

The Fire Within

Powerful.

There was no other word fit to describe how Katara felt. She had spent these last months living in constant fear. Stress. Uselessness. She had felt a pawn. But it was now that she knew she was the Queen of this game. She'd been waiting on the sidelines for her moment. This was it. Katara's power would be the turning point of this war. She, for the first time in her life, felt unstoppable. She looked up from the fallen Fire Lord and, with one gentle breath, raised her arms in the light of the full moon and cast her gaze upon the surrounding guard.

No one would stand in her way. Not tonight. Not every again.

A few of the guards took tentative steps forward, unsure what caused Ozai to collapse in the way he had, groaning in anguish and clutching his chest before resulting in a crumpled mass on the floor. The once almighty Fire Lord, snuffed out by a girl. No. A woman. A woman who was beginning to understand her strength.

It could have been fear of Katara or, perhaps, relief that Ozai was no more, that the remaining guard fled from the room, alerting the palace that the Fire Lord was dead. The few in the front that dared to test the waters of Katara's newfound bravery were about to learn what had caused Ozai's demise. Katara slowly drew the cool night air into her lungs and it was as if she felt the very power of the moon coursing through her veins. With ease, she connected herself into the blood of these loyal men and slowly began to, methodically, lower her hands.

Immediately and without their control, the men's bodies contorted into puppetry motions. Their arms bending outward, their heads cocking to the side, uncomfortable groans eliciting from their clamped mouths. She dropped them to their knees. Four men. On the ground before her. And she had done it effortlessly. She could feel the hatred pouring through three of these men, she could feel their energy within herself as she moved them. She knew if she let them live that they would only try and kill her. Or intervene with her plan.

And nothing was going to stop her tonight.

She bent her fingers and burst their hearts as well. They dropped to the ground, no longer in her command. She focused her attention on the last man, eyes wide in fear. "You're a free man if you want to be." Katara told him. She meant this reassuringly, but she knew her voice and actions would taint her words. She was a monster now as well. She didn't blame his fear. "I'm leaving," she continued anyway, "and if you try to stop me, I will kill you too. Do you understand?" He briskly nodded his head and bowed low on to the ground as Katara released her control from his blood. She didn't need nor want his bowing, but it did make her feel better about his threat. He was showing submission.

Just as she had done to Ozai. She would never do it again.

This whole ordeal had lasted no more than a few minutes. She didn't plan to waste a second more. She immediately burst out of the room and down the corridor to Zuko's room. She was going to free him, if it was the last thing she ever did.

Nothing else mattered. Not her freedom. Not her life. Only Zuko.

She heard screaming from all over the palace, explosions rumbled the ground beneath her. Katara did not know who awaited outside the palace, but she could guess that Hama or Mavang had decided this was the time to strike. They had saved her and, soon to be, Zuko as well. She would never be able to repay this debt.

Katara approached Zuko's room and for one brief moment hesitated outside the door. The guards that had so relentlessly been perched outside his door were gone. Perhaps they were all off fighting the invasion. There was also no noise coming from inside their room. Nonetheless, she knew she might face Azula herself inside.

Katara was prepared to do what she must.

Nothing was going to stop her.

She swiftly opened the door ... and then froze. The shaking of the ground settled beneath her feet. She couldn't feel anything at all. The screaming in the palace became whispers. Her breath hitched in her throat. And, without her permission, tears began to silently slide down her cheeks.

Zuko.

My Zuko. The words echoed in her head absentmindedly.

"Katara?" He rasped. As if he was surfacing from a dream. Katara had expected to face Azula when she strode in. She expected to have to bloodbend again. She secretly had hoped to. The high of the bloodbending was still coursing through her and she was aching to feel it again.

But there was no need.

Zuko stood in the center of the room, flames lacing his body and up his arms, beginning to die down to gentle licks of light. These flames were different, however. She had never seen fire dancing with colors of purples, greens, pinks, blues, and reds. The rainbow encircled him in a soft glow of salvation. Zuko was alive.

Beneath Zuko's feet, scattered throughout the room, were those who had dared oppose his fury. It seems Zuko had found his strength as well. Azula lay lifeless in the center. Her doll-like eyes open and unseeing. A cruel gentle smile etched forever on her lips. Several Dai Li and royal guards strewn, dissolved into ash and smoking flesh.

The room smelled thick with burnt bodies. Burnt fabric. Smoke and something sweet... Zuko.

