

## **i choose us**

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# i choose us

by [airiustide](#)

## Summary

Zuko wakes up ten years in an alternate future next to the waterbending girl who's name he can't remember and two children she claims is his own. With no clue on how he's landed in the south pole, Zuko concludes that he must gather the pieces in order to return home, back to the past and back to his life in the fire nation.

But unexpected feelings claim an unexpected piece of his heart.

“How can you look at me like that?” She asks, pulling him from his stupor.

Her blue eyes shift over his face, bound by the way he looks at her so intently, so infatuated. This man, who has loved and shared a life with her the past six years. And yet, she feels like she's sixteen all over again. A sudden bud rose in her chest and blossoms into everlasting longing. Katara remembers this, remembers this exact scenario where Zuko had met her with the same gaze in the Crystal Catacombs so many years ago. Where he had met her with the same gaze in the quiet of his princely chambers and the kiss that silenced her sobs when she did not know if he would make it alive from the injury Azula had given him.

Zuko swallows. “Like what?”

“Like you're seeing me for the very first time.”

## Notes

always wanted to do a time travel au and im so glad i finally got the courage to do it. domestic zuko living in the south pole is my weakness and i hope you all enjoy reading it as much as i enjoyed writing it. let me know what you all think!

## creature of karma

*“I thought you had changed!”*

*‘I have changed!’*”

He repeats this to himself in hopes that it’s as real as he believes it to be in his head. He *has* changed. The doubt rearing its ugly head over his shoulder is just his imagination and not some venomous creature of karma waiting to strike.

He’s doing the right thing. He has to be. After all the pain, all the tribulations and the rejections, Agni sought to give him everything he’s always wanted and it came in the form of Azula, the last person he thought would ever extend a hand to him. This has to be a sign. For if Azula of all people was offering salvation for his damned soul, then why not his father? The one who had the ability to restore his honor?

If anyone else were in his shoes, they’d understand. It was sensible, it was practical. So why did his Uncle choose differently? Why did he not act in their nation’s favor when the opportunity presented itself? They could have both left that awful city unchained. No more living under the thumb of another monarchy. No more being a servant to the enemy just to survive. No more stupid tea shop and trying to appease complete strangers who were beneath them.

Zuko knows his worth, and Azula reminded him of that. Iroh should’ve known his. That’s why the old man is in prison. That’s why he’s getting his just deserves. Zuko chose the logical path and his uncle had made his bed. Iroh forced his hand, he forced the prince to sever their bond. Even though Zuko tries to convince himself of this, why doesn’t the guilt go away? Instead it frustrates him to no end- swelling like a burning ball in his chest. It makes him angry and he doesn’t even know why.

He thought being here on Ember Island, away from the politics and away from the stress of returning home, would clear his mind— remind him where he belonged. Now Zuko realizes he’s more out of place here than he’s ever been before.

“Are you still sulking?”

He turns from his thoughts, from the stretch of ocean in front of him. He can still hear voices in the distance, the party they had sabotaged earlier still in a panic. He'd be delighted to bask in their dismay if not the whirlwind clouding his brain. He's even less enthused knowing the display he made in front of his sister and her friends. They had seen a side of him he had kept bottled up and now he doesn't know how to properly look at anyone.

“Weren't you going to bed, Mai?” He asks, clearly in no mood for company. There's still tension in the air between them.

She shrugs, standing next to him without a glance or an ounce of concern, “Can't sleep when it's easy to see you standing here gawking at the ocean. It's hard to miss your signature pout.”

Zuko frowns. “Thanks for the words of comfort,” He's pretty sure his sister and Ty Lee were spying as well.

Mai sighs, “I'm not going to baby you, Zuko. Don't forget that I'm still mad at you for the attitude you've displayed today.”

“Yeah, you've made that clear. Multiple times,” Zuko picks up a seashell and tosses it in the water, his attempt to skip it only results in it smacking flat against the surface before it sinks.

She remains indifferent to his shortness, only arching a brow and crossing her arms, “I'm willing to let you make it up to me.”

Sometimes it's hard for him to know what to say to Mai. She's beautiful, a skilled fighter and obviously too good for him; while Mai seems to have a clear understanding of her role and everything she stands for, Zuko can't even figure out a sliver of himself. And yet, she wants him. Zuko who disgraced his father and nation. Zuko who the traitor and fugitive. Zuko who bore a scar for the rest of his life, signifying those misdeeds. How can he complain? Still, he feels less and less like himself, like the person he thought he was or wanted to be. Being home should have fixed that. Shouldn't it?

“Why are you here anyway? If you’re just going to put me down, then go back inside.”

“Geez, you are so sensitive. You’re acting like a child, you know. Heaven forbid, anyone is mature enough to be real with you.”

Zuko’s eyes dimmer, his shoulders slump and he’s feeling so much weight over nothing, nothing he can figure out.

Mai decides to ignore the grimace contorting his face, coming up behind him to wrap her arms around his waist and rests her cheek on his shoulder, “Let’s not do this, Zuko. We can start where we left off before Azula interrupted us. You seemed pretty into it.”

He looks over his shoulder to see a rare smile present itself on her lips, and for a brief second, that made him happy. To be wanted by Mai, it makes him so damn happy. It’s not enough. He doesn’t even know what enough looks like.

“Maybe tomorrow,” He mutters, turning back to the ocean, the moonlight reflecting in the water.

Mai rolls her eyes. “Suit yourself,” then quietly retreats back to the beach house.

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He replays that scene in his head again. The one with the waterbender and her piercing, white hot anger— her sharp blue gaze burned an image forever haunting. *I thought you changed. I have changed.*

Why does it bother him? Why can’t he sleep or eat or breath without it picking and prodding at him from every possible angle. That waterbender be damned. How dare she plant a seed of doubt in his mind. What did she know? She can judge him all she wants. Her opinion means nothing to him. Nothing. It’s over. The Avatar is dead.

*No he's not.*

Of course he is. He was struck down in front of Zuko's very eyes. Many had witnessed his downfall. Forget the fact that it shook him to witness a child die. Forget the fact that he never wanted to actually kill the Avatar. He can wipe his hands clean of this because it was all Azula's fault. No burden or blood to trace the horrific event back to him.

*Lies. You would have done anything to retrieve your honor. You may not have killed the Avatar but you played a direct hand in it and even took the credit to save yourself. You know it to be true. The Avatar is alive.*

How?

*You know how. Because of her.*

Because of her...the blue eyed beauty who offered to lift the burden of his past from his face. Her gentle touch and gentle words, soothing like that of her element; her caress like medicine. For all that he couldn't stand about her, though he barely knew her, Zuko held a sense of admiration. She was a worthy opponent, and he respects that, but she's still the enemy. That's what he told himself when he betrayed her and his Uncle.

Zuko clicks his tongue, flipping on his side and kicking the sheets off the bed. Suddenly they're too uncomfortable, the silk making his skin crawl like snakes.

He claws at the front of his tunic as though there's this slithering pain coursing through his chest. No matter how many times he tries to convince himself that he's made the right decision, he still can't place it. He still can't get the image of his Uncle being apprehended and sheer disappointment on his face. Or the image of the Avatar convulsing with lightning or the image of the waterbender's tear stained face as she holds him in her arms.

He knows that look from anywhere.

*Mom* . He thinks. Would she ever be proud of the man he became? If she'd seen him now, will she accept the fact that he was responsible for someone losing their life because he chose the easy way out?

Zuko isn't sure what feels worse, being a traitor to his nation or betraying the very people who actually gave a damn about him.

# the air cuts like glass

## Chapter Summary

Zuko isn't where he was last night. There's a stranger in his bed but she knows his name.

## Chapter Notes

thank you all for the lovely comments <3. im really enjoying writing zuko adapting to the south pole and it all gets so much better. for those who might be wondering, i had received inspiration to write this fic after recently rewatching The Family Man film from (2002?)

It's as if the sun rose too soon. He can feel it in his veins, urging his muscles to move. Zuko pinched his eyelids tight, licking his lips and flexing his fingers. It's a new day, the demons occupying every corner of his thoughts scurries to the back of his mind as day breaks—though knowing full well they will return with a force once night fell. The first thing he thinks of his girlfriend. He had been such an ass to Mai and they had another two days on the island before returning to the palace.

The palace. How he dreads the suffocation awaiting his arrival among a world he wasn't completely sure he belonged. But he *needs* to belong. He *needs* to survive. That's what Zuko was always good at doing, surviving.

With a heavy sigh, he figures it's time to get up, do some katas and make the best of this trip. First things first, he needed to block out that ungodly snoring those two old hags were making in the other room. It echoed in his own quarters, so close Zuko thinks he feels it on his skin and it grinds his teeth on edge.

Blinking awake, Zuko notes that the room looks much different than he remembers. Granted, he isn't used to staying in Li and Lo's beach house, he doesn't recall the artifacts hanging on the walls...or the animal skin, or the fur curled beneath his fingers. It doesn't exactly hit him that this isn't Ember Island until...



“Mmm, five more minutes, Zuko.”

He’s frozen still, staring dumbfounded at the familiar face of a waterbender whose head is resting on his chest, snoring horrifically with her cheek resting against bare chest. She smacks her lips and hums, turning over to sling her arm around his waist, tossing her wild brown hair across his torso.

Zuko’s eyes darted around the room, slowly dawning on him that this is not the bedroom he last laid his head in. In fact, he doesn’t recall it being cold. Why is it so damn cold? He’s taken aback by his state of dress; half naked with only a pair of navy blue trousers hanging just below his waist. Never mind the clothes he’s wearing, how he got here was the bigger question. In his state of confusion he notices the ugly star shaped scar on his chest, puffy and red much like the one on his face, but the degree of it looked far worse. Zuko’s careful to touch it and when he does, he realizes that it is real and not a figment.

Panic rises, every terrible outcome he can think of runs through his mind, from kidnapping to his father finding out Zuko wasn’t the hero he thought he was, hence the new scar. Until the waterbender whose name he doesn’t remember caresses his chest, delicate fingers brushing his scar and he’s stunned to see her not recoil, but instead, kiss it, “Hmm, you’re moving too much. Please don’t make me get up early again, Zuko. You know the kids wake up-“

“Today’s the solstice!” Announces a tiny voice.

“-with the sun,” she finishes with a whine, grumbling under her breath as she forces herself to sit up.

Barging through an animal skin curtain, a little girl of about five comes carrying a baby in her tiny arms. The waterbender huffs, blowing a stray strand of her wild hair from her face and smiles tiredly at Zuko, “Too late. Okay, who’s ready for the day?”

“Me, Me, Me! And Ursa too!”

Zuko snaps his gaze at the two girls. One, who carried a slight paleness and blue eyes smiled directly at him. Her hair is chocolate, yet carried the same shine and straightness of his own. The younger one, a baby who hadn't seem to learn to walk yet let alone speak, had his eyes. Though her skin was darker than her elder sister's, there was no mistaking how she carried the same resemblance to his mother. He's starting to feel himself waver, his stomach somersaulting. He had to get out of here! He had to get home!

Zuko jumps out of bed, heart racing as he tries to gather whatever clothes are spread out on the floor to cover his naked torso. Where were his things? He hisses when his bare feet touch the floor, instinctively raising his body temperature to combat the biting cold, "My shoes! Where are my shoes!"

"By the bedside, where you always leave them, silly. Kya, sweetie, bring your sister to me so I can change her before daddy gets started on breakfast."

"You-you don't get it. I'm not supposed to be here!" Zuko shouts.

She stares incredulously at Zuko, "Did you forget to pick up something at the market? If so, it's too late, all the shops are closed."

For fuck sakes!

Zuko doesn't have time to explain. He snatches the brown, furred boots sitting at the bedside, "Ugh, why won't these fit?"

Everyone but him starts to laugh, "Because those are mommy's." The one called Kya giggles, retrieving a pair of larger boots and running up to Zuko to hand them to him. Her eyes are bright, the sparkle encrusted in her giant blue orbs are all too familiar, "Here daddy!" She's looking right at him and Zuko can't respond. Kya's smile fades and Zuko sees her expression slowly turn to confusion.

He snatches the boots and storms out the only door he can find. Wind and snow knocks the air out of him, skirting him off his feet and causing him to land hard on his back. "Ow." He draws out in a long groan, nursing the back of his head.

“Are you crazy! It’s below zero! Don’t run out of the house without your parka!” The waterbender stands at the door frame of the hut, Ursa on her hip with a gummy smile and Kya hidden behind her night dress with wide eyes, “And don’t think about sneaking away to go drinking with my brother so early in the morning again. I barely forgave you for last year. I swear, you and Sokka...” The waterbender turns on her heels back into the house, mumbling under her breath.

Zuko scrambles to his feet, running in the opposite direction of the hut into what looks like a village up ahead. There was no time to explore how he got here. He had to get back to the Fire Nation and fast.

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He should have grabbed that stupid parka. The wind and snow made it hard to concentrate on his bending, Zuko’s fingers and toes quickly growing numb. The snow is at least a foot deep and Zuko’s in such hysteria, tripping and falling consistently until he reaches the town where the streets are plowed and easier to walk on.

Zuko’s first instinct is to head to the docks. Maybe there’s a Fire Nation ship waiting for him. But to his dismay, there’s none. Zuko seizes up, he’s losing his breath and the cold air cuts his throat like glass. Had he been abandoned? Did his father send him away? Or was this all a bad dream?

He’ll have to escape on boat. The only problem was the docks were crowded with men, all watertribe. Agni, help him if he was a prisoner on this slab of ice. But the thought wasn’t as odd as the greetings he was receiving from every one of them he passed by. Some even clapping him on the shoulder.

“Mornin’, Zuko.”

“Hey, Zuko! Was’n expectin’ ya out today.”

“Do the misses know you're out? Hah! Better not have Katara catching you out drinking with Sokka.”

Everything is spinning. He really had been abandoned. “Uncle.” Zuko murmurs, utter fear taking over. One more clap to the shoulder and he loses it, crying out a roar from his mouth and shooting flames from his fingertips. Everyone flinches.

“Whoa! Hey, there, buddy! What’s the problem?” He recognizes that irksome voice. It’s the water tribe boy...or so he used to be- the person jogging towards him is a burly man. Zuko takes a step back when he approaches him, “What are you doing here? Katara is freaking out!”

Katara? That was her name. How could he forget after hearing the Avatar shout it so many times. But that was the least of his problems. Maybe this guy will be more reasonable. “Look, I need to get back to the Fire Nation. If you lend me one of your boats, my father will pay you handsomely and no harm will come to your village.”

There’s an awkward pause before Sokka bursts out laughing, throwing an arm around Zuko's neck and hugging his side. “That’s a good one, Zuko! Are you and Katara doing that freaky role play thing again? You know how that creeps me out.”

“You don’t understand! It’s important I-“

“Let’s head to my place before you freeze to death. What made you run out without a parka is beyond me.”

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“Drink this. That’ll wet your whistle.”

Zuko shivers, hugging the blanket Sokka lent him tighter around his person. He reluctantly accepts the saucer, blinking fast at the clear liquid.

“Just got it from the Earth Kingdom. Turns out, it’s stronger than your precious firewhiskey. It’s harsh down your throat, but man, it’ll warm you up real fast.”

That’s all Zuko needs to hear, bringing the saucer to his lips and throwing his head back. He chokes, the liquid burning down his throat. “Gah! The hell did you give me?”

“Told ya,” Sokka wiggles his eyebrows.

“What’s all the commotion here?”

“Suki!” Sokka exclaims. He laughs nervously, hiding the bottle of liquor behind his back. A very pregnant Suki enters from the back of the hut.

“It’s morning Sokka, what are you doing?”

“Just helping my guy, Zuko, out here. He's had a rough day.”

“You’re the Kyoshi Warrior,” Zuko recognizes. She’s aged. They all aged. Nothing about this makes sense. Was there some kind of spirit magic at work? Is Agni punishing him?

Suki shoots the fire prince a glare. “Nice to see you too, Zuko. Sorry to cut your merriment short but Katara is literally crying wondering where her husband is. She says you ran out in a panic.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll leave in a minute.”

Suki crosses her arms. “Now. Sokka.”

“Okay. Sheesh. Guess you’re heading back home then.”

Home. This wasn’t his home. What does he do, what does he say? These people know his name but when they speak it, they are referring to a completely different Zuko. None of this was a dream and Zuko’s pinched himself more times than he’s counted. Perhaps if he figures it out, he can find his way back to Mai, his home, his life, and put all this behind him.

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“I know how rough it is, buddy.”

“Pardon?”

“You’re going through a midlife crisis. You’re married, a stay at home dad to two daughters. Giving up your title and cushy lifestyle. All for what? A measly hut in the middle of the snow?”

“You’re not exactly helping,” Zuko scowls.

“You see, I get it. If I were in your shoes, I don't think I could've done what you did. I'll never understand what made you turn down the position of Fire Lord.”

He what?! Zuko would never consider such a thing. It was his destiny, his right!

“But I can get why. Katara is one of a kind. She’s strong and smart. Kind of takes after me, doesn’t she?”

“I doubt that.”

“I know I didn’t approve of your relationship before but after what you did for her...I can never thank you enough. You’ve proven yourself and I know that it doesn’t seem like much, but you truly are fortunate,” they stop, the hut Zuko had run from earlier right in front of them. “Don’t let whatever is bothering you get in the way of what you’ve built. This is the happiest I’ve seen either of you. You may have let go of your title, but you’ve gained a family. Life is funny like that sometimes, you told me once. Don’t forget that, buddy.”

Sokka gives his goodbye, leaving a tense Zuko staring at the door of his supposed home, with nowhere else to turn.

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“What has gotten into you?” Katara shoves her husband.

Zuko grits his teeth, biting back the urge to snap.

“I was worried! The girls were worried! I went to my brother’s after you ran off like that and when you weren’t there, I thought-“ Katara sobs in a handkerchief, shaking uncontrollably.

Oh, no. He’s not good with crying, especially if it’s girls. “I-I’m sorry?”

“Damn right, you are,” Katara throws the handkerchief at him. “Don’t you ever make me worry like that again! You could have froze to death, Zuko.”

“Mommy?” Kya peaks around an animal skin curtain that Zuko can only presume is another room.

“Kya, sweetie, not now. We’ll call you out when me and Daddy are done talking,” Katara shoos the little girl away.

Once Kya disappears, Zuko approaches Katara, throwing his hands in the air. “You don’t get it. None of this is my fault. I don’t belong here and I’m not the guy you think I am!”

“Real mature,” She scoffs. “first, you give your kids and wife a scare then act like it’s not your fault? Congrats Zuko, you’ve managed to be a complete ass.”

“What did you say to me?” He snarled. How dare she call him out of his name! He was a prince, heir to the throne. The Zuko this water peasant thinks he is must've been out of his damn mind choosing her as a wife. She’s short tempered and a know-it-all.

“You heard me. Don’t think you’re off the hook. I told dad we’d meet him later and you’re wet from head to toe. Now get ready.”

Zuko’s going to lose his shit. There’s a thorn in his side, and her name is Katara.

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They set off for the night. Zuko’s disappointed to find that the only attire available to him is water tribe. Nothing about this place is accommodating. The bath water is cold, the clothing material subpar and the food absolutely bland.

That isn’t what truly bothers him. What frightens him the most was the face reflecting in the mirror. His features are harder, sharper than that of a eighteen year old boy. He had grown well over six feet tall, and sitting there right below his chest is that star shaped scar. Zuko had examined it. Hissing, not because it stung, but because something about it felt so familiar. Dreadful.

Behind his eyelids lightning sparks. Zuko’s muscles convulse and white light shoots out from nowhere. He quickly opens his eyes, nearly doubling over. A rotting sickness sunk low in his stomach and Zuko felt like he was going to empty his meal. Not that the food set well anyways.



It's obvious this world is some sort of vision. A warning? A peek into the future? Who knows. Whatever this was he'd need to gather as much information as possible in order to get back home. The first he requires is the outcome of the war and where his father and sister were. Either one or two things had happened: the Fire Nation lost and Zuko had been forced into an arranged marriage. Or the Fire Nation won and Zuko had been forced into an arranged marriage. But then that cancels out what Sokka said earlier about him giving up his right to the throne by choice.

Overthinking wasn't going to get him anywhere. He needs to suck it up and tolerate as much of this place as possible in order to survive.

Katara asked him if he was okay after he readies himself and meets her in the kitchen. He doesn't answer and that seems to upset her.

"Fine," She sighs heavily, and hands a drooling Ursa to him.

"Wha- What am I supposed to do with this?" His face contorts in repulsion. Ursa finds it funny, giggling hysterically and kicking her small feet.

"Very funny," Katara says, kneeling in front of Kya to secure her parka for their departure. "Just get the sling so we can get going."

"Sling? Like a weapon?"

She stares at him concerningly. "The baby sling, Zuko. Save your jokes for the festival tonight with my dad. I, on the other hand, am still upset with you."

*Weren't they all.* Zuko rolled his eyes. It's a never ending circumstance with women, they can't seem to stand him.

Katara retrieves the wrap hanging on the wall and hands it to Zuko. He attempts to figure out how to put it on, first wrapping it around baby Ursa then getting it stuck around his neck and

under his right arm. There's snickering as he tangles himself further.

"What's so damn funny?!"

"Oh, Zuko," she helps remove the wrap from around his neck and secures it over his shoulders, "I love you, and one thing you know about me is that I can't stay mad at you for long," Katara slips over to his side, titling his face towards hers so she can stand on her tips toes and capture his mouth.

Zuko lost his train of thought. Her lips came and went before he could process it and the scar on his chest thrums.

"Let's go, shall we?"

They trek across the snow towards the village ahead. The place is alight; lanterns and smoke can be seen from a distance, the smell of food wafting in the air. The whole walk there Kya wouldn't stop staring at him. Her blue eyes wide and anxious, clinging to Katara from the other side. Zuko tries to ignore it but he cannot shake her curious stare. Instead, he concentrates on his footing while balancing a baby strapped to his chest.

Ursa. He doesn't know what to make of her. The resemblance to his mother is uncanny, making Zuko's heart squeeze painfully. He can't stop looking at her- her dark curls and beaming gaze. She's a happy baby. Zuko can't deny that she's adorable even after already being spit up on along the way to the festival. Somewhere deep within him, his fatherly instincts emerge and he's wiping the spit-up off Ursa's chin with his sleeve without a second thought, and in return he earns a gummy smile.

"Grandad!" Kya shrieks, darting off and jumping into the arms of a sturdy water tribe man, falling backwards into the snow.

"There's my Kya! Oof! So big and strong. Grandad might not be able to carry you anymore," Hakoda booms, lifting Kya above his head.

“Hey, dad,” Katara laughs, taking her daughter off the Chieftain so he could brush himself off.

“Hi, sweetie,” Hakoda stands up to give her a side hug and plants a kiss on Katara’s forehead. “And if it isn’t my son-in-law! Good game of pai sho last week, Zuko, next time let’s lessen the betting amounts.”

“Dad!”

Hakoda ignores her, coming up to pinch baby Ursa’s cheeks.

“Um. Hi- To you, I mean,” Zuko searches his memories, wondering when he had met the fellow.

Hakoda arches a brow, “You alright? Starting to sound like the time you asked my permission to court Katara after I learned she was pregnant. Six years and two kids later, you’re suddenly bashful? Come on, son, loosen up,” The older man reaches in his satchel for a flask and passes it to Zuko.

Zuko stares at the flask, some of the pieces coming together. It starts to make sense now. The Zuko from this vision must’ve had relations with the waterbender, meaning he had to do the honorable thing and marry her. That still doesn’t explain why he would be here, instead of the Fire Nation where it was sensible for a family of royal blood to live. Then he remembers Sokka mentioning how he had given up his title. With that noted, it doesn’t sound possible that Zuko would come here by choice.

As not to be rude, he takes a small sip, trying to hide the disgust with a wrinkled smile and Hakoda seems to accept that.

While they head to the center of the festival, Zuko hugs Ursa close, overwhelmed by unfamiliar faces and unfamiliar territory. They greet him casually, smiles and cheeriness all around. They begin to blur in his line of sight, clumping together like molten blobs. To everyone else, Zuko is a strong willed twenty-eight year old man with a good head on his shoulders, but truthfully, he was still just an eighteen year old boy without a clue.

*Don't let your guard down.* The demons return, coming back to poke at him once again now that dark has cloaked the land. *They are the enemy. Never forget what you've done to them.*

What he had done.

*I thought you changed!*

*I have changed!*

He stills at the gentle touch of someone's hands. Zuko's eyes meets Katara's, a smile radiating from her lips and he's struck by her presence. The demons scatter quickly, as though the light of her aura frightened them back into the depths of his broken self.

"Are you excited, my love?" She whispers, leaning close so that their shoulders are linked side by side as they continue through the festival; people alight with celebration. Candles and lanterns light the way leading up to an extravagant long table. It was adorned with food of all kinds, ice sculptures and animal bone and fur.

Zuko remembers how to breathe, staring intensely at his wife- no, not his wife, another Zuko's wife. Yet her words were impassioned, so strong that it had a strange affect on his body. The man who was really her other half must truly love her, because Zuko reacts with every touch, every time their gaze met, or even from the slightest thought of her. Has she always been this beautiful?

He can only nod, his throat too closed up to speak and her hand comes to wrap around his and he returns the squeeze in turn, knowing damn well this wasn't right.

"Remember our first winter solstice?" Katara beams, biting her lower lip and glancing over at Kya to be sure the little girl wasn't listening in. "We made love behind Panuk's hut because we couldn't get to our place fast enough?"

The blood drained from Zuko's face, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. She giggles, tugging him along.

Hakoda gestures that they seat themselves at the end of the table, it's from this that Zuko learns that his father-in-law is chieftain. *Wonderful*, he had married a leader's daughter and he's becoming even more convinced that his luck is getting worse and worse. Suki arrives, seating herself next to Katara and the master waterbender let's go of his hand to turn her attention to the Kyoshi warrior. The absence of warmth oddly left a hole in him.

"Zuko, why so sour?" Hakoda booms. "Eat! Have a drink."

"Sorry. I guess I'm not myself today."

"I'll say," Sokka shows up, dragging a large sack over his shoulder, dumping it on the ground to reveal fireworks. "By the way, thanks for hooking the tribe up with some killer fireworks. The Fire Nation has some pretty cool stuff, I can't wait to try them all!"

The young tribesman requests a drink, making a nearby group of men cheer and passing a bottle to him. Sokka swings it back, handing it over to Zuko when done.

"Umm, I don't think it's a good idea to handle those while under the influence," Zuko warns. He can only see this going wrong.

"Don't worry. I have a high tolerance to alcohol, it's all good."

Zuko and Hakoda share a troubled look. "Son, why don't we focus on the celebration first then we'll see where the night takes us."

"Well, that's no fun..." Sokka mumbles.

“Say, Zuko, after the gathering, how about I take the girls and you enjoy the evening with the guys. I’ll catch up with you when it’s all over,” Katara offers, brushing back Ursa’s curly hair, the little girl giggling uncontrollably and burying her snot nose face in her father’s parka. Katara places a chaste kiss on Zuko’s cheek and the thrum returns. She’s having an affect on him, the slightest touch enough to ignite the fire on his skin. “Don’t let him do anything stupid. For the girls’ protection, we’ll keep our distance.”

Zuko turns a shock white. “You’re leaving me with *him*?”

“Alright! Guys night out!” Sokka emphasized with a thumbs up.

# leave it all behind

## Chapter Summary

Zuko encounters the culprit behind everything, vaguely given the information he needs to complete whatever journey he is on in order to return home. In the mean time, he must learn what it takes to be a father and husband, all while fighting a battle within himself and the strong feelings Katara's slowly drawing from him.

## Chapter Notes

i can't believe how many people are on board with this concept and im happy you guys are willing to go on this journey with me. thank you for the encouraging comments and the excitement you guys are showing me to continue this.

He doesn't care for the goofy water tribe boy. Sokka's over enthusiasm drives into Zuko like nails to chalkboard and it's a wonder the other man had survived the war. Zuko chocks it up to sheer stubbornness because no matter how many times he tries to excuse himself, the other man is insistent. All the while, faces he does not recognize try to engage him in conversation. He can't follow, let alone understand their references. The awkwardness of not knowing these people turns out to be more painful than the fact that these were his enemies and if given a chance ten years ago, would have his head on a spear.

For the life of him, he can't figure out how this Zuko managed to become friends with these men. They're boisterous, vulgar and find humor in the expulsion of human bodily functions. The only thing that helps him pass the time was the bottle of liquor being passed around in a circle by the fire and the slight distraction that comes with being surrounded by others who lack any filter.

"A sip?" One of them points out when it's Zuko's fourth turn to drink. He's gray, hairline receding with the top half tied in a wolf's tail like most of the warriors here. Being on the spot provoked him to eye the older man with disdain. "What are ya? A delicate flower? Take a real drink."

“Aye. Must be one of those etiquette things they teach ya at the royal palace. Thought we knocked that out of ya already.” Another chuckles.

“Lighten up, guys. We all know our man, Zuko, here can drink all of you under the table.” Sokka mentions, nudging Zuko in the ribs to his annoyance.

“Benefits of a firebender.” Another says. “Jus’ cause he can burn through the alcohol faster don’ mean he can drink ya under the table.”

“Says you, Sesuk. You couldn’t even get through the first bottle before Zuko got a buzz.

Sesuk frowns. “Like I said. Wouldn’t ‘ave happened if he weren’t no firebender. That’s a’ unfair advantage and I woulda won jus’ fine.” He crosses his arms with a huff.

Sesuk hasn’t taken his eyes off Zuko since he arrived, shooting daggers that would make men smaller than his size crumble. Too bad for him, Zuko wasn’t intimidated by a man’s size.

Sokka leans into Zuko, a goofy grin plastered on his face and Arctic wine on his breath. “He’s mad because he was trying to impress a couple of girls the first night he challenged you and they left after he nearly passed out.”

“Like they were there for Sesuk in the first place. They were only interested because there was new dick in town, don’t try to downplay it, Sokka. Sesuk’s just mad because Zuko was getting all the attention.” Kaliq, the man with the receding hairline, corrects. “The single ones take a liking to newcomers. Nothing like fresh cock.”

“Fresh cock?” Zuko questions.

Laughter roared around the fire, save Sesuk who just scowled, his piercing gaze laid heavily on Zuko. The Fire Nation prince can only assume they’re not on good terms. Whatever the case, he’s not at all interested in Sesuk’s problem, ignoring the hole burning in his direction.



“You know, foreign meat?”

“New blood?”

“One night ride on the Fire Nation air balloon.”

“Tying the dragon knot.”

“Launching the eel-hound.”

“Squat thrusting in the sparring ring.”

Zuko’s face turns a beet red, now processing the group’s euphemisms, his ears bombarded with sexual innuendos in regards to the women here wanting to have a go at him. He’s heard this kind of talk amongst his crew before but he’s never participated and frankly he’s never wanted to. Carrying the title of prince was a clear indication to separate himself from such vulgar exchange and accompanying people below his status.

“I’m with Katara.” He states matter of factly, hoping that he wasn’t promiscuous in this timeline as well.

“Didn’t stop ya from getting eyefucked.” They all laughed again.

“Pay no attention.” Sokka waves a hand in dismissal, throwing back the flask when it was his turn. “They expected you to be some stuck up prince who got all the girls. Pfft, how wrong they were. You’re as smooth as a rigid sword, buddy.”

“Thanks.” Zuko grit.

“Well how else would you get a catch like Master Katara? After all, she was with the Avatar before you. No one could compete unless...” Sesuk suggests with a drunken smirk.

“That’s enough!” Sokka shouted, standing from his seating position. “You’re crossing the line, Sesuk.”

“Unless someone got her pregnant.” Zuko finishes. Everyone falls silent, casting their eyes away from him. Sokka opens his mouth to say something but closes it, slowly sitting back down. There’s no hiding that even his brother-in-law also had the same idea.

“That was a long time ago. No one thinks that way anymore. We all know how much you and Katara care about each other.” Sokka clarifies.

So, he wasn’t good enough compared to the Avatar unless he knocked her up? Granted, he gathered the same- their marriage built on the foundation of Zuko having to do the honorable thing, but being compared to the Avatar burned him. The relentless scorn he harbored towards the airbender surfaced once again. He’s always struggled and fought, paving his own way and that’s what made him strong. Not only is he thought less of compared to his sister and the Avatar but even the watertribe girl. Zuko wasn’t oblivious of what a prodigy she was, yet he feels less inclined to believe any good truly came from this marriage if he was nothing even standing next to his own spouse.

“Zuko, he didn’t mean it that way-” Another tribesman speaks up.

“I sure did.” Sesuk interrupts. “Let’s not overlook who ya are or where ya came from. Might ’ave fooled everyone with yer ‘transformation’ but ya ‘aven’t fooled me. Ya got lucky, nothin’ more.”

Luck? Is this man so insecure about Zuko’s presence that’s the best insult he could come up with? Perhaps he isn’t the best man out there for her. Hell, Zuko still couldn’t fathom how he managed to fancy Mai’s attention- regardless, he will not let a lowlife like Sesuk make him feel undeserving even if it might be true that Zuko was.

“Maybe it is luck that someone like Katara would ever look my way, let alone have romantic feelings for me.” Zuko doesn’t know a damn thing about Katara but he can see in the other man’s eyes the undeniable envy. “It must be bothersome, huh? That the enemy with half his face burned off has the pleasure of lying in bed with a woman probably well out of his league. But at the end of the day, I know who’s waiting at home for me. Who the hell do you have?”

Everyone held their breaths in stunned silence, glancing at one another until someone broke the tension. “His mom.” Kaliq snorts, starting another round of thunderous laughter. Sesuk, looking betrayed and shooting up from his seating position, stormed off.

“Jeez, he can be an outright jerk sometimes.” Sokka dismisses with the flick of his wrist. “He does this every time and gets put back in his place. No wonder he hasn’t found a wife.”

No, it’s deeper than that. Zuko thinks.

The alcohol isn’t doing enough good for him to stick around. Sokka and the other men shout after him when he storms off but their cries are distorted, fading in the distance.

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He’s unconcerned when he hears the front door of the hut open and a giddy Kya running in, chatting away to her mother about how many treats she had gotten from the festival and how big the fireworks were this year compared to last. Zuko’s sitting at the kitchen table, idle and indifferent to the sound of his wife and children.

“Zuko?” Katara calls out, her voice ringing in the darkened house, curious as to why there’s no fire. “Why are you home early?”

She’s answered with a stir, his gold eyes peering at her then shifting to the other side of the house. Katara isn’t sure, but when her husband glanced her way, his eyes held a hint of resentment. She shudders, hugging Ursa tighter, and proceeds to tell Kya to get ready for bed. “We didn’t see you for the Fireworks. Is everything alright?”

“Fine.”

“It’s cold. Can you start a fire?”

Flames erupt in the hearth and Katara flinches, jumping back. Kya, witnessing this once changed into her night dress, makes a tiny squeak and runs back to her room. Zuko is short. Katara turns on her heels, ready to demand to know what his problem is. She has a change of heart seeing her husband's figure slumped and unresponsive.

“I’ll put the girls to bed.” She announces, leaving Zuko alone once again and he’s actually grateful for that.

Even as an adult, Zuko is a disappointment. Agni forbid there’s a point in his life where he has it all figured out- less so, being he hasn’t a clue on why he’s here or the purpose behind it. Nothing against Katara, but this isn’t the future he envisioned and he’s worse at this than before he woke up here.

“I take it your night didn’t go well.” She guesses. Katara takes a seat beside him unnoticed. There goes that thrumming- beating faster, moving like sparks along his skin. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” He replies flatly.

“No? Okay, we don’t have to. If you’d prefer, you can put out the fire and we can sit in the dark together.”

Silence. He’s protesting, speaking out against the outrage of his ordeal. Sort of. In all honesty, he doesn’t know how to act around Katara. They’re alone for the first time since he’s come here, and they weren’t exactly on good terms before.

She hums a tune, her head on his shoulder. Zuko’s shoulders go stiff, now aware of her proximity and the heat of her body resting on his. The awkwardness builds in his throat and

he forgets how to swallow, afraid he'll choke. This goes on for a while, until Katara's humming starts to become a little louder and a bit obnoxious.

"You said we were going to sit here quietly." He says, finally giving her his attention as he snaps his head in her direction.

"No, I said we'll sit here together. In this house, there's no such thing as quiet." She comments, a smile teasing her lips.

Zuko forgets himself. Suddenly, it feels like a stampede of rhinos had run over him. Her smile, they reach her eyes. Round and shimmering in the firelight. They radiate a blue he's only had the pleasure of seeing once before- in the catacombs where the crystals made them look almost transparent. This. The Katara now...she has always been a beautiful girl but as a woman, she's absolutely stunning.

"It's Sesuk, isn't it?"

He quirks a brow. "I take it you're aware."

Katara shrugs. "I don't know the exact details of what happened today, Sesuk's just known for being quite the prick."

"Tell me about it." Zuko scoffs. Not exactly what he's concerned about but he'd be lying if he said that Sesuk's words didn't eat at him. "The man's got a death wish, if you ask me."

