.”

Aang needed no provocation. He told them all, exactly as he saw it. He told them of the atrocity she had committed, and the blood that was on her figurative hands. He allowed that she had been under some sort of influence, yet that she had brought it all upon herself. He briefly outlined the ritual, offering it as her reason into madness. No, he did not understand the full purpose of the ritual – she had run away before she could explain it. Finally, and with the smallest trace of exultation, he announced that Roku had informed him that she was unable to end the sleeping sickness.

Katara found her voice only because she obeyed the blind impulse to argue, fostered under a lifetime of senseless arguments with her older brother. Otherwise, she might have been shocked into silence like Zuko. “Well what about curing it? Can she do anything to help those already afflicted? Or at least identify it?”

Both men looked at her like they hadn’t the slightest idea what that meant. Then they looked at each other. Aang’s face stiffened again.

“I don’t know. I just know she can’t stop the plague.”

Katara followed the line of her argument like it was a light in the dark. It was her way of dealing with tribal genocide. “Maybe she can help though. The way you found her – it sounds a lot like certain cases of the epidemic. Who’s to say that the sickness isn’t some kind of…of soul malady? What if-“ Katara caught herself with a sharp intake of breath. “Oh La, what if her village is what caused the epidemic?”

Aang said nothing, not knowing what to say. He perversely noted the way Katara’s eyes swung first to Zuko, and then back to him.

“I don’t know, Katara. If her village had caused the epidemic, then wouldn’t its demise have ended it? Yet we were still receiving reports of fresh outbreaks this morning.” Zuko’s visage softened as
Katara slumped, clearly having forgotten all that in her excitement. He continued, and only Aang’s presence stopped him from touching her. “But you may be on to something, in regards to the spiritbender…she may be able to slow down the sickness…or even heal those already afflicted. Hopefully she can shed some light on what the sickness is—"

“No, no, Zuko. Katara may have gotten it.” Aang spoke with the memory of the villagers’ deaths before his eyes. It had been practically all he could see, since his return to Ba Sing Se, as if the vision had been painted against the back of his eyelids, instead of merely being burned into his memory. Unlike the younger benders who had focused on the dais, his gaze had been focused on those in the spirals, and the children who had attempted to pull themselves from their parents’ hands, and the despair and horror displayed by those who had known they were going to die. It was a personal affront to him. He was the Avatar, he who fought for and achieved world peace, and everything about the spiritbender and that inhumane ritual sickened him. Their deaths meant that he had failed. Well, he would not fail again. “Perhaps the villagers did cause the epidemic. And maybe the sickness won’t stop until all the villagers are dead.” He thought back to what Iroh had told him, only minutes before this painful interview. Toph had put her foot down, and demanded that the woman be healed before she was fully tried. That any attempt to take away her bending would kill her. For the first time in a long, long time, Aang considered going against Toph’s wishes. Yet he knew he wouldn’t; less because of his moral convictions, and more due to the fear that only Toph could instill.

“No.” Katara shook her head tightly. “No. I don’t accept this. We are not passing a guilty sentence on a woman who is inches away from death. Not even if she’s as evil as Azula was. And I don’t think-

Zuko spoke with the calm gravity he had adopted during his years on the Fire Nation throne. “We are going to wait until we know for sure what happened, and see if she can help us.” He exhaled slowly, letting the air between them shimmer from the heat of his breath. “We will abide by the Earth King’s decision. If the woman can prove useful, we will forget all this talk of vengeance. For now. If not, another decision will be made.”

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“Zuko!”

“For now, I suggest we go check up on our children. After that, we might as well return to planning the Remembrance Ceremony – that’s still in just a few days. I know the planning committee especially wants to meet with you, Aang.”

Having changed the subject, Zuko discreetly turned his gaze on Katara, quelling her indignation over the spiritbender’s fate. She knew as well as he that this was the best decision they could have come to. Aang had become progressively less patient and clear-sighted throughout the years, and it was largely their fault. Accept it for now; his eyes beseeched her. Accept this, and pray nothing happens that makes all this harder.

But that had already happened. As Katara walked between the two most important men in her life, she could not help but reflect on the scroll locked securely in Toph’s most useful gift – a chest for scrolls locked by blood. This ensured that she would be the only one to open it, as Aang had never been able or willing to learn the art of bloodbending.

My dearest Katara, it began. Daughter of my heart. If things had been different, I would have another name to call you. But events happen as they will, and I was far too wise to advise you any differently. For this, I apologize. For everything, I apologize.

Katara hung her head. Uncle’s last words to her…they were so painful to reflect upon, especially situated as she was. She had never realized he had known all. She had not known that he had sorrowed along with them, for all these years.
I had hoped your love would wither, that you would find peace with others. Yet I think I knew it would not – known since my nephew gave you the necklace that you still wear around your neck.

He had even known about that. The necklace, which had changed everything…

No! She would not lose herself in her misery now. There had been so much beauty then, and it would be wrong to mourn that. It’s loss, yes, but not that it ever occurred. That was simply not the woman she was. It was not the type of woman she had raised Sura to become.

Sura. Katara wondered if Zuko had grasped the other reason Aang was so determined to strip the spirit bender of her powers. If Sura had been able to somehow interact with the spiritbender while the woman lay unconscious, and was able to read a “friendly” intent, then who was to say what the spirit woman could sense? Their lives were bound by secrets, hanging precariously in reach of truth’s blade. Katara had always assumed that they would have to reveal their pasts one day; yet Aang depended on never doing so. Now, his hand was being forced. Could the spirit bender read their souls? Were their hearts and minds open to the same perusal? Would she reveal what she saw lying therin?

Katara hoped not. Yet even more than revealing the past, she hoped that the spirit bender would not announce what was currently in their hearts.

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Toph was a woman who appreciated the finer points of chaos, yet in order to run a city, she had to deal in hard facts as well. The majority of her day had been spent dealing with shenanigans – strange women fainting, Twinkle Toes getting angry, and Sparks and Sugar reverting back to their pre-war levels of angst - but her talk with Sura had been surprisingly illuminating. For one thing, Hot Stuff had not mentioned his connection to the spirit bender, although she figured that explained a thing or two. Likewise, Sura was clearly the girl’s champion, but that was only to be expected. No, what surprised and delighted her was Sura’s determination and newfound courage. Sura was a little afraid of her; it had always been obvious. Yet today she had looked Toph straight in the eye, and told her exactly what she thought: not only about the spiritbender, but also of the situation, and most impressively, her revered father. She too thought Aang was somewhat deranged, although she hadn’t voiced it in such terms. Toph had, for once, kept her silence. She let the girl rant, and nodded approvingly when called upon to do so. At the end, she merely smiled and handed the keys to the spiritbender’s cell over.

Sura had been surprised, to say the least. Toph had only winked. *You never know when these might come in handy*, she had said. *For now, just heal her. I’ll want to speak to her in the morning. But believe me. I’ll let you know if I have any other use for you…or those keys.*

Sura had looked like she was about to protest, but Toph waved her off.

*Don’t worry about propriety, Hero. Just protect your bender. And don’t worry about the Avatar either. I was born to handle your Father.*

Toph couldn’t help but smirk. If Twinkles didn’t watch his step, she was going to take that a step
further, and demonstrate how she had been born to dominate her oldest friend. Toph sighed, leaned back against her throne, and folded her hands demurely across her still-trim stomach.

Just another day for the King of Ba Sing Se.

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Chapter End Notes

Have almost caught up. Hope you're still reading! MAKE MY DAY.

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Interlude 5: Holding Back the Dark

Chapter Notes

Don't own ATLA
Ready for some letters? I sure hope so...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude 5: Holding Back the Dark

(mid Year 6 – late Year 7)

In tales, the dark is a force of chaos
terrible and unrelenting, a token of the end.
Yet darkness is the mother’s womb
warm and safe, and all we once knew.

I will bring the dark to swallow your light
Your soul’s candle guttering in my embrace
And when the light goes out you will find
The truth that all light obscures.

-Southern Water Tribe hymn, sung at the rising of the winter moon -

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Most honorable Fire Lord, esteemed and admired beyond measure, royal wielder of the Eternal Flame, and all those other titles I cannot be bothered to remember right now.

I am writing on behalf of my husband, the even more estimable Avatar. He says hello. He would probably say more, but is currently busy settling the earth colony uprisings.
Hope the Fire Nation is still there and everything. And that Mai (and the baby) are doing well.

Cordially,

Katara, formerly of the Southern Water Tribes

Oh for the love of La, Zuko! You told me that you weren’t attending my wedding because of the rebellion in the fire islands! Not because you were chasing down an insignificant band of earth kingdom pirates! Honestly, Zuko. Piracy has been an issue in the Earth Kingdom for centuries. Why it takes the FIRE LORD to hunt down the EARTH KING’s problem, on the DAY OF MY WEDDING is beyond me. You weren’t even in the Fire Nation - if my sources are to be believed, you were less than 30 miles away.

What is so important about those pirates that they kept you away from my wedding?


Dear Katara (and Aang),

I know that nothing I could say will induce you to forgive me. I have already come to terms with the notion that your righteous anger will be the end of me. Yet I shall try nonetheless.

You are right. I was in the Earth Kingdom the day of your wedding, and the day before that, I was within thirty miles of Ba Sing Se. The rebellion was put down far more easily than was expected (and the world will know of all that soon enough) and I thought to surprise both you and Aang on your wedding day. I knew that I could not stay long, but I had figured if worse came to worst I could steal a ride on Appa back to the Fire Nation.

Although I attempted to travel by stealth I made the mistake of greeting several of Uncle’s contacts, and I was recognized. The pirates attacked, and although Uncle’s friends are undeniably sage advisors and leaders, they were no help when I was set upon, and several items were taken from me. I will not lie to you – they took your wedding gift, and I was instigated to get it back. (Consequently – have you received it? I thought Aang would enjoy the tapestry, as it would be familiar to him from his childhood, a century ago. The Nomads had long ago gifted us with that particular piece, and it had been forgotten in one of the Palace storerooms. I had hoped you would enjoy the confections – we call them chocolates – but I can also just as easily see you throwing them at the wall, one by one, in your anger. If you did not consume them, let me tell you – they are delicious.)

So I took after them, hoping to catch them before they got back to the ship, dodging all my men chasing after me, demanding that I let the gifts go and not endanger my royal person. I could not do this, however. Along with your gifts, they had taken something personal from me….something that I keep with me always, to better remember the giver, and our promise.

You know of what I speak. I had no choice but to give chase, and luckily caught up with them before they escaped to the seas. Thanks to some unlooked for help from some conscientious earth nation citizens, I was able to reclaim the lost items. Yet at the expense of your and Aang’s happiness – securing victory made me unable to attend your wedding.
We were going to continue on anyways, so that I could at least offer congratulations and the gifts in person, but we were interrupted by an urgent hawk that warned of a burgeoning coup. I had to go home, and settle it before it erupted into a full-scale conflagration.

Now you understand. I have to go. I wish Aang the best of luck in settling the uprisings (if he hasn’t heard from the Earth King yet, tell him that he and I will be acting in conjunction to provide further supplies to hopefully quell further rebellions), and you may inform Toph that if she can’t keep secrets, she is no longer my favorite little earthbender.

Forgive me, Katara.

Your still best friend,

Zuko

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Dear Zuko,

Hmph. I have decided to forgive you, but only because of the promptness of your reply. To hear back from you before the honeymoon has even ended was far faster than I had expected, and I am duly impressed. Also, I am *very glad you got your…item back, as well as it meaning so much to you.

Anyways. I have seen Aang a total of 4 nights out of 11, and now fully understand the futility of planning a 2 week long honeymoon when one is married to the Avatar. I am striving not to lose my temper and remain humorous about everything, but I am not sure Aang appreciated it when I remarked that perhaps we should have waited until we were middle-aged to have our honeymoon. I imagine this is a lot what Mai feels like, and I have a lot more sympathy for her now. Oh! How is she? How is the baby coming? Don’t tell her (well, or maybe warn her…you’d know best) but Ty Lee is coming to keep her company for the birthing in a week or two – Suki dropped the secret during our bachelorette party.

Speaking of, did Uncle tell you he was there for that? I had thought those parties were only for girls, but apparently not. Ah well. He certainly was the most excited of all of us that night…

Aang loves the tapestry. He got all teary eyed when he saw it, although it doesn’t make any sense to me. He sends his deepest thanks, for both the tapestry and the help with the earth nation refugees. He says the problem was more on the earth nation side, with corruption staining the overseer’s pockets, but your aid was essential nonetheless.

Ok. I admit that the chocolates also helped me forgive you, but just a little. They would not have done so had I actually thrown them up against the wall, but as I simply ate them, they worked wonders.

Ah! And you’re so certain my “sources” are Toph! Interesting. Very interesting.

Well. Off to staring at the walls until Aang comes back.

No longer angry at you,
Dear Katara (and by proxy, Aang)

I am very pleased to hear that all is forgiven, and by this time I hope that everything has settled down enough for you to have enjoyed the rest of your honeymoon. I know how it is to be forced to put work before all else, but this is a special time for both of you, and I wish he could have shared more of it with you. But I know you. You’re so practical, you’ll probably convince yourself into spending the rest of your life in a state of perpetual honeymoon. Should I dare you to do so?

Mai is very well, all things considering. I heard from Ty Lee yesterday, announcing that she would be here in less than a week – and yes, I think it is a good thing she will be here. Mai still has a little under two months (Agni preserve her) and is suffering from all the typical ailments (or so I am told) but other than that she is quite pleased with how everything is turning out. Apparently her mother experienced very difficult carrying periods for both Mai and her brother, and hers in comparison is pretty mild.

I don’t know much about that, but I think...I think that I am more excited than terrified to be a father. Terrified because my own is such a poor example, but at least I know what I will never do to any child, whether it is mine or not. I also worry about whether I will be able to make enough time for the child. I remember my mother devoting hours to Azula and I, and I know Mai will do the same, but...is it wrong to want to spend time with it as well? It seems wrong for the Fire Lord to worry about such things. But I suppose I am an irrevocably unconventional Fire Lord at this point, and loving my child will do nothing but further muddy my name.

To further prove my oddness... I have a confession. One that you can only tell Aang (but not even Toph, or whomever your “sources” may be)-- if I could pick, I would rather Mai had a girl. I don’t know why – everyone tells me I must pray to Agni for a male heir, so that the succession is assured. Additionally, girls have always (mostly Azula, but even you had your moments...) terrified me. Yet every time I think about holding the child, or playing with it, or even just imagining the first few moments, I always envision a girl.

I told Uncle this, and he seemed surprised, but proud. I think he even teared up, a little. It made me think of your letter, and I can see what you mean about him attending the bachelorette party...

Anyways. I find myself spending more time responding to your letters than my official correspondence. As boring as waiting around for Aang might be, at least you don’t have to deal with the Fire Sages…and besides - you are Katara, Master Water Bender, and terror of at least 5 young gentlemen...(have you heard from any of our companions during our exile to the Western Air Tribes?) Regardless, if I know you, you won’t be bored long...

Your overworked, soon to be a Father friend,

Zuko
Dear Zuko,

First of all, let me apologize for the lateness of this letter. We had just decided to take a second honeymoon (a real one, with no interruptions by incompetent Earth Kings) where Aang practically kidnapped me on Appa, and flew me away to an “undisclosed location.” If you must know, it was the Eastern Wind Temple. We did not leave a forwarding address, and apparently just missed your messenger hawk. I would apologize for us both, but I believe Aang is lying on the bed and smirking, so I can only assume he is still too pleased with our escape to care about anything in particular at the moment. To be honest, I don’t expect a reply in return for a long time now – Mai should be due in less than a month, and I suspect that will take up all your time. I wish her a safe birth and a healthy child, and I wish you sanity, as I am led to understood men go a little crazy during birthing times.

Zuko, you are adorable. I’ve never heard of a man wanting a daughter first – especially a man in power! I hope Mai agrees. But I totally understand. I had always dreamt of daughters…not that I wouldn’t have loved sons, but there’s just something about baby girls.

Everything you just wrote me points to how good of a father you will be. You are nothing like Ozai, Zuko! You have faced those demons and become a new man. If anything, I think you’re going to be far more like Uncle…and your children will grow up to be cryptic and addicted to ginseng.

As for keeping myself busy…it’s honestly a little weird to think about. Water tribe wives aren’t expected to do much outside the household, and although I’ve spent the last 6 years traveling around the world and establishing myself as an independent woman, some habits are hard to break. I stay physically busy, with yoga and waterbending, but certain thoughts are impossible to get rid of. Ah well. Won’t bore you with all this-

How is the Fire Nation? Tell me what it’s like, truly, to be the Fire Lord. I assume it’s like being the Avatar, just with a lot more paperwork, and fire.

Have to go –Aang sends his best to you and Mai, and is looking forward to visiting the Fire Nation so you two can go “volcano hopping.” Do not tell me what that entails. I do not want to know.

Dreaming of seeing you all again (and those chocolates…)

Katara

Katara,

Agni be praised all is well – Mai is fine and Iroh is as well. They let me hold him for just a moment, but I will be able to again when the midwives have finished - I don’t know how to describe what I feel right now. Is this paternal love? It’s almost overwhelming –
I’m sorry. I began this letter in the first flush of excitement, right after I had held my son for the first time. Let me begin at the beginning – Mai went into labor yesterday morning, and almost 12 hours later delivered a healthy baby boy, whom we have named Iroh. Several hours ago he spat fire at his namesake, and the Fire Nation has been rejoicing nonstop. All throughout the streets people are celebrating the heir – yet all I care about is that I have a son. A child. I kept trying to hold him, and play with his fingers, and basically touch him in any way I could, but the ladies have barred me from the chambers until Mai recovers, and Iroh (the infant, not Uncle…although he’s been looking pretty peaky too) gets some sleep. There are rituals to go through tomorrow – and I have not slept in nearly two days, now – but I am too excited to sleep. Everything is wonderful. I am still boggled by the fact that Mai and I have made a life together, and that it is mine to hold, to love, to protect…

I may have embarrassed myself by crying a little when Uncle cornered me in the hallway and embraced me, telling me how proud he was of me, and of his hopes for the future. I told him it was an uncontrollable reaction as he had not showered in several days, but I don’t think he was fooled. He did mention something about a tea beneficial to infants, however, and I thought of your letter – we probably doomed him when we named him Iroh.

I won’t bore you with duties of the Fire Lord, especially as all I can think of is the baby. I am curious about what you meant by water tribe habits being hard to break – but if it is painful I will not press you. Just know that I am always here to listen, even if I don’t understand right away.

There will be no volcano hopping. Tell your husband that when he is a father, he will understand.

Zuko

I was so happy to receive your letter! I’m so glad that everything went well; that Mai is fine, and that baby Iroh (I can only imagine the look on Uncle’s face when you told him you were naming the baby after him) is not only healthy, but being an active little firebender as well. I’m so happy for you. Aang sends his congratulations as well, and we’re trying to plan a trip to the Fire Nation to see you all soon. He says to make no promises, however, but we’re both working as hard as we can to help rebuild the earth colonies so that they can function as independent cities, and not entirely under the power of either the Earth or Fire Nation. I’m hoping that we can visit in a month or so, but Dad has been asking us to come and visit the South Pole for a long time now…apparently, not just as a family visit. I don’t know all the details (as Suki is still recovering from the triplets my only correspondent there is currently Sokka, and you can imagine how that is going) but I suppose I’ll find out when we get there.

Oh! You’ve heard about Sokka and Suki’s triplets, right? She had assumed she was carrying twins, with how heavy she was during my wedding and all, but triplets was a surprise even for her. They’re fraternal (thank La): two boys, Yuen and Jian, and a girl, Sati. Yuen sounds much like Iroh, he managed to freeze one of Kya’s water whips when he was barely a week old. Jian and Sati both look a bit more like Suki – lighter skin, and Sati even has dark eyes, and neither seem to be waterbenders.
But I’m sure you’ve heard about this from Sokka, if not Dad or Suki…

Anyways. I’ve taken your advice, and thrown myself into helping the earth colonies rebuild. I’m so much happier now, especially on the days when I work myself into exhaustion. Isn’t that weird? Probably a product of the war – if I have time to myself, I find myself thinking that I’ve forgotten something, or that there’s something else I could do, and that drives me crazy. Aang’s busy too – sometimes we go for several days without talking to each other for more than 15 minutes at a stretch. I don’t think I could admit this to anyone else, but you understand how it is to find fulfillment in work, especially when it’s a necessity.

Speaking of, necessity calls – with the fevers sweeping through the camps I’ve been called to heal more people than I ever did during the war…hope to hear from you soon!

Love to all your family!

Katara

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Katara,

I’m sorry to make you wait this long for a response – I received your letter on time and everything, but I set it down on my desk in a thoughtless moment (I was also holding Iroh at the time) and due to the clutter on my desk, it took me almost a month to actually find your letter again.

Regardless, I’m glad to hear that you’re feeling more purposeful. I couldn’t imagine you lazing about, so it’s a comfort to finally hear what you’ve been doing all these months. I had received missives from Aang about the progress among the earth colonies, but he kept his letters short and impersonal, and I hadn’t known for sure whether you were helping him or not. I had assumed you were, though. Nothing short of children of your own would keep you from improving the world. And perhaps even that would not stop you!

Yes, I have heard all about the joys of fatherhood from Sokka. A more coherent letter from Suki arrived a few days later, telling all the good news. I even received a note from Chief Hakoda, in a more official capacity, yet warm and proud nonetheless. I had hoped to leave Uncle in charge for a month so that I could have gone to the South Pole to congratulate them in person, but I had to make do with a royal embassy. Don’t worry – I wrote several letters in advance warning of a friendly Fire Nation ship coming to the South Pole, bearing gifts and congratulations.

Everyone here is doing well. Iroh has learned to roll over, and Mai has already begun trying to teach him how to speak. She spends more time with him that I had expected – and I believe she loves him more than even she suspected. Uncle sends his love to you and Aang, and I firmly hope we see each other soon.

Zuko

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Dear Zuko,

I am not drunk. I don’t care what he said. One bottle of firewhiskey is not enough to bring down a waterbender. It is hard to write this, but that is only because I am so tired. All the time. So tired. And when I’m not tired he loves me, and all I can think now is that it’s fu- futiel- pointless. Why do we keep trying when we both know it will never work? It’s all my fault, Zuko. Aunt Wu told us but we didn’t listen and it’s all my FAULT. Everyone is so happy and I don’t want to say anything but technically I’m not saying anything now. I’m writing it. Please don’t remember this in the morning, but everything is not fine. I try so hard not to be jealous and only happy for everyone but that hurts too. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do.

I am Katara right now but sometimes I am not

Zuko,

Although I do not clearly remember anything that happened last night, I am told that I sent a letter to you. Please disregard anything I wrote, as I have no idea what I sent you. There was a huge celebration last night, as we finished building both the hospital and the school, and I (among everyone else) got very intoxicated. I remember feeling sad, largely because three young women died of fever earlier in the day, and I had been notified too late to save them. I hope I didn’t send anything too upsetting, and that you will forgive me?

Katara

Zuko,

There is nothing to forgive. If you’d like, I could destroy the first letter you sent, but I find it nostalgic more than anything (it certainly made me remember some long nights with Toph and Sokka right after the war), so I can set your mind at ease on that score.

Aang’s last letter mentioned that you would both be heading to the South Pole soon…I only mentioned it to him, but you I can attempt to persuade – if you hadn’t set your heart on seeing your family again, would you come first to the Fire Nation? I think your presence here would be essential for several edicts I’m trying to implement in regards to furthering our relations with the Water Tribes. The Northern representative is antagonistic and I believe may hinder all chances of reconciliation…whereas you are universally accepted, if not practically a public hero. To be frank, the Fire Nation loves you, and for a variety of reasons…but that is beyond the point. I hesitate to ask
you to leave your husband for an undetermined period of time, but in the sake of keeping busy – and bringing our nations together – I present it to you as an option.

Everyone sends their love. Please, tell me soon.

Zuko.

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Katara,

I wrote to you nearly a month ago, and have yet to receive a proper reply. In his last letter, Aang mentioned how excited you were to see your family again, turning down other offers in order to do so. I assume that means you have rejected my idea of instating you as an ambassador to the Southern Water Tribe. I completely understand, although am a little hurt you did not tell me personally. If you feel our correspondence should be kept to a more personal standard, I apologize. If I have caused a problem, I apologize again – simply tell me, and I will fix it.

Everyone here is well, and I hope you are as well. I miss hearing from you, and hope that you will write soon.

Zuko.

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Chapter End Notes

Well then. Looks like trouble is brewing...in more than one arena. Hint: Katara did not necessarily receive all of Zuko's letters. She may have missed one. There might have been a reason for that. Additionally, Zuko is a little more concerned than he is letting on. But that's all to come...
Chapter 6: Hope's Flight

Chapter Notes

Guess what I still do not own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 6: Hope’s Flight

Sing to me of hope, my love, so that my path seems brighter,

sing to me of joy, my love, so that my heart is lighter.

Sing to me of peace, my love, so that I know the way,

and sing to me of sun’s sweet light, so that I welcome day.

- Earth Kingdom Lullaby -

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Iroh should have realized that no one could hide from his father. The man had spent his teen years chasing after the Avatar, with undeniable (eventual) success, and had literally rewritten the Fire Nation Academy approach to stealth as a result. His father was, as Aunt Katara used to say, the Sneak-Master, and therefore knew all the tricks of the trade.

Nonetheless, he was surprised to see his father entering through the second-story window of Uncle’s abandoned teashop. He had assumed no one would look for him here, as it was not only a place of great emotional import to his father, but also closed off on the ground level until the day of the Remembrance Ceremony. To gain access to the upper-level, he had traversed several precarious roofs, and he cringed at the thought of his father doing so. Not that he wasn’t physically fit for such an exertion, but he was the Fire Lord. If anything happened to him…

It was an impossible outcome to entertain. Especially in the current situation.

“Good evening, father.” Iroh waited until Zuko had stepped off the windowsill, just in case he hadn’t noticed him lying in the darkness. He figured he must have, however, as the city had not yet settled
down for the night, and lamplight still filtered in through the window. It was a bit early for even firebenders to long for their beds, but Iroh hadn’t slept well since leaving the Sun Temple, and the last several days had been particularly horrific. To sleep was to invite memories to reign over his nightmares, but at this point he was simply too exhausted to entertain the alternative.

Zuko looked over at his son and smirked, before folding into lotus position on the hard floor. “May I have a moment of your time before you sleep, son?”

Iroh swallowed back a sigh as he slipped out of bed and joined his father on the floor. It was a longstanding nightly custom for his father to meet with both his children, sometimes separately but usually together, and simply talk to them. During this time they never stood on ceremony, and settled into a more familial atmosphere. Of course, the two boys relaxed to entirely different degrees. Koru had taken to lying down on the floor during these meetings while he tossed exotic fruits above his head, and Iroh… “I’m sorry for not seeking you out before I left the palace, Father. I was instructed to avoid certain people, and I nearly was caught three times.”

Zuko struck his meditative position and closed his eyes, flames dancing in his cupped palms. Iroh mirrored him, save for leaving his eyes open. It would be far too easy to fall asleep with them shut.

“I understand, Iroh. I’ve spoken with Toph, and she’s filled me in. She won’t make up her mind until the spirit woman recovers, but I agree with her wanting to keep her options open until that happens. What I’m not sure I can sanction, however, is how involved you are in all this. Why are you the one who must move in the shadows for this woman?”

Iroh stilled, taking a moment to think. He hadn’t told the Earth King about his connection to the woman, but he suspected it would be one of the first things out of Sura’s mouth. Did his father already know? Did it even matter?

“Toph asked me to stay out of sight because she worried the Avatar would try and enlist my help to move against the spirit woman. I…I do not agree with the Avatar’s decision. He is overlooking dangers greater than the woman, dangers that we were told that the woman must help us stand against.” Briefly, he filled his father in on the bare bones of Asha’s message, and what the woman had implied the ritual stood for. “I don’t know exactly what has happened. At this point, I’m not sure anyone does. I do know that the woman did not engineer any of this, and as such I am willing to trust in her usefulness.”

Zuko breathed deeply, inhaling through his nose. “And how can you trust her?”

Iroh hesitated, not wanting to put into words this supernatural tie that bound him. “Because I can feel it. Her. We are connected somehow. Yet even before we found her, I felt something...something terrible and painful happening. Koru didn’t feel it, but even after the mental attack faded, I could feel where the pain had come from. We followed that link to her, and when we found her…” Iroh trailed off, not knowing how to explain to his father the uncharacteristic bloodlust that had very nearly mastered him.

“Go on.”

“I knew it was her. What I had felt earlier. It was a little different…but not different enough. Not painful anymore, but still. I perceived it as a threat. I reacted badly to it.”

“How so?”

“I tried to kill her. The longer I looked at her, the more insistent the urge to kill her became. I think I was being compelled, but I’m not entirely sure. The urge to get rid of her remained that entire night,
even while Sura was healing her.” Iroh hesitated, as if remembering something confusing, but before he could identify what that might be he continued. “Regardless, her grandmother had interrupted us before any damage could be done, and told us about the spirits that were holding her. Then she told me to protect her. I tried to refuse, but she threatened myself and all my descendants with eternal suffering if I let her die.”

Zuko said nothing, and Iroh continued, the familiar relief of telling his father everything sweeping over him. “Later, when she spoke to us in the mountain, she claimed that the woman and I had always been connected. ‘Destiny exists,’ she said. Like that explains something of this magnitude.”

Zuko held his silence, but raised one brow infinitesimally.

“But even before then, weird things happened around her. I could feel her exhaustion, and it made me more tired than I should have been. I could feel her anger, and her sorrow, and in some instances I could see it as well. It’s only gotten stronger with time – currently she’s asleep, yet no ill. I know exactly where she is, and I shouldn’t. At least, I don’t want to. Father, I…I don’t know what—“

“Don’t know what to do?”

Iroh dropped the meditative posture entirely. He knew that edge in his father’s voice. Iroh felt his will rise to meet it. “I know what I should do. And I know what I must do. It’s just that they aren’t the same thing.”

“Your duties as my heir…”

“Are what I want to do. Not what I must.” Iroh was stunned at what had just left his mouth. It certainly wasn’t what he had meant to say, but now that he said it…becoming the Fire Lord was everything he had ever prepared for, had ever dreamed of. Yet now that he was embroiled in this impossible mess, full of the feared supernatural, and headed by a woman he needed no compulsion to detest, it almost felt as if his priorities were shifting. But that was impossible. This was just an obligation he would fulfill, and then his life would be his own again. Then, he would return to the Fire Nation, and in time he would follow his father as Fire Lord. All this doubt would fade after this was resolved. Simple as that.

Zuko smiled. Here it was; the warmth of a father’s pride, and the first purely positive emotion he had experienced since Uncle’s passing. Sometimes he worried about Iroh, but this decision eased his fears.

“Father?”

“I agree, Iroh. This threat is greater than any single nation. The chance to end the sleeping sickness alone is worth this momentary ‘defection,’ as you seem to consider it. For the time being, I’m placing you under Toph’s command – do what she needs you to do.” He hesitated, seeing his son’s exhaustion, knowing that enough had been said for the night. “Iroh. You’re doing the right thing. I’m proud of you.”

Iroh was far too tired to censure the small smile that blossomed from his father’s praise. He was also too tired to keep his eyes open any longer. He grunted as he attempted to rise, and again in response to his father’s huff of laughter as he helped his son to the bed.

“Rest well, my son. Tomorrow will be a long day for all of us.”

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Anicca awoke in a room so airy and clean that it took several minutes of examination to realize that it was, in fact, a cell. She wondered what this meant. The last thing she remembered before passing out was being cross-examined by the King of Ba Sing Se – a surprisingly tiny woman who hadn’t seemed impressed with the Avatar’s rage. Anicca wished the Avatar didn’t hate her so much, but she supposed it made sense. After all, as far as he knew, she had up and murdered her entire village one morning for fun.

Bile surged up her throat, and Anicca barely made it to the conveniently situated bucket before she threw up. She had barely finished emptying her stomach before she felt it rise again, and so she spent the next several minutes purging herself. In a twisted way, it almost felt good to be caught in the throes of such a painful physical reaction – it was a manageable outlet for her torment.

Yet soon enough she was merely retching water, and she knew she had to stop or run the risk of dehydration. Then she made an effort to force down her gag reflex, and leaned back against the bed, gasping. Despite her recent display, she no longer felt the fever clouding her body and mind; this was the most clear-headed she had felt in days. The illness had abated, and now it was time to make a decision. Before, everything had seemed so linear and desperate, and she had focused all of her dwindling energy into merely moving forward, one step at a time. Now that she had a moment to herself, she was in danger of losing herself in her grief.

Anicca thought of her village, her parents, and the children. She thought of Rama, and Asha, and their lost hopes for the future. She thought of the dark spirit that her village had accidentally summoned, and how, having secured the Avatar’s hatred, she would be alone to stop it.

She scowled. No, she was not quite alone…she remembered the angry firebender who had wanted her to die. She thought of how he would laugh to see her cry, what he would say to see her so weak. Anicca knew very little about the firebender but she could feel that his negativity towards her ran deeper than mere dislike. Although he did not let it blind him like the Avatar, he thought her a monster and hated her for simply existing. Even as early as her first impression of him, when she had awoken in the tent, the desire to kill emanated from him so strongly that she had been unable to face him. He didn’t even know her name and he wanted her dead.

Anicca looked down at her hands, tracing her square palms with lightly calloused fingertips. These thoughts go nowhere, she thought to herself. And they are not helping. Your options are to weep, or to fight. Mourn what you have lost, or protect the future. The answer was so obvious, yet it was so hard. All she really wanted to do was to lie on the floor and cry and then sleep for one hundred years. Barely a day had passed since she had lost nearly everyone she knew, let alone loved. That she was riven from them due to their own folly only made it worse.

A strangled, bitter laugh forced its way out of her throat. Now that her mind was clear, she could place an educated guess on what had happened. The only reason the ritual had failed was because of her – her, the shame of the village, the one who had denied the spirits’ blessings. Her, and Rama, the gifted one, the fortunate twin. He hadn’t known the purpose of the ritual; hadn’t known that the knife piercing his flesh would only take his soul, not his life. He couldn’t have known his physical survival was imperative to the ritual’s success, and that in giving her his power, he had chosen death for everyone in that room. She then became the medium, unintentionally using her new power to
interrupt the ritual, and to punish those who had attempted to undertake the forbidden. The enraged spirits had descended upon her village, dragging the life forces out of everyone in the chamber – but at least they were taken to the spirit world, where they would atone for their sin, aware and themselves.

If the ritual had been completed without Rama’s unexpected decision, he would have walked the earth a soulless husk, powerful and utterly obedient. He would have married the Chief’s daughter, tying together the two most powerful remaining lines. His children would hearken back to the days of glory, intelligent and strong, yet would forever be tainted with sickness and malcontent. It was, save for the hereditary evil, exactly what the village had decided was necessary.

What they must not have known was that to dare this ritual was to forfeit your own soul, ultimately giving it up to the dark spirits that would only temporarily empower you. Rama would not have been the only soulless being, the entire village would have eventually become a home of breathing ghosts, unable to dream of their lost identities.

For the first time, Anicca wondered how her village could have come across the ritual and not known of its consequences. The only ones who had access to the knowledge of the elder days was Asha, and the Keepers of the two sister villages. They would not give up their knowledge, especially for so dark a purpose. So how…?

“I fear that our tribe, in undertaking the Ritual of Sundering, accidentally unleashed something from the spirit world into your world.”

“...aggravating the spread of an epidemic that has been circulating for the last two decades.”

Anicca sat frozen, desperately struggling to unravel the truth in Asha’s words. There was something off, something wrong. Something was missing. Yet she couldn’t know for certain until she knew what the spirit was, and what it was after. If it simply wanted the artifacts for the power they held, why would it waste time and energy aggravating the sickness? To distract her? But she already knew - well, if the sickness was what Asha had implied it was – that she wasn’t the one who was able to stop the spread of the sickness...

“Morning, Trouble. Feeling less like death?”

Such was Anicca’s concentration that she hadn’t even heard the Earth King come in. She scrambled to her feet to…well, she didn’t exactly know, probably bow or something – but Toph waved her back down.

“Don’t even think about it. Sit back down before you contract lupus or something. Do you know how hard Sugar Queen and Hero worked on you to heal you this quickly?” Toph glanced over towards the metal bucket, before folding it in on itself so the smell no longer permeated the small room. “Maybe they didn’t do as good a job as they thought…”

“Ah no, Earth King. I feel much better now. That wasn’t - that was…” Anicca struggled for words as the Earth King turned a sardonic eye on her. “That was just from remembering.”

Something in the Earth King’s face changed, and Anicca suspected that somehow, she understood. She belatedly remembered to sit down, and was shocked when the Earth King sat down as well, barely three feet away from her. She was even more surprised when the Earth King swung her small legs onto the bed, and began to pick at her toes.

“Didn’t I tell you to knock off that damn honorific? King Toph is fine.” Toph finished off the first foot and rested it nonchalantly against the iron headboard. She turned her queer, milky gaze on
Anicca, and it was only then that she realized the King was blind.

“Now. I want you to tell me *everything.*”

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Sura had only managed a few hours of sleep before being unexpectedly roused by her Uncle Zuko. It was perhaps not as unexpected as one might think, given that she had fallen asleep watching over Koru. The last thing she remembered had been stumbling in to say goodnight to her love and finding him already asleep. Exhausted as she was from healing Anicca for the last few hours, it was a chore to decide whether or not she should return to her own room. She would sleep more comfortably there, and be easier to find if Toph should send for her, but if she didn’t stay near Koru now, who knew when she would see him next? She held the keys to Anicca’s freedom, and when the time came to act, she meant to go with her. Iroh may be her appointed guardian, but she needed to be there to keep his animosity in check. She had thusly rambled away her consciousness, and the next thing she knew, her Uncle Zuko was standing over her with a rare, gentle look on his face.

“Good morning, Sura. Guarding Koru from his nightmares, hmm?”

Sura tried to smile, but couldn’t. Sleep still clouded coherent thought, but she feared that her uncle would somehow know that she loved his son. She knew it was irrational, but for just a moment, she felt like she was doing something incredibly wrong.

“Morning, Uncle Zuko. I’m sorry, but I fell asleep talking to Koru about the situation…” Several thoughts woke her up quickly. “Is there any news? Is she better? What about my father?”

Sura was so concentrated on changing the topic – and shooing away this odd sense of guilt over kissing Koru – that she missed the momentary flicker of something in Zuko’s eyes.

“The spiritbender is fine, Sura. She has spent most of the morning speaking with Toph, and Toph considers herself enlightened.” Her uncle’s voice was wry, apparently finding humor with something Sura could not comprehend. “As does your mother. You have our blessing to do what you need to do. Leave the Avatar to us, Little Bear. Do what you know is right, and come home safely.”

Sura couldn’t help but smile, not only at the use of the special childhood nickname he had given her, but also at his faith. Sura knew she was nowhere near the warrior the fire princes were, or even at her mother’s level during her teenage years, and she had always been self-conscious of the fact. She had taken solace in her early mastery over many forms of healing, but she had always wished she were a better fighter. Now, she reasoned, it wouldn’t matter. It was precisely what made her a good healer – her empathy, patience, and talent – that allowed her to connect with Anicca, and had ushered her into this adventure.

“I won’t let you down, Papa Bear.”

He smiled genuinely, and Sura felt a warm flush of happiness. She had always loved making the Fire Lord proud. Now, dreaming of marrying his son, it felt even better.
“Go to the Earth King. I’ll take care of this troublemaker.” He nodded at his son, and Sura slowly got up from her seat, wondering if there was a way to nonchalantly kiss Koru without Zuko finding anything suspicious. A second presence in the doorway put an end to her dilemma.

“Zuko? Is she in he- oh, Sura.” Her mother’s arms were around her before she could fully stand, and her own arms returned the gesture reflexively. Distracted by all the craziness the night before, she had only been able to see her mother for a few hectic seconds. Now that she was here in front of her, she realized just how much she had and would miss her.

“Mom,” Sura mumbled into Katara’s dark hair. It wasn’t until the shoulders she was holding started to shake that she realized her mother was crying. “Mom? Mom? What’s wrong?”

Sura was able to make out my baby and so dangerous before her sobs choked off the rest.

“Mom, it’s ok. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. I’m a brave waterbender, just like you were when you saved the world with Dad and Uncle Zuko. And Iroh will be there to make sure nothing happens to us.” She thought back to how her uncle had phrased it. ‘I will come home safely, Mom, I promise. I promise.”

Katara pulled back and took a deep breath. She wiped her tears away with her hand, instead of with her bending, and looked hard at Sura. Sura wondered if she was trying to see the woman she had been when she had stood against Ozai, or the baby girl she had brought into the world. Sura gazed back at her mother’s eyes, identical in color yet not in shape, and tried to mentally send her reassurances. I am strong. I am smart. I will be fine.

Zuko placed a hand low on Katara’s back, steadying her and lending her strength. “She’s right. Iroh won’t allow her to be harmed.” He glanced over at Sura, and when he looked back his voice had gentled into a low hum. “We agreed, Katara.”

Katara glanced over at him and searched his face for something Sura could not identify before she nodded. Turning back to her daughter, she smiled hesitantly before reaching into her pocket, withdrawing something, and holding out her hand to her daughter. Without thinking, Sura extended her own hand, thinking, for a mad moment, that her mother was about to give her the nut in dream. Yet the nut was safe in a pouch she wore around her neck. This was a water tribe betrothal necklace. Sura couldn’t help her instinctive gasp, and the way her eyes slanted in the direction of Koru’s bed. She knew what a betrothal necklace was, and even though it was given by her mother, there was still a marital stigma attached.

Katara’s weak grin grew a little stronger as she saw Sura’s nervous confusion. “It’s not what you think, Little Bear. This was my grandmother’s betrothal necklace, given to my mother, and then to me, and then…to a friend who needed it. Now, it is yours.”

Sura’s eyes flew to the identical necklace around her mother’s neck. “But…I thought:”

Oddly enough, it was Zuko who answered. “What your mother is wearing is a different gift. One given to her by those who love her, and wanted her to know that she would never be alone.” He nodded to the necklace she held in her hand and continued. “For the last 20 years that necklace has served the same purpose. Yet your mother and- and her friend decided it was time for you to have it.”

Sura nodded, and then clasped it around her neck. She was glad to carry a piece of her mother – and their water tribe heritage – with her, so why did the gift hang so heavily on her neck?
“She must go, Katara. Aang won’t be distracted with his duties for Uncle’s ceremony much longer.”

“I know.” Katara gripped her daughter for a moment more, gripping her so tightly. She whispered something Sura couldn’t distinguish, and Sura found that her tears were closer to the surface than she had imagined. Especially when she felt the weight and warmth of her uncle’s arms as well, enfolding them both.

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Two figures stood together in an empty room, cloaked in shadow, but facing the sun.

“Should we have told her?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Aang fears the spiritbender will know. That she will expose the truth.”

“That is beyond our ability to control.”

“...What if she hates us? For keeping this from her?”

“Then we will do what we can, and continue proving that we love her. She is forgiving, Katara. She will understand we didn’t have a choice.”

One figure reaches for the other, its finger tentatively brushing against the other's hand.

“Zuko...this could be the end of everything.”

“We thought the same when we faced Azula, all those years ago. Even now, I can’t fear the end when you are by my side.”

As the sun begins the final quarter of its ascent, fingers intertwine.

“Yue help me, Zuko, but I can’t either.”

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Anicca sat on her bed, trying to think of nothing else than who would come first to get her, and what they would do when they got out of Ba Sing Se. Would it be Sura, who King Toph had intimated held the keys to her cell? Or perhaps it would be The Angry One, as Anicca had decided upon calling him. Even though he’d rather her rot in prison, she suspected he would come for her. Little as she liked him, she sensed that he was a man of priorities, and she knew he wouldn’t betray her.

Either way, it didn’t matter who came first. She simply hoped they would have a plan for getting out
of here. Of course, the Earth King could have handled that as well. She hadn’t needed much time to deliberate over her story. In fact, the questions she had asked hadn’t pertained to any moral issues, or even of strictly spirit matters. After asking a few questions on Anicca’s theories about the sleeping sickness; the location of her village; what the ‘Big Baddie’ could do to the rest of the world, and how the village was connected to the spirit plane, she had unceremoniously declared that Anicca needed to go and address this spirit issue, and that she would personally handle the Avatar. Anicca had barely recovered from her shock by the time the Earth King had reached the door. But I’m a murderer, she had exclaimed. How can... how can you just let me go?

Perhaps it had been foolish to give the King a chance to change her mind, but she couldn’t help it. How could the woman trust her like this? Especially after what she had done? She couldn’t trust herself, and she knew what she had to do, and pretty much why she had to do it. So how...?

Then the Earth King had smirked, balanced on one shoeless foot, and began wiggling her toes in the air. Can it, Trouble. These babies can sniff out a baddie from a mile away, and with you they don’t smell a thing. So here’s my advice: Focus on what you have to do, and do it. Forget about what you’ve had to do to get here. That’s all in the past. Now’s the time to get work done.

Anicca had sat stunned, unable to say a word to this strange, amazing woman who not only believed and encouraged her, but was still wiggling her toes.

And quiet moping. Only Fire Nation royalty can brood and make it look good, so leave it to them, Troubs. All right. Either Hot Stuff or Hero will be along to get you soon enough. I’ll see you all when you get back.

That had been a little under an hour ago. And-

Sudden awareness of him caused her to jerk her head before she realized what she was doing. The firebender was standing right outside of her cell, eyes trained intently on her. True to his nickname, he was angry.

Anicca gulped. For a brief moment, she was relieved that she was behind bars, and that he couldn’t get at her. Then she remembered that being a firebender meant they could generate their own fire, and she gulped again.

-You just have to accept him. Know that you both are separate, but find how you are the same-

She wasn’t exactly sure how to follow Asha’s advice. For the time being, she figured it might mean to conquer her fear of him. He no longer wanted her dead, she knew as much. And as for the rest…

“Are you going to come with me?” Anicca hated her voice in this language. It sounded so choppy and awkward, as opposed to her native tongue.

The Angry One scowled a little harder. He shifted so that she could see the pack on his back, and that was his response.

“Why?”

He looked away, angry and unwilling to say that he felt forced to. Anicca was caught between annoyance at his immaturity and relief that he was no longer glaring at her.

“This is not a matter as simple as finding our enemy, and fighting him. It will not be quick or clear. There are... things we must recover. People we must speak to. Rituals we’ll likely have to undergo. It
will take time and effort to bring together what we need before we could even find the dark spirit, let alone face him.” She waited until he glanced back at her before she continued. “This is no time for half-hearted companions, who come because they feel obligated.”

The unmistakable sound of someone approaching cut him off before he could respond. Yet before he could move (either away or towards the cell, he couldn’t decide what was less indicative) Sura rushed down the corridor, clutching the keys in her hand. A sense of relief flooded through him, yet he knew it was not his own. Agni above, he hated this; hated feeling like he was an extension of this woman. Besides, why should she fear him? It wasn’t as if he were the monster, here…

“All right you two, it’s time to move. We only have so much time before Father gets out of the meeting with King T. Well? Let's go!”

Iroh shook off the oddity of hearing Sura refer to the Earth King as 'King T' and helped Sura yank open the cell door. His body tensed automatically, just in case the spirit woman decided to make a violent bid for freedom. Judging by the dark look she shot him, she could tell exactly what he was doing.

There was no time to argue, however. Sura bustled into the cell and quickly removed a long, well-worn cloak from one of the packs that she carried, and handed it to Anicca. “Here. Put this on.”

“Isn't that a little obvious? If we lead a cloaked figure around the Palace people are going to notice.” Iroh didn't bother hiding his disapproval with Sura's escape plan.

“Not if we're all disguised.” She thrust an identical cloak into his hands, and began to put hers on as well. “There are about 15 sand hermits here for Uncle's festival, and King T. has put them up in the Palace. Anyways, we're cleared with the Dai Li – we just have to get out before Father gets out of the meeting.”

Sura and Iroh both looked back at Anicca, who was staring at the floor. “Anicca-”

“We must leave now.” Iroh's tone booked no refusals, yet from the way the woman's head snapped up and the combative glint in her eye, he knew she would try.

“I have to try and make the Avatar understand. We can't do this all by ourselves – the Avatar must know why this is happening, and especially for the sickness-”

Sura took Anicca's hands in her own. She squeezed, giving comfort for a moment before she began to tug the taller woman towards the exit. “He's not going to listen to you, Anicca. You're going to have to tell us, and we'll get word back to him. There's nothing you can do now; anything you say he will assume is a lie.”

Anicca could feel Sura's doubt and fear warring with the determination, like rainclouds marring the bright skies of summer. Sura had never seen her father like this before. He had always been capable, brilliant, strong...the Avatar. He had saved the world, and safeguarded the world's peace. That he was now so angry and blinded worried Sura deeply. She had to believe that her father would go back to normal and be the man she loved and admired...!

*He will, Sura. We will fight off the spirits that hold him, and then he will be himself again. I promise you. It will be all right.*

Sura smiled and clutched Anicca's hand more tightly. It was hard to be angry or embarrassed that the spiritbender could read her emotions so thoroughly when she could feel Anicca's empathy at the same time. Iroh, however, was going to have a hard time with this. Sura smirked. She wasn't going
to warn him either. He'd just have to find out about Anicca's peculiar methods of communication on his own...

“When you girls are done kissing, I'm ready to escape any time now.”

As one, both girls turned and scowled at Iroh. This was going to be a long, long journey...

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Escaping the Earth Palace was far easier than they had thought it would be. Amidst all the bustle of people preparing for the Remembrance Ceremony it was easy to lose themselves in the crowd. The only tricky part was remembering not to speak – but a tug on the elbow was enough to steer Anicca through the Palace, and within half an hour they were striding through the lower levels of Ba Sing Se.

They had just passed beyond the oddly unguarded great gate when Anicca stilled, her head turned towards the guard post ten meters from the entrance. Even Iroh's impatient scowl – coupled with Sura's gentle yet insistent tug – could not get her to move again. Finally, Sura broke the rule of silence with a hushed murmur.

“We have to keep moving- wait, what's wrong?”

Without a word to either of them, she had pushed off in the direction of the guard hut. Sura and Iroh exchanged panicked glances from underneath their hoods and rushed after her.

“Stupid woman – does she want to get herself caught? In Agni's name-”

Anicca had just cleared the threshold by the time they reached her, yet when their eyes shifted from her to what lay within, they froze as well. Two of the missing guards stood staring down at the third, the prostrate figure on a makeshift cot. Even from the doorway they could see his ghostly pallor, his features as still as they would be in death. It explained the aura of fear and hopelessness in the room – the comatose guard had caught the sleeping sickness.

“Hey now, you can't come in here, he's sick-!”

Anicca disregarded the guard's warning and crouched down close to the sick guard. The guard on her left grabbed at her in order to stop her, but it only pulled the hood back to her shoulders. The guard's inhaled roughly as her exotic light hair came into view, but Sura and Iroh were far more concerned with the glaze covering her eyes. Clearly she was in some sort of trance again, and it had just put an end to their successful escape.

Yet before anyone else could move, Anicca reached out a hand so that it lay gently against the man's chest. The other she placed against his forehead and closing her eyes, she began to speak in her native tongue.

Brave man... come... follow voice... light. ... don't be afraid... come.
Iroh frowned. Although much of her message was clouded, he was able to glean the import of the message. Judging by the nervous look on Sura's face, however, she hadn't understood a word of what the woman was saying. That meant it was up to him to stop the guards from doing anything rash. Yet the two guards were staring at Anicca with something akin to hope in their eyes, and when one of them began to pray, Iroh understood. Here was someone and something they couldn't understand, yet their friend could not get any worse, and they were willing to believe that she would help him.

Their hopes were rewarded. Suddenly the sick guarded coughed, sucking in deep breaths of air as he did so. Yet when the other guards surged closer to see their friend, Anicca held out her arms, warning them away. She then turned her attention back to her patient, who was struggling to keep his eyes open.

“Listen to me. You are still sick. I called you back, but cannot keep you long. Do you know why you are sick?” One of the guards started at her accent, but neither made a move to stop her. They had no mind to interrupt miracles.

The sick man shook his head weakly. He was clearly struggling to remain conscious.

“The sickness is in your spirit, not your body. Only you can heal it. You must win. You must tell yourself that you will survive, that you will overcome this challenge.” His eyes widened at her smile. “I sense great strength in you, soldier. I believe that you can win. You will defeat your illness. But you must go back, now. Go back and fight, strong one.”

“...Yes.” The reply was weak, and after speaking he immediately slipped back into unconsciousness, but it was there. His friends stared down at her with unabashed amazement even as she began speaking to them.

“You do not need to worry about getting sick from him. I do not think it spreads like other sicknesses. Keep talking to him- encourage him. He will hear you, and it will help him fight. Will you help him?”

Wordlessly the two guards nodded. Anicca nodded in return and then turned to leave. She had just passed her two companions when one of the guards shook himself from his stupor. “Healer, wait! Will he- will he recover?”

Anicca pulled the hood back over her head as she responded. “It is all up to him. But with your help, then I am hopeful. Be strong for him, and his chances are much better.” With that she stepped out of the guard building, Sura quick on her heels.

Iroh had other business, however. He had to salvage this damned situation, didn't he? Exhaling roughly, he pulled down his own hood; the guards eyes widening as they recognized the future heir to the Fire Nation throne.

“When does your shift change?”

“At nightfall, my lord. 6 Bells.”

Iroh frowned. Only about 6 hours then...it would have to do. “Keep this quiet until the end of your shift. Tell no one. Then, go directly to the Earth King. Tell her-and her alone- all that has happened here. If she will not give you audience, tell her that it is a message from Hero...concerning Trouble. Leave nothing out. And then...then tell her that her charge is safe, and that I will send Hero back at the earliest opportunity. She will understand. Do you understand?”
The two guards snapped to attention, practically clicking their heels in excitement. “Yes sir. Message from Hero, concerning trouble. Hero will return soon. Say nothing to anyone else. Got it.”

“Excellent. Good work, men.” He pulled the hood back over his head, yet spoke once more before he rejoined the girls. “I wish your friend a quick recovery.”

The quiet and unexpected concern for someone he did not know touched the hearts of the soldiers. Had they thought of disregarding his order before they never would now – in that instant they were loyal to him. Yet in the next moment he was gone, and they turned their attention to their ailing friend. Whatever happened between the Fire Prince and his “charge,” they had a gate to guard, and a friend to support.

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A man sat alone on the roof of the Earth Nation Palace. The darkening skies overhead coupled with the tolling of the 7th bell told him he should go back inside, yet he could not find the will to do so. He needed to think, to meditate; just for a moment to escape the disaster brewing.

Yet his peace was soon to be disturbed. From below came a rumbling sound and within moments a pillar of earth shot up into the sky. Riding atop the pillar was a figure he knew quite well.

“So, Twinkles. You done being all crazy, yet?”

Aang scowled at the petite woman in front of him. He pointedly did not respond.

Toph sighed as she flounced down next to him. She noticed that even though he was angry, he did not move away. It could, of course, simply been exhaustion. Aang had been run ragged all day with preparations for the Remembrance Ceremony, and hundreds of squabbles ranging from Meh to Oh Shit. This was on top of yesterday’s drama, which was placed closer on the spectrum to the end labeled Ozai Reborn. Unfortunately this was also completely disregarding the re-emerging attraction between Sugar and Sparky, and how Aang's marriage was coming apart at the seams...and all their old skeletons were preparing to launch themselves right out of their closets. On second thought, maybe expecting Aang to be less crazy was foolish. Maybe he was acting as par for the course as could be expected... With that in mind, Toph tried again. “Aang. I'm sorry. I realize you've had a spectacularly bad couple of days.” She waited until he huffed in annoyed agreement, and shot a suspicious look her way. Toph tried not to smile. Even when she was mad as hell at him, his goofy earnestness could still make her laugh. “But you gotta’ talk to me. I cannot read your little bald head. Its ways are mysterious to me, even now.”

Aang’s response was strained, but at least it was there. “You mean mind, Toph.”

“Well yeah, that too.”

Aang snorted. Toph grinned. Progress!
“Just tell me what's wrong, Twinkles.” She cut him off when he opened his mouth angrily. “No, what is really wrong. Not just the surface level shit.”

Aang grimaced. Toph always had that uncanny way of cutting through his bullshit. He figured it was due in part to the fact that she was still his Sifu, and when they fought earth to earth, she could still kick his ass. “It's...it's about Avatar Roku. I've been thinking about what happened when we were under the mountain, and what he said when he spoke to me.”

“Well, what did he say?” Toph wrinkled her nose in a way that was adorable, but would never believe whomever told her so. The sight of her unconsciously doing cute or girlish things always had made Aang smile, and he felt his mood lighten even now.

“That's the issue. I don't remember. It was so clear yesterday – he had told me the spirit woman was evil, and that she couldn't fix the sickness, and a bunch of other things too. But now that I've slept on it, and meditated on it...it's gone. And that never happens.” He stretched out his legs, dangling them over the air. “And I can't access Roku now. I can't even slip into the spirit world. Something is wrong.”

Toph knew she had to tread carefully. Aang was opening up to her, and her betrayal might be the final straw. Yet the news recently delivered by Fei and Wong at the gate might help matters. “And do you think the woman is...messing with your connection to Avatar Roku?”

The response took longer than it should, but finally it came. “...No. I know that she didn't. There was no way she could have – she was unconscious when I realized the connection was lost.”

“So what does that mean, then?” Toph felt a little like she was guiding Twinkles to the correct answer, and it felt a lot like their younger days. Why was it that the blind one could see the most?

“Something else is wrong. Not just her. I was maybe wrong. A little bit. Although I think she's not right either.”

“Well this is an exciting day indeed. The Avatar, wrong? Someone better write this down.”

“Toph. I'm being serious. I guess I panicked. I mean, all those people died, and I felt like somehow it was my fault. I knew it was my fault. I couldn't understand it. I still don't, but at least I know now something about it was wrong. And besides, I was worried about other things too. About...secrets being revealed.”

Toph caught herself before she said something annoying and wise about how some secrets were never meant to stay that way. Especially when she knew that Koru had harbored a secret crush on Sura during his early teenage years, and she was unclear as to whether or not it had gone away. For the moment, it was far more important to tell Aang what she had done – otherwise he would assume she had gone behind his back and betrayed him.

Of course, she had done just that. But she couldn't let him know that, could she?

Her spine straightened as she made the shift from Aang's friend to the King of Ba Sing Se. “Aang, there's something I have to tell you. Please let me finish before you make a decision, ok?” The body next to hers tensed, but said nothing. “One hour ago, two of the soldiers guarding the Great Gate came to me with an urgent message. The third guard had fallen ill with the sleeping sickness at the start of his shift, and they had hidden him in their compound. The situation remained at a standstill for several hours as they debated on whether or not to alert the rest of the guard – he was their best friend, and they hoped he would awaken as the rare survivors do- but before they could make a decision, three sand people came. One was a young woman with hair the color of gold. No, just
listen, Aang. She brought the sick guard back to consciousness, and then informed him that the malady was in his soul, not his body. She told him to fight off the sickness with his mind, and that he would survive. She and her two companions left soon after that. Five hours later the sick guard woke, the illness broken. If she was telling the truth, he healed himself, Aang. Do you know what this means?"

Aang's mouth formed words that would not come. Many thoughts whirled in his mind, fighting for dominance. You let her go and she escaped and hope, there is hope for the sickness and why? Yet what came first was, “Why did it take the guards so long to tell you? Wouldn't rumors of a cure spread almost as quickly as rumors of the initial sickness?”

There were no outward signs to represent her nervousness. “Apparently, one of her companions instructed them to wait until their shift was over.”

“And who might convince the guards not to do their jobs?”

“The heir to the Fire Nation, Aang. As far as I can tell, he and Sura sprang her earlier this morning. They travel with her still, although Iroh told the guards he would send Sura back at the earliest opportunity. Apparently the spirit woman is in conjunction with him on this.” Here was the truly dangerous intelligence. Whatever his feelings on spirit women and alternate evils, Sura was his daughter, and her defection was going to hit him hard.

As she suspected Aang's heart rate rose. He was angry...but was it because the prisoner had escaped? Or because his daughter was with them? “And why is Sura with the spirit woman? How did she get her? How did she get out?”

Toph affected a wince. “That was my fault. I gave Sura the keys to the spirit woman's cell so that she could heal her. I forgot to ask for them back when I went to finish my chat with the spirit woman this morning. If it helps, I left her cell at about 11 this morning, so they must have come for her between then and noon. I'm sorry, Aang. I hadn't realized the depth of Sura and Iroh's determination. From what they have told me, they believe whole-heartedly in this shadow threat that even you acknowledge, and have gone to face it.”

