

# The Wings of War

By falconwing

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*UPDATED 2/28/07 Added 14*

*For full Summery see chapter titled summery.*

*Aang needs a firebending teacher before time runs out. Zuko still wants to capture him. But what happens when he meets an old friend of Uncle Iroh's and learns . . .*

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# 1 - Summery and Author's note

The Wings of War

## Summery

The Avatar, twelve year old Aang has mastered water bending. But while he has learned Earth bending, he still has much to learn. Not to mention the fact that he and his friends, Sokka, and Katara, have not yet found a teacher so that Aang can learn the art of bending fire. The truth of the matter is, is that Aang has nowhere near the skill needed to defeat the Fire Lord, Ozai, and there are exactly four months before summer's end and the comet's arrival.

Fire lord Ozai's exiled son, The hot-tempered prince Zuko, is still determined to capture the Avatar. To him it is the only way to regain his lost honor. But a chance meeting of one of General Iroh's old friends may just, redefine what Zuko knows to be true. What is more important, the Avatar, or the well being of the exiled Prince's people.

Standard disclaimer does apply

2/28/07

Ok folks this is it. The End of the story. I actually finished it, though I know some of you thought I wouldn't :p

I'm sorry it took so long. The problem was the shows took a turn I didn't expect so I was unable to make this as long as I originally hoped with out jumping completely of the plot line. Still I hope you all enjoy. Let me know what you think. And maybe, just maybe, I'll write another story.

Author s note:

Love it? Hate it? Let me know.

Also, Any answers to questions directly relating to this story will be posted here. It s simpler for me if I post my replies here, so the reader may want to check this page once and a while

6/18/06

Ok so with the new shows out I have lots of new things to work in. In the next few chapters it will be explained how Zuko got a new ship, something I ve been struggling with since he became a fugitive, where Taph is, and a few other things that I m sure will pop up. I do not plan to change the earlier chapters as that would change the story too much. So any new information given in the show will be worked into later chapters.

12/??/05

PLEASE READ . . .

I do not have regular access to a TV, so I m relying on show summaries to keep things smooth. If you find something odd, or think I missed something let me know :D ideas and advice are always welcome.

??/??/05

Ok, so I m back. I m sorry things took so long.

I was lucky enough to have presented Chapter one as a dream, meaning that it has been left alone. Explanations of the events seen in the dream will come in later chapters (five) hopefully to every one's satisfaction. Chapter two has been edited. Zhao has been changed to an OC (Ishi) I believe that this character can take the place of the other. I did not wish to completely delete this story and I intend to keep this as close to the shows as possible. I hope people will read the new version before they continue with the rest

Thanks

Falcon

## 2 - The Dream

I

*The Dream*

The room was small and rather cramped; or rather it would have been if the only furniture hadn't been a table and two chairs. The first, a rather large padded armchair held an older man. White hair and bags under his eyes, Shan wasn't nearly as old as he looked, but he was old enough. The second chair, a ladder backed thing made of wood, with no covering of any kind, held a young man. A Prince by birth just beginning to learn what he would need to know in life. His long black hair was held in a ponytail, the rest of his head shaved completely bald. Prince Zuko sat poring over a sheet of notes he had just written, waiting for the ink to dry so he could start on the next page.

"Vierus!" Shan said holding up a Vile of white powder. "Colorless, odorless, tasteless, and fatal when mixed in the drinks of it's victims."

"Is there no cure?" Zuko asked a grimace twisting across his fourteen-year-old face.

"Ahhh, why must you tire me with such questions!" the tutor frowned, "Yes there is a cure. Though it won't work unless it is brewed fresh.

"That is not your concern however. My job is to teach you the poisons that you might avoid them, not to trouble my self in pointless attempts to remember antidotes.

"Now Vierus works slowly. The drinker will experience a sore throat and a sever cough, much like an extremely bad cold. Both will get steadily worst until the victim develops a fever. The fever will not break however. The body will slowly burn up from the inside out until the victim dies.

"Are you getting this prince Zuko?"

"Yes sir."

"Good! Now Vierus works incredibly slow for a poison. The effects are felt over a course of two weeks. Meaning that the poison is vary rarely seen for what it truly is until it is too late. Most think it nothing more than a common illness. When mixed with wine however the time period of the poison is shortened to one week. Something to do with the alcohol mixing with it . . ."

The morning lessons were cut short by a terrible cry echoing down the hall and through the open door. "Take your hands off me!"

Student and teacher alike rushed out of the room to find Mistress Kiata, Zuko's old nurse and a woman whom he loved dearly, being dragged across the floor by two of the empyreal guard. Infuriated Zuko rushed forward.

"Let her go! I command that you release her!"

"I'm sorry my prince," One of the Guards started, "but the orders for her arrest come from the Fire Lord himself."

"My Father . . .But surly he wouldn't . . ." Kiata, who was about the age of Zuko's Uncle Iroh, looked at him sadly. She wasn't afraid for herself, that Zuko picked up on immediately, but she was freighted about something. That only doubled Zuko's resolve to see her set free.

The only reason any one was brought before Zuko's father with out first requesting an audience,

was on a charge of treason. And it clicked. Kiata had been closeting her self in her room lately, something Zuko had attributed to her getting older, but others might think . . . “It’s not possible, this woman has done nothing at all to . . .”

“My Prince you may accompany us,” The guard snapped. “But we can do nothing other than what the Fire Lord has ordered of us!” Zuko nodded and followed them down the hall, leaving Shan behind.

The Hall of the Fire Lord was in all cases magnificent. Tall marble columns supported the vast vaulted ceiling. Windows on all sides of the tower room not only let in a huge amount of light, but also afforded a beautiful view of the City below. It was all Zuko could do not to stop and stare out at the horizon.

He forced himself to look straight ahead to the end of the Hall where his father sat on his thrown. The General Iroh stood on the Fire lord’s left, and an adviser on the right. The fire lord sat with the tips of his fingers pressed together and a frown on his lips.

“My son, why have you come here?”

“Perhaps brother,” General Iroh interrupted, “he has heard of the charges placed on the woman, and came to find the truth of them for himself.”

“If that is true, be satisfied son, that the charge is indeed treason, and leave!”

“If it pleases you father I would argue on her behalf.”

“Nephew,” Iroh began, “It would be far better if you . . .”

“Do not forget who is in charge here Iroh,” the Fire lord growled, “or have you decided that your age allows you to overstep your place!”

“When our Father died, I was out on the far boarder leading our armies against the Earth Kingdom. By the time I returned you were already two years into your reign, and no one could contest your claim on the crown. Had I returned inside two weeks of his death rather than two years, perhaps I would have argued the point. No Ozai, I do not want your throne. I only seek to send the boy away before something foolish is done.”

“He is my son Iroh, not yours. And you would do well to remember that! Zuko stays!”

Iroh took a step back into his corner spreading his hands in a gesture of peace. Ozai nodded, and snapped his fingers. The adviser stepped forward, and opening a scroll, began to read the charges.

“Lady, you are brought here on the charge of treason. You are charged on four counts. One, that you have helped to sneak Earth kingdom representatives into the city. Two you have seen to it that they have had access to every material they could want, said materials having been used to sabotage our resources. Three that you have helped spies into this very palace. And four, that you your self, residing in this palace have spied on your Lord, being that you have listened in at privet conferences, sent notes bearing confidential information, and conspired to have the present Lord removed from his throne permanently.

“What have you to say in your own defense?”

To Zuko it seemed as though she glanced at him before answering. But it was the barest fraction of a glance, and it barely even took a second. “Only this my Lord, that I may know the name of the person who accuses me. That I know who it is that claims I have done these things, and that I know what proof has been shown against me.”

The request was ignored and the advisor turned to face Zuko. “You wish to argue for this woman? Do so now and make it quick.”

Zuko took a step forward, and took a deep breath before starting. "Father, this woman has been my nurse since the day I was born. She has lived among us for over fourteen years, and never has any harm come of it.

"Father she has shared her life with us, eaten our meals."

"Raised your son," General Iroh added in.

Ozia barely glanced at him.

"Her family has been provided for by us, what reason could she possibly have for betrayal?"

"Some people hardly need a reason." The adviser muttered.

"Father . . ."

"My Lord!" The adviser stepped forward. "My lord, your own brother, the esteemed General himself admitted this woman raised your son. There is no doubt in my mind that is the only reason he wishes to speak for her."

General Iroh winced, "that is not exactly what . . ."

"The evidence against her is solid."

"But . . ."

"I myself saw her with one ear to the Conference Hall door!"

"Oh I get it now," Zuko burst out, "You've got some kind of disagreement with her!"

"This is a serious matter, and not the time for petty grievances!"

"I have made up my mind!" the Fire lord rose from his chair and strode across the hall to stand in front of Mistress Kiata. "Lady you are found guilty of all charges."

"Father!"

"This is WAR Zuko, and she has committed treason. Perhaps she did it for gold. Maybe someone even has her family. But treason is treason!"

"Lady your sentence is death."

"Father, no!"

"You are to be hanged by the neck until you are dead!"

"You can't!"

"I can, and that's the end of it!"

"I won't let you!"

"I am lord here, Zuko. It is for me to decide, and no one else." The Fire lord was advancing on him now, and it was all Zuko could do to hold his ground.

"I challenge you!"

"What?" Ozai snarled. Now would be a wonderful time to shut up, Zuko reflected. He should make his apologies and leave, return to his chamber without any meals for the rest of the day. That was what usually happened in these cases. But his temper had a hold of him and Zuko was not backing down.

"Agni Kai, I . . . I . . . challenge you."

"And this will accomplish what?" Ozai was in his face, so close that Zuko could see the anger burning in his father's eyes.

"If . . . if I win," Zuko's voice was stronger now, more determined. "She goes free."

"And if you lose?"

"Do as you like."

Ozai sneered, "Very well, I will allow you your fun. But whether you win or not, know this, You will be punished for the insolence you have shown today. I do not take challenges to my authority lightly. My son or not, you are still my subject, and you will learn to act like one!"

Take the woman to a cell. She will stay there until her judgment is decided. And escort the prince to his chambers. He will need his rest, for we duel at high noon."

As Zuko left he took a chance and glanced over his shoulder. Uncle Iroh wore a worried frown and he seemed to be speaking urgently with the Fire Lord who was not pleased. The advisor however, was standing with his back to the two men, and he was laughing.

\*

High noon came. Zuko had not eaten, he had not spoken with anyone. He admitted that he was scared. He knew he had no chance of winning and preserving his honor, not against his father, but he had to try.

There came a knock on his door, and Zuko rose from his bed to answer it. It opened before he'd even taken two steps. Instead of the expected guards, his uncle stepped into the room and smiled sadly.

"Are you ready prince Zuko?"

Zuko started, his uncle had never addressed him by his title before, usually it was just nephew. "I'm ready uncle."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I have no choice."

"There is always a choice."

"If I don't go through with this I will have forever lost my honor."

"Same if you loose."

"Better to lose than never to try!" Zuko snapped

Uncle Iroh nodded, "I said that there was always a choice Prince Zuko, but sometimes, there is only one right one."

"So you're not mad at me?"

"I agree with you. Although I do wish you would leave some things for your elders to handle." It was then that they reached the door to the training yard, and neither said another word more.

The gate swung open on a large square yard surrounded by walls of stone. The gate itself was made of steel. The floor was a combination of packed dirt, and sand. Any fire bender in the palace could use this area to practice their bending. The entire arena was fireproof.

Zuko took a deep breath, removed his shirt and sandals, accepted the ceremonial over robe his uncle held out to him, and allowed himself to be lead to the far corner.

A few minutes later the Fire lord Ozai arrived with several other benders who spread out against the wall to watch.

At fourteen Zuko was not considered short, but his father towered over him, and as they bowed to one another, Zuko realized exactly how much of an advantage that was.

A fireball was flung at his face, and Zuko blocked. Every move his father made, every kick and punch, every flick of the wrist, was followed by some form of Fire bending. It was all Zuko could do to defend himself. But the strange thing was that the more that was flung at him, the easier things seemed to become. Gradually he began to sense a pattern. Fire Lord Ozai was using the same moves again, and again, and once Zuko realized this, he began finding places for his own attacks.

