

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

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Submitted: May 4, 2006

Updated: November 19, 2006

A sweet story of chance meeting between Zuko and Katara.

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1. While on a Journey

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 1-- While on a Journey

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

It was a beautiful, warm summer's day; one of those days where you think nothing can go wrong. Katara, a young waterbender from the South Pole, was sitting on the shore of a forested island, not far off the coast of the western Earth Kingdom lands. She smiled as she looked out to sea, admiring the view. Every now and then she thought she saw a Green Fish jump up, and she watched the Seagulls fly overhead. She sighed happily, enjoying the day. Her brother Sokka and her friend Aang the Avatar had gone out to look for supplies and food while she stayed to keep an eye on the camp.

Katara, Sokka, and Aang had been traveling together for quite some time. They searched the world for teachers who could help Aang master all four of the elements, in his journey to fulfill his duty as the new Avatar. His skills were certainly improving, though he still had a long way to go.

Katara smiled as she thought of them, missing them. Sokka was her brother and Aang was her best friend in the world. 'They are the most important people in the world to me' she thought, 'With mom and dad both gone, they and Gran Gran are all I have.' She sighed; Sokka and Aang were great, but sometimes she wished she would meet a new friend, someone new to come into her life that she could care about. But, she often felt sad thinking that it would never happen. 'Oh well,' she sighed, 'I may long for someone special I could care about or maybe even love, but at least I have my brother and my best friend with me; I am luckier than many.'

Katara tried to shrug off her disappointment and dismiss her thoughts, as she got to work organizing the campsite, which was on the edge of the trees. She laughed as she started to pick things up and put them away, 'Boys are so messy!' After she organized her companions'

luggage, she put her things back into her traveling bag. She knew that Sokka and Aang would be back soon, and it would pay to have things already packed and ready when they wanted to get going again, to continue their journey. Just as she had finished packing things up, she heard a sound from the direction of the shore line. She grabbed Sokka's binoculars and turned to see a Longhaired Persian out on a rock in the water about 100 yards off shore.

"Oh, poor thing," she said sadly. 'It must have got stuck out there when the tide came in,' she thought. 'I have to help it.' She put the binoculars and all of the boys' gear into their tent where it would be safe, before shouldering her bag and heading to the raft and Sokka and Aang had made, which was sitting on the shore.

"Hang on kitty!" Katara pushed the raft into the water and climbed on. She grabbed the oar and started to row out towards the rock where the creature was stranded. She continued to call to it as she got closer, hoping that it didn't get scared and jump into the water. However, that was not a concern. The terrified creature saw her coming toward it and meowed loudly for help. "I'm coming," the girl called, "just stay there."

As she was approaching the rock, she hadn't notice that storm clouds were beginning to roll in. She suddenly heard the rumble of thunder starting, and shivered; she hated thunderstorms because they had always scared her and made her nervous. She ignored it however, intent on rescuing the helpless cat.

Katara rowed her raft up beside the rocks and reached out to grab the animal, which jumped into her arms quickly, happy to get off of the rocks where it had been stranded. She cuddled the creature up inside her coat, and started to row back towards shore. As she tried to get back, the storm clouds became more severe, and suddenly there was a loud crash of thunder and lightning struck. Katara screamed and the cat meowed loudly in fright. She cuddled the animal closer and tighter into her coat to keep it warm and dry as the rain started to fall.

They were about half way to shore when the rain began coming down heavily, pelting them. Katara tried to keep the raft steady as the waves picked and crashed against her tiny vessel. Suddenly, one wave almost knocked her off. Afraid that she and the Persian would both be hurt or worse, she made her decision.

Katara used her bending powers to create a sort-of water rope, which she wrapped around the cat and used to direct it towards the shore. The waves got rougher, but she kept her focus. Luckily, she got the whip to make it to the shore, and the Persian jumped and rushed into the

shelter of the trees.

`Yes!' Katara thought, happy that she had succeeded in rescuing the creature. However, her joy was short-lived, as a huge wave crashed into her raft at that moment, causing her to hit her head on the edge of the raft and knocking her into the water. She screamed as the waves slammed into her, making it difficult to stay afloat. Her bag of things was still strapped on her back, making it even harder for her to swim decently. She tried her hardest to swim to the shore, but the waves were too strong for her. Her waterbending powers didn't help, because she couldn't concentrate in terror of drowning or dieing in the raging storm. The small piece of the raft that she hung onto didn't do much to help.

`Sokka, Aang," Katara thought desperately of them, praying that she might live to see them again. Her last thoughts were of them, as she starting to tire out, exhausted from struggling against the waves. As she began to slip into unconsciousness, she thought she saw a blurry image of a ship in the distance. She prayed that it might be someone who could rescue her, as it was the last thing she saw before she slipped beneath the water's surface.

~TO BE CONTINUED.....

2. The Day's Storm, into the Night

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 2-- The Day's Storm, into the Night

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

"Everyone inside!" Iroh called out to the crew, "The storm is starting to get too severe!" The former Fire Nation general tried to help the crew members get the supplies secured on the deck as they raced against the growing strength of the raging storm. Despite their best efforts, some of the things fell overboard as the ship was tossed by the powerful waves. A young crew man named Ryu reached out to catch a bag of supplies before it went overboard, but slipped on the wet deck and crashed into the railing. "Look out!" General Iroh yelled to him, as a crate of more supplies started hurtling towards him in the chaos. Ryu screamed and covered his eyes, thinking he was about to be crushed to death, but suddenly a blazing fireball came out of nowhere, destroying the crate before it could hurt the boy.

Prince Zuko, the banished heir to the throne of the Fire Nation, came running out onto the deck to help his crew. He ran to Ryu and helped him up, leading him safely back to the door into the ship. Though the supplies went overboard, Zuko knew that the safety of his crew was most important.

"Uncle Iroh," the prince called out, "get everyone inside!"

The general turned to his nephew and nodded. "I think we have everybody. Hopefully no one fell overboard!"

"I got Ryu, but I don't know if anyone else is in trouble!" Zuko replied.

Iroh ran out to his nephew, once all of the crew was safe inside, and the two of them looked out to the water. "I don't see anyone," the general said, sounding relieved.

Zuko was silent, ready to agree with him, but all of a sudden he saw someone struggling against the waves not far in front of them. His body reacted immediately, as he threw off his coat and dived into the water.

"Zuko!" Iroh gasped, "What are you doing?" All he could do is watch helplessly, hoping that his nephew was strong enough to swim against the waves. He noticed a body being tossed in the water, realizing where his nephew was heading. 'Good luck Zuko,' he thought, as he watched the prince swim out further.

Zuko swam hard, tiring quickly, but not stopping. He swam out where someone had just slipped below the surface of the water, and reached for the hand that was just about to be submerged. The fire prince pulled up and brought Katara back up above the surface of the water. 'Huh? The waterbender?!' Zuko was surprised to see her, but he noticed that she was unconscious and didn't want anything bad to happen. The prince took her into his arms and supported her with his back and shoulders as he started to swim back to his ship.

"Uncle, throw down the ladder!" Zuko swam back to the ship as hard as he could. He was growing weary having to carry Katara and fight against the waves supporting her body as well as his, but he didn't give up. Iroh tossed the rope ladder down immediately.

"Zuko, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," the prince replied as he gripped the ladder firmly, "Pull us up!"

