

didn't know my heart

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by [babyfairy](#)

Summary

And yet, in a matter of days, she has managed to worm her way under his skin, has cracked open his rib cage and has begun to patch up the endless amount of wounds on his heart.

Notes

.....I feel like this is a giant mess partly because i finished writing this just before 5 am omg but I really really love s2 aus so I wanted to do something. Hopefully it's not actually that bad and it's somewhat believable.

This was inspired by these two wonderful pieces of art, [x](#), [x](#).

Paper Cup by The Shoe was on repeat during this~

Chapter 1

He was born under a cursed sign. A bad star. Born on an unlucky day. Or someone had cursed him the minute he emerged from his mother's womb. *Something*.

How else is Zuko supposed to explain this constant, life long string of bad luck?

No. Not just bad. Horrendous.

Bad enough that he's so far away from home. Bad enough that he's on the run. Bad enough that he has to resort to stealing just to get a scrap of food.

But to stick him with his former enemy? There's just no other explanation for it. Some being in the universe has it out for him.

From the hostile looks the waterbender has been giving him, he wonders if maybe it's her.

Zuko watches the ground ahead of him as he walks. He can hear her angry footsteps behind him, can imagine that she's kicking up flurries of dust with each step, can imagine her ridiculously long braid swinging between her shoulder blades. Can feel the daggers she glares into his back.

Zuko sighs. Maybe he should have just left her there.

No. You're better than that. Even if she is - was an enemy, you do not strand someone in such a situation.

He glances up at the sky, wondering once again why in Agni's name she's decided to follow him. Her group is rarely ever separated; the few times he had managed to get the Avatar alone had been by sheer luck and coincidence, and his friends were never far behind. So it begs the question - why is she trailing after him? And how did she end up alone?

Some colonies in the Earth Kingdom are sketchier than Zuko had realized. Until the Avatar emerged, a good deal of his time traveling had been spent on his ship. But on land, on his own, his feet have carried him over vast distances, bringing him to different towns and colonies. Each time he's left more disgusted than the last at the behavior he's witnessed. The soldiers stationed in these places bring shame to the Fire Nation, and their behavior has forced his eyes open, forced him to recognize something he had been reluctant to acknowledge for a long while now: his father had filled his head with lies about their nation's greatness.

So when he had come across the waterbender fending off two despicable men, drunk despite the sun being high in the sky, there had been no question about whether or not he would help her.

She hadn't really needed it, she rarely does, but it didn't stop him from unsheathing his swords none the less.

At first she hadn't recognized him under the brim of his straw hat, hadn't known who was wrapped in the dirty and worn Earth Kingdom clothing. The grateful warmth in her voice as she had thanked him, once they'd dispatched the soldiers, was foreign to him; not once in any of their encounters had she used such a tone when speaking to him - with good reason.

Zuko hadn't wanted to reveal his face, but she eventually ducked under the shade of his hat to properly thank him, and the warmth had drained from her voice with the color in her face. He'd never seen her look so pale.

The ice he was more accustomed to arrived with a swift vengeance.

So it hadn't surprised him to hear her following him once he'd left, or to hear the demands and accusations she flung at the back of his head. Had her voice always been so shrill?

What had surprised him, though, is how long the waterbender chose to follow him. They're miles from the first town now, closing in on the next, and she's still behind him. Somehow, he's managed to tune out her voice.

It takes him a moment to notice that the footsteps behind him have stopped. Warily, Zuko turns to find the waterbender stopped in the middle of the path, arms crossed over her chest. Her eyes are as icy as the blades she is capable of forming.

"You haven't responded to anything I've said," She points out. "I'm not going a step further until you do."

The eyebrow he has left climbs high on his head. "I never asked you to come with me," He shoots back, the corner of his mouth pulling back in irritation. "You were the one that decided to follow me. Why don't you tell me why, huh? Why aren't you with your friends?"

The waterbender's eyes tighten for a moment. She curls her fingers in the sleeves of her tunic. The reluctance in her is clear. Finally, she sighs quietly and lets her shoulders slump. "We.. Got separated. We came across a bad storm while flying. Sokka and I both fell from the saddle, and when I finally got to the shore, I found this town." She looks away, then back to the boy across from her. "I thought - well - you always find Aang. I didn't expect to find you here, but.. I figured if I followed you long enough, I could get back to them."

Something in Zuko's chest tightens briefly. He looks away. The girl doesn't know it, but she has added a rather large lump to the weight across his shoulders; a reminder of his continuous failure.

But it isn't enough to dismiss her and send her away. He supposes it couldn't hurt to help her at least look; after all, that life is behind him now. And the idea of leaving her stranded when she could run into the same trouble from earlier unsettles him greatly.

It's reluctant, very much so, but she's choosing to place trust and faith in him to guide her back to where she belongs, he thinks. She said as much herself, and it's making him feel... Odd. Uncomfortable. Zuko only knows of one person that would do that. The idea of this coming from anyone else, especially from someone that despises him so much, puts him on edge.

A soft voice in the back of his mind murmurs that Uncle would be proud. He dismisses it.

Zuko turns away from the waterbender and continues walking.

He doesn't see the perplexed look on her face, but he does hear her footsteps continuing after his after a moment's hesitation.

The sun begins to set before they reach the next town. Zuko watches the sky. His legs are aching, but it's so familiar by now that he barely even notices.

But he supposes the same can't be said for the waterbender.

Her discomfort is palpable, even with the distance between them. He supposes walking great distances isn't necessary when there's a flying bison at hand. Her steps sound slow and weary, as though she's going to give up and collapse into the dirt at any moment.

Zuko begins to look around. They are surrounded by trees now, which must mean a source of water is close by. Perhaps, with a waterbender in his company, they can fish in a lake or river and have a proper dinner. His stomach growls at the thought.

Glancing over his shoulder, Zuko nods for the waterbender to follow him off of the path. He picks his way through the trees, dividing half of his attention to tracking her tired footsteps behind him, and the other half to listening for the sound of running water.

By the time they come across a lake inside of a small clearing, the sun is gone, replaced by a quarter moon. It's a warm night, but dark none the less, so Zuko crouches down to gather a handful of sticks for a fire. He glances up, eyeing the waterbender.

She's watching him, all traces of her anger and suspicion gone, wiped away completely by sheer exhaustion. It hits Zuko suddenly, how young she is - younger than him.

"Sit," He says, voice quiet.

She doesn't need to be told twice. The waterbender turns away and shuffles to the closest tree. She puts her back to the trunk and slides down until she's settled into the roots. Her head falls back against the tree, mouth parting on a soft breath that expels all of the tension in her body, leaving her limp and boneless.

Zuko moves his bundle closer to her. He arranges it at a safe distance and conjures a flame. The fire spreads quickly, illuminating their small resting space. Zuko removes the hat from his head and rubs the spot under his chin where the string had been chafing at all day. He can feel the barest hint of stubble under his fingers.

For a time he contents himself with sitting before the flames. Now that he isn't moving he can feel the exhaustion behind his eyes, can feel the persisting ache of the life he's been living the last few weeks snaking around his spine.

He allows his eyes to wander to his right.

The waterbender has shifted into a more comfortable position. The exhaustion lingers on her face, but her eyes are trained on the sky. The fire light doesn't quite reach them; they look pale, like some sort of odd, colorless jewel. It's clear that she's wondering where her companions are, if they're safe.

Zuko allows himself to look at this girl, to really look at her.

When he had first arrived at the South Pole, he hadn't expected the girl that followed the Avatar onto his ship to become the threat that she is, yet she's turned out to be one of fiercest opponents Zuko has ever faced. He won't admit it, not even with a knife at his throat, but this girl has challenged everything Zuko knows about fighting, has forced him to become better in order to keep up with her, because she is the one that has always provided the strongest challenge whenever he's faced off with her group. It's always her that meets him blow for blow, that has improved in spades whenever they meet again.

So it had never occurred to Zuko to see her as anything but a formidable warrior.

But now, out here in the wilderness, against the light of the fire, under the dark sky, she looks anything but. She looks lost, lonely, but what twists at his stomach is the exhaustion in her eyes. It isn't simply the situation she's in; this is the kind of exhaustion that's been with a person so long it's become a familiar face - a friend, even. An exhaustion Zuko is deeply familiar with.

He swallows past the lump forming in his throat.

Nothing is ever as simple as he wishes it to be.

Clearing his throat, Zuko asks, "Can you - do you know how to fish?"

The waterbender blinks, looks at him. The suspicion and disdain that seeps back into her eyes nicks at an invisible wound in Zuko's chest, but he waits for her to respond. "Of course I do," She scoffs. She rises to her feet and walks to the edge of the lake, pausing to remove her boots. The waterbender rolls her leggings to her knees and wades into the shallow end of the water.

Curious, Zuko stands and follows her. He stops at the shore, a good distance away from her, and watches the way the waterbender coaxes the water apart. The motion is effortless, smooth. Zuko hesitates, then removes his boots as well. He steps into the water, faltering at the sharp look the waterbender gives him. When he extends his hand and creates a fire in his palm, she watches him for a moment, then allows him closer.

With the light, Zuko thinks he can see the shape of several fish on either side of the water. The waterbender lets it meld back together, watching the surface as she contemplates her next move.

"Where is your uncle?"

The question doesn't surprise him; he had been hoping she wouldn't bring it up.

“We went our separate ways. I’m on my own.”

She turns to look at him. The waterbender faces him, a frown on her face, her eyes critical as she looks him up and down. Zuko knows what she is seeing; his threadbare clothing, hanging loosely from his now malnourished body. The planes of his face, made sharper by stress and starvation. Her gaze lingers on his head, and only now does he feel self conscious. It’s been so long since he’s had a full head of hair that he still hasn’t quite adjusted to it, and he can tell it’s an odd sight for the waterbender to see as well.

“What happened to you?”

The honest confusion in her voice isn’t what he expected. Zuko looks down for a moment, watches the water around his ankles, soaking into the ends of his pants. He looks back up to meet her gaze. “It doesn’t matter,” He says, voice hardly above a whisper. “It - you don’t - you don’t have to worry anymore. About me. Chasing you. The Avatar.” He looks away again. “That part of my life is over.”

The silence stretches on for what feels like decades. For a long while, the waterbender watches him. Studies him. Then, she turns back to the water. Zuko watches as she twists her fingers above the air, turning her wrists occasionally. Her brows furrow in concentration.

He inhales a bit when she extracts a fish from the water, inside of a messy, moving bubble of liquid. She turns, carries it to the shore, and deposits the fish on the grass, where it thrashes desperately.

When she joins him again, she repeats her process, but this time, she says, “Katara.”

Zuko looks at her.

“My name is Katara,” She explains, lifting another fish from the lake.

Zuko watches the waterbender - watches Katara turn back to the shore with her catch. For a moment he lingers in the water, focuses on the coolness against his skin. When he steps onto the shore, he crouches and wraps his hands around his pant legs, drying them quickly.

Zuko makes quick work of cooking the fish. He passes one to Katara and they eat in silence, both far too exhausted from their day, from their exchange, from the sheer oddness of their situation, to do anything else.

When she is done, Katara lays down by the fire. She is asleep within minutes.

For a moment, all Zuko can do is watch her. Under the moonlight, while in the lake, she looked otherworldly, ensconced entirely within her element. Now, she looks soft before the light of the flames; young and gentle, nothing at all like the warrior Zuko knows she is. Her eyelashes are surprisingly thick, fanning across her cheeks, creating shadows that stretch about her face. Her shoulders are drawn in, one hand tucked under her cheek as she sleeps.

Entirely different from what he has come to expect of her.

Zuko sighs quietly and stretches out on his back. He watches the stars as he allows sleep to overcome him. As he drifts off, Zuko thinks about the expert flex of Katara's fingers as she manipulated her element, and how similar it is to what she's done to him all these months - forcing him to change tactics, to learn more, to better himself at every turn in order to keep up with her.

A formidable opponent, but more than meets the eye.

His eyes open when the sun begins to rise.

Zuko lays where he is for a while, content to simply watch the light begin to filter in through the canopy of leaves around them, and to think about what had happened the day before.

He glances to his left.

Katara is still asleep, settled onto her side. Her knees are drawn towards her stomach, arms tucked to her chest; a stray, broken leaf has tangled just above the metal in her hair, near her temple.

His fingers flex with the urge to remove it.

Zuko rolls to his knees. He stretches his back with a wince and rises to his feet, ignores the rumbling in his stomach. The sun is still rising, but already he feels warm, so he removes his tunic and lets it flutter to the ground as he stretches.

Practicing his bending forms has been the only thing keeping him sane lately. Zuko measures his breathing as he walks himself through the forms. He focuses only on the shift of his muscles, the warmth of the sun creeping across his skin, the steady simmer of the fire in his veins. Some days have felt as though his inner flame is gone, completely blown out by the despondency reigning over him as of late; those days it's a struggle to simply open his eyes.

Zuko loses himself in this ritual as the sun climbs to its resting place in the sky. When he finishes, he feels centered, calmer. Ready to deal with whatever comes his way today.

When he turns around, he finds that Katara is awake and staring at him.

A deep, embarrassed flush rushes across his cheeks and down his neck. She's staring at his torso, brows knit, eyes critical.

"When was the last time you ate?"

He blinks, his flush deepening. "Last night."

He turns away again to grab his tunic, eager to hide from her scrutinizing gaze. Still, he can feel the weight of her gaze between his shoulder blades. As he settles his tunic across his body, Katara moves around him. Her frown remains.

"Zuko, have you - you've barely eaten the last few weeks, haven't you?"

It isn't the first time she's called him by his name. He's suddenly transported by back to the North Pole - *trust me, Zuko, it's not gonna be much of a match* - but the sound of it in her voice is still odd to him.

Zuko doesn't answer, doesn't want to. Instead, he says, "We should get going. The next town isn't far away. Someone there might have seen your friends."

Katara opens her mouth to argue, but purses her lips and decides against it. Instead, she turns and moves to the lake. Zuko sits down to start the fire. He waits patiently, watching Katara as she fishes. It's fascinating; waterbending differs from firebending a great deal. Her movements, compared to his, are fluid and smooth, almost like dancing.

When she returns, she drops three fish at his feet, and nudges two of them towards him. "Eat," She commands.

Zuko blinks. A small part of him bristles - princes are not meant to be given commands by anyone, nor are they meant to take hand outs - but that part of him is overshadowed by the rest of him, by how dumbfounded he feels at the generosity and concern Katara is displaying for him.

It takes him a moment to find his voice. "Thank you," He murmurs, inclining his head.

The food settles easily in his belly. He eats quickly, faster than one should with company, but the need to satisfy his hunger overrides the etiquette he was taught. Zuko feels far less lethargic, far less sluggish now. He glances at Katara. She is watching him again, her own breakfast finished, the bones discarded beside her. The pity in her eyes makes his stomach churn.

Zuko stands abruptly, wiping his hands on his pants. "Let's go." His voice is a bit more brusque than necessary, but he cannot stand pity from anyone. Settling his hat on his head, Zuko heads for the trees. He can hear Katara muttering behind him as she follows him.

The sun climbs steadily higher as they walk. Katara walks beside Zuko. She seems to have come to terms with their situation and is treating him with far less hostility than he is used to from her. Instead, she is calm as they move along their path, face open to the light around them.

Zuko peeks at her often from under the brim of his hat. It is easy to recognize how lovely she is; her skin is a deep, rich shade of brown that the sun favors. The light plays in her hair, which is somehow darker than her skin, but shines with a healthy glow. Her face is beginning to lose the roundness of youth; she is becoming a young woman.

Zuko forces his eyes to the ground, cheeks hot. He isn't used to being in the presence of women. If Katara is aware of this, she doesn't say so. Instead, she tries to fill the silence intermittently. Zuko never knows what to say, so he lets her ramble, listens to her instead. He comes to learn that she enjoys the warmth of the sun, but that she still misses the snow and ice of her homeland. Though she misses her companions as well, she is glad to have a break from mending her brother's pants, and from the lemur picking through her hair all the time. She tells him that she doesn't hate it but she could do without eating fish ever again in her life

time. That one of her favorite things about her travels has been discovering the different types of flowers that grow in the places she's visited.

She talks far more than anyone he has known, but it isn't as irritating as he might have imagined. In fact, her voice is rather nice to listen to. Through this he learns that she is an optimistic person, someone that can find a shred of good in any situation she's put in.

When they arrive at the town, the sun has reached its peak in the sky. There is a faint flush across Katara's cheeks. Zuko studies their surroundings as they pass the houses on the edge of the village. Many people are already out tending to their farms; others are milling about to chat with their neighbors. They earn plenty of curious looks as they continue on.

They stop when they reach what appears to be a market. Zuko studies the activity, eyes lingering on a stall selling what looks like a sweet drink inside of small black cups. He has no money, so he turns away, moving to study the bulletin board to his left. There are many posters nailed to the wood. Some read in the ancient writing, some in a less familiar font. But none mention anything about the Avatar.

One of them, however, is a wanted poster that has Zuko's face beside Uncle Iroh's. The familiar script details a great reward for their capture, labels them both as traitors to their nation. His jaw clenches. It's tempting to tear the poster down, but that would draw too much attention.

Katara comes to stand beside him and studies the posters. Zuko looks away when she reaches the one with his face, grits his teeth when she gasps softly. He can feel her eyes on him, wide with many, many questions.

"Zuko," She starts, voice quiet, "What happened?"

He turns his back on the board and instead studies the market. He refuses to acknowledge it. That life is behind him now. "We should ask around," He says, "See if anyone's seen your friends."

Katara's irritation at his dismissal is obvious, but she doesn't argue. She huffs, but she turns around with him and nods. Her eyes narrow when she spots a woman struggling to balance several baskets. "I'll see what I can do."

Zuko blinks, and she is crossing the path before he can comment. He crosses his arms and watches warily. It's too far away to hear, but he can see Katara's friendly smile and the way it wins the woman over. He thinks she's offering to carry half of the woman's load. The woman warms to Katara quickly, laughs loud enough for Zuko to hear at something Katara says.

He envies how easy it is for her to win others over. Her body language is open and friendly, no nerves or discomfort in sight, her smile radiant. What would it take for her to act so comfortable around him?

Maybe not trying to constantly capture her and her friends.

Zuko sighs.

He looks up and finds Katara beckoning him over. Frowning, Zuko hesitates, then crosses the path. He stops to let a frazzled man with a surprisingly large crowd of children pass them, then moves to Katara.

The woman looks him up and down with a critical eye. "He's very handsome," She comments. "What's your name?"

Zuko blinks. His mouth flaps like a fish out of water for a moment, cheeks turning pink, before he finally mumbles, "Li."

Katara chuckles and places her hand on Zuko's arm. "I told you, he's so shy. But really, he's a good a man. I wouldn't have accepted his proposal otherwise!"

Zuko chokes on the air in his lungs. Proposal?! He shoots Katara a bewildered look, about to demand to know what in the hell she's talking about, but Katara pats him on the back aggressively, making him cough. "Poor thing," She coos, "He's had so much trouble with all the dust around us lately." She adjusts his hat and steps close, hissing, "Play along!" Zuko can only blink, dumfounded, when she turns back to the woman in front of them and takes one of her baskets. The woman pushes the other at Zuko. He barely manages to grasp it before it falls.

"Call me Qian," The woman says, crouching to grab her third basket. "My husband, Jin, will be happy to have to have the help."

Zuko glares at Katara as they follow Qian out of the market. "What did you say to her?" He whispers, nudging her leg with his knee to get her attention.

She shoots him an agitated glance. "I told her that we're traveling to visit my family to celebrate our proposal." Katara shrugs. "She wouldn't have believed we were siblings. And besides, she said we could stay with them if we help out as payment. We could both use the rest." Her eyes rake over him, critical and judgmental. "Especially you."

For a moment, all Zuko can do is stare at Katara as she follows Qian down the path. He exhales slowly, breathing out steam. He's tempted to refuse, to drop everything and leave the damned waterbender here with her new friend, but when he glances down, he sighs. It's been a while since he's had a mango.

Pursing his lips, Zuko shifts the basket higher in his arms and trudges after the women, trying in vain to tune out Katara's cheery voice.

The sun has set by the time they enter the barn.

Zuko is exhausted. It has been a long, long day.

Qian and Jin turned out to be two people easy to get along with. Zuko remained silent for most of the day, afraid he would do or say something to give away anything about his identity that would condemn him, but they never pressed, easily believing Katara when she referred

to him as "the strong and silent" type. But because of that, Jin had declared Zuko would help him with his daily work. It was difficult, at first; Zuko has only ever used his hands for bending or for wielding swords, not for labor. But Jin's teasing was light, and he praised Zuko whenever he picked up on what he was doing.

Many times he had been tempted to quit, to throw his hat down and raze everything in sight - like when the damn ostrich horse had kicked him into a pile of mud, bruising the hell out of his stomach. Katara had come running, and while she'd probed his abdomen to check for internal injuries, she had struggled to contain her laughter.

Zuko thinks about the mirth in her eyes as he follows Katara into the barn. He studies her back, remembering the way she had bit her lip to keep from laughing, only to fail and double over with it. The sound still rings in his ears, loud and unashamed. Enamoring.

He swallows and turns away from her, moving to the pile of straw in the corner. His arms ache as he reaches up to finally remove his hat, rubbing at the top of his head, then at the underside of his chin.

It seems like his body will never adjust to manual labor. But maybe it's not the labor that's making his bones feel so heavy. Maybe it's the knowledge that he is adrift, that there is nothing tethering him to the earth anymore. It sits in the center of his chest, stretched out across his lungs too snugly for comfort; he has nothing to keep his flame lit.

Rubbing his face, Zuko shakes his head once to banish the thoughts. It's been too long of a day to think about these things. He didn't spend all morning and all afternoon picking vegetables, tilling the ground, and hauling giant bags of grain around, didn't suffer the indignity of an ostrich horse taking him down, just to lay in the dark and poke around the saddest parts of his mind.

Katara shuffles ahead of him. She kneels beside a trough and takes her time scrubbing her hands and face clean. She glances over her shoulder to Zuko. "Come here."

He hesitates, then lays his hat down on the straw and moves to kneel beside her. Katara faces him and lifts the water, but he flinches back out of instinct, eyeing her hands warily.

Katara purses her lips. "I'm not going to hurt you," She insists, "I'm trying to help you get clean again. A little, anyway."

His eyes narrow, but he says nothing. Instead Zuko holds still. It takes some effort not to dodge again when she brings the water to his face, but he manages. Her fingers are coated in the liquid, which is fascinating in of itself; the water distorts her knuckles, strips the color from her skin. It's an odd sight to see.

Gently, Katara moves the water around Zuko's face. She doesn't touch him with her hands, but with the water instead, carefully peeling off layers of dirt.

"You're so pale," She comments, "I'm surprised you aren't red from the sun exposure."

Zuko grunts. "I grew up in the sun. I'm a firebender. We don't really burn."

She blinks, then gives a slightly sheepish smile. "Right."

When she's done with his face, Katara eases the water down and around Zuko's throat. The liquid barely trickles past the opening of his robe, and then it's gone, moving on to his hands. He does feel better, cleaner; the dirt and grime he's accumulated throughout the day might as well be a second skin.

When she's done, Katara dumps the water. She dusts her hands with a satisfied hum. "Better?"

Zuko nods, feeling strangely shy, and looks away. "Thank you," He murmurs, and stands and returns to the straw.

Katara watches him for a moment. Then she follows.

The prince is stretching out on his back as she kneels beside him, unsure of what to do, but he hasn't noticed.

The length of Zuko's back seems to breathe a sigh of relief at the gentle stretching as he settles. His muscles ache, but it's become a familiar pain at this point. Zuko closes his eyes. He scoops up his hat and places it on his chest, and he listens to the sound of Katara shuffling across the straw beside him. It's almost soothing, almost enough to lull him to sleep.

He is nearly asleep, but then the straw under him begins to rustle. Zuko frowns, eyes still closed. When it persists, he opens his eyes and looks around. It takes him a moment to realize that the source of the oddity is Katara, and it's because she's shivering.

Zuko glances around the barn. He supposes it's chilly in here; his internal heat often prevents him from noticing a chill unless it's snowing.

He hesitates, then reaches out and touches Katara's shoulder lightly. When she lifts her head to look over her shoulder at him, he murmurs, "Come here."

She gives him a confused look, but she turns over and slides across the space between them. When she is close enough, Zuko lifts his arm to her shoulders, but drops it when she pulls away quickly.

His cheeks flush with chagrin. "I - you're cold," He explains, pushing up on an elbow, "I just - I wasn't gonna try anything, I just - thought - maybe I could - help..." He trails off, letting himself slump back against the straw with a frustrated sigh. Does he always have to mess up *everything* he tries to do? "Nevermind. Sorry."

He begins to settle again, closing his eyes, but they fly open when he feels Katara settle against him.

She eases out on her side, hesitantly, her stomach lined against his hip, thighs against one of his, and her head comes to rest on his shoulder, against the crook of his neck, arms tucked to her chest. Zuko swallows down a sudden explosion of nerves. His heart jumps about in his chest, which he's positive Katara can feel. She holds herself stiffly for a moment, then

gradually begins to relax. "Don't know how you can stand being so warm all the time," She mumbles. Her breath ghosts across his throat; the metal piece in her hair presses against his skin, surprisingly cold. Her hair brushes against the rough edges of his scar. It barely grazes the skin of her forehead.

Zuko doesn't respond. He doesn't think he can. His eyes are wide as he stares at the ceiling of the barn. No one has ever been so close to him. Especially not his left side. Most people can hardly stand to look at his scar, let alone be close enough to touch it like this. He swallows past the hard lump in his throat and releases a carefully measured breath. Zuko eases his arm around Katara's shoulders, fingers trembling as they come around to rest on his hat. He focuses on keeping his body temperature regulated, on not searing holes into his hat.

She fits against him so, so easily.

It takes Zuko a terribly long time to relax. To adjust to holding Katara. But the exhaustion wins out eventually, and his eyes slip closed. He can feel her breathing, can hear it this close, and he allows it to lull him to sleep.

When Zuko wakes up, he squints groggily at the ceiling, then at the closed doors. Sunlight seeps in through the cracks. The sun has been up for several hours now. He grimaces, lifting a hand to rub his face. It's not like him to sleep so long, but he supposes it was warranted this time.

Zuko glances to his left. Katara is still settled in the crook of his arm. She is fast asleep, warm and comfortable in his embrace. His stomach flutters as he takes in the sight. Something about this feels so natural that it claws at his insides, digs into his heart and demands that he acknowledge this, that he understand that this? This is a sight he could stand to wake up to every day.

And it scares him.

But he doesn't move. Not yet. Katara looks so peaceful; her fingers have made their way to his chest, resting just under his heart, and the sight nearly kills him on the spot. He doesn't want to disturb her yet, and he isn't quite ready to let her go. His eyes wander over her face, struck once again by how long her lashes are. There's a natural arch to her brows; her hair smells like the straw they're laying on.

This is only the second chance he's had to properly acknowledge how beautiful she is.

Zuko tears his eyes away. He forces them closed and presses his lips together, recalling his meditations. It manages to calm the flutter around his heart, to settle him into a bearable state of being.

Katara sleeps for a while longer before she finally stirs. She exhales a soft noise as she sits up, and as soon as she does, Zuko rolls away and stands, putting a safe distance between them.

Katara blinks up at him and rubs the sleep from her eyes. "Sorry," She apologizes, voice muted. "I didn't mean to sleep so late."

Zuko shakes his head. "You didn't. The sun hasn't been up very long." He clears his throat, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. His skin feels warm and tingly with nerves.

Katara watches Zuko for a moment. Her face softens in understanding after a bit. She stands and brushes the straw from her robe, picks a few pieces out of her hair, then moves to him, placing a hand on his arm gently. "Thank you for last night," She says, "It was really nice of you."

He looks down at her, feeling his heart climb into his throat, and he nods. "Y-You're welcome," He mumbles, glancing away. He misses the small smile Katara gives him.

"I'm gonna go see if Jin and Qian are up so we can thank them before we leave."

Katara heads for the door, and as Zuko watches her go, he is suddenly, painfully aware of how lonely he has been, of how absent that feeling had been with her so close by. She slips through the door and lets it swing shut behind her, and as it does, the weight stretched across Zuko's chest threatens to cave in, threatens to trap him in this awful feeling. He's hit with the urge to run after Katara, to chase her down for an entirely different reason - to chase the way he'd felt while he held her, the security that came with it.

An unsteady breath escapes him. Zuko presses a hand to his middle for a moment and tries to center himself, but he feels so unbalanced he isn't sure if he'll be able to make it to the entrance without collapsing. What is happening to him?

Qian and Jin are insistent on giving them a few departing gifts. Katara takes them eagerly, passing Zuko one of the bags. He shoulders it and presses his fist to his palm, bowing as he says, "Thank you for your generosity. It is deeply appreciated."

Jin smiles and claps him on the shoulder. "Be careful out there. And bring your kids this way to see us when they come around!"

Zuko manages to stumble over nothing, choking on the air in his lungs once again. Beside him, Katara laughs, and the sound wraps around his heart, squeezing mercilessly. He turns away quickly and heads for the road, wanting nothing more at the moment than to leave. Katara trails after him, waving to their hosts as they depart.

The day is warm, but not unbearable. Zuko feels properly satiated for the first time in weeks, having had three proper meals while with Qian and Jin. Katara walks a pace ahead of him, a slight bounce in her step. He studies her. Watching the sun playing in her hair once again is a mesmerizing sight. Zuko sighs to himself.

"Where are you going?"

Zuko looks up. Katara pauses to let him catch up to her, then falls into step beside him. "I mean, after I find Sokka and Aang," She explains, shifting the bag on her shoulder. He reaches for it without thinking and slips it from her grasp, adding it to the weight he's already carrying. Katara looks at him in surprise, then gives him a soft smile that makes his stomach tighten. "You're headed somewhere, right? I know - I saw the poster, I can guess what that means, but.. You have somewhere to go, don't you?"

Zuko looks ahead. "I don't know," He confesses quietly. When he and Uncle had fought off Azula, had decided to cut ties to the Fire Nation, they hadn't had much of a plan outside finding the Earth Kingdom. Now, on his own, the most concrete plan he's had has been helping Katara find her friends. "I don't know where I'm going. I suppose it doesn't really matter."

Katara frowns at him. "Yes, it does," She insists. When Zuko glances at her, he notices that she has to tilt her head to look up at him. "You have to have somewhere to go, Zuko, you can't just wander around the Earth Kingdom forever. It's not safe for you. Someone could recognize you and then what?"

Zuko presses his lips together. And then that person would turn him in, hand him over to Azula, and he would finally go home, that's what. Except he would return with more shame draped across his shoulders than he left with. The idea alone threatens to steal his breath.

Katara is still watching him. "You could come with me," She offers. "Join me and Sokka and Aang."

Zuko looks over at her, bewilderment written across his face. He snorts and keeps walking.

"I'm serious!" Katara catches up to him, her hand wrapping around his upper arm. He is acutely aware of the shape of her fingers around his bicep. "Aang still needs a firebending teacher, and who better to teach him than you?"

He stops to look at her. She is so earnest in her offer, eyes wide and round with the possibility. They sparkle like gemstones in the afternoon sun. Zuko's knees feel a bit weak.

"Your friends would never let that happen." He keeps walking.

Katara huffs, jogging a bit to keep up with him. "Sure, they would! Aang is really reasonable, I'm sure he'd be open to the idea. And Sokka, well, he'll come around to it eventually."

Zuko sighs, lifting his shoulders. "If I say I'll think about it, will you let it go for now?" He glances at Katara, and she nods, giving him a bright smile.

Agni, what is he getting into?

They travel for three days on their own.

In that time, Zuko learns to be comfortable around Katara. He learns that, for all of her bending prowess, she is full of her own flaws, and it endears her to him all the more. But more than that, she is unfailingly kind, and to be on the receiving end of her kindness this time around is not something he's quite grasped yet.

They split their rations carefully, evenly, and forage for other food. Each night, Katara tucks herself into Zuko to sleep, and Zuko learns to adjust to this, to allow himself to enjoy the close proximity of someone that no longer hates him, but sees him as an ally, maybe even a friend.

Maybe something more. But he is too afraid to properly entertain that thought. The possibility of becoming friends with the waterbender seems too good to be true as it is.

On the fourth day, Katara insists they stop for lunch under the fifth tree they pass. They're closer to the next town, maybe twenty miles from it. There are thick clouds in the sky; they're gray at the edges, but not dark enough to cause worry for a potential storm.

When they reach the tree, Katara exhales loudly and drops to her knees. Zuko eases down beside her and removes the bags from his shoulders. He rolls them, easing the ache out of them, and watches Katara stretch. She lifts her arms above her head and rolls her neck with a soft hum, body arching in one long, lean line. Zuko swallows and looks away. He fumbles for one of the bags to distract himself.

The bags are half way empty. Zuko fishes for the container of rice and sets it out. He passes the canteen to Katara and grabs the other bag, peering inside to see what fruit they have left. "Qian and Jin were really generous," He comments, rummaging through the contents.

Katara closes the lid after she drinks, nodding. "I hope we can thank them properly for this one day." She holds her hands out and Zuko extracts his arm from the bag to place a papaya in her open palms, then reaches back in for the mango he had been looking for.

Katara grimaces, making a disgusted sound. "I hate papaya," She mumbles.

Zuko looks up, and immediately regrets doing so. Katara is pouting at the fruit in her hands, nose wrinkled in disgust. She sighs and her lower lip juts out further, soft and pink and terribly inviting. Everything about the look is horribly endearing, and it's wreaking havoc on his heart.

Zuko can't help himself. He stares at her for a moment, and then he leans in, pressing his mouth to Katara's. He takes the papaya from her hands and replaces it with the mango as he does. It's a chaste, uncertain kiss, but when Katara opens her mouth to gasp, Zuko jerks away. She stares at him in shock, but he turns away, dropping the papaya as he staggers to his feet.

His face is hot, his heart is pounding. He wants so badly to flee the scene, to run and run and run until he doesn't exist and everything about him is forgotten. What the hell was he thinking? His chest is threatening to collapse under the panic that's taking over his system. He feels sick, Agni, that was such a stupid thing to do, she's going to hate him again now, she's going to remind him of how vile and unworthy he is, she's -

"Zuko."

He stills.

Katara moves around him, her fingers grazing his shoulder as she does. She comes to stand before him, and the pink tint to her cheeks weakens his knees.

"I'm sorry," Zuko mutters, looking away, "I shouldn't have - I don't - I don't know what I was thinking, I-"

"Was that - have you ever kissed anyone before?"

Zuko blinks, caught off guard. He stares at Katara for a moment, and then he blushes harder. He starts to move away, wanting to go to the other side of the tree so that he can dig a hole to die in, but Katara stops him. She places a hand on his shoulder and steps closer to him. "It's okay," She assures him, watching him. "I'm not mad. I promise." There's a light in her eyes, making them sparkle in the sunlight around them. His mouth feels so, so dry.

Katara takes another step towards Zuko. She places one hand on his cheek, lifts the other to the left side of his face as well, but he flinches away, and she stays her hand. After a moment, she tries again, and Zuko holds still. Katara lays her hand across his cheek carefully. Her fingers fan out across the rigidity of his scar, her palm resting against the unmarred skin under it, and he feels sick with nerves, feels breathless. He expects her to recoil in disgust, to shove him away and leave him out here in the dirt.

Instead, Katara tips her head up and presses her mouth to his, and Zuko goes still yet again.

Her kiss is firmer than his was, is shy but sure, and for a moment all he can do is simply stand there and let it happen.

Katara kisses him again. She coaxes his mouth open gently, just enough, and she teaches him. She teaches him how to move his mouth against hers. She teaches him to place his hands at her waist, and she teaches him to recognize the feelings breaking through the anxiety - the desire, the warmth bubbling through his gut, the cautious happiness rising in his chest.

One of her hands slides down his chest, and Zuko is overcome with a sudden, fierce need for her touch. He presses a bit closer, kisses Katara again, and she responds with a gentle enthusiasm that steals every bit of air in his lungs. When she pulls away, he follows her mouth, his eyes opening slowly. The sun is beating down on them, but he couldn't care less. He wouldn't care if the sky fell down on their very heads right now.

Katara bites her lower lip. Her cheeks are tinted pink, she's breathing just a bit heavily, and it takes all of Zuko's strength not to fall to his knees, takes everything in him to resist the urge to offer her the mangled mess that is his heart.

Katara strokes her hand down Zuko's cheek, fingers grazing his scar. He can barely feel it, but the touch resonates through him. He closes his eyes and inhales slowly through his nose. Gently, Katara lets her hand fall. When Zuko opens his eyes, he sees her taking his hand. She leads him back to their small camp. Zuko sits down carefully, feeling tremors run through his limbs. He watches Katara settle across from him, watches her fidget with their things, and he picks up the mango once more and takes one of her hands. It looks so small compared to his. He places the fruit in her hand again and sits back, scratching his fingers over his jaw.

This time, he sees the sweet smile crossing her face, and he thinks that maybe he doesn't have to worry about giving her his heart, because she might already have it.

For a while, they eat in silence. Zuko lets the food settle his nerves. When he's done, he fiddles with the skin he had peeled off of the papaya, and he says, "I'll do it."

Katara looks up at him, pausing in her process of re-packing their bags. Zuko meets her gaze. His heart stumbles against his ribs, but he says, "I'll come with you. I'll teach the Avatar - Aang, I'll teach Aang firebending."

The answering smile he earns is radiant enough to put the sun to shame. Katara wiggles over to Zuko on her knees. She throws her arms around his neck, making him yelp in surprise, but he holds her waist, returning her hug hesitantly after a moment. When she pulls back to smile at him again, he isn't sure if he could have said no to her at all.

Katara touches his cheek again. "You're doing the right thing, Zuko," She murmurs. Her eyes are as soft as her voice, but they shine brightly.

Zuko stares at Katara. He wonders how she is capable of this steadfast faith, wonders at how she can hold to this conviction without wavering even once. But he manages a small smile in response, and he drops his head to her shoulder, allowing his shoulders to slump for a moment. Katara hums quietly and runs her hand down his hair. The touch is soothing, like a balm to his wounded soul. She turns her head, pressing her lips to his temple, to the scarred skin there.

Katara lets go first, and Zuko drops his arms, reluctant to let go. But he helps her pack their food up, and he stands with her. She gives him a small, gentle smile before leading him onto the road. Zuko lingers behind her for a moment, watching her as they head for their next destination. How did it come to this? Weeks ago he never could have fathomed that this girl, once his enemy, would be offering him such kindness, would ever consider getting as close to him as she has. And yet, in a matter of days, she has managed to worm her way under his skin, has cracked open his rib cage and has begun to patch up the endless amount of wounds on his heart.

Zuko glances down at his feet for a moment. He supposes Uncle is right; destiny is a funny thing, indeed. Maybe this is where his path is meant to take him.

The others find them two days later.

It is the uproar Zuko expected. Sokka's voice is as shrill as his sister's when he's indignant.

Zuko stands back, watching the exchange. Katara stands between him and her friends, her hands on her hips. She is fiery in her defense of him. Zuko represses a smile. Sokka glares at him over Katara's head, his boomerang clenched in his fist. Zuko doesn't begrudge the suspicion; he has yet to prove himself to these two.

"He's coming with us," Katara declares. She lifts her chin impudently. "Besides, Aang is the one that needs a firebending teacher, so he gets the final say. Aang?"

The siblings turn to the Avatar. The entire time he has been silent, watching the exchange with round, thoughtful gray eyes. Zuko looks to him as well.

Aang watches him, and when he starts to smile, Zuko suddenly knows what his thinking of. The boy is thinking of an exchange between them, of an early morning that feels like a life time ago. *If we knew each other back then, do you think we could have been friends too?*

Aang's smile widens into a grin. "I'm okay with it," He finally says, and Sokka groans loudly, throwing his hands into the air. "But only if Appa is, too." Aang reaches up to the lemur on his shoulder, scratching his chin. "Momo will be easy to win over." The lemur purrs, closing his eyes.

Zuko glances at Katara, who smiles encouragingly, then to the bison. Appa eyes Zuko with a massive brown eye, studying him in a way that makes Zuko feel incredibly tiny. He lumbers closer and sniffs at him, and it's all Zuko can do not to put as much distance between them as possible. Then, Appa groans, an intimidatingly loud sound, and opens his mouth to lick Zuko. Zuko yells as the bison drags his tongue across him, coating him in a disgusting layer of slobber. He stumbles to the ground and bats the saliva off of his cheek, glowering at the sound of laughter from Katara and Aang.

"Appa approves!" Aang declares. He steps forward to help Zuko to his feet, offering him another grin. "Welcome to the group, Sifu Zuko!"

Zuko attempts a smile, but it comes off as a grimace. "Just Zuko," He insists. Aang chuckles and pats his arm, then creates a current of air to lift him onto his bison's head.

Sokka turns and stomps to the bison, hands poised to climb up as he glares over his shoulder at Zuko. "I'm watching you," He warns. His bright blue eyes, so similar to his sister's, are filled with a suspicion Zuko is very familiar with. "And don't touch my jerky!" He turns back to Appa, muttering to himself as he climbs into the saddle.

Zuko adjusts the sheath on his back and glances at Katara. She rolls her eyes and waves a hand at her brother. "He'll come around, don't worry," She insists. She reaches out and takes his hand, and once again Zuko is found marveling at the contrast, at how natural the touch seems to feel. Katara folds her fingers around his and pulls him to the bison. She shows him how to climb up and helps him into the saddle, where he takes a seat against the back, a safe enough distance from the others. Katara seats herself close to him, near enough to her brother that she can push his knee when he continues to grumble.

"Appa, yip yip!" Zuko inhales as the bison rises to the sky. He reaches out to grasp the saddle, and Katara glances over, making sure he's settled as Appa finds his rhythm on the air currents. Zuko watches the waterbender. She looks happy, glad to be with her family, and maybe, he thinks, glad that he's with them. With her.

Zuko tips his head back to watch the clouds as they pass them by, feeling an odd sense of excitement settle over him. A new chapter is beginning in his life. Destiny is a funny thing, indeed.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

She tastes like moonlight, ethereal and celestial, like ocean waves cresting high - she tastes like home.

Chapter Notes

First of all, I want to say THANK YOU SO MUCH to everyone that voiced their interest in another chapter! I did not expect that to happen at all, so thank you thank you thank you!! I've decided there will be more coming, but in the mean time, here's the second chapter!

Paper Cup by The Shoe, Dust to Dust by The Civil Wars, My Love by Sia, and Eyes Closed by The Narrative had a big hand in this being created.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Traveling with Avatar is not what Zuko had initially expected.

Then again, he'd momentarily forgotten his sister was a factor in this convoluted game.

She's making sure that doesn't happen again.

Zuko rubs his face. The wind stings his tired eyes. He's often a restless sleeper, but it's been a long while since he's gone a full night without sleep. Zuko braces himself as best as he can as Katara attempts to steer Appa higher, but the bison is struggling, the lack of sleep affecting him too.

Zuko watches Katara's back, momentarily lost in thought. It bothers him, the idea of Aang fending Azula off on his own, and just as upsetting is knowing that Toph is out who knows where while his sister and her friends are hunting them down. He looks over Appa's back and watches the lizards crawling after them, eyes narrowing.

It doesn't surprise Zuko in the slightest that his sister is after the Avatar, now that he's officially been branded a traitor. He sinks his fingers into Appa's fur, heart jumping when he realizes Appa is beginning to lose air.

"We need to go faster!" Sokka yells, hanging half over the bison to keep an eye on Mai and Ty Lee.

“Appa is too tired!” Katara leans back as she tugs on the reigns, trying in vain to keep Appa in the air. “If we can just make it across that river, we’ll be safe! C’mon, Appa, just a little further!”

Zuko grits his teeth, watching the ground come closer and closer at an unsettling rate. He reaches out and grabs Momo to keep the lemur from being separated from their group.

Appa slams into the ground with a hard thud and Zuko flies forward with Sokka and Katara. He winces from the impact, and in sympathy for the bison. Several trees had scraped against Appa’s underside on the way here; he’ll probably have a few bruises from this.

“We made it! We’re safe!” Sokka climbs down from Appa’s head, Katara following him, and embraces his sister in relief.

Zuko is warier as his feet touch the ground.

There is no way it was that easy. It’s never that easy.

His wariness is proven correct when Mai and Ty Lee reach the river and their lizards rise on their hind legs to rush across the water.

Katara gasps, then rushes forward. She creates a wave that dispatches Ty Lee’s lizard, but Ty Lee avoids it easily, catapulting herself through the air to land on shore. Mai dodges and skirts her lizard onto the bank.

Zuko can see her reaching into her sleeve, so he darts forward, slashing at her steed with a whip of fire. She jerks back, eyes wide, full of shock, before they narrow, and she circles around with the thin arrows she had been reaching for. Mai unleashes her arrows, aiming for him, but Zuko turns them into ash with a short burst of fire. She slides off of her lizard and feints to the left, focused on Katara now.

Zuko feels his heart fumble behind his ribs, but he races after Mai.

He crosses paths with Sokka. Ty Lee has gotten all the right spots on him, turning three of his limbs to jelly. Zuko slides between them as Ty Lee takes aim again. He knocks one wrist aside and grabs her other hand, squeezing until he hears a pop, and presses forward against her chest with just enough force - not enough to cause real damage, but enough to disarm her. Ty Lee falls to the ground with a cry, glaring at Zuko with round eyed betrayal.

“Hey,” Sokka says, voice pleasantly surprised, “Thanks.” He shuffles forward and kicks a bit of dirt at Ty Lee, sticking his tongue out childishly.

Zuko leaves this behind, his momentary amusement drowned by the sight of Mai’s knives pinning Katara’s wrists to the tree. They narrowly missed her flesh, embedded in her wrist wrappings just a hair above her skin. Mai stops before Katara, arms crossed in casual arrogance. She opens her mouth, but the only thing that comes out is a raspy cry when Zuko sweeps her legs out from under her. He rushes to Katara, eyes sweeping over her frantically for an signs of harm, and tugs the knives from her wrists. The holes in her wrappings are minuscule, but they seize at his heart.

“Thanks,” Katara says breathlessly. She brushes against Zuko’s shoulder as she moves past him. Her tired eyes narrow into slits, and she sweeps her arms at the river, raising the water until it falls over Mai. The tide pulls the girl under; Katara grunts as she shoves the wave down river, sending Mai with it.

Behind them, Ty Lee wobbles to her feet. “That was so rude!” She gasps. She lifts her uninjured hand into its deadly shape, but Appa comes to their rescue, roaring as he tosses Ty Lee into the river with Mai, using one mighty flap of his tail.

Sokka yells with triumph as he stumbles to them. “Thanks, Appa,” He says as he stumbles to the ground, cheek pressed to the grass, “I dunno what we’d do without you.” He smiles at the beast, but it’s quickly wiped away by the slobber Appa coats him in.

Zuko smiles a bit, then glances down the river. That’s two problems taken care of, which just leaves his sister. He looks to Katara, moving to take Sokka’s other arm as she helps her brother up. He grimaces at the saliva clinging to Sokka’s skin, and now his hands. “We should get going. I don’t like the idea of leaving Aang alone to deal with Azula.”

Katara nods. She helps Zuko hoist Sokka onto Appa’s back, then takes Zuko’s hand to climb onto Appa’s neck. Zuko’s hand lingers for as long as it can, his fingers brushing her lower back before he climbs up and settles beside Sokka, grabbing his tunic to keep him from sliding off.

The trail of fur Aang used to lure Azula to him leads them into a small, derelict row of houses. Zuko’s chest tightens at the sight of his sister facing off with Aang. Both are small figures at this distance, but he recognizes them anyway. His fingers curl into Appa’s fur as he begins to land outside of the buildings.

Zuko is on his feet before Appa touches the ground.

He pushes through a thin door, ignoring Katara’s voice calling to him, and hurries for the front of the building.

Azula’s voice reaches out to him. “Do you really want to fight me?”

Zuko barrels through the front door in a blur of dust and chips of wood. “Yes.” He stands tall, fists clenched at his sides. “I really do.”

Aang gasps behind him. His relief is palpable.

Across from him, Azula crosses her arms. “I was wondering when you would show up, Zuzu.”

Aang snickers. “Zuzu?”

Zuko feels a vein throb in his forehead. He drops into a fighting stance and says, “Back off, Azula! You’re not getting near him.”

Azula slides into a stance of her own, calm, collected, and confident. As though she is simply amusing herself with a game to while the hours away. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The tension thickens in the air as the moment draws out. Zuko's eyes never leave his sister, so when he sees her smirk, he barely manages to create a circle of fire to fend off her attack, but it sends him crashing into a wooden beam, momentarily knocking the breath out of him.

And then, Aang takes to the air, and they are moving, three wild blurs of color, of fire, of air. Aang does his best to avoid Azula, to counter her attacks. Zuko forces himself to stay between them, refusing to let Azula get close enough to Aang to hurt him.

Azula is as powerful as ever, a prodigy in their element. The ease with which she moves frustrates Zuko. She's barely broken a sweat, and he's still exhausted, already winded from the bruise forming on his back. But he refuses to lose to her, refuses to allow her to compromise the fragile sanctuary he has been building with the Avatar and his friends.

Zuko rushes after them into the building - only to drop straight to the ground, the air forced from his lungs again. He rolls over slowly, dimly aware of the flare of heat above him. Azula drops to the floor beside him, landing with infuriating grace, as Zuko forces himself to his knees.

His frustration mounts, and he lets it fuel him, lets it strengthen his fire -

and Azula blasts him through the frail wall, leaving him thoroughly disoriented when his back hits the ground with a hard thud.

The exhaustion and pain win over for a moment. Zuko exhales unsteadily, fingers scratching at the dirt feebly. When he opens his eyes, he catches a flash of blue rushing by.

"Zuko!" Sokka drops down beside him. His arms have regained their mobility, allowing him to help Zuko to his feet. "I gotcha, buddy, be careful." He leans on Sokka for a moment, eyes struggling to focus before they find the blue he had first noticed.

Katara.

She blocks the doorway for a moment, gaining Azula's attention, and Zuko feels his heart constrict with fear when Azula chases Katara from the building, fingertips alight with blue fire.

Sokka leaves Zuko to defend his sister, deflecting Azula's fire, and Zuko sways for a moment until a pair of sturdy hands press against his back and grasp at his arm.

Zuko looks up into Uncle Iroh's face, inhaling quietly. "Uncle," He whispers, eyes wide for a moment.

"Get up," Uncle orders, voice sharp as he forces Zuko to stand right. His arrival gives Zuko the strength he needs to draw his energy in, to charge forward into the circle closing in on Azula.

Azula turns to face them, only to wobble when the ground drags her aside and forces her to her knees. Behind her, Toph grins, and Zuko feels the knot under his ribs untie completely.

"I thought you guys could use some help."

The others are as relieved as he is. “Thanks,” Katara says, smiling.

Uncle heads behind the rubble and Zuko follows, knowing the others are cornering Azula here. She stumbles backwards, flinging fire ahead of her, but she flies to her hands and knees when Uncle slams his weight into her back.

They corner Azula, trap her in a loose circle, and Zuko feels a tiny bud of victory forming in his chest. For once, he has the upper hand over his sister.

Azula glares at them all. “Well, look at this,” She spits. “Traitors and enemies working together. I’m done. I know when I’m beaten. You’ve got me. A princess surrenders with honor.”

Zuko’s eyes narrow. The fire in him courses to his fingertips, ready to aim, ready to -

But Azula aims first.

She shoots off a bolt of blue fire -

fire that catches Uncle directly in the chest, burning through to his heart.

Zuko watches Uncle spiral away from his side, a horrified cry bursting from his throat as Uncle falls, taking his stability with him.

Their attack is simultaneous, converging on Azula all at once. The force of it explodes against her defensive fire and sets the buildings around them aflame.

But Zuko doesn’t notice. He is no longer among them, instead kneeling at his Uncle’s side.

Uncle isn’t moving. His robe is singed, the flesh under it warped and charred, sizzling with an acrid stench. Zuko growls, an agonized sound, and presses the heels of his hands to his forehead.

It can’t end like this. Uncle is stronger than this, he can’t leave Zuko, not like this, not like this-

He whips around when he hears the others approaching. “Get away from us!”

It is hard to remember that the people watching them are allies when Zuko’s world hangs in the balance, when he feels like a child again - only this wound is bigger, smothering in its pain, threatening to drag him under.

“Zuko, I can help.” Katara steps closer, reaching for her water skin, uncorking it.

He whips around, lashing an arch of fire over their heads, and roars, “Leave!”

The silence around them is deafening. The others are still crouching, still feeling the heat of the flame above their heads, but Katara edges forward anyway.

“Zuko.”

He blinks rapidly, the sound of Katara's voice registering in his ears, and a fresh wave of horror washes over him when he realizes what he's done. Hot tears well in his eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I-"

Katara drops to her knees beside him. She pulls the water from her pouch and coats her hands, presses them to Uncle's chest. He groans faintly and Zuko jerks, lifts his hands to help, to protect, to defend, but then Katara's hands begin to glow, and the light settles something wild inside of him.

He thinks back to the second night they'd spent together, to when she had used her abilities to clean the dirt from his face, and the tears welling in his eyes spill down his soot stained cheeks.

For a long moment, the world is still. Katara does not move, and neither does Uncle, until he releases a slow and labored breath, and Katara draws her hands back.

"He'll live," She says, voice drained. "I need to take a better look at this wound, but he'll be fine while we find somewhere safe for me to do that."

Something in Zuko's chest shatters. He nods, unable to find the words to thank the waterbender, and pulls his Uncle into his arms to help him onto Appa's back.

He does not let go of Uncle the entire flight. The only things keeping Zuko grounded are the shallow breaths Uncle takes, the faint beat of his heart, and Katara pressed against his side.

They land on the shore of a vast lake. Appa gives out under them, as exhausted as the rest.

Except now, Zuko is wide awake, adrenaline and anxiety pumping through his blood stream.

He allows Aang to float Uncle to the ground on a gentle current of air. Sokka helps Zuko prop Uncle against Appa's flank. Under the moonlight, he looks sallow; he looks his age, like the old man he is, something that had never quite registered with Zuko until now, and it tears at his heart to be forced to see it.

Katara kneels down beside him. She places her hand on his arm, and the touch helps center him. "I won't let anything else happen to him," She murmurs. Her eyes shine like gemstones again, hard and unyielding. "I promise."

Zuko swallows past the hard lump in his throat. He still cannot speak, so he covers Katara's hand instead and squeezes it, hard. She nods once, and then she crouches before Uncle to begin her process anew.

Another hand lands on his shoulder, and Zuko looks up to find Aang looking down at him. He nods for Zuko to follow him, and he does so, his steps very reluctant. Katara does not look up.

"He's in good hands," Aang says. He watches Katara as she weaves the water into Uncle's skin, sinks it into him to soothe the burns. "Katara will take care of him. You don't have to

worry.”

Zuko is unable to look away from the waterbender, from his uncle. “I know.” Those same hands have been gradually piecing him back together for weeks now.

Zuko looks past Aang to find Toph and Sokka sprawled out beside Appa. Guilt rises in him as he remembers his earlier actions, and he follows Aang to their resting spots. Zuko looks around, searching for loose twigs and stray branches. When he has enough, he starts a fire to keep the others warm.

“I - I’m sorry about earlier,” He murmurs, eyes downcast, focused on the flames. Shame creeps through him. “I didn’t mean to hurt any of you. I know I overreacted, I-”

“Zuko, it’s okay.”

He looks up to find Aang giving him a small, tired, yet understanding smile. “You were scared, we understand.”

Zuko feels his throat tightening again. Across the fire, Toph heaves a heavy sigh, her small body rising and falling with it. “I’m really sorry your uncle got hurt,” She says. The exhaustion overlaps the remorse in her voice, making her sound even younger than she is. “I met him just before I caught up with you guys, but I didn’t know he was your uncle. But he told me a lot about you. He really cares about you. He’s a good man.” A small smile edges into her voice. “And he makes great tea.”

Zuko closes his eyes tightly. Toph has been a bundle of contradictions ever since she’d first arrived. Despite all of the attitude she carries, Zuko’s grown quite attached to the earthbender in a record time - though he won’t ever tell her that. She reminds him of what it was like to have a little sister, reminds him of the moments he and Azula were allowed to exist as children, before the world began to crack and fall apart around him.

When he opens his eyes again, Aang, Toph, and Sokka are sound asleep, unable to fight their exhaustion any longer. Zuko exhales unsteadily. He glances over his shoulder.

Katara has left Uncle’s side, heading for the lake. Zuko moves to the old man. His breathing comes easier now; there is a thick bandage about his chest, but his face no longer contorts in pain. Zuko allows his shoulders to drop a fraction.

He follows Katara to the shore, where she kneels to replace the water in her skin. When she stands and turns, her tired eyes soften when she sees him, and Zuko feels the shattered pieces inside of him begin to tremble.

“Katara, I-” His voice catches, cracks. Fresh tears form, stinging his eyes. “I’m sorry, Agni, I’m so sorry!” He moves closer and wraps his fingers in her sleeves. Holding on like this helps him feel like he won’t be swept away by the slightest breeze at any given minute. “I didn’t mean to lash out like that, I just - I couldn’t think straight. All I could think about was Uncle d-” His voice catches again, refusing to speak the word.

“Zuko,” Katara murmurs, and his shattered pieces still, listening. There is something about the way she says his name that quiets everything inside of him, that forces the wounded animal in him to stop pacing, to sit still. She lifts her hands, places them on his cheeks. “I understand. I promise, he’s gonna be just fine.” She lifts her chin and places a kiss on the very tip of his nose, uses her hands to angle his head down so that she can bestow a kiss to his brow. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I swear I won’t let him leave this world.”

She kisses both of his cheeks, and Zuko lets her words settle in his heart, lets her touch gather the broken pieces of him for yet another repair. He makes a pained noise, and he tips forward, pressing his lips to hers. It’s harsh, it’s messy, it’s desperate, but *he* is desperate. He is desperate for this, for her, for the one thing that has made him feel tethered to the world again, has helped him rebuild himself from the ashes that burned him out.

Katara returns Zuko’s kiss. Where he is unsteady, she is solid. She presses her hand firmly against his cheek and lets her other ghost over his scar, a touch that makes him shudder, and into his hair, curling her fingers against the back of his head. Katara meets Zuko’s wild desperation with gentle reassurance. She strokes her fingers through his hair as she presses her mouth to his repeatedly, pouring her steadfast faith into him, filling him to the brim with something he is terrified to name. It calms him, slowly, eases him down from the anxious state he’s been in all night.

When he feels his knees give out, Zuko sinks to the ground, and Katara follows, easing him to the ground gently. She never leaves him, remains connected to him by oaths breathed into his mouth, into his bones, into his heart.

Zuko finally breaks the kiss, gasping raggedly, and drops his head to Katara’s shoulder. She pulls him into her and holds him as he trembles, as he cries, holds him as he properly breaks apart.

He doesn’t know how long they stay like this, but Katara does not leave him. They are both exhausted to the bone, yet Katara takes the time to put Zuko back together. She fits his pieces against one another with her tender whispers in his ear, with her kisses, with her small hands, one pressed against the back of his head, one stroking his back. And though he feels fragile, he feels - he feels protected. Cared for.

When they return to their camp, Zuko stops before his Uncle to look him over again.

Katara sits down beside Uncle. “He’ll be fine overnight,” She murmurs, yawning widely. “I couldn’t do much more in my condition, but I can do more tomorrow.”

Zuko kneels before Katara. He cups her chin and tilts her head, kissing her softly. “You saved him. That’s more than enough.” *You saved me.*

Katara hums softly into the kiss, giving Zuko a surprised look when he pulls away. The affection in her eyes eases his heart. It reminds him that she is adjusting to this, just like he is.

When Zuko stretches out beside Uncle, it is with Katara on his other side, her hand resting close to his hip, and he succumbs to sleep feeling safe and grounded.

