

Unwanted Sprout

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Submitted: August 25, 2010

Updated: August 25, 2010

Sidestory about what could have happened between Katara and Zuko after she defeated Azula and before he met Mai again. It could be also called "The Death of Zutara".

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Unwanted Sprout

There are many kinds of pressure. The pressure caused by your people customs, your work, your family... Frequently, you press yourself, trying to do what you think is the the "right thing," or to get a job or to make the people you love happy - or for so other many reasons. I used to think that nobody knew the most about pressure than a woman from South Water Tribe. When the men came back, tired and hungry from hunting, fishing or whatever is considered 'a man's work' ; they expect to find hot food, a clean house, and fresh clothes. They also expect us- the women- to skin and prepare whatever smelly bloody kill they have brough, without the slightest clue about how much trouble all these things cost to us. Still, that's ok, these are duties I took when my mother was gone, and I knew it would be hard. The worst are social pressures. In my tribe, girls start marrying from fifteen years old. When I had my fifteenth birthday, the men were all out at war, so the subject of my own marriage was temporarily pushed aside. Not that I was especially anxious because of that - all men from our community were over thirteen years-old. Both Grangran and Dad had married for love; I was sure they would understand my wish of finding someone special. But the rest of people, especially women, would think I was selfish for not making a family and bearing more children for our small tribe.

Then all that changed the day we found Aang in that iceberg. Only after I discovered he was the Avatar I learned what real pressure was. Nothing could be harder than to be responsible for restoring the equilibrium of the world - a burden too heavy for a simple kid to carry alone. No wonder he fled away 100 years ago.

And there was Zuko, too. Now it's hard to believe I hated him so much in the past! Once you learn about the things he had to go through, it's easier to understand the things he did. Even I can. Everything was done because he had to restore his precious honour and get back the love of his dad, even when he realized the wrong things the Fire Nation did to people. General Iroh told us that Zuko got terribly sick back in Ba Sin Se before I was trapped with him in that cave, because of these two pressures fighting inside of him. How can a father to make such things to his own children? I can't help but compare Zuko's family to mine and think how unfair I was to my own father. I remember how much Sokka wished to make Dad proud of him, too, even when Dad insisted he didn't need to do anything to make him proud. Dad never demanded anything from us, and I'm sure he'd never press me into marrying if I didn't wanted to. Well, in the end I found two very special boys. Sometimes, life gives us more than we wished for - unfortunately.

Sobbing, Katara pressed her hand gloved in water on Zuko's burned chest. His wounds immediately started mending, yet he looked so still that the Water Tribe girl feared she had arrived too late. dogy Azula! However, after a few long, agonizing seconds, he finally opened his eyes.

"Thank you" he muttered.

"I think I'm the one who should be thanking you." she replied, her eyes filled with tears, her expression relieved.

Many meters from them, Azula squirmed and roared in frustration as she tried in vain to free herself. Out of her reach, Katara and Zuko let themselves sit on the stony floor, too exhausted to do anything else than stare at her in horror as Azula vomited her blue fire, her last remains of humanity completely wiped out.

Finally, she also tired herself and collapsed, sobbing like a small child. Katara's eyes were now on Zuko, though. She was trying to read his thoughts as he stared at the young woman who had been once his sister.

"It could have been me," he thought, "Too many times I almost lost my sanity repeating to myself that my father loved me and that I was doing the right thing, even if I had to become a murderer and destroy entire cities to get the Avatar. If he hadn't expelled me, I would have inherited his throne. And probably I would be the crazy one now. Even though my father preferred her and she was better than me in firebending, Azula can't change the facts that she's a woman and younger than I. That's why she always hated me so much. Azula always felt the need of humiliating me, to push me down, in order to prove to herself she was better than I."

A new sound joined Azula's whining. Surprised, both the youngsters looked up, to see two Fire Nation soldiers standing at the other end of the plaza. Katara started to stand up, but Zuko held her arm to stop her, and whispered for her to wait. The soldiers' eyes jumped warily from their injured prince to their maddened queen, as if they wondered whose side to take. Finally, Azula solved the dilemma. She burst out in an insane laugh that would frighten even the Face Stealer and spat a lightning towards the two men, not hitting them but close. The older man - an officer, now Katara noticed it - talked hurriedly to his subordinate:

"Quickly! Go and fetch the royal doctor, and warn the others that Prince Zuko has defeated Queen Azula in the Agni Kai. And bring reinforcements. We'll have to find a way to muffle her."