General Iroh, with the help of Ryou, who had come back out to help them, pulled Zuko up as quickly as he could, while still being careful not to go so fast that the prince lost his hold. Zuko held on to Katara tightly so that he wouldn't drop her, and kept her close so she wouldn't get hurt when the ladder swayed and bumped against the hull of the ship. He carefully climbed back on the deck and carried Katara inside as Iroh and Ryou followed him back into the shelter of the ship.

There were no spare rooms on the ship, as they were all occupied by crew members, so Zuko just carried the waterbender into his room. He lay her down on the bed carefully, and sent Ryu to get the ship's physician. Iroh watched his nephew quietly, as he removed her wet outer coat so she wouldn't get sick. She was breathing very softly; luckily her lungs weren't full of water. The prince gently rested his hand on her abdomen, making sure her robes were dry, and then he stood quietly looking at her.

"Zuko?" General Iroh finally spoke up, but he kept his voice soft, wondering what his nephew would decide to do. The prince was silent for a few moments, during which Ryu returned with the doctor.

Zuko turned to face the man as he entered and nodded to him. "Take good care of her; make sure she's warm enough and that she's not injured in any way."

The doctor nodded and went to work checking on her. Zuko looked at her for a few more moments, before he walked out of the room. Iroh glanced at the girl quickly before following his nephew back into the hall.

"Zuko, wait!" Iroh called out after his nephew, running to catch up with him. The prince turned around and looked at him, but didn't say anything. The general was quiet for a moment and then spoke. "What are you going to do about the girl, Zuko?" he inquired.

"I don't know," the prince answered, "I guess we'll see how she does, and decide later. In the mean time, we need to replace the supplies we lost."

General Iroh nodded, "Well, this is a string of islands out here. The largest one is at the bottom, several days' worth of sailing away. There is also a small village on one not too far from here that could sell us the supplies we need."

"Good, we'll head there then," Zuko replied, nodding in agreement.

"Very well," Iroh agreed, "but well should stay there too long; it's rumored to be not the safest or most stable village, with few real laws. We should anchor off shore, get the supplies and go."

Zuko nodded, knowing that it was best not to delay the journey too much. He was already not happy about being distracted from seeking the Avatar, especially when the waterbender could lead him to him, but he knew it was important for them to restock their supplies if they were going to continue.

The prince looked out the window at the island they were passing, assuming that that was where the girl had come from. If her companions were on the island somewhere, they were bound to continue down the island chain to try and find her. With any luck, they'd meet up later and he would still get a chance to try and capture the Avatar.

"I'm tired uncle," he said suddenly, "I'm going to bed."

"But Zuko..., what about the girl?!" Iroh asked in surprise.

"What about her?"

"She will need a comfortable place to stay for the night," the general insisted, "She shouldn't have to stay in the ship's infirmary."

"What are you saying?" Zuko asked him with a look of blatant confusion on his face.

"I'm saying, she's resting in your room, so let her stay there," Iroh replied.

"Fine!" Zuko groaned, not wanting to share his quarters, but he knew there was no arguing with his uncle when he insisted on something, especially the proper manners with and treatment of a lady.

Iroh chuckled and nodded as his nephew walked off. "Good night Zuko!"

"Night," the prince answered plainly, walking off to his room.

Zuko entered the room quietly, careful not to wake up the waterbender. The doctor had seen that she was alright and now she was sleeping peacefully in his bed. He strode over to the bedside and looked down at her, watching her sleep. He listened to her soft breathing, and couldn't help but feel calm and soothed. He shook his head trying to dismiss any such thoughts, but seeing her there reminded him of how lonely he could get during his travels at sea.

The fire prince sighed as he looked at her, and suddenly noticed her shiver. He reached down and pulled the blanket up to her chin. He carefully put his hand on her arm and concentrated. He was able to use his fire bending powers to warm her up inside, making her more comfortable as she slept. She sighed contently in her sleep, turning to her side slightly, causing a strand of hair to fall into her face.

Zuko took his hand away and reached to gently brush the hair out of her face. He sighed and walked over to a chair that was sitting by the window. The moonlight shone in, giving the only source of light to the room. The prince reclined in the chair, tired from his exhausting efforts against the storm earlier. As he started to dose off, he looked back at the water bending girl sleeping in his bed. He heard her sigh again, resting comfortably. He couldn't help a small half-smile as he closed his eyes. He listened to her breathing as he drifted off to sleep, and his breathing reached a pace where it was in unison with hers, as they both slept peacefully.

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3. Prince Zuko and General Iroh

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 3-- Prince Zuko and General Iroh

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

Sunlight came shining in the window, lighting up the room. Katara stirred and slowly opened her eyes. She had the remains of a small headache, and she didn't know why. She rubbed the bump on the back of her head, wondering what had happened to cause it, as she looked around. She didn't recognize her surroundings at all. The walls were metal, making the whole appearance of the room seem dark and cold. She looked around confused, and that's when she noticed it, the symbol of the Fire Nation on the wall!

Katara gasped and was immediately stunned. She looked around wide-eyed, realizing that she must be on a Fire Nation ship! She could vaguely recall the accident out on the water, and understood that the ship's captain or crew must have seen her and rescued her. However, seeing as how this was a Fire Nation ship, that didn't make her feel any better! As she was looking around, she heard the sound of a door opening behind her. She whirled around to face Zuko, the prince of the Fire Nation.

Katara screamed in surprise, startling him enough to make him scream too! She jumped out of the bed and ran towards the opposite wall. She backed into the corner, terrified of the fire prince. He stood in the doorway for a few moments before shutting the door behind him and starting to walk towards her slowly. She trembled in fear as she slid down the wall, crouching down near the floor. As she moved down the metal wall, she cut her hand on a sharp raised strip.

"Oww!" Zuko watched as the girl whimpered in pain as she pulled her hand away from the wall, her whole body shaking. He stood staring at her stone-face for a moment before walking into the washroom and getting a warm, wet towel, some warm water, bandages, and some salve. He walked over to her and knelt down beside her. Katara looked up at him nervously,

and saw him start to reach his hand out to her. She flinched away from him, but was suddenly surprised when she felt him touch her hand. She looked back at him, pale-faced and surprised, unsure of what to do.

The fire prince was silent as he gently took her hand and wiped the blood away with the towel, carefully cleaning the wound with the warm water. Katara flinched slightly as he took care of her hand, experiencing a small sting of pain.

"Sorry about that," Zuko said plainly, as he continued dressing the wound. She blushed slightly as he applied salve to the wound and bandaged her hand carefully.

"That's alright," she said softly, nodding to him when he looked up at her. She swallowed nervously when he met her eyes. "Thanks."

He nodded and stood back up, looking down at her. She stayed frozen at his feet before he reached his hand out to help her up. She looked at him nervously and didn't move at first, but then she carefully took his hand and let him help her to her feet.

"Oh!" Katara was shaky when she got up and tipped into his shoulder, trying not to fall. She was surprised when he suddenly picked her up in his arms and carried her back over to the bed. Zuko's face remained expressionless, but nevertheless he was careful as he set her down on the bedspread gently.

"You're probably exhausted and starving," he said suddenly, "That's why you don't have much strength. I will go see about some food for you."

Katara blushed again and nodded. "Thank you."