Feet pounding earth, bodies twisting in avoidance of the other's attacks, the battle continued. Zuko stopped thinking, stopped trying to remember every lesson he'd ever been taught, and started reacting. He realized that his body remembered the moves, and this allowed his mind to gauge his opponent's weaknesses. Eventually Zuko realized that his father, the fire lord, was continuously exposing his left side.



It was then that Zuko made his mistake.

Up until this moment those who had gathered to watch had entertained some hope that the Prince might win. He was after all very close to his father's match. They could all see that much. Prince Zuko also had the advantage of youth, but it could be a disadvantage as well. The prince was overcome with determination to win, and with the knowledge that if he acted at the right moment, he could win. In haste he rushed his father, and forgot to defend.

In less than a second he was flung hard against the ground. The last sight he would ever have of his father for many years to come was of the man towering over him, a furious sneer twisting Ozai's face into a hideous mask.

There was a flash of fire, and a searing pain in the left side of his face. Zuko had a brief vision of his Uncle rushing towards him before everything went black.

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A strangled cry ripped from his throat as Zuko fought his way out of the bed cloths. Not until he was on his feet did he realize that it had already happened.

He had already woken days later to find his face in bandages and Uncle Iroh packing his room. Already been informed of his exile with barely a day between waking injured and boarding a small ship. He had already removed the bandages to find his face hideously scarred a month later.

No, it had all been a dream, a nightmare, made up of his own memories.

There was a knock on the door.

### 3 - Midnight Council

II

#### Midnight Council

“Come in.” Zuko sighed rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, three weeks prior he had turned seventeen, making him an adult according to his own people. Among the crew he was treated as one, but his Uncle, still seemed to think he was a boy. And so when General Iroh stepped through the door, The first two thoughts to cross Zuko’s mind was to wonder what he wanted, and to marvel that Uncle Iroh had knocked at all.

“Good you are awake nephew. It seems we have unexpected visitors. Admiral Ishi has pulled along our ship and requested an audience with us.”

“Well why wasn’t I woken earlier!” Zuko demanded.

“Because nephew.” Iroh Sighed. “If you had been asleep the meeting could have been postponed till morning. As it is I will not get to finish my evening tea!”

Zuko nodded. He had no real wish to converse with Admiral Ishi at the moment; in fact, Zuko was convinced the man was a toy to his sister. True he had liked Ishi in his younger years, but in the months leading up to his banishment, things had begun to change. Whispered rumors, and sightings of the man doing things only his sister could have wanted done, had been enough to convince him. “Uncle how far are we from Fire nation waters?”

“Far enough that you need not fear arrest.”

“Alright,” Zuko muttered, “I’ll be ready in a moment. He began pulling on his cloths, pausing only long enough to tie up his hair before heading up on deck.

It was the dead of night. The sky was nearly pitch black. The shadow that covered the deck of the ship was riddled with deeper shadows. The only light around seemed to be that which came from the full moon its halo of light stretching to give everything an eerie glow.

Admiral Ishi stood on the deck of his own ship waiting as his men placed a boarding plank across the railings. “His ship?” Zuko asked.

“He insisted.” As they crossed the plank Zuko was incredibly grateful for the breeze that blew around him, cooling his face. They were lead below into a rather dark cabin lit with candles. To Zuko it seemed like a giant box. Had he been in a better mood he would have notice the tapestries were made of the finest silk, that the table and chairs that took up most of the space in the room were extremely well crafted, and the dishes on the table . . . those were Earth kingdom silver. Perhaps, had they met under different circumstances, Zuko would have been able to enjoy the Admiral’s hospitality.

The Admiral him self was a tall skinny man. He was graying at the temples, and the rest of his hair appeared to be thinning. His features were long; in fact his face uncommonly resembled that of a horse. How he had ever married Zuko was unsure. But Ishi’s son had been something like a friend of his growing up.

Admiral Ishi motioned for them to sit and began removing covers from various dishes. “Pork,” he said passing one to them. “Chicken, and fresh fruit.

“Delicacies I’m sure they must seem to you. You can’t have eaten much except fish for the past

couple of years.”

Zuko scowled and shifted in his chair. The truth was Ishi was right. While fruit was readily available in nearly every port, the other two dishes placed before him were prepared in such a way, that Zuko knew on sight that he hadn't tasted their like since leaving home.

“Come on, eat up. It's the very least I could do for waking you up in the middle of the night.” Zuko had the gut feeling that this comment was meant more for his Uncle rather than himself, though he couldn't put his finger on why. Admiral Ishi began filling his own plate, and Zuko, assuming it was safe, did the same.

Uncle Iroh waved the offer away. “Do you have any ginseng tea? It's my favorite.”

The tea was produced along with a pitcher of wine for the Admiral and Zuko. Once again Zuko waited until Ishi had filled his own glass. He was accustomed to wine occasionally, and as his uncle raised no objection, Zuko slowly sipped at it.

“Admiral Ishi might you tell us why we are here?” Uncle Iroh asked.

“Ah yes, you see I need you to watch a prisoner for me.”

Zuko burst out laughing and Ishi frowned at him. “I'm in exile, considered a failure. My Uncle is under suspicion, and yet you want us to take a prisoner for you? Why?”

“It will only be for a month or two,” Ishi scowled, “And you, young prince, do not make the mistake of thinking you are my first choice! It was requested that this particular man be removed from the sight of a man I intend to entertain. You prince Zuko are the only one with nothing important to do in the current vicinity!”

“Who?” Zuko asked.

“What?”

“Who are you entertaining?”

Ishi's eyes gleamed with pleasure in the candlelight, “your father.”

“Explain to me Admiral,” General Iroh interrupted, “why we should do this. There is after all a fire nation base on the nearby island of . . .”

“I did try to make this easy on you!” Ishi snapped walking around the table pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket as he went. “I wanted to make it seem as though you'd be doing me a great favor . . . But you just had to make things difficult, Prince Zuko.

“I have orders signed and sealed from the Fire Lord himself. You'll have the charge of this prisoner, and you'll keep hold of him, or you'll be charged with treason, again!”

“Very well Admiral,” Zuko muttered, if that is what my father requires of me, than it will be done.” He remembered now that Ishi had always had a temper, and the man tended to become completely irrational when disobeyed. Now was not the time to test him.

“Good!” Ishi snapped his fingers and a soldier came into the room. “See to it that the prisoner is brought to their ship, and make it quick! I want to be out of here as soon as possible!”

It was some time before they actually returned to their own ship. Just when Zuko thought they were about to leave, his Uncle decided that he did want some of the food Ishi had offered. Zuko was forced to sit and listen to their conversation suffering from a great deal of agitation. He wanted to get back to bed! General Iroh however, had decided that this was as good a time as any to be brought up to speed with the war.

The conversation ended with a rather long monologue, given by Admiral Ishi who was either greatly exaggerating, or greatly understating his own involvement. Zuko was at a loss to tell which, but something Ishi said did catch his ear.

“My father is going to what?”

“The comet at the end of the summer brings great power.” Ishi continued completely ignoring Zuko. “With it we can crush the Earth kingdom.” Zuko bit his tongue to stop from voicing an opinion which would surely cause trouble, but there was no need. Uncle Iroh said it.

“If my brother thinks he can do this, then he is a fool! If the smallest thing goes wrong he could destroy his own people, rather than the Earth kingdom.

“You will tell him I said so.” Admiral Ishi nodded his assurances and Iroh rose to his feet. “Come Zuko, it is time we were on our way.”

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It was past midnight by the time Zuko found himself on his own ship, with Ishi sailing safely into the distance. Even now he wasn't going to get any sleep, there was a reason Ishi had asked him to play guard, and Zuko was determined to find out the truth behind it.

There was a knock on the door and the prisoner was escorted in by his uncle. “I too would like to hear what this man has to say.” The prisoner standing before Zuko was obviously a water tribesman. Everything about him spoke of it. His dark skin, the heavy clothes, even the sealskin boots proclaimed him to be one of their number. But there was something different about this one, a familiarity Zuko was uncomfortable with. This man was very like the two fools who ran around with the Avatar, but he was much too young to be their father . . . a close cozen perhaps?

Zuko stood, cut the man's bonds, and motioned for him to sit. “Here, Eat.” He said handing the man a bowl of fish stew that had been brought up earlier. “I'll not have you starved. The man looked at him sighed, than did as he'd been told, eating slowly as so not to spill.

“Now,” Zuko said sitting down across from him. “Who are you?”

The man swallowed, bits of gravy dribbling into his beard, and scowled, “why should I tell you?”

“Because if you do,” Zuko replied leaning forward slightly, “you will be treated as a guest during your time here as opposed to a prisoner.”

Uncle Iroh grunted in surprise. Of all things that could happen this night, his nephew was offering to treat a water tribesman as a guest . . .

The prisoner nodded, “My name, is Kahlil.”

“Why do you fight the Fire Nation?” General Iroh asked.

“Why does any one fight you.” Kahlil retorted.

“Just answer the question!” Zuko snapped.

“At the time it seemed like the right thing to do. We all left, all the men, my nephew was furious at not being able to accompany us, but he was too young. I envy him sometimes.”

“At the time?”

“I was captured about a year ago. I've been in the Admiral's jail cells for almost all of that time.”

“You're hinting at a betrayal?” Zuko was a bit shocked, he'd heard of earth kingdom trading in information, but never a member of a water tribe.”

“No!” Kahlil said earnestly, “It is not my people he wanted to know about, so it is not betrayal. He only threatened to take . . .”

“To take what?”

“Admiral Ishi came to my cell several months ago claiming that two water tribe children were accompanying a boy believed to be the new Avatar. He wished to know about them.

“I told him I could tell him nothing with out names. The descriptions I was given at the time could have been any child of either the northern or southern tribes.”

“And?” Zuko prompted

"A week later he had the names. The Admiral knew enough about my background to guess who they were by my reaction. When I refused to tell him anything he grew angry, he said I would come to regret that decision."

"Then several weeks ago he came to me again. He claimed that he had captured the children although the Avatar had escaped. He said that unless I helped him Sokka and Katara would be . . ."

"What he failed to tell you," Zuko interrupted, "is that they too, escaped less than a day later!" Kahlil's face grew hopeful.

"What were you to do?" Uncle Iroh asked.

"He wants me to report to him everything the prince does or says . . . I think you will be charged with treason whether I escape or not."

"On who's orders?" Iroh asked.

"I don't know. I only know what I've over heard."

"Again, treason . . ." Zuko mused.

"He said," Kahlil replied, "He said that he thought you were going to try and teach the Avatar fire bending."

"WHAT!"

"I'm only repeating what I've heard!" Kahlil said holding up his hands defensively. "If the Avatar learns fire bending to the degree that he can challenge the Fire Lord in open combat and wins, than the entire war can be ended. We can have peace again!" Kahlil was in earnest now.

"Treason?" Uncle Iroh muttered ignoring the other man.

"Why should you even care Uncle?" Zuko growled, "I've nothing more to loose, I've already lost my honor."

"Lost your . . ."

"My nephew was exiled for directly defying his father." Iroh explained, "he voiced several opinions that were not appreciated at the time. Mainly to do with preserving the lives of our troops"

"And I failed."

"There is no failure in honoring life!" Kahlil said, "no you have not lost honor. You have what you have always had, more even."

"He's going to say I was teaching the Avatar?" Zuko asked referring to the earlier conversation.

"Yes. I don't understand it myself, the Avatar must have years yet to learn fire bending."

"Uncle see him to a comfortable chamber and tell the guards to give him anything he desires." Kahlil rose, but turned.

"There is one more thing. The Admiral seems to take quite seriously the advice of a girl who frequently visits him. I believe she may be a passenger. I have never seen her, but her advice it is taken as a command." He then followed General Iroh out, leaving Zuko with his own thoughts.