Uncle recovers quickly, thanks to Katara's tireless efforts. Zuko has never felt so grateful in his life.

It's easy for Katara to convince them to rest for a while, given the strained events of the last few days.

Zuko watches over Uncle like a hawk. The tension refuses to leave him until Uncle can sit up comfortably. When he leans against Appa and draws in a breath without flinching, Zuko feels the tension finally ebb away.

Aang brings Uncle a cup of tea, and Uncle smiles, eyes lighting up as he inhales the fumes. "Mm, this smells delicious." He takes a slow sip, sighing in pleasure.

Aang grins. "Katara is the one that made it. She's learned a lot about what's edible and what's not." His grin turns sheepish. "We've found out the hard way what's not." He shoots Sokka a look, who throws his hands up.

"Oh - you eat some poisonous berries *one time* and no one ever lets you live it down!"

Uncle chuckles quietly and sips his tea again. "I owe you a great debt, Miss Katara," He says. "Not only for my life, but for the wonderful tea as well!"

Zuko finds the blush on Katara's cheeks extremely appealing.

"Oh, I just did what anyone else would have done," She insists, but the praise pleases her none the less. Zuko represses a smile.

He lifts a hand when Uncle shifts to set his cup aside, a bubble of anxiety forming, and relaxes when the man moves without a shred of pain.

"Uncle," Zuko says, eyes trained on the ground for a moment, "I've been thinking. It's only a matter of time before we run into Azula again. I think I need to learn more advanced firebending, especially if I'm to teach Aang."

Uncle regards him. Beneath the thoughtful look in his amber eyes a small seed of pride.

"I know what you're gonna say. She's my sister, and I should be trying to get along with her." Just the idea conjures a sick feeling in his stomach; their time for getting along has long passed. The wounds Azula has purposefully carved into him are still fresh and threatening to fester.

So Zuko is surprised when Uncle says, "I wasn't gonna say that. She's crazy and she needs to go down." He straightens, and his posture hints back to a time when he commanded an entire army, when he was known as the Dragon of the West.

"It is time for you to resume your training."

Several pairs of curious eyes are on him, but Zuko studiously ignores them and nods. Uncle turns his gaze to Aang and offers a small smile. "And while we do this, you can begin teaching our young friend here the basics of firebending."

Aang lights up with excitement. Zuko feels a bundle of nerves settle in his stomach. He's barely mastered the basics of firebending himself, how in the hell is he supposed to teach anyone else - let alone the Avatar?

He looks past Aang's excited face to find Katara watching him. Her deep blue eyes glimmer, calm like the ocean in the summer. The smile she rewards him with is small, but it contains a deep reassurance, and an even deeper confidence. Zuko swallows hard, but feels the nerves dissipate, replaced with a resolve to be worthy of that smile, of that confidence and faith.

Unfortunately, Zuko is not a patient person, and the teachings do not go as smoothly as he wishes. But his frustration eases a bit when he learns that Aang is simply afraid. Afraid because he had once hurt Katara when he had first set out to master firebending.

Zuko follows Aang's gaze to where Katara sits among their group. His stomach churns at the idea of Katara having any sort of burn scar on her body. "Fire can be destructive," He says, voice soft. He unconsciously reaches up to touch the rigid, warped skin around his eye.

"But fire can do many good things, too." He turns to Aang and creates a steady flame in his palm, holding it out for the monk to see. "Much in the way water sustains life, life can also be created from ash. Fire can keep you warm, can help you cook your food." He spreads his fingers and the flame rises higher into the sky, a thin column of vibrant colors. "Water, air, and earth have their risks too. But fire is no better and no worse than those elements are."

Aang studies the flame for a long moment. His gray eyes are focused on the colors, brows knitted together above them. When he looks up, anxiety and uncertainty remain in his eyes. He looks to Katara, and the apprehension deepens - digging itself into a deep well of affection and longing.

Zuko chances a glance her way. Katara smiles at Aang with the same underlying affection, trying to offer him reassurance. It pulls at something in Zuko's chest, something that begins to whisper that he is inferior, that anything between them is a passing fancy-

until Katara turns her gaze on him.

The sunlight catches in her eyes, making them sparkle, and when she smiles at him, there is so much more than just gentle affection in it. Zuko feels his insecurities slink away under the weight of that smile. However she may feel about the Avatar, he knows for certain that it isn't him Katara's been sneaking kisses from lately.

Zuko smiles back, even if most of it is aimed at the ground, and glances at Uncle. Uncle is watching him with a serene expression, and he inclines his head in a way that Zuko knows means he is doing the right thing. The tightness in Zuko's chest evaporates, and he turns his attention back to Aang.

“You’re familiar with meditating, right? It’s a key part in Uncle’s training methods. Meditating helps me control my emotions, as well as my inner fire, so that I’m in complete control.” He extinguishes the flame in his hand. “We can start there until you feel comfortable with actual bending.”

Aang’s thin shoulders relax. He nods, giving Zuko a grateful smile. “Sounds good.”

The ground beneath them trembles. Toph removes her hand from the surface, having earned their attention. “When you’re done with that, we can start your earthbending lessons.”

Zuko motions for Aang to sit down. Since he has to learn two elements at once, the meditation might come in handy after all.

They practice these teachings until the sun hangs high in the sky. Uncle guides them through it, his voice steady and even, soothing and calm. In truth, Zuko had missed the routine of this. His meditations and trainings have always been the few things that have helped him feel in control, no matter what direction his life is taking.

When Uncle calls the lessons to an end, Aang sighs in relief. It’s easy to see that, though he is capable of holding still, he has a great deal of energy within him and feels the need for constant movement.

But that doesn’t stop him from groaning loudly when Toph yells, “Up and at ‘em, Twinkle Toes! Time to begin your earthbending training!”

Zuko chuckles and stands, stretching his stiff muscles gingerly. He takes a cup of tea from Uncle with a quiet thanks and lets the liquid soothe his parched throat.

“Well, since you’re done with that, wanna spar with me?”

Zuko looks up and chokes on his tea.

He has never seen so much of Katara before.

He has never seen her hair down, either.

Yet she stands before him, hands on her hips, in nothing but white wrappings. Without her robes and her leggings, Zuko can see the gentle outlines of curves that aren’t as obvious when she’s fully dressed. Her brown skin glows in the sun; the smooth expanse of her stomach, of her arms, of her legs - oh, Agni, help him.

Her hair hangs about her face in thick waves. He’s mesmerized once again by the sunlight playing it, free to explore without the constraints of her braid and loopies. Suddenly his hands itch with the urge to tug his fingers through all of that hair, to feel how soft it is again.

“Uh, sure,” Zuko finally says. He winces at the way his voice cracks.

Katara smiles, adorable, teasing, and beckons for Zuko to follow her. He exhales carefully and shucks his tunic from his shoulders - this time rewarded with the way Katara’s eyes widen and travel down his torso. He smirks faintly, feeling much less self conscious than he

had the first time she'd seen him shirtless. There is no concern for his well being in her eyes, not this time. He's put on weight since he joined her group, regaining some of his muscle mass.

Katara leads Zuko around the lake, until they are on the far side of the shore. From here, the others are tiny specks in the distance. Zuko can hear the thud of boulders hitting the ground, with Toph's reedy voice shouting commands at Aang. He turns to Katara, watching her stretch. It's a tantalizing sight. Zuko forces himself to look away, cheeks flushing.

He draws in a slow breath to center himself and takes a stance, watching Katara fall into her own. A thrum of excitement runs through Zuko. He waits, and when Katara smiles at him, he pounces.

It is an exhilarating match. They meet each other blow for blow, matching each other step for step. Zuko feels properly challenged; Katara keeps him on his toes, forces him to become creative. She has learned so much since this journey first began and he's awed to see all that she can do now. It's a far cry from the young girl that could barely move a puddle all those months ago.

Katara skirts around him on a wave and Zuko drops, one leg out as he spins a trail of fire through the water circling him. It cuts through the liquid with a sharp hiss. Katara grunts as she drops to the ground and she rolls to a stop, landing on her knees. She glowers at Zuko, and then she gathers the water on the shore and splashes him. Her laugh rings through the air, loud and sweet, and Zuko sputters, feels something bright blossom in his chest.

He scoffs loudly, grinning, and reaches into the shallow end of the shore to splash her back. Katara shrieks when the water hits her and Zuko falls to the side, laughter spilling out of him. Katara watches him, surprise written across her face, and Zuko feels rather surprised himself. It's been so long since he's laughed openly; the sound is rusted, frayed at the edges, but it is genuine, and it feels good.

Katara's smile softens. She moves to Zuko and pushes him onto his back gently, then she leans down and kisses him. Her mouth muffles his surprised noise, but he responds immediately, lips molding to hers the way she'd taught him not so long ago. Katara leans half over him, one hand on his shoulder, the other braced on the ground by his head, and kisses him softly, sweetly, tenderly. Zuko feels warmth bubble in his veins. She tastes like moonlight, ethereal and celestial, like ocean waves cresting high - she tastes like home. Zuko places his hands tentatively on Katara's waist. Her hair falls in his face, tickling his cheeks, and he can't help but sigh softly into the kiss.

Katara presses closer. She brushes her tongue against Zuko's lower lip, sending a jolt through his stomach, and skims her fingers slowly down his torso. Zuko stiffens a bit and pulls back, head falling against the hard ground beneath him. His cheeks are flushed, heart hammering in his chest. His skin tingles.

Katara watches him quizzically. Zuko opens his mouth, but she beats him to it and says, "You're not used to being touched at all, are you?"

Zuko inhales sharply, but he shakes his head. He brings a hand up to rub the side of his neck. "Not really, no."

"Did I make you uncomfortable?"

"No! No, not at all! I-" He glances at her, then looks away quickly, clearing his throat. "I liked it, a lot." The flush in his cheeks feels like hot embers under his skin.

Above him, Katara smiles softly. She cups Zuko's cheek and leans in, kissing him softly. "It's okay," She murmurs, slender fingers stroking his cheek, "I'm still getting used to this, too."

Zuko sighs softly. He wraps his arms around Katara's waist and rolls them over, smiling when she squeaks, and buries his face in her neck. Her skin is warm; they're both soaked from their sparring session. She huffs quietly against his ear and wraps her arms around his shoulders, squeezing him gently. Zuko does not have the words to express the storm of emotions Katara has awoken within him; he does not know how to thank her for looking past all of his sins, for choosing to open her heart to him, and in turn taking in the scarred contents of his own heart.

When they return to their camp, the others are beginning to root around for dinner. Zuko grabs his tunic and pulls it on, watching Katara begin to brush her hair. He looks up and finds Uncle watching him with a knowing smile and turns away, cheeks flushing hotly. The old man sees everything.

The group leaves the lake a few days later. They argue about where to land next; Toph is the loudest, insisting that she doesn't care as long as her feet are back on the ground. In the end, Aang convinces them to land in forest near a small Earth Kingdom village, insisting that he misses camping in the trees. Zuko disagrees, but he only says so once. If he never has to sleep in the wilderness again, it'll be too soon.

However, Aang is reluctant when Zuko and Uncle wake him up when the sun rises, but he complies none the less. They complete their meditations, and by the time the others begin to stir, Zuko has walked Aang through the most basic of the first steps of firebending.

The Avatar collapses into the dirt when Zuko steps away to help Katara set up the fire and the necessary components for breakfast. She looks soft in the morning light; her hair is still loose and hangs in dark, tangled knots about her face, and her eyes are still sleepy as she prepares their morning meal. Zuko feels his heart stumble and sigh in his chest. He follows Katara's quiet instructions carefully, if a bit nervously. Zuko himself isn't a skilled cook - he was raised in a palace, after all - but he wishes to help. So he helps Katara cook the porridge, heating it to the right temperature, and helps her distribute it.

Sokka hums as he roots through the bags that usually hold their food supply. "We're getting low on supplies," He muses, batting Momo away when he tries to reach into the bag. "I can hunt, that's no problem, but we still need fruits and stuff for Aang." His brows furrow as he all but sticks his face into the bag. "And some of the other stuff you like to use, Katara. Y'know, spices. I think some more bandages, too, looks like we're almost out of those."

Katara hums as she eats. She sets her spoon back in her bowl and stirs the contents absently. "I'll go into the market in a bit." She looks up. "Would you mind coming with me, Zuko?"

Zuko glances up, brow raised in surprise, but he shakes his head. "Not at all."

"Why Zuko?" Aang asks, tone bordering on petulant.

Zuko raises a brow again, but Katara sniffs as she flicks at the rapidly cooling pot of porridge. "Because he's the only one that actually bothers to help me out around here." She glances at Uncle and offers a sweet smile and adds, "And Iroh, too, but I'd prefer it if you took a few more days to recover properly."

Uncle smiles warmly. "I will rest as long as you see fit, Miss Katara."

Katara smiles sweetly again, and Zuko glances at Aang. "Besides," He says, "You have training to do. Firebending and earthbending. You don't get a break just because we need to get supplies."

Aang pouts at his food. Beside him, Toph yawns loudly. "Yep. You've got a *lot* of work to do, Twinkle Toes."

Zuko finishes his portion and helps Katara wash every dish until they're clean. When they finish, he puts everything in its designated place. He looks up for a moment to watch Toph drilling Aang through an earthbending method. She's a harsh teacher, almost as harsh as those who had taught him and Azula growing up; but she is thorough, and Aang is putting all of his effort into being a good student.

Katara drags a small bag into her lap, yawning quietly. She roots through it and extracts a small comb. It's surface is pale blue and covered in intricate carvings, with sharp white teeth hanging from its arch. Katara begins to pull the comb through her locks, wrestling with the tangles, and for a moment, Zuko simply watches, fascinated with the way she fights to manage her thick mass of hair.

He clears his throat after a few minutes. "Would you, um - would you like some help?" He offers. A pink tint touches his cheeks, but he adds, "I can braid, as well. If - if you want."

Katara looks up, surprise written across her face. "Really?"

Across from them, Sokka scoffs loudly. "What would you know about braiding hair? You never did anything with that weird ponytail when you had it."

"I know plenty!" Zuko insists, his flush deepening. "And it wasn't a ponytail, it was a phoenix tail!" Katara reaches out and thwacks her brother on the forehead with her comb, huffing when Sokka yelps. She turns back to Zuko and offers him the comb, a small, shy smile on her face.

Zuko takes the comb and kneels behind Katara. His heart begins to pound, nerves climbing through him. It's been a long, long time since he's braided at all. He still remembers how, thankfully, but being watched while doing it makes him uncomfortable.

He's careful as he begins to pull the comb through Katara's hair. The knots and tangles are plenty, big and small, but in this, Zuko is patient. He takes his time to untangle them, careful as can be so he doesn't hurt Katara. The process is methodical and makes him feel calm.

Uncle watches them with a small smile. "Zuko was taught many things as a child," He says, folding his hands across his round belly. "His mother was the one that taught him to braid his sister's hair, and hers as well."

Zuko's flush deepens once again. At this rate, he'll be a sun ripened tomato. But right now, he is glad for the lessons. Katara's hair becomes softer the longer he combs it, turning glossy and smooth between his fingers. She turns her head a bit to look at him. "Your mom taught you? That's so cute."

"Kind of hard to imagine the psychotic, flame wielding princess as cute kid with braids in her hair, though." Sokka looks up at Zuko and shrugs. "No offense."

Zuko shrugs back. "None taken."

He pulls the comb through Katara's hair once more, glancing up to watch as she separates the right amount of hair for her loopies. She shows him how to form the knot that goes above the braid. It takes Zuko a few tries to get that right, but he eventually does, adding the thin piece of metal that will connect to the loopies to the center of the knot. Satisfied, Katara returns to placing the smaller pieces of metal in her hair, and Zuko focuses his attention on the braid. It's a process he takes very seriously, and he feels particularly pleased that Katara allowed him to help at all. He could tend to her hair all day, he thinks, pulling the braid together carefully.

When he reaches the end, Zuko takes Katara's favored blue ribbon and wraps it tightly around the braid, tying it into place. He studies it with a critical eye as Katara fastens her loopies into place, looking for any lumps or pieces sticking out. When he finds none, Zuko tugs on the little tail under the ribbon. "Perfect."

Katara smiles at him over her shoulder. Her cheeks are pink, eyes shining, and Zuko feels a little breathless. He smiles back, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

Uncle stands and passes Zuko his hat. Katara grabs the necessary bags and the coin purse, arguing with Sokka about things he wants to indulge on that she doesn't agree are necessary.

Zuko pulls the hat on and fixes the brim low on his face. "Be careful, my nephew," Uncle says softly, and Zuko nods. If he's seen the wanted posters, then Uncle surely has too. Zuko straps his dao swords to his back and follows Katara into the woods.

The walk to the village is fairly short. The market place is mostly empty; a lull between the busy hours. Zuko takes the bags from Katara and follows her obediently from stall to stall. He is a little unsure of how to respond when she asks for his opinions on the selections, but he tries to be helpful by pointing out that Toph seems to favor sour fruits but doesn't particularly like squash, that Sokka had a bad reaction to that one weirdly red seasoning he'd wanted to try, and that Aang, Uncle, Appa, and Momo will eat just about anything given to them.

Zuko fiddles with the heaviest bag as Katara stops at her next stall. He adjusts the food inside, moving the items around gingerly to avoid denting and smashing them, and wraps the top of the bag carefully around his hand. He looks up to find Katara talking with the vendor, and smiles a bit when he sees the mangoes on display.

"Oh, absolutely!" Katara says enthusiastically. She digs into the tiny purse in her hand and places the right amount of coins in the man's open palm. "My fiance and I both love mangoes. We had our first kiss because of them, actually!"

Zuko's heart jolts, but he is not as surprised as he was the first time Katara had referred to him as her fiance. This time, he can hear the underlying humor in her voice, can see the roundness of her cheeks from how wide her smile is. No one else knows about anything that has happened between them; what harm could telling a total stranger do?

"That's very romantic," The vendor says, holding the crate steady as Katara plucks her desired amount of the fruit.

Zuko takes the bag from her when she's gotten her fill. "Thank you, love," He says, leaning down carefully to kiss her cheek, tilting his head so that the brim of his hat doesn't bump her. The shy smile that crosses her face is entirely worth it; Zuko will call her every pet name known to man just for that smile.

Zuko handles the bags carefully as they leave. He follows Katara down the path to their camp, ducking under a few branches.

"Are you gonna do that in every town we visit?" He asks.

Katara shrugs. "Maybe." She looks over her shoulder and raises a brow. "Why? Does it bother you?"

Zuko smiles. "No." He moves to walk beside her, shoulder brushing hers.

A thought crosses his mind. He chews his lip for a moment, unsure of whether or not he should ask. His need to know outweighs his nerves.

"Are we ever going to tell the others?"

"That we're engaged?" Katara smiles wryly. "I'll break it to them when you make me a betrothal necklace."

Zuko chuckles, then glances up. "I meant.. About us."

Katara is quiet for a moment, and Zuko feels a thrum of anxiety in his chest. He can understand why she would want to keep things a secret; he isn't the most attractive being in existence. Not many would make him the first choice for anything romantic. The others are still learning to trust him, and for all he knows, Katara is too. He's caused this group a lot of grief in the past.

"Eventually," Katara finally says. "But.." She shrugs, eyes on the canopy of leaves above them. "I like having this to myself. I like having you to myself." She glances up at Zuko from

the corner of her eye. "I'm always taking care of someone. Always doing something for someone else." She shrugs again. "It's nice to just... Be with you. I dunno, it - it makes me feel like a normal girl. When we're together, just us, I can forget for a bit that I'm helping to train the Avatar, and that I'm helping him save the world, and I can do that without feeling bad for it."

Oh. That wasn't what he expected to hear. None the less, it eases the tension between Zuko's shoulder blades. He nods thoughtfully.

"Does it bother you?" Katara asks, watching him. "Keeping it a secret?"

Zuko thinks about how little privacy everyone really has in their group. He thinks about the longing looks he catches Aang giving Katara; how protective Sokka is of his sister. How perceptive Toph and Uncle are. The idea of telling them about this... Thing between them is more than a little daunting.

And then he thinks about the way Katara looks at *him*, the soft tenderness and unashamed want he finds in her eyes. He thinks of the way she touches him, the way her fingers on his skin make him feel strangely whole; how her kisses are the greatest gift he's ever received. No one has ever admitted to wanting him, not like this. No one has ever wanted to be selfish with him. Zuko doesn't quite know how to handle this yet. A large part of him is positive that, somehow, this will blow up in his face, that he will ruin this completely and lose Katara, lose all of this. But he is more than willing to try, at least, to give himself to her and to take whatever she will give him.

After all, he has never wanted someone the way he wants Katara.

"No," He says, "I don't. We can tell them whenever you want to."

Katara smiles up at him, and Zuko thinks that her smile must be the physical embodiment of sunshine, there's no other explanation for how bright it is. They're closer to their camp now, he can hear the others, but Katara stops him with a hand on his chest. Her fingers curl into his tunic lightly and she leans up, kissing him softly. Zuko feels himself melting into the kiss, feels something begin to bubble inside of his heart. Katara pulls away gently, giving him another smile, and Zuko follows her down the path, feeling like a love struck idiot.

"So, a betrothal necklace," He says, "Is that what your necklace is? You said it was your mother's once." He clears his throat, embarrassed to remember the incident with the pirates.

Katara nods. They arrive at the camp, and she extends her arm as a perch for Momo when he flies at them. Zuko reaches into the bag to offer the lemur his favorite fruit. He takes it with enthusiastic chatter.

"It's a custom among my people," Katara explains. "We carve a pendant, usually from bone, put it on a ribbon, and give it to our intended. The pendants are all unique, but the meaning is the same." She touches the pendant hanging from her throat. "My father made this one for my mother."

Zuko leans close to Katara to study the pendant. He remembers how curious he had been about the details and designs and the meaning when it was in his possession, once. He notes the swirls and waves, the way the edges are perfectly smooth. "It's beautiful."

Katara smiles up at him, eyes soft. There's a touch of sadness in their blue depths, a sadness he understands well. Katara squeezes Zuko's arm gently and takes the food to the others. He watches as she fends off three hungry people, stepping in to help her pry Toph away from the bag.

Uncle kneels beside him. He places a hand on his shoulder and Zuko looks up, offering Uncle a moon peach. Uncle takes the fruit and gives Zuko a warm smile, the kind that makes him feel as though, for once, he isn't a total failure.

Zuko sits back for a moment to watch everything around him. Sokka is arguing with Toph about the fruit she favors, insisting that its sour taste is unholy and that the odd orange shade makes it a freak of nature. He glances at Aang, watches him fuss over his animal companions. Uncle stops beside the boy, offering some advice about how to keep Appa's massive nails clean.

He looks to Katara as she organizes everything, shifting her water skin to sit more comfortably on her hip. When she looks up, she catches Zuko's eye, and offers him a small, secretive smile. The light in her eyes wraps around his heart, settling deep within him.

Zuko extracts a mango from the bag and takes a bite, feeling utterly content and settled.

Chapter End Notes

So I really really really hope this lived up to anyone's expectations! Part of me was kind of worried about where this went, and another part of me was like "well it is an au....." soooooo hopefully this came across nicely! I'll have the next chapter ready soon!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Her thumb rests on the corner of his lower lip, and Zuko feels unbearably fragile, as though a single breath will shatter him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter got done a day earlier than I expected, so yay for that!!

Writing it was actually super stressful on me, because I want everything to be legit and realistic, so forgive me if anything seems amiss~

Once again, thank you to everyone that's following this story, I could not have done this without your support, thank you so much!

Special shoutout to [this perfect angel](#) for helping me out and putting up with my rambling!! I cannot begin to express how grateful I am for her!! <3

Zuko sighs as he stretches his legs out. It's so nice to sleep inside, with a roof over his head, and no bugs trying to eat him alive.

He folds an arm under his head and opens his eyes. His body knows that the sun is rising, just peaking over the horizon. Somewhere across the room, Uncle is snoring loudly enough to wake the dead. But even that can't ruin how relaxed he feels.

Sitting up, Zuko feels around for his tunic and tugs it on. He rakes a hand through his hair to try to pull out the tangles and slips out of the room, careful not to wake Uncle as he slides the door shut behind him.

Zuko completes his meditations and training forms, timing the moves with the rise of the sun. He can't see it, but he can feel the pull in his blood. By the time he is done, Katara stumbles from her room. She stifles a wide yawn, blinking blearily, and offers Zuko a sleepy smile when she sees him.

His heart melts into a puddle of goo behind his ribs. Will he ever get used to that feeling? He hopes not.

Zuko straightens out of his final form and moves to Katara. "Good morning," He murmurs, leaning down to kiss her cheek. His heart stumbles again, momentarily nervous, but when she smiles up at him, any unease in his body evaporates on sight.

It is still considered a miracle that she doesn't push him away, that she doesn't recoil in disgust when he comes near her. That she can feel even an ounce of the affection she gives him is enough to weaken his knees.

Katara yawns again. She shakes her head at the end of it and drops her head forward, resting it against Zuko's chest. "Ugh, how can you manage to be up so early?" She moans, fingers curling in his tunic. "It feels like torture to even open my eyes right now."

Zuko chuckles softly. He lifts a hand and brushes his fingers down Katara's messy hair. "I rise with the sun," He reminds her, leaning down to kiss the crown of her head. "Go sit down, I'll brush your hair and then we can do something about breakfast."

The domesticity of it all is not something Zuko thought he could ever experience. It's not something he's given much thought to, really; for so long, his pain and anger has been a driving point, compelling him to commit awful acts against the Avatar's group for even the slightest chance at returning home. At finally gaining his father's approval.

Letting go of that has been difficult. In the harsher moments, when his anger is difficult to quiet, when he can't stop thinking about all he's been through, Zuko cannot dismiss the thoughts crawling through his head to simply capture Aang, to burn the boy's friendship to cinders and take him to his father, so that he may return to the life he's craved for so long.

But the clarity returns in moments like this, moments when he sits behind Katara, pulling a comb through her hair as she babbles in a sleepy voice about old memories of her grandmother, as she tells him of the lighter things she's been up to while they've been in Ba Sing Se.

He watches the comb glide through her thick hair, removing the last of the tangles, and remarks on the incredible sense of peace surrounding him. Zuko begins the braid, and his chest feels tight suddenly. If not for this girl in front of him, this force of nature, this miracle inside of a human body, he might never have been granted any of this - this peace, the forgiveness the others have allowed. The friendship they have offered him. The love Katara gives him, unconditional and free.

He swallows thickly and ties the braid off, then he leans forward, arms looping about her waist, and tucks his face into her neck. Katara starts in surprise, but she covers his hands and turns her head a bit. "What's this for?"

"Thank you," Zuko murmurs, voice muffled against her skin. "I - I'm not good with words. I'm not good at - at this." He exhales an unsteady breath, arms tightening around her waist. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to thank you for all that you've done for me lately, Katara, but.. I'll never stop trying."

"Oh, Zuko." Katara twists in his arms and locks her arms around his neck. She hugs him tightly, peppers kisses down his temple, down the rigid skin of his ruined eye, and the tightness in his chest contracts painfully. "You don't need to thank me. I care about you, I want you to be safe and happy."

She pulls back and tips his chin, kissing him softly. Zuko feels the tightness in his chest beginning to loosen as he kisses her back, fingers bunching the fabric of her tunic.

"I'm so glad you're with us, Zuko," Katara whispers. Her slender fingers splay across his unmarred cheek; he is acutely aware of her touch. She smiles softly, eyes bright. "I'm so glad you're here with *me*. You've come so far."

Katara presses her other hand to his ruined cheek, and her smile widens into something more playful, alleviating the seriousness of the moment. "I think it's my turn to brush your hair."

Zuko blinks, then smiles shyly. "Uh, sure. If - if you want."

"You definitely need it, it looks like some bird made a nest on your head."

Zuko grunts, offended. "It's not that bad!"

Katara laughs and retrieves her comb, shuffles on her knees to kneel behind Zuko. She hums thoughtfully as she passes her hand over his hair, then pulls the comb through the back of it gently. Zuko winces when she catches a small knot.

"Your hair's gotten so long," She muses. The teeth of the comb tickle the back of his scalp. "I never thought I'd actually see you with a full head of hair, but it suits you."

Zuko smiles at his lap, shy and sheepish. "It feels kind of nice," He admits. "My scalp isn't nearly as sensitive now."

Katara chuckles quietly. She pulls her fingers through Zuko's hair, brushing it off of his temples, and Zuko feels himself relaxing into her touch.

Zuko watches the sun beginning to filter through the window, thinking about everything they've done since their arrival, and everything they've yet to do.

It has been a long, wild, and messy visit to Ba Sing Se. The city is not what it seems, with threats laced inside of it that none of them had expected. But still, they've pushed through, and they've finally come across some success.

They've gotten through to King Kuei; in a few hours Katara will be attending a meeting to plan for the invasion. She has tried in vain to convince Zuko and Iroh to go, but Uncle's responses are always mysterious and Zuko flat out refuses; he's hardly comfortable leaving their house, let alone visiting the Earth King's palace. He doesn't know how far the news of his name being on a wanted poster has traveled; he doesn't know who would and wouldn't recognize his face.

No, it is safer to help out behind the scenes, instead of risking the group's safety.

"Much better," Katara says, voice satisfied. She sets her comb aside and smooths her hand down Zuko's hair, then leans down and kisses the top of his head, and Zuko smiles at his lap.

He watches her return to her room to get ready for the day and exhales a slow breath.

How things have changed.

With the others gone, dealing with tasks of their own, Zuko and Katara have been left with only Uncle to occupy the house.

Which means they don't have to hide too much.

For the first time in his life, Zuko has been left essentially alone with a girl he likes.

With his Uncle as their chaperone.

He hangs his head and groans quietly.

When Uncle emerges, he yawns loud and wide. Zuko smiles a bit. "Good morning, Uncle."

Uncle smiles sleepily, scratching at his chin. "Good morning, Zuko." He yawns again, greeting Katara as she emerges from her room.

"I'll be back when I am!" She calls, pausing to attach her water skin to her hip. "There's plenty of food in--"

"We know," Zuko interrupts, giving Katara a small smile. "We can handle ourselves."

Katara blinks, then smiles sheepishly. "Right. Sorry." She moves to the door, turning as she opens it. "Try to have a little fun today." Winking, Katara disappears when the door closes behind her.

After a moment, Uncle moves to Zuko and places a hand on his shoulder. "Nephew," He says with a warm smile. "Would you accompany me on a walk? A rather nice man told me yesterday that there is a wonderful tea shop not far from here."

Zuko looks up. "Sure, Uncle." He moves to their shared room and pulls his robe on, fastening it at the waist. The material is thicker than the ragged clothing he had arrived in, much more comfortable too.

The air is warm outside, carrying the scent of spring on its breeze. Zuko follows Uncle down the cobbled path before them. There aren't many people out right now, but he feels his nerves beginning to wake up. His appearance has changed in the last few months, but he cannot change his scar; it's a dead giveaway to his identity.

Only a few people glance at them as they pass, cursory glances, but it knots at Zuko's stomach each time.

He takes a seat in the corner of the room when they reach the shop Uncle had in mind. It's a small place, cozy and warm, and smells of ginseng and something sweet that Zuko can't name. He lets Uncle order for him, watching the old man's enthusiasm with a small smile. It's nice to see his uncle in such a relaxed and comfortable state; he deserves it, for all of the intensity and strife life has thrown at him.

The tea that is settled in front of them smells warm and rich. Zuko thanks the young girl softly, inclining his head.

Uncle smiles at him over his cup.

“You have grown quite close with the Avatar and his friends,” He notes, sipping his tea. He glances into the contents for a moment, judging the liquid, and deems it acceptable when he takes another sip. “I’ve noticed you’ve grown especially close with miss Katara.”

Zuko blushes. He twists the small plate around on the table. Of course Uncle has noticed; nothing slips by him. He nods, risking a glance up. “She’s been a really good friend.”

Uncle’s smile is sly. “A good friend, yes. And perhaps something more?”

The heat in his cheeks feels too hot to bear. Zuko shifts uncomfortably in his seat, but when he looks up again, he berates himself for being so cowardly. Uncle has been his mentor, his guardian, the one constant pillar of support in his life when he needed it the most. If Zuko can’t talk to Uncle Iroh, then who can he talk to?

His fingers curl around the small cup before him. “She scares me sometimes,” He admits, voice soft. His eyes follow the steam from his cup as it curls through the air. “She’s just - she’s so.. Open. Unconditional.” He risks a glance up and relaxes a bit when he finds nothing but patient curiosity in his Uncle’s gaze.

Zuko shakes his head a bit. “I didn’t think someone like her could ever even.. Tolerate someone like me. But she doesn’t just tolerate me, she - she cares about me.” It’s the first time he’s said it out loud; the first time he’s even admitted it to himself. The weight of it settles heavily on his shoulders, but it doesn't feel like a burden. It feels like it's meant to be there.

“You are a very special young man, my nephew,” Uncle says. He sets his cup down and watches Zuko, amber eyes glinting in the gentle light around them. “And miss Katara is a special young woman. I believe that fate has brought you to a beautiful, if unexpected, path in life.” Uncle tips his head, and his eyes soften so much that Zuko’s chest feels like it's being pushed inwards. “I have not seen you smile this often in so many years, Zuko, and it eases my heart. And it isn’t just Katara’s presence, but the others as well. They have brought out the better side of you, as you are doing for them.”

Zuko looks away, unsure of what to say, if there is anything he can say at all.

Uncle reaches across the table and clasps one of Zuko’s hands in both of his own. His touch is warm, hinting at the fire simmering deep within him. Zuko looks up, and he offers his uncle a small smile, squeezing at his hand.

He glances down into the steam again, marveling at the path he has stumbled upon, and how drastically different it is from where he imagined his life being.

The pots are sitting on the stove, but Zuko can only stare at them, unsure of what to do.

He's never cooked on his own before. He eyes the ingredients Uncle has set out warily. Maybe it's best to watch a few more times before he tries to do it himself.

When Uncle returns to the kitchen, he holds a piece of thick paper in his hand. His mouth is drawn into a thin line.

"What's wrong?" Zuko demands.

"Katara has summoned us to her meeting."

Zuko frowns and takes the paper. He reads over the message, then looks back up.

There is no reason for Katara to summon them to the meeting. If she'd wanted them there, she would have brought them along when she'd left.

Which means that it must be a trap.

"Uncle," Zuko says, "This can't be from Katara. It could be a trap, and if it is a trap - then she-"

"I know." Uncle takes the paper and studies the writing once more. "We don't have much of a choice. If there is even a chance that Katara is in danger, then we must go."

Zuko clenches his fists and nods. Not for the first time, he wishes Katara had been able to go with Sokka to meet with their father. At least there, she'd be safe with her family.

Uncle watches Zuko for a moment. "Whatever this may be, we will make sure Katara is safe first." He places his hand on Zuko's shoulder and squeezes, then turns off the stove.

Zuko closes his eyes for a moment. He exhales a slow breath, quelling the anxiety threatening to overtake him, and follows Uncle to the door.

The walk to the Earth King's palace is tense. Zuko keeps close to his Uncle's side, eyes averted. For Uncle, it is easy to be unassuming, to give a friendly smile to everyone he passes. Zuko is content to walk in his shadow until they reach the massive stone steps. Inside the foyer, a young woman that unnervingly resembles their tour guide waits for them.

"Welcome," She says, voice overly bright. Her smile is wide, but brittle; like one touch could snap her in half. "Please come with me. Your presence is wanted right away."

Immediately, Zuko feels trapped, like a skittish bird in a gilded cage. It's been so long since he's been inside of such a luxurious place, since he's been in a palace at all. This is nothing like the one he grew up in. The halls are smaller; everything is layered in gold and shades of green, intermingled with brown.

He curls his hands in his sleeves and glances at Uncle, who appears to be the picture of serenity. But Zuko knows him better than that. He recognizes the alertness in Uncle's eyes, the tight lines at the corners; right now, he is a seasoned general scoping out enemy territory.

Zuko lets his mind wander to Katara, and the bud of anxiety in his gut begins to blossom. He knows full well she can take care of herself, but it doesn't stop his mind from flitting through all of the horrible things that could have happened to her, if anything happened at all.

He exhales slowly and follows Uncle through the door they're shown to.

It looks nothing like what a general in an army would use to plan anything. It's empty except for unused furniture laid out before a tapestry of mountains. A small table stands before them, a kettle and two cups sitting on small saucers on its surface.

There is not a single general or soldier around. Not a map in sight.

Katara is not here, either.

The blossom of anxiety in Zuko's stomach begins to branch out through his system.

They are left waiting for what feels like hours. Then, a door in the corner of the room opens. A line of men clad in black, with green insignias on their chest, file into the room and form a neat square around them. None of them say a word.

And then his worst fears come to life when Azula walks into the room.

"Hello, Zuzu, Uncle," She says. Her smile is sinister. They've walked right into her trap and she knows it.

Zuko's fists clench tighter in his sleeves, singeing the fabric.

"Azula," He snarls, "Where is Katara? What have you done with her?"

Azula rolls her eyes. "Oh, don't bother with the water slinging peasant." She tips her head, sharp brows raised thoughtfully. "Have you met the Dai Li? They're earthbenders, but they have a killer instinct that's so firebender. I just love it." The ice in her voice is enough to chill the room.

Zuko seethes with rage. Of course Azula is behind this, *of course*, because she always has to be one step ahead. Always has to ruin anything Zuko tries to do.

Beside him, Uncle reaches for a cup of tea. He is calm and collected. "Did I ever tell you about how I got the nickname The Dragon of The West?"

"I'm not interested in a lengthy anecdote, Uncle," Azula drawls, studying her dagger like nails with boredom.

"It's more of a demonstration, really." Uncle lifts the cup to his mouth and drains the liquid out of it.

Zuko glances at him and smirks. He takes Uncle's arm without prompting and ducks behind him. Above him, Uncle lunges forward, breathing a magnificent and deadly wave of fire at the Dai Li surrounding them. The heat radiates above his head, and when the square around them breaks, Zuko charges forward.

He crashes through the wall with a blast of his own fire and dashes through the hole, pausing only to be sure that Uncle is behind him.

The Dai Li are quick to pursue. Zuko slides around the corner, shoulders tensing at the sound of solid rock crashing into the wall just inches from him.

Uncle slides in front of him. He stops a few feet from the wall before them and conjures a bolt of lightning, movements sharp and fluid, and uses it to blast through the wall. Zuko stumbles after him, but stops short at the burning hole before him.

Uncle looks up at him from the bush he landed in, hand dropping from his head. "Come on! You'll be fine!" He yells.

Zuko curls his fingers at his sides. "No!" He shouts. "I'm tired of running! It's time I faced Azula!"

He turns his back on the exit and finds that he doesn't have far to go.

Azula stands before him. Her relaxed demeanor is infuriating. "You're so dramatic," She sighs, tilting her head. The green ribbon in her hair flops gently. "What, are you going to challenge me to an Agni Kai?"

He ignores the jolt the words send through his blood stream. "Yes!" Zuko growls. "I challenge you!"

"No, thanks!" Azula shrugs his challenge off, tone flippant, a playful smile on her lips.

The dismissal makes Zuko's blood boil. He slides himself backwards and lifts his arms, conjuring a large ball of fire - the exact way Katara had drawn him into a tower of snow and smashed him to the ground so many months ago. Zuko steadies his hands, remembers the way she had *pushed*, and he does the same, pushing the fire at his sister with a hard shove.

Azula doesn't move, doesn't even blink. Two Dai Li agents slide before her and open the floor to block the fire. The stone gloves on their hands fly at Zuko, trapping his feet in place. He falls forward with a shout, and another glove pins his hand to the ground. He struggles, he struggles hard, struggles with all of his might, but he can't break the hold.

Azula raises one perfectly groomed brow. She turns and walks away with out a word. More of the men under her command take her place. They continue to wrap their stone gloves around Zuko, effectively binding him in place.

The rage within him builds and builds and builds. Zuko grunts as the agents grab him and drag him to his feet, forcing him down the hall. He exhales harshly, steam hissing from his nose, and drags his feet, raising his body temperature to a boiling point. But it's useless; it only heats the stones holding onto him and burns small holes into the fabric of his robes.

The Dai Li drag Zuko through the palace, down into the depths of it. But they don't stop at the prison cells, like he expects. No, they take him further. Zuko grits his teeth, eyes flitting about nervously as their surroundings give way to ancient stone embedded with glowing

crystals. Zuko frowns. "Where the hell are we?" He demands, but no one answers. No one so much as glances at him. The push him forward, further and further into the depths of this strange underground world.

When they finally stop, the man holding his shoulder removes the stones from his body. Zuko jerks to the right, but the grip on his shoulder tightens painfully, almost forcing him to his knees. Another agent stops before the stone wall and opens a perfectly round hole, leading to a small tunnel. "You've got company," The man calls, voice echoing through the tunnel. The hands holding Zuko in place push him down the hole. He tumbles down, letting out several pained grunts, and lands hard on his shoulder. The hole closes above him, sealing him in.

"Zuko!"

Zuko shoots to his feet, his heart flipping. Katara stands before him, eyes wide, staring for a moment, before she rushes at him with her arms out.

"Katara!"

Zuko meets her half way. He grabs Katara by the shoulders and crushes her to him. The relief that floods through him knocks the breath from his lungs. He pulls back to look at her, taking her face in his hands. She's safe, she's in one piece. His heart squeezes before finally relaxing.

"What are you doing here?" Katara demands. Her fingers curl tightly in Zuko's robe, eyes still wide as she looks him over.

Zuko's face contorts with frustration. "Azula," He answers bitterly. "We received a letter saying you had summoned us to the meeting you were in, but we didn't think we could trust it. But I couldn't stand the idea of you being in danger, so we went anyway." He sighs quietly and looks Katara over again, touching her hair gently just to reassure himself.

The anger in Katara's eyes flickers like a flame threatening to escape control. "Great," She says sarcastically, "We get to rot down here together! How romantic."

"We're not gonna die down here." Zuko hugs Katara to him again, cupping the back of her head. "Uncle got away, I know he'll find us somehow. We're gonna get out of here."

"Even if we do, then what?" Katara breaks away from him, the anger in her eyes flaring brighter and brighter. "Azula is still out there - she's probably burned the place down by now!" Her voice rises, echoing off of the crystals around them. "She's a terrible person! Everyone from the Fire Nation is!" Katara begins pacing, unaware of the affect her words have on Zuko. "Spreading war and famine is all you people know!"

The anger in Zuko's blood simmers. "You don't know what you're talking about," He grits out.

"I don't?!" Katara whips around, her braid swinging about her shoulders like an agitated snake. "How dare you?!" She turns away from him, but not before he sees the tears forming in her eyes, before he hears her voice thicken with emotion. "You have no idea what this war

has put me through - me personally." All of the fight leaves Katara in a rush as she sinks to the ground, hunching in on herself. "The Fire Nation took my mother away from me."

She might as well have doused him with cold water. The anger in him deflates immediately, allowing a bone deep sadness to slink into its place.

"I'm sorry," He murmurs, moving closer, kneeling down beside her. "That's something we have in common."

Zuko remembers very clearly the cold clarity that had seized him the moment he realized that his mother was leaving and never coming back. The emptiness her departure created has been with him ever since.

He turns Katara's chin gently, and his heart breaks at the tears running down her face. He has seen so many sides to her, but this is the newest, the most surprising; beneath all of her strength, Katara is just like him - a person burdened by trauma, with no one to turn to about it.

He resolves to change that.

Zuko helps Katara to her feet and wipes a stray tear from her chin gently. She looks down; tear drops still cling to her lashes. She scuffs her foot against the ground in shame.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you before."

"It doesn't matter." His voice is barely a whisper, lost among the glowing crystals.

"It's just that-" Katara hesitates, glancing up at him. "For so long now, whenever I would imagine the face of the enemy, it was your face. But I know you're not the enemy anymore."

"My face." Zuko lifts a hand to his scar. "I see."

"No, no-" Katara moves closer, hands raised. "That's not what I meant." Her voice is contrite, brows furrowed.

"It's okay." He drops his hand and turns away, eyes distant with far away memories. "I used to think this scar marked me; the mark of the banished prince, cursed to chase the Avatar forever." He turns his head just so. "But lately, I've realized that I'm free to determine my own destiny. Even if I'll never be free of my mark."

It goes unspoken, her influence on this realization.

"Maybe you could be free of it."

His stomach jolts. "What?"

Katara moves closer. "I have healing abilities," She reminds him.

Zuko looks away. "It's a scar. It can't be healed."

Katara reaches under the neck of her robe and lifts a narrow blue vial from beneath the fabric. The tiny crescent moon on its stopper glints in the light. "This is water from the Spirit Oasis at the North Pole. It has special properties so I've been saving it for something important. I don't know if it would work, but..."

She trails off and Zuko closes his eyes. And then her slender fingers touch his scar, the only set of hands to ever do so. Her thumb rests on the corner of his lower lip, and Zuko feels unbearably fragile, as though a single breath will shatter him.

"You're so beautiful, Zuko," Katara whispers. "I don't know what you would look like without your scar, and I don't care. I know you as you are now, and you're so beautiful. But if it will ease your suffering, then I'll do my best to help."

And just like that, Zuko feels himself tumbling off of the precipice he has been on for all of these months. He falls deep into the depths of the vast ocean that Katara is, but he is not drowning, no, far from it.

He is being consumed by an emotion he has been terrified to name, an emotion he's been dancing around since the first night he held her in his arms.

Love. He loves her.

There is no going back from this.

The walls around them tremble. To their left, the stone blasts inward. The sound of crystals shattering is deafening; when the dust settles, they find Aang and Uncle Iroh standing before them.

Katara jerks back with a gasp. "Aang!" She runs to him and throws her arms around the boy, and Zuko is left feeling suddenly cold.

Uncle rushes to him and hugs his neck tightly. Zuko returns the hug loosely, watching Aang and Katara. Aang returns Katara's embrace without hesitation. The look he gives Zuko over her shoulder is full of questions.

The anger in Zuko's blood begins to simmer once more.

"Aang, I knew you'd come," Katara says, her hands on his shoulders. The relief in her voice is palpable. Aang smiles up her, gray eyes glowing in the light of the crystals.

Uncle watches Zuko. He places a hand on his chest. "Prince Zuko, it's time we talked." He turns to the others with a small smile. "Go help your other friends," He says, "We'll catch up to you."

Aang bows to Uncle and jogs into the darkness of the tunnel he created. Reluctantly, Katara follows him. She looks over her shoulder, eyes uncertain. Zuko looks away.

"Uncle?" He asks softly. His eyes stay locked on the ground. Beneath the anger, a keen note of sadness swirls in his chest.

"You're not the man you used to be, Zuko." Uncle watches him, gaze intent in the soft light around them. "You are stronger, and wiser, and more free than you have ever been. And now you have come to the crossroads of your destiny." Uncle moves closer, and Zuko looks up, eyes conflicted. "It's time for you to choose. It's time for you to choose good."

Zuko squeezes his eyes shut. Hasn't he already done that? What choice is there left to make? He's made friends with the Avatar, he's become his teacher, for Agni's sake! What else is there left to do?

The ground under him shudders. Zuko lurches back with a shout, and he immediately raises his hands in defense when sharp green crystals encase his uncle, locking him in place.

Two Dai Li agents slide into the cavern. Azula slides between them. Her eyes narrow as she approaches.

"I expected this kind of treachery from Uncle, but Zuko, *Prince* Zuko - you're a lot of things, but you're not a traitor. Are you?"

The anger in his blood begins to boil. "Release him immediately," Zuko demands.

She ignores him. "It's not too late for you, Zuko," Azula says. Her voice is smooth as silk, her words inviting. "You can still redeem yourself."

Behind him, Uncle says, "The kind of redemption she offers is not for you."

"Why don't you let him decide, Uncle?" Derision drips around the title, but when Azula turns her gaze back to Zuko, there is an unexpected softness in her sharp eyes. "I need you, Zuko. I've plotted every move of this day, this glorious day in Fire Nation history, and the only way we win is together. At the end of this day, you will have your honor back. You will have father's love. You will have everything you want."

Father's love. Something hot and piercing rolls through Zuko's stomach. His father's love is all he has ever wanted for the last four years, for longer, even - for his entire life. A heavy weight presses on his lungs, threatening to cut off his air supply.

But no, that's not the only thing he wants. Not anymore.

He can feel the phantom touch of soft fingers on his cheek, on his lower lip. On his scar.

"Zuko," Uncle calls, voice quiet, pleading, "I am begging you. Look into your heart and see what it is that you truly want."

Zuko bows his head and closes his eyes tightly. His skin prickles, the weight pressing down harder on his lungs. What does he want? What does he really want?

Azula watches her brother closely. "You are free to choose." She lifts a hand, and the Dai Li behind her ascend through the tunnel they arrived in. Azula leaves them behind without another word.

The air around him feels hot, stifling. Zuko stares at the tunnel ahead of him, lost in the darkness. No, he is not a traitor, he never has been. Not now, not when he was thirteen. But his eyes have been opened; he has seen the destruction the Fire Nation has wreaked upon the world, and it sickens him.

But... He could go home. He could end it all, today, and finally return home. He could regain his honor. He could finally make his father see that his not worthless.

Zuko curls his hands in his hair, shoulders hunching around his ears. Why does it have to come to this? What did he ever do to deserve any of this?

Uncle watches Zuko closely. "Zuko," He says, "Please. You have come so far. Do not throw it all away now."

The anger inside of him erupts, flooding his veins like lava. Zuko clenches his jaw and rips off the robes layering him until he stands in his pants and tunic, arms bare to the chill drifting through the tunnel. But it does not touch him.

"Zuko!" Uncle shouts, straining against the crystals encasing him. "Zuko!"

Zuko ignores him. He curls his hands into tight fists and takes off down the tunnel, following his sister's footsteps.

The sound of rocks exploding leads him to the end of the tunnel, back into the abandoned city the Dai Li had walked him through. Zuko stands at the edge of the tunnel for a moment. Azula is in a stand off with Aang and Katara, all three in defensive positions. No one has noticed him yet.

He gains their attention with a blast of fire aimed at the open space between them and holds his fist by his head, his arm extended, palm forward with his thumb bent in.

The other three watch him closely as he approaches. Zuko looks at each of them. His heart pounds against his ribs, a harsh beat demanding to be heard.

Aang stares at him with wide eyes, leaning back just so. He doesn't dare look away.

Katara meets his gaze. Her mouth forms a thin line, eyes filled with questions.

Azula watches him, waiting.

It would be so easy.

You're doing the right thing, Zuko.

His fist clenches tighter. He could do it. He could end it today. He could earn back all that was ripped away from him.

I like having you to myself.

His heart threatens to rip apart his rib cage, threatens to explode with the sheer force of everything inside of it.

I know you as you are now, and you're so beautiful.

Katara watches him. Her eyes are pleading, begging him to choose them, to choose her.

Zuko.

Zuko grimaces, teeth bared, and punches a large flame through the air, aiming for Azula. She lunges away, quick as lightning, and the battle resumes.

The anger raging within him fuels his fire, burns at every inch of him. He watches Katara, watches the wave she throws at Azula, watches the way it narrowly avoids slicing through his sister's face.

There is nothing but raw power in Katara's movements. She is matching Azula step for step, something Zuko himself has never been able to do. And when Azula takes aim at him, when she shoots a bolt of blue fire right at his chest, Katara slides in his way, evaporating the flames with a sharp water whip.

How could he ever let this go?

Zuko moves closer to Katara. She draws the water on the floor to her, coating her body up to her shoulders with the liquid. When Azula extends her hand, finger tips aflame, Katara lashes out, the water reaching for Azula, and grabs her wrist tightly. Azula gasps, then narrows her eyes. She lifts her leg for a different approach, but Katara grabs her foot with another tendril and lifts her off the floor. Zuko's eyes widen for a moment, and then Katara slams Azula into the ground, knocking the wind from her.

Aang reaches Katara's other side. His clothes are dirty and singed, much like Zuko's and Katara's are, a frown etched between his brows.

Before any of them can react, Azula is on her feet again. She twists her arms around her head and creates a whirl wind of blue fire, shoving it at Katara with all of her might. Katara draws up a shield of water, but the force of the flames sends her across the room. She slams into the crystals with a sharp cry, falling to the ground. Her ribbon has been cut loose; the impact tugs her braid apart, causing her hair to fall in thick waves about her face.

Zuko's heart lurches to his stomach. "Katara!" He yells. He rounds on Azula, punching out several balls of fire. She dodges them, but he chases after her, twisting through the air, a trail of fire following him. It hits the stone and blocks his sister's path, making her stumble.

Aang crouches deep, then lifts the stones around him. He raises them high -

but they are knocked from his grasp by the arrival of the Dai Li. Aang turns his attention to the intruders, combating earth with earth.

Zuko starts forward, desperate to get to Katara, to make sure she is alive, but Azula blocks his path. Fear coils in his stomach when eleven Dai Li agents surround Katara, but Zuko

relaxes slightly when she sits up. He refuses to look away until she has formed a moving mass of tendrils, and only then does he return his focus to his sister.

Azula smirks at him. "You really should have better taste than that," She chides, "Even if you are a traitor, you're still royalty."

Zuko snarls. He whips his arms through the air, creating long lashes of fire, and snaps them at Azula. She retaliates by cutting through his fire with her own; the air around them crackles, as if threatening to explode and engulf them.

They are outnumbered, dangerously so. Zuko looks around, chest heaving. Katara has not let her tendrils fall; even from here he can see the bruise on her cheek. He looks to Aang, meeting his gaze. The young monk is thinking the same thing. Zuko can see it in his eyes.

Aang shakes his head. "There's too many," He says. His voice is quiet, but it echoes through the cavern. He closes his eyes and whispers, "I'm sorry, Katara." Then, he turns his back, forming a crystal barrier around himself.

Zuko frowns. What the hell is he doing? He risks a glance at his sister, then rushes across the stones, splashing through the small channel, and stops before Aang's hiding spot. Whatever the kid is doing in there, Zuko isn't about to let anyone get to him.

So he fends off the agents that get close, whipping fire at their feet to keep them from moving the earth under Aang. The muscles in his arms are beginning to tire, but he doesn't dare stop.

Suddenly, the Dai Li stop their movements, eyes wide. Zuko frowns and lowers his arms warily, turning around. His eyes widen as well when he sees the blinding light emitting from the crystals, and he steps back quickly, watching it rise to the ceiling.

The crystals explode outwards and Aang emerges. His tattoos glow as he rises in the air. Pure, raw power radiates from every inch of him. The sight steals Zuko's breath away. He watches in awe, watches the way Aang's hands form a loose circle -

until a bolt of lightning sears into his spine.

Aang freezes mid air, and Zuko feels cold fear dash through his body. He watches in horror as Aang begins to fall, his light extinguished.

Below him, Azula smirks proudly, her fingers pointed in the position to conjure lightning. The Avatar has fallen, and she is responsible.

"No," Zuko whispers, "No!" He rushes forward, desperate to do something, *anything*, anything at all.

A tidal wave rushes past him. Katara submerges all in her way. She catches Aang before he hits the ground, letting the water rush out from under her. Zuko rushes to her, watching as she cradles Aang's limp form in her arms. Tears rush down her face as she looks up at him, anguished and defeated.

He drops to his knees before them, unaware of the hard impact, of the water soaking through his pants. Aang is not moving. He is not breathing.

This. This is what he could have returned home for. He could have gone back home today, could have had everything restored, and the price for it? The life of his friend.

Zuko feels sick to his stomach.

Azula advances on them, triumph written across her face. Before she can get close, a wave of fire cuts through her path, forcing her to double back.

Uncle Iroh drops from a ledge high above them, landing with a nimbleness that defies his age.

"You've got to get out of here! I'll hold them off as long as I can!" He lashes out three times, fending off the Dai Li agents advancing on them.

"Uncle-" Zuko says, panic seizing his heart.

Uncle risks a glance over his shoulder. "Go!" He commands, voice sharp, unyielding.

"Zuko," Katara pleads, voice desperate. She stands, clutching Aang to her, and sniffs, shoulders heaving with the sobs threatening to overtake her.

Zuko grits his teeth. He moves to Katara, follows her to the waterfall across the room. The sound of his uncle deflecting the attacks aimed at him claws at his heart, but he wraps his arms around Katara and Aang both, supporting the boy's weight. Katara weaves a thick stream of water around them and lifts them into the air, away from the chaos below. Zuko watches Uncle for as long as he can. They reach the mouth of the waterfall's entrance to the room quickly, and when they do, the noise below them ceases. Zuko squeezes his eyes shut, fighting back tears of his own.

It doesn't take as long as Zuko had feared to find Sokka and Toph. They're still in the palace, and when Zuko rushes into the throne room after Katara, they jump to their feet, horror written across their faces.

"We need to go," Zuko says. His tone is commanding, leaving no room for questions.

Sokka reacts first. He ushers King Kuei from the room, making sure that Bosco is in tow, and leads the others to where Appa waits. The great bison senses the distress around them and groans, the sound rumbling through the night air as he paws anxiously at the ground. Bosco is reluctant to go near Appa, but Toph lifts the bear and the king to Appa's back by moving the ground under them. When they're settled, Sokka helps Toph onto Appa's back. Zuko climbs onto Appa's head and helps Katara settle with Aang. She holds his lifeless body tightly as Zuko takes the reins and commands Appa to the sky.

When they are high enough in the sky, Katara lays Aang against Appa. Zuko shifts aside to give her room.

She watches Aang for a moment, then removes the vial of Spirit Water from her neck. She removes the cork and extracts the water. It floats in her palm for a moment, then picks up speed, racing itself in a tight circle that glows with the promise of life.

Zuko takes Aang carefully, so carefully, and leans him forward. The mark on his back makes his stomach roll; another burn scar to bear.

Katara brings Aang into her arms. She leans over his shoulder and guides the water to the burn mark on his back. It glows brightly, blindingly so, as it spreads across the entirety of the burn on Aang's spine, and then it sinks into his skin.

Aang doesn't move. Zuko swallows thickly. Katara sobs quietly, hugging Aang to her. Fresh tears spill down her cheeks.

And then Aang's tattoos flashes once, and the young monk groans quietly.

Zuko jerks, eyes wide. The others behind them lean forward, anxious to see the result of Katara's gift. She pulls back, a relieved breath falling from her lungs, and hugs Aang to her, holding him tightly.

Zuko closes his eyes. The wind whips through his hair, stinging his eyes. But he doesn't care. Aang is alive; they all made it out alive. His heart trembles in his chest as he watches Aang slowly return Katara's embrace. When Katara eases him down against Appa, Aang blinks a few times, and then he passes out.

Behind them, King Kuei is quiet as he says, "The Earth Kingdom has fallen."

Sokka takes over steering Appa. He takes them to Chameleon Bay, where he had been earlier this week with his father and his people.

At the moment, there is no safer place for them to be.

It's well past midnight when Appa lands on the beach. The colors are muted in the dark, but there is no mistaking the Water Tribe characteristics of the encampment. Only eleven tents sit on the beach, the chief's included. Appa lands with a low groan. It attracts the attention of the Water Tribe warriors immediately; they all emerge from their tents, startled at the sight of the massive sky bison before them. When Sokka slides to his feet, one of the men shouts for the chief.

Zuko gathers Aang into his arms and drops to the sand below, landing as lightly as possible. Aang doesn't stir. Zuko presses his fingers to the inside of Aang's wrist to reassure himself; the pulse there is feeble, but it flutters in his veins.

Katara joins him quickly, followed by Toph and King Kuei. Bosco tumbles to the ground with an unhappy whine. Appa huffs in response.

Zuko follows Sokka's footsteps. He ignores the whispers surrounding them and heads for the largest tent, the one marked with the chief's insignia.

A warrior inhales when he passes, eyes locked on Zuko's scar. "Fire Nation," The warrior says, voice alarmed, "You're-"

Sokka steps before Zuko and Aang. "Yes," He confirms, "He's Prince Zuko, and he's our friend, and therefor your ally. Leave him be." Sokka sounds every bit like the future chief that he is, full of authority.