He nodded to her before walking out of the room, leaving her to sit and wait. And wait, she did. Katara sat there for quite some time, waiting to see what would happen. She still had no idea how she got here, and was afraid as she wondered how long she would have to stay. She gasped as she suddenly heard the door open again. She held her breath, expecting to see Zuko come in, but was surprised to see Iroh instead.

"Hello Miss Katara," the elderly general smiled at her kindly as he walked in, "My name is Iroh, former general of the Fire Nation. How are you feeling? You must be hungry. Would you like some tea or some fruit? I have papayas!"

Katara smiled at him as he set down the tray in front of her, grateful to him for his kindness. "I don't like papayas very much! But I will have some of the other fruit and some tea," she smiled and nodded.

Iroh smiled back and nodded as he poured her some tea and handed her a small plate of fruit. Katara smiled appreciatively as he did so. As she took a few bites, Iroh noticed her look back at the door. "Is something wrong Miss Katara?"

"Hmm?" she turned and looked back at him, "Oh, I was just wondering, where did Zuko go?"

"I think he was going to go train for awhile," the general answered.

"Shouldn't he eat some breakfast?"

Iroh smiled, admiring her for caring about his nephew, "I'm sure he'll grab a bite later. I appreciate your concern, but he'll be fine."

Katara nodded and finished her fruit and continued sipping her tea. General Iroh finished his breakfast as well, and then turned to her. "Are you sure you're alright? You must have been through quite an ordeal yesterday."

She nodded, "To be honest, I don't really remember much. I had gone out on the raft to rescue a Longhaired Persian that was stranded on a rock when the tide came in."

"That was noble of you," the general smiled.

"Thanks," Katara replied, "After I got the cat back to shore, that was really it. The storm came in, and I remember getting knocked off the raft and into the water by the strength of the waves!" She gasped as she started to recall more of the past events. She automatically reached up to rub the bump on the back of her head, thinking.

"I must have hit my head on the raft!"

"You feel okay though?" Iroh asked as he noticed her frown as she rubbed her head.

"Yeah, I guess so," she answered.

"That's good," he replied. Before he could ask her anything else, the door flew open, hitting the opposite wall with a loud thud. They both turned to face Zuko as he silently strode into the room, with a very serious look on his face.

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4. A New Predicament

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 4-- A New Predicament

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

"Hello Zuko," Iroh greeted him pleasantly, "how was the training session."

"Fine," the prince answered simply.

"Would you like some tea or fruit?"

"No," he answered.

"Zuko, you should eat some breakfast."

"I'm not hungry uncle," he answered sternly, ignoring his elderly man, and turning to look at Katara.

The girl swallowed nervously as she looked up at him, their eyes meeting. She stared at him silently for a moment, and could swear she remembered his presence yesterday when she was in trouble. Had he been the one to save her?!

"You alright?" Zuko asked suddenly, catching her off guard as she swallowed and nodded. "Good," he replied, noting her answer, "Uncle, tell the crew to keep things maintained; we're continuing down the island chain to get more supplies at the nearby village."

"Wait," Katara suddenly spoke up, "What about me? I need to reconnect up with my brother and my friend."

"The Avatar?" Zuko smirked.

"Never you mind," she replied, frowning at his snide attitude.

"Actually, never you mind," he replied, "we lost many of our supplies during that storm last night, and we need to restock. We will continue down the island chain as planned. Uncle, inform the crew."

Iroh nodded, but was unsure if what they were doing was right. "Zuko...?" he tried to question his nephew, but Katara did it for him!

"You can't do that! I need to get back to them!"

"Well, too bad!" Zuko responded harshly, "We need to restock on supplies, and I deem that more important, so sorry!"

"Then when are you going to take me back?" Katara asked desperately.

"Whenever it's convenient for me!"

"You can't keep me here!" By now the two of them were practically in a shouting match, with Iroh watching helplessly.

"I am the prince of the Fire Nation; I can do what ever I want!" He yelled at her harshly, and she started to cry in frustration. "You better just get used to it waterbender. You're here and there's nothing you can do about it, so just deal with it!"

"Arrggh!" Katara growled at him, throwing a pillow in his direction as he stalked out of the room, pulling Iroh with him. Zuko had slammed the door, and the pillow hit the wall. Katara cried in frustration as she slumped down on the bed. She was so angry with Zuko and hated being on the fire nation ship. She got off the bed and walked into the washroom, closing the door behind her, sitting on the floor leaning back against the door and crying.

"Zuko wait!" Iroh rushed to catch up with his nephew as he headed down the hallway to the ship's kitchen, "Zuko!"

"What is it uncle?" the prince turned around to face him, watching as the old man tried to catch his breath, "Are you okay?"

"Just tired from running!" the general replied breathlessly.

"Uncle, I was barely walking fast!" Zuko frowned at him in disbelief.

"Oh...well, that's beside the point!" Iroh blushed, embarrassed. "Zuko, I really don't think you should have been so hard on Miss Katara; after all, she is our guest."

"Guest?! She's just a waterbender uncle, don't bother worrying about her!" the prince replied.

"Oh but Zuko, she's scared and alone. She fought for her life yesterday, and was very lucky you saw her and saved her."

Zuko turned and looked at his uncle, wide-eyed, "You didn't tell her that did you?!"

"No Zuko, but why would that..."

"Good! I don't want you telling her anything!" the prince said sternly, cutting him off. "Now, let's continue our course for the island. We must restock our supplies."

"Very well Zuko," Iroh replied, "But I do think that you should try to make the girl more comfortable if she must stay here. In fact, she might as well stay in your room since she's already there."

"What?!" Zuko groaned, not wanting to share his quarters on the ship. However, a firm look from his uncle made him surrender. "Fine, whatever!"

Iroh smiled and nodded, "Good, now, would you like me to go get you some breakfast?"

"Sure, thanks."

"No problem! I'll see you later Zuko," Iroh smiled at his nephew and gave a small wave, before he headed to the kitchen. Zuko watched him `till he turned the corner and walked out of sight. Then the prince stood silently for a moment, before heading the other way to go outside on the deck. Unbeknownst to him, Katara peeked out from behind the bedroom door, having heard everything that was said! She watched him walk away and felt a little more at ease, knowing he had indeed saved her life.

~TO BE CONTINUED.....

5. Getting to Know You

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 5-- Getting to Know You

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

Zuko was sitting out on the deck, meditating, when Katara quietly walked up behind him. He sat motionless, his eyes remaining closed as she knelt down next to him. Katara hesitated for a moment, thinking she shouldn't disturb him, but then she reached out to put her hand on his shoulder. The prince instantly came out of his trance, grabbing her hand and standing up suddenly, pulling her up with him.

"Ahh!" Katara yelped in surprise as she was pulled up from the floor. Zuko held her firmly, but wasn't rough at all, holding her hand close to his chest, keeping her body close to his.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, again, stern and serious but not harsh.

"I...I'm sorry!" she stammered, trying not to cry as she looked into his eyes nervously, "I didn't mean to disturb you; I just wanted to thank you!"

"For what?!" he asked suspiciously.

"For saving my life," she replied softly. Zuko turned his head away, gritting his teeth in frustration.

"Did my uncle tell you?" he inquired, turning back to face her.

"No, why?"

"You weren't supposed to know."

"Well, why not?" Katara asked, looking at him confused. "I'm...very grateful to you for what you did; it was very brave."

Zuko blushed slightly and looked away again. "Whatever...it's no big deal," he said plainly.