"Might want to get in line, no one's a fan of Sesuk, and vice versa."

"Really? Because he had it out for me. The guy clearly doesn't like me."

"Aww." Katara combs her fingers through his hair and he practically melts. Why did his body react of its own accord? "What's there not to like?"

“Plenty. I’m awful.” Zuko remarks.

She laughs, a sweet chime that provokes a blush to suffuse on Zuko’s cheeks and he comes to find he likes her laugh. Better than the memory of her tear stained face, he supposes. *No, you’re not out of the water. You’ll always have that guilt.*

“I like you.” She confirms, a sing-song playing in her voice as she continues to caress his hair. His eyes flutter close. Dammit, why can’t he pull away?

“Don’t patronize me.” He murmurs, failing to relay his annoyance in place of a soft groan.

She stops, cupping both sides of his face. The playfulness halts, she’s captured him with that strange feeling flapping in his stomach again. “I would never. I love you, Zuko. And your daughters too, never forget that. Okay?” She leans in, tilting her head just so, lips parting softly.

He does the same, unintentionally drawn to her lovely gesture and heartfelt words. Why? Why does she love him? There’s so many questions, that he can’t settle on only one. No one’s loved him. Every event in his life has proven the opposite. His father, his sister, even his mother; because who leaves their child without a trace? No, who Zuko was or whatever destiny laid before him, love will never follow. He is not this Zuko, he is not this man who seemingly deserves it.

*You are a disgrace.*

He removes her hands from his face. “I can’t.” He tells her, slipping from her embrace and leaving her bewildered.

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Zuko almost kissed her. He almost kissed a married woman while inadvertently betraying Mai. What has gotten into him? Half a day and he's ready to make out with someone he hardly knows? He wants so badly to feel guilty- livid at himself for his actions, but it doesn't come.

He pretends he's asleep after Katara puts Kya and Ursa to bed, slipping in next to him and casually hugging an arm across his chest. She wishes him goodnight, planting a gentle kiss to his ear. Zuko blinks in the dark when he hears her snoring and he contemplates that she must be a heavy sleeper because even *that* can wake the dead. He can't relax enough to slip into a state of slumber, not when he's in an unfamiliar place, not when he has someone who is basically a stranger clinging to him. Not when he had been on the verge of cheating on his girlfriend.

Then again, he's the stranger in *her* bed as well. He is not her Zuko; this great husband and father who gave up everything to be with her. This man who's enemies trust him with their lives. He's a fraud, a murderer. He watched Azula strike a kid down and reaped the rewards. He watched his uncle get dragged away like dirt. He watched a young girl who offered her kindness shed tears of a broken heart and broken trust. Where does the shame end?

*I just want to go home. I want to put this all behind me.*

The air in the room becomes colder and dread stirs in his gut. A heavy weight comes down on his body and there's a disturbance in the air that makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Alert, Zuko attempts to sit up. He can't move. His surroundings turn gray and there's an eerie quiet that even cancels out Katara's ungodly snoring.

"Hello, Prince Zuko." Soft white light floats close to his side of the bed, blinding him until what appears before him is a young woman with hair as white as snow and eyes the color of ice. "I would apologize for the late introduction but this is not the first we've met. Well, at least the first in which you haven't attacked me."

Zuko pales. He hasn't seen many spirits before but he can clearly tell this one was. There's no doubt she's involved in his predicament. "Who are you? Did you do this to me?"

"I am the moon spirit, Yue. And yes, I have brought you here."

He's seething. Of course the spirits were the culprit, nothing else held such power, but then that confirms that being here wasn't a dream. "Why? What could I have possibly done to deserve this?" He knows why, yet he refuses to acknowledge it; bury it somewhere deep within him where it could never come back to mock him. *Liar.*

"I cannot say. That is up to you to figure out."

"Argh!" He growls. This can't be happening! Realizing his outrage, Zuko checks on Katara, wondering if he had disturbed her.

"No worries. She cannot hear us." Yue answers without him asking.

"So this is some sort of punishment. For what? What I did in the catacombs?"

"Yes and no. It's quite complicated, really. But again, it's up to you to figure out. I am briefly here to inform you of just that."

"At least tell me where I am!"

Yue isn't enthused by his tone but decides to answer nonetheless. "What you are experiencing is a glimpse. This life is an alternate timeline, a branch out from your previous one. With every major decision you make, you come to a crossroad, multiple paths lay before you based on the decisions of your past that determine your future."

"So then, the Zuko who's life I'm now living isn't my future?"

"No."

*Thank Agni.* "How long am I here for? Can I go back?"



“You can but only when you have come to terms with the struggle inside you. You must rectify the injustices that have come to pass.”

That doesn't make sense. Zuko's no saint but there are people that have committed far worse injustices than he has. Yet, here he is. “A-against Katara?”

“Against yourself.”

What? He doesn't understand! Zuko has redeemed himself. He had set things right by regaining his honor in his father's eyes and given a second chance to revive his place on the throne. He has struggled immensely and has finally been given the chance to restore everything he's lost. What in this spirit's right mind gave her the idea that he needs rectifying? “None of that makes sense!”

“It will soon enough. It is up to you to determine your destiny. This is all I can give you. For now. I hope this helps you on your journey, Prince Zuko.”

“No! Wait!” She can't leave him here after explaining so vaguely. “That's all I get? A piss poor excuse for me being here and little to no explanation for what I should do next?”

Yue frowns. “You are a selfish one, I see. No different than I would have expected. Do not insult the spirits, Prince Zuko, we hold grudges and an eternity comes and goes in the blink of an eye for us. I feel no need to repeat myself.” Her eyes glow a harsh white and Zuko swallows. “Do not take for granted this opportunity, it's more than you deserve.”

She's gone. Like that the colors around him return to normal along with Katara's snoring. He can move but he can't find the strength to do so. The news has him at a loss, Zuko silently repeating to himself that this can't be happening.

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Morning arrives and it's all the same. Same room, same furs, and the same shit that comes with it. Zuko huffs out his anger in smoke, exhaling it from his mouth. Damn that spirit! Katara isn't in bed with him this time, the sound of a baby wailing disrupting the little sleep he managed to get last night. He wants to delve deeper into the encounter he had with Yue last night, replaying her words so that he could better analyze and break down the only useless clues she was willing to give him, but his concentration is interrupted by that excessive crying!

With a huff, Zuko kicks the furs off him and charges for the washroom. He throws the flap open before immediately averting his gaze, his face red from his neck to his ears.

Katara's bathing, one arm reaching the ceiling and the other bending water along her torso. "Ah, you're awake." She says when she notices him, turning around, exposing ample breasts- so supple and heavy from childbearing and lactation. That strange flutter that was in Zuko's stomach the day before raged south. His blood pulsed loud in his ears and he hates how his curiosity deverts to his other head. "Well someone's happy to see me."

Beads of water run down her body as Katara stands straight up, every inch of her skin glistening and making it all so difficult for Zuko not to stare dumbfoundedly. The raging hormones in his adult body might have ceased long ago but in his head his virgin mind is screaming.

He quickly covers his crotch. "T-the baby...it's, um, crying."

"So?" She asks, arching a brow. "Oh no, Zuko, you know today's my day of the week. Besides, I have a private waterbending lesson with one of my students this afternoon, then I have to stop by Gran Gran's since she wasn't feeling well for the festival. I told you about this."

Really? She's leaving him here with them? He doesn't know the first thing about babies! "I-"

"And don't forget to head to the market after taking Kya to school. Pick me up something sweet, will you? I like that taffy they get from Kyoshi Island."

He doesn't get a word in edgewise, Katara listing off things that need done while she's working. Being a stay at home dad entails more than he ever accounted for. "Oh, and Zuko? Can you bring me the soap and warm my bathwater? I wanted to ask earlier but I didn't want to disturb your sleep."

*So instead you let the baby do it.* Zuko wants to say but holds his tongue, grabbing the only bar of soap he can find in the washroom. He lays it on the ring of the tub, looking down at his feet and ignoring the hardness he's sporting painfully in his trousers as he dips his hand in the water.

"Much better." Katara moans, smiling over her shoulder at Zuko before proceeding to bathe.

Something catches his eye when she turns away from him. To his shock, the same scar Zuko had on his chest reflected on Katara's back, spreading from the center like spider cracks.

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Okay. It's a baby, a little human being. How hard could it be to change a baby?

Finally able to undo the pins holding Ursa's diaper in place, Zuko gags at the sudden stench. He stumbles on his feet, pinching his nose. How in Agni's name does something so small manage to smell like his uncle after a five course meal? "Pew...ack. All right. I can do this."

He sure as hell hopes this isn't what the spirits are testing him on but he isn't going to take the chance of skipping it if it is. "Umm..." He's spinning around the room in search of something to clean the baby with.

Kya, still wide eyed and staring intently at him, points to the water bowl and cloth sitting on a table. A lightbulb goes off in his head and Zuko reaches for it. Great, he at least has step one down. He dips the cloth in water, wringing it out and rushing back to Ursa.

"What the-" Ursa claps her hands, urine streaming onto Zuko's face after he attempts to clean her off with the fresh towel, sputtering uncontrollably. He takes the towel, scrubbing his face

hard in disgust.

Of all the battles he's encountered, this one was by far the worst. The little girl was constantly testing his patience- kicking her feet, trying to crawl away and just downright giggling endlessly at Zuko's distress. He struggles to get the diaper on only for her to leave him with another surprise and forcing him to start all over again, and once more because Zuko put the fresh one on backwards. With a sigh, he eventually accomplishes in getting Ursa changed and fit into a fresh pair of clothes, wiping the sweat from his brow. Cupping both his cheeks, his daughter rewards him with a sloppy open mouth kiss to the nose and for some reason that delights Zuko.

"You're not my daddy, are you?" Kya whispers.

She's is eyeing him incredulously. He opens his mouth, then holds back. Would he be tampering with his progress if he were to confirm that he was not indeed her father? "N-no. I'm not." He answers, nervous. "I'm just here...kind of on a mission. But your father will be back very soon. I promise."

Kya cants her head, standing up off her bed of furs and slowly walking to Zuko. He's like a fauna caught grazing. She stops in front of him, cerulean blue eyes like saucers. "A mission? Are you a bad person?"

"No. Or I don't think so."

"How long will daddy be gone?"

"Um, just for a while, I guess."

"You wouldn't hurt us? Me or mommy or Ursa, right?" Kya muttered, sticking her bottom lip out.

Oh no. Is she going to start crying? “Of course not. I would never hurt any of you.” Not like he did in the Earth Kingdom. Zuko blinks it away.

This eases her. Kya gives Zuko a big smile, taking his hand and sort of giving it a shake in greeting. “I’m Kya and this is my little sister, Ursa. She can’t talk yet so I have to introduce her.”

“Nice to meet you Kya.”

“Can all spirits turn into people?”

“Pardon?”

“You showed up during the solstice, which must mean you are one of the spirits Great Gran Gran always talked about who comes to people’s homes to visit and bless them with good health and good fortune.”

Zuko rolls his eyes. “Sure.”

“Yay! I knew it!” Without warning Kya wraps her arms around his leg . “I’ve always wanted to meet a spirit. Hey, do you know how to firebend?” She asks excitedly.

“Y-yes.”

Kya gasps, a smile breaking wide on her face. “I can too! You can teach me, can’t you? Please, please, please teach me! I’m not very good but daddy tells me to keep working hard. I really want to master it.”

She’s a firebender. Pride unexpectedly swells in his chest. He has a firebender for a daughter? And she’s not corrupt in any way, Zuko dismissing the idea of children long ago in fear that his children will end up like him or Azula, or worse, he’d end up like Ozai. The bullshit his

family gene carried apparently hadn't made its way to this little girl. Or he can at least thank his lucky stars that Katara's side managed to cancel that out.

"When did you find out you were a firebender?" Zuko asks, genuinely curious, he sits in front of Kya so that they're leveled face to face and cradles Ursa in his lap, allowing her to use his hand to nibble with her gums.

"Hmm, when I was four. I just turned five, so I haven't been learning that long."

Late, just like him. Kya wasn't bothered by this, the little girl with sheer determination in her eyes. A lot more confident than Zuko ever was. He worried about being a non-bender, his father commenting on what a disappointment Zuko was and what usually happens to royal born non-benders. Explaining how they were often gruesomely discarded.

*She has pride.* Zuko thought. *A firebender's pride.* Living in the South Pole did not hinder that, he can tell.

"I can't see why I wouldn't teach you."

She's alright. Zuko's touched. He's also feeling a sense of protectiveness, that of a father.

"First things first." Zuko interrupted her joyful bouncing. "What am I supposed to do next?"

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"I go to school until mid-morning and then sewing lessons with Great Gran Gran until noon. Mommy picks me up from there. Four days a week I have firebending lessons with Daddy and twice a week, the women gather in the village to skin the hunt."

"So, what, I just wait around until it's time for me to teach you firebending?"

Ky shakes her head. “Nope. Daddy does the shopping in the morning then goes home to clean and take care of Ursa until Mommy comes home from teaching. He has dinner ready by the time she gets home.”

“Dinner? I don’t know the first thing about cooking.”

Kya shrugs.

“Is there anything exciting I actually do, other than being a maid?” He’s not exactly coming to terms with this whole ‘stay-at-home dad’ bit.

She contemplates this, tapping her chin. “Hmm. Daddy also trains the men on combat weapons at the east end of the village I think twice a week when it’s Mommy’s turn to take care of us. You’re the best in the village! Uncle Sokka has a hard time keeping up.”

Oh. Well, that’ll occupy some time other than lazing around the house. That also explains why the other men in the village carry some sort of respect for him.

They arrive at Kya’s school, the little girl wishing him luck on his day and points in the direction of the market strip and the post area where they station their messenger hawks. Zuko pats the letter in his pocket where he had stored away a letter for his Uncle, requesting information about Azula and Ozai’s status.

She also took the time earlier that morning to explain the South Pole’s currency to him and which vendors in the village exchange goods for his training sessions. With that in mind, Zuko sets out across the snow with a drowsy Ursa strapped to his chest, possibly sleepy from a full belly. Katara had fed her before taking off, leaning affectionately next to Zuko while Ursa suckled at her breast, the Fire Nation Prince caught in an awkward dilemma and so oddly intrigued, he caught himself taking shy glances.

The market is crowded and Zuko’s brain is on overload from the massive selection lined up before him. Fish, arctic chicken, tiger seal, whale blubber, sea prunes- where does he even

start?

He's in for the long haul and he prays to the spirits that they know exactly what they're doing by putting him up to the task.

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Damn it all to hell, Zuko's not cut out for this. The broth was boiling over and the arctic chicken he selected was hard to cut through. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out how to use the kitchen tools properly. Annoyed, he tosses the whole bird into the broth and moves onto stirring the rice.

"Shit, shit, shit." He curses, having left the rice to boil too long without stirring, causing it to stick to the bottom of the pot, and now it has become completely overtender from too much water.

In the midst of this, Ursa begins crying. Zuko had given her the remainder of the breastmilk Katara had stored, and for some reason she's as red as a tomato, crying at the top of her lungs. Between cooking, trying to scrub the mess caked all over the place and Ursa's high-pitched cries for attention, Zuko thought he might lose his mind. He attempts to block out the noise by covering his ears but then the lid blows off one of the pots and bubbles of water begin to spew over. Zuko reacts by grabbing the lid bare handed and yelps. Out of anger, he huffs out the fire, submerging the house in complete darkness and this seems to frighten Ursa further into a crying fit until she's hiccuping.

"Please!" He yells, scaring her. That was a mistake. Zuko falls to his knees in front of his daughter, pleading. "Please. Ursa, sweetheart, what's wrong?" He tries to soothe.

He picks her up from her cradle, bouncing her up and down. Why was this so complicated? It's in this moment that he empathizes with his own mother and wonders if he or Azula had been this difficult. Zuko rocks back and forth, seriously at his wits end until-

"Bluuuurp."



It stopped. She stopped crying!

“Ah-hah!” Zuko smiles triumphantly, realizing that she had only needed to belch after feeding. Relieved of her bloating belly, Ursa mirrors her own gummy smile. “That’s a good girl. You just had an achy tummy, didn’t you? You sound just like Uncle, only a lot more cuter. That’s right, you’re so much cuter.” He tickles her round baby belly, making Ursa giggle and squirm.

With Ursa now settled, Zuko concentrates on finishing dinner. He saves as much of the rice as he can then proceeds to finish cooking the broth. He goes through the basket of leaves and spices, pleased to find one he recognizes from the Fire Nation. A little spice should do the trick.

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“Looks like you guys have had quite a day.” Katara enters the house with Kya linked to her hand, seeing pots and pans askew. The smell of burned rice and chicken lingered in the house. Kya gasped, looking at a smoke covered Zuko and silently smiles behind her gloved hand. Katara’s brow furrows. “What happened?”

“Uh...dinner kind of got away from me.”

“You don’t say.” Katara frowns. “Oh, well. I’m sure dinner will be great. Kya, go wash your hands.”

Zuko pours their bowls and passes them around the table, seating himself across from Katara, Kya deciding to plop right next to him. Not too terrible for his first try at cooking but considering he hadn’t burnt the house down, how bad could it be?

Katara grimaces at the first bite.

“Spicy!” Kya shouted, slapping her hands over her mouth.

He's baffled. "Spicy?"

"You may have used a bit too much seasoning." Katara coughed, bringing a hand to her chest, her face growing a bright red. "What did you use?"

"The dark brown seasoning. I only used the one bottle. What's the big deal?"

"The whole bottle!" Katara exclaimed, clearing her throat and wiping the tears from her eyes. She couldn't believe he'd waste a whole bottle of seasoning on one meal. "Zuko, that bottle is expensive."

"So." He says, failing to see the problem. "We can ask my Uncle for more. One letter and he'll send us anything we need."

"I thought we agreed we wouldn't ask your Uncle for anything."

"Who's idea was that?"

"Yours!"

Katara jumps from her seat, she can't take it. Her eyes were watering and she couldn't stop coughing. She opens the cork to a tall vase and bends the water to her mouth. Kya made a few coughs, exhaling a bit of smoke, but was okay afterwards; benefits to being a firebender.

Zuko watches disappointedly, upset that his so-called family did not enjoy the food he slaved over and the fact that he had come up with the silly idea of never asking his uncle for anything. No, not him, the other Zuko.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal."

The burn subsides, giving Katara's airways enough room to finally speak. "It's okay. I know you tried, love. Everyone has their off days."

"I wasn't talking about dinner." He mumbles but dismisses it by collecting everyone's bowls and does the dishes. Katara offers to throw together some stew, noting the scowl on Zuko's face but ignores it in favor of tending to her growling stomach.

Zuko's been off since yesterday and she ponders if Sesuk had really gotten to him that bad. But even before the festivities, he had been strange, unlike himself. Katara had often had this gnawing doubt that Zuko might regret marrying her but everyday he would sweep away those misgivings. Because he was Zuko and he loved her. Now, over the last twenty-four hours, she isn't so sure that he harbors no regrets.

"I love you, Zuko." She tells him in the middle of them all finishing dinner.

He pauses, keeping his eyes cast to the bowl and nods.

---

Two week after being here, Zuko picks up on his daily routine pretty quickly. His cooking techniques have come out slightly better but the most he looks forward to is escaping the house and teaching Kya firebending or leading the warriors in combat training.

He's a natural born leader, of course. He happens to have a knack for screaming at the top of his lungs at soldiers. None of the men contend with his methods, though he knows nothing of what methods the other Zuko uses. In fact, they seem to appreciate it. He works them until their muscles are sore and the weight of their weapons make their arms feel like jelly.

He actually finds it amusing when Sokka shows up to challenge him. Kya's right, he isn't nearly as good as Zuko, but he definitely gives Zuko a run. For being future Chieftain, the Fire Nation Prince wouldn't expect any less from Sokka despite finding the other man lacking in other senses. There's a sense of accomplishment behind being told what a great fighter he is, and for a moment he forgets his troubles at home with Katara. He forgets the

demons that snake in his dreams at night reminding him of what he had done in his previous life.

Kya is amazing. Zuko can't believe how advanced she is and it's almost scary that it only took her a year to reach the level of skill she has. Some of her forms were quite unique, pulled from what he had seen from benders around the world.

One day, Kya performs a pose he had not seen before, lifting a single knee then swaying the fire in front of her then back, turning around and shooting it out in front of her. Zuko's impressed, noting that being a waterbending move.

"Who taught you that?" He asks.

"Daddy did."

"Does he often teach you forms that involve waterbending?"

"Sometimes, but he usually adds his own spin to it. It's kind of cool. He says he learned them during the war. When he fought by the Avatar's side, he had learned to embrace all the nations fighting styles."

The Avatar. Zuko bit his lip, hard. He's alive. Of course, he's alive. And Zuko's helped him? "When you say I fought by the Avatar's side, you're saying I helped him defeat your grandfather?"

Kya nodded. "Daddy and Mommy defeated Aunt Azula when she was very, very sick, Daddy said. Uncle Aang defeated Ozai and Great Uncle Iroh became Fire Lord."

"I see..." Now for the bigger question. "Where are Ozai and Azula?"

“Aunt Azula is being taken care of by healers. Daddy says Ozai is someplace where he can never hurt anyone ever again. Uncle Aang had taken his bending just in case. “

Zuko’s heart sank. The Avatar could take away bending? The boy was more powerful than he let on. And to think, how many times did he have the chance to do the same to Zuko? He shudders, a cold feeling going over his skin. The shattered pieces were coming together. The war is over here but the outcome turned out to be a lot different than Zuko anticipated. The Fire Nation had lost.

“Zuko, a letter arrived from Iroh!” Katara waved from the front door.

“We’ll continue this tomorrow.” Zuko tells Kya sullenly. The disbelief is making him sick. He makes his way to the hut, hoping the response from his uncle will clarify some things.

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*Dear Nephew,*

*I have received your urgent letter and I’m afraid I had not come across it until recently. My duties have delayed my response but I am genuinely concerned. I’m afraid what you have written has left me somewhat confused. It is most unlike you to ask of your father and sister but if you must know, there has been no change since your last visit here at the Fire Nation two years ago. Nephew, please send a more detailed letter explaining what has brought you to inquire about this.*

*Love your Uncle,*

*Fire Lord Iroh*

*P.S.*

*Give lots of kisses to Kya and Ursa for me and tell Katara I've sent more of that tea blend she's wanted.*

That's it? Zuko reaches in the box the letter is attached to and scoffs. It is a gold tin imprinted with a red rose. "A contraceptive?"

Placing it back in the box and pushing it aside, Zuko reads and re-reads the letter over and over. He's absolutely blank on what he should reply. He had been impatient as it was, his nerves on edge because he still couldn't believe Iroh was no longer imprisoned but was in fact Fire Lord. Was this what Yue was referring to when she said he needed to rectify himself? Does he need to go back to his time and free Uncle so he can take his rightful place on the throne? And that's why the Avatar's involved?

Zuko's more confused than ever, frustration coming out in an angry growl. He singed the parchment, blowing it out afterwards when noticing his mistake.

"Zuko!" Katara runs in the room, kicking her boots off and stumbling around the bed. "Zuko, the kids are asleep."

"Hmm?" He says, staring hard at the letter again.

"Did you hear me? I said the kids are asleep."

"So?"

"So? You know what that means." She smirks, climbing on the bed and snatching the letter away.

"Hey, I was still reading that!"

"Later." She bites her lip, unbuttoning her parka one by one.

*Oh fuck.*

“Is that the tea your Uncle sent me?”

Zuko nods in a trance. “Uh-huh.” He can’t take his eyes away. There’s no denying the heat washing over him every time Katara’s close. She is stirring him up and he finds he can’t think straight around her.

“Good.”

Katara strips down to her leggings and upper bindings, showing off her hourglass figure and toned stomach; her hips are wide and her breasts heavy. Agni, how do the spirits create such a fascinating creature? Zuko’s a virgin but he’s also a man and it’d be an insult not to react to a beauty such as Katara. Mai’s existence scurries to the back of his mind and in the forefront of it all, it’s only Katara.

She climbs on the bed, pulling off Zuko’s boots, giggling when she finally breaks a lopsided smile from his lips. “You really have a thing for me, don’t you?”

She cups his bulge and Zuko makes a highly embarrassing moan. “If that’s what you want to call it.” She massages his cocks through his pants, flattening his hardened length against his stomach and skillfully stroking it.

“Wait-” He breathes, observing Katara as she comes in to straddle him and crashes her mouth on his in a long, languid kiss.

“Mmm, Zuko. I’ve wanted you in my mouth all day.” She coos.

*Fuck it all!*

Zuko tops her, kissing her hard and hungry. Lifting her legs and wrapping them around his waist, he bucks into her, their hips colliding and spirits, it feels so damn good; so good, his eyes roll to the back of his head, feeling faint and dizzy at how aroused and wild Katara has him.

Breaking away and inhaling sharply as though he were drowning and coming up for air, Zuko's ready to dive in for more but stops short. Those eyes, blue as the ocean on the coast of Ember Island, was staring back at him so lovingly. Like he was the world to her and she, the world to him. Those same eyes that offered him trust and friendship and freedom from the horrid mark of his past embedded on his face. The same eyes that shared a deep hatred for him when he had made his choice to join his sister.

He didn't know her name yet she offered him kindness when she knew he probably didn't deserve it. She's beautiful. Agni, she's absolutely beautiful. Katara radiates a charm that would have any man looking twice, and yet...and yet, she chose him.

"How can you look at me like that?" She asks, pulling him from his stupor.

Her blue eyes shift over his face, bound by the way he looks at her so intently, so infatuated. This man, who has loved and shared a life with her the past six years. And yet, she feels like she's sixteen all over again. A sudden bud rose in her chest and blossoms into everlasting longing. Katara remembers this, remembers this exact scenario where Zuko had met her with the same gaze in the Crystal Catacombs so many years ago. Where he had met her with the same gaze in the quiet of his princely chambers and the kiss that silenced her sobs when she did not know if he would make it alive from the injury Azula had inflicted.

Zuko swallows. "Like what?"

"Like you're seeing me for the very first time."

The world stands still around them and neither could look away. Zuko's heart jump starts, pounding relentlessly in his chest.

"Mommy! Ursa's crying." Kya calls to her.



“Shoot. Okay. I’ll be back.” Katara leans in to plant a chaste kiss to his lips before crawling out from under him to tend to their daughter.

Zuko leans back on the balls of feet, blinking out in space. This is wrong. *I shouldn’t- but I think- no, I can’t.*

It frightens him. He cares about Katara more than he should. She’s the enemy and he was ready to make love to her without a second thought. Like the coward he is, rather than exploring these newfound feelings, he buries himself under the covers of their bed and pretends he’s asleep yet again.

# Breaking Habit

## Chapter Summary

Months into living in the future, Zuko's gradually starting to adjust; becoming a father and growing a fondness for the two little girls. Too bad the spirits didn't leave him a manual. The longer he's there, the deeper he attaches and Katara isn't making it easy either.

## Chapter Notes

Here it is! Chapter four. Thanks again for all the comments. My goodness, I'm just so ecstatic you guys are really enjoying this. Makes me wish I could have finished this chapter sooner. Heads up, this chapter will contain premature ejaculation.

“We’ve been here for hours.” Zuko pouts.

“A few hours here is better than weeks stuck at the house with nothing to keep us warm. The girls are growing out of their clothes and the village is closed down during storms. Ooh, I like that skin. Which one, Kya? Do you like wolf or tiger seal skin for your boots this year?”

“Hmm...tiger seal!”

“Good choice. We’ll take the tiger seal skin, please.” Katara requests from the woman behind the stand.

They had been shopping all morning, Katara unexpectedly taking the day off to gather materials for the upcoming winter. Was it not winter here all year around? Because Zuko couldn't possibly see how it can get any worse.

“So, let’s see. We’ve got needles, thread, seal skin, wolf fur, cloth, cotton. Next, we’ll need to grab some curing, enough to last us a few months in case the blizzards hit hard this year. Do you see anything you need, Zuko?”

“Not really.” He says. To his chagrin, he can’t look Katara directly in the eye. He doesn’t like to be all mixed up and he’s feeling conflicted the more he’s around her. He’s made excuses to avoid sex and he can tell Katara is picking up that there’s something amiss about him, her expressions always dejected when he doesn’t return her affection.

They wander the market for another half hour. There are merchants from all over the world, a couple happen to be Fire Nation. Kya had informed him that now and then there would be a few merchant ships that would come to the South Pole, but most of the goods they received were mainly done through import. Outsiders didn't like to stay in the cold too long.

Zuko catches a glint in his peripheral vision, curiosity peaking upon seeing colors of vibrant reds; crimson, scarlet, mahogany, burgundy. Zuko stalks over to the stand where a Fire Nation man in extravagant attire and a neatly tight topknot is leaning over in a bored fashion until Zuko approaches and he stands upright. Zuko skims his fingers over silk, satin, cotton, lace- all kinds of material that reminds him of home. It’s smooth beneath his fingertips, soft like clouds and light as a feather- fabric meant to combat the Fire Nation heat.

“These are beautiful.” Katara’s next to him holding Kya’s hand, her gaze wandering over the fabric in absolute awe. “I haven’t seen anything like this in years. When I was an ambassador, I had all kinds of clothes but this...it would feel so good on my skin.”

“The finest the Fire Nation has to offer. It’s only available to the royal family but today, I offer this to you at a great price.” The merchant grins.

He’s lying, the material is decent at best but Zuko doesn’t care. It reminds him of home and from what his wife has said, she would also be pleased to have it as well. “We’ll take it.”

“These are expensive.” Katara gasped, flipping over the price tag. “We can’t afford this.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Figure what out? We only have one income coming in.” Katara argues. She wants it as much as him but they had to be realistic. “Maybe we can find something here that’s more our budget.”

“You won’t find anything like this anywhere else other than the Fire Nation, lady. I’m telling you, you’re getting a steal for your money.” The merchant chimes in.

“Shut up.” Zuko snaps at him. He then turns to Katara. “Look, I know you don’t want to ask for Uncle’s help but why should we deprive ourselves just because we’re too proud to ask for anything in return? We both work hard, it’s the least we deserve.” He picks up a bundle. “You can make the girls dresses. And this here,” he points to another, “is great for bed sheets when it gets hot.”

“We live in the South Pole, Zuko.”

“So? You want it. I want it.” He’s letting it surface again. He should be adapting but it’s hard when he’s living someone else’s life. “Day and day out, I wake up to the same thing. I drag myself out of bed, prepare the children for the day before taking Kya to school, then fill my time between going to the market and caring for Ursa. I cook, I clean, I do laundry, I fix dinner. After bathing and putting the girls to sleep, it starts all over again.” He’s forced into a life he didn’t ask for. How could she do this to him? There’s no way that he’ll let this one thing he’s asking for slip from his fingers. “We’ll take it.” He tells the merchant.

Katara looks hurt, clenching the front of her parka in disbelief. “I’m so sorry your life is a disappointment to you. Buy the damn fabric if it makes you feel so fucking validated! We’ll just starve this winter.”

“Ugh, why are you so difficult?”

“Why are you?!” Katara yells back, the ache in her voice carrying over the crowded streets, people stopping to see what the commotion is about. Among them happens to be Sesuk, a smirk present on his smug face and arms crossed as he watches the scene unfold.

“Not here.” Zuko tries to calm her, noticing the stares. “People are looking.”

Since when did he care what people thought? In fact, why did he think *she* cared? “Who are you?” But she doesn’t stick around for the answer, quickly unstrapping Ursa from his chest and snatching Kya’s hand before storming off.

Kya begins crying, having not seen her parent’s yell like this, the confusion also setting Ursa off in a fit. Kya pleads with her mother, not understanding why they were leaving so soon and why her father wasn’t coming with them. Katara doesn’t answer, she can’t. Her throat closed up and she’s already choking back the tears that are threatening to fall. Not here. She won’t cry here, Katara reminds herself.

“Katara.” Zuko calls out. “Katara, where are you going? They’re crying!” Zuko stammers a few steps forward, his instincts telling him to immediately run to his daughters, cradle them, tell them everything is okay and that he didn’t mean to frighten them. Following them through the busy streets, Zuko hastens himself to get to his girls. But Katara doesn’t stop for him and he loses her to a wave of people.

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“I fucked up.” Zuko sighs, unable to lift his head from the table.

His brother-in-law tries to console him to no avail, Sokka sitting across from him, urging him to drink some tea. Suki had left for Zuko’s house to comfort Katara after he had told his in-laws what had taken place at the market. The Fire Nation Prince had no intentions of wondering here but he had no idea where else to go. Home was not an option, he wasn’t ready to face Katara. Sokka kept him company, blabbering on about one thing or another—hell, Zuko couldn’t keep track—attempting to reassure Zuko that all this will pass. He scowls, his only source of entertainment aside from the tribesman are the cackles in the fireplace, dancing.

Then Zuko’s mind begins to fade into a place of recollection, that being his first time in the South Pole. The ice caps, the mountains, the endless fall of snow and his poor excuse for a crew huddling up around a fire unprepared for this kind of climate. He hardly paid attention to detail other than finding himself loathing the bitter cold. His focus only on his mission, nothing else mattered. He also remembers Iroh bringing him a heavy furred cloak for warmth

and tea at the lip of the ship where Zuko stood for hours. He also remembers shoving the coat away and slapping the teacup from his Uncle's hand, screaming at him for being lazy and unmindful of staying on task. Too disgusted, Zuko had then left Iroh to pick up the shards of his cup while he stared off into the unknown squaring his eyes into the distance hoping to capture some sign that the Avatar was close.

Zuko rubs a hand over his face. "What a horrible person I am." He had planned on responding to the letter Iroh had sent him a couple months ago but he couldn't find the words. Since then, his Uncle had sent him four more, none of which he has yet to read.

"You're not a horrible person. You're just...going through a rough patch."

"Rough patch? That's an understatement." The firebender scoffs.

He usually has the girls in a bath by now, laughing and playing until the water splashes over the ring of the tub and he has to call a timeout. He would dress them warmly, brush their hair. He'd share rice cookies with Kya and rock Ursa to sleep before tucking in his oldest after a full belly. He would tell them a story- some he remembers his mother telling him or his Uncle's crazy adventures in the spirit world. Then he would kiss them goodnight, waiting patiently as he fondly watches them slip into slumber before retreating for the night.

Zuko didn't think during his time here he would be desperate to hold them, be with them, if they were ever separated. They weren't his but it didn't change what they meant to him. "They haven't spent a single night away from me. Yet I'm here with no clue on how to handle this. I don't know what I'll run into when I get home."

"Yeah...Katara holds a pretty mean grudge. Thought you learned your lesson the first time she threatened you." Sokka tells him, ripping apart a piece of seal jerky with his teeth. "Want some?" He offers Zuko, in which he quickly turns down with a contorted face of disgust seeing his brother-in-law chew with his mouth open.

"She threatened me?"

“At the Western Air Temple? Said you're a dead man if you stepped out of line. Well, not in those exact words, but she might as well have. Even after joining us, she still didn't trust you.”

Zuko shudders. He'll admit, Katara is kind of scary. Already having witnessed her almost take out Azula. Azula, who he could hardly match himself, actually expressed fear. No one's ever done that. “I believe it.”

“Yeah, that's why I'm saying this once. *Don't-fuck-this-up*. I don't know what you're going through or why, but it's better to figure it out soon. Katara may be tough but she is sensitive. Since losing mom and when Dad left for war, being abandoned is one of the few fears she has in the world. She won't tell you but I know she's afraid that whatever's happening to you, you'll ultimately decide to leave in the end.”

“She- She's told you this?”

“Pfft, of course not. She's too stubborn. I just know my sister.”

“It's nothing against Katara. I don't want her to hate me or anything, it's just...I'm not the man she thinks I am. Or I-I feel like that way sometimes. I guess I look at my life now and wonder where it all...changed.”

Sokka nods. “I get it. I ask myself the same thing sometimes. If Yue were alive, would I have married Suki?””

Zuko frowns immediately. *Yue?*

“I believe things happen for a reason. Not all the time but for the most important parts. Yue was meant to be the moon and I was meant to be here with Suki just like you were meant to be with Katara instead of with that gloomy girl. What's her name again?”

“Mai.” Zuko hissed between clenched teeth.

“Yeah, her! You and Katara have made some serious sacrifices. I salute you both.”

Speaking of sacrifices. “Yeah, that scar. I can’t imagine what the war has done to her. Or any of you for that matter.”

“Are you talking about the one on her back? From when Azula struck her with lightning? I was actually referring-”

“When did that happen?!”

“Seriously, buddy, you’re making me worried. In the catacombs, remember? You came to our side, you and your uncle, and that’s when Azula struck her.”

Zuko’s good eye widened. He didn’t side with Azula in the catacombs? That time Katara had opened her trust to him, he must have accepted it. As a result of that decision, Azula probably chose to target Katara instead of the Avatar. Not betraying the waterbender set in motion a completely different reality, a different set of events. Azula always enjoyed hitting Zuko where it hurt and seeing him take Katara’s side must have shifted his sister’s judgement. She’s already done it to Uncle, why not the person who convinced him to join the enemy?