Zuko's throat tightens. His emotions are riding high, utterly overwhelmed by everything that's happened tonight. He gives Sokka a grateful look and follows him to the chief's tent. Katara moves ahead of them, intent on preparing somewhere for Aang to lay, but she stops short when she sees her father.

"Katara," The man whispers, and it's all she needs to break. Katara rushes forward, throwing herself into her father's arms, and sobs quietly into his chest.

Zuko swallows past the knot in his throat. He moves into the tent, not wanting to intrude on the moment, and lays Aang down on the bed roll Sokka spreads out.

"Hakoda," He says quietly, glancing at Zuko. "Our dad. His name is Hakoda. Chief Hakoda."

Zuko looks up and nods once. He settles Aang carefully, adjusting him in the most comfortable position he can make. After a moment, Katara drops to her knees beside him. Zuko is moving before she can even speak. He rises to his feet and moves to the corner, gathering the containers of water he sees, and brings them to her. She gives him a small, tired, strained smile, and begins to remove Aang's shirt. Zuko helps, stomach shifting uncomfortably at the wounds under the fabric, smaller than the mark on his back, but still worrisome.

Zuko remains rooted at Katara's side as she begins a proper healing session. He moves her hair behind her shoulders, pries it out of her face gently so that it won't get in the way. Her eyes never once leave her patient. The light from her water is soothing, and suddenly Zuko is exhausted, worn down to his very bones.

It takes Katara two hours to be comfortable with leaving Aang as he is. Only when his breathing comes easier, when his heart beat is stronger, does she finally return the water to their containers and slump back. Sokka wraps his arm around her shoulders, easing her back so that she can stretch her legs out from under herself.

"You saved him," He says softly, rubbing Katara's arm slowly. "He's alive. That's all because of you. But it's time for you to rest, too. You were in that fight too, you need to take care of yourself as well, Katara."

Katara nods and rubs at her eyes. She glances at Aang, sighing softly, and lets Sokka pull her to her feet. Zuko stands as well, wincing as he does; the bruises he sustained earlier are beginning to properly form.

"C'mon. Dad's set up some extra tents for us." Sokka nods for Zuko and Toph to follow them, and guides Katara from their father's tent. He leads them to the edge of the encampment,

where four new tents have been erected, and guides Katara into the first one. Zuko watches them go, watches the entrance for a long moment, and then slips into one on the very end.

It is unnervingly quiet inside. Zuko sighs slowly, sinking into a crouch. He presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, rubbing hard enough to see little bursts of light. Every cell in his body is exhausted, begging for sleep, for relief from the steadily blossoming aches awakening across his body.

"Zuko."

The sound of his name pushes him to his feet. He turns quickly to find Katara stepping inside, letting the flap flutter shut behind her. The sight of her, ragged and weary, breaks his heart.

"I'm sorry," She whispers, stepping closer. Tears form in her eyes, threatening to fall. "I'm so sorry, I - I didn't have a choice, I had to-"

Zuko frowns. "What are you talking about?" He asks softly, moving closer.

"The Spirit Water." The tears begin to spill down her cheeks, streaking through the dirt on her skin. "I told you that I would use it on you, but - then Aang - I had to, I-"

"Stop." Zuko reaches out, pulls Katara to him. "Stop, please, you do not need to apologize for that. He's alive because of you. I'm not mad, Katara, I could never be mad at you for something like that. You did the right thing." His arms tighten around her trembling shoulders. "You have nothing to be sorry for, absolutely nothing."

Katara presses her face to Zuko's chest and begins to cry anew. He holds her tightly, tucking her head under his chin, and lets her cry, unbothered by her nails digging through to his skin, unbothered by the tears soaking his tunic. Tonight has utterly overwhelmed her, he knows, rocked her very foundation. He holds her tighter; as much as she needs to be held, he needs to feel her against him, needs the physical reminder that she is safe, that they both survived everything that happened.

When she feels calmer, Katara lifts her head to look at him. She sniffs quietly and murmurs, "You looked so unsure for a moment, earlier, in the catacombs. I thought I had lost the both of you tonight."

Zuko sighs quietly, heavily. "You almost did." He looks away for a moment, shaking his head at himself. "Azula... She offered me redemption. Said that if I helped her, I'd be welcome back with open arms." He looks down at Katara. "It was tempting. I can't deny that. For so long all I wanted was to go home, to regain my honor and win my father's favor."

Zuko releases Katara's shoulders to cup her cheeks. He brushes his thumbs under her eyes, wiping her tears away carefully. "But I'm here. I made my decision, and I promise you, I will not waver like that again. You won't lose me. You won't lose either of us."

Katara's lower lip wobbles. She nods and pulls Zuko closer, pressing her face into his shoulder. Zuko wraps his arms around her again, cupping the back of her head, fingers

threading through her hair.

He doesn't know how long they stand like this. Eventually, the exhaustion gets to them both, and Zuko eases Katara to the ground. He adjusts his hold on her, unwilling to let her go just yet, and she settles into him, slumping against his chest. All of her weight falls against him, but he doesn't mind. He is more than capable of holding her up when she cannot support herself.

Zuko rests his cheek to Katara's hair, watching the side of the tent. No light filters through; the moon is absent tonight. Even the stars seem dim, their light dulled by the events of the evening.

A soft sea breeze pushes against the tent. Zuko sighs quietly and closes his eyes. Katara shifts, curling further into the circle of his arms. He doesn't move an inch. They escaped, they survived, but at a terrible expense. Zuko knows that the only way to go from here is forward, but for now, they need to recoup, need to nurse their wounds.

Zuko buries his face in Katara's hair. For once, when he goes to sleep, he won't worry about where he belongs, because now he knows; now he knows that he belongs here, with the young warrior in his arms.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

He feels small, suddenly. Small and frail and powerless. All he wants is to go back to the cliffs they were on, to curl up with her somewhere that nothing can reach them. Weakly, he whispers, "I belong with you."

Chapter Notes

Surprise, I pushed this one out early!

So we've moved into s3. Forgive me if this chapter feels out of place (I really hope it doesn't) but I felt deeply compelled to include Zuko in the invasion attack, and to give him the chance to confront Ozai like he does in canon. A small voice in my head kept insisting it was necessary to the quiet healing process he'd begun in this story. I wanted to touch on The Boiling Rock at least a little bit too. (I'm also ridiculously nervous to share this chapter, way more than I was to share the first three. Ugh.)

Once again, everyone that's continued to read this, thank you all so much. I couldn't do it with you. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's almost odd, being the only person from the Fire Nation among the rebels that have arrived. Zuko watches the masses mingling about, stretching their legs, greeting old friends and familiar faces.

But he's grown used to feeling like an outsider. At least in this sense, he can understand how Aang feels on a daily basis.

Zuko finds the Avatar in the crowd. He's harder to spot, now, with a head full of hair. It's still a disconcerting sight, but not an unattractive one. He looks more at ease, now that the forces have arrived.

The day they've been planning for is finally here. Today, they will invade the Fire Nation when the solar eclipse arrives. Today, they will give hope to the world once more.

A large scale invasion is out of the question without the Earth Kingdom's soldiers. But they've worked around this easily, thanks to Sokka's incredible strategic skills; without him, this wouldn't have happened at all.

Zuko crosses his arms. He knows the eclipse is coming, but at the moment, his inner fire feels stable and sure. Later, though, that won't be the case. He exhales quietly and looks across the bay, finding Katara among the crowd.

If ever he feels unbalanced, all he has to do is seek her out. It doesn't matter how far away she is, if he can just see her, he can find his footing again.

However, the earthbender mooning over her is starting to get on his nerves. Is she blushing? She's blushing! Zuko's eyes narrow, locked on the earthbender making Katara blush. Who even is that guy? He scoffs quietly, looking away to watch more people in green file off of the Water Tribe ships.

"Well, well, well. Isn't this interesting?"

Zuko jumps, his heart skipping a beat, and whirls to find Toph beside him. The devious grin on her face is not a good sign.

"Spirits, what are you doing?! Trying to scare me to death?!"

Toph's grin widens. "Don't try to hide it, Your Highness," She says, placing her hands on her hips. "Your heart beat is all over the place. I always knew you were the jealous type."

Zuko's heart flops around, betraying him to Toph's incredibly sensitive feet. "What are you talking about?" He demands.

"You're jealous of Haru. He's making googly eyes at Katara and you're jealous!" She lifts her chin smugly. "I know you two have a thing going on. You're both terrible liars, and if that weren't enough, you can't stay away from each other." She snorts. "Both of your heart rates get all whacky whenever you get close to one another."

Zuko opens his mouth, and then he sighs and slumps, conceding defeat. There's no point in denying it, not to Toph; she would know. Like she already knows. He looks around to make sure no one is listening to them; anyone that could be a problem is well out of ear shot, but that does little to ease his nerves.

"If you tell *anyone*, I swear I'll--"

"Calm down, Sparky, before you set your pants on fire." Toph rolls her eyes, waving off his agitation. "Your secret love affair with the Sugar Queen is safe with me." Her grin returns, shameless and wide. "For a price."

"You know, you're really devious for someone so small." He turns to the earthbender, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Alright, what do you want?"

Toph shrugs, examining the dirt trapped under her nails. "It's not easy for a girl like me out here. I'm very helpless, you know." Her sightless eyes go wide, adopting an innocent facade. "I need someone to carry me around when I'm tired, take care of my share of Sugar Queen's chores, do my bidding as I see fit."

Zuko shakes his head, but can't help the small smile on his face. Toph really does remind him of the less sinister aspects of what it's like to have a younger sister.

"Fine," He agrees, looking down at her again. "If I make it out of the invasion alive, I'll do whatever you want. I'll even brush your hair for you."

Toph blinks, leaning back a bit. It startles Zuko - he doesn't think he's ever seen her caught off guard.

"Really?" She asks, voice full of surprise.

"Um, yeah? Unless you don't want me to?"

Toph shrugs, glancing away. Suddenly she seems her age; a twelve year old girl, an only child that's still learning what it can be like to have siblings.

"That.. Would be nice, actually. It always makes Katara really happy when you play with her hair."

Zuko smiles softly. He reaches out and bumps Toph's shoulder lightly. "I promise I will if I come back."

"*When* you come back." She smiles up at him, reaching out to slug him in the arm.

Zuko grunts, holding the sore spot, but smiles none the less.

Eventually, Hakoda assembles their allies for quick meal, and for a briefing. The Water Tribe warriors settle before Hakoda easily, and the other recruits follow suit. When he begins to pass out the dishes, Zuko steps up beside Katara to help. He's met with only a few suspicious looks; after all, his red robes are a dead give away, even if his scar isn't, but a few is much better than many.

Zuko moves to stand with the chief and with his friends. Sokka stands beside him, his arms full of the maps he's been pouring over endlessly for weeks. He swallows audibly.

"Don't worry," Hakoda says, offering his son a warm smile. "You'll do great."

Zuko hesitates for a second, then reaches out to place his hand on Sokka's shoulder. "Leadership is in your blood," He murmurs, offering a small smile of his own. "You can do this."

Sokka looks at him, and for a moment Zuko can see himself in the depths of his blue eyes; the oldest son, destined to follow in his father's footsteps, born for the throne - or, in Sokka's case, the Water Tribe equivalent, a seat before his peers.

Squaring his shoulders, Sokka nods. He gives Zuko a small smile, his quiet thanks, and heads for the platform of stone Aang has raised for him. Zuko winces when he trips and his scrolls go flying, glancing at his family. Hakoda and Katara wear matching expressions of fond exasperation; their love for Sokka is abundantly clear, plain as day.

Zuko turns back to his friend to pay attention. It's an awkward presentation, but Sokka is getting the point across. After a few minutes, Hakoda relieves his son and takes over.

It's the day of The Black Sun. Soon enough, Zuko's bending will be completely gone, cut off by the eclipse. He'll be entirely powerless in the place he's been banished from. The place he used to long for.

His nails press into his arms. No, he won't be entirely powerless. His firebending isn't his only skill. The dao swords resting against his back are a visible, physical reminder of this, and he takes comfort in their weight.

The crowd gathered begins to cheer, and Zuko feels his heart flutter in his chest. He exhales quietly, watching everything around him, watching everyone prepare themselves.

This is it. This is really happening.

He makes his way to the boat when it's time, following Toph up the plank. Immediately he seeks out Katara, finding her by the thick mass of hair hanging about her shoulders in the crowd. Zuko allows himself a moment to admire how wonderful her hair looks when freed from her favored braid. She looks perfectly at home in the sea of blue aboard the ship, back with her people.

When the ship leaves, Zuko moves to the very back. He leans on the bow and watches the water, watches the waves rippling against the ship as it cuts through them, effortless and smooth.

Quiet footsteps approach. Zuko glances up to find Katara moving to him. She stops beside him, and a small part of the anxiety in his stomach quiets.

"How are you feeling?" She asks, watching him.

"I'm fine."

"Zuko."

He sighs, allowing his shoulders to slump. "Nervous," He mutters, "Sick to my stomach. Like I'm about to burst out of my skin and break apart."

Katara places her hand on Zuko's arm. He focuses on the touch, on how solid and real she feels. "I can't imagine how overwhelming this must be for you," She murmurs. "We are going to win this." He can feel the weight of her gaze on his face, but refuses to meet it. "And when we do, you can take your rightful place on the throne and fix your father's mistakes."

Zuko jolts, looking at Katara quickly. "What?"

"Zuko, you're the heir to the Fire Nation throne. You're the crown prince." Katara tugs on his arm until he's facing her. Her eyes are bright, fierce, trapping him in place. "It's where you belong."

When he had removed his phoenix tail, he had abandoned all hope of taking the throne some day. The thought has crossed his mind since, but more as a wistful fantasy of what could have been, not as a legitimate future.

Zuko shakes his head, feeling short of breath. "Uncle could-" He starts weakly, but Katara cuts him off.

"Iroh had his chance. He would want you to do this, Zuko." She places both hands on his shoulders; her thumb rests against his neck, right over the rapid flutter of his pulse.

"Someone has to do this and there is no one better for it than you. This war will end, but there will still be so much work to do after that. If we're going to have any chance at actually fixing things, then you need to become the Fire Lord."

She's right. He knows she's right. But it's not a thought he can fathom right now, when he's so close to his former life, when the past is about to collide with the present.

He feels small, suddenly. Small and frail and powerless. All he wants is to go back to the cliffs they were on, to curl up with her somewhere that nothing can reach them. Weakly, he whispers, "I belong with you."

Katara's eyes soften. Her lips curve into a tender smile, and she places her hands on his cheeks and nods. Beneath the tenderness lies a firm resolve. "You belong with me," She whispers, nodding in agreement. "And you belong on the throne." Katara brushes her thumb under Zuko's eye, across the uneven ridges of his scar. He can barely see her out of that eye, but he cannot look away. "You're not facing this alone, Zuko. None of us are. We're a family now. I have faith in you, and so does Sokka and Aang and Toph. Don't forget that."

Zuko nods once, unable to speak. He leans down and rests his forehead to Katara's, needing some of her strength, needing to know her faith in him isn't misplaced. Katara tips her head up to kiss him gently, softly, offering her reassurance in a physical way he can carry with him.

Whatever happens today, there is no going back. He will have to face his birth right.

All too soon they arrive. Zuko can see the statue of Fire Lord Azulon standing high above the fog. It's meant to be a symbol of greatness, but for him, it is only foreboding.

The royal city.

His home.

He cuts his eyes, glancing back at the others.

No, not anymore.

His home is a rag tag group of people, now.

His home is a waterbender with eyes like the ocean.

Sokka stands at his father's side as he gives out orders. Katara joins the swampbenders, creating a thicker cover of fog for them.

Zuko crosses the deck to join them. "The gate will be raised soon," He reminds Hakoda. And then the bell sounds, proving his memory right. The net begins to rise, and when it's in place, the dragons in the statue's hands set the net on fire.

The speed boats zip out, and Hakoda begins to usher everyone below deck. Zuko hesitates for only a moment when he spies the contraption The Mechanist had created from Sokka's designs, but he hurries in after Pipsqueak anyway. It's more than a little unnerving to be under water, but he focuses on Katara, watching her sure, steady movements as she helps propel the machine forward. So far, everything is moving along smoothly.

The necessary break for air arrives quickly. Zuko follows the others to the surface, breathing in deeply. The air smells of sea salt, of brimstone and warmth.

Aang lands on top of their submarine, glider sliding closed. He's bald now, not a hair in sight; his blue arrow stands out proudly in the light of the sun. "So," He says as they approach, "This is it, huh?"

"Are you ready for the Fire Nation to know the Avatar is alive?" Sokka asks. His voice is pure enthusiasm.

Zuko watches Aang. The monk's nerves are palpable, but beneath that is a stalwart determination that makes him proud.

"I'm ready."

Sokka grasps Aang's forearm in the traditional Water Tribe way, then pulls him into a hug. Katara and Toph envelope him as well. Zuko stays back, but when Aang looks up at him, beckoning him over with his eyes, Zuko steps forward with a small smile and wraps himself into the embrace. "I hope you kick some serious Fire Lord butt, Twinkle Toes," Toph says.

"Everyone, listen up." Hakoda's voice carries across to them, and the group separates to give the chief their attention. "The next time we resurface, it'll be on the beaches, so stay alert and fight smart. Now break time's over, back in the subs!"

For a moment, Zuko can only watch the waters around them, lost in the memories of his ship departing the city; he can almost feel the bandage wrapped around his head again. Shaking himself, Zuko dismisses the thoughts and follows Toph below deck.

The submarine sinks beneath the surface once more. Zuko stays near the window, watching Katara swim by with Appa. The bison looks magnificent in his armor, intimidating and ready for battle. Zuko watches the bubble on Appa's head, heart squeezing momentarily. She'll be fine, he knows that. Katara is a powerful warrior in her own right; whoever she comes against today won't be a match for her.

At the head of the submarine, Hakoda raises the periscope for surveillance. "Everyone in position!" He calls, turning around. "Earthbenders, into your tanks! This is gonna be a rough

ride.”

The earthbenders move quickly to their designated spots, settling in place. They reach the next obstacle, and when the bell sounds, muted and distant under water, Zuko thinks he’s going to vomit. He centers himself, locking his legs into place, and presses a hand to the wall beside him to stay steady as the submarines weave around the harpoons aiming for them.

Hakoda stays at the periscope, continuing to give out orders. Zuko watches as the torpedoes are loaded into place. He braces himself when they’re released, wincing a bit as their impact on the stone structure rocks the waters around them. When they make it through to the other sides, everyone gathers together inside of the tanks, something else Sokka designed.

Zuko stands beside Sokka. When he heaves a quiet breath, Zuko allows himself a smile. He glances at Sokka, sharing a look with his friend that says, *Yeah, I’m not too keen on possibly dying today, either.* It eases some of the turmoil in him, knowing that he isn’t the only one wracked with nerves.

The submarines begin to surface, and the attacks resume. The tanks holding them crawl onto the beaches. Everything is still for several agonizing seconds, and then war cries erupt, ricocheting off of the metal walls as everyone charges out into the open.

The attacks are immediate; all around them, stone explodes. Zuko sticks out like a sore thumb. He is the only person in Fire Nation colors, and he knows someone is bound to identify him. But there isn’t time to worry about that. Instead, he he scopes the towers above him, shooting out bolts of fire to stop the arrows and explosives from getting too close.

The front gates open to allow small tanks into the battle. Zuko rushes forward. He can feel the eclipse coming closer, heighting his anxiety. He gathers all of his energy and draws his hands down, then pushes out, creating a massive wave of fire that melts the wheels of the tanks, intent on making good use of his bending while he can.

Soon, the troops on komodo rhinos arrive, but their forces are gaining the upper hand. Zuko dives their numbers back with a fire whip. He drops into a low crouch and extends his leg, spinning sharply. The flames he creates spread outward, biting at the komodo rhinos’ feet, forcing the animals back.

He stands up, looking for his allies, and is relieved to see Sokka and Hakoda leading their Water Tribe Warriors, fending off the soldiers with ease. They are impeccable fighters; father and son, working together, as one extended, cognitive machine.

The majority of the battlements have been dispatched but there are still two in tact. That, added to the soldiers around them, makes things tight. Sokka lands Appa in front of them and calls for a wedge formation, benders in the middle. Zuko takes a spot outside of the earthbenders, watching everything closely, listening.

Sokka leads them forward, secure and commanding. Their tanks slam into the walls, triggering the bombs, and when they break through, their allies cheer loudly.

Zuko stays at the front lines with Sokka. He lunges forward, fighting fire with fire, and pushes the soldiers back. Several of them gasp - they've finally recognized him. But he doesn't stop, refuses to let that deter him.

Finally, the ranks break and the soldiers dispatch, running for cover. Their tanks push on, the earthbenders continuing to fend off the Fire Nation tanks. Zuko stays with Sokka and Toph, listening to Sokka's review of their plans. He's absolutely right; they're doing fine, and the eclipse hasn't even begun yet.

Which doesn't sit right with Zuko.

He lifts his head, watching the volcano in the distance. They should have met much more resistance than this; his father is never unprepared. Never one to hold back like this. So what gives?

Katara arrives with Hakoda in tow, which relieves the lot of them. Zuko follows Sokka and Toph to their sides. He looks Katara over, allowing the momentary flare of anxiety in his chest to disappear once he's sure she's safe. Her eyes rake over him as well. She reaches out, squeezing his hand, and then looks past him, brows furrowing. Zuko turns to follow her gaze, searching the sky.

He isn't sure what he expects to see, but it isn't Aang. So when he lands before them, a frown etched onto his face, Zuko's heart sinks into his stomach.

When Aang kneels down, Zuko and Katara do as well. Sokka tips his head and says, "Please tell me you're here because the Fire Lord turned out to be a big wimp and you didn't even need the eclipse to take him down."

"He wasn't home. No one was." Aang looks up. "The entire palace city is abandoned."

Cold realization clenches around Zuko's stomach at the same time that Sokka growls, "They knew."

"Azula," Zuko mutters, looking to Sokka. "Ba Sing Se. She was there. She must have discovered the plans while she was there somehow."

"It's over." Aang hangs his head, scratches at the dirt. "The Fire Lord is probably long gone, far away on some remote island where he'll be safe from the eclipse."

Again, Zuko is in sync with Sokka. He shakes his head as Sokka says, "No. My instincts tell me he wouldn't go too far. He would have a secret bunker, somewhere he could go during a siege, but still be close enough to lead his nation."

All eyes turn to him, and Zuko nods. "Sokka's right. There are a network of bunkers hidden deep beneath the palace. They were built years ago in case something like this happened. That's where he'll be."

"If it's an underground bunker we're looking for," Toph says, voice bright, "I'm just the girl to find it."

Sokka reaches under his mantle for the timing device The Mechanist had given him. "It looks like we have ten minutes until the eclipse. Ten minutes to find the Fire Lord."

Zuko watches the volcano again, listening to the others arguing about whether or not to stay and fight. He agrees with Hakoda; everyone that came today did so knowing the risks. He looks up when the decision is placed in Aang's hands, and a small smile crosses his face at Aang's determination to try. Despite the anxiety in his stomach, Zuko knows that this is where he's meant to be right now, right here, fighting to make things right in the world.

Katara chooses to stay behind with Hakoda and the others, something no one questions. But the decision does tie Zuko's stomach into heavy knots. His heart tumbles about in his chest as he climbs into Appa's saddle, turning to look at her one last time before they head to the palace. She's already watching him. The worry is clear in her eyes; for the others, and for him. Her brows crease, the worry too big to be held in her eyes alone. She watches him, and her thoughts are clear: *come back to me*.

Zuko nods once. His thoughts are written plainly across his face as well: *make sure I have something to come back to*.

It doesn't take Appa long to reach the side of the volcano, and for a moment, Zuko is overwhelmed with an onslaught of memories; chasing his sister through the halls, tea with Uncle Iroh, all of the games he'd played with Lu Ten, sitting at the turtle duck pond with his mother.

The indignation of soldiers being sacrificed so mercilessly.

The confidence that he could beat a seasoned soldier in an Agni Kai at thirteen.

The horror when he realized it was his father he would face.

The agonizing pain of the fire scorching his skin.

His stomach rolls, threatening to betray him.

Zuko lands lightly on his feet when Appa touches the ground. He watches Toph, nodding at her detection of the natural tunnels.

"The bunkers will be deeper inside," He says, and Toph digs her hands into the volcano, nodding in confirmation.

Sokka throws his fists into the air. "Zuko, you remember how to get to them?"

Zuko nods. "My cousin and I used to sneak down to the bunkers to explore. I remember." He reaches up, adjusting the scabbard on his back. "There are two of them, and our chances of running into Azula as well are high. Be careful."

The others nod, and Toph steps forward, creating their entrance. They follow her in, and immediately the air becomes thick with heat. Zuko dismisses it. He is a child of the sun; the heat cannot touch him.

Getting through to the right tunnels proves difficult, but they make it. When they come to a fork in the tunnels, they hesitate. Zuko clenches his jaw. His memory isn't the problem; he knows where both bunkers are. The problem is that he can't predict what they will find in the one they reach. His father and his sister are far too cunning to let it be this easy.

"Go that way," He tells Aang, nodding to the left. "Toph, Sokka, go with Aang. I'll take the right. I know Azula is in here somewhere, and if I can cut her off, then you can deal with my father." The eclipse is arriving; in a matter of seconds, his fire will be snuffed out.

Aang takes a step to the left, reluctance etched into his shoulders. "Be careful, Zuko," He says. Zuko nods and heads down his designated tunnel. His steps are quiet, barely echoing in the vast space around him.

He rounds another corner and finds the metal door he was looking for. The soft light of the torches on either side darkens the maroon paint coating the metal, adding a sinister air to it. Zuko takes a deep breath. He reaches out and opens the door.

It slides open smoothly and Zuko's heart plummets through his chest, through his stomach, through the floor.

His sister he is prepared to see.

His father he is not.

But he sits on the far side of the room, behind a row of twelve soldiers. Ozai holds a tea cup in his hand, lifting his head at the sound of the door opening. His eyes widen in surprise, and then his face smooths out, sardonic interest taking over.

"Prince Zuko," Ozai greets, chin lifting. "So you've returned home at last."

For a long moment, Zuko is rooted to the floor. He is acutely aware of the rigid, unyielding, warped flesh around his eye. And for a brief second, he can feel the heat of the flames on his skin. It is very hard suddenly to stay up right.

If Ozai is here, then Aang has found Azula. They chose wrong, they chose their paths so very badly. But there is an opportunity here, one Zuko cannot afford to waste. So he forces his legs to move, and he enters the room, refusing to cower in a corner like a large part of him wishes to.

As he crosses the room, Zuko feels it: the eclipse has begun. The fire deep with him disappears, and for a moment, panic claws its way into his throat. But he forces it down; he is not powerless. Though he is terrified, he is no longer the weak child that he was when he left the Fire Nation.

Zuko stops before the soldiers. Ozai waves a hand lazily, dismissing them. He doesn't see a threat before him, merely a mild irritant. Well, that's fine.

"So it would seem that your sister was right," Ozai says, watching his son. "Because if you are here, surely that means the Avatar is alive. Where is he? Don't tell me you were ignorant

enough to come alone."

Zuko bristles, but he holds himself in check. "He'll be here soon, and when he gets here, you're done with."

Ozai chuckles, and the sound embeds itself into Zuko's skin. "How perfectly fitting," Ozai drawls, standing to his full height. The sight intimidates Zuko a great deal, but he holds his ground, refusing to budge an inch. "My worthless son, working side by side with the enemy to bring down his family. To bring down his own people. How infuriating!" Ozai steps forward, crimson robes swirling about his feet as he stops on the edge of his platform. "Since you are so loyal to the Avatar now, you can die with him today. The next breath you take will be your last!"

Immediately, Zuko reaches for his dao swords. He splits the blades in half and slashes them through the air in warning. "Think again!"

Ozai stops where he is, eyes narrowing. Zuko knows that his father is a skilled firebender, but he is also a skilled fighter. Still, Zuko is as well; he can hold his own.

The silence between them is thick with tension, with unspoken anger and pain. Zuko shakes his head slowly. "For so long, all I wanted was for you to love me." He closes his eyes briefly. "To accept me." He opens his eyes, meeting his father's livid gaze. "I thought it was my honor I wanted, but really, I was just trying to please you. You, my father, who banished me just for talking out of turn. My father, who challenged me, a thirteen year old boy, to an Agni Kai." Zuko stabs a sword in Ozai's direction, his voice raising. It echoes through the chamber; the weight of what he's kept buried for so long is inescapable now. "How can you possibly justify a duel with a child?"

"It was to teach you respect," Ozai snarls.

"It was cruel, and it was wrong!"

"Then you've learned nothing!"

"No, I've learned everything!" Zuko slices the air again. His grip on the hilts of his swords is tight enough to turn his knuckles white. "And I've had to learn it on my own. Growing up, we were taught that the Fire Nation is the greatest civilization in history, and somehow, the war was our way of sharing our greatness with the world. What an amazing lie that was!"

Across from him, Ozai begins to tense. The rage on his face contorts his features into an ugly grimace.

"The people of the world are terrified of the Fire Nation! They don't see our greatness - they hate us, and we deserve it! We've created an era of fear in the world, and if we don't want the world to destroy itself, we need to replace it, with an era of peace and kindness."

The rage on Ozai's face melts away into astonishment, and then amusement. He laughs, sharp and cruel. "Your uncle has gotten to you, hasn't he?"

Zuko closes his eyes, heart clenching at the thought of Uncle Iroh. When he opens them, fire blazes in their depths, bright and defiant. "Yes. He has."

The softness in Zuko's voice clears any amusement from Ozai's face. He narrows his eyes, eyes so similar to Zuko's, so full of disgust.

Zuko lifts his chin. "After I leave here today, after you're defeated, I'm going to find Uncle Iroh. He's the one that's been a real father to me."

Again, Ozai laughs. The sound is rough, full of derision. "Oh, that's just beautiful." The mocking tone in his voice sets Zuko's teeth on edge. "Maybe he can pass down to you the ways of tea and failure."

"Laugh all you want. I am exactly where I am meant to be."

Ozai sighs, canting his head to the side. "Really? Since you're a full blown traitor now and you want me gone, why wait? I'm powerless. You've got your swords. Why don't you just do it now?"

"Because I know my destiny. Taking you down is the Avatar's destiny." Zuko puts his swords back together and places them back in their scabbard. The sound bounces around the room harshly. Deep inside of him, he can feel his flame beginning to flicker; the eclipse will end soon.

Aang will be here any minute now. He has to be. All Zuko needs to do is stall a bit longer.

Before him, Ozai seethes. "Coward!" He shouts. His voice booms in the open space; Zuko wants to recoil from the noise, wants to melt into the floor. But he doesn't. He stands tall, feet planted firmly on the ground. "You think you're brave enough to face me, but you'll only do it during the eclipse. If you have any real courage, you'll stick around until the sun comes out. Don't you want to know what happened to your mother?"

The world around him flickers for a moment. It takes Zuko too long to remember to breathe. He is aware of exactly what his father is trying to do; trying to stall him as well, so that he can make an attack when the sun comes out. Unfortunately, Zuko cannot resist the bait.

"What happened that night?" He demands.

"My father, Fire Lord Azulon, had commanded me to do the unthinkable to you, my own son." Ozai closes his eyes, as if bothered by the memory of the night. Zuko doesn't believe it for one second. "And I was going to do it. Your mother found out and swore she would protect you at any cost. She knew I wanted the throne, and she proposed a plan, a plan in which I would become Fire Lord, and your life would be spared."

Zuko's eyes narrow. His bones are trembling beneath his skin; the weight of this knowledge is almost unbearable. Tears fill his eyes, unbidden, uncontrollable.

"Your mother did vicious, treasonous things that night. She knew the consequences and accepted them. For her treason, she was banished."

Banished. His mother was banished. Zuko cannot stop the tears from sliding down his cheeks. "So she's alive," He whispers.

"Perhaps." The nonchalance in Ozai's voice is infuriating, but Zuko cannot dwell on it, not when he knows the truth.

"Now I realize that banishment is far too merciful a punishment for treason. Your penalty will be far steeper."

Ozai closes his eyes, and Zuko knows - the eclipse is ending. His flame is beginning to rise, steadily pushing out the chill that has settled into his bones.

When his father's eyes open, Zuko braces himself for the attack. He expects fire -

and instead witnesses lightning pulled from thin air -

and by some miracle manages to catch it when it's thrown at him.

The electricity pulses around him, threatening to consume him. Zuko hunches in on himself, holding the lightning between his fingers. For a moment, an agonizingly long moment, he is nothing but a vessel for the raw electricity tunneling through his chi paths. He could die like this, at his father's feet, a charred, ruined mess.

But he refuses.

Zuko steels himself, builds upon the fire regrowing inside of him. He remembers Uncle's technique, remembers the dogged determination he'd had to be able to survive this very moment. His hair stands on end, ready to fall from his scalp; his skin feels overly sensitive, feels as though it is going to melt from his skeleton. Zuko looks up. He locks eyes with his father, and is pleased to see the shock and outrage on his face.

The lightning travels through him, and he directs to his finger tips. With a mighty push, Zuko sends it across the room, back to where it originated from. The bolt strikes Ozai in the chest, throwing him against the wall behind him. The floor between them is ablaze.

Zuko does not stay to gloat. He turns on his heel and runs through the door way, runs down the hall, runs until his lungs are aching. And he continues to run. Zuko refuses to stop until he finds the others. One look around them tells him that it was Azula was that they found. Something inside of him quivers. But there is no time to catch up. It's enough for Zuko to know they're alive, so he hurries them out, back into the light. Above them, the sun is shining again, which means their window of opportunity has closed. Zuko climbs into Appa's saddle with the others and grips the side tightly.

His thoughts fly to the others, to Katara, and he prays to Agni that they're safe.

As Appa leaves the volcano, Zuko feels his heart plummet yet again. Massive war ships hang in the air, new designs that far surpass what Zuko remembers, and they're heading for the invasion force.

"It was a trap!" Sokka shouts as they land. "Azula knew we were coming, she's plotted out every step of this!" He drops to the ground beside Zuko and Toph. Katara is close enough for the tightness in Zuko's chest to ease a bit; there isn't a single scratch on her.

"Our best chance is to get to the beach. If we can get to the subs, maybe we can get out safely." Sokka looks to his father for confirmation. Hakoda gazes at their allies in silence.

"They've got air power, but so do I." Aang opens his glider and tosses it into the sky. "I'm gonna do what I can to slow them down." He leaps, catching his glider, and heads straight for the war balloons.

Appa roars, and Katara moves for him. "Appa, you and I can help too." She climbs onto his head and settles behind the arrow on his armor, and the tightness in Zuko's chest returns so forcefully it threatens to strangle him. He can only watch as she takes off, following Aang to give the others a head start.

Sokka orders their troops back to the subs, and Zuko is surprised his feet can move at all. But he follows them, keeping an eye on Hakoda to make sure he doesn't collapse. Thankfully, his wound is looking much better - thanks to Katara.

The war ships follow them to the beach. Several of them crash under Aang's and Katara's attacks, but the fleet continues onward. Their pace is agonizingly slow, almost mocking those on land; as if to say, *we will catch you, there's no where to run, no where to hide.*

Aang drops from the sky and lands beside Sokka. Katara lands Appa behind them and Zuko gravitates toward her, hardly aware of his own movements. Toph manages to cover them in time for several bombs to drop, but the ships float over them. Zuko watches with a frown - and then it hits him.

"The beach-"

"They're gonna attack the subs!" Aang finishes.

Sokka watches the ships go, shaking his head. "How are we all going to escape?"

"We're not."

They turn collectively to find Bato helping Hakoda to them. It's still hard for the chief to move; though significantly less deadly, the furrows in his side still cause great pain.

Sokka presses a fist to his hand. "Then the only choice we have is to stay and fight. We have the Avatar, we could still win."

"Yes, with the Avatar we could still win. On another day." Hakoda forces himself to stand straight. "You kids have to leave. You have to escape on Appa together."

"What?" Katara rushes forward, gripping her father's arms. "We can't leave you behind! We won't leave anyone behind!"

"You're our only chance in the long run. You and Sokka have to go with Aang somewhere safe." Hakoda looks at each of them. "It's the only way to keep hope alive."

Bato stands beside his chief. "The youngest of our group should go with you. The adults will stay behind and surrender. We'll be prisoners, but we'll all survive this battle."

Bile rises in Zuko's throat. It wasn't supposed to be this way; they were supposed to win today, it was supposed to put an end to everything, not separate them and force them to run and hide yet again.

The war ships reach the beach. The swampbenders make a valiant effort to stop them, but the bombs drop anyway. Their subs are destroyed in a few short minutes, effectively ending their argument. Zuko closes his eyes. He turns to Appa without a word and begins helping the others into the bison's saddle. He looks away, unable to handle watching his friends and allies say goodbye to their loved ones; there is no guarantee that they'll be together soon, if ever again.

Sokka and Katara finally join them. Katara goes to Aang, a hand on his shoulder as he stands to address their allies. "Thank you all for being so brave and so strong. I'm gonna make this up to you." He settles behind the arrow on Appa's armor as Katara climbs into the saddle. Appa's groan floats through the air as they make their escape.

A war balloon floats behind them, but doesn't pursue. Zuko knows instinctively that Azula is inside, and that she is allowing them to escape. He presses his back to Appa's saddle, hard enough for the rough molding to dig into his spine.

"I know a place we can go to where we'll be safe for a while!" Aang calls back to them. "The Western Air Temple!"

Zuko watches the clouds. He can feel the crackle of electricity radiating through him still; the memory of that moment has been burned into his mind, right beside the memory of the fire hitting his face.

Katara moves through the saddle until she sits beside Zuko. He can feel the heavy sadness radiating from her and it breaks his heart. Zuko draws his legs up, using them as a shield, and reaches for her hand behind them. She grasps his fingers tightly; he can't tell which of them is trembling harder. Neither lets go for the entire flight.

Eventually, they find the Western Air Temple. Zuko isn't as surprised as the others; he's been here before. The memory washes over him, unbidden - this had been his first stop after his banishment. Uncle had tried to convince him to be a bit easier on himself - his wound was still very fresh - but Zuko, young and angry and hurting, would not hear any of it. Zuko sighs and drags a hand down his face. He climbs out of the saddle when Appa lands by the fountain and helps The Duke down, waiting to make sure the others are out as well before he moves away.

The others run off to go explore. Katara stops Aang before he can join them, insisting that they need to plan their next step. For once, Zuko is on Aang's side; he wants no part of this. Really, he's more interested in throwing up and finding somewhere to lay down so he can pretend he doesn't exist. But he doesn't have the energy to argue, either, so he sits on the ground between the stones Toph and Sokka occupy.

It's a fruitless conversation. Aang has no interest in forming a plan at the moment, and Zuko isn't surprised or annoyed. He watches the monk rush off with his glider, Momo hot on his tail.

"Let him go for now," Sokka says, watching Aang disappear. "Today was hard on him. It was hard on all of us. We still have our old plan to fall back on - help Aang master the four elements before the comet comes this summer." Sokka stands, popping his back with a grimace. "He's already two for two!"

Katara crosses her arms, sighing quietly. "Yeah. We could all use some rest."

Zuko stands without a word. He moves past everyone, heading for the flight of stairs Teo, Haru, and The Duke had used to get inside. It's blissfully cool in the dark hallways, which helps to ease the headache he has. But the further he walks, the louder his stomach protests. It's finally had enough of the stress he's been under today. Zuko stops in a dark corner and finally throws up, unable to hold anything in anymore. He throws up the stew he'd had for lunch, and when that is on the floor at his feet, he keeps going, throwing up bile and other fluids. Only when his body feels thoroughly empty do the dry heaves stop. A cold sweat breaks out over his body. Zuko shudders and rises to his feet, wiping the back of his mouth. He stumbles down the hall, forcing his bleary eyes to stay open. He just wants to lay down, is that so much to ask?

Finally he comes across what must be the rooms the monks used to occupy. Zuko shuffles through the open door way. The room is barren, save for a rectangle of stone against the wall meant for a bed. The light filtering through the window is soft, just warm enough. Zuko allows himself to collapse on the floor. He presses his good cheek to the cold stone, shuddering at the coolness against his skin.

Try as he might, it's impossible not to relive the events of the day. He sees the lightning coming at him, over and over, hears his father's voice in his head. His mother's face floats through the mix, blurry and obscure; it's been so long since he's seen her that he's almost forgotten what she looks like, and it hurts.

The door opens after a bit, and Zuko forces himself to sit up.

Katara stands on the threshold. She's holding his bag to her chest, concern written across her face.

"Are you okay?" She asks softly. "You left kind of quickly, and you were really quiet before that."

Zuko waves Katara in. "I'm fine," He murmurs. "Are you okay?"

Katara nods and moves to sit beside him, and Zuko shifts to lean against the stone bed frame. Katara settles, placing Zuko's belongings on the bed, and rests her shoulder against it. "I need to tell you something." She looks up at him, and the unease in her eyes makes his stomach shift threateningly. "Before the invasion started... Aang kissed me."

He stares at her for what feels like eternity. "*What?!*" His voice bounces around the room, right into the hall, and he winces at the noise, but he isn't worried about who might have heard him. No, he's more concerned about the bomb she just dropped on him.

Katara winces too. "I didn't kiss him back!" She lifts her hands in defense, shoulders hunching. "I was trying to tell him how proud I was of him and he kissed me and then he took off. I was too shocked to do anything."

Groaning, Zuko pinches the bridge of his nose. "Great," He mutters, dropping his hand. "That's fantastic. So not only do I get to deal with that one guy with the moustache flirting with you, now Aang is making moves on you too. That's just wonderful."

"You're not blaming me for this, are you?" He can hear the frown in her voice, the reproach plain and clear.

"No, no!" Zuko sighs, tipping his head back a bit to look at the ceiling. He breathes deeply for a moment, watching the ceiling until he feels calmer. "I'm not blaming you at all." He waves a hand. "It's not your fault." He glances at Katara, reaching for her hand to squeeze her fingers gently. "I'm sorry. It's just been a long day."

Katara nods. She wraps Zuko's hand in both of hers. "It has been a long day, you're right."

The silence stretches between them for several minutes. Finally, Zuko says, "I saw him today. My father."

Katara inhales sharply. He can't look at her. His eyes are glued to the floor. "You saw the Fire Lord? Where was Aang?"

"In the wrong bunker." Zuko sighs. "There are two of them below the palace, deep inside the volcano. We didn't know which one he would be in, so I went one way, hoping I would find Azula so I could hold her off, but I found my father instead. I tried to stall him long enough for Aang and Sokka and Toph to get here, but they found Azula instead." He swallows hard. "He shot lightning at me. That was the second time he attacked me." His hand moves of its own accord, touching the edge of his scar. "This time he was going to kill me. And I managed to redirect it. I actually caught it and redirected it." He shudders, his heart lurching at the memory.

Beside him, Katara stills. Not even her breathing can be heard. "Your father did this to you?" She whispers, her fingers tracing the outer edge of his scar. He can barely feel her touch. "And he - he was going to - oh, Zuko-" She tugs him into her, and he slumps into her embrace, allowing her to hold him. His insides are threatening to rupture, to shatter into tiny pieces.

"Katara," He says, lifting his head to look at her. Tears blur his vision. "He told me - he said there's a chance that my mother is alive." The tears begin to fall, splashing against his tunic. "He banished her because he was going to kill me. My grandfather ordered it - I think as punishment for the way my father acted when Uncle Iroh lost his son - and he was going to do it. My mother - stopped him. And he banished her. She - she might be alive."

Katara cups Zuko's cheeks, wiping his tears away. She looks close to tears herself, her face wrought with a deep sadness. "We'll find her," She murmurs. "When all of this is over, we'll find your mother, and we'll find your uncle, too." She offers him a small smile. "I'm sure they're safe, wherever they are. I'm sure they're both more than capable of taking care of themselves. After all, they raised you."

A sob catches in Zuko's throat. He closes his eyes, tears rolling down his cheeks, and presses his face to Katara's shoulder. She hugs him to her, arms curling around his shoulders, and holds him as he cries. Everything he's held inside pours out of him, a quiet storm unleashed. Katara holds him tightly, soothing him, comforting him, refusing to let him fall. She presses kisses to his hair, she rubs his back, she murmurs soft reassurances to him.

When he finally stops, he is exhausted. Zuko lifts his head. His eyes are red and swollen; it's almost impossible to see out of his left eye. Katara offers him a small smile, and he leans in to kiss her cheek. "We'll get your dad back, too," He tells her, lifting a hand to brush the edge of her jaw. She closes her eyes, and he can see that she feels close to breaking down too. So he draws her into his embrace and holds her, wanting to return the comfort and support she had given him only moments ago.

He doesn't know how long they sit like this and he doesn't care. For once, Zuko allows himself to just exist, to be comforted.

The Western Air Temple proves to be a great refuge for their odd little group. Here, everyone has their own space; there is enough room to breathe without stepping on each other's toes. They choose to sleep in the same spot, out in the open in case of danger, but it's an easy compromise to come to.

Zuko and Toph pick up with Aang's firebending and earthbending lessons. Katara keeps up with Aang's waterbending as well; mastering the element doesn't give him a reprieve from keeping up with it, especially not with the comet so close.

As the days pass, the deep ache within Zuko begins to subside. He's able to put the day of the invasion in the compartment of his mind that holds his more painful memories, and he's able to move forward.

For the first time in his life, he doesn't feel angry. He feels content, he feels calm.

But this proves to be a problem for his firebending - it all but disappears. And if he can't bend, then he can't teach the Avatar how to master the element. More than that, firebending is a crucial part of who Zuko is. He's spent so long proving that he's a capable bender that without it, he feels lost. For years, the anger inside of him had been a driving point; a flame

in its own right that pushed Zuko to prove himself, that fueled him up until this point in his life.

In the end, Zuko takes Toph's advice: he and Aang travel to find the ruins of the Sun Warriors to discover the source of firebending.

The trip is more successful than either of them could have ever hoped for - it's completely worth having to cut chunks of tar out of his hair.

Dragons still exist. Uncle Iroh hadn't killed the last one after all, but had protected their existence from that very notion. It fits everything Zuko knows about his uncle, and it eases something inside of him.

The dragons impart their knowledge upon Zuko and Aang: life is the secret to firebending, not destruction. The flame inside of Zuko roars to life with this knowledge, settling in his veins with renewed vigor.

This knowledge will stay with Zuko for the rest of his life, he knows.

Aang is eager to show their friends what they've learned when they return. The others tease them, but Zuko takes it in stride. Nothing can ruin the happiness he feels.

Zuko sits beside Katara that night to help with dinner. There are several more mouths to feed, more people to watch out for, which has meant more work for Katara - work that Zuko does his best to help her with. Zuko follows her instructions obediently, marveling at the clever way she cooks the ducks Sokka had caught earlier. He flicks his fingers at the fire to keep it going, rotating the sticks the ducks sit on carefully to make sure they're properly cooked.

Katara stretches her legs out, popping her lower back. She hums as she checks on the food, cutting them open enough to see their progress. She looks up and gives Zuko a sweet smile. "Thank you for helping me," Katara says. She leans over, placing a quick kiss on Zuko's cheek.

Zuko flushes quickly, ducking his head. "It's nothing," He insists, but he smiles at the fire, pleased none the less.

The others filter into the room, rumbling their approval at the smell of the meat cooking. Aang starts to grimace, but Katara slides his meal of fruits and vegetables to him, and he beams, relieved to be included. Toph plops down beside Zuko, grumbling about her sore muscles. Zuko heats his hand, careful to control the temperature, and rubs his palm across the back of Toph's shoulders. Instantly she relaxes, sighing happily.

"Thanks, Sparky," She says contently, "You're a great servant."

Zuko rolls his eyes but smiles. He continues to rub Toph's back and splits his attention between relaxing her muscles and cooking the food. Katara catches his eye, smirking, and he scowls at her.

Dinner is easy and pleasant. The Duke, Teo, and Haru fit in nicely, though Haru sits a little too close to Katara for Zuko's liking. But he keeps his mouth shut, focusing on filling his stomach instead. He passes the rest of his portion to The Duke and reaches for a mango, slicing it into thin pieces, and licks a bit of juice from his thumb. When he glances up, Katara is watching him. Zuko smiles a bit, offering her a mango slice. She takes it, a faint flush to her cheeks, and looks away while nibbling at it.

The noise around them begins to die down. Everyone is relaxed and sated, happy with their meal.

Katara nudges Zuko. "Come spar with me," She says. "I didn't get a chance to practice my bending today."

Zuko nods and stretches his arms above his head. He ruffles Toph's hair as he passes and ducks to avoid the pebbles she pelts at his head, laughing softly. Katara leads him into the temple, leading him in a direction he hasn't been yet. Zuko ignites a fire in his palm and looks around curiously. "Where are we going?" The walls are dingy and covered in moss; thin rivulets of water trickle between some of the stones.

"There's another fountain down this way," Katara explains. "Teo found it by accident. He got lost trying to get back to his room."

Katara leads him into a cavernous space. He can't see the fountain yet, but he can hear the water somewhere in the room. Looking around, Zuko locates a handful of empty torches and launches several small flames through the air, straightening when they land in the right spot. The fire illuminates the room, and Zuko can now see the fountain Katara mentioned. It's bigger than the one outside, settled inside of a deep trench in the center of the room. The fountain has three tiers to it; the water flows through it continuously.

Katara moves across the room. She unties the white sash around her robe and lets it fall open, and for a moment, Zuko is helpless to do anything but watch. Katara is undressing right in front of him, not a care in the world about it. When she reaches for the waist of her leggings, Zuko forces himself to turn away. *Don't be a creep*, He scolds himself, shaking his head.

He removes his tunic as well, letting the material flutter to his feet, and curls his toes against the stone beneath them in anticipation. The cool air around him whispers across his exposed skin. Zuko turns back around, stretching his arms in front of himself, and sighs loudly. Katara is stretching as well, now in nothing but her bindings, and the sight is arresting. He looks her over, admiring the expanse of brown skin before him, the way her muscles move beneath her skin. When she looks up, she smirks at him, and he flushes deeply.

Zuko widens his stance. He extends his arms and crooks his fingers, an open challenge.

Katara doesn't hesitate, nor does she go easy on him. The water from the fountain erupts, racing at Zuko with deadly speed. He presses his hands together and rips them apart, slicing through the wave with a large sword made of flame.

Zuko chases Katara around the room, dodging her blows and countering her attacks. His fire is stronger, brighter, easier to conjure and control. Zuko is thrilled, completely enamored with

this newfound strength. He twists through the air to avoid the circles of ice thrown at him, landing on his feet with a loud laugh.

Across the room, Katara grins at him. "Having fun?" She calls. She forms a row of ice daggers and flings them his way.

Zuko grunts and ducks, pulling a whip of fire between his hands and cracking it at Katara's feet, forcing her to leap back. "Always!" He responds. "You're the best sparring partner I've ever had!"

"Aw, that is so sweet!"

Katara freezes the water into a slide and races towards him. Zuko grins, bracing himself. He kicks his leg high into the air, fire trailing along the heel of his foot, and brings it down hard against the slide, breaking it in half. The air hisses with steam; it coils through the room, making the atmosphere muggy.

Katara drops to her feet with a huff. It is a much more graceful landing this time; she's improving in spades every day. She pulls the water around her, floating eight orbs about her head, and charges for Zuko.

But he takes her by surprise when he grabs her wrists, pulling her flush against him. Katara gasps, and Zuko grins, leaning down to kiss her. Her noise of surprise is muffled by his mouth, but she laughs into the kiss, surprising him in turn by dropping several of her orbs over his back and shoulders. Zuko yelps and jerks back, laughing as the water rolls down his spine. Katara grins this time, cackling loudly, and grabs Zuko by the shoulders. She pulls him back into her and kisses him again, locking her arms around his neck.

Zuko melts into her embrace. He slides his arms around Katara's waist and pulls her up against him again, pressing a hand to her lower back. Her body molds against his, dips and curves fitting against his contours perfectly, as if they were made for this. Some part of him whispers quietly that they were, that this right here, this moment of stolen bliss, is what the spirits created him for.

Katara sighs into Zuko's mouth. She slides her hand against the back of his neck, fingers delving into his hair; he shivers when her blunt nails scrape against his scalp. Her tongue brushes against his lower lip, seeking permission, and this time, he grants it. Zuko opens his mouth to Katara, his tongue brushing against hers hesitantly. The soft noise she makes runs right down his spine, coiling hot and low in his stomach. His fingers dig lightly into her hip, holding her close as she explores his mouth. Her fingers curl in his hair, tugging gently, and he shifts against her, a low note rumbling through his chest.

The water clinging to his skin begins to evaporate, adding to the steam enveloping them. Katara pulls away with a soft gasp and Zuko presses his mouth to the under side of her jaw, trailing hot kisses down the column of her neck. She moans, soft and pliant, as Zuko kisses along her neck, and his knees nearly give out on him as the sound embeds itself in his memory. He presses her closer still, tasting the water on her skin, teeth pressing gently against the crook of her neck. He can feel her heart fluttering against his lips, can feel it beating wildly against his chest, matching the uneven rhythm pounding against his ribs.

Katara presses a hand gently against Zuko's shoulder and he lifts his head, tipping it back to catch his breath. She rests her forehead against his shoulder, laughing breathlessly, and Zuko grins at the ceiling, his heart feeling completely and utterly full. He lifts Katara's head and presses a tender kiss to her cheek, to her lips, and slowly removes himself from her. He grabs his tunic from the floor and slings it over his shoulder, turning away so that Katara can get dressed, and stops in the door way to snuff out the fire in the sconces before they leave the room.

The others are sound asleep when they return. Zuko stands where he is for a moment, simply watching. Even the new comers are important to him; they risked their lives not so long ago to make things right in the world. The Duke, Teo, and Haru are allies now - friends, even. Zuko sets his bed roll out and kneels beside Toph, tugging her blanket further up her torso.

Katara kneels on her bed roll, digging through her bag for her comb. Zuko joins her. When she finds the comb, he takes it from her and begins to pull it through her hair, careful as can be while he works on untangling the knots. Her hair feels so soft against his fingers; he marvels yet again at how she manages to deal with so much hair on a daily basis.

Zuko places the comb in Katara's bag when he's done. "I like seeing your hair down," He murmurs, giving her a soft smile.

Katara stretches out on her back, her hair fanned around her in a dark halo. "Yeah?" Her smile is so sweet it makes his teeth ache.

"Yeah." Zuko pulls on a lock gently. "I like the braid, but I really like it like this." He leans over Katara, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead, and moves to his own bed roll.

Zuko falls asleep, pleasantly exhausted from the events of the day. He lays on his side, facing Katara, unaware that she's facing him as well.

It must be an unspoken agreement among their group that they simply cannot stay out of danger for too long.

Zuko watches his sister below them, adrenaline pounding in his veins. He didn't think it would be easy, bringing Sokka to The Boiling rock in the first place, but facing off with Azula once again is something he hoped they wouldn't have to do for a long while.

Of course, the spirits have a different idea. Born under an unlucky star, he had to have been born under an unlucky star.

He grits his teeth as he pulls himself through the window and onto the roof of the gondola lift, watching as Azula and Ty Lee come closer and closer.

"Help me free my dad from The Boiling Rock, he says," Zuko mutters, locking his legs into place. "Oh, and while we're at it, let's break my girlfriend out too, he says, and this total stranger that could crush my skull with two fingers, he says. It'll be easy, he says. We'll be

back before anyone even notices, he says." Zuko shakes his head. "I'm going to throttle Sokka for this later."

Sokka and Suki join him, evening the odds. Azula and Ty Lee stand on each end of the lift, forcing them in the middle. Suki immediately turns to Ty Lee, and Zuko turns to Azula. He knows the warrior can hold her own; Suki has more than impressed him in the last twenty-four hours.

Azula fires the first blast, and the battle begins. Sokka stays by Zuko's side, forcing Azula to stay back with the sharp point of his sword. They're keeping Azula on her toes, something Zuko knows is hard to do -

until the gondola swings to a halt.

Sokka's feet fall out from under him and he slips, heading for the edge, but Zuko lunges out, catching his friend's forearm. It tugs at the muscles in his upper arm painfully, but he grips Sokka's hand in both of his, pulling until he's back on the roof.

Above them, Ty Lee shouts, "They're cutting the line!"

"Then it's time to leave." Azula turns to the edge of the lift, then jumps, landing gracefully on the roof of the passing gondola. Ty Lee joins her seconds later. The princess turns back to the stalled lift, not a hint of remorse on her face. "Goodbye, Zuko."

Something cold drops into the pit of Zuko's stomach. He watches his sister moving away, growing smaller in the distance. Gritting his teeth, Zuko swings back inside of the lift. "They're cutting the line! The gondola is about to go!"

Hakoda turns to the window. "I hope this thing can float," He mutters.

Zuko watches the chief for a moment. The situation is completely dire, yet Hakoda is still calm and in control of himself; he survived imprisonment in the worst prison in the Fire Nation with that sort of attitude. It's the kind of self control Zuko hopes to achieve some day.

Suddenly the gondola starts moving again, and Zuko lurches, stumbling to the side. He hurries to the window. Sokka leans out of it, pointing to the platform below them. "Who is that?!"

Zuko leans out the window, brows furrowing before his eyes widen. "It's Mai!" He answers, shock coloring his voice. The gondola resumes its ride to the shelf above the lake, and Zuko leans back, stunned. Mai isn't an ally he expected to have, but he won't look a gift ostrich horse in the mouth.

When the lift stops, Zuko follows Sokka and Suki out of the door way. Hakoda follows them, stopping only to direct Chit Sang to leave the warden in the lift.

"Sorry, warden," The chief says, "Your record is officially broken." Hakoda slams the door, hurrying after the others.

Zuko looks at Sokka and shares a grin with him. "My dad is so cool," Sokka gushes. He rushes after his dad happily, leaving Zuko to follow in their wake with a smile.

They rush to the edge of the shelf, stopping to catch their breath. "Well, we made it out," Suki pants, glancing at Sokka. "Now what?"

Zuko stays where he is, looking out over the island. The gears in his mind shift quickly. If Azula is here, she must have some sort of transportation with her.

"Zuko, what are you doing?" Sokka calls.

He looks over. "My sister was on that island."

"Yeah, and she's probably right behind us, so let's not stop!"

"What I mean is she must have come here somehow." He moves around the others, eyes searching the ocean for a boat, the air for a balloon -

and he finds the new age war ships Azula had introduced during the invasion.

"There!" Zuko says, pointing to the massive air craft on the beach. "That's our way out of here!"

The descent to the docks is uneven and sloppy, but no one is worried about looking graceful. Zuko ushers everyone onto the air craft and follows Chit Sang, momentarily thrown off by the inside of the air ship. It is much, much better and much, much more advanced than the simple balloon he and Sokka had used to get to the island. But the more he looks around, the more he realizes it resembles the ship he used to live on. He moves down the hall, searching for the right room. "Yes!" He mutters under his breath when he finds it, hurrying in. Zuko hurries to the wheel in the center, wasting only a few minutes to figure out what he's doing.

He moves a few gears, relaxing when the air ship begins to rise. Zuko focuses on steering, making sure that the air ship is far away from The Boiling Rock. When he feels they're far enough away, he lets his shoulders slump, exhaling a loud breath as he leaves over the wheel again. "I'm never sneaking out with Sokka again," He mutters.

The moon is high in the sky by the time they return to the Western Air Temple. Zuko steers the ship to the temple carefully, doing his best not to bump any of the upside down structures. He eases it up against an outcropping of rocks, where their group had first arrived, and shuts the engine down.

Sokka is waiting for him in the hall when he leaves the room. "Toph almost launched this thing into the cliff across from us," He says, rubbing his neck sheepishly.