He paced the room for awhile, voices echoing through his head  
*'The entire war could be ended!'* one way or another it would be soon enough  
'Destroy his own people' not likely, not with his father controlling the power.  
'Can crush the Earth Kingdom' Zuko sighed what could he possibly do about it anyway?  
'Charge you with treason' he had already lost his honor.  
'There is no failure in honoring life . . .' his uncle was right about the comet.  
Thousands of people would die either way. Was there anyway that the Fire nation could truly end this war? There would always be rebel groups, fatalities from those who disagreed with the ruler's methods. Comet or Avatar . . . neither way would the war truly end. And even if the avatar could save things, he didn't have the years Kahlil thought he had. He barely had four months. And the girl the man

had mentioned, there was no doubt in Zuko's mind that his sister was some how involved

Sighing Zuko went back to his bed. His throat was a bit soar, due no doubt to lack of sleep and cold air. It would probably be gone in the morning.

## 4 - Laundry Day

III

### Laundry Day

Katara was furious. How was it that every single time laundry day came around, Sokka and Aang both disappeared leaving her with Sokka's socks? Just once she would like Sokka to wash his own socks!

Aang wasn't half bad with helping her out. For some time he'd actually done most of the laundry himself. But Aang too grew tired of Sokka's socks. He'd let her take over claiming that he no longer needed to practice his water bending. He ignored her every time Katara pointed out that he still used his water bending every chance he got.

Katara growled as she began washing the socks. Perhaps if Sokka washed his own socks he wouldn't wear them three days in a row. She was convinced that was the only way Sokka's socks could smell so bad.

Either way the entire problem boiled down to Katara stuck alone in the Omashu wash room doing laundry while the others were off having fun. Granted Aang was probably somewhere getting last minute earth bending moves from King Bumi and Toph, if they weren't going down the world's fastest slide, and Sokka was probably practicing with the palace guard, but that didn't change the fact that she was stuck with Sokka's socks.

Katara sighed and she settled down to finish the laundry. She intended to be done by mid morning in hopes that they could pack and leave at noon. That was the plan anyway, to be done and leave after lunch. Bumi claimed he and Toph no longer had anything left to teach Aang, and that all the boy needed now was practice, which Aang could easily do on his own. Toph wanted to stay in the palace a while longer. She said she felt at home here. The problem was that there was no one to teach the Avatar fire bending. When the boy had asked why they were going to search for a teacher of one art when he hadn't fully mastered the other it had surprisingly been Sokka who pointed out the fact that since they were fighting the Fire Nation, a fire bending teacher was going to prove all but impossible to find. Well that wasn't quite how Sokka had said it, but it all boiled down to the same thing.

About an hour later just as Katara was finishing drying the cloths. (It was quite easy to pull the water from them and pour it back into the wash tub.) Sokka himself poked his head into the room, peeking carefully around the corner to make sure she truly was done before entering.

"You need any help?"

"You could have asked that an hour ago," she growled.

"Sorry. I was getting a last minute lesson from Mozi," he said referring to the guard who had offered to teach him the earth kingdom style of fighting. "Anyway who could stay inside on a day like this? The sun's out, the birds're chirping, the city's in full bloom of Market day . . ."

"Someone who had to sit inside for an hour washing your socks!"

Sokka waved the comment aside. "Anyway Aang is saddling Appa and Bumi has a few things he wants to say to us before we go."

“Then here.” Katara said smiling sweetly as she pushed a pile of clean laundry into Sokka’s arms, “If you fold, I can get the last of my stuff.”

Sokka sighed, but nodded in agreement and held up a shirt for examination.

Sokka was right, Katara decided as she walked through the halls, sun shining through the window arches and snatches of bird song floating in on the cool breeze. No one could stay grumpy for long on a day like this. She quickly found and packed all of her belongings and leaving them with Aang and Appa in the court yard returned to the wash room.

To her great surprise she actually found Sokka doing what she had requested of him. It was quite a sight to see her older brother sitting in the middle of the floor with stacks of folded laundry on all sides. And wonder of wonders he actually seemed to know what he was doing.

“I don’t know how you do it,” He said looking up at her expectantly, “but I separated it into my stuff, your stuff, Aang’s stuff, and King Bumi’s new robes.”

“King . . .” Katara trailed off at a loss for words until Sokka held up what appeared to be a frilly, lemon yellow, bath robe. “Oh, I wondered . . .”

“Come on; let’s get these down to Appa. Sooner we finish packing, sooner we can hit the road.”

“You mean skies”

“Whatever.” Katara quickly gathered her own pile and held the door open for Sokka who was managing to juggle his stuff and Aang’s, as well as the lemon yellow robe.

“So do you know where we’re going?” she asked as she walked behind him.

Sokka frowned. “Well I don’t know what anyone else had for an idea, but I was thinking last night . . .”

“You? Thinking?”

“Katara let me finish . . .”

“Sorry couldn’t resist.”

“Well, Aang needs to learn Fire bending right?”

“Right.”

“Which means we need to find him a teacher.”

“Yeah . . .”

“Well Haru and his father were going to take back their village. So maybe they’ve captured a soldier or something. Some one we could bargain with to teach Aang. Some one who won’t let him try too much too soon. I don’t want you burned again!”

“Hey he did apologize . . .”

“Still we want some one who can teach him control as well as bending.”

Sokka continued to talk as they walked, but Katara’s thoughts had taken another turn. What would it be like to see Haru again? True he wasn’t quite as good looking as Jet had been, nor was he as well trained to fight, but he was kind . . . she should her head. What was she thinking?

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“What do you mean you don’t think it’s a good idea?” Sokka exploded. Katara sighed and leaned back in her seat as Aang and Sokka continued to argue, Sokka leaning over the saddle to talk to Aang who was sitting just behind Appa’s head.

They were high enough in the sky that every thing below looked like ants, and they were still climbing.



"I just don't want to force anyone to teach me fire bending." Aang said calmly.

"I wasn't suggesting forcing anyone . . . I only meant . . ."

"You want me to learn from a captured soldier. Someone in prison wouldn't really have any choice."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"I don't . . ."

"See Katara he shoots my idea down with out having one of his own!"

"Hey leave me out of it!" Katara protested.

"Wait! I do too have an idea."

"Well let's hear it!"

"We find Shyu."

"What?"

"We find Fire Sage Shyu and ask him if he'll teach me. Jeong Jeong won't any more, not after I messed up so badly, plus he's vanished . . . But Shyu might."

"Aang," Sokka interrupted.

"What?"

"SHYU WAS CAPTURED BY THE FIRE NATION!"

"All the more reason he'll want to help us. If we can get him free . . ."

"You know, usually I'm the one who comes up with the crazy ideas, but ARE YOU NUTS! You can't just break some one out of a fire nation prison!"

"It's not as hard as you might think." Aang protested.

"I mean what are you going to do? Walk up to an Admiral and say 'excuse me sir, but I'm giving myself up, could you please make sure I'm placed in a cell next to Fire Sage Shyu . . ."

"Well not exactly . . ."

"Katara help me out here."

Katara sighed. "I hate to say it Aang, but Sokka has a point. We don't even know where Shyu is, if he's even still alive. At least if we visit Haru's village we might find some one to teach you a little bit while we look for a teacher who'll teach you every thing. We can look for Shyu afterwards, but at least you'll be learning something while we look. We can't afford a wild goose chase Aang. We just don't have the time."

"So . . . what you're saying." Aang asked, "Is that Sokka's prisoner will only teach me while we look for some one who wants to teach me?"

"Something like that."

Sometime later they had landed on the outskirts of their destination and headed into the village. Katara kept her eyes peeled for anyone she might know, but had so far seen no sign of any one familiar. Sokka had stopped in the middle of the street questioning passers by, only to learn that any captured fire benders had been sent to the nest village over. It was also implied that the next village over had been slightly more inclined to be kinder to the prisoners.

He was telling them this, and Aang was looking more and more worried when Katara noticed that Sokka seemed to be suppressing a rather large grin. She wondered for a moment what could be so funny, when she felt a large pair of strong hands encircle her waist and she was lifted into the air, much as a father might lift a two year old child.

"Katara it is good to see you and your friends again," a deep voice said. When she was placed back on the ground she turned to find her self facing Haru's father Tyro. Haru himself was standing off to the side looking as though he had just witnessed the funniest thing in the world, but wasn't allowed to laugh.

“So what brings you back to our meager little village?”

“Well . . .” Sokka started, but Katara cut him off.

“We were looking for some one to teach Aang to fire bend. We were hoping you might have some ideas.”

“Ahhh.” Haru’s father turned and motioned for them to follow. “Let’s go some where we can talk.”

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“I do not think we have any here who can teach you to fire bend. Nor do I think any of those sent to our sister village would be willing to cooperate under any circumstances.” They were in Haru’s family home sitting around a low table. “The type of teacher you want Aang, is some one who will teach you everything. Even the lowest soldier will have a trick they will keep back.

“This means you are looking for some one who has virtually no ties to the Fire Nation, or some one who has committed treason of one form or another.”

“We were thinking Fire Sage Shyu might help us, except there is one problem . . .” Aang started.

“Yes?”

“He was captured some time ago and . . .”

“You have no idea where he is nor how to get him out?” Aang nodded. “Well I can not help you there, not would I were I able?”

“Why not?”

“Because it is a foolish plan. The Fire Lord is not known for his mercy. It is even said he scared his own son. No the Fire Sage is probably already dead.

“But there may be another way. Stay here with us. Practice your bending. Eat and rest. Tomorrow morning I will tell you my idea.”

The small group shared a look as Haru’s father left the room. Haru sighed and looked at Aang. “Well I have a few trick I’d like you show you if you haven’t seen them yet, and maybe you have a few you could show me?”

## 5 - Unknown

### IV Unknown

It was evening. The sun had not fully set yet, but it was close. The solemn hour of twilight was upon the land. Katara had climbed to the top of a small ridge intending to watch the sunset. She had always liked to do that, though now, in the middle of the war, the sun's setting seemed almost wrong. To her it seemed almost sad. As if the sun knew what was going on in the world. For her a single moment of peace seemed to stretch for ages before the sun went down.

She didn't notice a soft sound of foot steps behind her until Haru sat down on the grass beside her a little way from the edge.

"I always liked coming up here to watch the sun go down." He said quietly. "It always seems to me as if it's the only time of peace we'll ever have . . ."

"I know." Katara sighed, "I would give anything just to have this war end."

"I never did thank you properly for coming after us," he said softly. "Nor did I ever apologize for the loss of your necklace."

"But it wasn't your fault!" Katara protested. "Besides, Aang got it back for me. Zuko got a hold of it some how. He tried to use it as a bargaining piece and later to track us . . ."

"I wondered." Haru paused fishing in his pocket for something. "Still I made this for you." In his hand he held a small bracelet seemingly made out of smooth polished stones. "I know it's not much . . . But I did want to say thank you and . . ."

"It's beautiful!" Katara gasped. He motioned for her to hold out her wrist so he could put the bracelet on and she did. When it was safely fastened he grinned at her then lay back on the grass, arms behind his head and waited for the sun to set.

Katara sat quietly, contemplating

The next morning was something of a state of chaos. Every one got up at different times, Sokka insisted on sleeping in, and Aang wanted everybody up as soon as possible. The morning was chaos. Thankfully the smell of hotcakes woke Sokka who chose to ignore the fact that Aang had been trying his prickle snake trick again. And so it was that they all sat around the breakfast table as Haru's father began telling them his plan.

Tyro seemed to have everything laid out. In fact it seemed as if he'd been preparing this conversation for some time. There was a map on the table and a small island seemed to have been circled in a faint outline of charcoal.

"The island of Kameko is all but forgotten by the fire nation. There is a small base there, but it has remained unused for so long that it is all but forgotten. The fire nation soldiers who man the base have been left on their own for so long they have become residents of the island."

"So you want us to take Aang to a fire nation base? The whole idea is . . ." Haru's father held up a hand and Sokka fell silent.

