

And They Were Roommates

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And They Were Roommates

by [Mustardcustard](#)

Summary

Zuko hated roommates.

But he's got a fucking hot one.

So he confides in social media for the time being, getting to know Katara's brother, Sokka, as they urge each other on to try to get to know each other's roommates.

This shit is going to hurt.

Notes

This fic was inspired by a Tumblr prompt given to me by [freckledsokka](#). I'd recommend checking her out if your starved for Zukka like I am. Thank you again freckledsokka, for letting me use this prompt into a fic.

I would also like to thank the absolute amazing artists that are [6y9brows](#) and [katanasonata](#) for letting me use their amazing work for letting me use their Zuko and Sokka fanart for the profile pictures on "Twitter". Check them out as well as I fucking died just going through their blogs.

Quick disclaimer, there is some talk of sexual activity and talk, but it's nothing explicit (I could never). Zuko also has trust issues and PTSD, which will be prevalent in the second chapter. If these themes can be triggering for you, please do not read this fic.

And that is all, thank you again for all the people on Tumblr who helped with this fic, I sincerely appreciate you!

Edit: I cannot, for the life of me, figure out why the images are not generating directly on AO3. But they're not and I've already cried over it so if the links don't work then I'm going to cry again. Click [here](#) to be taken to the four images (in order) as the links aren't working

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

Oh my god they were roommates

“Is this it?” Uncle asked as Zuko placed his last box on top of a stack next to his bare bed frame. He nodded, moving to shift the mattress that laid against the wall onto the wooden frame. Iroh moved as well, taking the other end to help maneuver until it fell snugly into the wood and the protective plastic covering was being crinkled off. Zuko pulled out the black sheets from his duffle by the door, tossing the pillowcases to Uncle so he could slip them on while he started making his bed.

“Thank you again for helping me move,” Zuko spoke softly to Iroh as the wise man calmly placed the pillows on the nightstand, patting them soothingly, as if they were a scared dog.

“Don’t worry about it nephew, you can always rely on me,” Uncle smiled at him, helping to tuck the sheet underneath the corners of the bed. A ringing from a phone interrupted them, making Iroh pull away to slip it out of his pocket. It was a video call from Azula, so Zuko dusted off his shirt before Iroh picked up. They smiled at each other in greeting, asking how each other was doing and commenting on the wonderful weather. Nothing much was going on at her school other than her disappointment for her new roommates compared to her old ones, but she still cracked a smile and asked about Zuko getting settled into his new place.

“How is the move coming? Any hot roommates?” She smiled at them, winking ridiculously and making Zuko roll his eyes playfully before responding.

“It’s going fine so far. It’s a nice two bed one bath so maybe one or two roommates but we haven’t seen any come in so far. The place is right on campus but not as expensive as a dorm, a great find for such a beautiful building.” Zuko smiled back at her, checking his smartwatch for the time.

“I’m glad! You deserve it, Zuko.” Azula sighed as she jogged up the steps to her apartment building. She was hundreds of miles away from home, let alone where Zuko was going to school and even if they said goodbye a week ago, he missed her already. *“I’m stuck with these morons, wish I had some pretty chick instead of literal dicks.”* She rolled her eyes, the thumping music signaling she was close to her room. *“I feel like I’m in a frat without being in a frat.”*

They continued to talk for a little while, sharing stories and recollections before saying their farewells, giving best wishes and reminders of love. After helping to unpack clothes and organize records, it was soon time for Iroh to leave as well. They gave a warm hug and Iroh even shed a tear before he had to take the moving van back home.

Zuko sighed as he sat on his bed, rubbing his right eye before opening another box of clothes for him to stuff into a drawer. He hated unpacking, with an undeniable passion.

After nearly four hours of tearing open boxes, folding and hanging up clothes, sifting through photos and album covers to pick which would go on his wall, organizing his skincare and makeup, and making sure his succulents had enough lighting on the windowsill next to his bed, he considered himself nearly completely unpacked. He had one more box, but he wasn’t

ready to open that one yet (maybe ever), so he slid it into his thin closet leaving little room on the floor to spare, underneath his jackets, skirts, blouses, and few dresses, along with other items he wasn't keen on folding.

It was quite late into the night when some noise was coming from the front door. Zuko had his computer open on YouTube, trying to figure out how to work a drill for his free-standing hat rack that would fit onto the wall above his bed. He gulped at the promise of a roommate, his last experience making his stomach churn and mouth taste sick and sour. He didn't want a relationship with anyone new at this point, either. Who he had was enough. Who he trusted wouldn't hurt him.

A heavy set of footsteps sounded from outside of Zuko's closed door. They stopped for a second after throwing their keys on the table at the front, probably due to the fact that there was now a light in the once empty bedroom. The stranger didn't linger, however. They moved past the room quickly, off into the darkness until the shower turned on.

Zuko also hated roommates.

After thirty minutes of utter confusion, struggle, and aching arms, Zuko put the drill into the shallow, clear bin of tools Iroh had made him bring, and shoved it far under his bed. Even as he listened to his playlist in the same headphones, and had the same pictures and lights on his walls, the room felt so much farther from home than ever.

The rest of Zuko's experiences with his roommate were fine for the week before classes. They didn't speak or even see each other, just tucked into their rooms unless they were picking up food, taking a walk at the lovely park near campus, or doing their business in the bathroom.

But he said "for the week", remember?

Zuko had also hated mornings, so all of his classes were scheduled for later because if he had a single eight A.M he would miss the entire curriculum. As a junior, he was much more prepared for lectures and getting on the good side of all his different professors, so his nerves weren't as wracked as they were when he was a young freshman. He was also taking this year... again. Due to his inactiveness from the past spring semester, he was forced to take the year over again (and while money wasn't the problem, time and effort was).

Every year he always showed up to his first class stunning, so he wore his long, sleek black hair into two space buns with front strands forming his face, paired with the slightest bit of makeup as to not be obvious but to also make his face glow. He decided to go more masculine for his outfit, wearing a red leather jacket and black turtleneck, paired with ripped jeans and a chain belt and his black canvas cross-body messenger bag.

He was physically and mentally prepared for his first day of classes. What he was not ready for, however, was the tanned stranger shirtless in a towel leaning against the kitchen peninsula that was right outside of Zuko's door.

"Fuck," Zuko swore softly, stunned by the beauty in front of him.

The man was tall, no scratch that, *a fucking giant* whose stature and features made him look like a god. His tan skin was glowing from the thin layer of water on his toned chest and shoulders, glistening from the afternoon sun coming in from the tall windows of the living room. If his chest wasn't defined and muscular, then his arms certainly were, biceps large and visible (and flexed!) from where he was leaning against the granite. After tracing the v-line left by the (insanely low) towel, Zuko's eyes flew to the hand that was holding a phone, strong with long fingers and bulging veins (*I can't do this right now*). His jaw was firm and chiseled, freshly shaven and supporting hollowed cheeks and sharp cheekbones, casting dark shadows on smooth skin. When the stranger had looked up, Zuko's stomach did a flip from the piercing and startling blue. It was no help that his hair was down and dripping, adding to the appeal.

"Oh shit!" The stranger jumped when he saw Zuko, clearly flustered by his own indecency. Zuko quickly averted his gaze, cheeks burning and through his racing heart and the countless thoughts flying in his mind, he just decided it would just be better if he left for class.

"Sorry!" His roommate had called after Zuko as he closed the door behind him. He leaned his head against the back of it, taking a deep breath to try to slow his quickening heart.

We can't do this again Zuko .

Yet against his pessimistic thoughts, he took out his phone as he walked to the elevator, opening his messages with his sister.

Yeah my roommate is hot

It had only gotten worse from there. His roommate was apparently not used to living with someone else (even though according to his landlord he's lived with many on-and-off roommates before) so he was always in a towel and coming out of the shower when Zuko was going to class or coming back from grabbing lunch, which never failed to fluster both of them. If that wasn't the case he was shirtless and sweaty, or just plain shirtless and lying on the couch.

It also didn't help how undeniably attractive he was, not just when he was dripping wet but also in loose tank tops that showed off his muscle and the black band of a tribal tattoo. It was a pain in the ass when Zuko's entire day was turned upside-down after being stunned silent and staring at this person he didn't even know the name of.

Because of his... situation, Zuko spent a lot of time at Katara's spacious apartment just down the block. They had met at a sorority party last year when she was a nervous freshman trying to rush and Zuko had enough experience as a sophomore to ease her nerves. They typically just watched movies or played video games with her high-school sweetheart, Aang. Nothing out of the ordinary. He recalled the time he hung out at her place with Suki, Yue, and Toph (three other girls which he was also good friends with, the former two also trying to rush in the same sorority but ultimately dropping out with Katara when they saw how toxic the other girls were) for late night pizza and ice cream paired with a stupid, cheesy and steamy rom-com.

“Toph you sure you don’t want me to put descriptive audio on?” Katara had asked again during commercial break. Zuko looked over to the arm-chair she was occupying, smiling as the short, blind freshman was knocked out cold, snoring and slouched with her back to the bottom cushion. Suki leaned over from where she was cuddling Yue, bringing the blanket that was on Toph’s chest up to her chin before falling back into her girlfriend’s arms with a sigh and looking up at her with a sweet smile.

“So Zuko, how did the move come along?” Yue asked him, after looking up from her girlfriend’s intoxicating heterochromia eyes, one a hazel, nearly green and the other a cool blue almost gray.

“Fine...” He mumbled, raking his fingers through Appa’s fur, Aang’s white chow-chow, who was laying in between him and Katara’s laps. He was probably blushing just by the memory of his roommate, but it was hard to tell in the dim light.

“Spill.” Suki urged him.

“I just... Ugh! My roommate... He’s so- frustrating!” Zuko fumed, making Appa lift his head up in confusion.

“Frustratingly attractive I think you mean. You got the hots for him I can already tell.” Katara sneered at him, grinning as she shifted further into her spot on the couch. He ignored Suki’s light, “*and they were roommates*,” as well as Yue’s response.

“Yes, that’s my problem.” Zuko grumbled again, coaxing Appa to place his head down again.

“What did he do?” Suki sighed.

“Just... existing is enough to make me get butterflies but he deliberately doesn’t wear shirts around the living room-” Zuko started.

“And he’s fit, isn’t he?” Yue filled in for him.

“And always sweaty or dripping wet from the shower, too! He looks like...” Zuko sighed, pulling a pillow from behind his back in front of his face to hide his embarrassment at the very intrusive thought.

“Like he just finished having sex?” Katara nudged him, causing him to take the pillow and bring it down on her face for reading his mind, causing Appa to emit a low growl.

“It’s ok buddy.” Katara hushed the dog. He calmed a bit, but kept his eyes open to stay alert for Zuko, even if he was getting a scratch behind the ears in apology.

“Have you guys talked?” Yue asked him again.

“No. Just him excusing himself and apologizing whenever I catch him being... indecent.” I don’t even know his name...” Zuko put his face in his hands, ashamed of himself.

“You have to try, Zuko.”

“Katara I can’t... it’s so hard.”

“I know Zuko, but you have to at least want to.”

Now, in the present, Zuko was walking back from a more recent trip to Katara’s, deciding to take the scenic route and walk through the park, stopping to get a *poke* bowl to-go at his favorite small and conscious business. He found a shady spot under a tree to sit under which blocked the blazing afternoon sun, enjoying his avocado mango tuna whatever happily as he checked social media.

There was a post from his mutual friend, Sokka, that had caught his eye. If Zuko had remembered correctly he was Katara’s brother, but Zuko hadn’t met him or known enough about him to send a friend request.

@boomerangboii

He just commented, “ *So we living the same life here?* ” before putting his phone away and savoring his delicious meal, smiling softly at a notification that signaled Sokka had liked his comment.