Well, Zuko can't really begrudge her that reaction. He follows Sokka out, smiling a bit when he finds Toph and Katara and Aang waiting for them.

"What are you doing in this thing?" Katara demands, voice echoing against the rocks. "What happened to the war balloon?"

"It kinda got destroyed." Zuko glances at Sokka with a sly smile.

Aang eyes the air ship behind them curiously. "Sounds like a crazy fishing trip."

"Did you at least get some good meat?" Toph's voice is so hopeful that Zuko feels bad for a moment, considering that they most definitely did not go fishing.

"I did." Sokka closes his eyes, smiling widely. "The best meat of all. The meat of friendship, and fatherhood."

Zuko can't even roll his eyes at Sokka's dramatics. He turns instead, watching Suki and Hakoda exit the ship with Chit Sang behind them.

The large man waves. "I'm new. What's up, everybody?" His smile is wide and charming.

Zuko glances at Katara. Her eyes are wide, filling quickly with tears. "Dad..." She whispers, taking a step forward. She closes the space between them quickly, hugging her father to her. "Hi, Katara," Hakoda murmurs, holding his daughter close.

"How are you here?" Katara lets go of Hakoda to look at Sokka and Zuko. "What is going on? Where did you go?"

"We kind of went to a Fire Nation prison." Sokka shrugs, grinning, and stumbles forward when Katara grabs his wrist. She tugs her brother into a group hug, holding her family to her in a tight embrace.

Zuko watches the reunion with a wide smile, feeling extremely happy. They've all three been through so much; it's comforting to see the family back together.

"Seriously..." Toph hedges, her head turning in Zuko's direction. "You guys didn't get any meat?"

Zuko moves to Toph and clasps her shoulder gently. "I'll go out first thing in the morning and get whatever you want," He promises. He chuckles at her grumbling, squeezing her shoulder, then stoops to grab his things from their sleeping circle and heads into the temple. He wants out of these grimy prison clothes.

He steps into an empty room at the end of the hall and strips out of the prison clothes, tossing them aside. Extra clothing is always helpful right now, but he has no intention of keeping those garments. Zuko settles his pants around his waist, wiggling his toes against the stone, and glances up when someone clears their throat behind him.

Katara stands in the doorway, arms crossed. Instantly Zuko feels wary, as though he's in trouble.

"I don't know whether I should thank you for rescuing my dad and Suki, or if I should kill you for risking your life like that and not even telling me about it."

Zuko ducks his head and rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. "It was Sokka's idea," He confesses, glancing up. "He was gonna go regardless, so I went with him to make sure he

came back safely."

Katara shakes her head slowly. In the moonlight, her eyes are pale, bright with a heavy current of emotions.

"When my dad walked off of that ship..." She shakes her head again, clearing her throat. "I could have kissed you out there, Zuko."

His heart flutters behind his ribs. Zuko shrugs, offering a hopeful smile. "You could kiss me now."

She does not need to be told twice.

Katara crosses the room. She takes Zuko's face in her hands and pushes on to her toes, kissing him deeply, fiercely. "Thank you," She whispers against his mouth, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Warmth blooms in Zuko's chest. He winds his arms around Katara's waist and holds her to him, meeting her fierceness with tenderness. "Your father is a good man. The world needs him, but you and Sokka need him more. I'd do it all over again."

Katara shakes her head yet again. She watches Zuko, eyes filled with so much wonder that it makes him shy. He bumps his nose gently against hers, then kisses her again, slow and sweet. Zuko allows himself to settle into this moment, to bask in the glow surrounding them.

"Stay close to me tonight," He whispers, thumb brushing along her side. "I miss getting to hold you while I sleep."

Her answering smile is gentle, glowing in the moonlight. The light encompasses them, and gives Zuko an odd sense of comfort. Katara takes Zuko's hands and kisses them both. She passes him his tunic, and he pulls it over his head, then follows her from the room.

Haru is laying out extra bed rolls, extra pillows and blankets for the new arrivals. Already Chit Sang has won everyone else over; his booming laugh bounces through the air around them. Beside him, Toph and The Duke are in stitches. Zuko smiles to himself.

Katara moves across the room. She pauses to embrace Suki, her voice fervent as she greets her friend. She leaves her friend to kneel beside her father, holding his hand as they talk. Hakoda indulges Katara, answering every question about his well being that she has. Soon, though, the exhaustion wins out, and he lays down with a drawn out yawn.

Zuko yawns as well. He stretches out across his pallet, groaning a bit at the dull ache in his muscles. What a long, long day.

There is some shuffling to his left. Katara pulls her pile of blankets closer to Zuko, closer than he expected. His heart lurches as he watches her settle just inches away from him. Katara pulls the blanket up around her shoulders and looks at him. Her eyes glitter in the dark, and he's starting to think they might be one of his favorite features of hers. She reaches out, extending her hand, and Zuko meets her half way, fingers threaded loosely between hers.

Around them, the sounds of light snoring and the measured breaths of sleep fill the air. Zuko holds onto Katara's fingers, watching as sleep overcomes her. He lets himself succumb as well. His dreams are peaceful, for once; snippets of different things float behind his eyelids, but the bright blue eyes stand out the most. Zuko sleeps with a smile on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully it all flowed well? I dunno, I feel like I kind of dropped the ball in here somewhere. I: Thanks so much for reading, though! The next chapter is on its way!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

"I'm so sorry, my love," He whispers into her hair.

Chapter Notes

I mean. How could I tackle some of my favorite moments in the story without touching The Southern Raiders?

(Muuuuuuuch less nervous about this chapter, lol. You guys are way too good to me, thanks for all of the wonderful reviews so far<3)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun rising over the Western Air Temple is a sight that simultaneously steals Zuko's breath and stills all of the noise inside of his head.

He watches the light ghost over the aged stones as he moves through his forms, steadily warming his blood and the world around him. Zuko stands straight for a second when he is finished, simply basking in the glow of the light around him. Behind him, his friends sleep peacefully, for once safe and sound, hidden away in this relic of the past. It's not something they get to experience often, and it's not something he wants compromised.

However, Suki is not the next person he expects to wake up.

Zuko jumps when he turns and finds her tip toeing through the sleeping circle, trying not to disturb those still asleep. She waves at him when she spots him and moves closer, choosing an overturned chunk of a pillar to sit on. The reprieve has been good for her; she looks much better than she did when she first arrived.

Suki tips her head in Zuko's direction. "Firebending forms?" She guesses.

Zuko nods. "Yeah. I practice them every morning. They're good for waking the body up." He feels awkward; making small talk still isn't his strong suit, especially with people he has a bad history with.

"I noticed your swords." Suki nods to the sleeping circle, where Zuko's bed roll is. His swords lay under his pillow, close by in case of an attack. "You can do more than firebending, then?"

"Oh. Um - yeah. Yeah, I can." The observation takes him off guard and he isn't sure why. Maybe he's still just adjusting to Suki's presence. She's an intimidating woman.

Suki nods slowly. She stands and asks, "What about hand to hand combat? Are you good at that? I haven't been able to spar in a while and I could use the practice. I'm pretty rusty."

For a moment, all Zuko can do is stare. He has a sudden image of Suki throwing him to the ground in two moves and then kicking him off of the cliff they're on just because she can. But the offer is tempting; he likes to keep up on all that he can do. So in the end he finally nods. "Um, yeah. I've learned that too, yeah." He rubs the back of his neck awkwardly and asks, "Would you like to spar, then?"

Suki's answering smile is small but stunning. "I would love to spar."

Zuko glances back at the others. His eyes linger on Katara, where she sleeps comfortably close to his bed roll. Her blanket has been pulled up to her chin, as high as she can tolerate, back to the rising sun. She won't budge until the last possible second.

Zuko leads Suki further away from the group so that they won't disturb them. They skirt around a few collapsed pillars and stop on the other side of them, deciding that the distance is far enough away for them to spar, but not too far in case they're needed.

Suki is not rusty. Not even close. In a matter of three minutes she has Zuko's elbow in a hold that hints at breaking it with the right pressure, her foot planted against his lower back to force him down, and an amused smile on her face.

Zuko can only stare at the ground. "Rusty," He echoes, watching several ants scurry for safety. "Right."

Laughing softly, Suki releases her hold and steps back. "Okay, not as rusty as I thought," She concedes, shrugging. Her demeanor is extremely relaxed for someone that just escaped prison, especially after being subjected to his sister's torture. Zuko marvels at her strength, both physical and emotional.

He straightens, adjusting his tunic. "I would be honored if you would teach me what you know," He says. A light flush creeps across his cheeks. "I'm not terrible at hand to hand combat, but I can always improve."

Suki tips her head, regarding Zuko. The silence stretches on. He tries not to fidget under the weight of her gaze. At last, a warm smile lifts the corners of her mouth. "I'd be honored to teach you." She glances over her shoulder, then back at Zuko. "There isn't anyone else here that could keep up with me on my terms."

Zuko follows her gaze. "Sokka could. He's a great fighter."

"Sokka is a great fighter, but it's hard getting him to focus." It's Suki's turn to blush, but Zuko's own flush deepens as well. Everyone else is fully aware of the deep affection Sokka has for the warrior. "Let's keep sparring, and then I'll break some moves down for you."

"Show me that one you used on Ty Lee. The one that almost knocked her off the gondola. That was one of the best things I've ever seen."

Suki grins. It lights up her face, highlighting her high cheekbones. "Easy, Your Highness. It's a bit early for that one." Her grin widens. "But it was one of my prouder moments." She bends her knees, palms facing him.

Chuckling, Zuko nods. He extends his arms, bracing himself, and his only warning is the flash in Suki's deep blue eyes. She comes at him full force, and Zuko thinks of nothing else for the next half hour. She forces him back constantly, pushing against everything he knows, but he does not back down. The exercises are fantastic for his muscles, stretching some he hasn't used in a long time, and he can see the same is happening for Suki; but she doesn't miss a step, doesn't even come close to being winded. It does much more than impress Zuko - it completely exhausts him in a wonderful way.

But he proves to be a challenge for Suki as well, something he takes pride in. She's finally panting by the time the others begin to stir, and Zuko grins at her as he knocks her fist aside - only to catch her foot with his ribs. He grunts, stumbling to the side, and Suki laughs, soft but proud. She hasn't completely lost her touch.

"Excuse me!"

Zuko and Suki stop in tandem, wrists crossed in the air to deflect the other's blow, and peek under their arms. Sokka is staring at them over the fallen pillar, hair loose and messy, bright blue eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"What in the name of Tui and La are you two doing?"

The two exchange a look. "Sparring," Suki answers.

"Oh." Sokka drops to his feet behind the pillar and emerges around the other side. He moves to the duo and separates them, wrapping his long arms around Suki's waist, and drags her away from Zuko. "Well, be careful with Suki!" He admonishes. "She's in delicate condition and needs to be resting!"

Zuko glances at Suki. She rolls her eyes to the ceiling, but there's a fond smile on her face. "Sokka, I'm fine. Zuko could barely keep up with me." The grin she gives him is playful, and Zuko can't help but grin back, shrugging in agreement.

Still, Sokka shoots Zuko another suspicious look. But it melts away when Suki runs her hand down his sleep tangled hair. He stands straight and presses a kiss to Suki's cheek. "Maybe you should spar with Zuko," She suggests. "I haven't seen you doing any drills with your sword yet. It'd be good for you - both of you."

"Hey, yeah." Sokka lets go of Suki and leaves them for a moment. When he returns, he holds his sword and Zuko's in his hands. He passes the dao swords to Zuko and removes his blade from its scabbard. The blade gleams in the light, almost as if its eager to be put to use. "We did learn from the same sword master. You always get to practice your bending with everyone that bends, so why not practice this with me? I could definitely use it."

Zuko shrugs again, nodding. "Alright." In truth, he could use the practice too. Though he is extremely confident in his swordsmanship, he still stands by what he told Suki - he can always improve.

Sokka grins, glancing at Suki. She gives him an encouraging smile and moves out of range, perching on a chunk of stone to watch. Sokka turns to Zuko, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Alright!" He crows, "Let's put space sword to work!"

As it turns out, sparring with Sokka is as much fun as sparring with Suki. Zuko marvels at Sokka's skill and speed; he holds his own against Zuko's double blades, and the focus he exhibits on his task is impressive. His serious facade only cracks whenever they take a break. Sokka keeps the atmosphere light and friendly, his wit as sharp as his sword. Behind them, Suki laughs at almost everything he says, and it lights Sokka up in a way Zuko has never seen.

After another half an hour, Zuko calls a time out to get breakfast started. A handful of them are awake; the rest are still sleeping. Zuko wipes the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his tunic and assembles the necessary pots and ingredients for porridge. When it's settled, he returns to Sokka and Suki. He doesn't want to start the food yet without everyone awake; that way, no one is left out and their meal is hot and fresh.

Half way through their third round, the rest of their group begins to awaken. Zuko ignores the tell tale grumblings and murmurs, focused on parrying Sokka's blow -

until a loud, drawn out yawn drifts to him through the sharp clanging of metal on metal. Zuko stops, his swords holding Sokka's at bay above their heads, and watches as Katara kneels down beside the pot and its laid out ingredients. He drops his swords immediately, ignores Sokka's grunts of disapproval, and crosses the pavement to kneel down beside Katara.

Katara looks up, blinking owlshly, and Zuko finds his insides melting yet again at just how utterly adorable she is when she's sleepy. He takes her hand and presses a quick kiss to her fingers, letting go before anyone can see, and is rewarded with a warm smile. He turns to the pot with a smile of his own and lights a small fire to prepare breakfast.

"Morning," Katara murmurs. Her voice is quiet, raspy at the edges. It flips Zuko's stomach back and forth. She reaches out and squeezes his fingers gently before she begins to cook the porridge. Zuko stokes the fire with a small smile, helping Katara prepare the meal. When it's set to cook, he reaches for her comb and kneels behind her, fingers brushing through the ends of her hair as he settles.

He's so focused on his task that he doesn't see how keenly Hakoda is watching them.

The sound of disgruntled footsteps fill the air. "You know, Zuko," Sokka says, tone bordering on annoyed, "You don't have to drop everything just because Katara so much as breathes."

Zuko flushes a deep red. He decides to drag everyone else through the mud Sokka has just pushed him into. "No one else bothers to help out around here." He gives Sokka a pointed look, tugging the comb carefully through Katara's hair. There seem to be thousands upon thousands of tiny knots this morning.

"He's right," Toph interjects. She's laying on her back, Momo sprawled across her stomach. "I'm certainly not gonna do it, you're too lazy to, Snoozles, Twinkle Toes and his new friends are too distracted to even bother with, and Warrior Queen just got out of prison with The Chief and my new best friend." Toph jerks her thumb over her head at Chit Sang and Hakoda, who are both watching the exchange with amusement and curiosity.

Zuko smiles when he sees Katara nudge a moon peach towards Toph.

"I do too help!" Sokka sputters indignantly. "I hunt a lot, and-"

"You do," Zuko argues, interrupting him, "But that's all you do. Katara is constantly cleaning up after everyone around here when she shouldn't be." Zuko raises his brows pointedly. "Sokka, your sister is the only one brave enough to go near your dirty socks. Even that iguana parrot that tried to steal The Duke's pants almost fainted when it flew over them." He shakes his head, lifting his hand to run the comb through Katara's hair one more time. "I'm just saying it wouldn't kill any of us to help Katara more."

In front of him, Katara beams like a ray of sunshine. "Well, I know who's getting extra helpings today!" She turns that sunlight smile on Zuko, and for a good five seconds, he forgets how to breathe. And then his flush deepens, and he ducks his head, shaking it a bit as he carefully prepares Katara's hair for the knot that will sit on the back of her head.

When he's finished with her hair, Katara squeezes Zuko's knee in thanks. "Can you take care of breakfast?" She asks. "Since we're on the subject, I do want to get started on laundry. The clothing pile is starting to smell."

Zuko nods and turns his attention to the food cooking. Katara stands, and her fingers skim down the back of his head, making him shiver. He glances up and watches her go, trying in vain to calm the fluttering in his chest.

Aang hops to his feet and hurries after Katara. "Hey, Katara!" He calls, voice bright, "Mind if I help you today? I really should be helping more..." He rubs the back of his head, following Katara into the temple.

"You have a lot to do as it is, Aang, but sure, extra help would be nice."

Zuko rolls his eyes at the porridge. Katara is always so easy on Aang, much easier than she is with anyone else, even herself. But Zuko isn't sure if it's something he wants mention. They haven't had an argument in months, he's not eager to start that up again.

He looks up to find Sokka watching him, which startles him. The young warrior's eyes are searching, thoughtful; he wants to say something, that much is clear. Zuko looks around. The others have spread out. Only Toph and Suki remain within earshot.

"I see the way you look at her, you know," Sokka starts, and Zuko nearly chokes on the air in his lungs. He coughs, glancing up quickly, eyes wide. Sokka shakes his head.

"I see the way she looks at you too." He opens his mouth, poking at the cooking pot with the tip of his sword, then he looks back up at Zuko. "I don't need to know if there's something

going on between you two, not unless you wanna tell me, but if you ever hurt her - well, Katara will kill you first, and then I'll resurrect you and kill you all over again myself."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Zuko responds, voice quiet, but he nods in understanding.

Again, Sokka regards him, bright blue eyes flashing.

Suki is the one to break the silence. "I think your sister could do a lot worse than the guy that busted your dad and your girlfriend out of prison," She comments airily.

Zuko decides then that Suki is his new best friend.

Sokka makes a sturgeon face, palms open to the sky as he shrugs. "Good point." He gives Zuko an appraising look this time. "At least you don't have a moustache or chew on a piece of hay."

Zuko snorts. He checks the pot when the porridge begins to boil and stands, clasping Sokka's shoulder as he passes. He will take that as a sign of approval until he proves himself to be worthy enough to Sokka.

Zuko walks into the temple and heads for the fountain inside. He finds Katara and Aang there, elbow deep in sudsy water. Aang is a bit closer to Katara than Zuko would like, but he chooses to let it go. He clears his throat, waving a bit when they turn to him. "Breakfast is ready."

"Finally!" Aang spins around, spraying soapy water in a messy arc, and dries his arms with a short burst of air. He conjures an air scooter and zips right past Zuko, yelling about how hungry he is. Zuko watches him go, wondering where the boy gets so much energy from.

He shakes his head and moves to Katara, helping her lay out the clothing that needs to dry. She bends the water on her skin back into the fountain and smiles up at Zuko. "You were awfully sweet earlier."

Zuko blushes, shrugging. He reaches up to rub the back of his neck. "I mean, it really wouldn't kill us to help you more. You do a lot for everyone."

Katara rewards him with a tender little smile, and it's a sight Zuko intends to commit to memory. "Thank you," She murmurs.

He offers a sweet smile. "You know, I'm definitely open to kisses as a thank you," He says, striving for a casual tone, patting a closed fist against an open palm. "Just for future reference."

Katara giggles softly; the sound echoes through the room, providing life to the dimly lit area. She steps closer to him and smooths her little hands up his chest, resting them on his shoulders as she leans in. Zuko meets her half way and kisses her softly. His hands settle about her waist, and for a moment he is amazed at how small she is, how large his hands feel against her gentle curves.

Katara starts to pull away, but Zuko hauls her in closer, grinning at her gasp, and peppers sweet kisses across her face. Her laughter grows, louder than before, and Zuko feels distinct happiness spill into his chest. He lets Katara go with a smile, holding onto her fingers until they slip from his grasp, and follows her back to their group, ready for whatever the day will bring.

Unfortunately, peace can only last for so long in their lives.

Being woken up to bombs exploding is not something Zuko wants to experience ever again.

He lurches to his feet, heart pounding harshly in his ears. Aang twists about, swinging the metal doors around them shut with a powerful gust of air, but the bombs keep coming, and the impacts crack the ceiling. They're under attack and if they don't move now, they'll be crushed. Everyone gathers close; they're all on alert, eyes darting around them.

Another explosion rocks their hideaway. The ceiling splinters under the force and begins to crumble.

Zuko watches a large section of stone fall from the ceiling -

right over Katara's head.

Zuko does not hesitate.

He lunges across the room, shouting, "Watch out!"

He snatches Katara by the waist and sends them sprawling across the floor, arms locked around her middle tightly as they tumble across the stone, both grunting from the impact.

Large chunks of the ceiling hit the ground seconds later.

Zuko does not let go even though Katara pushes up onto her hands under him. Instead, he presses his face to her shoulder, nearly overwhelmed by the panic in his blood stream. Her back is aligned with his chest; the wild thundering of his heart matches the uneven stuttering of hers. He does not want to even consider what almost happened.

"What are you doing?!" Katara demands, twisting to face him.

He gives her a flat look. "Keeping rocks from crushing you."

Her shoulders fall just a bit. She nods and slides to her feet, turning to pull him up as well.

"Thank you," She mumbles. Her eyes travel the length of him, silently checking for damage, and when she's satisfied, she grabs his hand and hurries through the dust to their friends.

Toph and Haru blast through the wall, creating a tunnel - an exit. "C'mon!" Toph shouts. Her voice is almost lost in the din around them. "We can get out through here!"

Everyone rushes to the tunnel.

Everyone except for Aang, who is struggling to lead a very reluctant Appa there.

Everyone except for Zuko.

Zuko stays where he is, watching the crater that leads to the enemy on the other side of their safe room. He knows who is attacking them, as if purely by instinct.

"What are you doing?" Aang yells.

Zuko glances over his shoulder. "Go ahead. I'll hold them off." He turns back to the crater. "I think this is a family visit." Narrowing his eyes, he runs for the crater.

"Zuko!"

It isn't just Aang's voice he hears, but Katara's as well. His heart trips in his chest. But he can't stop, not if he wants to keep his friends safe, so he vaults through the hole, ignoring the metal doors crumbling around him, and rushes to the edge of the temple.

A bomb is thrown his way. He dodges, sliding through the smoke, and punches a blast of fire at the ship firing at the Temple. Three Fire Nation war ships hang in the air. Below them, another comes into view, and on its riser stands Azula. Even from this distance the maniac glee on her face is obvious.

"What are you doing here?" Zuko demands. The wind ruffles his tunic, blows his hair across his eyes. He refuses to look away from his sister.

"You mean it's not obvious yet?" Azula leans over her railing, sharp voice carried on the wind. "I am about to celebrate becoming an only child!" She spins herself under the railing, feet pushed out, and fires off a jet of blue flame.

Zuko rushes out of the way, running to avoid the blast. He loses his footing and rolls across the stone, yelping in pain as the concrete bites into his skin. Columns crumble around him; the floor shatters beneath him. The temple is being destroyed. Fury rises hot and fast in Zuko's blood, boiling over at all that Azula has done this morning.

She's disrupted the peace they've found.

She's ruining a sacred place that's been a refuge for his friends.

She's almost taken Katara away from him.

Zuko pushes himself to his feet, teeth bared in defiant fury. No more running. He will never again run from Azula, for as long as he lives. Zuko charges forward, careful to avoid the curled point of his boots catching in the now uneven floor. He runs past hot jets of fire, he rushes up a falling and crumbling pillar, and he hurtles himself through the air, punching fireballs at his sister's tower. They find their mark, but she drops out of the way before she can be touched.

Zuko reaches out as he falls through the air. His fingers scrabble for purchase on the side of Azula's ship, trying in vain to catch himself, but there is nothing to hold onto. His stomach

twists with fear as he falls through the air, through the clouds. He prepares for the inevitable impact of hitting the rocks below the temple -

and has the air forced from his lungs when he lands on an air ship rising towards Azula's.

For a moment, Zuko is stunned, breathless from the force of the fall. But he doesn't have time to waste. He forces himself to his feet and forces the aches in his back out of his mind. Now is not the time to be distracted.

Somewhere above him, he hears the distinct groan of an agitated sky bison. The knots in his stomach loosen a bit. Zuko curls his fists at his sides, watching as the air ship he stands on levels out with Azula's. She turns to face him, anger distorting her perfect face before it smooths out into a sinister smile.

With a running start, Zuko leaps across the air to Azula's ship. He twists through the air to deflect her fire with his foot, retaliating with a blast of his own. He lands on his feet, rolling forward, and straightens, firing immediately. Despite the anger coursing through his system, he does not draw upon this to fuel his fire. No, this time, he relies on the instinct to protect his friends and himself - to preserve the lives around him.

Azula runs across the ship and Zuko gives chase. He deflects her attacks, dissipating her bright blue fire with an ease he did not have so many months ago. Azula grins, a feral sight, and swings her fist. The air around it begins to shimmer with the heat of her flames coming to life. Zuko swipes his hand through the fire in front of him, his own fist already ablaze, and swings it against his sister's.

The sheer force of the impact explodes around them, sending them both tumbling over the sides of the air ship. Zuko falls, eyes wide, the wind whipping past his face, stinging his eyes, and prepares once again to meet the rocks below them -

until Appa flies into view, and instead, he sees Katara standing in the saddle, arms outstretched.

His arms begin to lift, and beneath the awful sensation that comes with falling, relief floods through his veins.

She reaches out and snatches Zuko from the air, swinging him into the saddle roughly. It pulls painfully at the muscles in his arms, but that doesn't hurt quite as much as the death grip Katara has on his wrists. He looks up, meeting her livid gaze with relief and gratitude and a touch of chagrin.

Zuko doesn't let go of Katara's arms, but he turns to look over his shoulder, searching for his sister. When he finds her spiraling through the air behind them, his heart flips over itself.

"She's... Not gonna make it..." He murmurs, voice softened by disbelief.

But then Azula does what she does best - she proves Zuko wrong by tugging the flame shaped pin out of her hair and jetting herself to the cliff side, digging the pin into the rock to keep herself from plummeting below the clouds.

Any sadness within Zuko evaporates. "Of course she did," He mutters.

He turns away, a bitter taste filling his mouth, and relaxes his hold on Katara's arms.

But she does not let go. She tugs him closer, sliding her hands down his arms to grip his fingers, and refuses to relax her hold for the entire flight.

Aang flies them far, far, far away from the Western Air Temple. They fly well into the day, only taking breaks to let Appa rest and to relieve themselves. When they finally stop, it's on the cliff side of a small island; a safe place that Azula can't find - or so they hope.

Katara has not let go of Zuko's hands the entire time. She hasn't spoken to him, either. Only when it's time for her to leave the saddle does she let go, and she does not look back at him. Zuko sighs. He climbs down Appa's flank and moves to the bison's head, scratching under his eye gently to thank him for his efforts in keeping them safe. He steps away, moving to Sokka to help him unload their belongings.

The sun set long ago, casting their resting spot in relative darkness, with only the moon to give them light. Zuko creates a flame in his palm to help everyone see around them as they set up camp. He sets his tent up beside Katara's, watching her from the corner of his eye. She still refuses to look at him. He knows he's gonna be in for it soon.

Toph creates a small pit in the center of their loose square of tents, which Aang builds a fire in. It doesn't take long for Katara to cook up a quick meal of rice, which Aang also helps with, digging a sleeve of crackers out of the bag to go with the meal. Zuko watches from his spot beside the fire, uncertain about approaching. She still hasn't looked at him; the tension in her shoulders is obvious even to his bad eye. Zuko rubs at his cheek, pursing his lips.

When the food is done, Katara takes a spot beside her brother, fueling the anxiety within Zuko. Aang takes up the empty space next to him.

"Wow, camping," Aang comments, looking around at his companions. "It really seems like old times again, doesn't it?"

"If you really want it to feel like old times again, I could, uh, chase you around a while and try to capture you," Zuko offers, breaking his cracker in half. He glances at Aang with a small smile, which widens when the others laugh.

He doesn't hear Katara's mocking laugh. Doesn't see her downcast gaze.

Across from him, Sokka lifts his cup. "To Zuko!" He announces, smiling brightly. "Who knew after all those times he tried to snuff us out, today he'd be our hero?"

Zuko blinks, looking around in surprise. There are several gazes directed at him, cups raised high with warm smiles behind them. Both Toph and Aang nudge each of his arms. His chest tightens momentarily.

"I'm touched," He says, voice soft. "I don't deserve this."

Katara stands abruptly and turns, climbing the hill behind her with quick strides. Zuko's heart plummets into his stomach.

Sokka twists, watching his sister go. "What's with her?" He asks, looking at those around him.

"I wish I knew," Zuko mutters. He stands, curls his fingers into loose fists, and starts after Katara, ignoring Sokka's echoing question -

"What's with him?"

Zuko finds Katara sitting on a rock close to the cliff's edge. He glances at the sky. The moon is full, round and bright; a full moon means everything Katara is feeling is amplified, so Zuko knows that he must tread with caution. He approaches slowly, waiting for her to notice him. When she does, he only catches a brief glimpse at her profile before she stands and moves out of reach.

"This isn't fair," He says. The wind blows his hair across his face, obscuring his vision for a moment. "Why are you so mad at me? What did I do?"

"What did you do?" Katara whips around. It's hard for Zuko to resist the urge to flinch. Her eyes are dangerously bright, brows knit with anger. "What did you do? You almost got yourself killed, Zuko!" She turns to face him properly; her hair billows behind her, caught on an agitated current of air. "Azula could have killed you - she was going to kill you! And you ran right to her!" Katara cuts her gaze. Zuko wishes that her lower lip trembling was just a shadow flickering on her face instead. "She followed you and Sokka back to the Temple and now my dad is gone again. I don't even know if he made it out alive. And then you ran right into her creepy, sharp little claws! You didn't even think about what could have happened to you!"

So that's it. Zuko closes his eyes, grimacing. It isn't just about what he did today; her family has been separated once again and it's opened her wounds once more.

Zuko opens his eyes, his gaze imploring. "What can I do to make it up to you?" He questions.

Katara raises her brows. "You really wanna know?" She stalks closer. "Hm. Maybe you could rewind time and choose not to pull that stunt you did earlier. Or find a way to make sure my father is alive." She invades his space, and for the first time in months, Zuko leans away. Her eyes are like thunder clouds rolling in the sky; they flash with sparks of lightning as she glares up at him. "Or - I know! You could bring my mother back!" Her shoulder knocks against his as she stomps away, and Zuko is left feeling cold and shaken.

He watches the water across the cliff, wincing when arcs spray over the grass. It's been so long since he's been on Katara's bad side that he'd forgotten just how hostile she can be when she's angry. It's unsettling, being cast out of her light after spending so long soaking up so much of it. Zuko curls his hands tightly. His jaw clenches. He has to find a way to fix this, before the anger and the hurt fester into something worse.

Zuko turns back to the camp. There's only one person that can help him right now.

He marches across the grass and moves around a large boulder, stumbling back in surprise when he bumps into Suki.

She leans back, hands raised to her chest, and mumbles, "Oops!" There's a nervous flush spreading across her face. "Wrong tent!" She spins around so fast that the little ponytail on the back of her head flops helplessly.

"Sorry," Zuko apologizes, "Do you need to talk to Sokka too?"

Suki looks over her shoulder, raising her brows high, comically so. "Nope! Not me!" She waves her hands in front of her and turns around again, quickly tiptoeing away.

Zuko watches her go, frowning curiously. He shrugs it off and moves to the tent in front of him, slipping inside.

Sokka lays in the center on a neat bedding, feet swinging through the air, surrounded by small candles. The room smells overly sweet thanks to the bushel of roses hanging at the top of the tent. He turns his head, hair flopping about his face, a single rose in his mouth, and croons, "Well, helloooo-" And he promptly swallows the rose when he spies Zuko.

For several seconds, all Zuko can do is stare - where did he even find those flowers?

Suddenly Suki's odd behavior makes sense - she was coming to meet Sokka - and he interrupted. An embarrassed flush paints his cheeks.

But he can't worry about that right now. Zuko lets the tent flap flutter shut and seats himself across from Sokka. Sokka scrambles into a sitting position, babbling all the way, and coughs a few rose petals up. He gives Zuko a sheepish smile as he tosses them aside.

"So what's on your mind?"

"Your sister." Zuko leans forward a bit, hands braced on his knees. "She's mad at me, really, really mad at me." His anxiety slips through, coloring his voice.

Sokka hums sympathetically. "I had a feeling she was. I haven't seen Katara act this way with you in a long time. I know she's upset about being separated from our dad again, but I think you really scared her when you ran off to fight Azula."

Zuko sighs, shoulders slouching a bit. "I care what she thinks of me, so I need to find a way to fix this." He hesitates, drawing his arms in to cross them over his chest. "Okay, listen - I know this may seem out of no where, but... I want you to tell me about what happened to your mother."

Instantly Sokka's demeanor changes. "What?" He sits up, spine straight, eyes round and wary. "Why would you wanna know that?"

"Katara mentioned it before when we were imprisoned together in Ba Sing Se, and again just now when she was yelling at me." Zuko glances down, brow knitting faintly. "I think, somehow, she's connected her anger about that to her anger at me. I think that - I think maybe she's blaming me for being separated from your father, since Azula did follow me here after

the Boiling Rock, and she's so upset by it all that it's reminding her of losing your mother, and so I think she's having a hard time separating it all."

"Your sister didn't just follow you, Zuko," Sokka reminds him, "It was my idea to go to that prison in the first place." He drops his gaze with a soft breath. "It's not a day I like to remember. Many of the warriors had seen the black snow before and they knew what it meant - a Fire Nation raid. We were badly outnumbered, but somehow, we managed to drive them off. As quickly as they came, they just left." Sokka draws his knees up, folds his arms over them. "I was so relieved when it was over, but that's because I didn't know yet what had happened. I didn't know we'd lost our mother." He hunches inward, hair falling across his face.

It's the first time Zuko has ever seen Sokka so - so small. Vulnerable. He can very nearly picture the ash mixing with the snow; but the horror to be discovered is what sits heavily in Zuko's stomach.

Katara's words ring loudly in his head. *The Fire Nation took my mother away from me.* He had thought - his mother had only disappeared, Katara hadn't said out right that hers was dead.

A heavy sadness settles over Zuko like a polluted fog.

"Wait," He says, looking up at Sokka, "Can you remember any details about the soldiers that raided your village? Like - what the lead ship looked like?" If he has some details, then maybe he can do something.

Sokka glances down, brows furrowing in thought. "Yeah... Sea ravens. The main ship had flags with sea ravens on them."

Realization floods Zuko. "The symbol of the Southern Raiders." His eyes narrow, and he nods. He has the information he needs. "Thanks, Sokka."

"No problem!" The serious atmosphere shifts as Sokka waves his hand, then wiggles forward to nudge Zuko out of his tent. "Thanks for stopping by!"

Zuko stumbles to his feet. He begins to move away from the tent, but pauses when Sokka's head peaks out - calling for Suki. Sokka freezes when he sees Zuko is still within earshot. Zuko simply shrugs and moves out of range to avoid interrupting a second time.

The others are still asleep. Zuko looks towards Katara's tent. He knows she's inside; she isn't rash enough to run off. He sighs slowly, running a hand through his hair.

So now he knows the truth. Now he knows why exactly Katara's pain runs so deeply. Though he can understand it, it's not at all like what he thought when she first mentioned it in Ba Sing Se - he had assumed then that her mother was simply missing like his, had maybe been taken away from her village by soldiers. It hadn't occurred him to consider that Katara's mother had been murdered. But not only that, he knows now who is responsible for this. There is no mistaking who the sea ravens belong to; he'd memorized the symbol of each fleet in his father's military years ago in preparation for commanding them one day.

Zuko looks up at the sky. Thin wisps of black clouds snake across the full moon, stealing some of its light. So what does he do now? He can guess that just having the information won't be enough; his own mother's whereabouts have been a constant thought niggling at the back of his mind ever since his father had given him that scrap of information. If he had a lead, even one as small as this, he would take it without a doubt.

He lowers his gaze to their camp and looks at Katara's tent again. He knows what he must do, then. Zuko crosses to Katara's tent and hesitates, then sinks down onto the rock just shy of the entrance. He won't wake her up, knowing she likely still wants and needs her space, but he doesn't have an issue with waiting.

And so he does. He refuses to sleep, instead tracking the stars as they take their time fading, watching little bugs scurry through the grass, even counting the grass itself to keep himself awake. It's the most exhausting night he's experienced in weeks, but he doesn't say a word, doesn't budge from his stone seat.

A tired sigh leaves him once the sun begins to rise. It revitalizes Zuko just enough to keep from him toppling over and passing out. He knows it won't be long now before Katara emerges, but his muscles are crying in protest for him to give them even the smallest amount of relief.

Finally, he hears rustling inside of Katara's tent. Zuko exhales and leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. He waits a few more minutes, and then the tent flap opens. Zuko lifts his head to find Katara before him, arms folded with a cross look on her face. He tries not to frown himself; her hair is already put into her current favored style.

"You look terrible," She announces, stomping past him.

Zuko sighs quietly. "I waited out here all night." His voice is rough with exhaustion. He rubs at his eye and stands, watching her retrieve her comb with an open frown this time. It's hard to resist the urge to take the it from her.

"What do you want?" Katara keeps her back to him, pulling the comb through her hair none too gently.

Zuko winces. She is still very, very angry with him. But he has something to offer, so he squares his shoulders and says bluntly, "I know who killed your mother, and I'm gonna help you find him."

Katara stills abruptly. She turns enough to look at Zuko, and the anger within her surges forward in the downward slope of her brows and the shine of her eyes. "That is *not* funny, Zuko-"

"I'm not joking!" Zuko steps closer, refusing to look away from Katara. "I would never joke about such a thing. I spoke to Sokka last night and asked him to tell me about what happened to your mother. He said he remembered that the fleet that attacked had sea ravens on their flags. That's the symbol of the Southern Raiders, I know it is." He steps closer still, knowing he's risking her wrath by doing so. "You told me that when the war is over, you'd help me

find my mother," He murmurs, searching her face. The tide of anger in Katara's eyes recedes just a bit. "If I had a lead on her and I wanted to leave right now, would you go with me?"

Katara watches Zuko. Then she nods once.

"Then let me help you with this," Zuko implores. He takes another risk by reaching out and brushing his fingers against hers, just a light touch. "I can't bring her back to you, but I can offer you closure in this way, Katara."

The silence between them is tense. Zuko waits, watching the thoughts in Katara's head play out in her eyes. She looks up at him finally and nods. "Okay. Let's go."

"We'll need some supplies. It'll probably be a long trip." He nudges the bag at Katara's feet gently, where the majority of their food and cooking equipment is kept. "And something to disguise ourselves with, just to be safe. I can take care of that part."

Katara nods and starts to crouch by her bag, but then she straightens and tips her head at Zuko. He watches her, wondering what she's thinking, and feels a large part of him relax when she reaches out and squeezes his hand. Zuko squeezes back gently and lets go, crossing the small camp to get to his tent. He slips inside and exhales, taking a moment to go over everything that had just happened.

Idly, Zuko questions himself. Is this the right thing to do? But then he remembers the fear in Katara's eyes - not because he'd had the audacity to tie her to a tree, but because he held her mother's necklace in her hands. He recalls the way her voice had cracked beneath the crystal catacombs the first time she'd mentioned her pain; how utterly small she had looked hugging her knees when he'd turned around to see her.

He thinks back to the cold fear and despondency that came with watching his own mother walk away from him, and how the world had shifted around him when he'd learned that she might be alive.

Zuko clenches his jaw and kneels down, hunting for the handfuls of black fabric he knows are hidden under his bed roll. It's not much of a choice, really. Not when there's even a small chance that it might help Katara heal, even a little. He glances at his dao swords and considers them for a moment, then decides to leave them here. They'll be more than a match for whoever they're going to come up against.

Zuko carries the outfits back to Katara. She looks up and takes them, stuffing them into her bag, and stands with the bag slung over her shoulder. Zuko takes it from her gently, studying her for a moment. There is a stark determination radiating from her in waves; it's a side to her he hasn't seen yet, and for a second, he wonders at what else he has yet to discover about her.

Katara leads him outside of their tiny camp to where Appa sits, lazily chewing the long stalks of grass Aang feeds him. "I need to borrow Appa," She says.

"Why?" Aang glances over his shoulder, passing another handful to the bison. "Is it your turn to take a little field trip with Zuko?"

"Yes, it is."

The brusqueness of her voice earns the monk's attention. Zuko stands a few paces behind Katara, watching Aang turn to face them properly. "Oh." He steps away from Appa, eyeing them both uncertainly. "What's going on?"

"We're going to find the man who took my mother from me."

Zuko glances at Sokka, who lowers the beads in his hands and stands, watching them with wide eyes. "Sokka told me the story of what happened," He explains. "I know who did it, and I know how to find him."

"Um..." Aang looks at Katara, wariness filling his large eyes. "And what exactly do you think this will accomplish?"

Katara watches Aang for a second, then she scoffs and shakes her head. "I knew you wouldn't understand," She mutters, turning away.

"Wait, stop! I do understand!" Aang follows after Katara, a hand outstretched. She stops, back turned, but he stays where he is. *Smart*, Zuko thinks. "You're feeling unbelievable pain and rage. How do you think I felt about the sandbenders when they stole Appa? How do you think I felt about the Fire Nation when I found out what happened to my people?"

Zuko grimaces, glancing at Katara. He can see her thoughts on her face; the monks, sure, but comparing her dead mother to a missing sky bison isn't exactly the right comparison to use.

"She needs this, Aang," He interjects, watching the Avatar. Sokka has remained silent the entire time, but he watches Zuko as well. Katara still hasn't turned around. "This is about getting closure, and justice."

"I don't think so. I think it's about getting revenge."

"Fine, maybe it is!" Katara snaps. All eyes turn to her. Her fingers are curled tightly at her sides. "Maybe that's what I need." Her voice lowers dangerously. "Maybe that's what he deserves."

"Katara," Aang says quietly, "You sound like Jet."

Zuko glances between them, then at Sokka. Still, he remains silent.

"It's not the same." Katara turns to face them this time, eyes blazing. "Jet attacked the innocent. This man - he's a monster."

Finally, Sokka speaks up. "Katara, she was my mother too," He reminds her, moving closer to his sister, "But I think Aang might be right."

Katara's eyes flash. "Then you didn't love her the way I did!"

"Katara." The pain in Sokka's voice is palpable. Zuko winces, but he doesn't say anything, watching Katara instead. She turns away again.

Across from her, Aang lowers his gaze. "The monks used to say that revenge is like a two headed rat viper." He looks up, a rare display of seriousness on his youthful face. "While you're watching your enemy go down, you're being poisoned yourself."

"That's cute," Zuko says, raising a brow, "But this isn't Air Temple pre-school. It's the real world."

"Now that I know he's out there," Katara murmurs, voice vehement as she looks to Aang, "Now that I know we can find him, I feel like I have no choice."

"Katara, you do have a choice." Aang takes a step forward, arms open, hands out. "Forgiveness."

"That's the same thing as doing nothing!" Zuko exclaims, adding himself to the circle.

Aang shakes his head. "No, it's not. It's easy to do nothing, but it's hard to forgive."

"It's not just hard." Katara's voice cuts through them, carrying on the wind around them. "It's impossible." She turns away, leaving them behind.

After a moment, Zuko follows her. He ducks into her tent after she does, setting their bag down the entrance. Katara moves to the far corner. She crouches down, hugging her knees tightly, shrouding herself in the darkness of the small enclosure.

"Hey," Zuko murmurs. He moves to her, careful not to invade her space, and kneels beside her. Katara doesn't look at him. "I don't care what Aang says, or what Sokka says, or what anyone else says. If you want to go find this man, then we're going. Some way or another, I will take you to find him."

Finally she looks at him. In the dim light filtering through the thick material of her tent, her eyes are nearly black. "I need to face him, Zuko," She whispers. "I have to. After what he did-" She cuts herself off, swallowing audibly.

Zuko places a hand lightly on Katara's knee. "I know," He murmurs. "We'll leave tonight. We'll take Appa when everyone is asleep."

Katara nods, sniffing quietly. She looks away, but she covers Zuko's hand with her own, squeezing lightly in acknowledgement.

It takes a bit of convincing, but Zuko manages to talk Katara into at least laying down for the day. He certainly needs the rest, and he's sure she will too. Despite her fidgeting, her tossing and turning, Zuko stays close to Katara and catches up on the sleep he'd missed overnight. It feels like only minutes have passed when he's being woken up, but he sits up to see that the moon has risen, full once again.

Yawning, Zuko reaches for their supply bag and extracts their disguises. He passes one to Katara, watching as she slides her arms through the sleeves methodically, and pulls the other

over his head. He adjusts it accordingly, plucking at the fabric around his wrists and elbows to get comfortable with it again. It's been a long time since he's worn this.

Looking up, Zuko stands and moves to Katara. He adjusts the material around her waist, settling it so that it hangs properly. He glances up to find Katara watching his hands. He hesitates, then asks softly, "May I brush your hair?"

Katara watches his hands a moment longer. She turns away, bending down to dig through her smaller bag, and stands with the comb in hand, holding it out to Zuko. Another fraction of him relaxes as he takes it, shifting to stand behind her. Her hair is a knotted mess, thanks to the wind and her tossing and turning, but he is patient as he removes them one by one. After several minutes Katara exhales a soft breath, and Zuko leans closer to press a kiss to the back of her head. He understands the tension banding across her muscles right now; he will not resent the frigid attitude she exhibits, he can't. Not when he held on to something so similar for years.

Katara passes Zuko a thin, faded blue cord. "Tie it back, please," She murmurs, and he obliges, sliding the cord under her hair. He contains the thick mass within several loops, tying the cord off, and squeezes her shoulder gently to let her know he's done.

Grabbing their bag, Zuko follows Katara out into the night. The air is still this time; the clouds crossing the moon are much thicker than the night before. They are quiet as they cross the grass to Appa, who acknowledges them with a slow blink.

Zuko lowers the bag and crouches down, rifling through its contents. He wants to be sure that they have everything they might need for this trip, and he's beginning to feel too restless to hold still; the adrenaline and nerves are starting to kick in.

"So you were just gonna take Appa anyway?!"

Though he expected this, Zuko jumps slightly at Aang's loud voice. He glances up, catching Sokka's eye. Sokka frowns at him, but Zuko can only offer him an apologetic shrug, hoping he can understand.

"Yes." Katara barely turns her head, lowering her arms once she's sure her ponytail is secure to her liking.

"It's okay, because I forgive you." Aang closes his eyes, then opens them hopefully. "That give you any ideas?"

Zuko rolls his eyes. He continues to rifle through the bag, adjusting the food so that it doesn't get bruised during the flight.

"Don't try to stop us," Katara warns. Her voice is borderline antagonistic. Zuko pauses, fingers lingering on a small bag of rice, and recalls a time when he used to sound much, much more hostile than that. He sighs to himself and nudges the rice into place with the fruit.

"I wasn't planning to," Aang insists. "This is a journey you need to take. You need to face this man."

Katara is silent. She watches Aang for a moment, then nods and reaches for Appa's horn, pulling herself onto his head.

"But when you do," Aang continues, "Please don't choose revenge. Let your anger out, and then let it go. Forgive him."

Zuko stands and tosses the bag carefully into Appa's saddle. He looks at Aang, mouth open slightly, eyes narrowed - unable to keep the disbelief off of his face. For all of the wisdom and understanding Aang is capable of, it baffles and irritates Zuko that the monk thinks he's entitled to telling anyone else how to feel and how to handle their trauma.

"Okay," He drawls sarcastically, rolling his eyes to the side, "We'll be sure to do that, Guru Goody-Goody." He shakes his head and climbs up Appa's side, careful not to hurt him, and settles into the saddle.

Aang moves closer to Katara, watching her worriedly. "Thanks for understanding, Aang," She says, and faces forward before he can say anything else. "Yip yip!" With a low groan, Appa rises into the air, tail flapping with powerful strokes to gain altitude.

Zuko scoffs quietly to himself. Understanding. There was nothing understanding about that conversation, but he keeps his thoughts to himself. This isn't about what he thinks, either. He braces his arms across the saddle, watching as the ends of Katara's ponytail begin to flutter in the wind.

Appa flies parallel to the moon. It's light washes over them, turning everything within its reach the shade of bone. Zuko leans against the saddle, watching the back of Katara's head. "We need to find a Fire Navy communication tower," He tells her, voice raised to be heard over the wind. "All the Navy's movements are coordinated by messenger hawk and every tower has to be up to date on where everyone is deployed."

"So once we find the communication tower, we bust in and take the information we need."

"Not exactly. We need to be stealthy and make sure no one spots us, otherwise they'll warn the Southern Raiders long before we reach them."

Katara nods once, still facing forward. Zuko studies the back of her head, the tense set of her shoulders. Even when they were enemies he never saw such cold behavior from her. Thinking back on it, he's sure the abrupt shift in Katara's attitude deeply unsettled both Sokka and Aang, who are used to seeing only certain sides of her. But it only bothers Zuko because he knows it comes from a place of pain deep within Katara, a place she has clawed at for years but refused to show anyone until now.

Zuko watches the wind whip Katara's hair around, holding onto the saddle as Appa tips slightly to the side. Whatever is going to happen, Zuko is only interested in one outcome: closure for Katara, to whatever degree she feels is right.

They fly for almost two hours before they discover a communication tower. It stands on a small island, barely big enough to contain the building, with even smaller outcroppings around it. Katara steers Appa to the largest rock outside of the island. Zuko prepares to stand

as Appa lands behind a warped boulder. He leaps from the bison's saddle when his massive toes touch the ground, landing behind Katara. She starts forward, but Zuko catches her by the shoulder. Her features are twisted with irritation and impatience when she turns around, but he merely raises the cowl of her disguise to cover the lower half of her face before doing the same to himself. The irritation fades and she nods, turning back around. This time, Zuko lets her go and follows quickly behind her.

They run around the boulder. Katara takes a head start, twisting her body through the air to create a thick sheet of ice at the edge of the water. She leaps onto it and Zuko follows, crouching down behind her as she bends their float to the tower's shore. He tips his weight with the movement of the water to keep himself from slipping, nails digging into the ice slightly. Katara lifts them high on a massive wave, ignoring the shore completely in favor of launching them over the wall and onto its deck.

Zuko lands nimbly, listening for Katara's footsteps behind him. He finds himself proud of how light they are, impressed with her stealth as he leads her forward, hugging the walls to keep to the shadows. He stops at a corner when he hears a door creak open. The soldiers walk away, leaving the door wide open. Zuko shakes his head. A big mistake. He hurries forward and leads Katara inside, weaving through the halls. A heady thrill rushes through him; he thinks back briefly to his days as The Blue Spirit, remembering how he enjoyed the rush of being a completely unknown entity - the rush of sneaking around undetected to get what he wanted.

The halls are empty, so Zuko takes a moment to assess their surroundings. They're out in the open right now, a dangerous place to be. They can't risk being caught. He glances up, spying a vent cover above them, and glances at Katara, pointing to the ceiling. She follows his signal and nods. Zuko moves to her and takes her by the waist, lifting her into the air. He pushes Katara as close to the vent as he can get her, gripping her thighs, splitting his attention between the task at hand and listening for footsteps. It takes Katara only a minute to pull the cover open and haul herself inside. Zuko makes sure she's in all the way, then jumps, catching the edge of the vent. Katara grasps his arms as he pulls himself inside, helping him slide in and reaches past him to shut the cover - just in time for a guard to walk past. Zuko nudges Katara out of the view of the cover and glances at the metal around them. He knocks on it lightly, testing the sound - it barely echoes. Good. That means less chances of being heard.

Katara crawls ahead of Zuko, once again impressing him with how quietly she moves. He wonders if maybe he isn't the only one that's done some sneaking around in their life time. She pauses at each cover, letting Zuko check the rooms for the one they need. He nudges her forward until they come across the right grate - the room where communications are dealt with.

They stop side by side, careful not to put too much of their weight on the edge of the cover, and watch the soldier under them writing her letter. Katara lifts her hand, pulling her fingers together, and spills the ink across the desk and the parchment and the soldier's hand. The soldier gasps quietly, then pushes her chair back and leaves the room to clean up, shutting the door behind her.

Zuko waits for a beat, then opens the cover. He lets Katara out first and follows her, landing on his toes, and looks around the room. There's an endless amount of files here, but he remembers the system. He leads Katara to the scrolls behind the desk, scanning them quickly. "Okay, Southern Raiders," He mutters, eyes narrowing when he finds the right one. He extracts it and carries it to the desk, spreading it out on the surface.

"Bam!" He exclaims quietly, pressing a finger to the surface of the map. "On patrol near Whale Tail Island." He glances at Katara.

Her brows draw downward. "Whale Tail Island, here we come," She murmurs, a steely edge to her voice.

Zuko nods. He rolls the map up and sticks it back into place, then lifts Katara back into the vent, closing it behind him. They trace their way back to their exit point, making quick work of leaving the tower. Katara lowers them back to the water on another ice flow and carries them to where Appa is. He groans softly when they return, giant toes curling against the sand. Zuko scratches under Appa's eye gently as a greeting. He makes sure Katara is settled behind the reigns again before pulling himself into the saddle.

On this leg of the trip, Zuko passes out. He wakes as the sun rises, opening his eyes to find his cheek against the rough material of Appa's saddle. Zuko pushes himself up slowly, blinking the sleep from his eyes. He looks up and is dismayed to find that Katara hasn't moved from Appa's head. He moves closer, as close as he can get to her without leaving the saddle.

"You should get some rest," He tells, her, watching her hair flutter in the wind. "We'll be there in a few hours. You'll need all your strength."

"Oh, don't you worry about my strength. I have plenty." Her head dips forward a bit, shoulders tensing further. "I'm not the helpless little girl I was when they came."

Of this, Zuko has absolutely no doubts. It's hard for him to imagine, though; Katara has not once been helpless in the entire time he's known her.

For a while, she's silent. And then she begins to speak, recounting her version of the day the Southern Raiders invaded her village.

"They arrived so suddenly. Sokka and I were playing, and then the snow began to turn black. We both knew right away that something was wrong. I went to find my mother. I was scared and I wanted to be with her. I was sure she would protect me." She falls silent for a moment, and Zuko waits, his heart heavy already. "But when I got inside, he was already there. I didn't know what to do. My mother said she would tell him whatever it was he wanted to know if he let me go. She sent me away to find my father. I didn't want to leave, but I trusted her, so I did. I ran as fast as I could, but we were too late." Her voice begins to waver, softening with the remembered horror of that day. "When we got there, the man was gone." For a second time, Zuko watches Katara drawing in on herself, becoming smaller than she is. "And so was she."

For a moment, he can't find his voice. And then he says the only thing he can think of. "Your mother was a brave woman."

"I know." Her arm moves, and he just knows she's touching her mother's necklace.

They fly in silence after this. By midday, Zuko decides that Katara absolutely needs some rest, despite her wells of strength. He reaches out, brushing her shoulder to get her attention. "Come lay down," He requests, voice quiet. "Please. I'm not doubting your strength, but you really do need a little rest."

Katara ignores him long enough that he's beginning to think he might have a real fight on his hands, but then she lets go of the reigns and turns around. Zuko helps her into the saddle, relieved that she complied so easily. He pulls a stray lock of hair away from her cheek and ghosts his thumb over her jaw, unable to resist. She closes her eyes for a moment, then turns away to lay down, curling her legs towards her chest. Zuko climbs out of the saddle and settles on Appa's head.

He takes the reigns tentatively, jolting slightly when Appa groans. Zuko doesn't have much experience dealing with animals; he's ridden on komodo rhinos a handful of times, but the beasts always make him nervous. In truth, Appa and Momo made him nervous, too, before he got to know them. Zuko reaches down and scratches at the top of Appa's head gently, smiling a bit when the bison groans once more. He'll take that as a sign of approval.

For the duration of his time holding the reigns, Zuko talks to Appa, babbling senselessly about many of the thoughts he deals with on a daily basis. The bison has a surprisingly calming presence for something so large and intimidating. It's a relief, too, to vent some of the things on his mind without worrying about what someone else might think or say.

Zuko checks on Katara every so often. She sleeps through the day, fitfully, but she sleeps. For a little while he watches her, wishing he could banish the nightmares causing her face to contort with discomfort. The sooner this ordeal is over, the better. He isn't naive enough to think it will get rid of her trauma completely; he just hopes it helps in some way. Zuko turns back around, watching the water rush by beneath them. Yes, the sooner this ends, the better.

The sun begins to set, and Zuko becomes more alert.

He usually feels a bit weaker at night, in the absence of the sun, but right now there is a lot of adrenaline rushing through his veins. He won't be the only firebender in a slightly weakened state, and with another full moon out, Katara is at her strongest - a lethal weapon to the enemy they're closing in on.

Zuko twists around to peek into the saddle. Katara is still laying down, stretched out on her side. Her body has relaxed enough that her legs aren't curled in so tightly anymore. Zuko decides not to disturb her; after the last few days, she deserves the rest.

He sits back, pulling his fingers through Appa's fur absently. The adrenaline in his system has him feeling wide awake. As the moon shifts higher into the sky, he reaches back for their bag

and digs through it, extracting the spyglass. He looks through it repeatedly, keeping a constant vigil for the Southern Raiders' ship.

His heart lurches when he finally spots it. "There!" He shouts, lowering the spyglass. He looks over his shoulder to see Katara sitting up, eyes searching the waters. "See those sea raven flags?" He tosses her the spyglass and picks up the reigns, curling his fingers around them.

"It's the Southern Raiders."

Behind him, Katara says, "Let's do this." She grinds the words between her teeth with a fierceness that is not to be denied. "Head for the water. We'll go under the ship and surprise them from the other side."

Zuko nods, guiding Appa closer to the water. Katara climbs out of the saddle and settles beside him. The anger and power emanating from her makes him shiver. He grips Appa's reigns tighter and eases the bison under the water, relieved that he cooperates. Katara pulls the water around them into a large bubble. Appa seems to sense their urgency and propels them through the water at a speed that surprises Zuko. He crouches on the bison's head, watching Katara's hands as she holds the bubble in place. She leans forward a bit and shoots a tendril through to the surface. Zuko raises his brows, about to ask what she's doing -

when a soldier splashes into the water.

A distraction.

Zuko tugs on Appa's reigns to urge him around to the other side. The bison complies and returns them to the surface. Katara stands up on his head and pushes her arms out, separating the water around them and pulls it to them, then pushes it to the ship, crashing the wave against the side hard enough to rock it dangerously to the left. There is only one man left when they reach the deck of the ship. He prepares to attack, but Katara reaches behind her, pulling forward a thick jet of water that sends the soldier overboard with his comrades. She takes the water around them from the deck and coats her arms with it, then heads for the door.

Zuko follows her and opens the door, charging in behind her. He glances to the right when he hears the door beside them creaking and stops in time for it to open, revealing a masked soldier with a sword. Zuko catches his arms easily, almost too easily, and pulls the sword from his grasp, slamming his hip into the soldier's gut, forcing him back into the room he emerged from. He slams the door shut and slides the sword through the handles to keep the man at bay. When he turns, he finds Katara waiting for him. She begins moving again once she's sure the threat has been removed.

He leads her to the door that stands between them and the engine room, where the leader is almost always stationed. "This is it, Katara," He announces, glancing at her. "Are you ready to face him?"

Katara doesn't answer. Instead, she lowers her cowl and steps back. The water surrounding her arms begins to move, as if it has a mind of its own, and with a mighty yell she thrusts it forward, blasting the metal door open. Zuko darts in ahead of her, intercepting the fire that's

blasted their way. He deflects all three of the soldier's attacks and shoots a jet of fire forward, forcing the soldier back. It's almost impossible to hear anything over his heart pounding in his ears.

The soldier glances at the scorch marks on the floor, then looks up. "Who are you?" He demands.

"You don't remember her?" Zuko demands in turn, fist clenched before him. "You will soon. Trust me." He punches forward another ball of flame, stepping forward for the ensuing fight.

The soldier dodges the attack and prepares one of his own -

and freezes, wrist turning at an unnatural angle. His fingers open and his arm jerks across his body, then back around, extended out. "What-" He gasps, unable to fight the way his body contorts out of his control. "What's - ah - what's happening to me?!" His voice is strangled, muffled by the grotesque sound of his limbs twisting against his will. His helmet falls off, and he's forced to his knees, forehead practically touching the ground.