Aang stood up so quickly he almost toppled over. “This is my daughter, Toph! How can you just sit there so calmly and-” He froze as something occurred to him. “Does Katara know about this?”

“She was with me when the guards came. Zuko was as well, so he also knows about Iroh's defection.”

She was far, far too calm about this. She was also apologetic, and Aang had learned long ago that a sorry Toph meant terrible things had happened. “And what did they say? Why did no one tell me?!”

Toph's tremulous hold on her temper was beginning to slip. “We couldn't find you, ok? We tried! How were they supposed to get up here, anyways? And they- they were upset too. Katara especially. But they calmed down when they took a moment. They realized that this was for the best.”

“FOR THE BEST?!” Aang propelled himself into the air yet made not move to glide off. “HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?”

His rage was undeniable now. Toph had no time to think what exactly might be spurring his anger, she had only her presence of mind to fall back on. Try to frighten her, would he? Oh, he had another thought coming.

“You can try to frighten me, Aang. Or you can face this head on with me. With us. For the world.”
Toph stood there, solid as rock and hard as stone, chin tilted in the direction of the swirling winds above her. When he was in the air she could not feel him yet she would not – would never – be afraid of him.

Thankfully he landed again, falling gracelessly to his feet. His heartbeat was still irregular, but now it was verging towards the other end of the spectrum – sorrow.

“Toph, I sorry, I didn't mean to...but I can’t – don't lie to me. I know they couldn't have done this without your help. I know that.” When Toph said nothing, confirming his suspicions, he went on. “It's all falling apart, Toph. This, and Katara, and myself...what do we do?”

The pain in his voice broke her heart. Not that she would admit it, but Aang's pain had always made her weak. Yet the time for that had long passed, and she was now the King of Ba Sing Se. Still, it didn't keep her from gripping his hand with her own. “That's the thing, Aang. We have to decide now. Will you go after her? Knowing that you could be wrong and dooming us all? Or will you stand with me, and help us fight the ultimate evil?”

There was the sound of breath being forcibly being expelled from the lungs, a rustle of cloth against the wind, and the grinding of a staff pressed against hardened stone. Finally, a response. “You're being really serious, Sifu. Are you really so nervous about this?”

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. True, damning words: “It's because you're important to me, Aang.”

She felt him sigh, and knew what his answer would be the moment before it left his mouth. “Then let's fight, Toph. Let's save the world again.”

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Chapter End Notes

Oh look who decided to man up. Well done, Aang. Well done.

In other news, we are finally getting places. Are the pairings super obvious yet? Keep in mind there is still one last main character left to introduce...and a few bombs to be dropped.

I really, really hope this is not way too confusing. I think I finally cleared up a lot of the confusion in the chapter, at least in terms of what *actually* happened with the whole spirit hanky-panky. Hopefully it will just get better here on out!
Interlude 6: Standing at the Precipice

Chapter Notes

Don't own ATLA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude 6: Standing at the Precipice

(Late Year 7)

“She sat her man down and told him goodbye,
And he let her go without asking why.
She wanted the truth more than pretty lies,
and he wanted her love and the open skies.

That’s the truth between women and men
Ain’t no living without or with them
You can’t come back from what’s been said
and you can’t go alone into the marriage bed.”

-Folk Tune from the Omashu region-

Katara had forgotten just how cold her birthplace could be, especially in the dead of winter. Yet those who had never left would have disagreed – Sokka's heat trapping inventions that he laughingly dubbed “heat-bending” were well on their way, changing the lives of Southern Tribe residents, one insulated igloo at a time. Not to mention the inclusion of Northern Tribe men, who were taking
wives and warming igloos in quite a different way.

At the thought of husbands and wives keeping each other warm, Katara's fingers clenched into fists. She nearly crushed the letter she held, the latest missive from Zuko in the Fire Nation. She had found it as she was packing Aang's things; her husband having been called away to save children trapped underneath a collapsed building. She had been thinking of Zuko when she stumbled upon it – he hadn’t responded for quite some time, since she had written him that disastrous drunk letter and the subsequent apology. The silence terrified her. What had she written? What could she possibly have told him that would render him silent for months?

There were so many secrets she held, some more damning than others. Yet Zuko had promised to always accept her, even the darker aspects of her nature. He was not the type to run from uncomfortable facts. Even knowing this, Katara suspected there was something she could have said that would have shaken their friendship. She prayed to all the gods that it had not been said.

Two days ago her prayers had been answered...yet left only rage in their wake. She read Zuko’s letter as soon as Appa had landed, ducking into the bathroom for a moment of privacy. What she read left her blood boiling in a way she hadn't experienced since the war - Aang had read...and then hid her letters? How long had this gone on? It was immediately apparent what had happened- she was missing at least one letter, and Aang had answered for her, effectively taking her out of the running for ambassador. Her first reaction had been to waterbend her husband into oblivion, but then she caught sight of her necklace in the ice and hesitated. Aang had failed her, but she didn't have to fail Toph and Zuko...

She would breathe deeply, she would ask why, and she would handle the situation accordingly. So, she waited until they settled in for the night before asking, calmly and quietly, why she had found Zuko's letter to her in his possessions.

_Had she read it?_ He asked in a small voice that sounded much like he had pre-war.

_Yes._

Battled then ensued, and didn't abate for hours. Blame was tossed back and forth like a ball in a children's game, and Aang stubbornly refused to accept his actions were wrong. _I didn't want you in the Fire Nation, Katara. I wanted you with me. You're my wife shouldn't you stay with me?_

_That's not your decision to make, Aang. That was our decision to make, and you made it for me. That is unacceptable. I hadn't thought I was marrying into the Northern Water Tribe when I accepted you-

Of course, the ambassador position was only the tip of the iceberg. All the other repressed fears and insecurities came tumbling out in the dark of the polar night.

_So what did he find so nostalgic, Katara? What did you feel you needed to apologize for? And why would he bring up the fact that the Fire Nation loves you?_

_I don't know, Aang. I can only assume you're talking about some letter I NEVER RECEIVED. I'd know what you were talking about IF YOU HADN'T STOLEN MY LETTERS._

Then, only because Aang's nature was so utterly unused and unsuited for fighting – his nature was peaceful, his training was to foster acceptance and justice, and in all arenas of life save those concerning his wife he absolutely adhered to that – he said something ill-advised.

_Look, Katara. A proper wife wouldn't have...letter affairs with other guys! Mai was always worried_
about you two...maybe she was right-

Katara’s eyes were wide enough to reflect the light of the moon. Her grip on her necklace was strong enough to bend steel. When she spoke, her voice cut through the darkness and made the Avatar wince. *You knew the day you married me I couldn't be a "proper" wife to you. If you regret that now, you'd be better off finding a new wife.*

Aang left the next morning, flying away on Appa without a word for anyone. Katara made the customary excuses – his Avatar sense was “tingling”- and tried not to feel relieved. She avoided her father and brother, knowing they would sense something was wrong. She also avoided her brother’s four children, only forcing herself to be with Kya when she had her waterbending lessons. This was partially to preserve her sanity – Sokka had, for mysterious reasons, indicated to his offspring that she would *enjoy* being called Aunt Waterwoo, and the 18 month-old triplets especially appreciated that. Yet by and large, it was simply too painful to be faced with her failures like this. Especially when Kya looked so much like her...

She couldn’t hide herself from everyone, however.

“Katara, if you rub that figurine any more, you will break it. On account of me tearing it out of your hands and doing it for you.”

Katara turned to see Suki lounging against a chest of drawers, grinning mischievously. Suki spent half the year here, and half in Kyoshi, training the elite warriors while Ty Lee was preparing to take over as the new leader. She had come back a bit earlier this time to see Katara and Aang. “Not that I’m complaining - I never liked that damn thing. It is absolutely hideous. I mean, who wants a reminder of what childbirth is like?”

Katara looked down at the monstrosity in her hands. She had been turning it over while deep in thought, and now realized it was an extremely detailed – and very gruesome – figurine of an obese woman giving birth. She couldn't help but grin. Toph was infamous for her poor gifts, and this was bound to be remembered as one of the worst wedding presents ever.

The thought of Toph and Suki waging international war over an ugly figurine couldn't help but make Katara grin. “Oh, I dunno. Toph was quite sure that having this in the house was an effective fertility charm...and we all see how that worked out. I couldn’t let you just break it. I could, perhaps, simply set it down on my travel bag, and then forget to replace it. If it then fell out of the bag when I was on Appa, far above a convenient ocean, that would be another matter.”

Suki’s smile grew. “I like your style, Katara. I was planning to give it back to Toph if the happy occasion for revenge ever came up, but your way is good too.” She pushed herself off the chest as Katara put the figurine down. “Now. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Katara affected an innocent look but Suki held up her hand in warning. “Nuh uh. Happy women do not clutch the hideous babymaking symbol. They also don't make excuses for their husbands that up and ran away – don't think I didn't notice. Unlike your people, I'm up at the crack of dawn. Lastly, they do not gaze into space for hours, ignoring the rampaging children desperate for their attention, affection, or their undying hatred. For the record, I am *so* sorry about the Waterwoo shit, I *do not* know where Sokka comes up with these things. Katara. What is wrong?”

“Suki, It's not-“

“Kyoshi help me, do *not* make me get out the fan.”

Katara frowned, and hoped that was not indicative of Suki’s mothering techniques. “Really, Suki?
You're threatening a master water bender with a fan?"

"You're threatening your brother's wife with anything?"

Katara hesitated. For a moment she was thrown off by Suki’s resourcefulness, but then realized that as she was married to her brother, it probably was a way of life by now. “Playing the sister card, I see. Probably closely followed by the ‘Sokka will take away your heat if you anger me’ card. You're spending too much time with Toph.”

“And you’re stalling. Spill.” Katara still hesitated, and Suki knew precisely how stubborn a water tribe member could be. “Katara. I will not hesitate to whack you with your brother's boomerang if you don’t just—"

The long repressed pain coupled with Katara's current rage and frustration, and she found herself blurt out something entirely unexpected. She should have said Aang is hiding my letters, or He denied me the Ambassador position or even I miss Zuko too much, but out came the true problem, underlying all of Aang and Katara's current issues.

“We can’t have children.” Katara's eyes widened as she clapped her hands over her mouth, yet the damage was done. How in La's name had that just come out of her mouth? Saying it aloud was so final, so definite, so devastating. And to say it to the woman who in birthing 4 children in 3 years had proved herself a veritable birthing machine? Yet now that it had been said she could say nothing else, simply letting the silence stretch.

After her moment of initial surprise, Suki watched her friend carefully, taking care to make no sudden movements. Deep down, she was not surprised. Clearly there was something very wrong between Aang and Katara, and now the suspiciously little time Katara spent with her nieces and nephews made much more sense. With a moment of clarity, she remembered Katara's odd bout of depression before her wedding, and she belatedly put two and two together.

Suki's determination hardened. This was the time to step up and put her experiences on Kyoshi Island to good use. Katara needed to unburden herself, and Suki was determined to help in any way possible. In her mind, there was only one way to proceed.

All right, Katara. Let's get drunk.”

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An hour later, after shuttling off the horde of children to Grandpa Hakoda and threatening Sokka under pain of a sexless year to not come back for the next 5 or so hours, the girls were in business. Katara's initial protestations buckled under the weight of Suki's efficiency, and Katara soon found herself matching Suki shot for shot, and imbibing more tundra vodka than she had in her entire life. If Suki had cleverly managed to drain a shot or four back into the bottle when Katara was distracted, she must be forgiven, in this particular instance.

Within the first 20 minutes, Suki was careful not to broach the subject of children. Instead she learned all about Zuko's letters, Aang's mistake, and Katara's own struggle between what was expected of her, and what she wanted to do. Suki was careful not to express any of her own suspicions about Zuko and Katara's closeness and the tension between them at Katara's betrothal party, and tried to focus more on Katara's sense of powerlessness. Suki knew that particular struggle
well, as she was faced with the growing sexism of the South Pole on a personal level. While she herself was untouched, she was already fighting to protect her children's future, and she particularly worried about Sati, who had no waterbending of her own to protect her by bolstering her worth in the eyes of the sexist northern warriors.

Ultimately, Katara's problems were not ones that she could solve. That would require her husband's return, and a series of long, careful talks. All Suki could do was listen, offer advice, and give her unconditional support – something she had been lacking since the snafu with Zuko's letters. As Katara reached the later stages of intoxication, however, the tears finally surfaced. Suki had expected as much, judging from her years of leading teenage warrior women on Kyoshi Island, but there was a marked difference between crying Kyoshis, and weeping waterbenders. For one thing, Katara’s tears had the tendency to collect into a pool at their feet...and then freeze around their ankles. They also reflected Katara’s paroxysms of grief and became nearly violent when her sobs were the strongest. It was a testament to Suki’s love that she harbored all this, and only broached the subject of children when the worst of Katara's sorrow had passed.

“How do you know? Maybe it's just stress, exhaustion...?”

Katara sniffed and made a dramatic arm movement, causing her to tilt perilously. Suki caught her before she could fall out of her chair. Katara had to choke down her rampant emotions before she could continue. “Because. Suki. She told us. And it’s all my fault.” Her face screwed up again, and Suki moved to counteract the oncoming waterworks.

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“Who told you? And why do you think it’s your fault?”

“Woooooo! Aunt Wu told us. She said...she said...” Katara hiccupped and adjusted her voice, obviously trying to imitate the aged mystic. It was unsuccessful. “It would take a miracle greater than yourself to make her a mother, Avatar.’ She told us before we got engaged. That’s why I was...that’s why...and Aang, if Aang can’t find any air benders, he’s really the last air bender, and do you know what he’s going to have to do? If I can’t have kids? Even if I could have kids?” Suki shook her head, even though she had a fair idea. This might have been a bad idea...she should never have gotten Katara drunk. She had underestimated the level of this catastrophe. This wasn’t a problem that venting could solve or even make better. This was a natural disaster.

“He’s going to have concubines, Suki. And offspring. He says he won’t, but I know that women are already offering, and everyone knows now that I can’t give him kids, otherwise I would have already! We should have...we should have never gotten married, Suki. I hate this. I hate watching this. He feels this obligation to preserve his race, and I’m taking him away from all that.” Katara’s mood swung from despair to rage in the space of a heartbeat. “And I’m taking away from me, too! I’m sad, Suki! Sad because of my husband, and his stupid obligations!” She sniffed, yet before Suki could respond (what she would say only Kyoshi knew, because she certainly didn’t) Katara went off on another tangent, and it was this that broke Suki’s heart.

“Do you know what he said once? Right before we got married? He took me gliding with him, out over Ba Sing Se, remember? And as we were flying over everything, he said to take a good look below, because below was everything. Was the world. And he said all he could see was me. He said that I was his everything, Suki. That thanks to me, the world had been saved. Because I saved him, and kept on saving him every day. He said as much as the world reveres him, he would always revere me, because without me he is nothing. Oh Suki,” even in her drunken depression Katara noticed Suki’s tears. “Don’t cry. I know you wondered why I didn’t just leave him if I’m so unhappy. Now you know. It’s because I can’t. I’m his everything.”

Suki must have had more vodka than she knew, because tears were indeed running down her
cheeks. True to Katara's motherly nature, however, her sorrow lessened as Suki's grew. Katara pulled Suki in for a hug, and patted her back in an uncoordinated attempt to comfort her. “It's all right, Suki. It's not so bad. I can...I can adopt children! Or help raise Aang's. Or I could...I could...” Zuko’s face flashed before her eyes and gave her the inspiration she needed. “I could go see Zuko...and Mai! And New Iroh!”

There was something in the way she said Zuko's name that made Suki pull back. That, and the obvious danger of her seeking out her attractive friend when she was in such a precarious emotional position. After all, there had been sparks between them when they had danced at her betrothal party—“Why Zuko? Why not Toph, or visit the women in the swamp, or come back to Kyoshi with me?”

Katara looked so adorably confused Suki almost relented. But she needed to know just how Katara felt about her friend, and to see if her feelings were in some way influencing her current troubles.

“Because I have to apologize. Also then I can be the amabas- am-bass-a-dor and help the world! Maybe then I won't need children so badly...” Yet before Suki could do anything more than sigh in relief, she continued. “And I want to make sure he still has my necklace...and to show him I'm still wearing his.”

Suki’s heart stopped. Her eyes flew to the band around Katara’s neck, in her eyes no different than the one she had worn throughout her teenage years. “What necklace?”

Katara smiled happily through her tears yet the sight did not reassure Suki. “Oh! It's kind of a secret, but I can tell you. As long as you don't tell Sokka. He won't understand. But it’s a gift from Zuko and Toph, and it's meant to represent all of us.” She turned the medallion over so that Suki could faintly see the lines and whorls representing the elements...and was that her fan?

“And your fan is on it too, see? He said it would remind me that I wasn't alone in the darkness. That everyone would always be there for me!”

Suki could feel her sensibilities come crashing down around her. Zuko (and Toph) had essentially given Katara a betrothal necklace, under the flimsy excuse of fending off her darkness. Was this why she had refused Aang's offer of carving her a necklace himself? “When did he...they give it to you?”

Katara's smile dropped at Suki's tone. Worriedly, she looked into her face before answering. “At my betrothal party. Is something wrong, Suki?”

Suki shook her head slowly. The betrothal party was long after Aang's own attempt at necklace-making, so perhaps the infatuation wasn't as serious as she thought. Katara was clearly attracted to Zuko, and harbored a bit of a crush on him, but maybe she wasn't in love with him. Maybe all this was going to be just fine.

She was very sure she needed a drink, however. Dealing with all this tipsy was clearly not the right decision, and since it was easier to get drunk than sober up, she took an indelicate swig from the bottle of vodka next to her. As she put the bottle down, a sudden thought occurred to her. “Katara, what did you mean by Zuko having your necklace?”

Katara's bright smile was back, and the tears were nearly gone. She had to remember in the future that talking about Zuko was a surefire way to cheer herself up! “Well, I can't wear both necklaces, so I gave him my mother's necklace to make sure he kept the same promise. Also because he needs a mother too-”

Suki made a low noise that sounded like an animal's keen. Before Katara could say anything else, she drained what was left of the vodka, hoping it would put her beyond comprehension. Did Katara
not know, not realize? Judging by the concerned look on her face, she clearly had no idea that she was in love with Zuko. Well, Suki was certainly not going to say anything. She loved Katara, but she also loved world peace, and telling the Avatar's wife that she was in love with the Fire Lord was not the way of going about preserving that. So, she slung an arm around Katara’s shoulder, and swore not to say a word about the necklace. She then proceeded to brainstorm drunken, silly ways that Katara could win back her gumption, chasing away both their tears, fears, and uncomfortable revelations.

Neither of the women noticed the still, dark figure lurking behind the doorway, hands clenched stiffly at his sides.

The next day, Katara and Suki made their way across the blindingly bright ice to Yagoda’s hut. The two friends were uncharacteristically quiet, and when the young children of the tribe hoped to cheer them up with their antics, they were shocked at Suki’s annoyed growl and Katara's plaintive moan. Yagoda, who watched them from the doorway, was far more amused. After all, she hadn't seen these girls this blatantly hungover since the war.

Luckily she was free, and did not have to ask them to wait outside. The girls sighed in relief as they stepped inside – here, the sun would not find them and pound jagged nails into their aching heads. Hiding a small smirk, Yagoda handed them each a beaker of her own hangover brew, guaranteed to cure hangovers in 3 minutes...or empty your bowels for the next 10. It had been a long time since she had “accidentally” mixed the potion wrong, but the fear of it was enough to keep even the most annoying northern warrior in line.

She had assumed the girls had come only for that, so was surprised when neither made to move after taking the medicine. Instead Suki, after throwing several telling glances at Katara, opened up an unexpected line of conversation.

“Healer Yagoda? Katara...that is to say, we were wondering about something...and had hoped you might be able to help us out?”

Katara shot a desperate, wide-eyed glance at her companion, and Yagoda's white eyebrows inched halfway up her forehead. She had seen the rudiments of this situation before...but never with two girls, as it always ended in a pregnancy potion. Yagoda was impressed. She didn't know how they were raising those girls on Kyoshi Island, but they really knew how to shake things up!

“Katara, we have to ask. Who else would know than Yagoda? Besides, you said yourself that you didn't have much experience in that area...”

Yagoda's aged brows furrowed. She was already pregnant, was she? The Kyoshi warrior must simply be here for moral support. Perhaps this wasn't going to be as exciting as she thought. Oh, poo.

Katara turned a dark look of her own on her friend, but she finally turned to address her master.

“Master Yagoda, we are referring to an aspect of training I am relatively unacquainted with...may I ask you a few questions about...fertility?”

Sighing heavily in her mind, Yagoda trained her face into a welcoming, professional mask. “Of course, dearie. How many weeks has it been since your last period?” When both girls paled, she
realized she had read the question wrong. Or perhaps Kyoshi girls were actually hermaphrodites, and this whole day had just gotten much more exciting after all.

“Actually, perhaps I should be more specific- is there...well, with girls perhaps but with boys...I mean, can you still get your period but-”

“Is there a way to tell if someone is infertile?” Suki cut in, still looking vaguely queasy and with only a fraction of her usual patience and tact.

Yagoda snapped to full attention, her professional curiosity roused. Katara's childless state and the rumored tense relationship between her and her husband flashed behind her eyes, but she put it away for later inspection. She was first and foremost a healer, after all. “There are certain ways, yes. Some more dependable than others. Which method you use is largely reliant on the gender...and the phase of the moon, of course, but-”

“Men can be infertile?” Yagoda and Suki turned to stare at Katara, who had stilled like a statue. Only the expression in her eyes marked her as a living, breathing, being. “It's not just women?”

Yagoda sighed. She knew that sexist notions predominated the northern water tribes, and to an extent the Fire Nation as well, but she had not expected an imbalance of information even here, among the Southern Water Tribe. Yet she supposed there had been no one to correct such fallacies, no true healer among the Southern Tribe who would know. “Of course. Think of it this way: when a farmer plants his crops and some do not come up, what is to blame? The land, or the seed? It is impossible to blame only one factor with no variation. Perhaps several seeds sprouted too early, or the land was contaminated, or there was simply not enough rain or sun. The same is true of people – although I will admit it is much more difficult to determine whether or not it is the male who is infertile.” The aged healer smiled gently in Suki's direction, before nodding at Katara. “Yet there are ways to determine even that, if you call upon the healing properties of water.”

Katara was fascinated, and even Suki was reasonably intrigued. Yagoda took this as her permission to continue, and began to unfasten the water pouch at her hip. “Let us begin with how we can test women for fertility. To begin with, we have the standard fertility questions: length and regularity of cycle, any cases of difficult or easy pregnancies in the family, and the prescription or refusal of certain herbs. Then we may move onto the actual waterbending.” Here, Yagoda pulled the water from the pouch, twisting the liquid ribbons between her fingers. “There are some things that are easy to look for, and indicative that the lady will not be able to conceive. This is primarily internal scarring, or damage.” She sent a questioning glance at Suki. “Mistress Kyoshi, would you mind assisting us in this lesson?”

Hangover completely forgotten, Suki nodded eagerly. Where she had seen a good deal of aggressive, battle-based waterbending during the wars, she was still fascinated by the healing techniques. She stepped close to the aged healer when Yagoda summoned her.

“Very good, dear. I just need you to lie down on the furs, all right? Don't worry – there will be no pain, no prodding – this is a diagnostic practice only.”

Suki sank down onto the furs, and Katara kneeled at her side to mirror her master. She raised her own arms when Yagoda did so, pulling upon some water from the pouch at her own hip.

“We will use the water to see within, to sense the natural working of the inner body. We have practiced this previously to relax muscles, heal cracked bones, and to improve the flow of blood throughout the body. Now we will use it in much the same way, although I must warn you that especial care must be taken with any of the internal organs. Now, Suki is a very healthy young woman, and her reproductive system is in perfect order, especially for having had 4 children. I want
you to look within and to memorize what you see.”

Katara nodded, spreading her palms over the planes of Suki's gently rounded belly. The water glistened in the light of the hut, as well as the glow from within. Clearing her mind, her awareness pierced Suki's skin and in no time at all she was immersed in the pump of Suki's blood, burning the sensation into her memory. Distantly, she could hear Yagoda continue her instruction, although she never quite tore her attention away from Suki.

“There used to be methods talented waterbenders would employ to ensure...or deny fertility. Yet these are ancient techniques, and the talent needed to utilize them has been long lost. Still, you can see the natural order of the healthy female body, and perhaps you can imagine where such damage might be to deny conception.”

Katara could. There were several places that seemed especially fragile, especially among the ovaries, the fallopian tubes, and the womb itself. The knowledge that her own body was likely damaged in such a way was a cold shock to her system, and she slowly pulled her mind from Suki's body. She settled back on her haunches, patting Suki's hand before she turned to Yagoda.

“Master Yagoda, thank you for teaching me this. I won't forget what you've taught me.”

The wisewoman waved off her thanks. “No need, dear. Besides, there's no need to worry about forgetting – you are also a perfectly healthy young woman in that regard, and although it is easier to examine someone else, you can always check yourself if you need to clarify something.”

Distantly, Suki heard someone groan. It was a surprise to realize it had been herself. She sat up quickly, not knowing how Katara would react, but knowing she would need support nonetheless.

“I'm...healthy? How do you know?”

If Yagoda was surprised by the robotic tone of Katara's voice, she wisely did not let on. “Picture perfect health, dearest. I looked during your checkup before your wedding. I saw nothing at all to concern me, so I didn't mention it at the time, knowing how busy one can be during that stage of the engagement period- oh, dear.”

It took Suki a moment to catch what Yagoda had seen. The healing water had frozen into jagged, iced claws encasing Katara's hands – the only sign of Katara's rage. Her face was a smooth, expressionless mask, although there was a slight crack in her voice when she finally spoke.

“And how does one determine whether the man is the infertile one?”

Suki swallowed nervously, and Yagoda looked like she wanted to do the same. Katara's rage was legendary, as were numerous tales of her physically subduing some of the most powerful people in the world – including the Avatar, the current Fire Lord, Azula, Sokka, and on one memorable occasion, Toph Bei Fong. Both women were very, very glad they were not the man she had in her wrathful sights.

“It is a matter of examining their seed. The life-giving properties are exceptionally tiny, however, so it is an extremely difficult process to master. Generally, it is easier to learn the feel of potent seed, and impotent seed. It's...not something I can easily teach you, for obvious reasons. The difficulty in procuring fresh sperm aside, the seed dies out within minutes in cold climates. In warmer locales it can survive for up to several days, although the longer it goes without testing it is more difficult to obtain a result.”

Katara began taking deep breaths in a vain effort to calm herself. Yagoda was right. There was no
real way to test Aang's sperm to see if he was the one infertile, especially as she could only imagine one person to test him against, and she simply could not stomach testing her brother's sperm even with his and Suki's permission. She belatedly remembered that Aang had run off several days ago, and that she had no idea when he would even return. She shook her head and tried to flex her fingers, only then realizing what was now coating her hands.

“Katara, are you- it will be ok. We will figure this out. I'm sure Sokka will be fine to offer up...well, you know.”

Yagoda smiled gently at her pupil. “The blame need not lie with either partner, Katara. Just as plants need proper seed and good earth, rain and sun, there are outside factors to whether a couple has children or not. Sometimes, there is nothing wrong at all between partners – it is simply fate.”

*It would take a miracle greater than yourself to make her a mother, Avatar.*

Perhaps that was all Aunt Wu had meant by her cryptic admonishment. Yet now that Katara was longer operating under the assumption that fertility was the sole province of the female, she suspected something else. The onus had been laid on *Aang* all this time – he was the one who needed the miracle, not her...

*It doesn't matter. You knew coming into the marriage that there would be no children. It doesn't matter if you are fertile, and he is not. You made your choice.*

Yet had she? While she hadn't been expressly lied to, she was not in full possession of the facts. *She* could have children. Perhaps Aunt Wu had been wrong, after all.

Neither argument mattered. She could have children. *She could have children.*

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As Katara packed her bags that night, Suki sought out her husband. It had been agreed that she would broach the subject of Katara's spurious decision to leave the next morning, as the siblings were still known for their spectacular arguments. Besides, there were a few matters left hanging between them, and if Katara could muster up enough resolve to venture off on her own, Suki could certainly find the wherewithal to discuss their children's future.

It turned out she didn't have far to look. She had barely closed Katara's door behind her when her eyes fell upon her husband, leaning up against the wall. His face was uncharacteristically neutral, and when he tilted his head in the direction of the kitchen, Suki followed silently.

There was a moment of tense silence before Sokka opened with a surprising salvo. “Is she leaving tonight, or tomorrow?”

Suki's parted lips snapped shut. She wasn't entirely surprised that he knew, not with Katara's silence all throughout dinner, but she had hoped she could broach it a bit more gently than that... “She wants to leave tonight, but I've convinced her to wait until first light.”
Sokka nodded. “And will she leave something for Aang? For when he returns, I mean.”

Suki swallowed, hoping it didn't make her look too nervous. “I...imagine so. But I don't know.” The moment stretched until it threatened to swallow them whole, and so Suki tried to deter the inevitable. “Sokka, she has her reasons—”

“I know. I heard. I don't know how much I can blame her.” Sokka scowled. “Well, I am mad at her, yes. But I'm mad at Aang too, and a little angry at Toph and Zuko as well, to be honest. What the hell were they thinking, meddling in Aang and Katara's relationship like that? But I know that's not the main problem. The main problem is the children, and I can see what a strain it has placed on their relationship. I mean, I think she's crazy to think Aang will take concubines, but the thought of Katara never having children is enough to make me nervous, and I can see why it drove her a little crazy. Although she shouldn't be writing Zuko about it, she should be talking to Aang.”

“She was talking to Aang about it. It just doesn't work. And she was writing to Zuko about politics, not babies,” Suki murmured, amazed at how much Sokka knew. Had he not understood her threat for eavesdropping was for a sexless year? Yet this was not the time. Releasing her, he began to pace agitatedly, and she knew from the flow of his thoughts and his jerky movements he was trying to approach the situation like a particularly tricky battle plan. In this moment, she was profoundly thankful for her husband's quirky yet intuitive genius, and that deep down, he loved his sister more than nearly anything.

“Ahh, I see. Still. Doesn't she know that Aang is still super jealous about Zuko? I mean, because of That Terrible Play but still...Zuko managed to have the biggest fan base out of all of us, even though he is um...not looking so pretty in the face from all the angles, if you know what I mean. I'd be nervous if Zuko offered you a position, even though I trust you implicitly and understand that Zuko cannot possibly be in love with you too, especially as he's already got Mai and Katara...” Sokka trailed off distractedly, thankfully in a far better humor than she had expected. Clearly, Sokka knew his sister well enough to know that if she truly loved Zuko, she would have admitted it when intoxicated. The fact that she was so blind to her feelings was one of the scant positives in this situation.

“I think you and Aang are forgetting about Mai, the baby, Zuko's sense of honor...and the shurikens.”

Sokka chuckled, and reached out for his love. As he held her, he dropped several kisses into her hair to prove she was correct, and that of all the people he was upset with right now she certainly was not one of them. “I think it is something I am personally not going to worry about. At least until Aang comes back. Especially if she's not headed towards the Fire Nation.”

Suki smiled against his chest. There was still something so calming in his scent, even after all these years. She took a moment to nuzzle her nose against him before responding. “She's not headed there. At least, not yet. She's going to talk to Aunt Wu, first, for closure. Oh, but you don't know.” Suki explained the bare bones of their visit to Yagoda earlier that day, leaving out the particulars of the procedure, but emphasizing Katara's shock, guilt, and subsequent rage at realizing she had been wrong all this time, and worse, had been blaming herself. “She needs to come to terms with this, Sokka. She knows it ultimately changes nothing, but she's felt so guilty all this time. It would be better if Aang were here, and could do the same...but he ran off. There's nothing she can do about that, so she's going to take care of herself.”

Sokka hummed, and Suki wondered if now wasn't the time to bring up something a little more personal. “Speaking of taking care of herself...I want Sati to train as a Kyoshi warrior.” She stepped away from her husband and placed her fingertips against his lips, hoping that such a romantic gesture
would further quell his indignation. “Let me explain. It wouldn't be for a few years yet...and I
wouldn't want her to spend all her time away from here, and her family. But I'm afraid to let her stay.
She's not a waterbender, Aang can tell that much...and unlike Jian, there's no real opportunity for her,
here. Even your father is worried about the role women will play in the upcoming years, and with no
bending to protect herself, or to give her value in the eyes of the warriors...I'm afraid we'll be unable
to protect her. What can we give her, if she stays?”

Sokka's afflicted face was a testament to just how much he loved his daughter. “Protect her? Suki,
the water tribes are extremely protective, and—”

“It can't protect against the warrior who demands her for his bride. It can't protect her sense of worth
when the men tell her she is less than them. I want everything for our children, Sokka. Not just what
bending can give them!”

Sokka bowed his head until Suki could see the whorls at his crown. For a long moment he held his
silence, eyes tightly shut and lips pressed firmly together. Suki knew that although he would never
admit it, Sati was the closest to his heart, surpassing even Kya. Suki suspected it had something to do
with the fact that Sokka was ever a ladies' man, even among his daughters...and that she was not a
waterbender. It could also have to do with Sati's fearless nature, already well-established at less than
a year old, and her bright-eyed curiosity. Still, the fact remained. Of all his children, it would be the
hardest for Sokka to let her go, especially at such a young age.

“...many years?”

Suki's heart skipped a beat. “I'm sorry, what was that?”

Sokka swallowed, and tried again. “How many more years? Until you took her to train with the
Kyoshi?”

Suki had to fight down the urge to throw her arms wildly around his neck, making do with gripping
his large hand firmly between her own. “We could take her there for a few months every
year...starting when she turns 4 or so. All the children should come, so they see the world, and my
family, and our friends. Training starts between the ages of 8 and 10, so she wouldn't live there full
term until then. Even then we could bring her home once or twice a year, and visit her far more
often...”

Sokka said nothing, but his silence and sorrowful eyes rendered verbal agreement needless – he saw
the strength of her argument, and could see the socio-political climate of the southern water tribe was
quickly becoming an unwelcome place for women. Yet this was a discussion that would not end
here. His sister, on the other hand, would be gone by morning. He nodded slowly, once. For now,
that was all the response he could give his wife.

For a long moment, silence reigned throughout the kitchen. Sokka broke it with uncharacteristic
quietude. “Should I talk to Katara before she leaves?”

Suki smiled gently. “Can you wake up that early?”

He stroked the beginning of the beard he was so proud of. “Hmmm. No. Oh! And this way, when
Aang asks, I can better pretend to be totally innocent!”

Suki smile became somewhat less gentle, yet could not entirely hide her amusement. “You?
Innocent? Good luck with that, darling...”

Sokka scowled. “It’s a good thing my wife is always so supportive. Practically the prop at my side.
I’ll keep this in mind when my sister’s husband gets all glowy when he comes back and finds her gone.”

Suki couldn’t contain it any longer. She laughed, and it was the first time she had done so since her in-laws had arrived. “Let’s get you to bed, husband. You’re starting to get punchy.”

“I’ll show you punchy. I can’t believe you threatened me with no sex. For a year! You like sex more than I do!”

“Come on, Sokka.”

“Yes, dear.”

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Sokka only had one more thing to say before they dropped off to sleep that night.

“I still can’t believe she gave Mom’s necklace to Zuko.”

Suki smiled sleepily as she threw an arm over her husband's chest.

“Go to sleep, Sokka.”

“Love you too, dear.”

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Chapter 7: How Kingdoms Falter

I do not own ATLA.
This chapter breaks from the season 3 finale in a small, yet important way. See my notes at the end for more details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7: How Kingdoms Falter (Mid Year 30)

Before you and I all life was dust
And when we die to stars we go,
Our bodies but a senseless husk
Our minds set free from further storms.

Those that follow will not know
The unending pain and sacrifice;
What we gave through gifts of blood
All lives and safety crucified.

Wind and flame, earth and water
Release the sufferers from evil’s hold
We pray for the day the kingdom falters
and may the gods refuse their souls.

-Surviving fragments from an ancient elemental slave’s prayer-
Sura had spent near to half of her life imagining her parents' childhood adventures, and what it would be like to go on a grand adventure of her own: traveling the world with warriors and benders, friends and allies; fighting and laughing and loving in the face of danger. She had always focused on the noble aspects - the heroic deeds of tales, the friendships forged, the loves desperately fought for, the sacrifice and gain. Yet now that she was two hours into an epic tale of her own, she was thinking inordinately fond thoughts of her Uncle Sokka. Strange as that man was, he had a sense of humor, and that tended to defuse awkward situations. It had, after all, been proven over countless dinner parties during her youth. Upon further reflection, she decided she would even take Aunt Ty Lee, with her perky smiles and boundless energy. Anything to break this stagnant silence!

“So uh, does anyone have a story...or a joke...or anecdote...anything?”

To her left, Iroh’s scowl deepened. His nearly perceptible dark gloom intensified, and if Sura had been able to read auras, she would have taken a step back. Anicca, who if she concentrated could, merely took a deep breath and gave Sura a little smile. She had reflected for long enough, it was time to discuss some of her suspicions with her traveling companions. That way, when Sura went back to the Avatar he would be a better informed as well.

“Perhaps...I have a story to tell. I am not entirely sure if it all the way correct, but it is enough to go on. I will know more when we reach the forest. But for now...I will say what I know.”

And so she did. She began with the Ritual itself, and how it was a means to rip the soul from its human body, effectively destroying it. Likewise, she explained what the ritual demanded in payment – the souls of all those who enact it – and how it was forbidden knowledge, guarded carefully by Asha and the other two Keepers, and she had no idea how her tribe had learned it. She shared her suspicions on how Rama had transferred his powers to her, and how she had unknowingly called the spirits down upon the village. Thankfully the Ritual was not completed, so although the villagers had died, they retained their souls.

“And what about your brother. Rama? Does he still have his soul?”

Anicca could not meet the concerned gaze of the waterbender at her side. With a jerky nod and a twitch of her shoulders, she indicated that she suspected he did, but would not speak of it. “Yet worse is the situation now – the Ritual was a...a pathway for a powerful demon to come into this world. That is what we are facing. It has also targeted the Avatar, as a powerful spirit and elemental bending opponent. To fight it we need certain things...old, powerful relics from the past. But first we need to meet with a friend. I think...he might be able to help us, and they might help your father.”

“A friend? Is he like you?” It was the first Iroh had spoken since they left Ba Sing Se. It was not a friendly question, and the air between he and Anicca sparked with antagonism. For the fifth time that day, Sura wished herself far away from them.

Anicca gritted her teeth and tried not to glare at the firebender. She had never met someone as infuriating as him. How could he make her blood boil so easily? Besides, had he not listened to Asha when she told him there were no other spiritbenders besides her? Well, if he could be purposefully ignorant, she could be flippant. “Does he look like me, you mean? Certainly more than he favors you. I'm not sure that makes him a monster, though. Many women find him attractive.”

Iroh let out a heated breath that made the air in front of his mouth ripple, yet he did not let the expression on his face change. Just where did this woman get off? Perhaps he could have worded his
query better - but she had mentioned Keepers, and while they may not be spiritbenders they had to keep something – but as heir to the Fire Nation he was totally unprepared to handle such cheek.

“That is not what I meant, and you know it. I would think you were too old for childish retorts.”

Sura glanced longingly at the forest ahead of them. Another 15 minutes, and they would reach it. Would they last another 15 minutes without coming to blows? She doubted it.

“I am very sorry for misunderstanding. Your advanced years must give you such great wisdom. Perhaps if you turn your face to me, next time I will understand better.” Her barb fulfilled her intention. The Angry One swung towards her, with eyes like molten gold. She needed only a moment to make the connection and pass along a silent message.

Thankfully, Sura was too busy wondering what Uncle Sokka would do to notice the slight hitch in Iroh’s breathing, and the barest pause in conversation.

“Is he...a member of the spirit tribe? On reflection, I realize he cannot be what you are.” Iroh's mouth formed the words thoughtlessly as he focused on the strange feeling of the woman connected to him. Her message was simple and agreeable: that Sura must return home at the earliest possibility. She assured him the time was almost here, and not to worry. However, it was the intimacy of her message inside his mind that was unnerving him. He had never imagined communicating in this way, and somehow it didn't bother him as much as he wanted it to. It was hard to think her a monster when she talked to him this way...

Anicca winced and broke the connection. She could hear the echoes of his thoughts through their link, and it wasn't good. She would always be a monster to this man, and she didn't know how in her ancestors’ names they could stand each other find and take down a demon.

“No. Not any longer. But he was raised in one of our sister tribes, and left 5 months ago.” She snuck a glance at Sura and she smiled back in response. Perhaps she would smile more, when she met them? He always had made the women in his tribe smile, although women had always baffled him.

“You are looking for wind children, yes? He is such a one. Or were you not interested in them?”

Sura felt as if 2 and 2 was 5, and she simply could not figure out how to get there. The hope that churned in her belly, distracting her mind from working through what should have been a simple problem, wasn't helping matters. “Wind...children?”

Anicca looked at her strangely. She had suspected more excitement from Sura, not from the Angry One. Yet he was the one who was focusing so intently upon her, as if daring her to prove him wrong. “Yes, wind children. The ones who dance upon the winds.”

Sura's heart beat painfully against her chest in a quick rhythm that stole her breath. “You're taking us to see... airbenders?”

“Well, just two of them. The rest live in the sister cities, and we can't get into them unless we know exactly where they are. But Toshiro will know, and he is the one we are going to see.”

The news had finally gotten through to Sura, and she took off in a babbling rush. She may have also
bounced up and down a bit, but would forget that part later when telling the story of her adventure to her children. “There are more airbenders? How many? How old? Are they...are they trained? Were they descendants of the wind temples? Or from the nomads? When-”

Anicca laughed a little as she held up her hands. “Ah, enough, enough! I do not know all these answers. Toshiro will know more. I think we can make his camp before nightfall, and then we will have plenty of time for questions. Is this fine?”

Wordlessly, Sura nodded. Then she took off jogging towards the sea of trees up ahead of them. “What are we waiting for then? We're only getting older, here. So let's go!”

Iroh bit back a snort of laughter at Sura's childish behavior. Yet his amusement quickly faded when he realized Anicca had done exactly the same thing. The two locked eyes for a moment, carefully appraising each other for any sign of derision. They quickly looked away, however, and took off after Sura.

Suspended almost 20 feet in the air, Aang folded into the full lotus position, and breathed deeply. It had taken him nearly an hour to clear his mind from the worries and insecurities that had been building up steadily since Uncle's death. It had taken longer than that to find a quiet corner of the palace to begin his efforts. Yet now his mind was tranquil, his breathing steady, and his will resolute. He was the Avatar, and he would not be denied congress with his former self...

_Breathe. In, out. In, out. In-_

Undergoing the transition from Earth Nation Palace to Spirit World was like being immersed into a pool of clear, pristine water. However, that was at its heart an incorrect analogy - while it felt as if he were moving from one location to another, Aang was at all times the bridge between the secular and the spiritual, and as such existed in both planes at once. Aang spent most of his life ignoring this fact, so that he would not go mad in the secular world of definites and absolutes. Yet he was not ignorant of his true nature, and therefore was deeply concerned that something could disrupt him from accessing the spirit world. It shouldn’t be possible, and he was here to prevent it from ever happening again.

He cast his attention towards Roku’s spirit, feeling hopeful for the first time in weeks. He hoped that Roku would have answers for him. Or at least the right questions.

“Hello, Aang. It is good to see you again. I had worried - with such dark times - that you might not come.”

The relief of seeing Roku was enough to make Aang smile, even as a grown man. There was something so pure and calming about him that dispelled many of Aang’s fears and doubts. “Hello Avatar Roku. It is more than good to see you again. I am beginning to fear it is necessity.”

Roku nodded slowly, bringing his hands together in a polite yet thoughtful position. His long robes dripped to the ground, red and yellows bright against the grey mists of the spirit world. “I agree. Still,
you have made your way here, and that is the first step. Perhaps you found the path more **difficult** than you may have expected?”

Aang nodded hesitantly. His suspicions that it was not Roku who had spoken to him under the mountain were not quite confirmed, although this seemed to be a step in the right direction. “Yes. I have found my connection to the spirit world tenuous, lately. Although it has given me time to reflect on what you told me a few days ago.”

Roku’s surprise was genuine. “A few days ago? You have not come to me for many years, Avatar Aang. Nor have I come to you.”

Toph was never going to let him hear the end of this… “That is what I feared. A spirit impersonated you, and attempted to trick me. Yet his message was flawed, and...thanks to my friends, I was able to see its lies.” Aang bowed deeply, hoping it would impart his apology. “I should have known better. You would never say such things. I apologize, I should have known it was not you.”

Roku’s spectral hands rested on Aang’s back, bidding him to rise. His wizened face was troubled. “It is not your place to apologize, young Avatar. There is only one spirit who could have fooled you, and His masks are perfect. It is a testament to you and your loved ones that they were able to make you see the truth.”

Aang’s blood ran cold. There was only one spirit whose name could not be uttered lightly, and he had dimly feared that *He* would be involved. Although he had only interacted with Him once in this life, Koh the Face-Stealer had been the bane of several of his existences. He was also the only spirit entity powerful and wily enough to trick the Avatar, usually by utilizing the masks of his victims. “Yet how could he impersonate you so perfectly? He does not possess a mask of your face.”

“He has had millennia to refine His methods. Yet the mask was not perfect, as you are no longer operating under its spell.” Long fingers escaped his sleeves to pluck thoughtfully at the tips of gray eyebrows. “I suspect He was also strengthened by the recent tragedy. The collapse of the the village stirred up the spirit world for quite some time, with the transfer of power and their souls hanging in the balance. *He* took advantage of the chaos, and sent many dark spirits to join the fray. He sent several after you, as well, to guide you into a state conducive to his trickery. You must move carefully, Aang. The survivor is not the only one He watches - at the moment, He is far more concerned with you.”

Aang scowled, righteous rage building within him. How **dare** the Face-Stealer move against him in the corporeal world? There was something terrifyingly intimate about tricking him in this way, even though the damage was minimal compared to the villagers’ destruction. Yet there were still dark tendrils in his mind that prompted him to blame the spirit woman. Although he knew he was being manipulated, they were incredibly difficult to deny. “So *He* took advantage of the chaos? Do you know who began it?”

Roku’s clear eyes seemed to look straight through Aang’s soul. There was a minute possibility that they **did.** “Was it *Him* or was it the spirit woman, you mean? As far as I know, it was neither. She reacted to the impetus of her village, and he moved in her wake. Although the motives behind those who enacted that ritual are unclear, even to me.” Roku sighed, bringing his hands to his face, palm to palm. “If you look to place blame, you leave yourself open to his demons, Aang. Your role cannot be to seek vengeance, it must be to correct the balance.”

Aang breathed deeply, striving to clear his mind of all emotions. Roku was right. He had fallen prey to his anger and his guilt, and had leapt to the wrong conclusions. Knowing that he had been tricked by a god soothed, but did not fix the problem. He had to let go of his anger and his fear in order to move forward. After another inhale, he felt calm enough to continue. “You are right. Thank you for
helping me, Avatar Roku. Please, continue to guide me - tell me what I must do to counter Him.”

Pain flashed across Roku’s face, although Aang, with his eyes turned inwards did not notice. “It is unlikely that He will enter the fray directly. I would guess that He has entered into a covenant with a lesser demon, or perhaps even with a fallen human. I cannot be sure of this, however, even in my wisdom - His power clouds my sight. If I am correct, however, it would be they who could act as His agent in the human world. But they are not your foe, young Avatar. As I said, you must first correct the world’s balance before that evil may be addressed.”

“Correct the world’s balance? What do you mean?”

The aged Avatar sighed, before folding his legs into the lotus position. Only in the spirit world could he do so without first lowering himself to the ground. After a moment, Aang copied him, not needing his airbending talents to stay aloft. “There is much to tell you, my young friend. We have been remiss in not teaching you of the old promises...but hopefully it is not too late. Will you listen to our tale?”

As he spoke, Aang was aware of the presences of the other Avatars - Kyoshi, Kuruk, and Yangchen, among others - enfolding them with their energy and knowledge. He was struck with a sense of power and permanence, and wondered that there was still an aspect of his heritage - his existence - that was new to him. Eagerly he nodded, and Roku folded his arms as he began.

“Long ago, before humans harnessed the power of the elements, they harnessed the power within themselves…”

Koru awoke to find the palace in uproar: the spirit woman was gone, along with his brother and his clandestine fiancee. He knew the Avatar was being run ragged with preparations for the Remembrance Ceremony, but it hurt that his father and Aunt Katara were apparently far too busy to drop in and apprise him of the situation...or offer congratulations. The only way he knew anything was happening at all was because of Tanh. She had finally been told about the spirit woman, and had spent the last hour in his room - he had moved out of the infirmary earlier that morning - railing at their helplessness.

This, added to Sura’s defection (she hadn’t even left a note) and the sobering thought of limited mobility - although his arm and ribs were healed, it would still be several weeks before he could operate at full capacity, let alone bend strenuously - it was safe to say that today was firmly out of the running for the Best Birthday Ever contest.

“Seriously, Koru. I’m trying to be calm, and to understand where he’s coming from. But is it so hard to talk for ten minutes? We’re going to be married in less than a year and we’ve never even spoken! Is that too much to ask for? Am I being unreasonable?”

The hard part was, Koru decided, that she was in complete earnest. There wasn’t a drop of cattiness in her, and she truly worried about being too overbearing. This would not avail her with Iroh, however, who would cater to the needs of his country before her for the rest of their lives. So, he considered his words carefully, pretending to be more interested in his physical therapy stretches than
her question. “Iroh is a man of duty. He has a soldier’s mentality, and there’s no changing that. I know it sucks, but he doesn’t mean it personally. It is just the way he is.”

Tanh frowned. A treatise on the socioeconomic conditions of several southern Fire Nation islands lay on her lap, ignored since Koru had finished with the most taxing of his exercises. She had found Koru’s room was the quietest place to study, as the whole palace was full of the hubbub of preparing for the Ceremony. Although she supposed it didn’t matter how quiet the environment was when one’s heart and mind was in such turmoil. “Is he incapable of multi-tasking even in the slightest? Did he not have even five minutes to make an acquaintance? It just seems…” like I am being avoided “...odd.”

Koru paused mid-stretch to playfully tug on a strand of her hair. “As his younger brother, it is my duty to agree wholeheartedly with you. Calling Iroh odd is putting it kindly. It’s his own punishment though - I doubt he likes his position any more than you do. He hates supernatural stuff...and spiritbending is just that. So just remember - he’s miserable too.”

Tanh shuffled the papers in her lap, completely ignoring what any other young woman would be spellbound by - the cut of Koru’s muscles as he bent and stretched. “And...what exactly is spiritbending? All Aunt Toph would tell me were the bare details about the woman...and that I was to refrain from speaking of it to anyone.”

Koru smirked, and as he began his final round of exercises. “Yes, and you’re doing so well with that last part, aren’t you?”

“Oh, hush. You already know about it - you know more than me at any rate. I’m just curious, I won’t say anything to anyone else.”

Interestingly enough, Koru believed her. The fact that Toph had trusted her with this secret (even belatedly) was enough of a recommendation for him. “To be honest, I’m not sure - I got knocked out pretty quickly. Sura would know more though. I think there’s some level of telepathy, though.” He explained what little he knew of Sura’s interaction with the spirit woman, and their nebulous connection. “Again, Sura would have been the one to ask...if she hadn’t ran off without even saying goodbye.”

The thinly-veiled frustration in his tone garnered her full attention. She shuffled the papers into a manageable stack, and set them down on the bed. “I’m sure she had no choice, Koru. From what Aunt Toph said, there was only a very small window available for her and Iroh to move.”

Koru’s annoyance was soothed by Tanh’s positive outlook. Iroh had escaped her again, and she was taking it far better than he was. After all, he at least was assured of Sura’s affections, and had stolen some kisses along the way…”I know, I know. It’s just frustrating, you know? Well, yeah, I guess you do know.” He grinned ruefully at his future sister-in-law. “We may have to start a club, make life a little more difficult for our future spouses. First rule: they have to stop running out on us, or we will band together to stop them.” He held out his arm to her in a show of courtly deference.

Tanh laughed, looping her arm through his. “I agree. They need to fear us, I think. Otherwise they’ll never listen.” She winked up at him, thanking him as he opened the door open for her. “Now, if I can ask, where are we going?”

“First, the kitchens. We’re going to make sandwiches. Then, the gardens. That’s the best place for a picnic.”

“But...shouldn’t we be helping? Everything is so chaotic, with the ceremony fast approaching, and the spirit woman escapade…”
“...and my birthday.”

“And your-what? Your what? It’s your birthday?”

“My 21st. And you know what says happy birthday best? Sandwiches.”

Although she made a face as if to say that sandwiches were perhaps not the perfect gift for any birthday, Tanh laughed in surrender. If the birthday boy wanted sandwiches, sandwiches he would get. “Fine. You win, birthday boy. Let’s go get some sandwiches, and I’ll give you a proper present later. Many happy returns, you nut.”

Koru smiled proudly, happy to have at least one person wish him a happy birthday. He would simply have to console himself with the thought that wherever they were, Iroh and Sura were wishing him the same. “I look forward to many more. Now, shall we?”

“It is as the birthday boy commands…”

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Elsewhere in the palace, Katara worked herself into a frenzy. Like a firebender she had risen with the sun in order to make a dent in her sizable to-do list. She had spent the early morning conferring with all the physicians she could summon, instructing them in the only known treatment for the sleeping sickness. They hadn’t been pleased with such vague instructions, wanting to rely on something physical - a potion, herb, procedure or talisman. That they had to coax their patients with words of their own inner strength was not palatable. Still, as long as it worked, nothing else mattered.

Then, she had sent out countless missives spreading the word elsewhere. It would be days before word could reach all four kingdoms, but she sent the fastest hawks to the South Pole. Sokka had lost three southern tribe children in his last letter alone, and the loss had hit him hard. He was terrified for his own children, and with such a small population to begin with, losing more would be devastating.

She scurried around the palace, barely leaving herself time to breathe. To lose herself in her duties was a sort of freedom - when she was working herself to exhaustion, there was no time to think about the strained relationship between she and her husband. Nor was there time to reflect on the simmering fire in Zuko’s eyes whenever he looked at her, denoting his desire to hunt.

They had all weathered this storm for so long. Disregarding her moment of weakness when bidding her daughter goodbye, the thought of failing now was ...difficult to contemplate.

Toph found her an hour before lunch, holed up in a small room with a table to lay her letters upon, and just enough space to breathe. She brought word from Aang, Zuko, and a dozen other dignitaries all eager to converse with her either as ambassador, or wife of the Avatar. The latter group she could safely ignore, as she had to put aside her position as ambassador for the moment - she needed to spread the word about the capricious cure for the sleeping sickness first. The others were not so easy to write off.

“Twinkles has gone all spiritual; claims he has to connect with his past lives. You know. I promised
him I wouldn’t draw on his face when he was out, but other than that I left him to it. Sparky, on the other hand, is in the library helping the lawyers research anything spirit related. I tried to help, but it only made him frustrated. I can’t imagine why...he must be cranky.”

Katara smirked at her friend, momentarily distracted from her troubles. “Oh yes, that must be it. It’s not that you’re blind, or anything, and can’t read the scrolls. Sparky’s just cranky.”

“And are any of us surprised? Gods know how his people deal with him year round.”

Katara laughed, setting down her half-completed letter down on the table She did need a break; there was no harm in talking with her old friend for just a few minutes. “Now Toph, where’s all that diplomacy we drummed into you? I’m sure the most honorable Fire Lord has reasons for his...snappish demeanor. He likely just needs a nap.”

Toph’s glassy eyes twitched in the direction of the door. “Oh, he needs to get horizontal, all right. Although a nap isn’t exactly the activity I would prescribe…” She ignored the way Katara froze, listening instead to the acceleration of her heartbeat. Katara only had one foot on the floor, however, so it wasn’t enough to be able to determine whether it was guilt, or simply interest.

“I think I understand why Zuko is so cranky, now…” Katara sighed deeply, yet grinned at her irrepressible friend. She had long ago learned that keeping things light was the best way to deal with Toph when she was at her most insouciant. That, and removing herself from her presence diplomatically. “Although if you truly wanted to help, maybe you could go and check on Koru for me? There might not be enough time to celebrate his birthday, and I want to give him his gift before I forget.”

Toph made a show of pursing her lips, as if she were deep in thought. “I don’t know, Sugar Queen...I was supposed to report back to Sparky on your progress. He particularly wanted to know whether you’d sent letters to the Northern water tribe yet. But...it’s probably a better idea just to send you, now that I think about it.” Toph smirked as Katara’s eyes widened in horror. “Ok! I’ll go find Koru, and you go talk to Zuko! Excellent thinking, Katara!”

“Wait, Toph, I’ll go find Ko-” Toph cut her off by simply walking out the door. As soon as the door shut behind her, Katara clutched her head in her hands and fought down the urge to scream. What was Toph doing? She knew as well as anyone that they had to keep the peace, and after the events of yesterday, Katara wasn’t sure she was strong enough to handle seeing him. It had been foolish to hold his hand, but she had needed him and his support too much to act otherwise - after all, she had just sent her baby girl off into the world with a powerful, unknown entity; off to face some danger that even her husband could not identify. Besides, Zuko had given back her necklace, a gift he had treasured for decades. That had made it more than easy to slip her hand in his again, it had made it essential.

Almost as essential as the current efforts to stem the tide of sleeping sickness fatalities. Growling under her breath, Katara stood and made her way to the library. She cursed Toph Bei Fong as she did, ignoring the rush of people around her and the foreboding in her heart. All she had to do was to keep their conversation professional, and that was something she had become fairly adept at over the last fifteen years or so. Besides, they were much too busy for anything more to happen, and the library would no doubt be crawling with those assisting their research.

Katara strode through the library’s massive double doors, for once not taking a moment to note and appreciate the play of sunlight filtering through the colored glass windows mounted high on the library walls. The windows had been an early addition, and was an implicit reminder on the beauty wrought by those working together - in this instance, earth and fire bender artisans. Such a display never failed to uplift Katara’s spirit, but today there was no time. Between the urgency of her mission
and the apprehension in her heart there was no room for anything else.

She finally found him in the eastern stacks that were currently closed off to the public. It was dismaying to find him alone, although at this hour it was easy enough to suppose the fellow researchers were simply eating lunch. She spotted his crimson robe through spaces between the motley assortment of books and scrolls, and slowed her pace for one last steeling breath. Then she pressed bravely on, smile on her face.

*Keep it professional. You can do this.* “Hey. How’s the research going? I hear you have questions about the messages I’ve sent out?” Her arms fell awkwardly at her sides, and she was unable to think of how she arranged them normally. Should she put a hand on her hip? No, that would make her seem accusatory. Fold them? No, too angry.

*I am 44, and married what the hell is wrong with me?*

Zuko glanced up from his book, closing it carefully before setting it down onto a shelf. He did not look directly at her, opting to glance around the shelves before settling his gaze on her left ear. That settled *that* - he was struggling just as much as she was, although she knew the fight was much harder for him. He *was* a firebender, after all. Passion was their very nature. “Ahh, yes. I simply wanted to know if you’d already sent word to the Northern Tribe. If so, don’t worry about it. I had wanted to include a sentence or two to Chief Sangok, but I think the message is now too long to tack on to an already important letter.” He rolled his shoulders, using the opportunity to turn back to the stacks and lessen the need for direct eye contact. Katara would have been grateful to this if it hadn’t meant tracing the lines of his profile with her eyes. “And the research is going slowly. So far we have discovered nothing definitive, although some of the lawyers claim they have made some headway into the location of the village itself. There used to be documentation of the settlement there, five hundred years ago. Apparently, it disappeared sometime within the reign of Mad King Pouchong - although plenty about that despot’s rule has been lost or corrupted. The chronicler was of the opinion the village was destroyed during one of Pouchong’s rages, but mentions nothing of spiritbenders - just that there were rumors of ghosts in that area of the forest.”

Katara hummed thoughtfully. “Perhaps the rumored ‘ghosts’ were spirits? Or spiritbenders practicing their craft? It’s a tentative link but perhaps there is a connection. It doesn’t seem to be too helpful, however.”

“Not in terms of defining spiritbenders, no.” Zuko shook his head, and dark hair escaped his sloppy topknot. He only pulled it back in this manner when he was lost in thought, or extremely stressed out. “Nor of their history, or of any ‘covenants’ they may have established with benders.” He sighed, finally sparing Katara a glance and a small smile. “If my ancestors hadn’t laid waste to the air temples, I’m sure we could have found some clue there. As it is, we will have to put our faith in Aang, and hope he discovers something in the spirit world.”