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Zuko yawned as he stretched his arms up, exiting his room and stumbling to the bathroom as he rubbed his eye. He brushed his teeth and did his business before retreating to his room to finish the rest of his routine, sitting on his knees in front of his nightstand which had his standing mirror on it. He carefully applied winged liner and dangling chain earrings that ended with a star on the shorter end and a crescent moon on the longer. He checked his watch, hurrying up to get some nice clothes on before he smudged the rest of his makeup. He lifted his head with a start when the heavy front door burst open, capping his lip-gloss hastily at the sound of hissing and staggering heavy steps that could only belong to the eye-candy of Zuko’s roommate.

When he quickly opened his door he saw the tall man bent over holding his knee with both hands, so tightly his veins were bulging further and his tanned knuckles turned white. His face was in a tight grimace, bright eyes tight yet open just enough to see where he was going, enough for Zuko to see the pain and panic embedding in the darker blue veins of his iris. A corner of his mouth was pulled upwards, curling a thin upper lip in a snarl of pain. Zuko was distracted by his exposed back muscle due to a lack of a shirt (seriously does this guy ever have a top on?) which was shiny from sweat.

Zuko rushed forward quickly, wordlessly pulling the man’s left arm over his shoulder and back and crouching (not by much) to reach the man’s current hunched height. His armpit was sweaty and bare chest and shoulders were drenched, but Zuko put that past him as he helped to hurry the man over to the couch, guiding him to sit down and place his leg on the coffee table as he made a breathy groan and clenched his fist and wonderful facial features.

“What’s wrong?” Zuko rushed out, cringing at his raspy voice, even deeper and cutting the words sharper and quicker due to lack of speech in the morning. His roommate stared up at him, blue eyes nearly blinding and gorgeous, chapped lips parted, before coming to reality

with a startling cyan rushing to his iris as he blinked back at his leg. Zuko tried with all of his might not to look at the equally shiny muscled chest and forbade his mind to wander.

“I fractured my...” he gasped in pain, swallowing and punching his fist in the seat cushion (stay in the present Zuko), “Patella a few months ago... I get occasional... pains after that.” He struggled to get out, panting heavily and sweat on his forehead. His voice was thick and husky, but light with air and seemingly on the brink of laughter. Zuko nodded feverishly, blushing and running into the bathroom to hastily pull out the first aid (courtesy of Iroh who insisted it was needed), and rushed back out, quickly placing it on the couch cushion next to the injured man before continuing to rush to the kitchen.

“Expose your knee,” Zuko said firmly, not caring about his voice any longer as he quickly washed his hand with minimal soap and hurried to the small fridge, pulling out an ice pack (thank you again Uncle) and ripping some paper towels off of the stand. When he jogged back, the man had unzipped the bottom of his jogger and rolled it up past his knee.

“I’m sorry,” Zuko said softly when he placed the cold pack on the skin, flinching at a heavy cry of pain and remaining hiss that he expected, but hurt him nonetheless.

“My room...” The man sighed, calming a little more. “There’s a crutch and a knee brace in my closet... also my medication in pill and lotion form-” Before the man could finish Zuko was off, easily locating the requested items and coming back to his knees and shaking a sanitizing wipe from the plastic kit.

“Do you think it fractured again?” Zuko asked, flinching again when the man hissed and groaned madly at the alcohol on his large surgery scar, digging his fists into the cushions next to him until he eased to the stinging pain.

“No... this pain isn’t anything like that. Probably nerve pain from the scar tissue... it’ll subside in half an hour, just-” he clenched his jaw and teeth again in silence, “hurts like hell after rough practice.” He swallowed, still in a high state of panic but slowly calming down. Zuko placed the wipe and access garbage on a spare paper towel, taking it upon himself to soothe the medical ointment into the scarred skin delicately, knowing himself just how bad scars feel (even if they weren’t caused by the same reason). He decided to keep talking because it seemed to calm the man further (for whatever reason with his broken and shot voice).

“You train?” Zuko asked, pulling out the roll of gauze to comfortably wrap it around his knee so the ointment would stay and spread evenly and to also help reduce the cold of the ice pack.

“Yeah, I row,” He mumbled, taking his pills and tossing his head back to down them dry. Zuko cringed at that, softly taping the edge of the gauze to the side of the knee.

“Shit, class,” Zuko said hurriedly as he placed the ice pack on the man’s knee, checking his watch and swearing further as he quickly grabbed his bag from his room, stuffing his computer into it hastily and zipping it shut as he swung it over his shoulder, staggering out of his room.



“Rest, ice, compress, elevate!” Zuko called after his roommate before he closed the front door, rushing down the stairs. He hadn’t even eaten anything after waking up well into the afternoon. This was a disaster.

By sprinting he cut down his trip to the political science building in half, making him only three minutes late for his lecture, sighing happily as the doors were still open and students were still full of chatter. He slumped into a seat on the far left, catching his breath. He was never out of shape, but last semester and this past summer he had skipped the gym, losing a substantial amount of muscle mass. He would try to get back into it with enough motivation, but he was just focused on getting good grades this year.

He turned to his professor and stopped thinking about how Mr. Beefy would have enough muscle to spare, when they had moved to the front of the room and cleared their throat, signaling the lecture was due to begin.

Zuko hated lectures, but he had his imagination to get through it.

When he left the large hall after his lectures (half-hard might he add) he made a speedy walk to the small Uruguayan coffee shop down the street from his apartment, getting a cappuccino and an absurd amount of *biscochos* to calm his painfully hungry stomach. He nodded in appreciation and thanked the kind, short, and round old lady for the sweet baked goods in his best Spanish, sitting down in a secluded corner far from doors or windows as he gratefully ate his worries away, going on his phone and deciding to post on Twitter due to the events that happened mere hours ago stilling playing on repeat in his head.

@PrinceZuko

He set his phone down, Katara, Aang, and surprisingly Sokka, being quick to like his post in under five minutes. He bit into a *membrillo* cookie, savoring the sweet quince jam and each of the buttery soft crumbs before his phone vibrated from another Twitter notification, Sokka had commented “*Ikr. How do they do it?* ” which Zuko promptly liked. He was bolder on social media, due to everything on there being believed to be the absolute extreme and/or fake, so he could pretty much put whatever.

He sighed, tracing the edge of his glass as he let his imagination wander again, thinking of firm hands and tanned skin, sweaty abs and shoulder muscles whose smooth surface could be scarred by scratches so very easily, other ways the man would gasp and groan and collect his breath. At that point, his stomach did a flip before rising to his throat, so he asked for a bag, tipped the lady, and gathered his belongings as he made his way home.

He was, to say the least, frustrated when Muscles wasn’t on the couch like he’d left him, deciding to ignore Zuko’s first rule, which was to rest. Zuko stalked to his room, closing it softly before flopping down on his bed and staring at his ceiling with his hands behind his head, sighing sharply as he let his little to no composer loose in private. He could think of whatever he wanted, and the mental images with the contrast of tan and pale, strong arms wrapped around Zuko’s thin waist to pull him ever closer, did not disappoint.

He fanned himself with his hand, sitting up on his bed and scrolling through his Twitter notifications. He hadn’t gone viral, but he got more likes and comments than he had ever

before, so he was content and smiling as he scrolled. Coming upon another post by Sokka that caught his eye again, posted well before Zuko was out of class.

@boomerangboii

Zuko was impressed with the numbers Sokka had wracked up, commenting *“Do it. Life is a bitch sometimes so bite it in the ass and defy against the universe .”*

Shortly after, he received a reply from Sokka, *“You’re one to talk. You might actually have a chance.”* He chuckled at that.

*“I’m sorry? I have no chance, my roommate is a literal godsend dusted with the light of the heavens. No thank you. ”*

*“Again, you’re one to talk. Mine has the power of god and anime on his side. ”*

At that, Zuko just liked it and giggled to himself, allowing someone else to respond with *“AAAAAAAAAAAAA ”*.

*“No, but in all seriousness though, if you feel that strongly abt someone, take it upon yourself to make the move. He’s seriously missing out if not .”*

*“I’m trying but he looks like the epitome of straight.”* Zuko emphasized his predicament.

*“No one’s really straight when you think about it. We’re called HOMOsapiens for a reason... right? ”*

*“Exactly. You’re so very right. ”* Zuko sighed and smiled at Sokka’s humor, throwing his phone to his feet as he pulled out his computer, wanting to binge a bit of TV before he got started on his homework, still too distracted. Normal people go out on a Friday night, but Zuko liked staying home in his own bubble, texting the people he trusted without having to get hurt, being selfish and trying to find more.

At around two in the morning, Zuko was still awake, too entranced in the true-crime documentaries on Netflix to pay mind that he had been watching for nearly eight hours, only getting up to pee or closing the tab to get a headstart on his homework. He paused when he heard someone struggling to open the door, cursing loudly as they dropped their keys behind a fit of giggles by two people, a low voice that was undeniably his roommate, lower and huskier from drinks, and a high pitch stupid noise that had to belong to some blonde chic. Zuko shot up and closed his door, already knowing why his roommate would bring a girl home and not wanting to get caught up in the middle of it.

It didn’t hurt Zuko, not one bit. But the noises coming in between the thin wall were loud and made Zuko close his computer and crumple up into a ball in his bed, trying not to focus on the thumps or moans or giggles and trying his hardest to keep the strain in his pants calm, but he was failing miserably. His arousal reached a painful state, one he could not bear for long.

He would regret it in the morning, shamed by what he had done, but it was so easy for him to reach down, trailing his stomach to give himself time to bail, before he pushed past his

boxers.

He woke up sweaty and uncomfortable, the events happening last night coming into his head like a trainwreck. He shifted under his blankets, reaching for his phone to see what time it was, groaning at the godforsaken hour. He reluctantly got up, taking a shirt from his hamper and wiping his legs and hips clean, as well as changing out his sheets for his clean ones. He dumped it all in the hamper, putting on gray sweats and a black hoodie, tying his messy hair into a bun, and hiding it with the hood. He placed his laundry basket on his hip, opening the door so he wouldn't have to face his roommate who was lazily lying on the couch, scrolling on his phone. He wasn't wearing a shirt again, and Zuko saw a small purple hickey on his neck, bites on his collarbone, and scratches (the fucking scratches) on his arms and back. Zuko pulled at the left side of his hoodie, mentally cursing the man for getting him so riled up.

Zuko muttered to himself as he shoved his clothes into his washing machine, irritated and upset for no apparent reason. The man had done nothing wrong, but his aura and casualty after doing something that caused him to be so open and vulnerable, to act like it was nothing, was bothersome to Zuko. It wasn't like he knew the acts Zuko had done behind that wall, but it was either a sense of jealousy for the girl or envy for Muscles' demeanor.

As he turned the washing machine on, he realized something that changed his perspective. Maybe not in the long haul, but for a slight moment he was embarrassed and sorry for himself. He had become so attached to a human being he didn't even know the name of, someone who had spoken little to no words to him or made the effort to start a conversation. And even if he didn't want or need it (he knew it was hard to be dependent on people sometimes), the man hadn't even uttered a "thank you" from after Zuko had cared for him! He was so involved and *fantasizing* about someone else who acknowledged him at the bare minimum. Zuko grunted in disapproval of himself as he pushed the knob in to start his clothes, the machine coming alive with a startling whir.

He opened Twitter, typing out a post he would delete later but was too much in a mood to do anything else.

@PrinceZuko

Katara was the first one to like, commenting "*Bitch he can have abs of steel and he won't deserve you. Come over so I can smack some sense into your fine ass.*" Zuko smiled at her, liking her comment before scrolling through his feed until he got another comment, this time a reply to Katara. It was Sokka again, saying "*Periodt. Know your worth.*"

He rolled his eyes, but DMed Katara to accept the offer nonetheless, feeling moody and in desperate need of some stand-up to cheer him up.

The rest of the following weeks were normal. Well, as normal as Zuko could make them. His roomie would get drunk every Friday (and Saturday depending on which frat was hosting) partying with his team and come home with a girl or an occasional guy (at least there's some hope) every time he did so. Zuko didn't dare advance like he had the first time, knowing that if he did the fiery hill of emotions would be even steeper to overcome. Sokka was still

replying to Zuko, Zuko to Sokka, even private messaging each other to urge them on to who they liked (Zuko refused to call it a crush).