“You okay there, buddy? You look a little pale.”

His gut clenched, a sickness rolled in his stomach. “She survived?” No one survived Azula's lightning.

“Yeah...” Sokka raised a brow, but then his features went dark, recalling that day. “That day, we thought she would die...she *did* die. We escaped and you kept rambling on about water. I was angry and Aang was frantic. Toph was silent after telling us she couldn’t feel her heartbeat and your Uncle was trying to calm me down so I would listen. I didn’t believe you at first when you tried to say there was a way but I kept shoving you, screaming that it was your fault. You snatched the necklace around her neck and poured the spirit water over her



back. I thought you were crazy.” He gave a short laugh. “But then she started coming to and...She wouldn’t have made it without you, Zuko.”

*Yes she would have. Zuko wants to say, shutting his eyes in regret. She would have been better off not knowing me at all.*

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The house is quiet when he enters. No one greets him but the toys scattered on the floor and the fire. He stalks to the back of the hut. He needs to see his daughters, make sure they are tucked safely in their beds. To Zuko’s surprise, Katara is there, lying in the furs next to Kya and Ursa. He means to apologize, ready to turn on his heels.

“This isn’t the life I envisioned either, you know.” His wife’s voice breaks through the dark, reaching him with a rasp from what sounded like she had been crying.

Zuko stops in his tracks and turns to look at her, curiosity drawing him back. He kneels at the bedside and decides to brush back Kya’s hair, careful not to pet her too hard when her breath exhales loudly before slowly coming to a normal rhythm. She’s in a deep sleep, and spirits bless her, she snores like her mother. “It isn’t?” He urges Katara to continue.

“No...I had plans as well. I had dreams.” She sits up, her red rimmed gaze meeting his before sliding away and across the room to focus on anything else but him. “I traveled the world after the war and it felt...it felt like everything I ever imagined as a child was so much bigger- so much more. Without all the fighting and the bloodshed. Without being tied down. I had a purpose outside fighting the war and when me and Aang separated- everything was at my fingertips and for once, I was ready to take it on my way. Don’t think you’re the only one who made sacrifices.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not what I thought- or wanted you to think.”

“I don’t want your apology.” She snapped.

“I’m sor- I mean, continue.”

“When your uncle asked me to be his Watertribe Ambassador, I was ecstatic. It’s not exactly what I had in mind but I was honored. I’d be able to make a difference. Not just as a Master Waterbender but by gaining a title that would put me in a position to make the world a better place as a whole. Iroh gave me an opportunity and I had my best friend to help me through it, so I knew I was making the right move going to the Fire Nation.”

It takes a minute for Zuko to pick up that she was referring to him. Best Friends? Were they really that close? Granted, he finds himself at ease with Katara, unusual for two people who were enemies on opposite sides, forced to fight.

“So then, what made you decide to give that up? Even getting married, I would have hoped that wouldn’t have hindered what you truly wanted.”

She smiles fondly. It fades as quickly as it comes. “When I found out I was pregnant, I was so mad. Mad at you, mad at myself. One careless night at an inn and it changed everything.”

Katara confessing being mad when finding out she was carrying shocked Zuko. Most women he’s seen who’ve heard that kind of news would brim with joy.

“So, then you thought it best for us to get married. Leave the Fire Nation and raise Kya? Would it not have been in her best interest to raise her there? Where she would have been treated with high respect and care?”

“I didn’t think of it that way, Zuko. In fact, I planned on retiring and raising Kya in the South alone.”

“You were going to keep her from me.” It was a statement rather than a question. Outraged at the possibility of never being near his daughter, let alone forced out of her life. But she was not his daughter yet he felt betrayed all the same. “You...you were going to keep her from me?”

“That wasn't my intention. You and I had a thing before and then you left with Mai. So, I went with Aang and I wasn't going to stick around with your constant on again, off again relationship with her. That what we had was merely a fling and I and Kya wouldn't be a priority. I was scared and I didn't want to stick around on the off chance you would reject me and end up spending the rest of your life with Mai.”

He wants to tell her that's crazy. He would always do the honorable thing even if it meant giving up what he wants. Zuko then tells himself it's not an irrational concern and he can't condemn Katara for thinking that way. Zuko didn't care for people. Kya and Ursa were never even in his mind let alone their existence before all this but he could never see his life without them- not now, not ever. He'd tell his children stories of his other life, how much he's wanted to return home but thinking about it now, they wouldn't be there. He couldn't accept that even if he tried. He's grown too attached when he should have known better not to.

“What changed your mind?” He blinked back.

“Not what, who. You did. I might have been irrational back then, I was twenty and stubborn.”

“You still are.” He comments.

Katara laughs. “Yes, that I am. I've loved you for a long time Zuko. When you told me you loved me back and to marry you and move to the South...all blame, the hurt, the confusion washed away. You threw away your title and your claim and whisked me away, and for so long I didn't understand. And then Kya was born.”

It was him, his doing. He blamed her and it was him that had convinced her to run away. What compelled him to convince Katara to drop their lives in the Fire Nation and come here? “Yes, she must-“ Zuko catches himself, “was a surprise, huh?”

“She was. A really good surprise.”

“Well, I like her.”

“That’s great, Zuko. Maybe we’ll keep her.” Katara glares at him.

“You know what I meant.”

“No I didn’t. I don’t know what you mean when you say anything anymore.” He can tell she’s at her wits end, he had never thought the waterbender who had crushed him in the snow years ago with a flick of her wrists would be so uneasy. Not because of him. She bites the corner of her bottom lip and he particularly finds fascination there, blinking back the desire that hoods his eyelids.

“I’m -“ He cuts off another apology. “Maybe I haven’t been very attentive lately.”

“That’s putting it lightly.” Katara deflects. “Are you starting to hate me?” She musters up the courage to ask and Zuko’s shocked. He’s never hated Katara, hate was not a simple emotion and he never much thread any further other than the thought that she was simply the enemy. Or so he liked to believe.

For being a teenage boy, Zuko wasn’t interested in the idea of romance, his focus hard on capturing the Avatar and regaining what he once lost. When he thought he had it all, Mai pursued him and he welcomed it. Someone liked him and that meant a lot. Albeit, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t lingered. He’s noticed. Katara is attractive and immensely so. In the catacombs he felt it. The foolish pounding in his chest and the color that left his face as she brought her hand to his scarred cheek and her thumb grazed his lip. A bead of sweat rolled down the nape of his neck and he had been aware of her proximity. To think that simple gesture was the line that would direct their fates.

“I could never hate you.” Zuko says honestly, finally looking up at his wife. For the first time since being here, he initiates consolement, reaching out and enclosing his hand over her’s. “Afraid sometimes. But I could never hate you. Ever.” He meant it. Every word.

“What are you afraid of?”

*Of loving another man’s children. Of never wanting to leave. Of falling for you when you aren’t really mine.*

“A lot.”

“I am sometimes too.” Katara admits with a sad smile. “But I’m happy.”

“So looking back you wouldn’t change a thing?”

“If I did, then I would be erasing all the things that I’m sure about.”

“Like what?”

“You, the girls. Life has thrown us curveballs, that’s true, but if I knew then what I know now, I wouldn’t have fussed about the little things.”

Zuko admires her, while he can’t even decide if betraying his uncle and returning home to the Fire Nation was really the right thing to do. He figured in due time it would all come together and he would wake up happy. It never came.

“I...have a question. And it’s not to do with us or the kids. But say, you aren’t happy with the decisions you’ve made, do you think there will come a time where it eventually starts to feel...I don’t know- right?”

Katara cocked a brow, apparently contemplating his words, opening and closing her mouth as though she might answer then thinking it over again. Finally, she says. “If it doesn’t feel right in the beginning, I don’t imagine it ever will. No matter how hard we try-“ She pauses, licking her lips. “What’s this really about?”

“The catacombs-“

“Spirits, Zuko, is that what’s been bothering you? There’s nothing you could have done to stop it.” *Yes, I could have.* “It was a long time ago.” *Not for me.* “I may have blamed you once but I was wrong.” Katara squeezed his hand, warmth spread all over him. How can she forgive him? How can she speak so sweetly after all he has done? Yue is right, he doesn’t deserve this. Not her.

“Can I see it? Please?”

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Zuko shyly looks away as she undresses, unnoticing the smirk crossing Katara’s lips. They had kissed their daughters goodnight and moved to the privacy of their bedroom. At first, she was taken aback by his odd request but she trusted her husband and decided he has his reasons.

“I had hoped that the next time I would do this, you would be bending me over instead.” She quips, provoking her husband to blush furiously.

Why must she be so straightforward? “Another time.” He says, much to her disappointment but she bows her head and turns her back to him as she tugs the knot holding her top bindings in place, letting it drape over her hips.

He replays what Sokka told him earlier that night, detailing how it was all Azula’s doing. He examines the ugly scar, observes the puffy skin and the cracks that make many paths; to her shoulders, her neck, her waist, her backside. Indeed, the work of his sister and he can see the precision in her strike, one that was meant to kill directly.

Zuko reaches out, traces the zigzags and puffy skin with his fingertips. Aside from the large wound, lacerations cross her body, most likely from fighting during the war, like the ones found on his own, only as an adult he carries a lot more. Zuko carefully ghosts his touch like he was trying to discern a map; from the center of her spine to the dip in her waist. Up her side and along her shoulder blade. Azula definitely aimed to kill. All because of him.

“That feels good, Zuko.” She moans softly.

“It does?”

“Mmhm.” He can tell she’s delighted after so long of no physical contact.

“Does it hurt?”.

Katara chuckles at this. “Does yours?”

He shakes his head and hushly replies. “No.”

“Then there’s your answer.”

“This should not have happened to you.” He mutters.

“A lot of things should not have happened.” Katara responds in a low whisper. She pulls away from his touch. “I know you, Zuko, and I know when you let things like this eat at you until you feel next to nothing. I don’t blame you for what happened.”

She lays her hand on the flat of his chest, the place where his own scar lied and he inhales sharply. The throbbing on his chest elicits a pleasurable thrum in his groin. Katara’s elated, seeing Zuko’s gaze go half hooded. The way he’s looking at her now sends tendrils up and down her spine. Katara suddenly feels shy in his presence, like she had been caught under the scrutiny of a stranger. Yet, at the same time, it feels new- a good new.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to kiss you.” Katara breathes.

Zuko’s good eye widens, his heart pounding so loud in his ears, he barely hears her. It isn’t fair. He’s only been here two months and it isn’t fair how quick his feelings change. No

amount of force on his end could stop where this was going. “Then I’ll just look at you like this all the time.”

The air leaves his lung in a harsh gasp, Katara having cupped the nape of his neck to bring him to her lips. He returns the kiss with more fervor, slotting his mouth over hers, groaning his approval. Callous fingers trail along the softness of her hip, burying so deep he fears he might bruise her. He flushes her to him, allowing the heat of his broad chest to overcome her. Katara shudders and mewls in his arms, lacing her fingers in his shaggy hair and tugging sharply, and he’s pleased. One hard kiss and Zuko already has her weak in the knees.

Katara breaks away to her reluctance. “Hold on.” She presses a finger to his lips. “I got a surprise for you.”

Like that, Katara dashes to the living room, leaving a very horny and painfully erect Zuko standing there in confusion. He hears a giggle from behind the flap, parting open moments later and in comes his wife wrapped in red satin, threaded in gold designs of a large peacock surrounded by blossoms, swaying seductively towards him.

“You...bought it? W-Why? I thought...” Zuko licks his lips, his throat going dry. He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. Having had a totally different idea for using the material, Katara seems to have put it to better use.

“Mhm.” She smiles mischievously. “It was expensive but nothing we can’t make up for with a few more waterbending lessons and if you take up some private sessions with any of the warriors over the next month. Remember when you said you liked me in red?”

He doesn’t, probably having taken place before his arrival, but Zuko nods anyways. She looks appetizing in red. “Yes.” He husks, his pants growing uncomfortably tight. “Red is a good color on you.”

“Really? What about gold?”

She opens the fabric to reveal that she was naked save a gold lariat necklace that hung between her breasts all the way to her belly button. "From our wedding day." She reminds



him. Fringes dangled around the choker until it reached the center where a ruby was encrusted.

Zuko's jaw unhinges. Agni, gold suits her so better, never mind that she's exposed for all of him to see- from the peaks of her dusky nipples to the dark curls between her legs- but gold fits so perfectly against her smooth, brown skin. Heat spiked on his skin, raising the hairs on his neck as though he had just been possessed by instinct and it's all he can take to stand there and watch, rushing over his wife and snatching her in his arms. Katara instinctively wraps her legs around him, grinding her pelvis into his. Zuko's tongue eased between the seams of her lips. Katara parts obediently, melting into the magnetic pull of his fiery kiss.

She's wet. He can feel it through his trousers. Spread open and hot. His cock twitches and he matches her rhythm, rutting his hips, though more desperately. Being a virgin, he had no idea where to start, but he was caught in a haze, clumsily kneading her bare breasts with the palm of his large hand or unskillfully brushing her clit with the pad of his thumb but the gasp leaving her mouth was all he needed to urge him on. Sending hot breath between them as their arousal burns hotter and Zuko's fighting to control his bending.

"*Agni*." He whines, falling on top of the furs with Katara straddling him. He lets out a raw groan when she reaches in his pants, cupping his length and balls. "Oh...fuck..."

"Touch me too, love." Katara takes his hand, bringing it between her legs. Zuko's panting fast, his heart rate rushing a mile a minute and the blood rushing to his cock is making him dizzy at a rapid pace. The heat of her sex grazed his fingertips, glossed with wetness. She's slick, warm. A rush of blood pulsed to his groin and he's harder than he can ever remember being before, the bulb of his length becoming over sensitive and the palm of Katara's hand is only adding fuel to the fire.

Zuko eyes flutter close, bombarded with a million emotions, a million different tingles that buzzed on his skin and enraptured him. "I-I-" He stutters, Katara aiding him in sinking his fingers past the barriers of her velvety petals. With his other hand, she brings his thumb to her mouth, humming as she sucks without resolve before removing it with a pop, giving Zuko a demonstration of what she plans on doing to him next. It's too much. Too much and not enough.

He's bursting with pleasure and a need to explode. It comes before he could stop it, Zuko's eyes rolling to the back of his head and his mouth gaping open in a silent moan. It grabs him

by the gut, Zuko fisting the furs beneath him. He shook and sputtered upon losing himself, shutting his eyes tight in utter shame as Katara watched him blow a load in his pants.

“Spirits.” He wants to bury himself in a hole right now. There’s no excuse he could conjure up that could diminish the awkward tension brewing in the room. This time around he was serious only to be a complete disappointment. “I don’t- I mean-”

“Oh.” Katara’s face heats in discomfiture. “That’s...never happened before.”

“I can’t begin to- Katara, I’m sorry.”

“Actually.” She covers her cheek, trying to hide the tint painting it. Zuko always had better control but something about losing himself over foreplay alone...well, that gave Katara an unexpected sense of satisfaction. “I’m actually flattered. That was kind of a turn on.”

Zuko blinks. A turn on? Of all the things in the world, this is what turns her on? His humiliation? Was sex that complex? Either way, he wanted their first time together to be memorable. In this case, it was.

“Don’t be sorry. It’s been a while.” She brushes back his sweat drenched hair, coming in to kiss him fully. His brows pinch, “We can always try again tomorrow.”

Katara’s sincerity is touching but after this, Zuko isn’t sure he has the confidence.

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Like always, Zuko drags out of bed when Ursa’s crying reaches his ear. He felt the sun pull him awake moments ago, and it was the same for his children. He honestly doesn’t doubt if Ursa ends up a firebender as well but it was hard telling at this age. Ozai would be disappointed if he learned his grandchildren didn’t have the ‘spark’ when born. The Fire Nation Prince rolls his eyes, shuffling his feet to the kitchen and putting on a pot of tea before going to Ursa and Kya’s room. Ursa’s bouncing in her bassinet, clapping her hands when she sees her father enter and reaches out for him.

“Good morning, Ursa. My precious girl.” Zuko smiles groggily, rubbing her baby belly and making her giggle. “Such a good girl. Who’s hungry?”

“Me, me, me.” Kya squeals, hopping off the bed and scurrying to her father.

“Okay, okay. First things first.” Zuko digs through the sack of clean clothes he had washed recently and laid out a couple outfits. He clicks his tongue in annoyance, having caused a few permanent stains while doing the laundry. He doesn’t know when he had gotten accustomed to this place but he’s starting to care a little too much about perfecting his chores.

Taking a seat on the floor, he gestures for Kya to sit on his lap, grabbing a whale bone comb and tucking a few hairpins between his teeth. He puts the little girl’s hair in a ponytail before fluffing it in a bun and allowing the rest to fall to her back. Normally Kya wore it in a braid but Zuko failed miserably at every try and eventually she accepted whatever style he was able to accomplish. He hands her a mirror when he finishes.

Kya examines the new hairstyle.

“What do you think?” Zuko asks.

“I love it!” She grins, colliding into her father’s chest to give him a hug. “Thank you.”

“Of course, sweetie.” He says, petting her head.

It’s time to fix breakfast, telling Kya to play in the living room so that he could take Ursa to Katara to be fed. He’s shocked to see his wife already awake, trying to suppress a grin with something hidden behind her back.

“Happy Anniversary.” She brings an animal skin wrapped present to her lap.

*Oh no.*

“Don’t just stand there gawking! Open it!” She takes Ursa from him and sits her on the bed, leaving him dumbfounded. “Come on, Come on! I made it myself, exactly like the one you had back in the Fire Nation.”

“Of course you did.” He smiles sheepishly, untying the knot and finding a robe made from satin, the stitch is in black and gold, sewn into a dragon curling from the bottom with its claws and teeth bared, skillfully done at that. She must have done this while he was at her brother’s place. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I had to make it in a rush but I think it’ll look great on you, Zuko. You’ve worked so hard. Enjoy it.” She says sincerely. Katara closes her eyes, holding her hands out. “Okay, your turn.”

“Yeah, um.”

“I can’t wait to see what you got me. Spirits, I’m surprised you held out this long. You can never keep a secret.”

“That’s me, isn’t it?” He sighs heavily. “You see, I kind of...forgot.”

“What?” Her eyes snap open, staring at him in disbelief. Her hands fall flat in her lap. “You forgot?”

“Things have been crazy lately. And my head’s been boggled. Look, that’s not an excuse, I swear. How can I make it up to you?” Zuko takes both her hands in his only for her to pull away.

“You forgot.” She repeats. “I can’t believe you forgot.”

“Later tonight. I’m sure I can do something. Just give me some time, I can fix it.”

Katara purses her lips, shaking her head. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and for the first time since he’s been here, Zuko sees her shed a single tear. “I don’t think you can.”

# A Trip To Nowhere

## Chapter Summary

He had it coming. Katara has resorted to completely ignoring Zuko at all cost while he comes up with a plan to fix forgetting their anniversary. The family makes a trip to Ember Island, and along the way not only does Zuko learn it will take more effort than a simple trip to make things right, an unexpected visitor appears.

It isn't enough that he grown attached to his newfound family, his desire to return home beginning to fade.

## Chapter Notes

Here it is, the long waited chapter. I manage to make it on my predicted date somehow, having broken my toe the day before \*sobs\*. And, woah, I was not expecting to write an 8K word chapter but it got away from me, lol. Thank you for all the wonderful comments! Let me know what you guys think this chapter.

“What am I going to do?” First, the incident from last night and now this? Why is he so bad at being good? One step forward and another set back is waiting to tip him on his heels. The spirits weren't looking out for him to redeem himself. They weren't looking out for him at all.

He had seen Katara hurt on numerous occasions, some which he wished he could have erased if given the courage to do so- and not after fully realizing the feelings he harbored for her. What he saw in that moment was the remaining shred of respect she had in him dwindle. The aftermath of his delayed awareness had a strong effect on him, and Zuko wants nothing more than to patch up his mistakes.

But how will he win her over? The other Zuko might have an idea but unfortunate for him, the other Zuko wasn't here to give him advice- not that it would work in his favor. In fact, if he were here, Zuko wouldn't be and he selfishly denied accepting that. So he swallows it whole, quietly letting it slip in the back of his thoughts and focuses on what to do about Katara.

“I’m sorry.” Kya says, petting her father’s head, comforting him as he was splayed out on the bed, face buried in the furs. “I should have told you they’re anniversary was coming up. Daddy always does something really special for her.”

“How special?” Zuko inquires, turning his head to the side to look up at his daughter. She’s five but he’ll take any advice at this point. Katara shut down completely, going about her day as though it were any other, except Zuko didn’t exist. She bathed, ate breakfast and hugged the girls before setting off for work. She didn’t even glance at Zuko, finding himself disappointed that he had not received the affection she often gave him when departing for work. And who could blame her, he was a lousy excuse for a spouse.

Kya ponders this, eyes flickering to the ceiling. “Last year he took Mommy out on a boat overnight and they cuddled while watching a meteor shower together.”

“That is the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Kya shrugs. “Mommy liked it. She said it was the most romantic thing Daddy ever did. He made her a picnic and everything and they spent all night talking.”

“Talking?” If that’s what Katara wanted to call it. Zuko was tempted to roll his eyes but he would not insult his daughter by doing so. Katara apparently preferred pensive gifts over finery; the thought of the gift mattered more than the gift itself and he highly doubts the other Zuko could afford to do something grand so he had to resort to making big gestures. Well, if that happens to be the highlight of their married life, surely he can come up with a much better one.

Zuko’s never catered to another person and he’s never had to make the effort to impress a girl- if you don’t count his date with Jin but then again she made the initiative and he went along with it. The same with Mai. *She* approached him with an open invitation and he happily accepted. A Fire Nation noblewoman with a respectable background was ideal for any prince. And yet, he wasn’t happy.

Being a prince was all he wanted and three years separated from his homeland concluded how even less he belonged. The crushing weight, the guilt, the constant look over his

shoulder- none of regaining the honor his father bestowed him erased any of it and Zuko contemplates when he was ever truly happy.

His eyes shift to Kya and Ursa, his oldest playing peek-a-boo on the bed with her sister, making Ursa laugh hysterically. Every day here had been...simple. All the complications and stress of being an heir were far away and he had gained a family who loved him unconditionally with no motives. Katara loves him unconditionally. He sees now why his future self had been so infatuated with her all this time. This is what they mean by better half, Zuko thinks, despite how horrid he had been to Katara.

“So, he always does something big for your mom?” Zuko interrupts their game.

“Yup.”

“Okay...” *Something big, something big.* “What about jewelry?”

Kya’s expression sours. “Mmm, not really. Mommy doesn’t really wear any other than Gran Gran’s necklace.”

Okay, scratch that. “What about a vacation? Has she been to Ember Island?”

Kya grins, nodding her head in approval. “Now you’re getting it.”

Zuko smiles, pleased with himself. He could take her to Ember Island, her and the children. His guess is, they’ve never been so he could make a family vacation out of it. Give Katara a piece of their past they didn’t have the luxury of affording anymore. She can’t possibly say no to that, especially if he mentions bringing the girls along. Ember Island was beautiful from its beaches to its entertainment and festivities. He’s bound to get on her good side if he took her on a stroll under the stars or even allowed her to relax while being catered by servants. It was perfect. He’s not a romance expert in the slightest but who could resist rekindling in a setting like that.



“There’s something I need to do. Kya, go get changed, we’re heading out.” He tells her, abruptly getting up from bed and retrieving Ursa for her afternoon nap but not without digging for something hidden in one of the cases.

Iroh’s letters. He could help and this could also be his only opportunity to confront his Uncle.

Pulling out ink and blank parchment, Zuko scribbles a quick reply along with some requests. Sealing it before preparing to leave for the post.

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Kya squealed, clapping her hands when the airship landed and all Ursa could do was stare wide eyed at the large structure. Turns out, Katara had visited Ember Island before, many years ago while hiding out during the war. The other Zuko having guided her and her friends there under his father’s nose after Ba Sing Sa’s downfall. Katara wasn’t exactly dismissive at the idea, stating it was something the girls might enjoy, rather than show appreciation that he was making an effort towards patching up their marriage.

At first, a part of Zuko worried Katara going to the island might have been traumatizing due to the war but a conversation between her and her brother reminiscing stated otherwise. That gave him a peace of mind, as well as the eagerness on the children’s faces. Katara was still unappeased; unforgiving that he had forgotten their anniversary last week. Unforgiving that he had been a distant husband.

“Wow. What a beauty. Wish I was going with you.” Sokka pouted earlier before he, Katara and the children took off.

“I told you, you and Suki could accompany us.” Zuko reminded him, though he was happy the water tribesman declined, wanting to spend some proper alone time with Katara and his family.

“Wish I could. Suki’s too far along and we can’t chance her giving birth during flight. Besides, there’s no way I’m going anywhere with my sister in *that* mood.” Sokka jerks his head in Katara’s direction where she’s exchanging friendly conversation with the captain, one

whom she apparently has already been acquainted with while an ambassador. She catches her husband and brother looking, responding with a scowl and both men awkwardly wave to her. “Good luck with that, buddy.”

“All set?” Hakoda approaches the men, having come out to bid his family a good trip. “You’ve chosen a great time to take a holiday, we’re expecting heavy snowstorms soon.”

“If anything we’ll be back after it passes.”

Hakoda crosses his arms over his chest, noting Zuko’s apprehension. “Look, son. It hasn’t been pleasant between you and Katara lately. Don’t let it discourage you. My daughter doesn’t stay mad forever, so long as you have good intentions, and I know you do. Use this opportunity to make it right. Every marriage has its bumps, all you need to do is find a middle ground and it’ll all piece together.”

“I appreciate that, Hakoda.” Zuko has grown to deeply respect Hakoda. Ozai never did call him son, not until he thought he had killed the Avatar. The difference is, Hakoda wasn’t expecting anything of Zuko other than being a decent person and Zuko hates himself for having found that kind of love and respect from Iroh only to do the most horrible thing to him in return. He might as well have put a knife in Uncle’s back.

There’s no time for self pity. The captain, Chey, announced they’ll be departing soon, offering to show the family to their cabin. Zuko, Katara and the girls wish the rest of the family goodbye, following the captain aboard the airship.

“Woooow.” Kya’s eyes widened, taking in all the decor, the artifacts, and colors of the other half of her nationality. She nor her sister have ever been surrounded by such vibrant red and gold, and not just that, everything was brilliantly extravagant; from the drapes to the arranged table in the middle of their cabin displayed with fresh food and wine. “Look at the bed, Mommy, it’s huge!”

Zuko smiles, bowing to Chey who leaves the family some privacy. “Lunch will be provided very shortly, Prince Zuko.”

His face turns to stone, the familiar sound of his title leaving dread to settle in his chest. "Please, just Zuko. I haven't been a prince in a long time."

"As you wish." The captain returns the bow.

"Do you like it, love?" Zuko changes the subject, noticing the confused look Katara shot at him after the captain had mistakenly announced his former title.

"I love it." Kya exclaims, running to the center of the room and falling into the large bed, burying her face into the soft mattress with a sigh. "It feels like clouds."

Zuko chuckles, placing Ursa on the floor so that she could explore the room too, crawling first to a chest of toys Iroh had made sure was provided for his great nieces. He grins at Katara, who does not return it. He's really messed up but he's confident that the getaway will mend what he had broken.

Katara quietly settles them in while Zuko entertains their daughters. The airship will take a day and a half to reach Ember Island as long as the weather was in favor.

Admittedly, Zuko had been selfishly desperate to return to the Fire Nation even if for a little. A piece of home could surely give him solace despite his undeniable attachment to Kya and Ursa. Regardless, he still missed it. On top of that, there were unanswered questions he desired to know. He'll just have to think of a way to see his uncle without disrupting his progress with Katara.

*Katara.* He glances through his peripheral vision to see what she was up to. If she noticed him staring in the least, she'd shoot him a glare. In her hand was a scroll, one which she was looking intently at with deep interest.

*Love Amongst the Dragons.*

He smiles. That was his mother's favorite too.

She caught him. That goofy smile he always does when he tries to butter her up, well, she won't let it slide this time. Though, on Zuko's end, he doesn't have a clue.

"I think I'll take a walk." Katara announces, moving to her feet and gathering a shawl.

"They'll be bringing lunch soon." Zuko argues. To his disappointment, it has no effect, Katara tucking the scroll under her arm and exiting the room.

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A single day had come and gone and the tension still remained. Katara had spent most of her time between socializing with the crew and spending time with their daughters. Only when it was time for bed- to his surprise- did she make physical contact with him, lying next to him and angrily throwing his arm around her waist.

"To be clear," She corrected before Zuko could think on the matter. "This does not mean I've forgiven you. We made a promise never to go to bed mad at each other, and unlike you, I keep my promises."

That struck a cord. Nonetheless, her form fit against his like a puzzle piece and if it meant she would be angry with him forever, then he'll accept it as long as he at least has this. Then morning rose. The harsh existence of their marital problems still laid as heavy between them as the day before.

Then there it was, the endless sea breaking pattern in the distance to reveal a group of islands up ahead. The ice and cold were far behind. It seemed like not long ago, he was just arriving but in this lifetime, he hadn't set eyes on his homeland in two years. And at the lip of the airship stood his wife dressed for the weather and clothed in red. Zuko was right, she was perfect in red; the colors clashed elegantly with her brown skin glowing against the sun and her chocolate hair drifted in the wind like she was an unworldly beauty.

His heart sped up. Zuko clenched the front of his tunic, the need for air taking up in his lungs. What he's feared aside from being trapped here has come to flourish. This was more than a

case of infatuation...but Zuko wasn't ready to admit yet.

“I’ve been a pretty big disappointment.” He had suddenly appeared next to her, emitting the warmth he always did when he stood by her. Dawn had broken and the captain had informed them that they would be arriving mid morning.

The scent of sandalwood and vanilla met her nostrils, and Zuko observed the blush gracing her cheeks. She tried not to eye the outfit he had changed into, choosing to ignore the sleeveless tunic that showed off his muscular physique. He had just come out from bathing, having settled on an oil he always preferred. “I don’t want to fight.”

“No one is fighting, Zuko.” Katara deadpanned.

“D-do you want to talk?”

“What’s to talk about? I don’t want to be negative during this trip but at the same time it’s hard when I feel like everything I’ve known and loved about us is slipping away.”

He bows his head, feeling trapped behind how to handle a situation he had no experience in. He’s still a kid.

“You hate it?” He asks. Maybe the idea of going to Ember Island was too traumatic. “We could have gone somewhere else.”

“No. I don’t hate it. It has nothing to do with Ember Island. I’ve always loved the Fire Nation.”

His brows shot up. “Oh. I assumed-”

“You assumed wrong. My patience has been running thin and if not for Kya and Ursa, I’d be staying at my Dad’s right now.”

“You don’t mean that. Katara, Don’t shut me out.” Zuko pleads, linking his hand with hers. There’s a spark of hope when her shoulders relax and the length of her body leans closer to him as though it has been seeking his warmth all this time. His free hand finds her shoulder, brushing his thumb over the ball of her bare skin and drinking in the way that makes her shiver. She’s small, so tiny compared to him. Zuko likes that, and all he wants is to wrap himself around her.

“Then you should not have shut me out first.” Katara grits, pulling back from his hold and retreating from the deck.

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“The beach, Mommy, the beach!” Kya shouts, burying her feet ankle deep in the sand. Indeed, her first time in the Fire Nation. Zuko, Katara and Ursa behind her after dropping off their belongings at the beach house.

The former prince wasn’t exactly thrilled to find out Iroh had restored his family’s former beach house. Granted, it had been remodeled and refurbished as though there were not a trace of the previous owners’ existence; Zuko believed his Uncle should have left the place to rot.

The looks on Kya and Ursa’s faces were enough to cope through it. The place was like a palace to them. Servants waited patiently at the front of the lounging area, giving a traditional bow to the former Fire Nation prince and his family. Zuko smirked at how bashful the girls were at the attention. They deserved it, being that royalty courses through their veins.

Katara- Agni, bless her- is so humble. She greets the servants with kindness and light chatter. While most nobles wouldn’t bother to take a second glance at any of a servant's faces, Katara learns their names and joins them in the kitchen for a while.

Zuko wanted to get the family to the beach before sunset, Kya being the first to bolt towards the shore as soon as her father slid the back door open leading to the beach. He half expected her to complain of the heat or the travel, having not stepped foot in the Fire Nation since her birth.

“*Whoa.*” A small hand picks up an object glinting in the sand. “It’s so pretty.” Kya’s eyes shine, brushing away wet sand to reveal a coral shaded seashell.

“There’s lots of seashells all over the beach.” Katara tells her. “Whatever you find, you can take home with you.”

“Yay! I’m going to take home a hundred.”

“We’ve got plenty of time for that.” Zuko says, opening the umbrella and placing Ursa on the beach blanket while Katara settled next to her. “Race you to the water?”

Kya gives her father a challenging glare then a huge smile stretches on her lips. “Okay.”

“We go on the count of three. One. Two-“

Kya takes off, giving Zuko no chance to count to three before running towards the water, a clear grin plastered on her face. It’s a second too late before he reacts, Katara laughing at him to run too. Zuko chases after. Of course, being much taller, his strides had gotten him there faster but not without sweeping up Kya- who’s little legs didn’t reach the water in time- and she’s tossed in the air.

“You little cheat.” Zuko chuckles, cradling Kya then burying his face into her belly and blowing raspberries.

She kicks and squeals, begging her father to stop. He takes them into the water, waist deep. Kya’s laugh is contagious, Zuko’s losing it along with her.

“You know what happens to cheaters?” Zuko asks, finally able to catch his breath. She shakes her head, burying her face into his chest, preparing herself for what’s to come. Kya yelps, getting tossed in the water.

“Hey, no fair!” She cries, breaking the surface and splashes water at Zuko who pretends he’s trying to swim away and let’s Kya tackle him.

They run along the shore, Kya chasing after and Zuko dodging her every move until they fall backwards in the sand. She pounces on Zuko’s chest with a ‘humph’, a slight crack indicating his physical age and the former Prince notes that he needs to get used to this unfamiliar body soon.

Kya looks up, canting her head to Zuko’s confusion. She reaches out, cupping his face and observes him closely, ignoring her father’s contorted expression. Blue eyes examine him; his nose, ears, and mouth, her scrutiny unreadable. A soft sigh escapes her and her arms wrap tightly around Zuko’s neck. “I knew you’d come back.” She whispers.

He parts briefly. Touched that she thought he was her real father come back to her. He should correct her. He should tell her she’s wrong and that he can never be her father. That what he feels about her and Ursa can never be real and that tomorrow, he may disappear without a trace and they will be but a distant memory. A dream. Surely, Zuko can live with that.

“I love you so much, Kya.” He confesses, bringing her to his chest and placing a kiss on her forehead.

Consequences be damned.

A shadow comes over the two, Zuko thinking Katara had left her spot on the beach to join them. Lifting his head, the sinking sun cast a silhouette of a woman that was not his wife. Her long dark brown hair sifted with the ocean breeze. One step closer to them, she reveals she is indeed not Katara, her smile as brilliant and radiant as Zuko remembers.

He stumbles to his feet while holding Kya, reaching a height that surpasses her; needing to lean his head to get a better visual of the woman before him. He thought it utterly hopeless. Somehow a miracle was in his presence and Zuko can’t seem to find his voice.

*Mom.*



“Hi, Nana.” Kya greeted, reaching her arms out, Ursa accepting her eager hug.

“There’s my big girl.” Ursa coos, lifting Kya on her hip and brushing the sand from her pudgy cheeks.

“Look, Nana. I lost two baby teeth.” The little girl showed her.

“My, so soon? Nana won’t be able to carry you around anymore with you getting sooooo big.”

He can only stare. Disbelief shadows his face and everything he’s ever wanted to say since the day she left couldn’t find his tongue.

“Ursa. I didn’t see you at the beach house when we arrived, so I was worried you wouldn’t make it. I wish Zuko would’ve told me you might be a little late.”

Ursa turned to her daughter-in-law who was holding their youngest, putting Kya down and tapping the baby’s nose with her finger. “Is that my little Ursa? Nana hasn’t seen you since you were born.” She takes little Ursa into her arms, “Iroh had written to me, telling me you all would be here on a vacation. I decided to surprise you.”

Katara’s brow furrowed, snapping in Zuko’s direction. “Zuko, you never invited your mother?”

His mouth opened and closed like a fish.

“I’m sorry, Ursa. I don’t know what’s going on with him lately. I’m sure he meant to. “

“No worries. I’m just glad to be here.”

They get along well, Katara and Ursa. They hug and chat as though they had been family more than the six years Katara and him had been married. What begs to question, when did Ursa come back in his life and why did she leave. He had mixed feelings of seeing his mom again- both joy and anger. Joy, because it had confirmed she had been alive all along. Anger, because she abandoned him when Zuko needed her the most.