"Kameko is part of the earth Kingdome and like most small villages it contains some of our benders. But in the case of Kameko there has been no attempt to arrest them or even to tax the people. My wife has an old friend on the island and through her we have heard tails of the fire nation soldiers and the earth benders actually working together. It is my idea that among these soldiers who

have been left on their own so long that they have become part of the islands people, that among them you will find someone who will willingly work with earth benders, a teacher for fire bending you may be able to find. You will have to be careful of course. It is still a fire nation base, but the probability of finding a teacher there is quite favorable.”

A grin spread across Katara’s face. “Aang this is great! We might be able to find someone who wants to teach you!” Aang looked as if he was about to jump for joy but Tyro once again held up a hand.

“There is more I must tell you. The people of Kameko are at this time of year preparing for the Great Feast of Lights. This is a time honored ceremony for them, and so I must explain it to you for they will not gladly welcome anyone who would interfere, but if you know enough of their customs the island people should receive you with open arms as they would at any other time of year.

“Also because of the ceremony the great sea turtles for which the island is named will be gathering along the shore, you will have to fly in on the east side, for the turtles are very protective of the island, which also happens to be their breeding ground.

“And now, if you will all help to clear the table I will tell you about the Feast of Lights, and how to find my wife’s friend, Healer Kiata.”

## 6 - Dreams Explained

V

### Dreams Explained

Zuko stood silently leaning against the ship's railing on the foredeck. A soft breeze filled his nose with the sent of the ocean's salty waves, in the early morning light. So absorbed in his own thoughts was he that he failed to hear the foot steps that came up behind him.

"Trouble sleeping, Lord?" Zuko turned to se the water tribesman, his prisoner, his guest, standing behind him.

"Nightmares." He murmured turning back to face the ocean.

"The war?"

"My face." There was silence, but Zuko was aware of the older man coming to stand beside him, leaning against the railing. "It's strange what dreams do to us..." Zuko continued no longer able to stand the silence. Kahlil's knowing glance annoyed him to no end. "What they would have us believe happened. I could swear I was as I am now or nearly so, in that dream, though I know I looked different.

"I only ever fought my father once, in a training exercise. I challenged him and was kept in my room for a week after Mistress Kiata was banished. I was told I could be let out when I stopped acting like a child, but not punished beyond that. In the dream . . . That training exercise became a fight for her life." He laughed ruefully. "I almost wish that had been how things happened. Better to be banished for that than . . ." He trailed off glaring at Kahlil as if it was the water tribesman's fault he had said so much.

"If I may ask," Kahlil said slowly, "what did happen."

Zuko sighed. He had said this much, he might as well say more. "I begged to be let into the council room during talks of war. One man would have slaughtered our troops and I spoke against it. But I spoke out of turn I shouldn't have said anything." His anger at the memory had long since died away. There was only bitter sadness now. "I was told I would have to fight, Agni Kai, for my disrespect. But when the time came, it was my father they would have me face." Zuko shook his head as if trying to chase away the memory. "I refused to fight him. And for my disobedience . . . my . . . weakness" he grimaced and gestured at his face. "I was banished as soon as I woke . . . Better for me if it had been for Kiata"

Zuko looked over at Kahlil who seemed to be nodding to himself. "Well are you a prophet or a seer? Can you interpret dreams? Or is their another reason you seem so interested?" he snapped.

"No Lord, I am neither of those things." Kahlil said a small smile across his face, "And while I can not tell you what the dream meant perhaps I can offer you some insight, if you would listen."

"Well let's have it" Zuko muttered, "I could do with a laugh."

"I seems to me that while your father was willing to indulge you with the life of your friend . . . and he did let her live. Your Uncle told me the story. When it came to talks of war your disobedience could in it's self be seen as a threat, and a man in your father's position might consider the matter well, if the threat was removed. Especially, lord, if you had said or done other things that might give weight to your argument in an out right confrontation, and I don't mean a simple argument. I mean the type of thing that might cost your father the thrown."

"But why would he think," Zuko started before Kahlil interrupted him.

"The country is nothing more than a mob, and he who controls the mob rules. If by some chance you

had secured the love of your people rather than their fear, the Fire Nation might do well to overthrow your father in favor of you. It wouldn't be the first time in history a son overturned his father or a nephew his uncle."

"I still don't understand why he would fear that of a mere boy?"

Kahlil shook his head, "It is not who you were, but who you could become."

Zuko who was starting to get angry by now, opened his mouth to say something rather cutting to the other man about how his speculation was just that, when he dissolved into a fit of coughing.

"Why do you call me Lord?" he asked instead when he could talk again.

"Because that is what you are." Kahlil replied calmly. "Perhaps you don't believe it so, But exiled or not you are the crown prince, what ever your sister would claim, but you are not my prince, and so I would call you lord . . . and I think you are the type of man who could be called lord even if you were of the common people."

Zuko frowned slightly and stifled another cough.

"Is there a medic aboard your ship? I think you should have that cough looked at."

"It's nothing."

But it wasn't nothing. As the day wore on Zuko's cough grew progressively worse. His throat felt like it was on fire and he had developed a slight headache. Finally Uncle Iroh put his foot down.

"Nephew this is foolishness. You are not feeling well, and what ever it is you have caught is not getting any better. I insist you let Hagi look you over."

"Uncle he's the steersmen not a medic."

"But he knows some medicine, maybe he can help."

"And if he can't?" Zuko said with a slightly sarcastic tone to his voice. Their current crew was made up of various sailors from any port they had put in at. Only the cook had managed to return to them after Zhao's death and the fire armada's failure at the city of the northern water tribe. The rest had not been heard from, and the cook had no idea what had happened. It seemed Zuko's original crew had been split up in hope that any loyalty they had towards Zuko would vanish with out the support of their comrades.

Hagi, had been picked up in an Earth kingdom port, and was the son of a healer. He claimed to know a great deal about herbs and illness. Uncle Iroh considered him the equivalent of a Fire Nation medic.

"If he can't help, then we put into port and find a healer." Zuko wanted to protest. He wanted to shout and rage, claim that he was fine; what ever he had would go away on its own. He needed none of Hagi's foul tasting concoctions, but he did none of it. The shouting would only make his headache worse. He couldn't breathe well enough to rage, because of the coughing. He felt terrible, and no matter how foul tasting he was willing to drink anything so long as it made him better.

"Alright," he said hoarsely after a moment of silence, "Alright."

Hagi was very quick and very thorough. Zuko not longer had any doubts about the man's skill, but after a few minutes of prodding and poking, of having his eyes thumbed open and holding his mouth open so his throat could be looked at, Hagi shook his head and stepped back. "I don't understand it, the entire illness is too much too fast, in one day nothing should have progressed like this. It's already beyond me."

"Can you do anything?" Uncle Iroh asked in a voice so low Zuko almost didn't hear him.

“I can give him something to help his head, and something to make him sleep, but until I know exactly what is making him sick . . .”

“Do it then. We will put into shore and hope to find a healer.”

“The nearest Island is Kameko. There is a small base there. Hasn’t been needed in years, but there is always a healer near a base.”

Zuko was handed a glass of something that smelled awful. It tasted awful too. It was all he could do to get it down without choking. Whatever the white powder Hagi had mixed with the water was, it made him cough, which made his head pound.

“Powdered willow bark.” Hagi said answering the unasked question. “Taste terrible doesn’t it, but it’ll help your head, takes a while to kick in though. Here this’ll be better. It’ll make you sleep.

The second liquid was an amber color, but it was sweet and cool, and it washed away the taste of the first. He laid back and let his eyes slide closed.

## 7 - The Isle

VI

The Isle

Zuko woke late the next day and was surprised to find the ship had slowed to a stop. His head pounded and everything else seemed worse, but he forced himself out of bed and into his cloths.

When he finally staggered up on deck he found both his uncle and Hagi waiting for him. "I see you are awake Nephew." Uncle Iroh said turning to greet him, "that is good. I sent the sailors out to find a healer early this morning. We are on Kameko, have been for some time."

"And you let me sleep?"

"You need your rest." Hagi replied calmly, "and it was less than five minutes ago word came back that a healer had been found. You were better off in bed."

"This healer," Zuko asked, "he is reliable?"

"She is among the best." Uncle Iroh replied a mysterious smile on his face. "Come, the Rhinos are saddled we will meet the others half way . . . that is if you can stay in the saddle."

"Of COURSE I can!" Truth was it was a struggle for him to even get mounted. Not since early childhood could he ever remember feeling this terrible. And having forced himself out of bed only made the situation worse. Even the gentle swaying of the Rhino's gait sent a jerk through his head. Every breath sent sharp pain through his chest, and to top it all he was cold, Zuko had never truly been cold, with the possible exception of that brief venture in the ice water at the North Pole, he was a fire bender. You get cold you do a bit of bending and warm yourself up. But the little bending he could manage with his trouble breathing didn't seem to work. And so it was that Zuko, who would be furious by now if he could make himself care enough to be angry, hung on as tight as he could to his Rhino's harness; and prayed that he wouldn't fall off and disgrace himself in front of the men.

It was some time before they met up with the two men Uncle Iroh had sent ahead. In fact they were nearly at the town. Kameko shared its name with the island, and it seemed as though the entire place was decked out for celebration. It was Zuko recalled. Tomorrow the Ceremony of the Tortoise, or the Feast of Lights, would begin. Each year after the snow melted and as the giant tortoises the island was known for returned, the island people would throw a great feast and dance, a ceremony that lasted for nine days, in honor of the great animal. There was a story that went along with it, but in his current mood Zuko wasn't even going to try remembering.

They had just come into sight of the town when the two scouts stepped into the open accompanied by a short graying woman who was getting on in years. Zuko knew that face, but he couldn't place it. It was a face he knew he had loved, who had loved him and cared for him as his uncle did. But try as he might he simply could not remember.

Vaguely he realized he was being helped off the Rhino. That he had needed help. He was cold, but his throat felt like it was on fire! Seconds later a cool hand was resting against his face and a worried voice, a woman's voice, one he knew well, was exclaiming that he was burning up. They had to



get him into her house before it was too late. Arms were supporting him as they walked, and more and more he needed their support. Some where along the road he blacked out.

He was freezing when he awoke, though he knew he shouldn't be. He was covered with blankets but still cold. His head was groggy and he could hardly concentrate, but he heard that voice again as well as his uncle's and so he tried to listen.

". . . been poisoned."

"What?"

"Vierus, don't know how it could have progressed this fast except . . . Has he had any wine in the past few days?"

"Yes." Zuko choked forcing himself to sit up. The woman's hand pushed him back down again.

"But you weren't the only one to drink, nephew how could . . ."

"He poured." Zuko coughed, "the powder must have been in the cup. . ."

"Can you do anything . . ." the healer stepped in to the light and Zuko remembered.

Her scream echoed down the hall as he rushed out of the room. She was being dragged across the floor by two of the empirical guard. Infuriated Zuko rushed forward.

"Let her go! I command that you release her!"

"I'm sorry my prince," One of the guards started, "but the orders for her arrest come from the Fire Lord himself."

"Mistress Kiata?"

She held up a hand for him to be quiet, but smiled slightly. "The cure will take time to put together. Time I'm afraid we don't have, if the fever doesn't break soon he will die, but I will do what I can . . ." Zuko drifted off again his old nurse's voice lulling him to sleep. As his eyes slid closed he barely heard the last few word she said. ". . . I would welcome your help master Hagi. certain herbs must be picked fresh . . . he will be in good hands Iroh, until we get back. In the mean time my apprentice will get you some tea, I believe you like ginseng?"

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His dreams were dark. Full of past memories strange beings and fire. Because of the fever he supposed as he slowly shifted towards consciousness. There was a strange voice speaking, to him Zuko thought, but what it was saying he couldn't tell. It was lovely to listen to. Melodious like a ringing bell, calm, but it sounded sad. As Zuko slowly woke to this sound he kept his eyes closed, afraid that if he opened them the voice and whomever it belonged to would disappear. He was still cold, still in pain and his head still pounded. This was enough to tell him that he wasn't dead, not yet; in fact he wasn't feeling better at all, only worse. But there was that voice.