*“Bitch just fucking tell him you like him before I get your address from Katara and force you to.”* Zuko had typed.

*“No cause then you’d be blown away by this god of a twink and like him too, smh.”* He smiled a little at Sokka’s response.

*“Bitch nuh uh. I got my muscle man over here.”*

*“So why tf won’t you tell him you like him too?!”*

*“Because rejection is imminent so let me enjoy things from afar.”*

*“Hypocrite.”*

*“That’s becoming your name on twitter from now on.”* Zuko sent him a screenshot as proof.

But at some point, he started falling. He didn’t know into what, but it felt familiar.

Which made it hurt even more.

It was the first day of October. Store fronts and restaurants had put up fall and Halloween decorations, getting Zuko into the mood for pumpkin spiced everything and a walk in Uggs on a colorful, leafy dirt path. It was his favorite time of the year, where he could wear natural earthy tones the most often, which suited him the best, and be the most basic bitch possible. He had come home from a long day of late classes, rubbing his eye as he placed his keys at the front table, stomach growling from nothing in it since breakfast.

“Good afternoon.” A familiar, husky voice had asked him from the living room, perfectly slouched on the couch with a remote lazily held in his tanned hand with long, perfect fingers. He had a shirt on, luckily, but it was one of those damned tank tops that still exposed his arms and the slightest bit of his side. Zuko swallowed, taking off his scarf and putting it on the hat rack before gaining the courage to look into the sea of... blue that seemed to emit from the man. He seemed like a wild card, like the waves in the ocean, calm one moment but able to surge and drown a victim the next.

“Good afternoon to you as well.” Zuko said, fidgeting with his fingers as he stood at the edge of the living room, cringing at his voice. He didn’t know the man well, so it could have well scared him off at the raspiness.

“I uh... I didn’t get to thank you for helping me with my knee a few weeks back. That was... very kind of you to do for a stranger who was just... shirtless in your living room.” The man got up, walking over to Zuko and being taller than he had remembered, making Zuko look up a decent amount to meet his gaze. It made him swallow again, Zuko wasn’t short by any means but... damn.

“Don’t mention it...” Zuko said coolly, smiling softly. “I’m sure you would have done the same for me.”

“Still I uh... I couldn’t help but notice you often come home late from your classes.” Zuko couldn’t help but think over the word “home”, something that seemed intimate yet so simple at the same time. He followed the tall man into the kitchen, looking at the dishes on the counter. “So I made you dinner. I know it’s not much and I suck at cooking but-”

Zuko’s heart was caught in his throat, taking away his breath and turning his feet to stone. He blinked at the Caesar salad, avocado toast, and charcuterie board of different meats, cheeses, and fruits. He gasped, taken aback by the insanely kind gesture.

“Thank you.” Zuko said without hesitation, not cringing at his voice and how soft the words were. “This is-” Tears threatened to well in his eyes, but he blinked them back. “This is... Thank you.” Was all he managed to say. The stranger put a hand behind his neck, rubbing it awkwardly.

“I’m Sokka by the way,” he extended an arm to Zuko, and he took it lightly.

“Zuko. Nice to meet you.”

# A wound to heal

## Chapter Summary

Holy. God. Damn. Shit.

THIS CHAPTER IS ANGSTY AS SHIT. NOT EVEN ANGST. FUCKING TRAUMA.

tw: domestic violence/abuse, abusive past relationship, vivid nightmares, controlling partners, implied self-harm/eating disorders, dubious consent/borderline non-con

Please, and I cannot stress this enough, do not read this chapter if these are triggering for you. I have put a warning for when they are the most prevalent in his nightmare in case you want to read the more light-hearted parts.

## Chapter Notes

TYSM for all of the love on Zukka Week! It was really stressful for me particularly, so I am thinking of going on a small little hiatus after this chapter.

Have no fear! You get updates from me on [tumblr!](#)

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

Strange, how the name seemed familiarly... comforting? Kind? Warm?

Strange would have honestly been the best word.

“Nice to meet you too, Zuko.” Sokka looked at him puzzled. “Do I know you?”

“Another life, maybe?” Sokka studied him for a moment, before shrugging.

“Uh... Do you mind if I ask you what your major is?” Sokka tilted his head, moving to sit on the far barstool of the peninsula. Zuko naturally took the other one, pulling the avocado toast to himself.

Typically he would be sweating nervously from sitting with someone that was a stranger, let alone someone he found *attractive*. His voice would be higher and therefore raspier, unable to form coherent sentences. But next to Sokka who seemed... cooling? In a sense? Compared to his racing heart and warming chest and stomach, it felt... right.

“Political science, you?” Zuko crooked an eyebrow as he took a small bite of his meal, wiping away some avocado that had traveled to the side of his mouth.

“Engineering.” The man, no— *Sokka*— smiled. Zuko raised his eyebrows impressed, nodding and putting a finger up to signal he wasn’t done chewing.

“When did you first realize you wanted to be an engineer, just curious.” Zuko rushed out at the end, not wanting to pester too much and seem nosey around... Sokka.

Zuko *swears* he’s heard that name somewhere, sometime, seemingly so far away and distant yet enveloping time in a cooling breeze of familiarity.

“I mean... forever I guess? If that makes sense? I always liked taking apart my toys and looking at the gears and springs before putting them back together. I was in robotics club when I was seven, and I just kind of... knew? If that makes sense?” Zuko nodded.

“It does.” He supplied slightly, making the man smile softly as Zuko took another small bite.

He had never seen Sokka smile before, and the cool atmosphere became thin as his lips tightened, his eyes crinkled just so slightly (for the first time not in pain), his features darker and sharper than Zuko had remembered. Zuko had forgotten he was eating for a moment, until the avocado in his mouth got sickeningly bland and mushy.

“And you?” Zuko raised a questioning eyebrow, lips curled slightly downwards in question. Zuko picked up the slightest change in atmosphere, the air becoming just *that much* thicker as Sokka’s eyes flickered downwards. “Uh-” Sokka blinked when Zuko arched his eyebrow further, “Oh! Uh... what made you want to study political science?” The apples of his cheeks were a slight pink, but Zuko assumed it was from being caught off guard like he was now.

“Oh! Well...” Zuko looked down at his plate for a moment. He was behaving *very* strangely right now. And by strangely he meant *calm*. Like he was talking to an old friend instead of his (incredibly hot) stranger of a roommate.

And yeah, sure, he wasn’t being *that* vulnerable and open but, hey! This is a big step for him! He traced the edge of the glass of water Sokka had brought him, thinking of a half-decent answer.

And he did that to not only to think of an appropriate answer that would suffice to Sokka’s curiosity, but one that wouldn’t send his roommate running if he just dumped all of his trauma within five minutes of getting to know him.

Yeah. That would be *bad*.

It’s not that he didn’t like his major, oh no. Just the reason he chose it was...

Not the kindest thing that has ever happened to him.

(But certainly not the worst.)

“As you said... I’ve kind of known forever that I wanted to pursue something in politics. So it just... made the most sense... you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Sokka shot him another one of *those* smiles and Zuko busied himself with his food.

*Someone, please come fucking help me.*

Which is exactly what he tweeted (with a few keyboard smashes and more exclamation and question marks than what is socially acceptable, but who gives two shits) with no remorse as he entered his room with a full stomach, rapidly beating heart, a feeling of warmth deep inside of him but goosebumps on his skin, and his head spinning, crazed with the thought of *holy shit that just happened*.

It was nothing other than polite conversation and platonic interactions, but the pre-described feelings and differing temperatures were enough to make him sick. All because Sokka had made him dinner, smiled a few times, and complimented how healthy Zuko’s hair looked (which, anyone would say, right?). His heart wouldn’t stop pounding, and he felt sick for it.

A buzzing sound from his phone signaled a notification, so he quickly grabbed it from within his pocket and slid to the floor with his back pressed against the door. He opened it when it was a comment from Katara’s brother, or “Hypocrite”.

*Shit. What the fuck was his name again.*

“ *Did you talk to him?* ”

He responded with a resounding yes before he turned his ringer off, leaning his head against the back of the door as he took a deep breath, trying to control the heat in his body and bring back the calming chill that seemed to invade his skin. He tucked himself under the covers, falling asleep with a soft smile and the comforting envelopment of warmth, sinking into a feeling of contentment.

He hummed with the feeling of a hand on his cheek, softly caressing his skin with feather-light touches, before he woke with a start, panicking at why someone would be so close while he was asleep.

The familiarity of it was concerning.

There was no one there. It was still night, room exactly how he had left it, light from the outside street lights filtering through the blinds.

Zuko calmed his racing heart, taking deep breaths before sinking into the pillow behind him with a heavy sigh. He grabbed his phone, checking the time before turning around and trying to go back to sleep.

*It was just a dream, Zuko. No one but Sokka is here. He wouldn’t hurt you. Go back to sleep. It must have been a good dream anyway. Sokka wouldn’t hurt you... he’s not like him.*

And although he repeated it in his head over and over it didn’t erase the doubt one bit.



On his typical Saturday morning, he would sleep in until two in the afternoon, go get coffee and breakfast (technically lunch but shut up), see if any of his friends had plans and maybe hang out with them if he was open for it. Today though, he had gotten three hours of sleep, and by eight there was too much light to even try. Zuko groaned as kicked his blankets off of his legs, heading straight for the bathroom as he rubbed his eye, grumbling insults at whatever he was mad at.

By the time he left the bathroom and felt considerably less grumpy, he thanked the spirits that Sokka had left, because his outfit was not something he wanted to be caught by surprise by. He rummaged through his draws for something comfortable yet publicly acceptable before grabbing his wallet and heading for the Uruguayan bakery for breakfast.

“ *Hola, Zuko!* ” Jin said with a smile over her shoulder, pouring coffee into a mug. She wasn’t the kind old lady who ran the store, but she was still one of Zuko’s favorites. Her face was soft and kind, round with joy and glowing from a smile. She gave great advice, similar to Iroh’s, and never failed to brighten Zuko’s day. He reminded Zuko of Ty Lee, his childhood friend who goes to university with Azula. “ *Cómo estás?* ”

“ *Asi-asi, y vos ?* ” Zuko smiled at her, sliding into one of the bar stools at the counter even if he wasn’t feeling too sociable.

“ *Eh. Pero... todo es mejor con café.* ” She smiled at him as she slid a cappuccino his way, winking at him before taking a sip of her own mug and leaning against the counter. “ *Algo más?* ”

“Those little hot sandwiches that you have?” She gave a happy nod, pulling some pre-made sandwiches from the mini-fridge before popping them on the press. He rubbed his eye, the sleepless night setting into him.

“What happened, Zuko,” She busied herself with another customer, smiling widely as she gave them their mobile order before turning back to him and her face falling into one of concern. “You never come in this early, let alone on weekends, and I can just see the tiredness seeping from you. Something’s up.”

“I’m fine, Jin. Really. Just didn’t get much sleep last night, that’s all.” He tried to reassure her, but she wasn’t having it.

“When something is weighing down on you, it becomes easier to carry when you can distribute the weight with others.” Jin looked at him with kind eyes once more, soft and twinkling with worry.

He hated when people worry.

“You sound like my uncle,” Zuko sighed into his seat, a sarcastic smirk on his face.

“Your uncle sounds like a wise man,” Jin returned the smile over her shoulder, placing Zuko’s toasted sandwiches on a plate, and sliding it on the counter in front of Zuko.

“He is.” Zuko supplied her, munching on the delicious sandwich he was served. Jin just rolled her eyes, wiping her workspace down before placing some more pastries on the display case. She didn’t bother Zuko again, much to his joy, but continued to move around the shop, just lightly conversing with her co-worker who was in the kitchen, and the upcoming events happening at the university with Zuko.

“You know, there’s this event we’re hosting on the campus park that you might enjoy.” She smiled at him from behind the counter, ignoring his fifth request for a third cappuccino which was probably wise on her part but insanely frustrating for Zuko.

“Socializing with people I don’t know? Not a fan.” Zuko reminded her, swirling his finger around his empty glass.