Ursa's hair is longer, still styled in the way she had always had it as a princess. The lines on her face were visible but accented her beauty and it actually made her seem more graceful. And her features truly confirmed that his youngest is a spitting image of her.

"Hey, Zuko, can I take Kya in the water to play?"

Coming up to hug his side is a young girl of about fifteen. His mind immediately goes to Azula, only her face is more rounded and the top half of her hair is in a ponytail.

"Please? We won't run off like we did last time."

"Well, they are less likely to leave our sight on the beach than on ice caps." Ursa chuckled.

"S-sure." Was all Zuko could muster.

"Come on, Aunt Kiyi, let's go play in the water." Kya tugged her along, the two holding hands as they ran towards the water.

"You wouldn't think with the age gap those two would be so mischievous together. Kiyi loves seeing the girls, it's the highlight every year we come to visit the South Pole." Ursa says.

"Well, maybe we can meet halfway more often and visit here. Right, Zuko?"

The two women are stunned by his sudden proximity, Zuko taking Ursa's hand, testing to see if she was really here. The biggest missing piece in his life and he's more confused than ever. But one thing manages to grasp Zuko and he finally finds his voice. "I've missed you."

Ursa's taken aback. Granted, the last she saw her son was after little Ursa's birth but even that was some time ago. She smiles, squeezing Zuko's hand back, heartfelt. "I've missed you too."

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There's a lot to unpack. Zuko thought waking up in the South Pole was life shattering but this takes the cake. Getting his nerves under control proved hard and the break down that had built over the course of eighteen years was balling in his gut. He needed to absorb this because it was happening all at once and he just can't sort it out fast enough.

Ursa was alive. Remarried, in fact, and had another child with another man. Which, lucky for him, was unavailable and unable to join them at Ember Island. Zuko couldn't handle that if he tried, not that he wasn't happy for his mother- in the end, there was still this lingering feeling of abandonment. Ursa had gone and lived a whole other life without him while his father treated him like the dirt below his feet.

That's why he's excused himself, escaping to his room and leaving his family to play on the beach. He's supposed to be fixing things...not running away like a scared little boy.

"You're hyperventilating." Katara says, approaching him sitting on the bed with his face buried in his hands. Zuko had not anticipated for her to check on him, their marriage being on the rocks and all. "The last time I saw you like this was in Hira'a. I thought you were going to leave and never speak to your mother again. She's worried, you know."

He sighs. "I don't want her to worry. I'm just...I'm in my feelings right now. I'm sorry. Some anniversary trip this turned out."

Katara nodded, having forgotten for a moment that she was livid with him. Albeit, the softer side of her couldn't ignore that her husband was conflicted.

“Why aren’t you with the others?” Zuko asked. “Don’t let my negativity dampen everyone’s good time.”

She sighs. “Why must you be so moody at the most unreasonable time?”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been the perfect husband. It’s hard when you don’t let me in!” He seethes. It takes seconds before he regrets his outbursts.

“Well, it’s hard to let someone in when they’re being a complete ass!” She retorts.

Zuko opens his hands in a plea, on the brink of loss and possible insanity. “What do you want me to do? Tell me what to do and I’ll do it. You want me to grovel at your feet? Fine! I’ll grovel and beg like that piece of shit I am!”

Katara throws her hands in the air. “I give up!” She proclaims, turning on her heels but stops short, refusing to let go. “You know what? No, let’s hash this out, Zuko.” She presses, pushing a harsh finger into his chest. “Tell me what it is? Is it your mom? Is it me? Is it the girls? Is there this distraction so big that it clouds out your judgement and forget anniversaries?”

He’s baffled, jumping to his feet because her outburst struck a nerve. The dark cloud that’s loomed over him since the catacombs reappears, the slithering snake of his guilt weaved in and played on Zuko’s doubts. He doesn’t like to be reminded what a shitty person he is. He can’t shake how maddening it is to prove himself when she won’t even give him the chance. He cares so damn much. More than he should. Yet every part of him couldn’t fight how much he did even if he tried. Why does he put up with this?

*Because you love her. A gentle voice reminds him. Because fighting for her is worth more than never having her at all. Because nothing worth having comes easy.*

Zuko’s always fought for an easy way out, though he struggled, the one goal in mind was enough to motivate him. So when Azula killed the Avatar and gave Zuko the credit, he

snatched it up and let the rest fall in his lap, his conscience be damned. Then, he was miserable.

Katara and him were like night and day. She challenged him, crossed him and didn't think twice about telling him what's on her mind. But through these, she's motivated him and supported him. Gave him two beautiful children and loved him, looking past the worst of him and accepting that even though Zuko was once her enemy, she always appreciated him for what he was now.

"I'm scared." She bites her lip, choking back a sob that threatened to come out. "I'm scared that one day you'll wake up and you'll want to leave. You won't *touch* me, or *kiss* me or *fuck* me--"

She gasped, now flushed against Zuko, one hand pressed to the base of her spine and the other cupped the nape of her neck. Katara's heart jump started, Zuko's breath brushing her sensitive ear lobe and her tear glossed eyes blink rapidly.

He had forgotten himself.

"I'm sorry for the way I've been acting. I'm not going anywhere. I'm scared too but not enough to envision ever abandoning you. I would do anything. Anything. You deserve to be reminded of that everyday. And as for the last part, I want to fuck you, Katara. I want to fuck you so bad that it's taking every ounce of me not to throw you on that bed and have my way with you in every position I can imagine."

She keened, Zuko's lips brushing her jaw then coming up to kiss chastely on her forehead. The placement of that kiss was so gentle, so breathtakingly sweet, the air in her lungs stilled and a blush graced her cheeks.

"Give me a few moments and I'll prove that to you." He reassures.

That feeling, the one she's felt the night after the solstice, she now recognizes as the first time. When they were young and clumsy and nothing else existed in the world but them. Her heartbeat pounds with unexpected anticipation, his lips imprinted where they trailed, and

Katara's eyes fluttered close at the sensation. The spark, renewed, set light thrums of electricity across her skin.

She tells herself not to give in so easily. Make Zuko work for the way he's taken her for granted. No matter how long she tries to cling on to her anger, regardless of how reasonable her resentments are, she can't find it in her heart to continue. "Don't think you're out of hot water yet."

Zuko chuckles, grazing his thumb below her ear. Her lips break into a seductive smile, coaxing him to trail his thumb over that place. He wants to worship that place, steal every exhale she makes just like she's doing now. The temptation had his temperature rising. But first, he has to set aside these lingering preplexions. "Will you wait for me here?"

"Where are you going?"

"Do you trust me?"

Katara stared at him incredulously but then answered. "Of course."

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Kiyi is teaching Kya handstands by a fire while little Ursa is worn out, sleeping across her grandmother's lap. Ursa herself is looking past her daughter and grandchild, gaze fixated on the ocean- the sun having disappeared and the moon now reflecting on the water. A picture perfect scene, one that Zuko considered impossible.

His quiet footsteps in the sand didn't stir Ursa who sat upright on the beach blanket with her legs crossed as she hummed a tune to which his youngest had seemed to have fallen asleep to as her grandmother stroked her hair. Zuko's mother always had a gentle nature about her.

"You can sit next to me, you know. I haven't seen any turtleducks about, so you're safe for now." Ursa patted the space next to her, the tender smile he had long wanted to see again present on her face, revealing the dimples on her cheeks.

Zuko mirrored her with his own, crossing his legs in a lotus style when seated next to her. An indication of his willingness but also a position in which stated he still had his guard up. He wasn't sure what kind of relationship his mother and his future self had but he hadn't the mindfulness to keep up appearances. Doing that with his wife and family is hard enough, trying with the very person who disappeared without a trace to start a whole other family was another.

"You said you missed me earlier. That's an improvement." Ursa half heartedly jokes, her hushed laugh fading.

Zuko blinked. So their relationship wasn't on good terms. "It's the truth." He replied.

He can tell she's nervous, his mother shifting uncomfortably. He had imagined that if they ever reunited, things would return to normal as though the years lost between them never happened. Instead, Zuko feels disappointment. He had nothing against Kiyi. In fact, he's happy to see he had a sibling that didn't have a vindictive motive against him. But that's what makes Zuko resent Ursa all the more. If she had taken him and Azula with her, would they have turned out better people? With a happy childhood like Kiyi?

"That means a lot." Ursa whispered.

"What happened to us?" Zuko asked before he could stop himself, fear clutched at his heart because now he was afraid of the answer.

Her eyes widened, obvious that Zuko's never asked her this question before. She swallows hard before answering. "I wish I knew. But if I were to blame anyone, it would be myself. I'm lucky enough you allowed me to be in my grandchildren's lives. And Katara, heavens, I can't imagine never meeting her."

"They're good." Zuko agrees. "Too good for me. Yet, here we are."

Ursa gave him a pained expression. "I don't know where you're getting at, Zuko."

He exhaled a heavy sigh, reaching out and enclosing his hand over hers. She left to protect him and Azula, that part he picked up long ago. Ozai was a sinister man and power hungry to boot. If anyone were to play a part in his mother's disappearance, it would certainly be him. In the end, Zuko couldn't fathom ever abandoning his family. No amount of fear his father could emanate would ever persuade him to commit that. "Does that matter?" He asks more himself than her.

"Yes." She sighed. "But only on your own terms."

On his own terms. No one's given him the luxury aside from his uncle. Coming here, he's discovered a place where he is genuinely accepted and his feelings count for something. Not by one, but many people. And though things were strained now, Zuko is confident that he can gain a portion of what he and his mother had lost despite the other Zuko probably having no intentions.

Yue mentioned how being here was more than he deserved. It's true. Zuko had been given a second chance and maybe the way his future self handled things didn't suit the spirits either; having not returned to the Fire Nation in two years, staying holed up in the South Pole, and keeping his mother and Uncle at arms length. He can change that, starting now.

"I love you, mom."

Ursa isn't so quick to hide the tear falling from the pit of her eye before wiping it from her cheek. "I love you too, Zuko."

"And I love you, daddy!" Kya squeals, suddenly appearing on her father's lap. "Do you love me?"

"Of course I do. No one could forget you, turtleduck." Zuko grinned, displaying fierce kisses all over her daughter's chubby cheeks until she whines.

"Yuck. Gross, daddy, come on."



“Certainly you’re not too old for kisses.” Ursa mocked a pout, before coming in to tackle her along with Zuko. Kya begs for her aunt Kiyi to save her, only for the teenager to betray her as well. The game ends in a fit of laughter that leaves them with their sides hurting and Kya feeling the exhaustion after a long day as her eyelids fought to stay open.

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“Careful now.” He smirks over his shoulder.

Katara huffs, pulling her foot out of the sand and clinging tighter to Zuko. “It doesn’t help when you’re in a rush. My feet can’t keep up with yours.”

He had forgotten their height difference. Katara had always been shorter than him but as an adult, it’s more so. While he had grown well past six feet Katara might have been awarded a few extra inches since she was sixteen but it was something he had noticed was common among watertibe women. While he was used to the tall, thin figures of Fire Nation women, water tribe women were the opposite; built for the harsh atmosphere of living on an icy tundra.

“I’m sorry. Want me to carry you.” He teases.

Katara pursed her lips, fighting the heat suffusing her cheeks. “Thanks, but I’m a big girl.”

“I’ve never had my doubts about that.”

“Right. You made that quite clear before. ‘Well, aren’t you a big girl now.’” She mimics his voice.

Zuko grimaced. Did he really say it like that? “Ugh, I wish I could erase that.”

“If you weren’t trying to steal my friend, I’d think you were flirting with me.” She laughs, coming in to nibble the ball of Zuko’s shoulder. It’s his turn to blush. He can dish out the banter but Katara always had a way to leave him tongue tied.

“M-Maybe I was. Kind of...” He cut off.

“Really?” Katara arched a brow.

He shrugs. Maybe. It was more or less him trying to come off menacing, really. “We’re almost there.” He tugs her along.

They reach a group of rocks not far from the shoreline, Zuko peeking over the corner to make sure no one else is around. There, a few feet out of view, was an entrance. A makeshift staircase of rocks led deep below the surface, Zuko igniting a flame in the palm of his hand. He guides Katara carefully, ensuring that she does not slip easily, enthralled how she clings to his side as they make their way down.

“Where are we?” She asks.

Good. She’s never been brought here before. “You’ll like this.” Is all he clues her in on.

They reach the bottom and to Katara’s surprise, she can hear waves crashing somewhere below. Her eyes widen in amazement, looking up first at the wide open space above the cave exposing the night sky littered with stars and the moon positioned closer than Katara had ever seen. Her wondrous gaze then lands on a patch of sand beyond the water.

“What is this place?” She gasped.

“It’s a hidden cave.” Zuko replied, untying the sash to his sleeveless tunic and lifting it over his head. He climbs in the water first, burning out the flame and lifting the basket he brought on his shoulder. “We’ll have to swim to the beach.” He urged her to strip down to her

bindings, in which she complied, eyes fixated on the scene before her, Zuko proud of his accomplishment.

Reaching the patch of beach sand, Zuko stages the items they brought while Katara fascination draws her in to explore a part of the hidden cave.

“So, how did I do?”

Katara makes a short laugh. “I don’t know how you’ve done it but I’m officially impressed.”

“I take it I’m in your good graces now.”

“Just about.” She quipped. “It’s still early.”

He builds a fire while Katara plays in the water, bending it in a dancelike motion that would put anyone in a trance. Her wet hair clung to her skin, droplets trickling down her exposed skin. Zuko licks his lips, feeling almost parched and tries concentrating on setting up their evening. That proves to be extremely difficult when she parts her lips and closes her eyes, lifting her head to the sky and showing off her neck.

“Come here.” Zuko appears near her. She smiles serenely, accepting his embrace and stroking delicate fingers down the nape of his neck, provoking him to quiver.

“Agni, you’ll end me before we even start.” He hissed between clenched teeth. Wherever her touch lied, his skin prickles.

“Oh? And what exactly did you have in mind?” Katara hums low.

“I...uh, I’ve brought food.” He insisted, changing the subject. Zuko didn’t want to seem needy nor did he have the confidence yet to make a smooth initiative even if he tried.

Katara's hands wander from his neck to his chest, paying special attention to his pectoral area, then trailing low until one hand reaches the treasure patch of hair that led below his trousers and her fingers linger there- right at the tip. Zuko swallows, the head of his cock centimeters from where her hand rested, having grown erect during her explorations. "Okay." She agreed, wading out of the water. Zuko doesn't remember holding his breath. He regains his composure, joining her.

Ursa had kindly packed them something small since they would not be joining her, Kiyi and the girls for dinner. Kya probably couldn't stay up long enough to finish her meal and Ursa slept mostly through breastfeeding.

They nibbled quietly on komodo rhino and sweetbread. While they ate, Zuko silently prays to Agni that he could get through this without another...incident.

His hard concentration must be apparent because Katara breaks the awkward tension. "Can I have a grape?"

"Sure." He mumbles, reaching in the basket. "Here."

"Feed it to me." She requests.

Heat spiked in his belly. Zuko nodded eagerly, plucking one off the vine and pressing it on Katara's lips. She parts them, enclosing her mouth over his fingers and suckles slightly. Agni, he won't make it. "H-How can you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Be so collected. Aren't you nervous too?"

Katara snorted, swallowing the rest of the grape. "It's not like it's our first time."

*It is for me.*

Her expression turns to concern. “Zuko?”

“There’s something I need to tell you. Something you need to know that I should have been upfront about.”

It's okay. He should tell her. Zuko wants nothing more than to tell her who he is and that he could treat her so much better, love her so much better. Yes, it might come off that he was comparing to his other self but spirits knows if he'll ever come back. *He's* here now- *this* Zuko- with Katara, and for reasons beyond anything he could explain. Perhaps she'll accept him for who he is, eventually she'll come to love him just the same. She might think he's crazy at first. Is it a risk he's willing to take?

He doesn't want her to love him because she thinks he's her real husband. He wants her to love him for who he is, right here right now, in this moment with the night sky above them and her blue eyes dancing in the firelight.

Zuko leans in, taking her mouth. Katara blinks, their lips linger there- unmoving, innocent. She closes her eyes, letting Zuko draw her into his lap, never breaking the kiss. They remain there, held in each other's embrace until Katara pulls back for air. “What did you want to tell me?”

She's radiant. There's no place he'd rather be. Zuko wants to keep this forever, if she'll let him.

His smile falters. *If.*

“I love you.” He confesses instead.

Katara rests her forehead against his. Something in the way he says it makes her heart soar and her body come alive. She feels young again. His embrace, careful. His confession, pure. Now she's feeling shy, her breath coming in quiet pants and she can hear Zuko do the same. "I love you too."

His lips come down harder this time, shaky and clumsy. Zuko fingers tremble as they brush the dip of her clavicle. He hears Katara gasp a 'please', urging him to give attention to the beautiful structure where he rained kisses. The muscles in his stomach bunch, electricity trailing down the furrow between the ridges of his spine.

"More." She mewls.

"Only if you're good." Zuko keens, smiling wolfishly into her throat.

He caresses her neck, her shoulders, her sides, her stomach. Katara's nipples pebble beneath her top bindings, aching to be let out. She wants so badly to just rip off their clothes and take out all her sexual frustration on him. She had been touch starved way too long but something in the way Zuko behaves during his ministrations tells her to let him have it this once. So, she bites her lip, hard.

"None of that." Zuko cups her chin, tongue lapping at her upper lip, coaxing her to release her bottom, leaving an opening to slip inside her mouth.

"Ah!" Katara gasped. Her heart hammered in her chest, clinging tight to the hard muscles of his back, fingernails biting so deep they leave marks. She straddles him, seeking friction where the ache lied between her legs and her bindings are suddenly uncomfortable.

"Lie down." Zuko instructs, adjusting them both so that he was towering over her. He groans, lids going heavy with lust and his gold eyes turn molten at the sight of Katara on her back panting heavy and eagerly caressing the space between her legs while keeping her gaze steady on him. Her hips slightly off the ground, swiveling lewdly as her lower bindings dampen beneath her skilled fingers.

Zuko snatched her wrist, tossing it aside and pressing her knees to her chest so that she was wide open and exposed. “I thought we agreed you would be good.” He rasped, losing his voice. He had never been struck with so much desire; breath ragged and hot blood pulsed through his veins like an undercurrent of sexual awareness he didn’t know he was capable of harboring.

“If I wanted be good, I wouldn’t have married you instead.”

He shot her a glare, understanding her reference. A growl vibrates low in his chest at the thought of the Avatar having had her before him. Desire shot through her, witnessing Zuko’s eyes flash possessively.

As much as he wanted to take her with no resolve, he didn’t want a repeat of last time. He had some making up to do and it required all his concentration. So when he rips the barrier between his lips and her sex, Katara cries out, stunned. He lapped hungrily at her inner thighs, rotating between the left and the right. He turns circles with his tongue, biting and nibbling the sensitive flesh. He then goes in to bite her ass, hearing her squeak at the action and he laughs out loud.

“I told you to be good.”

She tastes so sweet and he’s so hard. Her disheveled state as he rolled and suckled her clit had him damn near on the edge. But he couldn’t stop. For every orgasm he failed to give her from every opportunity he had to have her was made up over and over. Katara shook and sputtered. Tears surfaced in her eyes from the mix of pain and pleasure, Zuko assaulting her every senses.

His grip remained strong, holding her in place, even when she began to rut against his mouth. Zuko’s hips ground into the blanket in time with the way he impaled her with his tongue. Fuck, he could give her this all night- enraptured by pleasure sounds, watching her surrender so prettily as one orgasm crashed after another. He would make sure that after this, she was imprinted on every part, every crevice; her lips, her tongue, her skin, her cunt.

Katara, in a dazed state of mind, was fixated on the stars. Her mouth agape, her hands locked in Zuko’s hair and she didn’t know if she had it in her to be overtaken by another release.

Zuko licks his lips of her wetness, releasing Katara legs and examining her blissed filled expression. He makes an approving moan, separating her folds and lining the tip of his cock at her entrance. Katara sighs, happy to be filled again after so long without Zuko and closes her eyes in anticipation, loosening the knot holding her upper bindings and caresses her breasts.

“Look at me, Kat.” He murmurs, cupping her cheek, watching her search his face for some sort of explanation. He makes up none. “Look only at me, okay?”

“Yes.” She replies, confused by his request but stayed only on him.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She’s tight. Oh so fucking tight. Zuko’s jaw clenches, spasms hitting him hard as Katara chants his name in a pure cry of lust. She’s so overly sensitive that she came apart, thighs quivering violently from another release and Zuko’s even more satisfied to have gone along with his first approach because he was damn near close already.

He bottoms out, hugging Katara flush, his face buried in her neck and breath fanning her skin. She’s warm and wet and pulsating all around him and Zuko relished in how she sucked him in so greedily. If he had known that she felt so good wrapped around his cock, he would have taken her sooner. He would have loved her sooner. He would have cherished her sooner.

He draws back his hips, slamming back into her. Zuko moves with inexperience, focusing on how and in what ways he should do this. Katara doesn’t react as vocally as before until he hooks her legs over the crease of his arms. She throws her arms around his neck, sobbing uncontrollably, both from pleasure and the relief of having her husband back.

“Don’t hurt me again.”



“I won’t.”

“Never again.”

“Never again.”

“Zuko- *Oh* . Zuko. So close...*harder*. Fuck me harder.”

His vision blurs, grasping Katara by the neck and tilting her chin back. His lips came crashing hard on hers, holding back as long as his body would allow him as he pounds relentlessly into her with a bruising force, the slick sound of him sliding in and out of her growing louder; slapping flesh echoing in the cave. Katara clenches, arching her back in what Zuko hoped was another orgasm because he can’t hold back. His balls tighten, Zuko roaring against Katara’s lips as he cums; shuddering uncontrollably as he spills his seed deep inside her.

Zuko bows his head, embracing his wife through the afterglow, brushing back tears from her face that had fallen during their lovemaking. She’s stunning. Everything about Katara is amazing in every aspect. She gave him everything he didn’t know he needed; companionship.

He wanted to go home and he did. His mind is made up. Zuko knows where his place is now, even if that meant stealing it from someone else.

# back to you

## Chapter Summary

The truth comes out. And with truth comes pain. Zuko's time is coming to an end.

## Chapter Notes

this fic is going to take a dark turn. lots of emotions and goodbyes. it's been several months but we're not too far from the story's ending. let me know what you guys think.

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

“This way, Prince Zuko.”

“I’m not a Prince.” He’s corrected for probably the fourth time since entering the palace.

“Of course.” The servant replied with disinterest.

Not even two minutes in, he starts to feel like a stranger, an outsider. His footsteps were heavy with the weight of his misdeeds and the shame that follows lumps like stone in his chest. He wasn’t a banished prince anymore, he wasn’t even a prince. He was a man who betrayed the only person in the world that saw good in him. He turned his back on Iroh, and facing him proved to be the hardest thing in the world to Zuko, more than facing Ozai. Not because Zuko feared Iroh, but because he anticipated the disappointment he knew would come.

He’s wanted to talk about this with Katara. Leading up to this gave him little sleep at night. His family could tell that his behavior was a tad off but he would not burden them with his past. This was his to bear and he only needed to face it.

The servant cleared his voice, obnoxiously getting Zuko's attention as they stopped at a set of familiar doors that once belonged to his father. With a knock, the servant announced, "May I present to you, Fire Lord Iroh, prin- I mean, your nephew, Zuko."

"Zuko? Of course, bring him in!"

Hearing Iroh's voice on the other end overjoyed Zuko.

They enter the room. The place, once intimidating to Zuko, now was bright and warm with the comfort of a man such as the former general. The study smelled of jasmine and lavender, artifacts and collectibles from the Earth Kingdom placed neatly on the walls and shelves and the Fire Lord's desk. Incense filled the room and the balcony, hung with potted calla lilies and lilacs, were wide open overseeing the beautiful gardens below that Zuko recalled last seeing unattended and dead. Iroh must have revived his mother's garden when taking the throne. That, or Ursa participated.

"Just a moment, nephew." Iroh called to him with his back turned, preparing a tray whilst pouring a pot of tea into two cups. "You see, you came just in time. I was looking for an excuse to take a tea break." The old man chuckled.

The servant rolled his eyes but smiled gently, they know well enough Iroh uses any excuse for a tea break.

"Today is my own special blend that I like to call 'moon tea'. I even made the slice of lemon into the shape of a crescent moon!" Iroh turns around, walking towards the table set neatly on the balcony.

Zuko swallows a gasp. Iroh has gone from gray to white. Though he still looked healthy, Zuko can tell he definitely aged a decade. His heart tightens, having missed Iroh immensely.

Iroh meets Zuko's eyes and the smile he had stretched on his face quickly fades, turning from one of sheer joy to downright confusion. There's a beat of silence before Iroh turns to the servant standing next to Zuko. "Kwong, leave now." He says harshly.

“Your majesty?”

“I’ll call if I need you.”

“Yes, Fire Lord Iroh.”

Dread prickles on Zuko’s skin after Kwong shuts the door behind him. Iroh marches up to Zuko, his features hard and his gold eyes filled with suspicion. His uncle grabs his elbow, discerning Zuko with a grim expression.

*He knows* . Zuko panics.

Iroh harshly pulls him by the arm, stopping at the table where the tea is set. “Sit.” He demands.

Zuko does so but with some reluctance. “Uncle-“

“Who are you?” Iroh interrupts, sitting angrily across from Zuko. He isn’t sure if his uncle thinks he’s a threat or not. “You are not my nephew. Speak truthfully, for they may be your last words. Assassin? Imposter?”

Or maybe he does.

No need to use the notes Zuko had tucked away in his pocket so that he could explain this whole phenomenon. Clearly, Iroh has caught on. “I-I-“ his courage slipped away. Now he’s tongue-tied. “I don’t know how to explain this.”

“Try.” Iroh frowned.

“I’m not a threat, I promise. I don’t- I don’t know how it happened or how I got here.”

Zuko can tell Iroh isn’t convinced, the burning in his eyes telling the signs of accusation.

“You claim that you do not know how you got here? Or how you’ve come to look like the former prince?”

“I am Zuko!” He cries, getting defensive and overwhelmed from the interrogation. “Just..not *this* Zuko.”

Iroh falls silent but nods his head for him to continue, though Zuko can still see the mistrust wrinkling on his uncle’s features.

“One day I was in Ember Island and the next I woke up in... *this* .” Zuko gestures to his body. “I *am* Zuko but somehow I’ve woken up ten years in the future. The last I knew before coming here was that the war was still going on and the Avatar was presumed dead.” He doesn’t relay that he thinks the Avatar survived, not that it matters since he remains alive in this universe.

“Your story is credible. You expect me to believe it?”

“No.” Zuko sighs. “I hardly believe it myself. If not for encountering the Spirit responsible, I would have thought this was a dream. But it’s not and I’m here now and I need you to listen, please. It’s crazy, I know.”

Iroh’s skeptical as he quietly analyzes Zuko’s words. There’s no discrepancy in the way he speaks, no hiccup to suggest that the man in front of him is lying. And now that Iroh is looking at him more carefully, he realizes that this is not an imposter. His nephew, yes, but at the same time it wasn’t. It explains the letters.

“This...is truly the work of the spirits. Remarkable. You really are Zuko. How has this come to be?”

“I was informed by the moon spirit, Yue, that what I’m experiencing is a glimpse- whatever the hell that means. I guess I’m in the future I would’ve been in if I had made different choices other than the ones I’ve made before.”

“Well, that is certainly drastic.” Iroh made a short laugh. “What could you have possibly done for them to put you in such a position.”

Zuko bowed his head and Iroh could feel the atmosphere in the room change. “Worse than you could realize. Uncle, the Avatar is dead...or at least, I think he is.”

“You killed the Avatar?”

“No! Of course not. But I might as well have. Azula did it and I took the credit to win father’s favor. In the catacombs in Ba Sing Se, she shot him with lightning.”

“So, instead of joining the Avatar, Azula killed him and your father welcomed us back with open arms?”

“Not us.” Zuko corrected sullenly. “Me. *I* was welcomed back.”

“Then-” Iroh stops short, clearing his throat. He can guess what took place but doesn’t urge Zuko on the matter. “Oh, I see.”

“It was my fault.” Zuko blurts out. “I thought I was doing the right thing. Azula offered me a way home and I selfishly took it. I thought you would join me but then you didn’t and you were imprisoned.” The tears came flooding out before he could stop them. “I’m ashamed. I am so sorry and ashamed of what I did. You supported and loved me and I betrayed you. I watched them take you away and I did nothing. I hate myself everyday because I know you hate me too.”

“Stop it!” Iroh’s now in front of him, cupping his face and shaking him slightly. “*Stop it* . No matter what you’ve done, no matter what happens, I would never come to hate you, in this life or another. I would be sad. Sad because you lost your way.”

“I did lose my way.”

“And you’ve found it again.” Iroh smiles, pulling a shocked and confused Zuko in for a hug, the older man unable to hold back tears either. “And you did it yourself.” He releases his nephew. “What matters is that you owned up to your misdeeds. You’re here for a reason and I’m glad.”

Zuko smiles back, wiping the tears. “I’m glad too. Katara, Kya, little Ursa, they made me realize what I could have if I had only done the right thing from the start. I didn’t know I could be this happy.”

“Yes. Yue is wise. Katara has a way of making an impression on people. I could not have imagined anyone else by your side.”

“That’s why it’s important, when the time comes, to ask the spirits if I could stay. And I was hoping you’d help me plead my case. I’m meant to be here. I know I am.”

Iroh expressed disbelief, appalled at what he was being asked. “You want me to help you convince the spirits to have you stay? What of *my* Zuko? I cannot do that. What you’re asking is unthinkable and selfish.”

“But...but I thought you of all people would understand! I’m here for a reason, aren’t I? You even said that yourself. Seconds ago you agreed with me!”

“You have his wife, you have his children, you have his *life* . You cannot take what someone else has built and call it your own. I understand how you must feel. You deserve all the good things, nephew, but you cannot skip ahead because the pieces between now and then are too

hard to face. Take whatever you must of this time with you but I will not support your decision to replace another human being.”

The anger, it boils before he has the chance to stop it. “I didn’t steal anything!” Zuko flared. “I was brought here against my will. How am I supposed to just up and leave? No, you don’t understand!”

Iroh’s disappointed. Zuko had yet to learn. “What now? Will you go back to the Southern Tribe and forget your past?”

“What else am I to do?”

Iroh wishes he knew. Zuko returning to his past will not prevent the inevitable struggles he will face all over again. Iroh wishes he can protect him from that but eventually the world will have to be set right again. It is only natural. “I’m afraid I don’t have that answer. Have you not told Katara?”

“I don’t know if I should. Or if I’m supposed to. None of what the spirit that brought me here said makes sense, only that I had to figure it out on my own. I thought I did and now I’m even more confused.” He feels betrayed. When he thinks he’s grasped it all, Zuko’s hit with another obstacle. What was right and what was wrong? But he’s made up his mind. He loves his family, he can’t willingly step aside after everything. “I’ve considered moving the family here. Katara said she loved being an ambassador. I think the change will bring us closer.”

“You’re acting irrationally, Zuko. Katara and her children have developed roots in the South Pole. My nephew has made it his top priority to provide a place in that setting for the sake of his family and most importantly himself. Have you discussed any of this with Katara?”

Zuko scowls. Shouldn’t Iroh be on his side? “No.” He replies flatly. “Either way, I know Katara would trust my judgement. She knows I’d do anything for her, Kya and Ursa. Again, she’s told me how fulfilling being an ambassador was to her and I want to give that back.”

Iroh sighs. “I...I was afraid to bring this up but I think there’s someone you need to speak with before making these decisions.”



“And who’s that?”

“It’s time you spoke to your father.”

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Speak to Ozai? What was there to say? Thanks for pretty much getting rid of me then placing a bounty on my head? And in turn, Zuko can bring up how he had ultimately betrayed Ozai by choosing the Avatar’s side. Not that it was him exactly, but thinking back on it, he wishes he had. It’s hard to hear his whole life story from the perspective of others.

Zuko tells Iroh he would keep note of that. They had less than a week left on the trip. He wanted to utilize this time with his family before they departed; Iroh joined Zuko on the journey back to the island for a couple days so that he could spend time with his grandchildren. Zuko tries to ignore the worry looming over him after his conversation with Iroh. He had been back and forth and he eventually planned to confront Ozai but that idea felt far away and now that it was so close, he damn near wanted to opt out.

“What’s on your mind, love?” Ursa pulls him out of his stupor.

Oh, was he that deep in thought? “Nothing in particular. Um, I was thinking about what souvenirs to take home.”

“Well that’s easy. If it’s Uncle Sokka, fireflakes!” Kya chimes, being carried on Zuko’s shoulders as they stroll through Ember Island’s marketplace. Kiyi was with them as well, skipping ahead to check out the stands. “Grandad likes weapons and Aunt Suki likes the material.” She leans into her grandmother’s ear and whispers. “She says it feels like clouds.”

Ursa laughs. “Really? Oh Zuko, look, there’s papaya, Katara would appreciate some.”

Zuko scoffs, momentarily distracted by Kya grabbing his nose. “Mom, Katara doesn’t like papaya.”

“I know but she says it eases her-”

“Mom!” Kiyi interrupts, looking back and shaking her head.

“...uh, I meant, I use it to ease...headaches. Yes, Katara suggested it eases heradaches.”

Zuko’s good brow raises. That’s odd, why didn’t his mother say that in the first place? “That’s the first I’ve heard of that but sure, we can grab a few to take home if you’re having headaches.” Kya and Kiyi giggle unprovoked and Zuko thinks nothing of it.

They circle the market, carrying back to the beachhouse what they purchased. Word reached them that morning that the snow storms have let up and should be safe for them to journey home. Zuko would have to speak to Katara about the possibility of moving here, fast. He’s confident, anticipating her reaction. To Zuko’s surprise upon a deep conversation they had one night about Fire Nation politics, Katara had a lot to offer. Her knowledge was outstanding and the proposals from letters her and Iroh sent back and forth had Zuko considering how beneficial she was to the nation. No wonder the people here adored her so much.

Iroh was in the living area with Katara, lifting Ursa above his head with his signature laugh. It was his first meeting little Ursa, whose birth he had regretfully missed. Fire Lord duties and all. Ursa’s laugh has always been infectious and Iroh was having the time of his life joining her.

“You’re back already?” Katara’s sitting across from Iroh, holding a cup of tea, the liquid in a color Zuko was not familiar seeing.

“It’s not so busy this time of year, so shopping was a breeze.” Ursa explained, setting down her purchases and joining Iroh in playing with baby Ursa. “I suggest you guys come back in the summer. There are a lot more merchants and they have fireworks by the docks every night.”

“Fireworks!” Kya giggles, bouncing on her father’s shoulders until he let’s her down.

“Do you think you guys can come visit again?” Kiyi asks Zuko. He still feels a bit awkward, seeing a softer version of what Azula looks like. He reminds himself this isn’t Azula and Kiyi could never be Azula.

“Of course.” He smiles, hugging Kiyi from the side and she returns it in kind.

“Dada.”

Everyone in the room turns in little Ursa’s direction where she’s being held by her grandmother and reaching out for Zuko.

“Dada.”

She’s immediately surrounded by familiy, encouraging her to say more and she repeats herself, reaching out for Zuko with her chubby hands in which he happily took her. The occasion was joyous and Zuko couldn’t help but grin.

“Looks like she’s missed you on your walk.” Katara chuckles.

“Can you believe it? She called my name. My name! Did you miss me that much, princess?”

“Dada.” Ursa shows him a gummy smile. This happened to be the highlight of Zuko’s day, so far at least. This was a milestone, meaning that both his children fully accept the Zuko he is now. The family had gotten the baby to speak more and more and while everyone eventually had their fill, Zuko kept little Ursa going until even she didn’t have it in her to continue.

The adults stayed up a little longer, enjoying a glass of wine or two in the lounge room while the children slept. Kiyi tried to convince her older brother to let her stay up and maybe have a tiny sip of wine but Ursa caught on and would have none of it.

“When you're older.” Zuko winked at Kiyi whose disappointed face turned bright and she kissed her brother on the cheek goodnight.

The evening conversation between the four adults began to simmer and Zuko was becoming especially sleepy. His mother and uncle must have felt the same, getting up so that Iroh could escort Ursa to her room before going to his own. They bid the married couple goodnight, leaving the two to themselves.

Katara stretches her limbs next to Zuko, extending her legs into his lap. Zuko smiles shyly, glancing up to see if his uncle and mother were still around. He's still self conscious after losing his...well, basically his virginity. Katara reaches out and brushes back his hair, catching his attention.

“Is something wrong?” He croaks accidentally, his confidence dissolving.

“Nothing is wrong. In fact, everything is really good.”

This piques Zuko's interest. Could it be she's really happy that they came to Ember Island? “I think things are really good too. Katara, there is so much I want for us and the girls and I want to offer all I can.” He takes the hand playing in his hair and kisses the inside of her palm.

This seems to relieve Katara but he takes that as a sign that the conversation is going in the right direction. “I'm glad you say that, Zuko. A-actually, I was worried. We've patched up things between us in the past weeks and I know we still require some time to really work on our marriage. That's why I've been thinking a lot about our future.”