Zuko eases out of his stance uncertainly, glancing at Katara -

and realizes that she is the one toying with the man like a puppet. *She is bending his blood.*

His eyes widen, shock rooting him in place for a moment. But he pushes it aside and turns back to the soldier, eyes narrowing.

"Think back," He orders, hands curling at his sides. "Think back to your last raid on the Southern Water Tribe."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" The soldier wheezes. He twitches helplessly in his hold. "Please, I don't know!"

Zuko drops to the ground in front of him. "Don't lie!" He growls. He turns enough to point to Katara, who hasn't said a word the entire time. "You look her in the eye and you tell me you don't remember what you did!"

Katara's hands glide through the air, lifting the man enough to meet his terrified gaze. She leans towards him, trembling with her rage, her pain, and then she stills.

Her voice is a quiet whisper that cuts like a knife.

"It's not him."

She lets go of her hold on the soldier's blood, arms dropping limply at her sides. "He's not the man."

"What? What do you mean he's not?" Zuko leans towards Katara. "He's the leader of the Southern Raiders! He has to be the guy!"

The rage on Katara's face is gone, replaced by a disconcerting emptiness. She lowers her gaze and turns away, walking to the exit.

Panic coils through Zuko's gut. No, this can't be right. They did not come this far for nothing. Gritting his teeth, he turns and grabs the soldier's arm, forcing him to his feet, and shoves him across the room to smash his face against the dirty window. "If you're not the man we're looking for, who is?" He digs his fingers into the back of the soldier's neck and presses on his elbow to enforce his demand.

The soldier twists enough to try to meet Zuko's furious gaze. "You must be looking for Yon Rha," He says, "He retired four years ago."

Zuko glances at Katara's retreating form. He presses down on the soldier's elbow. "Where is he now?"

The soldier grunts, shifting against the wall. "On - on the island! Whale Tail island!"

Zuko absorbs this information for a moment. Then he presses down on the soldier's elbow with enough force to break it, leaning in close to hiss, "If I find out you contacted him about this, we will return, and we will make you pay for it." He lets go, pushing the man against the wall, and walks backwards, watching the soldier to be sure that he won't attack when their backs are turned. Once they're out of the room, Zuko follows Katara back onto the deck.

The other soldiers she had thrown from the deck haven't gotten back on the ship yet. Zuko follows Katara onto Appa's head, steering the bison off of the ship. He waits until they are far enough from the ship to turn to Katara, who sits rigidly beside him, staring straight ahead.

"We're going to find him," Zuko promises. He watches a muscle ripple through her jaw, watches her hands clench so tightly that her knuckles turn white. "I swear, we will comb that island until we find him."

Katara nods once. Zuko settles beside her and allows her her silence, allows her the minutes she needs to prepare herself for the confrontation that's coming.

They fly through the rest of night. They fly past the sun rising, past the storm clouds forming - a hint at what's to come. Zuko guides Appa to the very edge of Whale Tail Island when they arrive, to a thin stretch of beach that looks unoccupied. The village occupying the island is small, which helps narrow their chances of finding the culprit. Zuko reaches into the saddle to grab their supply bag. He roots through it, digging for a few items that might come in handy. He follows Katara to the ground when they land, taking a moment to thank Appa quietly for all that he's done so far. The bison hums in response and settles into the sand for a well deserved rest. Katara starts forward and Zuko jogs after her to catch up.

Now, where to start? Zuko squeezes Katara's shoulder, silently instructing her to follow him. He creeps through the small hills and thick patches of grass, eyes scanning the area around them. There are a handful of houses in the distance, so Zuko heads there. Above them, the clouds thicken, blotting out the sun; the light around them becomes gray and dull. They stop just shy of the homes. Zuko turns to Katara, ready to offer a suggestion, when a rough, agitated voice catches their attention.

"Yon Rha, you lazy piece of work! I need something!"

Katara's eyes widen. She turns around and starts towards the voice, but Zuko catches her shoulder again. He moves in front of her and waves for Katara to follow him, creeping around the development, peeking between the buildings to find a middle aged man kneeling in the dirt. His hair is the color of faded ash, face drawn heavily around his chin and jaw. He turns toward the woman yelling at him, looking tired and worn down.

This is the monster that's haunted Katara for years.

Zuko places a hand on Katara's shoulder once more to keep her beside him. They listen to the yelling, watching the defeated way Yon Rha rises to his feet and grabs a basket, leaving the fenced in garden of his home to head for the market.

Zuko glances at Katara. He lifts his chin after Yon Rha and follows her footsteps, nudging her occasionally to keep her out of sight, to avoid something that would make enough noise to give them away. When Yon Rha reaches the gate to the market, Zuko steps onto the path. He reaches into his tunic and produces a trip wire, tying the ends around two small rocks on either side of the path. Katara waits for him, then leads Zuko into the market. She walks in front of him, light on her toes, and sticks to the empty buildings. Zuko stays behind her, watching Yon Rha retrieve what he needs. When the man turns, Zuko pulls Katara out of sight. He holds her shoulder, listening to Yon Rha call out, voice searching. They're beginning to get his attention, which means they need to be more careful.

They wait for a beat, then leave the market, hurrying behind the buildings to keep up with Yon Rha. Katara leans over the edge of their perch, watching him move down the moss covered stones, pulling back quickly when Yon Rha looks up.

"Hello?" He calls out suspiciously. "Is someone there?" He squints at their perch for a moment, then continues moving.

Katara lifts her head again. Zuko looks over her shoulder. "That was him," She finally confirms, "That was the monster." Her voice is quiet, trembles with barely contained rage.

Zuko slips down the rocks, pausing every so often to be sure Katara is behind him. They continue to follow Yon Rha, heading further up the path to cut him off. Above them, the clouds open and rain begins to fall. Zuko glances up. He has an odd feeling that Katara's element is responding to her emotions, aiding her against the man that traumatized her.

Yon Rha trudges down the path. He stops and twists around, looking behind him. When he turns again, he lunges forward a bit, pushing out a gust of fire that finds its target in a tree. "No one sneaks up on me without getting burned!"

Zuko sneers, shaking his head. He watches Yon Rha stoop to gather his fallen purchases, watches him turn to the path again. His foot catches the trip wire, just as Zuko had anticipated. Yon Rha falls into the mud and Zuko steps in front of him, forcing the man to scramble back with a flame of his own. He holds his stance, knowing that he looks menacing dressed mostly in black, only his eyes visible, hands poised to attack.

"We weren't behind the bush." He steps closer, extending his closed fist in a threat. "And I wouldn't try firebending again."

Yon Rha covers his face, peeking over his arm. "Whoever you are, take my money, take whatever you want. I'll cooperate."

Behind Zuko, Katara approaches slowly. If he looks menacing, then she looks down right terrifying. Zuko keeps Yon Rha in place with the threat of fire, heart beginning to pound deafeningly against his ribs.

Katara stops beside him and lowers her cowl to reveal her face. Rivulets of water run across her cheeks, cloaking her in her element. "Do you know who I am?" She asks, voice low.

"No. I'm not sure." Yon Rha blinks through the rain, shifting in the mud.

"Oh, you better remember me like your life depends on it! Why don't you take a closer look?"

Yon Rha flinches, shielding his face with his arm again. He looks under it, watching Katara with fearful eyes. The recognition dawns on him slowly. "Yes. Yes, I remember you now! You're the little Water Tribe girl."

Katara watches the man at her feet. "You raided my village. You invaded my home." Her eyes blaze as though made of fire instead of the water they so resemble. "You killed my mother!"

"I had orders to carry out." Yon Rha shifts, flinching when Zuko presses his fist forward, warning him not to move. "I was told to remove the last Southern waterbender. She told me it was her!"

Lightning flashes through the sky, painting the world in a white light for a brief second. Zuko eases out of his stance, but keeps his hands closed, watching the exchange before him.

"She lied to you!" Katara turns away, closing her eyes. Rain drops drip from her lashes. "She was protecting the last waterbender."

"What?" Yon Rha sits up, eyes wide. "Who?"

Katara whips around. "Me!" The rage in her swells to a breaking point. She drops into a low stance, then stands straight in one fluid motion, arms extended. All around her, the rain stops, forming fat orbs in the air. Zuko lowers his cowl, unable to do anything but watch as Katara forms a solid dome of water around them, encasing them completely. It stretches and stretches, encroaching areas far out of reach. Katara holds the dome, holds the orbs, holds the rain in place. She stares at Yon Rha for several drawn out seconds, and then she twists her hands above her head. Sharp daggers of ice form in the air, and she throws them at the man in the mud with an angry shout.

Zuko's heart plummets into his stomach in shock. Yon Rha throws his arms over his face, whimpering -

but the daggers stop inches from his face, the larger ones embedded in the ground around him.

Katara stays still for an agonizingly long moment. Zuko watches her, eyes wide as her shoulders slump and the daggers revert to a liquid form, splashing across the ground, splashing over Yon Rha where he cowers for his life.

He tumbles to his hands and knees, shaking the water from his hair and face. "I did a bad thing!" He admits, and Zuko feels a flicker of rage forming within his chest. He bits down on his tongue to avoid overstepping his bounds, watching instead.

"I know I did," Yon Rha continues, glancing up cautiously, "And you deserve revenge! So why don't you take my mother? That would be fair!"

"I always wondered what kind of person could do such a thing," Katara says quietly. "But now that I see you, I think I understand." She walks to Yon Rha, and the man tenses, rightfully afraid of her. "There's just nothing inside you. Nothing at all. You're pathetic and sad and empty."

Shifting onto his knees, Yon Rha watches Katara, trembling with fear. "Please, spare me!" He begs. He drops forward onto his hands once more, hanging his head with a pathetic whimper.

Zuko glances at Katara, watching the water sink into her hair. Her hands curl into fists.

"As much as I hate you... I just can't do it."

Zuko moves to stand beside Katara, watching the murderer before them. He looks at her, and she turns around, leaving them behind. Zuko watches Yon Rha for a moment longer, watching the sad way he trembles in the mud. And then he turns as well, following Katara. Quiet sobs fill the air behind them.

They return to Appa in silence. The bison shifts when they arrive, soaked with rain water, and Zuko grimaces. He rubs Appa's head sympathetically and then climbs up into the saddle, watching Katara take the reigns. Though he wants badly to comfort her, he gives her the space she deserves, and he waits. They leave the island, leaving behind a great deal of pain and suffering.

The further they fly, the worse the storm gets. Zuko tries to shield his eyes from the rain. He watches Katara, and when he sees her hunched over, he realizes the storm is raging because of her. Zuko crawls out of the saddle and onto Appa's head. "Katara!" He calls, forced to shout over the howling winds, "Appa can't fly in this, we need to stop!"

She doesn't respond, doesn't lift her head from her lap, but she doesn't fight him either when he takes the reigns. Zuko squints at the water below them, struggling to find somewhere to land, anywhere at all. It takes him a long time, but he finally finds a tiny island and steers Appa towards it. The bison lands with an unhappy groan, trying to curl away from the rain falling.

It comes down harder, no longer round droplets, but sharp bullets instead. Zuko winces for each one that pelts his shoulders and his head, but pushes it aside. He reaches for Katara, but she shies away immediately, dropping to her feet. Zuko follows her, watching as she paces through the mud.

And then Katara curls in on herself, arms tight around her middle, and releases a cry so anguished it cuts right through Zuko's soul. He swallows hard, watching her sink to her knees, watching her shoulders heave, watching the bullets of rain fall faster and faster - responding to Katara's pain. He can't stand it any longer. Zuko hurries to Katara and drops to his knees before her, splattering them both with mud. He takes her shoulders and pulls her up right, prying locks of hair from her cheeks, pressing his hands to them. Her skin is chilled and wet with rain water and with tears.

"I couldn't do it," She sobs, arms tightening around herself, "I couldn't, I couldn't! I wanted to, so badly, but I just couldn't!" She gasps raggedly, struggling to breathe through the tide of sorrow and pain dragging her under. "I am weak, I am so weak!"

"You are not weak," Zuko argues fiercely. Katara lowers her head again but Zuko tips her chin, forces her to look at him. "You are anything but weak, Katara. Confronting him at all took more courage than anyone will ever know."

Katara shakes her head. She sobs, a broken sound that rips through her chest, and the rain thickens around them. "But - I wanted to. I wanted to kill him, I - I wanted him to suffer!"

"I know." Zuko brushes his thumbs across her cheeks, wiping them clean in vain; the rivulets continue to run down her face.

She looks up at him. Her eyes are bright with her pain, lashes matted together with her tears. "And what if I had?" She asks, sniffing. "What if I had killed him? Would you - would you have looked at me any differently?" Her gaze drops, unable to handle his reaction.

"No." There is no hesitation, no need to hesitate. He lifts her chin once more, searching her face until he catches her eye. "If you had killed him, I would have burned his body so that no one could ever find him again."

The tide breaks over her again, and Katara falls against Zuko, sobbing loudly into his chest. He gathers her in his arms and sits back, ignoring the cold mud, ignoring the rain bruising his skin. He tucks her head under his chin, closing his eyes when he registers her fingers curling into his tunic.

"I'm so sorry, my love," He whispers into her hair.

The storm rages on, and Zuko holds Katara as she releases the torrent of emotions inside of her. He holds her close to him, raising his body temperature in an attempt to combat the chill sweeping over them. Zuko hides his face in Katara's hair. A keen sadness fills him; he mourns for her, for all that she has lost because of Yon Rha - because of his family. He knows that someone related to him had given the order, most likely his grandfather, and it makes his stomach churn painfully.

How long they sit like this, he doesn't know. Long enough for his extremities to go numb. Long enough for Katara to thoroughly exhaust herself; the rain only ceases when her tears do. Zuko doesn't budge. When Katara pushes herself away to sit up, he loosens his hold, wincing at the ache in his muscles. She sniffs quietly, eyes heavy, and he wipes the moisture away from her cheeks yet again. Katara glances down at them and grimaces. She moves her hands

weakly, pulling as much water as she can from their clothes. The heaviness disappears, but they're still damp. She turns, reaching out to Appa to remove some of the water from his fur as well. He shakes himself out, rumbling in response.

Zuko shivers. It's best for them to get out of their wet clothing before they wind up sick. He stands carefully, coaxing his muscles back to life, and pulls Katara to her feet. He helps her into the saddle and follows her, sitting down gingerly. Katara begins to remove her disguise and Zuko helps, tossing the wrinkled fabric aside, then removes his as well. Katara's fingers fumble with the sash at her waist, struggle with prying the clinging blue material of her tunic from her shoulders. She manages, then wiggles out of her pants and sits in just her wrappings, drawing her knees to her chest.

Zuko pulls his own damp clothing away from his skin, shivering in the small gust of wind that curls around them. He strips until he's in just his pants, then he takes their wet clothing and spreads them out over the edge of the saddle to finish drying. He grabs for their supply bag, and he's relieved to find that the items inside are mostly dry. Zuko extracts his blanket and lays it out.

He glances up. "Come here," He murmurs, holding out a hand. Katara looks up and takes his hand, scooting closer. She lays down on her side, pillowing her cheek on her hand, and Zuko follows suit, pulling the blanket over them. He shifts closer until his knees bump Katara's. After all that's happened, he has a deep need to be close to her. Katara reaches out, taking Zuko's hand. She shifts closer still until her forehead touches his shoulder, and he tucks her head under his chin once more, draping his free arm across her shoulder. He raises his body temperature again, providing the much needed warmth to fight the chill around them.

It doesn't take Katara long to fall asleep. The exhaustion rolls off of her in waves; she's deep asleep within a matter of minutes. Zuko stays awake, listening to the quiet sound of her breathing. He doesn't allow himself to relax until he feels the tension leave her, breath by breath. Zuko sighs softly, watching the clouds slowly recede from the sky, following the sun as it retreats below the horizon.

His eyes begin to droop, finally, and he falls asleep as well, unable to fight off his own exhaustion any longer.

Zuko lets Katara sleep on the way back to their friends. He delays the returning trip long enough to feed Appa, who more than deserves the meal after all of the flying he's done for them in the last few days. His own appetite hasn't quite returned yet, and he doubts Katara's has either, so he leaves the food in their supply bag to be used later.

Once they're in the air again, Zuko lets his mind wander, now that the most pressing matter has been dealt with, and comes to an important question: where are they going to go? Azula forced them out of the Western Air Temple. They don't know where Hakoda and Chit Sang and the others are, and their allies are in limited supply. As it is, they're stranded fairly close to the Fire Nation, but they can't stay on that cliff forever. Zuko exhales, squinting in the early morning sunlight. So where can they go? His mind filters through their options, and then it hits him.

A place no one would ever think to look for the Avatar and his friends.

Right under his father's nose.

Their family home on Ember Island.

He mulls it over, chewing his lip. The last time his family had been there was long before his mother had left; before he'd really begun his firebending lessons. It's highly unlikely that anyone's been there in years. The worst that could happen is that Azula would somehow track them there.

Zuko makes a face. Almost not worth the risk.

He twists around to glance at Katara. She's shifted onto her stomach, hair tossing about in the wind. He thinks about their friends, waiting for them on a cliff side, exposed and vulnerable to the elements and to potential enemies. Zuko sighs. He tugs on Appa's reigns, steering him in a new direction.

Ember Island sits on the very edge of the Fire Nation capital. Zuko feels a bit skittish as he guides Appa closer to the shore. He scans the area, pulling on the reigns gently when he spots the familiar house tucked into a cliff side - his family's vacation home. Even from up here it looks neglected and abandoned. Zuko coaxes Appa into landing by the old dock on the shore. Katara sits up, awakened by the landing, brows furrowing in confusion.

"Where are we?" She asks, looking towards the house.

Zuko slides to his feet. "My family's old vacation home," He explains.

"What?" Katara exclaims. She climbs out of the saddle and eases to the ground, giving Zuko an incredulous look. "This is dangerous, Zuko! What if your sister, or worse, your father shows up?"

"They won't." Zuko turns to Katara, golden eyes impassive. "My family hasn't been here in years. No one would ever think to look for us here." He nods for Katara to follow him, heading up the stone path. She hesitates, then trudges after him, eyeing the surrounding area warily.

Zuko tries the double doors when they reach them. They won't budge, so he steps back, checks over his shoulder to make sure Katara isn't in the way, and kicks the doors in. They fly open, exposing the dark, empty home to the outside world for the first time in years.

He steps inside, moving slowly through the house. Katara follows him, hovering close by. Everything is as exactly as Zuko remembers it to be; the only differences are the layers of dust and grime coating everything. He moves through the room, lighting several torches, nostrils flaring at the smell of burning dust.

Zuko turns to Katara. "I'm gonna go get the others," He tells her. She opens her mouth to protest, but he shakes his head, moving closer. "I promise you, we're safe here. Do you see this place? No one's set foot in it since long before my mother disappeared." The

apprehension still shows in her eyes, but he doesn't blame her for it. He moves her hair from her shoulder, fingertips ghosting over her collarbone. Exhaustion still lines her lovely face. "Will you stay here and try to rest?"

Katara sighs. Her shoulders lift and drop as the air leaves her. She nods, folding her arms under her chest. "Hurry back," She says softly. Zuko nods. He leans forward and kisses Katara's forehead, hand lingering on her shoulder for as long as it can as he walks away, returning to the beach to retrieve Appa.

When Zuko returns to their group's outpost, he finds Sokka and Aang pacing in agitation. They rush to Appa as soon as he touches the grass. Zuko drops to his feet, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

"Where is Katara?" Sokka demands. He looks nearly as exhausted as Katara did when Zuko had left her, which makes Zuko feel guilty.

"She's at our new hiding place," Zuko answers. He meets Sokka's gaze, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "I'm sorry we've worried you. Your sister - she's not okay yet, but she will be. I promise."

Sokka watches Zuko for a moment. He closes his eyes and nods, lips pressing into a thin line. When he opens his eyes, he places his hand on Zuko's forearm and squeezes. "Thank you," He murmurs.

Zuko nods. He glances at Aang, who is watching him with an odd expression on his face, and moves past them to begin taking down the tents. Toph gathers a few bags, tipping her head in Zuko's direction. "Is Katara okay?" She asks, a bit hesitantly.

Zuko folds the tent into a manageable square. "She will be," He answers. He moves to Toph and ruffles her hair gently, then settles his arm around her shoulders and walks with her to Appa. "I found a good place for us to stay. It has beds and bathrooms and everything."

"Oh, good." Toph stops when she's close enough to Appa and Zuko takes her bags, hoisting them into the saddle. "I am so tired of hearing Snoozles all night long."

Above them, Sokka squawks indignantly. Suki's fond laughter reaches them, and Zuko helps Toph into the saddle with a smile, climbing in after her. He's glad to be back with his friends; all that's missing is Katara.

Much like he expected, Zuko is met with reactions similar to Katara's when he informs them of their new safe place. He spends a good chunk of the flight arguing valid points with Sokka and Suki, with the occasional interjection of Toph's opinion. Aang remains silent, but Zuko knows what - or rather who - he's thinking about. When this debate has been settled, he gets to the story everyone is curious about - their trip. The others listen in attentive silence as Zuko tells them about the journey. He doesn't give every detail, doesn't need to. Sokka looks the most upset, but Zuko doesn't know if it's for his sister's suffering or for the journey overall. Aang turns to look at them once, and he gives Zuko the same odd look he gave him on the cliff side, a look Zuko doesn't quite know what to do with.

The sun is setting when they arrive on Ember Island. Zuko leans out of the saddle to direct Aang to his home, watching it come into view as they land. He spies a lone, tiny figure out on the dock, and he sighs softly. Aang runs to Katara the minute he's able to. Zuko looks across the others to Sokka.

Sokka glances out to the dock, watching his sister. "She'll come to me when she's ready," He tells them, looking away. "I know she will."

Zuko nods. He helps Toph from the saddle, then follows Aang onto the dock. Katara has not turned to face them. He stops a few paces behind Aang, watching them both.

"Zuko told us about what you did." Aang touches his head nervously. "Or, what you didn't do, I guess. I'm proud of you."

Zuko presses his lips together slightly, but he stays quiet.

Katara's voice is soft when she finally responds, laced with the anguish she's been working through the last few days. "I wanted to do it. I wanted to take out all my anger at him, but I couldn't." She sighs, a sound so soft it's barely heard. "I don't know if it's because I'm too weak to do it, or if it's because I'm strong enough not to."

"You did the right thing," Aang assures her. "Forgiveness is the first step you have to take to begin healing."

Zuko studies the back of Aang's head. Though he's bothered by the monk's need to push his beliefs onto Katara, Aang's words lead his mind down a different path.

Katara stands up. She turns around, looking Aang in the eye as she says, "But I didn't forgive him. I'll never forgive him." Her eyes close, brows knit together with the pain she will carry for the rest of her life. But when she opens her eyes, her gaze finds Zuko, and her entire demeanor shifts, softens considerably. The pain recedes to the depths of her being, replaced by deep gratitude and affection. "But I am ready to forgive you."

She moves to him, watching him for a moment, and then she throws her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. Zuko's eyes widen in shock, but he catches Katara easily, instinctively, enveloping her in a tight hug. He rests his chin to her shoulder, closing his eyes. This is the first sign of affection she's given him so openly, in front of any of their friends. It leaves Zuko a bit breathless.

"I'm sorry," She whispers against his shoulder. "I blamed you for everything, and I shouldn't have. I was so scared and it overtook me, but I promise I won't let that happen again." She pulls away, her hands lingering on his shoulder, and gives him a warm smile.

Zuko can only smile in return, grateful that the air between them has been cleared. He turns with her as she moves around him, watching her walk down the dock, to where Sokka waits for her.

His eyes are locked on her retreating form as he thinks something over.

"I have a question for you." Zuko turns to face Aang, studying him. "If violence isn't the answer, then what are you gonna do when you face my father?"

Fear washes over Aang's face. He looks away and closes his eyes, taking a breath to calm himself. "I - I don't know," He admits, glancing up uncertainly.

Zuko raises a brow. In truth, he thinks it's entirely unfair that a twelve year old boy with such a gentle soul has to be the one to deal with his father, has to be the one to put an end to his tyranny, but none of them have time to mourn over that.

"You should really start thinking about it," Zuko tells him. He leads Aang down the dock, glancing down at the boy. "The comet will be here sooner than any of us are really ready for. You've come a long way with your bending, with all of the elements, but my father will be at his most powerful that day, and he's ruthless. You need to be prepared for this, Aang."

Aang's thin shoulders slump. He nods, running a hand over his bald head. "Yeah. I'll - I'll start coming up with a plan, I guess."

Zuko reaches out and squeezes Aang's shoulder. "You don't have to do it alone," He reminds him. "We're all here to help you. We'll come up with a plan together."

Aang looks up. His smile is small, but it's grateful. He nods and follows Zuko to the house, moving past him to hurry inside when they're close enough, his curiosity getting the better of him. Zuko follows Aang through the doors and raises his brows. The place has been cleaned up, bringing life back to the house. He can smell rice cooking further down the hall, drifting around the sounds of familiar voices, adding an extra layer of warmth that the place has never before had. He follows his nose to the kitchen, where he finds Sokka, Suki, and Katara. Sokka sits beside his sister, with Suki across from them. Both listen attentively to the quiet story Katara tells of what had transpired over the last few days.

Zuko walks into the room. He takes the empty seat on Katara's right, glancing at the door way when green and orange blurs rush by, eagerly exploring their new environment. Zuko shakes his head fondly. He reaches under the table, tracing his littlest finger along the outside of Katara's hand, and wraps it around hers when he finds it. She squeezes his finger in response, still focused on giving her brother and her friend the more personal details of her journey.

Zuko listens, watching Katara. Though she still looks tired, she looks lighter as well, as though a heavy weight has finally been lifted from her shoulders. Seeing this allows him to finally relax. She's going to be okay, he knows this. Katara is made of steel, of diamonds and moon dust, far too strong to let anything thoroughly break her. Zuko rests his chin in his hand, glancing at his other friends. They're all going to be okay, he decides. They're all going to be okay.

So sorry if the ending felt rushed, I'd finally reached that point where I just wanted this done with and out there. Be on the look out for chapter six!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

He kisses her with gratitude, he kisses her with promise, he kisses her with love.

Chapter Notes

Alright, y'all. It's the moment of truth. The moment we've all been waiting for - the Aangst. (lmao here's hoping I did it justice)
As always, y'all are far, far, far too good to me. A thousand times thank you for your kind reviews. <3
(Consider the beginning a little reward for that. :))))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Katara slips into the bedroom, biting her lip to contain her laughter, and drags Zuko in after her. He pushes the door shut just in time for her tug him closer, to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him silly.

Zuko hums low in his throat, hands falling to Katara's hips. His fingers press into the soft material of the red fabric hugging them, and he hums again in approval. "Still amazed at how good red looks on you," He murmurs against her mouth.

Katara giggles softly, her fingers dancing over Zuko's shoulders. "I couldn't tell," She replies, pulling back to grin at him, "You're just so subtle about the way you stare at me whenever I wear this outfit."

"Sorry," He mumbles, a faint flush crossing his cheeks. He cannot deny how much he likes seeing her arms and shoulders and stomach exposed; each time he's hit with the urge to kiss every inch of skin available. "I'll try to be more appropriate." But his hands contrast his words as they slide up her sides, moving around her back to press her closer. He's waited all day to touch her, if he has to wait any longer he'll combust. He leans down and kisses her heatedly, hungrily, full of need.

It's Katara's turn to hum. She kisses Zuko back and wraps her fingers in his tunic, pulling him with her to the bed behind her. He follows obediently, caught in the pull of her tide, unable to resist her. She breaks the kiss and steps away, making him pout, and he yelps when she spins them around and pushes him down onto the bed. Zuko looks up with wide eyes, and then he grins and reaches out, grabbing Katara once she's close enough. She laughs yet again, the sound filling him with warmth, and climbs onto the bed, planting herself in his lap.

When she settles herself across his thighs, all Zuko can do is stare. He feels as though he's waited eons to touch her, fingers itching to dig into her flesh, mouth practically watering at the way her Fire Nation disguise hugs her body perfectly. Perched above him like this, with the light from the moon outlining her in such an ethereal way, Katara looks like a goddess. She smiles down at him, and Zuko groans, leaning forward to attach his mouth to her neck.

Katara inhales softly. She fists her hands in Zuko's hair, tugging gently as he kisses along her throat, teeth pressing into the sensitive flesh teasingly. The necklace she wears takes up too much room, so he reaches up with a quiet noise of frustration and unclasps it, tossing it to the floor. He is careful not to leave any obvious signs of their affair on her skin, but he allows his mouth to drift down, skimming dangerously along the sloping neck line of her top.

Katara's breath catches again. She arches lightly, head tipping back, and Zuko takes this as an invitation to press hot kisses through the fabric covering her. His lips skirt the outline of her wrappings, just warm enough, hands molding to her lower back to hold her ever closer. Above him, Katara moans, soft and drawn out, sending a frisson of liquid heat right to his core. His arousal is beginning to grow, beginning to really make its presence known.

And then Katara presses *down*, hips shifting forward, and Zuko all but short circuits.

He chokes on the air in his lungs, leaning back with a quiet gasp, and she takes advantage of this to kiss him, hot and deep. Katara's tongue licks into Zuko's mouth, exploring like she knows every little inch of him, and she almost does, at this point. For a moment, Zuko is helpless to her ministrations, but he finally comes back to life. He grasps her hips again and meets her fierceness with his own, shifting his hips up against hers, and is rewarded with a moan he swallows, presses into his lungs.

The desire in his blood is burning him up from the inside out, turning his veins into ash. Katara rocks her hips forward, a bit clumsily, but Zuko gasps none the less, heart thundering in his chest. She presses against him, unbearably warm, unbearably close, yet somehow not close enough. His head is spinning, but he kisses her again anyway, overcome by an intense need to be connected to her in this way - in a way he has never been connected with anyone before.

Katara's hands slip beneath the hem of his tunic, deft fingers skirting over his stomach, dangerously close to the waist of his pants. Zuko makes a faint noise, one that Katara seems to breathe in, and she guides her fingers higher, exploring the toned planes of his torso. She maps out his stomach and his chest, explores the lengths of his sides, and she kisses him still, as though her appetite is insatiable.

As good as it is, it's becoming too much. He's all too *aware* of everything, every little movement and breath, of what path they seem to be heading down. His skin feels sensitive, suddenly, completely overwhelmed. "Katara," Zuko breathes, voice ragged and weak. He catches her wrists carefully, and she pulls her hands out from under his shirt immediately, shifting out of his lap to sit further down on his thighs. The loss of her warmth leaves him unusually chilled.

Katara brushes the back of her hand along her cheek, smiling sheepishly behind it. She laughs quietly; the sound whispers through the room. "Sorry," She apologizes, exhaling. "Got

a little carried away."

Zuko laughs, his own smile shy and flustered. His cheeks are warm, visibly red even in the dark, and his heart is still thudding away against his rib cage. It's silent for a bit while they both catch their breath and calm down. Then Zuko lays back against the pillows and opens his arms. Katara smiles cutely and slides into his embrace, resting her chin on his chest. Her gaze on him is curious, and just when Zuko is about to prompt her, she speaks.

"Have you ever been with anyone else?"

The air catches in his throat. He turns away to cough, face reddening further, and pulls a face when Katara pats his chest gently. But the curiosity in her eyes only grows stronger, so he settles back, breathing out a slow breath, and shakes his head.

"No," He answers, peeking at her from behind his hair, "You're - you're it."

Her brows rise slightly. "You mean I'm the only person you've ever been with?" She inquires, pushing onto her elbows. "The only person you've ever kissed. Gotten close to. Really?"

The surprise in her voice makes him squirm. Zuko flings an arm over his eyes, nose wrinkled under it. "Is it really that big of a deal?" There's a faint whine in his voice. "It's not like I had much time to really meet anyone."

When he moves his arm, Katara has her fingers laced together, chin propped up on them. She tilts her head curiously, studying him. There is no judgment in her eyes.

Zuko shrugs. He reaches out to toy with a lock of Katara's hair to distract himself a bit. "I was banished when I was thirteen. At that time, I wasn't really interested in romance, and then... Well, finding the Avatar consumed me. I just wanted to go home." He glances at the window absently. "Besides, I spent most of those years on a ship with an all male crew. Didn't have a chance to meet anyone even if I had been interested."

A small smile touches his lips as he looks back at her. "Actually, you were the first girl I'd really had any interaction with since I'd left home. You really annoyed me, at first." Katara huffs, so Zuko lets go of her hair to hold his hands up in his own defense. "You were in my way! At the time, I mean. I saw you as the only real threat, I think. You were the one always out in front protecting Aang, and it frustrated me, but-" He turns his gaze on her, his small smile turning wry, "I also considered you a worthy opponent. You got better every time we fought and it forced me to get better to keep up with you. I wouldn't tell anyone else, but I appreciated that about you."

Zuko's smile widens into a grin. He reaches out, pressing his fingers gently into Katara's waist. She squeaks in response. "I also wouldn't tell anyone else that I thought you were really pretty. You were the enemy, that was not allowed."

Katara's answering smile is pleased. She tosses her thick mane of hair from her shoulder, tipping her pert nose into the air. "I may or may not have found you attractive," She alludes, lifting her shoulders, "You were the enemy, yeah, but you were also the second boy that

wasn't my brother or someone I needed to teach how to use the bathroom." She shrugs. "Aang was the first, but he's a kid."

Her gaze returns to him, warm in the moonlight. "And then I found you again, that day in the Earth Kingdom. It was so obvious how drastically you had changed, I just didn't know how to react to that at first. You seemed so lost." She reaches up, ghosting her thumb across his lower lip.

Zuko presses a gentle kiss to the pad of her thumb. "I was lost," He confesses softly. "I think you helped me find my way, that day under the tree." He regards her for a moment, and then he murmurs, "That night that I held you in the barn, to keep you warm? That was the first night anyone had gotten so close to me. I don't think I'll ever forget that night."

Again, Katara's smile is pleased, but so soft at the edges. She shifts up, laying flush against Zuko's chest, and takes his face in her hands, kissing him softly. She kisses him with the warmth she holds in her eyes, pours it down into his very soul. Zuko sighs softly, arms circling about her waist. He relishes in the moment, filing it away for those days that are hard to get through.

Her eyes open, liquid pools of sapphire in the dark. "You belong here," She whispers, and the words lodge themselves firmly between his ribs, tucking themselves away against the darker parts of him that feel scarred and aged. He remembers the first time she had said this to him. He remembers the way the wind had whipped her hair about, how firm and sure she had been - as firm and sure as she is now, but without the edge needed for battle. This time there is nothing but tenderness in her voice and her gaze.

Zuko shakes his head in awe, in disbelief. He has no words, nothing he could possibly say to express how deeply he feels for her, so he tips his chin up and kisses her again, slow and deep. He kisses her with gratitude, he kisses her with promise, he kisses her with love. When he pulls back, he kisses her nose just to hear her giggle again, and holds her to him tightly.

"Stay with me tonight," Katara murmurs, and Zuko smiles. He lifts his head to kiss her nose again as his answer. Now that the excitement has died down, drowsiness is settling over him. Katara shifts to the side and reaches down the bed to grab her blanket, pulling it up over them. She lays close to Zuko and lifts her hand to card her fingers through his hair. It relaxes him further, and he turns on his side to face her, shifting down to pillow his head on her outstretched arm, allowing himself to drift into a peaceful sleep. He's aware of Katara kissing the crown of his head, and then he's out like a light.

When he does wake again, it's to the rising sun, like always, but he's a little disoriented.

Zuko pushes up onto one hand looks around the room. He doesn't sleep in Katara's room often, but the lay out of her room is always slightly jarring first thing in the morning. He thinks it's the amount blue she has strewn around and the way it stands out against the shades of red decorating the walls and furniture.

Glancing to his right, he spies Katara, still sound asleep. She's curled up on her side, away from the window and the rising sun; her hair is an umber storm across her pillow, loose and curled. Zuko reaches out and brushes his fingers through the very ends of it. He then slides

out of bed carefully and crosses to the window, checking to see where the sun is in the sky. It's peaking over the horizon, still rising, so Zuko moves to the middle of the room and takes his time as well with his bending forms.

When he finishes, the sun is now up, Zuko is properly stretched and awake, and Katara is still asleep.

He twists his mouth to the side, debating. He could wake her up early, but in doing so, he would be risking her wrath, and he's seen the ugly side of it. Poor Chit Sang had almost lost his foot when he'd woken Katara up by accident at the Temple.

But on the other hand, he really wants her attention; he wants some more time with her before the others wake up.

Zuko slides back into bed. He sits behind Katara, hand hovering at her shoulder as he decides the best way to do this. Direct approach? No, he values his life and his limbs too much. Gentle nudging? Maybe, but then she still might push him off the bed. Zuko settles for playing with her hair, parting some of the knots with his fingers. He draws his fingertips down the back of her neck and smiles when she shivers. Zuko keeps this up, repeating his ministrations patiently until Katara wakes up.

When she finally does, it's with a low groan. Katara wriggles around, tugging the blanket off of her waist with her feet. She hates feeling overly warm, he knows. Moving her hair, she rolls over, cracking an eye open to glare at him. Zuko smiles in response. "Good morning," He murmurs.

Katara opens both eyes to glare more. She's still sleepy, lower lip jutting out in an agitated pout. "Not so sure about the good part," She grumbles. "It's so *early*."

Zuko hums in response. "Guess you should go to bed earlier," He responds, and has to lunge away from her hand when she swats at him.

He laughs, and she grumbles under her breath, then wiggles closer to lay her head in his lap, pressing her nose to his stomach. Her lower lip is still sticking out, pressed up against the softer part of his abdomen. Zuko smiles softly and runs his hand down Katara's hair. "I'll make breakfast to make up for it."

"Yeah, you will." She snakes her arm loosely around his hips, still too tired for a proper hold. "And you'll give me the last of that mango stash you've been hoarding."

"That's fair. It's almost time to go to the market, anyway."

Katara huffs. Her warm breath tickles his stomach. She pushes herself into a sitting position, her hair a curly mess about her shoulders, and yawns while sliding out of bed. Zuko watches her shuffle about the room, placing his chin in his palm, content to simply watch her complete her morning routine.

Katara grabs her comb from the dresser top and brings it with her to the bed. She sits down in front of Zuko and he shifts to tuck his legs under him, raising up a bit to meet the task

properly. Zuko takes the comb and begins pulling it through Katara's hair as carefully as he can. He's gotten good at picking apart the tangles without removing too much hair. It's a little ritual between them, now; something that certainly helps Zuko feel more prepared for the day, despite the simplicity of the task. Maybe it's because Katara trusts him to do it, something he relishes, and he knows Katara enjoys being catered to.

Zuko combs Katara's hair until it's soft and glossy. When he finishes he leans over her to place a kiss to the top of her head. She hums her thanks and twists around, placing a kiss on his cheek. Zuko wraps his arms around her middle and turns her properly, grinning when she yelps, and drags her into his lap for a proper kiss. Katara laughs into it, hands moving to frame his face. She bestows a series of sweet pecks to his lips, grinning through it, and it's such a lovely sight that he can only sigh, utterly enamored with her.

Reaching behind her, Katara retrieves the comb. "Your turn," She announces, sitting up. She moves out of his lap and shuffles around to face him on her knees, then returns to straddle his lap, focusing on his hair. He ducks his head with a small smile, allowing her as much access as he can. He doesn't have nearly as much hair as she does, but it's thick in its own right, tangled from rolling between the pillows in her bed for most of the night.

Katara is thorough and gentle as she brushes through Zuko's hair. It's a bit awkward at this angle, but not worth moving her out of his lap. She hums quietly, a song he doesn't recognize, something lilting and inviting that sounds nice wrapped in her voice. When she is finished, Katara mirrors Zuko's routine and places a kiss on the crown of his head. He smiles at his lap, peeking up at her, and hugs her close when she taps his nose with the tip of her finger.

Eventually, Katara pries his arms off of her and climbs out his lap to get dressed. Zuko lets go reluctantly and slides off of the bed, leaving the room to head for the kitchen. He makes sure to keep himself quiet - Katara isn't the only one that doesn't appreciate being woken up early.

Zuko enters the kitchen and begins rustling around to prepare a breakfast of rice, the remaining stash of fruit they have, and two of the fish Sokka and Suki had caught a few days ago. He lets the rice cook and focuses on preparing the fish, letting his mind wander over the tasks set for the day. Right now that mostly consists of training and a trip to the market. The three bending masters have set up a routine for their student; Zuko teaches Aang first thing in the morning to wake up his chi flow. Katara gets him second, as water is the element of change, and then Toph takes over for the rest of the afternoon to round things out.

In between Zuko gets to train with Sokka and Suki and Katara. He greatly values all of his training sessions; sitting around all day would drive him nuts.

Zuko shifts the fish around in the pan. He glances up when Katara enters the room, a still sleepy Toph shuffling behind her. They separate as Katara moves to the stove to help with the food and Toph drags herself into a chair.

"Ugh," Toph groans, rubbing at her eyes, "I'm so tired. You guys have really got to keep it down when others are trying to sleep. I was up all night because of you two!"

Zuko lifts his head. He glances at Katara, who raises a brow at him, and turns to face Toph. "My room is at the end of the hall," She reminds her, "You picked the room between Zuko

and Sokka, and Zuko wasn't in his room last night. And we weren't even loud, or doing anything bad."

Slowly, Toph lifts her head. Her thin brows furrow first with confusion and then rocket to her hair line in horror. "Oh, no!" She moans, smacking her tiny hands to her cheeks. "That means - it was Sokka and Suki -" Her hands move to cover her face, muffling her shriek.

Zuko drops his head back and laughs loudly. Beside him, Katara looks torn between amusement and disgust. "I never need to know about what my brother does behind closed doors," She mutters.

Still chuckling, Zuko removes several bowls from the cabinet beside him. He fills one with rice and places two slices of fish on top, then carries it to the table and slides it over to Toph. "Eat up," He says, "Unless you don't have an appetite anymore."

Toph pouts. She pokes at the bowl, as if contemplating whether or not it's truly worth it, and then pulls it closer, but not without muttering under her breath. Zuko laughs again. He takes the rest of the bowls from Katara and sets them out, along with glasses of water.

When the culprits enter the room, Aang following them with a loud yawn, and head for the table, Toph promptly pulls her food into her arms and drops to the ground, marching around the table to sit beside Katara, who laughs quietly into her drink.

Sokka nudges a chair out for Suki and takes the one beside it. He gives Toph an odd look. "What, do we smell badly or something?" He asks.

Toph opens her mouth to answer, no doubt to stir up some trouble, so Zuko stuffs a piece of fish into her mouth. He passes the one bowl without fish in it to Aang, nudging two bananas and a handful of purple berries beside the bowl.

"Thanks!" Aang says enthusiastically. He eats the fruit first, watching the exchange between his friends curiously.

Zuko glances at Katara over Toph's head. She's watching as well, chin in her palm, amusement dancing in her blue, blue eyes. Zuko sighs softly. She looks so beautiful with such contentment on her face.

After breakfast, Zuko leads Aang outside to begin their training. Sokka and Suki leave to go to the market, and Katara and Toph settle on the steps leading into the court yard to watch the training begin.

Aang is a very dedicated student. He moves along side Zuko, in perfect harmony with him, right down to the fire they create. Zuko thinks a huge part of this is thanks to the dragons they'd learned from; a moment like that creates a very deep and sturdy bond, and he sees the results of it now as they train.

Even Aang's flexibility and stamina have improved. Zuko watches him from the corner of his eye. Though it's hard to see around the scar, it's still noticeable how easily Aang moves now, how precise and even his strokes are. The fire crackles through the air before it disappears.

They move in tandem still, bringing their hands down past their stomachs with a controlled breath, and then they turn to bow to each other, fist against palm. Zuko gives Aang a small, proud nod and cracks his knuckles as he walks away, stretching his arms out.

Across from them, Katara asks, "Doesn't it seem kind of weird that we're hiding from the Firelord in his own house?" She glances at the covered walk away around her.

"I told you," Zuko answers, sitting down on the edge of the empty fountain, "My father hasn't come here since our family was actually happy and that was a long time ago." He rubs a towel across the back of his neck and through his hair. It isn't lost on him that no one has addressed Ozai as his father around him; today he feels grateful for that. "It's the last place anyone would think to actually look for us."

Pounding footsteps signal the return of Sokka and Suki. Zuko looks up and watches them enter the court yard. He notices with some annoyance that the only thing Sokka is carrying is a rolled up piece of paper.

"You guys are not gonna believe this!" Sokka exclaims. He folds his hands behind his back and adopts a smug expression. Suki stops beside him. "There's a play about us!"

"We found this poster while we were in town!" Suki chimes in. Sokka unfurls the poster with a dramatic flourish. It's incredibly detailed, with Katara and Sokka framing Aang, all three in battle stances - with Zuko's eyes shrouded in red behind them. The sight unnerves him.

"What?" Katara stands and moves to her brother, bending forward to peer at the poster. Aang joins her curiously. "How is that possible?"

Toph joins the group as well, and Sokka waves the poster in all of their faces excitedly. Zuko stays put on the fountain.

"Listen to this!" Sokka turns the poster back to him and begins reading the synopsis written on the front. "The Boy in the Iceberg is a new production from acclaimed playwright Pu-on Tim, who scoured the globe gathering information on the Avatar, from the icy South Pole to the heart of Ba Sing Se. His sources include singing nomads, pirates, prisoners of war, and a surprisingly knowledgeable merchant of cabbage."

Aang glances at Katara, who folds her arms under her chest and tilts her head. Zuko leans forward with his elbows on his knees. Toph turns her head toward Suki as she adds, "Brought to you by the critically acclaimed Ember Island Players."

Zuko can't help it, he groans and slumps forward. "My mother used to take us to see them," He explains when the others look at him. "They butchered Love Amongst the Dragons every year!"

Katara gives him a small, amused, sympathetic smile before she turns to Sokka. Ever the voice of reason, she asks, "Sokka, do you really think it's a good idea to attend a play about ourselves?"

In response, Sokka puts on a pleading expression and unfurls the poster again. "C'mon, a day at the theater?! This is the kind of whacky, time wasting nonsense I've been missing!"

Katara can only turn away with a flat look on her face. "Alright," She sighs. "I guess we can go."

Sokka cheers, which gets Suki and Aang excited. Toph simply shrugs; it doesn't matter to her if they go or not. Shaking his head, Zuko gathers his towel and his tunic and heads inside. He sighs softly at the change in temperature, glad for his momentary break.

He looks up when he hears footsteps to see Katara joining him. She crosses her arms and gives him a decidedly unhappy look.

"I know," He soothes, stepping closer to her. "I don't want to go see it, either. I really, really don't want to." Most of his memories of the Ember Island Players have blurred into one big smear of boredom. He brushes his hands along Katara's arms and says, "At least it'll amuse them for a little while."

Katara sighs quietly. "I dunno," She murmurs. "We've all been working really hard, so I'm fine with doing something fun once in a while, but that - does not sound fun. It sounds like very bad idea."

Zuko nods in agreement. "Hopefully it won't last very long. Two, maybe three hours tops." He leans down to kiss her forehead. "Then we'll be back here and we can laugh about how awful it was together."

Katara nods, but she sighs again. "Here's hoping it goes well," She mutters.

It does not go well. It does not go well at all.

It seemed bearable at first, but then the curtain had risen and the acting began. Now they all sit awkwardly, ranging from uncomfortable to aggravated - except for Toph, who thinks everything is accurate and hilarious. Even Sokka's excitement has run completely dry.

Zuko adjusts his cloak, grimacing when his actor returns to the stage. He notices for the thousandth time that his scar is on the wrong side and rolls his eyes. These guys never get anything right. He remembers just how badly they would perform Love Amongst the Dragons and nearly smacks himself in the face.

A faint flush creeps up his neck when the Blue Spirit prances onto the stage. He curls his fingers into his cloak and glances at Aang, who's expression mirrors his own uncomfortable one. That is one night neither of them will forget, and Zuko is still grateful that Aang kept his secret.

He sighs softly and relaxes once the Blue Spirit exits the stage. The sooner this play is over, the better. Zuko glances at Katara, who meets his eyes with a bothered pout. He doesn't have to ask to know that she is extremely unhappy with how she's being portrayed; weepy and

over emotional, two things Zuko cannot fathom associating with Katara. He moves his cloak aside and nudges her hip gently, grazing the skin above the waist of her pants with his thumb. She smiles at him, her shoulders relaxing a little, and he presses his thumb into her hip gently.

"Honestly," He whispers, leaning in a bit to be heard, "I think the biggest insults are to Appa and Momo."

Katara giggles quietly behind her hand. She moves it away from her mouth and reaches down, slotting her fingers between Zuko's. Her skin is soft and cool against his, her touch reassuring. Just a few more hours of this nightmare and then they can leave. Their entwined hands settle among the folds of his cloak and he sits back, resigning himself to the rest of the play.

Although, he can't help but roll his eyes when they mention Jet. More aggravating than that is the way they twist the situation; Zuko knows it didn't happen like that. He's heard it from Katara, and that's the only version he needed. He glances at her, squeezing her hand in reassurance when he sees how uncomfortable she looks. Toph snickers beside Katara and Zuko rolls his eyes again.

The play drags on, and on, and on. If there is one slightly positive perspective to take from this, it's that it gives Zuko a glimpse into the lives his friends lead before he joined them. Completely taken out of context, he knows, but still fascinating to learn about. His heart aches a bit for Sokka as he thinks back to what happened at the North Pole; while he had been occupied with capturing Aang yet again, and with confronting Zhao, his friend had lost his first love.

Aang's onstage counter part hops around on stage, giggling while destroying tiny Fire Navy ships, and then falls over. The curtain finally drops for the first intermission.

Aang himself flops over the balcony railing with a loud groan. It's a miracle that his hat stays on.

Zuko exhales loudly. The noise is lost among the cheers and whistles - and Toph's clapping and laughter. Zuko shakes his head and lets go of Katara's hand to stand, pulling his hood up. He nudges Aang's side with his knee. "Get up," He tells him, "I'm not staying in here for another minute."

Aang stands with a huff, moving into the isle and following Suki out of the sky box. It's quieter outside, but other audience members are trickling out of the doors to find bathrooms and snacks and to stretch their legs. Zuko keeps his head down a bit to avoid being seen and follows Aang through a curtain that leads to a blessedly empty balcony. Zuko lowers his hood, relishing the silence and the cool night air. He never thought he'd prefer the sound of the ocean and birds to anything else.

Everyone mills about on the steps with an air of dejection about them. Zuko leans against the railing, standing close to where Katara's sitting. She leans back on her hands and sighs loudly, giving him a rueful smile. He responds by lifting his brows and rolling his eyes. Wacky, time wasting nonsense, indeed.

Sokka returns from his food hunt with a bag of jerky. He trudges down the steps and plops down beside Suki, who pats his arm sympathetically.

"So far, this intermission is the best thing about the play," Zuko grouses. He crosses his arms and scuffs at the worn carpet on the steps.

Sokka huffs in agreement. "Apparently the playwright thinks I'm an idiot who tells bad jokes about meat all the time!" He goes on to unintentionally prove the playwright somewhat correct by digging into his bag of jerky and waving a piece around.

"Yeah," Suki chuckles, smirking at her boyfriend, "You tell bad jokes about plenty of other topics."

"I know!" Sokka's voice climbs two octaves higher than his normal pitch. He tears into the jerky irately. Suki's smirk widens.

Below them, Aang says, "At least the Sokka actor kinda looks like you. That woman playing the Avatar doesn't resemble me at all!" He lifts his hands into the air, fists curled in his aggravation.

"I dunno," Toph argues. There's a playful lilt to her voice. "You are more in touch with your feminine side than most guys."

Aang tugs his hands down his hat, rising to his feet with an angry growl. Toph doesn't even blink.

"Relax, Aang," Katara calls, effectively earning his attention. "They're not accurate portrayals." She leans back on one hand, placing the other on her chest, and Zuko can't help but smile a little. "It's not like I'm a preachy cry baby who can't resist giving over emotional speeches about hope all the time." When no one agrees with her, she sits up, opening her hands. "What?"

"Yeah," Aang drawls, turning away, "That's not you at all."

Zuko rolls his eyes at the back of the monk's head. "It's not," He says, glancing down at Katara. He smirks at her. "They completely glossed over how demanding and bossy you are."

Katara whacks him in the shin, and Zuko yelps, but laughs quietly, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder in an affectionate apology. She huffs at him, but there's a smile toying with the corners of her mouth.

"Listen, friends." Toph's voice cuts through their chatter. She crosses her arms, closing her eyes while tilting her chin up. "It's obvious that the playwright did his research. I know it must hurt, but what you're seeing up there on that stage is the truth."

Sokka scoffs loudly, but he doesn't respond, choosing instead to stuff more jerky into his mouth. He's the only one that's found any sort of comfort.

Sighing, Katara stands. "Guess we better go back in," She says. She stretches her arms behind her and turns around, stepping through the curtain.

Zuko sighs as well and pulls his hood back up. He follows Katara, listening for the footsteps of their friends, and steps back into the sky box.

The rest of the audience is filtering in; the conversations drift around them in a jumble of noise that can't be deciphered. Zuko takes his place beside Katara. He lowers his hood and leans forward, folding his arms over the railing to watch the activity down below. The seats his family would choose for their visits varied depending on his father's mood. If he felt generous, they would sit right up front to see everything in detail. But when he felt less than kind, they would sit in the sky box farthest from the stage with the quickest exit so that he could leave as soon as possible.

The audience quiets down as the curtain begins to lift. The sets have been changed, and it takes Zuko a moment to realize they've moved on to the adventures the Avatar had in the Earth Kingdom.

And then an all too familiar scene begins to play out - one that involves a stand off between Fire Nation soldiers stationed in an Earth Kingdom colony, a lost waterbender, and the banished, traitorous prince.

His eyes widen. His spine stiffens. His hair may be standing on end a bit. The flush returns to Zuko's neck full force, creeping up over his jaw and chin to settle in his cheeks.

Like everything else they've covered, the actors completely butcher what actually happened. Zuko is overcome with a sudden urge to curl up inside of his cloak until he disappears as his actor brandishes his fake swords, practically bald, his scar still on the wrong side, and makes a ridiculous show of fighting the soldiers with no regard for his country - but he makes an even bigger spectacle of wooing Katara's actress. Once the soldiers have been taken care of, the woman lets herself fall into the actor's arms, once again crying and pretending to be utterly helpless.

And when they move on to pretending to be engaged, Zuko's positive he's the same color as the drapes on the walls when he hears several gasps echoing around him.

Sokka sticks his head between Zuko's and Katara's. "When did you two get engaged?!" He hisses, far too loudly for Zuko's comfort.

"We didn't!" Katara twists about to push Sokka back into his seat. She's more than annoyed now - she's down right angry. "It - it didn't happen like that! It was just a cover!"

Zuko looks up at the ceiling and exhales. He silently thanks Agni that no one knows what went on that night in the barn, or when they were on their own for those three days. Those are very good memories that he does not want tainted. He glances at Katara, who meets his eyes with aggravation. Zuko reaches between them and covers Katara's hand, squeezing once. She shakes her head, pursing her lips. Her irritation is more than justified.

Zuko glances at Aang, who has been unusually silent for a while now, and is startled to find Aang's round eyes fixed on him in a sharp glare. Zuko frowns at him, but Aang turns away, redirecting that glare to the stage. He's about to demand Aang's attention again, to ask him what that look was about - when he remembers the crush he has on Katara.

Zuko closes his eyes and resists another urge to smack himself in the face. This play is doing far more damage than he had ever anticipated. He sits back, tapping his fingers against his thigh in a poor attempt to get rid of some of the agitation in his body.

The play moves along, thankfully sparing Zuko and Katara further embarrassment - for now. He half listens to Aang's actress babbling about needing an earthbending teacher. He lets go of Katara's hand to take the poster from Sokka, lifting it to his face to study the synopsis again.

On Katara's other side, Toph inhales excitedly. "This is it!" She says, "This must be where I come in!"

The pretend Avatar circles around the audience once and returns to the stage. Zuko cringes. And then Toph's character finally emerges, lifting the fake boulder from the ground to toss it across the stage. It's a man twenty times bigger than Toph will ever be in her life time, with a voice that's ridiculously deep and gravelly. Zuko promptly drops the poster in shock, and everyone around him busts out laughing.

"Wait a minute." Toph leans over the balcony and rubs at her ear. "I sound like a guy - a really buff guy."

Katara slides closer. "Well, Toph, what you hear up there is the truth. It hurts, doesn't it?"

"Are you kidding me?" Toph sits back, tiny hands held up in excitement. "I wouldn't have cast it any other way!" She giggles and leans forward again. "At least it's not a flying, bald lady!"

Zuko glances at Aang. He's never seen the kid so frustrated before. He glances at Katara, who simply shakes her head in exasperation.

He's wondering how they're going to exaggerate Toph's blindness and her unique abilities like they have with everything else - when the actor leans into everyone's personal space and lets out a high pitched, strained, screech. Zuko grips the rail, shoulders hunching to his ears as the sound invades his senses. That is *not* what he was expecting to happen. He opens his eyes when the audience starts clapping and looks at Toph. She's practically hanging over the railing, excitement radiating from her little body in waves. Zuko can't help but smile. At least someone is getting some enjoyment out of this.

The play moves on, dragging through several more discomforting scenes. Zuko rolls his eyes at the ridiculous wig his actor eventually starts wearing and resists the urge to touch his hair self consciously. He watches Uncle Iroh's actor exit the stage, feeling a strange sense of sadness. Wherever Uncle is, he hopes he's safe. But he rolls his eyes at yet another joke about honor and crosses his arms. Katara pats his knee sympathetically, smiling a bit. He rolls his eyes again.

"At least they got Azula right," He mutters. "She's as annoying in this as she is in real life."

Beside him, Aang snorts.

His chagrin returns full force when the set shifts into a cheap imitation of the crystal catacombs beneath Ba Sing Se. Zuko crosses his arms, grimacing at the scene playing out before them. This time it's not even close to what happened when he and Katara were trapped in the cave. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, glancing at Katara from the corner of his eye. She's watching the actors, shaking her head with obvious disapproval. Zuko sighs quietly. That moment is deeply important to him, much like many of his memories with Katara are; they had revealed deeply personal things to each other and strengthened their bond, but the playwright's making a farce of the whole thing.

Zuko's eyes practically roll back into his head when his actor cries something about Katara being the Avatar's girl. He peeks at Aang and scowls when he sees his nod of agreement. That anyone would dare to think of Katara as a piece of property or some sort of trophy is absolutely aggravating.

He winces when the actors hug dramatically, then sighs when Aang stands abruptly and walks out of the sky box. Zuko pinches the bridge of his nose. His heart sinks further at the treatment displayed toward the fake Uncle, a grimace twisting across his features. Zuko sighs and leans forward to fold his arms across the balcony, resting his chin on them. What a wonderful idea this was.

The reenactment of Azula injuring Aang seems to be the breaking point. When Katara stands, Zuko does as well, and the others follow suit. Zuko tugs his hood up and leaves the balcony, shoulders slouched dejectedly. The others follow him out into the lobby, and Katara separates from their group to find Aang.

Zuko slides down the wall and sits between Toph and Suki. The din of the audience goes is much softer this time; he can hear snippets of conversations from people passing by.

"It seems like every time there's a big battle you guys barely make it out alive," Suki comments. "I mean, you guys lose a lot."

"You're one to talk, Suki!" Sokka leans into his girlfriend's personal space, voice echoing through the hall. "Didn't you get captured by Azula? That's right, you did!"

Both Zuko and Toph snort and shake their heads. Wrong thing to say.

Suki's attitude shifts immediately. "Are you trying to get on my bad side?" She questions, voice low.

Sokka leans back. "I'm just sayin'." He lifts his hands in his defense.

Again, Zuko shakes his head. Definitely the wrong thing to say.