“I actually suspect a lot of introverts to be there-”

“You’ve never met an introvert then.”

“Can you let me finish?” Zuko nodded, leaning back into his seat with a grin. “It’s a coffee hour with animals. We’ve been trying to do this for years, and we just got the OK to do it on campus. We’re partnering with the local shelter to try to promote adoption and get more donations, so they supply the puppies while we supply the coffee! It’s for a good cause.”

Zuko just nodded, still too tired to make a decision yet, although it did sound like a fun idea. He’d go if Katara and the others did, but for now, he just wanted to sleep.

And curse the two cappuccinos he had because now, as he lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, the caffeine coursing through his veins denied his one true wish.

He groaned as he rolled to reach for his phone, cursing that it had been an hour and he still had no luck. He grumbled as he walked out of his room, wanting his to-go bag of *biscochos*. He shoved his hand in it, pulling out a sweet custard roll and munching on it happily. His friends hadn’t answered him about the upcoming event, but he was sure once it became well-known news Katara would be all over it and convince Suki to go, and therefore Yue and Toph.

He pushed himself up on the counter, swinging his legs and staring out at the living room. He never spent much time out here, and the atmosphere was something he wished he could have experienced more. It was very cozy, with many flowering plants by the tall windows on the wall, that spilled out to the fire escape outside. The windows themselves were lined with thin white curtains that were spread open to let in the light, with twinkling fairy lights in between the folds of fabric. Zuko grabbed another pastry, picking at the square of savory bread to eat it in pieces as he stared at the well-cared-for plants. It was a bit surprising for Zuko, that an engineering major who was always out of the house for practices or class, would have time and patience to develop a green thumb.

He smiled when he noticed the beginning beats of “Sweater Weather” start to come in from somewhere outside, drumming his finger against his thigh and nodding his head, humming to the lyrics.

*“ She knows what I think about*

*And what I think about .”*

He couldn't help but sing along, closing his eyes and softly singing to himself. Knowing what was too loud and what was just right from having to keep quiet when his dad was home.

*“ 'Cause it's too cold, whoa*

*For you here ”*

He immediately got chills, running up his spine and tickling the back of his neck, and lingering at the base of his lower back. It was electric, feeling like the cooling sensation he had with Sokka yesterday, yet somehow more intimate. Like it held more passion.

*“ And now, so let me hold, whoa*

*Both your hands in the holes of my sweater ”*

He turned towards the door when the keys started to jingle in it, only aware that the music had gotten louder just then. In came Sokka, forehead sweaty and features loose from previous exertion. He reached behind his head to pull the elastic out of his wolf tail, shaking his head to let all his hair down and sighing as he placed his keys and phone—which the music was playing from—on the front table. He took another heavy sigh as he leaned his head back against the door before spotting Zuko.

*Sometimes the silence guides your mind*

*So move to a place so far away*

“Oh! Hello! I didn't expect for you to be up this early.” Sokka blinked at him, not moving from his place at the door.

*The goosebumps start to race*

*The minute that my left-hand meets your waist*

“Couldn't sleep. How was practice?” Zuko asked easily, like this was a conversation they've had before. Things with Sokka just felt... *simpler*, easy, straightforward, like he didn't have to be scared.

But he knows to keep his distance.

*And then I watch your face*

*Put my finger on your tongue 'cause you love to taste yeah*

“Good as usual, nothing really happened other than getting ready to start conditioning for the winter.” His eyes flew to the bag that Zuko was taking another *bizcocho* from. “Is that *Camila's* ?”

*These hearts adore, everyone the other beat heart is for*

Zuko nodded, holding out the bag for Sokka to take one, him expressing his thanks as he bit into a breadstick that was shiny in sugar.

*Inside this place is warm*

*Outside it starts to pour*

“I can turn the music down if you want,” Zuko just shook his head, smiling as he savored the sweet jam of the *membrillo* cookie.

*One love, two mouths*

*One love, one house*

Zuko nodded to the beat, drumming his fingers against his thigh again and swinging his legs in rhythm, humming the rhythm once more.

“ ‘Cause it's too cold, whoa

*For you here ”*

Sokka sang softly as if he didn't realize it, wiping his hands on his shorts before walking over to the window full of plants, voice thick and low and filling the room with ease. Zuko spun around on his butt to look at Sokka, who was inspecting the petal of one of the many flowering plants. It was a pot of pretty pink flowers that got white in the middle with a bright yellow center.

“ *And now, so let me hold, whoa*

*Both your hands in the holes of my sweater ”*

“What type of flower is that?” Zuko asked, hopping off of the counter and walking over to Sokka.

“Eglantine roses,” Sokka said, picking one gently. Zuko noticed how he left enough stem to not damage the roots, but enough to not disrupt the rest of the plant. “A wound to heal.”

Zuko flinched as Sokka reached for the right side of his face, wanting to tuck the flower behind his damaged ear.

“I'm so sorry.” Sokka said suddenly, removing his hands from Zuko immediately. “I- I should have asked first.”

“It's okay, it's not your fault.” It was Zuko's, really. He was just so overcome by trauma he thought every kind gesture was someone coming out to get him. He should have been used to being half blind and deaf on the left side of his face, but alas, he wasn't. He opened his palm to ask for the flower, and put it behind his ear himself with a smile, looking up at Sokka with a shrug.

And did he imagine it, or did Sokka part his lip?

“Don’t you have work soon?” Zuko asked quizzically when the silence was too heavy and over-bearing. Sokka’s face lit up in realization, clearing his throat soon after.

“Thanks for reminding me.” It was then that it became obvious Zuko had memorized Sokka’s schedule, and he mentally cringed at that. “I’m going to shower quickly, but I’ll be back-”

“At five.” They said in unison. Zuko chuckled in embarrassment, head dipping to the floor as he squinted his eyes shut.

“I-I’ll see you later!” Sokka smiled sheepishly, bringing a hand to the back of his neck. Zuko bit his lip before releasing it as he nodded, waving over his shoulder before retreating to his room. He flopped onto his bed, screaming into his pillow.

*PLEASE COME AND HELP ME I FEEL LIKE I’M FUCKING SHIT UPPPPPPPPPP*

Zuko sent the message to the only other person who would understand his situation, Katara’s (now nameless) brother.

**Wdym?** Sokka sent, like an idiot.

*WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN ‘WHAT DO YOU MEAN’ I’M FUCKING THIS ROOMATE FLIRTING SHIT UP SO BADDDDDDDDDDDD*

**Really? I think mine’s going pretty good**

*Fuck you this is about me rn*

**What happened exactly?**

*Ok so like, this dude, he’s very fucking cute and cozy, but also like insanely muscular and athletic, literally perfect for me. Like, he owns plants AND he rows! Like wtf!?*

*So theres fucking sweater weather playing in the background, and we’re eating pastries from the coffee shop down the street, and he’s singing so G O D D A M N HOTTTT*

*So then, like the bitch I am, I ask him what the flower he’s looking at is. You wanna know what it was?*

...

*A FUCKING ROSE THAT MEANS “A WOUND TO HEAL”!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?*

*AND HE TRIES, LIKE THE SWEET GUY HE IS, TO TUCK IT BEHIND MY EAR WHERE I HAVE THE STUPID-ASS BURN SCAR, AND I FLINCH! I FUCKING FLINCH!*

**The guy kinda seems like a dick.**

*E X C U S E ME?!?!?!?!?*

**I mean, why would he just automatically assume you were comfortable with him touching your scar? I don't mean to insinuate anything, but for anyone, there might be some degree of trauma associated with that. Not everyone would be comfortable with it.**

**Trust me, you didn't fuck anything up.**

*How in the living hell do you know?*

...