Zuko shifts his position, leaning towards her mouth. Katara inhales sharply through her nose, letting him kiss her. It was so sweet and so much like Zuko. The anticipation in his stomach

was too much not to share the news he was nervous about telling her all this time. They separate. “Me too. That’s why I’ve been thinking about moving back to the Fire Nation.”

Katara stares at him wide eyed, trying to grasp what her husband just said. “You- You what?”

“I’ve been thinking about how happy you all have been here lately. I’ve even discussed it with Uncle. You could get your position as ambassador back, Uncle says he could convince his current one to let you take it. We don’t even have to move to the capital, we can stay here on Ember Island if you want.”

Katara makes a short laugh but not out of joy but as though what she was hearing was complete bonkers. “Zuko, we can’t move to the Fire Nation. We have a house, my job, Kya’s school-”

“You’ll make ten times more than your job. As far as a house, we can choose whatever one we’d like here. The girls can go to the best school’s the Fire Nation has to offer, I can even find Kya a proper firebending teacher.”

“What will you do?”

“Uncle says the governor of Ember Island retires in a month. I could take his place and aid with finances. No more scraping up money to get by, no more crappy house, no more ice and cold and snow. We could build a life here, it’s perfect for us.”

It’s this time that Katara removes herself from Zuko and scoots away. “And you’ve thought this all out on your own? I love our home, I love my job! Kya’s friends are there and the only person she wants to teach her firebending is you!”

“I don’t understand. I thought you said you liked it here. You even said you missed being an ambassador.”

“I did! But we’ve worked so hard to establish roots. We did that on our own with very little and I’m proud that all hard work led to getting the home you consider ‘crap’!” Katara shoves Zuko away from her, getting up to leave.

No! Just when they were starting to see eye to eye, why was she acting like this. “Katara, wait. I’m just thinking about what’s best for our family. I’ve been feeling inadequate and small and I feel this is a way for me to fill that emptiness. I want to give back, why won’t you let me do that?”

Katara takes a step back away from him. “You really think being a stay at home dad makes you inadequate? That it makes you less of a man? Who are you? And where is my husband? Because he’d never think for a second that taking care of his family is emasculating!”

Zuko grits his teeth. “Just...Just see my side, for one second-”

“I have. I’m not the least bit ashamed but it seems you are. Maybe you need some time to reflect. Feel free to sleep in another room.” She was done. That was Katara’s final answer and all her husband can do is stare off dumbfounded.

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“This will be hard. You will not like what you hear and when you come back, you will come back with a different mindset. I hope you are prepared.” Iroh warns Zuko, now dressed in a dark cloak and gaze as sullen as the attire he is wearing. He looks up at his uncle, unperturbed and nods. “Do you want me to go in with you?”

“No.” Zuko replies flatly.

He crosses the two guards posted at the gated entrance leading to the deeper part of the prison, marching through a narrow hall. He reaches a fork, one that leads to a set of stairs going up and another set going down. A guard informs him that his destination is downward. Lucky for Zuko, none of the guards call him ‘prince’. If they did, he’d probably snap. Katara had not spoken to him in two days and his mother’s already scolded him, despite him believing all this time Ursa would be the happiest.

The mood in the beachouse grew sour and it was really getting to Zuko. Iroh hadn't bothered to mention Ozai again since that day they argued in his study back at the palace. Instead, it was Zuko that approached him, which was why they had secretly taken a boat all the way to the capital's maximum prison under the pretense that they were exploring the town at night.

There are two more guards, these one masked with military helmets, at the bottom of the stairs and another two down the end of another hall that would lead to a door- a door to his final destination. Zuko nods and one of the guards unlocks it, letting Zuko in before shutting and locking it behind him.

The lighting in the room is dim, making the shadow at the far corner of the cell to his left an eerie silhouette. It makes Zuko's heart tighten. If he had not just seen his father a few months ago, he would be sweating like a pig. The man he is now and the air about Ozai that once frightened him as a child had faded along with the loss of his father's bending.

"If it isn't former prince Zuko, the bastard son who betrayed me. I wonder sometimes, if you had not let that water tribe whore warm your bed, would you have continued to stab me in the back."

Zuko bites the inside of his cheek. He can't fully see Ozai hidden in the corner, the man was huddled up but Zuko can feel his hard stare on his person. "You will not speak of my wife, keep her off your tongue and I won't cut it off." Zuko exhales, the torches in the room grow bright and now he can clearly see Ozai.

He grew...old. Ten years of aging in a cell made him look much older than his age. Ozai greyed at his sideburns and his roots, even his beard. He had this odd slump about him and his hands were mangled and looked to be disfigured. Ozai hid them under the sleeves of his brown robe after catching Zuko staring at them. His gold eyes were still menacing, that was the only feature that resided of the former Fire Lord.

"You expect me to shiver in my boots at your sorry threat?"

"I expect to make my time here as short as possible." Zuko frowns.

“Like the last time, I see.” Ozai chuckles darkly. “Only, you left me a present. I wonder what you’ll give me this time.”

“Cut the shit, dad. What you did, count yourself lucky the Avatar hasn’t ended you.”

“So you’ve told me before. Anything new?”

*I have?* Zuko furrows his brow albeit ultimately decides not to thread deeper in the question. Ozai is known to steer the conversation in the direction he wants and tends to cut the conversation short if it’s not to his liking so if Zuko wants answers, he needs to ask the right questions. Taking a seat in front of his father’s cell, Zuko sits in lotus style, keeping his back straight and his head high. Ozai does the same and Zuko realizes he is much taller than him.

“Last we talked was two years ago, correct?”

“Are we here to reminisce about our last conversation? If so, I’m not exactly delighted to walk down memory lane.”

“Must have been traumatizing for you.” Zuko was being sarcastic but he can see the change in Ozai’s expression. “Help me remember, how many times have I visited you.”

“You think I’m in the mood to answer your questions?”

“I think you’re in the mood because I know for a fact that no one has come to see you since our last visit. Again, cut the bullshit.”

“Twice. Once after I was thrown in this disgusting prison and the second when you burned my hands to the bone.” Ozai showed his teeth, his hands shaking in his lap and to Zuko’s shock, he could clearly see how horribly disfigured his father’s hands were. Ozai’s hands had third degree burns, his thumb on his right hand and his forefinger and pinky on his left were



missing, indicating that the burns to those were probably so severe and blackened, they were cut off.

He did that. Angi, *he did that*.

“I would say I’m proud- your meek nature was often an annoyance- but I wasn’t expecting to be your target.”

Zuko shakes his head. “You purposely said something vile to set me off. You and I are no stranger to that.”

“And you are my son, of course you know that.”

“I’m nothing like you!” Zuko lost it. It’s the first time he’s heard it out loud. He’s always wanted to win his father over. He’s wanted Ozai to love him and accept him for who he was. So, Zuko spent his banishment terrorizing people for his father so that he could finally look at him and see a reflection of himself in his own son. Zuko’s came to the conclusion long ago, he could never stoop as low as his father. Though, it was easy to get by lying about killing the Avatar, he knew deep down, he could never kill an innocent person on purpose. He could never take the lives his father didn’t shed a thought about taking himself.

This is when it hits Zuko, that is why he struggled with his decision to return home after he was welcomed back. Not only did he play a hand in the Avatar’s demise, he was forcing himself on a path that would be his own self destruction. For what? The impossible outcome that his father will love him? That he won’t feel second to Azula? That he’ll find his place in this mess of a world where his dysfunctional family was hellbent on destroying it and he would take his seat and watch?

Zuko’s stomach rolled, he felt like he was going to be sick.

“I’m nothing like you.” Zuko repeated, lower.

“So you think.”

“Would I have meant anything to you if I decided not to join the Avatar. Could you honestly say that if I ended up exactly like you, you would love and accept me?”

There’s this pause, this prickling pause. Ozai makes this throaty noise that sounded so choked, Zuko almost thought he was crying. Instead, he was laughing. It rang louder and louder, echoing and bouncing off his father’s cell until it reached the hall and the guards posted at the door opened the squared window peering through it.

“Is that why you came all this way? A hopeful boy’s wish. Here’s the thing- *son* - no matter what you could have said, no matter what right you could have done in my eyes, it would never change how much I despise you. From the beginning, I wanted you thrown out. Your absence of fire the day of your birth was only an excuse. Every breath you drew made me want to snuff it out of you. No. There is nothing- *nothing* that could ever make me love you let alone want to share the same blood. And if Azula was of no use to me, I would wish to discard her in the same manner.” Ozai continued to laugh, Zuko’s horrified face feeding him.

Zuko knew, he always knew and yet it didn’t stop from hurting like a knife piercing his heart. “I was never going to amount to anything to you.” Zuko remarks, more to himself. The case was open and shut. All his ambitions as a child desperate for his father to want him had always been futile.

“You were destined to disappoint me, just like when you threw away your chance to become Fire Lord. You’re weak. Weak! Instead you lie with the enemy and breed. I should have ended that wretched abomination years ago when I escaped and had her in my grasp. Her tiny frame would have been easy to break like brittle. If my hands worked, I would break out of this cell now and do it all over again- Ahhhhhh!”

Zuko doesn’t know when he moved. Hell, he doesn’t know what gave him the strength to speed up to Ozai’s cell so fast and grab hold of his disfigured hands in a vice like grip that Zuko could hear the bones crack. All Zuko could see was red. Pure, raging red. Ozai cried out so loud, drool fell from his mouth. The heat in Zuko’s palms raged hotter and hotter, steam rolled from between his fingers and his teeth grit so hard, he thought they might crack.

“You...will...never...harm...my daughter. Ever.” Higher and higher, his bending grew until Ozai made a blood curdling scream. “I should not have spared you. I should have ended you the first time. I should have burned you to a crisp and watch you squirm! I would take joy in knowing I caused you so much pain until your very last breath.”

Ozai was on the cusps of passing out, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. He could hear the guards unlocking the door and so Zuko let go, Ozai falling back to the floor with a thud and holding his hands to his chest screaming like a madman. Having enough, Zuko used this chance to escape while the guards ran in and surrounded Ozai. Tears blurred his vision on the way up the stairs. He couldn't see, he couldn't breath. His hands scaled the walls, leading him to the fork he was at before, down several sets of halls and to the outside where Iroh was waiting.

His Uncle caught Zuko right before he fell to his knees and vomited.

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It was the day after Kya was born. Katara wanted to finalize her duties before retiring and ended up in labor. What was supposed to be a joyous occasion for them and a healing time for Katara, turned into a parent's worst nightmare. Kya had been taken from her crib while Katara was under numbing medicine and watched in terror as Ozai slipped into her chamber. Zuko was outside the room, speaking to the healer, and Katara's cries were hoarse and strenuous, her body immobile, that when her husband finally heard her, it was too late.

They caught Ozai a mile into Caldera, with apparently little plan on where to go from there, which was unusual for a former leader and tactician such as Ozai. His eyes were wild and crazed upon being surrounded by soldiers, armed and ready. Kya was finally back and in the safety of Katara's arms, though the waterbender was still weak and frantic, she couldn't rest until she had her daughter. Zuko sought out Ozai but the guards refused to let him pass into the prison on Iroh's orders after Ozai was returned to his cell.

Zuko looked at his daughter and he knew they had to leave for the South Pole that day. Taking a newborn on travel was probably unwise but Zuko couldn't risk his family's safety. After some years and many letters, Iroh finally permitted his nephew into the prison to confront Ozai. What transpired in that cell resulted in Ozai's hands being burned and mangled and Zuko finally renouncing his title as prince.

Iroh told him this on the way home. Zuko needed to be left alone. All he could do was sit off and stare at the fireplace. The flames cracked and flickered in the silent house, the servants and even his mother and sister stayed cleared. Kya and little Ursa were already in bed before he and Iroh returned. His eyes were rimmed red. He threw back two shots of Fire Whiskey and still the thought of Kya, or even Ursa, being taken from him was eating at him.

“I did not want you to have to relive this.” Iroh told him following the story. “I did not think you would commit the same act either but I do not blame you. You're the same Zuko no matter what timeline you hail from. Know that I did not suggest this out of ill intent but only because I want you to truly understand the circumstances. I'm so sorry, nephew.”

It didn't matter, Zuko would learn how truly evil his father was one way or another. In the end, Ozai will always be himself. “He's not dead.” Zuko wants to confirm, the idea that Ozai died as a result of his injuries didn't bother him in the least.

“No.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“I will cover it up, like last time. Do not worry.”

Worrying was all he could do. When Iroh realized his nephew will say no more, Zuko going totally absent, his eyes still stained red from strain and tears, the Fire Lord left him to his thoughts.

“Zuko.”

He blinks, looking up to his wife who looked a bit sickly herself. He doesn't know what to say. Zuko feels so guilty.

“I know you would do whatever it takes to make our family happy. You have been so good to me and the girls, that I would go anywhere you asked of me; no questions asked. I would take

myself and I would take Kya from the school she loves and leave the house we built together. I choose us, Zuko. I will always choose us.”

Zuko closes his eyes. “Kat-”

“I’m pregnant.” She interrupts.

Pregnant? *Pregnant*. That would explain everyone’s odd behavior; his mother buying papaya for Katara. Katara drinking that odd colored tea. Was that perhaps prenatal tea?

“And this is one decision I stand by with my everything; I will *not* move back to the Fire Nation.”

He stands slowly on his feet, finally looking down at his wife who had been scared all this time while he so selfishly wanted to return to a life that would never truly be his. Her eyes said she will follow him wherever he went because she trusted him- Katara has always trusted him- but not here. Not where they had almost lost their daughter. The fear that it will happen all over again was evident on Katara’s face, telling Zuko she will not put herself or her children through that nightmare. And knowing the truth, he could never place his family in harm's way either.

Zuko comes to his knees, bringing his lips to her exposed midriff. “Katara.” He whispers, so broken and so soft, her heart melts. He wraps his arms around her waist, clenching her dress desperately, thanking Agni for this gift. “Let’s go home.”

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Zuko now knows what it means when people say there’s no place like home. He’s missed the frost in the air, the chill on his nose and the plains of snow and ice. He missed their little hut and their bed of furs. Most of all, he missed the people; from warm greetings to late night visits from Sokka. After learning of Katara’s pregnancy, Zuko was more adamant than ever to prepare for the newborn. He’s even convinced Katara that it might be high time they look into extending the hut. With another baby along the way and Kya getting older, a bigger room for all three children might be necessary.

They planned to present this to Hakoda at the end of the week, Zuko making out the blueprints with the help of his brother-in-law. A part of Zuko couldn't believe how naturally he was acting at becoming a new father again. He'll admit, the short time raising Ursa and Kya had been rough, yet the joyous memories outweighed the stress of being a parent and he knows he could handle a third. In fact, he was looking forward to it.

Zuko has been especially affectionate, using every opportunity that Katara was home to nuzzle and kiss Katara's belly. He'll whisper to their little one, telling it about his day and how he couldn't wait to meet her.

They're in bed as Zuko does his nightly routine, planting kisses up and down Katara's stomach. It makes her gasp and shudder. She likes his lips on her bare skin, his large hands on her waist as he shamelessly moves them up and down her sides and down her legs. It makes her toes curl and it especially makes her heart soar at how excited he is to be a father again. Katara admits, it's one of the sexiest things about Zuko.

"How do you know it's a girl?" Katara quips, combing back Zuko's hair and eyes him curiously at the slow grin crossing his lips.

"It's a girl." Zuko is confident.

"Well, I think it's a boy this time. With the two girls we have, we're probably due."

"That's what you think." He grins. It's a girl, no doubt about it. "Care to make a bet?" Zuko raises his good brow, coming up to nibble on the underside of Katara's breast. She mewls.

"No fair, Sparky, don't start something you can't finish." Katara pushes Zuko over on the furs and he falls on his side, laughing.

"When have I never finished? And for the times I haven't come through, I believe I've made up for that and more." So sly. Sly enough to make her blush. Six years of marriage and she's

still defenseless against his flirting, even though Zuko doesn't know he's capable of flirting almost all of the time.

"I'm up for a bet." Katara's smiles, biting her bottom lip. Zuko's gaze flickers to that place and she can't help but feel a spark of victory. "If you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to kiss you." her voice turns sultry. She lifts her chin, coming up until their nose to nose. Her tongue roams his upper lip in a seductive manner and if she keeps this up, Zuko might knock her up twice.

He hums low, cupping Katara's cheek and grazing his thumb along her cheekbone. "Then I'll just have to look at you like this all the time."

They're both interrupted by a knock at the door. Katara makes to get up but Zuko stops her. "I'll get it." He says, going to the door and untying the flaps. Sokka rushes in, grabbing Zuko by the collar and panting like crazy.

"Suki is in labor! Katara! Need Katara!" Sokka shoves his brother-in-law, bringing his hands to his head in a panic.

"What's going on? Why are you yelling?" Katara entered, annoyed that her brother interrupted her and Zuko's alone time. It wasn't the first.

"Suki's in labor!" Sokka shouts.

"Oh La, let me get my parka! Zuko, stay here with the kids."

"Shouldn't I come?"

"I'll send for you and the girls. Let them sleep, I'll be back." Katara promises, taking Zuko's hand and kisses him chastely on the lips before following her brother, who's frantic behavior is starting to nerve her.

Zuko stays up, waiting for Katara to come back. He sits on the floor, back to the wall, at Kya's bedside while rocking Ursa's crib with his foot. Did labor take long? He pondered. Nine months from now, he'll have his own experience with Katara. This makes him smile. He wishes he could have been there for Kya and Ursa. At least this time around he could. Will her eyes be blue or gold? Will she be more like him or Katara? He hopes she's a waterbender. He chuckles to himself, surprised at how adamant he was that they'll have another girl.

Zuko could feel the sun come up and his daughters will wake soon with it. He quietly organizes the outfits they'll wear then warms a bath for them to quickly clean up so they could prepare to visit Sokka and Suki. He doesn't have to wake them, both Kya and Ursa up when he enters their room.

It's midmorning and still no word from Katara. Zuko hopes nothing has gone wrong, the girls getting anxious because their mother was not there when they had awoken. He explained to them that Aunt Suki was having the babies today and that seemed to settle them for a while.

By noon, they all hear the flap open and in comes Hakoda. He's grinning from ear to ear. He informs them that the children were born healthy and the rest of the family is waiting for them. Today was like any other day visiting Sokka's house but today felt different. The house smelled a bit like medicine and something else. Sitting in the middle of the living room floor by the fire is Katara and Sokka and lying on a bundle of furs glowing and pale is Suki holding two tiny newborns in her arms.

"Babies." Kya points in awe.

"Yes, sweetie." Zuko whispers.

"Congrats, son." Hakoda clasped a teary-eyed Sokka on the shoulder.

Zuko and the girls gradually approach them all, Kya squeezing in front of her mother to get a better view and Zuko looks down past the others with Ursa on his hip. They're so tiny, he thinks. This is when Sokka comes to Suki's side, taking one of the newborn boys in his arms.



Suki wipes a stray tear from Sokka's face and they both smile at each other, a silent exchange of gratefulness and love.

Katara sees this as well, looking up at Zuko as though saying 'I can't wait for this'.

He can't either.

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"Don't run far, Kya!"

"I won't!"

The air is a little warmer today. After the harsh blizzards came calm days and the weather was especially nice that the sun actually came out. Zuko uses this opportunity to gather water to store for the house. He's behind on laundry and the girls required a much needed bath since running out of water two days ago. Some days are harsh but Zuko's grateful they're far and few between.

A smile breaks on his face watching Kya gleefully playing in the snow and practicing fire bending moves in between. He had just finished lessons with her and now was working on upkeeping the home. He thinks oyster stew might be good tonight, Zuko was lucky to come across fresh ones at the market this morning.

"Zuko, does Ursa have a fresh pair of socks anywhere?" Katara opens the flap to the hut's entrance.

"There's one more pair in the basket by the fireplace. I'll need to wash once I get this last jug of water in the house."

“I don’t know why you go through the trouble of gathering water. I could just bend it from the snow into the jugs, you know?”

It would’ve been nice if he had known she’d be home sooner from her classes but he just nods. The task is already done anyhow. “I’ll remember that next time, love.”

“Uncle Aang!”

Katara and Zuko look up at the sight of a bison descending from the sky. The beast groans, landing hard and tossing snow all around it. The parents look on in surprise as their daughter runs to the Avatar sliding off Appa’s tail end with open arms. The now grown airbender laughs, swinging Kya in the air. “Long time, no see, princess. Did you miss me?”

Kya giggles. “Yes. A lot. I’m two inches taller than last time and Ursa is big! And another baby will be here soon!”

“Is that so?” Aang smiles at his friends. “Two isn’t enough to keep you busy, I see. Congrats.”

Zuko frowns. “We appreciate it.” He’s hesitant, never having properly spoken to the Avatar before. There’s still this dread when seeing him, how he had always compared himself to the airbender, a lot more now knowing that he and his wife had once had a thing. Call it jealousy. Zuko doesn’t care.

“Aang, it’s so good to see you.” Katara greets, cupping one side of Aang’s cheek and kissing the other. “Where did you come from? Oh, where are my manners! Come in, you must be cold. Zuko, you want to get tea started?”

“Sure.” Her husband grumbles. He’s not as thrilled to see the Avatar as his wife. He doesn’t dislike him per se and it isn’t exactly because he and Katara have a history; Aang was looking at Zuko in a way that made his flesh goosebump. All the while Zuko rummaged through the kitchen to make them tea.

After bringing out refreshments, Kya immediately snatched a rice cookie and broke off a piece for Ursa whom Katara sat next to her.

“Republic City?” Zuko catches part of the conversation. “That’s the project you’ve been working on?”

“Yup! It’s going to be big, Katara. It’ll be a melting pot for all nationalities. It’s nothing like you’ve ever seen. It’s the start of a new beginning, I can feel it.”

The only space available to sit was between Aang and Katara, leaving Zuko in an awkward position next to who is supposed to be his friend but is having a hard time making small talk. There’s only exchange between Katara and Aang, Zuko nodding here and there, pretending to be part of it. The hours tick by and Zuko thinks of ways to excuse the Avatar from his home because now things are becoming even more awkward the longer Aang sat next to him.

“Hungry?” He hears Katara say.

“Huh?”

“I said are you hungry? I’ll make dinner while you two talk. Kya, take your sister in the room and go play while I’m in the kitchen.”

‘Yes, mommy.’ Kya replies, picking up her baby sister.

Zuko hangs his head, casting his eyes to his lap, trying to figure out what to say to Aang. An apology, maybe? He barely said ‘hello’ when Aang approached him. Then the Avatar says something that disturbs him.

“I know.”

Did Zuko just hear him right? “Pardon?”

“It’s no secret to me, Zuko. I’d like you to know that I commend you for everything you’ve gone through. You’ve really changed and I’m happy. It’s been tough, I’m sure, but it’s time for things to be as they were.”

Who the hell was he? “I’m not going anywhere. I have a family.” Zuko says, point blank.

“You don’t belong here. Any longer and it could disrupt the balance. You and your existence cannot coincide with those of this universe. Like Yue said, this is a glimpse. You aren’t real to them and they aren’t real to you.”

Zuko shot up on his feet, pinning Aang against the wall by his collar. Anger contorted his face. How dare he! To say something so disgraceful about his wife and children. “You son of a bitch.” Zuko grits between clenched teeth. “You think you know everything because you’re the Avatar. I may not have all the answers but I know where I belong. So take your petty wisdom and shove it! It’s not needed here.”

“Zuko, what are you doing?!” Katara shrieked, dropping the tray of saucers she carried in of saki while dinner boiled. She ran to her husband and friend. “What’s gotten into you? Let Aang go.”

He doesn’t listen at first, Aang’s glare is just as fierce as his own and he wasn’t letting up yet. It was clear who the real winner would be if Zuko so much as harmed the Avatar but that means little in this moment where Aang had insulted him. Zuko wishes he could knock him out. He’s not that person anymore no matter how much his blood boiled right now.

“Let...him...go.” Katara whispers harshly to Zuko, feeling the dark tension growing in the room and making the hairs on her neck stand. She was worried Kya and Ursa might come out to investigate.

“It’s time to say goodbye, Zuko. I’m sorry.” Aang’s words don’t sound the least bit sincere.

Katara’s brow scrunches, confused about what Aang was talking about.

“I think it’s time our friend here called it a night.” Zuko hissed between clenched teeth.

“I agree.” Katara follows, gently prying her husband’s hands off Aang’s collar. “Aang, I’m sorry. Maybe come back tomorrow when things calm down.”

Aang’s features brighten upon turning to a Katara. He smiles, brushing himself off, and nods. “Of course, Katara. Tomorrow will be a better day, I’m sure.”

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"I've upset the Avatar."

"Mmm...yeah but you and Aang have your moments. I'm sure you'll make up tomorrow."

No chance. Aang’s visit replays in his head. Over and over. The sun is starting to sink and Zuko has a feeling that he won’t see it again in this place. Aang’s words really got to him. Zuko swallows his panic like a lump in his throat and he can’t seem to think straight. Unable to relax after his encounter with the Avatar, Zuko announces to Katara that he’ll be taking a walk.

She’s concerned but being the understanding wife that she is, Katara retrieves his parka and helps him in it, going in to kiss her husband on the cheek. Zuko turns his head in time, capturing her lips and kisses her- hard, and slow. “I’ll be back.” He promises, turning on his heels and exiting the house.

Zuko doesn't have a destination in mind. It’s completely dark and the moon is so visible, it looks like it might collide with the Earth. His feet take him further and further, as if of their own accord. It was like he was being drawn somewhere of no control of his own until Zuko’s standing at the edge of a dock. He’s trying to wrap his head around what happened. Did attacking the Avatar cause him to lose his chances? What will happen now that he was told he was going back home? No, that wasn’t his home, not anymore. He couldn’t just wake up the next day and pretend as though none of this ever happened.

“You did this to me.” He looks up at the moon, hugging his arms. “I’ve done a lot of terrible things in my life that I deserve to be punished for. Not this. I don’t deserve this.”

“I am so sorry, Zuko.”

He doesn’t need to turn around to know who’s behind him. “If you were sorry, you’d let me stay.”

“I cannot change what is, I can only maintain a temporary glimpse.”

“What now?” Zuko asks. He’s afraid of the answer. “The other Zuko comes back, finds out his wife is pregnant and doesn’t remember how? Not to sound mean, that’s pretty fucked up.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be the case. As you go back to the time before you had come here, so shall everyone else in this universe.”

Zuko turns around, finally looking at Yue who’s head is bowed and hands clasped in front of her. She glowed, hwe dress flowing out like waves of the ocean. “They won’t remember me.” It registers to him. “That’s what you’re saying. I’ll be erased from their lives...forever.” Not only will he no longer be with his wife or daughters, the existence of he and Katara’s unborn child will not exist either. “You can’t do this. You can’t just tamper with people’s lives! I-”

Yue brings a finger to his lips. His anger disappears and the world around him fades behind watery eyes. A single touch and it all came crashing down. “It hurts. I can’t change that. No one can. What *you* can change is far greater. I can’t give you what you *want* , Zuko, but I want to show you what you could *have* . Please, allow me to show you.”

Yue cups Zuko’s cheeks, bending his head toward her. She places her fingers on his temples, a glow coming from the tips, and closes her eyes.

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“Hey. Feeling alright now?”

Zuko sits next to her on the bed. He smiles but it doesn't reach his eyes. Katara's stretched out, reading a scroll with the prenatal tea at her side. “Yes. Much better.”

“Good.” Katara smiles too, scooting over on the furs to make room for him.

“I know the last few months have been...crazy. I, uh, haven't really been myself, I guess.”

“Mmm, no.” Katara contemplates this. “It's been interesting, though.”

Zuko nods, sighing deeply. “I've done some good things, right? At least I think.”

“You're Zuko, that's always a good thing.”

How could something so simple make him the happiest man alive? A simple word of appreciation.

Zuko purses his lips, mustering the courage to express everything he's feeling right now. “Promise me something; that you'll remember. Remember how I am right now, this...me, this Zuko. I want you to look back on this moment, that if it seems like things may have changed, that who I am right now is the truth to everything I feel about you. I want you to hold it in your heart and keep it there forever.”

Katara sets the scroll on her lap, quiet for what seems like hours- yet it's only seconds before she speaks again. “Zuko, you're scaring me.”

“For me.” He gently squeezes her hand. “Please. Promise.”

“I promise.” She whispers. Her heart feels like it’s sinking and she squeezes Zuko’s hand back as though he might disappear in front of her.

“Thank you.”

“Come to bed.” She asks softly.

“I will shortly. I’m going to check up on the girls first.”

Katara nods, watching her husband slip from her fingertips and out of their bedroom.

He can’t bring himself to lay next to Katara. It’s dead in the night and he could hear the cold winds howling outside. He should seek the comfort of the furs but he cannot budge as Zuko sits quietly, cross-legged, at the edge of the bed, watching his wife sleep peacefully and his eyelids grow heavy. Sleep calls to him, bading him to come to the otherside. Zuko fights it with all his might but hours pass and the minutes tick loudly in his mind.

Maybe tomorrow will be as it was today. Maybe Yue can find a way. The likelihood is slim to none but he could hope, can’t he?

Zuko’s head lulls, there’s weight on his eyelids. He bid Kya and Ursa farewell and kissed Katara on the cheek one last time. One. Last. Time.

*It’s okay , Zuko tells himself, I can start over. I can fix it all over again. I can do right.*

He doesn’t want that. He doesn’t want to lose all the things he’s come to love. Because what he loves is all around him; from the flimsy flap at the entrance of the hut he always has to fix to his brother-in-law’s invasive company and the bottle of liquor he carries with him.



The house feels empty. His heart feels empty. And his body feels heavy.

*Just a little longer. Let me stay. Just...a little...longer...*

## Chapter End Notes

i jokingly asked my husband would it be wrong if i ended the fic here. he told me point blank not to be mean to my readers, so i'll cut you guys some slack. look forward to zuko returning to his past and reuniting the gaang. how do you think past katara will react?

# we're closer to the line

## Chapter Summary

Zuko wakes up in the past, his family gone forever. Though he mourns, he's determined now more than ever to change, the Fire Nation Prince sets out to aid the invasion on the Day of Black Sun and confront his father for good.

## Chapter Notes

We're one chapter away from finalizing this fic. I can't believe me, of all people, actually finish a multi chapter fic in less than a year (lol i kid). there's a lot that uncovers here and things get slightly darker in this chapter.

Zuko has been sent back, and I for one am heartbroken for him. despite learning to be a better person, it's still traumatic to lose his family like that forever. this chapter's turn of events follow around the time of Day of Black Sun. Just a warning, there is a character death.

He's stirred awakened by crashing waves and seagulls, sunlight floods his room and Zuko groans, shifting on the bed. He curls his fingers into cool sheets, expecting to feel pelts beneath them but finds an empty space. His eyes slowly opened, revealing paper walls and burned out candles, seashell decorations and polished furniture. The scent of sandalwood and seawater are in the air. It's familiar but distant. That's why when he recognizes it Zuko abruptly sits in an upright position.

Why was he expecting to be anywhere else other than where he was?

His state of mind is foggy, as though it couldn't process, or rather differentiate, what was real and what wasn't. Was he dreaming? One so vivid that he had felt like he experienced a completely different reality? The question hangs in the air but one in particular lingers even higher. He can't quite pinpoint it but it's there, trying to recall every part of his dream without causing the sudden pang throbbing in his head.

What was this horrible ache in his chest?

“Rough night?”

Zuko wasn't expecting company but the familiar voice of his current girlfriend did not alarm him. All he can do is slump his shoulders. “I'm not in the mood.” Is the only answer he cares to muster. He had wanted to apologize for his rude behavior last night yet the guilt wasn't truly there for him to say the words.

“It's nearly noon. Your sister is impatient and suggested we leave for the beach without you if all you're going to do is hole yourself in this room.”

“Why does she care?” He snapped. “Go ahead without me.”

Mai sighs, crossing the room to sit next to him on the bed. He had originally seen her in his peripheral vision standing by the window with her arms crossed, a common trait of Mai's, and he hates that he can't read her. She probably isn't too fond of his mood either. Regardless, Mai reaches for his scarred cheek, caressing it so lightly that he can't tell if her hand is really there.

“We can stay here then. Just us. We could go down to the hidden cave Ty Lee mentioned.”

*“What is this place?”*

*“It's a hidden cave.”*

*“Don't hurt me again”*

*“I won't.”*

*“Never again.”*

Katara! Without meaning to, Zuko flinches. He turns to Mai, expressing panic. He doesn't give her time to question him because he's out the door. How could he forget? If for a second?

His feet carried him away before he knew it- out the bedroom and Li and Lo's beach house- ignoring the shouts of Mai and the confused stares of his sister and Ty Lee standing on the porch conversing. His breath couldn't catch up but he didn't care. He had to find them. He had to go to where they were.

It was all coming back- the snow, the hut, the frost on his tongue and the endless ocean patched with ice. The smiles of his daughters, an imprint of his pride and joy. He especially remembers their laughter, the weight of their cheeks on his chest as he read them a bedtime story by the fire- Katara adjusting the coal and bringing over a warm blanket for them all to huddle under.

Maybe they're still here, in reach. Logically this may be untrue but for the sake of his anguish, he had to confirm it.

He fumbles here and there, trying to remember the location. Which house was it? It used to be a former general's, that much he knows. As if every part of him had the ability to memorize the exact place, Zuko finds himself standing at the front door, out of breath and perspiration on his brow.

He knocks impatiently.

“P-Prince Zuko?” A elderly man cracks open the door, his eyes are like saucers. He swallows nervously. “Yo-you're here on Ember Island? I mean, what could I do for you, your highness?”

Zuko looks past General Gui. The disappointment wasn't unexpected yet it hit just as hard.

“Look, Prince Zuko, I know I called in sick for his majesty’s meeting- but you see...”

Gui’s voice drowns out, Zuko turning on his heels and gradually walking away.

“Haha..uh, y-you won’t tell your father, will ya?”

That horrible ache, it was coming back. The sand in front of him seems to expand and stretches out so far the ocean looks miles away. But he’s there, gazing sullenly past the horizon and the blinding sun forces his eyelids to close.

Ah, Zuko begins to grasp, this is what they call absence. Who knew it was so akin to mourning. He’ll never see his daughters again, and his unborn child will never come to be in this world, she’ll never know her mother or her father’s face. Katara, though here, will not be the same. She will never love him the same, she will never be his- because the mistakes he’s made have set in stone the outcome of what they could have been. Regrets were a common feat of Zuko’s but none like the one of destroying Katara’s trust.

Waves crashed on the shore, surrounding his feet all the way to his ankles. Zuko buries his face in his hands. When they draw back Zuko wishes the water could carry him away too .

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Evil. That’s what this was. Zuko would like to think this was a new low for Ozai and his generals but that would be giving them too much credit. Zuko should be sick to his stomach, he should be shocked at how merciless and cruel the plan was. Instead, he’s stoic. He’s endured his fair share of pain. Just like in the future, Ozai will stop at no end and Zuko feels numb.

Ozai proudly asked his son to sit at his right hand. It was everything he ever dreamed of. He should be thrilled, he should be holding his head high and accept the gift of being chosen, of being the prince of the Fire Nation once again; sitting at that place was, once upon a time, so far away. Zuko wishes it had stayed that way.

*Destroy their hope.*

Zuko scoffed. "Destroy their hope." He repeats out loud. That was something Ozai was good at.

"You left in the middle of the meeting without a word, you idiot." Azula charged after him, exiting now that the war meeting adjourned only moments ago. Zuko didn't even bother to excuse himself. "Do you realize what you made yourself look like? What you made father look like?"

"I'm guessing not so good. Don't worry about me."

"I'm not." Azula deadpanned. "But if you don't want to end up banished again, or worse, incinerated, I suggest you start behaving. Your attitude lately is making everyone talk. We've all seen the way you glare at Dad."

Zuko stops in his tracks. For the first time in her life Azula flinches, her brother snapping his eyes at her. There was something odd about him, different. Everything physical about him was the same yet the aura around him was a lot more noticeable, mature; as though when you looked into his eyes it was like he had aged a decade. Ty Lee claimed it was a dark grey but not like that of someone who was just sad but someone with mysterious intents. Azula deems it silly, Zuko was an open book. Albeit, doubt began to play on her mind.

Azula quickly brushes it off. "I'm only looking out for you, Zuzu."

Zuko's face hardens. What an absolute lie. However numb he felt was betrayed by the manipulative words his sister says. It's seething.

"Are you listening?"

"Mai is here." He dismisses, marching down the hall where his girlfriend was waiting for him the entire war meeting. Azula watches in disbelief as he walks right pass Mai without a glance and out of sight.

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“I’ve snuck you some tea and rice cookies. There was some left over from the kitchens. I figured you’d appreciate food other than grimy rice.”