Katara and Zuko just exchanged a look. Nobody needed to know that he had a little help. Officially, Prince Zuko had won the battle with Azula by himself.

As the young soldier ran to acknowledge the orders, the sergeant ran in a half circle, avoiding Azula, and went to his new lord, eager to help and please him. Rudely, he pushed Katara to the side, making her fall on her backseat.

"Step away from my prince, you filthy peasant!" he ordered, with a disgusted voice.

The girl promptly opened her mouth indignantly, but before she had time to protest, a raspy sound echoed through the yard. The sergeant clutched his aching cheek with as he stared in disbelief at his new lord. Zuko's eyes were narrowed in anger as he tried to stand up by himself. Even in his injured state and with his clothes tattered, there was something in him that couldn't be described in words, but that it exhilarated respect. Even Katara was speechless for a moment.

"She's not a peasant." Zuko stated with visible struggle to contain his anger, "She is a Water Tribe warrior and my guest, so I demand respect for her. I would be dead now if it wasn't for her."

"Yes, my lord. I'm sorry." the sergeant looked down humbly and muttered insincere apologies to Katara before insisting to offer support for the injured Prince. He escorted him towards the royal quarters.

There wasn't much for the royal doctor to do, besides bandaging the already healing injuries and giving Zuko something for the pain. Actually, he behaved better than the soldiers around Zuko's hostage; he admired Katara's work and even offered to recommend her to a medical school if she was interested. When she was finally allowed to be alone once again with Zuko, he apologized for the sergeant's treatment. Katara couldn't help but smile, remembering how many times he had called her "peasant" too, so long ago. So hard to believe that man was really the same Zuko who had pursued them so much and threatened Aang's life!

"Never mind," she waved a hand dismissively. "I heard much worse when we were hiding at the Fire Nation territory, after everyone thought that Aang was dead. Sokka even hid the fact that he was from Water Tribe from Master Piandao, fearing he wouldn't teach him to fence."

Zuko nodded wistfully.

"My uncle and I suffered with others' prejudice, too, when we were running from Azula," the young man sighed as he stared at the ceiling. "The Earth Kingdom hate my people, even the civilian ones - though I can't blame them. Many years will pass until the prejudice and hate among the three remaining nations will be eradicated completely... if that day ever comes. Probably we'll not be alive to see it coming."

"Don't be so pessimistic" Katara said, smiling as she came close to his bed, "If there are more people like you and your uncle in the Fire Nation, certainly it won't take so long. During years I hated your people because I thought that all of you were monsters, like my mother's murderer. But you healed me."

Slowly, she bent over him and ran a hand over Zuko's soft hair. He blinked in surprise, but didn't run from her touch.

"You were the only one who understood how much I needed to expulse that poison from inside of me," she whispered.

Behind his golden ((Are his eyes actually gold-colored?)) eyes, a small glint appeared, as if it was the first time he really saw her. Smiling, Zuko raised his hand and allowed it to run over Katara's smooth cheek, noticing the contrast of his pale fingers against her dark skin. She closed her eyes, letting out a sigh that was almost a purr. Just at that moment, a vision flashed through Zuko's brain, of his fingers caressing a very different face, narrow and pointed-chin, with a skin as white as his. The glint in his eyes died almost instantaneously. He pushed his hand back and looked away.

"Zuko?" Katara called softly, dumbfounded at his sudden change of mood.

"Please, don't t..." he muttered, turning to the side and backing away on his bed "I've hurt too many people in my life. I don't want to do that again."

For a moment, Katara just stood staring blankly at him. Then the remembrance of someone else dawned on her, too. Aang! How could she forget him, after all the ways he had shown how much he loved her? Especially his last kiss... she had actually enjoyed it. How could she do that to him?

"I... I'm sorry, err... thanks for bringing me back to my senses. I don't know what happened to me. Must have been because I almost saw you getting killed, so much stuff has happened... it was that," she stuttered, avoiding his face.