**I just do, trust me.**

~~~~~

If any of the aforementioned triggers effects you. Stop reading here.

Sokka was already in bed, too tired from working overtime to hang around much. Zuko understood, offering to make him dinner. Sokka refused, stating that he had already ate, but appreciated the offer nonetheless.

Zuko stood in the bathroom, staring at his face in the mirror. He traced over the line of the scar on his cheek, where it drifted just slightly to his nose. He tried opening and closing his eye rapidly, trying to move it and roll it, but was unsuccessful. He studied his distorted reflection, scoffing at his own pity of himself.

That was the pain he couldn't control, but rolling up his sleeve, he could see all the little marks of harm. All the times Zuko felt he wasn't in control of his own mind, his own emotions and pain, a slash on his skin.

Then it was the pain he couldn't control. The small burn scars on his wrists and hips. Caused by someone he had once loved.

Was it ever real love? It was nice in the beginning, so where did it go wrong?

He looked back into the mirror once more, studying the figure in front of him that seemed so foreign. He seemed so calm, bored, relaxed. He didn't reflect what Zuko wanted to feel, what Zuko felt at the bottom of his stomach.

"Who are you?" Zuko whispered in bed to himself, before closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep.

The *whoosh* of wind and light was a feeling that was all too familiar. Zuko opened his eyes with a start, before closing them with the flashes of red and orange and yellow flying past him as he fell further, down into the fiery hole that never seemed to end. Screams echoed through his ears, Azula's, Zuko's, Uncle's, any scream he had ever heard.

Please not again, please not again. I beg of you.

“It’s been a while,” The booming voice echoed through the pitch-black room, startling Zuko awake.

“Who are you?” Zuko asked again, lying on the cold, dark floor. There was nothing for miles on end, just... *darkness* .

“You know who I am, Zuko. You’re just scared to admit it.”

That was true. The voice was just like Zuko’s before pain usurped his life, before he felt like falling into an endless fiery hole.

“I’m not you.” He pleaded, rising from the floor quickly.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. We are the same, you and I. Together as one, but torn into two different bodies, two different times.” The silence following it was deafening.

“Let’s take a trip down memory lane, shall we?” Zuko braced himself, waiting for the scene to rush forwards.

“Good morning, Zuko.” Jet had said. Hair splayed around his face and the pillow below, messy from sleep but still fitting his soothing face and glowing skin. His eyes were dark, cloudy, and crusted. Yet still bright with passion and want. His voice was low and soft, grumbly and husky from not being used.

“Good morning, Jet.” Zuko had said clearly, voice lower and raspier just because of sleep. He blinked slowly, taking in his surroundings before nuzzling his head underneath his chin, humming and smiling against warm, soft skin when a kiss was pressed to his short hair.

No.

Yet, the two rushed past him again, taking him to be in the middle of another memory.

“Babe, where’s my phone?” Zuko implored, drying his hands on the towel next to the sink. It was his turn to do the dishes, but wasn’t it *always* his turn?

“Who’s Yue?” He said with distaste like it was an insult.

“My friend... She tried to rush a sorority with Katara and Suki, you remember them, right?” Zuko walked out of the kitchen, peering over Jet’s shoulder. He was holding Zuko’s phone, scrolling through his texting conversations with Yue.

“What are you doing, why do you have my phone?” Zuko asked incredulously, brows furrowed in frustration. Jet didn’t even look over at him, just paused for a moment while he read.

“I’m making sure you’re not hiding anything.” He mumbled, agitated like it was obvious.

“I’m not. What do I have to hide? I love you, you love me. Is as simple as that.” Zuko scoffed, not appreciating this violation of privacy.

“Then there should be no problem.” Jet finally looked over to Zuko, eyebrows just as furrowed as his own, eyes dark, but this time with anger and annoyance. Zuko faltered, he’s seen those eyes before, just before a hand fell to his cheek when he got home and his father was seething from Azula sneaking out. His hand flew up to his necklace, fingers finding comfort in the presence of the chilling glass, palm familiar with the curve of the heart.

“Did I do something wrong?” Zuko hesitated to say, fingers idle on the black, glass heart necklace close to his chest.

“Not yet.” He grumbled.

How could he be so naïve? How could he have not seen the red flag instantly? Why had he made excuses? Why had he... why?

But Zuko knew the answer to his question. It was simple. He was in love. His judgment was clouded by the feeling of safety and someone loving him just as equally. He would notice when the love changed into something darker and less of a feeling of being wanted and more of being needed, into something of being used, and then just *being*. But even as the love grew colder, the air at night became thicker, harder to breathe through, he still felt it. The feeling of having someone. And that was enough to make his worries calm, the excuses more reasonable.

They moved past him just the same, the next scene coming to a halt with Zuko staring at it.

“Jet, can I have my phone back please?” Zuko asked as they settled for bed. It wasn’t a bad day, just some slight disagreement over what to get at the grocery store. But it wasn’t leaving Zuko crying in bed alone... again. He was tired, it was a long day, and he just wanted to text his friends for a bit before falling asleep.

“Well, then I need some collateral in return.” Jet smiled down wickedly at him, taking Zuko’s chin in his thumb and forefinger and smoothing out the skin.

Zuko felt his stomach churn.

“Babe I don’t want to tonight. I just want to text Azula and Katara, that’s all I want, please?” Zuko sighed defeatedly when he hung his phone in front of his face, daring him to reach out. But he didn’t. He knew the consequences. “Baby, please, I’m tired.”

“No. I want something too.” Zuko looked up at him through hooded eyes, turning around to go to sleep. He repeatedly told him to stop multiple times that night, and sighed with a small victory when Jet got frustrated and just turned around and went to sleep.

“Stop! No! Not again, don’t take me back, please!” His protests were in vain as the room disappeared again. He searched for someone, anyone, but was left alone to face his demons once again.

“Zuko! You haven’t been answering your phone for the past month! What’s going on?” Azula’s voice said through his cell-phone. He checked out the window for the umpteenth time, making sure Jet didn’t pull up in the parking lot.

“Nothing, Azula. I’ve just been really busy. How are you?” He couldn’t stop his voice from wavering, scared his connection to his sister might be severed at any moment.

“ *Zuko I’m doing fine are you... are you sure you’re ok?* ” The concern in her voice was genuine, and Zuko clutched the wrist that was holding the phone.

Was he ok ?

“Yeah. I’m fine, just... didn’t get much sleep last night, that’s all. How’s Uncle doing?” He lowered his voice a bit to steady it, wanting to not worry Azula further.

In truth, he wasn’t ok. Zuko saw that his cheeks were hollowed, his stomach disappearing, ribs poking through his flesh. His eyes had no life in them, lips chapped and white, bones visible throughout his body. Jet had pointed out every imperfection that Zuko ever had, and nagged him constantly and called him names until it was fixed. He didn’t recognize himself in the mirror anymore, nothing but a person of flesh and bones.

And bruises and scars, some self-inflicted, others not.

“ *Uncle is doing fine... Zuko, are you safe?* ” Azula questioned once more.

“Of course I’m safe!” Zuko swallowed nervously, slowly pacing around the living room. “How’s school?”

“ *Zuko, you’re scaring me-* ” Azula said warily. She was cut off by the door opening to his apartment. He quickly turned around, fear on his face upon getting caught with using his phone without permission.

“Hang up.” Jet barked, throwing the pack of cigarettes he bought on the counter.

“Azula I got to go-” Zuko said quickly.

“ *Zuko- What?* ”

“I love you! Take care of Uncle for me! Get good grades-” He was cut off with intense heat pressed into his hip, making the grip on his phone falter as he cried out in pain. Jet grabbed it, hanging up quickly before withdrawing the lighter.

Zuko watched in horror for the millionth time as Jet smashed his phone with his foot, looking at Zuko with a dark look in his eye.

Zuko heard his own scream, and felt the burning of his skin on his wrists, crying out as he watched and felt himself be burned in different places. He shook in horror when he saw Jet bring the lighter close to his face, yelling as he experienced the pain coming to his face.

“Zuko? Zuko are you ok?” A concerned voice said as Zuko screamed with himself once more, crying at the pain.

“I am you Zuko. You and I will never part.” Zuko saw the scene around him disappear, but the pain was unrelenting. In the distant darkness, Zuko saw someone walk towards him, but

the pain was too much to bear, his eyes too foggy, his head too clouded, to see who. He fell to the floor, blinking on his side as the figure walked closer.

They bent down to his level, picking up his chin and pulling him up. Zuko was too tired to care, blinking slowly as he registered who it was.

“But how will others deal with it? Once you can no longer bottle it up inside anymore?” Zuko saw himself say, face completely scarred with burns and cuts, bruises along his neck and exposed arms.

“How will you stay loved when we are so unlovable?”

“Zuko?” Sokka asked as he shot up, panting heavily and gripping the sweat-stained sheets. He was sitting on the bed next to Zuko, a firm hand holding his, with an intensity unlike any other.

“Do you need water?” Sokka asked, Zuko nodded. He was still in panic mode, so any sudden movement terrified him. Sokka got up slowly, but when he tried to pull away, Zuko didn’t let go of his hand.

Please don't leave. I can't be alone with my thoughts again. Please stay .

He didn’t need to speak it for Sokka to agree, and he stayed silent as Zuko reflected on his dream, tears streaming down his face.

Chapter End Notes

ok lemme go read the four books i bought today in a matter of hours~

Also, if you got the MANY references to my Zukka week drabbles i love youuuuuu

Do you know what you're playing with?

Chapter Notes

Heyyyy so sorry for the delay. I just honestly did not know what to post for this chapter, but now I have a clear vision for where I want this story to go. I was also super out of it for the past few weeks and didn't have the motivation to write, nor did I even have the time. Anyways, I made this one a bit longer, so I hope that makes up for it! This upload schedule is hella inconsistent because my life is just nuts rn.

Also, a big thanks to [BetrothedZukka](#) over on Tumblr for giving me the inspiration I needed this month.

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

“You should get some sleep,” Sokka said, the weight of his palm still Zuko’s hand. He hadn’t said anything, just gently held Zuko’s hand until he was reduced to a shaking form when the tears stopped flowing.

“I can’t,” Zuko said, looking up to meet Sokka’s eyes. He shook his head wildly, feeling tears well up again at the memory, at all of the pain.

More importantly, the pain he *hadn’t* seen.

“I can’t because he’s there, because I’m there.” Zuko held onto Sokka’s hand with a deathly grip, scared he would disappear from the room and become another figment of memory or imagination. “They’re both there. *Him* too. All three of them. They’re waiting for me.” Zuko whispered, shaking even more. “Please don’t make me go back, please...”

Zuko rocked himself before Sokka pulled his hand, making him suck in a breath before being wrapped in a tight hug, tucked under Sokka’s chin, nose pressed into his Adam's apple. Zuko trembled and whispered “don’t make me go back” repeatedly, gripping the back of Sokka’s shirt, needing that comforting notion of material to ensure that he was awake and wouldn’t become a victim to his own suffering once more.

“I’m sorry... With what you're going through. I don’t understand it yet, but just know that I’m here. I don't know what you saw, who you’re scared to go back to, but I won’t make you. I’m right here. It’s gonna be okay.” Zuko’s grip tightened at the words, “it’s gonna be okay” becoming a mantra in his mind. What would once be wallowing in his own self-pity and patheticness, was now a shared experience with someone who wanted to help him.

It seemed so strange.

It was so foreign to have someone soothe him, to softly pet the back of his head and rub circles at the base of his spine. To have *someone*. It was something he didn’t deserve.

Yet he felt so safe. No matter how much he told himself he didn't deserve it, didn't deserve Sokka, didn't deserve to be cared for. It was overpowered by the sheer emotion of *belonging*. He seemed to have a place, not tossed away by someone who used him until he was no longer deemed useful. He fit inside someone's embrace, crinkling their shirt and taking in their scent; overwhelmed in coconut and chocolate and pine.

"I'm right here, trust me."

Yeah, trust.

Zuko's *very* good at trusting people.

And that thought alone was enough to make the pine burn in his nose, the coconut smell sour, and have doubt race across his mind, reminding him of exactly *why* people can't be trusted.

No matter how liberating it may feel to give that trust.

"I'm sorry," Zuko said abruptly, pulling away quickly wiping the corner of his eye with the edge of his black hoodie. "I barely know you, this is probably a lot."

"You do know me." Sokka reached for Zuko's hand again, trying to bring him back. It all became very surreal at that moment. The fact that Zuko was making so much noise (probably even screamed) that it had woken Sokka up and it was enough for him to peep into Zuko's room and calmly interrupt his nightmare. The fact that Sokka was now sitting on Zuko's bed and holding his hand with a warm and gentle, yet constant (always constant) grip.

"I don't, not really." Zuko shook his head, pushing the tears that dared to fall further down. "I probably woke you up, you should go back to bed."

"I don't sleep," Sokka said simply.

"Well, you should. It's good for you."

A joke.

Easy.

Simple.