Katara was quiet for a moment, looking at him. "Well...", she spoke softly, "Thank you anyway. I really appreciate you saving me and letting me stay here on your ship." She stood up on her tiptoes and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek as a way to say 'thank you'.

Zuko turned back to her, surprised at her actions. He swallowed nervously and then nodded, accepting her gratitude. Katara smiled shyly back at him and nodded.

"Well, I guess I'll let you get back to what you were doing. Thanks again."

The fire prince nodded and watched her turn and walk back inside the ship. He stood silently and stared after her as she went, his heart suddenly feeling lighter.

Hours later, the day was waning and the sun was preparing to set. Katara was sitting in the room by the window reading when Zuko walked in. He had been training with a crew member earlier and was ready to relax for a bit now, having already had dinner. Katara looked up when he came in and gave him a shy smile.

"Hi."

"Hi," he nodded to her as he walked toward the washroom, "You okay?"

She nodded, and he took note of it, before he headed into the washroom to take a bath. After a while, he came back out and sat down on the bed. Katara turned away from the window and looked at him. She watched as he lay back and closed his eyes, taking slow, deep breaths. She listened to his breathing for a few moments before she spoke.

"Zuko, where is it you and your crew are sailing to?"

The prince opened his eyes and turned to look at her. "We're going to restock our supplies at an island village."

"I know that," she nodded to him, "but where is your eventual destination."

He shrugged, "Don't have a specific destination, we sail to fulfill assigned missions, and then eventually hope to go home to the Fire Nation. It's been over 2 years since I've been there."

Katara looked at him stunned. "You haven't been home in 2 years?!"

Zuko shook his head, "Nope; been sailing for so long."

"Did you choose to leave your home at such a young age?"

"Young age?" He looked at her curiously, "Why, how old do you think I am?"

"Oh, I don't know," Katara shrugged, "I'm only fourteen, and I guess I didn't think you could be that much older than me."

Zuko couldn't help but grin, "Well, I'm sixteen, and no, I didn't choose to leave, but I had to. And I'd rather not say why," He said seriously, "I just know that I have my mission to complete now."

She nodded, "I understand. I miss my home too, and I've only been gone for six months. Oh, I am from the South Pole Water Tribe, by the way."

He nodded, "You miss it a lot at first, but after a while it gets easier."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Well, so what now?"

"What do you mean?"

Katara looked at him confused, and shrugged, "Well, I thought you were going to go with General Iroh to go get the supplies."

Suddenly Zuko jumped up off the bed, startling the girl. He looked at her sternly, making her nervous as he seemed upset, "You mean they left already?!"

She swallowed nervously and nodded, "They had dropped the anchor and then he and another man left, hoping to reach the village before it got dark and get there in plenty of time because it could storm tonight and prevent travel!"

Zuko growled in frustration and stalked out of the room, leaving Katara to follow him and try to catch up as she rushed after him.

~TO BE CONTINUED.....

6. Night Time

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 6-- Night Time

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

"I can't believe this!" Zuko angrily threw aside his uncle's staff, which he had left behind leaning against the wall. He couldn't believe that his uncle had left for town without him. They were supposed to go together to get supplies, and instead he takes a servant to assist him and leaves his own nephew behind with a waterbender!

"It's probably best if we stay here." Katara had come up behind him and he whirled around to face her.

"I know that!" Zuko responded fiercely. "I don't need you to tell me what to do!"

"I was just saying," Katara replied simply, "they'll surely be back in no time, and we would only get ourselves lost going out there to find them. It is best just to wait until they get back."

Zuko glared at her, but knew she was right. The island was heavily forested, and in such a wilderness-like environment it would be all too easy to get lost and never found! He grumbled and headed back into his room. He still couldn't believe that he had to share his quarters on the ship, but his uncle insisted that the waterbender get a comfortable place to stay while on their vessel with them, and the lack of room resulted and the two of them being roommates! She even got the bed! Zuko was so frustrated with the events that he pulled down a sword off the wall to practice and let off steam.

Katara walk quietly into the room, and sat down on the bed. For a few moments she sat silently, watching him work. He certainly was a skilled fighter. After a few moments he turned around and glared at her, obviously not appreciating being stared at. She frowned at him, but decided to respect his wishes and pulled out a book and began to read.

After about 45 minutes, Zuko was exhausted from practicing. He replaced the sword on the wall and turned to look at the waterbender. She didn't look up from her reading. He frowned, but decided to forget it, and went to take a shower.

When he returned, she had finished reading and was changing into a more comfortable robe for bed. She blushed when he entered, and he was quick to realize the situation.

"I'm sorry!" He quickly turned away so that she could finish changing. He surprised even himself with his etiquette. She too was stunned that he bothered to turn away and give her her privacy. She smiled at his attempt to hide the fact that he indeed had some manners. "It's alright," she said softly, once she had finished dressing.

"Oh... alright." Zuko turned around, blushing a bit when he saw her. They shot soft half-smiles at each other. The longer they were together, the more the tension eased, and they seemed to enjoy each other's company more and more, grateful for it in comparison to being alone.

Katara sat down in a chair silently, and Zuko noticed her shivering in the cold of the night wind blowing through the halls of the ship. He walked toward her and she looked up meeting his eyes. He stood still for a moment and then summoned a fire. She smiled at him thankfully and warmed herself in front of it. Zuko took another chair and sat before the fire as well.

Another 20 minutes or so passed in silence, and Zuko could feel her eyes on him.

"If you want to know something, just ask me," he said softly.

"Huh?" Katara blushed, feeling bad for staring. She had been wondering about the scar on his

face, but didn't dare ask him for fear of offending him. She was silent for a few moments wondering what to do, but didn't answer him.

Zuko gave an exasperated sigh and shook his head. He had opened the door for her to ask him what she wanted to know, but she didn't take it. He wished she had more courage, but understood that she didn't want to offend him, and was grateful for that. After another long, awkward break of silence, he decided to take it upon himself.

"It happened when I was fourteen," he said softly, referencing the burn scar on the left side of his face.

Katara let out a surprised gasp as he spoke to her. She was silent and waited for him to continue.

"I lost a fire duel. I didn't even want to fight, but there was nothing I could do. The battle was one-sided, and my opponent wouldn't stop. In the end I lost a fierce battle, and walked away with this scar to carry for the rest of my life."

Katara was stunned by what she had just heard, and felt overwhelmed with pity for him knowing that he had been hurt. With her voice shaking she softly inquired, "Who was your opponent?"

Zuko was very quiet for a moment, making Katara feel very nervous. She immediately wished she hadn't asked.

"It was my father," he suddenly replied plainly.

"What?!"

"My father gave this to me. He was my opponent in the duel."

Katara could hardly believe what she was hearing. Zuko's own father had fought with him and burned him! How could anyone do such a thing to their own son?! She felt so bad for him. She looked at him sadly, not knowing what to do as he turned away so as not to look at her. He just kept staring at the ground, attempting to conceal his feelings as he was unable to fight back the few tears.

She didn't know what to do. All she knew is that she desperately wanted to comfort him and ease his pain. Hesitantly, she slowly reached out her hand to caress his face, purposely touching the side with the scar.

Zuko held his breath. He felt immediately paralyzed by her touch. He couldn't believe she was being so kind and brave. She actually touched the face that so many regarded with disgust.