Katara smiled back reflexively, holding his gaze for but a moment. Even so, it was enough. She was hooked as surely as a fly in a spider’s web. It was impossible to look away from him - he was lit from within with the flame that had always drew her to him, and judging by his covetous expression, it was the same for him. The part of her that had warned her away from him all day was curiously muted, and any second thoughts were easily pushed aside. This made it incredibly easy to step into his arms when he opened them, beckoning her into the warmth of his embrace.

Both were silent as they held each other, basking in their presence. It had been years since they had last embraced, bound by their promise and their convictions. Yet all was falling apart in the spiritbender’s wake, and perhaps they could be thankful for this much - if she had not come and blasted apart the status quo they might not have had this chance again.
Katara focused on the beat of his heart, thumping steadily against her ear. His warmth crept over her like an old, familiar blanket, and the anxiety of the last few days melted away. That his touch could still heal her would upset her later, but that was then and this is now. Her arms tightened around him, and she gave in to the freedom of touching him without caring who saw.

“It’s all going to be fine, Katara. Sura, and Iroh, and whatever mission they go on. And we will figure out a way to end the sickness. We’ll stem the tide here, and then Aang will-”

“Shhhh.” Katara breathed, tilting her head up so her nose brushed his collarbone. “Zuko, hush.” The last thing she wanted was to talk, especially about her husband. Now that she had succumbed all she wanted to do was feel.

Zuko did not agree. “We’ll figure this out too, I promise. We’ve all been bound by secrets and lies for far too long - we need to talk about it, and not just with each other, and Aang. We need to talk to our children, as well. And then-”

“Zuko.” Katara’s fingers slid up his shoulders until they caught at his jaw, effectively silencing him. She was looking up at him now, and there were two separate needs in her stare. To touch him was one, and this she fulfilled by running her thumb over his lips, reveling in the heated puffs of air pushing past his deceptively soft lips. The other was to keep him from continuing, and that she could accomplish in a more delicious way - she simply had to summon her courage.

Yet Zuko would not stop talking, even though his eyes were practically burning, and his hands were indicatively warm against her waist. “Do you know what today is, Katara? It’s Koru’s birthday...and the 21st anniversary of Mai’s death. Duties aside, I should be honoring her memory, today of all days. And yet…” He pulled her more tightly against him, rubbing his cheekbone against her hair, “I can’t do this anymore, Katara. Even knowing how disastrous it would be if we were caught.” He shut his eyes before placing a kiss on the crown of her head. “Agni preserve us. I cannot keep away from you.”

Katara shook in his arms, although her eyes were dry. Repressed memories swirled before her eyes, yet her somatic memories - triggered by the feel of him under her fingertips - trumped all. It would be so easy to surrender to him, and then her body would be set afame. All she had to do was tilt her head up, look searchingly into his eyes, and pull his face down to hers-

“ARRRRGRHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Katara and Zuko jumped away from each other, sending panicked glances around the stacks. Yet the intruder was obvious: Toph stood not five feet away from them, blind eyes opened wide, and still yelling.

“Toph! Shhhh!”

“Calm down! Its not like the stacks are on fire or anything-”

“Gods damn it guys!” She finally dropped down to a whisper, pointing accusingly - and perfectly accurately - at her two friends. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Seriously! Someone could have walked in on you guys! Someone - me- did walk in on you guys, and let me tell you - unacceptable.Sexy as fuck, but unacceptable.” She rubbed her forehead stomping her feet a few times for good measure. “Damn it! Now I won’t be able to fantasize about anything else for weeks.”

Panic thundered through Katara’s body, causing her heart to beat like a bass drum and the neurons to shut down in her brain. “You fantasize about us?” She winced as even Zuko gave her a look, then tried to salvage the situation. “I mean, nothing happened, Toph. And besides, weren’t you the one
telling me all about...being cranky?” Ok, not much better.

Thankfully, Zuko stepped in to give Katara a moment to recover. “We apologize, Toph. It was a moment of weakness, and it won’t...happen again.”

Toph waved a hand in front of her face, blowing off his efforts. “Puh-lease Sparky. We all know it’s going to happen again. Frankly, the only surprise is that you’ve held off this long. Infidelity is not what concerns me - it’s what happens when Twinkles finds out. Especially now. Between the spirit bullshit and Uncle’s ceremony and the sickness and your kids haring off on some crazy adventure, this dramatic re-enactment of Oma and Shu is just going to have to wait.” She fixed them both with a glare that promised creative metalbending punishments to those that defied her. “Also, the library? Seriously? C’mom, guys, I have about 900 other rooms in this place, and you pick the public library?”

“Look, Toph. Are you mad at us or not?” Katara’s response was a bit grumpier than she’d like, but she could hardly feel differently. To have come that close to the edge and then to be pulled back forcefully? “I’m starting to think the only reason you stopped us is because of Aang.”

“She’s just handling this in her own way, Katara-”

“And is that so wrong? He is the Avatar. He does go all glowy on occasion.” Toph smiled blandly in the face of her friend’s surprise. Zuko’s expression in particular - could she have witnessed it - would have satisfied her immensely. “And it’s not like there wasn’t a precedence, or that it’s been all sunshine and flowers for the rest of us. Look. I know that you’re going to do what you’re going to do. Personally, I don’t care. This has gone on long enough, and as soon as this spirit bullshit is finished this is going to be resolved. In the meantime: don’t get caught, don’t tell me what you do, and begin prepping your political explanations for why the Fire Lord is making off with the Avatar’s ex-wife.”

She turned to go, but imparted one last piece of homespun advice before she did. “And about your kids? Guess what - they’re adults, now. There’s no use in hiding it for their sakes. The longer you do, the better the chances that they’ll never forgive you...or maybe even make the same damn mistakes. So chew on that for a while, and remember: 900 other rooms. 900. And some of them even lock on the inside.”

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It was dusk by the time the woman called for a halt. Although Sura flopped down onto the ground, fragrant pine needles scattering in her wake, she walked from tree to tree, seemingly looking for something. After a few moments of searching she apparently found what she was looking for. She stuck two fingers into her mouth and let loose a piercing whistle.

Sura, who had been resting with closed eyes, bolted upright. “What the- what was that?” Upon realizing there was no immediate threat, she clambered to her feet and grumbled. “I’m awake, I’m awake. Does this mean we’re here?”

Iroh would have responded but all his attention was on the spiritbender. Although he knew better,
this was the perfect time and place for an ambush. His instincts did not allow him to take anything on faith, and although he believed the woman, he certainly didn’t trust her. Judging by the sharp glance she sent his way, he assumed she didn’t either.

“Yes. He should be on his way now.” The spiritbender stretched her arms above her head, yet kept her head firmly pointed towards the east. Iroh didn’t know if she could sense him she was simply avoiding eye contact.

He glanced over at Sura, who was rubbed her eyes and shifted from foot to foot in an effort to keep awake. She had not been trained as a woodswoman, nor was she used to hiking for hours, and even less living rough. It was for the best that she would return home, even though he admitted her use as a buffer between he and the-

A gust of wind tore through the trees, shaking the boughs and leaves before it went suddenly, eerily still. Iroh spun to face the direction of the wind, yet it was over too quickly, and there was no sign of anyone. Heat gathered at his palms, although he did not let the flame manifest - she wasn’t worried, and he trusted in his skill and speed in case it was an ambush. Sura moved behind him until she was close enough to lay a tentative hand on his shoulder.

“Iroh, what is it-”

The spiritwoman interrupted her by calling out in her own language. Preoccupied as he was, Iroh only caught the core of her message: come. He grit his teeth as he waited, adrenaline picking up in his veins. Perhaps he was being foolish...or perhaps he was simply being prepared. Either way, he would not be taken by surprise-

“Anca!”

The unexpected voice directly behind him caused the blood to still in his veins. How could he have not heard the intruder approach? Without further thought flame burst to life in his hands and he spun to face whoever had moved stealthily enough to sneak up on him unawares…

...and stared stupidly down at a small girl, giggling and smiling broadly as she reached up to hold the spiritbender’s hand. The fire sputtered out immediately, yet it was not enough to save him from embarrassment. This child was clearly no threat to anyone, save perhaps its teething blanket. He must be more on edge than he had supposed to glean such a threat from a mere child…

The woman bent down to speak to the child eye to eye. Iroh could not miss the sparkle in Sura’s eye and supposed the child, with her lopsided smile, freckles, and sloppily plaited braids was cute. He wouldn’t know. He just knew that her hair was the color of a dying sunset, and such a thing simply was not normal.

“And where...Toshiro? ...show me?”

It was happening again. Iroh knew he should at some point get used to it - use it as a weapon, even - but it still made him angry that he could understand her. Yet there was little time for such thoughts. The child pointed up into the trees directly above them, a moment later, an acorn fell to the ground.

He glid to the ground much like a parrotsquirrel would, although instead of wings he merely spread his arms and fingers and appeared to catch the breeze. There was something unsettling about seeing someone travel this way - the Avatar used his staff to fly, whereas this young man simply fell...slowly.
The spiritwoman did not wait for his feet to touch the ground. She threw herself at him before he landed, and all thoughts of ambush and betrayal were cast aside when he noticed how tightly the airbender held her, and the dark glower on his face. For a long moment he and Sura stared at them, and Iroh was sure that the woman would start weeping any minute now - he could feel her sorrow bubbling back up to the surface, and it was held back only by a sense of purpose...and the realization that he, himself would witness her weakness.

Yet she pulled back before he could be proven correct. She gripped her friend’s hand firmly, leading him over to where they currently stood. The little girl skipped over to them, yet her bounds were over three times the length a grown man could have accomplished. Iroh glanced over at Sura who was practically vibrating with excitement. Clearly these people had an affinity for air - it looked as if her father’s lifelong search for airbenders had finally borne fruit.

“Toshiro, Chihiro - this is Sura and...Iroh. They are elemental benders, and have been and will be great help to me. Likewise, this is Toshiro-” he nodded, and Iroh guessed he must understand a little of their language. “...and the little one is Chihiro. She doesn’t understand this tongue, so we must be patient with her. Toshiro speaks some, and understands more. If you need help with her, you can ask him.” She spoke to the girl in her own language, and Chihiro smiled brightly, bowing at the waist. Chihiro responded, although it sounded less like the spiritbender’s language and more like a parrotsquirrel’s chatter. Out of the corner of his eye Iroh noticed Sura’s entire face light with wonder.

Oh, Agni. Sura was in love with the chit already. Wasn’t it enough that she had taken the spirit under her wing?

Sura bounced at his side, eager to bombard them all with questions. Before she could do so, Toshiro looked directly at first him and then Sura, and boldly asked, “Are you why Anicca’s home...gone? Your fault?” Yet he couldn’t focus his glare on Sura, and turned back to Iroh. “Your kill?”

Oh, this was rich. To be pinned for the spiritwoman’s crimes? The urge to promptly lambast the fool who dared question their morality was strong, but the woman moved before he could. He watched the blood drain from her face and her head turn from side to side before she found the strength to answer him, in her own language.

“No, Toshiro. It was me.”

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15 excruciatingly awkward minutes later, Anicca and Toshiro emerged from the forest, and apart from her red eyes, Sura couldn’t tell how their private conversation had gone. She had asked for time to explain the catastrophe to her friend, and it had been granted - even Iroh trusted her when she explained that they could go no further if Toshiro imagined them to be the villains. While they waited, she and Iroh set to work setting up the campsite, knowing that Toshiro and Chihiro often slept within a cradle of tree branches. Anicca had told them so during their trek here.

Furthermore, Chihiro buzzed around them like a little bee, poking into things and nattering on in her chirpy language. For possibly the fourth time since their introduction, Sura had to fight down the urge to gather the little girl up in her arms. Unlike Iroh, she found the girl’s exotic looks - similar yet slightly different to Anicca, especially the tangled red hair and the heavy concentration of freckles spilling across her nose and cheeks - and playful demeanor impossibly lovely. Coupled with a sense of fascination about the girl’s examples of unconscious airbending, she was completely and irrevocably in love.
Yet Sura found her attention swinging over to Toshiro, as he and Anicca made their way over to the campsite. Anicca had been correct when she claimed he favored her - while he was built long and thin like her father, his skin and hair were only a shade darker than Anicca’s, and his large, hazel eyes were framed with eyelashes so light that at first glimpse she couldn’t see them. She could also understand Anicca’s quip about women liking him. He was very handsome, although in a different way from Iroh, or Koru.

It wasn’t until the camp was set, and dinner was warming on the fire that he spoke again. “If you are right, then you need Keepers. Mori and Iwaya...you need go to them?”

Anicca nodded, and murmured something in the language he would better understand. Sura would have minded not knowing exactly what she said more, had Chihiro not deposited herself in her lap a few moments ago. As it was, she busied herself with untangling the girl’s hair as she leaned back against her, humming happily. By the way Iroh was glaring holes into the side of Anicca’s head, he was paying enough attention for the both of them.

Toshiro responded in kind, and Sura was lulled by the cadence of his voice, and the unconscious motions of his hands. His hands were like her father’s - long, tapered fingers, and she could imagine them engaged in the motions of airbending. Every time she looked at him excitement lit in her belly. She had done it - there were airbenders. Her father’s search was over. His people had survived.

“Toshiro says he will tell us the location of his old village, Mori - from there, we can find the last village, Iwaya. And then-”

“There are three villages? Are they like yours? Or are they home to the airbenders?” Iroh did not take his gaze from the fire as he spoke, so he missed Sura’s scowl. He had asked her earlier not to frighten the airbenders with her endless volley of questions about them and their history, yet it was acceptable for him to do so?

“Wind children-”

“Some are-”

Toshiro and Anicca spoke at the same time. They caught themselves and he nodded to her when she cocked her head in question. She glanced over at Iroh, but her eyes strayed immediately as she responded. “Some are airbenders, yes. Most are neither spiritbender nor airbender, although if they were to...breed with one, their children may be.”

“So there could be more spiritbenders in a generation or so?” It was the first question Sura had allowed herself to ask in quite a while. Her hands stilled against Chihiro’s hair, and she lowered her palms until the girl could tug at them.

Anicca shook her head. “I do not believe so. Anyone with...talented blood lived in my village - save the Keepers, who are both too old to bear fruit. Even assuming that I should have a child...no, but even then it is too unlikely. There will be no more.” She very pointedly did not look at Iroh, who watched her with slitted, mistrustful eyes. “That is nothing to worry about. Especially right now.”

Sura looked from one face to another; one dark and stony, another only slightly less so. Anicca simply looked exhausted, which was only to be expected. Yet she kept talking, even as they all - save Toshiro and Chihiro, who ate meat rarely - helped themselves to the brace of badger-rabbits roasting over the fire. “I think things would make sense if we started from the beginning - then you can see more clearly what we are up against, and how it all came to be. Otherwise it will take too long to answer all the questions you may have, about spiritbenders and airbenders.” She took one last deep breath, locking eyes with her old friend as she did so. He offered her up a grim smile in
“Before the Elemental Age, the world was held by the power of the spirit-”

“Oh!” Sura clapped her hands over her mouth, but it was too late to hide her excitement. “I’m sorry! It’s just that I’ve heard this before, a little.” She continued when faced with Iroh’s questioning look. “Father told me. Apparently people used to bend their energy...or spirit, I guess...before they learned to bending elements. A great Lion-Turtle told him.” Sura nodded firmly, ignoring Iroh’s dubious glare.

“Your father...with Lion-Turtle? They are very rare, very powerful. He was lucky to meet.” Toshiro smiled for the first time that night in a small gesture of respect. “They are...how you say...symbols of big power.”

Anicca smiled too, but it was distant. “Perhaps it was not luck. Her father is Avatara, Toshiro.”

He looked at Sura sharply, his lips twisting into a frown. Yet just as quickly, his gaze dropped to the dozing child in her lap and his expression softened. Finally, he turned to Anicca who merely smiled.

“It is for the best. You could not have kept her here forever.”

He shook his head. “Later. For now...continue.”

So, gazing into the fire, she began again. “The history we were taught is a little different than what you were told - those with the power to control their spirits, or the spirits of others, became rulers in the ancient world. Eventually they abused their power. After centuries of this, people rose up against them, but they were beaten down again and again.” Her eyes flicked over to Iroh, but in the firelight Sura could not read their expression. “It was worse than the oppression of the Fire Nation 30 years ago. The spirit rulers could control every aspect of their slave’s lives - their power was far beyond any known in modern times - and could even hold back death. It was a dark time, a terrible time, for all peoples.

“Finally, the people’s pleas reached the ears of the Gods. After a long debate between them, they decided to gift their chosen worshippers with understanding from heaven - mastery over fire in the West, earth to the East, water to the North and to the South. They were bound together by those scattered throughout who could understand the wind, and when they came together, they finally stood a chance at defeating the tyrants who ruled them.

“So: they rose to war, and met with their captors in battles that spanned over the entirety of the earth. They fought desperately, and overturned many great cities and palaces built by their own hands. Yet even with their newfound powers, they were unable to win. They were finally beaten back, and would have been annihilated had the spiritbenders not felt their victory secure, and spared them, to better utilize their strange new talents.”

She paused her tale to swallow thickly, and when she began again she tore her eyes from the fire to look at each of them in turn. “The spiritbenders celebrated for three days and nights, parading their captured elementbenders throughout the streets. For those three days and nights the captured people wept, and prayed to heaven. Many offered up their lives to the gods simply so that their children might be free. Yet the gods were silent, and many lost hope.

“It was on the third night of their celebrations, however, that the spiritbenders began to die. They fell asleep and never awoke, and no one knew why. Soon it was they who turned to the gods, yet they were silent, as they had been to the elemental slaves. Desperation overtook them. The ruling population, whose numbers were already low from the war - dipped even further, and when their
numbers were less than the total of five battalions of soldiers, they turned to the slaves, none of whom had succumbed to the sickness. Help us, they begged. We will give you your freedom, if only you will spare our lives.

“Whether the Gods finally heard their cries, or the slaves got what they wanted, the sickness abated. The spiritbenders entered into a covenant with the elementals, and sealed away much of their power. The slaves were free, and the great empire of the spirit was over.”

She took a deep breath. “The number of spiritbenders fluctuated, yet were never enough to be of significance. They took to living in the shadows, apart from the people who remembered enough of their transgressions to hate them. They kept closest to the wind people, who found it easiest to forgive.

“For thousands of years my people stayed out of the events of your world, keeping to ourselves and our traditions. From time to time elemental benders would seek us out, but for the most part we passed out of history, only merging once more with the elemental people when the air nomads were being hunted down and killed. We took them in to our to our remaining villages, and they bolstered our numbers, as we did theirs. It is how a small number of them survived the purge, and lead to the existence of my friends.” Anicca leaned back, popping tight muscles in her back. “No doubt Toshiro can tell you more of the history of his people, but time is too precious, and I must continue.

“What concerns us today is the agreement made between the spiritbenders and the elementbenders. Of course you can see that the sickness of today is the sickness of from the story. Whether it was sent by the gods or benders I do not know. I do know that it is the price for breaking the covenant.”

“You’ve mentioned that several times now. Are you going to tell us what the dictates were? Or do we need to sit through ten more minutes of exposition first?”

Sura glared across the fire at Iroh. For a man who was slated to rule an entire nation, he was being very rude about this. Hate her or not, this was important information, and he didn’t have to be an ass every time he opened his mouth! A movement at the corner of her eye drew her attention, and she could see Iroh’s questions had not sat well with Toshiro either.

Before either could speak, Anicca gave him a dark look of her own, and continued. “The promise is, at its heart, quite simple. At the time there were many...aux-auxi...secondary issues, but those concerns have long passed. The core of it is this: the elemental benders may not kill a spiritbender with their element, while the spiritbenders may not use their abilities on any non-spiritbender without express permission.”

Sura’s arms clenched around the sleeping girl in her lap. “But...you’ve used it, haven’t you? When you healed the guard? And when we communicated...silently?” She ignored Iroh’s sharp look, and noted with interest that he said nothing about his own bond with the woman.

She smiled grimly. “It is true, these are examples of breaking the covenant - although I did not heal the guard, I merely established contact. Had the covenant not already been broken these would be heavy sins indeed. As it is, they are like raindrops falling into an ocean and until the demon is faced, I think it is more necessary than not. I do apologize, however, if I have caused you any discomfort.”

Sura shook her head slowly. “It’s fine. But since the sleeping sickness began 18 years ago...should we assume it was then that someone broke the promise? But who? And what did they do?”

Across the fire, Iroh stilled. “She would say it was the Avatar. It’s what she said when she met him, at least.”
“Father? But what could…” she trailed off, realizing the futility of the question. “Is it because he’s both? No, that wouldn’t...unless he used spiritbending during the war?” She gasped as she remembered. “Oh, La. He did use spiritbending! He channeled the spirit of La, the God of water, to take revenge on those who defiled the shrine!”

Anicca ran fingers through her tangled hair, deep in thought. “If a God was involved, then I think it could not be that. Gods are above the treaty, and if one possessed him it was not his will, and therefore not his action. I do not think that can be the transgression.”

“Wait, you mean you don’t know? How can you know all this - and know it was my father that started the sleeping sickness, and not know how?”

Anicca exhaled, her frustration evident. “Sura, I was three when the sickness began...and it’s not like I had access to the spirit world to ask the ancestors personally. Besides, I don’t think even Asha - or the spirits - knew, I remember how disturbed she was when even the wisest of our ancestors could not identify the root of the problem. All she would or could tell me was that the Avatar broke the promise sometime between the end of the war, and the start of the sleeping sickness. Logically, the only ways he could have done that were by killing a spiritbender...which is extremely unlikely, as he had no interaction with us during the war...or by using a spiritbending technique on a non-spiritbender.”

For the first time since the story began, Iroh and Sura locked eyes. Although their realization was the same, she was the first to speak. “Shit. Iroh, do you think...when he faced your-”

She was cut off by the flames in the firepit leaping impossibly high, the heat causing them all the lean back, and the light throwing the forest around them into flickering relief. The display ended immediately, but it was enough for Anicca to turn worried eyes on the firebender, and Toshiro to leap to his feet. Even after the flame settled he remained standing, clearly not trusting Iroh’s outburst.

Iroh was clearly still enraged, but when he spoke his voice was cold as steel. “The Avatar sealed my grandfather’s firebending abilities to end the war thirty years ago. He called it energybending, and claimed he was taught by your Lion-Turtle. I can think of no other instance he has used such techniques against anyone else.”

Curiously enough Anicca looked for Toshiro before confirming her suspicion. “But I thought the Avatar killed the Fire Lord to end the war...”

Sura shook her head decidedly before laying a hand on Anicca’s arm. “No. My father has - apart from the night La possessed him - never taken a life. He doesn’t even eat meat! It’s as Iroh said, Father took away Ozai’s firebending. But he claimed that Ozai did it first, and he only reacted-”

“No. That is impossible.” She smiled grimly to soften the blow, but was adamant. “The only living being to have both elemental and spiritual power is the Avatar. If the Fire Lord was a firebender, there is no possible way he could have used spiritbending at all.”

“Even if he was strengthened by the comet? My father claimed all firebenders received an enormous boost to their abilities, and were capable of things beyond their usual scope.” Iroh’s face was still tight with anger, yet he allowed his eyes to swing in Anicca’s direction, so Sura supposed he wasn’t about to launch fireballs at her face.

Although Iroh clearly disliked looking her in the eyes, Anicca held no such compunction. “And could he start waterbending? Earthbending? If the comet strengthened his abilities as a firebender, that is fine. But a comet cannot magically teach him how to spiritbend. That is impossible.”
“So is the idea of the Avatar making up a story like that. He could have easily killed the Fire Lord and no one would ever blame him, save himself. That he spared his life was—”

“-his personal choice, and perhaps the wrong one. If that is what happened. It is harder to believe that our sacred protector - the Lion-Turtle - taught him this technique without cautioning him on its consequences.”

Sura and Toshiro exchanged a worried glance as the fire grew higher the more Anicca and Iroh argued. Sura had rarely seen Iroh lose his temper, and judging by the surprise on Toshiro’s face, it was the same for Anicca. She decided to intervene before they accidentally burned the camp down. “But the Fire Lord tried to kill Father. Doesn’t that also break the treaty?”

Anicca tore her eyes away from Iroh and breathed deeply, attempting to banish the anger that danced like flame along her nerves. “I...am not sure. I would say no, as the Avatar is primarily an elemental bender. But I am not fluent with the laws of the Avatars. I only know the laws of the spiritbenders—”

“Does it matter?” Three heads turned as one to the airbender, who transferred his weight from one leg to the other. He looked uncomfortable with the sudden attention, but forged on anyway. “‘Tis Avatara’s problem, he must fix. ‘Tis not why you are here, no? You have more...no, other purpose. Or am I wrong?” He glanced quickly at Sura, and was heartened by her encouraging smile. Any levity was lost when he turned back to Anicca, however. “You must stop velnias—”

“Demon,” Anicca corrected.

“Daymon, then. ‘Tis your purpose.” He continued in his own tongue, and although Sura could not understand it, she saw the way Anicca stiffened when he mentioned Rama.

“You are right, Toshiro. That is our duty - we must stop the demon that my people brought to this world.” She glanced over at Sura, and her eyes lingered at Chihiro, still fast asleep in her lap. “But that is not your job - you must seek out the Avatar. Chihiro needs instruction, and he will need you. But you will need a guide...” she trailed off, looking suggestively at Sura.

Sura’s eyes widened when her three companions all turned towards her. They all agreed? What was this, some sort of conspiracy? “Oh, no. I worked way too hard to get you here - I’m coming with you guys!” Chihiro stirred in her lap and she automatically lowered her voice. “They honestly can’t make their way to Ba Sing Se?”

“They don’t speak the language fluently, Sura. And no, they have never been to a large elemental city. Besides, will your father trust them if they do not follow you? These are dark times, and it would be too easy to think them a demon’s trick if they come alone.”

Although Sura saw the truth in her words, and a large part of her wanted to be the one to proudly present the long lost airbenders to her father, she had been dreaming of adventure all her life. To have it taken away now, and to have to go back home was anticlimactic and completely unfair! “But...you and Iroh will kill each other! You can barely look at each other without spitting and snarling! How will you succeed if you don’t have me to buffer?”

“We will be fine.” Iroh’s voice was calm and sure, and brooked no opposition. If Sura hadn’t known him so well, she couldn’t have told he was lying - even King Toph had trouble reading him, just as she had his Aunt Azula. At her left, Anicca looked at him with guarded eyes, and Sura suspected she also recognized the lie, however. That bond was probably driving them crazy, but had to be useful at least in times like these. “Besides, we promised the King we’d have you home within a day or so. Would you make us liars?”
Sura stuck out her chin. “Iroh, I don’t give a damn about what you told the King—”

“And what about your father?” Anicca smiled gently. “If you don’t return, how will he know the truth of what happened? How will he be able to stop the sickness if you do not return and tell him this story?”

“I...well...we could—”

“You don’t want to go with me? Or Chihiro?” Toshiro nodded to the girl in her lap. “She likes you very much. Does not sleep in my lap.”

His simple observation made her protests catch in her throat. She swung her eyes down to the sleeping angel in her lap, before gritting her teeth. She had very nearly played into his hands...that man had seemed simple but he was dangerous. “No, I would like that very much, but—”

“Amma?” Chihiro picked that exact moment to wake, clutch Sura tightly, and whisper in her native tongue. Although there very few cognates between Chihiro’s tongue and her own, she could recognize ‘mama’ well enough. A surge of uncontrollable love flooded her, and her innate domesticity finally won out. She scowled deeply at her adult companions before settling her arms around Chihiro.

“I hate you all. Except for you, Chihiro. Iroh, you better be sending me hawk messages at every opportunity. Also, don’t kill Anicca.” She shifted her eyes to Anicca. “Same goes for you, ok? Try to get along, you two. Otherwise I’ll sic my dad on you when you get back.” She turned to Toshiro, who had not shifted his odd, light eyed gaze from her. “So we’ll leave at first light, yeah? That way we’ll be back before dark. On the way you are telling me everything, mister. I have been so patient all night and tomorrow all your knowledge is mine.”

He raised his eyebrows, but nodded. “If...if you wish.”

“Then we should sleep now. Dawn will come quickly enough as it is.” Iroh smirked across the fire at her, as if he knew exactly how exhausted she was. “Give my respects to the appropriate people. Tell Father and the earth king that I will honor their wishes. Tell Koru not to be stupid.”

Sura nodded as she yawned, and then the camp broke down into a quiet flurry of activity. Anicca claimed the first watch, and by the looks Toshiro was giving her, he would be assisting. Eventually Sura found herself ensconced in her sleeping bag, with Chihiro pressed up closely against her. It was not long before the child’s quiet breathing lulled her to sleep.

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After Sura and Iroh bedded down for the night, Anicca and Toshiro found time to talk.

“I don’t understand, ‘Shiro. How could this happen?’

“The spirits willed it, my friend. Is it so hard to know it was the work of a demon?”
“I know, but...no, it is worse than you know. Things were wrong before the ritual was completed - Rama was accused of...perversion. By the Chief! I know he refused to marry his daughter, but to accuse him of such a thing is too much. Far too much.”

“The Chief was desperate. Can you be sure you know the extent of their conversations? Do not be so quick to judge, Ani. You have spent the last few months with Asha, there is much you may have missed.”

She looked sharply at her friend. “Do you know something? Were things so much worse than I knew?” Yet she cut him off before he could do more than look in her direction. “No, that doesn’t matter now. He’s dead Toshiro. They all are. My parents, my family, everyone…” She shook with the effort to hold back her tears, and she gripped his hand between hers. “I am sorry, my friend. I have destroyed everything - our way of life, and the haven you established for Chihiro. I am thankful you two were away from the village that day...but I think that I may never atone for my sins. Even if we stop the demon, I will always be a murderer.” Anicca cried openly now, and Toshiro guided her so that she sobbed against his shoulder. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry…”

They remained that way for a long time, until her eyes were dry and her hiccups had quieted. Toshiro stroked her hair, giving what comfort he could. Eventually her exhaustion won out, and he laid her down on her bag, pressing a dry kiss onto her forehead. She was asleep in moments.

Toshiro made a full rotation, glancing into the forest for any dangerous animals. Even so, he suspected the true danger was already within the camp.

“I know you are awake, firebender.”

Iroh opened his eyes, but said nothing. He merely returned Toshiro’s challenging look with one of his own.

“If you fail her, I will hunt you down. I do not care that you are prince. Or fire. Or you hate her. Bring her home. Or you will never take in air again.”

Before Iroh could do anything other than wrinkle his eyebrows in confusion, the world around him stilled. For one terrifying moment his lungs could pull in nothing - no matter how he tried there was no oxygen in the air. Neither could he call his inner flame, as there was nothing to burn. His eyes flew to the airbender, who had gripped his left hand into a fist. As soon as they made eye contact he unclenched his hand, and air flooded Iroh’s lungs.

Iroh breathed deeply, filling his lungs to their capacity. He was incredibly tempted to breathe fire right into the airbender’s impudent face, but years of hard-earned discipline won out. He settled for glaring, instead. “Threaten me again, airbender, and you will find I have other weapons than merely flame. I would not test me. After all, you need me at my best to protect your friend.” Toshiro’s eyes narrowed and Iroh smirked in response. That had hit a nerve, had it? Well, it was his own damn fault. Everyone and their grandmother had been pushing him around for the last few days, and he was done with feeling helpless. Besides, it wasn’t as if he had overtly threatened her - he didn’t like her, but he would do his job. Why did everyone assume he was going to kill her?

...well, besides the time he was actually going to kill her. But that was before he understood the situation, and more importantly she shouldn’t know about that. So why was the airbender acting like he had a legitimate reason to be wary of him?

Eventually, Toshiro nodded, and turned away. He walked off into the trees, supposedly to find a resting place for the night. Seeing that it was his time to watch, Iroh sat up, shrugging off his thin blanket and propping himself against his pack. His keen eyes tracked the darkness, and although he
did not look directly at her for the rest of his shift, he spent an unforgivable amount of time trying to forget the sensation of her tears ghosting tracks down his own cheeks, and the way his heart had sympathetically loosened when the airbender had held her. For the twelfth time that day, Iroh wished he had nothing to do with this entire mess.

...he’d almost rather meet his fiancee than this.

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Chapter End Notes  

It's been a long time since I've seen the finale, but here is what I remember from it: Ozai *magically* got spiritbending powers, because why not. This way, Aang was not forced to be the aggressor in their battle, because it's a kid show? I don't know. I do remember a very satisfying battle against Azula, because she was crazy and my favorite, and Zuko and Katara were pretty much the darkest good characters and kickass fighters at the end.  

Point of ramble: Ozai could not spiritbend. I don't understand. If I'm getting it way wrong, then I'm sorry. But even the 14 and 10 yr olds I babysat/watched the series with were upset about this.

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In other news, New Iroh may be the sexiest male lead I've ever written about. Very excited about him haha!

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Lastly, Chihiro does *not* look like little orphan Annie. If you must call upon a literary heroine to compare her to, think Anne of Green Gables (minus the braids) in angelic toddler form.
Interlude 7: Swift Wings

(Mid year 9)

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All rivers flow to the ocean,
all waves halt at the shore;
But love, they say, is boundless
In olden books of lore.

So take my love and hold it fast
When on your journey you must go;
I will not mourn you when you’re gone
For there is one thing that I know:

There are no gods to judge us
all are as beggars and kings;
yet surely as winter swallows fall
Death comes on swift wings.

-Funeral poem from the Gaoling region -

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Katara glanced out from underneath the hood of her cloak, looking up at the bright blue sky above the docks of Capital City. She was the last passenger off the boat, and unlike the other passengers,
she felt no desperate need to disembark. After all, the fire nation was not her native home, nor had she fallen prey to the sea sickness that had affected so many others. Most importantly, she couldn’t help but acknowledge that there was a large part of her that dreaded the coming days - her reintroduction into the world at large, not to mention her friend’s lives wouldn’t be easy, after a year and a half spent apart.

As she walked down the gangplank, her attention was caught by familiar yet foreign sights and sounds - the lapping of waves against the dock, the creak of ropes and wood, the chatter of fire nation citizens, the smell of spices in the air, the cries of strange birds...all of it made her throat tighten with fear and excitement. After so long, she had finally made her way back to the place she had fought all her young life to reach, and was now the home and kingdom of the man she had once called her best friend. Would that hold true, even now? How would Zuko react when she turned up on his doorstep, after not communicating throughout the entirety of her long journey?

Such fears had plagued her throughout the boat ride, and it kept her from discreetly waterbending so as to lessen the length of the journey. Truth be told, she was nearly as afraid of Zuko’s reaction as she was of Aang’s. The others were not nearly so terrifying. Suki and Sokka she had long ago made peace with, as they had been part of the catalyst for her leaving in the first place. Toph had also understood, citing her own propensity to take matters into her own hands whenever things got too annoying. Leave matters to me, Sweetness, she had advised in her scribe-dictated letter, delivered to her by a discreet White Lotus messenger. Do what you need to do, as long as you come home with the answers that you’re looking for.

That she hadn’t come home at all - let alone with answers - caused Katara’s step to falter. Instead, she had come to the fire nation, where she would undergo the last step in her journey. Undoing the clasp at the collar of her cloak, her fingers gently stroked the pendant at her throat. Surely, she wouldn’t be unwelcome here? Their promise couldn’t have meant so little?

As little as her marriage vows?

Katara strode forward purposefully, shaking away the ghost of indecision. If memory served her correctly, she was half an hour’s walk away from the palace. It should be just enough time to plan what she would say, as the trip here had been spent partly in self-recrimination, and otherwise in healing the seasick passengers. So, to plan: first, she would knock on the palace door, letting her hood fall back so that she might be recognized. If not, she would then announce herself, and then ask if Zuko or Uncle were in residence, and if they were unavailable, then perhaps Lady Mai? Here was where her plan fragmented. If Mai was the first one she saw, there would simply be a polite nod, perhaps a disengaged question or two about where she’d been. Then a bath, some food, and if she were lucky, a glance at little Iroh. If Uncle found her first, it would be a bit more complicated. There would be hugs and wide smiles, and many perceptive questions about their time apart. Yet there would also be tea, and hopefully dinner and a bath in this scenario as well, and then assuredly a glance at the fire prince.

If it were Zuko… Katara’s stomach clenched, and she had to swallow past the dryness in her throat. If it were Zuko, she had no idea what she would do. Nor what he might. Yet she did know that even in silence, she’d be able to tell whether he had forgiven her for running away, or if he blamed her for it. If nothing else, she could depend on that.

Rather than imagine the inevitable meeting between the Fire Lord and herself, Katara let her thoughts wind back over the past two years, starting with when she had absconded from her home in the south. For many days - many weeks, really - she had been too angry to think straight, and she had travelled haphazardly to the village of Makapu where Aunt Wu lived. Until she knew for certain whether it was she who was infertile or her husband, she couldn’t let go of her anger. It was as ever
present as a phantom; riding her like a living thing, ruling her dreams until all she could imagine were
the worst scenarios. When she had finally found the aged mystic, she had been more than a little
unhinged - it had taken Aunt Wu almost thirty minutes of consoling the irrational young woman on
her doorstep before she could even determine what was wrong. Once that was done, however, Wu
had leaned back in her chair, holding a cup of tea within wrinkled hands, lined with age spots. Faced
with all of Katara’s pain, rage, and her jagged, broken heart she had said simply this: that when her
hatred had passed and she found herself again, Katara would bear a child.

That was all. Nothing about her previous prophecy, Aang’s fertility, nor when, how, or even how
many children she could expect. It did address her own fertility, but that inadequacy had already
been laid to rest by Yugoda, a month before. Katara had gaped at the wise woman for nearly a
minute before helplessness washed over her, more powerful than the ocean’s waves. She broke
down sobbing in Wu’s kitchen, and all throughout wondered who she had become.

By nightfall she had fallen ill with fever, and as there were no other waterbenders to heal her, spent
the better part of three days in fever-dreams. Vacillating between chills and spiking temperatures, her
dreams adjusted accordingly - at times she dreamt of her friends and her family; of love and pain and
promises. Yet towards the end she dreamt of the war, and of the gods, and of the people she had
saved. When the fever finally broke, her first thoughts were of Zuko, of how his redemption had
begun in the tea shop in Ba Sing Se, when he had been broken down by sickness and despair. When
he awoke he’d had to fashion himself anew. Feeling more like herself than she had in years, Katara
knew she now had to do the same thing.

She wrote letters to her family and Toph and Uncle, and then finally to Aang. I’ve been sick but am
out of danger, she’d written. I need some time to recuperate. If you love me, you won’t come looking
for me. I will return when I’m better. To Aang, she had written something more: I forgive you. Do
not forget who you are. With his letter, however, she had enclosed her wedding ring. It would not
help her find herself, and she was not cruel enough to hold him to her when hope would only be a
lie.

To Zuko, she could not write. She feared that if she wrote to him, she would write everything and
yet it would still end in nothing. Worse, she had finally learned to worry, now that she realized his
hold on her heart had not been shaken when all else had. She remembered the look on Suki’s face
when she told her about the secret of their necklaces. Now, she understood. All too late, she
understood.

Thus began her journey, her sojourn from her past and duties, away from her well-meaning friends
and family. She had traveled the length and breadth of the earth kingdom, never staying in one place
for more than a week or two. Healing was her primary purpose, and it made her think fondly of her
escapades as the painted lady - enough so to procure a wide-brimmed hat on the fourth month of her
travels. Although she had not gone so far as to paint her face, she had adopted many pseudonyms -
most more believable than Sapphire Fire - and over the next twelve months met people and made
friends that she otherwise would never have known. She sampled dishes, heard wondrous stories,
birthed babies and attended weddings, and huddled in exhaustion over the corpses of patients she
could not save. At times she laughed, at others she cried, and there were days when she felt so strong
she suspected she could move mountains. Yet at the end of every night, no matter where she was or
what she was doing, her fingers pressed against the necklace at her throat, and she thought of flame.

In retrospect, it was so obvious. How had she not known? Because she had not wanted to know, and
because she truly had loved her husband, as well. Was it possible to love two men at once, with
differing levels of intensity and longevity? Katara had never thought so before, but now she knew
better. That she had only realized it when both were forever beyond her reach only increased her
determination. She would have a child; Aunt Wu had promised. She had to believe in that prophecy,
just as fervently as she had the first. Yet it hinged not only on her ability to let off her anger...she had to learn to love a third time, as well.

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Eventually the day came where Katara could no longer deny that she was delaying the inevitable, and brave as she had grown to be, she was putting off her return. If she could not forget how to love Zuko in over a year with no communication, she likely never would. Were that the case, she was only doing herself and her remaining loved ones a disservice by staying away.

Perhaps there was one final test, however. The image of Zuko in her heart was not necessarily accurate. Even if it was, seeing him interact with his wife and child might be what she needed to end her feelings for him - and the final step in becoming someone new. Before she could change her mind, she wrote letters to all her friends, and even Aang, after a day’s reflection. Then, she boarded the first ship to the fire nation, and all she could hope was that the woman she had become was stronger than her feelings for the man Zuko had been.

Now the palace walls were in view, and Katara had to shut her eyes firmly to hold back tears. This long walk felt like a goodbye, as if she were shutting away the last part of the old her, the only aspect of herself that had survived her time apart. Yet beyond those walls was her future, even if not with the man she loved….nor her husband. *It’s just the first step*, Katara told herself, preparing her mind for what must follow. *Not the journey. All I need to do is knock...fate will take care of the rest.* 

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The firelord paced the length of the waiting room, wishing that he had not made defacing government property illegal. As it was, he had to make do with scowling deeply and channelling his nerves into the fire sconces on the wall, three of which had already cracked from the sudden spike of heat.

“Zuko. Mai will be fine. Babies come early all the time - you were at least a week early as well. Now, come. Have some tea. It will soothe your nerves.” Uncle held out a steaming teacup, delicately scented with hibiscus, rose, and cinnamon. All this was lost on Zuko, however, as he tossed back the beverage in one fell swoop. Had he not been a firebender, he would have burned his esophagus. As it was, it barely made him pause from his pacing.

“Tea is for *savoring*, Zuko-”

“Not now, Uncle.” Even so, the firelord attempted to hold still, restricting himself to playing with the border on his high-collared, imperial robes. The detente lasted for under a minute, and then he was back to striding about the small room.

Uncle watched him while nursing his own cup of tea. High strung as his nephew could be, it *was* an improvement over Iroh’s birth. Then, he had been too terrified to move; sitting for hours clutching his knees with a grip that left them bruised for days afterwards. Now, it was pacing. And although it was bound to be better for his knees, the servants were going to have a fit when they saw what he had done to the new rug.
He took another sip and breathed the steam in deeply. Ah, but he was getting old! Gone were the
days he could simply smack his nephew over the back of the head and command him to sit down.
Well, not that he ever promoted familial violence, but the principle remained. He was past his prime
now, although by no means infirm, and there was no physical means of keeping Zuko from pacing a
hole in the floor. If the rug was to be saved, he would have to rely on his wiles...and if even that
failed, something even more potent.

He shifted his weight and Katara’s letter crackled against his hip.

“Nephew. If you are not too busy breaking the new rug in, perhaps you could sit and talk with me?”

Zuko huffed, twitchily eying the door. If he didn’t know from past experience that his uncle would
simply drag him right back, he would have been out racing about the palace hours ago. “I’m not sure
now is the best time, Uncle-”

“Indulge me.” There was no arguing with him and that tone of voice. Zuko dropped gracelessly
down into the chair across from him, and immediately began toying with everything within reach.
Uncle shifted his teacup away from his nervous nephew, just in case his reach extended to his half of
the table. “There are things we should discuss, and although I realize you are in no state of mind to
give it serious thought, it might be a good time to get acquainted with it. Now, if it is as Lady Mai
believes and she births a daughter, there will be nothing to worry about. If she births a son,
however…”

Zuko set down the ornamented, duck-shaped paper weight with an amount of force that no paper
weight merited. “The Fire Sages can go hang. I’m not raising either of my children the way they
prescribe - the second child to be treated as a spare indeed. That was probably half the problem with
Azula, and I’m not subjecting any of my children to the Fire Sages’ foolishness. Ever.”

Uncle allowed himself a small smile for his nephew’s noble vehemence. Zuko was a doting father,
even when crippled by fear that he would fail. Yet his desire to protect and nurture his unborn child
proved just how worthy a father he was. “I am glad to hear it. Know that I will lend my full
assistance to whatever you choose to do. The Fire Sages have held sway for too long…” Trailing off
suggestively, he saw that whatever he said would have to be delivered with the subtlety of a
jackhammer. Yet perhaps Zuko was right and now wasn’t the right time for undermining the close-
minded religious institution that had enabled Sozin and Ozai to wage war on the world. He had to
think of something lighter. “Speaking of the child’s gender, what would you choose? Would you still
prefer a girl?”

Zuko’s gaze dropped to his hands, and for a moment Uncle felt as if he had inadvertently stumbled
onto something personal. Yet it was by no means an unexpected question. What could Zuko be
thinking of that made his mouth twist and his eyes fill with regret?

“I...I'm not sure if it matters, this time. I’d welcome either. I don’t have a preference.”

Lying. His nephew was lying to him, and about something incomprehensible. What did it matter if
he still preferred a girl child? And why would he not just admit it? Somewhat miffed that Zuko was
hiding something from him, he brought forth his biggest piece of news without his usual skillful
segue way, largely to see his expression. “I received a letter a few days ago. Apparently it had been
delayed during the Midsummer Festival. Would you like to know what it said?”

Zuko twisted to side, clearly done with the conversation and impatient to resume his pacing. “Not
really, Uncle. I am a little preoccupied at the moment. If you have no more questions...?”

Spirits forgive him, but he was enjoying drawing out the suspense. “You don’t even care to know
who it was from?"

The firelord ran his hands through his hair, dislodging his crown and ruffling his immaculate topknot. He then picked up the paperweight again, squinting at the garish displacement of aquamarine stones. “I thought we’d agreed on no important matters of state until Mai gave birth, Uncle. Surely whomever sent you this all-important letter can wait.”

He waited a beat to gain Zuko’s attention. Then, he smirked. “I’ll be sure to tell her you said so. I would worry though, as her temper is somewhat legendary. No, I certainly wouldn’t want to anger a master wate—”

Just then, the door swung open violently, smacking against the wall. One of the midwife’s servants entered, breathless and terrified - so much so that she made no attempt at obeisance before her lord. “My lord! Please, you must come quickly!”

Zuko shot to his feet and Uncle rose quickly as well, grimacing at the shoot of pain through his old bones. “What is the matter? Is it Mai? The baby?”

“Yes, my lord. The midwife says...I am so sorry. It does not look good. She’s not sure she can save either of them, at this point.”

Zuko paled and swayed on his feet. Uncle steadied him, all mirth lost. All thoughts of the wayward waterbender vanished, replaced with the memories of his own wife, whom he had lost in childbirth so many years ago. “Take us to her.”

“Right away, sir.”

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For all her projected expectations, meeting a manic Ty Lee within moments of entering the palace had not been one of them.

“Katara! Oh thank Agni! Follow me, quickly!”

Katara struggled to keep up with the acrobat, and was stuck by the oddity of this greeting. Ty Lee was a little quirky and very excitable, but usually not desperate. Then Katara noticed the blood stains on her pink tunic and deep down, she understood. “What happened? Who’s injured?”

Ty Lee spared a glance at her companion before continuing their breakneck pace to the healing chambers. “It’s Mai - something’s wrong with the baby. The midwife can’t turn him, and she’s lost so much blood...oh Agni. Please, you have to help them!”

Katara stumbled, but Ty Lee’s grip on her was firm. Mai was pregnant again. The news should probably break her heart, but Katara was first and foremost a healer, and even her heart knew her priorities. She increased her pace so that she nearly outstripped Ty Lee, knowing there was no point in asking her questions about the procedure. “I’ll do my best, Ty Lee. How long has she been in labor? And is there plenty of water in the birthing chamber?”

“About 5 hours now. And there should be - there was when I left. Right through here.” Ty Lee led
her through an inconspicuous door, and at Katara’s questioning glance explained. “It’s the servant’s entrance. I figured we should get you in here without running into Uncle and Zuko...saves us time.”

Katara was surprised but pleased at her friend’s quick thinking. Then there was no more time for auxiliary concerns. Mai was before them, lying pale and weak on a bed whose white sheets had been stained red. Katara sucked in a deep breath. This was bad. Even for a baby newly delivered there was far too much blood. There was very little chance of the baby having survived, especially if it was a breech birth. Moving briskly past Ty Lee, Katara nodded to the midwife, who stood between Mai’s thighs, forearms covered in blood. “Madam. What’s been done? Has the baby been turned?”

Although Katara did not recognize the midwife, she recognized her. “Master Waterbender! No, we’ve been unable...if we’re to save the Lady’s life, this is our last chance to turn back. We will need to cut the babe out, and it will not survive the procedure. Yet to lose the Fire Lady—”

Mai moaned, and to Katara’s ears it sounded more like a keening animal than any human noise. She hadn’t realized - nor expected - Mai to be conscious, not with all the blood she had lost. “It’s going to be ok, Mai. We’re going to get you through this—”

“No,” Mai whispered, opening her eyes with supreme effort. “No. Save the baby. Not me. Save the baby.”

Katara’s breath caught in her throat. She had seen such selflessness before, and had heard other dying mothers make the same plea. And Mai was the Fire Lady, Zuko’s wife. She couldn’t give up so easily! Determined, Katara summoned clean water from the pitcher in the window, and settled it over Mai’s abdomen. Using techniques she had perfected during the last 18 months, she bent all her focus on healing the most heavily damaged tissue, so that there may be a chance to save both mother and babe. With that finished, she turned to the midwife, whose mouth had fallen open.

“We will save both of them. Now, we have a chance!”

The two women worked tirelessly. Katara discreetly utilized both waterbending and bloodbending techniques to staunch to heavy flow of blood, and to heal the ravages of birth left on Mai’s skin. The midwife continued her efforts to turn the babe, and even Ty Lee found little ways to be helpful - replacing the linen, bathing Mai’s brow with a cool, soaked cloth, and providing what the other two could not: heartfelt reassurance to Mai that all would be well.

“We will get through this! We will get through this!”

Yet as the hours dragged on Katara’s hope dimmed, although her determination did not fade. The baby was stuck, and was now lodged so that turning him was next to impossible without endangering Mai’s life. Katara continued to use every trick she had learned over the last 18 months, yet none of it was working, and Mai’s energy was fading quickly. Finally, when the midwife excused herself to avail herself of a chamber pot and Ty Lee was out getting fresh bedding, Katara allowed herself a moment’s pause to look up at her patient.

Once again, Mai had surprised her. The fire lady watched her back, exhausted and weak, yet there was still a spark in her eye. She gestured at the carafe of water, and Katara obliged, bending some directly into her mouth. When she had swallowed thickly, wincing in pain as another contraction threatened to tear her womb apart, she finally spoke. “Katara. You...you know what must be done. I asked you before - please save the baby. Now I command you. Save my baby.”

As Katara shook her head helplessly she was forced to bend the liquid around the placenta - and she
couldn’t even tell whether it was bloodbending or waterbending now - to keep the baby from causing irreparable damage to Mai’s body. “No, Mai. I am not going to let you die. You can’t give up on me like this!”

Mai cried out in pain as another spasm tore through her, yet there was no real energy in it. She had been battling herself for nearly 8 hours, and there was little left to give. “Listen to me. I carried this baby for 9 long months. It is mine. It is me. I am its mother. So if you let my baby die to save me, I promise you. I will haunt your every step. I will render you barren, and force you to be alone and miserable for the rest of your life.” Salty tears trailed down her cheek, and Katara watched them fall, astounded. “This is my child, Katara. Please. Don’t let it die!”

Katara had birthed many children, and seen too many mothers die in the attempt. Yet this was different - this was someone she had known, and was loved by those that she loved. And there was something so noble about Mai’s last request, buoyed by the expectation of her demand to be followed. Yet she had also begged, for the child she would never know...yet had clearly loved so much.

It was then that the Ty Lee returned, arms full of clean linen. She raced into the room, and with panicked eyes gripped Katara’s shoulders. “The midwife just told Zuko that there’s nothing we can do! She’s giving up! I told her to fuck off, but she pretty much told him Mai was a goner...how can she do that?” Ty Lee’s enraged tears glimmered on her cheeks and it was then that she looked at her best friend, conscious and listening in. With just one glance she knew what Mai had decided, however, able to read it in the women’s auras. She dropped the bedding and rushed to her friend’s side, gripping her hand within her own and kissing it. “Oh Mai. Mai.”

“I’m not afraid, Ty.” Mai’s head fell back against the bed, and Ty Lee followed her. Her lips moved, and Katara knew she whispered something private. She averted her eyes, casting around for more water. She would need it to turn the baby...as well as delivering it safely. And then she would need Ty Lee, because saving the baby was one thing, but trying to save Mai would require two sets of hands.

“Hold on, Mai,” she whispered, one hand settling on her swollen abdomen, the other concentrating on swirling the fluids within her. “We’re not giving up yet. Ty Lee, I need you to hold her down - I’m going to turn the baby. Mai, listen. This is going to hurt like hell. But it is not going to kill you. You and the baby are going to be fine. I promise.”

“Save...baby…” Mai trailed off, too weak to articulate. Ty Lee bounded over to her, holding down Mai’s hips with unexpected strength. She tilted her head away from Mai so that she couldn’t overhear her whisper.

“What are you going to do? The midwife said-”

Katara blew back a stray hair from her face, where it promptly stuck to the sweat on her brow. “I can’t turn the baby with water...otherwise I’d have done it hours ago. There’s too much internal bleeding...so I’m going to turn it with her blood.”

“You can do that?”

Katara exhaled raggedly. “It’s not something I’m proud of, but in this circumstance? I’ll do it. If it can save them…”

Ty Lee nodded determinedly, and as both hands were in use, leaned over to place a firm kiss on Katara’s cheek. “It’ll be ok. We can do this! Are you ready?”
“Hold her down.” Katara closed her eyes, focusing her concentration on the body within Mai’s own. There - through faint tendrils of her power, she could hear the baby’s heartbeat. But it was weak, almost as weak as Mai’s own. There was no more time. “Ty Lee - now!”

Taking control of the blood within one’s body always made her hyperaware of the blood within herself. It was this way now, and when she bent the blood around the baby, gently guiding its head to the birthing canal, Katara could feel the blood in her own uterus flow in response. Yet she ignored the sudden, unnatural instigation of her moonblood just as she did the anguished cries of the fire lady. Her only purpose was to deliver this baby; the only sound in the universe was the baby’s heart, pumping through her fingers, through her mind, through her blood.

“Katara, hurry!”

From far away Ty Lee yelled, but she was too hyper focused on the baby to attend. Now that the baby was turned, she devoted all her strength to increasing the pace of the birth, and the baby slipped through the canal more quickly than any other birth she had assisted. Such was her connection with the infant that she could have sworn she felt a puff of air on her own scalp when the baby crowned, and within minutes she held the infant in her arms, snipping off the umbilical cord with the scissors on the birthing tray with a practiced motion.

For a moment she allowed herself to glance at the baby - male, perfect...yet silent, covered in blood, and with lips tinged blue. Katara’s heart stopped, just as baby’s had. No! Mai had not worked this hard to let the baby die now! Thinking back to the last stillbirth she had delivered, she pinched the baby’s nose and sealed her lips over his. Opening his little mouth with her own, she simultaneously breathed into him, and probed his heart with her energy. One tiny squeeze and the exhalation of her breath into his lungs...and the heartbeat began anew, the infant wailing.

“Mai! You did it! He’s alive!” Ty Lee called out to her friend, but Mai was nearly gone. Katara held out the child to her, giving Mai a clear glance of the wonder she had battled out of her body.

“A son...” Mai whispered, and the exhaustion and pain was replaced with sheer love “My so-”

Before she could even hold her child, the light in her eyes went out, her body falling slack against the bed. She exhaled in a gentle rush, and Katara had seen enough people die like this to know it was her last.

“Mai, no! Hold on!” Ty Lee begged her friend, tears streaming down her face. Knowing there was nothing they could do but determined to do it anyway, Katara placed the baby into her arms, directing her to sit at the head of Mai’s bed. Between her pleas and the baby’s wails, Katara bent back over the body, doing all she could. Yet there was no gainsaying death, and when even after her steadfast efforts Mai’s heart refused to beat, she knew it was over.

Katara looked down at Mai’s face, and there was a serenity there at odds with the sweat on her brow, the paleness of her cheeks, and the lip nearly bitten through. Then she looked at the baby in Ty Lee’s arms, still wailing lustily. When she brought her eyes to Ty Lee’s, the acrobat was waiting for her. She stood, made her way over to the waterbender, and placed the squalling babe into her arms.

“Here. Clean him up. I’ll go alert the midwife...and give her a piece of my mind. Take the baby to the antechamber outside - I left some linens to swaddle him there.” Katara nodded sadly, looking down at the child in her arms. The effort to cry nonstop was exhausting him, and he was quieting down, slowly and surely.

Ty Lee paused to trace a finger down the baby’s blood-covered cheek. “I’m sorry. I’d stay with you, but the funeral traditions for royalty are time sensitive...and I need to tell the embalmers before I start weeping.” Surprising her once again, Ty Lee rose up on her toes to place a kiss on Katara’s other
cheek. “Thank you, Katara. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t come. Mai died at peace, thanks to you - I could see it in her aura. I will never forget this…”

With that ringing in her ears, Ty Lee fled through the servant’s entrance, and Katara faced the outer door. She wiped the baby clean of blood and placenta with a simple gesture, thinking abstractly - a little in shock - of what would need to happen next. A wet nurse must be called for, and Zuko, of course. Hopefully Ty Lee would quickly track down the midwife, for she would know who to call to…prepare Mai’s body. Ty Lee would also have to present the baby, and break the news of Mai’s death. In all the hubbub she could slip away, or even just lay down on the floor and sleep for 1000 years, because she hadn’t had to deal with this cocktail of exhaustion and sorrow since the war...and to top it all off she had just begun to cry.

Katara fumbled with the doorknob, so intent on opening the door without causing the baby to cry again that she didn’t notice the two men standing in the room until she walked through; body soaked in blood, cheeks in tears. Yet their gasp made her look up, and in her shock she nearly dropped the baby.

“Katara! The baby - what of Lady Mai, does she live?”

“Katara.”

Katara ignored Zuko’s earnest whisper, yet she could not look away from the anguish in his eyes. “Zuko, I’m so sorry. We managed to save the baby, but…Mai, she…I was too late. I couldn’t save her.”

Zuko stared into her eyes like a drowning man reaches for shore, but Uncle moved to her, supporting both her and the baby before she collapsed. She had just enough presence of mind to deposit the naked baby into his arms, wherein he placed a gentle kiss on the baby’s forehead.

“You did all you could, Katara. That you were able to save the child - the midwife assured us both were lost…” Uncle continued, but Katara heard none of it. All the tension and exhaustion of the last several hours hit her at once, combining with the loneliness of the past several years. She was unsure of who moved first, whether it was her or the fire lord. All she knew was that in the next moment they were in each other’s arms, both weeping as if the world had ended.

If she had known that she would bring death in her wake, she would have never come home.

Chapter End Notes

This week on: the most upsetting story I’ve ever written in my life.
So Zuko and Katara are reunited, at long last. Thoughts on where it will go from here?
There are plenty of rocks in the road ahead...but some sweetness too. Stay tuned! ^_^
Once upon a time, there was a woman who left her home and family in search of a new life. What she found instead was a forest of ghosts.

Yet she had not been raised to give up halfway, so she made her way through the spirits until she found a bear resting at the foot of a great tree.

Which is the path to the moon? She asked the bear. And once I find it, may I come home again?

~First excerpt from Annica’s fairytale~

With their world turned upside down by mysterious spirit benders, the sleeping sickness, and secrets that seemingly refused to be kept a moment longer, it was easy to forget the reason why everyone had converged in Ba Sing Se in the first place. Tomorrow was the Remembrance Ceremony, during the rehearsal Zuko finally found the time to muse on the events of the past few days. He couldn’t help but feel a little detached from the rehearsal. Although the newly elected White Lotus Grandmaster was speaking well; extolling Uncle’s virtues within a larger framework of calling upon all nations to come together in peace and harmony, Zuko’s thoughts couldn’t help but drift. Where was Iroh now? Had he and the spirit woman managed to send Sura back? Or was that only lip service to appease Aang? How long would they be gone? What would they ultimately do? His elder son’s mission was a mystery to him, and unless he was able to send a hawk with a message, there was little possibility of answering any of his questions until his journey was over. Zuko would have to be patient, and believe in him. He was lucky that his son - as well as Katara’s daughter - were trustworthy and responsible.