"Does anyone know where Aang is?" Katara stops beside her brother, hands clasped before her. Worry is beginning to creep into her voice. Zuko looks up at her, then down the hall. He hasn't seen Aang since he left the sky box.

"He left to get me fire gummies, like, ten minutes ago," Sokka answers, leaning on the wall, "And I'm still waiting!"

Katara levels him with a look, then turns away. "I'm gonna look outside," She says as she walks to the closest exit.

Zuko watches her go. He draws a leg up to rest his arm on his knee. A faint current of unease is beginning to swirl in his stomach. He knows that Aang is unhappy with what he saw, but he doesn't know what to do about it. Is he supposed to do anything about it? Aang's crush on Katara is obvious to anyone and everyone around them, and Zuko knows they'll have to come clean to him eventually, but he had hoped it wouldn't be an issue for a little while longer, given all that's going on. And as it is, his relationship with Katara isn't anyone else's business; Katara hasn't mentioned wanting to speak openly about it yet, despite Toph knowing and Sokka and Suki suspecting, so until that happens, Zuko is perfectly fine with waiting.

A little boy dressed as Aang runs past, shouting with glee as he pretends to glide through the air. Tufts of dark brown hair stick out from under his bald cap.

Beside them, Sokka stirs with excitement. "Suki," He starts, turning to face her, "What are the chances you can get me back stage? I got some jokes I wanna give to the actor-me."

Zuko tips his head a bit to watch Suki push off of the wall. He can only see her back, but she's standing ram rod straight, completely serious.

"I'm an elite warrior who's trained for many years in the art of stealth." Her seriousness is so intense that Sokka's excitement starts to ebb away, but then she shifts, shoulders relaxing as she chirps, "I think I can get you back stage!" She leads Sokka away, and Zuko shakes his head, smiling a bit to himself. He wonders if those two know just how well they balance each other out.

Beside him, Toph chuckles. "Geez, everyone's getting so upset about their characters! Even you seem more down than usual, and that's saying something."

"You don't get it," Zuko argues, looking up at his friend, "It's different for you. You get a muscly version of yourself taking down ten bad guys at once and making sassy remarks."

"Yeah, that's pretty great." Toph crosses her arms and tips her head up, happy as can be.

Zuko turns away, eyes down cast. "But for me, it takes all the mistakes I've made in my life and shoves them back in my face." His head lowers further. "The worst part is the way they display my relationship with my Uncle. I know they're exaggerating a great deal, but... I don't know anything about my Uncle's whereabouts. It'd be a miracle if my father only put him in prison and didn't do anything worse than that. And this play just keeps reminding me of how badly I treated him for so long when all he did was try to help me. He stood by my side when I was at my very worst, when no one else would. And I don't know if I'll get to see him again and redeem myself for that behavior." The strange sadness in his chest swells slightly.

Toph slides down the wall to sit beside him. "You have redeemed yourself to your Uncle," She tells him. "You don't realize it, but you already have."

"How do you know?" He asks curiously.

"Because I once had a long conversation with the guy, and all he would talk about was you."

Zuko pushes the hood off of his head and looks at Toph with a small, hopeful smile.

"Really?" The happiness in his voice startles him a bit.

"Yeah, and it was kind of annoying." She tilts her head thoughtfully.

"Oh." The happiness fades as he turns away. "Sorry."

"But it was also very sweet." She leans closer, bumping her shoulder lightly against his.

Zuko turns back to Toph, and a slow smile crosses his face. The happiness returns, blanketing the sadness inside of him.

"All your uncle wanted was for you to find your own path and see the light." It's astonishing how wise she sounds for someone so young. "Now you're here with us. He'd be proud." She lifts her arm and slugs him hard under his shoulder.

"Ow!" Zuko jumps, holding the bruised spot on his arm. "What was that for?!"

Toph shrugs. "That's how I show affection."

Zuko stares at her for a moment, then huffs a laugh. He feels lighter, much lighter than he could've imagined. Though he's feeling too shy to say it out loud, he's also feeling deeply grateful for Toph and her presence, and very blessed to call her a friend.

The little boy dressed as Aang runs by again, then stops before them. Zuko's heart lurches with sudden nerves. The kid stares at him, and Zuko's positive he's about to be recognized-

"Your Zuko costume's pretty good, but your scar's on the wrong side."

Zuko's jaw drops. The kid runs off again, arms extended to fly once more, oblivious to the insult he just dropped.

"The scar's *not* on the wrong side!" Zuko shouts. He thumps back against the wall and tugs his hood up as far over his head as he can get it, sulking within the confines of his cloak.

Beside him, Toph laughs loudly.

Zuko crosses arms again and glances around. Sokka and Suki haven't returned, and neither have Katara and Aang. The first two he isn't terribly worried about; Suki may indulge Sokka, but she won't let him blow their cover in his eagerness. The other two are more of a problem. Zuko taps his fingers along his arm, mouth pulled to the side.

When Sokka and Suki return first, he begins to worry. Toph climbs to her feet and Zuko follows suit, eyes sweeping the hall. He looks at Sokka, about to suggest they go looking for their friends, when Katara finally emerges from behind a curtain at the end of the hall.

Zuko starts to relax, but new tension cuts through him when Katara comes closer. She's hugging her arms tightly, eyes downcast. The look on her face is distraught. Zuko moves to

her immediately.

"What happened?" He demands.

When she looks up, it pains him to realize she's close to tears. "Aang left," She announces miserably. Sokka, Suki, and Toph join them, shock mingled in their voices as they overlap each other, all demanding to know why. Zuko thinks he already knows the answer, but he doesn't speak. He waits for Katara to explain instead.

Katara shakes her head, closing her eyes for a moment. "I found him out on one of the balconies," She starts. "He was really bothered by the play. He was convinced that I'd really said what was written in the script and asked about my feelings. How I feel about him." Her eyes dart to Zuko. He keeps himself in check. He will not cause further strain for her. She looks down with a quiet sigh and continues. "He brought up when he'd kissed me during the invasion-" Her eyes close briefly when the others erupt once again in shock - " And then he asked if I have feelings for Zuko. I didn't know how to let him down. I wasn't ready to have that conversation."

When Katara looks up again, the distress in her eyes shines brightly. "He kissed me again. I - I told him, Zuko, I told him about us. I'm sorry, I just-" Her hands tighten around her arms. "I didn't want to - I wasn't going to, but then he kissed me and I had to. I'm sorry. He was so upset that he left and I don't know where he went."

"Don't be sorry," Zuko insists. He steps closer, close enough to cover Katara's hands and pry them from her arms. He holds onto them tightly. "You didn't do anything wrong, Katara, don't be sorry."

"But he left because of me, and we haven't even talked about actually-"

"Wait," Sokka interrupts. He looks between them, gaze critical. "So, you two really are a thing? You're together?"

Katara's eyes widen, and Zuko's irritation flares. She nods and says, "I'm sorry, Sokka, we-"

Sokka shakes his head. "It's fine," He assures her, waving a hand. "We'd suspected for a while now, but I figured you'd tell me when you were ready." Sokka raises a brow. "We can talk about that later, though. Right now, we really should find Aang."

Suki leads them down the steps to the lobby, discussing ideas about where Aang might have gone. Zuko holds onto Katara's hand. Beneath the agitation and anxiety, he's relieved that everything is out in the open now. Katara's fingers wrap around his tightly, and he squeezes her hand, hoping to convey some small reassurance.

"At least we don't have to see the end of the play," Sokka says, and Zuko finally gives into the urge and smacks himself in the face.

Night turns into day, and Aang still has not returned.

Zuko hasn't slept much because Katara hasn't slept much. Part of this is because she spent a large portion of the night talking to Sokka about their relationship. Sokka wasn't as bothered as she had feared, which Zuko appreciated; it eased a lot of Katara's nerves to know her big brother wasn't angry with her.

But the longer Aang stayed away, the more bothered everyone became.

Zuko sits out in the court yard with Toph, gaze lost in the shrubbery surrounding the property. It's well past noon, and his agitation is running high. A part of him does feel badly for hurting Aang; they are friends, after all. He's grown really fond of the kid and become closer with him than he'd ever expected. But the strongest emotion Zuko feels right now is anger, and most of it is for Katara's sake. He's appalled that Aang would have the nerve to disrespect her twice now; that he would make her worry sick like this by staying out. Aang knows where all night, when anyone could recognize him and put him in danger.

Zuko drags a hand down his face and exhales slowly. He breathes out some steam in the process.

"You know," Toph drawls, "I've tried to talk to Twinkle Toes about this, but he just doesn't want to listen."

Zuko lifts his head and looks at Toph. She's stretched out on the third stone step, little legs crossed at the knee. The bottoms of her feet are as dirty as ever; one swings leisurely through the air. She bites into a slice of watermelon, wiping some of the juice from her mouth with the back of her hand. Out of all of them, she's been the most relaxed.

"At least about Katara, anyway," Toph explains. She digs a seed out of her watermelon and flicks it across the court yard. "I haven't mentioned anything about you two, but I have at least tried to tell him she's not as perfect as he thinks she is. Which isn't a bad thing, nobody is perfect. But - you get my point." She takes another bite of her watermelon, speaking through a mouth full of fruit. "He thinks they're destined to end up together."

Toph sighs. "I've also tried to talk to Warrior Queen about Snoozles, but there's just no hope for that one," She adds. "At least she can handle him."

Zuko smiles just so. He glances upwards, watching a trail of thin clouds make their way across the blue sky. Toph is right; Katara isn't perfect and it's not a bad thing. He certainly doesn't think so. For him, it's a comfort. He likes knowing she's flawed like him. It makes things feel more real, like he doesn't have to worry about impressing her or keeping up with her.

He doesn't have anything to say, though, so Zuko reaches out and jabs at the bottom of Toph's foot lightly with his thumb. She squawks and fumbles with her watermelon, almost dropping it, and sits up, ready to retaliate, when she suddenly goes still.

He straightens immediately, about to speak, when Toph bolts to her feet. "Zuko, move!" She shouts.

Zuko heeds her warning and rolls out of the way -

just in time for the stone he was sitting on to erupt into a thick pillar meant to launch him into the sky.

His head whips around, heart pounding as he searches for the source of the attack.

Aang stands to their left at the edge of the bushes closing the yard in. The distance between them does nothing to diminish the anger on his face.

"Aang!" Toph shouts, shock written across her pale face, "What are you doing?!"

Zuko presses his lips together. That's how it's gonna be? Fine. That's the way he wants to work this out? So be it. He rises to his feet and moves down the steps, watching Aang closely as he does.

Aang doesn't wait. He slams his foot into the ground and raises a chunk of the earth, tossing it at Zuko. Zuko stretches a whip of fire between his hands and cuts through the stone, knocking the two jagged halves aside. He dodges Aang's follow up, ducking low to avoid the smaller clumps thrown at him, and jumps nimbly away from Aang's attempts to trap his feet.

He will not retaliate, but he will not leave himself defenseless, either.

"How could you do this to me?!" Aang shouts. His voice reverberates through the court yard, startling a few birds in the trees around them. "I thought we were friends!"

"We are friends!" Zuko counters. He flips backwards to avoid an onslaught of slabs of stone aiming for his legs. When he lands, Aang immediately traps his feet this time. Zuko's eyes narrow. He bends forward and exhales a breath of fire, causing the stone around his ankles to explode.

The doors leading inside are thrown open as Katara, Sokka, and Suki rush out to see what's going on. Sokka and Suki look as shocked as Toph does, but Katara's face is utterly horrified, which only makes Zuko angrier. He straightens, but he holds himself back. He will not engage Aang like this. He refuses to give in to the fight.

Unsatisfied with one element, Aang abandons the mess he's made of the court yard to attack with fire instead. Zuko almost sighs. These are forms and tricks he's taught to Aang, which means he knows how to work against them.

Aang kicks out, shooting a heavy gust of fire at Zuko. "No, we're not!" He yells. "You stole her from me! Friends don't do that to each other!" He creates two fire whips, slinging them around his head, lashing them at Zuko with a ferocity he's never seen from the Avatar before. "Your sister is right! You are a traitor!"

Outrage spikes in Zuko's blood. He growls quietly, but still he only deflects the attacks. He breaks through the fire whips almost too easily, kicking through a small sphere aimed for his stomach. Aang bares his teeth; that Zuko will not properly engage him only makes him angrier.

"I am not!" Zuko shouts. "I didn't steal her from you!" He skirts around a whirlwind of flames, parting through them with his hands. He can hear Katara shouting Aang's name, can hear the desperation in her voice as she attempts to gain his attention, to make him stop.

Aang ditches the fire to create a thick tornado of air. He shoves it at Zuko, and it nearly catches him. The current pulls at his tunic, threatening to suck him in, but Zuko jumps backwards, landing on the edge of the fountain, and launches himself through the air again to land on top of the domed structure in the center. He takes a moment to thank Agni that the fountain is empty - three elements are more than enough for him to handle right now.

Aang chases after him. He blasts another wave of fire into the air, and Zuko extends a leg, spinning smoothly on top of the fountain to cut through the flames. The air around him shimmers with heat as the flames fade into nothingness.

"Get down here and fight me!" Aang demands. "Isn't that the honorable thing to do?"

Zuko's eyes narrow. "No, it's not." There is nothing honorable about this situation, but he understands that anger is not a logical emotion; neither is pain.

Behind them, Katara rushes down the steps. "Aang, please stop!" She pleads. The wind tugs at the ends of her hair, as if encouraging her to get involved. She looks close to tears again, which only angers Zuko further.

Do not engage him. Do not give in to the fight. For her sake, if for nothing else, do not do it.

Aang whirls around. His anger focuses on Katara now. Flames dance at the ends of his fingers.

"Why him?" He demands. His voice carries again, riding the breeze surrounding them. "I thought we were going to be together! We're meant to be together, Katara! How could you do this to me, too?! What makes him better than me?!"

Aang lashes out as he speaks. The flames at his fingers surge forward to race across the stone - to race toward the steps. Katara flinches back, stumbling into Sokka's arms when he reaches out and pulls her out of the way, and Zuko finally reaches his breaking point. Sokka tugs Katara back under the awning, forcing her behind him as he reaches for the boomerang strapped to his back.

The fire creates a barrier between Aang and the others, flaring high into the air from the force of his emotions. Zuko stands and launches himself into the air, flipping over Aang's head, and lands in the middle of the fire. He crouches among the flames and cuts through them with sharp slices of his hands, effectively ending their existence.

"That's enough!" Zuko bellows. He straightens to his full height, placing himself between Katara and Aang. His inner fire rages among his bones, a furious dragon demanding to be let loose to answer the challenges that have been thrown at him, but he holds himself in check. He will not stoop that low. He will *not*.

Aang stares him down, brows furrowed in anger, his thin chest heaving. The air around him shimmers, as if in a threat, but Zuko is not intimidated.

He'll allow Aang to take out his frustrations on him, but he will not allow him to get any closer to Katara with this.

"I don't care how upset you are, you will not bring Katara into this mess." Zuko watches Aang, features stern, hinting at the authority that runs through his blood.

"I did not steal Katara from you," He repeats slowly. He turns to face Aang properly, but doesn't move from where he is. "She isn't a piece of property to take, and she definitely isn't a thing that belongs to you, or a thing that you own. She's a person with her own identity and feelings, and you really can't seem to grasp that. Yes, we're in a relationship. We have been for a while now. We didn't tell you, or anyone else for that matter, because it has nothing to do with you or anyone else. It's about us, for us, between us. Katara had her reasons for wanting to keep it a secret and so I respected her wishes and kept it private. If she turned me around right now and said she wanted to end things, I would respect her wishes still and let it happen."

Aang remains silent, but he is listening. Some of the anger has faded from his face. Zuko allows his shoulders to relax a fraction, once he's sure he won't be pelted into the sky by another stone outcropping.

"But maybe you should ask her about how she's feeling for once."

Zuko steps aside and looks up at Katara. She's watching him. Her eyes are the ocean, and a storm of emotions rages within them. The currents make it impossible to decipher them.

Aang doesn't move, but shifts his gaze to Katara. She steps out from behind her brother, hugging her arms the way she did the night before.

"Why?" Aang asks. His voice is quiet this time, but it reaches her anyway.

Katara closes her eyes for a moment. Her voice is soft when she speaks, expression pained, but she finally says, "Zuko listens to me. I don't have to be anything but myself with him. He - he accepts me for who I am, not who he thinks I am, or who he thinks I should be. He listens to me, and he takes care of me." She hesitates, but then she deflates. "For the first time in my life, I'm not just - just taking care of someone. I'm being looked after too, I'm - I feel like I'm equal to someone. Zuko doesn't expect anything from me, even now. He doesn't just want me, he also wants what's best for me, and that... Makes me feel so free in a way that I have never felt before."

"I listen to you too!" Aang insists. His voice rises again, desperate to be heard. "I always do, and I care about you, Katara, I love you!" He takes a step closer, one hand pressed to his chest, the other out in the air. "I've always accepted you for who you are! I can give you all of that! I know I can!"

The pain on Katara's face deepens, but she shakes her head. "It's not the same," She argues. Her voice remains quiet, but a firm foundation begins to form within it. "Aang, I care about

you so much. I love you, you're my best friend, and I want the world for you, but... It's not the same." She looks up, her mouth pulling into a thin line for a moment. "I'm happy with Zuko. He has seen the worst sides of me and he hasn't looked away once, and I can't explain how important that is to me. I can't let that go."

Zuko swallows thickly. He feels oddly shy, hearing Katara discuss her feelings for him so publicly. Beneath the anxiety and agitation in him right now, the parts of him she's been repairing painstakingly for months glow quietly with happiness.

He turns back to Aang, who's gaze has moved to him. The betrayal on his face is still fresh. Later, that will bother Zuko, but right now, guilt isn't his main concern.

"Katara is my girlfriend," He says, and his heart tumbles against his ribs as he does, but he locks his nerves into place. "It will stay that way until she decides otherwise. And if you ever disrespect her by touching her against her wishes again, you will get the fight you came looking for today."

Aang watches him for several heartbeats. His gaze shifts to Katara, and he takes a step back, then two, and then he's off, running through the bushes to get away.

This time, Katara lets him go.

Zuko turns to her. He moves up the steps to stand before her and lifts his hands, but she shakes her head, her own tightening around her arms. He simply nods and places his arms by his sides once more. Katara turns away and walks into the house, an air of sadness about her that stabs at Zuko's heart. Sokka follows her, Suki on his heels.

Toph remains outside with Zuko. For once, she has nothing to say.

Zuko drops his head back and releases a long, loud breath. He allows himself to fall back against a pillar, allowing it to support his weight. His heart is still fluttering from everything that's just happened. He wasn't sure how he expected their reveal to go, but he knows it wasn't like that. But there's no more hiding, now.

Zuko slides down until he's sitting on the ground. He scrubs at his face, working through the anxiety still thrumming in his system. There's still a lot of damage to repair, but right now, the best thing to do is to let everyone calm down.

Toph shuffles across the deck. She sits down beside Zuko, her thin shoulder pressed up against his arm, and he feels the comfort she's trying to convey. He reaches out and squeezes her knee in silent thanks, grateful for her company.

Zuko ventures out to the beach when the sun begins to set.

He finds Aang sitting in the sand, legs drawn up for his arms and chin to rest on. The water laps lightly at his feet. He looks up when he hears Zuko coming, and he heaves a large sigh.

Zuko sits down beside Aang. He keeps a respectful distance between them. For a while, they sit in silence, watching the the colors of the setting sun bleed across the ocean.

"I'm sorry," Aang finally says. He looks over at Zuko, remorse rooted deep within his gray eyes. "The way I acted earlier was horrible. I didn't mean what I said, I was just..." His thin shoulders slump forward. "I was hurt. I still am. But that's no excuse for my behavior. I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

Zuko nods once. "I do," He promises, "And I'm sorry, too. You mean a lot to me, Aang, I don't want to do anything to jeopardize our friendship. I'm sorry for hurting you, and I hope you can forgive me, too. It doesn't have to be right now, or even tomorrow. I understand that it will likely take time."

"Thank you." Aang looks out over the water again. The ocean sings to them softly, as if offering its approval for their maturity.

"Do you love her?"

Zuko looks up. Aang isn't look at him, but out at the water still. Zuko follows his gaze. The water sparkles in the distance, as beautiful and inviting as the master they know that commands it.

"I do." He exhales softly. It's the first time he's admitted it out loud - to anyone other than himself. There is so much he could say about Katara, so many thoughts that circle each other about why. But he doesn't want to aggravate Aang's fresh wounds. Instead, he says, "It's impossible not to."

"Yeah. I know." The forlorn notes in Aang's voice are hard to listen to. "Guru Pathik, when I stayed with him, told me that I needed to let go of all my worldly attachments in order to access the Avatar state. That included Katara. I just... I couldn't do it. I still can't. I don't know how to." His gaze shifts to the sky. "She was the first face I saw when I came out of the iceberg. She's been there through everything that's happened since. I can't imagine my life without her."

For a moment, Zuko simply watches Aang. He's struck again by his young, young age, and by the weight that he bears across his shoulders. By the depth of his feelings and the complexity of him. Zuko curls his fingers into the sand beneath him. He can't even properly imagine feeling heartbreak like this.

"She isn't going away," Zuko reminds him gently. "Katara isn't going to disappear, Aang. Romantic love isn't the only love that matters, and she has a lot of love for you. It may not be what you want, and that will hurt for a while, but it doesn't mean you aren't important to her."

Aang sighs slowly. He leans forward and places his chin on his arms again, digs his toes deep into the sand. "Yeah." He draws the word out, sullen, but Zuko isn't bothered. He knows it will take time to process. He reaches out and pats Aang's back gently, hoping he's providing a bit of comfort to his friend.

The silence stretches out between them again, but not uncomfortably. They watch the sun set, and they allow the retreating light to take the tension between them away as it sinks beneath the horizon and makes way for the moon.

Zuko glances at Aang. "You should go talk to Katara soon," He tells him. "She feels awful about this. She's been worried sick."

Aang's shoulders hunch up, but he nods. "You're right. I owe her an apology too." He glances at Zuko and offers a small smile. "Thank you for this."

Zuko simply nods in response. He watches Aang stand and dust himself off, but he stays put. It's not a conversation he needs to be apart of, and he doesn't know if Katara is ready for him yet. So he lets Aang return to the house alone and stays on the beach.

The moon takes its time rising, and Zuko sits on the shore of the beach to watch it. He folds his legs into the proper form for meditation and straightens his back, emptying his mind of everything the way Uncle had taught him many, many years ago. One by one, the stars begin to emerge. They keep watch over Zuko as he releases the negative energy from his body, expelling all of the tension and agitation and upset that's been sitting inside of him since last night. He sits like this for a long while, and when he opens his eyes, a sliver of the moon hangs in the sky, and he feels infinitely better.

That's the last time Sokka gets to pick our form of entertainment, He thinks wryly.

Zuko stands slowly and dusts himself off. He flexes his feet in the cool sand and turns around, making his way back to the house. When he lets himself in, he finds most of the lights are out, except for one in the kitchen. He peeks inside to find Sokka rummaging through the cabinets.

Sokka looks up and waves at him. "There you are. I was starting to think Aang had made fish food out of you." He snickers at himself, grabbing the stash of jerky he'd hidden away a few days ago.

Zuko chuckles and shakes his head. "I talked to him before I sent him to find Katara. He and I are gonna be okay, I think." He looks up, glancing at Sokka. "How is she doing?"

Sokka hums as he closes a cabinet door. "She's exhausted," He admits truthfully, meeting Zuko's gaze, "But she's not so anxious anymore. They finished talking a little while ago. I think she might be sleeping everything off."

Zuko nods, glad to hear that things are working themselves out. He looks up at Sokka again and reaches up to rub the back of his neck nervously, opening his mouth to say - well, he's not quite sure what to say.

But Sokka beats him to it.

"Buddy, relax." Sokka crosses the room to him and squeezes his shoulder. "I'm not mad at you. I swear. I talked with Katara again before Aang came to find her. I'm not mad at her, either." He drops his hand to cradle the hoard of snacks in his arms, which consists of fruits

as well as his jerky stash. "I was a little bothered that neither of you told me, but I understand. I'm just glad you're making Katara happy. She deserves that more than anyone else in this world. She does so much for everyone else, it's nice to know someone's taking care of her too."

Zuko can only nod, his throat feeling tight with an emotion he can't quite identify.

Sokka digs into his bag and plucks out a thin piece of dried meat. "But I meant what I said a few weeks ago," He reminds Zuko. "You do anything to hurt her and I'll take you ice fishing and leave you to the tiger sharks and dolphin piranhas."

A small smile crosses his face. "Still wouldn't dream of it," Zuko promises.

Sokka smiles in return. He clasps Zuko's shoulder and squeezes again, then moves past him to bring his food stash to his room. When he hears the door shut, Zuko heads down the hall to Katara's room.

He cracks the door as quietly as he can and peaks inside. She's facing away from the door, but when she lifts her head to look up, he lets himself in and shuts the door behind him. Zuko brushes off any remaining grains of sand and heads for the bed. He waits for Katara to turn to face him, then he climbs into the bed and settles on his side to face her.

It's clear that she's been crying; her eyes are a little swollen and red rimmed. Zuko reaches out and pushes her hair off of her shoulder, reaching around her to rub her back. "How are you feeling?" He whispers.

Katara relaxes slowly under his ministrations. "Sad," She whispers back. "Exhausted. I hurt Aang so badly... I should have just told him from the start that I don't feel that way, but..."

Zuko shifts closer. He stops rubbing Katara's back long enough to reach for her blanket and pull it over them. When they're properly tucked in, he returns his hand to her back, traveling the length of it in an attempt to soothe her.

"What happened, happened. There's no going back now, and there's no point in dwelling on the past, either. The best thing to do is move forward."

Katara nods slowly. She rubs at her nose and sighs softly, then shifts closer, tangling her legs with Zuko's. Her feet are cold, and she presses them right up against his to steal his warmth. He leans in and places a soft kiss on her forehead.

She closes her eyes, and she's so quiet for a bit that he's starting to think she's fallen asleep. But then she opens her eyes, and the smile she gives him is small and tired, but warm in its sweetness.

"You called me your girlfriend today," She whispers.

Zuko blushes. He averts his gaze briefly, unable to resist his own smile. "I did," He agrees softly, bringing his eyes back to hers. The storm he'd seen in her eyes earlier has cleared. "I'm

sorry that it's not a secret anymore. I know we hadn't gotten to talk about when you wanted everyone to know."

Katara hums her acknowledgement. She reaches around and removes Zuko's hand from her back to curl both of hers around it. "It's alright," She murmurs. "As much as I liked the privacy, it doesn't change the fact that I still have you all to myself. It's just not a secret anymore." Her eyes meet his. "I don't want to be rude and flaunt this around immediately, but..." Her smile returns, a little bit wider than before. "Now I can hold your hand and kiss you whenever I want."

Warmth bubbles inside of Zuko. He smiles softly and kisses Katara's knuckles, lips lingering there for a moment. It's comforting to know that she wants him publicly as much as she wants him behind closed doors and in hidden spaces. To think that she'll soon be touching him this way, hugging him where anyone can see, excites him.

Zuko wiggles closer and pulls his hand from between Katara's. He drapes his arm around her middle again to hold her close. She curls into him immediately; her feet are a little warmer now, and she feels much more relaxed than she did when he'd first come in.

Katara falls asleep very quickly. Zuko tucks her head under his chin and watches the wall across from them. He is exhausted himself, but he's relieved more than anything else. For all of the missteps they've made recently, they've made the necessary amendments too. He allows sleep to finally overtake him, his eyelids drooping slowly. His hold on Katara slackens as he drifts off, but he keeps her close, right along with the sense of contentment the embrace brings him.

Chapter End Notes

Here's hoping this lived up to everyone's expectations!! Be on the look out for chapter seven!!

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

She watches him openly with pride, with love, for everyone around her to see.

Chapter Notes

We're almost done, y'all!! I can't believe we're so close to the end. I'm getting emotional already!

Thanks yet again for being so supportive, I couldn't do this without y'all. <3

Also!! Special shout out to niallsvoice for being so lovely and helping me out of some tough spots!! I hope I did those parts to your liking!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Zuko has come to think of full moons as a gift.

He glances up at the sky as they skirt through the town, finding himself deeply grateful for the spirit keeping watch over them. When the moon is full, Katara is at her strongest, and when Katara is at her strongest, she is unstoppable.

There is something deeply comforting, and deeply satisfying, in knowing that his partner is the master of the element created to temper the one he reigns over.

Zuko glances at Katara. She's dressed for the occasion, a black tunic covering most of her body. Beneath the hem, hints of Water Tribe blue peek out when she moves. She looks fierce, a force to be reckoned with, and if it were for anything else, he would allow the sight to bring him to his knees. But he forces himself to focus on the task at hand.

For weeks now, their plan has felt insufficient at best, something that troubled Zuko deeply. Defeating his father is absolutely crucial to stopping this war, of that there is no doubt, but Zuko knows better; he knows that simply removing Ozai from the throne will not be enough. The bloodline he hails from has crafted master strategists, his father included. He has not gotten this far on sheer luck alone. So that begs the question: what are they missing?

It wasn't enough to wipe out all but one of the Air Nomads. It wasn't enough to eliminate all but one Southern Waterbender. The Earth Kingdom now sits under Ozai's thumb, and the Northern Water Tribe is very likely next.

And Zuko knows deep in his gut that when Sozin's comet arrives, his father will use every last minute of it's available power to do something truly heinous in order to ensure his legacy.

When he'd finally voiced this concern to his friends, they had immediately taken it into consideration, which Zuko had deeply appreciated. For days he'd discussed what to do with Sokka, with a great deal of input from the others; Sokka is a sound, competent strategist and leader, but the opinions and thoughts of their friends had been a necessary factor into their plan.

Finally, they had come to a conclusion: they needed information. And so it had been decided that they would infiltrate Royal Caldera City in an attempt to learn what they could.

Zuko leads his small stealth group through the dimly lit streets of the city. Night time is their best chance to find any information; though heavily guarded, Zuko is sure that the shift rotations and the locations for battle plans have not changed. He doubts the invasion on The Day of The Black Sun actually shook his father's confidence, meaning Ozai is arrogant enough to leave things exactly as they are.

Earlier that day, once they'd landed on the island, Suki had paid a visit to one of the seedier taverns in the village outside of the palace. Much to Sokka's irritation, she had gathered the information they needed by flirting with a group of guards enjoying their break inside of the tavern. They had been all too eager to divulge the nature of their routines and schedules to impress a beautiful lady. Suki had returned to confirm what Zuko suspected - the schedule hasn't changed. The biggest focus is on the protection of the Royal Family and the other residents of the palace. This leaves at most four guards stationed at the main entrances, with two patrolling the remaining corridors.

The palace looms ahead, drawing closer and closer as they race along the grassy knolls leading to stone walk way surrounding the building. Zuko glances up when a massive shadow passes overhead. He can make out the shape of Appa's tail as he flies over them with Sokka and Suki on his back. They disappear around the edge of the crater - their waiting spot for the departure when the mission is over.

Silence reigns over the night. When they reach the outer wall encasing the palace, they stop before the stone structure and turn to Toph. She stares at nothing, listening instead with her feet, and one corner of her mouth quirks to the side.

"No one is outside," She announces quietly. "It's just as Warrior Queen said - and like you remembered, Sparky. Four heart beats right up front, two scattered in each hall, and what feels like a big cluster in one section."

Zuko nods. "The wing for the Royal Family. The servants are near by, and then the guards that are watching over them."

Toph hums her agreement. She turns to Aang. "Let's get going, Twinkle Toes." Toph presses her hand to the wall and forces the stone inward, creating a window just large enough to see through.

Aang looks up at Zuko, then Katara. "Be careful," He says somberly. His eyes linger on Katara, but he doesn't speak again.

Their relationship hasn't been the same the confrontation between all three of them, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Though things have been awkward, and Katara and Aang have walked on eggshells around each other, they've begun to move forward, and Katara's begun to breathe easily again.

She lifts a hand, hesitating, but Aang reaches out to grasp her fingers. "You guys be careful, too," Katara responds, holding onto Aang's hand tightly. He nods once.

Zuko looks at Toph, where she stands beside the wall. He reaches out to bump his fist against her shoulder. "Behave," He tells her. "Don't draw any more attention than necessary. I don't want to have to go and bust you out of prison too."

Toph huffs, bird chest puffing up beneath her stealth outfit. Sokka had gone all out when he'd shopped for this, giving everyone something that fit them snugly. "There's not a prison in this world that can hold me!" But she reaches out and catches Zuko's upper arm with her fist, much more gently than she normally would. "I'll behave. I promise."

"Good." Zuko squeezes her shoulder, then steps back.

Toph cracks her fingers and Aang moves to stand across from her. Zuko moves further back, pulling Katara with him gently, and watches as the earthbenders begin their distraction. Aang peeks in through the hole in the wall. "Alright," He whispers, falling into a stance that mirrors Toph's. They push at the ground together, just enough to create a faint rumble. Toph smirks and repeats the motion three times.

The rumbling grows louder with each movement. Zuko glances at the wall. If their plan works, the commotion will attract the attention of the guards and provide a way in.

Yawning, Toph shifts her hands, and Aang follows suit. This time, the earth shudders in warning somewhere behind the wall. Aang peaks inside of the hole again and says, "Ground is cracked. Keep going?"

Toph nods. "Keep going. We want them outside."

Aang squares his shoulders and lifts his hands, fingers curling, and shoves them down. On the other side of the wall, the crack in the earth deepens. The sound is grating, but not loud enough, so Aang twists his foot, and the fissure widens further - reaching for the palace. Zuko wobbles on his feet when the ground under him begins to shudder with the earthbenders' impact.

Finally, they hear voices and footsteps. Zuko grabs Katara's wrist and pulls her to his side, bringing them both closer to the wall. Aang looks through the hole again.

"They're coming out!" He presses a hand down and drags his foot to the left, his movements creating more chaos on the other side.

Toph steps aside and pushes her arm out. "Be careful in there!" She orders, and she pulls upwards, lifting the stone out from beneath Zuko and Katara - lifting them to the top of the wall.

Zuko grabs Katara's waist to keep her close. She grips his shoulder and he pulls her with him to the top of the wall, crouching low to observe their surroundings first. The barren landscape below them lays in ruin, ripped down the middle with several equally dangerous fissures running away from it. Several soldiers stand as close as they dare to get. They wave their hands around, griping at one another, wondering just what in Agni's name is happening. And when the earth shudders again, one of them squeaks with fear, dropping the helmet under his arm.

Katara snorts. Zuko tightens his hold on her waist and jumps to the ground with her, landing as lightly on his toes as he can. He scans her once to make sure she's alright, and then he leads her through the shadows, as far away from the guards as they can be.

The only way in is through the main entrance, so the two creep along the side of the palace carefully. The guards remain distracted, and another quake rumbles the ground, allowing them to slip inside undetected.

Beneath the nerves, a thrill of excitement runs through Zuko's blood. There is something addicting about moving like a shadow - existing only in a flash of movement, only to be seen from the corner of the eye, gone within a blink. Katara sticks close to Zuko. Her eyes glitter like sapphires in the darkness; her brows remain in a furrow of determination above them. She catches Zuko across the chest when she hears something that he does not and shoves him back around the corner. Her back is flush to his chest, and for that brief second, their heart beats become one pounding rhythm of adrenaline. When she's sure the coast is clear she peels away and leads him down the hall.

Zuko takes the lead. Not a single thing has changed since his banishment, nor since the invasion attempt. Lit only by dim torches, the halls are exactly as Zuko remembers. The familiarity of the place almost overwhelms him; his head spins slightly as they charge towards the Throne Room. Also referred to as the War Chamber, it's where the Fire Lord makes most of, if not all, of their decisions; all military concerns and plans are dealt with and created in that room. It's where they'll find any information they need.

They arrive at a set of wide, ornate double doors. Zuko pushes them open with all of his might and leads Katara inside.

The spinning in his head increases.

The Throne Room is dark, lit only by the faint light coming in through the open doors - but for Zuko, it might as well be as bright as it was that fateful day.

He can see the shadow of the long table in the center of the room, the map on its surface covered in tiny pins - conquest points. Ghosts of the military leaders at that table fill the room; phantom flames dance towards the ceiling in front of the throne.

The voice of his thirteen year old self protesting his father's cruelty echoes back at him through the empty space.

Zuko is frozen in this memory, unable to remove himself from it -
until familiar hands touch his waist from behind.

He jumps, but Katara's touch moves over his sides like water, bringing him back to the present. They are the only occupants in the room, no one else but them. He is *here*, not *there*.

Somehow, Katara knows just where his mind has gone to. She moves around him and reaches up to place her hand on his cheek. "Zuko," She murmurs, blue searching gold, "Come back to me." Her gaze is attentive, sharp. "It's just us. Just you and me. We've got a mission to complete, remember? Focus on that and then we'll be out of here."

His name wrapped in her soft voice is all he needs to fully return to the present. He nods once, a jerk of his chin, but his hands find hers and he squeezes tightly in thanks. The ghosts disappear completely and the voices die down. She squeezes back, then lets go and looks around the room.

Exhaling, Zuko's gaze narrows. He heads for the throne in the center of the room. "The palace is full of hidden chambers," He murmurs to Katara, eyes sweeping the room. "Azula found all of them when she was a kid, but she only showed me a few of them. There's one in here, and I think there's a good chance my father's battle plans are hidden in it. If not, they could be in another room entirely."

"I hope not," Katara mutters. "The less time we spend here, the better."

Zuko nods in agreement. He steps gingerly over the thin canal used for the flame barrier and moves around the throne, eyes scanning the wall for anything out of place. But it's not that obvious - of course it's not that obvious. Tapping his fingers against his leg anxiously, he walks the length of the platform, fingertips grazing the wall for something, for any sort of clue.

A gasp across the room sends his heart to his stomach. Zuko whirls around and leaps to the floor, running to Katara in time to see her sliding a panel on the wall carefully out of place. His heart settles back into place once he realizes nothing bad happened and he steps through the panel, opening his hand to create a small flame as a source of light.

The room is small and unassuming, suspiciously so. Frowning, Zuko steps further inside and looks around carefully at each wall, each corner. He walks until he reaches the other side of the room and presses his free hand to the wall. It feels thinner than it should, so he slides his fingers to the edge and pulls, carefully - and smirks in triumph when it opens to reveal a set of stairs.

Katara follows him. She shuts the first panel, closing them inside, and moves to Zuko to peer over his shoulder. He leads her down, footsteps silent as they descend below the palace.

The stairs lead into a larger room. Its walls are lined with shelves that are filled with stacks upon stacks of scrolls, of parchment and ink and brushes. Off to one side stands the table Zuko remembers, the one used to hold an enlarged version of a map of the world. The surface of the map is still covered with pins; several pieces of parchment lay discarded across the far corner of the table.

Zuko looks around the room. When he spots a sconce on the wall he lights it with a small flame, then crosses the room to the table. Katara moves past him to the first shelf against the wall. Zuko stops at the table and peers down the length of it, frowning. Most of the pins in the map are clustered over the Earth Kingdom. There are a handful of pieces he doesn't recognize, but the shapes and the coloring make him think they're meant to represent the new war ships.

What exactly are they planning?

His frown deepening, Zuko moves down the table until he reaches the uneven stack of papers sitting on the corner. He picks them up and leafs through them, scanning them for anything they can learn. Most of the writing is unfinished, but consistent of the same message, as if the writer wasn't satisfied with how they tried to convey their message.

Across the room, Katara whispers, "Zuko."

He is at her side in a matter of seconds. She holds an unfurled scroll in her hands; it trembles faintly between her fingers. "It's a letter," She whispers, voice faint, "It says it's a mandatory service. All firebending soldiers are to accompany the Fire Lord on the air ships to the Earth Kingdom. Zuko, he's going to burn the Earth Kingdom to the ground." Her breath catches in her throat. "The - the Water Tribes are targets too. They're going to attack the Water Tribes after the Earth Kingdom."

His heart plummets to his feet once more. Zuko stares at the parchment, reading it once, twice, three times over Katara's shoulder. Then he turns away and swears loudly. The fire behind him flares in response.

"Put it away," He orders. "Katara, put it back where you found it." She is slow to respond, fingers still trembling, so he takes the scroll and rolls it back up, slots it back into its empty space on the shelf. Then he turns to his partner.

"Listen to me," Zuko whispers, framing Katara's face between his hands. She looks pale, stricken with panic. "We are not going to let that happen. We will not. Do you understand me? None of us are going to let my father or my sister or whoever else is working for them get that far. We will stop them." He brushes his thumbs across her warm cheeks, pressing down just under the bones gently to make sure he has her attention. "The Earth Kingdom will survive, and so will the Water Tribes. I swear on my life."

Katara exhales slowly. Her eyes search his, and the panic slowly fades. She closes her eyes and nods, lifting her hands to squeeze his wrists. Zuko presses a quick kiss to her forehead, then ushers her to the exit. "We need to get going. We shouldn't be in here much longer." He waits until she has the secret panel open, then he extinguishes the fire and follows her out. They are careful to leave everything as they found it before they disappear.

Miraculously, there are no guards in the main hall, but they learn why when they step outside. The guards are still fussing over the ruined ground at their feet. The rifts and fissures have spread far around the palace now, leaving dangerously overturned chunks of dead earth to face the sky. Zuko can hear the guards arguing about the source; many think the volcano the city sits on has finally awakened and is getting ready to erupt. Zuko smirks to himself. He reaches back to touch Katara's hand, partly to check on her, partly to reassure himself, and leads her across the open space as quickly and silently as he can.

It's difficult to walk across the quaking surface of the earth, but they manage. Zuko stops long enough to shoot a small flame into the sky, their signal, and tugs Katara forward when a dip in the ground opens beneath the wall. Zuko pushes Katara through first, then follows her. Aang meets them on the other side, immediately covering their tracks once Zuko is on the other side of the wall. He covers the hole, then pulls Katara to her feet, helping Zuko out after.

"Let's go!"

The group wastes no time in retreating, racing down the grassy hill outside of the concrete walk way. They can hear the guards shouting over one another about the earth stilling so suddenly, but no one dares to look back.

Half way to the village, Appa descends to the ground in front of them with a quiet groan. Aang catches Toph's arm and lifts them both into the saddle with a puff of air. He turns back and reaches out, taking Katara's hand when Zuko nudges her forward. Zuko grabs onto Appa's fur carefully and hauls himself up, dropping into the saddle just in time for the bison to return to the air.

Instead of taking the reigns, Aang remains in the saddle as Sokka joins them. Sokka kneels down beside Suki and asks, "Alright, so, what'd you find out? Please tell me you found out something."

Zuko looks to Katara. The moonlight washes away the warmth from her complexion. Her voice is quiet as she says, "Fire Lord Ozai is planning to eradicate the Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes when the comet arrives. Just like Sozin did with the Air Nomads."

A collectively shocked gasp ripples through their group. The color drains from Aang's face completely. Not for the first time, Zuko sympathizes with the young monk. The weight upon his shoulders is an impossible one to bear, especially at such a young age.

Appa leaves Caldera behind, heading for their hide out on Ember Island. For many heart beats, the only sound around them is the wind whistling past.

Sokka is the first to speak.

"We won't let that happen." His wolf tail flutters behind him; the moonlight throws his profile into sharp relief, the temporary shadows hinting at the man he will become. Authority fills his voice and carries it around them. "Now that we know, we can form a plan. We can stop this. We *will* stop this."

Zuko nods. "We will," He agrees. He meets Sokka's gaze, feeling connected to him by the birth rights that run through their blood.

The others murmur their agreement. A somber mood falls over them as they return home, minds occupied with the extravagant weight of the future looming over them.

The closer the comet gets, the higher tensions run.

Zuko has been drilling Aang non-stop since their second invasion of the palace. It is the Avatar's destiny to restore balance to the world, which means stopping the Fire Lord, and that responsibility belongs to Aang alone. But that does nothing to quell Zuko's mounting anxiety.

He is Aang's firebending teacher. The Fire Lord is his father. His ties in this tapestry have begun to tangle around him, digging into his skin to remind him of all that hangs in the balance.

And Katara's words run through his mind constantly.

You belong on the throne.

Zuko has spent many, many restless nights agonizing over this. There is only one other person in this world that would have such deeply rooted faith in him, and he hasn't been seen since the fall of Ba Sing Se. Sometimes he stresses himself sick over this.

The Fire Nation throne is his birth right. He is the first born, heir by blood. He had been groomed for the very title of Fire Lord, only for it to be ripped away from him, and for years he could fathom nothing but earning it back. Letting go of that part of his life had been a cleansing of sorts; once he had, so much toxicity had left his body.

But now? Now he has to consider it anew.

The Fire Nation will need a leader to guide it into a new era of peace, someone to heal the damage they have caused for so long.

Katara is right. He belongs on the throne.

But the acceptance of this does not let Zuko rest, nor does it stop the anxiety bubbling within him.

He drills Aang day and night, and when that is done, he drills himself even harder, on the brink of collapsing. Only Katara manages to pull him away, forces him to rest and eat. She is the only one that has any understanding of the turmoil in his head, because she is the only one he will talk to about any of it. Each night, she listens to his overwhelming thoughts, and each night, she lulls him to sleep with what he learns are Water Tribe lullabies.

And the cycle repeats at the beginning of each new day.

Perhaps the hardest lesson Zuko attempts to teach Aang is how to redirect lightning.

He has not forgotten how it felt to hold the electricity within him - as if it would take control at any moment and devour him until he was nothing but ash and smoke.

Katara keeps watch over them both. Her presence is grounding for Zuko, reminding him of where he is and why; reminding him to shut out the noise and simply breathe once in a while.

Hardest still to deal with are Aang's Air Nomad teachings. He refuses to accept that death is the only way to defeat the Fire Lord, but can't come up with another option. Defeat by death is not an option Zuko likes; for all that he's done, Fire Lord Ozai is still his father, and to think of his friend killing his father makes Zuko feel so ill it's a wonder he can remain upright sometimes. But he knows better. He knows that his father will not stop until he has accomplished his goals, and he will not hesitate to remove anything in his way - including Aang. Especially Aang.

Sokka continues to come up with plans, something that helps preserve some of Zuko's sanity. This kind of stress has been known to tear apart seasoned soldiers and generals, but it hasn't even made a dent in the bond their group shares. Their promise to fight this battle together has not been forgotten, nor has it been broken.

But when they're finally ready to leave for Caldera, and Toph points out that Aang is missing, the stress increases by ten fold.

They search every nook and cranny of the house. They search every bit of the island. Aang is no where to be found. When Sokka returns with Appa, the others eventually turn to Zuko. He has the most experience with hunting down the Avatar, which puts him in charge of this mission. It only takes him a few minutes to form a plan. Zuko ushers everyone into Appa's saddle and coaxes the bison into the air. He leaves Ember Island behind, heading for the Earth Kingdom.

The sun hasn't yet set when they arrive. Zuko lands Appa on the outskirts of the village and drops to his feet, waiting for the others to follow. They all look around curiously, but he doesn't offer an explanation as he leads them through the thicket of trees. The building comes into sight soon, and Zuko is relieved to see that the tavern is still up and running. He can only hope that his first option is here, like she was the last time.

The raucous can be heard well before they even reach the door way. Zuko opens the door and leads the others in. The occupants are loud, smelly, and drunk. He ignores this and scans the room, and a bubble of tension inside of him pops when he finds her.

"And the reason you've brought us to a seedy Earth Kingdom tavern is - what, now?" Katara asks, raising her voice to be heard.

Zuko lifts his hand and points to a woman across the room. "June," He answers.

She sits at a table surrounded by a good portion of the tavern's customers, a steaming cup in her hand as a man charges her. June doesn't even look away from her drink, simply lifts a leg, tugging the man down to the ground with her foot.

"Oh, yeah!" Sokka exclaims, watching June rise to her feet to dodge another attacker. "That weird bounty hunter with the giant mole!" June spins out of reach, shoving the man so that he topples over the first - who slams his head against the edge of the table.

"Mole?" Suki stands on her toes to get a better look. "Her skin is flawless."

June weaves between her would be assailants, almost as if she is dancing. Her drink remains in her hand all the while.

"No, she has this giant mole creature she rides around on."

"A shirshu," Zuko interjects. He tracks June's every move. "It's the only animal that can track Aang's scent anywhere in the world." He turns his head slightly, gaze meeting Katara's. "It's the one shot we have of finding him."

June continues her dance. The second attacker lunges for her, shouting as he does. June tosses her cup into the air. The drink hovers above her head as she crouches, catching the man in the middle, and tosses him clean across the room. He lands on a table in the corner and sends it crashing against the wall. June glances up and catches her drink as it falls, turning away to knock its contents back.

Toph shuffles forward eagerly. "I dunno who this June lady is, but I like her!" She declares, crossing her arms with a wide grin.

Zuko's shoulders hunch. Even many months later, June both intimidates and impresses him. He resists the urge to pinch his nose and instead leads his friends across the room. Katara stays close to his side. Her nose wrinkles at some of the crude words shouted around them.

June returns to her table and sits down. She kicks out the chair across from her to prop her feet up.

"She helped you attack us," Sokka reminds Zuko, eyes narrowed at the back of his head.

"Yup. Back in the good old days." Zuko steps off of the threshold and crosses to June's table. She looks up, rolling her eyes when she recognizes him.

"Oh, great," She mutters, refilling her drink, "It's Prince Pouty. Where's your creepy grandpa?" She lifts her gaze again, only one eye visible, the other curtained behind her hair.

"He's my uncle," Zuko answers sharply, "And he's not here."

June looks up again. Her gaze travels to Katara, and she looks her over once, then smirks.

"I see you worked things out with your *girlfriend*." The inflection is mocking, meant to make him blush, and it works.

Zuko clears his throat, peeking at Katara, who tugs on the end of her hair nervously. "Uh, yeah. She - she wasn't my girlfriend, then - no, she would have frozen my insides solid back then before that happened." He clears his throat again, resisting a smile when he hears Katara's quiet laugh.

June smirks around her glass. The chair under her creeks as she leans back. "So, what do you want?"

Suki moves to stand beside Zuko, eyeing June critically. "I need your help finding the Avatar," Zuko answers.

"Hm. Doesn't sound too fun." June sips at her drink. She doesn't even bother to look at them.

Zuko twitches, muscles tensing with irritation. They don't have time for this! He leans into her space and demands, "Does the end of the world sound like more fun?"

June eyes him, mouth lingering against the rim of her cup. She studies Zuko with her one visible eye, appraising him - debating on whether or not his plea is really worth the effort. In the end, she finally sighs and sets her drink aside. "Fine," June says, standing. "Let's go find that bald friend of yours."

Relaxing, Zuko stands back and straightens. "Thank you."

June waves a hand at him. She walks around the table and heads for the other side of the tavern, passing through a door in the corner. Zuko sighs slowly. Katara places her hand on his back, rubbing small, soothing circles between his shoulder blades. He lets the touch placate him, closing his eyes for a minute to gather himself.

When he opens them, June has returned. She holds a hunk of raw meat in her hand. "Let's get going, then." Moving through their group, June leads everyone outside, where they find their bison face to face with the bounty hunter's shirshu.

"Nyla," June sings. She lifts the meat and waves it around, beckoning her companion forward, then tosses it into the creature's snapping jaws. June coos at Nyla and rubs her snout while she eats, then quickly ducks out of the way to avoid the shirshu's dangerous tongue. "Whoa! Careful there!" Turning to the group, she crooks her fingers. "Okay, so, who's got something with the Avatar's scent on it?"

Katara clambers up Appa's side and digs around in the saddle. "I have Aang's staff," She answers, twisting around to hold the staff up. She slides to her feet and brings it to June.

June takes the staff and presents it to Nyla, who sniffs at it twice. Nyla turns her nose towards the air, then begins to pace the area around them, sniffing for any trace of Aang. She walks in a circle around them; she even stops to sniff Appa's saddle.

And then she lays down, massive head between her massive paws, and claws at her nose with an unhappy rumble.

Zuko crosses his arms. "Well, what does that mean?" He asks apprehensively.

June kneels down to stroke Nyla's head. "It means your friend's gone."

"We know he's gone," Toph reminds her, hands open, "It's why we're trying to find him."

June stands. "No, I mean he's *gone*, gone." She looks over her shoulder. "He doesn't exist."

Zuko's arms fall uselessly to his sides as the weight of June's words fall over them. The anxiety he had finally managed to quiet begins to quietly scream inside of him again.

Sokka is the first to recover. He marches up to June and throws his hands out, demanding, "What do you mean, Aang doesn't exist? Do you mean he's - y'know - dead?"

"Nope. We could find him if he were dead." June looks down at her shirshu, stroking her head again. She shrugs one shoulder. "It's a real head scratcher. See ya!" Without looking back she hoists herself onto Nyla's back.

"Helpful," Toph mutters. "Real helpful."

"Wait!" Zuko steps forward, another idea coming to him. He turns around to face his friends. "There's only one other person in this world that can help us face the Fire Lord." Hope begins to grow inside of him, slow burning like an open fire. If they can't find Aang, then they at least have one other alternative.

He looks up at June. "I'll be right back with a smell sample." Zuko jogs to Appa and climbs into his saddle. He digs through his bags, grunting a bit until he finds it. Dropping to his feet, Zuko moves to Nyla, and he presents her with Uncle Iroh's sandal.

Everyone around him backs away quickly. Katara and Sokka plug their noses.

"You saved your Uncle's sweaty sandal?" Sokka gasps, eyes wide.

Toph chuckles. "I think it's kind of sweet."

Zuko doesn't say anything. He would be embarrassed for being so sentimental, especially with something so gross, but he doesn't have the time to explain that he's held onto anything of Uncle's that he came across to stave off how lonely he tends to get without his presence.

Nyla lunges forward, startling Zuko, but he holds the sandal up to her sensitive snout. She sniffs at the footwear, huffing out hot air, and paws at the ground. June tugs on her reigns.

"Let's do this."

She turns around and bounds away, leaving the others to scramble after her. Zuko barely gives anyone time to settle before he's ordering Appa into the air. Thankfully, the bison catches up to the shirshu, able to see her from the air.

It's a fast flight through the Earth Kingdom. Zuko keeps a tight grip on Appa's reigns. His heart beat grows faster with the more ground they cover. Will they really find Uncle Iroh? He hopes so, with everything in him. Zuko hasn't seen his uncle since the fall of Ba Sing Se; the

last memory he has of the man is of the Dai Li encasing Uncle in crystals, and it's one Zuko desperately wishes to replace.

Nyla's instincts are unstoppable. She bounds across the land well into the day, and she continues on as the sun moves through the sky. His friends sleep when they can, but Zuko doesn't move from his position. He can't allow himself to; there is too much adrenaline, too much anxiety, *too much* inside of him to do anything but focus on the mission in front of him.

It's night time once more when Nyla finally comes to a stop - outside of a hole in the wall of Ba Sing Se. She lifts her head to sniff at the air, and then she crawls through the hole.

Appa flies over the wall and follows Nyla still, landing behind her when the shirshu stops. She rears up and claws at a mound of rubble, desperate to get to her prey.

"We're going to Ba Sing Se?" Zuko questions. He finally lets go of the reigns and flexes his fingers; they ache from the tight grip he's had them in overnight.

"Your uncle's somewhere beyond the wall," June explains. "Nyla's getting twitchy, so he can't be too far." She tugs her companion away from the rocks and looks up at Zuko. "Good luck." The sincerity in her voice shocks him, but she takes off before he can respond.

Zuko watches her go, then looks away and closes his eyes. "It's been a long day," He says, turning around to find Katara watching him. "Let's set up camp and begin our search again at dawn."

Zuko drops to his feet and turns around, holding his hands out to help Katara down. She grasps his hands and slides down, glancing around warily.

"I know," He murmurs. "I don't like it, either, but we need some rest." He looks behind him to see Toph erecting her preferred earthen tent, already clambering inside. A bit away, Sokka stands close to Suki, hands running along her arms as they speak quietly to one another.

Appa drops all of his weight to the ground with a dull thud. He groans quietly and stretches out all six of his limbs, fully on board with the idea of resting. Katara leads Zuko by his hand to the bison. She kneels down and stretches out on one of Appa's legs, pulling Zuko down to lay beside her. He does so gingerly, sighing as his cramped muscles finally begin to relax. Appa's fur is coarse, but not unbearable. Zuko scratches at bison's leg gently in silent thanks for all that he's done for them today.

Katara settles on her side to face Zuko. She finds his hands and tangles them up with hers, resting her chin to his knuckles. Worry swims in her eyes.

"We'll find him," He whispers, watching her. "We'll find him and we'll put a stop to all of this. I promise."

Katara nods once. She closes her eyes with a quiet sigh and nestles deeper into Appa's fur. Her hands remain wrapped around Zuko's, and he watches them as they both begin to drift off.

It feels like he's only been asleep for a few minutes he hears Toph dismantling her tent.

Zuko's eyes pop open and he jumps to his feet, heart lurching when he sees a ring of fire surrounding them. Appa groans in distress, shifting anxiously in place. Zuko searches for the source of the fire, spine straightening when he spies four men dressed in blue robes on the outcropping above them. One of them he recognizes - Master Piandao, the man that had taught him how to use dao swords when he was a boy.

"Well!" One of the men exclaims, leaning over his perch, "Look who's here!" He snickers, shoulders heaving with the motion. His white hair sticks out haphazardly, but the muscles on his arms insist that he is far stronger than his age lets on.

Sokka turns around to grin at Katara, which only confuses Zuko further. What in the name of Agni is going on?

The fire dies down suddenly and the men begin to descend from their perch. Zuko watches them warily, stepping closer to Katara, but she no longer looks suspicious. She looks relieved - excited, even.

"What is going on?" Toph demands, throwing her arms into the air. "We're surrounded by old people!"

"Not just any old people," Katara insists, stepping forward, "These are great masters and friends of ours!" She stops before a man with long white hair and familiar blue eyes - a fellow waterbender. "Pakku," She greets, closing a hand over her fist as she bows to him.

The man named Pakku bows in kind. "It is respectful to bow to an old master," He says, "But how about a hug for your new grandfather?" Pakku straightens and opens his arms with a small smile.

Zuko's jaw drops a bit. He glances at Suki, who looks at Sokka with wide eyes. Sokka grips his head and shrieks quietly as his sister flings her arms around the waterbending master's shoulders. "That's so exciting!" She exclaims. "You and Gran-Gran must be so happy to have found each other again!"

Pakku squeezes Katara's hands. "I made her a new betrothal necklace and everything," He confides happily.

But the smile falls when Sokka races to his new grandfather's side and latches onto him. "Welcome to the family, Gramp-Gramp!" Sokka cries, nuzzling Pakku's cheek.

"You can still just call me Pakku," He insists, pushing Sokka away gently.

"How about Gramp-Pakku?"

"No."

Katara turns to Zuko, who's watching the exchange with a small smile. She steps toward a stoic man with a messy crop of white hair. "This was Aang's first firebending teacher," She explains.

Zuko moves to stand before the man and bows to him. The man bows in return. "Jeong Jeong," He introduces himself as.

Zuko turns to his former master, bowing to Piandao when Sokka does, then to the man beside him - who Katara tells him is Bumi, King of Omashu.

"So, wait," Suki interjects, looking around, "How do you all know each other?"

Bumi's eyes glitter in the dark. "All old people know each other, don't you know that?" He cackles quietly at himself.

Piandao smirks at Bumi, then turns to the group before him. "We're all apart of the same ancient, secret society," He explains, "A group that transcends the divisions of the four nations."

Understanding and recognition blossom in Zuko's eyes. "The Order of The White Lotus," He says, a small smile on his lips.

"That's the one!" Bumi agrees.

"The White Lotus has always been about philosophy, and beauty, and truth," Jeong Jeong explains. "But about a month ago, a call went out that we were needed for something important."

"It came from a Grand Lotus." Pakku nods to Zuko. "Your uncle, Iroh of the Fire Nation."