Was he hallucinating? He hoped not. Zuko concentrated. Trying to keep the sound in his mind, and the more he concentrated the more he fancied it was still there, the more he fancied it was talking to him. Gradually he began to understand the words.

"I don't understand you . . . running around the world letting the war continue. Why don't you go home? You could have stopped all this, but No. The Almighty Fire Lord has full reign to do what ever he pleases. You're old enough. You could have done something.

"The taxes are increasing incredibly every month. The same for the poor as well as the rich. What farmer can afford this? For a well to do merchant perhaps it is only a tithe, but the rest of us? The

tax is over half what we make. And they're taxing people who don't even live in the fire nation! You even grumble and you're locked up . . . in fact do one thing wrong even if it's just something they don't like, sell the wrong books, advertise a product they don't approve of, and they lock you up . . .and then there's the war . . .

"The war? What's so good about the war, we lose more than we gain, our men go off and never return, families are ripped apart, and still it continues? I'm sick of it!"

There were tears in the voice and as she went on as Zuko listened, he truly saw what it was like for his people. In the beginning he'd only been worried for the soldiers, the wasted lives, and now . . . it was worse that he could ever have imagined. Raising taxes, unjust laws . . . but she was still talking.

"and you . . . you could have done something about all of this . . . even a prince has some power, you could have issued decrees, given orders, made requests in favor of your people, something . . .anything at all. Even if you didn't have full command, you could have curried favor from your father, One request would be all it took to take care of some things, but no . . . you had to go and leave . . . I leave your people to this tyranny, and you . . . you . . . light you're dying, you cant do anything now . . . and even if you could you're asleep . . . I don't know why I bother, you probably wouldn't even listen to me if you were awake."

"You're wrong . . ." Zuko said struggling to sit up. His voice was extremely hoarse and it was all he could do just to push himself higher up on the pillow. "I have been listening to you for the past ten minutes." He could see the speaker now. A short slim girl not much younger than himself, obviously the apprentice. Her hair was pulled back out of her face and in the poor lighting of the room (a candle or two) he couldn't make out its color, but her gray eyes appeared startled and they had a rather shocked look about them.

The girl gave him one frightened look and fled the room muttering something about him needing some water or some such.

Zuko was left to himself, though he didn't much mind. He had been given quite a bit to think about.

## 8 - Kameko

VII

Kameko

It was late when Appa reached the island of Kameko. The sun was still up, but the light was fading fast. The village itself was bustling with activity, last minute preparations for the feast and dance. They flew in from the east as they had been instructed and walked the mile to the other side of the island where the village was located. Having left Appa and Momo behind they were hardly noticed as they slipped inside and made their way to the village square where the first of the activities were to take place. They talked quietly for some time before the festivities started, deciding that it would be best to ask a few questions tonight, but save any actual searching for the healer for tomorrow. It had been suggested that they go to her first, to avoid Fire Nation notice. They didn't want to get into trouble, only find a teacher for Aang.

They were about ready to start moving through the village to see what they could, when there was a sound of a tambourine. A bonfire had been lit, and now in front of it, stood a figure robed in a storyteller's garb. The entire village was present now, but the entire village was also quiet.

The man spoke, his deep voice commanding attention.

"Over a thousand years ago we were just a village on a simple island. Until our ancestor Uraschima Taro befriended the great Turtle . . ." the man was another shake of the tambourine and several players leapt into view, their costumes portraying an elder couple in the woman's arms a doll cradled as if it were a real child.

"O Great I love plays!" Aang grinned.

"The story of our island starts with a poor fisherman and his wife. They had but one son who was their world . . ."

They lived on the coast of our beautiful island, and made their living by fishing and selling what they caught in the local market. For the sake of their son, who was their pride and joy, they were ready to work hard all day long so that he might have the best they could offer him. The fisherman and his wife never felt tired or unhappy with their lives, for despite the hard work and long hours their lives were joyful and they spent the time fishing together able to share all their fortunes and misfortunes. From a large catch to the one that got away. Their son's name was Uraschima Taro, which means "Son of the island," and he grew to be a fine good natured youth, and a good fisherman, minding neither the wind nor the weather.

Another player leapt into the light at the first two continued to pantomime fishing. This player wore a mask painted in the face of a handsome young man.

Not even the bravest sailors in the entire village dared to venture so far out to sea as Uraschima Taro, and many of the neighbors would shake their heads and mention to his parents, "If your son goes on being so rash, one day he will try his luck once too often, and he will meet his end. He will sail out into one of his storms and die!"

But Uraschima Taro paid no attention to these warnings, and he really was very good in managing his boat, his parents were very seldom worried about him. One beautiful bright morning, as he was hauling

full nets into the boat, he saw lying among the fish a tiny sea turtle. It was a beautiful green color and because it was unharmed by the net it would grow to be healthy and strong if left to itself. He was delighted with the turtle and intending to keep it for a pet he tossed it into a wooden box in the corner of his little fishing boat to keep it safe until he got home, when suddenly the turtle found its voice, and tremblingly begged for its life.

"After all," the little turtle said, "what good can I do to you? I am so young and small, and I would gladly live a little longer. Be merciful and set me free, and I shall someday prove my gratitude." Now Uraschima Taro was a very kind young man, and besides being shocked that the turtle had spoken to him, he could never say no to anyone, so he picked up the sea turtle, and put it back into the sea.

Years past by, and every morning Uraschima Taro sailed his little boat out on to the deepest part of the ocean without any problem. His skill was great and he faced many a rain storm to come home with a full days catch despite being soaked to the bone. But one day as he was making for a little bay between some rocks, there rose up a fierce wind, which shattered his boat to pieces against the rocks as he tried to pass between them, and the boat was tumbled through the sea by the waves until a current pulled it under. Uraschima Taro himself very nearly shared the same fate. As the rough waters pulled him this way and that, but he was a powerful swimmer having been taught from a very young age, and he struggled against the sea to reach the shore.

The Player portraying Taro mimed a frantic swim as others robed all in blue swirled around him. Then several more players rushed into the firelight coved by a shimmering green cloth embroidered with the pattern of a shell. They were obviously meant to portray one of the great Tortoises the island was known for.

Then as he finally thought he was going to drown, he saw a large sea turtle swimming towards him, and above the howling of the storm's winds he heard what it said.

"I am the turtle whose life you once saved. I will now pay my debt and show my gratitude. The shore is still a long ways off, and without help you will never get there in time. Climb on my back, and I will carry you where you will."

Uraschima Taro did not wait to be asked twice, and thankfully accepted his friend's help. He grabbed fast onto the turtles shell and pulled himself up on to her back. But scarcely was he seated safely on the shell, when the turtle proposed that they should not return to the shore at once, but go under the sea, and look at some of the wonders that lay hidden there.

## 9 - The Story Continued

VIII

The Story Continued

Uraschima Taro willingly agreed to go, and in another moment they were deep, deep down, with fathoms of water above their heads. The speed with which the sea turtle moved was amazing, as well as how warm the deep blue water was. The young man held tight, and marveled at where they were going and how long the journey was, but for three days they rushed on, until at last the great sea turtle stopped before a splendid underwater palace, shining with gold and silver, crystal and precious stones, and decked with branches of pale pink coral and glittering pearls. It was truly a beautiful place to live. But if Uraschima Taro was astonished at the beauty of the outside, he was struck dumb at the sight of the hall within, which was lighted by the blaze of fish scales.

"Where have you brought me?" he asked his guide in a low voice.

"To the palace of Ringu, the house of the sea god, whose subjects we all are," answered the sea turtle. "I am the first waiting maid of his daughter, the lovely princess Otohime, whom you will shortly see."

Uraschima Taro was still so puzzled with the adventures that had befallen him, that he waited in a dazed condition for what would happen next. But the turtle, who had talked so much of him to the princess that she had expressed a wish to see him, went at once to make known his arrival leaving him alone for a time with his thoughts.

The player dressed as Taro sat down before a screen that had been brilliantly painted to resemble the story palace. The light from the bonfire only increased the artist's effect. After a moment another player appeared. A female dressed as though she was a beautiful princess. Like all rest of the players she wore a painted mask.

And when the princess beheld him her heart was set on him, and she begged him to stay with her, and in return promised that he should never grow old, neither should his beauty fade.

"Is not that reward enough?" she asked, smiling, looking all the while as fair as the sun itself.

And Uraschima Taro said "Yes," and he stayed there.  
For how long?

That he only knew later.

His life passed by, and each hour seemed happier than the last, when one day there rushed over him a terrible longing to see his parents. He fought against it, knowing how it would grieve the princess, but it grew on him, tugging at his heart, till at length he became so sad that the princess inquired of him what the matter was. Then he told her of the longing he had to visit his old home, and that he must see his

parents once more. The princess was almost frozen with horror, and implored him to stay with her, or something dreadful would be sure to happen.

"You will never come back, and we shall meet again no more," she moaned bitterly. But Uraschima Taro stood firm and repeated,

"Only this once will I leave you, and then will I return to your side for ever." Sadly the princess shook her head, but she answered slowly,

"One way there is to bring you safely back, but I fear you will never agree to the conditions of the bargain."

"I will do anything that will bring me back to you," exclaimed Uraschima Taro, looking at her tenderly, but the princess was silent. She knew too well that when he left her she would see his face no more. And she grieved over it but eventually gave in.

Then she took from a shelf a tiny golden box, and gave it to Uraschima Taro, begging him to keep it carefully and above all, NEVER to open it. "If you can do this," she said as she bade him farewell, "your friend, my maid, the sea turtle will meet you at the shore, and will carry you back to me."

Uraschima Taro thanked her from his heart, and swore solemnly to do her bidding. He hid the box safely in his garments, seated himself on the back of the turtle, and vanished in the ocean path, waving goodbye to the princess. Three days and three nights they swam through the sea, and at length Uraschima Taro arrived at the beach which lay before his old home. The turtle bade him farewell, and was gone in a moment.

Uraschima Taro drew near to the village with quick and joyful steps. He saw the smoke curling through the roof, and the thatch where green plants had thickly sprouted. He heard the children shouting and calling, and from a window that he passed came the twang of the koto, and everything seemed to cry a welcome for his return.

Yet suddenly he felt a pang at his heart as he wandered down the street. After all, everything was changed. Neither men nor houses were those he once knew. Quickly he saw his old home; yes, it was still there, but it had a strange look. Anxiously he knocked at the door, and asked the woman who opened it after his parents. But she did not know their names, and could give him no news of them.

Still more disturbed, he rushed to the burying ground, the only place that could tell him what he wished to know. Here at any rate he would find out what it all meant. And he was right. In a moment he stood before the grave of his parents, and the date written on the stone was almost exactly the date when they had lost their son, and he had forsaken them for the Daughter of the Sea. And so he found that since he had left his home, three hundred years had passed by. Shuddering with horror at his discovery he turned back into the village street, hoping to meet some one who could tell him of the days of old. He found an old man, one who looked as though he might be able to recall what had happened. But when the man spoke, he knew he was not dreaming, though he felt as if he had lost his senses.

In despair he thought of the box which was the gift of the princess. Perhaps after all, this dreadful thing was not true. He might be the victim of some enchanter's spell, and in his hand lay the countercharm.

Almost unconsciously he opened it, forgetting all warnings the princess had given him and a purple vapor came pouring out. He held the empty box in his hand, and as he looked he saw that the fresh hand of youth had grown suddenly shriveled, like the hand of an old, old man.

The player turned his back to the watching crowd and when they could see his face again the mask of a young man's face had been replaced with that of an old man.

He ran to the brook, which flowed in a clear stream down from the mountain, and saw himself reflected as in a mirror. It was the face of a mummy which looked back at him. Wounded to death, he crept back through the village, and no man knew the old, old man to be the strong handsome youth who had run down the street an hour before. So he toiled wearily back, till he reached the shore, and here he sat sadly on a rock, and called loudly for the sea turtle to come. But when she came she did not see the youth she had brought to the shore, not recognizing the old man. Death soon came for him, and set him free.