The soldier kneels, placing a small tray through the cell bars. She was used to Iroh’s silence. Maybe it was why she likes coming to visit him. Because though he had not spoken, his presence was comforting. It was like her father’s, when she would walk into his study and it felt like home. She would bring him tea and cakes and he would let her lie her head in his lap while she listened to the stroke of his pen.

She missed her family. Becoming a soldier meant making her family proud, it also meant being far away from home.

Iroh’s blank stare remained on the wall in front of him. Yet, his composure stirred for some reason. The young soldier had always come to check up on him, the sweet person that she was but her behavior today seemed...scripted.

“If you need anything don’t hesitate to ask.” She pauses. “You call out to me as soon as anything goes awry.”

She waits, her feet shifting slowly to the door, unsure, and she quietly closes the cell behind her.

“Ming is good to you. I’m glad.”

Iroh scoots the tray beside him, picking it up and setting it neatly on his lap. He hums at the sweet scent of tea. None comes close to his own making but one cannot be picky when one had been deprived of proper tea. “You assigned her to me. Ming is a kind girl, I hope you did not involve her too deeply.”

“She knows enough. I made sure of that.” Emerging from the shadows was a masked blue demon, darkly clad and his swords strapped securely to his back.

“I see you have not given up your persona.”

It was never likely. “Does that...disappoint you?”

Iroh hums again, bringing the tea cup to his lips. “A lot has disappointed me, my dear nephew, that is not one of them.”

“Is that why you sent the moon spirit to teach me a lesson?”

Iroh stills, looking up at the only source of light he had become acquainted with during prison time. He quietly places his cup back on the tray, closing his eyes and basks in the moon’s rays. “You were so far gone, so out of my reach. I feared for you. So I prayed.”

“Uncle, I-”

“I was afraid I lost you. I prayed and I begged that you will find your way again. You did once. I had asked the spirit above to give you guidance for I was no longer able to do so.”

“I know.” Zuko reaches out, cautiously. Iroh does not jerk from his reach and Zuko takes that as a sign to rest his hand on Iroh’s shoulder. “I don’t have all the answers yet. I lost my way too many times. I promise, Uncle, coming out of this, I will make it right again.”

Iroh smiles, enclosing a warm hand over his nephew’s. “All I want is for you to be happy.”

*I was once.* Zuko wants to correct him. “I know Roku is mom’s grandfather.”

“How-”



“Yue showed me. She’s shown me so much. Ozai will stop at nothing. We have to get the Avatar to confront him.”

“Those are dangerous words, Prince Zuko. You believe the Avatar to be alive?”

“He is. I’m pretty sure you’ve realized that.”

“The young watertribe maiden, she has a special gift.”

Zuko purses his lips at the mention of Katara. “Yes. If anyone has the ability to save him, it’s her.”

“She’s quite admirable.” Iroh smirks.

“I want to save the Fire Nation, Uncle. I want to save the world. I can’t begin to apologize for all the fucked shit I’ve done.” Zuko changes the subject. Katara was a sore subject he didn’t want to venture into. He wouldn’t know what to do with himself if he sees her again. “I won’t blame you if you never forgive me.”

“I won’t forgive you if you keep assuming I think so little of you, nephew.” Iroh turned around for the first time to look at Zuko since being imprisoned. “I look at you as my own son. Your wellbeing has always been my priority.”

Zuko’s gaze casts to the floor. “I won’t let you down. The day of Black Sun is approaching and the Avatar and his friends will use this to their advantage.”

“You can’t be serious? Ozai will be well hidden. They’ll be walking into a trap. Imprisoned or even killed before they got the chance to learn his location.”

“That’s why we need to warn them. I know where they’ll be meeting. Don’t give me that look, Uncle. Yue, remember? If we catch up to them in time, we can redirect their men so

they're not detected."

"What is your plan?" Iroh asks worriedly. If Zuko gets caught the punishment would be far worse than banishment or a burn to the face.

"Soon. Keep a lookout, I'll be communicating with you."

With that, Zuko walks to the door, making a full stop before turning to Iroh. "I love you, Uncle." He says for the first time in his life. "Whatever I do, I do it for the people that mean the world to me. If we don't see each other between now and then, remember that."

"Zuko..." Iroh chokes, watching his nephew slip out. "I love you too."

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### **(Morning of Black Sun.)**

"We move out in an hour, kids, get some rest. I'll be going over battle plans with Bato if you need anything." Hakoda tells the gaang, worriedly checking on Sokka who's standing at the cliffside.

"No problem, Mr. H." Toph gives him a thumbs up, ignoring Katara's disapproving frown.

"He'll be alright, Dad." Katara reassures. "Sokka wants so much to be like you. It just stinks that he didn't have the chance to prove himself."

"Sokka doesn't need to prove anything. None of you kids do. I'm proud of how far you have come." Hakoda pats his daughter's head. "And all on your own too. That's proof enough of how far more capable you children are than I am. Speech or no speech."

Katara smiles. Her heart goes out to Sokka but she's relieved to see Aang and Toph meet her brother on the cliffside to comfort him. "I'll check on him too, Dad. You go ahead."

Aang is already coming down the hillside leading to the cliff, Toph staying with Sokka, and meets Katara halfway. "How's he feeling?" She asked.

"Kinda down. Give him some time before we sail out and I'm sure he'll be back to his good old self, ready to fight some Fire Nation." Aang grins.

"That's good. I was getting some water skins prepared. I figured some of the swamp people would find them useful when we land. Are you hungry?"

"Um, not really." Aang replies shyly. He blushes, running the palm of his hand over his bald head. "I wanted to talk to you, in private, actually."

Katara blinks. "What is it, Aang?"

The Avatar clutches his staff and exhales. "It's about-"

"Um, guys, I don't know what's going on but there's two sets of feet running in this direction!" Toph shouts. Everyone is on alert, looking over their surroundings for something out of the ordinary. Sokka is the first to get a visual.

"Aang, Katara. Watch out! They're running up the shoreline this way!" Sokka cries out, unsheathing his sword and pointing a finger in the distance. He grabs Toph's arm and runs down to join his sister and Aang.

"Fire Nation?" Katara gasped, readying a water whip as Aang made a stance with his staff angled out.

“Huh.” Toph smirks, the least bit worried of the group and the only one not to go into defense mode. “Who’d a thunk? Nice to run into a familiar face, if I knew what it looked like. What brings you here, grandpa.”

Aang’s eyes widens, relaxing his pose, and his head shakes in disbelief. “Iroh?”

*Wasn’t he taken away?* Katara pondered. Someone else was with him too, cloaked and hooded, sticking to Iroh’s side like glue.

“Don’t come any closer!” Sokka commands, pulling Toph behind him for protection after noticing her failure to take a stance. What was she thinking? Iroh was still Fire Nation, this could be a trap.

“Cool it, Snoozles!” Toph snaps.

“We mean no harm. We’ve come to help.” Iroh and the person next to him raise their hands in surrender.

“How did you escape?” Aang takes a step forward- letting down his guard- only for Katara and Sokka to stop them.

Iroh is clearly out of breath, sweat drenched and exhausted. “No time to explain. I’ve come as fast as I could. I had originally planned to buy time before escaping prison but I had to come once I got news. It’s about Ozai.”

“Why should we believe you?” Katara questions.

“He’s not lying. Just shut up and listen instead of interrupting, will ya.” Toph doesn’t fully trust the former general but Iroh was an honest man. More honest than he probably should be.

“Oh no.” Sokka’s brow furrows. “They know we’re here, don’t they?”

“Far worse. Ozai and his officials know of Black Sun as well and will be securely hidden in a disclosed place until it passes. Very few trusted people know. Not even I can tell you where he’ll be.”

“No!” Aang screams, bending a gust of wind off the cliffside and knocking a boulder over the edge. “This can’t be. This was our one chance.”

“We can’t give up now. We have to try.” Sokka attempts to console his friend.

The elderly man shook his head sadly. “Your attempt to invade is futile. They are prepared to take you all prisoner when the eclipse passes.”

“What about you?” Sokka peers at the person clinging to Iroh. “What information do you have?”

They flinch, peering from under their cloak. “I- I’m sorry. I don’t know anymore than General Iroh. I was instructed to help him escape and get him here as quickly as possible. That’s all, I promise.”

“Don’t be frightened, Ming. They will not hurt you. They are no longer your enemy.” Iroh soothes.

Katara bends the water back in her waterskin and opens a hand to the female soldier. “Don’t worry. You’re here to help, right? Welcome, I’m Katara.”

This seems to calm Ming’s shaking. Not only is she a traitor to her nation but she had abandoned the place where her family is. She trusted General Iroh and Prince Zuko so she went along with their plan. “Thank you, Katara. I’m Ming.”

“You say someone instructed you to help Iroh escape?” Sokka gestures for them to follow him and the others to the boats so they could relay what happened to Hakoda. “Who would do that?”

Ming and Iroh exchange a look. “My nephew. We were hoping he'd meet us here.”

“Wait, Zuko?!” Katara exclaimed.

“Who knew Sparky had it in him?” Toph grinned.

“He told me how to escape with General Iroh.” Ming pulls out a letter from her sleeve and presents it to Aang. “The timing of which to do so and where to meet Avatar Aang. It was well thought out. He says he will be here to resume explaining a strategy to finally stop Ozai.”

Aang wasn't buying it but accepted the letter, though reluctant. He eyes the two Fire Nation suspiciously. “Why in the world would Zuko help us?”

“I promise, he's changed.” Iroh pleads.

Katara crosses her arms. She's had a one on one encounter with the Fire Prince. She's seen him struggle and they all know just how quick he is to concede to evil. No. He will never change. “You've said that before.”

Iroh doesn't have the answer, other than hoping his nephew will be here soon to explain.

“Come with us.” Sokka says, sheathing his sword and taking by Iroh the arm. “You can explain that to the rest of the camp.” Katara escorts Ming.

“What is this?” Hakoda runs to his children, seeing them approach with Fire Nation people. The same worried look that was on Sokka's face earlier was now present on his.

“This is former General Iroh and his escort, Ming.” Aang offers.

Hakoda observes them in disbelief. “The Dragon of the West?”

“We’ve come to warn you that Ozai is aware of the day of Black Sun. In fact, he’s used every precaution to hide while his bending is lost.”

“This can’t be!”

“I’m afraid so.” Iroh says sadly. “But don’t give up yet. My nephew will arrive with an answer. He’s guaranteed it.”

“You mean to tell us Prince Zuko is on our side?” Hakoda scoffed.

“Please, he is quite serious about ending this war. You may not have faith in him but I do.”

“That doesn’t exactly help our cause.” Hakoda dismisses.

“Chief!” Bato yells from the camp, waving a rolled up scroll. The shock on his face when the group came walking up to answer his call was quickly erased. Something seemed more urgent than their surprised guests. Bato clears his throat. “From a messenger hawk.”

Hakoda examines the scroll, his gaze flickers to Bato then Iroh. He purses his lips as if to contemplate then hands it over the former general. “It’s addressed to you.” He says.

Iroh carefully accepts it. His face goes pale after unrolling the parchment and taking a moment to read it. “It...it’s from Prince Zuko.”

Everyone gathers in, eagerly awaiting to hear the contents of the letter.

“I- Oh spirits, let it not be.”

“What is it?” Aang inquires. “ Is it bad? Will we have to retreat?”

Iroh wavers, clutching the front of his robes. “ *Tell the Avatar it will be over soon. The world will be free again .*”

What did that mean? Slipping out from under Iroh’s hand is a separate parchment. Sokka picks it up.

“It’s a map. A map to an underground system beneath the palace!” He exclaims joyously.

Katara was confused and Aang...well, something didn’t sit right with the message.

“We must hurry, Avatar Aang!” Iroh pleads with the airbender. “Prince Zuko is in danger!”

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“I’m not afraid of you anymore.” He’s ready to face his abuser again. This time Zuko is stronger, his willpower and determination set like stone. No going back.

He opens the door, revealing his father sitting on the far side of the room. The Fire Lord is drinking tea, surrounded by his loyal guards. He sets his teacup down, eyeing his son suspiciously upon Zuko’s entrance..

“Prince Zuko? What are you doing here?”

“Is my visit unwelcomed? We need to talk. It’s time you learned the truth.”



“Telling the truth during the middle of an eclipse. This should be interesting.” Ozai is amused and his lips turn into a sickly smile. He waves a single hand, dismissing the guards from the room; one by one filing out and closing the door behind them. “Continue, Prince Zuko.” He permits.

“I’m no prince.” Zuko corrects. “I haven’t been in a very long time.”

“Let’s cut the symbolic shit, son. Speak your mind.”

“First of all, in Ba Sing Se, it was Azula who took down the Avatar, not me.”

Ozai’s smirk turns into a deep frown. “Why would she lie to me about that?”

“Because the Avatar's not dead.” Zuko relays.

“What?!”

“In fact, he's probably leading an invasion. He could be on his way here right now.”

Ozai rises from his seating position, emitting a strong ray of intimidation. That damn fool! Yet not as foolish as he’ll be if he chooses not to leave with his head still intact! “Get out! Get out of my sight if you know what's good for you!”

Zuko disobeys, reaching behind his back. “He seeks to end you. But I’m afraid it will not come to that. Not if I beat him to it.”

His father is seething. “You will obey me, or this defiant breath will be your last!”

Zuko quickly pulls out his swords. “Think again. I am going to speak my mind, and you are going to listen.”

Ozai reluctantly sits down after calculating his chances. Anger contorts his face and sharp gold eyes were cold and darkened.

“I could tell you how all I wanted was for you to love me, to accept me. About how I thought it was my honor I needed. I could go on- with a list as high as the fucking walls of Ba Sing Se- and it won’t change a damn thing. But I’ve changed. I’ve seen myself for who I am. I’ve seen *you* for who you really are. You’re pathetic. A parasite festering and praying on the weak.

I wanted to forgive you, so much. You were all I knew, all I looked up to, excusing your abuse and enduring your punishments were an effort to cope with the idea that maybe you’d look at me as worthy one day. I’ve seen the future. You will always be rotten to the core, Fire Lord or not. You will always be a *monster*. My father, who challenged me, a thirteen-year-old boy, to an Agni Kai.”

“It was to teach you respect!”

“It was cruel! And it was wrong.”

“Then you have learned nothing!”

“No” Zuko corrects. “ *You* ’ve learned nothing! Growing up, we were taught that the Fire Nation was the greatest civilization in history. And somehow, the war was our way of sharing our greatness with the rest of the world. What an amazing lie that was. The people of the world are terrified by the Fire Nation.” He thinks of his children, what world would they live in if Ozai continued his reign of terror. “They don’t see our greatness. They hate us. And we deserve it.” Zuko bows his head for a moment, *I* deserve it. “We’ve created an era of fear in the world. We need to replace it with an era of peace and kindness.”

Ozai throws back his head and laughs. “Your uncle has gotten to you, hasn’t he?”

Zuko joins him in a laugh, only mocking. “Yes. He has. Am I supposed to feel ashamed for something you yourself lack? Understanding? Compassion?”

Ozai is growing more and more furious. What insolence! But he remains cool. The sun was nearing and all he needed was to distract Zuko a little longer before making his strike. “So what now?” He grins slyly. “The Avatar makes his move and you’ll be crowned Fire Lord? Since you’re a full-blown traitor now and you want me gone, why wait? I’m powerless. You’ve got your swords. Why don’t you just do it now?”

Zuko is eerily silent, gripping his sword handles so tight his knuckles turn white.

“Coward! I know you aren’t brave enough to face me, but you’ll only do it during the eclipse. If you have any real courage, you’ll wait around until the sun comes out.”

Zuko only blinks as Ozai’s sinister smile widens. “I don’t need bravery.”

“Now I realize that banishment is far too merciful a penalty for treason. Your penalty will be far steeper.”

“I could say the same for you. Sorry, but only one of us is leaving here alive today.”

Ozai inhales, closing his eyes briefly. “So, you reveal your true intentions. I would commend you for having the guts, if not for the mistake of challenging me.”

Outside the palace walls the sun begins to appear, once again the life of light ignites within the two men glaring death at one another.

Ozai opens his eyes again and in a split second, generates lightning, firing the bolt at Zuko. He does not get knocked down so easily. Zuko focuses on his breathing, concentrating on

every particle of the deadly electricity surrounding him and tries to remember why he's doing this even with the bitter guilt forming in his mouth.

He had been beaten.

*I meant you no disrespect. I am your loyal son.*

He had been broken.

*Remember this, Zuko. No matter how things may seem to change, never forget who you are .*

He had been tormented.

*Why would he want you back home, except to lock you up where you can no longer embarrass him?*

He had been wounded.

*You will learn respect, and suffering will be your teacher!*

But he had been loved and he had been cherished. He learned happiness and he learned loss. Kya, Ursa...they may never come to be his. Katara will never love him, for his faults have turned the tides of time. But in another life they are well and safe; they will have each other, and that's enough for Zuko.

His feet shift on the floor from the impact, blinding hot light cackling all around him. His skin prickles and the hairs on his body stand on end. His eyes are trained harshly on his father. Zuko spreads his arms, one behind him and the other in front, index and middle finger pointed outward.

For the first time in Zuko's life he sees Ozai display fear.

Yes, this was enough.

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Toph crinkles her nose, using the back of her arm to block out the smell. "Whoa. Is he...dead?"

It was too late when the gaang arrived. The secret passageways made for a quick descent on the Fire Lord's hidden bunker. While the gaang with Iroh's aid snuck into the palace undetected, the rest of the warriors and fellow fighters used this opportunity to strike while also masking their purpose to distract the Fire Nation military.

What they didn't expect was the horrific scene before them. The charred remains of Fire Lord Ozai laid slumped against the wall with a torn Fire Nation banner draped over his head. None could speak and were stunned into breathless silence.

"Zuko...he did this?" Aang spoke. "To his father?"

"Even I have to admit, I'm all for wanting Ozai dead but this..." Sokka swallows, "has to be the most fucked way to die."

Aang shook his head in disbelief. "It should never have come to this. This is wrong."

"Maybe this was the only way, Aang." Katara tries to console, clasping his hand.

"Yeah. The whole point of coming here was to kill the guy." Toph agreed.

"No!" Aang snatches his hand away. "It wasn't. Look at him, Katara! This wasn't about saving the world, this was personal!"

“You don’t understand.” Iroh tries to calm the airbender. “Zuko would not do this unless he felt he had to, if he felt this was the only way. Avatar Aang, do not be so quick to condemn him.”

“So you condone his actions!” Aang flared.

“No! I do not agree this was the right method. It has always been the Avatar’s responsibility to exact just punishment. I can’t make excuses for my nephew but please believe me when I say he has been a victim in his own right, his father’s abuse knows no bounds and he has the scar to prove it.”

Everyone gasps.

“Ozai did that to him?” Katara slapped a hand over her mouth in disbelief. “I always assumed it was because of some silly accident during firebending practice or something.”

“No, Master Katara, it was inflicted with the intent to punish him severely. Like my nephew, the Fire Nation has been victimized, my brother and ancestors oppressed the nation into wholeheartedly submitting to their beliefs. Once were the days when sages reigned to bring spirituality and understanding in the nation. Since my grandfather’s rule, all the teachings of good have been replaced with tyranny and fear.”

“That’s no excuse to enact revenge.” Aang frowned. “Zuko is a prince and his actions won’t be overlooked for taking it upon himself killing a world leader.”

“That’s a discussion that might have to wait, Twinkletoes.” Toph reasons. “We still got an army to deal with, not including Princess Azula.”

“She’s right. Once they find out their Fire Lord is dead, all shit will break loose.” Sokka adds.

“We’ll have to split up. There’s too much to do at once and Iroh and I know the palace.” Ming says.

Iroh looks surprised. “You do?”

Ming laughs. “I am a nobleman’s daughter. I was shy and weak but that’s why I joined the Fire Nation military. To become stronger.”

“Such a fascinating creature you are.” Iroh compliments.

“Okay.” Sokka starts.” Here’s what we’ll do. Iroh and Aang will search for Azula and Zuko, it’s best to end this quickly. Toph and I will sneak back outside and see what we can do about leading the rest of our forces into the palace. Ming, take Katara and go to the entrance of the palace and wait to let us in. You’re going to have to knock a few heads along the way.”

Ming and Katara shared a smile.

“Right, let’s go.”

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Katara and Ming did have to knock a few heads along the way. The problem was now that their bending returned, soldiers were patrolling the area and upon spotting the girls, they were forced to fight, alerting others of their infiltration. Eventually, the two girls had to split up. Katara informs Ming she will find her way around and meet her at the entrance. The young soldier nods, reluctant, and only hopes she actually does make it.

Katara cuts corners, cursing under her breath that this whole damn place was too big. Then she’s someplace she really doesn’t know how she landed. Before her is a plaza. She leans against a pillar, stopping to catch her breath and think of a solution to get out of here before she gets caught. She’s a master but fighting a bunch of soldiers alone with just her waterskin won’t be enough. Hopefully Ming had made it to the entrance and the invasion was being implemented in the palace.

“What are you doing here?!”

Katara pursed her lips, cautiously backing up against the pillar. Shit, she’s been caught.

“What’s this you’re wearing, Zuzu? Are you planning on going somewhere? Answer me!”

Zuzu?

Katara peers carefully around the pillar, looking out at the grand space to see Princess Azula and none other than Prince Zuko, standing at the center. Katara doesn’t miss the worry in the princess’s face, which is odd considering how devious the girl is.

“I won’t beat around the bush, Azula. This will be over and once it is, I’m leaving for good.”

“Over? You coward, you have so little faith in our defenses? Father wouldn’t so easily succumb to such a rag tag group of soldiers.”

She doesn’t know he’s dead. It dawned on Katara.

“Father doesn’t play a hand in this any longer. He’s dead, Azula.”

There was a bitter silence. “You lie.” The princess snarls.

“No, Azula, that’s something you do. He’s dead and it stops today.”

Katara’s shaking. Two powerful firebenders at odds. This has happened before and still Zuko betrayed everyone. It was different now. Zuko committed an act that he can’t worm his way out of. Or was that ever his intention? The charred body of Fire Lord Ozai begged to differ. It wasn’t a spur of the moment and from the conversation Zuko was having with his sister, it



most certainly was premeditated. She doesn't know whether to be angry or grateful for it. At the same time she wants to be mad that he took it upon himself to do something only the Avatar was allowed to do. Another is grateful that her friend wouldn't have to sully his hands or experience the weight of taking someone's life.

In the midst of this conversation, Katara mulls over making a run in search of Aang or continuing her mission to the palace entrance when suddenly horns go off in every direction. Katara jolts, heart pounding in her ears and trying to decipher the meaning behind the warning.

"You know what that means, Azula." Zuko announces.

Katara carefully turns to look around the pillar and is shocked to see a tearful Azula. "You..." she whimpers "YOU-"

"Ozai would stop at nothing to destroy the world even if it meant using his children. He prayed on our weakness. He's turned us against each other."

"I was never weak." Azula laughed mockingly through her choking sobs.

"Yes you were. Your dependency, your need for validation, it was all your weakness. Mine too. The difference between us is that you made the better tool. Father never kept anyone close who wasn't of use to him. What did you think it all was? He never showed an ounce of affection or recognition. I know for a fact father would dispose of us once we become useless. I told myself everyday all I had to do was try and father will love me again when the facts stand that he's never loved his children to begin with."

Katara clung to her chest trying to blink back tears. Zuko didn't betray her for the sake of selfishness, he did it because his dependency on his father was all he ever knew. Katara can't say if her father wasn't the same, she wouldn't follow his every footstep much like a child would when relying on their parent for guidance. She'll always hold him accountable for his misdeeds but at least she empathizes with a semblance of his character.

"That's what you think, Zuzu. I don't need father's affection, or his validation. I was always better than you! What you lack is no one's fault but your own!"

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you like a big brother should have been. I want us to be different. I want to change. Come with me, Azula. We can start over, far from our father's reach and our ancestors’ brainwashing.” Zuko pleaded. “Our place here is not necessary. There’s a world out there where we can be free of our chains.” Zuko should have done this sooner. He should have protected Azula from the get go.

This left Azula taken aback, her brows knitted. She reels back as though contemplating his offer. Zuko is genuine, Katara can tell. He wants to save them.

“I’m not going anywhere with you, *big brother* . With father gone and me as his heir, my place is nowhere else but the throne! And the first thing I’ll do is eliminate you, the traitor. We both knew it would always come to this. So let’s settle this. Just you and me, brother. The showdown that was always meant to be. Agni Kai!”

Zuko’s frowns, shaking his head. “I won’t fight you, Azula.”

The corner of Azula’s lips curl into a sly smile. “You don’t have a choice.”

Before he knows it, Azula sends a full blast of blue fire towards him. Zuko brings his arms up in front of his face, grunting out loud and parting the flames with his own fire. He’s angry, angry at the situation and angry at himself. This was not what he wanted but it seems fate would not allow him to hold the only family he had left after losing his wife and children.

But today, he will not let fate shape him like it had shaped Azula. Her crazed eyes and wild grin told the signs of a deteriorating mind. The tear stains on her cheeks and the awkwardness of her fighting stance turned out to be an inevitable circumstance, just like the one he learned about in his other life.

So it comes to this.

Zuko tosses his swords to the side and reaches a hand out, balling his fist and throwing it at an angle towards the ground, punching a powerful blast of fire at the one Azula had spun and

kicked at him. The collision bursts like waves crashing against each other, lifting high in the sky and coming down like trickles of steam and smoke.

As this is happening, Katara thinks it's time to make her escape- get help, because the fueling fight between the siblings is bound to burn the place down. But she can't take her eyes off the scene before her. She decides to stay in case things go wrong and Zuko might need her help. Figuring they are distracted, she walks quietly around the pillar and off to the side for standby.

They could probably be at this for hours. Zuko's becoming increasingly frustrated, as well as impatient; having expected the Avatar and his friends to have already stormed the palace. It looks like his window of escape was officially closed. He was overwhelmed from redirecting lightning at Ozai; and stable or not, Azula was at full strength. He'll have to end this fight, fast.

"No lightning today? What's the matter?" He mocks. "Afraid I'll redirect it?"

Azula grits her teeth, dismissing the flames around her. "Oh, I'll show you lightning!"

Azula parts her legs in a stance, moving her fingertips and motioning her arms in a form that would generate lightning, but her stance is shaking and most certainly off. Zuko thinks there's no way she could possibly do this but knowing Azula, she's always defeated the odds.

Zuko inhales and exhales deeply, assuming his own stance and readies himself. "I'm sorry, Azula." He whispers. having redirect lightning once, he prays he could redirect it enough to only injure her.

As Azula charges, Zuko notices her gaze flicker somewhere else. Confused by this change, he turns slightly to catch a figure standing in his peripheral vision. He goes pale, seeing his wife- no, Katara- standing off to the side with worry masking her face now that she had been spotted.

Azula smiles deviously, adjusting her stance and extending her arm forward. Lightning bends at her fingertips and the princess releases a strike...but not at Zuko.

“Katara!” Zuko shouts. “Noooooooo!”

His feet pick up without realizing it, reaching out to a dumbfounded Katara who can’t seem to find the will to move.

He won’t make it in time. Not enough to push her out of the way, the lightning is too fast. Zuko’s eyes move from Katara to the lightning, jumping midair between them both, and extends his finger out in order to redirect it, but fails in doing so, therefore absorbing it.

Behind him, Katara expresses horror. Zuko hits the ground hard, relieving the lightning through his arm and shooting it straight into the air. His improper stance sent the remainder of the lightning coursing through his body. He convulses, groaning in pain and clinging to his now exposed chest.

Katara, shaking away her horror, runs to him. “Zuko!” She calls the water to her hand. He’s reaching out for her, strained and weak. Katara reaches out for him too only to be stopped in her tracks by another strike of lightning. She dodges it, taking cover behind a pillar. Spirits, why did she expose herself! There’s no time to explore that mistake, Zuko is injured and if she doesn’t stop Azula, she’d be next. Escape was out of the question.

All the while, Zuko watches on, incapable of helping Katara in her struggle. Azula was crazed and as far as he’s aware, unstoppable. Her usually calculating behavior was jumbled up and causing havoc regardless of the consequences. Flames erupted everywhere. Was he going to die like this? A part of him had probably wanted this. Without Katara, with Kya and Ursa, what was left for him?

Zuko shut his eyes, trembling as he choked. “I’ve...done some good things...r-right?”

*“You’re Zuko, that’s always a good thing.”*

He smiles, leaning into a familiar touch against his cheek. Katara’s hands weren’t warm but the gentleness behind it always made it seem like they were. He opens his eyes, though his vision is blurry, he can still make out his wife’s face. “Did you...keep...your promise?”

*“Forever. That’s what you asked me; to keep it in my heart forever. I would never break that promise.”*

Zuko nods, relieved. His limbs twitch and his face contorts in agony. If he breathes his last breath, at least he’ll do it with that knowledge. “I’m scared, Katara. But I’m so tired.”

*“You will rest, love.”* She whispers softly. Katara leans into him, a hand on his back and her lips pressed gently to him. *“But not now. Now, you stand up and look upon the world, because it isn’t over and you won’t give up that easily.”*

Zuko heaves as he’s rolled on his back. The pain in his chest starts to subside and for some reason he’s able to see clearly. Bending over him, shedding tears, is not his wife but a younger Katara. He smiles weakly and to his surprise, she smiles back.

“Thank you, Katara.” He says, voice still hoarse.

She sobs a laugh. “I think I should be the one thanking you.”

She helps him up, steadying his balance when he wavers.

“You did this?” Zuko’s shocked to see his sister chained to a grate, screaming and disheveled. His heart aches seeing his sister so far gone. “No matter, it was for the best.”

Katara opens her mouth to say something but she’s interrupted by soldiers pouring into the plaza.

Katara pulls Zuko to her. She’s in a panic, darting her eyes as they surround them. They circle her and Zuko, readying a stance with their fists out. Breaking the circle is a tall, thin man with a receding hairline and sharp, slit eyes as black as his richly robes. He approached them.

The man glances at Katara only once before sliding over to an injured Zuko who looks as though he knew this was coming.

“Prince Zuko, you are under arrest for the murder of Fire Lord Ozai.”

# **the silence hung(and you caught my eye)**

## Chapter Summary

Zuko has been imprisoned and awaits trial. The motion for his crimes is more severe than he anticipated. The end is near and Zuko thinks he just might have one final solution but at a steep cost.

## Chapter Notes

This was meant to be the final chapter but I ended up writing so much more that it'll have to be split into two chapters. so, the final chapter will come after this one pretty soon, shedding more on Zuko and Katara's newfound relationship. A huge, huge thanks to AndreanAnEgnima for betaing this chapter. And i look forward to seeing you guys at the end.

“We’ve frozen all assets of every businessman and high birth who had profited from the war. They are unable to continue with their lives until each and every one of them has been questioned.”

Zuko makes a dark chuckle, leaning against the wall of his cell and crossing his arms over his chest. “They won’t tell the truth. They’ll play victim, try to convince you they were brainwashed or forced to contribute.”

“How do you know that isn’t true?”

“Rich men don’t get rich by telling the truth, Avatar. Didn’t you learn that in Ba Sing Se?”

Aang sighs, slumping his shoulders. He forgets that he can’t always put his faith in people’s words. He had been overseeing things in the palace with little rest, aiding Iroh- though he could easily say that Iroh was more so helping him. Becoming a newly realized Avatar didn’t

give him the knowledge on how to dismantle tyranny- or the knowledge of politics for that matter. Aang has come to the conclusion that he has a lot to learn.

As for Zuko, he had been arrested the day of the invasion. By then, all the generals had surrendered and their soldiers forced to bring down their arms. Once getting word, he had found Katara sobbing uncontrollably in the Fire Lord's study where she had been escorted. Thinking she was hurt, Aang ran to her side. That's when she told him that the soldiers had surrounded her and Zuko after defeating Azula and took him away. She even begged them to let her follow up on his wound, but they refused and escorted her here where they told her to wait for the Avatar.

Katara assured him she wasn't hurt and that Zuko had saved her life before he was taken away. Aang demanded that they release Zuko, or to at least question him, but was denied. The man who had ordered Zuko's arrest, High General Bujing, had stepped in.

"He is not to be released, Avatar Aang. He must be tried for the murder of Fire Lord Ozai."

"Ozai was planning on destroying the world," Aang argued. "The balance of the world rested on his elimination. It was only imminent that he be stopped."

Bujing turned his nose at him. "Stopped, yes, but not by the hands of his own son. We have laws that not even the royal family are exempt from, and failing to abide by those laws requires punishment. You see, while it's the Avatar's duty to maintain balance, it's our duty to hold our citizens accountable for the crimes they've committed."

"You know very well Zuko did it for the sake of the world, and you want to punish him for that?"

"Are you asking us to override our principles for the sake of your personal disagreement? Be that as it may, Prince Zuko will stand trial. We have surrendered accordingly, have we not, Avatar Aang? Then we ask that you respect our ways as long as they do not interfere with the balance of the world."



“Accordingly” is not how they surrendered. If their leader hadn’t been slain, none of them would have given in so easily. Still, Aang couldn’t argue. He is the Avatar, not their ruler. He can’t ask them to change their ways as long as it didn’t tamper with the balance, and not over a single person, no less. He’d be starting a war all over again.

“Iroh was crowned Fire Lord this morning. So many walks of life were there to support him. It was amazing, seeing all those people from other nations come together to cheer him on. There’s a lot of work ahead, but I’m confident the Fire Nation is in good hands.”

Zuko smiles proudly. “Of course it is. No one but Uncle is more capable. I don’t mean to sound rude, Avatar, but I don’t want to dance around the topic anymore. What are Bujing and the rest of the generals pushing for?”

It won’t be good. The system is tainted, and even though it is up to the sages to finalize judgement, they’ll go along with whatever Ozai’s former party will aim for. Money will buy their vote, and Zuko wasn’t exactly well liked before all this mess.

Aang swallows hard. Even then, the lump in his throat wouldn’t go away. Zuko was deserving of a lot of things- for what he’s done to him and his friends- but he didn’t deserve what Aang was about to say next. “They’re calling for the death penalty.”

“How?”

“I-I don’t understand the question,” Aang stammers.

“How do they plan to put me to death?”

Aang tears up. Why did it have to be this way? Why didn’t Zuko just let him handle Ozai his way? “By fire.”

Zuko grimaced. “Sounds painful.”

There was bound to be a trial; Zuko could never have guessed they'd go for execution. Then again, Bujing is leading the team of judges. The man has had it out for him since his father didn't finish the job all those years ago. Only one opponent made it out of an Agni Kai alive. Bujing must have been pretty disappointed, Zuko mused.

"They asked me to be one of the seven judges in your trial. They say the Avatar's opinion would be vital. I don't know what good my participation will do for them."

"It's to make them look good, nothing else. Bringing you in on the trial will display an image of favor. If you're part of it, then it makes it seem like the Avatar agrees with their ways. They'll say your opinion is important but then make the final decision to their liking."

"Then I won't do it!" Aang protested.

"You have to. At least you can create a path to bring the citizens of the Fire Nation on your side."

"And you'll sacrifice your life for that? That's ridiculous!"

"I don't exactly want to die here," Zuko snaps, feeling sorry as soon as he'd seen Aang shed tears. "I'm fighting a losing battle. I always have. Don't get mixed up in my mess. Worry about the rest of the world."

"I'm going to fight it. As much as I can, I'll convince them you deserve your life and your title."

"I don't want my title. It's been nothing but a weight on my existence." Zuko smiles sadly. "Thank you, um, Aang..." It's the first time he's said the Avatar's name. "I appreciate you caring, even though I did all those terrible things to you."

“I don’t want your apology.” Aang shook his head. “I want you to survive. don’t give up so easily. You never have before, so don’t start now.”

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“Iroh, you have to eat,” Katara encouraged the recently crowned Fire Lord. She slides the bowl of rice in front of him.

Iroh smiled sweetly at the waterbender, but his eyes tell a different story. Heartbreak. Taking on the role of Fire Lord was strenuous enough, but not knowing the fate of his beloved nephew who was like a son to him caused a string of sleepless nights. They would not allow Iroh to see Zuko, leaving the elderly man in a state of sadness and distress. “You are so kind, Master Katara. Bless you for being so concerned. Delicious as the food may look, I cannot find the strength to eat.”

“You should at least take a few bites. It’s hard, I know, but we must be strong and prepared for whatever’s to come,” Katara reasoned.

Sokka hums an agreement, stuffing his mouth with portions from every dish laid out on the long dining table. “No need to go hungry during these hard times. Food makes everything better!”

His sister sighs, shaking her head in disapproval. “Must you be so insensitive?”

Toph shot a fist at his shoulder, making Sokka yelp. “Yeah, Snoozle, show some respect, will ya?”

Sokka huffed at the earthbender before turning to his sister. “These people treat us like royalty, Kat! Two years travelling the world and we finally get a break. I’m going to have my fill.”

“At least chew with your mouth closed,” Katara hissed between clenched teeth. “Iroh has even been kind enough to release Suki and the Kyoshi warriors from jail despite his own

troubles.”