Katara turns to Zuko quickly, eyes wide. The small smile returns to his face. Relief mixes with pride inside of his chest at knowing that Uncle is safe after all, that he's been taking action to end the war like they have.

Toph moves to Zuko's side. "That's who we're looking for!"

"Then we'll take you to him," Piandao says, but he stumbles aside when Bumi shoves between him and Jeong Jeong.

"Wait! Someone's missing from your group - someone very important." Bumi presses his finger tips together, head swinging about as he looks around. He rushes up to Sokka, forcing the boy to bend backwards as he practically mashes their noses together. "Where's Momo?"

"He's gone," Sokka answers, eyes darting about, "And so is Aang."

Bumi steps back with a frown. "Oh, well! So long as we have each other, I'm sure they have nothing to worry about. Let's go!" He reaches towards the ground and pulls his hand up, stepping away from a stumbling Sokka as the earth beneath him launches him into the air. The king's laughter echoes as he disappears over the wall.

Zuko stares at the place Bumi had been in. After all of that, he understands why Aang would call him a friend.

They chase Bumi down, and he and the rest of the White Lotus members lead them to their camp. Sokka strikes up a conversation with Bumi, full of questions about the man's latest adventures, but Zuko can't focus on it. His thoughts are stuck on his uncle. Nerves suddenly overcome him. What if Uncle doesn't want to see him? His behavior had been so much better the last time they were together, but several voices in Zuko's head are shouting that it doesn't matter, that Uncle was probably glad for the time apart so that he didn't have to deal with Zuko anymore. A thick lump forms in his throat.

The camp lies just outside of the wall, protected by an loose circle of boulders. Bumi lowers one to allow them entrance. "Well, here we are!" He announces cheerfully. "Welcome to old people camp!"

Zuko scans the area. A strange fluttering sensation fills his limbs. "Where..." He swallows past the lump in his throat. "Where is he?"

Piandao points to the tent at the very end of the camp. "Your uncle's in there, Prince Zuko."

The title startles him. It's been months since anyone has referred to him by it. Zuko thanks Piandao quietly and walks forward. His heart beat increases with each step, but when he reaches the entrance, he can't go any further. Instead, he sinks to the ground, legs folding beneath him.

Katara follows him. She kneels beside Zuko, watching him with attentive eyes. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay," He answers tersely. "What if he doesn't want to see me?" His eyes flit toward the entrance of the tent. Such a flimsy barrier stands between him and the man he considers his father, yet he cannot bring himself to cross it.

"Zuko," She says softly, and his eyes fall closed. "Of course he'll want to see you. He sacrificed himself for us to escape Azula - he sacrificed himself for *you*. He loves you. I bet he's missed you as much as you've missed him - I bet he's been just as worried about you."

An unsteady breath leaves him. Zuko looks at Katara, and she offers him a kind smile. The sight fortifies him, and he nods his thanks, reaching out to squeeze her hand. Finally, he stands and enters the tent.

The inside is dark, the only source of light coming from a single candle on the left side of the tent. "Uncle-" Zuko starts, voice soft, but the rest of his words die when he hears the familiar snoring.

Uncle Iroh is sound asleep, back turned to the entrance, snoring away. Zuko watches him for a moment, then closes his eyes and smiles slightly. An intense rush of affection floods him. Zuko sits down and crosses his legs. He's waited days, weeks, months to see his uncle again. A little bit longer won't kill him.

Zuko sits through the dawn. The position is uncomfortable; his back and his knees ache, and his eyes feel dry and gritty. But he waits, and when he hears Uncle stirring, he lifts his head, blinking repeatedly to clear his gaze.

Iroh sits up, yawning loudly, and turns around slowly. His amber gaze is bright, like a flame in the dark when he sees his nephew. "Zuko," He murmurs, and it's all Zuko needs to break.

Tears flood his eyes and spill down his cheeks. Zuko scoots forward, reaches for his uncle, and Iroh reaches out as well to pull his nephew into his embrace. He hugs Zuko tightly, practically crushing him into his chest, and Zuko welcomes the pressure. He tucks his head to Uncle's shoulder, his tears soaking through the fabric of his robe.

"I was so worried, Uncle," Zuko mumbles, voice weak and raspy. "I thought - I was so afraid-"

"Hush, my boy," Iroh murmurs. He squeezes Zuko and runs a hand down his hair, soothing his nephew. The anxiousness fluttering around Zuko's bones leaves him in one swift rush, and he sags against Uncle, exhaling unsteadily. "I am not so easily broken or defeated."

Iroh pushes Zuko back gently to look him over. His eyes are critical, and he only relaxes when he's sure his nephew is in one piece. "I am so happy that you found your way here, Zuko."

A small smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "It wasn't hard, Uncle. You have a pretty strong scent."

Iroh laughs softly. He squeezes Zuko's shoulders, smoothing out the sleeves of his tunic before retracting his hands. His gaze turns sharp as he asks, "Are you here with the Avatar?"

Zuko sighs. Exhaustion begins to creep up on him. "No," He admits. "That's why I came looking for you in the first place. Aang just - disappeared! No one knows where he is at all and the comet will be here in just a few hours. Uncle-" Zuko leans forward in his intensity. "We know what my father is planning. He's going to wipe out the Earth Kingdom with the power of the comet and then go after the Water Tribe. Without Aang, we don't have any chance of stopping him!"

"This is most troubling," Iroh strokes his beard, expression thoughtful. Zuko watches him, takes him all in. He looks older than he had the last time they were together, but healthy. With his brows pulled down, his mouth formed into a frown, his looks speak to his lineage - a Fire Nation prince strategizing his next move.

"Come," Uncle finally says. He stands and Zuko follows suit. "Let us get something to eat and find your friends. I would like to see them, too, and there is no use in planning anything on an empty stomach."

Zuko nods. He turns away to give Uncle Iroh his privacy to change, then follows him out of the tent. The sun is bright, and its energy helps Zuko fight off the exhaustion hanging over him. He inhales the fresh air and soaks up the sun's rays as he follows Uncle through the camp. Its occupants are moving about, preparing for the day. The stop to bow to Uncle, and to Zuko, to incline their heads or wave in a friendly manner. It isn't surprising; Uncle tends to attract respect and friendliness wherever he goes.

They find Toph first. She greets Iroh enthusiastically, then leads them to Katara, Sokka, and Suki.

Katara moves to them immediately. "Iroh," She greets warmly, accepting his hug.

Uncle hugs Katara tightly. "It is good to see you, my dear." He pulls back to look at her, touching her cheek before he moves on to greet Sokka and to meet Suki.

Katara steps closer to Zuko. Her eyes narrow. "You didn't sleep at all," She accuses, frowning reproachfully.

Zuko shakes his head. "I'm sorry, I was too wound up." He shrugs, a bit helplessly. "I'll be fine, though, I promise. Nothing a little food won't fix."

Katara's frown deepens, but she doesn't argue. Instead she leads Zuko to the food herself, even going so far as to prepare his bowl. He can't help it - he steps up behind her and hugs her middle, pressing his face to his shoulder. There are several other people in this tent, likely watching the embrace, but he doesn't care. All he wants right now is to hold the girl he loves and be held in return.

And it's as though she can hear his thoughts, because Katara sets their food down and turns around. She murmurs soothing noises as she pulls Zuko closer, hugging his shoulders tightly. She cups the back of his head and brushes her fingers through his hair, leaves a kiss on the side of his head. Slowly, Zuko relaxes. He breathes Katara in; he draws the strength he needs from her and soaks it up like a flower soaking up sunlight. It's exactly what he needs. Now, he can face whatever is coming their way today.

Zuko loosens his grip and pulls away. "Thank you," He whispers, leaning down to kiss Katara's forehead.

She smiles up at him and squeezes his arm in response. Gathering their food, Katara leads him outside to where their friends have gathered with food for themselves. Zuko takes a seat on the ground beside his Uncle. Katara sits across from him on Iroh's other side. He allows himself to simply listen to the conversation going on around him while he eats, filling his stomach to make up for the lack of sleep.

But the issues at hand can't be put off forever.

"Uncle," Zuko says after a bit, "You're the only person other than the Avatar who can possibly defeat the Father Lord."

"You mean the Fire Lord," Toph interjects, pointing her chopsticks at him.

Zuko's eye twitches. "That's what I just said!" He turns back to Uncle.

Iroh closes his eyes. He shifts his chopsticks idly between his fingers.

"We need you to come with us," Zuko pleads.

"No, Zuko," Iroh argues, turning to his nephew, "It won't turn out well."

"You can beat him," Zuko insists, voice gravelly with its intensity. He looks around at his friends. "And we'll be there to help."

"Even if I did defeat Ozai, and I don't know that I could, it would be the wrong way to end the war." Iroh places his chopsticks carefully inside his bowl. He looks at each of the young faces around him. "History will see it as just more senseless violence; a brother killing a brother to grab power. The only way for this war to end peacefully is for the Avatar to defeat the Fire Lord."

"And then..." He has to know. He has to ask, just this once. "Then would you come and take your rightful place on the throne?"

Zuko has been preparing himself to take the title of Fire Lord. But for all of the pep talks he's given himself, he knows that Uncle Iroh is the true, rightful heir; he would have been next had his brother not manipulated and cheated his way into power. If Uncle wishes to take the throne, Zuko will step back willingly and let him do so.

But Iroh closes his eyes and shakes his head. "No. Someone new must take the throne." His gaze moves to Zuko, full of hard earned wisdom. "An idealist with a pure heart and unquestionable honor. It has to be you, Prince Zuko."

Disbelief washes across his face. "Unquestionable honor?" He repeats. "But I've made so many mistakes."

"Yes, you have." Iroh does not look away. "You've struggled, you've suffered, but you have always followed your own path. You restored your own honor, and only you can restore the honor of the Fire Nation."

His throat is tight with too many emotions. Zuko looks to Katara. Her eyes are shining brightly, full of pride - full of love. She nods once in agreement, reminding him of what she once told him.

You belong on the throne.

It astounds him of how sure she is of this decision - as sure as Uncle is. They both believe in him with all of their hearts, and it's so overwhelming that fresh tears sting his eyes.

Zuko swallows thickly. "I'll try, Uncle," He murmurs.

"Well," Toph hedges, "What if Aang doesn't come back?" It's a valid question, one that has been on everyone's mind for hours and hours now.

"Sozin's comet is arriving, and our destinies are upon us." Iroh looks around him once more. "Aang will face the Fire Lord." He closes his eyes, bows his head. "When I was a boy, I had a vision that I would one day take Ba Sing Se. Only now do I see that my destiny is to take it *back* from the Fire Nation, so that the Earth Kingdom can be free again."

Something tight expands within Zuko's chest; at this very moment, he has never been more awe inspired at the man that his uncle is.

Suki lifts her chin. "That's why you've gathered the members of the White Lotus," She states, hand extending to the people around them.

"Yes." Iroh looks to his nephew once more. "Zuko, you must return to the Fire Nation so that when the Fire Lord falls, you can assume the throne and restore peace and order. But Azula will be there, waiting for you."

His eyes narrow. This does not shock him, nor does it scare him. "I can handle Azula," Zuko says confidently.

"Not alone." Zuko looks to his uncle, brows raising a bit. "You'll need help."

He considers this for a moment, then nods. "You're right." This decision isn't even a decision, not really. There is no one else he would rather have at his side. He looks across the circle to the master garbed in blue. "Katara, how would you like to help me put Azula in her place?"

Katara meets his eyes. A small, wicked smirk curves her full mouth, and a quiet thrill runs down Zuko's spine. "It would be my pleasure."

"What about us?" Sokka asks. He looks at Suki, then at Toph. "What's our destiny today?"

Iroh picks his bowl up and fishes a piece of meat out of the soup. "What do you think it is?" He eyes Sokka as he eats, eyes glowing knowingly.

Sokka rubs his chin. The gears shifting in his head are practically visible to those around him. "I think that even though we don't know where Aang is, we need to do everything we can to stop the airship fleet." He smacks his fist against his palm. Sitting like this, in his Water Tribe Warrior robes, he speaks greatly to his heritage, to his proud and strong and intelligent people.

Beside him, Toph mirrors his moves and smacks her own hands together. "And that means when Aang does face the Fire Lord, we'll be right there if he needs us!"

Iroh nods once in approval. Zuko looks at each of them, allowing himself a moment to simply bask in their presence. He's more than astounded at how far they've all come; these people that he once considered enemies, considered to be so far beneath him, are now his family, closer to him than blood. They've all been through far too much at their ages, and yet here they are, preparing to reshape the world with their own hands. His throat closes tightly for several seconds. There is no one else he would rather do this with.

They clear their breakfast and prepare to leave. Zuko finds Appa to make sure that the bison has rested and been fed. He's antsy, picking up on the energy around him; he's been uneasy since Aang's disappearance, and now he knows that something very big is about to happen. Zuko strokes Appa's nose gently. "He'll be back," He murmurs, peering into one large brown eye. "He wouldn't leave you behind. I'm sure he'll be back." Appa sniffs, grunting quietly in response.

Zuko sets off to find his friends again. He stops before Sokka and Suki and Toph, and he hugs all three of them tightly. They embrace him in return, even Toph, who hugs his middle

with enough force to break his spine. "Be careful," He orders, looking each of them in the eye. "I know what you guys are capable of. I know that you can stop the airship fleet. But make sure that you all come back in one piece."

Sokka extends his arm - a Water Tribe custom. When Zuko grasps his forearm, he says, "You better have that crown on your head the next time I see you. And you better make sure my sister stays safe."

"I swear on my life that I will," Zuko promises. He squeezes Sokka's arm once before he lets go. Piandao joins them and leads his friends to an eel hound, and something heavy settles across Zuko's chest as he watches them go.

Katara is waiting for him inside of Appa's saddle. Zuko climbs onto the bison's head and settles behind the reigns. He takes another look at his friends, then moves his gaze to his uncle and the other Lotus members.

"So if I'm gonna be Fire Lord after the war is over, what are you gonna do?"

Uncle's smile is slow and easy. "After I re-conquer Ba Sing Se for the Earth Kingdom, I'm going to conquer my very own tea shop, and I'm going to play pai sho every day." He flips a pai sho tile with a white lotus on it in the air and catches it.

Zuko smiles as well, small and soft. It scares him to think about taking the throne without his mentor behind him, where he's always been, but he knows that Uncle cannot stay with him forever. The old man more than deserves his tea shop and pai sho games.

He looks at his friends yet again, one last time. Sokka and Suki are watching them; Toph sits between them, clutching Sokka's shoulders. He nods once, and Zuko nods in return. Behind him, Katara says, "Goodbye, General Iroh."

"Goodbye, everyone. Today, destiny is our friend." Iroh looks at each of them, eyes bright. "I know it."

Sokka departs first. The eel hound races across the earth, kicking up a trail. Zuko takes to the air shortly after, not wanting to waste any more time. The longer he stays, the more tempting it will be to hide somewhere to avoid what's coming.

But he will not let himself run. He stopped running a long time ago.

The flight seems almost to pass almost too quickly. The ocean races beneath Appa as the sky around them darkens -

and the comet arrives.

Power instantly floods Zuko's veins. He watches the sky with wide eyes, utterly overwhelmed by the intensity - of the comet, of the heat inside of him, of the fire rising in his blood. It doesn't consume him, no, it invigorates him in ways he has never before experienced.

Katara climbs out of the saddle and kneels beside him on Appa's head. "Zuko, don't worry," She tells him, watching him, "We can take Azula." Her eyes stand out against the darkened sky, vivid and piercing and blue.

"I'm not worried about her, I'm worried about Aang," He admits. Wind whips his hair around his head, tangling it into a hopeless mess. He glances down at the water, then at the sky. Muted shades of red and orange have bled across the world in the comet's wake. "What if he doesn't have the guts to take out my father?" He meets Katara's eyes. "What if he loses?"

Her eyes are so very fierce. "Aang won't lose. He's gonna come back." But the worry creeps into her irises, slips down to settle around her mouth. "He has to."

Zuko watches Katara for a moment. She's focused on the path ahead of them now; the wind tosses her hair about, too. She looks wild and untouchable. He looks forward as well and reaches for her hand. The leather glove wrapped around her skin is rough against his. Her fingers grip his tightly, offering a great deal of comfort.

Uncle's words chase Katara's through his mind. The Fire Nation draws closer and closer, and as it does, Zuko begins to steel himself.

Today, he will take back his country.

Today, he will face his sister for the final time.

Today, he will prove himself worthy of his destiny.

Today, he will become the Fire Lord.

Katara turns to him again. She lifts their hands and presses a firm kiss to the back of his. Her mouth is soft and warm. "I'm right here with you," She reminds him. "Don't forget that. We can do this. Together."

"I'll never forget that," Zuko promises. He tugs Katara close, fueled by the fire burning inside of him, and kisses her fiercely, deeply. "There is no one else I trust more with this with than you. I trust you with my life, Katara."

Her eyes shine so brightly that they're almost blinding. "I trust you with my life, too, Zuko." Her grip on his hand tightens.

The palace is empty when they arrive, save for Azula and a handful of Fire Sages. The crown of the Fire Lord glints above her bowed head.

Appa lands in the center of the pavilion with a distinct roar. Zuko stands on his head, spine straight, shoulders back. He holds himself like a prince.

Like a future king.

"Sorry, but you're not going to become Fire Lord today."

He jumps to the ground. His voice echoes across the empty buildings.

"I am."

Across from him, Azula laughs. "You're hilarious."

Zuko looks at his sister, truly looks at her. Her entire appearance is sloppy; her hair is uneven and messy, her armor sits crookedly across her shoulders. He doesn't think he's ever seen dark circles under her eyes before. She looks completely unbalanced.

Katara jumps to her feet and joins Zuko at his side. "And you're going down," She snarls. Her ferocity is exactly what he needs right now.

The Fire Sage lifts the crown once more, uncertainly this time, but Azula stops him and rises to her feet. "You want to be Fire Lord?" She asks. "Fine. Let's settle this, just you and me, brother." The mania in her eyes increases with every word she speaks. "The show down that was always meant to be. Agni Kai!"

Zuko bares his teeth. "You're on," He growls.

Katara turns to him sharply. "What are you doing?" She hisses. "She's playing you! She knows she can't take us both so she's trying to separate us!"

"I know. But I can take her this time."

Azula watches them both. Her sinister smile is present, but the air of confidence she normally possesses is gone. Something has unhinged her.

"But even you admitted to your uncle that you would need help facing Azula."

Zuko's eyes narrow slightly. "There's something off about her. I can't explain it, but she's slipping." He turns to Katara. "And this way no one else has to get hurt."

Her eyes flash, her mouth presses into a thin line, but she nods once - trusting his judgment. She reaches out and snatches his hand, squeezes it almost painfully. "Be careful," She stresses.

Zuko nods. He squeezes Katara's hand in return. Her trust relieves him; this way, he won't be worried about her well being. Katara lets go and steps back. Zuko curls his fingers. Her touch is fortifying, the phantom press of her fingers a reassurance.

Azula dismisses the Sages. She descends the steps and Zuko turns his back to her, walking across the pavilion. Katara takes Appa's reigns and murmurs to him to leave. It takes a bit of coaxing, but the bison eventually rises into the air to find a safe hiding place, and Katara moves to the safety of the pillars surrounding them.

As per the custom, Zuko puts one knee to the ground, his hand on the pavement. It's frighteningly warm against his skin. He closes his eyes to center himself. There is no fear in him; no anxiety, no uncertainty.

He is calm. He is ready.

Standing, Zuko turns to face his sister. He watches her remove the robes meant for the Fire Lord. Her movements are twitchy, a far cry from the elegant way she usually carries herself.

"I'm sorry it has to end this way, brother."

He extends his hands. "No, you're not."

Azula smiles crookedly and lifts her hands as well. She spins and fires a powerful blast of blue flames, and the Agni Kai begins.

Their fire clashes, a beautiful and deadly mess of blue and orange. Zuko counters Azula's every move. He meets her attacks, each one bigger than the last, and does not falter once. It's the first time in his life that he feels like he has a chance at defeating his sister - the first time in his life that he thinks he will overcome the prodigal princess.

The power of the comet is completely intoxicating. Zuko feels utterly invincible right now, as if nothing in this world could possibly stop him. He punches his fist forward and aligns his blast against Azula's. With a slight turn of his foot, he powers through it, breaking the wall of fire she has up. The flames surround Azula, lingering on the roof and the pillars behind her. She whips her head around and stares at her brother with wide eyes - with shock - with fear.

He is not so weak anymore.

She charges forward and launches herself through the air, bringing a mighty whip to the ground with her foot. Zuko spins around and crouches, slashing his hands through the air - breaking through the flames with his own. The fire dashes across the buildings, and he winces slightly. He needs to be more careful; Katara is still within range, and he doesn't know where the Fire Sages have gone. Even Appa could still be close by. He glances around to see flames dancing on the buildings around them. They are wrecking everything in sight.

Azula drops to one knee. Zuko straightens, attacking first this time. He punches his hand down, creating a small scale comet of his own that races towards his sister. Azula narrowly avoids the attack. She throws a wave of fire at him, and Zuko launches into the air, twisting about as he brings forth a wall of his own. He lands and moves in a circle once more to chase her around the pavilion, and then he drops to the ground, spinning on his back - creating a whirlwind inferno that knocks Azula off of her feet.

She tumbles to the ground. Her hair comes loose, hanging in stringy clumps about her head.

The confidence within him rises higher and higher.

"No lightning today?" Zuko calls. "What's the matter? Afraid I'll redirect it?" He steps forward, hands extended in another stance - an invitation.

He doesn't hear Katara running into the pavilion behind him.

"Oh, I'll show you lightning!" Azula nearly touches the ground as she conjures the lightning. Her movements are jerky, unsteady, but the bolts are massive, boosted by the comet's power.

Zuko takes a slow breath and moves his hands down to his abdomen, then extends them outward. He watches the lightning, watches his sister bring it toward her chest to release it.

But she hesitates.

She does not fire at Zuko.

He frowns and follows the path the lightning is taking and feels his heart plummet to the ground.

Katara. She's aiming for *Katara*.

She is aiming for his heart.

Time seems to slow down. Zuko throws himself into the path of the lightning. His cry of horror is lost beneath the electricity crackling through the air.

Not Katara. *Not Katara*.

Zuko catches the lightning. It is too late to properly redirect it, so he gathers it inside of his chest - the most dangerous place for it to be, but not the worst. No, not the worst at all. The force of it flings him through the air. It wraps around his heart, searing his flesh in a white hot pain so intense that he cannot fathom anything else. His body crashes to the ground, and the lightning leaves him, lighting up the sky as it does.

After shocks rock his body. Zuko curls in on himself, then rolls onto his back. A breathless noise leaves him, and he curls his shaking fingers over his heart, above the horrific burn marring his skin. Katara's voice dimly echoes in his ears, but it's so hard to hear over the static and the white noise surrounding him.

It's almost too difficult to turn himself over. Zuko gasps when the pavement scrapes against the burn mark on his chest. He lifts his head, vision blurred, and searches for Katara. She is running for him, hands glowing, but a wave of blue flames separates them. *No, no, no. Agni, please, no. Not Katara, please please please*. But he cannot get up. He can hardly lift his head. Zuko collapses, jaw scraping against the pavement, and closes his eyes. He is aware of voices, of explosions, but it is faint, so very faint, and the world around him is growing darker by the second.

He had gotten to arrogant, and now, his heart is paying the price.

If this is how he is to die, then he will accept his fate.

But then a pair of hands turn him over. Zuko gasps raggedly, eyes clenching shut. Pain floods his system, weakening him further. And then -

and then something cool sinks into his chest. It washes through his veins, over his muscles. It blocks out every other sensation, overwhelming him for several seconds. His heartbeat returns, grows stronger, his breath comes easier. The pain is not gone, it is still very much present, but now - now he feels alive again. Weak, but alive.

When he opens his eyes, he finds his heart is intact and safe. Relief crashes over him so strongly that he would've been brought to his knees had he been standing. Katara's own relief is palpable. Her eyes shimmer with tears as she leans over him, little hands pressed to his chest. Zuko reaches across his body to place his hand over hers.

She reaches beneath him and helps him sit up, and then she locks her arms around his neck in a vice like grip. Zuko grunts, flinching, but wraps his shaking arms around Katara's waist. He presses his face to her hair and inhales slowly. She smells like smoke, like brimstone and life. He holds her tighter.

"Zuko," She breathes against his neck. "Zuko, Zuko, *Zuko*." Her body shakes within his embrace, but her heart beats strongly against his, and that is all he needs. Katara lifts her head. Tears stream down her face, dripping onto her tunic. She presses hard kisses to his temple, his cheek, his chin, his mouth. Her unsteady breath ghosts across his sensitive skin, and he has never been so grateful to be able to *feel*.

Katara eases Zuko to his feet. He sways slightly but stays up right, Katara's hand against his back to steady him, and he looks around. The white noise in his ears slowly clears, allowing him to hear an utterly heart wrenching sound - Azula's sobs. Zuko turns to find her chained down to a sewer grate, thrashing harshly against the restraints. He watches his sister, arm across his middle, below the ripped, singed fabric of his tunic - below the burn mark she has given him. He can't recall a single time that he's ever seen Azula cry, not even when she was a child. To see her now, chained to the floor, soaked, ruined, sobbing hysterically, is almost too painful to deal with.

Slowly, Zuko looks to the sky. Streaks of red paint the clouds bloody; the buildings around them smoke, scorched and broken as a result of the battle. Azula's sobs continue to fill the air. Zuko turns away. His movements are slow; his body aches terribly, but he crosses the pavilion regardless. Katara stands close at his side, her hand on his back. She stops them when the Fire Sages emerge and slides in front of Zuko, tendrils of water coiling through the air threateningly.

But the Sages do not respond to this. Instead, they take in the destroyed pavilion with wide eyes. Their gazes shift to Azula, who is sits hunched over the grate she's chained to. They look to Zuko again, and they all drop to their knees. "My Lord," The Lead Sage says, and a large knot inside of Zuko unfurls.

Katara relaxes her stance slowly. She returns her water to the pouches on her hips and slides her arm around Zuko's middle to help him up the steps. When the Sages rise, he says, "Take my sister to her room. Do not remove her chains. Make sure that two capable guards are stationed outside of her room at all times until I say so."

The Sages rush to fulfill the new Fire Lord's first order, and Zuko leads Katara through the palace. It is eerily silent; all of the occupants are gone. He doesn't know where they are, but he hopes they're safe. Katara supports as much of Zuko's weight as she can as they walk to his former room. She is focused on him, but her eyes flit about curiously every so often.

When they reach his old room, Zuko pushes the doors open. It's dark inside. Nothing has changed. He looks around slowly at the canopied bed, at the red drapes hanging over the

windows and the walls, at the desk in the corner. Katara says something, but he doesn't hear her. The lack of sleep, the duel, the lightning, it's all taking its toll. The darkness creeps up on him suddenly, and he drops to his knees and hits the floor, passing out.

He sleeps. He sleeps hard, he sleeps deeply. The intensity of the wound on his chest and the intensity of the Agni Kai has completely wiped Zuko out.

When he does wake, he is alone. The sun is out, lending him its energy like it always has; one of the few constants throughout his life. Slowly, Zuko eases out of bed. His body still aches, and the burn on his chest is sensitive and deeply, deeply painful, but he can move, he can breathe, and that is enough. The bandages around his middle restrict a good deal of his movement. Zuko grabs a robe from a chair by the door and leaves the room. He makes his way to the first balcony available, looking for anyone that can answer his questions, but no one is around. He hasn't seen Katara yet, either.

Zuko stops at the balcony when he reaches it. The sun shines brightly, warming his skin, but it leaves the damage he caused on full display. He looks at the ruined buildings, at the scorch marks lining the pavement, and sighs quietly. There are a lot of repairs to be made. But that can be dealt with in due time. Zuko tugs the sleeve of his robe over one arm, grunting at the pain that flares in his chest. He holds his middle, taking a moment to breathe.

"Hey!"

He whips around to find Katara storming towards him, brows furrowed with worry and irritation. His heart jumps happily.

"Katara!"

"What are you doing out of bed?" She demands. She takes the other half of his robe and slides it on properly, then ties the sash at the waist. "You're not supposed to be up yet! La, I'm gone for three minutes and you get out of bed and wander away!"

As soon as the sash is tied, Zuko steps forward and hugs Katara to him. He ignores the pain and he ignores her protests about his wounds and he holds her tightly. She places her hands against his back and rests her lips to his shoulder, breathing him in slowly.

"Where is everyone?" Zuko demands, leaning back. "What happened? Did Aang ever come back?"

"Breathe," She insists, placing a hand against his chest. "Everyone is here, your uncle included. Aang did come back. They're all safe." Katara looks up at him, blue eyes full of pride. "He stopped Ozai. He did it without killing him - Aang took his bending away instead."

Zuko's eyes widen in shock. "Took his bending away?" He repeats.

Katara nods. "He said he met a lion turtle that showed him what energy bending was and so he stopped Ozai by taking his bending away."

Zuko looks away and closes his eyes for a moment. Relief floods him for many reasons; the war is over, his friends are safe, and his father is alive. For everything Ozai has done to him, for as much pain as he's caused him, Zuko is still relieved that Aang hadn't killed him after all.

When he opens his eyes, Katara's gaze is locked on his bandage. Her fingers have drifted to the top of it. He knows what she's thinking.

"Katara-" He starts, but she interrupts him.

"What were you thinking?" She demands angrily. When she looks up, her eyes are full of tears. "You almost died, Zuko! You were practically dead when I got to you, your heart was barely beating!"

"I wasn't thinking!" He shakes his head. "You were in danger and I had to stop it! If I hadn't jumped in front of you, you would be dead for sure, Katara."

She shakes her head this time, hair bouncing with the intensity of it. "I am not worth that! You-" Her hand presses against his chest, ever so gently, and his heart beats strongly beneath her palm, all thanks to her. "You're the Fire Lord now, the world needs you! And you sacrificed yourself for me! La, Zuko, I have seen you do so many stupid things and that by far was the stupidest!"

"Stop, stop." Zuko takes Katara's face in his hands and tilts her chin gently. Tears spill down her cheeks, and he brushes his thumbs through their tracks. "I would do it all over again - I would. The world needs you, too, Katara." He leans down carefully to touch his forehead to hers. "I need you, Katara. I could not have continued to exist had you not survived."

Her lower lip trembles. Katara closes her eyes tightly, spilling more tears down her cheeks, and slides her arms around Zuko. She is careful not to squeeze him too tightly, and she presses her face to his shoulder and allows herself to cry. Zuko holds her to him and strokes her hair, sways with her gently.

"You're going to have another scar," She mumbles into his robe.

His mouth quirks slightly. "I'm not ashamed of that. I'm not ashamed of the first one anymore, and I won't be ashamed of this one. Not when it saved someone I love."

A quiet noise bursts from her. It is the first time he has hinted at the depth of his feelings for her.

"You brought me back from the brink of death, Katara. My life belongs to you now."

Her fingers curl into the silk of his robe. "I love you," Katara whispers unsteadily, "I love you so much. I was so, so afraid that you were gone, you scared me so badly."

Zuko's heart explodes behind his ribs. He lets go of Katara to take her face in his hands again, shaking his head a bit in wonder, and he kisses her with all of the happiness inside of him. "I love you, too," He breathes, "Just as much. I'm sorry that I scared you. I'm here, I'm still here thanks to you."

She kisses him back, lifting her hands to stroke his cheeks, his jaw, his chin, fingers trembling as she does. "You can't do that to me again, Zuko, you can't. I can't go through that again, and neither can you."

He doesn't know what prompts him to say it. His emotions are running high, bubbling over, but when her mouth leaves his, he whispers, "Marry me."

Katara jumps in surprise. She jerks back, eyes wide with shock, cheeks still wet with tears. "What?" She demands, brows knitting together. "Zuko, that's - I -"

"It doesn't have to be today." He slides his hands down her arms in an effort to soothe her. "It doesn't have to be next month, or later this year, or even five years from now. We can get married when we're old and wrinkly if we want."

The more he thinks about this, the more he wants it. A new chapter in his life is beginning and there is no one better to share it with. He takes her hands and continues, "Katara, I love you. I don't want to be without you, and along with that, the union makes sense. Uniting the Fire Nation and the Water Tribe after everything that's happened could do so, so much good for both of our people."

Katara lets go of him, and instantly he feels cold and nervous. "Zuko," She murmurs, chewing on the inside of her lip for a second. "I can't stay here, not completely. Not yet. I - I love you, I don't want to leave you, but I need to go back home. I need to find my father again, I need to see my grandmother. I have to help rebuild my tribe. There's so much for me to do there."

The nerves inside of him start to dissipate. That's not an outright rejection. "I know," Zuko responds softly. "I would never ask you to stay, Katara, I would never try to keep you here. I understand that you need to go back home. I would never begrudge you that." He takes her hands gently in his. "Like I said, it doesn't have to happen right this minute, or even in a few years. But I want you by my side." He meets her gaze, his own warm and sincere. "Even if you're off traveling the world to heal it, I just want to know that you're still with me."

Her eyes soften. Katara lifts their joined hands to kiss each of his. "I will always be with you, Zuko," She promises him. A small smile crosses her lips. "Make me a betrothal necklace and then we'll talk."

Zuko smiles in return. He squeezes Katara's hands and nods. "I can do that."

Katara's smile widens. "C'mon." She pulls him toward the doorway gently. "Everyone is really eager to see you. Iroh stayed with you while you were asleep, but I made him go see everyone to get something to eat."

Zuko follows Katara inside, eager to see his friends and his uncle. He feels lighter than he has in months, knowing that everyone is safe and that they're near by. The sun is shining brightly, and the war is over. He grips Katara's hand tightly, a smile on his face.

His heart pounds loudly in his chest. His palms are sweating, but despite the nerves, he feels ready.

Zuko looks at himself in the mirror. He takes in the regalia in all of its form, quietly awed at how the robes of the Fire Lord look on him. The same robes worn by his father, by his forefathers, now belong to him. And soon, the crown will rest on his head too. He turns his head slightly to study his scar. With his hair pulled into a top knot, completely swept off of his face, the full extent of his scar is visible; the uneven hairline, the shriveled husk of his ear, the thick ridges of his ruined skin. It's all out in the open for everyone to see.

And he is not ashamed of it.

Taking a breath, Zuko turns away from his reflection and leaves the room. The palace has come back to life again. Servants and nobles bustle about, and they all stop to bow to him as he passes. Zuko inclines his head in return to each of them. It's a little surreal, being treated like a prince again.

But he isn't a prince. Not anymore.

When he reaches the doors to the pavilion's balcony, Aang is waiting for him, and he is a breath taking sight in his yellow monk's robes. A wooden necklace with the emblem of the airbenders hangs around his neck, tying the look together. He looks splendid. He sits against the wall, head bowed, and his eyes open slowly as Zuko approaches.

"I can't believe a year ago my purpose in life was hunting you down," He says. "And now..."

"And now we're friends," Aang finishes for him.

Zuko's smile is warm and tender. "Yeah. We are friends."

Aang stands and faces him. "I can't believe a year ago I was still frozen in a block of ice. The world is so different now."

"And it's gonna be even more different." Zuko crosses to Aang, places a hand on his shoulder. "We'll rebuild it together."

Aang smiles widely at him and reaches out, and Zuko embraces him tightly. When he lets go, he turns and parts the curtains. Aang follows him through.

Outside, the Fire Sages line the steps. One of them bangs on a gong as Zuko walks to the edge of the platform he's on. Before him stand the rebels that helped end this war, lined up among his people. Many are bandaged, terribly wounded, but they look up at him with pride. It resonates deeply within him. The cheers that fill the air humble him like nothing ever has before.

Zuko lifts a hand. "Please!" He calls, "The real hero is the Avatar." Aang walks to his side, and the cheers grow even louder.

"Today, this war is finally over!" The cheers resume, and Zuko lets them enjoy the moment before he continues. "I promised my uncle that I would restore the honor of the Fire Nation, and I will. The road ahead of us is challenging. A hundred years of fighting has left the world scarred and divided." He looks to his friend with a small smile. "But with the Avatar's help, we can get it back on the right path and begin a new era of love and peace."

When he hears the footsteps of the Fire Sage, Zuko kneels and bows his head, closing his eyes.

"All hail Fire Lord Zuko!" The crown slides into his hair, and Zuko rises, walking forward to even more cheers. He looks back and waves Aang forward with a smile. He joins him, and they look out across the faces of their friends and allies together.

Zuko looks to his left, where Uncle Iroh stands. His eyes are shining with pride, something that soothes at every old wound inside of Zuko. It's everything he's ever wanted to see and more.

At the front of the crowd stands Katara and Sokka, and between them, their father. Hakoda is in one piece, looking as lively as his children, a sight that very much pleases Zuko. He meets Katara's eyes. She watches him openly with pride, with love, for everyone around her to see. A bright smile crosses her face, and Zuko's heart soars inside of his chest.

Here he stands, the new Fire Lord, ready to usher in an era of peace, love, and healing with his friends, his allies, and the love of his life.

The sun is setting over Ba Sing Se, painting the great city in shades of lilac, peach, and coral. Zuko soaks up the warmth as he leans on the balcony, letting the source of his element comfort him. Inside, he can hear the sounds of his friends chattering, bickering, and laughing, another small comfort for him. He smiles a bit when Uncle's tsungi horn drifts out among the din.

A gentle hand touches his back, and Zuko looks up to find Katara beside him. He straightens from leaning on the balcony, turning to face her. In her Earth Kingdom robes, against the setting sun, she looks so very gorgeous.

"Still thinking about her?" She asks.

Zuko sighs softly. "Yeah," He answers. His voice sounds sullen and it makes him want to cringe. "I just - thought it would go differently, I guess."

Katara hums softly. "I don't think anyone expected your mother to literally change her identity."

Though Ozai had confessed when prompted about where Ursa was, it had taken Zuko almost two months into his reign as Fire Lord to find his mother. It had been hard enough to get time away from his political duties, but then tracking Ursa down had become almost impossible thanks to her new identity as Noriko. When he had found her and had learned this, unnerved and upset were not strong enough words for how he'd felt.

He glances into the tea shop to see Sokka waving his paint brush at Momo. A small smile touches his lips. Uncle had finally gotten his tea shop back and running, so everyone had gathered for one more night together.

Katara runs her hand down his arm. There isn't much she can really say, but Zuko appreciates her presence more than anything.

"I just can't believe she chose to remove her memories of us," He says quietly, looking out over the city. "Of me. I'm glad she found Ikem again, I'm glad she has Kiyi too, and I know she decided to take her old face and her old memories back, but..."

"But it hurts."

He looks up. There is no judgment in Katara's eyes, only patience and understanding, a bigger comfort than Zuko can express. He nods, scrubbing a hand down his face. Katara steps closer and takes Zuko's hand. "That's okay," She assures him. "She's still your mother. You spent years missing her, and to find out that she changed her identity and purposely got rid of her memories, even the ones of you, well, that hurts a lot."

Zuko nods again. He runs his thumb along Katara's hand and silently thanks Agni for her presence once more.

He's going to miss her terribly.

"Come on." Katara tugs on his hand and leads him inside. Their friends are scattered; some still linger in the tea shop, but others have retired to the apartment Uncle has attached to the building. In the morning, they will all go their separate ways; Katara and Sokka will return to the Southern Water Tribe with Hakoda and Pakku, Suki will return to Kiyoshi, Toph will be paying a visit to her parents, and Aang will be going with Toph before he begins visiting other places around the world.

It will be the first time they've been apart like this in so long that Zuko already feels lost without them.

Katara leads Zuko to the room Uncle has set aside specifically for him for when he visits. He slides the door shut behind her and removes the outer layer of his robes, placing it on a hook on the back of the door. He sheds the second one with a soft sigh. The clothing is comfortable but it's also heavy. Zuko adjusts the sleeveless tunic over his shoulders and turns around, smiling when he does.

Katara is undressing as well. She removes her robes with her back to him until she remains in the first layer, a cream colored slip that looks so lovely against her brown skin. She removes the pink flower from her hair and unravels the knot and the loopies, then turns to the bed roll

on the floor. She slides down on it and stretches out, beckoning Zuko to her with a small smile.

Zuko joins her and stretches out on his stomach. He pulls the blanket up over their legs with his feet and reaches out, dragging his fingers through the halo of dark hair across his pillow. Outside, the sun has set, casting the room in mild darkness. The moon is new tonight; signaling the end of many things.

For a long while, they simply hold each other, enjoying their last night together. Zuko buries his face in Katara's neck and breathes her in. He does his best to commit the coolness of her skin to memory, locking it away with the other important moments he's shared with her over the year that's passed. Her arms remain around him, fingers stroking through his hair as the night passes.

"You're not gonna grow a beard while I'm gone, are you?"

Zuko laughs quietly against Katara's shoulder. He lifts his head and says, "It's kind of a tradition for Fire Lords."

Katara's nose wrinkles. "It's not really attractive," She says bluntly, and Zuko laughs again. "Seriously, don't do it."

"I'll think about it," He assures her, leaning down to kiss her nose.

"Good." She hugs him closer and nudges her nose along his cheek until her mouth finds his. Zuko welcomes the kiss, brushing his fingers down her side gently. He kisses her slowly, softly, tenderly, drinking in as much of her as he can.

When she pulls away, he lays his head on her chest and hugs her middle. Katara settles her arm around Zuko's shoulder. Her fingers hover over his collarbone, just above his heart. Her breathing slows as she falls asleep, and it begins to pull Zuko under as well. He falls asleep to the sound of her heartbeat under his ear.

Eventually, though, the sun rises. Zuko awakens and contents himself with holding Katara while she sleeps. She burrows into his embrace, humming in her sleep, and he closes his eyes.

Already the ache of missing her is forming.

She wakes after the sun has risen completely and turns over to bury her face in his chest. Zuko smiles into her hair, stroking it softly, before untangling himself to stand. He keeps his back to Katara to give her her privacy and digs into his belongings, looking for his Fire Nation clothes. Today is a day for comfort, and he wants the familiarity of his reds and golds and blacks.

Katara is dressed in her Water Tribe robes when he turns. He smiles softly at the sight and crosses the room to her, reaching around her for her comb. The routine is completed in comfortable silence. He combs her hair until it shines, then forms her favored knot and attaches the hair loopies when they are ready. Gently he tugs on the ends of her hair and

places a kiss to the crown of her head. Katara turns around and kisses his cheek in thanks. She gathers her bags, and she leads him from the room to find the others.

Breakfast is quiet and easy. Everyone sits huddled close together as they eat, chattering over each other. Iroh, Hakoda, and Pakku watch over them with small smiles, offering refills until everyone is full and content.

But there is no more delaying after the food is gone. Appa flies them to the docks at the closest port when everyone is ready. It had been decided that they would say their goodbyes here, to give everyone just a bit more time together.

Zuko slides to his feet and looks around with a soft sigh. He turns to Appa and smiles at him, scratching below his eye gently. "I'm gonna miss you, buddy," He tells him, laughing when Appa licks at his feet.

Behind him, Toph punches him in the back, almost knocking the breath out of him. "You better not start any new wars without me," She orders.

Zuko turns around and pulls Toph into him, hugging her tightly. "I'll wait for you before I do anything like that."

Her little arms wrap around his middle, practically squeezing the life out of him. Zuko squeezes her in turn and adds, "And remember, when you get tired of your parents, you can always come back to my place."

Toph snorts as she lets go and steps back. "I'll be taking you up on that," She insists.

Zuko smiles, then turns to hug Aang and Suki in turn. "The same goes for you guys," He says. "You're always welcome in the Fire Nation."

Aang smiles brightly and pats his back after Suki lets go. "Thanks, Sifu Hotman." Zuko rolls his eyes and nudges Aang's shoulder lightly. Suki leaves them to see Sokka, and their eyes follow her to those further down the dock.

"Go," Aang says, nudging Zuko forward.

Zuko nods. He turns and moves down the dock, where a ship is waiting to travel to the Southern Water Tribe. He stops before Hakoda, who is watching him with familiar blue eyes.

Zuko bows before the chief. "Thank you for all of your efforts in helping to end the war," He says, straightening.

Hakoda's smile is warm, brushing away the nerves he usually has around the older man. He extends his arm and responds with, "Thank *you* for what you did to end it, Fire Lord Zuko, and most importantly, for keeping my children safe."

Zuko grasps his forearm and smiles brightly, then gasps when Hakoda tugs him forward into a hug. He stiffens with surprise, but manages to relax enough to return the embrace.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you again," Hakoda says, and Zuko's smile returns, wider than before.

The chief lets go, and Zuko moves to Sokka, who ropes him into a ridiculously tight hug. "I'll miss you, Zuko," He says, squeezing his shoulders.

"I'll miss you, too, Sokka." Zuko lets go and grasps Sokka's forearm the same way he had done with his father. "Try not to do anything too stupid while you're gone."

Sokka squawks indignantly, but Zuko smirks and pushes him back into Suki's waiting arms.

Finally, he reaches Katara.

She is waiting for him, expression open and tender. Her eyes, though, hold a sadness that is echoed within Zuko's own gaze. He wastes no time and pulls her into his arms, hugging her as tightly as he can without hurting her. She holds him just as tightly, drawing in a shuddering breath.

"I love you," Zuko whispers into her hair.

Katara nods against his shoulder. "I love you, too." She lifts her head and cups his cheeks, and he leans down to meet her for a soft, tender kiss.

When she pulls away, she sniffs quietly and presses her hand to his chest, to the scar that marks his skin. The scar he earned by saving her life.

She looks up at him, tears shining in her eyes, but they don't fall. "You better write to me. Every day."

He lifts her hand and kisses her knuckles. "Every single day."

Katara pulls away with a little smile. "Goodbye, Zuko," She murmurs.

"Goodbye, Katara," He murmurs in kind, watching her. His eyes glitter. "I will have that betrothal necklace the next time I see you."

Her smile widens, tinted with approval. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

Hakoda and Sokka join Katara. They ascend the walk way and step onto the ship, where Pakku waits for them. Everyone gathers around to wave goodbye as the ship begins to depart. Suki touches Zuko's back, a gesture of comfort, and he reaches around to squeeze her hand in return.

He watches Katara until he can no longer distinguish her form. He watches the ship go, watches it cross the waters to return his heart to the other side of the world.

I had to get away with at least one cliff hanger before this ended, just one!!

PS; I know there's a few variations for how to spell June's name, I just went with the version I saw the most.

Be on the look out for chapter eight!!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Something ancient binds itself around his soul as he gazes into Katara's eyes. He wonders, not for the first time, if maybe the spirits above had planned this all along.

Chapter Notes

This is it, we're finally at the end! I'll save all of the sappiness for the end notes~ Just so everyone is aware, there will be some time jumping throughout this, especially at the beginning. And yes, the rating has gone up to explicit. ;) (Apologies for any badly done math with the time passages. I cannot ever express just how bad I am with numbers, oof.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dear Zuko,

I had forgotten how much I love snow and ice. Exploring the world has been incredible, but the South Pole is where I was born. I didn't think I would miss it so much when I had actually left the Tribe, but every night that I'm here, it's almost ridiculous how happy I am to be wrapped up inside these familiar blocks of ice. And the lights are so beautiful. I wish you could see them. Actually, you will see them one day, I'll make sure of it.

Zuko smiles softly. He rests his chin in his hand and smooths the pages out, careful not to smudge the ink. Katara's hand writing is messy, crooked and uneven. It reminds him of choppy waves under a cloudy sky out at sea. He runs his finger across his lip absently and continues reading.

Sokka won't admit it, but he's cried so many times for Suki. It would be sweet if he weren't such an idiot about pretending that he's too manly to cry. She writes him often, though. She visits as often as she can, too, and he lights up every time. I swear, if he's not careful, she'll have a baby before they're married and then Gran-Gran will have his head mounted on the wall.

Zuko snorts into his palm. He's surprised that those two haven't had a baby yet, actually.

I know I've mentioned this a lot, but I'm still just so amazed by the amount of people that live here now. Pakku brought so many people with him after he left our sister tribe. I'm almost overwhelmed by it, I don't know if I've ever seen so many people in my village. So many of

them are women that want to learn how to waterbend. Some are as old as Gran-Gran, and it makes me so angry that they were held back for so long. But the school was finally finished a few days ago and I've begun to teach them, along with Pakku's help. They're so talented! I am so proud of every single one of them.

I miss you. I miss everyone.

Zuko closes his eyes for a moment. There's been a permanent ache in his chest ever since that ship had left the Earth Kingdom port, but it's comforting to know he isn't the only one experiencing it.

We were only traveling together for a year, but I got so close to everyone that it's really weird to be back where I started with just Sokka. He misses everyone, too. We're both looking forward to when we can see you all again. But I miss you the most. I think I miss sleeping next to you and sparring with you most of all. The warmth and company is always nice and no one here can keep up with me now, not even Pakku - which is extremely satisfying, honestly, but still.

Write me back soon. I love you.

Love, Katara

Zuko sighs slowly and sets the letter down. He looks to the window, where the afternoon sun streams in. Four months since he'd last seen Katara and it hasn't gotten any easier, though there has been plenty to distract him.

Attempting to repair the damage done by The Hundred Year War has been an arduous process. Though most of the men on the council had accepted their new Fire Lord with surprising ease, it's been a fight to convince many of them that things are in desperate need of a change. And Zuko knows that he must visit the other leaders of the world in order to begin new alliances and to begin to heal the wounds his Nation has left on them. But he can't do that until he's brought about at least a little bit of change about in the Fire Nation.

Katara's letters have been his biggest source of comfort. They always seem to arrive just when his stress is reaching its peak, and reading about her own attempts at repairing her home and the little adventures throughout her day bring him back to a bearable place. For as badly as he misses her, and she misses him, he can read her happiness and pride between the letters on the pages, and that makes the separation worth it.

He reaches into the deepest drawer in his desk and extracts a wooden box. Inside sits two objects; a hunk of moonstone and the jaw bone of a whale. Zuko has yet to decide between the two for Katara's betrothal necklace. He knows the significance of it, and he wants it to be just right.

Pressing his thumb against the moonstone, he closes the lid and places his box back inside of the drawer, and then he reaches for the stack of parchment and his ink pot. There is so much he wishes to tell Katara, but he can't quite fit all of it onto the page, so he tries to condense it as best as he can, and allows himself to look forward to when they will be able to talk about their days in person.

He tugs the crown from his hair and lets it clatter onto the desk in front of him. The gold glints dully in the dark. Zuko sighs slowly and drags his hands down his face. He glances around his room and waves his hand lazily, igniting a few sconces for better lighting.

The surface of the desk is bare save for his crown, the ribbon meant for his hair, an ink pot, a brush, parchment, and a lazily rolled up scroll. Zuko reaches for the scroll and unfurls it for the second time that day. He scans the contents, heart aching fiercely for its correspondent. Nights like these are particularly hard for him; after a long, long day, he wants nothing more than to hide away in his room for some peace and quiet, but the one person he wants the most is never here to comfort him like she used to when he got overwhelmed.

Zuko stares at the blank page before him. There is so much he could tell her. He could tell her about Kiyi's adventures in the palace and how she's named all of the turtle ducks in the pond. He could inform her of the troublesome meeting today in which almost every council member had fought him tooth and nail about opening more schools, opening more hospitals, and creating better trade systems. He could rave about how much he hates not being able to sneak around anymore when he really needs to be alone. He could write about Aang's last visit and how the Avatar had filled out a good deal and grown an extra five inches, and how many times he'd mentioned that he was now taller than his Sifu Hotman.

But when he picks up his brush, none of that comes out. Instead, he writes this.

Dear Katara,

I miss you. Sometimes I think this separation is going to be the death of me. Sometimes I want to toss aside my duties and race across the world to steal you from yours. I just want you close to me again. I don't care where we are so long as we're together.

Love, Zuko

The brush clatters to the table and Zuko sighs loudly. The noise echoes back at him throughout the room. He leaves the letter to dry; it will be sealed and sent off in the morning. Standing, he undresses slowly, doesn't bother with brushing his hair, and crawls into bed. The empty space seems to mock him as he settles beneath the silk sheets. One year later and he still hasn't adjusted to sleeping alone again. He stretches his arm out as far as he can and presses his face to his pillow, wishing that there was a warm body with brown skin and blue eyes laying beside him.

The letter sits in his lap, demanding his attention. Zuko does his best to focus on the meeting he's in, but it's difficult when he has the latest letter from Katara so close yet still unopened. He's dying to know what she wrote; has Ulva had her baby yet? And what about the tiger seal cub Sokka had found, sick and injured? At the moment, those tales are infinitely more interesting than talk of finances.

But he is the Fire Lord, which means he must be invested and pay attention, even to matters that bore him.

When the concerns about finances have been settled, Zuko prepares to leave, fingers curling around his letter, but one of the council members calls to him.

"My Lord, we have one more topic we would like to discuss with you."

He lifts his head and settles back into his chair, nodding for them to proceed. The man that had spoken, Wei Shan, looks around at the others once before returning his attention to Zuko.

"We would like to discuss the matter of finding a wife for you, My Lord, so that you may have an heir for your future."

Zuko blinks, then represses a sigh. This subject he had been waiting for; when his cousin was alive, Lu Ten would often joke about how he would need to marry right away so that he could have an heir to keep the council off of his back.

Zuko lifts his brows. "So it's taken you two and a half years to finally pester me about this?"

Wei Shan coughs a bit to cover up a smile. "Fire Lord Azulon was encouraged to begin producing heirs a few months into his reign."

Zuko openly rolls his eyes. "We have much more pressing matters," He tells his council. "There is still so much to be done. I haven't even yet had a chance to visit the chiefs of the Water Tribes or those ruling in the Earth Kingdom for the treaties we've discussed drawing up with them."

"Well-"

"And, as it stands, I am unavailable for marriage," He reminds them, arching a brow - an invitation to contradict him.

An invitation that several take by protesting audibly.

Zuko watches them all with a calm that surprises himself, something he would've had to struggle with not so long ago. "When I took the crown, I was very much involved with someone, and I am still very much involved with her. If there is to be any sort of marriage, it will be with her, or with no one at all."

Several seats down, a man with a ridiculous moustache sputters indignantly - Yi Xuan, one of the council members that was begrudging to accept his new ruler. "That waterbending peasant?" He cries, brows drawing in. "You expect to marry her?! To make her our Fire Lady?!"

"Watch your tongue!" His voice reverberates sharply through the room. Many of those grumbling are silenced immediately, though Yi Xuan watches Zuko with angry eyes.

"Her name is Katara, and she deserves your respect. Not only did she save my life, but she also had a deeply important and intricate role in ending The Hundred Year War. She is a master waterbender that trained the Avatar himself and defeated my sister, a firebending prodigy." He reigns in his temper, but the edge in his voice is as sharp as the dao blades that hang on the wall above his bed. "Katara is also the daughter of the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe, which puts her on par with being royalty, and she is incredibly important to me. Speaking ill of her in my presence is a very, very bad idea. If she accepts my proposal, when I am ready to deliver it, then she will be your Fire Lady, and that is the last that I will say, because if I ever need to repeat myself, I assure you, it will not end well."

The room is quiet for several heartbeats. Then, Wei Shan nods. "Marrying Master Katara would be a very wise move, politically," He admits. "It could help repair the Fire Nation's relationship with the Southern Water Tribe, and possibly the Northern Tribe as well. It would prove our promises of peace and unity to be true, should this union happen."

Zuko files a mental note away to give Wei Shan some sort of raise for being as agreeable as he is. "We will discuss this at another time," He says, standing. "For now, focus on addressing the financial situations in the schools and see about setting up a meeting with King Kuei."

The council members bow their heads and wait for Zuko to leave before exiting the room. Zuko tucks the letter into the sleeve of his robe to conceal it from curious eyes. Though his correspondence with Katara is no secret, he still values his privacy. He releases a slow breath, inclining his head to those that bow to him as he passes by, heading for his private study. Once inside, Zuko allows his shoulders to slump. He sets the letter down and removes his outer robe, draping it over the back of his chair.

The moment he sits, his fingers unravel the scroll eagerly. The familiar writing greets him and a knot inside of his chest loosens just so.

Dear Zuko,

Don't get me wrong, being a teacher is really rewarding, but also so exhausting. I thought Aang was a handful, but now I have twice as many that are even rowdier than he was! Just two days ago, one of my girls caved in half of the roof because she wasn't getting her way. Her parents were mortified over her behavior. Still, despite all of that, I'll never be able to express how special it is to see a brand new generation of waterbenders growing under my care. They've come so far, I feel like there's nothing left for me to teach them. And many of the older women have graduated to teaching along side me and Pakku and the students he brought with him.

Sokka's tiger seal didn't make it, he was so devastated. He had named him and everything. Dad's promised to help him find a new one, or another companion to cheer him up. I think after spending so long with Appa and Momo he's a lot more fond of animals now than he'll let on.

Ulva finally had her baby, too! She gave birth three days ago to a healthy baby boy with the roundest cheeks I have ever seen. Her poor husband fainted from all of the anxiety in the air. It was really sweet. Luckily Ulva didn't have to deal with too much pain after the birth, thanks to the amount of healers we have now.

I still miss you, more and more every day. Dad says we're due for a visit soon because of politics and I have never been more eager for something political in my life, just as long as it brings you back to me. How is your mother doing, and Ikem? Did Kiyi like the doll I sent her? I hope so, I loved that doll when I was little. Whenever you do come, try to bring Iroh with you. I miss his tea.

Write me back soon. I love you.

Love, Katara

PS - You better not have grown a beard!

Zuko laughs softly and brushes his fingers over his stubble free chin. His hair has grown out a great deal, but he hasn't let more than stubble settle on his face, like he promised. Sighing softly, Zuko folds the letter up carefully and reaches into his desk. He extracts the box that holds Katara's letters and lays it in there with the rest of the collection, then reaches for the black pouch beside it. He opens it and tips the contents into his palm.

The moonstone shines in the day time sun. He runs his thumb along the round edge of it. Once he had decided on the moonstone for the betrothal necklace, it had taken him months to perfect the circular shape to match the pendant hanging from Katara's neck; he had been getting so desperate that he'd almost taken a visit to the North for help.

Zuko slides his thumb across the surface of the pendant. He hasn't yet decided what to carve into it. Whatever it is, it has to be absolutely perfect, or else he'll have to start from scratch. Setting the pendant down, Zuko reaches for his ink pot and his brush, then for a clean piece of parchment. Today, he has much to say.

Seeing Uncle Iroh's tea shop bustling with business fills Zuko to the brim with pride. He watches Uncle drift about the room, tending to his customers, making pleasant conversation as he refills their drinks and places extra cakes and cookies onto their empty plates. The ease with which the old man works a room will never cease to amaze Zuko.

He sips his drink and sets it aside, drawing his parchment and ink closer. Stifling a yawn, Zuko lifts his brush as he recalls the contents of Katara's last letter. She's been growing a bit restless the last few months. He supposes he can't blame her; someone like her is meant to be active and responsible in the world, not stationary and sedate. Though she's done miraculously with rebuilding her village, even that work eventually runs out, leaving her with little to do.

Dear Katara,

Being the Fire Lord is horribly boring sometimes. I've had to meet with King Kuei three times this week and at least once I've had to fight to not fall asleep in front of him. Bosco wasn't there, either, which was disappointing. He was off being groomed.

Uncle sends his love and well wishes. He's interested in visiting the Southern Tribe with me once I make it there. I'll be leaving the Earth Kingdom for the Northern Tribe in two weeks, assuming all goes well here with Kuei. I'm nervous to go back to the North, but I'm nervous to go back to all of these places, after the terrible way I behaved when I was younger. I still have to apologize to your grandmother. Also, it seems strange to say it, but I'm looking forward to the snow. The Fire Nation is so humid, and the Earth Kingdom is so dry, I think I'm overdue for some cold weather.

I got the chance to visit Toph. She's worked things about with her parents, but they're still driving her crazy. I suspect that she'll leave them soon. It just amazes me that there's anyone in this world that thinks that Toph is helpless, but still. She's told me she'll make her way to the Fire Nation when she's finally tired of being at home, but I think she'll stay with Uncle for a bit before she does that.