But before that happened, the people who saw him sitting lonely on the shore had heard his story, and when their children were restless they used to tell them of the good son who from love to his parents had given up for their sakes the splendor and wonders of the palace in the sea, and the most beautiful woman in the world besides.

"But though Uraschima Taro failed in his promise to the princes, the Turtle did not forget hers to watch over him. Though she never found him the sea turtle continued to watch over those on the island as did her children for generations to come."

The story teller took a bow as the audience cheered. The performers behind him disappeared in to the crowd. Very soon the other festivities began leaving the Avatar and his friends very little opportunity to find the healer. They did learn one thing though. The healer was not at the festivities, having a patient who was dying, and ingredients for the cure needing to be found.

They decided that the next day would be

## 10 - Bedridden

### IX Bedridden

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Zuko awoke groggily. When he had fallen asleep he couldn't remember. But the pain was dulled for the time being. Vaguely he remembered the girl bringing him the same vile liquid Hagi had made him drink. Zuko grimaced as he remembered, but he had to admit the stuff had worked. With his head not pounding for the moment, Zuko could think clearly. He wasn't weak, at least he didn't think he was, and he was thirsty, not to mention another need. He scrubbed his hand across his head as he thought and stopped.

It made perfect sense to him that no one would have thought to shave his head while he was sick, there was a good amount of stubble across his scalp as well as his chin, but there was something missing. Earlier that year he had cut his hair to avoid notice, but since then it had grown a good four inches. (his hair had always grown fast) it wasn't much compared to what he had once had, but once they had stopped hunting him, it had been long enough to start tying back again. But now, those four inches were gone. Who would dare . . .

The thought slipped away in light of other matters. Looking around, and struggling to breathe. Zuko made an assessment of the room. It was plain, but serviceable. It was also dark. Something Zuko was glad of because of his head. There was however a single candle lit which meant it didn't take him long to discover that what he was searching for wasn't in the room.

Carefully, trying not to cough he slid out from under the covers and shivered. It felt cold in here even though Zuko's mind told him that wasn't true. He placed his feet on the floor, and gripping his hands into fists he stood. His knees held. Wobbling slightly he walked to the dresser where the water pitcher stood and moved it and the glass to the table beside the bed. He would want those before long. But he didn't get back into bed where it was warm. There was another need he needed to take care of first.

Legs still shaking he reached for the door, but his knees chose that moment to give out on him. Zuko reached for the bedside table to catch himself but only succeeded in bringing it down with a crash. The water pitcher clattered down with it, slopping water everywhere and rolling across the floor.

It didn't take long before Zuko heard footsteps running for the door. The girl burst into the room. Zuko could see her clearly now. Petite, but not tiny, gray eyes, and auburn hair held out of her face by a brown kerchief. But he barely spared her a glance, just sat on the floor and waited, hoping Hagi or his Uncle would enter behind her. The girl however was not to be ignored.

"What do you think you are doing? If you wanted water you could have called for someone! You're not to be out of bed!"

Zuko said nothing. She didn't really need to know, though if she didn't let him up he was going to have to embarrass himself and tell her . . . how did one go about telling a girl a thing like . . .

"Well are you going to answer me?" He was saved as Hagi ran into the room

Hagi swooped down and lifted Zuko off the floor. As he did so Zuko managed to voice his concern in his crewman's ear. Better to ask Hagi for help than to disgrace himself in front of the girl. In a movement so fluid it was almost unnoticeable Hagi changed from helping Zuko to the bed to helping him walk out of the room.



“Wait where are you taking him!” the girl called after.

“I’ll have him back in a minute.” Hagi called over his shoulder, supporting Zuko from the room. Zuko had to admire the other man. He made it seem as if he was only steadying him, rather than practically carrying him from the room. It meant a great deal to Zuko to be able to appear to be walking on his own two feet at the moment.

“Thank you.” He managed as Hagi lead him to the out house.

When he returned the girl’s eyes were wide. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize . . .” she started.

“It’s nothing.” Zuko muttered as Hagi helped him back into bed. Zuko felt completely drained. All he wanted to do was sleep. Ignoring the others in the room he pulled the covers around himself as close as he dared in attempt to keep warm, and rolled over falling asleep almost immediately.

Zuko dreamed. It was strange, he knew they were dreams, but it seemed he was living everything over again. Memories came to surface as he slept.

He was about five. His Uncle had taken him on a tour of the main city before he left for the war. “Best you ask all your questions of me now,” Uncle Iroh had said, “before your father takes you tomorrow.” They had not gone far when a man pelted Uncle Iroh with a tomato, hitting him squarely in the face and splattering Zuko as well with the red juice. Little Zuko steeled himself determined to watch the man punished with out crying. But Uncle Iroh did not punish him. In fact Iroh didn’t even seem angry. Instead he spoke calmly to the man. Finding out that the man was angry with the extra taxes levied on his shop. Uncle Iroh resolved the problem in a matter of minutes. The man walked away with a smile on his face.

Little Zuko noticed something else as he walked with his uncle. People Uncle Iroh didn’t even know would smile and wave as he passed. Those he did know would come out into the street to speak with him. The people would talk to Zuko too, if he was polite and smiled back. They usually told him to have a fun day with his uncle, though once an older woman told him he would do well not to anger his father. Zuko didn’t understand this at the time. He just thought she was telling him to be a good little boy.

Two weeks later his father took him out. His mother was with his sister Azula, who was still little, but Zuko was older then she was, he was big enough to go. This time no one tried to talk to them. They all kept their heads down and went about their work. The five year old prince tried to wave to a few people who had been nice to him before, but his father gave him a stern look and Zuko stopped. Though the man at the candy store slipped him a piece when the Fire Lord wasn’t looking.

And then it happened. Zuko wasn’t too worried when nobody spoke to his father. He was the Fire Lord’s son after all, and people were supposed to respect him, not trouble him with small talk. but he saw the entire thing in a different light years later.

A farmer had thrown a cabbage at his father. Instead of handling the entire episode as Uncle Iroh had done, with a calm face and kind words, Ozai was furious. The Tomato had hit Uncle Iroh in the face, the cabbage missed completely, but the Ozai acted as if it hadn’t. If he’d been knocked flat on his back by a rampaging rhino he couldn’t have been madder.

The farmer realized his mistake too late. With in seconds the man’s clothing was afire and he was running down the street screaming. Ozai only smiled ruthlessly. “Let that teach them to throw food at me.” Zuko only hung his head ashamed. Why did his father have to hurt people? The little boy wondered.

Zuko woke from the dream and grimaced. His head pounded, but the last thought from the dream was still clear in his mind. Why did his father have to hurt people? He was only awake for a few

seconds, but in that small space of time he made a promise to himself. If he lived, he would take care of his people. He would protect them and care for them as a ruler should do. He had no place to hope to do that anymore. Somebody had ordered him assassinated, but he would do what ever it took to keep his people whole. If he had to shake the very foundations of the Fire Nation he would do it. If he had to betray everything, his father, his thrown, if he had to join the Avatar and teach him fire bending, he would do what ever it took!

He fell asleep promising himself this and when he awoke hours later, he had not forgotten.

## 11 - The cure

X

The cure

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Zuko woke off and on through out the rest of the day and far into the night, and the next day as well. Each time he felt worse. If this was dieing he was glad he only had to go through it once. The pain was terrible. And the worse part was he was starting to forget. He never had learned the girl apprentice's name, but now he could no longer remember what she looked like. He was starting to confuse Hagi with his Uncle. Not to mention he was starting ask for his father, whom he knew had never visited a sick room in his life.

Zuko was like a five year old child with a nightmare, and nobody had the heart to tell him his father wasn't there. Soon enough Zuko wasn't even fully waking up. Instead he was slipping into a state of sleep and wakening, without knowledge of what was going on in the room around him. he would talk to people not there, give orders to a crew that had long since abandoned him, shout at deeds long since forgotten, and beg with those he cared about not to leave him. Most often it was his father he would beg with before falling back into a deep sleep.

His fever raged and no longer would the people in the house risk leaving him alone, rather they would take shifts. One or two people would sit with him as the rest searched for the rest of the ingredients for the cure. It was a complicated brew. Though most of the ingredients could be found in the market, there were a few that had to be picked fresh. In fact they very quickly accumulated everything except the heal-all herb, which though native to the island, grew in only very shady moist areas, making it difficult to find as there were no woods or swamps on the island of Kameko. In fact after three days of searching they were beginning to despair of finding it at all. Hagi and healer Kiata had needed to enlist the help of several of the villagers. It came as a great surprise when three children who were only visitors offered to help. But the girl had a great interest in healing and the younger of the two boys thought the healer might be able to help him find somebody, so after some discussion it was decided that after the herb was found they would talk. But that herb had to be found. The healer would not loose her patient to poison. And so they searched.

\*\*\*

It was late in the afternoon of Zuko's last day. If they did not get the antidote soon, he would die before morning. Hagi had fallen asleep in the chair he occupied in the sick room. He was worried about the prince but exhausted from searching. He'd just sat down for a moment. Kiata's apprentice was in the house as well, so it wasn't as if there was no one else there, but falling asleep had not been part of his original intentions. He'd wanted only to rest. Hagi woke with a start and slightly ashamed looked around the room to make sure every thing was ok. Prince Zuko was asleep, but looked worse then ever. Hagi sighed. He hated not being able to do anything.

"How is he?" a soft melodic voice sounded in his ear. Hagi started and looked at the girl he hadn't seen come in.

"Same as ever." he said sadly.

There was the sudden frantic sound of voices and a pounding at the door. Hagi was out of his seat in a flash and rushing through the house for the door, the girl following him.

When he opened it he found three kids staring up at him. Two, a brother and sister, were obviously from a water tribe. In fact they looked rather like Kahlil. He had spent quite a bit of time with the other man in the past few days. The third was a boy younger than the first two, and clutched in his hand was a cluster of purple flowers.

"I found it!" he announce panting a little. Seconds later Kiata's apprentice had pushed past and was running for her mistress. Hagi him self was leading the boy and his friends in to the kitchen area where all the ingredients for the cure were laying out on a scrubbed wooden table.

"There's more." The boy was telling him. "I only picked a little incense all you needed was the flower, but if I did something wrong there's plenty more . . ."

"As long as it's fresh," Hagi said kindly, "everything will be fine." Hagi gestured for the three to sit down. He was curious as to if he was right about who they were.

"I don't dare try to start the cure myself." He explained to them, "but as soon as Mistress Kiata gets here it should go relatively fast if you are all willing to lend a hand?" They all nodded. "Good! My name is Hagi by the way. I am from the earth nation."

"My name's Aang." The younger boy said first with a huge grin.

"I'm Sokka, and my sister's name is Katara." The other boy said jabbing his thumb at the girl who was studying some of the plants on the table intensely.

"Lavender?" she asked, "What is that used for?"

"Migraines . . ." That was all Hagi got out. He'd been going to ask if they were related to Kahlil, but Mistress Kiata and the girl rushed back in. Seconds later the healer had given everybody a job. Sokka chopping sea slugs, Katara grinding lavender, hyssop, thyme, and purple sage in one bowl while the girl ground the heal all with Loosestrife in another. Hagi was given the task of turning willow bark to powder . . . not to mention the various other tasks Kiata handed out.

It didn't take long, as Hagi had predicted, and soon enough Kiata had taken the two girls aside to show them how to press the pulp through a screen into a pot of boiling water.

This gave Hagi the chance he had wanted to ask his question of the boys. Though the answer he got was exactly what he had expected, but the reaction Sokka gave him was one entirely knew to Hagi. Normally when he asked if somebody knew a friend of his he either got surprise, or a confused no. Sokka however acted as if it were perfectly normal for people to know his uncle, the surprise didn't come until Hagi told him Kahlil was on the island.

"He's here really?" Sokka practically leaped out of his chair.

"Hey Sokka, now I get to meet more of your family." Aang grinned. "I wonder if . . ."

Hagi never got to hear what the boy was going to say next. He was plucked out of his seat by Kiata who pushed him into the hall in front of her, closing the door to the kitchen behind her.