After Zuko didn't pull away from her touch, Katara felt that her efforts to help him feel better were working. She shyly leaned in to him and placed a sweet, gentle kiss on his cheek. Her hand moved to his shoulder, but never once left him.

Zuko turned to her, his face white with a stunned expression. Her face was just as pale from nerves. Their eyes met and there was silence for a few moments. Then, as if snapping back to her senses, she blinked and pulled her hand away. She couldn't believe she had dared do that.

"I...I'm s-so sorry" she said, with her voice shaking. She got up to leave, still so stunned by her own bold actions. She was about to run off when she felt a clasp on her wrist. She turned to face the prince. He had grabbed her wrist to keep her from leaving. She nervously met his eyes, preparing herself for the flood of insults she was sure she'd get for touching him.

However, when she met his gaze she saw a soft affection in those beautiful golden eyes. His look was gentle, and he showed no signs of preparing insults. He swallowed hard and relaxed his grip on her wrist so as not to hurt her.

"I... I don't want you to go," he said softly.

She took in a soft, shallow breath, slowly relaxing, and smiled gently at him. "Then I won't."

~TO BE CONTINUED.....

7. Time Together

Disclaimer: I do not own Avatar: The Last Airbender or any of the characters associated. This is a fan fiction! =)

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 7-- Time Together

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

So we literally were frozen stiff! Katara laughed at the childhood memory of one of her and Sokka's crazy misadventures.

Zuko smiled and chuckled along with her. He enjoyed listening to her stories from her childhood, and even shared a few of his own now and then, though he felt his stories weren't nearly as fun or enjoyable. When it came down to it, he realized he really enjoyed talking with her.

What is it? Katara looked questioningly at him when he sat silently for a few moments.

It's nothing, he said smiling gently, I was just enjoying your story. Sounds like life off with the South Water Tribe is... entertaining, to say the least.

She smiled. You could say that!

Well thanks for sharing it with me

Huh, well, your welcome, she stated, I would have thought that you might find my stories from home boring, compared to all of the traveling and exploring you do.

No, he replied, I like hearing real childhood stories about a happy home, seeing as how I never really go to experience it myself.

I'm sorry, she said softly, feeling sad for him.

It's ok, came a voice from behind, my nephew has moved on from such things. He now enjoys his studies and his adventures and explorations.

Zuko and Katara whirled around to face General Iroh.

Uncle, where did you come from? Zuko asked with blatant confusion, Did you travel back from town through the night? I mean... why are you up so late?

On the contrary nephew, we were up with the sun, making first tracks to travel back here, Iroh replied, we wanted an early head start. However, I am surprised to see you up this early, Zuko, Katara. He gave them each a small smile as he nodded and addressed them, and then walked out the door to the kitchen for a late breakfast.

Zuko looked out the window, noticing the sun already rising in the sky, Huh, its morning, he informed her. We&we talked all night.

Looks that way, she answered as she blushed slightly, funny, but I m not really even that tired.

Yeah... me either.

She smiled at him, Well, I m a bit hungry, so I think I ll go to the kitchen to get something to eat.

Oh, okay, he replied.

She nodded and got to her feet. Well, see you later, she said.

Yeah, he answered, before she walked out the door, later.

Later that afternoon, Zuko sat in the kitchen reading. The only sound that pulled him out of his focused state was the knock on the door.

Come in, the prince answered, as he wondered who it could be.

General Iroh opened the door and smiled at him as he walked in. Good afternoon Zuko, how are you doing?

I m fine uncle, Zuko answered.

Sorry if my return startled you this morning, Iroh told him, I didn t mean to disturb you. It seemed that you and Miss Katara were having quite a pleasant conversation this morning.

We were just talking. It was no big deal.

Well, seemed to be enjoying her company quite a bit, Iroh answered. He wanted to question their relationship further, but a look from Zuko made him change the subject.

Well, I just wanted to tell you that Ryou and I are heading back into the village. We realized that we need more stocks.

Oh. Well do you need me to go with you? Zuko asked.

That s up to you, the general replied, you can join us or you may stay here with Miss Katara.

She s not going?!

She is sleeping right now back in your room, Iroh answered, I didn t want to disturb her. If you ask me, someone should probably stay here so that she s not all alone.

Oh, yeah... you re probably right, Zuko agreed, I could stay here with her if you want me too.

It's up to you, Iroh replied with a smile.

Okay, well I guess I will stay then, unless you think you need my help, that is, the prince answered, I want you to be safe.

We'll be just fine, Iroh assured him, we should be back by late tomorrow morning, provided that the storm doesn't prevent our return.

Storm?

It's supposed to be a thunder-storm tonight, which could make travel quite difficult, his uncle answered, if the storm does delay us, we will stay in town until it is safe to make the journey back here.

Will you have enough time to make it to the town if you leave now? Zuko concerned himself with his uncle's safety.

Yes, that shouldn't be a problem.

Alright, well, safe travel to you uncle, Zuko said as he followed his uncle out the doorway to the ship's exit, Contact me if you need anything or run into any trouble.

I will son, don't worry, the general said as he walked down to meet the servant Ryuu, who was waiting to take off on their journey. Enjoy your night. I'll see you tomorrow.

Zuko nodded and waved goodbye. He watched them walk away until they were out of sight. Then he walked down the hallway of the ship. He walked until he came to the door to his room, the room he was currently sharing with the waterbender. He opened the door a crack. Light from torches still lit the room, but it didn't seem to disturb Katara, as she slept peacefully. He couldn't help his smile as he watched her sleep for a few moments. Then he used his powers to disperse the fire from the torches. He then shut the door, leaving Katara to rest in her peaceful slumber.

~TO BE CONTINUED....

8. Good Night's Sleep

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 8-- Good Night's Sleep

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

The sun had begun to set and there was a gentle breeze blowing throughout the ship. Katara walked out onto the deck to admire the view. She loved watching sunsets back at home, but with all the recent traveling she had been doing, she realized that it had been far too long since she had done so. Momentarily lost in the beauty of the sunset, she suddenly realized she wasn't alone. She looked over to see Zuko sleeping in a slightly reclined chair with a blanket over his legs and a book on his lap. She blushed suddenly, she couldn't help it. She hadn't realized that he had gone up to the deck to allow her to nap in his room. She was grateful for that consideration.

She quietly walked up to him. She noticed him shivering in the breeze. She carefully removed the book from his lap and pulled the blanket up to cover his shoulders to keep him warmer. She stepped back quickly, hoping he didn't wake. She watched him sleep for a few moments, in which he didn't stir, and then headed back inside.

Almost an hour later, Katara was in the kitchen preparing something to eat. She hadn't eaten since her late breakfast earlier. She was so busy cooking that she didn't notice Zuko enter the kitchen from the door behind her. The prince stood silently watching her for a moment, and then finally spoke.

Hey.

Oh, Zuko! Katara turned and looked at him surprised. You startled me!

Sorry, he replied plainly, what are you doing?

Just making some dinner, she answered, I can make you something too.

You don't have to do that, he told her.

It's no trouble, she answered, I have plenty here.

Thanks, he nodded.

Where are Iroh and the others?

They went back into town for another trip, he replied, Hopefully this time they will make it back

before the storm hits, otherwise they'll be back in the morning.

Oh, alright, she nodded.