"You can say that to yourself, if it makes you feel better," Zuko stated calmly, with a sad voice despite his sarcastic words. Katara promptly turned around with a reply, but her frown melted down, disarmed by his wistful smile.

"I, too, have someone I like, just as you like Aang," he explained, "I was forced to leave her when I decided to join you guys. That broke her heart, but still, she risked her own life to save mine, and was thrown in prison because of that. "

Katara remembered her brother's comments about how Zuko's little girlfriend had saved both the boys and the prisoners from falling into the lava river and down to Boiling Rock. A wave of heated blood quickly rushed up to her face, darkening her cheeks.

"The tossing-arrows witch?" she snapped, unable to disguise her jealousy "Sokka told me about you two! Honestly, you have very bad taste!"

Zuko's eyes flared, his temper instantaneously spurred by her insulting tone.

"I have a bad taste?" he spat back. "And you, who's always hanging around with a baldy?" "YOU used to be bald, too, if you don't remember! Aang at least remembers shaving his head every morning, while you never seem to comb your hair!"

"Oh, so that was why you were fussing on my hair? To straighten it? " he said sarcastically, grabbing Katara's wrist and forcing her to touch his hair again, "Then finish the service... ouh!" Yelping in pain because of the movement, he released her, taking his hand to his bandaged chest. Katara promptly helped him to lie down and smoothed the pillows beneath his body, as Zuko muttered new apologies for his rude behavior. An embarrassed silence fell between them for a few moments. At a complete loss of what to do, Katara sat at the border of the bed as she pushed a few stray locks that had loosened during their fight.

"What has happened to us?" she whispered to herself, raising her hands to cover her face.

"Whatever has happened to us must be silenced and buried right now." Zuko's voice was sad, but firm "That wouldn't bring anything good for any of us. It would just hurt the people we love. And that could even ruin all those things we've fought so hard to win. We'd eventually hate each other."

Katara jumped back to her feet and slowly turned away. Although inwardly she agreed with him, the young water bender couldn't help but feel hurt at his rejection.

"For someone who's always keeps going no matter how hard it is, you're giving up too quickly," she remarked, giving him a sharp look over her shoulder, before turning again. Zuko grabbed her wrist, interrupting her movement and forcing her to turn to face him.

"I don't want you to hate me again," he said. His face was stoic, but there was a sad, pleading expression in his eyes that made Katara's irritation melt away. Blinking to keep tears from rolling down, the girl leaned towards Zuko and rested her hands on his shoulders.

"I'll never hate you again" she promised, brushing her face against his and wrapping her arms around his neck, taking care to not touch his injuries. With equal care, Zuko returned the hug in an affectionate but respectful way, just like he would do to the Avatar many hours later, after the crowning ceremony.

Slowly, they separated and smiled at each other in a sort of brotherly pact, before Katara finally turned and left him alone.

After the crowning ceremony, we were invited to remain in the palace a few days more. Sokka is driving the servants mad with his demands of food and hot massages the whole time. Toph, of course, never loses a chance of teasing him, since these things are so common for her. About me, I think I would go crazy if I had to live like this, with a bunch of people watching me and not allowing me to lift a finger. Zuko's clearly uncomfortable at the fussing around him, as much as he tries to not show it. I'm sure that he would love to leave everything to come with us if he could. But he knows his responsibilities, just like we know ours.

We have done the right thing. Zuko was right; our ways were traced separately from the beginning by forces even stronger than the Avatar himself. This small sprout that has germinated between us will have to die crushed between the pressures caused by the lives we chose. I don't think I would be happy as a queen, even if the Fire Nation citizens accepted one from the South Water Tribe. I can't care for Mai - and apparently she feels the same about me - but she belongs to the Fire Nation nobility and will know how to deal with the courtship protocols and yaddayaddas. Most importantly, she truly loves Zuko, anyone can see that. And I love Aang. I can't stand seeing him hurt, physically or emotionally. Even being the Avatar, he's still a child and will need someone to support and love him. Deep down, I think that I always knew that one would be me - and he's not a bad kisse, at all! Yet, sometimes I can't help but wonder how it would have been if Zuko had decided to join us, back at that day at the cavern, instead of taking Azula's side. I think I'll never forgive him entirely for this.

Maybe in another life Zuko and I will have a chance together.

THE END