"Iroh asked that they not know he or Zuko were here." She said softly.

"Your apprentice . . ."

"She knows to keep her mouth shut." Kiata said quietly leading the way into the sick room.

Zuko opened his eyes. Everything was fuzzy. He was freezing, and he hurt.

"Father?" he asked softly of the figure who was lifting him up against the head board of the bed.

"No," a voice answered, "it's your Uncle Iroh."

"Uncle, where is Father?"

"In his thrown room no doubt. Planning the War."

"The War!" Zuko gasped with a sudden moment of clarity. "Uncle I have to find the Avatar, I have to find him."

“Shhh, no you don’t you need to drink this and rest.”

Zuko waved away the glass that Uncle Iroh tried to hold to his lips. “No I have to find him! Father must be stopped, I have to find the Avatar and teach . . .” he got no further. The glass was held to his mouth again and he nearly choked as a cold liquid poured in. Zuko swallowed convulsively, and nearly choked as the rest of the glass’s contents was poured into him.

They wouldn’t let him talk afterwards either. Zuko soon fell asleep again, angry that no one would listen to him, half lost in the delusion that he was still at the fire palace.

They watched him closely long into the night. Sometime near morning his fever broke and the entire house gave a sigh of relief.

## 12 - The finding of Heal-all

XI

The finding of Heal-all

Earlier that same day Aang, Sokka, and Katara had found the healer's house. It hadn't really been that hard once they figured out what they were looking for. Right in the center of town outside a large square with the market on one side, more houses on the other and the blacksmith straight across, the white washed building had bushels of drying herbs hanging from the edge of the roof, more planted in pots around the door, and a small path that led to a larger garden around back. Apparently the healer grew the majority of the medicines she used. Which was just like every other healer Aang had ever known when he paused to think of it. But the house itself had been in a state of chaos. Apparently all the ingredients for the needed cure had been found, all but one. The rare heal-all herb. A small purple flower that grew in large clusters so long as it had a damp dark area to flourish in. The herb was coveted for its miraculous ability to heal almost anything, and because of the conditions required to grow the herb, it was extremely rare. Used only in the most potent of antidotes or when all other cures failed. It was no wonder the healer hadn't had it growing among her other plants. Luckily the herb was native to the island though proving impossible to find.

The patient was dying, would be dead by the next morning. So desperate was healer Kiata that she was recruiting villagers to the search for the herb. Aang immediately volunteered to help. He needed a teacher, but this man's life was more important. He didn't even know who the patient was, but he was determined to help the healer find the rest of the cure.

They'd been wandering around for several hours searching for the herb, but had no luck. It seemed they could find plenty of places the herb had been but every time it was eaten down to the roots. It seemed the flower was a favorite of the local animal life.

Aang found his mind wandering from the task at hand. He found himself missing Bumi and Toph. It was easier to practice his earth bending with them around to invent games or challenges. But without them he felt alone when he practiced. There was no one to challenge him. It wasn't the same practicing against Katara. She just turned the earth in to mud and bended it back at him and that wasn't quite the same as having a boulder thrown at your head. When they had passed by Omashu for the third time that summer, the small group had noticed something different. No longer had the city been flying fire nation flags. Rather the earth nation's banner was flown from nearly every tower in the city, not to mention that they could see the delivery slides working again. It seemed Bumi had grown tired of living in a box, made contact with his soldiers and retaken the city. The fire nation soldiers and civilians had been treated well provided they were willing to live in peace. Those who had tried to cause trouble very quickly found themselves in prison. But even the prisoners were well kept. Omashu had proved a safe haven for the two weeks they had stayed. Learning new tricks from Bumi had been a blast, and Toph had enjoyed the old King's company so much that when they had left she remained behind, saying she'd "catch up later."

"Where could that herb be hiding!" Sokka said in frustration kicking a rock.

"I don't know." Katara sighed, "For some reason I thought it'd be easier than this, like finding Appa . . ."

"Like finding Appa . . ." Aang repeated. "Wait a minute!" in a flash he remembered their journey into the swamp. Everything was connected in the world like the swamp was to the tree. Maybe, just maybe he could find the heal-all herb the same way he had found Appa. Taking a deep breath he placed the tips of his fingers against the ground, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

This time it was different. There was no line pointing his direction to the object of the search. Rather there were several brief images. The shore, a cliff, a small cave, the flowers.

"Well? Sokka asked when Aang stood up again.

"They're on the east side of the island in a cave." Aang said as he started walking.

"The east side, wait the east side is covered in cliffs!"

"I know."

"So were looking for a cave in the cliffs?"

"Yeup." They stopped on the edge of the cliffs in question. It hadn't taken long to get there, just a couple of minutes. The view was breathtaking. High up at the top of the cliffs with the waves crashing on the shore below them and the sun striking the water so it sparkled, Aang could have sat there and just looked, but they had to find that herb.

"Do you at least know which one?" Sokka asked.

"No the vision didn't tell me that." Aang said, "But don't worry we'll find it. Come on help me find a way down to shore so we can start looking.

"Wait a minute. Are you telling me we're looking for one cave on an island full of caves? Did you not pay attention when we were flying in? The Turtles use them for their nests the whole island is full of caves! What are we supposed to do slip on a rock and fall into one?"

"Wow Sokka that's a great idea why don't you try it." Katara said as they picked their way along the edge. "At least it might prove helpful, which your complaining is not!"

"Ok I will!" Sokka retorted. "Here I go guys." He gave a great leap into the air and came down . . . on nothing. When he landed the ground beneath him gave way and Sokka fell through a hole about two feet by two feet. It had been so overgrown by brush and grass that had Sokka not landed on it they would have walked right past and never even known it was there. "Uh a little help here!" his voice came floating back up at them.

Aang lay down on his stomach and reached his head and arms into the hole to help his friend back out. But before he had even grabbed hold of Sokka's hand he stopped.

“Aang?” Sokka asked “what’s wrong?” he turned around to see what Aang was looking at and gaped. The cave stretched for about ten feet before ending in a small opening that let just a little sunlight through. It was high enough up the cliff that the turtles couldn’t get to it, and low enough the sea spray could. However that’s not what Aang was looking at. Behind where Sokka was standing was a huge patch of small, clustered, purple, flowers growing in the fertile soil of the cave.

“Sokka,” Aang said finally, “I think it worked!”



## 13 - Conversations overheard

XII  
Conversations overheard

Together they raced down off the ridge and back into the village. They very nearly ran several people over on their way to the healer's house, but the entire village knew what was being searched for and one glance at what Aang carried in his hand was enough to stop any comment. In fact most people seemed to jump out of the way

When they reached the house Sokka immediately started pounding on the front door. There was a sound of running feet before the door swung open to reveal a tall lean man obviously of the earth kingdom.

"I found it!" Aang panted. Seconds later a girl Aang assumed was Kiata's apprentice had pushed past him and was running for her mistress. Aang hadn't really met her. She seemed nice enough though. The man who opened the door led them in to the kitchen where all the ingredients for the cure were laying out on a large wooden table.

"There's more." Aang told him hurriedly slightly worried he'd done something wrong by picking the herb. Healers could be rather finicky about the way things were done. "I only picked a little incense all you needed was the flower, but if I did something wrong there's plenty more . . ."

"As long as it's fresh," The man said giving him a smile. Aang relaxed a little bit. "Everything will be fine." He gestured for the three to sit down Aang and Sokka both took a chair. Katara however was studying the herbs on the table a look of acute interest on her face. "I don't dare try to start the cure myself." The man explained to them, "but as soon as Mistress Kiata gets here it should go relatively fast if you are all willing to lend a hand?" They all nodded. "Good! My name is Hagi by the way. I am from the earth nation."

"My name's Aang." Aang said grinning; it was nice to be able to help some one.

"I'm Sokka, and my sister's name is Katara." Sokka said jabbing his thumb at Katara who was still looking at the plants on the table.

"Lavender?" she asked, "What is that used for?"

"Migraines . . ." That was all Hagi got out Mistress Kiata and her apprentice came in sending the entire room in to a whirlwind.

It didn't take long for the cure to be finished and as Mistress Kiata showed Katara and her apprentice what to do next, and while Hagi talked with Sokka about some one they apparently both knew, Aang slipped away. He wasn't really being sneaky, and he certainly had no intention to overhear what he did. Aang simply wanted to go out in to the back garden and see what else the healer had growing. But he hadn't made it much farther than the back hall when he saw some one out the window that he recognized. Crossing the very garden that Aang had intended to visit was Prince Zuko's Uncle Iroh. He was being supported by another man who was rather chubby and had the look of a cook about him. Iroh had apparently done something to his ankle. At least the cook appeared to be muttering along those lines. At least the words "must be more careful," were said repeatedly. Iroh was settled onto a bench in the garden and the cook made his way to the door. Aang quickly searched about for a place to hide. He had to know what was going on here. Was it one of Zuko's men who was sick? Was Hagi a friend or not? Was this whole thing an ambush? If so how had they known where they would be, and if

not where was Zuko?

He ducked behind a rather large potted plant place in the corner next to a door he could only assume led to a sick room, and crouched as low as he could get, just as the handle of the garden door turned. Mistress Kiata must have heard some one coming in because a moment later she appeared from the kitchen.

"Healer, General Iroh's twisted his ankle. He saw a cave he though the herb might grow in and slipped trying to climb down."

"Where is he now?"

"On the bench in the back garden."

"Bring him in quietly. There is a chair in his nephew's room. Place him there for now."

"Yes ma'am" he disappeared out side for a moment. Aang was detained from leaving his hiding place however by Mistress Kiata who stood holding the door for the two men as they came in.

"I am sorry Kiata." Iroh said as they gained the door. "I truly thought the flower might grow in that cave or I would not have tried it."

"It is alright Iroh." She said as if addressing an old friend.

"Will it ever be found?" he sighed sadly

"You have already lost a son to battle; do you think I will allow you to loose your nephew to poison?" Aang felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach. It was Zuko who was dying? He rather liked the young man, when they were on the same side that was. Aang certainly didn't want him to die. Well he didn't really want any one to die but that was beside the point. "The flower was found less then an hour ago by three children" Kiata was saying. "Visitors to the island. Two of the water tribe, brother and sister, the third . . ."

"Is the Avatar." Iroh had needed no more description then that which was already given and the healer took his word for it. "I must ask, Kiata, that if you haven't already please do not let them know we are here, and if possible do not let Zuko know they are here."

"It will be done as you ask."

They entered the room and Aang managed to slip back into the kitchen just in time to hear Hagi telling Sokka his Uncle was on the island. Seconds later Kiata snatched Hagi out of his chair and dragged him into the hall, no doubt giving him a warning about saying too much. It was only a little while before the healer returned to check on the cure only to find it completed. With a smile for the girls she took the pitcher in both hands and walked carefully from the room. She never noticed Aang holding the door for her. He was about to let it close when a voice from the other room startled him. "Father?" Zuko's voice was soft, barely audible, the voice of a man who'd been bedridden for months rather than a few days. Aang moved closed the kitchen door behind him, walked down the hall to the sick room and pressed his eye to a crack in the closed door where he could see into the room. General Iroh sat in a chair beside the bed, one foot propped up on a stool, supporting Zuko who seemed to be struggling to sit up.

"No, it's your Uncle Iroh." The others, Hagi, the cook, Kiata and her apprentice were all gathered around the bed.

"Uncle, where is Father?"

"In his thrown room no doubt. Planning the War."

"The War!" Zuko gasped. "Uncle I have to find the Avatar, I have to find him." Aang sighed even ill it seemed Zuko was determined to capture him.

"Shhh, no you don't. You need to drink this and rest."

Zuko waved away the glass that Uncle Iroh tried to hold to his lips. "No I have to find him! Father must

be stopped, I have to find the Avatar and teach . . .” he got no further. The glass was held to his mouth again and he nearly choked as a cold liquid poured in. Aang watched as Zuko sputtered and coughed before moving away from the door slowly. A small spring of hope welling in his chest. Was Zuko serious? Or just delusional? Perhaps, just perhaps, they could be friends after all.