Katara went back to cooking, as Zuko sat at the table and watched her. Eventually, she began to hum and even sing softly while she was cooking. Zuko looked up at her, surprised by the sudden sound of her singing. She didn't notice him looking at her and when she made no reference to it he realized it was most likely purely out of habit. Still, he made no effort to stop her. He even found himself enjoying the sound of her lovely voice, though he didn't know the song she was singing. He sat listening in silent appreciation as she finished cooking the food.

Here we go, she said as she placed a plate in front of, careful, it's a bit hot.

Thank you, he smiled at her. She blushed fiercely and nodded, casting her nervous eyes down to her own plate. He smiled at her shy attempt to avoid looking at him; he had to admit, she really was cute.

Is it okay? Katara shyly questioned after the prince had eaten a bit.

Zuko looked up at her and smiled at her. It's great, he answered.

Katara again couldn't help her blush. Thanks.

He nodded, and the two of them finished their meals in silence, yet still comfortable in each other's presence.

Later, the two of them entered the room they had been sharing. Katara yawned as Zuko opened the door up for her. She walked into the room and stretched and yawned again.

Zuko chuckled, Tired?!

A bit! she laughed.

Thunder rumbled above them, making them realize that the storm had started. It seemed they would have another night on the ship to themselves, just the two of them. They smiled at each other in an awkward silence.

Go ahead, Zuko told her, you can take the bed. Get some rest.

No, that's okay, she shook her head, I was napping there earlier. You take it.

He smiled and nodded, Thanks.

She nodded, and walked toward a chair. Zuko watched her as she adjusted herself on the chair, trying to make herself more comfortable; unfortunately it was no avail. He stood silent for a moment, and then finally spoke.

Katara, would you like to sleep with me?

Huh? she looked at him with surprise.

You can sleep with me, if you want to, he replied, We can share the bed, and then we could both be comfortable.

Oh...well, if you re okay with that, she answered hesitantly.

He nodded and climbed into the bed sliding to far side so that there would be room for her to join him. She stood up slowly, still very unsure. However, a reassuring smile from Zuko eased her mind. She lay down on her right side, lying beside him, and he covered both of their bodies with the blanket. He used his bending ability to lower the intensity of fire on the torches significantly, creating and warm low light. He then lay down, curving his body against her back. He draped his arm over her as he got into a relaxed position.

Are you comfortable? he asked softly.

Yes, she quietly replied.

Good.

She nodded, and took a few deep breaths, relaxing more and more, all the while becoming more comfortable. She found herself cuddling up in his embrace. He smiled, feeling happy to be holding her in his arms. He pulled her closer to him, reaching his arm over hers and entangling their fingers in an unspoken comfort.

Good night...Katara, he whispered.

Good night...Zuko.

~ TO BE CONTINUED....

9. Comfort

Disclaimer: I do not own Avatar: The Last Airbender or any of the characters associated. This is a fan fiction! =)

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 9-- Comfort

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

The thunder rumbled loudly outside, and lightning flashed, illuminating the dark room. The rage of the storm was severe, and Katara was unable to rest. She shivered in dark, nervous but careful not to move; she didn't want to disturb the young man sleeping peacefully beside her. Zuko's breathing was soft and low and she tried listening to it to calm herself. Unfortunately it didn't work. The loudest crash yet sounded throughout the ship, followed by a huge lightning strike. Katara's whole body shook violently with fear, and she whimpered as she tensed her shoulders and shut her eyes tight. Her reaction was enough to awaken Zuko.

What is it?! Zuko asked in surprise. Katara, are you alright he gently touched her shoulder.

Ye...Yeah, she answered with an audible tremble in her voice.

Zuko was silent for a moment, during which another roar of thunder and a blaze of lightning occurred. He noticed her tremble and tense up yet again. Unsure of how he should handle her fear, the prince began to gently rub her shoulder to try to ease her tension. Katara sniffed and tried to hide her tears from him.

I hate thunderstorms, she said softly, her voice still shaking, as she shielded her face from another lightning flash.

Zuko gave her a gentle tug on her shoulder to turn her from her side onto her back, so that she wasn't facing the window. He moved his hand to her face and tenderly wiped away her tears.

It's alright, he said softly, you're safe here. It'll be fine. I'm right here; nothing bad is going to happen to you.

She managed a smile and looked in the prince's eyes, which were filled with an often unseen kindness and concern. She nodded and rolled onto her other side, facing away from the window, and cuddled up next to him. He put his arm around her and lay back. He held her close to comfort her as she shivered with another thunder strike. She looked up at him and smiled again.

Thanks.

Zuko nodded and closed his eyes. Katara cuddled close to his side and rested her head on his chest. Suddenly, she giggled softly.

What? Zuko chuckled and questioned her.

It s just... I can hear your heart, she replied cutely, with a sweet smile.

He smiled lightly back at her and reached for her right hand. He pulled it gently across his chest and placed it above where his heart beat softly.

I can feel it too, Katara said sweetly.

Zuko nodded with a smile and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. Katara sighed contently and closed her eyes as well. She felt much more calm and relaxed, and so secure knowing he was right there beside her. She smiled happily and slowly drifted off to sleep in his warm embrace.

General Iroh, where do you want these? Ryuu asked as he hauled in their supplies.

Just in the storage closet is fine, the general answered.

Ryuu dragged their stuff down the hall as Iroh stopped on the deck, admiring the sunrise. Sure is beautiful, he said to himself. He took one last look at the colorful early-morning sky and smiled before he headed back inside the ship. He walked down the hall towards his nephew s room to see if he was asleep. He opened the door a crack and peered inside. He noticed Zuko sleeping peacefully with Katara at his side. He smiled when he saw them in together, so peaceful and content. He closed he door to let them sleep, and then headed to the kitchen to get some breakfast.

Sun shone brightly in the window and the rays warmed Zuko s face as he slowly opened his eyes. He sat up just slightly and looked around the room, taking in his surroundings. He noticed the sunlight and figured that it was probably late morning or early afternoon. His stomach rumbled, hungry for some breakfast, but he didn t move. After all, he didn t want to disturb Katara, who was still sleeping peacefully beside him. The prince laid back to relax, continuing to let the girl sleep in his arms. He knew that he didn t want to wake her.

Zuko thought about all that had happened in the past few days since he found Katara and brought her onto his ship. He had been feeling strangely recently and wasn t sure what it was. He didn t even know why. All he knew was that he was starting to actually enjoy spending time with the waterbender. He even felt happy in her presence, content when he was with her, and when he wasn t with her he was thinking about her. He wondered what more would happen in the days to come, and how much longer they d be together. After all, he did promise to help her find her brother and the Avatar again, so how much longer would this last?

Katara suddenly stirred in his embrace, and he released his hold on her a bit. He sat up and looked down at her as she slowly opened her eyes. She looked up at him blinking, her eyes adjusting to the light, and smiled when she recognized him looking at her.

Good morning, she said sweetly.

Good morning, he softly replied.

Katara sat up slowly and looked at him. She heard his stomach rumble again, and giggled. He chuckled along with her and got out of bed. He stood and reached out his hand to her.

Breakfast? he invited.

She nodded with a smile and took his hand as he led her to the kitchen.

~TO BE CONTINUED....

10. Arrival

Disclaimer: I do not own Avatar: The Last Airbender or any of the characters associated. This is a fan fiction! =)

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 10-- Arrival
By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

~ (After Breakfast...)