The thought of Iroh and his mission inevitably led his thoughts to the Avatar. He glanced over at his old friend, currently standing behind the new Grandmaster on the dais, fidgeting just as he would have when he was 14. Zuko caught his gaze and rolled his eyes, knowing the Aang would be unable to return the gesture. All he could do was narrow his eyes, and it made Zuko smirk. Several nights back Toph had managed to calm Aang down considerably, and it was with profound relief that he recognized his old friend had come to his senses. Since then, they had managed to pass along what little they had learned of the spirit tribes, and he had caught them up to date on what he had learned during his foray into the spirit world. Yet his way forward was also unclear, and there was little assistance Zuko could personally offer him. His dealings with the spirit world were limited, and he didn’t understand the ways of the Avatar as Aang did. His efforts were better directed toward
helping Toph with the Remembrance Ceremony, and Katara with healing the sleeping sickness.

And as they had all too often lately, his thoughts then wound their way back to her. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and carefully kept his gaze away from Katara, who had chosen to stand with the other water tribe delegates rather than her husband. For the ceremony - and from a political standpoint - it made sense. Katara had long ago established her career as separate from her husband’s, and had even argued against him several times. Yet it also made sense on a personal level, as even though Aang had stopped pursuing his vendetta against the spirit survivor, his relationship with his wife was once again on the rocks.

The Fire Lord bit the inside of his cheek. He certainly wasn’t helping matters. Their episode yesterday in the library had been completely out of bounds for both of them, and he had lain awake last night chastising himself for giving in. Yet it had felt so good to hold her again, and faced with all the present uncertainty it gave him strength to know that while dishonorable, his feelings for her - and apparently hers for him - had not changed. Even after all these years, she instilled him with a sense of peace; just as he might feel when watching the ocean waves roll away into eternity. But peace was not what had brought them to the brink, nor was it what might break her marriage. He was still deeply in love with her, and although he was prepared to deny himself forever, it wouldn’t solve anything if she was still in love with him.

Keeping his head pointed directly towards the Grandmaster, he gave in and observed her out of the corner of his eye. She stood with impeccable posture, back straight and chin raised. She had not aged as well as Toph, who had kept her youthful figure and smooth skin to an almost preternatural degree. Yet he found her just as beautiful as she had been as a young woman - her eyes were still bright, and her smile still wicked, and her heart still honest. She was no longer as slim as she used to be, as water tribe women’s weight tended to settle in their hips; but frankly, he found her curves enticing - the thought of burying himself inside of her, or even simply sleeping curled against her seemed so much more inviting than it would with some young, undeveloped woman. Besides, he was no supple teenager himself; it took him twice as long to run through his warm ups, otherwise he risked inflaming old injuries to his knees and ankles. Worse, his hair had lightened at the temples, and although he was assured it made him look refined, the color drove him spare.

As his eyes drifted away from Katara, he wondered if he would still be as physically attracted to Mai, had she survived Koru’s childbirth. Zuko doubted it, but to reflect on such a thing was dishonorable, and unfair to Mai. He had loved her, and in the few years they had together she had proven herself worthy of that love. Yet whether or not he could have loved her as well or as long as he did Katara was something he thankfully never had to determine.

Zuko exhaled slowly, reaching for his inner flame to steady himself. They needed to come to a decision. This precarious situation would not last much longer, and Toph’s blunt observations had done away the last of his delusions. If he and Katara remained in the palace together, they would end up in each other’s arms, and all their hard work would be undone. His stomach churned in anticipation at the very thought. They had kept those few years a secret for the sake of their children, but now all their children were grown - and what was it that Toph had said? To be careful that their children did not make the same mistake? Zuko’s eyes lidded in displeasure, but the remembrance chased away any lingering, sultry thoughts about Katara. The only one whom could warrant any such warning was Sura...yet they had been careful to raise her as a sister to both Koru and Iroh. Zuko could attest for Iroh’s lack of interest, and that Toph had helped the two of them escape together meant Sura was likely uninterested as well. Therefore, if any of their children were interested in each other - and it was the only situation that could warrant the danger Toph had obliquely warned them of - it would have to be Sura and Koru, who, by virtue of being closer in age and in nature, he would have sworn were more like siblings than Koru and Iroh.
There was a chance he was wrong, however. He hadn’t seen Sura much over the weeks spanning Uncle’s final descent, although she had been right there in the palace the whole time. Now that he thought of it, he hadn’t seen much of Koru, either...especially during the few days leading up to Uncle’s death. His blood ran cold. Had something happened? No, he couldn’t let his worries drive him - it was just as likely nothing had happened, and Toph was just telling them to be on their guard. Still, it might be best to drop a few hints as to Sura’s unavailability...or, as he had thought just a few minutes earlier, it could just be time to start telling the truth.

And then...when all the cards were laid upon the table, and all their secrets were revealed...would he finally be free to pursue his heart’s desire? The thought caused a small smile to bloom on his face and his eyes to turn to Katara - who was now staring straight back at him. His breath caught in his throat as her cheeks flushed, noticeable against the creamy dark of her skin. Their connection was tangible, even across the distance. It was in this one glance - against their entire history - that finally decided Zuko. There would be no more lies; no more denying themselves. Come what may, they would be together.

Yet before he could signal any of his intent to his love, the wide, double doors at the entrance to the hall were thrown open, throwing the ceremony into disarray. The Grandmaster trailed off, huffing with annoyance as the entirety of the congregation turned to witness those who had disrupted the practice. As Zuko’s eyes fell on the interlopers, they grew wide with surprise. In walked Sura, with a man at her side, and a young child in his arms. Notably absent were his son and the spirit woman. What in Agni’s name was going on?

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They began the long walk back to Ba Sing Se at dawn, before Chihiro was properly awake. Toshiro carried her in his arms with a stoic expression that made Sura wonder how long he had been caring for the girl. He could be her father...Chihiro relied on him implicitly, and obeyed his directions just as any young child would their parent. Yet he was so young. He couldn’t be much older than Iroh - and if he was her father, where was her mother? Well, the day was young, the walk was long - plenty of time to talk! She turned to her companion and began with, “Are you sure it’s all right to take Chihiro to Ba Sing Se? What about her family? Her mother?”

Toshiro turned to her, and she was struck again by his hazel eyes, so much like her father’s. “Ah. Her parents...they are gone. Fever, two years ago. Better with me. I am her family now.”

Sura’s heart squeezed in her chest. He was so matter of fact about something that many young men would see as a burden, and respect for him blossomed in her heart. She had felt echoes of Annica’s trust and affection for him, back when they had said their goodbyes. Now she understood for herself. “How old is she?”

“3 winters.”

She smiled over at him. “It must have been difficult raising her by yourself...I admire you. Not many men would choose to do what you did.” Her eyes fell to the groggy angel in his arms. Her domestic
instincts kicked in, and already she was itching to hold the girl again. Yet they would undoubtedly move slower if she did, and they were currently making excellent time. If they kept this pace, they might even reach the palace by early afternoon.

“Ahh. Asha helped - you know of her? Yes, you do. So not alone, no. But also it was not choice. Was need. No place for her in village. So I take her with me, and she is free.” His thin lips quirked in a small smile. “And she make me free also. No woman from village would marry man with child already.”

Sura remembered what Anicca had said about Toshiro being attractive to women, and wondered if he was adverse to this. She knew such men existed; those that sought out the company of other men. With a sinking heart, she remembered that Koru had intimated something along these lines - that apart from her, male or female did not matter to him. That in mind, she was not as tactful as she usually would be with her next question. “You do not like women, then?”

He turned to her with wide eyes, but before she could apologize or retract her question, he laughed. Again, Sura was surprised. Shouldn’t he have taken offense? This was a strange man indeed.

Apparently, they were thinking along similar lines. “You are strange woman. In good way, do not frown. I like women, but like freedom more. Besides, I do not like women like them.” When her confused expression did not clear, he attempted again. “The women from village...they thought Chihiro dangerous. Monster. She was too strong. I took her when they gave her...ahh, how is it…”

He trailed off, hitching Chihiro higher on his shoulder so that he could momentarily wrap his hands around his throat. “What you call this? For animals, too.”

It came to her immediately. “A collar? They wanted to collar her? Because she was too strong?” This must be what he had meant when he had asserted they were free together...and that his taking her had been a need, rather than a choice.

Toshiro shifted Chihiro again before responding. “Her strength is great. More than mine, I know. But she has little control, and there are no teachers in village. So they want collar her so she is not dangerous. I did not like, so I took her. We left. We become...ahh. Exile?” He sighed, eyes clouded as if reliving those dark days. “I know Avatara will be busy with demons...but any help is needed. I try to teach of breathing, and how to move - but I have little training. Sometimes all I can do is take her to lonely places in forest, so she will hurt no one. Do you think he will help? He must have enough power to help her, no?”

The strong sense of justice that she had inherited from her mother swamped her, and she actually grabbed his free hand in order to convey her sincerity. “He will. I promise you. He has spent his entire life looking for airbenders - he’d be honored to train both of you!” His eyes dropped to their hands and she let go abruptly, grinning an apology. “And he’s going to have tons of questions for you. Almost as many as I have.”

Toshiro sighed dramatically, but smiled as he did so. “Yes, as you told us last night. Ask them. I am prepared.”

She asked him everything she could think of, her own natural curiosity the equal of her father’s. Some things she had pieced together from Anicca’s tale: the airbender nomads who had survived the fire nation purges had sought refuge with the spirit tribes, and over time had assimilated within them. Yet over the century their talent had waned, and the loss of the monks had left them with very few teachers. Toshiro could not be certain, but he suspected that of the two remaining spirit villages, nearly half the inhabitants had airbending talent. Yet with no way to train them, only a few were able to harness their abilities, as he had. Even then, his skills were different than his ancestors - he had no way to make a staff-glider, nor could he use the wind as a presence to push or pull his opponent.
With no teacher he had looked to nature - he had watched the parrot-squirrels and sought to copy their movements, and honed his body’s natural abilities. It was how he was able to fall so slowly from the trees, and could leap over 20 feet with proper preparation. He could channel his breathing, and had worked out a few techniques that he had trouble explaining to her: the best she could figure was that he knew a way to displace the air around something, but even then she could not be sure. Hopefully her father would have better luck assessing his talents than she.

When she had run through enough questions on his heritage and his history - for now - their conversation had turned to the here and now. He had met Anicca (and by extension, Rama, who had been inseparable from his twin until only a year ago, when they reached full adulthood) when they were children, in the woods between their villages. He had just run away for the third time, he admitted with a smile, and after an incident that involved a platypus-puma, a ravine, and Asha’s staff, the three had become fast friends. While he had not officially left his village until he had absconded with Chihiro more than ten years later, they would often meet in the forest or in Asha’s hut. Each of them brought something to the mix that made their friendship work: his dreams and his airbending; Anicca’s practicality and Keeper training; Rama’s mischievous nature and spiritbending.

Toshiro’s smile was pained when he spoke of Rama, but when Sura told him he didn’t need to push himself, he assured her that this was their way - to not speak of his friend would be dishonoring him beyond the scope of all that had already passed. Anicca had told him about the ritual they had witnessed, and while Toshiro didn’t fully understand it, he felt the loss of his best friend keenly, as well as her pain. Rama had shone the brightest of all of them; he was intelligent, handsome, and witty, as well as immensely talented. He had been the driving force behind most their adventures, and had been the unofficial leader of the three. He would do anything for those he loved, and his loyalty, once earned, was kept forever.

Yet his capriciousness had its downsides, as well. There were times when he would pass judgement without learning all of the facts. He was also quick to anger, slow to forgive, and was stubborn as well. Toshiro knew this firsthand: the one time he and Rama had seriously quarreled had been five months ago when Toshiro had showed up on Asha’s doorstep, with Chihiro wailing in his arms. Rama had refused to accept his decision, seeing Chihiro as an impediment to his dreams of freedom. Normally he would not even try to argue with Rama, knowing the force of his personality, but on this Toshiro had refused to back down, knowing there was no other choice. They argued for days, and for several days after hadn’t spoken with each other. Finally, Anicca managed to convince her younger brother to accept Toshiro’s decision (how she did it he would never know, as no one else ever managed to change Rama’s mind) and their friendship was restored. Rama had even stood next to him when the Keeper from his village unsuccessfully sought to take her back. Still, Toshiro knew Rama’s loyalty didn’t necessarily extend to Chihiro. He brought her to the Yama village only rarely, choosing to spend more time with Asha and Anicca on the outskirts instead. It was a practical decision, as Asha had been teaching both he and Anicca the elemental bender’s tongue, and if he and Chihiro were ever to rejoin society - as they were now, he admitted with a small smile - that was essential.

That Rama’s death had made all this possible was terrible for him to comprehend. Yet that Anicca had brought about her village’s end was even worse.

By the time they reached Ba Sing Se the sun was still high in the sky. Chihiro had awoken and had walked with them for several miles, but her stride was difficult to moderate - she was either fifty feet ahead of twenty feet behind at all times. Toshiro had called to her in their language, and it was then that the idea hit her - this was the perfect time to begin teaching Chihiro her language! So they had practiced, teaching the girl basic words, which she absorbed quickly. Yet as the day drew on she
tired, and Sura had taken Chihiro from Toshiro, unable to hold back from mothering the girl.

They made their way unimpeded the entire way to the palace. Sura was recognized and waved on by the guards, who had been told to expect her. Their gazes lingered on her odd companions, but no one questioned her. The streets were oddly vacant, yet even still Toshiro and Chihiro looked on in wide-eyed wonder. Everything was new and strange to them - the market stalls, the curious looks of the few people the passed, the houses, the streets, the sounds, the colors, even the sprawling size of the city. Sura assured them that not all cities were like this - that Ba Sing Se was one of the largest in the world. Toshiro had nodded absently, eyes flicking from alleyway to the path behind them, always on the alert. It was obvious he was not comfortable here, but how could he be? His life had been restricted to a small village, and the forest. Chihiro was young, and adaptable, and would in time learn to feel at ease in such places. Yet would Toshiro ever feel truly comfortable here? Sura remembered how much of his tale had centered on him leaving home, and finding freedom in the open skies. Here was his chance, albeit with Chihiro in tow. She told him so, and couldn’t help but grin at his surprised expression.

“You are strange woman, Sura.”

Sura was unsure the type of woman he grew up knowing, but she was glad that little as they knew each other, he smiled at her as he said it. Chihiro shifted in her arms, chattering away at the people who watched them. Sura patted her on the head, moving forward. “Come. We are almost there - and if you think I’m strange, wait until you meet my mother...or Aunt Toph. Oh. I bet you’ll like Aunt Toph a lot.”

The airbender looked at her with worried, narrowed eyes. “Oh? I think you are lying of me. The way you say makes me...ah. Nervous?”

Sura smiled wickedly, her happiness and excitement getting the best of her. They were nearly to the great doors of the palace, and she nearly trembled from emotion. She had done it! In just a few moments she would be presenting her father with the remnants of his people, and his dreams would be realized. Furthermore, she was in a position to make three people she cared for - and it was remarkable how much she liked her new friends, when she’d only known them for less than a day - happy, and that made her glow with pleasure. “I’m sorry, I’m just so excited! Father’s been looking for you - airbenders, I mean - since the war ended...he’s going to be overjoyed. He’ll definitely be able to train you and Chihiro! I know it’s a difficult time for you but I can’t stop smiling.”

Toshiro paused directly before the gate to give her an earnest look, and the only reserve he felt about the Avatar’s being happy to see the both of them was expressed in a single raised eyebrow. “No. Do not worry. Smile, Sura. It is glad day, and more for what we lost.”

He extended his hands for Chihiro, and reluctantly Sura handed the girl back over. It was probably for the best, she decided, although there was still a pang in her heart as she did so. Chihiro might be frightened, and Toshiro was much better equipped to soothe her in that case. And she needed to be prepared to explain the situation. So, after taking a deep breath to steel herself, Sura signaled for the doors to be opened, and the guards in place at the top of the arch activated the levers that would do so. At her side, Toshiro sucked in a deep breath, clearly surprised. Perhaps she should have warned him, but there was no time for second thoughts - even before the doors were fully opened, she could see that the main hall was packed full of people, standing in rows facing the throne like...like they were in the midst of the Remembrance Ceremony.

Oh La, Sura thought, panic bubbling in her stomach. Uncle’s ghost is going to kill me. Or my mother. Possibly together. Yet there was nothing else she could do, so she stepped forward bravely, looking straight ahead and willing her eyes to adjust to the pale lighting of the chamber. She could
practically feel Toshiro vibrate with a mix of nerves and tension, and she needed to present herself as cool and unflappable, otherwise he may - judging from her father’s example - take off at the first sign of a scolding. Knowing that the scolding would be coming from the most powerful people in the world in front of a majority of all the other world leaders, she felt like running.

Surprise rippled through the crowd and Sura sensed Toshiro hitch Chihiro higher on his hip. The girl had finally sensed what had her caretakers rigid, and looked around the room with wide, nervous eyes. Toshiro murmured reassuringly to her, quietly and in their own tongue. It did not seem to relax the girl at all, and Sura smiled somewhat manically, hoping that something soothing would happen that would break this awkward, buzzing silence without making it worse.

“Sura!” Her father called out from across the hall, and Sura waved in greeting. This was it - the moment she had dreamed of since she was five and decided that she was going to be the one to find the airbenders for her father. Surely he at least would be overjoyed at what she had found!

She found her voice just as the audience began to ripple with confused disapproval. “I’ve found them, Father,” she called out, and by some architectural miracle her voice carried all the way to the dais at the far end. “Airbenders.”

She glanced back at Toshiro, and saw his eyes widen. When she glanced back, Aang was gliding towards them, halfway across the room in less time than should have been possible for him to even assemble his glider. Toshiro stiffened reflexively, and it was the tipping point for poor Chihiro. The exhaustion of the day, tension of the moment and unfamiliar surroundings made her begin to cry, yet unlike most children, her wails encompassed a compression of the air that shot out on every exhale, knocking down the closest bystanders like dominos. Toshiro shielded her hurriedly, sending them sprawling backwards into a tangle on the floor. Yet even when he was on his back Toshiro directed Chihiro’s cries into his chest, so that he would take the brunt of her unintentional attack. Sura, who had skidded backwards along with them, crouched over them, trying to block some of the residual wind that escaped around the edges.

Judging by the her personal discomfort and the stoic expression on Toshiro’s face, he was in quite a bit of pain. This made ignoring the panic amongst the audience and her approaching father easy, as well as stroking the sobbing child’s hair and comforting her as best she could essential.

Yet then there was a voice at her shoulder. “Here.” Her father reached past her, and after a moment’s reassurance, took Chihiro from Toshiro. The girl wailed louder still, yet now that she was in Aang’s hold she couldn’t hurt anyone - his power over wind far eclipsed hers, and he was able to direct its flow to keep everyone safe. Slowly, he walked in a little circle, patting her back and hushing her gently, waiting until she had cried herself out. Sura smiled, caught up in how good her father was with children, and the flush of pride that she had at least inherited that from him, before she remembered Toshiro and his injury.

It seemed he had forgotten as well. When she turned to look at him he was in the process of standing, although his movements were constrained. As soon as she had helped him to his feet she was able to tell why. Laying her hand on the center of his chest revealed that not only was there a worrying multitude of burst blood vessels pooling underneath his skin, but Chihiro had also cracked two of his ribs. She opened her mouth to tell him so (and assure him that it was nothing to worry about, as this injury was not as bad as Koru’s had been, and healing that had barely taken half an hour) but Chihiro’s cries had tapered off, and by the worry in Toshiro’s expression she could tell now was not the time. She understood. In the moment of her greatest triumph, Toshiro’s worst fears had come true - Chihiro had just proven the reason for their exile in front of the Avatar, and he was worried that like his village, Aang would judge her for it.
At that moment, Sura was a bit worried too. Chihiro was silent now, contentedly sucking on a thumb while resting on the Avatar’s shoulder. Yet her father was carefully wearing no expression at all, and when compared to his normally overly expressive self, Sura knew that this could be a very bad sign. After all, her father hadn’t quite been himself lately, and as both Asha and Anicca had intimated to her, was being targeted by a demon who would stop at nothing to cloud his judgement. Asha had further said that she was the one to make him see reason. Had he been so manipulated while she was gone that he wouldn’t recognize what an amazing moment this was for them?

Aang approached, and even though his eyes flicked towards her, there was no lessening in his intentional gravity. Sura swallowed thickly, and her arm brushed against Toshiro’s. Even in that fleeting touch she could feel him tremble, and so she brought her hand back to his and gripped his palm. She would give him what reassurance she could, and no matter what her father thought, she would not let him make the wrong decision!

Aang stopped two steps away from them, and looked Toshiro in the eye. The younger man was taller, but only by an inch or so. Still, Sura felt dwarfed from the exclusivity of their gaze. “You are an airbender as well?”

Toshiro nodded, and when Sura squeezed his hand, he spoke. His accent was so thick with nerves she could barely understand him. “Yes. And you are... the Avatara.”

Aang matched his nod. Her father’s expression was still that maddeningly inexpessive mask, and it made Sura want to scream out loud and shake them both. Why weren’t they smiling? Why weren’t they happy? Why in La’s name weren’t they at least hugging?

Toshiro’s eyes dropped to the girl, and he gestured for Aang to give her back to him. Aang cocked his head, and held up one finger. “On one condition.” He held the moment dramatically before his mask finally cracked: at the very corner of his lips quirked the beginnings of a smile. “You let me train you. Both of you. Please.”

Toshiro blinked rapidly. “I - of course. That is what we want. What we came for. I say please, and help for Chihiro, and...” He trailed off, looking over at Sura somewhat helplessly. Finally realizing that her father had just been playing a terrible prank on his new students-to-be, she smiled as widely as she possibly could, and nodded frenetically.

“Accept,” she whispered to him. “Say, we accept.”

Toshiro turned back to Aang, who by now was having a very difficult time keeping the smile off his face. “We accept.”

The next moment found Aang hugging him firmly with Chihiro in between them, grinning like an idiot all the while. “This is quite possibly the best day of my life,” he told a shocked Toshiro. “I am so ready for this. I have been planning our a teaching schedule for years and I am so excited to have two students at once! And of course you’ll have figured some things out, but it’s going to be a different type of challenge and it may be the best challenge and of course we’ll begin with breathing, but the right kind of breathing, and-”

He kept going, but Sura couldn’t make out anymore over the sound of her own internal jubilation, and the effort to keep from crying like a ninny in front of every single politician in Ba Sing Se. Toshiro shot her an anguished look and all she could do was smile radiantly back at him. She untangled their hands and stepped back, not realizing her Aunt Toph had stepped up to watch until she heard her voice at her ear.

“That big softy. Thought he could pull a fast one on us like that? Although it was a pretty good
effort, for him. Almost had me going for a second there.” Toph squeezed her shoulder, and just like that, Sura’s tears started to flow.

“Oh c’mon now, why the waterworks? Oh, I see. Happy tears. You know, I never understood those. I do a lot of things when I’m happy, but crying was never one of them. Now, tell me something else, Hero. Were you successful on your mission?”

Sura nodded, and turned to her aunt. She leaned down to rest her head on her shoulder, and as she did so sniffed and murmured, “Anicca and Iroh are headed to the spirit villages. They will undo what her village did…and I will help keep Dad sane. There’s something he has to do, but they’re not quite sure what it is…something about keeping the balance, and-

Toph patted the back of her head in an awkward attempt at consoling her. “We know. Aang finally met up with his past selves, and is working on that angle. But the sleeping sickness. Your spirit lady gave us a key, and we mean to open all the doors we can with it. But all that can be hashed out later.” She took a step back just as Katara and Zuko made their way through the crowds, heading straight for her. “Welcome home, Hero.”

Sura smiled through her tears as her mother tackled her, and the Remembrance Ceremony rehearsal was effectively ruined. Up on the dais the Grandmaster sniffed. It seemed he was going to have a lot to get used to, what with the Avatar’s rambunctious family, and the largely inappropriate earth king, and resurrected peoples. He wondered how the late Grandmaster would have handled this (as he had long admired the previous Grandmaster, and had turned around his life during his youth due to a chance encounter with the great man himself) and after a moment’s reflection, knew. Turning back to the audience he spread his arms wide, and proclaimed, “The lost airbenders have been found! Tea for everyone!”

It was the most unorthodox ceremony rehearsal most of the audience had ever been to. Yet with the exception of those who had been knocked down from Chihiro’s cries, surprisingly few were able to muster up enough indignation to care.

... Oblivious to all this, Aang continued hugging the airbenders, and expostulating. “And then I can teach you how to make gliders, and levitate people, and how to read the ancient air languages...oh this is going to be so much fun!”

... They reached the village by noon the next day, although it felt far longer than that. The Angry One had not stopped the scowling the entire time, and although she was not surprised, it was still forbidding enough that she had to steel herself to warn him before they reached the village proper. Rather than speak mind to mind - which would be safer - she chose to speak verbally, which she hoped would be better received. “There are a few things I should tell you before we reach the village.”

He cut her off. “Just get on with it.”
Anicca frowned, yet continued. “We will not be very welcome, I am afraid. My village provided protection for both Mori and Iwaya...and by the winter solstice the protection will be gone. Depending on how much the villagers know there may be some...anger. I think they will not attack us, but even if they do, I must ask you to not hurt them back.”

He looked at her incredulously, yet it still was threatening. “You’re telling me to simply stand there while an angry village attacks us? You are insane. There’s no reason for me not to defend ourselves, as your treaty was already broken, and none of them are spiritbenders - or so you claim.”

So he did listen to her. She had thought he might ignore everything that was not to his liking, especially with his impatience when she’d told the spiritbender’s history last night. Apparently, she was wrong. “I ask you this just so I can explain to them what happened. They may be nervous with you as they have not dealt with firebenders...or anyone other than airbenders before. Just be calm. Remember they have done nothing wrong.”

“Neither have I,” the Angry One snarled, folding his arms over his chest. “Yet here I am, hogtied to a madwoman on some insane quest. Little as I like it, I understand this much: my role is to protect. If they attack, I will fulfill that purpose.” His lips curved in a grin, yet his eyes were hard as chips of obsidian. “I will relish doing so.”

Anicca swallowed. She could feel his strength like a wall of flame, fortifying him from below his flesh. His resolve was steady, his intent unfriendly, yet more than that she feared his aggression. This man knew how to fight, and would not hold back from hurting people. If their bond were not protecting her, she was sure that he would take great pleasure in hurting her. She nodded slowly, still mulling over what she knew of him and how best to proceed. This was a dangerous man. She felt the honesty in his words, and although she had known that he would keep this promise, she now realized that were there an opportunity to hurt someone, he would enjoy it.

And he had called her a monster. This man, as long as he perceived someone as his enemy, would strike them down without hesitation - and would smile when doing so. Yet he had judged her when the spirits had forced her to act beyond her will, even when it resulted in her being sick to her soul! Her anger flared, and it burned away her fear. Across from her, his eyes narrowed. He had felt her anger? Good! Let him know she would not fear him, and would not allow him to bully her. “And you think me a monster? Hah. If you are so eager to fight, I know what I must do - I will keep the fight away from you. Now. Are you ready?” The last was asked with a mocking attempt at civility, and his mouth grimaced in distaste.

At least he did not attempt to argue with her. “Let’s get this over with.”

She turned from him, opening her arms wide. The lookouts had undoubtedly spotted them, and had they understood the elemental tongue would have overheard them as well. Now, she addressed them in her own tongue. “We come from Yama. We seek your Keeper. We bring dark news.” She glanced back at the firebender before finishing, as if reprimanding him. “We come with peaceful intent.”

The village of Mori flickered into view in front of them, barely twenty feet away from them. The firebender swore quietly under his breath, and Anicca could feel his unease. Yet the moment was too tenuous to focus on her connection to him - as long as there were no spikes of negative intent, she would let him be...with one final precaution.

As the hunters approached them, she reached back so that she could slide her fingers around his wrist. His tensed immediately, yet even before he could jerk away she spoke mind to mind. This way you will understand them. Fight me and I take away this gift.

He made no reply, yet she could feel his seething rage all the better now that she was touching him.
Neither did he jerk away, and for that she was both thankful and disturbed - he was like a leashed tiger-hyena, and she never knew whether he would obey her, or try to bite her.

The hunters of Mori surrounded them while the oldest addressed her, resting his hunting bow on his shoulder. “You bring an unwelcome guest, if you could be considered welcome yourself. Yet the Keeper has commanded you be brought to her.” His eyes raked over the Angry One, and Anicca was unsure who was more tense - the man at her side, or the pack of hunters. “Keep hold of him, ill-born. If either of you challenges Mori, we will bring you both down.”

Anicca nodded her assent. The hunters turned away from them, stalking off into the village, leading them to the Keeper. Hatred flared up in the Angry One’s heart, and although Anicca understood the impulse, she squeezed his wrist. They will tell us how to find the demon, she whispered through their mental link. Just keep calm until then.

Once again, there was no response, yet by now she had not expected one. They followed the hunters in silence through the village, so similar to her own. The homes were constructed precisely the same, and the people were no different. All that was different were that the people of Mori lacked the spark within their spirit which enabled them to bend energy itself. These were Toshiro’s people, she thought to herself, and only realized that she had transmitted it to the firebender as well when he grunted. So, he hadn’t liked Toshiro? By the Ancestors, was there anyone he did like?

He glared at her in response, and she realized that while they touched, very little remained private. She would have to remember that in the future. Yet the hunters had stopped outside a home at the center of the village - their Keeper, Priya, lived here. Unlike Asha, this Keeper took an active role in the guidance of the village, and her home and its location reflected this. No wonder the hunters had been so antagonistic - it was only natural to fear for their leader when the annihilator of their sister village arrived.

She took a deep breath and strove for calm when the hunter who had spoken earlier turned to her, jerking his head towards the door. For a moment her feet failed her, yet she remembered the strength of the man behind her, and the remembrance fueled her determination. She pushed through the door, prepared to meet the Keeper with stoic resolve...only to see the chief of Yama - the one who had enacted the Ritual of Sundering - lying on a stone slab directly in front of them. Horror seized her heart, and flame ignited behind her - the Angry One held it in his free hand. It was a contained threat, and before they even noticed the Keeper kneeling next to the body they realized it was futile. The chief’s face was pale and waxy, and she could not feel that bright spark that separated the living from the dead.

They had watched the chief die at the close of the Ritual. How, then, could he be here now? The Keeper spoke without taking her gaze away from the corpse, unintentionally answering their unvoiced question. Her accent was more pronounced than Annica’s, yet she spoke clearly and fluently. “You are surprised to see him? We found him in the forest six days ago. He was killed by a blade to his heart - but the weapon was not found. And yet four days ago Asha sent word of a taboo ritual, undertaken by a dead man.” She looked up directly at her, and there was a challenge in her large, dark eyes. “And now you come to me, Keeper’s apprentice, with spirit powers you had not before possessed. Asha sent word of a demon. Prove to me that I am not looking at it.”

Numb with rage, Anicca unwrapped her fingers from the firebender’s wrist one by one. If the Keeper was going to keep speaking in the elemental tongue, there was no purpose to touching him. Besides, if she kept the connection open, she may find a way to channel his flame onto this hateful woman. Yet how could the chief have died when she claimed? She had to be lying. She had to be! “We saw it, Keeper. Along with the Avatara, we went down to the chamber, and saw their ghosts. If
you have his body, then you must have gone as well. He could not have been found in the forest. It is a lie.”

The older woman’s eyes narrowed. “Look, then, with your new powers, apprentice. See if I lie.”

Annica jutted her chin up, no longer bothering to disguise her anger. “And why do you not look, Priya? See if I am the one who lies!”

The two women glared at each other, and had not the firebender chose that exact moment to display an unexpected level of maturity, the visit may have ended in failure. “Just keep calm, is that what you told me? Well. We all can see how that worked. And you. Keeper. She’s not lying. We saw him underneath the mountain, doing what Asha assured us was something forbidden. At the least, he killed a man. So it is unlikely that you found him in the forest six days ago. Besides, if you had found his body then, why didn’t you send word to the village?”

The Keeper stood, straightening herself to her full height. She was a middle-aged, handsome woman, tall and naturally imposing. “How do you know we did not?”

“Asha would have known. And if he had died then, the ritual would not have been undertaken.”

Anicca interrupted him, striving for calm. That he had spoken for her, keeping professional when she was overtaken by her hurt and anger had meant more than his admonishment. That was what chastised her, and she breathed deeply, determined to not embarrass herself any further.

The Keeper frowned, but made no reply. She looked at them keenly, and Anicca finally felt her using her spiritbending to search for the truth. Then she turned her gaze to the firebender, and Anicca knew she was doing the same thing. When she found their experiences coincided and that they did not lie, the Keeper looked away, confused. “I see. You believe your eyes and your words. I see my mistake. But no man can be in two places at once - and I assure you, this man has been in this hut for the last six days. And he is no demon - we had to embalm his body for to keep it from...decaying.”

She gestured them to follow her, leading them deeper into the hut. “I did not send word to the village as he was not dead when we found him - it took him nearly a day to die. Until the last I was sure that I could save him, yet the wound refused to heal. By the time we realized the inevitable, it was too late to send a messenger - night had fallen, and the wolf-bears have been particularly hungry, as of late. Yet we also wondered why no one from Yama had come, seeking their leader.”

Both the firebender and the Keeper looked to her, but Anicca had no answers for them. She had spent the last few months with Asha, and had not returned to Yama for several weeks.

“We prepared to send word to Asha the next day, but the circling wolf-bears attacked the village. By the time we had defeated them, it was too late. I felt the ripples of death from Yama, and was laid low by them. By the time I had recovered, Asha had sent her messages through the spirit world. So I know your story already - the Ritual of Sundering, the demon your people released from the spirit world, the Avatar...and Asha’s death in the mountain shrine. Forgive me for testing you, but I had to ensure that you both were human. Yet I know why you are here. And so I will ask one last time. Do you know where or who the demon is?”

“No.”

“And do you know its intent?”

Anicca hesitated. “Asha said it would go after the artifacts. That it would move against us and the Avatar...but I don’t understand. If the demon is what my people brought into this world...who killed the chief? And if that is the real chief...who enacted the ritual?”
The Keeper glanced from the body behind them to both their faces, as if she could see how they were all connected. “That is the question you must put to the demon, when you find it. As long as you are still prepared to face it?”

The Angry One broke the tenseness of the moment by laughing outright. It startled both women, although Anicca less so. She could still feel the anger thrumming through his veins, after all. “Is that a serious question? Our options are to fight a demon, or go home.” He grinned barbarously, and it made Anicca’s breath catch in her throat. “What do you think, woman?”

Unamused, the Keeper turned to Anicca, who drew her eyes away from the Angry One with effort. “I will not let the demon win. For Asha and Rama, and all the lives he destroyed.”

The Keeper nodded, approving for the first time since they had entered the hut. “Good. Now, I assume Asha had told you of the rituals? The Forest and the Grotto shrines are still intact - the demon only managed to infiltrate the Mountain shrine. Even so, the rituals will be more difficult to complete. Without the Mountain’s efforts to stabilize the two of you, it will be much easier to get lost during the test. This is your only warning. Once you begin the rituals, no one will be able to save you.”

Anicca’s eyes lidded in thought. Asha had assured her that folk tale was important to their success, and so Anicca had told the firebender of it on the way over. It was an oblique tale of the moon traveling through the forest, the grotto, and finally to the mountain to catch the sun, only to realize that in doing so she had doomed herself to a never ending cycle. She had thought she understood what she would be facing, yet the Keeper’s words made no sense - the mountain stabilized them? And how could they possibly get lost during the ritual?

“What do we have to do?” The firebender saved her again, by asking the question she was too afraid to ask. She doubted he saw the Keeper’s meaning from the abridged story she had related to him. It was likely he was simply forging ahead, too brave - or impatient - to reconsider what they already knew.

“In the room behind us, there is a pool of water. All you must do is gaze into the pool. Do not blink when the reflection shimmers. That is all I can tell you.” The Keeper bowed, and edged to the side so that they could walk past her. The firebender glanced at Anicca, the only time he had done so since they had reached the village. Feeling the heat of his stare like a direct challenge, Anicca lifted her chin and stepped past the Keeper.

Before they crossed the threshold, however, the Keeper had one last thing to say, and in their native language. “I wish you luck, ill-born. You must grow powerful in a very little time. For after you bring down the demon, you will have to protect yourself - you will never be allowed within the confines of Mori ever again. But for your grandmother’s sake, I would have let the hunters kill you at the entrance. Do not fail. Else I shall end you.”

Anicca swallowed before nodding jerkily. The Angry One looked over at them, his eyes narrowed, but Anicca did not look at him as she moved past Priya. Salty tears burned at the back of her eyes, and this time even the thought of the firebender did not stiffen her spine. She swallowed again, thickly, before stepping into the pool room and addressing the firebender. “Are you ready?” Her accent was thicker than normal, and she hoped he wouldn’t realize it was from emotion.

Whether he could or couldn’t, she was unable to tell. He simply watched her with his unnerving dark eyes before sitting down before the pool in a half-lotus position. Something in his expression prompted her to circle the pool, choosing to sit across from him. Priya had said nothing about sitting closely together, after all, simply that they had to look down into the water’s depths.

When she had seated herself she looked across the water, and the open amusement in his expression
finally brought her fighting spirit to the fore. He thought her avoidance of him amusing? She would show *him* amusing! Yet even as she frowned forbiddingly back at him, she realized that once again, he had banished her sorrow. *May he never realize how strong he makes me,* she prayed, and her eyes dropped down to the pool before she could see the fleeting expression of surprise cross his face. She focused on the dark, glassy pool, and there was no more room in her mind for infuriating firebenders.

Slowly, the water began to ripple...

Chapter End Notes

Just in case you forgot all about this fic, here is an update. And after 4 years of thinking about this goshdarn story, I finally sat down at outlined the rest of the tale. Yes. It now has an ending, so presumably we will get there *someday*...
Interlude 8: Of Hearts Divided

Chapter Notes

Oh hey, why not have an update a year later. Yeah, man. Sounds cool.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Interlude 8: Of Hearts Divided

(Early year 10)

My feet are planted on the ground
My head is up among the stars
My hands can touch the beauty of the world
But my heart is lost in you.

My mouth can sing and smile and laugh
My knees might quake with fear or joy
My eyes can close against your light
But my heart cannot unsee you.

My arms long to hold you tightly
My fingertips to graze your skin
My ears know the song of your voice
But it makes my heart tremble for you.

My hope will not be defeated
My courage shall stand the nighttime fears
My reason for being shall not be met
Until I prove my love for you.
Toph was not a woman who appreciated being emotionally blackmailed, but when it resulted in
vacationing in the fire nation palace with an alcoholic drink in either hand while being attended to by
(what felt like) the most attractive men she’d ever heard the vibrations of, she wasn’t going to
complain too vehemently.

“Another cocktail, Master Earthbender?”

Oh, yes. She could get used to this, although she would have to pretend to be extremely upset when
she got back home to Ba Sing Se, and report back to the architect of her current...situation. “Why
yes, Steve. Perhaps another of those...oh, what did you call them...Volcano Villude?” The last two
drinks he’d brought her were unfinished, yet no one remarked on it. It was the principle of the thing,
to make the help work, and to call them all a ludicrously incorrect name while doing so.

“Of course, Master Earthbender. Right away.”

Barely had the heavily muscled servant turned away (and Toph would like to imagine that just as in
those erotic romance novels currently circulating around the middle ring of Ba Sing Se, those
muscles were oiled up until they glistened, whatever that looked like) before Toph sensed some
familiar vibrations rapidly approaching. She allowed herself a small smile. Here came her reason for
being in the Fire Nation, (mostly) against her will and all trussed up like a lady of means with
nothing better to do than order about the servants. Not that that wasn’t amusing upon occasion, of
course. But she really did have better things to do with her time, and time to do better people, and...

...oh dear. Perhaps she shouldn’t have had those three Victory Vacations (whatever they were, they
were stone cold delicious) prior to the two currently in her possession...

“Toph!”

“Sugar Queen!” Toph swung tipsily towards the sound of her voice (only hamming it up a smidgen,
for strategic drama purposes) and smiled wildly. “I have arrived.”

Katara hugged her fiercely, yet snorted as she did so. “Toph, you nut. How many drinks have you
had? Wait, don’t answer that. There are an alarming number of glasses on the table next to you, and
I’d like to pretend you didn’t drink all of them.”

Well, string her up and call her a piñata, but she hadn’t come all this way to immediately trigger
Katara’s Mom Mode. It was a good thing she was pretty sloshed and cared not at all. She was
definitely going to be snarky about this later, though. “Steve has totally been helping me out with
those. Promise. I promise for Steve, as well. But that’s all in the past, now.” She looped her arm
through Katara’s, shifting her plans as she did so. She had originally thought to be all official and
demand a tour and then see the tiny fire princes, and leave Operation: Drunk and Girly for the
evening. But Toph had learned to be flexible, and as she was already halfway to oblivion, it was
incredibly easy to be so.
“Sugs, let’s have the tour, yeah? And by tour, I mean park your ass down and drink a couple of my Vibrant Vespas or whatever the hell they are, and catch up.”

There was a beat of silence, and Toph could feel Katara’s amused indulgence.

“Vibrant Vespas?”

“Vibrant Vespas, Voluptuous Vicars, whatever. Just take one. And then another. And then let’s get gazeboed.” Toph sat down abruptly, immediately attempting to position her trip into a lounging posture. From Katara’s snigger, she was fairly sure she was only about 10% successful. Someday, she would have to teach Katara about underestimating her opponents. Today was not that day, however.

Toph waved her hand, signalling for Steve and Hernando to give them some space. Before they did, however, Steve set down one more Vigorous Villain. Good man. Toph was going to top him later. Or tip him. Whichever he preferred, really.

Maybe even both.

Toph shook her head, leaving behind that tantalizing line of thought. She waited for Katara to tentatively sniff at her drink before beginning the operation. “So. Lady Katara. How’s the fire nation?”

Although she couldn’t actually see it, Toph knew that Katara was giving her one of her looks. Probably the one that meant she either had to go to the bathroom, or that Toph had just demolished someone’s ancient family heirloom again.

“It’s...well, it’s going. Are you sure this is what you want to talk about when you’re drunk? Also, to me?”

Toph shook her head and tilted to the side. “Of course not! Neither of those statements are true. Unless you’re secretly running the country - although knowing Sparky, it probably wouldn’t be such a secret. Actually, I’m changing my mind. You should be running this country. Where is Sparky, this is a brilliant idea. It’s time for him to abdicate. Why hasn’t this happened yet?”

Katara may or may not have swallowed a most unladylike snort, and Toph took this as her cue to continue. “We’ll bring this up with him whenever he shows up. In the meantime, however, there are other things. Let us discuss them. Like Steve. Tell it to me true, Sweetness. Hot enough to hit?”

Katara was now probably making the face that she made whenever she swallowed cactus quills, or walked in on her brother getting it on with Suki. Gods, sometimes Toph kind of loved being blind. It allowed her to envision - hah! - all her friends with their most unflattering expressions all the time.

“No, Toph. Not in any sense of the word.”

Well, damn. Oh wait! She was blind! Day was saved. “Doesn’t matter! Can’t see it, no shame. Moving on.”

“Um, Toph-”

While drunk, her usual accuracy was quartered, so she may or may not have pointed at the potted plant next to Katara rather than her friend. “Sugar. You are making far, far too much sense. Drink the damn VaVa Voom already, because I am getting lonely in Drunkers Land and you are not helping.”

“But-”
Toph raised her eyebrows as far as they could go. “Is this country going to fall apart if you loosen up for one blessed afternoon?!”

Her argument must have been even more effective than she would have guessed as Katara picked up the cup, and a moment later Toph heard the sound of three gulps. Well. That was showing some spirit, and Toph approved.

As soon as she finished draining the drink Katara coughed and sputtered. “Yue, Tui, La...what was in that?” She coughed again. “That was...potent.”

Katara was clearly not schnozzled enough if she was using words like potent. Toph nudged another across the table and tried to sound knowledgeable. “Half alcohol and half magic, 100% deliciousness. You’re doing great, Sweetness. And when you are halfway to God Save the Queen, then we will continue on with the girly talk, and it will be fabulous.”

It took less time than Toph imagined it would. Katara must have been needing some drunken girlie times more than she had thought, because Katara wiped out the remains of the last three Vivacious Victors in record time. And when she was giggling and swaying, and doing something icy that changed the temperature of the air to near freezing, Toph judged she had played her cards well enough and it was time to go for the gold.

She worked slowly and cautiously, utterly at odds with her level of drunkenness. She asked about everything non-political - the fire princes, Steve, Uncle, Ty Lee (who, having thrown off her ex-fiancé Haru due to irreconcilable differences in the bedroom, was spending suspicious amounts of time among the now-defunct fire nation harem), Steve again, Hernando (just so he wouldn’t feel left out), and then, when Katara was good and hammered, her 18-month exodus up and around the Earth Kingdom.

“Oh, Toph,” Katara had breathed, caught between laughing at Toph’s blatant disregard that the men she was asking about were standing right there listening, and whatever emotion her self-imposed exile evoked. But then, haltingly, she did. She spoke for what seemed like hours, and had Toph been truly as drunk as she had pretended to be, she would have never retained enough. But Toph had learned to listen, and listen well. She heard the echoes of many things that Katara would never admit while in full possession of her faculties, yet never was it enough to make up her mind on whether or not Twinkles had lost his chance at reconciliation forever.

Finally, when Katara took a sip of the melted ice at the base of her drink, Toph decided to be blunt. “So now that you’re back...did you find it?”

Toph could almost see Katara’s head pointing to the side. “Find what?”

Oh, she wasn’t fooling anyone with that innocent act. At least, not Toph. “Don’t give me that, Sugar. Did you find the answer you were looking for?”

Seeing that there was little to no space for further evasion Katara became quiet. For a long moment silence hung heavy between them, but Toph made no move to break it. She knew better than anyone the power of silence, and she thought that Katara, with her bustle and motion and energy would not be able to withstand it.

“Yes,” Katara whispered quietly, in tones of such finality that made Toph put both feet on the floor. “Yes, I did. Although I don’t know if it will help me, in the long run.” She sighed deeply. “But it has to be worth it, in the end. She promised that I would have one eventually. When I found myself again, she said, and when my hatred passed. I don’t think I hate anymore, Toph. But I don’t know about finding myself.” She laughed quietly, yet it was not a happy sound. “I don’t think I feel lost
anymore, either.”

All this was veering into the super depressing territory of crying friends, and Toph knew better than to challenge a master waterbender at drunken sad times. But the tingling sense of her mission made her continue. “One what? What did Aunt Wu say you’d have?”

There was the faint sound of her fingernail tapping against the glass, and then there was the whispered confession, soft enough that only Toph could hear: “A *child.*”

Toph’s heart skipped a beat. Then it skipped another. Then her brain caught up, recognizing the feeling of dread that spread throughout her like the waters of a warm bath.

After Katara had left, Aang had spent several humiliatingly painful weeks with Yugoda until it was determined that (perhaps due to his 100 year stay in an energy bubble under arctic waters) he was infertile. Therefore, if Aunt Wu was correct in her prediction…

*Well, damn,* Toph thought. *Shit’s about to get real up in here.*

Yet before she could say anything the double doors behind her were opened, and the very familiar footsteps of Fire Lord Sparky interrupted her thoughts. Toph found herself undertaking the fastest about turn she had ever undergone, lighting up her face with all the memories of happier, sparklier times, when she was not drowning under the weight of knowledge that Toph’s best (female) friend was not going to have a child with her husband, Toph’s best (male) friend, and that the man the former was very likely in love with (runner up for both categories, except he was not so female, not that she thought about it) was not only in the physical proximity to do it, but his wife had also died about half a year ago.

In sum, Fire Lord Sparky was in prime position to knock up Sugar, leaving Twinkles alone and mopey in Ba Sing Se. Unless, of course, Toph did something about it.

Which she totally was. For three reasons: because she was all three of her besties and runner-up besties’ bestie, and she was a fan of world peace, and she had promised. And while she was reeling from the alcohol, she would be honest enough to admit that of the three reasons, the promise held the most weight.

Yet now FLS was upon them, and Toph launched herself over the settee, missing him by a good foot and making him work to catch her. Yes, Toph had learned to like making men work. Especially men who were so good at it.

“Sparky!” She cried out belatedly, hanging half over his arm like a tea towel. “Nice catch!”

Katara snickered behind her, and Toph totally felt the female solidarity. She directed a thumbs up her way.

She felt Zuko’s huff of frustration before he settled her on her own two feet. “I leave the two of you alone for a couple of hours and this is what happened?” Toph assumed he was giving Katara a pointed look, because it would do absolutely no good directed at her. “Seriously?”

“Welcome home,” Toph told him very seriously. “Let me tell you. Those drinks are fantastic.”

“I hesitate to ask, but what drinks were those?”

Oh, Toph totally knew this. “Vigorous Vixens.”

“Oh was it Vengeful Vampires?” Katara slurred helpfully.
Zuko made a very loud and long sigh, and Toph thought it was not perhaps the most warranted reaction. “Vi’xat Va’lal. The most alcoholic and dangerous of all fire nation drinks...and the two of you drank…” He muttered under his breath as he counted the empty glasses. His voice shot up at least a fifth in surprise. “Twelve of them? Twelve? How are either of you still standing?”

“We are champions.” Toph informed him, knowing somehow that he was still staring at Katara. Had she taken her clothes off or something? Hmph. At least she was pretty sure Steve and Hernando were still on her team, if only because the FLS would probably kill them for making eyes at his not-girlfriend.

Ugh, this was all getting complicated…

Toph found herself being lifted back onto the settee. “Yes, well, both of you champions are going to have a hard time of it...oh, about any time now. That stuff has a delayed kick, especially if you can’t burn it out of your system. And - oh, damn it. There she goes.”

Toph would have asked what the thump and its attending vibrations were, but she had the sinking feeling that it was Katara. And if Katara had just bit it and fallen right onto the floor - or so Toph would guess from FLS’s sudden surge in her direction - that meant Toph could only be next.

There was a sharp twinge in her head, and then just enough time to grin victoriously at having outlasted her friend - by a good half hour at least- before all the sounds in the world spun together viciously (ahh, another v-word!) and Toph passed the fuck out.

With a vengeance.

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Toph awoke many hours later to a soft but insistent poking of a finger in the face, and only the remembrance that she wasn’t allowed to metalbend any interlopers in her bed while she was vacationing in the fire nation kept her from doing so. It could be Sparky’s kids or something.

Or Steve.

Toph metaphorically opened her eyes by stretching her feet, and then gained hold of the situation by grabbing the tiny wrist of the person who had disturbed her slumber. Well, damn. Unless Steve had the wrists of a toddler, she had probably just caught a two year old.

“Let go!”

A particularly stubborn two year old… Toph swung her feet to the floor so she could sense their vibrations. Then she defused the situation with her signature charm. “Well, now. You feel a bit young to be slipping into ladies’ beds, but if you’re cute I will forgive you. Tell me, Oh Tiny One. Are you adorable?”

Oh, she could feel the tiny waves of indignation rolling off the brat, and she needed no other introduction. “No,” what could only be Iroh the Younger proclaimed. “No cute. ‘M scary. ‘N
tough.”

Oh spirits above and below he was adorable. Toph wanted to hug him, and that was a reaction she had never, ever entertained, even with Sokka and Suki’s water babies. Maybe it was her being 22 now, and her biological clock was beginning to tick?

Or maybe this child was dangerous.

She stood, never letting go of his wrist. He squirmed but her grip was well-honed after years of travelling the world with squirrely boys like oh, the Avatar. He had thin wrists too, she mused, before letting the youngster know his fate. “All right, Oh Great and Terrible Fire Lord Junior. Lead me to your father. I have questions for him.”

The boy regarded her distrustfully - or so she would guess - but dutifully lead her down the hall. Yet they had barely gone ten steps when Katara’s welcome voice rang out from the far end.

“Iroh! Oh, you found Toph! Well done, dear.”

New Iroh preened, or at least, that’s what Toph would have done in the face of such obvious love and maternal pride. He also managed to squirm out of Toph’s hold and ran down the hallway to Katara. Judging by the abrupt lack of footsteps, he had either been picked up, or had launched himself into her arms.

Toph scowled. What was it with water tribe women making fools of fire nation men? Like father like son, she concluded darkly, and suspected that New Iroh’s first love would be his father’s, as well.

Then Katara’s voice was close and warm - clearly, having an armful of fire-brat did her good. “Good afternoon Toph. You’re just in time - Zuko was thinking we could take a few days off and take the boys down to the old mansion on Ember Island. You’re coming too, obviously.” Katara’s glee was eminent. “I’m taking you swimming.”

Toph’s immediate reaction would have singed the ears of the toddler prince, and was withheld only by the remembrance of how cute the damn kid was. Then she was distracted by the use of we, and wondered just how many decisions they made together these days. Katara had been here for more than half a year...the potential worried her.

But first, to business. “You may try. When are we leaving?”

“An hour? Maybe two? I was just going to check on Koru and his nurse, to see if she was ready to go. Come with us, Toph.” Her voice gentled when she addressed New Iroh. “Are you ready to see your baby brother, Iroh? Maybe he’ll even spit fire at you this time.”

“He better,” New Iroh mumbled, and from the sound of it his face was likely lodged firmly against Katara’s neck. “Baby’s no fun with no fire.”

Toph’s sightless eyes narrowed, and for once she was sure that Katara was doing the exact same thing. Only in the Fire Nation. And among them, only in the Fire Nation royal family.

How had Zuko ended up so sane again? Toph suspected Iroh the Elder, but if she allowed herself to wonder how he had learned sanity she thought her brain might implode.

Zuko’s Not Girlfriend must be getting used to this sort of mindset, however, as she simply shifted the boy on her hip and gripped Toph’s wrist, dragging her along with them. “Well, let’s go check. Toph, have you even unpacked?”
Toph snorted. “Nope.”
“Excellent. We’ll just grab a bag on the way out, then.”

“What about you?”

Katara’s hesitation was momentary, but telling. “I...have some things there already. Oh! And Uncle is there, waiting for us. That’ll be a nice surprise, won’t it?”

That was a segue with all the subtlety of a charging rhino-hippo, and even with the inducement of Pops - one of her favorite people ever - she wasn’t going to stand for it. “Sweetness...why do you have swag on Ember Island?”

“Why are you calling it swag?”

“Katara.”

She sighed and they turned the corner. “I spend a little time there. When I’m not trying to defuse Arnook’s vendetta against the entirety of the Fire Nation, or overturning the ridiculous regulations on supplies to the earth nation colonies, or even butt heads with the old, stubborn men on the political circuit. It keeps me sane, Toph. And also from murdering them all in fits of watery, homicidal fury.”

Toph nodded wisely, understanding entirely. In the ten years since the war had ended, she had become an important personage in Ba Sing Se as well as Gaoling, and not just for her fighting prowess. Of course, she still took the most amount of pride in being the Blind Bandit, but she had found that she held a certain amount of political clout, and there were certain people who thought she should do something about it. Especially as her best friends were all up-and-coming leaders of their countries - if not the outright ruler.

Also - and this was the clincher, Toph thought - the Avatar was kind of living with her. Had been, actually, for the last two years when he had come back to the south pole and found his wife gone. (Actually, at this point, she really should start making him pay rent. Not that Twinkles wasn’t the best housemate ever, but spirits knew enough people were throwing money, valuables, and even their virgin daughters at him nowadays…)

No! She could not sidetrack herself with the intriguing concept of how much a virgin daughter would go towards rent payments. She had a mission.

Toph chose her words with all her usual care, which was to say, not much. “Hmm. So I totally get what you’re saying - people be crazy, and all that. The war ended ten years ago, can we all just move on already? But uh, does Sparky use Ember Island as a little getaway, too?”

Katara’s heartbeat continued steadily. “Yes? Less often than I do - he’s a lot more busy than me, obviously. But it is his house, Toph. I’m just the guest, here.”

From the tone of her voice, Katara honestly had no idea what Toph was trying to imply. Absolutely no increase in her heartbeat, either. Toph frowned. Either Katara was so stone cold innocent that she didn’t even know what Toph was getting at...or her friend was playing a winning hand in a losing game.

Time to be a little less subtle. “So uh, do you guys ever go there together?”

“No,” Katara replied without hesitation as she bustled them through a doorway. From within Toph could feel two more heartbeats. “This outing is special, and it’s all for you, missy.”

There was the perfect amount of arch sass that Katara had perfected in the post-war years, and once
again, Toph was thrown. So far, it looked as if Sweetness and Sparky weren’t lovers. This coincided with what her discreet spies in the Fire Nation - and Pops - had also attested. This seemed like good news, but she had yet to determine the most important thing: even though they had (apparently) not acted on it, were they in love with each other?

Toph groaned. She had a feeling this was like asking whether the sun rose in the east.

Before she could make a retort, however, a warm bundle was pressed into her arms. She held it reflexively, and there was a quiet yet definitely pleased gurgle that told her she was now holding Koru, Zuko’s youngest son. He smelled of warm milk, and the steady heartbeat thrumming through her fingertips made her face soften, and cause her to temporarily forget her mission.

Toph turned her sightless eyes to the bundle in her arms.

The bundle, although she did not know it, stared back.

As if in response to the almost perceptible waves of perfect love and trust resonating from the bundle, Toph narrowed her eyes menacingly.

The bundle gurgled happily, waving its tiny arms in the general direction of Toph’s nose.

Toph’s heart swelled. He was enchanting. She was never holding him again.

“He’s not even a year old yet and he’s already a little charmer. He’s going to have a way with the ladies. Isn’t that right, Koru?”

Toph turned her attention to her friend, rather than the bundle in her arms that was making her want to make babies, right here, right now. She assumed most of the statement was actually directed towards her, although she had been wrong before. Katara could very well have been speaking to New Iroh, as she had clearly gone a bit baby mad and was well on her way to longer being able to make conversation with people her own age.

Yet judging from New Iroh’s attitude on charm, pleasantry, and babies who were not on fire, Toph was not so sure he gave a damn.

“Yes, I can barely contain myself,” she muttered, holding the baby out just a little away from her body. “Pretty sure you should take him away from me, before I decide this is the one I have waited my entire life for, and that there will be no others.”

Knowing her as well as she did Katara ignored her, but the nursemaid must have taken her somewhat seriously, as the baby was hurriedly whisked out of her arms. As soon as the bundle of baby love was out of her arms Toph felt a bit more like herself and came to an unexpected conclusion. She had thought Katara guilty of the sin of underestimating people, but she herself had not realized how great a foe the tiny fire princes could be.

She would have to proceed carefully, and keep in mind their devastating powers of cuteness.

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If Toph threw herself headlong into Uncle’s arms upon arriving at Ember Island, she thought she shouldn’t be held accountable for that. She hadn’t seen the man for a solid month.

“Pops!”

In return, he made sort of an oofing sound, but she thought he was still pleased to see her by how tightly he hugged her, even as he nearly fell over. Toph righted them with an impromptu rock formation at his back, and they both gamely ignored Sparky and Sugar’s (and maybe even the nursemaid’s) muffled snickering behind them.

Pops chuckled as he let go. “It is good to see you, Honorable Blind Bandit. And also to know that you arrived in the Fire Nation unimpeded. I had feared you would have a difficult time travelling, especially with Gaoling’s recent stricture on travel to the Fire Nation…”

Toph made a face. Several Earth Kingdom city-states had banded together in agreement that trade and travel with the Fire Nation should be restricted, a worrisome about-face turn from their attitude from a few years prior. As far as Toph could tell, it had more to do with the fragmented political climate in the Earth Kingdom, as King Kuei was still a bit of a milksop - ok, was still a lot of a milksop - and they could get away with it. If the Earth Kingdom had a strong, dynamic leader to rally around that was smart enough to focus their attention toward the growth of their own nation, the cities would not be trying to assert themselves by playing upon old, shallowly buried tensions and hatred of the Fire Nation to maneuver themselves into a position of power.

But they were, and it was starting to piss Toph off. And she was just a concerned citizen! She could only imagine how Sparky felt about all this. She couldn’t envision him - oh, she cracked herself up - as being too pleased about it.

Yet then the others were there and Toph gave way for the others, letting them have their hug time with Pops. She kept close to the old dragon, however. She hadn’t forgotten Katara’s promise about taking her swimming.

In the water.