Yet so hard to utter in the thick air.

"You're such a hypocrite." Sokka shook his head with a soft smile on his face.

Zuko's face faltered for a moment, but he shook off the familiarity of the word.

"I have a good reason." Zuko tucked his legs into his chest, wrapping his free hand around his knees.

It's not supposed to be this easy to bounce back. It's supposed to be angry and sad, yelling and crying, ending with someone storming out and slamming the door, making the morning

awkward. It's not supposed to be nice and cheery. There's not supposed to be measured banter to overcome the unspoken hurt.

"My mind doesn't let me sleep. Too many thoughts, you know?" Zuko nodded in understanding.

"Have you ever tried anything to combat that, to try to get you calmer and more focused?"

Why is this so easy? Something has to go wrong.

"I took Adderall when I was a kid, but I weaned off of it during high school. I can't sit still enough for meditation, so sports help diminish the amount of energy I have. Plants, too. They help me focus. Therapeutic, I guess." He shrugged dismissively.

"What about you, what helps with the nightmares?"

Ah shit .

"I tried... therapy," The word was sour on his tongue, reminding him of the failure of sitting in carpeted rooms in silence and not wanting to speak at all. "When they were really bad. But it just made things worse."

Don't go too far, you barely know him .

"So I stopped, I can't really do anything about it other than trying to forget, you know?" Zuko shrugged, placing his chin on his knees.

"Yeah." Sokka nodded, brushing a thumb over the back of Zuko's hand, calluses softly scratching the skin in a comforting manner that Zuko was going to become addicted to.

"I uh..." Sokka started again. "I wanted to tell you that if you're ever in the mood to talk, I'm right here. All ears, no matter what."

Do you know what you're playing with?

But Zuko knew what to say in this situation, just nod, smile, accept it with thanks, move on.

So now what ?

They just sat there, holding hands and staring at each other in an eerie silence. Zuko took the time to pay closer attention to Sokka's face, the way the freckles dotted his nose and cheeks, an occasional darker one right below his left eye and another on the right side of his chin. His eyes seemed like a labyrinth—created by the smartest man on the island of Crete—easy to fall and get lost in the bright blue of the iris. His lips were chapped and crusty, but it did little to Zuko's want to just lean over and press a kiss to them, to see how Sokka would react.

Would he reach up and tangle his strong hand in Zuko's hair? Would he kiss back and grip Zuko's hips with eagerness and greed? Would he want it just as much as Zuko did? To trail kisses along every curve of muscle and every juncture of bones, every freckle and "impurity" of skin?

Or would he fade into smoke and disappear in the wind before Zuko had the chance?

He must have been staring for too long, because Sokka cleared his throat, snapping Zuko out of his daydreams and making him blink into functionality again.

“I should probably go, let you get some rest,” Sokka said, with a hint of pain in his voice.

“I won’t get much of it.” Zuko shrugged, shifting in his position so he was sitting on his knees, retracting his hand.

It was immediately cold, fingers opening and closing at the lack of rough skin and weight against them.

He didn’t want Sokka to go, not at all, but sometimes throwing caution to the wind (what Zuko is most known for) is not the best decision.

Especially if you want to survive.

Still, he’s already soaring, he knows it.

He’s trying to fly with the birds and soar with the love and will of the Gods. No matter what anyone tells him—what he tells himself—he’ll keep on flying upwards. The burning wax on his back is addicting. The thrill of becoming something larger than himself, finding and reaching for love he doesn’t deserve, is something so desirable that he needs it to live. Falling doesn’t seem like an option, the notion of flying as high as the sun the only fuel to the burning flame of pride burning in the deepest pit of his stomach.

Yet he calls himself back, a warning that only fools pretend to be Gods, to try to act worthy of love.

So for now, he allows Sokka to slip away into his own room, reeling Zuko in to fly back into safety, away from the troubling waters and jagged rocks below, but not high enough to melt his means of freedom.

Zuko doesn’t sleep.

Instead, he stares up at the ceiling and imagines himself as Icarus. He feels free, feathers rustling in the wind, gliding in the air next to Daedalus. But in place of an old shadow of a father, it’s a familiar tanned figure next to him, laughing as he loops in the sky and dares to fly as high as Zuko wishes. He doesn’t crash down into the water when he dives down, nor do his wings melt when he soars as high as the sun. He seems so at peace, face lifted into a smile and alight as the wind blows the loose strands of his hair.

But then Zuko remembers Sokka has no reason to fall. His wings are real. Not scraped together in a desperate plea to escape his past prison. Zuko has to be careful, Sokka can do as he pleases.

He opens his phone to not get sick thinking about the choppy waters and the burning sun.

Twitter - New message from: *Hypocrite* 🙄

Goodnight <3

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“This is too posh for my taste.”

“Toph, shut up you can’t even see.”

“They have a braille menu! I hate to say it, but all the places that have braille menus are expensive and gaudy.”

Katara scoffed at her, rolling her eyes before returning to her leather-bound menu with swirly golden accents on the edges and spine. Which she strains to read under the dimly lit chandelier in the center of the insanely large, extremely *white* room.

*It really is posh for brunch.*

“Do you know if Yue and Suki got in some traffic or something? They’re never late to Sunday brunch.” Zuko mumbled out, rubbing a tired, droopy eye.

“For the third time today Zuko, they said their bus came later than usual.” Katara eyed him warily, silently judging his inability to properly function.

“This place is too white.” Zuko groaned, pressing the menu to his forehead and squeezing his eyes shut because then *maybe* it will improve his migraine.

Nope.

Still hurts like shit.

“Oh, don’t be such a baby.” Katara and Toph said at the exact same time.

“Not helping,” Zuko muttered through gritted teeth, groaning again when it just made his temple hurt even more.

“What’s up with him?” A familiar rough yet always polite voice asked, which Zuko immediately recognized as Suki. “And what’s up with the place looking like I just walked into an insane asylum?”

“See? I’m not the only one!” Zuko yelled in triumph, immediately regretting it. He placed his head heavily on the table, hearing the silverware clink with the thud of his skull.

“Do you need ibuprofen?” Yue’s light and airy voice filtered through the air.

“Tooph om in de mornning,” Zuko mumbled, and if she couldn’t understand then that was her problem.

*Fuck nightmares and spending all night being paranoid .*

“He just needs to eat something, he’ll be fine,” Katara said dismissively, and Zuko could picture her waving for Yue and Suki to sit down.

“How’s Aang doing?” Someone asked. Polite conversation continued, sharing pleasantries and catching up. Typically Zuko would be all for it, but his throbbing temple and splitting skull made him too out of it to care.

*I just need a coffee. Any coffee will do.*

“Your drinks, ladies.”

Zuko should have gotten whiplash for how quickly he lifted his head to grab his cappuccino. He downed half of it in a matter of seconds, unphased by the sudden rush of caffeine, as it diminished his headache substantially.

“Mmm, sorry, you were saying?” Zuko asked when the pain in his head dialed from a *fucking kill me now if I’m not already dead* to an *eh its just a little bit of nearly unbearable pain*. He wiped a foam mustache off of his top lip with his sleeve, looking to Suki who had asked a question. Katara scowled playfully at his antics, while Yue giggled slightly.

“I asked how it's going with Loverboy. You haven’t filled us in since ‘Crazy Rich Asians’.”

“I fall asleep for five minutes and I miss Zuko spilling news about his romantic life?” Toph roared, crossing her arms. Zuko cringed at her volume, not appreciating it

“It’s really nothing, he just...” Zuko huffed, swirling the wooden stick in his glass. “He’s my roommate, and he’s really considerate and kind. I know I made him out to be kind of a dick, but he grows flowers on the fire escape, and he woke me up talked to me after I had a nightmare-”

“When was this?” Katara asked with a raised eyebrow as she brought her mimosa up to her lips.

“Oh, uh, last night,” Zuko said anxiously, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear before grabbing a piece of bread that was also brought to the table. “Anyways, he’s really nice and super cool. He made me lunch after I helped him with his injured knee-”

“When was this?” Suki asked incredulously once more.

“Last week I think? No, maybe two weeks ago. No definitely not. Last month, definitely. Or is that too late-”

“You didn’t tell us he made you *food* ?” Toph asked with crossed eyebrows.

“Oh no! He made me food a few days ago. Friday, I believe. But the actual *injury* in which I tended to his wounds happened a few weeks ago.” Zuko put his hands up to help clear things up.

“It took him *weeks* to thank you?” Suki asked offensively.



“Guys, I realize he’s not perfect, but you have to understand that he did the same for me, and he apologized.”

“You got injured?” Yue said concerned.

“No, no, no. He woke me up from the nightmare and just kinda... held my hand while I cried.”

“Are we all set to order?” The server asked as they came up to the table, pen and notepad in hand. They seemed so well put together. Hair slicked back with not a single strand out of place, face pulled into a comforting smile which alighted their features.

But Zuko noticed the way that their shoulders were hunched over, the wrinkles from smiling so much, the slightest hint of stress in the corners of their mouth.

“Oh, yes.” Katara smiled, rambling on their order. They always shared an array of different platters, a side of bacon, home fries, scrambled eggs, a stack of pancakes, a charcuterie board, whatever sounded delicious.

“Okay, back up to the beginning,” Toph said once the waiter had walked away. “Fill me in on what he did before movie night while you’re at it.”

So after five to ten minutes of spilling all of the deeds of his interactions with his roommate on the table, rambling on about how perfect his face looked or how his actions made Zuko feel, the four of them were finally up to date on Zuko’s personal life regarding Sokka.

“I don’t like him.” Katara shook her head, picking up a slice of brie to place on a buttered piece of bread.

“You and your brother,” Zuko mumbled, taking a sip of his water, mouth dry from talking so much in such a short amount of time.

“I don’t know... On one hand, I don’t particularly enjoy the fact that he took *three weeks* to thank you for helping him when he was injured, but on the other, I think it was sweet he checked up on you and made sure you were okay when you had that nightmare.” Yue smiled, cutting into her share of the pancakes.

“But was it his business?” Katara argued lightly. “Like, what could have possibly happened for him to go into Zuko’s room without permission and wake him up?”

“I- uh...” Zuko stammered, not sure how to approach the subject.

Zuko keeps his mental health and his relationship with his friends relatively separate. He’s never wanted to unload his burdens to anyone else, they are his and his alone. In being closest to Katara, she’s aware of his history with Jet and Zuko’s father, but she isn’t quite aware of the depths of Zuko’s demons. The other three are aware he has anxiety and some form of PTSD from Jet, but he isn’t quite comfortable talking about it outright.

He never has been.

Which brings him to his main point.

*Sokka.*

“Sometimes I make noises.” *Screaming, crying, yelling.* “Like, thrashing around or saying stuff and whatever. He probably heard that and got concerned or something. I just...” Zuko huffed, putting down his fork and knife. “He made me feel safe, I don’t know. It’s ridiculous, yeah, but when he held me and told me it was going to be okay... I kind of believed him.” He said the end like a question, not sure if he was making sense.

“So why aren’t you going after him?” Toph asked, ripping a piece of bacon with her mouth.

“It’s... It’s not that easy.” Zuko stared at the napkin laid in his lap. “I’m scared.”

“Being scared got no one nowhere.” Toph crossed her arms. “You think I’m not scared walking the streets of the city? It’s fucking *terrifying*. But life is scary, Zuko. Everyone is scared of something. But are you going to let that fear determine who you’re going to be, or are you going to put up a fight against it and not let it define you?”

And that's why he loves Toph.

They sat in contemplative silence for a moment, before Yue opened her mouth to say something, but thought against it and shut it quickly.

“What?” Zuko asked behind a mouth full of eggs, making Katara cringe from across him.

“I was just going to ask if you guys were going to go to that coffee hour thing that *Camila’s* is hosting with the animal shelter sponsor?”

“Sounds stupid.” Toph deadpanned, taking a swig of orange juice.

“Jin was telling me about that on Tuesday... If you guys just want to go for support I’d be happy to.” Katara hummed before grabbing a piece of toast. Zuko nodded, taking another sip of his cappuccino.

It was nothing like the ones Jin or Camila made, but it was good enough to get his fix and tide over the headache.

“When is it?” Suki asked as Yue pulled out their shared planner from her purse.

*They’re so cheesy, my God.*

“This Friday?” Zuko asked, getting nods as confirmation.

“Okay but like, I’m all for helping out, raising money, playing with dogs, whatever. But can we at least do something *fun*?” Toph groaned, reaching for her plate.

“You have a piece of bacon at nine o’clock,” Katara pointed out to her, getting a nod of thanks when she located it. “Anyways, your definition of fun is getting black-out drunk and partying all night.”

“Which is exactly what we need! You know, for someone who wanted to rush, you sure don’t like going to clubs or frat houses.”

“Frat’s are disgusting.” Zuko pointed out.

“But they have the best beer.” Toph retaliated.

“Up for debate.” Suki raised a playful eyebrow before helping Yue with their planner.