A few hours later, Katara was sitting on the deck reading, slightly reclined in her chair. She was so absorbed in her book that she didn't notice General Iroh arrive. He came up behind her slowly, so as not to frighten her. He cleared his throat to get her attention.

Oh! Katara whirled around to face the general, Hello sir! I didn't see you come up here!

That's quite alright, my dear, Iroh replied, how are you doing?

I'm fine, she answered, Did you get all of the supplies you needed?

Yes, we loaded them in the storage closet when we got back to the ship this morning. I assume you were asleep; hope we didn't wake you when we arrived.

Oh, no! she blushed slightly, wondering if he suspected that she had been with Zuko. Neither she nor the fire prince had any idea that the general had seen them together!

I am glad to know that, General Iroh replied.

Katara nodded then she thought she'd ask him what had been on her mind, Where are we heading now?

Iroh smiled, We're heading due west right now. If my calculations are correct, we should soon reach the shores of nearby island village. An old friend of mine lives there, and I said that I would visit if I was ever in the neighborhood. Hope you don't mind making the stop.

Katara shook her head, Not at all.

The general smiled and nodded, Well, I will see you later. Should only be a little over an hour or so before we reach the island.

He waved, walking back into the ship. Katara smiled and waved back, watching him go. After he left she got up out of the chair, setting her book down, and walked to the edge of the deck to look over the railing, looking out over the water. She sighed and couldn't help but smile as she watched the waves dance along side the boat. She admired the clear blue sky as it was, almost completely free of clouds. The sun was beginning to get lower in the sky, nearing the

dinner hour; soon they would arrive at a new village, just another stop along the way in her getting back to her brother and Aang.

Sokka, Aang, I miss you guys so much, she said softly, I hope we find you really soon. She went back to her chair, picked up her book, and took one last look at the ocean and sky before heading back inside the ship.

About two hours later, Katara walked to Zuko's room and knocked gently on the door. When there was no response she carefully opened the door a crack, careful to be quiet in case he was resting or meditating. The room was lit and she slowly walked in; she saw him sitting by the window gazing intently at the sky.

Hey, he said plainly when she entered, as he turned to face her. Though he had seemed lost in thought, focusing out the window, he was incredibly aware of his surroundings.

Oh... hi, she said shyly.

What's up? Zuko asked, looking at her questioningly, wondering why she seemed so nervous.

Nothing, Katara looked at the prince, momentarily meeting his eyes. I was just coming to rest in here for awhile, unless of course, you'd like to be alone?

Zuko said nothing; he just continued to look at her calmly. He felt that he couldn't take his eyes away from her; after all, she was a very beautiful and intriguing creature.

I mean, I can go somewhere else, if you want. Katara still felt so unsure. She wanted to be with him, but she also didn't want to bother him.

No, you're fine, the prince replied, have a seat.

Thanks, she nodded and smiled shyly, as she sat down on the bed across from him. Some time passed, with the two teens sharing a shy but relatively comfortable silence. Eventually, Katara noticed Zuko glance back out the window. Nice evening, huh? she inquired.

He nodded, but didn't look at her. Katara nervously wondered if maybe she had disturbed him. Suddenly he stood up and walked to the door. She was afraid that he was leaving, but then he turned back to her.

Come on, he said, putting his hand out to her. When she didn't take it, he decided he'd resolve her confusion. We've arrived at the fire nation village.

Oh! she jumped up in surprise and took his hand as he led her up to the deck.

When they got there General Iroh and his servant Ryuu were already there, preparing to get off the ship. As soon as they were in sight, Zuko quickly released her hand. He quickly walked over to them, leaving her to follow him.

We're here! the general had a big smile on his face, obviously happy to be returning to the

village.

Are we staying overnight, uncle? Zuko asked.

It wouldn't pay to travel through the night, Iroh replied, My dear friend Mandesa has offered us her cabin for the night.

Alright, the prince sighed. It was clear he would have preferred to limit the time they stopped and continue the journey. However, Zuko did feel a bit happy knowing that the delay would allow Katara to be with them longer. He wasn't exactly eager to see her return to her brother and the Avatar; he really was starting to enjoy her being around.

The general nodded and walked off the ship, as Ryuu, Zuko, and Katara all followed him.

Once on the shore, Katara looked around at the island as she followed the others away from the port and into the village. She felt a bit unsure, knowing that she was far from home, in a fire nation village she knew nothing about. Yet, at the same time, she felt excited to be there. The island was beautiful and Iroh made the village sound very nice. She knew that if she had to be away from her brother and Aang, she was glad to be with the group instead of alone. She also couldn't help but feel eager to spend more time with Zuko. She was starting to enjoy spending time with him, getting to know him better. It seemed that the fire nation prince really wasn't so bad after all!

~TO BE CONTINUED....

11. An Old Friend

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 11-- An Old Friend

By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

As they group reached the entrance to the village, Katara looked around. It was a very cute, clean little village, with bright festive decorations hanging from all of the buildings. She had never seen such beautiful decorations. They made the whole village come alive with bright colors in the darkening evening as the sun was slowly sinking into the western horizon.

Iroh!

Katara spun around to face the voice that had called out excitedly from behind her. General Iroh and the others turned around as well. They all faced a short, stocky middle-aged woman who had a big smile on her face. She was followed by a few servants, prepared to assist her. She ran towards them and gave Iroh a huge hug.

I have missed you so much! the woman said happily. She released him from her embrace after what seemed like forever; clearly she really had missed him!

I've missed you too, Mandesa, the general smiled down at her and nodded. It's been far too long.

I'll say, she replied, What, has it been, four years? Why on earth did it take you so long to get in the neighborhood ?

Sorry Mandy, Iroh apologized, but since I left the fire nation kingdom a while ago, I have been traveling with my nephew Zuko.

The prince came forward when his uncle referenced him with a gesture. He bowed respectfully to her and then stood facing her. Mandesa looked up at him and another large, toothy smile came to her face.

Prince Zuko, she looked at him admiringly, smiling all the while, Why, the last time I saw you, you were just a tiny little thing just starting to learn to walk! And now look at you, a grown man, so tall and handsome, prince of the fire nation!

And a very powerful bender, Iroh proudly added, as Zuko blushed slightly.

Wow! Mandesa nodded, impressed, That's wonderful Zuko, dear. Good for you!

Thanks, he softly replied, obviously a bit embarrassed by the situation.

Katara smiled. Mandesa seemed like such a sweet energetic lady; even Zuko didn't correct her to stop her from her chatty ways. It was then that Mandesa noticed the young waterbender standing behind the general and the prince. She looked right at her and smiled.

Why, hello there dear, she walked toward Katara, reaching out to shake her hand, I didn't even see you there! I'm sorry! Hope you didn't think I was rude!

Not at all, Katara smiled, shaking the woman's hand.

Oh good, the lady smiled, My name is Mandesa. Iroh is a dear old friend of mine from our childhood, back in the fire nation main kingdom.

I'm Katara, the waterbender replied.

Miss Katara is from the Southern Water Tribe, General Iroh informed.

Oh! Mandesa seemed surprised at first, but then she simply nodded and smiled at Katara again. Well, welcome to our fire nation village my dear. As our guest, let us know if there is anything you need.

Katara nodded, and smiled gratefully. Thank you, I hope it's not a problem that I'm here.