*Over Toph’s dead body.*

Yet Katara seemed to have forgotten all about it. With New Iroh clearly torn between holding her hand, his father’s, *or both*, and Koru making disgruntled baby sounds from the arms of the nursemaid behind them, she had enough on her plate. Sparky, whose voice sounded like he hadn’t seen the softer side of the mattress in days, seemed no better.

Guessing that between the children and their personal needs for a nap Sugar and Sparky wouldn’t be getting it on in the immediate future, Toph sidled closer to Pops and raised her eyebrows in the direction of his face. She couldn’t tell if he was actually looking at her, of course, but she was usually right about such things, because she was awesome like that.

No one had said she couldn’t mix business with pleasure, after all…

“So, Pops,” she began when she was reasonably sure that FLS and SQ were out of earshot, “How does the White Lotus contingency feel about breaking fire-nation hater Fei Shong’s hold over the Gaoling region? Preferably with senseless violence?"

Pops sounded as if he were exasperated, but Toph could hear the underlying notes of fondness rounding out his tones. “The White Lotus is sworn to diplomacy during peace times, Honorable
Blind Bandit.”

Ahh, but Toph knew all about getting around pacifism. Also, Pops. “And how do you feel about taking care of problems, Pops? Especially one that threatens peaceful communications and trade agreements and sports an awful goatee to boot?”

Pops was giving her a look, she just knew it. “His facial hair is a mistake, I agree. Especially on a man of his size. And I may be...open to negotiations on a more personal level. Shall I assume that is your purpose here, then? To unofficially smooth over relations between our nations?”

Twinkles had said absolutely nothing on her under the table, get shit done by any means necessary brand of politics, as he knew by now that any objection was fruitless. Toph was a woman who knew her own mind, thank you very much, and very few entities had ever managed to change it. It was miracle enough that Twinkles had talked her into her primary mission in the first place, as her first reaction had been to tell him to sit and spin and get the hell over it.

Not that she needed to tell Pops that. “Among others,” she shrugged, leaving herself wiggle room to deny, deny, deny. “But the Fei Shong problem isn’t going away whether I accomplish my original mission or not.”

Now Toph could feel Pop’s eyebrow rising, but before he could press her in his I am an old man who is wiser than mountains and so you should tell me all your secrets sort of way, Katara suddenly came careening out of nowhere, grabbing Toph’s hand and yanking her towards the dark, cold spot in her geographical awareness where the ground was continually shifting, weaker and less stable and wet.

“Come on, Toph! Let’s go swimming!”

Toph’s inner voice commenced to high-pitched, girly screaming all the way to the water.

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That night found Toph huddled around a campfire, swaddled in blankets, firewhiskey, and Pops, and nursing a well-developed desire for revenge against her two of her three best friends. Oh yes, both of them. For Toph could have handled Katara on her own, as her element was cradled within the earth. It was when Zuko entered the fray by picking her up and tossing her into the sea that things got serious.

Her friends would rue the day that they moved against her. This she swore on the earth itself.

Yet she would bide her time. For now, she was being pandered to, and they - along with the nursemaid - were putting the children to bed. As she was ill-equipped to handle crying and/or screaming children (and the demise and/or disappearance of their parental figures would no doubt result in such) she would plan her comeuppance for a time when she would not be held responsible for the wellbeing of children immediately afterwards.

Besides, Pops had already acquiesced to sending an extremely discreet hit team to ‘discourage Fei
Shong’s political ambitions’, in return for Toph’s openly championing the fire nation during her next rumble battle. Toph thought he was aiming a little too low. She had been fully prepared to entrap political dissidents in the desert - and if she were lucky, maybe some sand people too! Pops had only frowned at her bloodthirstiness, however. Then mumbled something about the Avatar having his hands full.

Toph remembered the quaver in Twinkle’s voice when he had said they had said goodbye, made all the worse by the tiniest spark of hope that he couldn’t quite quell. His hands were full, yeah, but it was of his own sorrow. That’s why she was here, she had wanted to tell Pops. So that for one way or the other, I can save the people that I love.

Even if it doesn’t exactly make me happy, myself.

“I received a letter from Azula, the other day. Her penmanship had been immaculate, before the war. I’m glad to see that it’s finally beginning to return to its former grace.”

Toph blinked. Well. That was apropos of not a whole heck of a lot. Also, was Pops doing that thing where he was pretending to talk about Azula’s writing and really meant her? Toph had no time for this. She let him know in her bluntest manner.

“So, Crazy isn’t so crazy anymore? That’s good.” A sudden thought occurred to her. “Where’s she being kept, anyway? She still on that island?”

Azula had been sent to an experimental care home on an island during the first few weeks after the war, when it was realized that she was too psychologically damaged and powerful to be restrained in the palace. Toph knew nothing of the place other than that it specialized in new forms of psychiatric care, and that Azula hadn’t found a way to break free or kill any of the workers during the last decade. With the current degrading political relationship between the fire nation and just about everyone else - not to mention the personal matter of Sparky and Sugar’s ill-fated attraction - she had the energy to care for little else.

“Yes, for now. But there is talk of moving her.” Pops’s voice dropped, to make doubly sure his nephew wouldn’t overhear. “While I am pleased that she is stabilizing, I am not sure that moving her is necessarily the best news for the fire nation, however.”

It only took Toph a moment or two to process this surprising statement, largely as she was much cannier than she generally let on. Misleading people about her capabilities and her powers of retention was not just for fun, it was a matter of principle.

Also as she was lazy and proud of it. “Pops, tell me your people aren’t dumb enough to want to reinstate Crazy just because she’s leveling out a little,” she griped. “She was Fire Lordette for a hot, insane second at the end of the war. Tell me your people haven’t forgotten how nutso she was.” Realizing that was a bit harsh, she sought to even it out with a compliment. “Besides, isn’t Sparky doing great? People seem to like him. No one’s even tried to kill him since Koru was born!”

Pops was no doubt looking at her with a miffed expression, but she was fairly sure he still loved her. He needed someone to shoot the shit with, and no one told it like she did. “That does not mean the people have forgotten that both Azula and Ozai still live,” he reminded her gravely. “And although this makes me a terrible brother, I am not sure letting him live is the right choice, either.”

There was little Toph could say to that. Ozai still resided in the palace dungeons, stripped of his bending, and under the severest of restrictions. Only a handpicked few had been allowed to guard him, all generously paid and watched carefully by Zuko himself. Although all nations had clamored for his execution - including many members of the White Lotus society - Zuko kept him there,
refusing to let his father face execution for his crimes. Life in prison was punishment enough, he had said, and Aang had agreed.

Toph had privately suspected that Zuko kept him there for information about his mother, but it had become obvious years ago that Ozai had not known where Ursa had ended up. After murdering Azulon all those years ago - a tale Ozai had told with no small amount of gory detail- she had disappeared, and no one living seemed to know her fate. Even the White Lotus spies had been stymied, and after the birth of his first son, Zuko had given up on his quest to discover his mother.

If she still lived, he hoped she was happy, but he would no longer let her ghost dictate his own happiness.

Yet none of this was anything she needed to point out, and so Toph tried another tack. “So what does Sparky think about all this? He doesn’t seem to be too concerned…”

There was a slight hesitation before Pops responded, and Toph’s ear perked up. “He...has kept fairly calm about this. Raising his sons has stabilized him tremendously. And having two male heirs has eased much of the criticism his people could lay at his door - at least he has done his duty as well as my father had, in that respect. And with Katara around...well, perhaps I can say that having a feminine influence around also helps.”

And here it was. The moment she had come to the fire nation for, gotten drunk off her gourd from those fantastic cocktails, flirted shamelessly with her new bro Steve, and had faced peril in the form of adorable babies and cold freaking seawater.

The moment when she and Pops aligned and saved the world from their friends.

“So what’s the damage, Pops?” Her voice was quiet and unusually thoughtful. “They are together then? Honestly, they hide it well. I was beginning to think they weren’t, and-”

“But they’re not,” Pops interrupted in tones of I know something you don’t, and I’m still not very happy with this situation. “Lovers, I mean. They have both been very careful not to allow themselves such liberties. In fact,” he mused, “I think they are unaware that their feelings are reciprocated. They likely believe themselves desperately in love with the other, holding no hope that the other could possibly feel the same.”

Toph’s mouth fell open. “What, are they blind? Check that. I’m blind and I can see it!”

Pops made a hrumphy sound that made him sound very noble and distinguished, and so therefore he would likely hate it. “Yes, my young friend. We can all see it. But they are in love and therefore cannot. Love is blind, they say. In this case it might be more apt to say love is unknowing.”

Toph thought unknowing might not be going far enough. Senseless might be slightly more apt, as Pops had termed it. But in terms of her mission, this might actually be a good thing. “Doesn’t matter. If they haven’t gone through with it by now, they might never. Unless, of course, someone meddles.”

She turned and squinted her eyes in the general direction of Pop’s face. “Don’t meddle.”

Pop’s reply was quiet and a little sad. “Even if it meant their happiness? I think the two of them are very, very good for each other. I doubt they will find this level of contentment with anyone else.”

Personally, Toph thought so too. But back in Ba Sing Se there was a man with skinny wrists and ankles and a penchant to float five feet off the ground just so she couldn’t kick them, and he had been moping for the last two years. If Twinkles could have gotten over Sugar, he’d have done it by now. And if Twinkles could never get over his wife, then Toph was going to do all that she could to
get them back together.

She could rattle off at least fifteen political reasons why it would be impossible for the Avatar’s Wife to leave the Avatar for the freakin’ Fire Lord, but truly, it all boiled down to this: Aang needed her. Toph loved all of her friends equally, and she was sure that they all needed the light of Toph in their madcap lives, but Aang needed her the most. So the decision, when it was put to her, was shamefully easy. She would never tell a soul what she was doing here, and the Avatar had learned to keep his secrets. Yet he had asked for her help and she would give it, even if it meant that Katara and Zuko wouldn’t get their happy ending.

And although she loved and trusted the man something fierce, it was something she should never explain to Uncle. Time to be practical.

“They can’t be together, Pops. Forget Fei Shong, and the Ozai insurgents. Forget Arnook and his senile dementia, and that all he remembers is his hatred of the Fire Nation. This would destroy everything. Every inch of peace that we’ve fought for and won. There’d be no way to come back from that.”

“The Avatar would not forgive them?”

Toph responded more quickly than was prudent, but the truth bubbled up out of her without her consent. “No.”

Uncle was silent for a long moment, sipping from his a flask of some unpronounceable pirate brew that he had developed a liking for during his time at sea. Toph, who was still recovering from her brush with the Fire Nation’s national drink had declined his offer to share.

Finally, he sighed deeply. “Do you know what they are doing right now?”

A little surprised by the sudden change in topic, Toph dug her toes in the sand and tried to look. They were too far away, however, and there were many vibrations between the bonfire and the old mansion that they were staying in. Finally realizing that Pops was speaking rhetorically, Toph scowled. “No. Should I? I thought we just decided we shouldn’t be worried about them!”

Pops chuckled. “Oh no, my young friend. If I were the Avatar, I’d be very worried, indeed. I can only assume that they are doing what they do every evening, and that is wishing each other good night.”

Toph hesitated, waiting for the clincher that didn’t come. “And?” She finally asked. “Do they say it naked, or something?”

She could feel Pop’s amusement. “Someday, you will learn a thing or two about intimacy, my young friend. And then, perhaps, about love.” He sighed. “No, they are without a doubt fully clothed; perfectly respectable in every way. Zuko will be standing at the doorway, and Katara within. They will say nothing more than goodnight, and there will be no expectation of anything more. Night after night, and it is always the same. And that is the trouble. That is where the danger lies.”

Toph squinted as if that would possibly help her see Uncle’s point. “Pops. Loveless heathen here...but I still don’t get it. Where’s the fire? That just sounds...well. Boring, actually.”

Pops shifted next to her, the vibrations running up through her toes. “Allow me to explain. It’s very fire nation, what they’re doing - silently expressing such a powerful, unspoken, enduring love. Saying goodnight to each other; being the last to see each other in the evening... it has become a ritual where they are allowed to tell each other - even if just with their eyes - that they love each
other, one day at a time. That sort of love is not easily forgotten. It is not the rush of physical desire nor the overwhelming intensity of one’s first affection. It is true, deep, abiding. And I fear it will outlast the current political unrest...and the lady in question’s marriage.”

The quiet finality in his explanation struck something in Toph, and she found her resolve to keep her true mission a secret crumble. She was canny but Pops was *wise*, and suddenly she wondered if she hadn’t made a mistake in coming here, planning what she did. She tried to think of something snarky or even flat out inappropriate, anything to buy her time. What came out instead was the damning truth: “I’m here on Aang’s behalf. He wants his wife back. And I think I know the way of doing it.”

And then, after a dry swallow and a moment of brief but intense soul searching, “Am I doing the right thing?”

Pop’s consideration was like the heat of the sun on her skin. “And if I tell you that I think you are not, will that sway you?”

Toph thought of returning to her small home in Ba Sing Se, where everyone knew the Avatar lived when he wasn’t out keeping the world saved. She imagined walking up the stairs to his room, the attic, the highest he could get in that house. He would be waiting breathlessly, although he had learned how to hide it from everyone but her. She would feel his anxiety from the little tremors through the floor, yet would know it with even more certainty if he kept himself entirely aloft.

He was her antithesis in all ways, and yet she knew him better than anyone alive. Only she could hear that tiny seed of hope in his voice when she had left for the Fire Nation. Could she go home and kill it entirely, telling him that he was too late, there was no recovering from his mistakes, that his wife loved another? Could she go home and feel him wilt, knowing there was nothing she could do to fix it? Would salty tears fall from the sky, staining her skin as he melted in sorrow?

Or would he turn to her, desperate to do anything to stopper the pain?

Toph might never see the sea or the sky or the faces of those she loved, but she saw into her own heart with unerring clarity. And she knew that if there was one thing that she could not do, it was withhold Aang’s happiness. Even if, in doing so, she would close her heart against the one chance she had of love.

Could Pops sway her? In most things, but not in this. For all her strength, she was powerless. She would give the man she loved the woman he wanted, even if it made everyone else unhappy in the process.

*And to perpetuate peace,* she told herself. *The last thing we need is another war.*

No, her mind was made up, no matter how much she wished it weren’t. “No,” she whispered, and wished for some of her bravado, that she might wear it to cloak her own heartbreak. “I’m sorry, Pops.”

There was a tense moment, where for once Toph had no idea what Uncle might do. Then she felt his presence as he leaned in. There was the touch of dry, papery lips against her temple. Only the thought of Aang’s smile kept her from crying.

“Then I hope that a force greater than destiny watches over them,” he murmured. “I hope it watches over you all. Else what did we win the war for, if the hearts of those who love each other can be so divided?”
The rest of her visit went exactly as she had expected it to. Katara was domestic and happy, Zuko was overworked yet optimistic, Iroh and Koru were cuteness incarnate, and Uncle watched over them with a quiet, solemn air. Observing their healthy equilibrium closely, Toph spent the next two weeks calculating her chances.

Two nights before she left for Ba Sing Se, there was a failed assassination attempt on Chief Arnook’s life from a soldier of mixed earth and fire nation ancestry. Had she not already come to a final decision, the outcry - largely against the Fire Nation, even with the soldier’s mixed heritage - would have decided it for her.

She and her friends had already had their happy ending - the Avatar returned, Ozai overthrown, ten solid years of peace. She couldn’t be so greedy as to wish for more than this.

That being the case, she hugged Katara tightly just before boarding the airship and whispered into her ear, “Any messages for anyone back home?” To illustrate her point Toph ran her fingers over Katara’s ringless fingers, and her friend stiffened against her.

“Just that I hope everyone is happy,” she finally replied. Toph wondered if she was looking at Zuko, standing a handful of feet behind Toph. “And that their lives are as fulfilling as mine.”

*That settled that,* Toph decided as she hunkered down on the airship, resigned to two solid days of misery as she traveled thousands of feet above her element. *Sweetness has moved on.*

*Time for me to step in.*

Two solid days of misery later, Toph arrived in Ba Sing Se. It took her half a day’s worth of travel to reach her house on the upper ring, and ten minutes to steel herself to open her own front door. As soon as she did, however, there was the rush of wind against her face, and the scent of sandalwood. That meant that Aang had used the soap she’d bought him, even though he lectured her on the usage of animal fat in it.

The thought that he had used something she bought for him made her heart glow like an ember in the fireplace. Yet this was an indulgence that she could not afford. Taking a deep breath, she prepared to put her heart’s light out.

“What will you do to win her back, Aang?” She asked without preamble, cutting off his chirpy welcome.
He hesitated, and she was unsure whether it was to consider his answer, her tone, or the fact that she had just used his real name. But then, just as she knew he would, he replied, “Anything.”

Failure washed over her like the waves of the sea, dark and cold and bitter. But she kept her face impassive, telling herself that this would not be the worst moment. Others worse than this would follow.

“Do I still have a chance?” Aang asked, and still he kept himself aloft. Toph was grateful for this, in a distant sort of way. That meant she would have a harder time reading his emotions, especially when she had such a mixed message for him.

Yet anyone could read his tone perfectly when it darkened as he asked, “Are they lovers?”

*That sort of love is not easily forgotten. It is not the rush of physical desire nor the overwhelming intensity of one’s first affection. It is true, deep, abiding. And I fear it will outlast the current political unrest...and the lady in question’s marriage.*

“No,” Toph answered. “They are not lovers. But they are in love, and I highly doubt that will ever change.”

Aang’s breath hitched, and Toph could almost feel the panic spiralling in his gut. Before his outburst could escape him she pressed forward. “They’ve achieved a sort of balance, Aang. Although they’re not together, they’re painfully in love. There is a chance that they might never act on it. It’s small, but it’s there. But that’s not what you need. In fact, that’s the worst possible thing for you.”

“What?” Aang cried. “What are you talking about? How could that be terrible? She’s my wife, Toph, how could I possibly want her to...to be with anyone else?” His voice was rising and it was choked with a mixture of rage and sorrow that hardened Toph’s own heart.

It enabled her to answer as callously as she must. “Because if they don’t, they’ll stay like this forever, falling more and more in love and never able to act on it. It will become an obsession, and then you’ll never win her back. You need to tip the balance, Aang. You need to take a risk. You need to let them have what they want...and then be available when the world forces them apart.”

He was practically heaving for breath and had lowered himself enough so that Toph could feel his body’s vibrations. Just an inch or two more and he’d be on the floor, and then she’d understand every inch of his sorrow. She was fairly sure she felt it already. “Toph, I don’t understand. You need to make sense. I can’t... I can’t...”

His left foot brushed the floor and suddenly she could feel it - the pounding of his heart. It would never pound like that for *her*. Toph closed her sightless eyes.

“Think of it this way, Aang,” she explained, schooling her voice into the calm, lady of the manor voice she had learned as a child. “In order to get what you want, you need to give them something that they want. And if you’re smart about it, it’s all going to work out for you.”

“But he wants her! If I give her to him, I’ll never get her back!”

Was she really the only one who could see this? “And what does she want? What’s the one thing that he can give her, but will ultimately force them apart?”

Now both of his feet were on the ground and she could feel every painful slam of his heart, his confusion, his despair. “I...I don’t… Denouncing them as the Avatar? But that will start another war, Toph, I can’t do that!”
So not quite anything, then, Toph decided. Not that he’d meant that when she’d asked him. He’d do anything and everything as a man to get his love back, but would not besmirch the honor of the Avatar with his own personal sorrows. He would not embroil the world in another war over a woman. And for this, Toph still loved him, even when he was breaking her heart.

She reached out, taking his hand in both of hers. It was all she’d allow herself, and she found herself cataloguing the feel of his long, slender fingers against her delicate ones. His heart rate jumped, but she knew it was from surprise, rather than attraction. Then, she sealed all their fates.

“A child, Aang. That’s what she wants more than anything. And it’s the one thing you can’t give her that Zuko can. But it’s also the one thing he can’t - she can’t raise a child with him. Not in this world, not even now. But she can raise a child with you.”

He was silent, barely breathing. Toph squeezed his hand and continued. “But you have to understand what you’re getting into. If you can’t accept her bearing Zuko’s child, you have to know that now, because I won’t let you hurt her later about this. But this is the only way, Aang. You said you would do anything. If you can do this, you’ll keep her. If you can risk this now, this is how you’ll get her back.”

He was still silent, and now Toph wondered if he was breathing at all. Then, slowly, he tugged his hand out of her grip.

“I understand,” he finally said. It was in his Avatar voice and Toph felt her stomach shrivel. “I need to consider this. I need to think. I need to - Toph?”

She jolted, surprised at the sudden emphasis. “What?” She asked, but then felt the tears against her cheeks. Hastily she scrubbed them away, surprised at herself. She had not thought she’d be the type to cry over her own broken heart. Or was this for Katara and Zuko’s sake?

Aang’s fingers brushed against her cheek, a teardrop collecting on his fingertip. Then he was gone, leaving only a gust of wind and a regret that Toph had never before known in his wake.

Toph sat down right where she was, right on the kitchen floor. She tucked her knees to her chest, bowed her head, and cried.

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In the morning, Aang was gone.

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And if anyone was wondering about when Toph was going to up and fall in love, wonder no longer. She is always my favorite even when I’m making her miserable. She also has a moment with the letter ‘V.’ Among other things.

Volcano Villude is from the best playstation game of all time, Legend of the Dragoon. If I have made a drink of it, please don’t judge me. (It’s a 1-900- F**k me up, only with grenadine and limoncello instead of cranberry juice...and it is delicious. And perhaps not in shot form. Don’t judge me. )

Tophhhhh what is this stop meddling you’re only going to have an about face turn in like 20 years ughhh woman. Seriously, wth me.
Chapter 9: The First Ritual

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter - hypothetical incestuous and suicidal desires, set within a nightmare construct.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 9: The First Ritual

(Mid year 30)

The bear stirred and smiled at her, teeth white against its black fur.

I have what you long for, it told her. Catch me, and you will have what you seek.

So she chased the bear through the forest, mind racing with the joy of the chase; under the sparkling waters of the grotto, heart alight with night’s beauty; up the mountain to its very peak, straining her body until she thought she might collapse.

-Second excerpt from Anicca’s fairytale-

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Iroh awoke in the Sun Temple, just as the dawn broke. Light spilled through the wooden slats, marking rosy, transient patterns on the stone floor. There was no sleepy transition from dreams to awareness. Firebenders rose with the sun, and Iroh had trained himself from a young age to wake fully and immediately. Such a skill would avail him when he was allowed to join the army, he was sure, and as most of his waking moments was spent honing the skills he would need for adulthood, he thought very little of any current discomfort.
He was halfway through his morning stretches before he remembered that he had promised to do them with Koru, and he broke off with an unexpected sense of disappointment with himself. It was not like him to be so forgetful, and Koru would likely not let him forget it anytime soon. Annoying as Koru often was, he had an excellent memory, and it was a younger brother’s prerogative to give the elder a hard time.

Iroh sighed. He had hoped that Koru would have matured a touch more when he had turned 15 only a few weeks ago, but so far, it seemed that he was born to disappointments.

Iroh, a far more stately 17, made his his way to the door connecting his and his brother’s rooms, knowing that he was not going to enjoy whatever came next.

On the second round of knocking, Koru opened the door with a too-wide grin. “Oh good morning, brother! I was just about thinking to come and get you...but then I thought that just maybe you were sleeping in. But ah! I see from the fine sheen of sweat at your brow that you...oh, could it be possible? Could you have started your exercises without me?”

Iroh rolled his eyes.

“Iroh! And after you promised me last night that we would stretch together! I’m hurt. Dreadfully so. I may begin to weep at any moment.”

This time, Iroh did not temper his aggression, and whacked his brother soundly on the side of the head.

“Ow!”

A small measure of peace permeated his being. It had been some time since he had last smacked his brother for being such an insufferable smartass...

Koru, who knew just how hard Iroh could hit when he was serious, mock pouted as sat down on his bed. “Well, now. If that’s how it’s going to be, I’m not going to tell you my amazing idea for today.”

Iroh smirked. “Fine. Now, as we’ve lost some time this morning, I think we should cut straight to the waterbending salutations-”

Koru waved him off. “No, no. I was kidding - you really want to hear my idea. It’s a great idea, you’ll see.” He raised an eyebrow, and Iroh felt that familiar twinge of annoyance that his little brother could do something he couldn’t. Superior as he tended to be, his eyebrows either rose together...or not at all.

After a suitable enough pause, Koru continued. “I was thinking...that today, while all the sun monks are attending to their secret festival arrangements...that we could learn how to lightning bend.”

It was a rare thing when Iroh laughed at all, let alone this early this morning. Yet he couldn’t help a derisive snort. His brother truly was ridiculous. “As I was saying, let’s skip straight to-”

“I’m serious, Iroh!”

Iroh did not go in much for jokes, but he had a dry, sarcastic wit that he used when he wanted to cut someone down to size. “Oh, all right. Let’s spend a day and learn how to lightning bend. Let’s take 24 hours to learn a technique that has taken every single bender who’s ever mastered it months, if not years, to learn.” He smile was humorless. “It sounds like a wonderful waste of time, to me.”

Just as Iroh’s patience was thin, Koru’s was wide - yet he could only be pushed so far. “I’m not
saying that I could learn it in a day...but you could. Or aren’t you the most talented firebender since Uncle...or Azula of the Blue Flame?”

Iroh hesitated. While it was an unpopular thing to compare oneself to his mad, yet incredibly talented aunt, it was also a measure of how good he truly was. Additionally, he was a proud man, and he had trouble stepping down from challenges, no matter how infantile or degrading. This was silly, and a waste of a full day of training and contemplation in the most hallowed place he had ever had the privilege to visit. Yet when his brother said it in that tone of voice…

“Besides, I already know how to direct lightning. So technically, you are behind, because you still can’t figure out how to do that.”

He scowled, unable to refute. Like their father, Koru had learned to direct lightning long before he could learn to generate it. Father had claimed that it was likely due to Koru and Sura’s closeness, and their penchant for training and sparring every time she came to the Fire Nation. Yet it was a skill that Iroh simply could not learn - while he was every bit as flexible and powerful as Koru, there was something rigid in his soul that could not lend itself to the fluidity required for waterbending, and by extension, lightning direction. It was a failure born of his strengths, and as such was something Iroh had no idea how to change. The prospect of never learning how to direct lightning sat heavily upon his shoulders, and it made him react in just the way his brother had hoped.

“Fine. I will try. I make no promises...but I will do all that I can.”

Koru smiled, all his posturing wiped away in the pleasure of spending a whole day with his older brother. “That’s all anyone asks, Iroh. Now, let’s go have some fun!”

Anicca paused as she glanced up at her grandmother, hands covered and face streaked with soot. “What do you mean, I can’t be there tonight? It’s Rama’s coming of age ceremony!” And then, when she had half a moment to think it over, “And it’s my birthday too. Even more so, for I was born first!”

Asha hummed as chopped a mixture of country herbs. “Keep kneading, dear one. Else the mixture won’t set.”

Anicca scowled as her gaze fell to the unpalatable combination of soot, animal fat, and spices she was currently kneading into rolls of inedible dough. It was an offering for the ancestors who would be present for the celebration tonight - Rama’s 18th birthday. That it was her 18th birthday as well would not matter to the tribe at large. Beyond her immediate family, no one would even speak to her today. She was a painful reminder of the spirit bender’s decline on the best of days, and today her presence would not be tolerated. Thus she was unofficially banished to Asha’s hut, under the pretense of assisting her grandmother prepare for her brother’s ceremony. “But I wouldn’t say or do anything. I just want to watch. I just want to support him…”

Asha slowly set down the knife before coming over and taking her granddaughter by the shoulders. She waited until Anicca turned to face her, then thumbed away a smudge of soot along her
cheekbone before beginning. “Dear one, listen to me. Painful as it is to be excluded on such a day, this is far better. I would have chosen it for you, had it been my decision to make.”

“What?” Anicca jumped to her feet, staring down at her grandmother in consternation. “How can you say that? This is the most important ritual - no, the only ritual I’d ever be allowed to undertake, and you would have me banished to the forest?” She shook her head and her throat grew tight with unexpressed emotion. “I don’t understand. Why would you-”

Asha reclaimed her hands and drew her back to her. After a tense moment, Anicca sat back down. “If you went to the ceremony tonight, no one would speak to you. No one would look at you. All would treat you as if you were not alive.”

“Rama wouldn’t-”

“Rama will be inundated by the spirits, and unable to sense or interact with anything on the earthly plane. You would be alone, Anicca, and painfully reminded of that with every step. And on the off chance that you were not ignored, the attention you would draw would only be negative. Even on such a joyous occasion as this, you cannot forget your birth, dear one. No one else in the village ever will.”

Anicca broke her grandmother’s gaze, swinging her head to the side and blinking back hot tears. Even with her childish tantrum, she understood exactly what her grandmother was trying to say. It was not simply that she was an ungifted individual in a village full of spirit benders, she was also a twin amongst a people who considered such a thing a curse.

She breathed deeply, struggling for calm. Ever since she was little, she had been taught that twins were aberrations of nature, designed to bring the gods and their wrath down upon those who bore them and kept them in their midst. If both children survived the birth, one child would always be killed. Such was the tradition and unspoken law among their tribe - and yet both she and Rama were still alive. She had been allowed to live because she’d been desperately sick as an infant. The villagers took it as a sign, and had decided to wait until the gods themselves corrected their own mistake. Yet against all odds she had managed to survive, defeating illness after illness until she’d reached the threshold of childhood - age 3, and the end of the impunity given in the case of a child’s murder- and after that she had been safe.

Spiritbenders had strict rules concerning children, their rituals, and the roles they must play in the village. She flouted all of them, and even on the day she became a full fledged woman, Asha was reminding her not to forget her precarious position amongst them.

“Besides, I think you have another friend who wishes to celebrate with you tonight. I believe he will be making a dramatic escape from Mori in order to see you - Priya is beside herself, but I think it will do her good to be thwarted from time to time. She is far too full of herself as it is.”

Asha’s dry commentary about the Keeper of their sister village broke the tension and made Anicca grin. Priya was a haughty woman who made it very difficult to like her, although Asha grudgingly admitted Priya was a model of morality, and had not been corrupted by the power the Mori tribe allotted her - which could not be said of Mori’s previous Keeper.

Yet then Anicca remembered what Asha had first said. For a moment her mind felt cloudy, and it was with honest misgiving that she said, “A friend? But I don’t have any friends among the Mori Tribe…”

Her grandmother started. She then peered closely at her, yet after a moment her confusion cleared. She smiled to herself. “Are you and Toshiro no longer friends...”
spoken of his wish for you two, although I had not thought that it was a wish either of you shared…”

Comprehension flooded her, and memories of Toshiro flooded away that strange, twilight unawareness that had kept her from remembering him. What had just happened? What was wrong with her that she could forget her best friend?

“I...no, of course not. Toshiro and I are just friends. Rama is foolish, truly.” She was being absolutely honest. She and Toshiro were just friends, and felt not an ounce of desire for the other. Yet her grandmother was still watching her like a falcon-hawk. In an attempt to turn her grandmother’s attention away from such an embarrassing topic - and that odd moment that she still could not explain - she tried to turn it into something else.

“I was only joking, grandmother. How could I not know my best friend? I was simply...ah, how do they say…” She switched into the element bender’s tongue that Asha had begun teaching her when she was 13. “I was playing a trick on you. Was that it? Was that correct?”

“The wording was right. Although I am not sure if you should be joking about such things. Poor Toshiro. You will break his heart, I think.” Her eyes unfocused, and for a moment she seemed to be looking past her granddaughter, past her kitchen, past current time. “But perhaps now is better, before you meet someone with gold eyes and a smile like a blade…”

Anicca rolled her eyes. Even though her grandmother was the wisest Keeper in memory, she was also her grandmother, and as such tended to embarrass her fairly regularly. Over the years she had dropped a few too many unsubtle hints about her desire for grandchildren, and how she wouldn’t be too upset if they had the tendency to fly. Rama, of course, tended to chime right in...until Anicca reminded him that there were plenty of airbending women left, and he had all the working parts to make their grandmother’s dreams come true.

The golden eyes part was new, however, and fanciful - she had never met anyone with eyes other than blue, grey, or hazel. Odder still, something about the way she said it made goosepimples rise on her flesh, and her eyes flash with irritation.

Perhaps Toshiro had the right idea about someday, flying away to freedom. At least out in the wide world there would be no matchmaking grandmothers!

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By the time the sun had climbed past its zenith, Iroh was stiff, frustrated, and ready to launch a fireball or two at his younger brother’s face. Unsurprisingly, he had been unable to generate more than flame, and as per usual, lightning felt as far off as the moon. Not that he was giving up. No, there was no part of him that accepted defeat. Yet now that he’d challenged himself, failure would be at best unacceptable, and at worst...humiliatingly painful. He shook his head. Now that he’d committed himself, he would learn it. There was no other alternative.

The only real question in his mind was whether or not he’d have to kill Koru before doing so. His younger brother had been far more irritating than usual all day, and it took all his discipline not to simply give in to the hate that swirled and eddied inside of him. The darkness within was as ever
present as the ocean waves, and on most days he was able to hold it back by sheer force of will, and the realization of what he would lose if he lost himself. Yet on a day like today when he was stretching himself and his abilities to the utmost, his hold over his hate was tenuously thin...and any little thing could make him snap.

Iroh breathed deeply. He had to remain calm. He had to remain in control.

Koru called out from across the sparring grounds, breaking his concentration. "Any day now, brother! Although this one, preferably. You've only been working on this for the last year or so...don't you think it's time?"

All this made Iroh seethe and clench his fists, but it was Koru's next statement that pushed him over the brink.

"Besides, it's going to look kind of bad for me when we get home and you still can't lightning bend. I promised Uncle and Father that I'd have at least have taught you lightning direction." He cocked his head to the side. "Would you make me a liar, Iroh?"

*I will make you dead.* Senseless rage swamped him, bubbling up from the dark, deep reaches of his psyche that even he dared not tread. It was the same rage that had shaped his grandfather and aunt, and had been the bane of the Fire Nation royal family for centuries. Now, it was directed point blank at his younger brother, and one of the few people he truly loved.

The power that surged within him was instant and staggering. Was this what he was capable of? How could he have denied himself this?

At a thought, his fingers licked with flame.

"Iroh? Iroh!"

Someone called to him from far away, but they were without and he was within. All his life he had kept his rage at bay, thinking it dishonorable, knowing that to surrender to it was weak. Yet now he recognized its tenterhooks in his soul...and he embraced it.

Weaving tendrils of flame split from their customary spherical shape, and began trailing upwards. The sunlight bleached their tips blue.

"Iroh!"

He was right to fear him, he truly was. Because now that Iroh had surrendered to this power, everything had changed. He had been taught that rage was a dark, messy emotion, blinding one to the truth and the correct path. Yet now that he was firmly in its grip, everything was so clear. He could calculate the strength running throughout his bones exactly, and even the scent of the air seemed sharp and unforgettable. His brother stood out with bright clarity against the tamped earth of the sparring ring, and there was a burn in his hands - different than flame, somehow sharper and more *primal* than flame - that filled him with a dark joy.

He looked down. Lightning glittered and sparked between his fingers, like some sort of magical spiderweb, growing with each passing second.

"You can't *hold* it! You gotta' *throw* it!"

The words resounded in him, registering as truth despite this odd state heightened removal he was in. Indeed, no one could hold lightning and live. He must deliver judgement, just like the ancient gods.
Iroh’s body moved through practiced motions, glorying in every movement. Had he always been this powerful? This fluid, this purposeful? No, the rage was fueling him. Yet his father had taught him that rage limited a firebender’s strength.

His father had lied.

“Wait, Iroh!”

Iroh did not wait. The lightning bolt left his fingertips with more force and speed than flame ever could, and as soon as it was gone he felt bereft. With the lightning went his dark purpose, and icy clarity washed over him.

He had wanted his brother to die.

Horror suffused him. Although time seemed to move slowly, there was nothing he could do but watch: the lightning raced toward his brother, yet Koru was one step behind. He had just dipped into the penultimate step when the lightning hit him dead in the chest, lifting him off his feet in a sparking, twitching mess. Far off, someone was screaming, and Iroh couldn’t tell if it was Koru, or if it was himself.

Suddenly the ring was swarming with sun monks. Most rushed to his brother’s body, and from this distance Iroh could see them channelling energy into his brother’s prone form. It was no use, he tried to say, but for some reason he couldn’t make his mouth shape the words. Only then did he realize he was still screaming.

This was the price of anger, he realized, and his throat clenched. Across the field, the monks had just laid Koru’s arm back down over his chest, gently, reverently. Like they would do for the dead. This was the price of losing control.

In the same half-way state, he felt the blow to the back of his head as if it were happening in a dream. Yet consciousness fled him, leaving time for one fleeting thought before he succumbed.

That was easy.

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Night had fallen by the time Anicca was free to meet Toshiro in the forest, and the Coming of Age ceremony was well underway. She took her grandmother’s advice and did not linger, even though she wanted to see her little brother in the ceremonial paint and men’s garb. She was proud of him, would always be so, but she had to do what was right for the both of them. So she made her way through the village into the forest, relying on the light from her small lamp to find their secret place.

Their secret place had been established years ago, back when they were all still children and in need of such things. Now it was not so much a secret as it was a small clearing in between a few weeping willows, with a small rockpit and a few logs to sit on. It was the place they would meet or escape to, if they needed a few hours solitude from the increasing demands from their villages. While Anicca’s duties had remained fairly constant, pre-decided and maintained by her grandmother, Rama and
Toshiro had found a marked increase in their duties and expectations since they had reached adulthood. Toshiro avoided his, which was why Priya worked so hard to keep him in the village - if not by doing his duty with some young woman, then at least to use his powers for the enhancement of the tribe. Yama’s expectations for Rama were no different, and would only get worse now that he was a grown man...

Anicca broke into a grin as she pushed aside the hanging branches of the willow tree, and saw Toshiro already sitting there, stoking a small fire. He stood as she approached and they hugged.

“Congratulations, Ani. May you live happily and healthily 100 years more.”

Anicca laughed at the traditional greeting before sitting next to her friend on the log. “Thank you, ‘Shiro. I’ll pass along your greeting to Rama, tomorrow. Unless you’re going to be around?”

Toshiro had the habit of sleeping in the forest whenever he wanted to put some distance between himself and his tribe. He claimed that the ancient airbenders had done so before they erected their temples, fashioning cradles in the trees to protect themselves from wild animals. “I will try. It is not every day that my friends become adults - now none of us are children. I have waited a long time for this.”

Anicca threw her friend a suspicious look. Toshiro was only a year or so older than them, and just as the coming of age rituals from village to village, so did the benefits of adulthood. There was one in particular that she thought he might be referring to. “‘Shiro...what’s that behind the log?”

He grinned, and it was the grin that had the women of his village chasing him since he was 13. “Your present. And Rama’s, for whenever he gets here.”

He grinned, and it was the grin that had the women of his village chasing him since he was 13. “Your present. And Rama’s, for whenever he gets here.”

Her blossoming happiness over her present wilted. “Ah...I don’t think he will be coming, tonight. I’m sorry, Toshiro. I hadn’t exactly realized what the ritual would entail until Asha taught me of it earlier…” She trailed off, wincing. It was awkward enough to think about what he brother would do under the spirits’ influence, but odder still to explain it to their friend.

“He will, um. Be busy, tonight. Doing...adult things. With other adults.” She snuck a glance over at her friend, and blushed when she saw his eyebrows were at his hairline. “Oh, stop it. Don’t make me say it.”

Toshiro’s expression didn’t shift an iota as he reached down, grabbed her present, and took a sip. From where she was sitting, Anicca could smell the fermented honey - he had brought mead. More so, Toshiro had brought them the Iwaya village’s special mead, knowing that she and Rama had never been allowed to have alcohol before. The thoughtful gesture was almost enough to forgive him making her admit what the Yama village’s Coming of Age Ritual entailed.

“So, let me get this straight. Rama is currently becoming a man in all senses of the phrase...while under the influence of his ancestors?” Toshiro looked both horrified and impressed. “All we had to do was run a gauntlet!”

Anicca scowled as she blushed harder, and he pushed the jug over to her. She took a tentative sip so that she wouldn’t have to answer. Then, surprised at how good it tasted, she took another.

“And do the women do this too? Or is it just for men?”

Anicca was still embarrassed, but the golden mead was warm and smooth, and went a long way towards softening her at the edges. She was also grateful that he hadn’t asked it more baldly: then why aren’t you there?
“Generally, yes. And it’s not just...that, Toshiro. There’s a huge party, and everyone celebrates the new adult. During the ritual, the spirits enter the celebrant, and anything that happens afterward is at the discretion of the spirits, and the will of the individual. Any...dalliances are forgiven, and many of the married folk stay close together in case of accidents. And the spirits protect against any unwanted pregnancies, so the women are just as uninhibited as the men.” She took another long drink, and suddenly Toshiro’s wide-eyed interest in what must sound like an orgy to him - she hadn’t explained it well, she knew it - changed to concern.

“Hey, Ani - maybe you should slow down a little? This is your first time drinking, after all, and that mead is pretty potent…”

Toshiro was such a worrywart sometimes. Anicca smiled broadly, feeling looser and happier than she had in years. Now wonder Toshiro had been so impatient for them to reach adulthood. Feeling like this was wonderful!

She hadn’t realized she’d said all that out loud until Toshiro laughed, and snatched the half full jug out of her hands. “Oh no, you’re done for now. No, no, sit down. You’re going to fall into the fire-”

The fire. Something about the fire was drawing her attention. She had never given flame a second through, but now in her mead-addled state all she could think of how dangerous it was, and yet how beguiling as well, with the way the light danced and wove…

Toshiro’s hands on her arms steadied her, and she found herself looking at him more intently than she could ever remember doing so before. She was entranced by the length of his eyelashes, and the small flecks of green in his hazel eyes. Toshiro really was pretty, wasn’t he? No wonder all the women in his village were chasing him!

His expression flickered. “If I’d known all it took to make you notice me was alcohol, I’d have screwed tradition and done this years ago, Anicca.”

Oh. She must be speaking out loud again. Yet nothing he had said made sense, and she finally realized she may in fact be drunk. She told him this, and watched him lick his lips in response.

“Forgive me, Ani.”

Forgive him what? He was her best friend for a reason, and-

Oh.

Warm lips pressed against hers, and she was so out of it all she could do was realize that she couldn’t breathe. Then he pulled back and she inhaled in a rush, eyes wide and unfocused. She wasn’t so drunk as to overlook that. Whatever...that was.

“Toshiro?”

His eyes were nearly as wide as hers, and searched hers urgently. “Was that bad?”

Through her Keeper training, Anicca knew that there were different layers of consciousness. She also knew that she was currently inhabiting several of them. On one level, this was her best friend, and she had just told her grandmother this morning that there was nothing like this between them. There hadn’t been anything like this between them. On another level, her body was warm, his was warmer, and his mouth had made embers flare in her belly...

There was a third layer, too quiet and still and clear enough for words, just feelings. That layer was permeated with anxiety. Something about this was wrong. Something about this…
Anicca shook her head, hoping to re-center herself. Whatever that odd moment had been, she needed to sort things out with Toshiro, first.

“Well, in that case…”

Too late Anicca realized what she had done. Yet before she could correct him his mouth was on hers again, and the layers rearranged themselves. Toshiro was her friend, yes, but his mouth was warm and wicked, and the alcohol helped to fog her mind. Yet now that last layer was lurking upwards like some monster from a nightmare. Wrong, it seemed to say, and danger. It only gained in volume and coherency when Toshiro opened her mouth with his tongue.

(This didn’t happen never happened what are you doing-

“Annica!”

All the layers fell away as they broke apart. She recognized the anger before she realized the speaker. Then she turned, and mouth fell open.

“Rama?”

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Within the holding cell Iroh sat and meditated in full lotus position, eyes closed and hands outstretched. He had sat so for several hours, only moving once to shift legs. To an observer he was the picture of calm, beyond earthly cares and concerns. Yet within his inner landscape, he was lost: railing and weeping at the crime he had committed.

The only kindness was that Koru had died instantly. There was no suffering past the brief moment of paralyzing pain, and the fear of watching his brother shoot lightning at him. It was not so for Iroh. There would be suffering and pain ever onwards, knowing himself to be his brother’s murderer for the rest of his life.

Yet Iroh had been ever practical, even to the point of ruthlessness. Even now, when his life was crumbling all around him, and the memory of Koru’s voice still rang in his ears like a ghost. He had to face the situation like a man: with honor, and clear-sightedness, and honesty. He could not lie to himself. He would not let that fear destroy him.

He had to search within himself and find strength. It was all he could do while waiting in this cell for his father to arrive. Then, he and the sun warriors would decide his fate. Once that was accomplished, he would accept his punishment like a man - whether it be death, exile, public recrimination... None of it would be enough, of course. Iroh could never amend for destroying the light-hearted, charming, witty fire prince.

His brother. He had murdered his brother.
His hold over his control lost, Iroh panicked. Mentally he cast about, desperately alighting on horrible thoughts, each worse than the last. Did his father already know? Was he grieving as he travelled? He had been meeting with the Avatar at a summit while they were gone - did he know as well? Did the Avatar hate him now? Did his father?

Iroh’s breath came hard and fast, an uncontrolled fire in his lungs. His eyes shot from one corner of the cell to the other, finding only shadows when he looked for salvation. And what of Uncle? What of Aunt Katara, and Sura? Surely his aunt would be the first person his father would tell. There would be no one else he could look to for comfort, and Sura had long been Koru’s best friend. They would never forgive him. They couldn’t. Not for Koru - the favored prince, the most beloved son; Uncle Iroh’s true heir, in temperament and ability.

No one would ever forgive him this. Not them, not the Avatar, not his father...

...certainly not Koru.

He slumped over, keening in grief. There was heat and moisture against his cheeks, salt against his lips. It was all his fault. There was no one else to blame, nothing to be done. Koru was dead. He would never come back. He would never antagonize Iroh ever again, never smile up at him, never raise one eyebrow as he argued an incorrect point just to make Iroh’s jaw clench. Koru was gone. His baby brother, his first charge and responsibility, his best friend. How could he have been so foolish? How could he have allowed himself to hate?

Iroh hunched over, forehead to the cell floor. He wept like a child, silently and with hitching shoulders. His life was over. He couldn’t rule a country after this, not when he had murdered his brother. He couldn’t be trusted again. Was he even human now? He didn’t feel like he was. He felt like something twisted and disgusting, broken.

He felt like a monster.

Streaking through his mind like a comet came the image of a woman both impossibly familiar and unknown. Grey eyes regarded him thoughtfully from behind tangled, honey-colored curls before the image disappeared. Although he did not know her, Iroh felt that she, too, was a monster. But how could she compare to him? He, who had murdered his own brother?

The image was gone as quickly as it came, leaving behind an obsessive clarity on his sins. He had killed his brother. He would never be forgiven. He could never forgive himself. His life was over now.

So why not end it? Leave this life behind. Atone.

The whisper was quiet, insidious. When he heard it he could think of nothing else. Why not end it? It would show his grief better than any other action could. If he did this, no one could doubt his suffering, his remorse. He hadn’t meant to do it, after all. No one would need to know he’d given into his hatred if he took himself out of the equation. Even better, then his father could leave the country to someone worthy of it.

His breath caught in his throat. It wasn’t just about his atonement among the living. There was also Koru to consider. And if...if there was a life that followed this one, then he could find Koru there and apologize. He couldn’t possibly wait a lifetime to do that. Koru was the most important thing - it was he that Iroh had wronged most of all!

A mad joy filled him, and his eyes glittered. Finally, he had a plan. Here was something concrete he could do, rather than waiting for an end he had not engineered. He would not let someone else
dictate his fate. He would be strong, and he would be brave, and he would find his brother in the next life. He could not let his sins go unpunished.

He would punish himself.

Thus decided, Iroh found the calm that had deserted him and called upon it. It was easy now to channel the rage, easier still to use the clarity it bought him. He would never forget such a feeling, not when it had come with such disastrous effects. Within moments he held in his hands a ball of lightning, blue and sizzling and icy hot.

He loved his brother, and would honor him by taking his death as his own.

*You can’t hold it, Koru had said. You gotta’ throw it.* Iroh wondered how long he could do so before his arms gave out, how many times he would have to call down the lightning before it killed him. Yet for now, he gave himself to the experience, letting go his few remaining doubts as he stared deep into the light. It dazzled him, like the spray of a waterfall in the sun. Soon his hands and forearms began to burn with the exertion of holding the tempest, and he began to see colors shifting underneath the blue. Jolts of electricity shot down his arms, making his torso twitch. Perhaps that was how death would come - a jolt that went right to his heart, shutting it down forever.

The lightning grew, until it was all he could do hold it between his palms. He could not look away, and the blue blurred like flame. But now there were voices, as well...faint whispers at the edges of his hearing, cutting through the sizzle of the lightning. *Monster*, he heard, and *Fire Lord. My true heir. Grandson.*

“Failure.”

Iroh’s head snapped up, and he nearly lost his control over the lightning. That had not been an indistinguishable whisper coming from the lightning itself. That had been a woman’s voice, low and accented, louder and more present. He turned and there she stood, just beyond the bars: the woman he had seen once before, the monster he had compared to himself.

*Anicca,* the lightning whispered to him. *Spirit woman.*

*Enemy.*

Yet how the lightning knew her he did not know. Yet it almost felt as if he had known her, although surely he could never have forgotten someone with her coloring. Nor with her intensity. She glared at him through the gates, colorless eyes glinting more compellingly than the lightning in his palms. *Enemy,* the lightning whispered again, but Iroh ignored it. He would make that decision on his own.

“How are you here?” He asked, even as he strained to keep the lightning from overtaking him.

Her accent made him shiver. It added to her inexplicable familiarity, even though he had never before heard someone speak like that. Neither could he place where she might have come from. “To see if you will fail me. I did not think that you would.”

Fail her? The thought filled him with anger, but not of the kind he had used to call down the lightning. He never failed anyone, especially not mysterious, maddening women! “I did not fail you. I do not even know you!”

She simply stared at him, and suddenly more images flashed in front of his eyes. Her lying on the ground, rising slowly as if propelled from within; sagging in exhaustion on Appa’s back; eyes flashing with ire as they traveled through a forest with Sura beside them…

Iroh clenched his jaw, blocking them both out. *Did* he know her? Then why couldn’t he remember her? More importantly, why did he feel as if he owed her something?

“You need to go,” he told her gruffly, jaw clenched against the strain of holding the lightning in place. “I need to atone. And I can’t hold the lightning much longer.” He told her this as if it would mean something to her, and to his surprise, she nodded.

“Then you should throw it,” she advised him. She took a step backwards and nodded at the bars. “Atonement is doing, not ceasing. Living, not dying. So if that is what you wish you must throw the lightning.”

“But I need to die.”

Her head tilted to the side as if she were considering his incredible statement. “Your anger defines you,” she began, before switching tracks. “You wish to fight me first, no? We are monsters, and such beings do not live together peacefully. Defeat me, and then you may die.”

She gestured to the bars between them. “But there is something in the way. You must get rid of them. Throw the lightning. Then you may fight me.” She licked her lips and Iroh’s stomach tightened. “Do not fail me, Iroh.”

There was something in the way she said his name that had him surging to his feet, lightning wobbling in his grasp. His body screamed with the need to obey her, but whether it was because he wanted to reach through the bars and throttle her or because she was inadvertently extending his life he did not know. The only thing he did know was that she either wanted to kill him or to save him. Right now, he couldn’t care which. As long as she never looked at him with pity in her eyes ever again, he would take either option.

He looked down at the lightning once more and now saw that his hands had burnt down to the bone, gleaming white with the loss of muscle, blood, and sinew. Her eyes fell to his hands as well, but rather than being horrified, she raised her own hand through the bars, as if in supplication.

“Send it to me, Iroh,” she prompted him. “If it is of you, I will take anything.”

This cut through the mire of his despair like a ray of sunlight through winter clouds. He had never anything so wonderful in his life. Here was a monster -*just like him!*- who did not fear him. She *accepted* him. And even to take the physical manifestation of his rage, his anger, his cruelty?

He would give it to her. He would give her *everything.*

With a wild cry, Iroh launched the lightning at the bars of his cell. It tore from his skeleton hands, shrieking with fury, burning through the air. All Iroh could see, however, was the woman standing on the other side of the bars. She was not afraid. If anything, she looked joyous.

Then the lightning hit the bars, punching through them as if they were made of paper. Debris rained down from the ceiling as the entire cell shook. Such an explosion would bring all the sun monks down on him, but Iroh could not move. The bars that had not been obliterated from the force of the blast were now melted down, leaving a gaping hole for him to escape from. But the woman was gone. Had she ever been there in the first place?

Had he killed her, too?
Yet before he could lose himself to an even deeper despair than before, he realized that he could hear something. Voices, nearby. A woman - was it her? There was no accent now, but the tone was the same. And now two men, arguing with each other. Neither was familiar, but he understood their anger without necessarily hearing what they said.

Iroh stepped close to the bars, hoping to make out their argument. Meaning began to flash through his consciousness, and with every word the edges of his vision began to flicker. The walls of the cell began to ripple, and all at once there came a strong breeze, heavily scented of pine. The freshness of it made him close his eyes, and suddenly there came an entire sentence that grabbed his entire attention.

“Do you not love me most?”

It was from one of the angry men, and in response the spirit woman- it was her, it was- said, “Not anymore.”

He had found his nemesis. Yet the sound of defeat in her own tone made his blood boil. No one else could torment her - no one else was her equal. They were monsters together. No one else could have what they shared!

Without opening his eyes he called down the lightning, yet this time he did not hold it. His skeleton hands launched it immediately towards the sound of the argument, the crackle of a bonfire, the scent of the forest. Only when he felt the impact of the shockwaves did he open his eyes…

...to find himself looking out into a forest, where the woman and two young men stood just on the other side of a bonfire, anger and fear in the air.

Iroh leaned closer, temporarily distracted from his dark thoughts and even darker plans. What was going on?

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…”What in all the gods’ names are you doing?”

The warmth from the mead was gone, leaving icy fear in its place. Anicca had never seen her brother so angry. And what was this to be angry about? She took a step away from Toshiro, pitching her voice to be soothing.

“Rama, it’s nothing. He was just...wishing me a happy birthday.” She gestured without taking her eyes off of her twin. “He brought us mead from Iwaya. It’s really good! You should try some-”

Rama’s eyes slid from her to the man behind her. “You got her drunk? Is that the only way she’d kiss you?” His tone was scathing and Anicca felt her jaw clench. Rama was nearly impossible to deal with when he was this angry, and she’d never been forced to do so with Toshiro present.

“I didn’t plan this. It just happened.” Toshiro’s tone was bitter, and too late Anicca realized she had hurt him. “Apparently it won’t be happening again.”
But if hadn’t happened before, Anicca thought, panicking. There was nothing like this between us! Something is different, something is wrong…!

Rama moved closer to them and the long hem of his robe dragged against the dirt. It was his ceremonial robe, the one he had shown her secretly only yesterday. All thoughts of the oddity of the situation were brushed aside as Anicca realized its import.

“Wait, Rama…aren’t you supposed to be at the ceremony right now? How did you get out?” Her eyes widened in realization. “Are you housing one of our ancestors even now? Is that why you are angry?”

Rama shook his head as he stepped close to her, identical grey eyes glaring down at her. “There is no one inside me but me, Ani,” he murmured, and only by the clenching of his jaw could she tell he was still angry. “I left the ceremony to be with the ones that I love most, after all.”

There was something strange about his expression, something hungry in his eyes that made her heart turn cold in her chest. Toshiro must have seen it too as he moved next to her, trying to insert himself between them. Rama did not look away from her for a moment, and all the while panic bubbled up from the third layer of her consciousness, the one that chanted all this was wrong, this never happened, and that neither of them had golden eyes and a smile like a blade-

With no warning, her brother leaned in and a warm mouth covered hers for the second time that night. This time, however, there was no compunction to allow the kiss. Her brother kissed her fiercely, pressing her closely to him, but she struggled in his hold. Her eyes blew wide with fear as he swallowed down her distressed cries, until Toshiro ripped her away from him.

“Enough!” He yelled. “Rama, have you lost your mind?”

Gasping for air, Anicca watched as her brother wiped his mouth with his fingertips. His eyes flickered from her to Toshiro and she knew what he would do the moment before he did it, but there was no time to warn him. Suddenly he was pulling Toshiro down the inch that separated them and he was kissing his best friend as well, tongue parting through his lips just as Toshiro had done to her.

Anicca’s breath froze in her lungs. This was not right. Not Rama. None of this was real. This had to be a spirit inside of him, twisting him.

In the ancient days, the element benders used flame to purify vengeful spirits.

Asha’s teaching came to her as a whisper from the deepest layer of her consciousness, and her eyes tracked to the flame. It had drawn her earlier, and now she felt safer simply from looking at it. Yet how could she use it to purify her brother? Surely not by setting him alight!

Toshiro finally shoved free on Rama’s hold and he reared back, sputtering. “You bastard! If this is revenge for kissing Ani, you take it too far. You scared her! And me!”

Rama’s face crumpled with exaggerated sorrow. “I never meant to scare you,” he whispered, his mouth trembling. “I just needed you to know how much I love you. Both of you. You didn’t understand.”

Perhaps she had to trick the spirit into getting close enough to the fire? Clutching at wild hopes, Anicca took a step closer to the fire, hoping it would draw Rama’s attention. “And is this the way that you love us, brother? Or the way that your spirit does?”

When he looked at her his eyes were brimming with tears. “You don’t believe me? You should know better than anyone how I love you. How I love Toshiro.” He brought his hand to his heart.
“We’re connected, Ani. You must understand.”

But she didn’t, and all this was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, and only the fire could make it right. Yet how could she fix this without hurting him?

“But it’s wrong, Rama! I’m one thing, but you can’t kiss your sister like that!” Toshiro swallowed, as if remembering the invasive feel of Rama’s lips. “Your twin!”

Abomination, she heard on the wind, and it was the voice of any one of the members of her village. It was the reminder of their entire lifetime. Mistake.

She closed her eyes as she heard another voice, a male voice, dark and husky, like he’d been breathing in smoke for years and years. Monster, he’d called her, and now, with the taste of her brother’s lips drying on her skin, she felt like one.

But that was not right either. This was not what she had chosen. It was not this connection to her brother that made her a monster. It had been the absence of it. She remembered in flashes - feeling their bond snap, racing through the forest half out of her mind. The spirits that had come, drowning her in her weakness. And then...and then-

“I gave up everything for you,” Rama whispered. “Everything. My place in the village, my future...why won’t you give me something in return? All I ask is for your love. Your acceptance. I could make you both happy. We could all be together this way, no village interfering, living our own lives! No one else would ever love you two the way I do. And what is so wrong with it? Don’t you love me most?”

And then there was the memory of the girl with ocean blue eyes, and the man with eyes of gold, slipping away just before she could put names to their faces. Still, it was enough. They were not of her nor the sister tribes, and the reminder that there was a world outside of their own was enough to spark the inevitable return of her memory.

“Not anymore,” Anicca whispered, understanding crashing in on her like a lightning bolt through the sky. “Because you’re dead.”

She remembered everything, now. Her village’s ill-fated decision, and the revenge it had forced her into. Becoming a monster, yet set free to save the world from a greater threat. Her eyes fell to the fire in the moment of silence that followed her proclamation and then she knew something else, too.

The fire was not to purify Rama. It was to purify her.

Toshiro and Rama’s voices rose around her, but she could not understand them now. She did not need to, now that she knew they were not real, simply a construct of her own mind. All she cared for now was the flame and how it might save her.

As she watched it flared with a blue light, and for a moment she could see what lay beyond: not the forest as she might have expected, but a room made of stone, with broken bars that looked as if they had been melted away. Standing directly behind those bars was the man with golden eyes and a mouth like a knife: not meant for smiling at all, but when it came it was devastating. Iroh, she whispered, and then there was nothing left to remember.

If the fire did not purify her, he would. He knew what she was and was not afraid. How could she choose anyone other than him, who knew her capabilities far better than even her brother, and their best friend?

You just have to accept him. Anicca remembered Asha’s advice about her bond to the firebender,
given by her spirit underneath the mountain. All this time Anicca had worried about how to do that when they hated each other so. But now she thought she understood. Liking each other was not part of the equation. Knowing that they were both monsters was, and if they were very lucky, they could save each other from their own selves.

Looking into the flame, Anicca made a decision. If she failed, she would feel the purifying heat of the flame on her flesh...and in all honesty, she could think of worse ways to die. But now there was a chance to succeed. She thought she knew how to accept him, after all: all she had to do was trust him.

Trust him and *leap*.