“Okay, you know what? You don’t complain at the shelter coffee thing *at all*, and I’ll go to whatever party you want, deal?” Katara sighed into her seat.

“You just made the worst deal of your life, Sugar Queen,” Toph smirked.

“I know.” Katara sighed, finishing her glass.

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“*Talk to me*,” Azula said on the second ring, words muffled by something.

“I need help.” Zuko sighed, falling dramatically on the couch.

“*With what exactly?*” She asked, the sound of a crunch coming from her side of the phone.

“Are you eating while I’m having a crisis?” Zuko asked, feigning agitated astonishment with a smirk.

“*Uh-huh, these tacos are fucking pog.*” She groaned out before creating a loud crunch again, probably doing it on purpose for the fun of it.

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop using gamer slang outside of gaming?” Zuko scoffed, rubbing his head with his hand. It was still throbbing, although slightly and not as bad as when he got out of bed in the morning. “Not everyone spends three hours a day on *Valorant*. Some people are actually productive with their lives.”

She feigned a gasp. “*At least I have a life.*” She joked, making Zuko lightly chuckle before remembering his reason for calling her.

“Okay but, real talk? I’m stuck in this mess and I don’t know how to get out.” Zuko groaned.

“*Spill.*”

“So... Where do I even start?” He sighed, knocking his head back into his armrest. “I have this roommate, right? And he’s really fucking hot. Like, *greek God-level* muscular. And so-”

“*Wait wait wait wait wait.*” Azula cut him off, the crinkle of some wrapper indicating she had set down her taco. “*You’re asking your extremely lesbian sister for relationship advice?*”

“Yeah. That’s how desperate I am.” Zuko rolled his eyes, staring up at the ceiling again. “My friends don’t like him with what I’ve described.”

“*Honestly, all I can give you is ‘just move in with him’ but that problem is already solved.*” Zuko chuckled again, rubbing his eyes.

“I really like him, Azula. And I don’t want to fuck this one up.”

“*Zuko,*” Azula’s voice turned concerned, with a hint of authority, “*You’re not going to fuck it up.*”

“That’s what everyone says but... he’s *different*, I don’t know. There’s something special about him.”

“*Describe him to me.*”

“He’s tall, like super tall, probably like six foot five or something. And his face- God he has these freckles all over his face and like the smoothest skin ever—and oh his *eyes* —don’t even get me started about how *blue* they are. I think I’m already lost in them. Oh, and before we started getting to know each other, he would just *live* shirtless, and he *rows*, Azula. He fucking *rows*. His fucking *back muscles* —oh my goodness.” Zuko rambled on, describing Sokka to the best of his ability because *come on you can’t put that man to words*.

“*Jeez, you’re so gay.*” Azula sighed when he finished, taking another crunch of her meal.

“Yeah, I know. But I haven’t even *started* about the other things he’s done.”

“*Yeah? Like what?*”

“He made me *food*. ”

“*Oh my God, you better keep him.*” She chuckled around a muffled mouthful of food.

“I know right? And he *plants*. There’s so many on our fire escape it’s so cute.” He shifted in his spot on the couch so he could see Sokka’s plants behind him. They were witling compared to the upright stems and bright petals from yesterday, but Zuko blamed it on the fact that he was staring at them upside-down. “And he was also limping when he came home a few weeks ago from a recurring injury, and he was huffing and puffing and *God* Azula when I tell you that that man is *hot* —Oh. My. Gosh.” He drew out the end for dramatic effect, making Azula chuckle.

“But yesterday, get ready for it,” he paused for dramatic effect, “He woke me up from a nightmare and held my hand while I cried.”

“*Woah, dude.*”

“I know, right?”

“*What was it about?*” She asked with that concerned tone again. When Zuko didn’t say anything, she continued for clarity, “*The nightmare, I mean.*”

“Ah.” Zuko scratched his scalp. “The usual one, where I see the memories of Jet and I get confronted by the injured version of myself.” He hesitated for a moment. “Sokka woke me up

before Dad, Mom, and you.”

Azula hummed in understanding, sitting in silence for a few moments before sighing out, “*You really like him, huh?*”

“Yeah. I do.”

“*So why aren’t you doing anything about it?*” Azula asked like it was an actual question. “*Just go up to him and ask him out, kiss him, do something.*”

“I can’t, Azula. It’s not that easy.” He struggled with his words for a moment. “Everyone assumes that I can just bounce back. But therapy didn’t work after they put me through that, then you had to intervene when I turned to drinking and partying, and now, after not doing anything and just trying to be *normal*, I can’t. Why? Because trusting people and getting betrayed hurts more than keeping my distance in the first place.”

He huffed in liberation, his chest becoming a little lighter. For a moment, he enjoyed the freedom of daring to fly as high as the sun.

Remember what happens to fools, Zuko.

“So that’s why, Azula. I’m scared.”

Silence.

“*I never knew.*” She said softly after a minute.

“Never knew what?”

“*I never knew how hard it was. You don’t really talk about that stuff. I just thought it was hard for you, and I’m sure it is, but-*” He heard her sigh. “*I thought you bounced back really easily. I should have asked. I should have-*”

“Stop,” Zuko said quickly. Azula always did this. She took the blame for everything; for Zuko getting hurt while he was with Jet, for her own experience with their father, for Iroh being alone back home because they had both moved away for college. It wasn’t fair for her to always view herself that way. She had never done anything wrong, and when she had, it was because she was corrupted by the vile being that was their father.

“You didn’t know because I didn’t tell you. I *don’t* like talking about things because it’s hard and it just makes the nightmares worse, so that’s why. It’s not your fault. It never has been.” He said the last part after a beat of silence, not sure whether to add it or not.

“*Just... tell me next time, okay? When the nightmares get worse, or if you just want to talk. Deal?*”

“Deal.” Zuko smiled softly.

“*Okay... so now, back to your predicament.*” He could hear the smirk in her voice. “*What exactly is the problem?*”

“That. The not being able to make a move. I don’t know what to do because I don’t want to lose him, but I also don’t want to scare myself by going in too deep too quickly.” He sighed again, staring at the silent television.

A beat of contemplative silence.

“What if you just tell him exactly that?”

“What do you mean?” Zuko asked incredulously.

“Like,” She huffed out. Either from trying to find the proper words or frustration Zuko couldn’t tell. *“I’m not good at this... Just- Tell him exactly how you feel, how he makes you feel, and then just tell him about your commitment issues.”*

“You realize that makes me sound like a complete and utter douche, right?” Zuko turned over on his side, grabbing the remote from the coffee table and turning on the TV.

“But you say he’s different?” Azula asked again.

“He is! I just... I don’t know, Azula. I’m trying, I really am, but I’ve gotta take it slow.”

“I’m not saying do it now.” She urged him on again. *“Keep talking to him, see where it leads. If he wants to take it to the next level or make a move, you allow it, or you don’t. But you have to have that honest conversation. You have to communicate.”*

He contemplated it for another minute. “Okay...” He breathed out. It sounded defeated, but it was the most liberating word he had uttered in the past week.

“Okay?” Azula confirmed again. Zuko hummed. *“And you communicate with me over everyone else. Got it?”*

“Yes, Azula.” Zuko laughed lightly, flicking through the channels, “You’re the first person I go to when I panic and need advice.”

“Bullshit.” She swore, and he could hear the shit-eating grin on her face. *“It’s Katara and the girls first.”*

“This guy I’m friends with on Twitter, too.” Zuko laughed lightly, settling on a channel that was airing reruns of his favorite sitcom. “Oh gosh you should see our DM’s... he’s apparently in the same situation that I am and it’s *hilarious*.”

“Who is he? What’s his name?”

“Ah-” Zuko scratched his head again, “Well I kind of forgot his name-”

“How do you forget someone’s name on social media?” Azula snorted, the sound of plastic squeaking blaring in Zuko’s ears. *“Sorry, this baja blast is fucking cracked I can’t resist.”*

“Can I trade you for a new sister?” Zuko asked, turning on the captions with a click of the remote.

“Nope. Sorry, you’re stuck with me.” The creaking of plastic persisted as if to prove her point, and Zuko scoffed as he brought the phone away from his face.

“You done?” Zuko asked again.

“Okay yeah sorry,” She laughed unprompted, the kind that made Zuko’s chest swell and a smile crease his face. *“What was his name again?”*

“I don’t remember... I changed his name on Twitter and he doesn’t have it in his username. I know that he’s Katara’s brother though, and the fact that he is also struggling with his roommate—which is a weird coincidence when you think about it-”

“Zuko,” Azula sighed exasperated, *“Did I not teach you about social media stalking?”*

“I tried! He hasn’t posted any pictures of himself, no links to other social media, nor does he have anything information in his bio other than ‘I don’t know what I’m doing on here either.’”

“Katara’s- ”

“Nothing.” Zuko interrupted her with a huff. “I’m literally at a dead end.”

“Stupid,” she chuckled, *“the one friend you make on social media you forget the name of? Your best friend’s brother?”*

“Yeah, yeah. I’m dumb. I know.” He groaned.

“I think you should start talking to your friend about your relationships with your roommates more. Who knows? Maybe you’ll find...” Zuko stopped paying attention to her words for a moment, the sound of keys entering the lock in the front door disrupting his devotion to their conversation.

Sokka came in, leather jacket hiding his muscles with the fabric hood tucked over his head. He shoved his keys into his pocket before pulling his hood down to fix his hair.

He looked just how Zuko had pictured soaring in the clouds. Loose strands of hair framing his face, stance calm and liberated. Yet his eyes weren’t alight with freedom, rather trapped and dull. His mouth was clenched in a tight frown, eyebrows knitted together in a look of distaste.

As Sokka pulled the elastic out of his hair he caught Zuko’s gaze. His eyes twinkled and turned a darker shade of blue, face relaxing and the corners of his mouth turned up into a smile. He waved at Zuko as his hair fell around his cheekbones, full with mirth.

Zuko couldn’t help but smile back.

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Azula giggled, interrupting Zuko from his trance.

“Sorry Azula, what was that?” Zuko asked quickly, turning away from Sokka so he could focus on the conversation again. “I was uh... distracted.” He snuck a glance at Sokka, who

was taking off his jacket and hanging it up by the coat rack. “Sokka just came in.”

“*Ooo*,” Azula drew out, sounding like a middle schooler when someone was confronted for misbehaving.

“Azula, please,” Zuko said sternly, rolling his eye at her immaturity.

“*I’ll leave you alone then,*” he could hear the grin on her face, “*have fun.*” She drew out.

“Azula-” Zuko was cut off by the sound of her hanging up. He rolled his eye again, tossing his phone on the couch.

“Was that your sister?” Sokka asked from the kitchen, grabbing a leftover Chinese take-out box from the fridge.

“Yeah,” Zuko nodded.

And now silence.

Awkward silence.

“What were you guys talking about?” Sokka asked over a full mouth of vegetables.

You. “Uh... just catching up. I talked to her about the nightmare, she’s like the only one who knows the depths of it.” Zuko scratched the persistent itch behind his neck, moving to grab the remote and turn down the TV.

“Is she like your best friend?” Sokka asked, stuffing his chopsticks in the box.

Zuko hesitated for a moment, thinking. “You could say that. I kind of tell her everything, even if she isn’t the first to know.”

“Was it always like that?” Sokka asked, hopping up to sit on the counter. His back was to Zuko, but he was still able to converse politely.

What is with all of these questions?

“I mean...” *Keep it general Zuko.* “We didn’t always get along as kids, but at some point, we knew that we would be stronger together.”

“What do you mean by ‘stronger together’?”

Zuko sucked in a breath. The alarms blared in his head. He could feel his heartbeat quicken as he tries to even it out by slowing his inhales.

Abort. Change the subject.

“Do you have a sister?” Zuko whispers breathlessly like it was a secret that he finally got off of his chest.

What kind of fucking question is that?

Sokka blinked in confusion, before licking his lips (those darned fucking lips) and answering evenly. “Yeah, I do.”

“Older or younger?” Zuko shifted in his seat so he could see Sokka better, placing an arm on the back cushions.

“Younger.”

“Same. What is she like?”

“She’s smart, really fucking smart. She’s training to become a nurse and I’m so incredibly proud of her. She’s always taken care of me, that’s her thing—taking care of other people. She can be... hard-headed and stubborn sometimes, but it's because she cares.” He let out a chuckle. “I remember when I first bought my bike, she didn’t talk to me for a week because she wanted me to get a truck or a car, something safer.”

“Is she your best friend, too?” Zuko asked in a hushed whisper.

“Yeah. She is.” Sokka looked at Zuko with a smirk as he nodded, before turning back to his meal.

Silence again.

Still awkward, but not as much.

“Do you ever get scared, for them?” Sokka asked again. They spoke so quietly as if they were sharing secrets in the dark.

Which, they kind of were. Just the afternoon sun spilled onto the carpets and shone on the flowers, making the dust visible in its rays and float around them, exposing their skin and making the conversation and atmosphere even more vulnerable.

“Like, my sister?” Sokka nodded. “Absolutely.”

Zuko thought for a moment, before continuing. “She lives so far away, so I can’t help her if she needs me. I wonder if she can protect herself if she’s in trouble or she’s struggling with something and I’m not there to help. But it's all in vain. She’s not the vulnerable nine-year-old that I remember. She’s strong and capable and can fend for herself. And if she can’t, she has other people to help her when I can’t. I believe in her.”