I'm gonna try those sea prunes you're always raving about when I get to the North Pole. They still sound disgusting, but even if they are, I can at least come prepared in case sea prunes are an important delicacy in Water Tribe society. Spirits forbid I insult anyone and start another war over sea prunes, of all things.

Hopefully I'll see you soon. I love you.

Love, Zuko

He sets the page aside to dry and reaches for his cup, heating the ceramic carefully to warm the tea inside. When Uncle passes, he steals a small cake from the closest plate and smiles when Uncle clicks his tongue at him. Zuko nibbles at the cake, setting his cup down to reach into his pocket. Carrying the pendant with him has become a habit these days; he's terrified of it falling out of his pocket and being lost forever, but there are moments when he just needs to touch it. Aside from the letters, it's all he has to feel close to Katara right now. The moonstone is cool against his skin, smooth at the edges. He runs his hand over the corner of the carving he started, resolving to set some time aside to finish that.

Soon enough, he'll have his answer. Hopefully, it'll be a good one; hopefully, soon enough, he'll be engaged to the love of his life.

The chill is frigid and biting. The winds are so harsh that they threaten to tear through thick furs and strip flesh from bone. Zuko breathes in deeply. The air is crisp and fresh, invigorating. He stands at the edge of the walk way, simply breathing, simply existing. The last time he had been in the North Pole, he had barely escaped an assassination, and not without the wounds to show for it. He had captured the Avatar, had gotten them both lost in the icy tundras; he had witnessed a man dying because of the reprehensible actions he had taken, and he had witnessed the spirits making that man pay for them.

Now he stands among the Northern Water Tribe people once more, four years older, this time with offerings of peace and restoration, of negotiation and trade, rather than the violence he had first arrived with. Zuko looks up to the sky. The moon is full tonight, illuminating the purity of the snow and ice that make up the buildings around him. He gives a silent prayer to

the spirit of the moon and tucks his cold hands into the sleeves of his parka, then turns and retraces his steps until he arrives at the hall of the Chief.

The throne room is empty. Zuko walks past this entrance to get to the adjacent rooms, where the Chief, his family, and guests passing through are housed. In this hall, he finds the man he is looking for.

Chief Arnook looks up when Zuko enters the kitchens. He smiles sheepishly, as though he has been caught doing something he shouldn't. His smile is a handsome one, framed by lines brought up by age and stress. Zuko smiles in understanding, and Arnook closes the lid of the container he was digging into. He offers Zuko his secret treat, something that looks soft and round and is covered in what looks like crystallized sugar. Zuko takes one and pops it into his mouth, chewing curiously. It is as sweet as it looks, just a bit tangy, and chewy.

"My wife tries to restrict my sugar in take," Arnook confides, "But I just can't resist sometimes."

Zuko chuckles. "I think my uncle would understand that. He has a mighty sweet tooth." The after taste of the treat isn't entirely unpleasant. Looking up, he says, "I just wanted to apologize again for earlier."

Arnook shakes his head and waves his hand. "There is no need, Zuko, really. Some of the men here hold impressive grudges. They don't forgive easily, but that isn't your fault."

"Still. That's why I'm here, to at least attempt to make things better, not start fights with chieftains." Though he had thought he was being diplomatic earlier, he had pushed more than a few buttons and caused quite an argument.

Arnook's smile is small and warm. "And that is why I continue to host you." He lifts his brows, as if remembering something, and pats down his parka until he finds what he's looking for - a letter in his front pocket. "This arrived for you this morning, but with everything that happened, it slipped my mind until now."

Zuko takes the letter eagerly, quickly unfurling the scroll. The sight of the familiar wavy handwriting soothes something deep within him.

Dear Zuko,

I don't think I could trust anyone else with this. I'm not sure anyone else would actually understand. I realized that I've been feeling so restless lately because I've done all that needed to be done here, at least on my part. I've helped rebuild my tribe, I've opened a school, I've trained so many waterbenders, I've even delivered a good handful of babies. There's still so much work left to be done, but that can be said for the rest of the world, too. But here... I don't know.

No, I do know. I feel - trapped is a harsh word, but I can't think of anything else. It's not like people are disrespectful - quite the opposite, actually. Everyone is really nice and I've made some good friends. But since things have slowed down, I feel like I've fallen back into the

pattern of things that I used to do as a child; I'm back to doing laundry, mending clothing, cooking, and looking after everyone, except now I'm also healing and teaching.

I guess that after seeing so much of the world - after ending a war, for La's sake, I feel like I could be doing more. I don't want my life to be reduced to this. To - to such repetition and loneliness. Sokka is here, but he's fine with taking over as chief at some point. No one even asks me what I want, unless it's something to do with the school or a student or with healing.

Please come soon, before I go out of my mind.

Love, Katara

Something inside of him pops and expands to press against his skin. If he had been waiting for an opportunity, well, this certainly was one. It's not too surprising that Katara is feeling this way, not to him; he can't imagine her ever being tied down in one place for the rest of her life, not after all that she's seen and done for the world.

There is still a bit to be resolved here in the North, but finally, his trip to the South is coming.

Exhaling, Zuko rolls up the letter carefully and tucks it inside of his sleeve. He looks up and meets the Chief's curious gaze.

"Chief Arnook, what all can you tell me about betrothal necklaces?"

This trip has been the longest of his entire life.

He's been told three times that he's exaggerating, but no one else has what he has to look forward to - a girlfriend he has not seen in years. And, as it is, traveling from the North Pole to the South Pole actually is quite a long trip.

Zuko stands at the railing, watching their surroundings. More and more ice flows are beginning to appear. He knows they've breached the Southern Water Tribe territory, and it's only a matter of time before they reach the village, but it feels as though whichever of the spirits that deal with time are dragging out the minutes to purposely torture him.

He sighs softly, fingers curling around the freezing metal of the rail. What does she look like now? Is her hair longer, or did she cut it all off? Has she gotten any taller? Does she look more like her father, now, or does she favor her mother still, like she had mentioned once when they were younger? So much can happen in four years. If it weren't for the constant flow of Katara's letters, Zuko's insecurities would've convinced him long ago that she had abandoned their relationship as a passing fancy to distract her from the situations they'd lived through.

Above him, a whistle blows - land has been sighted. Zuko's heart lurches in his chest. He stretches as high as he can on his toes, straining to see anything beyond the water and the chunks of ice.

And then, finally, *finally*, the land comes into view. To his eyes, it's only the barest speck of white, but it's all he needs to see.

It takes all of Zuko's will power to allow his attendants to dress him up for his arrival; truthfully, their presence is all that keeps him from jumping overboard and swimming to the village. They slide his crown into his top knot, settle the mantle about his shoulders, smooth his hair into place until all is acceptable. It is extremely reminiscent of his first visit to the South Pole; then, he had been a teenager hiding his wounds beneath thick layers of arrogance and anger, bent on rebuilding his small section of the world.

But right now, he doesn't care about appearances and titles and politics. He only cares about finding one person again.

The ship docks after what feels like centuries of coasting, and Zuko has to fight down a strong urge once again to drop everything and jump overboard and plow through the snow until he finds Katara. But he resists, and instead holds his chin high as he emerges once more into the chilled air, dressed properly for his station, and observes the sight before him.

The village has expanded exponentially in the last four years. He knows that the waterbenders must have had a hand in this; their skills would absolutely move the process along. His memory recalls a pitifully small village contained by a circular wall of snow, with maybe seven tents at the most and one igloo in the corner. Before him sits a much, much bigger village - no, a city, no longer encased in a circle, but in a vast square of snow, with a high arch way that glitters in the cold sun. The tents are no more; in their places are buildings, each finely detailed and at least two stories high. He can only see glimpses from the deck of his ship, but the sight takes his breath away.

"Zuko!"

He tries to be dignified as he descends the ramp the crew extends to the snow, really, he does. But when that voice carries to him, his head snaps up in time to see a familiar face with bright blue eyes and wild brown hair racing toward the ship, and all thoughts of being graceful and regal abandon him as he practically slides down the rest of the ramp to get to her.

Katara bounds through the snow, kicking up a flurry around her. Her arms are outstretched, a blinding smile on her face that nearly brings Zuko to his knees. As soon as he's close enough he snatches her by the waist and lifts her into the air, crushing her to him. She locks her arms around his neck with a small gasp and does her best to squeeze the life out of him.

To finally have her in his arms again releases a heavy weight inside of him, to the point that he nearly loses his balance.

Katara lifts her head to look at him, and all of the air leaves his lungs.

She has grown all the more beautiful in their time apart.

Her hair is as long as ever, a thick and curly umber waterfall spilling down her shoulders until it reaches her lower back. She has gotten taller by about four inches; her arms feel more

muscled beneath her parka. Her face has lost almost all of its roundness, lingering only in the apples of her cheeks. The smile she gives him is brighter than the sun, and her eyes, oh, her eyes are brilliant and blue and beautiful as ever.

A crowd has gathered around them, but Zuko doesn't care. He kisses Katara, kisses her fiercely, kisses her with everything he's been holding in for the last four years. She returns his enthusiasm and tangles her fingers in his hair, and the sigh she breathes into the kiss melts his insides.

Someone clears their throat, prompting them to break apart. Zuko pulls back, cheeks flushed, and grins sheepishly. He sets Katara down on her feet, but he can't let go quite yet, and she still hasn't removed her arms from his neck.

Katara moves her hands to his face and beams at him, and the sight warms him like nothing else can. "Look at you," She breathes. Her fingers stroke his cheeks, chilled from the cold, but he doesn't mind it.

"Me? Look at you!" Zuko squeezes her waist, shaking his head in awe. "I didn't think you could be any more beautiful than you already were, but I was so wrong."

Katara laughs, a rich sound, and pulls Zuko closer for another kiss.

"Hey, hey, let me through! Stop sucking face already!"

Zuko looks up and his grin widens when he recognizes Sokka pushing through the crowd. He's grown as well, taller than he was the last time Zuko had seen him. He's bulkier now, having grown into his long arms and legs and developed proper muscle. Most of his head is shaved around his traditional wolf tail, and he looks more like his father than ever.

"Sokka!" Grinning, Zuko lets go of Katara and moves to his friend. He grasps his forearm tightly, then pulls him in for a hug. "Finally grew into those chicken legs, huh?"

Sokka scoffs loudly. He pushes at Zuko's shoulder, tugging on a lock of hair that hangs well past his chin. "What's this? Please tell me you've caught this on fire at some point."

Zuko lets go of his friend with a laugh and looks around. He finds Hakoda watching them with a smile, and he turns to the Chief, bowing before extending his arm. Hakoda grasps his forearm, his smile widening. It's almost unsettling how much he resembles his son. "Fire Lord Zuko," Hakoda greets warmly, "Welcome to the Southern Water Tribe. It's good to see you again."

"Thank you for having me, Chief Hakoda. I'm glad to see that you're doing well."

Zuko looks to the small gathering of warriors and waterbenders, of mothers and children, of curious faces, and bows in turn to each of them. But when the crowd parts for a older woman with snow white hair and familiar loopies, his heart flops in his chest.

Sokka welcomes the woman to his side. "Zuko," He says, smirking, "You remember our Gran-Gran, right? Her name is Kanna."

Kanna watches Zuko with a level gaze that deeply unnerves him. She doesn't speak, only blinks at him, and it makes him feel as if she is seeing right through him - or as if she is remembering the belligerent teenager he once was during his brief first visit.

Zuko walks until he stands before the matriarch of the Southern Water Tribe. He presses his fist to his open palm and he bows deeply. "Kanna, when we first met, my behavior was deplorable," He says, straightening to meet her calm gaze, "And I would like to apologize for that. I hope you can forgive me for it."

Still, Kanna watches him. Her silence is intimidating; no one else speaks, waiting for her reaction. And then the corners of her mouth lift into a slow, small smile, one that reminds Zuko of Katara. "You're forgiven," She decides. "Call me Gran-Gran."

All of the nerves leave Zuko in that instant. He inclines his head in his response, in respect, and beside him, Katara beams.

Zuko takes a moment to check in with the captain of his ship, then he lets Katara pull him through the arch way. Inside the walls, the city is even more impressive. Many of its residents stop to stare at the Fire Lord and his retinue; they stand out in sharp relief against the snow, against the shades of blue throughout the city, in their red robes flecked with gold and dashed with black. Zuko inclines his head to each person that catches his gaze, but not all return the gesture. He isn't bothered by this. He will not begrudge these people their wariness after so many years of pain.

Katara leads Zuko to a wide set of stairs leading to a three story building made of ice. It is the largest in the city, with etchings in the ice that resemble crests - possibly the crests of the Chief's family, or the ancestors, or the Council of Elders. They step through the doorway and are met with a wide, spacious room that reminds Zuko of the hall in the Northern Water Tribe; where it differs is in the details.

A platform meant for the Chief and the elders stands in the center of the room with several fur blankets stretched out over it. Two thinner steps sit below it. Three large tapestries depicting Water Tribe myths hang on each wall; the room is not nearly as ornate as the throne room belonging to its sister tribe, but it is just as beautiful.

Katara leads Zuko to a doorway that exists behind the platform. The corridor is spacious, tapering off into different rooms and other extended hallways. They walk until they reach the very end, where she makes a turn into another hall. He follows her to the very end, where she ducks through a drape made of fur. Zuko follows her inside. It must be Katara's room; a bed made of furs and pillows sits tucked into the corner, with a desk and a vanity table on the other side of the room. Several items he recognizes from their time spent traveling together decorate their surfaces. Both items are made of wood, not ice, and look as though they were made in the Earth Kingdom - a good sign. It means that trades between the people have begun once more.

Zuko has time to look around the room just once before Katara shoves him up against the wall, invading his space to attach her mouth to his.

It is not the sweet, joyous kiss that they shared outside, simply happy to have one another back. This kiss is intense, hungry in its pursuit. Katara's fingers claw at his robes, race up his shoulders and neck to delve into his hair. A low noise rumbles through his chest as he grasps at her waist and pulls her flush against him, devouring her mouth, her very breath. Any space between them suddenly feels too painful to bear after so long apart. Katara tugs at Zuko's hair, tangles the locks around her fingers, and sighs into his mouth, breathing life into him.

Zuko drags his mouth away from Katara's to kiss along her jaw, nipping at the corner of it. He leaves a trail of searing kisses down her neck, as far as he can get before her parka interrupts him, and he silently curses the thick fabric for existing. So he retraces his path and presses his hands against her lower back, trying to get as close to her as possible.

The sound of steam hissing around them pulls them apart. Katara looks up, eyes clouded with lust, a sight that liquidates Zuko's insides. She blinks a few times and then laughs, prompting Zuko to turn around - to see the wall he'd been pressed against melting because of the heat rushing through him. Laughing, he pushes away from the wall, but keeps Katara close to him. He buries his face in the collar around her neck, inhaling everything that she is.

"Spirits, I missed you," He murmurs.

Katara locks her arms around Zuko's neck once more. "I missed you, too. Tui, I missed you so much." She lets go and steps back just enough to look at him, lifting her hands to cup his cheeks. "I can't believe how much you've changed in the last four years." Her fingers tap against his chin. "And not a hair in sight. Good."

Zuko chuckles softly. "Only for you." He sighs slowly and shakes his head. "You look so beautiful. I almost fell when I first saw you."

Grinning, Katara leans in again. Her kiss is gentle this time, tender and warm. She pulls back slowly, fingers trailing down his jaw. Warmth blooms inside of him.

"I'll show you to your room. You can rest and freshen up before the feast."

"You mean I can't share your room?"

Her grin returns, wicked and playful. "I made sure your room is right next to mine, and I think we can both get through the walls easily enough."

Zuko laughs again, and Katara reaches for the drape to lead him out, but he catches her hand to stop her. When her curious gaze meets his, a nervous flush blossoms in his cheeks.

"Katara, I-" He hesitates, then swallows down his nerves. "I meant what I said, on the dock a few years ago. About the betrothal necklace? I - I have it." He silently curses the way his voice trembles and the way he stumbles over his words.

Her eyes widen, but he barrels on before she can speak. "This isn't a regular union - or, wouldn't be, if you accept - and I know that, which is why I have every intention of bringing this up with your father and the council, but I - I didn't want to spring it on you. I didn't want to put that kind of pressure on you."

Katara lets him speak his mind. Her eyes are soft, warm like the ocean on a cloudless summer day. She pushes on her toes and kisses his cheek. "Thank you, Zuko. That's very considerate of you." Her hand finds his. "When you bring it up, I'll give you my answer then."

Zuko nods, but his heartbeat quickens. It's not a rejection, but there's still a possibility for it. Shaking his head, he shoves that thought from his mind and follows Katara from her room to the empty one beside his. It's bare except for the bed beside the wall and the trunks containing his belongings.

Katara pats his back lightly. "Hope you're hungry!" She says brightly, and the devious glint in her eye makes him instantly wary. "We've got lots and lots of sea prunes prepared for the esteemed Fire Lord."

Zuko finds himself silently, deeply grateful to be a firebender, because it allows him to ward off the cold of the icy floor beneath his very numb butt. But he is the Fire Lord, and therefore he refuses to show his discomfort in front of the dignitaries of the Water Tribe.

He does, however, very subtly grimace at his girlfriend every so often, who stifles her laughter behind her gloved hand.

For most of the day, Zuko has sat before the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe and the Council of Elders, with Katara and Sokka on either side of their father. They've discussed treaties and trades, as well as opportunities for further restoration to the South with the Fire Nation's help. Though several of the Elders have interjected with heated words, interruptions that Zuko handled with grace and remorse, the meeting has gone better than he could have hoped.

As the meeting draws to a close, Zuko can feel the sun slowly inching towards the horizon outside. He glances to his right, where Tzuyu sits, the woman he'd handpicked for this job because of her dedication, skill, and tidiness. She is bent close to her papers, her brush scribbling quickly to take down a written account of everything that has been spoken today. It still amazes him how she manages to keep her handwriting so orderly and clean while moving so quickly across the page.

Above him, Hakoda exhales and looks at the faces on either side of him. Katara and Sokka have been allowed to give their input, something Zuko has been grateful for; their ideas have been some of the best.

"Well, if that's all, then I think we can close this meeting for today. We've made excellent progress." Hakoda looks to Zuko. "Is there anything else you'd like to discuss, Fire Lord Zuko?"

His gaze flickers to Katara, something the Chief does not miss. Katara's cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink, but she offers a small, encouraging smile, which Zuko takes as a good sign.

He draws in a quiet breath to strengthen his resolve. "There is, yes. I would like to offer a marriage proposal to Katara."

Several of the Elders gasp. Tzuyu drops her brush. Sokka nearly topples over in his spot. But Hakoda only raises his brows. He looks at his daughter, who can no longer fight the smile on her face. Zuko's heart is pounding away in his chest, but that smile comforts him like nothing else can.

One of the Elders, a man named Tikaani that has been the most vocal throughout the meeting, sneers at him from his spot on the platform. "A proposal? You know nothing of our customs, Fire Lord. Perhaps you should learn of them before you offer such things."

Irritation sparks within him, but Zuko does not let it show. Instead, he says, "Actually, Tikanni, I am aware of more than you might think. As a child, it was important to me to learn about the other nations in my preparations for becoming the Fire Lord. Not only that, but I've become close enough to Katara and to Sokka to have learned of several Water Tribe customs over the course our travels, simply out of curiosity and my desire to know my friends better. Therefor, I am aware that necklaces are extremely significant in Water Tribe cultures, as they symbolize a betrothal." Zuko reaches into a pocket inside of his parka to remove the necklace he has been working on for years.

He meets Katara's eyes. When she nods, he leaves his spot on the floor to kneel on on the step below her. Her eyes are glowing, but she composes herself as Zuko settles before her. Swallowing down his nerves, he lifts the necklace into view. The moonstone glimmers quietly in the dim light. It's round and smooth, cool to the touch. Carved into its surface is the sun, with the crescent shape of the moon sitting inside of it - a depiction of a waterbender and a firebender in perfect harmony. The pendant hangs from a thin chain made of gold.

"Moonstones are a valuable gem in the Fire Nation, prized for their unique beauty." He glances at the offering, then meets Katara's gaze again. "I understand how important your mother's necklace is to you. I would never ask you to replace it. Should you accept my proposal, your necklace would sit beneath hers, if you chose to wear it, belonging to you without replacing your mother's legacy."

He sits back just a bit to meet each gaze of the Elders, as well as Hakoda's and Sokka's. "My feelings for Katara are no secret. I suspect they haven't been for a very long time now." Hakoda's knowing smile answers that suspicion, but Zuko continues on. "I love her, and there is no one else I could ever want as my wife - as my partner. She has seen me at my very worst and she has helped me become the man that I am today. Katara is the very reason I am alive right now. Our union, if she accepts me, could be incredibly valuable to both of our peoples after so much suffering. And I know that as the Fire Lady, Katara would have so much to offer my nation, much like she has to offer her own Tribe. I truly believe it's a necessary step in repairing the relationship between the Southern Water Tribe and the Fire Nation."

His gaze returns to Katara. She watches him still, wonder filling her eyes. "Katara," He says, voice soft, "Will you accept my proposal? Will you marry me?"

She is silent for a long moment, and his mind flits back to the first time he had asked her - had demanded this of her. They had both been so young, young and traumatized and in awe of a brighter future that they had created together. But this time, there is no uncertainty on her face, no hesitancy, no unease. This time, her eyes are brighter than the stars, her cheeks are flushed, and her mouth is curving into a smile, lifting Zuko's heart as it goes.

"Yes. I accept your proposal."

Several of the Elders protest loudly against this, but Zuko pays them no mind. A smile so wide it makes his cheeks ache crosses his face. Katara opens her parka to allow Zuko to fasten the chain around her neck. He slides it carefully beneath her hair and her choker and clasps it. It settles under her mother's pendant, bright and beautiful against her dark skin. His heart soars at the sight of it. When he looks up, Katara's smile is as wide as his, making him even happier.

Tikaani is the loudest of those protesting. "Hakoda!" He shouts, looking to the Chief in outrage. "Are you really going to let this happen?"

The Chief's demeanor remains calm. He looks to Tikaani, then to Katara and Zuko. "Truthfully," He responds, "The choice is Katara's and Katara's alone. She is more than capable of picking someone worthy enough to be married to, and she knows that marriage is a life long, demanding commitment." A small smile pulls at Hakoda's lips. "As for my opinion? Well, I can't think of a better person for my daughter to marry than the man that's saved my daughter's life repeatedly, that's protected both of my children, that's risked his life to release me from prison, and that's taken on the massive responsibility of ending a war his nation started. He is more than worthy to be her husband. I am proud to witness this union, and to welcome Fire Lord Zuko into my family."

Something heavy settles over Zuko's heart. His throat closes tightly, and all he can do is respond by bowing deeply to Hakoda. To have his blessing is something Zuko will never be able to express proper gratitude for. Katara reaches out to take her father's hand. "Thank you, dad." She squeezes tightly, and Hakoda smiles at her, a tender thing tinged with sadness - his daughter is no longer a child in need of her father's protection and guidance, something every parent must come to terms with eventually.

Beside Hakoda, Sokka cheers loudly. He scrambles down the steps to lock Zuko into a bone breaking hug. "Welcome to the family, buddy!" He crows, beaming at his sister. "Oh, man, I can't *wait* to take you ice dodging!"

"Wait, what?" Zuko leans back enough to look at his fiancé - his *fiancé* - and pales a bit at the way she snickers behind her hand. He has a feeling he's in for a terrible and terrifying rite of passage.

Katara's necklace catches his eye again, glitters at him, and he smiles softly, deciding he's far too happy to be properly cowed by daunting traditions.

It's been a long, long time since Zuko has felt so nervous. Right now he feels like he's going to throw up the regrettably rich lunch he had earlier.

He peeks out at the sky. The sun had set long ago, taking with it a good amount of his strength and courage. Now the moon sits in its place, full and bright, surrounded by twinkling stars. It's a beautiful night to have a wedding.

The engagement hadn't lasted long; the council in the Fire Nation wanted the couple back as soon as possible, meaning the traditional Water Tribe wedding had to come first and come fast. But now that it's here, Zuko feels as though he may faint.

He looks down at himself, taking in the outfit he has been given. It's a beautiful garment of blue and white, with beads of pearl and sapphire and rose quartz interwoven down the chest, around the collar, and around the cuffs of his sleeves. The only thing of his that remains is the crown in his hair, this time pulled completely off of his neck and shoulders in a smooth top knot.

Despite the nerves, there is an undeniable fountain of joy gushing inside of him. It's his wedding day - his *wedding day*! The day that he will marry the love of his life, one of the most powerful women the world has never known, a kind and beautiful and generous soul.

He peeks outside again. Well, wedding night, but it's all the same right now.

Sokka ducks into the room. He grins at Zuko, dressed in his own finery of blue and white. "Are you ready? It's time!"

His heart flops about against his ribs, but he nods. "Let's go." There's an eager note to his voice that makes him blush, but Sokka's grin only widens. Zuko grabs a small trunk by the door way and lets Sokka tug him outside.

The excitement in the air overwhelms the chill. Sokka leads Zuko to the center of the city; their footsteps echo within the sound of drums, steady and sure. A circle of women surround Katara where she waits, hiding her from view. Standing near by are Hakoda and Pakku, watching over the proceedings. Zuko walks to them first. He bows before Hakoda, and then he offers the trunk. Inside the trunk sits several gifts; tools, samples of fabric, precious gemstones, and scrolls of Water Tribe stories he had found hidden in the library in his palace. Hakoda opens the trunk and takes his time examining the gifts. When he looks up, he smiles with approval, and Zuko relaxes. He grasps the Chief's forearm and then turns to the circle beside him.

The circle parts, and all of the air freezes inside of Zuko's lungs.

Stunning is too poor a word for how Katara looks. Her parka is as thick as ever, this time trimmed with white fur and more sapphire beads. A pale, circular stone is stitched into the center of the parka, twinkling in the moonlight. Her hair has been let down completely and threaded through with the same beads, sapphire and pearl and rose quartz glittering against her dark tresses. A warm flush decorates her cheeks, and her eyes are the brightest of all, shining with happiness and excitement. She smiles at him, and the sight nearly brings him to his knees.

Kanna steps forward and takes Zuko's hand, pulling him to stand before Katara. They turn to face her, and she lifts a clay bowl, dips her fingers into the dark blue paint inside. Taking his hand, Katara pulls Zuko to his knees to kneel beside her and before her grandmother. Kanna smiles down at them.

"The day that my granddaughter was born, I knew that she was destined for greatness. I have prayed to the spirits many, many times for her safety, for her security, and for her happiness. Katara has suffered, she has prevailed, she has succeeded. And now she has found a husband worthy of sharing her life and her heart and her spirit with. My time with Zuko has been short, but it has been enough to learn of the kind of man he is. I know that he is brave, he is honorable, he is kind, and he is loving. I have seen with my own eyes how devoted he is to Katara, and how devoted she is to him. Their love is true; it is a love they have cultivated through hardships, a love they have nurtured together."

She dips her fingers into the paint, then reaches out to Katara and draws two interlocked circles above her brow. She turns to Zuko and paints the same symbol over his brow as well.

"Water and fire are two elements that directly contrast each other, yet they balance each other as well. This union of water and fire, of moon and sun, of night and day, of woman and man, is one consecrated with dedication and with trust. Because of this, it is a union blessed by the spirits, Tui and La."

Kanna sets her bowl down and touches each of their cheeks. Her voice is warm as she says, "I wish you well in your marriage, my children. Love long and love fiercely."

When she steps back, Zuko looks at Katara. She grins at him and throws her arms around him, nearly knocking him down, and kisses him passionately to the sound of her people cheering loudly around them. Happiness surges through him as he kisses her back, hugging her to him. He pulls back, gazing into the eyes of his love, his best friend, his partner - his wife. Something ancient binds itself around his soul as he gazes into Katara's eyes. He wonders, not for the first time, if maybe the spirits above had planned this all along. If so, it is certainly a much better path in life than he had originally imagined taking.

Standing, Zuko sets Katara on her feet, arms still around her. Her family and friends surround them to sing and cheer their congratulations and well wishes, a happy chorus of love and support. The sound is loud and echoes well into the night; it surrounds them in a cocoon of warmth. Zuko looks up at the sky. Above them, ribbons of violet and emerald snake across the sky, twisting between the stars. Zuko smiles at the sight. The lights Katara had mentioned in her letters - what a beautiful night to finally see them.

The ship powers through the ocean, cutting through the light rain falling around them. Zuko steps onto the deck and looks around, shielding his eyes. Unnecessary, but he's never been a fan of rain.

But Katara loves it, so he isn't surprised to find her standing at the rail that wraps around the stern of the boat. Her face is tilted to the sky, accepting the water as it falls over her. She's

been out here long enough to be properly soaked; her robes are dark with the water clinging to them, hair heavy and wet around her shoulders.

For a moment, he simply watches her. Katara stands far out of reach, ensconced in her element. A strange spirit in human form. Their time apart had been long; he's eager to discover new things about her, to relearn that which he already knows.

Zuko climbs the last two steps and crosses to his wife. "Come inside," He insists, lowering his hand, "You're gonna get sick."

Katara turns to him. Rivulets of water run down her face, giving her an otherworldly look. "Please," She scoffs, "I've only been sick once or twice in my life time." She twists her fingers and flicks raindrops at him.

He leans back, chuckling. "Then humor me." He reaches for her wrist, sliding his fingers along her skin until they settle between hers.

Katara smiles a bit and nods. She follows Zuko below deck, dripping water behind her as they go. When they reach their room, Katara crosses to the rather thin screen that stands before the bath tub. "This is a really big room," She comments as she removes the water from her clothing and her hair.

"Perks of being the Fire Lord and the Fire Lady." His eyes track her movements, watching the shape of her hands as they pull the water out of her clothes and hair. He doesn't miss the robe sliding from her shoulders.

"Perks, huh?" She chuckles. "Can't wait to see what else that gets me." She stoops down to remove her boots, then her pants.

Zuko turns away to remove his tunic. He lets his hair down, running his hand through it a few times to relax his roots. "It'll get you whatever you want, y'know, within reason."

"Hmm." He looks up to find Katara stepping around the screen, wearing only her familiar white wrappings. Zuko bites down on the inside of his lip. Time has been very kind to her; her hips are fuller, curves much more pronounced. There is still an endearing softness to her stomach, and her skin is as dark as he remembers, just as beautiful.

"What if I want you?"

He blinks, then grins. "You have me. I've always been yours."

Katara grins back. "Good answer." She crosses the room, and Zuko backs away from her, walking until his knees hit the bed. He sits down with his eyes locked on his wife, simply enjoying the view before him. When she reaches him, she takes his face in her hands and kisses him soundly. His hands find her waist, pulling her to stand between her legs, and he kisses her back, humming happily against her mouth.

But she is not interested in something sweet, and neither is he.

Katara climbs into Zuko's lap and kisses him again. She tugs at his lower lip, deepening the kiss with a quiet noise of want. He can taste the jasmine tea she'd had earlier on the back of her teeth, can feel the intensity of her need in the way she twists her fingers in his hair and presses against him. Zuko secures an arm around Katara's waist and shifts properly onto the bed. He settles against the pillows and attaches his mouth to the column of her neck, kissing his way down her skin. Above him, Katara moans, and the sound runs right through him to his core.

His mouth travels below her collarbone and immediately his fingers begin to pick her bindings apart. Katara helps and unravels them quickly, shifting her hips as she does, and Zuko groans, his arousal growing by the second. The bindings fall away, settling around her hips, exposing parts of her to him she has never exposed before. He shakes his head, in awe of her beauty, and presses his mouth to her skin once more, dragging his lips down the valley between her breasts. Katara inhales, fingers curling around his shoulders. She arches against him, fingers drifting up to tangle in his hair once more. He brushes his lips against her nipple, shivering when she gasps and arches again, and closes his mouth around it, lavishing the sensitive nub with attention.

Katara moans, open and wanting. She presses her hips down, circles them over his, and it's Zuko's turn to moan against her chest. Liquid heat rushes through him, hot and demanding, filling him with an intense need. He lifts his head and kisses her hotly, hands falling to her hips to fumble with the wrappings there. Her fingers overlap his with the same urgency until the white fabric falls away. Zuko tugs the fabric off of her, pushing it away, and drinks in the sight before him; so much brown skin before his eyes, plentiful curves and taunt muscles just begging for his exploration.

He looks up and finds Katara pouting at him. He opens his mouth to ask, but she reaches between them and tugs at his pants. He laughs softly and shifts under her to wiggle out of his pants, kicking them down the bed once they're off. The exposure leaves him feeling suddenly shy and vulnerable; though no one has ever seen so much of him, Katara is the only person he could ever imagine trusting this intimacy with.

Zuko slides his hands along Katara's thighs, squeezing them gently. He peeks up and moves a hand higher to draw his fingertips gently along her folds. Already she's wet and his cock throbs in response, throbs with need, with anticipation, hard and ready for her. He shivers at the heat emanating from her core, looking up when Katara gasps. She nods her encouragement, biting her lip, so he slides a finger into her slowly, carefully, baring his teeth a bit at the hot, wet sensation of it all.

She inhales slowly, arching, and shifts, fingers gripping at his shoulders tightly. He watches her as he moves in and out of her carefully. She rocks against his hand, sighing in pleasure, and the sound rolls right down his spine to settle deep within him. He chews at his lip, watching his digit slide in and out of her with wide eyes, until he can't take it anymore. He extracts his finger gently and she whines, dropping onto his lap with a pout.

Zuko laughs softly. He leans up to kiss Katara in apology, pulling her closer by the hips so that she sits directly over him. "Oh," She breathes against his lips. "Oh." She rocks forward, rubbing her wetness against him, and the friction short circuits every coherent thought in his

head. He curses quietly and presses against her, cock sliding between her folds slowly, deliciously.

"Zuko," Katara whines softly, breathless. She reaches between them and wraps her hand around his cock, fingers stroking the sensitive shaft. He curses again, heart lurching against his ribs, and watches as she positions herself over him - ready for him. Slowly, Katara lowers herself onto his cock, taking him inch by inch until he is sheathed completely inside of her. Her wet heat envelops him, robbing him of breath. Moaning softly, Zuko drops his head back against the wall.

Katara exhales unsteadily. She rocks her hips once experimentally, biting her lip hard enough to turn the flesh white. Zuko reaches for one of her hands and laces their fingers together, then settles the other at her hip. She squeezes his hand and begins to move over him, rocking forward slowly, finding her rhythm. He drops his head forward, watching the movement of her hips with rapt attention. This moment is more than worth the wait; for years he's thought about this, dreamed about the different ways he could love her, but they all pale in comparison to actually being inside of her, to watching her toss her head back in pleasure, to watching her breasts heave and her hips undulate over his.

Leaning forward, Zuko drags open mouthed kisses across her chest, up to her neck. He sucks at the crook of it, tasting ocean salt and sweat and the dregs of the soap she had bathed with earlier. His teeth scrape across the sensitive flesh, pressing down to leave behind evidence of this moment, of the passion born between them. Katara cries out, rolls her hips faster, fingers digging into Zuko's shoulder. Her cheeks are flushed, hair sticking to her jaw and neck with sweat; she has never been so warm before and it drives Zuko mad.

He lifts his head, watching her with awe, with lust, with wonder. "Beautiful," He whispers, "So beautiful."

She leans closer, forehead touching his as she rides him, moving faster now. Her hands leave his and his shoulder to slide past his cheeks and into his hair, tugging lightly. Zuko groans. His hips jerk upward, and she gasps loudly, back arching. "Oh - yes, yes!" She breathes, biting her lip again. Zuko grunts, breathing steam as he wraps his hands around Katara's hips and thrusts up to meet her, biting his lip hard. He meets her move for move, feeling the pleasure build and build and build, unable to look away from her gaze. Her eyes are dark, darker than he's ever seen them, wild with lust, with need - need for *him*, for everything that he can do for her.

"Zuko," She moans, "Zuko, *Zuko*." The sound washes over him, heedless and demanding; he knows she is close from the way her hips jerk and her fingers tighten in his hair.

He kisses her deeply, hotly, thrusting faster, chasing both of their releases. Katara rips her mouth from his and drops her head back, back arching deeply. Her nails scrape along Zuko's scalp and she inhales sharply, and then she cries out as she comes, hips rocking quickly with the force of it. Zuko gasps raggedly as her walls clench around his cock. He watches Katara, completely mesmerized, and thrusts almost frantically into her, moaning loudly when he finally comes.

Katara settles slowly. She comes down from her high and she slumps forward, tucking her head into the crook of Zuko's neck. He settles his arms around her, hand running down her back soothingly; her heart is fluttering wildly against her ribs. He kisses her hair, humming softly. His bones feel like they've melted inside of his skin. He's never felt anything better in his life.

Gingerly, Katara separates herself from Zuko and lays down beside him with a loud exhale. She puffs her cheeks out and looks up at him, smiling lazily. Pride flickers within him at how utterly satisfied she looks.

Zuko leans down and kisses her softly. He smiles against her mouth and lets his hand drift down her stomach teasingly. "Up for round two?" He asks, voice deep and suggestive.

Katara laughs loudly. She bats Zuko's hand away and twists to get away from him. Zuko grins and chases her, pulling her into his arms to press kisses along her cheek. She squeals, the sound reverberating through the room, and pure happiness floods his system, yet another layer to his good mood. Katara settles against him, skin warm and damp with sweat, fitting perfectly against Zuko in ways he never knew he wanted.

He holds her to him as they begin to drift off, both utterly sated and satisfied.

To Zuko's knowledge, the Fire Nation has never experienced snow, ice, or anything of the sort. Yet this room is as cold as the South Pole during its harshest winter.

He rubs at his temple and opens his eyes, looking to his wife. The pure rage on her face is a look that used to terrify him as a teenager, and still does seven years later, which is why he's glad he's not on the receiving end of it.

Two members of the council have made the mistake of suggesting that Southern Water Tribe is not capable of conducting foreign affairs properly, and have even gone as far as to say that the Water Tribe people are still nothing but savages living in the ice - which has, naturally, infuriated the Fire Lady.

"The people of the Southern Water Tribe are more than capable of conducting foreign affairs and anything else for that matter," Katara snarls. The temperature in the room drops from chilled to icy. "My *father* is more than capable of doing so! To call my people savages to my face, especially after all that *your* people have put us through, is the deepest insult you can give me!"

"To insult my wife, and the people of the Southern Water Tribe," Zuko interjects, dropping his hand, "Is to insult me. They are not only the Fire Nation's allies, but the Chief himself is as much my family as he is the Fire Lady's." He looks to the woman that delivered the insult, eyes flashing. "I'd consider changing your view point, Xiaoli, and I'd consider giving an apology to Katara while we're at it, or else I will be removing you from this council." He stands. "This meeting is dismissed."

Xiaoli, looking rightfully scolded, bows repeatedly and hurries from the room. The others follow suit, and Zuko escorts Katara out and down the hall. Her footsteps are loud and angry; even her hair bounces about her shoulders in irritation. When they are far enough away, Zuko stops her with a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," He murmurs. He brushes his hand down her arm in an effort to sooth her, thinking that today was certainly an appropriate day to wear the simple but lovely blue silk dress his mother had gifted her with. "There's no excuse for what was said."

Katara exhales slowly. She screws her eyes shut and shakes her head, nose wrinkled as she wrestles with her emotions. Slowly, she unwinds, and with a loud sigh her shoulders drop and her forehead comes to rest against her husband's shoulder. He pulls her into his arms and strokes her hair, careful not to disrupt her crown, and sighs with her. Assuming the title of Fire Lady hasn't been easy on Katara, but she's never once backed away from its challenges and troubles. Her strength never fails to amaze Zuko.

Katara steps back and rubs at her cheek. "I think I'm gonna go lay down for a bit," She murmurs, looking up, "I just haven't felt right all day."

Zuko nods. He's noticed the lack of color in her cheeks since this morning, and it isn't the first time in the last few weeks that she hasn't felt well. "I'll send someone to bring you some tea and come check on you in a bit." He kisses her forehead, watching as she turns around to find their room, and sighs quietly to himself.

Once he's sent a servant with a tray of Katara's favorite tea and a plate full of mango slices to his wife, Zuko goes about the rest of his day. He devotes a few hours of his day to answering letters from his friends and his uncle, from other dignitaries with mild concerns. He follows this with a sparring session with his dao swords; every morning he gets to spar with Katara with his bending, but his other skills he takes care to keep up with as well. When he feels as though they've been apart long enough, he maneuvers through the palace to to the bedroom.

He doesn't find Katara right away when he enters. Zuko looks through the room, even checks outside on the balcony. The sheets on the bed are rumpled - she did as she said she would, but where is she now?

Frowning, Zuko heads for the bathroom. He knocks once before he opens the door. "Love?" He calls, poking his head through the door a bit. "Are you in here? Is everything okay?"

Katara is sitting on the floor beside the tub. She wears only her wrappings, legs crossed, head bowed, hands resting on her stomach. They're encased in glowing water - healing water. Zuko moves to her immediately.

"What's wrong?" He demands, dropping to his knees.

She looks up slowly. Her eyes are wide with wonder, with nerves and excitement. Tears glisten along her lashes. "Zuko," She breathes, "I'm pregnant."

The floor shifts under him. He catches himself on his hand when he topples to the side, eyes glued to Katara. "Pregnant?" He repeats hoarsely. "Pregnant. You're sure? Positive?"

Katara nods. She blinks and the tears slide down her cheeks. "I'm positive," She insists, a smile forming on her lips. "I'm pregnant. There's a baby growing inside of me. We're going to have a baby!"

The air has been compressed inside of his lungs. So many emotions flare high and strong within him; happiness, excitement, fear, anxiety, uncertainty. A baby. A *baby*. He's going to be a father.

Being responsible for an entire nation, being a world leader, had seemed like the most daunting task he would ever face in life. Being responsible for a life that he helped create now eclipses all of that completely.

"Zuko," Katara murmurs. His name brings him back to the present and he looks up. Katara has disposed of her healing water and shifted closer. She touches his cheek, brushing against something wet, and he's startled to realize that he's crying as well. He smiles sheepishly, throat unbearably tight.

"Are we really going to do this?" He whispers, blinking rapidly through his tears. "That's not - I mean I am happy, but I -" He scrubs at his face with the back of his hand, struggling to breathe, to work through the shouting going on inside of his head.

Katara pries his hand from his face and presses it between hers. "It's okay, my love, it's okay," She soothes. She shifts closer until her legs are laying over his. "I know. I'm scared, too - I'm terrified. This is going to be the hardest thing we've ever done, but it'll be the most rewarding, too." Her lips brush his knuckles. "I know what you're thinking. It won't be the same, Zuko. Not even close. You are so, so different from your father, you're nothing like him. I know you would never hurt our child." Her eyes shine with warmth, with that bone deep faith she's had in him for so long now. "I know that our child will be more loved than anyone else in this world, because I know your heart, and I know what's in it."

Zuko closes his eyes. His heart trembles, trembles with fear and sadness at the very possibility. But he allows Katara's words to sink into him, to wrap around him and pull him up right. Her faith in him has always been a source of strength; he's been able to draw on it through some truly hard times, and even when he wavered, she never did.

Opening his eyes, Zuko leans forward and kisses Katara softly. He rests his forehead to hers and looks down at her stomach. "We're going to have a baby," He breathes. His fingers drift down, touching her stomach carefully, hesitantly - already wary of the fragility of the being growing inside of her. Katara takes hold of his hand and presses his palm flat to her stomach. He allows this and imagines the very faint heartbeat within her, the impossibly small shape of the child - *their* child.

Fresh tears well in his eyes. He looks up, and he smiles, terrified and excited and nervous and happy all at once. "I love you," He whispers.

Katara grins through her own tears. "I love you, too, Zuko." Her hands cover his, both resting over the life they've created.

The sun shines brightly over the turtle duck pond, casting everyone around it in a warm glow. Zuko sits away from the gathered group. He tears pieces of a bread roll apart and tosses them into the pond, watching the ducklings swim around and squawk excitedly for the treats. One particularly small one stays close to its mother, who watches over the others protectively. Zuko's eyes linger on the pair. He looks up to find Katara.

Their friends and family had arrived just a week ago; everyone had wanted to be present for the birth of their first grandchild, their first great grandchild, their first niece or nephew. Many of them sit surrounding Katara with questions about her pregnancy, her birthing plans, her feelings, names for the baby, anything they can think of. Today she wears red, a silk garment with a gold sash that sits high above her round, round belly. Around her arms hangs a gossamer blue shawl; a small reminder of who she really is. The dress stretches comfortably across her body and allows her plenty of movement. At this stage, the baby has grown rapidly over the last few weeks alone; Katara looks ready to pop any day now, though she and the physicians have said it won't happen for another few weeks.

He watches Suki caress Katara's belly. She talks animatedly, excitement filling every movement. Katara responds in kind. Her cheeks are round and rosy; she is the perfect poster for a happy, healthy, expectant mother.

Zuko returns his gaze to the turtle ducks. He tosses his last bits of bread to the mother and her littlest baby, smiling just so when they scoop them up out of the water. The mother calls her ducklings back to her and takes them around the pond, letting them see the excitement of the humans they pass.

Someone sinks into the grass beside him. Zuko looks up to find Hakoda folding his legs beneath himself. He settles with a sigh familiar to those that are not as young as they once were.

"You're quiet," Hakoda observes, looking to his adopted son. "I thought you would be happier about this."

"I am happy!" Zuko insists defensively. "I'm ecstatic! Couldn't be more excited if I tried!"

When Hakoda raises a brow at him, Zuko sighs and lets his shoulders slump.

"I am excited, really, I'm just..."

"Scared?"

He looks up. Hakoda is watching him, waiting patiently for Zuko to work through his thoughts. There is no judgment in his blue eyes, only understanding. Zuko lets out another breath and nods.

Hakoda has always been kind to him, but ever since the wedding, he's welcomed Zuko in with open arms and treated him as his own flesh and blood son. To this day it still astounds Zuko; only Uncle Iroh has ever treated him so well, and now? Now he has two father figures to guide him through moments like this.

His eyes find his wife again, taking in her happiness, as well as the swell of her stomach. It's almost intimidating. Once the baby is out, their lives will change forever.

"I'm terrified," He admits. He's already shared these sentiments with Katara, many times over by now, but they come spilling out again anyway. "I just don't want to be like... Him. I never want to put my child through anything even remotely similar to what my father did to me and my sister." The thought alone paralyzes him.

Hakoda nods in understanding. He looks across the pond to his own children. "Being a parent is a terrifying experience on it's own," He admits. "When Sokka was born, I cried for three days straight. I thought I was prepared, but then he actually arrived and, well, I didn't know what in La's name I was doing. Kya was just as terrified as I was, so I wasn't alone." His gaze returns to Zuko. "But adding what you've been through to that general terror? That's a lot to deal with."

He reaches out and clasps Zuko's shoulder. "It's a good thing you're nothing like that, and that you've got good people around to help you remember that." His smile is small, but it's warm and reassuring. "You are nothing like your father, Zuko. You have a good heart and a good head on your shoulders. Katara would not have tolerated you otherwise."

Zuko snorts. Vividly he remembers the flare of anger and disbelief in her eyes in their early days of interacting. "That I absolutely do know."

"You're gonna be okay, Zuko," Hakoda says, squeezing his shoulder. "It's already a good sign that you're so aware of what's happened and that you're cautious of repeating those tragedies." He shrugs, lifting his hand to wave it around. "Now, parents always make mistakes. We're human, that's just what humans do. The key is recognizing the mistake and learning from it, like I know you know how to do."

Zuko exhales slowly. He tilts his face to the sun and soaks up its light, letting its energy invigorate him. When he looks at Hakoda, he offers him a small smile of his own. "Thank you, Hakoda. I'm so glad and so honored that my child has you for a grandfather."

Hakoda grins, and the gleam to his eyes is as wicked as his daughter's when she's feeling mischievous. "You say that now, but you'll change your mind when that baby is spoiled rotten."

Zuko laughs. He stands and offers his hand to Hakoda and pulls him to his feet, then pulls him into a hug. Hakoda returns the embrace with a gentle pat to his adopted son's back. Zuko releases him with a smile and leads him around the pond.

The others make room for them. Katara watches them approach with a warm smile. She extends a hand to her husband when he's close enough, and he takes it, kneeling before her to greet the baby inside of her. He kisses the swell of her belly, his free hand caressing the bump tenderly. He is not his father. He will not repeat the past. He will be better.

"I swear to every god in existence, Zuko, you are *not* touching me ever *again*!"

Zuko winces. Katara's voice is loud, ragged at the edges, and carries through the room and out to everyone waiting in the hall. "I know, I know," He assures her, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I won't even look at you again after this."

Katara has been in labor for five hours now. The pains began early in the afternoon and dragged into the evening, until the contractions finally began. There hasn't been much for Zuko to do, which only heightened his anxiety; his wife is suffering a great deal of pain and he can't help her at all. All he can do is let her squeeze his hand until the bones pop, but he'd gone numb to that a few hours ago.

Kanna stands on Katara's other side, the very definition of calm. She hums softly, something distinctly Water Tribe, and dabs along her granddaughter's brow with a cold cloth in an attempt to ease the feverish heat pulsing through her right now. Katara whines, teeth tearing at her lip. Her cheeks are flushed and tear streaked, her hair wild and curled thanks to the high temperature in the room. They've done everything they can for her to ease the pain; Kanna came prepared with Water Tribe remedies, Zuko's had Sana, the physician, scrounge up everything she knows, Katara has even tried to soothe herself with her own healing abilities, but at this point, there's nothing else they can do.

Sana lifts her head. "It's time, dear," She says. "The baby is crowning. Push!"

Zuko's heart fumbles in his chest. He grips Katara's hand in both of his and looks frantically between her and the physician. Sana is focused, coaching Katara through the pushing, who begins to sob in earnest. Zuko grimaces.

After several minutes, Katara slumps backward, chest heaving with labored breath. She closes her eyes, looking thoroughly exhausted already. Zuko lets go of her hand and reaches into his pocket for a spare ribbon. He pries Katara's hair from her shoulders and her neck and ties into a messy bun, hoping to help even a little bit.

"You're so strong," He tells her, taking her hand once more. Her skin is feverish and clammy. "You're incredible, my love, my heart, you're doing so well. Soon enough our baby will be here and it'll be over. This part only lasts for a little bit, and then we get to keep our baby forever."

Katara turns to him. She looks miserable, messy and wiped out. But she grits her teeth and braces herself, her grip on Zuko's fingers renewed. She sits up again, Zuko's free hand at her back, and resumes pushing at Sana's order.

She pushes, and she pushes, and she pushes. Katara's cries fill the room, drowning out Sana's instructions and Zuko's encouragement and Kanna's singing. Still, Katara pushes. It feels like an entire life time passes by inside of this hot, cramped, stuffy room, an entire life time consisting only of the greatest waterbender in the world forcing her body through one of the universe's best and messiest miracles.

Katara pushes one more time, head bowed, shoulders hunched to her ears, legs drawn up and as far apart as she can get them. She clenches her jaw, she sobs, she growls, and then -

and then another cry joins the chorus in the room, the loud, shrill, distinct cry of a newborn taking its first breath.

Their child is here.

All other sound ceases for the span of several heartbeats. Zuko stares in shock as Sana lifts an infant covered in blood, in vernix, in Agni knows what else, into the air for all to see. The child wails, a piercing sound, and flexes tiny fingers and toes, eyes scrunched closed, mouth open, not a tooth in sight -

the most beautiful creature Zuko has ever seen.

Hot tears blur his vision. He blinks through them quickly, spilling them down his cheeks, and watches Sana carry the child to the other side of the room where a basin with fresh water waits. Zuko turns to Katara, beaming at her. She meets his eyes, thoroughly wiped out, but smiles brightly, beautifully. He leans down and kisses her brow, her nose, her mouth, unable to contain his happiness.

Sana returns just minutes later with the baby cleaned and swaddled in a soft blue blanket - the very one made by the child's great grandmother.

"It's a girl," The physician announces, and Zuko barely represses a sob.

A girl. A *daughter*, he has a daughter - a princess. When Kanna opens the door to announce this, the crowd in the hall erupts with cheers.

Katara extends trembling arms and Sana places the baby carefully against her chest. She snuffles and Sana walks Katara through the process of breastfeeding, showing her how to convince the baby to latch on. It only takes a few minutes before the child does so and begins her first meal.

Zuko has to fight a mighty urge to climb into the bed with his family. Instead, he leans over and watches the baby in his wife's arms. She is as dark as her mother, with a thick patch of coarse, black hair on her round head. Her fingers are impossibly small, her face pudgy and round. She opens her eyes, a brilliant shade of gold that mirror her father's.

Zuko has never felt so hard in love so quickly.

He allows two servants in to clean up the mess the birth made, hardly able to look away from his daughter. He rests his cheek to Katara's sweaty hair, sighing softly at the sight before him. Sana returns to tend to Katara. Zuko knows that she will heal herself later, but for now, she is too exhausted and too enamored with her daughter. Sana places a fresh towel beneath Katara to put a barrier between her and the mess on the sheets once she is finished cleaning and covering her wounds. She leaves a pitcher of water beside the bed and bows deeply, then departs from the room with a smile.

Zuko takes the pitcher and fills a small cup with water. He holds it to Katara's lips and holds it steady while she drains the liquid inside, then repeats the process until she feels sated. Her skin has cooled down considerably, a good sign; he's heard many horror stories of all that can

go wrong during the labor process for both the mother and the child in the last nine months. That this one happened without any complications is a massive weight off of his shoulders.

He looks down to find the baby watching him with wide, curious eyes. Smiling softly, he reaches out to trace a finger delicately down her round cheek. She is warm and soft, and she is finally here. Carefully, Katara passes her to Zuko, and he takes the child into his arms with the utmost care. She settles into the crook of his arm with only a faint noise. He can feel her feet shifting inside of the blanket and his heart melts.

"Have you thought of a name yet?" Katara asks softly.

Zuko studies his daughter's face. He was given the task of deciding a name for their child, something he found to be challenging. He's spent weeks pondering over the right name for a baby of noble blood, a baby born from two people that compliment each other so well. In the end, it had finally come to him; it was the love he shares with Katara that had influenced his decision.

"Aiko," He announces, looking to his wife.

"Aiko," She repeats, beginning to smile as she considers the meaning. "Child of love?"

Zuko nods with a smile of his own. "I don't think there's anything more appropriate for our child."

Katara sighs softly. "I love you," She murmurs. "I love her. I love the both of you so much."

"I love the both of you just as much." He settles gingerly on the side of the bed and kisses Katara's temple, then returns his attention to Aiko. He watches her eyes take in her surroundings, noting that she has her mother's chin and nose as well, and decides that, yes, the name is a perfect fit.

The others are allowed in when Katara is ready for them. She has Aiko back in her arms, and she grins as their family and friends rush in.

As soon as Sokka sees his niece, he claps a hand over his mouth and bursts into tears. Zuko laughs softly and beckons everyone closer. Hakoda stands beside Kanna as he peers down at his granddaughter, tears in his eyes. "She's perfect," He whispers thickly.

Suki takes Toph's hand and guides it to Aiko's face, carefully brushing her fingers against the baby's cheek and nose and chin. Toph holds still, observing Aiko, and smiles slowly. "Wow, she is really pretty," She murmurs.

Zuko looks up as Uncle Iroh rounds the bed with Ursa and Ikem and Kiyi to stand at his side. "She is perfect," He agrees, wrapping an arm around Zuko's shoulders, and Zuko feels his heart swell with pride and with happiness. Uncle smiles warmly at him. "I am so proud of you, my nephew. You will be a wonderful father."

Zuko turns back to his daughter, watching her sleep in his wife's arms. He nods in agreement, vowing to Agni Himself that he will do all within his power to give his child all of the love

that she deserves and more.

Zuko studies the comb in his hand. It's age shows at the edges, but the brass still shines and the large pearl in the center of its lattice work design hasn't budged over the years. It's a gift from his mother to Aiko, one she had insisted on wearing right away.

At four years old, Aiko is loud, blunt, and demanding. Hakoda had made good on his promise to spoil his grandchild, and spoil her he has - along with her uncles and aunts and her grandmother. But neither of her parents mind terribly, because Aiko is also bright, intelligent, kind, curious, and loving. She makes sure to show her love to those around her in the form of sticky kisses and clinging hugs and drawings and the occasional pretty rock she finds outside, gestures Zuko will never grow tired of for as long as he lives.

He hums quietly and sets the comb down to reach for a much plainer comb, one meant for brushing. Settling Aiko before him, Zuko brushes through her hair carefully. It's still as black as night, and now reaches past her shoulder blades, but resembles her mother's curls. He pulls the comb through them carefully, smiling as Aiko babbles on and on about the adventures she'd had with her aunt Kiyi earlier today; Kiyi had taken her through the kitchens on a hunt for sweets.

Aiko holds still and munches on the sweets from her adventure, coating her face in powdered sugar. She smacks her hands together when the sweet is gone in an attempt to get the powder off of her hands. When Katara walks into the room, Aiko shouts, "Mama!" She holds out her dirty hands, expecting them to be cleaned.

Katara rolls her eyes affectionately. She digs through her robes to find a handkerchief and wets it with her tongue, then rubs it across her daughter's powdery palms. "And what do I get for that?" She asks, and Aiko leans forward to leave her signature sticky kiss on her mother's cheek. She settles back within Zuko's reach and bats her golden eyes sweetly.

Katara laughs softly. She pats Aiko's cheek and settles beside her husband, kissing his cheek in greeting. Zuko turns to catch her lips for a brief kiss, then returns his attention to his daughter's hair. Once it's glossy and smooth, he takes small sections of Aiko's hair and twists them, then pulls them back behind her head and slides the comb into place. He taps the pearl once. "All done, princess."

Aiko spins around to face him with a smile so bright it renders Zuko breathless. "Thank you, Daddy!" She says, climbing to her feet. "Your turn now!" She takes the comb from his hands and walks behind him.

Zuko bites his lip to contain his laughter. Even sitting down, Aiko is still too small to reach the back of his head. To remedy this, Katara finds a foot stool and places it behind Zuko, helping Aiko onto it. Aiko plants her little feet against the cushion and begins to drag the comb through her father's hair. He winces now and then at the force she uses, but otherwise holds still. Beside him, Katara reclines on one hand, watching them with a smile.

Aiko waves her hand at Katara. "It's Daddy's turn to brush your hair, Mama," She declares.

"Oh, is it?" Katara stands and walks to their dresser, retrieving one of several hair combs scattered across its surface. She sits before her husband with a smile and passes him the comb over her shoulder. "You know, Daddy's been brushing my hair since we were young."

Zuko takes the comb with a smile that widens when Aiko launches into a multitude of questions about this, all of which Katara answers patiently. Zuko pulls the comb through his wife's hair and listens to their conversation, occasionally butting in with a detail Katara forgets.

The atmosphere surrounding the moment is peaceful, happy. Zuko listens to his wife and his daughter, marveling at how blessed he is to have them both. Maybe he had been born under a bad star, or on an unlucky day, but this moment? This is what he fought tooth and nail for. This love cultivated between the three of them is what he made for himself. He never needed luck; he never wanted it. But right now, settled between the two loves of his life, the reasons his heart beats, he lets himself think that maybe the spirits allowed him this, after all that he has been through. His life is good now; it isn't perfect, but it was never meant to be perfect.

There is still so much for him to experience, so much for him to accomplish and fix. But he has time. He has all the time in the world, and he has all of the love that he needs, sitting in front of him and behind him, and that is more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

The end!! I can't believe that this actually happened. What started out as a simple one shot progressed into seven more chapters that challenged me in the best ways. I really cannot thank you guys enough for going on this journey with me.

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This is so special to me. I'm so glad y'all have enjoyed it, and I hope that anyone else that discovers this in the future enjoys it as well. <3

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