Still thinking he made his way back into the kitchen. “Aang where were you?” Katara asked a small note of worry in her voice.

“Oh, I just . . . went out side for a walk. I’m sorry if I worried you Katara.”

She smiled at him and it was all Aang could do not to grin goofily back. “Perhaps we better come back in the morning.” Katara said, “I don’t want to be in the way.”

“Why don’t we go to the sea shore?” Sokka suggested. That sounded like a good idea to all and they made their way out side. “Hey Katara! Guess what Hagi told me . . .” Sokka started as they walked toward the beach. Aang walked slowly behind them, his thoughts on something other than Sokka and Katara’s uncle.

The morning came quickly. The small group made their way leisurely from their camping spot to the village in search of breakfast. But as they topped a ridge where they could see the village below them, and stopped in shock. People were running every where. They ran to the top of the next hill and stopped to watch. There was no way they could run in blindly and win. Aang had to know what was happening if he wanted to be helpful in the least. A fire nation ship had apparently remembered the base. Local soldiers were on their knees bound to prevent interference. As well as the cook from Zuko’s ship who sat in the center of the line of prisoners. Soldiers from the ship ransacked the town searching for something. A young soldier was arguing with an older man, a fire admiral, whom he closely resembled. Father and son? Another figure stepped between the two, one Aang knew on sight, Azula. She pointed and the young man went. Obviously furious.

Aang grabbed his staff and prepared to run for all he was worth just to get down there in time, when something else happened. A young man ran out of the door of the healer’s house. Barefoot, wearing only a baggy pair of brown pants and an untucked white shirt, but Aang knew it had to be Zuko. The cure had apparently worked. No one else would rush to face Azula like that! He didn’t manage much of anything. A few words were apparently exchanged, Zuko took a fighting stance and the young soldier snuck up behind him and hit him across the back of the head with the hilt of a sword. Zuko fell. The young soldier picked him up and slung the prince’s body across the back of his shoulders before making his way to the docks. The other prisoner’s marching behind him. The Fire nation had gotten what they came for. Aang who had started running the moment Zuko had been hit was seconds too late. He rushed to the healer’s house unsure of what to do only to find Uncle Iroh struggling out the door on his bad foot.

“Please Avatar . . .”

“Don’t worry, I’ll bring him back.” Aang said before Iroh could finish. “You might say I owe the Blue Spirit a favor.” Uncle Iroh appeared startled but nodded.

“Well you’re not going alone.” Sokka said as he reached the house bending double to catch his breath. Katara ran up behind him.

“But how’ll we find them?” she asked.

“You girl are staying with me to help with the healing. I need your talent.” Healer Kiata said walking up. Her usual neat hair hanging in her face and her skirt was slightly singed. “The boys can take one of the turtles. They can feel the wake of a ship and they’ll be far less conspicuous than that flying bison.”

## 14 - To be Set Free

XIII

To be Set Free

When he awoke for the second time he found he was being dragged across the sand of a small sand bar. He frantically struggled to his feet, but the guards holding his arms never changed pace. Zuko could see Azula up a head of him. She of course was being carried in a sedan chair. No reason to make the Princess walk, but let's just drag the heir to the throne across the beach, Zuko thought bitterly. He very quickly changed his attitude from feeling sorry for himself to scanning his surroundings. It seemed the ship had landed on the tip of a small peninsula within the quiet bay. Before him was the most morbid sight Zuko thought he'd ever seen. A prison camp, but not the typical high security camp enemy soldiers and benders were kept in. It seemed this one had been built for civilians. Several rings of shabby tents in the center housed the prisoners, and surrounding them were several rings of white and red canvased, high walled, wide service tents ringed by a wall of spikes. No doubt those that housed the soldiers that had been spared for this despicable job. Zuko very soon realized that most of the soldiers around him were not soldiers at all but raw recruits. It seemed the prison camp was actually a boot camp.

This troubled him to no end. Surly as the crown prince and a firebender, Zuko warranted some worry. He should by all reason be kept in a high security prison. Either someone wanted him to escape, unlikely for Azula, or this was the last place on earth anyone would try a rescue attempt. Come to think of it any one looking for him would probably try at one of the higher security camps.

Zuko was never allowed any time to hope for escape. He was very quickly taken to a small tent at the center of the rings and chained spread eagle against two poles on the inside. His hands and wrists were placed in a cuff like steal manacles, and his feet in thick anklets. The chains were stretched till they were as tight as they could be without lifting Zuko off his feet and into the air. The whole position was highly uncomfortable and there was no way he could bend his way out of this. Trying to melt the manacles would cause burns worse than the one that marred his face.

They left him there in that tent. No food, no water, no visits from Azula trying to taunt him. It was strange Zuko realized suddenly. He had seen no sign of his sister's friends. Had they finally regained their senses and left her? Or had they become part of some further plot in case he hadn't been captured?

He was left there several hours as the light faded, with nothing to do but muse over his fate and wonder how things could have been different. Perhaps he never should have become the Blue spirit, or perhaps

he should have turned himself in, in the first place. He could see where he was now and trace each of the steps that had led him here. The strange thing was each had seemed necessary at the time. Alright so maybe he shouldn't have stolen the Ostrichhorse from Song, and he really hadn't needed to leave his Uncle behind to travel alone, but then if he hadn't, he never would have met Lee. Helping that kid Jet really hadn't been necessary. But what had been necessary had been speaking up in the war chamber.

He had never meant to shame his father but surly the highest respect was the refusal to fight him. For that he had been burned and banished. From there it had become simple. Or so he had thought. Capture the Avatar and return home. But that had led to a chase around the world. Then it had become necessary to save the Avatar from Zhao, which in turn led to the becoming the blue spirit, as well as the incident at the North Pole.

When Azula had come for him and Uncle it had been necessary to return home with honor, not in chains. And he still held to that ideal. To do that he had needed to become a refugee, and for a time he had enjoyed his time in Ba Sing Se, until Azula had shown up. He didn't know why but every step he had taken had seemed to be the right one at the time and now he was here. The worse thing was that some where along that line he had forgotten about his people. And now it was too late.

Zuko stirred coming out of his stupper and letting his thoughts fade away as the tent flap moved and a lantern was thrust through. An arm very quickly followed the hand holding the lantern and that was followed by a man Zuko knew quite well. He stared at the face in front of him unwilling to believe that the best friend of his childhood could have been among those here at this camp. The sheer misery of the prisoners here was more than Zuko believed any one could live with on a day to day basis, surly not the man in front of him. Azula maybe but not Yul. He was tall and thin, but Yul lacked the horse face of his father, Ishi. Truth be told Yul was actually considered quite handsome, though Zuko himself had all too often thought his friend looked like a human stork.

"I'm sorry Zuko." His friend muttered gesturing to the knot on the back of Zuko's head. "But I truly believe Azula would have killed you otherwise. I'd rather see you injured than dead."

Zuko swallowed, it seemed they were still friends despite the circumstances. But still . . . "Why are you here?"

"Believe me when I tell you I don't want to be. I've requested transfer after transfer only to be turned down time and time again. It's terrible here, what these people go through here. What's worse is most of them are peasants. People who could never harm us, but the generals want them out of the way. Even some of ours who have spoken out against the war one to many times. I won't say I'm not surprised to see you here Zuko. You always were rather vocal in your dislike of this war."

Zuko sighed but said nothing still watching his onetime friend.

"I came to tell you. Several of the watch have seen shadows sneaking around the bay. Probably just some type of animal. The General, my father, is convinced the soldiers are jumping at wolves. But I tell you this, and by our friendship you know it to be true, I would not be sorry to see you escape tonight. You understand I can't help you of course. But if you disappear I will not look too hard."

"Thank you Yul." Zuko whispered. Yul nodded, content, picked up the lantern and left. There were shadows, Zuko mused, but his Uncle was injured and no one else truly cared enough about him to risk their lives. So who could it be?

He didn't have too long to wait. One by one the lights faded as various lanterns outside were put out for sleep and very soon after, a small figure slipped into the tent. The light was poor, but Zuko could see well enough to make out the arrow tattooed atop the figure's head.

"Avatar?"

"Some one asked for my help."

Zuko studied Aang's face as the younger boy picked the lock the manacle that held his left wrist.

"Did you mean it?" Aang asked looking up from his task?"

"Did I mean what?" having not had contact with the Avatar for some time Zuko was more than a little confused at this question. Hurriedly he racked his mind trying to discover what it could be the other boy was talking about.

"I was in the healer's house while you were sick. I over heard you tell your Uncle you would teach me."

Zuko nodded slightly everything making since to him now. "My father has never been what my people believe him to be. Most don't believe my face to be scared and the rest make up stories of a training accident just to keep him in a favorable light." His mouth twisted with a bitter frown. "But recently there have been reports of insurrection. People have finally realized that this war is wrong in more ways than one and they will do anything to stop it, I've known this for some time though it's taken recent events to actually make me decide to do something.. I am the crown prince If the fire lord can be dethroned quickly and the thrown passes to me, then I can declare an end to this. I can take care of my people with out sending their sons off to die. There would be no need for civil war." He paused taking a deep breath, the lock clicked and the manacle fell open. Aang caught the chain just before it could clatter to the floor.

"Yes Avatar I meant what I said. If you would be willing I will teach you."

"Good, because nobody else seems to want to." Aang laughed softly as he moved to the next manacle.

It took some time to get the chains undone. Every time a shadow passed the tent both of them jumped, but Aang worked quietly and no one came to interrogate Zuko, though he was half expecting it at every moment. The moment the last manacle fell from his left ankle Zuko and Aang slipped out the back of the small tent and into the shadows. As quietly as they could they slipped behind the camp and out towards the camp where Aang said Sokka was waiting with a turtle. What a turtle had to do with anything Zuko didn't know, but he wasn't about to waist time asking useless questions. If it was important he'd find out sooner or later, but right now silence was crucial.

It didn't last. They got just beyond the final row of tents when Aang tripped over a stray piece of firewood and went tumbling . . . right into a pile of dirty dishes. One of the soldiers must have left them there to take down to the beach for scrubbing, but that's not what Zuko cared about at the moment. As Aang flew into the pots there was a horrible clanging and tent flaps flew open every where as soldiers rushed out. Since the Traitor was escaping and the Avatar helping him, they few into action grabbing what ever weapon was handy and rushing after the two.

Zuko forced his tired form to run, Aang some where behind him bending bursts of air that sent the guards flying back into their comrades. Zuko did spare him a second glance. Weak as he was, there was no chance he would be of any use in this fight. Suddenly he heard a rushing sound and felt himself snatched into the air as Aang Helicoptered over his and wrapped his legs around Zuko's torso, much as he had done to lift the two of them over the wall when Zuko has masqueraded as the Blue Spirit.

Up ahead of him Zuko could see Sokka. The water tribe boy was astride a Giant turtle already halfway out of the bay. Apparently the possibility that they might be spotted had already been planned for. Looking over his shoulder Zuko could see archers fitting arrows to the string, but the Avatar had already carried him out of range. The arrows fell short. For a moment he wondered why they had taken so long to fire and then something else caught his eye. Near the center of the camp were several collapsed tents as well as no fewer than five fires possibly started from a handful of overturned torches. And surprisingly there was a number of soldiers headed in the opposite direction. It seemed a number of other prisoners had escaped inland. Yul had been as good as his word.

They didn't really land on the turtle's back more drooped onto it. Zuko stayed where he had fallen lying on his back atop the smooth shell. Aang settled cross-legged next to Sokka who shot Zuko a suspicious look. He didn't really care though. He had found what he needed, the courage to do what he knew in his heart was right, and his people would benefit from it. He looked up at Aang and got a cocky grin in return.

"I expect you to apply your self."

"I will."

"And I expect you to listen to me when I say something's too dangerous."

Sokka snorted.

"I will."

"Because one mistake with fire bending can destroy a life."

"I know."

"You realize Aang, I won't be an easy task master."

"Just don't think that I'll be so easy to teach."

End