“Do not be upset, Master Katara,” Iroh assures. “You all have done so much for me; I want nothing but for you to relax and enjoy your time here. As for Miss Suki, I am all too happy to release her and her warriors. My apologies, but I must excuse myself.” He gets up, stalking to his bedchambers and quietly shuts the door behind him, leaving the rest of the gaang in his study. They had all come to join him for dinner in the hopes of raising his spirits.

“Seriously, Sokka.” Katara shot him an accusing glare. “We’re supposed to be here to support Iroh.”

“Does that mean I have to go hungry?” Sokka countered.

“I swear-” She’s interrupted by a guard announcing the arrival of the Avatar, and in walks Aang with his head bowed and a grim look on his face. “Oh. Aang, I thought you would be late. Are you hungry?”

He shakes his head, sliding his feet across the marble floor, kneeling onto a pillow set right in front of the dining table.

“Seriously, Iroh and now you? You guys can’t keep at this much longer before you starve to death.”

“You don’t seem so hot, Twinkletoes,” Toph comments, crossing her arms in front of her and arching a brow. She can feel the offbeat of his heart and doesn’t want to show the anticipation eating at her. “What’s the status on Sparky?”

“It’s bad,” Aang mutters.

“What do you mean, Aang?” Katara takes a seat next to him while everyone else scoots in to hear better.

“The list goes on and they refuse to drop Zuko’s charges. Not only have they accused him of Ozai’s death, but they’re somehow trying to blame him for Azula’s mental state.”

“That’s bullshit. I was there!” Aang’s eyes widened at hearing Katara curse. “She did this to herself, Aang. They can’t just decide that on their own.”

“I know, but there’s little I can do. Even so, they want me to be one of the judges in his case. Zuko thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Why would he suggest that?” Sokka asks, swallowing the rest of his komodo chicken. “Wouldn’t that be futile?”

“It’s called maintaining an image, dufus,” Toph answers. “Every noble person uses it. Even if Aang disagrees, him playing a part in something major shows his dedication to the Fire Nation and, in turn, makes them look good to the rest of the world by having the Avatar on their side, hoping their participation in the war will minimize their own consequences.”

“Not exactly making any of us feel better, Toph,” Katara reprimands.

“Can’t exactly beat around the bush here with someone’s life on the line, Sugarqueen.”

“And what does that mean?”

Aang side eyes the earthbender.

“Wait, what does that mean?” Katara looks to her friends. Sokka also looks unsettled, putting down his chopsticks and casting his eyes away. Knots twist in her stomach. It is at this moment that Katara learns why Iroh had failed to improve the last few days.

“Katara, there’s a motion to execute Zuko.”

She can’t find the words. This is the last thing she’d expect. Zuko was cruel, yes. Mean, yes. Stubborn, yes. But is he so bad that he deserves to have his life taken from him at the age of eighteen? He’s their prince! How could they do that to him? “Aang, you can’t let them do that!” Katara shouts.

“I don’t have that kind of power, Katara. Believe me, I tried. They’ve also isolated Iroh from the case. If he isn’t allowed to be involved, it’s obvious they’ve already made up their minds.”

Aang’s voice fades in the background as he continues to explain, and Katara stares hard at the platters of food in front of her. She’s numb and can’t quite figure out how to let this all sink in. Beforehand, she had been urging Iroh to eat so that he could stay healthy regardless of the circumstances. Hearing that Zuko might die, especially after learning everything she did about him the day of Black Sun, suddenly the food doesn’t look so appetizing anymore.

Everyone else eats in silence; meanwhile Katara picks and prodded at her dinner. Tension fills the room, so thick the gaang can hardly stand it. They had won the war, but there was no celebrating.

Sokka is the first to excuse himself and then Toph. Aang doesn’t want to leave Katara, seeing her deflated after learning what Zuko might be facing. She’s in the middle of collecting the dishes for the servants that will show up later, but his eyelids are heavy, and he has a schedule a mile wide that he’s not exactly looking forward to for tomorrow, so he opts to turn in for the night too. Aang nearly jumps out of his boots when a strong hand grabs his shoulder. It’s Katara, and Spirits, she has fingers like biceps.

“What is it, Katara?”

“Take me to him.”

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There's a creak at the end of his cell room, and the sound of the door opening jars him from his sleep. Zuko licks his dry, cracked lips and rubs at the stubble growing on his face. He squints. He doesn't recall expecting visitors but then again, Aang has a habit of randomly showing up when he pleases. Maybe the Avatar has some news.

But where he's anticipating gray eyes, Zuko is met with sharp blue ones and a familiar scowl.

She's cloaked in black, shutting the door behind her and approaching the former prince's cell.

"Katara?" Zuko stands up quickly. "What are you doing here?" Katara bit the corner of her lip. Zuko's heart thundered in his ears. He's forgotten how seeing that particular habit made him feel. He turns away. Not a good time to be admiring her. "You shouldn't be here."

"You shouldn't either," Katara retorted. "I heard what they're going to do."

Zuko shrugs. "I suppose word would have gotten out."

"And when did you ever become the type to give up?"

Zuko laughs. "Probably when I took lightning to the chest."

Katara doesn't find it funny. "I have questions."

Zuko blinks. "I might have answers."

"Why did you save me?"

Why? Zuko can't believe she thinks he's so cruel that he'd allow her to be killed, wife or not. "It may come as a surprise to you, but I'm not a monster. I didn't want you to die. I don't want anyone to die."

"And your solution was to jump in front of lightning?"

Zuko laughs despite himself. He cuts himself short, realizing he might have come off as mocking. He leans his back against the wall, hugging his chest. "It wasn't exactly a solution, so much as it was a dumb last-minute decision. I didn't know what else to do...I-I just did it."

Katara rubs her hands over her face. She was anticipating something more complex, but the answer is pretty simple yet confusing, much like Zuko's very nature. Just when she thinks she has him all figured out- what is with this guy and why can't she accept his demise?

"That contradicts a lot, you know. You took advantage of my kindness and left Aang to die at the hands of your sister. How do you explain that?"

He bows his head in shame, his shaggy hair falling over his eyes. "I-I don't have an explanation. I saw this window, this chance to redeem myself in my father's eyes, and I took it, damning the consequences. I didn't think that the consequence would cost someone's life."

What makes Zuko feel worse is that consequences were to happen regardless of his decision. He's still sad remembering the scar on Katara's back from his other life.

"I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. I feel guilty. Trust me, Katara, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Trust you? Trust you!" The rage boils up so fast, she can hardly contain it. He has no idea what he put her through! "I was the first person. Remember, back in Ba Sing Se? And you turned around and betrayed me, betrayed all of us!"



Zuko's face goes shock white. Her outburst is sudden, but he can't exactly object. "What can I do to make-"

"And I'm mad. Mad all the time! And no matter how much I tell myself that it shouldn't bother me this much, I get even more upset!" He can't ignore her broken tone and doe-like eyes filled with hurt and regret, or the way tears make her beautiful blue eyes sparkle, especially in the dim lighting of his cell room. "But I have every right to be mad."

"You do."

"I trusted you, I-I opened up to you, and you tossed it aside as though my feelings meant nothing. It was *selfish*."

"It was."

"You don't get to sleep at night without knowing what you put me through. You get to sit there while I say everything I need to say, and you're going to take it."

"Yes."

"Stop agreeing with me!"

"Ye- I mean...no?"

Katara is starting to burn out. She wants to be angry, she wants to yell at Zuko some more until she's blue in the face and there was nothing left of him but a puddle of his shame. Instead, she weeps. Katara falls to her knees, holding onto the cell's bars as all the tears come pouring out and she's sobbing uncontrollably.

This confliction in her heart is eating her up inside. She wants Zuko to be punished, wants to see the face of all her sorrows disappear with the ache and loss of her mother, but in reality,

Zuko hadn't played a hand in her mother's death. He was just a lost boy looking for redemption and love and ended up tangled in the mess of his forefathers while thinking he was doing the right thing. There isn't enough hate in her heart to condemn him.

A hand brushes her cheek, and she gasps, looking through the blur of her tears to find Zuko smiling at her. She thinks to pull away, scold him for touching her without permission, but instead, Katara leans into it, finding that she doesn't hate the warmth on her cheek or the smile on his face. Who knew the prince who terrorized her and her friends had such a gentle smile?

"You took lightning for me." She reaches out and places a palm on his chest, the proof of his sacrifice.

"And I'd do it again," Zuko confesses.

"What are you doing? Don't you understand what's going to happen to you?"

"I got to see you, if not one last time. As long as you're okay, I think I can make it through the rest of my trial. I'm so happy Azula didn't hurt you."

Katara's eyes widened. Zuko's fingers brush loose hair behind her ear. The contact leaves an invisible mark, an electric sensation. *What is this?* "We need to figure out how to get you out of this," Katara whispered, wiping the stains from her cheeks.

"How did you get here?" Zuko questions, retrieving his hand from her face, taking his warmth with him, much to Katara's disappointment. She does not show it.

"Aang brought me here. I asked for a little privacy. Look, Zuko, I won't overlook the things you've done, but I can't sit back and watch you die after saving me and ending Ozai. It's not fair."

Zuko sighs, sliding down against the wall and hanging his head. “I’ve already had this talk with Aang. My final trial is in two days. Hell, I wasn’t even allowed at my previous ones, let alone allowed to plead my case. I’m grateful for your concern, I really am. They made up their minds as soon as they learned I killed my father. Two days from now, they’ll come up with a verdict and that’ll be the end of it.”

Katara growls, picking up a rock and throwing it at Zuko’s shoulder. “Y-you coward!”

“Ow! What the hell was that for?”

“You! So you roll over and die? Without thinking of any other way to get out of this?”

Zuko clasps his shoulder. Agni, that fucking hurt. “You don’t get it, Katara. This isn’t just about me killing Ozai; this is about severing me from ever having a claim to the throne. As long as I exist, I play a threat to them. No one wants the banished prince who killed their leader and only means of profit. It’s revenge, and they’ll get exactly what they’ve wanted.”

“Then think! You’ve always managed to snake your way out of bad situations. What’s one more?”

“They won’t let me go so easily. It’s not like I can be banished a second time!” Suddenly Zuko gasps, stalling Katara in her attempt to grab another rock and throw it at him. He’s staring off into the distance as though hit by a sudden realization. They can’t banish him a second time, no, but he might have a solution no royal before him would ever dare consider.

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“Do you see them?” Toph whispers. She and Sokka had been seated at the top of a balcony, and Toph couldn’t detect Aang or Zuko from this height.

“No, not yet,” Sokka replies. He looks to his father, who had also been invited as a witness-regarding his status- among several other warriors. “Have you seen Katara? She wasn’t in her room this morning.”

“I’m afraid not, son. Give her time. I’m sure this is hard for her. The young man did save her life, after all.”

It’s another half hour until the room falls silent and in walks Zuko, wearing a brown, tattered robe and chains on his wrist and ankles. He has only been in his cell for several weeks, but the recently grown facial hair makes him look a few years older. Still, the Fire Nation prince holds his head high as he is presented in front of the council, with six of his father’s trusted and most loyal advisors being used as judges.

A single chair has been placed in the middle of the throne room. Sitting atop of the ascending staircase is his uncle, and sitting at the bottom of the stairs is General Bujing and the other six judges he selected, including the Avatar. Bujing announces Zuko to be seated.

It is at this time Sokka notices his sister passing through the curtains onto the balcony. Her eyes are swollen, and her cheeks are puffy. She doesn’t say anything, coming to sit next to their father, who wraps an arm around her shoulders.

“Prince Zuko, for the crimes you have committed against the crown- from high treason, an act in which you mercilessly murdered the former Fire Lord, Ozai, to attempted murder on the princess, Azula- how do you plead? You may speak before us,” Bujing permits.

Zuko inhales and exhales. He glares up at Bujing, knowing no answer he gives is the right one. “Guilty, but not of the crimes you claim I’ve committed.”

Bujing raises a curious brow. “Care to elaborate, Prince Zuko.”

“I don’t owe it to you- I don’t owe anyone an explanation of why I did what I did to my father. He was a cruel and unjust man. Anyone could see it, from the war he continued with an iron fist to the disease and famine our own people faced everyday while you filled your bellies every night and slept on comfortable beds,” Zuko accused. And for the threat he was to his daughters. No matter how many lifetime’s away they were, he would forever hold Ozai accountable for that.

Bujing chortles. “I hardly see how that permits you to take matters into your own hands.”

“But I digress,” Zuko replies. “No matter what I say, I’m guilty.”

“We have not resumed the verdict yet, Prince Zuko. We only wish for exact punishment.”

“For stopping a war criminal?”

“You know the system just as much as the rest of us, Prince Zuko. War crimes must be tried accordingly. You know the punishment for taking matters into your own hands without legal authority.”

“I do not deny that.”

“So you accept the punishment that will be bestowed upon you?”

Zuko sighs. “I’m no prince. I haven’t been in a very long time. I thought I couldn’t make my peace with that, considering it would be beneath me. In the three years of my banishment, I’ve learned that it doesn’t have to be.”

Katara and Sokka share a look, unable to understand what’s going on. “What is he talking about?” her brother murmurs.

Katara shrugs. He acted strange the night of her visit after he mentioned he can’t be banished twice. Is that what he’s aiming for?

“I think we’ve heard enough,” Bujing dismisses. “We move onto the verdict.”

“So quick to get rid of me. I’m not finished!” Zuko shouts, provoking an uproar in the throne room. Some people call out for his head while others shout that he be released as a war hero.

“Prince Zuko, compose yourself!”

“I’d like to hear what he has to say!” Aang cuts in, quieting everyone in the throne room. Bujing frowns. “Say what you must, Prince Zuko.”

“I want to suggest a proposal, one that will benefit both myself and the nation. I’ve reflected on my actions and only want peace to resume in place of my absence, which is why I’ve come to a conclusion: I beg the judges to allow me to renounce my title. I will leave the Fire Nation for good, never to return. My name, and all belonging to it, will be stripped, and I and any descendants of my blood will never claim rights to the throne.”

Voices erupt in the room again. No member of the royal family has ever renounced their title. Many would rather die with their pride intact.

Aang smiles. So this is what Zuko has been conjuring.

Bujing’s confident expression twists into a sneer. “You expect me to believe that you’ll just walk away this time for good?” the general accuses. “Have you forgotten that the rules of your banishment have been broken before?”

“This isn’t just a mere banishment.” Aang smirks, crossing his arms over his chest. “In my years before I was frozen, any nobleman or royalty that publicly renounced their title was forever branded a commoner with no ties to their name or their family. Riches, estates, and all inheritance were cut off. Document this, and Prince Zuko and his bloodline can never go back on this word.”

“I don’t understand,” Katara whispers, leaning on the edge of the balcony.

“It may be the only way to save his life,” Hakoda explains to his daughter. “Giving up his title is worse than death, apparently, but it comes with more of a price, I’m afraid.” Hakoda points his chin towards Iroh, who Katara can now see is witnessing the trial, horrified.

“How so?” Sokka scoffs. “Seems like a pretty easy way out.”

“It means because Iroh is now Fire Lord, he can never see Zuko again.”

A lump grows in Katara’s throat. When she told him to fight for his life, she imagined Zuko giving it his all to get everything he lost back, but it seems the only way to survive is to actually give it *all* up, permanently.

“And you swear to it? You swear to leave and never come back?” Bujing muses.

“Yes.”

“Then say it out loud for all to hear, and you will be allowed to leave the Fire Nation for good, with your measly life still intact.” Bujing grins sinisterly.

Months ago, Zuko would have lost his temper over that, but now, he wants nothing more than to start over. So he stands up from his chair and darts his eyes around the throne room. It’s packed full with every known noble and several diplomats from around the world. He catches Katara and her family in the crowd along with the blind Beifong girl.

“I, Prince Zuko, son of Princess Ursa and former Fire Lord Ozai and heir to the throne, renounce my title and all that comes with it. For my crimes, I will leave this nation, never to return, and any children I father will never step foot on this land as well. I swear before all of you and Agni Himself.”

With a final slam of his gavel, Bujing announces, “The verdict is final. With all here and Agni as our witness, former prince Zuko will leave the Fire Nation, taking effect at dawn in three days’ time.”

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The scene is bathed in orange rays of a burnt sky, the sun hidden beyond the horizon. All seems quiet, aside from dancing water and the creaks of gently rocking ships. The two men walk silently, side by side, on the wooden dock; one adjusts the travel bag he's carrying, the other resting a warm hand on his companion's shoulder. The former prince smiles, stopping at a set of crates and taking a seat. Iroh joins him.

"You will write as soon as you arrive."

"Yes."

"Keep Junsik's address with you."

"Yes, yes, Uncle."

"Is it secured? Do you have it in your pocket?"

Zuko laughs, patting the pocket of his cloak. "Yes, yes. Don't worry, I'll get there just fine. You know, you're not supposed to be here. Your advisors will have a fit."

"Screw them," Iroh booms.

*Whoa* , Zuko thinks, never having heard his uncle use foul language.

"Spirit knows when I'll ever see you. I've come to see you off, though our time is little until I can find a way to meet you again."



“It’ll be pretty hard being Fire Lord,” Zuko teases. “But I know we’ll see each other again someday. Banishment won’t keep us apart forever.”

Iroh sniffs. “This is one of the hardest goodbyes I’ve ever gone through. While we were fugitives, in my heart I knew we’d find a way back to one another. But you being out there, separated by sea, how can I not worry about you every second of every day?”

Zuko doesn’t know how long he can keep up the facade. He promised he’d be strong, but that’s proving to be hard. He forces a smile, leaning over so that his forearms rest on his knees. “Don’t think of this as ‘goodbye’. Think of this as starting a new journey in separate locations.” He peers over his shoulder at Iroh with a grin. “This time I can experience Ba Sing Se without worrying about my identity. The Earth King didn’t have to extend his kindness to me after I had played a part in the fall of his city, but I’m grateful he’ll give me a chance to start somewhere.”

“Well, Junsik is a member of the White Lotus and a friend. Good thing he is the King’s high general to top it off. You know, he could have happily gotten you a place in the Upper Ring.”

“Thanks, Uncle, but I’m perfectly satisfied with accepting a job at one of Junsik’s factories. I want to build a life with my own two hands. A decent apartment and a steady job will suffice. Living a life of luxury doesn’t have the same meaning for me anymore.”

Iroh nods, taking Zuko’s hands and kissing the back of both of them. “I am so...so proud of you, Zuko.”

That’s all Zuko ever wanted to hear, all his life. All it took was to give up his old life for good. “Keep me updated on Azula, will you?”

Iroh presses a finger to Zuko’s chest. “You worry about yourself, then your sister. Promise me that you’ll use this opportunity to find your own happiness. I need you in tip top shape when you decide to woo Master Katara.” The elderly man grins, giving Zuko a thumbs up.

Zuko sighs heavily, wishing he had not told Iroh exactly what happened after he sicced Yue on him. “I don’t think that’s a possibility.”

“Nothing is not a possibility, Nephew. If you would only tell her—”

Zuko rubs his face, turning away. Iroh immediately regrets bringing up Katara, realizing the toll this is taking on him. “You mean well, I get that, but this isn’t the same. I can’t just walk up to her and say, ‘hey, you’re my wife in the future and we have kids, let’s get together.’” He bows his head, pressing his lips in a hard, fine line. “I chose them, and they were taken away. Even if Katara accepts my feelings, how do I know it’s because she really loves me and not because fate is playing a role?” The spirits have tampered enough, and Zuko can’t handle the idea of being disappointed again.

“I’m sorry. I was not thinking.”

“No you weren’t, but thank you for trying to cheer me up.” Zuko playfully nudges his shoulder.

The ship will be here soon, though it is running a little later than expected. Not wanting to alert his guards to his absence, Zuko suggests Iroh return to the palace. After one last, long hug and a string of sad goodbyes and tears, Zuko and Iroh part ways. Zuko watches as his Uncle disappears into the city, staring fixedly on the place between two buildings where Iroh is swallowed by the dark. He isn’t coming back, and when that sets in, the former prince slowly sits back down on the crate, staring out at the ocean for a glimpse of his ship.

Twenty minutes in, he becomes alert. He probably isn’t the only passenger, and there was a bar around the corner that often catered to seafarers, but the quiet tiptoeing is all too suspicious to guess that it was a fisherman or a Navy soldier.

“I thought you’d be long gone by now.”

Zuko snaps his head up, “Katara?” He smiles, light beaming in his eyes. He’s shut down when she doesn’t return it.

“How long until your ship arrives?” Katara asks, tilting her chin at his traveling bag.

“Soon. You won’t have to see me again.”

“Is that enough?”

“I got what I deserve. I lost everything I betrayed you and Uncle to get. I truly am sorry. That’s not enough. It’ll never be enough. I just pray that going forward you’ll find it in your heart to give me a chance, Katara. A chance to show you I’ve changed.”

Katara’s breathing slows, her clenched fists pressed to her chest. She hates him, hates how easy it is for him to speak such kind words, hates him for making her heart beat fast in her chest- so loud, it flutters like sparrowkeets in her stomach. The rising anger she felt moments ago faded, falling prey to Zuko’s apology. Now she’s left speechless.

She steadies herself against a lightpost. Zuko sits up abruptly to come to her side but reels back from a single glare shot in his direction, sitting back down on the crate. She’s overwhelmed and can’t gather her feelings. “You saved my life. I will forever be grateful for that. That’s all I want say. I have to get back before the others notice I’m gone. Good luck in Ba Sing Se, Zuko.”

“You came all this way? Just for that?”

“Yes.”

Zuko doesn’t believe her.

Katara turns to leave. Zuko had prepared himself for this, prepared for her outburst, her distrust- prepared to never see her again and be shut out of her life forever. And yet he can’t accept that so easily.

“We have two kids!” Zuko blurts out.

Katara turns on her feet, her face contorted with confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Two daughters. Kya and Ursa. We have a house in the South Pole, sitting far enough outside the village that we can see the ocean. It’s not big and there’s a lot of work that needs done, but it’s ours and we’re happy.”

She’s ready to tell him off, concluding that Zuko was playing some sort of trick on her. She stops herself; looking back, she doesn't recall telling Zuko her mother’s name.

She hasn’t moved, and Zuko uses this opportunity to continue. “Kya is five. A firebender. But she has eyes like yours. She’s not good yet, but everyday she practices really hard. She’s smart. Sometimes I think she’s even smarter than me.” He smiles fondly. “And when she looks at the world around her, you can see her determination, and you know that someday she’s going to do great things. A-and Ursa, she can’t talk much, but when she laughs, it’s contagious. She’s so observant. When you look at her and she looks back at you...it’s like witnessing a miracle.”

“I don’t know if it was a dream...No, it wasn’t a dream because every touch, every taste, every second I was there was so vivid, I can still see it clearly, even now. It was real. Our marriage, our home, our family. Those are pieces of myself that I can’t dismiss, and you were a part of that.”

Katara lifts her head up, slowly. She examines Zuko’s face up close, looking for a lie, the slightest giveaway that he was being untruthful, and she finds none. “What makes you so sure?” Katara asks in a low whisper, unable to hide her skepticism.

“There’s a lot I don’t know in life. All the mistakes I’ve made, all the wrongs I’ve done. They were clouded by poor judgement and selfish desires. All my life, I wasn’t sure of anything until I met you. You’re the one thing that’s always been real, Katara. And I choose us. Always. But...hearing myself saying this out loud, it all sounds insane. You’ll never believe me if I told you everything.”

He slumps back in his seat in defeat, waiting for Katara to leave. Katara makes cautious steps towards him, and it seems as though she’s contemplating something. After what felt like

forever, she sits by Zuko's side, gently covering the hand resting on his knee with her own. As if instinct took over, he laces their fingers together.

“Try me.”

# won't you let me love the lonely out of you?

## Chapter Summary

They lived their lives separately for four years. Time heals all wounds they say, but for these two it plants many doubts. In the end, Zuko and Katara are drawn together once again, bringing their feelings to the table. But is it always that easy?

## Chapter Notes

This is the final chapter, I'm sad to say. Thank you all for coming on this journey with me and supporting me while I brought this fic to life. It has been wonderful- crazy! but still amazing. Let me know what you guys think :)

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

“I’m not prepared for this,” Katara admits. She can take it all back- tell Zuko she wasn’t ready for this. Letters were one thing and although writing back and forth was personal enough; this was more real.

“Can’t say anyone would be prepared if they were in your position, Sugarqueen,” Toph shrugs comically. “It’s not everyday someone tells you they married and produced spawn with you in the future. It’s freaky.”

“Must you say it like that?”

Toph turns her milky green eyes slightly upwards as though analyzing Katara. “How else do you want me to say it? It’s freaky, I get it. But Sparky’s story checks out, he hasn’t told a single lie. If I couldn’t tell, I’d say his story is unbelievable.”

It was, if not for the accuracy in everything Zuko had told her, and Toph confirming the truth in his words. His exact knowledge of her homeland, her past; including her childhood. The coincidental names of their ‘children’ and even going as far as to describe sensitive situations such as her mother’s death.

“What would you do?” Katara inquires to her friend.

Toph tugs Katara’s sleeve, keeping the distracted waterbender by her side as they turn a corner on the crowded street. Winter Solstice was always like this. “What can I say? If I’m being honest, I’d run for the hills.”

“Really,” Katara mutters, debating on the idea. “You said Zuko’s changed. He’s been staying in Ba Sing Se for four years and you’re the only one from the gaang that visits him the most.”

“It’s nothing to do with whether he’s changed or not. I’m not in love with Sparky,” Toph smirked, Katara clears her throat. “The guy knows some pretty intimate stuff about you that drives so close to home, it’s scary.”

Katara bit the corner of her lip. Guess there’s nothing that could calm her nerves now, not even her friend, “That’s not just it, though.”

“Then what is it?”

“We’ve been getting...I don’t know, close? Really close. Two years ago when I started writing to him, it was so I could pry for information. I was ready to ask more questions because, frankly, it was hard to digest in the beginning. Then a year into it, something...changed. It’s been so casual lately that we talk about mundane things, like how our day went or the weather. Even personal stuff. Deeply personal stuff. Like how I was offered a waterbending teaching position for the Northerners that recently moved South. ”

“Look at you, making progress, Sugarqueen,” Toph chuckled.

“Yeah. It’s an honor, considering little I know about teaching. Aang was my only student and it was done out of desperation. ”

“You’re more than that and you know it. No one is more suited. Don’t make me remind you,” Toph lifted her fist.

Katara laughs, wrapping her arms around the earthbender’s neck. “Aww, Toph, you do care about me.”

Toph swats her away. “None of the touchy, feely crap. You know how that annoys me,” Regardless, Katara can see the blush surfacing on her cheeks.

“At least tell me what you’ve been up to. Aang doesn’t tell me anything when I see him. He’s so hooked on this project he says he’s working on in Yu Dao.”

“As good as it gets, I guess,” She mutters, rubbing the back of her neck. “We’ve talked about moving in together.”

Katara feigns a gasp. “Is the Blind Bandit actually considering settling down.”

“Pfft...well, maybe. Could be a good way to get my parent’s off my back. And I don’t always have to come up with an excuse to avoid seeing them,” Toph had been overseeing some of her father’s factories in both the Earth Kingdom and in the Fire Nation. When business slowed, she’d run off to see friends to avoid going home. Zuko was closest, so he was often her go-to to crash in on. “It’ll break Sparky’s heart. He won’t see me much.”

“I’m sure he’ll be devastated,” Katara remarked sarcastically, knowing Toph was probably eating Zuko out of house and home.

“I really do feel bad. He’s here in Ba Sing Se all alone. Aang, Sokka and Suki see him in passing and it’ll be a miracle if he ever sees Iroh. I’m probably the most company he has.”

Katara combs her fingers through her hair, feeling a pang of guilt for her insensitive remark. “Oh.”



“But he’ll be happy to see you though.”

“You don’t know that,” Katara trails off.

The faces passing by began to blur. Katara thinks back to the letters. How she made the initiative, how Zuko kindly agreed to answer any and all questions; jotting them down carefully, as if he was avoiding placing his own feelings in the letters. She had expected to hear from him after they had parted on the dock that evening four years ago- his ship disappearing in the distance. It ran late, leaving them alone as Zuko went over every piece of his story while Katara sat silently absorbing every word. She said nothing. Even when his ship showed up and he slung his luggage over his shoulder and ascended up the plank to his new destination, she still said nothing and Zuko did not press her. In fact, he seemed to understand and quietly left.

Katara hoped to come out of this the same person but every night she thought about it- about him- and this dream of his, she was wrecked with sleepless nights. An emptiness consumed her and so within a year of her travels with Aang, she became distant and they both thought it best for her to return home. Aang sensed a difference in his partner and his forever girl became someone he didn’t really know. War can do that to you; help you create this idea of a person or your future. Nothing turns out what you think. The light at the end of the tunnel was so far away that when they both reached it, it became blinding, coming to a threshold with no clear ending in sight.

The distance made it more clear. Katara and Aang broke up.

Katara wasn’t going to have her life dictated by this painted picture Zuko said the spirits had shown him. That wouldn’t be her, that wouldn’t be her choice. So while her friends remained in contact with the former prince, she avoided him at all cost. Katara meant what she said, she was grateful for him saving her but she didn’t owe him her friendship.

For a while Katara forgot about Zuko and his ventures. She forgot about Aang and her loneliness. She purchased a hut right outside the village- not too far but enough so that she could see the ocean. The hut is big, too big for one person; two bedrooms and a large living space. Nonetheless, it was home. Like she was meant to be there all long. She spent her days aiding in the Tribe’s restoration and in between would visit the markets or enjoy a cup of tea

at the entrance of her home while peacefully watching the snow fall. Something was missing but she couldn't place it.

Until one day when the Northerners started pouring in. Those who sought a less restrictive lifestyle journeyed far to be a part of a tight knit community. With that came waterbenders, young and old, women, children and men. Katara was happy but not prepared for the offer she was about to be given. Many inexperienced benders asked that she teach them. She was thrilled...then it hit her. Was she walking in the same footsteps as that woman? Turned off by this, Katara declined at first.

She was plagued by this. Katara thought she had it all figured out and now she didn't know if every step she took was because it was her choice or because of what Zuko had told her.

Unable to stand it, she asked her brother for Zuko's address. That's why she picked up the pen and parchment. That's why two years later after finally developing a friendship she's in Ba Sing Se, meeting Zuko for the first time since that fateful day at the docks.

"Sparky!" Toph waved.

A whistle sets off. He emerges with a group of others, caked in soot. He doesn't notice them at first, men and women exiting the factory with Zuko clap him on the shoulder, displaying friendly gestures. He smiles proudly. Upon seeing the two girls, Zuko's eyes immediately catch Katara's. Her shoulder stiffen. He had grown well over six feet. His hair had grown past his shoulders and he kept the top half in a loose ponytail. There was stubble on his face, probably from not shaving in a couple days but it's apparent he keeps up on grooming. His shoulders are broader and the Earth Kingdom attire he wore couldn't hide his defined physique. Most of all, he looked...really attractive.

He goes red as soon as he heard the nickname only one other person in the world called him.

"This is going to be awkward," Katara hisses a protest. Toph would have none of it, using her strength to drag the Master waterbender away.

"No it won't, quit being a baby."

Zuko is already making his way to them, greeting them both with a small smile. He pets the top of Toph's head and ruffles it a bit. "Nice to see you again, Toph," His voice was deeper, yet it carried the soft tone of it's usual rasp.

"I wish I could say the same for you, Sparky. Remember Sugarqueen? She tagged along this time."

He shyly turns to Katara. "I'm glad to see you too, Katara."

"Me too," Katara replies with honesty, a smile on her lips. "We've written to each other all these years, it was about time we met face to face again. So, do I get a hug or would you prefer to pet my head like Toph's?" She opens her arms.

Zuko clears his throat, displaying bashfulness as he opens his arms to her too and waits for Katara to initiate the hug. She laughs, quite sheepishly, before closing the space between them. Unbeknownst to her, Katara doesn't see the unevenness of the ground, tripping over one foot and running face first into Zuko's chest. She clung to the front of his robe, Zuko reacting quick enough to catch her. She gradually looks up at him, blushing profusely as she steadies herself, her hands resting on the hard surface of his abdomen. One couldn't tell by his attire but getting up close and personal, it's clear he kept up on his training.

"I-I-I-" Katara stutters.

Zuko's good eye widens, trying to make out Katara's stammering apology.

Toph raises a brow, listening to the two of them with a sly smirk and kicking back her foot so that the ground where Katara tripped was put back in place. "Heh. You were right, Sugarqueen, this is awkward."

"You okay?" Zuko asked.

“I’m fine. Really, I am,” Katara promised, shifting her attention to her friend knowingly. “Are you hurt?”

Zuko shook his head and laughed. “No. If I were, I could handle it. I’ve survived the worst of your attacks,” He says, recalling their fight in the North Pole.

Katara grins. “Don’t be too sure about that. I’m a much bigger girl now.”

“Ugh,” Toph rolls her eyes, “can we put the flirting on the back burner and find some grub.”

Katara opens her mouth but shuts it fast. She pursed her lips in a hard line, ignoring Zuko’s gaze briefly flickering in her direction. She wishes Toph was more discreet. If not for her, at least for Zuko.

“Do you guys mind if I clean up first?” Zuko raises his hands, emphasizing how dirty he was. “I don’t want to enter a restaurant looking like I rolled around in the smoke.”

“We could stop by your place if you don’t mind us tagging along.” Katara suggested.

“I was going to say you and Toph could go ahead and I would meet you there. Toph and I usually eat at Jiang’s Noodle Shop.”

“We insist. We did come all this way, we should stick together.”

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Zuko’s home is quaint. A little kitchenette, a table, a washroom and a bed were displayed in the small apartment. There’s pots and pans by the fireplace along with a few baskets of rice, spices and a vase of water. There’s also a basket of needle and thread with various fabrics. The bed laid beneath one of the two windows and you could hear the chatter going on in the streets.

“Make yourselves at home,” Zuko welcomes them. “I’m going to clean up in the washroom. Toph, there’s tea in the cabinet if you want to show Katara.”

“Um, blind. Remember, Sparky. Unless you want me to burn down the place.”

“I was suggesting Katara can make it,” Zuko rolls his eyes. “There are spark rocks in the drawer beside the stove, Katara.”

“Thank you, Zuko.”

So this is where he’s lived the last four years. Not a trace of his upbringing followed him in this tiny apartment. It was a commoner's home. Which made Katara relax a little bit as she grabbed the kettle and began to brew. She opened several cans before settling on ginseng. It smells exactly how she remembers Iroh makes it. Katara hums as she works her way around the kitchen and even sets out rice cookies on a little plate.

“Someone’s cozy,” Toph remarks, sitting at the table and throwing her hands behind her head. She crosses her dirty feet on the table.

“He told us to make ourselves at home,” Katara retorts, shooing Toph’s feet off.

“A little too at home if you ask me.”

Zuko comes out moments later with a clean shave and freshly clean clothes. The first thing he sees is Katara setting the table with tea and snacks and wiping off the dirt from Toph's feet with a cloth.

“Tea’s done,” Katara announces.

“Oh, thanks,” Zuko joins his friends.

They finish up, some awkward chatter here and there. After a while, Toph’s had enough and suggests they get food and alcohol in their stomachs before it gets crowded at Jiang’s. Tonight the festivities will have everyone out in the city.

The Winter Solstice was big here, bigger than in the South Pole. Granted there were more people to celebrate. The smell of food wafted in the air and lanterns were lit. The lower ring was alive and children ran along the streets wearing masks and carrying sugar treats.

“Looks like I arrived at a good time,” Katara laughs.

“This is only the beginning,” Zuko replies, having not missed a single Winter Solstice celebration. At night, he would light a candle in remembrance to his wife and children. No one knows of this little tradition but him.

Jiang’s is indeed crowded. It’s another hour before the three are seated and waited on. They’re all given a menu and water to start.

“Back so soon. Weren’t you just here this afternoon for lunch?” A bright looking girl with pretty green eyes and hair in a high ponytail giggled. She had an apron on and a tray underneath her arm, signifying she was their waitress.

“Oh, hi, Jin,” he blushes. “I’m here with friends tonight.”

“How’s it hanging, Jin?” Toph salutes.

*Jin?* Katara thought, frowning at the young woman who seemed all too familiar with her friends.

“Good to see you too, Toph,” Jin greets the earthbender. She presents a smile to Katara who’s forced to give back one of her own. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Katara,” she states impassively.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Jin. You guys want the usual? I’ll bring the rice wine out now for Zuko, and of course, gin for Toph.”

“Yeeesss,” Toph’s groans, having waited for this all day.

“Oh, Zuko. You have soot in your hair,” Jin takes out a rag and wipes the soot from his hair then proceeds to use her fingers to comb his hair back in place. Who was this chick?! Katara wanted to scream. “I’ll be back with your orders.”

“This night keeps getting better and better. Both of your hearts are racing like mad,” Toph cackles.

“She, uh, she your girlfriend?” Katara asks, taking a sip of her water while trying to hide her annoyance.