Without warning she ran toward the flame, shrieking with a mixture of fear and elation as she threw herself through it. From behind her came Rama and Toshiro’s panicked yells, and the flame was so hot, so much hotter than she could have ever dreamed. But in front of her stood Iroh, and now he saw her. He held out his hand to her and even as her skin burnt away and she howled his name in agony, she reached for him, fingers desperate and grasping until she cleared the fire, hurtling into his arms.

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Anicca woke with a jolt, covered in a sheen of sweat, certain that she had burned to death. It took her a long moment to realize this was not the case. She could still smell the smoke, and hot air singed her ear, and she was tightly pressed against something warm...but then she felt the give of smooth skin underneath her fingertips, and the hint of a masculine voice on every exhale. Strong arms were around her, holding her tightly against a muscled chest that smelled like cedar and smoke. She had never felt so comfortable or safe before, not even before her world had fallen apart.

There was a rumble against her ear and she glanced up to find the firebender looking down at her. She had remembered jumping across the fire into his arms at the end of her dream...had she jumped across the pool in real life? Yet for once he was not angry, and *that* was such a surprise that she was content to lie here with him, sitting half folded up against the wall in what was an awkward position for both of them.

Truth be told, she could do little other than stare up at him in wonder, a perfect reflection of his own expression.

“But your brother didn’t die,” she finally whispered when she mustered up enough courage to break the odd, fragile moment they found themselves in.

His voice was lower and raspier than usual, and she felt its reverberations through his chest. “He was able to direct the lightning. He’d antagonized me on purpose to help me break that barrier. It ended a joyous day, not a nightmare.” He swallowed thickly before admitting, “It was one of the proudest days of my life.”

Anicca hummed as she lowered her cheek against his chest. For some reason she was so unfathomably tired, even though all they had done was dream. She was content to lay there forever,
but his next rumbling question roused her.

“And what of you? Did your brother...truly love you in that way?”

She was so comfortable here that even this could not anger her. “No,” she mused. “The dream twisted it. Toshiro kissed me on the cheek, as is Mori’s custom. And when Rama saw it, Toshiro kissed him too. As a joke, nothing more.” She hummed as his arms shifted, bringing her closer. “It was a wonderful night. Yet the dream made it awful.”

Some awareness trickled down her spine, bringing her out of her haze. She picked up her head so that they looked each other in the eye. “But it could have been awful without dreaming. For both us. Because of us. But for luck, we could have been monsters long before this.”

Something flickered in his light eyes, but whether he would have agreed or argued she never knew. Priya chose that precise moment to stride into the room, hesitating in surprise when she saw them awake.

“Oh! So you did live, then.” She sniffed as she looked them over. “I am very surprised.”

Suddenly realizing their position they broke apart from each other, not stopping until they stood at opposite ends of the pool. Anicca was woozy on her feet and kept her gaze firmly away from the water. She never wanted to go through a dream like that ever again, after all.

“Did you think we would fail?” She asked Priya, deciding that she shouldn’t look at the firebender either. Her cheeks burned and she hoped he was not looking at her either. “Did you want us to?”

“I did not want that, ill-born. Not when such danger is at hand. But two days is a very long time to travel in dreams, and longer still for the ritual to be completed. Most either complete it in one day’s time, or not at all.”

“Two days? We slept for two days?” Iroh sounded astounded, as well as angry. Anicca tried not to remember how peaceful he had been just a moment before.

Priya’s mouth twisted. “Time moves differently in the spirit world, just as it does in dreams. More so when you are in both at once. Now, I must know. Who was it that broke the dream?”

Startled, Anicca looked at Iroh. She found that she could no longer think of him as the Angry One, not when she had the memories of him in his cell, nearly surrendering to the darkness in his heart. “I...I don’t...We both-”

“She did,” Iroh interrupted. “She was the one who knew it was a dream. She was the one who ended it.”

“But you were the one who broke free,” Anicca argued. “You came for me. If I hadn’t seen you, neither of us might have gotten out.”

He looked at her then, and for a moment there was an understanding through their bond, different and yet similar to her old bond with her brother. We came for each other, he thought, giving her a mental image of her own outstretched hand through the bars of his cell. And then, begrudgingly, We kept each other from giving up.

“So we both did,” Anicca finished, keeping her eyes on his as she answered Priya’s question. “We broke it together.”

Priya waited for Anicca to look back at her before nodding slowly. “Then I must congratulate you.
You have passed the Mori ritual - the Ritual of the Mind. May its grace be yours.” She swept past them to a dark corner of the room where she leaned down to pick up an old, wooden box, closed with a rusted metal lock. Holding it in front of her she bowed as she presented it to Anicca.

“Take what you have earned.”

Anicca frowned. She had never been allowed to know the secrets of the village rituals before - only those that had to uphold them did, and she had not progressed so far in her training. Yet something about this did not make sense. She could not feel anything from the box, let alone an artifact of great power. More so, how could the blessings from the the Ritual of the Mind be collected into solid form?

She hesitated, hand hover over the box. She struggled to put her suspicion into words. “Have we...not already taken it?”

Hoping he might be able to understand her better than she herself did, she glanced back at Iroh. Perhaps due to the strengthening connection of their bond, he did. Surprisingly, he also agreed. “There’s nothing in the box, Keeper. Do not play us for fools.”

Priya held her bow, words directed to the floor. “If not a physical gift, what would you seek from the close of the ritual?”

It was not what they wanted, she knew that much. It was what they needed. And after such a horrible beginning, she knew exactly what that was. “The truth. And the will to follow through and see it found.”

“And you, firebender?” Priya asked.

Iroh hesitated, thinking. If she pushed on their link she could feel his thoughts, but she chose to wait. “The strength to protect us both,” he finally said, “and to keep all the monsters in their cages.”

Anicca shivered, knowing he was not speaking only of the demon, nor of her...but also of himself.

Priya straightened, and Anicca thought she saw satisfaction on her face, even if the woman still hated her. In that moment, Anicca knew they had won.

She turned and placed the box back on the floor. “Your firebender is correct. There is nothing in the box. Many years ago, we gave the artifact of the mind back to the Yama tribe, to hold in the most sacred shrine on top of the mountain. The physical artifact shall lie there, along with one third of the power required to bless you with strength from our zenith.”

Anicca frowned, but Iroh did more than that. “So then we came here for nothing, then?” Priya’s chin rose to face his antagonism. “There would be no power within the artifact at all if you did not pass the Ritual in the first place. Consider it kept in a safe place for you to collect later.

“Besides, the Ritual of the Mind has another gift: it is in empowering the self. You delved into your dreams and defeated your own demons, and I believe you rewarded yourselves accordingly.” She glanced at the wall where they had held each other something in her air became accusatory. Anicca felt herself flushing again. “Perhaps more than accordingly.”

Priya straightened. “Still, it is good that you have succeeded in the ritual. Better still that you wished for what you did. You have earned all but the truth, but that will come in time. It must, else how will you right your wrongs, ill-born?”

Anicca said nothing, knowing that it was not only her wrongs she was righting. Although she was
exhausted and hungry and more than a little embarrassed about waking up in the firebender’s arms - no matter how unintentional that may have been - she felt stronger and more focused than she had since the Ritual of Sundering. Therefore it was not difficult to hold her tongue, when before she might have loosened it.

Perhaps seeing that Anicca could no longer be needled, Priya clicked her tongue. “You may stay until the morning breaks. There is food in the next room, and water has been drawn for you to bathe. In the morning I shall give you provisions and directions to Iwaya. All I ask is that you do not fail in your journey...and that when you leave you do not come back. Do you understand?”

“We do.” Iroh spoke for her, and the sound of it made her skin tingle. Truthfully, she thought that might happen anytime he spoke without blatant hatred coloring his tone. “This will be the last you see of us, Keeper.”

“You’d be better served to keep a civil tongue in your head, firebender,” Priya sniffed. And then she swept out the door, head held high and her hands clenched tightly. Iroh turned to her wearing a formidable scowl, but for once it wasn’t addressed to her.

“She was unpleasant,” he remarked, and Anicca suspected he was trying very hard to be neutral. He was just as staggered as she was by their dreams, and with the promise of provisions and directions for the next stage of their journey, she knew there was only one thing they should do.

Eat, bathe...and then sleep.

He felt her intent through their bond and huffed. “We just woke up, and all you want to do is sleep?”

“No just that,” she grumbled. “It will be good to feel clean again. And are you not hungry?” He shrugged noncommittally and with a flash of understanding she knew what troubled him. “We won’t dream again,” she assured him. “Not like that. Besides, it will be a long day tomorrow. And we...I need to come to terms with some things.”

She felt the flare of anger of being told what to do - especially when he did not agree with her. They were in a strange, hostile place, and he was loathe to trust her. But he tamped it down quickly. Dislike it as he would but he did trust her, just as she now somehow trusted him, and that took the edge of the blinding hatred he had felt for her since they had met.

She still felt the echoes of it when she brushed past him, however, and it caused the hair to rise on her flesh. And although she now knew the purifying effects of fire, she could still feel the flame licking at her heels when he followed after her.

Dawn was just a few hours away, and with it the rest of their journey.

She did not know whether that was something to look forward to or dread.

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Well now my brain hurts. I just powered through about 40K of this fic in about a week
(buhhhhh) and have like, 3 more chapters/interludes to update before the end of the
year. So multiple updates in a year! *Runs around in a screaming tizzy*

And I don’t feel bad for saying, but the next interlude is the Zutara interlude that - I’ll be
honest - I’ve been waiting to write for the last 5 years. *More screaming tizzy*

So tell me how it's going, guys. Not that this fic has ever been a thing, but am I still on
the right track? :) That is my hopeful smiley face, guys. It follows me everywhere.
I’d pull up a chair and make a nice drink, because this chapter’s 11k. You may be here awhile… (also this chapter’s NSFW. Just to let you know.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Interlude 9: Heart, Mind, and Soul.

*(Late Year 10-early Year 11)*

…

…

It is you that I love, that I love, that I love

It is you that I’ve waited for.

It is you that I know, that I know, that I know

It is you that my dreams adore.

…

Autumn to winter, from spring until summer

Only grow my feelings for you.

Sunrise to sunset, all the hours of my life

I long to be with you.

…

It is you that I need, that I need, that I need

It is you that my heart burns for.

It is you that I love, that I love, that I love

It is you that I’ve waited for.

…

~Air nomad lovesong~
There was nothing different about the night Aang came to him, nothing to mark it as an evening of great or terrible significance. If anything, Aang’s unexpected arrival was a relief. The last year had seen a continual escalation of anti-fire nation sentiments, and tension grew rife on both sides of the ocean. Abroad, nations clamored for stricter reparations, even after ten years of healthy trade and tentative political amicability between the nation’s rulers. Within his own realm there was tension of a different sort. Racial segregation had struck up again in earnest, and what remained of the fire sages and those who followed their religion spoke out openly against him. They called for the return of Ozai, and barring that, Azula, even though his sister was still not stable enough to function adequately in normal life, and his father evil beyond salvation.

Although it was largely the outliers and extremists, it hurt that his own people were ignoring the good he had done for their country, even to the point of planning assassinations. It had been more than a year since the last attempt, but Zuko suspected another was brewing. Especially after the most recent altercation, resolved only a few nights ago - a month long siege of a rebel colony who fought to see Ozai - still stripped of his power and half mad with weakness - returned to the throne.

Zuko had returned to the palace earlier this morning, and weary and sick at heart he was ready to lay down everything just so he could get a good night’s sleep. Thus, he was perhaps a bit more enthusiastic than usual at the sight of one of his closest friends sitting primly in his quarters. The Avatar’s expression was grim, but Zuko ignored this in lieu of succumbing to his exhaustion and sagging into the Avatar’s arms.

Hugs between men were not necessarily unmasculine, he counseled himself. Uncle hugged the pirates he traveled with and no one had ever given him a hard time. Well, not for long, anyway.

Perhaps Zuko’s exhaustion was palpable, as Aang sighed in response and tentatively patted Zuko’s back. “Welcome home, Fire Lord. I see you’ve missed me.”

Zuko snorted. He’d heard rumors that Aang had been spending more than usual amounts of time with Toph, and with cracks like that he could see the effect. He patted Aang’s shoulder in return before letting go. “I did indeed, Aang. Although if you ask me about it now I’ll probably start to cry. Let me get ahold of myself first. Would you care for some tea?”

Aang raised an eyebrow at such an Uncle-like statement, or perhaps it was the threat of tears. Zuko was too tired to care, currently. He hadn’t slept for more than two hours at a time for the last several days, and due to his his weakened awareness had come within a hair’s breath of dying several times. Only his discipline, training, and the thought of those who waited for him here had made him keep pushing through.

Knowing that the Avatar would not appreciate knowing his wife was second only to his sons on that list - and fearing he might read it on his face - Zuko turned and prepared tea without waiting for Aang’s response. After all the years of practicing at Uncle’s behest the motions were easy and soothing, and in no time Zuko held out a cup of spiced black tea to Aang. It would provide a boost of energy, giving Zuko the wherewithal to deal with whatever Aang had come here to tell him.

It would not be a social call, of course. Or at least, not about anything good. There had been none of those meetings for almost two years now, not since Katara had disappeared, come to, and then remained in the Fire Nation. Zuko missed his friend and often worried at Aang’s refusal to come and see him, but there was a fair amount of relief mixed in as well. The day would inevitably come when Aang realized Zuko was in love with his wife, and although he was prepared to spend the rest of his life doing absolutely nothing about it, he was unsure he could convince Aang of this in the short term.
He was the Fire Lord, hopelessly in love with the Avatar’s estranged wife. No good could come of this, and he could not put his own needs above his country’s. But when the day came, could he convince Aang of this? Would Aang trust him to stay close to Katara even knowing of his resolve?

A quiet, dark voice inside of him whispered, *Is it even his place to do so? Katara came here. Even if only as a safe haven, she chose you. Who is Aang to decide anything for her, anymore?*

It was a conversation he’d had with himself hundreds of times. It was not limited to what he thought and felt every evening when he wished her a good night. Those were the most precious moments he had ever spent with a woman, and never once had he touched her or kissed her or even implied his feelings for her. It was simply because she was there, happy or sad or dim with exhaustion. She was Katara and she was there, and although there were times when his body lit with the need for more, he would take every blessed moment of this until there was no time left.

And now her husband stood in the same room with him, after years of staying away. There could only be two reasons for his being here. Either as the Avatar, here to address yet another - and likely more serious - world problem...or as Aang, here about Katara.

Agni preserve him, but he knew which one he would prefer.

“Aang, forgive me for being blunt, but why are you here? Don’t take this the wrong way - I’m glad to see you. But you’ve stayed away so long…” Zuko trailed off, blaming his brusqueness on the month he’d just had.

Aang sipped cautiously from the tea, and seemed surprised to find it palatable. He sipped again before responding. “Zuko, this is really good. Not Uncle’s recipe, huh?” Then, at Zuko’s raised eyebrow he winced, trying to cover it with a smile. “Well, just so you know. The tea’s fantastic. But uh, you don’t have to be so worried. I’m here for personal reasons, not...Avatar reasons. So, uh…” Aang trailed off, a fleeting expression playing across his face. He had always been so expressive, as opposed to Zuko. Even were half his face not irreparably scarred, he thought that might have always been the case.

“A personal reasons?” Zuko prompted, when it became obvious that Aang might just simply stutter and take tiny sips of tea for the next hour or so. Aang glanced up at him with a tortured expression, cutting through his previous indecision. The strength of his gaze made Zuko drain the rest of his cup before setting it down. He’d need to be as awake as he could be for whatever came next.

Aang fiddled with the handle on the teacup. “I’m here about Katara.”

He hesitated, and Zuko’s stomach fell. So the day had finally come when Aang tried to reclaim his wife. Could Zuko stand by and let this happen? Could he be neutral when all he wanted was Katara to stay? There was no way he’d be able to convince Aang that he wanted his wife to stay with him for purely political reasons. Aang would know, and this would be the end-

“I’m...I’m letting her go, Zuko.”

Every worry suddenly dissipated. Zuko’s fingers twitched in surprise, but he was able to keep the senseless joy permeating him from showing on his face. His hand brushed against the ornamental duck-shaped paperweight Uncle had given him long ago and he picked it up, simply to give his hands something to do.

“And that’s what you want?” He asked, and he was surprised at how steady his voice was. “I thought you were just giving her time.”
“I’ve given her time,” Aang replied with a tight smile. “Years of it. If she hasn’t come back to me by now then she’s not going to.”

Zuko swallowed thickly and tried to make sense of this, fighting back his joy and his exhaustion to do and say the right thing. “Have you told Katara this?”

Aang shook his head. “I’ve written her a letter. I left it in her quarters when she was out...she’ll know by tomorrow.”

Zuko’s fingers tightened around the duck when no more was immediately forthcoming. This was too sudden, too much, too incomprehensible. Aang was simply giving up? After years of waiting and pining for her? “I don’t understand. Why now?” A painful suspicion occurred to him. Did Aang know of his feelings for her? Is that why he was here?

No matter the answer he had to know. “And why are you telling me?”

Aang sighed and his eyes dropped to the floor. “Because you’re my best friend, Zuko. I needed to let you know myself. And also...I had something to ask of you. I wanted to make sure that she could stay here-”

“Of course she can,” Zuko interrupted, restrained giddiness making him abrupt. “All of you can! No matter the political situation, I will not refuse harbor to any of our friends, no matter what country they come from, or their personal situation, or-”

“No in the Fire Nation. With you. Specifically.”

Some unknowable emotion crashed over him, making it hard for Zuko to breathe. “As - as my ambassador? That wouldn’t change, Aang-”

Without warning Aang set down the teacup with force, and tea sloshed over the rim onto the desk. His voice was harsher than he’d heard since they had been children fighting a war together. “I’m saying the two of you can be together, Zuko. As lovers.”

Zuko dropped the duck. It bounced off the carpeted floor, sending several of the jewels skittering into the unlit corners of the room. Uncle would be upset, Zuko thought distantly, before he realized how unimportant that realization was.

Aang has lost his mind, was his second, far more pertinent realization. Else I am-

“Am I dreaming?” He asked aloud, too shocked to understand this was perhaps not the most acceptable response. “This can’t be real.” When Aang simply stared at him, eyes deep-set and haunted, he blurted out, “Aang, you can’t be serious!”

“I’m serious, Zuko,” Aang murmured. “This is the only thing I can do. As a wife I’ve lost her forever. I can’t lose her as a friend.” He glanced up and something unfathomable flashed across his eyes. “Nor can I lose you. I’m not just speaking as the Avatar. You’re one of my best friends, Zuko, and I love you both. And if I don’t do this now...I’ll end up losing both of you.”

He knew. He had to. That was why he was here, giving him his blessing. But Zuko wasn’t totally sure, and so he still tried to salvage the situation. “No, Aang. I - I don’t understand. Just because you’re letting her go doesn’t mean that she has to...with me-”

Aang pressed on, brow knitting in pain. Clearly, this wasn’t easy for him. “If I give her up...if I give her to you we can all stay together. Otherwise the whole gang will take sides, and-”
Enough was enough. “You can’t give me your wife, Aang!” Zuko shouted, and immediately cradled his mouth in his palm. “It doesn’t work like that,” he mumbled into his hand. “Even if she wants...even if I want...”

For a moment Aang glowed, filling the room with a mysterious blue light. Zuko had to shield his eyes against the glare. Even before it faded came Aang’s voice, with all the gravitas of the Avatar, “She’s not mine to give. But if I could choose, I’d want you to be the one with her.” The light faded entirely as his thin shoulders slumped. “I’m giving you my blessing, Zuko. Her as well. Do with it what you will.”

Then reaching into the folds of his voluminous robe, he pulled out a glider. With a flick of his wrist it shot open and he was running for the balcony before the cloth wings caught on the threshold. Zuko called out after him, but no one outran an airbender. With the patter of bare feet against the marble floors and a flash of his brightly colored robe Aang launched himself off the balcony, opening the glider overhead as he fell.

Zuko rushed out to the balcony and gripped the edge before peering over, where Aang had leveled out several floors below. He watched him soar away on the evening breeze, mouth working soundlessly in shock. Had that just…? Had Aang just…?

Could that have really happened?

Yet the chill night air roused him, forcing him back inside. He ran a hand over his face, torn between the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Aang had given him his blessing. But how could he take what was so freely offered? This was his friend’s wife. Yet now she was his for the taking, if she wanted.

That was the crux of it. Did she want him? He knew that she loved him, as she did his sons, Toph, Uncle, her brother and Suki...and even Aang. But did she desire him as a man, as well? Could that be why Aang had come to him?

Zuko shook his head wildly, hoping to dislodge the hope that settled within. He was the Fire Lord. She was still the Avatar’s Wife. And she probably didn’t even want him! They had been best friends for so long...how could an attraction have survived not only the most recent decade, but also all the wrongs he had done to her throughout the war?

Yet if there was a chance - even the slightest chance… His body was buzzing with excitement, and although he knew no good could come of this, he wanted nothing more than to go to her and see. He had learned a little of the act of love from Mai. Could he use that much to woo her? Win her?

No, no. He was exhausted, and tonight had been a night of upheaval. He had to sleep on this, see what counsel the morning brought. Perhaps clarity would come, or more likely yet regret, but he would make no decision tonight.

Yet now that he was so unsettled, sleep was beyond his grasp. To calm himself he would take a walk down to the nursery to check on his sons. He had not been able to see them since he returned, and he knew that watching them sleep for a moment or two would bring his life back into perspective. Thus decided, he walked to the door and threw it open-

-only to see Katara, ashen and trembling just outside.

“Kata-” he began, but his throat failed him when he looked at her, thinking she seemed both lost and victorious all at once. He had never seen such an expression on anyone, but when he moved closer to her she took a step away from him, slippers whispering over the floor.
“I…” she whispered, eyes alight with something that both enticed and frightened him. She had never seemed so far away from him as she did now. “I heard. I heard.”

And then, before he could say or do anything else, she turned and raced down the hallway. Stunned, for a moment all Zuko could do was stare after her.

Then he gave chase.

Katara raced through the darkened wings of the fire palace as if Ozai himself were on her heels, knowing that if she stopped for a moment she would be unable to make herself start up again. She ran stupidly, with very little sense of where she was going. She kept hearing her husband’s voice, giving her up, asking Zuko to keep her. And then Zuko’s rebuttal, yelling at him, telling him that he couldn’t accept her…

She was free but at what cost? Aang had finally given up on her, but she could not bask in the relief. Not when she was more in love with Zuko than ever, and she had just heard him deny her.

You can’t give me your wife!

A sob tore out of her throat, and only then did she realize she was crying. Crying. She, who had travelled the world alone for 18 months, and had rounded the next 6 by fending off allegations and recriminations from the most powerful men in the Fire Nation for remaining here. This was absurd. Clearly she was overtired and a little overexcited from Aang’s announcement. She just needed to go to bed and in the morning all would be well…

There was a faint clatter behind her and she hesitated, glancing back. There, only about twenty yards behind her was Zuko, grim-faced and bearing in on her. Panic lit her, and Katara suddenly began running again in earnest.

She ignored him calling to her as she sped down another hallway, ducking into the servant’s wing in hopes of eluding him. Why was he chasing after her? TuiYueLa, could he not just leave her alone with her grief for one night? Katara skidded around a vase, nearly toppling it to the floor in her haste for escape. He couldn’t possibly be following her to apologize, could he? He had nothing to apologize for! It was Aang’s stupid idea to pair them together, and if Zuko hadn’t had that idea himself she wouldn’t beleaguer the point.

In fact, she wanted to do nothing other than avoid that point for the rest of her natural life, which was something she might not be able to do if Zuko did not stop chasing her.

Her breath caught at her throat in harsh pants, and her lungs began to burn. She needed to hide, and she needed to hide well…where could she go that Zuko might not follow?

Inspiration hit her like a bolt from the blue, and she turned into another hallway. Thankfully she was close, and not many came into this old wing. Even the servants stayed away, and so she thought she might be the only one with both the desire and the permission to come here.
Panting, Katara bent some of her sweat through the lock, picking it as cleanly as she had the first time. She hadn’t meant to come, then. But she had been sorrowing and tired and needed someplace quiet to rest, and the locked door had intrigued her. She had not realized until she inhaled the old perfume and swiped dust from the mirror that the chamber had been the missing Fire Lady’s.

Then she could not have left. Her curiosity and her feelings for the lady’s son would not let her, however.

Now, Katara let herself into the room, shutting it and locking it quietly behind her. She took a moment to take in a deep breath, holding it and then letting it out slowly. Then, in an effort to still her pounding heart, she turned, taking in every corner of the room.

There was the four poster bed, untouched for years until she had come in last week and turned the bed out, shaking the dust out of the sheets through the open windows at the north wall. There were the chests of drawers with glazed figurines atop them, a jewelry box, and an assortment of letters tied neatly with a black ribbon. Next to them was her vanity, the large oval mirror resting above a delicately fashioned desk.

It had been the vanity that afforded Katara her most intriguing discovery about Lady Ursa. She had felt the pull of liquid in the desk - liquid with a bite to it, perhaps a perfume, alcohol, or a fermented tincture. Yet upon her initial look she had not found it. Hairbrushes, old broaches and earrings, pens and paper and in the bottom drawer even a few scraps of cloth...yet no liquid.

Searching through her ability she had found the hidden bottom to one of the drawers, and after working it free, found what she could not help but think might describe the duality in Lady Ursa’s character. The perfume was topped with a beautiful, intricately carved stopper, and the scent was light, delicate, pervasive. It was something only a woman in power would wear, and at that, one who knew without question she belonged there. There was no artifice in the scent, no hunger for anything beyond her reach. It was the quintessential Fire Lady scent, and it made Katara feel unworthy every time she smelled it.

Lying next to it, as innocuous as day is to night was an 11 inch kris knife. Curved, unadorned, deadly...and from the coppery scent of the rust at the hilt, used.

Katara had returned both items to the secret drawer, feeling the weight of the secret keenly, yet also having a deeper, more highly developed appreciation for the late Fire Lady’s character, as well. She wondered if Zuko knew he had inherited his ruthlessness not only from his father, but from his mother as well.

Tonight she remembered her discovery and it served to calm her. She might never be as beautiful or (perhaps) as deadly as the Fire Lady had been, but she was so many other things - strange and wonderful things, and as such, her unrequited love for Zuko would not destroy her.

If losing him hadn’t destroyed Ursa, neither would it destroy her.

There was a sound behind her, and the scent of burning metal. Katara whipped around to see Zuko stepping through the door, smoke rising from the burned metal of the doorknob. Katara’s mouth dropped as he simply stood there, watching her with heaving shoulders and a stare that could set buildings alight.

Firebender indeed.

His mouth opened, but it took two tries for him to bite out, “You came to Mother’s room?”
“I - I panicked, I’m sorry-”

He shook his head, as if willing himself not to be sidetracked. “Don’t run from me again,” he ground out. Zuko’s voice was deep and raspy, like every word was a struggle to drag from his chest. Katara hadn’t heard him like this since he had chased them throughout the world demanding the Avatar and his honor, in that order.

Katara stepped to the side, closer to the bed. “I’m sorry I came here, Zuko. It’s so peaceful, I just - I needed a moment to think-”

“Katara,” he interrupted, and from the tone of his voice he was at the very end of his patience. “Do you love me? Like a...like a woman loves a man?”

Too surprised to evade, Katara stared back at him, moonlight arcing in the room between them, marking the settling dust motes with milky light. Something in her chest unclenched when she saw him bathed in it, his stern features softened in the ethereal light.

“Yes,” she answered bravely, feeling as if this were her end she would meet it with her back straight and her head held high. She would regret nothing, not even her feelings for him. “I’m sorry, Zuko, but I do.”

His expression seemed to crumple, and only when he spoke did Katara realize that it was with relief. “Thank Agni,” he whispered, and then before she could do anything to stop him, he was across the floor and looking down at her, golden eyes blazing with a passion she’d never before experienced.

“Katara,” he whispered, bringing a trembling hand to her face. His palm cupped her cheek and her eyes fluttered at the pleasure invoked by his touch. “I wasn’t ever going to say anything. I couldn’t. It wasn’t honorable. But if Aang has truly given us his blessing...and you want it too…” He broke off his fumbling speech, eyes tracking almost desperately over her face.

It was this that made Katara finally realize what he had done everything but say. Her love wasn’t unrequited. Zuko loved her back. Zuko loved her back.

But she needed to know for certain. Mirroring his action she placed her hands on his face, bringing his attention down to her. “Zuko,” she began, heart thudding painfully against her ribcage. “Zuko. Say it. Just...tell me.”

“Tell you?” His answer was a puff of air against her cheek, hotter than it should have been. Katara’s breath caught as he leaned in further, eyes fluttering closed as he lightly dragged his nose across her cheek, towards her jawline.

“Tell you,” he repeated, his words a bare whisper. “Tell you how I’ve thought of you, laughing and beautiful and dangerous? How I’ve dreamed of you, even back when we were only teenagers? How I am blinded by you, even now?”

He nosed down the dusky column of her neck, breathing deeply as if her scent was intoxicating. “Should I tell you how proud I am of you whenever you hold your own against my council? Or perhaps how much you tantalize me when we spar, how you make me want to turn violence into something more erotic?”

Katara shivered at the reverberation of his words at her throat, and he dragged his cheek along her before pulling back. She had no idea how she must look to him, but if it was anything like a reflection of what he looked like - half mad with elation, eyes wide and dark, body tense - she wondered how he could still hold himself back.
Zuko licked his lips. “Should I tell you what I’m really saying when I bid you goodnight?”

She couldn’t take anymore. “All of it,” she breathed. “But, please, Zuko. You know what I have to hear; I can’t do this without it...”

He leaned in until his response was just a whisper against her lips. “Every night that I leave you; every time I say goodnight...I’m saying that I love you, Katara.”

Katara let out a jumble of syllables that she meant to be I love you too, but never quite made it. For she had followed her words physically, rising up on her toes to press her lips against his, and after that all coherency was lost.

He kissed her back passionately, groaning as their mouths melded together. It was a clash not unlike their elements: primal, powerful, full of fire and its need; of water and its promise. The kiss grew frantic, fueled as it was by so many years of denying themselves. Finesse would come later, Katara hazily promised herself. For right now all she wanted was to burn.

As if it were happening to someone else she felt herself fall back against the bed, Zuko pressing up against her. His taste and scent and the fire in his touch muddled her mind, making her dizzy with pleasure and its long belated completion. His weight bore her down into the mattress, burying her in sweetness not yet realized.

It had been a long time since she’d taken a man - she had lain with none since her last time with Aang. Yet while Katara’s mouth was dry at the thought of him pushing inside of her, the land between her thighs ran wet in anticipation. So when his hands pulled off her finely woven Fire Nation tunic, she did not fight him. When he brought his lips from hers down to her neck, kissing and sucking down to her breasts she did not stop him. Time enough for prudence and pain later. Now was the conflagration.

He suckled on her until she cried out for him, yet he did not let her rise from the mattress. Sensing his desperation, Katara did not force him. Unlike her time with Aang there was no need to assert herself, to keep the core of herself separate even during this intimate act. She was prepared to give all of herself to Zuko - had, in fact, already given all that she could - and so in this she let him take control.

Yet as he played with her breasts, teasing her nipples with fingers and tongue she felt her control stretch to the breaking point. Finally he heeded her moans, and licked down further, tracing the curve of her waist, hands trailing even lower to pull her loose-fitting pants down her thighs. And then further still, past the dark curls that topped her sex, down to the little button of flesh that shot shockwaves of pleasure when he closed his mouth around it and sucked.

Katara arched halfway off the bed, and might have toppled off it if Zuko hadn’t held her down. That had never been part of her sexual education as a married woman. And although she had heard of the act, she had never dreamed it could feel like that. Nor could she imagine it being any better, yet she was soon proven wrong when he began licking her, back and forth with a slow, purposeful rhythm.

As the pleasure built Katara found she was losing control of her element. How Zuko wasn’t breathing fire into her womb she’d never know, but the moisture in the air began to chill, frosting against their heated skin. Zuko groaned when she brought down cool hands to cradle his skull, and began working at her harder, bringing his fingers to trace gentle patterns among her folds. Now Katara was half out of her mind with desire, and she found herself babbling and pleading for anything that might bring her release.

Finally, she said something that seemed to resonate with her lover. “Zuko, I swear to all the gods. If you don’t take me now, I will never do this with you again!”
He chuckled against her, and the reverberations against her stimulated sex made her groan. “No, beloved,” he murmured as he shifted himself back over her, kissing her briefly before he reached down to untie his own pants. “We’re going to do this again, and again, and again.” He wriggled his hips out of his pants and then she felt him against her - comparable in size to her husband, but so achingly hot and hard that it felt as if she had never experienced its equal.

“Forgive me for wanting to drive you a little crazy. Just know that it’s only a fraction of what you do to me.” Then he ground his length up against her, slipping against her slick, gritting his teeth against the urge to slip inside of her and thrust.

“Zuko,” she whined, arms threading themselves around his neck, pulling him closer to her. “Zuko, please.”

“What do you want me to do, beloved?” He asked in a voice that was a rich and dark as black silk. His question was punctuated by a swivel of his hips, bringing the tip of him down to her opening...yet not quite inside.

The teasing made Katara find her own inner fire, and she thrust her own hips up, capturing the head of his cock inside of her. Both groaned at the sensation and around her Zuko’s arms began to tremble.

“Take me, Zuko,” she whispered to him, clenching her thighs to keep him from pulling out. “Make me regret every moment I’ve spent keeping myself from you.”

He moaned her name and his control was lost. He thrust into her, driving her hips back down to the bed. She called out as he pushed into her, and fragmented thoughts surfaced as he rode her with enough skill and strength to keep her from full coherency. It wasn’t like this before, and I’m lost, oh La, I’ll never be me again.

Yet perhaps neither would Zuko. For surely it couldn’t be him who gasped and moaned promises of devotion into her ear. Finally, “I won’t last long,” he warned her as he thrust particularly deep, breaking his even rhythm to tear a strangled moan from her. “I need you too much. Love you so much. Oh, beloved. Katara.”

Prudence and pain, Katara tried to remind herself against the mounting pleasure. She’d never approached orgasm like this before, as if she were burning up by slow, delicious degrees. And no matter what, waterbending after.

“Then come. Zuko, please. Don’t make me wait-”

“I won’t,” he promised her with more passion than coherency. “Never.” He pistoned in and out of her at a bruising pace, yet it was exactly what she needed to bring her to her end. Katara felt her climax leap closer with every thrust of his hips, and soon enough she was keening his name, barely aware of anything other than the burning need he was stoking, and her desire for him to find his release as well.

It came upon her with an all-encompassing force that left her breathless and unaware in its wake. The frost in the air hardened into ice particles that fell down around them, tinkling as they hit the floor. She was so consumed in the pleasure that she didn’t realize she had screamed out his name until she heard the sound of it in her echoic memory. Nor did she realize he too had come until she came back down to herself and realized what his clenched jaw and the break in the rhythm of his spasming hips meant.

They clung to each other in the aftershocks, feeling the pulse of each other’s heartbeat and groaning
softly as she pulsed around him. Although every moment was precious when bending a man’s seed out of the womb, she held him for a long time, too afraid that she might wake up if she let go. From the strength with which he returned her embrace, she thought that he might be thinking the same thing as well.

Finally she could ignore the warning in her head no longer and she wriggled from his embrace. When he looked up at her with a slightly worried, questioning look, she smiled down at him.

“You might not want to watch this part. It’s a bit...graphic.”

His brows furrowed in confusion, but she was already bending his gift out of her. With a few graceful motions, she had pulled all of his seed and its attending fluid out of her. Holding it in stasis for just a moment, she rose from the bed and worked the latch of the window so that she could deposit it out onto the grass outside.

When she turned back Zuko was watching her with an expression that merged between fascinated and horrified. “That’s...useful,” he finally said.

“It’s gross,” she told him flatly. “Even I think so, and I’m the one doing it.”

He snickered, but he was too happy to keep from holding out his arms to her, inviting her back into his embrace. Katara went willingly, giddy as a child.

He kissed the top of her forehead as he held her close, sinking back down so that they could lay on his mother’s bed. Katara burrowed in happily, listening to the strong, rhythmic beat of his heart. Once, that heartbeat had stopped and she had nearly exhausted her own to bring it back. Azula and her lightning be damned, but Katara still felt as if she had some amount of ownership over it, and now him as well.

After some time, Zuko shifted. “I just claimed you on my mother’s bed,” he mused drowsily, apropos of nothing.

Katara snickered. “Claimed me? Have you been getting into the romance scrolls again?”

He hummed and she felt it against her cheek. “Would you rather I said that we made love on my mother’s bed?”

The sentimentality of that phrasing appealed to her, although it would be embarrassing to admit it. “Hmmmm,” she hummed, with a mock thoughtfulness to her tone. She traced her fingertips up and down his biceps before skating over his shoulders and collarbone. “Claimed me? Made love? I’m not sure I remember any of that happening…” She trailed off as her finger dipped lower, inching their way over his pecs, pausing over the lightning scar over his heart. “You may have to remind me…”

“Minx,” he breathed into her hair as he began tracing her curves. “You’re insatiable, aren’t you? I’m going to have to teach you some discipline.”

Something in his tone reminded her of wartime Zuko, before he had joined them. I’ll save you from the pirates…

Katara shivered as she remembered, and her hand closed his member. “You could tie me to a tree again. I think that worked wonders last time.”

The memory made Zuko huff with laughter, even as she stroked him back to life. Then, when she leaned down to take him in her mouth, there was no laughter at all, just little gasps and moans and bitten off directives. Later still, when she returned the favor and rode him, her hips snapping tightly
against his while he reverently traced her curves, she found there was nothing else they needed to say at all.

They made love and laid claim to each other until sleep took them, tangled on his mother’s bed, happy and secure in the fruition of their love.

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The next morning Zuko went into his war council smiling, and did not stop until Uncle gave him a pointed look and an even more pointed comment about married waterbenders. After that, he was more careful. So was she.

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Thus began their winter of love. They cleaved to each other as only lovers can, yet they were not children in their first flush of affection. They came to each other offering all that they were and the possibilities of all they could be, and it was far more profound than any other connection either of them had ever known.

Yet they were careful. Mindful of the political ramifications of their affair, they let only a few know - Uncle, and two of Zuko’s most discreet and trusted servants. They also spent time and energy in keeping up their facade of friendship: engineering arguments during council meetings, trade disagreements, and other social flare-ups that would result in one or both of them stomping away from the other in a huff. Those watching did not realize anything had changed - it was simply Ambassador Katara and the Fire Lord facing off again.

(What they might have been gratified to know, however, was how those arguments were resolved, later that night and behind closed doors, with Zuko driving into Katara mercilessly, or Katara teasing Zuko until he could take it no longer.)

Remaining friends during the day left the nights and stolen time together infinitely more precious. They came together breathless and gasping, aware that every moment could be their last, all the while hoping that it would not. Every stolen hour was spent with the other, whether in bed or out of it. At every instance, however, they professed their love. They had gone long enough holding their silence, and they would not quiet their hearts any longer.

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Zuko told her secrets when they lay awake in bed. He leaned in close and whispered them into her dusky skin, soothing away the sting of them with his tongue. The pain of his scarring, the shame of the Agni Kai against his father, how he cried every night for a week when he was first exiled. His first kill, and his first kiss. How in his heart of hearts, he wished Uncle was his father, rather than Ozai.

How he’d dreamed of her as a teenager, with her wide blue eyes and thin shoulders, even as far back as the time they’d fought at the North Pole. Her role in those dreams had shifted the more he’d known her. They began as subjugation, with him forcing her to her knees and looking up at him in admiration. Then he dreamt of her compassion, healing his fever in the teahouse, and then his scar under the caves of Ba Sing Se. When he betrayed them for Azula’s offer he dreamt of her forgiveness, and when he finally found them at the air temple he dreamed of her smile.

*And when we were finally friends?* Katara asked, kissing him to show him all his darker desires were forgiven.

*I dreamt of what I didn’t have,* he finally answered. *And by the time Azula shot me with lightning, I dreamt of your love.*

Katara told him stories when they lay awake in bed. She told him stories of her people, both in the past and the present, and how the way of life she had known was collapsing, year by year. Stories of her time abroad, travelling through the Earth Kingdom, and how her necklace had kept her from succumbing to loneliness. Stories from the war, before Zuko had joined them - of sand people, cactus juice, spa day with Toph, Sokka’s never ending quest for meat.

She told him stories of the girl she had been, and how fighting him had always set her blood to racing. How she grew to crave those spars, rather than fearing them. How she had lain awake after he betrayed them and felt as if her chest had split right down the middle. How she had continued feeling this way when he had finally come back to them, and didn’t stop until he had held her after finding Yon Rha.

*And now?* Zuko asked, kissing her to show he’d never leave her again. *How does the story go now?*

*The beautiful and fearless and wise waterbender turned to her lover,* Katara replied with an impish smile on her face, *and said, ‘I have found my happiness. What better end to a story could there be?’*
greenery healthy and tended to. They would be safe here, and they basked in that security.

“About…?” He asked, although he was fairly sure he knew the answer.

She looked back at him with a little smile and eyes that glowed from her happiness. “About loving me. Back then.”

He sighed, although it was for show. He was far too happy to think badly of the fool he had been. “You were Aang’s. Anyone with eyes - and, in Toph’s case, without - could see that. There was nothing I or anyone else could do or say.”

She gave him an arch look. “Zuko…” She shook her head, not able to argue with him. But then something occurred to her and she looked up at him with a questioning expression. “Anyone else? What does that mean?”

He gave her a wry smile. “Oh, so you’re already looking for more admirers? Is the Fire Lord not enough for you, anymore?”

Katara snorted and flicked water at him, and he was charmed that she used her fingers to do it, rather than her bending. “Zuko. All the boys were either 12 years old, you, or my brother…” She trailed off, eyes widening. “Haru?”

“Why do you think he always watched you train Aang?”

Katara eyed him suspiciously. “Because it was interesting?”

“You trained in your underclothes, Katara.”

She smirked. “Sounds like someone else was watching and enjoying the view…”

Zuko leaned in with a wolfish smile on his face, lowing her down to the ground so that he could lay a trail of sizzling kisses along her throat. “Why do you think I was always so steamed? There you were, prancing about the air temple in clothes that left very little to the imagination. All I could do was meditate, train Aang...and imagine burning those wraps off of you.”

He sucked a bruise just underneath her collarbone, where his mark would not show. “You don’t know how many fantasies I had about you, me, and that little tiled pool that we all bathed in at the temple. Midnight baths, heating the water...heating you...” He groaned as his tongue lapped lower. “Maybe we can recreate those a little later-”

Katara interrupted him by pulling his face up to hers. Her eyes were dark and desperate, and her breathing hitched unevenly.

“Zuko,” she ground out. “All that will happen. I promise. But for now…”

“Yes?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Smiling, he did.

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Yet the world did not stop turning, no matter how much the two lovers wished it would. Koru contracted the turkeypox at a worryingly young age, and although was caught in time for her to help, Katara spent a sleepless night in keeping the fever and irritation down. Due to her efforts the worst was over by morning, yet the fear remained. Koru was too young to have contracted the disease - it only ever affected children of 4 or 5, at the earliest, and he was not yet 2! If it had been Iroh it would have been understandable, but for a toddler to have caught it?

Katara voiced her suspicion to Uncle one morning, and was surprised to see his expression darken. For a moment he looked so old, he who had been old since the war, yet so young in spirit. It made her blood chill in her veins, yet he did not give her time to adjust. He apologized as he abruptly stood, leaving behind her and their breakfast to check with several of his White Lotus contacts.

Within days, the truth was out. It had not been turkeypox at all, but a poison that emulated the effects. It had been slipped into his food by an unscrupulous maid, who was eventually chased down and captured by those same White Lotus contacts that discovered her. If Katara had not been on hand, Koru would have died, and the Fire Nation royal family would have been torn asunder.

In public, Zuko performed exactly as he must. He made a series of speeches about the sanctity of family, and the importance of children to the future. He said exactly what he needed to. Over the next week his people were whipped into a fervor, and hundreds came forth offering information on dissidents both connected to the attack on Koru, and those who would target Zuko. Of course, not all could be trusted. Both his guards, the Yu Yan archers and the Fire Nation contingent of the White Lotus were kept busy tracking down leads, arresting and imprisoning those with murderous intent, and absolving those falsely accused.

In private, however, Zuko was a wreck. Raging one moment and fearful the next, he sparred with Katara in an effort to regain his equilibrium. He wanted her to hurt him more than anything. He felt as if he must be punished for allowing his son to come to harm, no matter how many times he was told there was nothing he could have done.

But I’m the Fire Lord, he would tell her. If I can’t protect my sons, what good am I?

Katara knew there would be little she could say to sway him. So she set about doing. She sparred with him until he dropped from exhaustion, and then plied him with her hands, mouth, and sex so that he might sleep a little more peacefully. During the day she assisted him and Uncle in tracking down the assassins who targeted his children, and made public appearances at schools and hospitals and even a few unsuspecting neighborhoods to heal their sick and wounded. On the days when she didn’t leave the palace she spent hours with his sons, teaching them and playing with them, mothering them and loving them.

And then, when Zuko was barely sleeping more than 3 hours a night, Iroh turned 4. Zuko remembered, but he was barely able to hug his son, let alone plan something for him. He had been run so ragged by the recent situation that he could not consider anything else. So Katara planned it for him, tracking down the cooks and asking for Iroh’s favorite foods as well as a cake that had a frosted fireball on top. She charmed several of the older servants into bringing up some of Zuko’s old toys, and together they all brought down some decorations from storage. Uncle provided the drinks (as per always) and after commandeering an old storage room, the stage was set.

She left Uncle in charge of watching the boys while she went to find Zuko. She found him poring over spies’ reports, trying to rub away a throbbing headache by digging his fingertips into his
temples. In the end, the headache was the only way she was able to drag him away from the desk - offering to heal him but needing some water from her chambers.

He followed after her, too drained to remember she carried a water pouch at her hip. That more than anything told her he needed a break. So she dragged him along after her, careful not to entwine their fingers until they were only a few feet away from the door. Now they were close enough to hear Uncle’s shushing whispers, and Koru’s unrestrained cries of delight. Zuko turned to look at the door, confusion written on his brow.

Katara smiled up at him before drawing the water from her pouch and using it to heal his headache. Her heart warmed at the look of relief on his features, and then she tugged him forward.

“We mustn’t be late,” she told him.

“Late for what?” He asked, smiling just a little.

“Iroh’s party,” she answered, as she opened the door to the storage room, where his family waited within.

When he took in the sight of them - food and cake laid out on the table, his old toys in the corner, obviously having been played with, decorations that sagged from the corner of the room, paper and wilting under the heat. Of more importance: Iroh sitting at the head of the table, smiling at his brother who wriggled with excitement on Uncle’s lap; Uncle himself who brought their attention to the dancing flame on the table, perfectly controlled to resemble animals and objects and even people…

Zuko squeezed her hand once more before smiling widely, surprised at his own happiness. Shaking his head, he gave her a look of such sincere gratitude and love that Katara almost thought he would kiss her in front of his sons. Yet then he was moving past her, taking Iroh up into his arms and spinning him, making the boy shriek with delight. Koru called out to him for his turn and Zuko scooped him up as well, so that he held both of his smiling sons - and now Iroh was trying his hardest to look serious, but it was his birthday and such things affected even the most serious of little boys - close to him.

Katara’s heart turned over at the sight, and knew that she would never forget this moment, not if she lived to be 100 years.

Uncle stepped close to her, laying his weathered hand on her shoulder. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Katara turned to him, but could not take her eyes away from Zuko’s happiness. “For what?”

Uncle smiled enigmatically. “For making him happy. For keeping him sane. And for bringing him back to us.”

Katara could only smile as Uncle hugged her. Like Zuko, she had not known such happiness could exist.

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And then when spring had come and the insurrection had passed and it seemed like all their troubles were over, Katara learned that she was pregnant.

She verified this late at night while Zuko lay sleeping, snoring quietly beside her. She checked her womb as Yugoda had taught her years ago in the Southern water tribe. Yet she had suspected for the last few days when she had felt the sudden heaviness to her blood, as if the currents had changed to accommodate something new, something different, something not entirely of her.

She and Zuko had been careful, but not careful enough. Or perhaps there was no being more careful than the necessity of fate? Katara spent the remainder of that night lying awake and thinking. Planning for every contingency. And truth be told, staving off the fear that trickled up her spine, one vertebrae at a time.

Five days later, with a heart heavy from a truth she could not admit to herself, she told him. It was as they lay in bed together, and the first green shoots of spring flowers were sprouting. The scent of rain and clean air drifted in through the open window, and Katara took his hand and laid it on her stomach.

“You’ve given me a greater gift than I can ever repay,” she whispered in the darkness. “And no matter what happens next, I love you so much.”

His hand stilled underneath hers, and Katara could see his eyes glinting gold even in the dark. Not sure that he comprehended what she was trying to tell him, Katara smiled at him, even though her eyes were filling with tears.

“A child, Zuko,” she whispered, and now she was crying just a little. “We made a child together.”

Now he was no longer still but trembling, and his hands ghosted all over her stomach, her face, her mouth. “A child,” he repeated shakily as he brushed away a tear with his thumb. He did not smile but his wonder and joy shone through his eyes, the slackening of his mouth. He buried his face into her neck and she felt the heat of it when he mumbled, “Katara, I - I need...Please, Katara, I need you.”

She opened her arms to him, stunned at the power of his reaction. He made slow, aching love to her then, careful not to crush her with his weight, whispering of his love and joy to her with every thrust. Overcome by his emotions, Katara held him tightly and wept all throughout, kissing him to assure him these were not only tears of sorrow.

When he found his end within her she did not follow after, yet neither had she ever felt so close to anyone before. He held her tightly afterwards, kissing her until their lips were full and swollen. Katara found that she could not voice her fears to him. Not tonight, in the first flush of happiness. The morning would come soon enough. She would tell him then, when she knew what it was that she must do.

Yet Katara did not know what she should do when she finally came to him and voiced her fears. Once again they found themselves sitting beside the pond in his mother’s garden, and when he
He stiffened before shaking his head. “No,” he murmured. “You’re safe here. And so is our child. The palace loves you, even down to the servants, and so do my people for all that you’ve done for us.” He tried to smile and catch her gaze. “They’d see me dead before you, beloved. You are safest here, and you should stay.”

Katara knew there was truth in this, yet he was ignoring the wider ramifications of her remaining here. “If I stay, they’ll know it’s yours.”

His jaw clenched at that. “Not necessarily. It will likely favor you, with your skin and eyes, and-”

“Who else could be the father? Aang, who I haven’t seen in years? Besides, what about bending? What if it’s a firebender?”

Zuko sighed, looking away from her momentarily. “If it is, then all we have to do is finalize your divorce with Aang, and then I can take you as my wife. No one could say anything then.”

He looked back at her and cupped her face with his hands. “Katara, if you’d let me, I’d give you everything. Not just stolen moments and nights in my bed. Not a fatherless child. Everything.” He swallowed thickly before continuing. “If I asked you to marry me, would you say yes?”

For a moment Katara wanted nothing more. To be with him publically, living life at his side, arguing with him and laughing with him in the sunlight, as well as the shadows. She had to close her eyes against the intensity of her desire, and suddenly felt like crying, or giving in, or simply throwing her arms around him and never letting go.

Yet before she could surrender to the this moment of weakness, she heard Gran-Gran’s voice in her head, reminding her of something she had told her long ago. *I left my home with a baby in my belly because it was the right thing to do. Not the only thing. Nor the easy thing. I could have stayed with the man I loved and bitten my tongue as I watched our child grow up in a land that would never love it back. But I didn’t. Because I loved, Katara. And my mother taught me that the right thing is usually the option where you gotta’ love the most to see it through.*

Katara closed her eyes and knew what she must do. “Zuko, if I stay with you and bear this child here, everyone will know that it’s yours. No matter the bending, no matter what we say about it. And yes, I think that your people would accept it. You have two sons already, two heirs to the throne. One child conceived out of wedlock won’t bother them, especially if you’re right on how they feel about me.

“But the rest of the world will also know. From my father down to the Southern tribes to Arnook in the north...from Kuei in Ba Sing Se to every single political dissident in between. *Your* people might accept it, and maybe we could even convince the Southern Tribe to look the other way...but the Northern Water Tribe and the Earth Kingdom never will.

“At best they’ll say I seduced you, or even that you raped me-”

“Katara!” His interjection was scandalized.

Yet she continued, holding his angry expression with her own. “And at worst, they’ll think this is a calculated attack against the Avatar, meant to punish him for what happened during the war and after. And then what will Aang do? Even if he told everyone that he gave us his blessing, no one will believe him.” She breathed deeply, trying to still the rapid-fire beating of her heart. “Staying here could start another war, Zuko. And the Fire Nation can’t be the aggressors again. It will undo
After a minor eternity of staring into her eyes, gauging her sincerity, Zuko bowed his head. “The Fire Nation takes what it wants,” he mumbled. “Both now and a century ago. Is that what they’ll say?”

“I love you so much,” was her only reply.

Zuko stood, unable to look at her. Smoke steamed from his nostril, and from the rigid lines of his shoulders he was furious. He had learned to hold his anger, hold it within and shape it until it was something far more deadly than his teenage rages had been. He did it now, and Katara’s heart dropped down to her toes.

“I need time,” he told her curtly. “I need to think.”

Finally, he turned back to her. “Will you still...come to me tonight?”

Although it felt like she might be better served jumping from Appa’s back with no glider to catch her, Katara nodded.

His hands clenched, and then he was away, leaving Katara staring down into the glassy waters of the koi pond.

Katara never knew what happened between then and that evening, lying together in the dark, but it enabled him to say, “You’re right. I hate it, but you’re right.”

Just like the first time they kissed she found herself incoherent as she threw herself at him, half-hoping he really would burn her this time.

Afterwards, as they lay together panting, bodies glistening with sweat from the rigour of their love, Katara found her plan falling into place. She would go to the Southern water tribe, and bear the child there. Among her father’s people there would be plenty to offer their services as the child’s rumored father, and time enough to see whether or not the child favored Katara, or if it would spit flame. Then they would wait and gauge the situation, and see whether the world could accept them together.

She whispered her plan to him in the dark, voice thick from unshed tears. So much of it hinged on Aang. If he moved on and found another, she could be freer to choose whom she would. Yet if the world did not accept the Fire Nation, there was still a good chance they would have to wait years to be together again...

Zuko watched her as she spoke, the despair in his gaze never wavering. Whether he agreed with her or not he did not say, yet he obviously did not share her optimism over their eventual fate.
Finally, when the first rays of the sun peeked up over the horizon, Katara told him something else. “If it’s a boy...I want to name him Hako. It’s close enough to my father’s name, but it’s also a little like yours.”

Zuko hummed noncommittally, burying his face into her neck, breathing deeply of his scent on her skin.

“And if it’s a girl...I want to name her Sura.”

That had him picking his head up. “Sura? Is that a water tribe name?”

Katara shook her head. “Sokka named his firstborn after our mother...if we have a daughter, I want to name her for yours.”

It only took a moment for him to comprehend. It was the same naming style as Koru and Roku, after all... He touched her face with gentle hands, feeling as if his heart might burst with love for her. “People will guess. The names are so similar.”

Katara smiled up at him. “Let them guess. I want to give you this much. I need to.”

He smiled at her, even though his heart was breaking. “Then I agree, beloved,” he whispered as he leaned down to kiss her once more.

When the decision was made, there was little time to lose. In less than a week they stood the royal family’s private dock, where the fastest ship in the Fire Nation waited to take Katara back to her home. Only the two servants privy to the secret, Uncle, the fire princes, and Zuko came to see her off.

The servants bid her restrained yet fond adieus, and Katara hugged them tightly to their consternation. Uncle’s hug outdid hers, although his whisper of assistance and a contact in Ba Sing Se held even more weight. Little Iroh threw himself into her arms, holding back tears, yet unable to disguise his pained look of incomprehension. He did not understand why she had to go, and neither did Koru, who simply cried as she kissed them goodbye.

Zuko was the last to bid her goodbye. In full sight of his family he held her and whispered in her ear part of the Fire Nation marriage vows. It was in a ritual language, old and outdated, used only for the most important ceremonies. Yet in voice Katara understood all she needed to know. He was promising her companionship and fidelity, his faith and honor, to love and respect her above all others until death came and his body was given to the flames.

Katara began to make her own promise of undying love - the Fire Nation was not the only tribe with an older, ritualistic tongue, after all - but Zuko stopped her.

“Give me something to dream of,” he told her gravely. “Something to look forward to. Tell me the next time we meet, if you can. I’ll wait for you, Katara. I’ll wait for you forever.”
Katara put a hand to stomach, as if protecting the child forming inside of her. Then she leaned up to kiss him one last time, full and on the mouth.

“No matter what happens I am yours, beloved,” she whispered to him, using his own name for her on him. “Heart, mind, and soul.”

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Chapter End Notes

I have been waiting for many, many chapters to write the words “Zuko dropped the duck.” It is unfathomably funny to me, please send help.

More seriously, I have been imagining this interlude since I was 20 years old and began writing this damn epic. I am a heck of a lot older now, and fear that it was nowhere as good as it was in my head. And now I feel old. Please send more help.

I also feel like I promised happier chapters, and if anyone else can find them please let me know. Dang, me. Dang.
Chapter 10: Coalescing Passions

Chapter Notes

More NSFW stuff although not as explicit. Remember how last chapter was all hells yeah Zutara? Well. There’s more where THAT came from... :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10: Coalescing Passions

Mid Year 30

Yet when she reached the top of the mountain, there was no bear there, but a man. You have won me, he said, and in her eyes he was glorious, in the way of beasts, rather than men.

Yet you are not the moon, she announced wonderingly. You are the sun.

While one eye smiled, the other leaked tears.

And you have finally caught me. Do you understand now, my love?

-Third excerpt from Anicca’s fairytale-

Koru lay flat on his back on the floor of the palace conservatory, tossing a wooden shuriken toward the ceiling. Had anyone been there to see it they might have reprimanded him, but fortunately (or unfortunately, if his current mood was taken into account) everyone he knew was far too busy for him, even though the remembrance ceremony had finished several days ago.

Of course, not everyone could be blamed: Uncle Aang had nearly lost his mind with joy over the acquisition of two new students, and since they had arrived had spent every waking moment either with them in an intensive training regimen, or scouring the spirit world for ways to ‘correct the balance.’ Similarly, King Toph was running a country, and also was generally fairly cranky and probably wouldn’t have come out here anyway. His father was busy helping Toph with the inevitable cleanup of the ceremony, and also in helping Aunt Katara (his future mother-in-law, his brain helpfully provided. Hopefully) spread awareness of the only (partial) cure to the sleeping sickness - positive thoughts, and a willingness to do battle within oneself.

He didn’t begrudge them any of their duties, and had done his best to help where he could. Yet his
effectiveness was limited, and rather than assign him menial chores any could do, his father and Aunt Toph had declared him a complete success as a speechmaker/dignitary, and had him writing more speeches to deliver to the public. Apparently his eulogy at Uncle’s funeral had gone over better than he’d expected, and he was now lined up to give several other speeches in the next few days to bolster goodwill and friendship between the earth and fire nations.

All that was well and good. Perhaps more. In all honestly it was far more enjoyable than he’d expected. It was such a rush getting up and speaking to hundreds - if not thousands - of people, and his glib tongue never failed him. The content of the message enthused him, as well. He was giving his earnest promises of peace and prosperity - on behalf of his nation and his father, of course - and he’d never felt so useful before.

This was him making a difference. He found that he liked it a lot.

Koru tossed the shuriken again, catching it deftly between two fingers as it fell back down. Thinking of the speeches reminded him that not everyone had been avoiding him. Even while in a pitying mood, he could not be unjust. Over the last several days Tanh had been invaluable. He had seen more of her in the past five days than anyone else, and had learned that she was without a doubt the most politically minded woman he’d ever met; logical, orderly, brilliant. She had also helped him draft his upcoming speech about trade regulations on consumables, and as such Koru had found his respect for her doubling.

Although their speaking styles were a little different, they were complementary: while his own speech at the remembrance ceremony had gone over well, the speech they had subsequently given together had been even more of a success, and Koru had been completely staggered by how popular they had become. Especially when the content had been fairly inaccessible to the masses, meant for the trade unions that relegated the flow between Ba Sing Se and the southern earth colonies. Although it had only been given a few days ago, word had already spread to the outskirts of town about the good rapport between the future rulers of the Fire Nation. (And Koru assumed they were speaking largely of Tanh, or that the message had gotten a little garbled the farther it was passed on. Perhaps rumor had gotten he and Iroh mixed up? It certainly had happened before. But he was never going to be Fire Lord. Nor marry Tanh. Those were things that he knew for certain).