Not at all, and you're very welcome, dear, the woman nodded, smiling. Not all firebenders are the same; we can think independently for ourselves! Any friend of Iroh's and Prince Zuko's is a friend of mine, and certainly very welcome here! She smiled and turned to address the others as well, Now, you all must be tired after your journey. Let me show you to the cabin.

That would be wonderful, Mandy, thank you, Iroh nodded and gestured to Ryuu, Will you please help them carry some of our things?

Yes sir, Ryuu nodded and helped Mandesa's servants carry their luggage up to the cabin.

Mandesa led the way and Iroh, Zuko, and Katara followed her up the hill to her cabin. The cabin was actually a pretty good size, with plenty of space to accommodate guests, and they all were able to get their own room for the night. Katara got her things situated in her room and then walked out into the hall. She found herself heading out onto the deck, admiring the view, as it overlooked a beautiful pond surrounded by trees. She smiled as she could hear birds singing. She watched fish jump and dragonflies zoom across the surface of the water.

Beautiful, isn't it? General Iroh came up beside her to look out off of the deck. He smiled at her and she nodded, smiling back. I used to spend whole summers in this village, the general told her, the fishing is wonderful!

Katara nodded and smiled at him, and looked back out. It is very nice here.

Well I'm glad you could be here then, Mandesa joined them, smiling, you couldn't have come at a better time!

What do you mean? Katara looked at her, confused.

Tonight is our annual Festival of Firelight, the woman answered, We celebrate with an all-night party, with a great feast to start!

Oh, wow! Katara nodded to her excitedly, That sounds wonderful!

Oh it s very exciting, Mandy nodded, I am so glad you re here to join in the fun!

When will it start? Katara inquired.

Feast starts at sundown, and before then we will find you a beautiful dress to wear to the party!

Thank you, the girl blushed, somewhat stunned, I really appreciate that.

Your welcome dear, Mandesa replied, Now, come with me, and we ll get you ready. Iroh, she turned to the general, you and Zuko get ready too, and we ll see you in about an hour. You ll be the most handsome men there!

You flatter me Mandy, Iron smiled at her and nodded, I ll inform my nephew and we ll meet you in an hour to head to the feast together.

The woman nodded and led Katara back into the cabin. Katara waved good bye to the general and followed her inside.

~TO BE CONTINUED....

12. The Festival of Firelight

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM ~ Ch. 12-- The Festival of Firelight
By: Emily Beyer (a.k.a. SxK_YGOfan)

Uncle, do I have to go? Zuko sighed as he followed Iroh down the hill into the village. Couldn't I just stay in the cabin and meditate and train tonight?

Now Zuko, Mandy was kind enough to invite us to the celebration, the general shook his head, we can be gracious enough to accept. And, when I say we... I mean you!

Zuko frowned at his uncle and groaned, knowing that he wasn't going to get out going to party.

Really Zuko, Iroh looked at him and shook his head, You are a member of the fire nation after all, and this festival is part of our history and tradition.

Yeah, well, I'm not really the socializing, party type, the prince sighed and rolled his eyes.

Well, we're already here, and you're staying, so try to enjoy the evening and have a good time.

Whatever, Zuko just shrugged and followed his uncle to the tables where the feast would be served. Weren't we supposed to go with Mandesa to the feast?

She is helping Katara get ready, Iroh answered, she said they'd meet us there.

Yeah, women always take so long to get ready to go out!

Oh, Zuko! the general just shook his head and sighed. He walked to the head table, which was atop a platform overlooking all the others, and they met up with Ryuu.

Hello sir! Ryuu bowed swiftly to Iroh and turned to Zuko, bowing to him as well, Good evening, your highness.

Yeah, sure, Zuko just ignored him and looked around, checking out the set up for the feast.

You both look very nice, Ryuu complimented, nervously as he noticed the prince avoid eye contact.

Why, thank you Ryuu! the general smiled proudly and nodded to him.

In truth, the fancy satin kimono-like robes that the two of them wore were very attractive and beautiful made. General Iroh's was red with a black detailed bonsai tree on the back. The

prince looked even more striking in his black one, with a red dragon stitched on the back and across his shoulders, incredibly detailed and decorative; a very impressive and fancy design. Ryuu and the other peasant villagers wore them too, though theirs were cotton or wool, and much simpler and more plain. The royal and wealthy stood out impressively, dressed so nicely for the festival celebration.

Ryuu nodded to Iroh, to further compliment him. Sir, are Madame Mandesa and Miss Katara coming?

They re on their way, the general replied, They are meeting us down here in a little while.

Oh, I see, Ryuu nodded to him, Well sir, I am going to help set the rest of the things up. I will see you later; enjoy the celebration.

Iroh nodded, Thank you Ryuu, you enjoy yourself as well.

Ryuu nodded and bowed to them both, Good bye, your highness, he addressed Zuko hesitantly.

Yeah, the prince gave a small casual wave and continued to look around, basically ignoring him.

As Ryuu and some of the others walked away to continue working and setting up, Iroh turned to look at his nephew. Is something bothering you Zuko?

Hmm?

You seem preoccupied, the general answered, Is there something on your mind?

It s nothing uncle, Zuko replied plainly, I m fine.

Well, alright, if you say so.

Iroh then decided to take a seat at the head table. He sat down and looked out at all of the other long tables down in front of the main table. Zuko just stood there watching him for a while as he relaxed in the chair and sat humming and mumbling to himself as he looked around. The prince wasn t really sure what to do at first, but just as he decided to sit down himself, a voice called out behind him.

Hey guys! Mandesa called out as she came up the steps and rushed towards them waving excitedly. Zuko stepped back quickly as Iroh stood up and hugged Mandesa when she got up onto the platform with the head table where they were waiting. How are you two?

We re fine, the general smiled down at her when she released him from her embrace, How are you?

I m good!

Iroh nodded, You look lovely. He smiled at her admiring her decorative purple kimono, which was marked with pretty golden and green bird designs.

Awww thanks Iroh, the woman smiled sweetly at him, so do you. Really, you both look so handsome... you too Zuko!

Thanks, the prince mumbled and blushed slightly, casting his eyes down to the ground to avoid eye contact.

Mandesa smiled and nodded to him, Well, I hope you really enjoy the celebration tonight. This center, main seat is for you.

Huh? Zuko looked up at her, confused, You want me to sit in the main seat?!

The lady nodded, Of course, you are the prince after all. It s not often that a member of our royal family pays us a visit!

Zuko just blushed again and swallowed nervously, Okay, then.

She smiled and nodded, Your uncle and I will sit to your left, and you can place your lady to your right!

My lady?!

Where is Miss Katara? General Iroh quickly jumped in before Zuko could say anything else.

I m right here, said a soft, delicate voice from behind.

The three of the turned around and faced Katara as she walked up the stairs of the platform to meet them. Iroh and Mandesa ran to meet her and say Hello , but Zuko just stood there. For the first time in his life, the prince found himself completely speechless. He looked at the waterbender as she talked with the elderly woman and the general. Her hair was pulled up with a flower comb and she wore the most beautiful sky blue kimono, with decorative flower designs. Her make up was perfectly applied and her beautiful smile lit up her face and she conversed with the two adults. He just couldn t take his eyes off of her; she was the most beautiful woman he d ever seen. As she came up to the table and walked towards him he felt as though he couldn t breathe; he still couldn t move from his spot. All he could think about was how happy and honored he felt to be in the presence of one so lovely.

~ TO BE CONTINUED....