“No. We, um, did go out a couple times. Once when Uncle and I were refugees,” Zuko shrugs.

“So the other times were recent,” Katara guessed.

“Shut up, our drinks are coming,” Toph interrupts, clapping her hands as Jin sets down their orders then leaves.

Zuko offers Katara some wine which she declines.

“Nah, sugarqueen isn’t really into it. Leave her to her water.”

Katara glares at her, handing out her empty cup. “You know what, I will have some. Thanks, Zuko.”

“Oh ho. Can’t wait to see how this all goes down,” Toph rubs her hands together.

She ignored the earthbender’s comment, not wanting to be the odd one out, or feel second to that Jin girl. Katara had another cup, then another. Her nerves swayed away by every drop of rice wine. She shouldn’t care about who Zuko dated, she’s dated too. But in his heart, Katara thought there would be no else and that bothered her immensely.

That’s why when their meal finally arrives, she continues to have her fill of wine until Zuko’s bottle is empty and he’s reluctant to purchase another. That’s why she’s being carried out the restaurant with Zuko hauling her out of the place while he and Toph try to get directions from her to the inn she’s staying at. And that’s why she’s being carried over to Zuko’s place instead because she’s too inebriated to remember. He lies Katara down on his bed and takes off to the kitchen.

“Oh, man. I can’t believe we had to cut tonight short because Sugarqueen’s a lightweight,” Toph pouts.

Zuko hands her a cup of tea and then sits by Katara on the bed. “Not everyone has your tolerance,” He mentions.

“Nobody but you. I can’t even get my own boyfriend to keep up. That’s why you’re my favorite drinking buddy.”

Zuko hooks an arm around Katara’s waist and brings the other cup he’s holding to her lips. She gags, alert at the smell of whatever concoction he brewed.

“What the hell is that?” Katara coughed.



“Banana onion juice. Pretty good way to kill a buzz fast. Also, it can prevent a hangover. So drink,” He urges. She reluctantly accepts, swallowing the juice as quickly as she could without spitting it back up. “There, there. I’ve got kale cookies and water after this.”

Katara gulps down the remainder of the juice. “You buy kale cookies?”

“No, I make them.”

This intrigues Katara. “Can you make stewed sea prunes? Or seaweed noodles?”

“And pickled fish and puffin-seal sausages,” Zuko continues.

“Hence why I never come over for dinner,” Toph says, picking at her ear.

“The latter is harder to find. Not a lot of merchants from the Southern Water Tribe visit as much.”

‘How did you-’ Katara starts. She knows the answer and quickly shuts her mouth. “Right. I guess it makes sense.”

“Sure. It all makes so much sense...when you think about it like a crazy person.” Toph interjects.

Zuko rolls his eyes, taking Katara’s cup and cleaning it out. He comes back with water and a plate of kale cookies as promised. Toph announces she’s heading to her room, promising to come back tomorrow once Katara has her head together. “I’ll take her home,” Zuko promised.

The waterbender uses this opportunity to speak with Zuko now that they are alone. She had come all this way, after all. “What other water tribe things can you do?”

Zuko cocks a smile. A really, really attractive smile. “A lot. It may come as a surprise but I can sew, weave and hunt. In the winter, I take a trip to the Northern regions of the Earth Kingdom so I’m not rusty.”

“Why?”

“No reason other than what I’ve told you before. I can never forget that part of my life. The Southern Water Tribe is still in my heart.”

“Is that why you have a single candle made of whale earwax sitting on your kitchen table? Today is the solstice.”

Zuko sighs. “Very observant, I see.”

“You can’t let go of that part of your life, yet you’ve been dating.”

He frowns, running his fingers through his loose hair and Katara realizes she took it too far. “What’s it to you? It’s not like I should wither away in this place alone, not that my attempts at dating were all that fruitful. You had Aang, it was only fair I found a way to move on.”

Tears glossed Katara’s eyes. The alcohol was making her vulnerable. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I don’t expect anything from you. Whatever makes you happy, I wholeheartedly support,” Katara does that thing again where she bites her full lip. Agni, be damned, that image will play nicely during his alone time tonight.

Katara supposes she had dated Aang in spite of what Zuko told her about their marriage. Aside from that, Aang was her best friend, he was there in the beginning. She hardly knew

Zuko, so at the time it made sense. “Me and Aang aren’t together anymore.”

“I’m aware.”

“Will you sit next to me? I’d really like to talk.”

Zuko glances down at his feet, then gold eyes look back at Katara, reflecting in the most beautiful way in the candlelight. He obliges, keeping his head high and gaze on anything but her.

“Look at me, Zuko,” She says, gently. The slightest husk could be heard in her voice, sending a quiver through him. “What do you know about me? Personally, not just the Water Tribe part.”

“I know you snore.”

“I do not!”

Zuko snickers, hiding a smile behind his fist. “You like to sing during a bath. You’re terrible, by the way. And you absolutely hate mornings.”

“Well that’s a given. I’m a waterbender.”

“You do this thing with your lip every time you’re nervous or upset. It’s cute. You have a way of comforting people, through words or actions. You don’t let others get to you but when it comes to the people you’re closest to, you’re the most vulnerable. And might I add, you’re kind of a pervert.”

“Excuse me?” she coughs up her water.

“Haha. Yeah. You have a strange taste in...romance. Also, you have the oddest reactions to certain places. Like here.” He points to the place below her chin. “And here.” He strokes beneath her earlobe, the soft spot where her jawline ends. Katara hisses, the fingers tracing her skin makes it come alive and she trembles. Zuko retracts. “Shit,” he mumbled, scolding himself for crossing boundaries, especially in places where he had memorized every erogenous zone Katara had.

She reddens, flushed with discomfiture and arousal. Flutters assault her belly and her lower regions swell into a throbbing ache. It’s too hard to ignore, it’s even harder to ignore how knowledgeable Zuko was of her body. Their friendly exchange had turned intimate, too intimate for her heart to keep up. It’s frightening and enrapturing.

“You should go,” he mutters, his honey-like tone replaced with apprehension. The alcohol was making him brave and Zuko’s modesty to forbear became harder to maintain. Besides, it was time to light the candle and he wasn’t sure if he was ready to let her in on that. “I’ll walk you to your place.”

“Yeah,” she agrees, balling her skirt in her lap. Katara accepts Zuko’s hand, aiding her to her feet and let’s go so fast, you’d think she just burned him. She hides the disappointment behind a forced smile. “Thank you. Um, Zuko, would it be alright to come over the next time you make dinner?”

He’s taken aback but nonetheless is overjoyed. “Of course. Any time.”

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And visit Katara did often. Most of her days were spent between waiting for Zuko to return home from work and actually spending time at his apartment. Toph tagged along for the most part but stayed weary of the cuisine. Katara was pleasantly surprised at his slight spin on the dishes, adding a little Fire Nation spice to it.

She’s also learned he constructs fur almost as skillfully as Gran Gran. His detail to attention was fascinating. And not just that, the hunting weapons he made and the baskets weaved made Katara feel like being away from home wasn’t all that hard.

A week went by, then two, then three. Before she knew it, a month had come and gone and she nearly forgets about the South Pole, the waterbenders who waited on her answer to teach them, the loneliness that ate at her when she lies awake at night. She would spend most of her time with Zuko, conversing by the fire while enjoying a meal. Just like in the letters, it was so easy to talk to Zuko in person. It was like they never spent their lives apart. But all that was bound to change with a single question.

“What does this mean? You being here? I’m not exactly foolish but sometimes it helps to have clarification.”

Zuko’s busy with making tonight’s dinner, Katara his only guest for the night. He’s speaking to her but he isn’t looking at her, his focus is on the large pot he’s kneeling in front of.

Katara puts down the scroll she’s reading onto the kitchen table. She raises her brows, sitting up straight. She had been at Zuko’s place every day for dinner and she supposed during her stay she had gotten a little too comfortable at Zuko’s than the dingy inn she’s been renting.

“Zuko, I don’t know what you’re-“

“You do,” He cuts her off. Zuko raises his voice in defense, as though he was the one on the spot and not her. Katara swallows, her throat constricted and she can’t come up with a rebuttal. “You come here almost all the time. You said before arriving in Ba Sing Se you wanted our friendship to progress. For two years we’ve sent letters back and forth. How did you think I’d feel?”

“How do you think I feel?” Katara finally speaks. “I’m not trying to disregard your feelings over mine but...but...” she can’t finish. She could say he was still a stranger to her. Or that she didn’t trust him. But that would all be a lie. “What do you want from me?”

“I guess I’m the idiot here, huh? Thinking that those letters meant something.”

“They did mean something, but at the same time I have to protect myself. I’m not the Katara you married. I never will be. I have my own ambitions, my own plans. You’re a great guy Zuko and a dear friend to me. I see how much you changed but I can’t be who you want.”

Zuko's flabbergasted, "That's what you think? That I'm comparing you? Has it ever occurred to you that- spirits, what is this? I'm not delusional, Katara, and I can't tiptoe around this. I can't pretend. I don't need you to cater to me by being my friend— I don't need your sympathy."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Katara had her suspicions but she didn't foresee how deep they were. "So you're saying you've started to fall in love with me?"

"No," Zuko corrects, "I'm saying I've never stopped."

"I don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing!" Zuko shouts, throwing the ladle he was using to stir the pot of chowder. He regretted his outburst immediately. "I'm sorry. Your intentions are good. I really am happy to see you again. But what I want is different from what you want and I can't be your friend."

Katara kept her eyes on her lap, too embarrassed to face Zuko because she really didn't have an answer for him. "Then what else is there?"

Zuko's shoulders slump in defeat. "...I need you to leave."

"Zuko, listen, I really am—"

"Please, leave me alone," He says so quietly, it breaks her heart. She gets up from her seat, making it to the door and out the apartment building in time for the tears to rain down her face.

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“He threw me out.” Katara announced, stabbing her chopsticks into the noodles. Coming to Jiang’s has become a regular and lucky for her Jin wasn’t there to show off with Zuko around.

“Can’t blame him, you’ve kind of overstayed your welcome,” Toph replies sarcastically. She picks up on Katara’s tone and decides to reel back on the banter. “What happened?”

“I asked if he still had feelings for me.”

“What did he say?”

“He said...he said he’s never stopped’.”

“Pfft, is that supposed to shock me? The whole gaang knows that, he hasn’t exactly denied it all these years, and that bothers you? Why does that bother you now?”

Katara idly twirls a lock of her hair.

“You- you like him,” Toph picks up. “But you’re afraid he’s comparing you to this other Katara.”

“What if he’s built this idea in his head that I’m exactly like her. That’s why me and Aang broke up. I can’t stand being with someone again who makes up this image I’m not. In the end, I’m just me.”

“Have you asked him? I can’t see Sparky using you as a means to erase his loss. It’s apparent how strongly he felt about this family he had in the future and that’s why he’s never pursued you until now.”

“Am I being unfair by not telling him? I just want to protect myself, Toph, and I hardly know if the love I feel is true or if it’s because I’m tangled in some web of inescapable fate.”

“This is probably coming late and I’m in no way an expert into this spirit mumbo jumbo. But maybe you’re thinking too harshly about it. What if his glimpse wasn’t about some destiny you’re fated to have. What if it wasn’t what the spirits are trying to force on you. What if it was some sort of window into your happiness, of your heart’s desire. Because I believe Zuko would not have been affected so much by it otherwise. Knowing his shitty upbringing, I think he’s lived a possibility he’s always wished for in his heart and you were only part of it because perhaps you’ve wished the same.”

Katara wanted to laugh and at the same time cry. She doesn’t want to be suckered in but she also doesn’t want to lose Zuko. “You think Zuko’s always wanted that life? That’s impossible. All he did was boast about how he was the prince and how he needed his rightful place to the throne. I can’t imagine him wanting to settle down in a harsh environment with a lack of followers to do his childish biddings.”

“Think about it. He’s been ridiculed, he’s been mistreated, he’s been *burned* - and the one person who was his entire world abandoned him as a kid. It’s not entirely crazy that Zuko would want to be surrounded by a community who loves and supports each other, because that’s the very thing he didn’t have, with the exception of Iroh. And even then who knows when there will come a time when Zuko would see him again. He deserves more credit than that.”

“And why should I? I feel sorry for what happened to him, I do. It still doesn’t excuse what he put us through.”

Toph sighs aggressively, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I’m not suggesting you overlook the past, I’m only saying to look at the man you see today and ask yourself if there’s really a future there.”

Katara never thought of it that way. She’s tried so hard to keep this future from coming to be that she had been suppressing her own desires; becoming a teacher, being recognized and appreciated for her skills while also having the support of a loving and caring family of her own to come home to every night. It was a lot to ask but it was hers to want. When Zuko brought all these things up, it frightened her and she kept him at arm's length.

She was fighting no one but herself and everyone saw it but her.



“When did you get so wise?” Katara smiles widely, wiping the stray tear that had fallen down her cheek. “Aang must be rubbing off on you.”

“Take that back,” Toph deadpanned.

“What do I do now? He basically kicked me out of his apartment.”

“I don’t think that was the case. He’s probably trying to respect your space. Sparky isn’t in love with you because you were his wife in another life, he really means he’s *in* love with you. Talking to the guy, it’s pretty apparent.”

This made her heart soar. Katara clasped her hands in front of her, blinking rapidly before saying. “I gotta go.” She jumps out of her seat, ramming into several chairs on her way out, apologizing to the other patrons she knocked into before taking off and leaving the dumbfounded earthbender.

“Hey! Don’t leave me with the bill!”

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Zuko cleans up after dinner. Dishes washed, laundry folded and a basket of needle and thread set aside by the fireplace. He hasn’t made any new clothes in a while, he could use the rest of his evening before bed to make more. It’s become a habit, this routine. Sometimes he’d catch himself making tiny outfits, ones that would fit Kya or Ursa. He’d sell them for extra money on the side when it was too hard to keep them around.

He puts on a pot of tea, using the kettle his uncle gave him as a housewarming gift four years ago. Iroh sends a new one every year on the anniversary of his renouncement but Zuko prefers this one. While the water boils, Zuko takes a seat by the fireplace and begins to sew.

There's a knock. He gets up from his seat on the floor and sets aside the material he was going to use to make a decent pair of pants. He opens the door, furrowing his brows at the sight of Katara standing there panting and hugging her torso.

"Invite me in," she says. "I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid that when you look at me, you're looking at a different Katara. I'm not afraid to disappoint you if I'm not who you imagined I'll be. I'm not afraid to be myself around you. Because when I'm around you it feels like home. You make me feel like home. I'll no longer keep my guard up. I'll no longer push you away. So, let me love you like you love me. Invite me in and ask me to come to your bed."

She doesn't think she could be the person he fell in love with. Then again, he's never truly expected her to be. He treats her with such regard and careful consideration. He had been patient and asked nothing of her in return but to be herself. That's what's so good about Zuko. She was ready now, ready to let all the qualms fall to her feet and give him her heart.

Zuko sighs heavily. What was she doing to him?

He bows his head, closing the height between them and rests his chin on her shoulder. Katara's throat swells, Zuko is quiet. Was it wrong of her to presume?

Her answer is given, a flick from Zuko's tongue brushing her earlobe then a kiss encloses over the soft spot he had touched the day before. "Come to my bed, Katara." He whispers, low and husky and warm, it makes her melt.

Katara mewls, nuzzling her nose between his lips and her skin, forcing him to part and rest his head on her forehead. Large hands skimmed over her bare arms and surfaced goosebumps on her flesh, coming around to caress her hips before giving her ass a squeeze. Zuko grips harshly, provoking Katara to gasp and flush into him. She swings her arms around his neck, her mouth curling into a playful smirk. His bulge laid on her stomach, cock rising to full attention, prodding urgently. He hasn't taken off his pants yet but Katara likes what she feels so far and so she rubs against him.

Katara licks her lips, blinking rapidly and looking up at Zuko with keen eyes. "Zuko, I'm not against using the hallway but for our first time, it might be a bit of a stretch."

He groans, Katara using this opportunity to run her fingers through his hair. She's slightly jealous of how smooth and soft it is. She especially likes it long, more for her to grab. They're both panting. Katara's sarashi had grown damp and she's starting to feel the discomfort of having them on while throbbing uncontrollably between her legs. Zuko palmed her ass again, lifting her a few inches off the ground and making her yelp.

"Looks like my plans have been foiled," He hushed her with his mouth, not exactly kissing her, but playing light on her lips.

Zuko backs into the apartment carrying Katara with him and slams the door shut. He lets her down and cups Katara's face, tracing his thumbs over the line of her cheekbones. Agni, she's beautiful. Soft and beautiful. Her lashes fanned above her blue eyes as she gazed up at him. "We could make new plans," She whispers with a pleased hum. "There's one in particular I can think of."

Zuko agrees with a single nod. He must be canny; be patient. This was their first time- in a sense- the last thing he wants to do is be too forward. Even if he's aware of how she loves to be kissed. Or which nipple was her most sensitive. Or how she likes her clit teased while he tasted her from behind. He can relearn that and she can learn with him.

He pecks her lips. She responds in kind, kissing him back and slotting her mouth with his. Zuko dove in harder, suckling at her upper lip. Katara inhales sharply through her nose, closing her fists into his hair. His jaw unhinges, snaking his tongue into her mouth. Katara hikes up his legs, wrapping her own around his waist. His hard length rubs her clothed sex, sending sparks flying behind their eyelids. Katara squeezed her eyes shut, Zuko slamming her against the door but he pulled back the weight of his body, reminding himself that Katara needed to be taken care of slowly.

Instead he ghosts his touch where he deemed was reasonable to start, putting aside his gnawing hunger, this insatiable appetite that had collected over the last four years. Patience was not his strong forte but for Katara, he's made a secret promise that if they were to have this again- that if she were to come around and finally accept him- he would be more gentle to her liking, more sweet and kind and undemanding. Because she was worth the wait.

Katara decides she likes the way Zuko kisses. It's not featherlight or rough. It was a combination of passionate and fulfilling, like swirling wine on your tongue or savoring the taste of fruit. He would kiss her lips lightly several times before enclosing his mouth over hers in an hungry like motion then uses his tongue to delve into her mouth further. It took her a few attempts to catch up but when she got it right, Katara playfully tugged at his bottom lip with her teeth and smiled when Zuko made the most animalistic groan. See, she can stir him up too and that makes her feel confident.

"Let's see how well you know me," Katara steps to the side, taking Zuko's hand and leads him to the bed. There's mischief in her eyes and a seductive sway in her hips every step she takes. She stops abruptly in front of his bed, Zuko halts so that he doesn't stumble into her. She grabs both of his hands and plants them on her waist. Arching her back, Katara's bottom comes to his erection, grinding mercilessly as she leans back onto his chest, looking up at Zuko with those beautiful blue eyes and whispers. "Are you going to be kind to me?"

Zuko grins wolfishly, cupping her breasts. Using his index finger and thumb, he pinches her nipples through her robe. Just the tiniest of pinches was enough to make her knees weak and cause an audible gasp to leave her lips. He teases her more, pinching and turning circles until they grow hard. Zuko sneaks a hand through the opening of her robe, finding the knot that holds her bindings in place and loosens it with ease.

Katara's pleasantly surprised. Not only can he clean and sew and cook a fine Water Tribe cuisine but he also knows the inner workings of Water Tribe bindings. She's soaking wet at the idea of what else Zuko can do. Erotic thoughts bombard her mind.

Zuko spins her around, letting the bindings fall and unties her sash. Her robe parts to present him with beautiful mounds, pebbled from arousal and noticeably aching. "Someone's eager," He smirks.

Katara cries out, one leg hooked over Zuko's arm while his other catches her back. Using his strength he lifts her up so her breasts met his mouth. He starts with her right, suckling it hungrily.

Katara wraps the other leg around his waist to keep her balance. She buries her fingers in his hair, urging him to keep going and throws her head back in ecstasy. "Zuko, yes! Spirits that feels so good. Keep going- mmm, like that." She moans, rocking her hips. His cock is as hard

as steel. It feels like heaven. She's swollen and needy and she *needs* him. She needs *Zuko* - something she never thought would admit.

He moves to the left breast after spending time with the right. Katara is in a frenzy. He can feel her wet and grinding on him. Fuck, she was wild, his waterbender. Much like her element she was calm one minute, a raging storm the next. But when she was hot and bothered, it was a whole other work of passion. Fuck being patient! All he wants is her.

Her grip on his hair was harsher. Zuko bit, nipped and swirled his tongue around her nipples. With every hard bite he gave her a soothing kiss. This went on and on. Katara's rocking turned to harsh thrusts and eventually Zuko joined her. Fuck- Because he's so painfully hard that if he didn't get the tiniest relief, he would burn up from the inside out. The last thing he wanted was for his temperature to get out of control. He wouldn't be able to find another apartment at a cheap rate if he turned the building to ashes.

Katara's mouth falls open, her high pitched moans turn to broken sobs. She's dry humping his clothed dick, clinging onto him as he continues to assault her breasts. "Ah! Ah! Close..I'm close! Zuko, I-I'm close."

She can wring out her underwear at this point. Katara's running on ragged breath, chasing that pleasure. She's driven on pure instinct, riding faster and harder on his cock. Zuko grunts like a primitive beast, holding her closer while meeting her thrust for thrust.

A pure scream of lust rips from her throat. Katara trembles, her inner walls convulsing and a seep of fluid leaves evidence on her underwear. Spirits, when had she last gotten off like that?

"Don't think it's over just yet, waterbender," Zuko brought her out of her trance.

"I don't know," Katara breathes a laugh. "If there's more of that, I'm not sure I could survive."

"That's the whole point." Zuko replies, crushing his mouth with hers. He sits her on the bed and kneels in front of her, starting with removing her boots. "To leave you merciless, shaking

and spent so that come morning your legs won't work and I've imprinted all over your body so much that my name is the only thing you can remember for days."

"Oh," Katara smiles shyly, watching him remove the last article of her clothing. It was her turn to undress him. "If you're lucky, I just might remember it forever."

She burns red, realizing her implication. She purses her lips in a hard line, putting her focus on undoing his sash. Zuko cups her chin and tilts her upward, "Is this forever?"

Katara's breath leaves her, he catches her words in midair. She parts her lips as if to speak but her throat has run dry. Him standing above her, with his strong, masculine stature and his loving eyes, there was only one answer she could muster. "I want it to be," she admits.

She licks her lips at the sight of his hard, taut body. Zuko's built so deliciously, her hands explore him thoroughly. The former prince jolts and trembles under her touch. It's so enticing how he reacts to her. Katara certainly wants this forever. She returns her attention to the last of his clothing; his trousers, only for Zuko to grab her chin again and bring her gaze back to him. She blinks, watching him as he caresses her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

"I want it to be too," he says softly.

Zuko kicks off the rest of his pants. His cock rests against his stomach, hard and throbbing. The head is swollen and the sheer size of him- Katara is burning hot from the inside out. She grasps his length, admiring all nine inches. She can feel the blood pulse south and her womb clenches. La, how did the spirits manage to sculpt someone like him?

Zuko makes a heavy sigh, her cool hand admiring his cock; tracing the veins, swiping the top with her fingers and giving it a firm squeeze before blowing air on it. The former prince cups the back of her neck- more so for leverage because he can't concentrate. Katara takes this as a sign of Zuko wanting more and with a smirk, she leans in and kisses the tip. Zuko gasps, wavering on his feet. When he tries to speak, Katara engulfs him, taking him in as much as she could and using her hand to cover the rest. With what felt like forever, Katara draws back, sucking him hard in the process and rolling her tongue in circles.

“Fuck! Katara!” Zuko shouts, the way she sucked him in so fast made his dick harden further. “Give me a warning next time. Agni, I almost came!”

She chuckles around him, stroking him slowly as she continues with her mouth. Katara can hear him curse and moan and even hear him whimper a few times. She didn't think Zuko, Prince of the Fire Nation and overly confident hunter of the Avatar, could make such lewd sounds while getting his cock sucked. It fills her with exhilaration. She needs to hear more of those sounds, more of Zuko begging her 'please'.

He buries both hands in her hair, making small thrusts into her mouth. Katara hums in approval, grabbing his bottom. But then he abruptly pulls her off him, a string of saliva connecting them and she coughs.

“Sorry,” Zuko apologizes. “I just- I really want to make love to you.”

“Then make love to me. Please, I want you so bad, Zuko.”

“You already have me,” he murmurs.

He climbs on top of the small bed, forcing Katara to scoot over. She comes to her knees, reaching for his face and brings him back to her in a bruising kiss. He's so good to her, so sweet. It felt like a dream. He urges her to lie back but instead, she tells Zuko to lie down. “I want to take care of you. Will you let me?”

He nods. Licking his dry lips, lying back as Katara straddles him. She strokes him firmly, flicking her wrist in a rotating motion and brings his cock to her entrance. She teases the tip along her cleft to get it nice and wet. A harsh gasp leaves them both simultaneously when Katara lowers herself. He's so hard and thick. Katara shuddered with absolute delight, raising her knees and planting her feet on either side of Zuko.

She sinks down onto him to the hilt. She can hear her own labored breathing while adjusting to his size. Zuko mutters a string of praises and moans, his toes curling at the sensation of her tight, wet cunt. And when she's comfortable enough, Katara lifts herself up and comes back down. There's a ripple effect, a wave of pleasure that sweeps them both away.

Zuko's eyes became smoldered. Smoke arose from heeded breath and it was the single, most hottest thing Katara ever witnessed. He had his eyes on her and only on her. Katara's body came alive, tingles on her skin spun a song where his hands searched. The apartment is filled with music of proclaimed love and quiet whispers.

Katara grinds harder, moving like that of her element. They linked hands as Katara rode him fast. Flesh met flesh, lewd and loud. She's a goddess on top of him, a seductress in her motions. She rides his cock with skill, pulling him beneath an undercurrent of raw pleasure. Katara's hair framed her face, her eyes shut tight, signifying her approaching orgasm. She sucked him in, hugging him tight with her sweet little pussy and he was on the cusp.

She brings a finger to her lips, sucking it greedily with a knowing smile on her face. Zuko followed that finger- watched it pop from her mouth, trail down her sternum and her stomach and dipped to her glistening wet curls. Katara rubs her clit quickly and just like that they both lose it. Zuko lifts his hips to meet hers in an absolute frenzy, forcing Katara to bounce on his cock as he roughly penetrates her from below.

"Katara...Agni! You're sucking me in!" Zuko's losing his mind. Spirits, how he had missed this. How he had dreamed of being inside her like this.

This was better than Katara imagined, heat rose on her skin, Zuko's hard body and hard, thick length was reaching deep inside her, tapping the swell of her need over and over and over again. Until a cry broke out. She throws her head back, lost in the sensation and it all comes crashing down. Zuko shook and his hips sputtered. Katara drenched on his lap, giving him enough traction to slam in one last time before his balls draw up and he cums releasing jets of his essence deep inside her.

Katara slumps over him, Zuko catching her in his strong arms and hugging her tight. His flaccid cock slipped out of her, drained. He kisses her forehead, then her cheek one by one. He kisses her eyelids and her nose and he thanks the spirits that he had been given a second chance.

Zuko lays Katara on her side since she was apparently too boneless to move on her own. He wipes the sweat from her brow and strokes her hair lovingly as her eyes flutter close. He



takes the blanket, having balled up at the corner of his bed from their lovemaking, and covers them both.

“You light that candle every year, don’t you? The one from the solstice.” Katara spoke, moving closer to Zuko’s warmth, molding her body in his. She rested her hands on his chest and nuzzled beneath his chin.

He nods, his voice heavy as he replies “I do.”

“You miss them,” she states.

“Everyday,” He admits.

“Zuko...would it be okay if I’m here the next time you light the candle.”

Katara feels him shift, looking up to find him staring down at her in disbelief. She cups his cheek to assure him how serious her words were. “Of course. Nothing would make me happier.”

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“Stay.” Katara clung to his back as Zuko dressed for work the next morning. The muscles on his back flexed as he readied and she thinks she could stay like this with him forever. Zuko covers a reassuring hand over her arm and gently breaks away from her hug much to her annoyance. She puffs her cheeks out in a protestant pout.

“I’d love to spend all day with you but I have to go to work. It’ll go by fast, I promise.”

“For you, it might. Then I’ll be the only one stuck here thinking about this,” Katara grins, cupping his crotch. Zuko hissed, a powerful shudder rippling through his spine. “Surely I haven’t worn you out yet. I’ve shown you my secret weapon, won’t you show me

yours...Sparky?" She rubs him to hardness with the palm of her hand, excitement growing along with his erect state.

"Don't," He narrowed with a scowl, watching her fall backwards on the bed; hair spread out like a fan and legs spread open so that he had a clear view of what he'd be missing the next eight hours of his shift. Agni, seeing her still naked was doing things to Zuko's body. The daylight made everything look more...glorious.

"What, you don't like the nickname?" She quips, knowing damn well he can't stand when Toph calls him that, let alone anyone else.

"Enough, Kat. I have a good mind to spank your ass red."

"Is that a promise, Sparky?" She nudged his bulge with the heel of her foot. She giggles but is cut short, sucking air in through her lungs when Zuko pulls her by the ankle until she's sitting at the edge of his bed. He flips her over, and unexpectedly swats her bottom; this is when Katara realizes she's taken her joking a bit too far. But she doesn't complain. In fact, she likes it; biting her bottom lip in anticipation for another slap. When it comes, she's still not prepared either way, gasping out loud and arching her back.

A lovely shade of red colors her brown skin after he administers a few more slaps. Zuko kneels on the floor, coming down to bite her thigh then her buttocks- first the left cheek then the right. He chuckles a laugh when Katara shrieks. She's adorable, getting so worked up, but when he parts her asscheeks Zuko is met with glistening wet curls and swollen lips. His eyelids go hooded. She's just as beautiful as he remembers, his waterbender, all slick with wet and want. Zuko wants to bury tongue there, lay his lips on her lovely cunt and eat her out until there's nothing left of her to devour; and even then he'll taste her some more.

He takes hold of her hips, sinking callous fingers into her hips. He kisses the back of Katara's neck, chasing them down her back. He's face to face with her sex again, taking one long lick up the cleft of her pussy to her butt crack.

"Oh, Zuko!" Katara shook. Her cheeks burn hot as she reaches between her legs and plays circles with her clit. "Kiss me down there like you know me."

Dammit! She was going to make him late for work. But he needs to get her off one more time. Or thrice- just to hear her scream his name again. Zuko pumps his fingers into her quickly. Despite his aching nature, he only has time to get her to orgasm a second time before he leaves her exhausted on the bed and he has to run out the door for work.

“What about you?” Katara caresses the bulge in his pants after he tucks her into bed. Her eyelids hardly stayed open and he can only know that as a waterbender, she didn’t usually wake so early in the morning. “You can’t go into work like that.”

“I’m fine, love,” he assures her. “As long as you're satisfied, I’ll be fine. Besides, I’ll have something to look forward to later.”

Katara groans a protest but she is too weak to argue. It wasn’t even dawn yet and mornings were not her thing. “Can I sleep here?”

“Of course. As long as you’d like.”

“Then maybe you can sleep at my place sometime too. In the South Pole.”

“If you want me to.”

“I do. I really do.”

“Then it’s a promise.”

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*(Fives months later)*

“Hurry up, I want to show you around,” Katara takes him by the hand, giddy as she gives him a tour of the house. She drags him from room to room; first the living area, a wide open space piled with furs and pillows. In the center was a firepit. To the right, once entering through the front, is a kitchen. A cauldron was stationed over the fireplace and laid out in front of it were pots, pans, baskets and vases of various ingredients. A few feet over is a dining table.

Walking in, Zuko immediately feels cozy. Katara had taken the time to decorate with animal skin, handmade tapestries and pelts used for rugs and extra blankets before his arrival. Prior to that, it was empty. Now, she had a reason to make it feel more like home since she won't be traveling as much as she used to.

There are two separate rooms on opposite ends of the house. Katara takes him to the one on the left. It was the master bedroom, a nice bed of pelts laid neatly on the floor including pillows stuffed with Arctic hen feathers. She must have been folding laundry before he came, Zuko noticing a few clothes piled on the bed.

Zuko has good knowledge of the place but he doesn't have the heart to remind Katara. Earlier her, Sokka and Hakoda had greeted him when his boat docked and shared in conversation on their way to Katara's place. It had taken some time, Katara urging him to come to the South Pole as quickly as possible. Once he settled things with his job and landlord, he was good to leave his old home. Sokka and Hakoda left the couple be, expecting them the next day to introduce Zuko to the Tribe.

“The washroom is over there. There's a basket for your dirty laundry by the tub and one for your freshly cleaned clothes next to the bed. I'm afraid we don't have running water and because I have to bend from the snow, it's pretty cold.”

“Good thing you have a firebender living with you,” Zuko grins.

Katara smiles too, snaking her arms around his neck and he blushes profusely, the form of her body pressed hard against his own. She removes a glove, lacing fingers into his hair. “There's a lot I can benefit from you.”

“I-is that so?”

Katara giggles. “Your hair is longer. I like it. More for me to play with.”

“You don’t hold back, do you?” Zuko buries his face in her neck, pulling her flush and basking in the warmth of her small body. She had him flustered. He had wanted so badly to hold Katara like this. It was a dream come true, nestled so close to her.

“Hehe. Don’t get shy on me now. I think we’re way past that. Otherwise...”

Zuko makes a playful sigh. “You’re right.”

“I didn’t have enough time to make you clothes before your arrival.”

“It’s fine, I’ve brought my own. I’ve made you some too,” Zuko says, swinging the bag he carried through his travels off his shoulder. They take a seat in the living area in front of the fire, Katara lying back comfortably as Zuko rummages through his things.

He pulls out several outfits; ones made of baby blue, lavender and navy. Katara couldn’t believe how well made they all were, kneeling on the floor bedside Zuko and spreading them out to display. Her fingers brush the material, burying them in the fur trim at the collar. “They’re beautiful, Zuko.”

“It’s not easy to find animal skin or fur for this kind of weather in the Earth Kingdom but I managed somehow. I also made some for when Mom, Ikem and Kiyi come to visit.”

Katara notices something else, something smaller, poking out of the sack. She pulls it out carefully before Zuko notices. She lifts it up, tugging it away when Zuko tries to grab it. It was a onesie, made in detail of her tribe’s design. Katara smiles softly, cradling it to her chest. “I love it.”

“I-it’s not done yet,” Zuko stammers, nervously running a hand through his hair. Katara takes note to style it in a traditional Water Tribe style later.

“Are there more?”

“Uh...yes,” He confesses. “I’ve made a few but I plan on making more now that I’m here.” He bites his lip, looking down at the outfit then back to her. “How is she?”

“Want to feel?” Katara asks excitedly, laying the outfit down. She kicks her feet up and stretches out, parting her parka so she could reveal her small round belly. She takes Zuko’s hand, slipping it through an opening in her robe. Zuko’s good eye widens then a goofy grin breaks out on his face.

“I can feel her heartbeat.”

“She’s healthy as a artic-ox and just started kicking a week ago. I’ve been having this string of heartburn lately. She’s definitely a firebender. A strong one too based on her excessive kicking,” Katara laughs.

Zuko leans in, resting his ear on Katara’s belly. His heart pounds in his chest and he’s overwhelmed with love and the urge to protect this little one growing in his future wife’s belly.

“I’m sorry it took so long to get here. But I’m here now and I will love and cherish you a lot harder this time. I will protect you and I will never leave you again. So keep growing, okay? Daddy will see you soon, Kya.”

He finalized his speech with a kiss on Katara’s belly, the Master Waterbender tearful as she watches him speak sweet words to their daughter . A few moments of loving silence goes by; Zuko enjoying Katara’s delicate fingers running through his hair as he continues to listen to Kya's heartbeat. The snow picks up outside, and between the warmth of their fire and the howling wind, it’s soothing- for the first time in a long time, Zuko feels at home.

Katara nearly drifts off to sleep when a hand shakes her awake. Her eyes flutter open to see a content Zuko smiling blissfully happy at her. She can’t help but mirror it. “What?” She asks.

“Nothing. I just need to etch every part of this in my memory. You never know.”

“I won’t disappear, Zuko. I’ll always be here,” Katara promises. Zuko nods, drawing the back of her hand to his lips without taking his gaze off her. “So if you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to kiss you.”

Zuko chuckles, dropping his head as his whole body shakes with laughter. How can she be so perfect? Katara- his other half, his true love. You see, she was a better person than him but it made him a better person to be around her. Years apart has not changed how hopelessly and unbelievably in love he was with her. Coming back, he’s met with those beautiful blue eyes again. It was at this moment everything felt right in the world. “Then I’ll just look at you like this all the time.”

## Chapter End Notes

"I ask you about love, you'd probably quote me a sonnet  
But you've never looked at a woman and been totally vulnerable  
Known someone that could level you with her eyes  
Feeling like God put an angel on Earth just for you  
Who could rescue you from the depths of Hell  
And you wouldn't know what it's like to be her angel  
You don't know about real loss  
'Cause that only occurs when you love something more than you love yourself"- Robin  
Williams, Good Will Hunting

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