Still, their positive relationship would send an even more profound message to not only the Earth Nation, but to all the nations: after a century of war and another thirty years of tension, earth and fire were coming together. By his and Tanh’s actions, (followed up by Iroh and Tanh’s marriage) they were all giving hope to the future.

Yet even she wasn’t here now, although her duties had not markedly increased. He suspected it was to hide her growing frustration and uneasiness for her future. Nearly a week had passed with with no word from Iroh, and although Uncle Aang had sworn he’d know if Iroh died (Roku took a distinct interest in his descendents, after all) Koru thought there may still be cause for concern. His father had eventually revealed he was on a mission with Sura’s spirit woman, and remembering how Iroh had stood over her with his dao blades drawn, Koru couldn’t help but feel uneasy about the mission’s chance for success...as well as the spirit woman’s chances for survival.

(Tanh, upon hearing that the woman was only a year or so younger than her fiance and not impossibly ugly, was uneasy for other reasons entirely. Koru had done his best to reiterate how actively and uncharacteristically his brother had hated her, but oddly enough that hadn’t done much to quell her fears.)

Still, all she had to do was to be patient. Iroh had given his verbal assent to their marriage, although it was not binding until he signed a piece of parchment, and then in a ritual token of his faith, presented
her with a lock of his hair. Tanh would then offer a lock of her own, and she would braid them together before Iroh would burn them with his own flame. Then their troth would be plighted, and she could rest easy.

Koru groaned. If only it was so easy for him! He was in a similar situation to Tanh, yet as much as he pitied her for her forbearance, he pitied himself more. Sura was here at the palace, yet he could still not move to secure their happiness! Of course, he wasn’t so unfeeling as to push his suit with their parents when everything was in such disarray. It would be callous of him to demand an answer of Uncle Aang when he was torn between his students and his duties as the Avatar.

Neither could he speak to his own father or Aunt Katara, not when they were run ragged by their efforts to stem the sleeping sickness, and assisting Aang by researching what they could of the spirit tribes and their covenant with the element benders.

He would not be so selfish. But was it selfish to demand a little time with Sura?

Well. After their interaction this morning, he was not so sure that selfish was the word. Koru groaned and hid his face in his arm. Although he’d rather not admit it, this loneliness was of his own making, especially when he acted as he had this morning….

Koru groaned again as he remembered.

*Sura was avoiding him. Koru had suspected this for the last couple days, but now he knew for certain. He had been waiting patiently for her to come to him, rather than cornering her in a dark hallway and dragging her back to his room where they could work out their frustrations in an entirely more pleasurable manner. But this morning when she had passed him by on the way to go assist her father with Chihiro (who was adorable, Koru allowed. Unlike the other one) he had found his control snapping. (She had barely even acknowledged him as she walked by! Just a little, fleeting smile that almost seemed more begrudging than happy! And ok, it was a public space and she was obviously harried - assisting her father with his new students was no easy task, apparently, especially in teaching Chihiro their language - but would a quick kiss be too much? Or maybe even two?) Apparently so, as when he pinned her to the wall, grinning devilishly as he leaned in to kiss her, he found himself - and his ardor - doused by an icy cascade of water, kept in the pouch at her waist and frosted by her power.

She had gone off of him then, and he had realized how tired she truly was. Airbenders this and Father that; the spirit realm is a dangerous place and I’m worried about Iroh and Anicca; I haven’t even seen my mother in almost two days, and King T is looking pretty peaky, as well...

The only positive aspect about the scolding was that her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled with annoyance, so at the very least Koru could enjoy the show. He had always taken a perverse pleasure in winding her up, even from a young age. It had been one of the first indications of his love for her, back when they were still children.

Koru began tossing the shuriken again, adding another to the mix. Of course, his love had not always been this mature, this marked. Back when they were small, he had almost loved her more as a sister, just as Iroh still did. It had only been about five years ago that his affections had taken a more adult turn, and as such, her denial stoked an unexpected impatience. Why was she still holding him at arm’s length? She had not been so reserved when she first returned to the palace, when the spirit woman was still here...
Yet the spirit woman had sent her to him, wasn’t that what Sura said? Somehow she had reminded Sura of her feelings for him?

Could her avoidance of him mean that she had somehow forgotten them between then and now?

Koru growled. If so, there was only one reason for it: the tall, handsome airbender, with the long, thick eyelashes and the tendency to shadow Sura wherever she went. The one whose hand she had held when she introduced him to her father, and the one who monopolized all her time with Chihiro this and Avatara that and let me tell you stories about your spirit woman and her dead brother in my intriguing accent.

Koru suspected he had discovered the root of his problem. It was Toshiro of the Mori tribe. Between his undeniable charms, his exoticness, his airbending and his obvious (at least to him) interest in Sura, he presented a strong rival for her affections. After all, Sura had always been just as obsessed with finding airbenders as had her father. And if he went to Uncle Aang, asking for her? Would the Avatar just roll over and beg him to take her, in hopes of airbending grandchildren?

Koru threw the shuriken with such force that wooden or no, it stuck to the ceiling and refused to dislodge itself. That possibility was unacceptable. Secret or not, he and Sura were engaged! She wouldn’t throw him over for a fascinating airbender, even if she also refused to make illicit kisses with him in dark corridors.

She was just overworked, he told himself. And she probably thought he was just loafing around. Her annoyance must have stemmed from the thought of him with nothing to do when she was so busy, rather than instinctively avoiding the taste of his lips. When all this passed things would go back to normal, and he would have what his heart sought.

Even with this in mind, Koru sighed.

So far, it was not shaping up to be a good day.

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Travelling to the Iwaya tribe - or the grotto tribe, as she translated for him - was very different from travelling to the Mori tribe. Without Sura between them, talking and mediating and unconsciously hampering their efforts to move as quickly and efficiently as possible, they made good time. This was essential, the spirit woman had told him. She was not entirely sure rogue Mori warriors might not come after them anyway, regardless of Priya’s promise to leave them alone outside her tribe’s borders.

They blamed her for many things, she told him gravely. The loss of their city’s protection, foremost, but also for Toshiro’s defection - which was in truth entirely due to the redheaded child, Iroh felt through their bond. In time, they may even blame her for whatever had happened in the Ritual of Sundering itself, even though she had not been there. It was the way of things everywhere, to blame someone weaker, different.

She had glanced up at him questioningly. *Was it so in the element bending world?*
Iroh had glanced back at her and found himself unable to respond, knowing what he did of his nation’s history. *We should move on,* he had finally answered curtly, and that was all the answer she needed.

Their current journey would also be a longer stretch to travel. While Mori and Yama were within two days’ walk from Ba Sing Se and a day’s walk to each other, Iwaya was nearly five days out from the Earth Nation capitol, a fact that made Iroh’s jaw clench. Although he found his earlier hatred of her impossible to summon, there was still a good amount of irritation clouding his part of their link. Not wanting anything else in their tentative alliance to change, he kept away from her side of the link, not sure whether he’d be more reluctant to feel anger or acceptance from her.

Fear was no longer an option, he knew without question. The dreams they had shared - which he thought should make any sane woman fear him down to her bones - had burned away her deepest misgivings, and worse yet, instilled a measure of trust between them. She would not betray him, nor he her. And both of them knew it.

Their strengthened connection made him snappish, and although he could not push against it as he had before they reached Mori, he found himself retaliating in smaller ways. Just before they bedded down the first night, in an old hut where Toshiro and Chihiro had lived, he turned to her and asked, “Why did we not go back to Yama first?”

When she had simply looked at him, her expressive face as impassive as she could make it, he pointed out, “It was closer.”

There was an eddy of something warm yet painful from their link, and for a moment he saw autumn leaves swirling down onto fresh graves. “We have to go in order,” she answered, and her restraint grated on him.

He wanted to fight her, just as she had guessed back in his dream. More than he had ever wanted to fight someone before. But knowing that a physical confrontation was unfeasible, he at least wanted to see that answering spark in her, proving that they were the same. “Don’t be stupid. It’s just a story. The rituals can’t have changed that much.”

There was a flare of pure heat through her link, and he basked in it, knowing he had prompted her anger. His body tensed in readiness, and his side of the link twitched in anticipation.

Yet before she could act on it, she deflated. Something had occurred to her, some memory had brought her down from the brink. Iroh bristled both at her timidity and at not knowing what made her pull back.

She stood over her bedroll, with the miswak stick she used to clean her teeth in hand. “It would have been too painful,” she finally admitted, and then the link was thrumming with sorrow, so much of it that his childish anger was wiped away. Iroh glanced away at her honesty, his own heart uncommonly tight in his chest.

He slept that night remembering Koru’s death in his dream, and how he had almost lost himself in the face of it.

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The next day, Iroh found himself clarifying something he likely should have addressed at the very beginning. “So when we finish all the rituals, we earn the artifacts? Along with some additional...”
He hesitated, unable to spit out the word *magical*, even though it seemed so to him. “*Internal benefits*?”

She glanced over at him, the late afternoon sun glinting off her light hair. “I believe so, yes. Although I have a feeling they will all be at the mountain shrine in Yama.” She frowned. “And I’m not sure the rituals were supposed to have more benefits. In theory the rituals would be undertaken by full-fledged spirit benders, who would have already undergone extensive training, much like the tests themselves. Perhaps we received those internal benefits only because we did not already have them, not because they were a gift.”

Iroh hummed. There was some sense in what she said, especially as he was an element bender, and thus never supposed to be in the picture at all. But then again… “Will my being an elemental bender be an issue in using the artifacts?”

She hesitated. “I...I do not know.” She glanced over, and the cautiousness in her expression made the annoyance from yesterday resurface. Where had her fearlessness from the ritual gone? Why was she being so meek now?

“Truth be told,” she began, “I’m not exactly sure what to do with the artifacts. I know they bestow great power on the wielder...but I’m not sure what to *do* with them. Especially as-” She cut off abruptly, her eyes hooding.

Iroh wondered if he started a small fire she would find her backbone and face him without this timidity. “Especially what?”

This finally roused her and she shot him an arch expression. “Especially as in the stories Asha told, it was always the most powerful spiritbender who attempted the ritual - and even then, only one ritual. Never all. The power of all three at once would be unimaginable. I do not know if I could stand the power of the artifacts, especially as I have no training.”

She sighed. “Of course, the strongest spiritbender today is the Avatar. We could try and give the artifacts to him. With his connection to the spirit world and all his past lives aiding him, he might be able to use them without undergoing the rituals. Yet who is to say he would accept the artifacts, if they came from me?”

Before he could respond she looked him full in the face, her grey eyes catching the light in a way that made his stomach tighten. “Would he listen to you? Even knowing that you chose to come with me?”

“Would he think me compromised, you mean?”

“Will he believe in you?”

“A- Woman,” he ground out, his voice cracking under the awkwardness of nearly having said her name, “The Avatar will no longer be deluded by anything when we return. He is already a hero among men, and I think you will be surprised at his mental fortitude.”

She raised an eyebrow, and he rose to the challenge of it like a true firebender. He leaned in closer to her and growled in a voice as soft as silk, “And if does not...I will *make* him believe us.”

He walked on, but had he looked behind him, he would have seen her shiver.

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They found the first carcass late that afternoon. By the third dead rabbit-deer, mauled and only half eaten, they knew to be cautious. Priya had already warned them that wolf-bears were on the prowl, and they were not so naive as to believe they had all been killed on their attack on Mori. Although Iroh was confident in his ability to hunt wolf-bears, the woman was slightly less sanguine. She had grown up here, after all, and had been aware of the danger since she had been a young girl.

Unlike the night before, there was no man-made shelter for them to take refuge in. So they set up camp as best they could in a small copse of trees, and the spiritwoman watched the perimeter as he roasted a trio of sparrow-squirrels, taking care not to singe the tender meat.

They ate in silence, and Iroh could feel her preoccupation through their link. She was focusing hard on something, trying to remember something of an old tale? Sensations and images flashed through their connection - the smell of Asha’s cabin, the cadence of her voice as she spoke, and then, even more disconcertingly, snippets of the story itself. Yet all were gone too quickly for him to catch and so he waited as patiently as he found himself capable of for her to explain.

Finally, she finished picking at her meal. Without looking up at him, she said, “I think I know a way of protecting us tonight.”

Iroh’s eyebrows rose. His way of protecting them was suggesting shifts, although with only two it would be a rough day tomorrow.

She stood, brushing dust off her pants as she gazed around the campfire. “A long time ago, before the earth kingdom had...settled, we had to keep element benders from stumbling into our camp. We learned to hide our tribes, but we also needed protection when we travelled. So we called upon the ancestors to guard us.”

He didn’t need to feel through the link to sense her intent. “You want to call down spirits again? After what happened last time?”

It was a low blow but it didn’t even phase her. She simply turned to him, all earnestness and focus and said, “Tomorrow we reach Iwaya. I will do everything I can to ensure that we are ready for the next ritual. Even if it means chancing...unfriendly ancestors.”

At the last she had wavered but now she set her shoulders. “Otherwise I might fail. And I cannot... I will not fail again.”

She turned from him, but at the last he had seen his own face in her thoughts. He was reminded of what she had thought just before they began the first ritual: *may he never know how strong he makes me.*

Although the thought of her being strong for him filled him with an inexplicable sense of contentment, he still didn’t understand. “You are strong for me? You will not fail because I will see it?” Was it that she would not allow him to see her weakness? That he could understand. In regards to how he felt around her, he understood all too well.

Perhaps he had not guarded his side of the link as well as he’d hoped, however, for she only gave him a little half smile before admitting, “Because of you I must be strong.”

And then, after she had dropped into a half lotus position, she reprimanded him. “Now, please be quiet. I need to focus. I think I know how to do it...but I do not wish to make a mistake. I think perhaps neither do you.”

Iroh scowled at her, but left her to her meditation, mulling over what that the tiny distinction in her
wording had meant.

Half an hour later, with absolutely no warning at all, she succeeded. Iroh had no idea what she did - the link was closed to him when she concentrated, and so he focused on watching the perimeter for predators. One minute there was the stillness of their campfire, and the next there were four wispy, spectral shapes flickering at the corners of the campsite.

Such was his aversion to anything unnatural that he nearly let loose a fireball through one of the faceless ghosts. The only thing that kept him from doing so was the spirit bender's hand on his arm, disrupting his concentration.

"Iroh, no - they are protecting us!"

She hadn't spoken in his tongue. If she hadn't been holding onto him he wondered if he would have understood her. Yet the meaning was immediate, along with a deeper understanding. These were sentinels, called from the spirit world and willing to guard them during their quest. They were good spirits who protected their descendants. They would not hurt the two of them, but if either hunters or predators came for them in the night, they would find themselves stymied by all the power the spirits had at their disposal.

They were also deeply unnerving, and he could not help letting his feelings on the matter slide through their connection. *I don't like them. They're unnatural.*

He felt her surprise that he had utilized their bond like this, and he also felt her fingers slide down from his bicep to the crook of his elbow. Her touch was distracting, but not so much as the almost imperceptible hint of amusement that she quickly swallowed.

*They will not hurt us. Now her hand was at his wrist. Would you let me show you their intent?*

Iroh stared at one of the sentinels, still and silent and flickering an otherworldly shade of green. He wondered if any of them would hold up to his flame. He wondered how any of the incorporeal figures could even protect them.

Yet then her fingers closed around his palm, cupping it firmly. What was distracting before now garnered his full attention. He stared down at their hands for moment, usually ordered thoughts in disarray. To his horror, he had to fight down the urge to curl his own fingers over hers.

Enough was enough. Iroh pulled his hand away, ignoring her look of surprise before turning and moving back to the campfire. “I don’t need it,” he explained when the silence grew too great for even he it ignore. “I trust you.”

Only when the words left his mouth did he realize they were even more indicative than his impulse to hold her hand had been. Ignoring her amazement, he scowled at the campfire, wrapping himself in a cocoon of his own ire.

The ghosts watched him silently, and somehow their sightless gaze seemed like judgement.

Iroh fell asleep still hating the unnatural. And this quest. And spirits. And her.

But sleeping within the circle of her guarding ghosts and within arm’s reach of her, his dreams that night were the most peaceful he could remember.

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Aang thought of his two students (*two! Two whole students!* and smiled. Nearly a week into their training and he still couldn’t help himself from grinning hugely at them. He supposed it unnerved Toshiro, but he couldn’t help it. After a lifetime of searching, the remnants of his people had been found! The airbenders would not die with him!

There would be even more in a generation or two, Toshiro guessed. He was taking Toshiro’s report of the people of his tribe into account when deciding this. Judging by how numerous those with airbending abilities were compared to their spiritbending counterparts, airbenders were far more fertile than spiritbenders. And although there were many older, untrained airbenders in the two remaining spirit tribes, too set in their ways to undergo effective training now, most had one or two young children who could benefit from Aang’s teaching...as soon as this new war was over.

Aang knew his premier responsibility was in chasing down and defeating this demon. *Or god*, he added privately. *For the Face-Stealer had been known to move on his own before...* But he could not tear himself away from his students. Not yet. He had to stabilize them, first. And while Chihiro was making excellent progress (and just in time as her power was great, and Aang understood Toshiro’s struggles in containing her) Toshiro was having more trouble.

*It was because he was older,* Aang had told him when he saw the young man frustrated with his own lack of progression. *He had already learned how to learn. Chihiro was a blank slate, and open to everything. Toshiro would have to rationalize everything, take older teachings and learn them in his own way.*

It was hard going, certainly, but rewarding. Enlightening, too. It had only taken Aang a few hours to realize he understood much of the little girl’s chatter - cognates here and there, bringing back long buried memories of his childhood 100 years ago. The spiritbenders had assimilated much of the air nomad’s native tongue, otherwise lost to the world when the Fire Nation destroyed them.

This left Aang in the unique position to tutor them, even without Toshiro’s knowledge of the elemental language. Although he was not fluent in their tongue, his basic hold on it was a way of communicating in fragments and ideas; mere colors against the nuance of the language. Again, it was a better way of communicating with Chihiro, with a child’s flexibility and creativity.

Yet today, Aang had another idea for Toshiro.

He had Toshiro meet him in one of the older wings of the palace, in an old storeroom that Toph had given him years ago in order to ‘store his Avatar swag.’ There was less than she had expected, largely as he found himself bringing only old relics here, memories of his time among a people he could never fully explain. Yet it was here that he stored all the old air scrolls that we had perused during his time in the Eastern and Western air temples. They held all the knowledge he had hoped to remind himself of when - if - he had ever found students to train.

The young man bowed gracefully to him, a gesture of respect among the spiritbenders. “Good morning, Avatar. Are we train with no Chihiro?”

The young man’s brows furrowed in a moment of concern. He was not so used to letting the little
A girl out of his sight, even though he appeared to trust Sura implicitly with babysitting her. Aang liked his over concern, his worry for the girl. It meant Toshiro would make a good father someday, and thinking practically, Aang knew that was something their race needed to continue and strengthen.

“Just for a little while, Toshiro. I have something to show you, first. Then I will split the time between you today.” Aang adopted a faux regal facade as he swept his arm around the dusty contents of the store room. “Feast your eyes on the wisdom of the airbenders!”

At Toshiro’s hesitant appreciation, Aang dropped his pose and smiled naturally. “There used to be a lot more, obviously. But this is all I have to work with now. Anyway, I wanted to check something. Can you read?”


Toshiro approached cautiously, not sure where he was going with this. Aang did not make him wait in suspense. He carefully pulled out a scroll from uppermost box, blowing some dust off it before laying it out across an empty table.

“How about this? Can you read this?”

Toshiro bent to study it, hazel eyes flicking over the fading ink. Within a minute or two his mouth began to twitch, sounding out words and cognates he recognized. After a few more moments of inspection he turned to the Avatar with an expression of restrained excitement.

“It says...I think...It says of how to breathe. What to think when filling lungs with wind. How to see in mind what must happen next. Here-” He pointed just above the third paragraph, not letting his finger touch the scroll. “It says of movement. Of arms and legs and...” He gestured to his torso, stymied for the specific word.

Aang nodded. “Very good. This is in the old monk’s tongue, what they used to train us in. It’s very close to what the air nomads spoke, and from hearing Chihiro speak, I thought it might be close to what you speak as well. Do you think if I let you read it, you would be able to understand enough of it to use it to augment your training?”

Toshiro nodded excitedly. “Yes, Avatara. But...could I make list of words I do not know? Would you translate? I learn faster that way, I think.”

The utter seriousness with which Toshiro framed his question made Aang smile again. Although there were obvious similarities between he and the young airbender - generally physical similarities, although enough facial differences to mark separate families - he was more struck by the differences in their personality. Although there were aspects to him that Aang would tentatively label as ‘flighty,’ he was, compared to Aang, remarkably level-headed and practical, unflinching when it came to his duties and protecting those he cared about. It was impressive enough, but when Aang remember how he had been when he was Toshiro’s age...!

“Of course, my friend,” Aang responded with the same amount of gravity. “I would be honored to help you learn more of my native language. Now, let’s go through this first scroll together.”

Aang took command of the air beneath him, spinning it until it propelled him several inches off the floor, sitting and rising in the same motion. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, preparing himself. When he opened them he saw Toshiro watching him with a student’s envy over their teacher’s prowess.
“Let us begin. Will you read me the first instruction?”

Toshiro did so, his accent far better than any elemental bender’s would have been. Aang smiled at the nostalgic sounds, for a moment transported back to the Western Air Temple along with all the other boys, and his friend and father figure, Monk Gyatso.

“Now, one more time. And as you read, I want you to do what it tells you.”

Toshiro did. And several hours later, when he was breathing and going through several katas just the way Aang wanted - and had been unable to get him to do so for the last five days - Aang smiled.

In that moment, he felt as if the future was already in his grasp, and that it was a wonderful one.

Katara watched the rain from the privacy of her balcony, listening to the soothing, arrhythmic patterns that were still, even after thirty years of leaving her homeland, fundamentally foreign. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Night had fallen over Ba Sing Se, and the approaching storm held sway over all - even the light in the waterproof lanterns flickered wildly, dancing in the high winds.

Although the night air was turning chill, Katara felt no compunction to move indoors. She was captivated by the raw display of the elements, and hoped to lose herself in the contemplation of her own. The last week had been one of constant upheaval, and only now, late at night and when she was utterly alone could she admit what it was to her: unbearable.

Oh, she was more than happy that airbenders had been found, and that they took to Aang’s training like a goose-ducks in water. Happier still that there were reports of a sudden increase in those surviving the sleeping sickness, waking healthier than they had when they fallen prey to the plague. Happiest that her daughter had come back to the palace, with eyes full of determination and a confidence that had her bustling around the palace while running errands for her Aang and Toph like she was born to do so.

All these things were wonderful things, and knowing that Aang was no longer hiding from his destiny, and that Iroh and Anicca were out facing theirs as well filled her with hope and a sense of purpose that had been lost for years now.

Yet there had also been that moment in the library, and even so many days later she could not forget the feel of Zuko, nor his scent or the rasp of his voice. He still loved her. And Katara could not unknow that.

Unbearable.

They had born it for 20 years. 20 years that had felt like 20 lifetimes, even with their promise to make a new life. And all those years of emotional barriers and fortitude and the notion of doing what was the best for their countries had collapsed in the space of two weeks, or perhaps even one afternoon in the Ba Sing Se library. Yui, Tue and La...they had not even kissed, and still Katara felt as if she were drowning!
Things could not go on like this. Katara could no longer live this life, knowing there was the slightest chance of living with Zuko’s love. 20 years ago they had been without choice. Yet now the world was different - there was no more outright hostility against the Fire Nation. Zuko had won them over in the spite of all the odds.

Perhaps the world had finally changed enough for the Avatar’s Wife to leave the Avatar for the Fire Lord.

Perhaps they had finally changed enough to finally tell Sura the truth about her parentage.

The flames in the lanterns lining the outer wall of the balcony roared, and Katara jumped, surprised. Someone or something had caused the flames to jump against their natural inclination. Heart beating loudly in her chest, she scanned the dark garden for the firebender responsible. Was it only Koru fooling around, perhaps to impress - or annoy - young Siyi Tanh? Would it be Aang, coming to kiss her a chaste goodnight before making his way to his separate room?

Or would it be the one she wanted and feared most to see, coming for her after a week of indecision?

Her heart stopped its beat entirely when she saw the shadow move from the bench, striding forward purposefully towards her balcony. Although far off and soaked by the rain Katara could just make out the intruder’s build, and his distinctive walk. It was him. He was here, and if he came for her tonight…

Oh Yue watch over her, but she did not think she could refuse him. She did not want to.

Yet just as the first light touched his face - the scar caught first, just as it always did - he turned and lunged, falling into the opening position of a kata that she had taught him long ago at the end of the war. It was a waterbending kata, and even though there had been no practical application for it, he had convinced her to teach him.

The memory of it made Katara smile, even through her current turmoil. Zuko had been so earnest and disciplined then, and even when he made absolutely no sense to her she had found it hard to deny him. Especially after he had tracked down Yon Rha with her, and helped her lay her mother’s ghost to rest.

Now she understood him better, however. He was out there in the rain, inundated by her element, pushing himself through a kata that held no purpose other than to let her know that he was thinking of her. That he loved her.

Had he loved enough her then, with his ill-cut hair and his determination to teach Aang firebending and his refusal to go anywhere alone with her unless it was on a mission of revenge or, in the end, to face his sister? Had she, with her bruised heart at his defection and her worry for Aang being alone with him and the way the strength of his grip made her heart flutter when he held her after choosing to let Yon Rha go? Could they have fought for this as teenagers, half out of their minds with mistrust and fear and desire?

Perhaps, Katara allowed. The desire had likely always been present. But they had been powerless in the face of it. They had not even been in a position to fight for themselves a decade later, when they were secure in their adulthood, and in their feelings for each other. Yet now, finally, she was in a position to make it so.

This would be her happy ending, she decided. This time, no one would take him away from her.

Katara jumped over her balcony, and immediately was soaked to the bone. The rain pelted down
warm and sharp all around her, and although it would be child’s play to bend it away from her, she did not. He had not. So neither would she.

“Zuko!” She called out as she ran towards him, wind ineffectual against her sodden clothes. She had to call again when she was only a few steps away from him, alerting him to her presence before she bowled him over. He broke off the stretch just as she reached him, turning and opening his arms before she threw herself into them.

Although he clearly had not expected her to come hurtling out of her room and into his arms, he held her tightly, not letting her second guess herself. For a moment Katara let herself be sheltered by his strength, no less impressive nor undesirable now that they were older. Then, she pulled away just enough to put her hands on his face, tipping it down so that she could look up at him, rain and all.

“I love you,” she told him with no preamble, as gravely as the pelting rain would permit. “I have always loved you, and I don’t think I can possibly stop loving you in the future. So unless you tell me no, I’m going to love you right now, and to the face-stealer go the consequences.”

The eyelashes on his one unscarred eye hung wet and heavy with rain, and Katara knew she looked ridiculous with her wet hair flopping unattractively in front of her face. Yet the adoration in his gaze as he smoothed the hair back from her face never flickered.

“Beloved,” he murmured as he leaned down to bring his lips to hers. “If you choose me now, I will never let you go.”

And then his mouth was on hers, with all the warmth and fire of his passion to keep out the pounding rain. Katara responded instantly, wrapping her arms around him to bring him that much closer. There was no moment of regret, no moment of panic. They had spent only a handful of months together against all their years apart and still she chose him in an instant, their love for each other breaking down all the barriers time and their situations had erected.

For long, desperate minutes they held each other out in the rain, kissing feverishly to keep the world at bay. Yet soon enough an old, familiar desire made a muddle of her, and she found herself dragging him back towards her room, one step at a time, barely able to keep away from each other for a moment before their mouths came back together.

Before they had gone more than ten steps Zuko stopped, trying to pull her back to the darkness of the shadowed garden, and away from the lights now flaming within the lanterns, illuminating the palace walls. “Stay with me,” he whispered against her ear. “Otherwise we’ll be seen.”

Katara could have gone cold from that, thinking that he meant he would regret being seeing with her. But she knew him too well, and knew that when he faltered, it was up to her to move them forward.

“I don’t care,” she murmured into his mouth. “Let them see. I choose you, Zuko. No more secrets. Not anymore.”

With one last quick kiss she broke away from him, taking a few steps toward her room. She was bathed in light now, as he was keeping the lights high. Then she held out her hand, gesturing to him to take it.

After only a moment of hesitation, Zuko did.

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They had not come together for almost 20 years, and doing so now felt like something entirely new: not like their first time, nor an encounter in a practiced string of them. It was not the same dance they
had discovered when they were at their physical peak, straining and desperate before surrendering to love’s madness. They were no longer young, and they had changed in many ways. Yet their passion was not wasted on them - theirs was the sweetness of finally coming back together, older and wiser, directed by more than just their need.

Zuko pressed her down onto the bed, sizzling with steam until with a flick of her hand Katara divested them of the rain. Then it was only their bare bodies against the mattress; hushed moans that cut through the dark; the slide of cloth against skin. There were no elaborate displays of bending, no contortions, nor games. It was just them, simple and together in body, mind and spirit, coming together in the age-old rhythm that had lost none of its power in their years apart.

Katara clutched his shoulders as she came, breathing out his name as her legs tightened around him. Only a minute or two later he buried his face into her neck as he followed after, jerking and spasming into her as she held him just a little too tightly.

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Afterward, they lay tangled together in the dark, fingers tracing patterns on their skin. Katara found that she could not let go even for a brief moment, and he had huffed with laughter as she clutched onto him as she bent his seed out of her, depositing it onto the ground outside her window.

Although exhausted, they kissed and stroked each other to forgotten heights as the night whiled on, flushed with happiness and hope. They whispered to each other in the dark, confessing the secrets of their time apart, their desire, their hope for the future. When she finally fell asleep, Katara did so in his arms, lulled by the dark rumble of his voice and his half-forgotten scent.

Her dreams that night were beautiful, for there was no room for regret when faced with such a profound happiness.

Chapter End Notes

*Throws self on floor.*
Well, that only took like 5 years. And to be honest, I wrote the Katara/Zuko love scene just before writing the previous interlude, so if anything feels off/rushed… that is why. Go back and read the smexy part of Int 9 if you need more loving, but my fingers were all smexed out after typing up these two sections in like...two days. (And then I took a month to edit. Go me!)

Also, miswak sticks are real. I only know of them through reputation, but the internet assures me they are a thing. I think they are nifty, although I only know the theory, not the practice.

Do I use too many commas? Be honest, now.
Chapter 11: Fractures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11: Fractures

(Mid year 30)

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The moon did, and wept, knowing that she could not unknow what she was. She lay with her lover, hiding his light until he was forced to rise, shaking off his black man-pelt and showering the world in his light.

Alone, the moon-woman made her way back to the forest of ghosts, knowing that the ghosts were now more real than her.

-Fourth excerpt from Anicca’s fairytale-

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“Who is missing you most, back at home?”

Iroh glanced over at her, wondering where in Agni’s name that question had come from. Yet a moment’s concentration on their link revealed that the closer they came to reaching Iwaya the more nervous she became, and was simply grasping for some way to pass the time.

Knowing this did not make him inclined to make it any easier on her, however. “Missing me?”

She huffed. “You know. Someone who wishes to see you. Who worries for you. Like your family?”

Judging by how badly this conversation could go were he to callously turn this question onto her, she must be desperate indeed to talk. Yet he had slept well, far better than he’d imagined, and it had put him in a surprisingly good mood.

“My father or brother, I suppose. Although missing isn’t the right term. They’ll want me to complete this mission quickly and to the best of my ability before coming home. They will likely be too busy to think of me more than that.”
Her brows furrowed as she latched onto the part he had hoped she would not. “And what of your mother?”

Iroh sighed, good mood gone. “My mother has been dead since I was very young.”

There was a moment of quiet as she considered this. Then realizing that there were no overtly painful emotions about this through his link, she kept on her line of questioning.

“She will not miss you?”

Iroh gave her a disbelieving look. He was glad she was not asking any further questions about his mother, but this was just becoming ridiculous. “We just saw each other a few days ago! Besides,” he continued, feeling her incomprehension, and even a snippet of a thought: *are you not close?* “We usually go for many months without seeing each other. Sura travels the world more than Koru and I. We do not need to be in the same place to be close.”

This had her nodding, and he suspected she was thinking of her own friendship with Toshiro and Chihiro. “So family and friends,” she mused to almost to herself. “Those are the people that miss you most?”

Acting on an impulse he didn’t quite understand he admitted, “Well. I doubt this counts, but I am engaged to be married. It’s conceivable that my future bride might worry a little.”

The spirit woman’s amazement was palpable. “Future bride! There is someone who wishes to marry you?”

Iroh glared at her. “Why wouldn’t she? She seems to like me well enough. Or, the idea of me at least. We’ve never really met.”

From her expression, her amazement was now tempered with confusion. “You are engaged to a woman you have never seen before?”

Iroh frowned at her, wondering if this sudden disconnect was because she knew nothing of the elemental world (very possible) or because he hadn’t exactly explained his duties as prince of the fire nation (also possible). “You do know I’m heir to the Fire Nation throne, yes?” He ventured, gauging their link for her reaction. “Arranged marriages are a common enough thing. This is slightly different because she’s not from the Fire Nation, but it’s a political statement that we all decided to make.”

She continued staring up at him in amazement, and for once her side of the link was eerily quiet. There was nothing Iroh could feel. It was almost as if he had turned her to stone.

Suddenly, he was worried. “Is there something wrong?” Should he have told her who he was before? Surely it was too late for his station to matter in the rituals now.

Slowly she shook her head, yet the odd expression did not fade away. “Let me understand,” she finally said. “You are promised to a woman that you have never met...and this does not bother you? When is the marriage?”

Iroh shrugged his shoulders, suddenly uncomfortable. Explaining a political marriage to someone who had no basis for knowledge of it was something very different than finagling it with his family and rulers of the countries involved. In her eyes it probably seemed heartless and cold. Yet what was marriage like among her own people? Had not her own brother been sacrificed because he would not marry who they wanted him to?

That would never happen to you, a voice inside him said. You are the only one forcing yourself to do
Iroh shook his head and his doubts away. “The betrothal ceremony will happen when I return. The marriage is not for another year after that, perhaps. And it’s not as odd as you’re thinking. It’s just...it’s like a job. It’s a political decision. It’s my duty. I have obligations to my nation, and marrying her is...is one of them.”

Now he could feel her through their connection, the cold stillness being replaced by something warm and pitying. “There is no love then? Will there ever be?”

“We’ve never even met,” he snapped, annoyed by both her pity and his helplessness in the face of it. “How could there be? And there won’t be,” he told her with the utmost certainty. “There will never be. There will be respect, honor, duty. Perhaps even amiability. But no love. I am not a man who loves.”

“And isn’t that a disappointment!”

The voice was high-pitched and soft, and speaking the spirit bender’s tongue. Iroh spun to face this new threat, fire burning in his palms. Yet just as it had when the little airbending girl had snuck up on him, the fire died away immediately.

Standing disconcertingly close to them was a tiny, wrinkled raisin of a woman, older and smaller than Asha. Her hair was bone white yet there was a gleam of excitement in her eyes, and if he matched the voice to her face, he had a feeling whereas Priya was haughty and regal and Asha straightforward and elegant, this woman was impish, irreverent.

At his side the spirit woman bowed, and Iroh sighed. And of course, she had to be the last Keeper.

“Good day, Keeper Lakshmi. We come to fight a great evil, and to humbly request to undergo the Iwaya trial-”

The old woman waved her hand in front of her face, cutting Anicca off. Then she giggled, “So serious, so serious! Ah, but most heroes are.” Straightening herself in an obviously exaggerated motion, she intoned in a false, serious voice, “Anicca of the Yama Tribe, I grant to you and your delicious piece of firebender ass entrance to Iwaya, as well as to undergo our sacred ritual. None shall harm you as long as you stay within the confines of our village. Especially if you laugh at my jokes.”

She turned around, speaking to the trees around her. Her tone turned sharp, in contrast to her previous bubbly tones. “Did everyone get that?”

Quietly, almost as if ashamed to answer came a chorus of male voices, now just visible from their hiding spots in the forest and sounding nothing so much as like scolded boys, “Yes, Keeper.”

“Yeah, we got it.”

“No fighting...”

“The firebender is pretty delicious, she’s right about that...”

Next to him, Anicca hid her face in her hand, and the only thing that kept him from attacking this strange woman - even more awful than Priya, for all her friendliness - was the spirit woman’s utter mortification.

Yet there was something else, too. A line of her thoughts: At least he doesn’t understand what they
“But I do,” he said, surprising her and himself. “I understood all that.”

Now her shame was mixed with amazement, and she brought her eyes up to his. “But I didn’t touch you,” she whispered, testing him in her own tongue. “And...and you are not delicious,” she mumbled, flushing red.

The surprise of her reaction kept him rooted to the spot. All he could do was stare at her, mind spinning. She was embarrassed? For him? For this Keeper and her lascivious band of warriors?

Or for herself?

All possibilities boggled him, and so he simply stood there until the Keeper drew his attention back to her. “Ah yes,” she chirped. “And so it begins. And Asha had been so worried about her! Clearly nothing to worry about here. That part of her destiny is as clear as day. Hot, too. Mmmmmm. Oh, to be young again…”

Iroh turned to give the Keeper an aggrieved look. There was little else he could do. The incomprehensible old woman was not being antagonistic, even though something about the way she was speaking about them when she was right there in front of them grated on his nerves. He couldn’t just attack her. Not an ancient woman who looked like she would be carried off by a stiff breeze. Besides, he had promised An- the spirit woman that he wouldn’t.

Oh, who was he kidding. Everything about the spirit tribes grated on his nerves, Keepers or no! No wonder he wanted to attack everything in sight!

The Keeper then clapped her hands together, like a little girl. “Oh, but we’re almost there! Only about a half hour’s walk. The rest of our news can wait until you reach the village. And then the ritual tonight! Ohhh!” She squealed, and Iroh winced. “It’s just so exciting!”

Iroh and Anicca watched in dumb amazement as Lakshmi then whistled sharply, bringing a bevy of young warriors scattering out of the forest around them. Several stooped low to carry her, the others moving in close. It resembled a human litter with Lakshmi as their queen. Waving languidly at the stunned watchers, she then pointed straight ahead and yelled with surprising vehemence, “Mush!”

The men took off, but not until one or two gave Iroh a lurid once over. Iroh shuddered as they watched them go, faster than they should be able to, kicking up a cloud of dust in their wake.

Finally, Anicca found her voice, addressing the least of their concerns. “It’s...mostly men, in Iwaya. Their ways are...a bit different. Perhaps more open than they should be.”

Iroh said nothing, too shocked by the blatant interest in his person. Unwilling to think more on it, he decided to attack their most obvious concern: “Why was the Keeper happy to see us? Is she...unhinged?” Sensing that Anicca didn’t quite understand the term, he clarified, “She’s insane, isn’t she?”

Anicca made a face that told him her suspicions on the matter of Lakshmi’s mental health, although her words were more politic. “Lakshmi has always been a bit of a...wild woman, but her tribe reveres her. Iwaya is special. It is the oldest tribe, and they do not move with the seasons. Besides, all three of the tribes have their own character and...oh, how do you say this...ideals. The Mori tribe is of the mind, and they revere their laws and their traditions. The Iwaya tribe is of the heart, and they follow their feelings and their intuition.” She shrugged. “And for Lakshmi...she follows them a bit more than the others.”
Iroh considered this. “And what of your tribe? What did they follow?”

Anicca swallowed, and the last vestiges of the flush faded from her face. “The Yama tribe was of the body, and we respected power and family, the most.”

Iroh felt a small stirring of surprise at how their homes’ values had aligned. “My people respect those as well. We respect only honor more.”

She looked at him then, perhaps confused by the faint stirrings of pride through his side of the connection. Yet then she glanced ahead and smiled faintly. “We must go. I have a feeling there will be more of Lakshmi’s excitement before we may begin the ritual.”

Iroh grumbled as he followed. “As long as she leaves my ass out it, I don’t care what she does…”

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Zuko had learned in his youth that the attainment of his wildest dreams often left him with only ashes in his mouth. Earning back his rightful place in his kingdom, proving his worth to his sister and his father, and finding and catching the Avatar had only brought him unhappiness, even though they were all he’d dreamed of doing since he’d been exiled as a boy. And although he had grown much since then and his desires had shifted accordingly, he still feared that regaining Katara after 20 years apart might reveal some hidden regrets in his psyche.

He was wrong. Every minute since their night out in the rain had only been another moment of long-denied happiness that set everything in his world to rights, even when the world outside was floundering. In finally coming back together, he found an optimism and strength that he had not known for many years. And although they were committed to keeping their love and time together a secret for a little while longer, he even allowed himself to hope for one more happy ending.

In many ways, their situation was much like it had been 20 years ago, when they had loved each secretly in his own palace. His days were still spent spreading word and hope for those suffering from the sleeping sickness, as well as dispatching missive after missive to his (now) completely loyal council back in the Fire Nation. No one had expected him to be gone for so long, without even his sons to hold his place. Yet if this was the final answer to the sleeping sickness, his people could wait. He had surrounded himself with stalwart generals, canny noblemen, and a few unambitious advisors, and they would watch over his nation until he returned home, with or without his sons (depending on the completion of Iroh’s mission, and Koru’s unexpected popularity with Earth Kingdom commoners)...and the love of his life.

Perhaps, if all played out better than his most optimistic expectations, even his daughter.

Yet when the work was done and he retired for the evening, then began their time together. Never in his room or hers, not after that initial night. They had finally taken Toph up on her advice (900 rooms, or so she had claimed) and they went through all the unclaimed ones. Locking the door behind them and then sealing it as best they could with their elements, they made their way through a series of dirty, dusty, stale-air rooms that became glorious when displayed against their affections for each other. Some rooms had not been opened in years, yet as long as they had a bed, a blanket, and each other, they did not care.

Someone might notice that neither the Fire Lord nor Ambassador Katara slept in their rooms at
night...but if they truly needed to be found, he thought that the Earth King might have an idea or two on how and where to find them.

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Zuko had thought about holding her during the Remembrance Ceremony rehearsal, finding her curves more enticing than even her slim form from 20 years ago. Now, holding her in the dark and stifling laughter at one of her pointed, unguarded comments, he thought he would find her beautiful even if she weighed as much as Uncle. Now he knew it was not her body. Had never been, although he could admit aesthetically he found her dark skin and light eyes striking. It was her energy that had always drawn him, that light within her that was never extinguished, no matter how dire things seemed.

She had always been his opposite. She had always been complicated. She had always given him hell, even when they wanted the same things.

He wouldn’t have it any other way.

“What would it have been like if we had managed this before?” she murmured, jarring him from his thoughts. “If we’d never left each other? If we hadn’t needed to?”

If the world were different. Zuko knew that was what she meant, along with, if I hadn’t married Aang.

“I think it would have been tempestuous,” he admitted. “Very exciting. We may just have killed each other during our more...passionate years.”

She turned to face him, and he could just make out the wicked curve of her smile. “I don’t think I’m out of my passionate years yet, Zuko.”

He had already taken her once tonight, and brought her to orgasm with his fingers and tongue twice more. This, on top of an exhausting day where Toph had somehow managed to delegate half her daily duties to him. Still, he met her challenge by leaning in close and grinning his own roguish smile. “Prove it.”

He found himself conceding defeat in increasingly broken tones when she brought her mouth down to him and did not stop until she had swallowed every drop of his seed.

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After, embarrassingly breathless and nerves still singing with pleasure, he held her close.

“That passionate enough for you?” She asked smugly.

“You will be my end,” he admitted, voice still hoarse from clenching it, keeping his yells - and flame - locked behind his teeth. “And you delight in it, don’t you?”

Katara propped herself on an elbow, long hair flowing down to the bed. She regarded him thoughtfully. “That’s what we say in the Southern Water Tribe. In our marriage ceremony. ‘You are my end, the last thing I will see before I go to the Darklands.’” She frowned. “Although I think they say Spiritworld now, rather than Darklands. A lot has changed since I’ve been there last.”

“But not everything.”

Her smiled gently down at him as she teased a lock of his hair with her fingertips. “No. Not my
feelings for you, at least.”

He caught her hand and kissed it, eyes smoldering. “Nor mine for you.”

They kissed lingeringly. When she finally pulled back he admitted, “I always knew I wasn’t meant to keep you. Even the night Aang came to me, asking that I be your lover. I knew he didn’t mean it. That the world couldn’t allow it.” He leaned up to plant a kiss on her shoulder, teeth scraping gently at her skin. “I never thought you’d still love me after all this time. It was enough to have just that small piece of you.”

“It was a larger piece than you knew,” Katara admitted, voice hushed in the dark. “I never broke our promise. All that I did in our time apart was to make a way for us to be together again. Even if it was only to be in the same council chamber.”

Zuko smiled. “Arguing and threatening to bend the room into oblivion. I remember how it is to argue with you.”

He felt her grin against his shoulder as she nestled down onto it. “No more secrets, Zuko,” she whispered sleepily. “We have to tell Sura. And Toph. Your sons. Aang.”

“Maybe one at a time,” he advised, eyelids heavy with exhaustion. It would be another long day tomorrow, and for the foreseeable future. “And I would begin with Toph.”

“Love you, problem solver,” Katara mumbled, or something along those lines.

Zuko whispered of his love in reply, and then stared up at the ceiling, too happy to sleep for a long time.

Lakshmi had attempted to pinch Iroh’s ass three times now since they had arrived at Iwaya, and he was furious. Anicca had taken to standing close by him as the Iwayans jostled him, nestling herself practically in the crook of his arm so that she could grab his wrist before he could set the old woman on fire.

Finally, Anicca settled for grabbing Lakshmi’s fingers. The Keeper looked up at her with the expression of a child whose hand was caught in the cookie jar, and Anicca huffed in frustration.

“Sorry, my dear,” Lakshmi’s apology was token and totally insincere. “Couldn’t resist.” Then, leaning closer and in a stage whisper, “It’s as hard a plank of steel-wood. Makes you wonder what else might be so long, strong, and capable!”

She pulled away, winking, but the damage was done. Iroh turned to Anicca with a look of murder on his face. Anicca, for the fifth time that day, felt her face catch fire.

“I want to leave,” he whispered to her from behind gritted teeth. Miserably, she agreed.

She wondered what might have happened if Sura had travelled with her. Their reception would have
been very different. Lakshmi and her warriors wouldn’t have been throwing lascivious winks at him every five paces, impeding their progress to what Lakshmi laughingly dubbed ‘the guest rooms.’ Anicca would have been freer to admire the natural elegance of Iwaya, as well as let her curiosity be assuaged about the spirit tribe she had never visited, and that was so different to her own.

Whereas Yama and Mori were seasonally nomadic, Iwaya was not. Therefore it was not a collection of huts and basic structures that could be disassembled, or otherwise matched the architecture of the minor earth kingdom villages. It was built into the side of the mountain, one of the smallest in the ridge that her village had been named for.

Protecting them from the rest of the world was a waterfall, running from the river bisecting the mountain and falling into the basin of water that split the camp. At night it would glow green with the lights positioned at the water’s edge, and built into the rockface. It was the reason the Iwaya tribe was nicknamed the Grotto, and had also earned its accolade as the most beautiful of the tribes.

The ‘guest rooms’ were on the edges of the settlement, but the ritual would take place in the caves behind the grotto’s opening. Asha had told her of them once, after she had visited her old friend to assist her with a ceremony. The caverns themselves were just as beautiful as the water that guarded it. Sparkling with gems and kept cool no matter the season, most of the rituals of the Iwaya tribe took place in the heart of the grotto itself.

At night especially it was a beautiful, magical place. Yet there was no time for Anicca to appreciate it. Not when she had to keep everyone in camp from making advances on her enraged firebender.

Anicca flinched. Not that he was her firebender, not like that! Desperate to keep him from catching the tenor of her thoughts, Anicca reached out to the bustling Keeper - and just how did she move that quickly, old as she was?

“Keeper,” she spoke in her own tongue as Lakshmi did not know the tongue of the elemental benders. “I have bad news. My grandmother-

Lakshmi turned to them, halting suddenly. Iroh very nearly stumbled over her. She tilted up her chin and gone was the impish good humor, and Anicca suddenly felt chilled to the bone. “She is dead. I know. I felt her pass. I also know what happened with you in the Mori tribe. We Keepers are connected, you know. In more ways than you might expect.”

Anicca suddenly felt the loss of her grandmother keenly, yet the presence of Iroh at her side anchored her. “I am more sorry than I can say, Keeper. I know she was your friend. She cared for you very much.”

The old woman breathed deeply, and only now did she appear old. Her words were laced with sorrow, and it was as if the natural, exuberant joy of her spirit was momentarily tamped down. “We have taken her body down from the mountain shrine. We did not think it would be a pleasant surprise for you to find her there. Besides, it was...all I could do. We have prepared her body, but have not yet committed her to the fire. We shall undergo the final rites after you two complete the ritual.”

Anicca nodded, swallowing thickly to keep the tears from flowing. “Thank you, Keeper. I can’t...I can’t tell you how much this means to me-”

Lakshmi smiled grimly, cutting her off as she gestured ahead of them. “The guest rooms. Perhaps your firebender would take the room on the left?”

Startled, Anicca turned to glance at Iroh, who glared at Lakshmi before defiantly taking the one on
the right. He stomped away with his pack in his arms, shooting them both a suspicious look before tossing his things within.

Before he returned to them Lakshmi leaned in close and whispered, “The rooms connect. In case you were interested. It is where I always kept your grandmother when she came to visit...and I always took the room next to hers, of course.”

Anicca’s eyes boggled as her meaning was accompanied by the faintest hint of a memory - Asha when she was young and tall and handsome, and Lakshmi when she was pretty and petite and even more devious than she was now. The women had been close in age and had trained together when the Iwaya Keeper had died unexpectedly, becoming friends and weathering many trials together.

They had also been, from time to time and with no strings attached, lovers.

Lakshmi shuffled off, holding a finger to her lips in a coquettish gesture for Anicca to keep her silence. Iroh loomed above her, angry and confused, wanting to know what he’d missed.

“Oh, nothing,” Anicca found herself responding. From his previous reaction to interest among the same gender, she didn’t think the revelation of her grandmother’s own fluid sexuality would go over well. “She was just telling me what she’d do to you, were she ten years younger.”

Iroh groaned, and the sound of it brought a tiny smile to her lips, in spite of all the day’s revelations.

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It had been a little over two weeks since she’d arrived back at the palace, and Sura was not sure she’d slept that entire time. She knew she’d caught snatches here and there, and had dozed off more than once in Chihiro’s room when she had been watching the girl, or even trying to get the toddler to sleep, herself. But now, blinking dazedly at King T’s closed doors, she knew she needed to take an afternoon off. Otherwise, she would fall over right on her feet, and what help would she be to anyone then?

Since she’d come back she’d thrown herself into helping everyone she could. It seemed as if everyone needed her. She was kept busy from morning until night translating and explaining things to Toshiro (who was doing wonderfully, all things considered, even if he looked a bit lost when he didn’t know she was watching), to looking after Chihiro (who not only increased in leaps and bounds in airbending, but also in speaking their language), to running errands for King T (who was coming down with something, Sura was absolutely certain. Yet she wouldn’t let Sura do even a cursory examination!) to keeping her father happy, healthy, and not driven by dark spirits. She had not forgotten Asha’s advice - you are the child of his heart. If your light cannot keep him from his darkness, then all you can do is find the one who can.

Sura supposed that she was the only qualifier for ‘child of his heart,’ although if he spent any more time with Toshiro and Chihiro, they might also have a shot. And there was nothing wrong with that. Perhaps it was the strength of all his bonds, all those he felt affection for that kept him grounded and free from further evil influence. Suspecting this, Sura did not give him any slack about spending so much time training them when he should have been scouring the spirit world for the evil spirits, even
though she could not help worrying about Iroh and Anicca.

She thought of them every moment she had free. Where were they now? Had they passed the first ritual? The second? Or had they killed each other instead? There had been no word, although Sura had not thought there would be. Iroh was terrible at correspondence, preferring to accomplish his mission before sending back word of its success (or, far more rarely, failure). And Anicca would not necessarily know how to contact them, unless she managed to do so in dreams, like past Avatars did to her father.

Yet was that a standard spiritbending technique? Or was that something special to the Avatar?

Sura laid her head against the door grimacing. Although the good she had accomplished here was tangible, she still felt as if she should be out there with them. What if they failed without her? What if they honest to La up and killed each other?

She groaned. Why were the majority of the people she cared about so damn difficult?

“Well, I’d hate to interrupt the moment you’re having with that door, but…”

Sura smiled tiredly as she turned, keeping her head on the door until the last second. “Hello Koru,” she replied. “And you’re right. Things were just getting steamy.”

His brow creased when he saw her face. “You look exhausted, love. When’s the last time you slept?”

Sura raised her eyebrows as she tried to think. “Yesterday?” She guessed. “For a couple hours, I think.”

He crossed his arms. “That’s it. We’re getting you to a bed. If it’s this good with a door, can you imagine how good it’d be with a mattress?” He winked as he leaned in to pull her fully upright. “Especially one warmed by a firebender.”

Seeing he was serious, Sura frowned. “I can’t sleep yet, Koru. I have several more things to do today. Then, yes. I’ll take the afternoon off and sleep right through until tomorrow.” Knowing he was about to protest she continued, “And I can’t sleep with you regardless. This isn’t the time.”

She smiled to soften the harshness of her message, although she was a little annoyed as well. Koru had taken to flirting publically and even shoving her up against walls when they were alone, and she was getting a little sick of it. This was not the time for play, it was time to work. To save the world. What didn’t he understand about that? Could he take nothing seriously?

“When will be the time, Sura?”

Sura stilled. Koru’s voice had been still and quiet, and without any of its usual laughter or charm. He sounded angry, and she could feel herself sloughing off her exhaustion to meet the challenge.

“Excuse me?”

Koru’s mouth was set in a harsh line. “Because it seems like you’re avoiding me. Has something changed? Are you having second thoughts?”

Sura remembered their last altercation, when he had shoved her up against the wall and playfully demanded kisses before he would let her go. She had not found it appropriate and she had told him so in no uncertain terms. She felt badly for hurting his feelings, but forcing the issue like that was not acceptable, either then or now. Especially when she was weaving on her feet!
“Koru,” she began. “That is not the case. But you keep catching me at bad times, and I can’t focus on you. I know that—”

“I know what you’re focusing on,” he muttered, and the darkness of it surprised her.

“What do you mean?”

He looked down at her with a barely contained fury. “I think you’ve decided it’s not a firebender you want in your bed, after all. Maybe an airbender would suit you better?”

Sura stilled, suddenly understanding his anger. “Toshiro? You think is about Toshi— you’re jealous,” she realized. “Just because I’m spending more time with him and Chihiro. But I have to, Koru! They need me! I’m not just teaching them our language, I’m teaching them the airbending forms and katas my father taught me, and—”

Koru shoved her up against the wall (again! Sura’s brain so helpfully supplied. And I hate it when he does this!) and breathed down hotly into her face. “He looks at you like a man does a woman. But does he need you like I do?”

“They need me more. In a different way!” Sura emphasized, hoping to bring his attention away from the admittedly attractive airbender onto the little girl as well. “Along with Father and King T— and she is not well Koru, I’m starting to get worried—”

He cut her off with a searing kiss, and Sura tasted possessiveness on his tongue. Unlike all their other kisses, however, this one felt wrong. Sura knew it immediately when something inside of her rebelled. This was not how she wanted to be treated. This was not how she wanted to be loved.

Yet he was trapping her water pouch with his hip, and her wrists with his palms. So, acting on a desperate impulse she pulled at the liquid pooling at the bottom of the wall sconces, and tugging at it with her fingers, directed it onto Koru’s back.

She knew it had worked when he pulled away, hissing in pain. Sura felt a moment’s regret for having burned him, but he had scared her. How could he do this to her, all because he was jealous? She sidled down the wall, withdrawing water from her pouch and holding it at the ready. Koru was by far the better bender than her, but would he truly attack her?

This argument had gone too far. She had never known him to lose his temper like this, never known him to be cruel or uncaring. Maybe if she healed him he would regain his temper? “Koru, take off your shirt. I have to heal your burn.”

“Now you want me to take off my clothes? Is that the kind of bedroom play that excites you? Wax and pain?” His voice was still cold, although mockery twisted his words. Sura’s heart skipped a beat. Looking at him now, knowing all he had just done...she didn’t recognize him. It was almost as this was Koru at all, but some dark version of him left in its place.

It was astounding what jealousy and rage could do to a person. “Koru. Stop it. You’re scaring me. I don’t...I don’t like you when you’re like this.”

The cold light in his eyes dimmed as he sneered. “Then go find your airbender, Sura. I’m sure he’ll be more likable.”

With that he turned and strode away from her, leaving Sura shaking, wondering what in Yue and La’s name was wrong with him....and if it was somehow her fault.
Although Aang hadn’t thought he could be any more proud of his two airbending students, he found himself corrected when he came back after a long night of searching the spirit world for leads to see Chihiro balancing on a shaky, barely stable air cushion. At her side was Toshiro, working her through a technique that he had not yet mastered, one of Aang’s personal air scrolls at his side.

Toshiro muttered to her in their own language, and Aang caught his breath as Chihiro’s little tongue poked out the side of her mouth as she concentrated. The air cushion wavered, she dipped back down to the floor - yet with a tiny little grunt, she stabilized the cushion and rose back up.

Then, with a delighted smile, she noticed Aang. She called out in excitement, something between a mix of his name and Avatara. Just as Toshiro glanced over, she began scooting over to him, dipping her hands like she was rowing a boat almost a foot off the floor. She reached him just before the air cushion disappeared (she was doing the entirely wrong hand motions, and Aang was more surprised that it hadn’t disintegrated when she was halfway to him) but Aang still stooped to catch her, swinging her around so that she shrieked in excitement.

“You’re brilliant!” He told her, not caring if she understood him or not. “Brilliant! And you too,” he called out to Toshiro. “Get over here, you fantastic teacher, you. Air hug!”

Knowing what one of these entailed, Toshiro stepped forward with a small, embarrassed grin on his face. Then Aang’s arms were around them both, and with a moment of concentration, a spinning ball of air beneath their feet lifted them a foot into the air. There they hugged, until Chihiro poked her head out to smile smugly at Toshiro, drawing a quiet snort from her father figure.

Aang ignored this exchange, far too happy at their progress. If Chihiro followed this progression of improvement, she would be into martial forms in just a few more months. Stabilization might only take another week or so, barring the occasional accidents that Toshiro had long learned how to contain. The older airbender would take longer, but had already stabilized, and had proven to learn effectively from the ancient airbending scrolls - even to the point of reconstructing his own glider. More importantly, he could teach others those techniques.

This was exactly what he needed after last night, when he had finally received the answers he sought in the spirit world. Although he was still unable to divine the identity of the angry spirit who moved at Koh the Face-Stealer’s bidding, he had at least determined that he was no longer in the spirit world. With the help of his past selves, he had discovered that the ritual he had watched underneath the mountain had been the spirit’s way of travelling from the land of the dead to the land of the living. How, exactly, was a mystery left to the spirit bender, and as he was beginning to realize, who as well. The spirit would have taken the form of someone living - and although his heart still mistrusted her, it was unlikely it was the spirit woman. It would have been someone in the ritual chamber, although unless they went back to the source and counted all the bodies, it was unlikely to know who it might have been.

*It could have been anyone, Aang, Roku had counselled him. Anyone from the lowliest child to the chief himself. The vessel does not matter. Not when it is powered by the spirit’s rage.*

Yet to address the lesser spirit was no longer his mission. Iroh and the spirit woman had undertaken
an ancient ritual only a few days ago, sending shockwaves through the spirit world. They had been successful, and their newfound power would draw the earthbound spirit’s attention. There were two more rituals to complete, he learned, and with each one the spirit would be more and more unable to focus on anything else.

*This gives you a window to move in,* Yangchen advised him. *The spirit will have a hard time manipulating you or any others - or even to aggravate the spread of the sleeping sickness - if its attention is on them. It is dangerous to them, but they understood that going in. This frees you to do what you must.*

**And what is that?** Aang had asked, fearing the answer.

*You must face what they cannot,* Kyoshi answers. *Humans cannot face a God. But an Avatar can.*

*Accept their gifts when they return,* Kuruk had added. *If your two heroes are successful, they will bring you a power that the world has not seen in millennia. Without it, you can still fight the Face-Stealer. But with it, you can destroy him.*

Aang had received their advice gratefully, but knew what none of them said. It was one thing to trick Koh, as Avatar Kuruk had done after his wife’s face had been stolen. It was another to defeat him. Koh was one of the most dangerous gods, an outcast among the pantheon, preying on humanity while his brothers and sisters blessed them. Although he had been foiled before, and Aang had even met him in his youth, he had never attacked the world so obviously.