"Katara?" He asked again, his voice wavering, as if he didn't know she was truly here. And then reality rushed into her in a tidal wave. Katara slammed the door shut behind her and ran into the chaos, right into Zuko's shaking arms. His flames went out instantly. Zuko threw his arms around Katara just as she crashed into him. Her arm was now throbbing in pain from Ozai, but that seemed a miniscule thought in the midst of everything.

She pressed her face into his neck and felt her feet gently lift off the ground as Zuko hoisted her up in his embrace. "You're alive." He whispered into her hair, as if to himself. She couldn't bring herself to speak. She couldn't make any words come out at all. Katara simply nodded into his shoulder. "You're here." Zuko's voice sounded distant.

"I'm here." Katara barely managed the words, but she knew Zuko's mind must be struggling to sort reality. "We're okay." She didn't know if that was actually true. She didn't know how much damage had been done to Zuko's mind by the Dai Li or his memories or what had happened with Azula... he had killed his sister. His little sister. No matter what Azula was, she was still his family. And then it dawned on Katara for the first time that Zuko had no family left. The thought startled her. Because it wasn't true at all. Zuko had her. She was alive. And Zuko was alive.

And they were together.

Nothing else mattered.

Zuko slowly set her back on her feet and moved his hands to either side of her face. His amber eyes stared at her, dancing along her face, her hair, her neck, her shoulders, and then settled back on her eyes. "I'm here." She reminded him. He nodded slowly, his hair swaying along his face. Zuko bowed his head to rest his forehead against hers. His long fingers desperately kneaded in her hair, as if to ground himself.

His breath was heavy and warm and panted on her mouth.

Katara's arms remained around his neck, clutching to him just the same. She weaved her fingers up into his hair as well. The warmth of his neck pulsating along her hands. His bare chest heaving beneath her arms.

We're alive. She reminded herself. He was real beneath her touch. He was here.

My Zuko.

"Katara..." Zuko's breath came out in pants as he tugged at her, attempting to melt her body into his. Before she could respond, Zuko pressed his mouth to hers and wrapped her in a deep kiss. He continued to hold her face firmly until he broke away, his face a mere inch away, their noses

brushing against one another. And then, as the moon danced in Zuko's eyes and fire raged through Katara's soul, he whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too." Katara responded immediately. Without question or wonder. She knew it in her very being. There was no doubt that she loved Zuko, body and soul. She was ready to kill for him, to die for him if needed. He was the center of her being. Her best friend. Her soul mate. And she loved him thoroughly. This wasn't love at first sight. This was a love that was built one brick at a time, deliberately, and carefully curated to withstand the world. A love you feel quietly at first and then, suddenly, all at once.

A gentle smile spread across his face and it was almost comical. The palace was in shambles, explosions sounding off outside, screams and cries heard in the distance, and yet here they stood professing their love for one another. In absolute bliss.

Because nothing else mattered anymore. Just them. *Just this.*

"We need to get out of here." Katara reminded Zuko. His smile receded as he nodded in agreement. "Will you be able to?"

"I'll be fine." Zuko interrupted. She didn't know how bad the mind games had been with the Dai Li. She didn't know if he was fully back. If he had been putting on a show before, pretending to be under their control. Or if he just truly snapped. But, at this moment, he was here. Both physically and mentally. Right now, he was still her Zuko. "Let's go."

He dropped his hands from her face and resolutely walked over to their wardrobe. He grabbed their black clothes they'd worn to the lemon grove and tossed Katara hers. They quickly donned their camouflage and then Zuko dragged their wardrobe over to the door to block it from anyone who might try to come after them.

While Zuko worked on barricading the door, Katara used water from the washroom to heal the burns on her arm and then fill the water skins on her hips. She tied her matted hair back and then slipped the black mask over her face that Zuko handed her. He had done the same and now only his eyes showed on his face. Zuko had his dao swords on his back and the rest of their measly belongings loaded in his pack.

As they opened the window in the washroom, the chaos outside ensued. Fire and screams filled the air. The sound of a revolution. Nothing would be the same after tonight. Zuko crouched before the windowsill and held a hand out to Katara to help her out first.

He always thought of her first. Instinctively. Naturally. And her heart swelled.

Everything will be okay. She now knew. *He'll protect me.* Of this, she was confident. No more fear. No more uncertainty.

Katara reached her hand up, past his, and to Zuko's face. She rested her hand there, cradling his cheek, and gently stroked her thumb along his scar. Zuko tilted his head into the warmth of her skin.

And I'll protect him.

"Just you and me," Katara said. A reminder that she wasn't alone anymore and neither was he. She didn't expect a response, she said it aloud, but more to herself than anything.

And yet, Zuko squeezed her hand against him, his eyes softening in her favorite way, and he replied, "always."