This was not mischief, nor a personal attack. If Koh was the progenitor of the sleeping sickness, he had declared full-out war against humanity, and Aang would have to save the world again...even if it meant losing everything in the process.

Kyoshi had been correct. No human could defeat Koh. But could an Avatar? He was not a god, nor at the level of one. It would take more than what he had done to defeat Ozai, and that had been the hardest battle of his life. He had prepared to give up his love for Katara, even his life. What would he have to give up to face a god?

Aang considered this as he supervised Toshiro and Chihiro’s training for the rest of the day. He considered this all throughout dinner, which he shared with a distracted Zuko, a grumpy assortment of council members, a chipper Siyi Tanh, and an exhausted Toph. He considered this as he checked on Sura that night after learning that she had gone to sleep early that day, and when he sent a message to Katara letting her know that he had news from the spirit world. By the time he had reached his own room that night, he knew what he must do.

He would share all that he knew with his friends and loved ones. When they had all the information before them, they would come to a decision, just as they had during the war 30 years ago. Of course, Sokka and Suki weren’t here, but now there was Sura and Koru, and even Toph’s niece to stand in. He would call a war council in the morning, and his path would be made clear then.

He was so deep in thought that he didn’t sense the body standing in his room until the door was opened. Aang tensed, but the intruder firebent the lamps, lighting the room. Then Aang relaxed, but only marginally.

*“Koru? Why are you here? Is something wrong?”*

Although Zuko’s youngest son shook his head, Aang thought that he might be lying. Although he could not see auras as Ty Lee could, he could see there was something disturbing the young man. This became especially apparent when he began pacing, so worked up about something that he could
barely speak.

Aang took a step closer, and modulated his voice so that it was soothing. “Koru, is there something you needed to speak with me about?” He guessed, not knowing what could put Zuko’s most amiable son into such a state.

This got through to him, and suddenly the young man left off pacing and stepped close to Aang. “Uncle- sir,” he began, correcting himself before he could begin. “Avatar. There’s something I’d like to ask of you.”

Such formal language and tone...this was something he’d expect from Iroh, but not Koru. “What is it, son?” He asked, unable to keep his concern from showing. “Do you need help with something?”

Koru took a deep breath, and Aang’s nerves compounded. “You know what kind of man I am, sir. You know what I will do for those that I care about. You know how hard I work to deserve those I love. And I know that being the heir to the throne makes for some difficulty in matters of the heart, but-”

Aang’s blood ran cold as he belatedly made the connection. If Koru had come to his chamber alone to talk to him about love, there was only one person he could be thinking of. “Get to the point, Koru,” he interrupted, his voice harsher than he’d like.

Koru’s back stiffened and finally he met Aang’s eyes. “I humbly ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage, sir. We are in love, and would like to spend the rest of our lives together.”

Aang’s world went very quiet and still. Koru’s voice came as if from far away. Aang shook his head slowly, and it felt as if the room was spinning around him. “No,” came his answer, and how his mouth managed to form the words he did not know. “You cannot. I’m sorry.”

Koru’s expression tightened. “If...if this is a matter of her being too young, I am prepared to wait longer for her-”

Now the world was beginning to rush together, and in the back of his head there was a tinny, shrieking sound. Was this what madness was like? “No,” Aang reiterated, more firmly this time. “It has nothing to do with age. I cannot give you Sura’s hand. More so, I ask that you leave off courting her. She cannot be with you, Koru. Please just leave it at that.”

Now there was flame in the room, and Aang thought it might be coming from Koru’s hands. It was difficult to tell in his current state, however. “Is it because I’m fire nation? Is that why you’re looking down on me?”

“I’m not looking down on you. You simply cannot love her like that.”

“Then why?” Koru shouted. “Why can’t I?”

Aang shook his head as the ghosts of the past threatened to collapse in on him. Because I can’t let you. Because it would be wrong. Because of the secrets we should have never kept.

Because she’s not my daughter to give you!

He needed to get away before he did something he could not come back from. The window was open. Shoving past Koru, Aang’s glider came to hand in an easy, practiced motion. He flicked it open as soon as he crossed the threshold, and it was a cool, clear night, with no drafts that might batter him to the ground in his distracted state.
“Avatar!”

Koru shouted from behind him, but Aang was gone. Streaking away through the night until all he knew was the wind whipping at his clothes, the varnished wood holding him aloft, and the tears drying on his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Koru stop dicking it all up, man. Seriously.
HERE WE GO. It’s all about to hit the fan…

... 
So in practical terms, I am still way behind on interludes, but am doing quite well on chapters. So here is another one, and the main storyline is progressing smoothly. The next installment will be another interlude, however, and hopefully it will be the last one that ties into the present. After that they should just be bonuses.

...

Once again, I’d like to thank everyone who has stuck with the story, or recently discovered it. I hope you enjoy where it goes!
Happy All Souls' Day! Here's an update, with lots of spirit-y business :) It's a nice 12.5K chapter. Just to tide you over.

Some questionable sexual content (as well as a bit of torture) in this one, but once again it’s all in a hypothetical dream scenario.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 12: The Second Ritual

(Mid Year 30)

...
Perhaps she should still be thinking of him as the angry one, if the alternative was to be so aware of him physically!

While Anicca was struggling with her wayward thoughts, Iroh saw a chance for a more expedient conversation. He leaned in close to her and the scent of him - smoke and cedar - washed over her. “Ask her what this ritual entails,” he asked in a strained voice. “Else I will go mad and end them all.”

“Her hand isn’t even on your leg, anymore,” Anicca pointed out in what she thought was a reasonable tone. “And don’t men like attention? Or is that just when their partner is young and attractive? Half of her warriors are staring at you, if that is the case.”

Iroh frowned. “That has nothing to do with it. I have no time for women, and no inclination for men. Now, ask.”

Anicca nodded. “Wait a moment.”

Just then Lakshmi glanced over at them, eyes sparkling with curiosity at what they could be whispering about. Seeing her moment Anicca said, “Keeper, we thank you for your hospitality. At the risk of sounding ungrateful, we are preoccupied with the thought of tonight’s ritual.”

At Lakshmi’s nod, she continued. “Is there anything you could tell us about it? Is it like the Mori ritual?”

Lakshmi hummed thoughtfully. “Yes and no, my dear. What you experience may be similar, in that you will see, feel, and otherwise experience things that are not...strictly real. But while the Mori ritual is directed by the mind, ours is by our heart. What you see may be as similar or dissimilar to your first ritual, depending on the connectivity between your feelings and your intellect.”

She smiled at Iroh as well, even though the gesture just made him grit his teeth. “In execution it is slightly different. We shall take you to a series of caves beneath the grotto, and you shall make your way through until you reach the center. What you see in the caves is up to you, and there are many ways to the center. Yet it is not a journey you may share. Each of you must find your own path to the central chamber.”

“We won’t be together?” Iroh asked her, very, very quietly. “I don’t like that. We should not be separated.”

Anicca stilled as a flare of stubbornness flooded his link. Cautiously, she allowed him to feel her own agreement. “Why is that, Keeper?” She asked. “We were together for the first ritual.”

Lakshmi’s eyebrows drew together. “Oh, you mean in Mori’s ritual chamber? Ah, yes. Mori uses a pool, and it is the conduit for you to travel the spirit world through your dreams. Iwaya does not do this. You will be awake as you travel through the spirit world, otherwise how else could you reach the end from the beginning?”

“But we were together in our dream,” Anicca insisted. “At the end. We found each other. That’s how we finished the ritual.”

Lakshmi jolted in surprise. Then she looked from one to the other as if gauging their sincerity. Seeing that they were not lying to her, she leaned back and smiled.

“Well then,” she finally admitted. “I think that our ritual will be interesting indeed. Yet we cannot change what you ask. You must both make your own way to the great tree. The power will not come to you if you do not.”
She smiled gently, offsetting her refusal. “Yet you you may decide together then, if you are ready to begin.”

Not entirely sure what her change in mood had been, Anicca looked to Iroh. After a moment of looking at her with a questioning expression - his own version of being civil - he nodded sharply. Anicca turned back to the Keeper.

“We are ready.”

It took almost an hour to reach the ritual caves underneath the mountain. The path leading in was rough but lit by glowing crystals set into the mountain walls, and Anicca was enchanted by the way the waters caught and reflected the light above. Next to her, she could feel Iroh’s tension. He was a soldier as well as a prince, and all of his senses were on alert for a trick or a trap, even though he knew this tribe relied on their success as well as Mori’s had. Still, she could share a bit of his anxiety. She could not lead them back out of the caves if worse came to worst, as both of them were hopelessly turned around within on ten minutes of entering the caves.

Lakshmi walked ahead of them on her own power, and she had just begun to flag when she called for a stop. They were in a large chamber, more fully lit than the others. At the far end were three tunnel entrances, each of them dark and forbidding like a dragon’s maw. Anicca’s heart rate increased at the thought of walking through one of them alone. Yet then Iroh shifted next to her, and just as his hand closed around her wrist, she reminded herself that as long as he was here with her, challenging her and fighting her and making her want to be better than she currently was, that she would be strong.

She didn’t realize he had gleaned this much from her psyche until she heard his voice quietly through their link, as if reminding her of what she had said before. *Because of me. Be strong because of me.*

He began to release her wrist, but Anicca twisted her hand and caught his, squeezing once before letting go. *I’m going to beat you this time,* she taunted him through the link. *And if I do, you have to give me a firebender massage.* She let go before he could see how she knew about them, for she had been somewhat intrigued ever since Sura had ‘told’ her about them during their ride to Ba Sing Se on the back of an air bison.

Before he could retort, Lakshmi’s voice rang out through the cavern. “Bring forth the pipe!”

“Pipe?” Iroh asked.

Anicca shared his confusion. “What is the pipe for, Keeper?”

One of the warriors brought forth an elaborately crafted smoking pipe made of blue glass, crafted with whorls and designs that seemed to shift before her eyes. It was packed with some sort of herb that made Anicca’s head spin, even at this distance.

Lakshmi took it from him before handing it to the firebender. “It is our way to the spirit world, young heroes. Your firebender shall light it - gently, now! Don’t burn the leaf! And then you shall breathe in of it, like so.” After Iroh cut off the tiny tongue of flame, Lakshmi took a slow, deep drag from it to the muttered appreciation from the warriors watching.
She took the pipe from her lips before continuing. “When the spirit world is before you, you shall choose your door. Are you ready?”

Anicca hesitated, having heard stories from Toshiro about the traditions from the Iwaya tribe. Yet then Iroh was next to her, reaching for the pipe as he encouraged the embers to flare. He held it to his lips and paused.

“And if I win,” he whispered for only her to hear, “you have to apologize to the Avatar on bended knee. And also to me.”

Then he breathed in deeply, keeping his gaze locked on hers. After exhaling the plume of smoke just as Lakshmi had, he handed her the pipe.

She took it from him and set her lips to it, repeating his action. The smoke hung heavy in her throat, causing her eyes to water and her throat to tighten. After a moment, she desperately wanted to cough. Lakshmi and Iroh had not, however, and so neither did she, even when the smoke settled like fog in her belly.

Iroh still watched her with his unnerving direct stare, light eyes hooded with every ounce of his attention on her. For once it did not unsettle her. Instead, it made her want to watch him all the more, so much so that she barely felt the Keeper take the pipe from her.

“Are you ready?” Asked the Keeper, who was now a great horned owl sitting on a tree branch. Without taking her eyes from the firebender, Anicca nodded. After a moment Iroh did the same.

“Then choose your paths,” the owl continued, extending a long, feathered wing in the direction of the three doors at the end of the cavern, each as glittering and ornate as the doors to the ritual chamber of her own tribe. On the left was the symbol of flame, and the longer she looked the more realistic it became, leaping and flickering and heating the wood of the door. On the far right was a cross, a symbol her tribe associated with the dead and the spirit world.

On the center door was a mask of a face, and although the fire had warmed her and the cross had filled her with hope, the face filled her with dread. So she made her way to the door with the cross, stumbling and veering sharply over the uncertain terrain.

Just before she pushed through it, she glanced over to see her firebender at the door of flame. As if her attention directed his he glanced over at her, eyes hazy and unfocused. Then, as one, they stepped into the dark.

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“And to bind our families together in the hopes of saving our tribe, I respectfully request that Anicca be given to me as a secondary consort.”

Anicca opened her eyes at the surprising statement, yet her father’s hand on her shoulder kept her from jumping to her feet. Across from her sat the chief of their tribe, an unpleasant man her father’s age with a wife already, demanding her for his own. Next to her Rama stiffened, yet Asha, the
person to whom he’d been speaking - and as Keeper of their tribe, the one who would undertake the ritual - merely bowed her head for him to continue.

“My wife is now too old to bear fruit, and I have only one daughter to further my line. I require more children, and although she is untouched by the spirits, her progeny may be as powerful as her brother. I would pay handsomely for her, of course.”

“This would bar her from becoming the Keeper until after your death,” Asha pointed out.

“You could always begin training a new assistant,” her father replied. “You are not old, mother-in-law. And our tribe’s need for children is great.”

Rama turned to her with a smile, “And if you marry him, Ani, I’ll marry his daughter. We could have children around the same time! They would be almost as close as we are. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Anicca, struck through with horror down to her very soul, shook her head.

“It wouldn’t be marriage,” her chief corrected. “I am married already. But she would be the honored broodmare to my children, and would enjoy all the respect that brings. A fitting alternative to Keeping a village. Especially if I beget many children upon her. She would be a good mother, I think.”

“No,” Anicca whispered, and her body felt like ice. No one heard her denial, nor seemed to notice her distress. “No, I don’t want this.”

“It would be a great honor indeed, Anicca,” her father said. “If you bore a son then he would someday lead the village! Think of the power you could enjoy!”

Asha hummed in agreement, swivelling her Keeper’s staff on the floor of their home. “It would be a way to atone for the ignominy of your birth, granddaughter. This way, you could do some good for the tribe. If you refuse...you shall always be the shame of our village.”

Then why make me Keeper? Anicca tried to say, but found that Rama had folded his fingers over her mouth, rendering her silent. “Agree, sister,” he counselled her. He leaned in close and there was an odd glint in his eye, something between madness and ill-will. “Become the chief’s whore. It is all that you are good for, now.”

“Tribe-ender,” the chief spat. “You should be lucky that I’m even willing to touch you.”

“ Murderer,” her father whispered. “Because of you all of us are dead.”

“You failed me,” Asha admitted, her tone dark with disapproval. “I had so many hopes for you, and you failed me at every step. All that’s left of you that’s worth saving is your womb. Otherwise…”

“Otherwise we’ll end you here,” her brother promised, bringing his lips close to her ear. “Do you understand, Ani?”

Anicca sat there, breathing heavily behind her brother’s hand. Her thoughts spun, and it was impossible to think clearly. She felt as if her mind was bathed in fog. Yet even so she felt as if something were wrong. What had prompted their sudden change in mood? How could marriage negotiations have come down to this? And what had her father said about all of them being dead?

“Perhaps you need some convincing, child,” the chief crooned. He was no longer angry, and the sudden change in his emotion confused her even further. He lifted a hand to her face, cupping it as
gently as a lover. Rama removed his hand as the older man leaned in to kiss her in front of her family.

He moaned, yet Anicca stiffened in revulsion. Yet now Rama and her father were holding her in place as the Chief swathed his tongue against her lips, and brought his hand lower. Slipping it underneath her tunic, he firmly cupped her breast, squeezing it tenderly.

Anicca began screaming, shoving backwards with all her strength. It was enough to dislodge her father and brother, and the chief fell back, wiping his lips and laughing.

“She’s feisty enough, I’ll grant you. It will be worth something to break her stubbornness.” He turned to Asha and gave a little bow. “I accept your offer, Asha. I shall take your granddaughter as my secondary, and provide many children to bolster the tribe’s numbers. I’m so glad you came to me with this solution.”

Anicca panted, wiping her mouth firmly, and rubbing at her chest over top her tunic. Yet her disgust did not make her deaf. Asha had offered her? Had asked this terrible man to bed her? Rape her?

No, she promised herself, in a voice so full of conviction she did not recognize it as her own. While there is breath in my body, this man will never touch me.

There was now an altar before them, separating Rama, her father and her from the chief and Asha. With an air of deep gravity, the chief withdrew a knife from his holster. It was an ancient weapon, a relic of the older days. It was his ritual knife, and the glint of it made Anicca’s head throb and an image to flash through her mind.

Rama, standing before the chief. Whispering, ‘Anicca. Save—’

The chief laid it on the altar, and all eyes turned to her. “Do you accept his gift, granddaughter?” Asha asked her in her Keeper voice, yet rather than fear her severity, Anicca’s resolve strengthened. “Take his knife, and become his.”

She looked down at the knife, and another memory came, vivid yet out of context. The chief pulling the blade from his belt, kissing both sides of the blade, and then stabbing downwards in a deadly motion…

Yes, Anicca thought. If that is the cost of freedom, then I shall pay it.

She took up the blade by its hilt, and from behind her she heard her father’s happy praise, “Well done, daughter, I knew you would see reason—”

Yet before anyone could say anything else, Anicca vaulted over the altar, bringing down the knife in the exact same motion as her memory. Stunned, the chief did not defend himself. The blade came down on his neck, slicing through it like a twig through an autumn leaf. Blood spurted in a high arc, dousing both Anicca and Asha.

Gurgling, the chief fell to his knees, and Anicca felt powerful.

“What have you done?” Asha asked with horror in her voice. She gripped her staff but Anicca spun to face her, keeping her blade on her.

“Taking my freedom,” she answered. “I will not be bound by this depravity. He was wrong. You are wrong. I will not be a slave to your mistakes!”

As she spoke the hut rippled, and for a moment everything changed. She saw them as they truly
were - shadows of their real selves, two-dimensional simulacra of real people. And then, in one shining moment of clarity she saw beyond them, past the door of the hut, down a long winding tunnel, lit by glowing crystals of blue and green and yellow…

*Freedom*, she thought. And she leapt out after them, dropping the knife when she passed the threshold-

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*The* drip-drop *of water against stone woke her.* Yet as soon as she woke she felt the rub of cold iron manacles on her wrists and panic set in.

*Caught.* She had been captured for the murder of her chief. But how? And when? How long had she even been here?

She opened her eyes to find herself in a dank cell, surrounded by stone on all four sides, save for a heavy iron door set into the wall. She was suspended by manacles, chained to both her wrists and ankles. Her feet could just touch the floor, but her position was by no means comfortable.

She moaned in distress as more memories flooded in. She was in the palace prison in Ba Sing Se, the earth bending capitol, only a few days travel from Yama. They must have brought her here for her sins. But why would they care about the murder of a tribal chief? Why wouldn’t they have left her punishment to Asha?

Or perhaps this *was* her punishment. Perhaps her tribe had given her away, painting her crime in a damming light. Had her desperation for freedom had only bought her exile and death?

Anicca shook her head, trying to clear it of the fog that enshrouded it. It was so difficult to think clearly, she could barely remember why she was here from one moment to the next. It felt as if each experience stood on its own, with no transition from one to the next. Had they drugged her? Was this why it was so hard to stay coherent?

Suddenly the door swung open, and a tall shape loomed at the threshold. Backlit, she could make out none of his features, yet her stomach twisted in anticipation. The torturer had finally come for her, after making her wait for...days? Months? She could not tell. All she knew now was that her waiting was over.

“Good evening, prisoner.” The torturer’s voice was young and low and raspy, and in any other situation might have been pleasing. “So kind of you to wait up for me.”

Anicca shivered. “I didn’t have a choice-”

“Did I give you permission to speak?” He snapped, and then stepped into the room so she could see his features. He was tall and strong and utterly handsome, and Anicca’s heart turned over in his chest. His eyes were gold and his features finely molded, his lips thin yet expressive. For one fleeting moment she felt as if she knew him, yet then the moment was gone.

From one hand billowed up a column of flame and she understood - he was a firebender. She began to struggle, thinking of all the ways he could hurt her with his flame.

“Yes, yes,” he whispered in an intimate voice that made heat lance her insides, cutting through her
panic. “I love it when you struggle. Agni above, look at you. Chained, helpless...entirely at my mercy.” He stepped closer, running his free hand down her bare stomach. “Exquisite.”

Anicca began breathing heavily, torn between the terror of what would come and the heat his touch brought. She had never felt such a visceral reaction to anyone before, yet the thought of the torturer touching her - even to hurt her! - made arousal eddy and swirl within her.

She clenched her teeth to remain silent. Partially because the firebender had already reprimanded her about speaking...and partially to keep her excitement a secret.

The torturer leaned in, brushing his cheek against hers. She could feel the faint rasp of his stubble and exhaled shakily. “Oh, my dear, sweet prisoner. I’m going to hurt you. I’m going to make your screams resound throughout the dungeons.” He pulled back enough for her to see a wide, wicked grin on his face, and her heart stopped. She had seen that smile before. She knew it! Somehow, she knew him!

“And all throughout,” he continued, eyes tracking all over her body, lust darkening the the gold of his eyes to amber, “I’m going to make your body sing for me.”

He pulled back abruptly, and the column of flame thinned and lengthened into a whip of fire. With his free hand he burned through her tunic and pants until she stood naked before him. Anicca shook with nerves, and her body thrummed with excitement. Distantly, she wondered at her body’s twisted reaction to such treatment. Yet her thoughts felt buried under a layer of calm. After all, he had told her exactly what would happen, and somehow - even with all his dark promises - she trusted him.

“Beautiful,” he admitted through gritted teeth, eyes sweeping over her. “Your body. So perfect. I could hurt you for days...and make you need me all the more.” With a sharp, slashing gesture he brought down the whip across her unprotected stomach, yet the fire did not burn as hotly as his praise. When she looked down, there was no burn mark - just a faint reddened welt whose pain melted away under her consideration.

The firebender saw her looking and smirked. “Just a warm up, pet. Now, let me get you in the mood.”

He unleashed a barrage of blows, the fire whip landing all over her stomach, thighs, arms, even the sensitive flesh of her breasts. Anicca found herself gasping and moaning and pleading...yet not screaming. No matter the sharp sting of the whip, the pain always faded. Yet the pleasure of his attention did not. Every time he looked at her with such desire she found herself responding.

In between blows he would rub his hands along her body, massaging the reddened flesh as if staking claim to all he had whipped. The contrast between the pleasure of his touch and the pain of his whip drove her half mad, until she was gasping a name she did not know. “Iroh. Iroh. Please, more!”

“More, my love?” The torturer leaned in close and whispered, running lips as hot as a brand down her throat. “You are a rare woman indeed, to take my love and want more. Even my fiancee would not envy you this treatment, for all that I worship you…”

Fiancee? Anicca thought. No. He’s mine. All mine.

With that thought driving her, Anicca canted her hips forward. She, who had never even been kissed, let alone experienced anything that might come after. Hoping that whatever followed would make him as desperate for her as she was for him, she jutted forward her chest as well, pushing her breasts into his hand.
“Hurt me more, Iroh,” she whispered, barely knowing what she said in her delirium. “I need you.”

“My love,” the torturer whispered, overcome. “I will give you everything.”

The whip fell away, and torturer crowded her, pressing her back against the harsh rockface. His mouth was everywhere now but on hers - the side of her face, her jawline, her ear, neck, collarbone...burning her with every touch, yet leaving her desperate for more. His hands as well - one plied her breasts, tugging firmly on her nipples, while the other trailed lower, heated hotter than was comfortable, slipping past her curls until his fingers slid in against her dripping sex.

Both moaned at the sensation, and Anicca found her hips bucking forward again. She was desperate for something that she couldn’t articulate. For heat and pressure and him, and if he teased her any longer…

With no warning at all he pushed his fingers deep into her, feeling hot and thick and foreign inside of her. She had touched herself before, experimenting, but she had never found the release Rama and Toshiro had whispered about. Now, however, her entire body was throbbing in need of it, and she felt as if she might explode if he didn’t touch her more.

“Yes,” Iroh moaned against her neck, sucking a bruise into her flesh. “You feel so good. So perfect. Agni, you’re so wet, even though I hurt you…” He began thrusting with his fingers at a steady pace, rubbing along the ridged flesh within her, making her body spark with pleasure. He had been right when he said he’d make her body sing. Even now, his touch made her want to do more than sing. It made her want to lose herself completely.

His fingers moved faster and harder within her, drawing out little gasps and exhalations of breath. She was closer now, closer to something that just might kill her but she still wanted it so badly. Yet as her pleasure mounted the cell began to shimmer, and soon the firebender felt like the only anchor she could be sure of. His fingers in her womb, his breath against her neck, his hand at her breast...Anicca clung to him, pulling him closer to her, afraid that he might disappear along with the rest of the cell.

Only when she had her hand on his face, however, did she realize that somehow she was now unchained.

Yet he did not seem concerned. His eyes bore into hers, and he was just as moved as she. His eyes flickered down to her lips and without breaking the rhythm he had established down below, he leaned in to kiss her. It was harsh, burning her almost as painfully as his fire whips, yet the little moan of need as his mouth moved against hers made her open her mouth to him reflexively.

It was all she needed to find her release. In a moment of chaos, she felt her body seize and tremor, and then indescribable pleasure shot her from the earth to the heavens. She pulled back to suck in a ragged breath, lost in the force and pleasure of her first orgasm. She moaned as the pleasure crested, body jerking as her womb sought to draw his fingers deeper inside of her. Unknowingly she called out his name, and upon hearing it, the firebender lowered his head and bit down upon her collarbone, leaving the mark of his teeth on her.

Finally Anicca screamed. The shock of pain just at the height of her pleasure was enough to overcome her will, and as she did so, the manacles disappeared. She found herself flung from the wall as it rippled behind her, and when she looked back her heart stopped.

Now chained to the wall was the firebender, looking as debauched as she had only moments ago. Now he was helpless before her, and she could do to him whatever she wished...hurt him, pleasure him, make him call out her name as he came…
Anicca stepped forward eagerly, but a sobering thought occurred to her. If I find my pleasure in pain - mine or others - how can I ever know a normal love?

How can I ever love anyone at all?

This was merely the most recent layer on her eccentricities. Her failure to adhere to all that was normal. Memories flooded in. Her time as a child, when no one would play with her except Rama, and then Toshiro. Her inability to get along with her tribe, her parents, everyone who tried to love her. Her lack of powers. The murder of the chief. Becoming a monster.

And now this. How could she be anything other than an aberration if this was what it took to find her release?

And now as she watched him, the firebender began to plead. “Please, let me go. I don’t want this. I don’t want you! Please, don’t do this!”

Spirits protect her, she was no better than the chief! Keening in grief, Anicca turned and raced from the room, ignoring her nakedness when she ran through the doors, out into the dimly lit tunnel beyond-

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It was silent all around her. Anicca held still, waiting. For sound or movement, something to indicate that she was not alone. Somehow, she thought it impossible that she might be. Although how she knew this she could not say. After all, with her eyes closed like this, she did not even know where she was!

The futility of standing there alone in the dark hit her, and she slowly, cautiously opened her eyes.

“Hello, sister.”

She very nearly slammed them shut again. Standing before her was the spectral shape of her twin, and the sight of him brought back a rush of memories, all more painful than the last. At length, she wet her lips and replied.

“Hello, Rama.”

His ghost smiled gently. “I’ve been waiting for you. For a long while I thought you might not come for me.”

Guilt bore her down, made it hard to breathe. “Of course I would come. I’m here now, aren’t I? I just...things I had to do first.” What those things were she could not remember, surely they must be important to keep her from consoling her brother after his death.

Her purpose was not the only thing she could not recall. There must be something wrong with her memory. She could not remember exactly what had happened between her slaying the chief of their village, nearly succumbing to the sexual torture at the hands of the fire nation jailor, and meeting her brother’s ghost. Perhaps she had hit her head in escaping? Or they had drugged her? Her mind was fuzzy, and it was difficult to reason things through...

“More important than me, sister?” Her brother’s face crumpled, and in response she felt her own
heart sorrow. They had always been connected like this, hadn’t they? Yet then how could she not have felt his death?

“Never, brother,” she assured him. “But still. I had to…” She frowned, trying to concentrate. There was something she had done, or still had to do. But what was it? “I’m sorry, I’m having trouble remembering…”

“Then it can’t have been important.” Rama was smiling again, and he took her hand in his. “Come with me, sister. Let’s sit together. I’ve missed you. And I don’t want to be lonely anymore.”

Anicca nodded but then hesitated, pulling back from where he tugged her. “Rama, I miss you as well, but...but something is wrong. There’s something...I’m forgetting. I need to remember.” She shook her head, trying to explain this nebulous feeling more coherently. “I feel as if there’s something I must do before I come with you. I’m sorry. Can you wait a little longer for me?”

Rama abruptly let go of her hand. “And it’s more important to you than I am? I died for you, Anicca. How could you choose something over me?”

It wasn’t more important than Rama. In fact, she had the feeling that it was somehow connected to him. But still knowledge eluded her, and so she struggled. “No, Rama, it is not that way…”

She trailed off as her brother began to cry. She had not seen him do so since they were small children, and the sight of it made her eyes prickle reflexively. She moved to hold him and his arms tightened around her painfully.

“Sister,” he sobbed into her shoulder, squeezing her harder. “I didn’t want to die. I wasn’t ready! I want to live again!”

Anicca tried to whisper reassurances, but Rama would not be calmed.

“I’m lonely. I’m scared. I can’t ascend to the spirit world. Would you see me trapped here forever? Don’t you love me, Ani?”

“Of course I do,” she assured him. “And you won’t be stuck here. I’ll get you to the spirit world, Rama-”

“No!” He interrupted her. “You can’t! They won’t let you! You don’t have the power, Ani. The spirits would never let you in. You must stay here, with me. Then you’ll be safe, and I won’t be lonely. It’s the only way, sister. Then we can be together again.”

Anicca wasn’t totally sure he was correct. Just because she was not a spiritbender did not mean that she could not find a way to help him ascend. After death her spirit would not be barred from the spirit world, after all. But the longer he held her the darker things looked, and the more his depression became her own. Distantly, she knew that he was affecting her, that he was using their bond whether purposefully or inadvertently to drive her to despair. But she couldn’t bring herself to let go of him. How did she know that he wasn’t doing what was right for them?

In life, she had always followed his lead before, hadn’t she? So why did she feel so nervous doing so now?

“But you must decide soon, sister. Choose to stay here with me. Don’t go back to the surface. Your captors won’t catch you here, and I can make the transition painless.”

“Transition?”
“Stay with me, sister. What is life if we can be together again?”

At the realization that he was asking she die for him - that he would kill her to keep her here - she felt the core of her run cold. She let go of him, and as she did felt her despair lift. When she was several steps away from him she felt clearer still, and in this newfound clarity she found something other than sorrow - anger.

“You wish for me to die?” She hissed, and her brother’s stubborn expression only made her anger grow. “You selfish, hateful being. How can you say that you love me and still ask this?”

“It’s because I love you, Ani. Otherwise I would choose to be alone!”

Anicca’s rage grew exponentially, and for the first time in a long time she felt powerful, in control. “No, spirit. My brother would never choose this! If you were he you would know this! You are only a trick!”

The spirit shook its head, but a look of panic crossed its features. “No, I am no trick. I am Rama, your twin!”

Now she was shaking with rage, filled inside and out with it, like a lightning storm in her soul. “No. You lie. My brother would never choose this - not for me, not for anyone he loved! This is a lie! You are a lie! You are not my brother, spirit, and if you come to me in his form I know you are not a friendly one.”

“No, please, I am he!”

The anger was beginning to center in her soul, and she could feel the power of it, like a weapon she had honed all her life but never before used. Voices whispered to her, telling her how to direct it. Heeding their instruction, she imagined the power coalescing within her, swirling like a great ball of light.

Within it was the power to banish a spirit, or more, to unmake it. To wipe it from all planes of existence, erasing even the memory of it. It was the cruelest punishment to unleash on anyone, the murder of the spirit. Yet Anicca thought it fitting. Why should she be lenient on the spirit that impersonated her brother’s spirit and tried to kill her?

Sensing her rage the spirit fell to its knees and begged. “No, please, don’t! I admit I am not what I appear to be, but I beg for your mercy! I was sent! I was commanded! Please, have mercy!”

“I don’t want to,” she whispered, focusing her power until it grew hotter, brighter, more deadly. “I want to destroy you.”

So they were all monsters like you.

The voice from her memory was raspy and familiar, spoken in the tongue of the elemental benders. And although she could not place the context, she remembered the words so clearly, as well as the indignation it had sparked in her. Yet why would she remember it now? Could it have something to do with her rage?

Anicca shook her head, giving herself back over to her anger. What did it matter if someone thought her a monster? She would do this and then move on, alone and unencumbered-

Another voice broke her concentration, making her wince. Asha’s voice, reminding her… *Rama is gone, but you are still connected to someone. Do you feel it?*
Anicca’s breath quickened. The power was building, the spirit terrified, yet still she held back. If her grandmother was right and she was still connected to someone...would they judge her for doing such a thing? Or would they understand how she had no choice?

Anicca tried to ignore the voices, tried to focus on striking down the spirit once and for all but then one last echoic memory grabbed her attention, making her resolve waver.

This time it was her own voice: *If you are so eager to fight, I know what I must do - I will keep the fight away from you.*

Anicca grit her teeth against the pressure of holding such power at bay, yet she couldn’t go through with it. Not when even her own self was trying to get her to stop! With one last look at the spirit, Anicca let the power dissipate with pained yell. She sagged with the exhaustion of holding such power without following through, breath hitching as she fought to get herself under control.

Before she could move, however, the spirit disappeared right in front of her eyes. Anicca’s eyes widened and she cursed bitterly. Although there was a part of her that was glad that she had not destroyed the spirit, she had still let it escape! Who knew what trouble the spirit might go on to cause, now? Had her mercy only doomed others?

Yet even in her distress she could not entertain such a notion. She could not think this way. She knew better than anyone that mercy was never a weakness. Mercy was life and hope and a future, and all creatures deserved that, no matter their crime. After all, she had been afforded mercy at birth. Truly, she was more horrified that she had thought of destroying the creature so fully, denying it a chance for redemption whether in this existence...or whatever followed. That could not have been forgiven, no matter its crime.

Yet she had stayed her hand. She was not damned! All she could do now was know that she had done the right thing, and hope that the spirit would be just as unsuccessful the next time it tried to hurt another.

For the first time in what felt like days, Anicca felt her mind begin to clear. The fog that had enshrouded her seemed to lift, and the cavern she remembered no longer matched what her eyes could see. There were glowing crystals on the wall, lighting her way with their blue-green light. Their glow shone on the far wall, bringing her attention to a door that she had not noticed throughout her altercation with the evil spirit...

As Anicca approached the door she came to a determination. She could no longer remember her path here. Even her altercation with the spirit was rapidly dimming in her memory. Nor did she know what might follow after. But she knew she needed to go through that door. *No one can stay anywhere forever,* she counselled herself. Whatever came next was something she would have to experience for herself.

She paused as she rested her hand on the door. She merely hoped that whatever followed would be better than what she couldn’t *quite* remember that came before.

Anicca pushed open the door and walked through.

...
Iroh watched his bride walk toward him with a look of eager anticipation on her face, and anger’s burn embered in his belly. This was followed by a moment of quiet surprise. He admitted he had never wanted to be here, but his marriage to the earth kingdom diplomat was a matter of course. Their countries needed to be tied together, and marriage was the way to do it. He knew that his own personal feelings had nothing to do with it, and he was surprised only that they were powerful enough to make themselves known now.

Surprised and displeased, if he was to be honest with himself. But, again, there was no turning back. He had made his choices and he must abide by them.

Tanh reached the ceremonial stone altar, and she beamed up at him, her joy barely hidden from behind her sheer white veil - a tradition from Gaoling, according to the earth king. Iroh found it unpleasant. Had he ever dreamed of his own wedding, he would have dreamed of seeing the face of his chosen woman, not that she would bar herself from him. That reminded him a little too much of hiding oneself away in fear, and the thought tested his already strained patience.

Across the ritual stone stood the Avatar, swallowing back a proud smile. Today, Iroh could not meet his proud gaze. Whenever he did so, something like guilt twisted in his stomach. And anger. Always anger, kept carefully in place by an equal and opposing sense of respect for the man who had ended the war all those years ago, and his mad grandfather’s reign.

Iroh kept his gaze carefully away from his bride, ignoring her glow of happiness and shy eyes. Although he did not want to marry her, he knew he could not scare her so early on. His rage was his own demon, one he did not want to share. She would be unable to withstand it, regardless. So small and delicate and beautiful...what could she do in the face of a man who wanted to hurt her? Who would take pleasure only from doing so?

There was a reason Iroh had never trusted himself to bed another. And Tanh reminded him of all the women who had ever tried to turn him from that determination...

Breaking into his thoughts, Aang stretched out his hands and began the ceremony. All the watchers fell dutifully silent, and for a brief moment Iroh was left alone with his thoughts in the silence. Up rose a realization, crystal clear and devastating: I do not want to marry her.

I do not want to marry at all.

Aang began, speaking of fidelity and honor, tying nations together; of becoming friends and partners in a quest to keep the world whole. He spoke well, interspersing the solemn ceremony with humorous anecdotes. Not enough to disrupt the tenor of the ceremony, but enough to make the audience chuckle and sigh at all the right moments. It was a masterful performance, Iroh allowed. He merely wished that he was not fighting down his inner flame, fueled by his anger and this encroaching, inexorable feeling of helplessness.

And then the Avatar spoke of love.

“It is the most beautiful of all the gods’ gifts to us, giving us both strength and compassion, fueling passion and forgiveness. It is what truly saved the world 30 years ago, and continues to save us all everyday…”

Old, murky memories surfaced from the almost-forgotten depths of his childhood. Love? Oh, he knew what love was; he had seen it firsthand: his father smiling gently down at Aunt Katara, discreetly slipping a hand through her tangled dark locks. Aunt Katara splashing his father with
water from the forbidden duck pond, and his father leaning in to press her down to the ground. Himself, hiding behind a pillar, watching as his father and his aunt twined their bodies together, kissing desperately in a dark corner...

Aunt Katara leaving, kissing he and Koru goodbye with tears in her eyes. Watching her embrace his father at the docks and Uncle’s rasping voice murmuring, “There will be no other love for them.”

Love, an enraged inner voice spat. Love is what tore your family apart. Love is what divides, not unites! And for the Avatar to speak thus!

He was the one who tore my family apart!

“Hypocrite,” Iroh whispered, so absorbed by his memories and the pain they evoked that he spoke without monitoring himself. Yet the words tasted right on his tongue, and there was a dark pleasure in witnessing the Avatar’s surprise. He stuttered before glancing at Iroh, who glowered back at him.

“Iroh?”

Iroh shook his head, fury building in unimaginable heights within him. Yet this was not something he could unleash with flame. This rage could only be released by his tongue. “I said hypocrite!” He yelled, turning so he could address both the Avatar and his future wife as well as the crowd. “Hypocrites, all! There is no love here, nor will there ever be! You are right to speak of duty, and honor, and our countries,” he addressed Aang. “But that is all you may speak of. It is all you are qualified to speak of.”

His young bride-to-be shook, eyes brimming with tears. But Iroh had no time for her. Aang’s expression was far more interesting, a mixture of confusion and indignation and that much-tried Avatar patience.

“Iroh,” he began gently, trying to calm the groom. “If you need a moment-”

“I do not need time,” he snarled. “I need truth. And honesty. And no more hypocrisy. You know better than anyone that there is no such thing as love. Not for you or for me. There is only power, and the decision to wield it.” He glanced tellingly over at his father, and then Aunt Katara, sitting several rows behind him. Once he looked at them they both stiffened, and then as if helpless not to, glanced at each other.

He looked back to Aang who watched him with a carefully erected facade of inexpressivity. “You know that better than anyone. You’ve wielded that power. Power over love. That is all I can expect.”

“Don’t speak that way to the Avatar.” Tanh’s voice did not waver as she reprimanded him, but it was all the respect he could afford her. When he turned to her she flinched away, awed by his power and his rage. It would feel good to undermine her as well, picking holes in her little romantic fantasy...but ultimately, all too easy. She was pathetic, loving someone such as he.

Even more pathetic thinking he was someone deserving of love.

Then Koru was there, standing at the bottom of the steps. “Brother,” he entreated, pitching his voice low. “What are you doing? Isn’t this what you wanted?”

I was wrong. This is wrong. I cannot stand this.

His father was there now as well, his expression dark. “Son, you cannot disrespect the Avatar like that. Nor your bride to be. You have given your word. Would you now break it?”
His helplessness made him petty. “Didn’t you break your word, Father? To both him,” nodding to the Avatar, “and to her?” His eyes trailed back to his aunt, and his father paled. His father turned to her and sorrow made his body turn in on itself, leaving him small and weak.

Love had made his father weak, his aunt sorrow for years and years, and the Avatar to break his family apart. There was no honor in this type of love. Only pain and destruction.

Iroh looked back at his cringing bride-to-be and realized something else. There would only be more pain if he went through with this. It was not only a matter of her being unable to withstand his demon. If she expected love from him, she would allow herself to be hurt, thinking it might be enough to save him. Change him. Remake him.

There was no woman alive who could do that for him. Only himself. And he did not choose to.

*Then make another choice,* another voice whispered. This one sounded like Uncle, and he listened closely. *Choose to protect, rather than destroy.*

Protect? Iroh knew just how to do that. In order to protect what remained of the last of his family...he would never have one.

Decision made he raced down the aisle, pushing past his father and brother, ignoring the outraged cries of the crowd around him. The sun had gone behind a cloud and the aisle was dark, now only illuminated by the small, glowing crystals that lined the path. The audience stood quickly and he found himself dodging thrown purses, hats, pointed shoes...and at the last, a fireball that spent itself harmlessly on the thick iron doors.

Iroh turned to see his brother in a familiar stance, and unfamiliar anger on his features.

*Brother,* Iroh read his lips from the distance. *No.*

Their bond was the last example of honorable love, Iroh realized. This was what he must protect. Thus knowing, he turned and pushed the doors open-

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*All wedding nights were meant to culminate in pleasure, and after several months on the run from his, Iroh finally indulged.* She had come to him in the wilderness, right when he had been considering ending all things. She was like no woman he had ever seen before - tall and confident, with exotic coloring and an unwavering stare. She had sat at his campfire and challenged him. She had not been afraid, even seeing his power.

He had never known anything so beautiful.

And now she came to him, asking for what he had never given anyone else. He had never laid with a woman before, afraid he would lose control and hurt her. Give into the whispering desire that told him to put his hands at their throat and take all their breath for his own. Rumors had spread of his prowess, spread by women who did not want others to know they had failed. Iroh had let them,
using them to shore up his resolve to never succumb to lust.

He knew that he would never match up to the expectation.

Yet with her who did not know the rumors, he did not need to.

She lay back in his tent, honey-colored hair slipping past her shoulders. Silently, she slipped her tunic over her head, leaving her completely bare before him. The curve of her breasts and the tint of her areolae - large and rose pink, tipped with pert nipples that made his mouth water in readiness - prompted him to do the same.

He pressed her down against the ground, wondering at the ease of all this. There were no forced kisses, no conversation, no second guesses. She was here to slake his lusts, and he would return the favor. He had never desired anyone else like this. Something about her made him feel uninhibited, as if he could give her all he desired. Perhaps she would even survive.

Perhaps she would even like it.

His cock throbbed between his legs when she reached down for him, and he found himself biting back a snarl. No woman had ever touched him - but she could. She was. Her hands stroked him, urging his hips forward. Her own hips canted up and suddenly he was within her, shoving inside to glory in her wet heat, expelling his breath in a heated puff that would have, had he been looking down at her, singed the hair from her scalp.

For that first moment all was pleasure and pressure and beautiful new sensation. Underneath him she was gasping and writhing, urging him to move within her. Until she gripped his shoulders and brought her own hips up to meet his, however, he could not move.

Then his dark desires washed over him like an ocean wave, and he was lost. He began thrusting deeply, spearing her mercilessly. He brought his mouth to her neck, breathing searing air onto her flesh, relishing her choked cry. He kissed the burned flesh after, his tongue rubbing over the pebbled skin, chasing after sensation rather than offering comfort. His hips never ceased pistoning into her, and soon her moans became louder, more frantic.

He drew back just enough to see hints of pain on her face, warring with the fading remnants of her own desire.

Just like me, he thought, hips momentarily losing their rhythm. Oh Agni, she's just like me.

Overcome, he bent down so that their foreheads were pressed together. He inhaled her gasps, tasting her breath on his tongue. His heart swelled even as his desire to harm her grew.

“Anicca,” he gasped, just before the whisper of hurt her, own her, dominate her, grew too loud to be ignored. “Anicca.”

Then he pulled back, keeping himself lodged within her. Their position flowed seamlessly so that he was now on his knees, plunging into her with both his hands free. These he fastened around her neck, needing to feel her life pumping into him. Her desire, her breath, the very beat of her heart - he needed it all.

His large hands tightened around her neck, and still she did not beg him to stop. She simply watched him with her wide grey eyes, and he found his tongue stumbling over what his heart finally could say.

“I've finally found...you're perfect. Please don't leave me. If it was you, perhaps I could...oh Agni, I
want you. I - Anicca...” He hands tightened momentarily and her breath was cut off. The dark whispers grew to a clamor in his head, telling him to worship her, give her everything, give her death. She felt so alive beneath him. He couldn’t hold back…!

“I need you too much to stop!”

Her eyes widened but before he could do anything else the world shifted again, rippling momentarily like a pebble thrown into a pond. When he came back to himself, Iroh was lying on his back, Anicca above him. More than just that had changed, however. While the burn against her throat remained, as did the bruises his hands had left at her neck, now she looked at him with desire, rather than equanimity.

Iroh felt the heat of her returned affections like a fire in his brain, burning away the insidious desires that had called for her destruction. For the first time he felt as if he were seeing her clearly, and knew he had underestimated her all along.

But perhaps not. Perhaps he had allowed himself to desire her because she was the only one he’d ever met who had the potential to be greater than him. If she could overcome him and his twisted desires-

All thought fled as she lowered herself down upon him, taking him down to the hilt. He tilted back his head and groaned, glorying in the lack of control. Yet his desires would come back, driving him to take, to mar, to destroy…

His eyes shot open when he felt her hands in his, tugging them up. He thought she might direct them to her breasts - full and bouncing enticingly with every movement she made - but she passed them, laying them gently on her neck so that his hands once again fit the bruises that spanned her throat.

He couldn’t breathe when she looked down at him, warmth in her gaze. Then she spoke, and there was something familiar not only about her voice, but also the words themselves: “If it is of you, I will take anything.”

Now he could feel her intent, almost as if there was a link between them, bridging their emotions. He felt her answering desire for him, and better yet, her faith in him. She was not afraid of him, even knowing what he wanted of her. She wanted him. She accepted him. She would never leave him.

The realization sparked such a rush of warmth in his chest that he felt as if his heart had cracked open. The heightened emotion that surged through him drove him past his senses, and for the first time he wanted more for her than he did himself. He gentled his thrusting, and his hands dropped from her throat to her breasts on their own accord.

He wanted to give her pleasure. He wanted her to come apart under his hands. She would come before him, or he would not come at all.

Suddenly it was a totally different experience. Her nipples against his teasing fingertips brought him just as much pleasure as it did her - again, almost as if he were feeling the echoes of her pleasure through an imaginary link. He felt the fire in her womb along with the mounting pressure from his own core, and he modulated his tempo to align them. And at the last, when all was madness and desire and the bone-deep need to be close to her, he pulled her down to him so that his mouth could find hers in a searing kiss-

He felt her eruption both on top of him and around him, and he gloried in the dual sensation of her climax. When faced with her overwhelming pleasure he was helpless to stem his own. Her orgasm drew his, and with the last inch of self-awareness he possessed he pulled her head in close to his
chest so that the flame he roared into the air above them would not burn her as he spent himself within her.

He had never felt such pleasure and peace before. He doubted he ever would again.

When he finally stopped spasming, emptying himself into her, he looked down at her mess of curls and felt his mouth stretch into an unfamiliar smile. There was no danger to it, nor promise of pain. There was simply uncomplicated happiness, and he could not remember the last time he had felt this way.

“Iroh,” she whispered as she nuzzled her face against his chest. “I liked that. May we do that again?”

Her accent caused tingles to ripple up his spine, and he spoke before he knew what he would say. “Always, Beloved,” he whispered, and as the tent above him disappeared into darkness - punctuated by the faint glow of blue-green crystals - he felt himself tilt backwards, and was gone.

When Iroh opened his eyes it was unto a dark garden, and a tendril of fear wound itself down to his core. He knew this garden, yet could not remember how he had come to be here. The last he remembered he had been travelling through the earth kingdom with her. How had he woken up in the Fire Nation, in the small, private garden preserved for his mother’s memory?

Not only could he not remember how he had come here, he knew instinctively that there was something wrong. Iroh stepped around the koi pond, empty of fish yet overflowing with cool water. He dipped his fingers into it and grimaced when his fingers caught against the rough surface of the pool. Water splashed over onto his shoes, and Iroh moved on.

The gazebos that intersected the gardens were in disarray. The wood was blackened as if they had been burned, and no matter how he strained his memory, he had no idea why that had come to be. Surely his father would never have let Mai’s garden fall into such disrepair, no matter the state of the kingdom, nor of his personal affairs. Yet here he was, in a scene from a nightmare. It was utterly, eerily silent. No birds sang, no small creatures snuffled in the undergrowth. Vines grew thickly over the blackened structures, and greenery grew wild, the stronger plants choking and killing the weaker flowers.

It was almost as if the garden had lay abandoned for years, Iroh realized. Letting nature run its course while mankind looked the other way. The thought chilled him. For if this garden had been forgotten, did that mean there was no one left to remember it?

Was his father dead? His brother? What had he forgotten? His memory loss must be more severe than he imagined if he could not even envision the state of events that had allowed this negligence to come to pass!

Desperate for answers, his step quickened until he was jogging through the garden, heading straight toward the center. With the fuzzy certainty that came in dreams, he knew the answer would be found there. Before he reached the center gazebo, twined high with dead roses, he saw a figure moving
within. Yet it was not until he reached the elaborate doorway that he recognized who it was.

It was the spirit of his mother, dressed in an old-fashioned Fire Nation gown, glowing with the spectral light of the dead.

“Mother?” He whispered, taking a careful step closer. “Mother, is that you?”

Recent events had taught him to be merely wary of spirits, whereas before he would have been terrified, or enraged. Although he couldn’t quite remember what those events were, he felt that he had been tempered by them. So when his mother looked up at him and smiled, he felt joy pierce through his heart, rather than the fear or distrust he would have felt only a week ago.

“My son,” she murmured, holding out her arms. “Iroh. Look how you’ve grown.”

He stepped into her embrace, and even when his arms passed right through her he did not shudder. His mother was here, and that was all that mattered. “Mother, I’ve tried to live as a honorable son all my days,” he assured her, not quite sure what one said to the spirit of his dead mother, but needing to say something nonetheless. “I’ve protected Koru and always tried to be strong for Father. And I—”

Mai smiled up at him, more gently than was her wont than when she was living. “I know, my son,” she interrupted him. “And I am so utterly proud of you. You’ve become a man.” Her smile became a smirk, and Iroh thought it suited her better. “Even if you tend to take the long way round, just like your father…”

Iroh thanked her, and pulled back. Now he could see her face. She had not been much older than he when she had died, and looked just as she did at the height of her health and beauty. She was wearing the dramatic face paint she had been known for, but underneath it he thought he could see her love for him. It was different than Aunt Katara’s open and obvious love for them, and his father’s quieter yet no less obvious affection.

“Why are you here?” He finally asked her. It seemed the most pertinent question to ask, if a bit abrupt.

Mai looked down, glancing toward a small, clear pool at her feet. “To ensure my beloved’s happiness,” she finally responded. “Even at the cost of my own.”

He frowned in confusion, but rather than respond she gestured to the pool. When he peered down at it, he jerked back in surprise immediately. A man and a woman were lying together, clearly in the aftermath of an intimate interlude. While the woman’s face was hidden, the man’s was not. Iroh recognized his father immediately, and if the dark skin and curling black hair was any indication, his lover was Aunt Katara.

“They’re lovers again?” He asked, before realizing how impolitic the question was.

His mother nodded slowly. “It is a time of great change. Endings come upon us, and perhaps theirs will be a happy one. Regardless, they have seized their moment.”

“And you watch this? Mother, how can you stomach it?”

She laughed mirthlessly. “I’m dead, Iroh. I do not require him to cling to my memory.”

Iroh looked back at the pool, but now the waters were dark and opaque. There was nothing more to see, apparently. A dried petal drifted down onto the water, and it directed his attention to a dead rose that hung precariously over the pool. It reminded him of the garden, and finally he thought to ask. “Why are we here, Mother?”
"Because you sought me, my son."

"But why are you here? This is such a dark place. Is it because you are...dead?"

Mai shook her head slowly. "This is merely my corner of the spirit realm. It is the most fitting reflection of who I am." She gave him an arch look. "Does it surprise you that your mother is such a woman?"

Iroh was surprised at how quickly he disagreed. "You were not always dark. Not to me. Not in my heart."

She smiled at him, and took his hand. "I appreciate your loyalty, but I know the truth of myself. Besides, I made a...decision here, once. Back when it was beautiful. Back when I was alive. I had once thought to kill Katara before she could steal your father’s heart. Thankfully, I was stopped before I saw it through, but our choices echo throughout eternity. Even now, there is darkness inside of me."

Iroh’s breath caught in his throat at the thought of his mother murdering his aunt. What madness had driven her to that? Then again, what madness had driven him to strike out at his brother with hatred, and desire the pain and likely death of all his hypothetical sexual partners?

"Is that where I get it from, then?" He asked, suddenly enthused at the thought of finally knowing where his own darkness had come. "Am I like you?"

His mother’s expression tightened. She touched his arm to gentle her answer. "No, my son. Your darkness is not mine. I did not desire my loved ones to suffer. And while I was taught to ignore it, I could and did feel empathy for those around me."

Iroh clenched his teeth. He had known since he was a boy that there was something wrong with him, but he’d thought that it was manageable. Empathy was not a trait highly valued by the Fire Nation, even though Uncle and his father had it in spades. Were it to become necessary, he’d hoped he could simply learn it.

There was one member of his family that felt none of it, however, and he had always feared that he might someday end up like him. "It came from him, then." He said darkly. "I’m like Ozai. The monster."

"You’re not like Ozai," she reassured him quickly. "Not entirely. And certain inclinations have been tempered by those who love you."

Iroh didn’t think that was enough, but his mother brought her arms around him. He followed her obvious impulse and sat down beside her on the bench. Once he sat, she stroked his face with an ethereal finger, garnering his attention.

"Do not lose hope. You wish to change, and that is something Ozai never could do. There is a way to combat what you are." She told him, looking at him seriously all the while. "You’ll never be like Ozai, my son. If the influence of your father, his mother and his uncle do not sway you, think of it like this: there is too much of me in you. If nothing else, that could be what saves you."

"How?" He whispered.

She smiled before leaning in and pressing a kiss to his forehead. It was not a tangible sensation, but he felt the warmth from her attention - if not touch - spread throughout his body. "You are the best of me," she whispered. "Loyal and brave and unable to stop loving, no matter what happens. That’s the key. To save yourself, all you have to do is love someone more than you love yourself."
Iroh blinked. Surely it couldn’t be that easy? Then again, he’d never cared for anyone outside his immediate family, and their closest family-friends. “And that will defeat my darkness?”

Mai began to glow with a blue-green glow. From behind her, the gazebo melted away until all that remained were grey, stone walls. “Love is not darkness. Love is light. And what else can you defeat darkness with, if not light?”

The light emanating from flared sharply, and he shielded his face with his arm. When he lowered it she was gone, and the garden with her. There was only a dark cavern, and a door set into the far wall.

Iroh walked towards it, heart and head full with his mother’s message. Although he did not know where he was going, nor what he was doing, he thought that if he had a chance to overcome himself by the end of it, all this would be worth it.

Love is light, he reminded himself, and then stepped through the door.

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The room he stepped into was large and open, and reminded him of the shine underneath the Yama mountain. Rather than huge columns, however, there was a gigantic tree right at the center of the room. Silver, glistening fruits hung from its branches, while behind it was painted an immense mural which took up the entirety of the back wall.

For a moment Iroh simply goggled at it, feeling unaccountably swimmy in the head. Although he could remember every last detail - in all its explicit, embarrassing glory, particularly that second interlude - he could not remember how they had run together, nor why he had faced such challenges in the first place. His thoughts were interrupted by a door opening to his left. Through it stepped the woman from his second ‘dream,’ and when their eyes met, suddenly he remembered everything else.

The spirit village, the ritual, the demon, Lakshmi and her insufferable flirting...Annica.

From the frozen expression on her own face, she was doing some remembering as well. It relieved him to know that she’d not remembered either, and perhaps that she’d had some...unexpected experiences of her own.

What she said however, was this. “You were here first. You won.”

That made him blink, and remember the wager they’d undertaken just before beginning the ritual. It was a happy circumstance, as it pushed all memories of her naked body - or, what he imagined her naked body to look like, Agni damn him! - from his mind.

“Not yet,” he replied gruffly. He glanced towards the tree, which was clearly the locus of the ritual. She looked over as well and nodded grimly.

“Let’s go.”

They walked to the tree, slowly, and perfectly in step with the other. Now that they were reunited Iroh wondered how he could have forgotten her for a moment. Their connection seemed even stronger now, and he could feel a curious mixture of embarrassment, excitement, and relief thrumming through her. She had not liked being separated from him, either. He did not want to think
about what that meant in terms of their dependency on each other, nor how quickly it had changed from their outright animosity only a few days before…

Yet now they were before the tree, and its strange fruit was in reach. One dangled particularly close to them, almost brushing Anicca’s shoulder when she stepped close. A quick glance at the mural showed them what they were to do. In the painting, the lone spiritbender took the fruit from the branch and ate from it before falling into a deep sleep at the roots of the tree.

Deciding that Anicca was the one for whom the fruit was meant, Iroh reached out and plucked the fruit before he could think of letting her do it herself. When she looked at him curiously, he found he could make no excuses. It simply felt right to take the fruit himself and slowly press it to her mouth, offering up a bite.

She hesitated before she did so, glancing up at him. Whatever she saw on his face convinced her, and she opened her mouth, dragging her teeth across the fruit’s soft flesh. He held his breath as she pulled back, chewed, and swallowed, humming a little at the taste. There was something unspeakably intimate about feeding her, and heat thrummed through him as he watched her, making him shift uncomfortably.

Before he could lower his hand, however, she wrapped her fingers around his, guiding the fruit towards his own mouth. “Now you,” she murmured in her husky accent. “This we should share.”

The fruit was not meant for him. He knew that. But when she pressed it to his mouth and looked up at him so trustingly, he found that it didn’t matter. All thoughts of the importance of the ritual and his previous determination to do as little as possible to complete them were lost as he opened his mouth wide and bit into the fruit. A rush of tangy juice flooded his mouth as he chewed, never breaking eye contact with her.

Perhaps she found the act as intimate as he did, for her gaze never wavered. Her eyes were wide and dark. Her side of their empathetic link was unguarded, and he could feel a familiar heat that eddied through them both, making him remember how her body felt against his in his sexual vision of her.

With her, he thought disjointedly. With her, I could…

A rush of fatigue hit him as soon as he swallowed the fruit, however. He was aware enough to catch her as she stumbled, although he let the fruit fall to the floor.

“We did it,” she slurred, before falling to her knees.

Darkness swooped down upon him, disorienting him. He followed a moment later, and his last impulse before he fell unconscious was to lay an arm over her, protecting her even then.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, so it’s been about, oh, 7 months. Let’s have an update! (I’m posting this bc I just cannot make myself write the last damned interlude. It’s a doozy, but I just cannot get there. Hopefully I can find some discipline before 2017. Here’s hoping.)

…

I nabbed a line from Gladiator, because I still love that movie (even after 16 years). Just
After years of working on this, I finally renamed it. It was simply too misleading, before. I hope you enjoy the edited version!

There are a fair amount of OC's, as this is technically a fic about their (Non-Korra compliant) children. There is Zutara romance in the chapters as well, but if you're only here for the parts about the original characters, I would stick to the interludes (starting with int. 3).

The Years reset after Ozai was defeated, so the year after Ozai defeat was Year 1. It was, so to speak, the beginning of a new Age.

I hope you enjoy!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!