Sokka nodded. “Kind of the same thing with me, just that I live five minutes away. But I still have that feeling. I was always there for her, and she was always there for me. I don’t want that to change, you know?”

“Which part, you needing her, or her needing you?” Zuko asked, leaning into the back of the couch with his elbow supporting his face.

Sokka stayed silent, looking down at his food before placing it to the left of him and turning around to fully face Zuko. “Both.” He said with confidence.

Zuko shrugged. “That’s fine. You just don’t want to lose your bond with her. You like consistency, right?”

Sokka nodded lightly, head hung down to look at his converse that he forgot to take off at the door, swinging his feet back and forth. His hair fell in front of his face, blocking his view and securing him in an area of personal shelter.

“What about you? Are you as scared of change as I am?” Sokka raised his head, tucking the hair on the side closest to Zuko behind his ear. Zuko was hit with the beauty of Sokka’s dotted nose and cheeks, freckles lit up by the sun hitting his face perfectly, eyes shining an even more impossible shade of blue, making Zuko blink in surprise. He tried to pass it off as thinking from Sokka’s question.

Definitely. Probably more.

“Yeah.” *Easy honesty. That’s a new one.* “I think everyone is, to some degree. I just... we’re similar that way, we like consistency. And...” *Danger. Careful. Don’t fly too high. Don’t dive too low.* “It might be because change, any inconsistency, has changed us as a person.”

He can feel the wax melting.

Sokka nodded contemplatively.

“What-” Sokka stopped himself, putting a hand over his mouth smoothly. While Zuko would typically ask Sokka to spit it out, he was thankful. He knew the question.

What changed you?

And he didn’t have an honest answer to give.

Chapter End Notes

Zuko you dumb mf (affectionate).

Thanks for reading! Love all of you!

I really wished I could have seen you smile today

Chapter Notes

Finally, coffee hour!

Also, I did the math. Its been 17 days and I wrote 7,000 words compared to the whole month and barely making 6,000 last update so I'm like kinda proud.

TW other than the ones mentioned in prev chapters, mentions of alcoholism/substance abuse, stay safe you guys.

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

The following days were full of downing painkillers, little to no sleep, and an endless flow of caffeinated beverages (Zuko had switched to energy drinks when the taste of coffee had become too repetitive and turned sour in his mouth).

Monday was one of the only days in the entire week where he actually slept, but even then it was short-lived. He woke in a cold sweat, gripping the sheets until his knuckles turned white, chest heaving as he desperately panted for air to fill his lungs.

He had lived his nightmare in full this time.

And he had the terrifying, self-evident realization, that he no longer had someone to assist him with his past.

And even if he did, he wouldn't allow himself to get too close.

So began the cycle of the rest of the week. First, he would go to class and not be able to focus, downing his first Monster of the day and taking ibuprofen to calm his throbbing head. Then, he would trudge home, try and fail to take a nap, walk to a convenience store to buy another energy drink, and spend the rest of the day on his phone or watching TV isolated in his room, procrastinating and pushing the increasing and ominous mound of schoolwork off to the side for another day. Sokka was becoming busier with the crew season winding down, so he was rarely home unless it was a quick stop to shower or pick up food or to turn in for the night.

Home was still a strange word in Zuko's mind.

But it was becoming more normal to use.

On Wednesday the group was finally told of Toph's plans for their form of entertainment of her choosing after coffee hour.

Again, a *horrible* deal made by Katara.

They were in their typical weekday facetime call, filled with coos towards Appa and shouts at either Toph or Suki for something stupid they had done while on the call. Zuko had gone outside for a walk, turning his phone off so he could listen to the conversation through his earbuds, yet still diminish the amount of adrenaline pumping through his body. The caffeine held a tenacious grip on his mind, and while Zuko knew he would get minimal sleep, he didn't appreciate uncomfortable restlessness at the ass-crack of dawn. So it was enough for him to brace the cold wind of the night in favor of clearing his mind and letting his muscles work and tire him to some degree.

“ *Okay...* ” Toph said as Katara settled down onto the couch after grabbing her dinner. “ *I know what party we're going to.* ”

Katara swore, “ *I hoped you would have forgotten about that .* ”

“ *In your wildest dreams Sugar Queen .* ” Toph sneered, taking an audible sip of some form of beverage (Zuko bet it was a Red Bull, Toph fears no one).

“ *So which frat are we going to?* ” Suki groaned.

“ *We're not going to a frat. I don't exactly want to deal with the thumping bass from their enormous speakers. It's too overwhelming. Especially with all of their loud, drunk voices shouting over each other, and it's only going to get worse the closer we get to Halloween. Plus, I found a better place .* ” Toph cleared her throat at the sound of a glass set down on a counter. “ *It's a club not too far from the place we had brunch.* ”

“Wait, is it the new place that opened up a few weeks ago?” Zuko asked as he stepped down a leaf-filled road in the park. He watched as faded shades of orange, red, and yellow moved around his feet like he was wading through water, all of the colors blurring together in his foggy mind into a neutral shade of brown.

If Zuko squinted hard enough, he was able to make out Sokka's face in the creases of leaves.

“*Yeah, Déjà Vu?*” Zuko hummed, the name having some form of familiarity, which was humorously ironic.

Why does he feel like déjà vu?

“ *Oh gosh remember when that song came out-* ” Someone had spoken up, but Zuko had allowed for his mind to wander and devote less attention to the conversation. Too many thoughts were running through his head for him to put energy and focus on small side conversations that served no importance whatsoever.

I wish it didn't hurt to think about him. I wish his touches were new and fresh.

He'd be hesitant to reach out and hold me, wouldn't he?

The leaves blended too much. He shut his eyes tightly.

“ Anyways, ” Toph spoke up again, reeling Zuko back into the conversation. “I peeped it out a few weeks ago. From what I could feel and hear, it's got everyone drunk and dancing, exactly what we need. ”

Can he just get out of my head?

“ As long as you hold up your end of the deal, I'm okay with wherever we go ,” Katara said happily, speaking in a baby voice for Appa to do tricks for a piece of her meal. Cheers were elicited from Yue and Suki.

Zuko stopped and stepped on a leaf that was messing with his head and making his eyebrows twitch in confusion.

It was bright red, yet the center was an alarming yellow, creating an orange gradient.

It flickered in Zuko's vision as if it was alive.

“So are we dressing degenerate or- Ouch!” Suki exclaimed after a thwack was heard on her shoulder, evidently Yue scolding her. “What? It's a serious question!”

“We can,” Zuko laughed out, subconsciously bringing a hand up to his mouth to hide his giggle, “I won't be drinking, so might as well have fun another way.”

“ What? Why? ” Toph asked.

She doesn't know.

“Just a personal preference,” Zuko shrugged it off. “I'll be the sober one to hold your drinks and make sure you get home safe.”

“ Are you sure? I don't like drinking either, you don't have to worry about that stuff .” Yue asked quickly.

“Yue, honey. Get drunk . I've seen you at that frat party when you were trying to rush. You get wasted so easily, girl.”

Toph snorted. *“ She's such a lightweight .”*

“Oh, I love when she has like two shots and she already wants to take me to a corner to make out -” Suki joked, her smile audible through the phone. Another cry of pain from a slap to the shoulder. Zuko sucked in a breath of amusement, smiling at the two bickering until Suki let it be known that “ oh my, Yue's blushing! ”

They really are immature sometimes.

It's cute.

Zuko looked back down to the leaves crunching under his feet again.

Would he be immature with me too?

I think he'd be cute like that.

I want us to be cute like that.

He brought his head up to stare at the road ahead of him in shame.

Us? Snap the fuck out of it Zuko. You don't know what you want.

“ So what's the game plan? ” Katara said after clearing her throat around a bite of sandwich. “ We all get to the coffee hour on Friday at eleven? ” Hums of approval.

“ We meet at the club on Saturday at ten? ” Toph asked after burping, making Katara give her the most passive-aggressive “ excuse you. ”

“Sounds good to me,” Zuko confirmed, turning around to start heading home.

What if I do know what I want?

“ Perfect for us, ” Yue smiled, she always sounded like she was smiling.

I know what I want .

“Uh, guys... quick question,” Zuko looked up at the stars, stopping in his place. “Should I invite my roommate?”

“ On Saturday? ” Toph asked incredulously.

“No, no. That's girls' night. I'm talking about coffee hour.”

A collective, small “ Oh. ”

“It's just... I don't know. I've been thinking I'd maybe want to look into pursuing that. Slowly, of course, I'm not saying we're doing anything yet. Oh lord no. Nor am I saying I'm looking for a relationship. I mean, maybe- I'm not entirely sure yet. Anyways, one day—the time that he put the flower in my hair—I was eating pastries and he asked if it was *Camila's* and I offered some to him so he's obviously had it before. So I think he would want to go. Plus I kind of want to introduce him to you guys because your opinion matters the most to me. I mean, you kind of remind me of Azula and her friends back home so-”

“ Zuko .” They all said at the same time, making him realize how much he was rambling.

“Oh, shit, right, sorry,” Zuko muttered quickly, dropping his gaze to his boots as he continued walking.

“ Dude, chill. ” Toph snorted again.

“ You don't have to ask us permission, Zuko . You can spend your time with whoever. ” Katara reassured him.

“I know *that* but it's just...” He focused his attention back on land in front of him when the leaves started changing shape. “It’s important to me, y’know? You guys are important to me.”

He’s important to me .

I need help making sure I don’t mess that up.

“ Aw, ” Suki sniffed, feigning tears. “ *Zuko just said I’m important to him.* ”

“Yeah and you better behave or I’m crossing your name off of the list.” He joked, giggles ringing in his ears.

“ *But yeah man, definitely invite him,* ” Toph said surely.

How she had the confidence, Zuko had no clue.

Thursday morning he got out of bed at six when he realized no amount of effort for sleep would allow him to drift off. He rubbed his face as he grumbled upon leaving his room, before dropping his hand when he heard the sound of a zipper.

Sokka.

They hadn’t spoken since Sunday, the air in the apartment so thick and heavy with tension. They had managed to avoid each other so far.

So far.

Sokka’s hair was pulled back into his classic wolf tail, a form-fitting athletic jacket hugging his muscles. The bulge in his arms was significant for Zuko to note, yet it didn’t matter to the image for what Zuko had already seen.

“Good morning,” Sokka said amused, a smile lighting up his features like magic.

God that morning voice .

““Morning,” Zuko smiled in return, scratching his bird's nest of hair, “Going out so early?”

While Sokka sounded like a mixture of dripping honey and *lust* , Zuko sounded like a scratched CD, a broken record, a vinyl that was split down the middle.

“Daily morning run.” Sokka shoved his foot into a sneaker. Zuko nodded.

Do it.

Say it now.

“Have you been down to *Camila’s* lately?” Zuko asked instead.

You fucking idiot .

“Yesterday, actually. I heard they were doing that coffee hour thing with the animal shelter. Were you going to go?” Sokka asked.

Thank you .

“Yeah, actually. That’s what I was going to ask you. I was going to just go with my friends but then I um...” He cleared his throat. “Would you uh...”

Do it Zuko .

Now or never.

“Would you maybe want to go with me?”

You look like a slob.

You just got out of bed and you're asking him out to coffee now?

He's going to reject you, just wait for it .

It's what you deserve, wasting his time and his space.

“Absolutely,” Sokka said with the widest smile Zuko had seen, it should be illegal.

It was so pretty.

“Awesome,” Zuko gasped out, not expecting that reaction. He licked his lips, blinking up at Sokka.

"I'll meet you there? Tomorrow morning, right as it starts?" Sokka asked, opening the front door.

“Perfect,” Zuko whispered, his own smile twisting his face.

“Alrighty then! I gotta run, my buddies are expecting me, but I’ll see you soon!” Sokka's smile was the last thing Zuko saw before the door shut.

Which should be foreshadowing for something, right?

 Oh My

GODDD

Zuko sent that to Katara's brother/internet bestie/someone Zuko rants to/he doesn't even know anymore a few hours after his interaction with Sokka, shifting the books he was carrying to open his buzzing phone.

What is it this time?

I ASKED HIM OUT. OH MY GOSH, I ACTUALLY ASKED HIM OUT.

What? Really? No way!

Zuko smiled, setting his books down on a desk in his lecture hall before sitting down.

Yes way! And he agreed to get coffee with meeeeeeeeeeeee

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

I'm so excited omg omg

Congrats my guy

Ty ty

Btw, how's it going with your dude? I feel like we've only been talking about me lately.

Oh you know, It's been good. We had lunch together once

Not like an actual date, but we ate lunch together.

Nice man

This means that you now have to ask him out, you know that right?

No, it does not.

Yes it does. I braved the unknown. If I could, you most definitely can

Just give it a try. It wasn't even that bad.

Maybe. We'll see.

I'll try to keep you updated.

Zuko grinned before sending a thumbs-up and turning his notifications off, the lecture officially set to begin.

Friday came easier than the rest.

He still only got minimal sleep, but it was more than he had in the past week. He rose out of bed at eight, having an hour to shower, get dressed, make some toast, and do other basic human things he hadn't done in days. He put on his whitest blouse, cleanest pants, and his tan overcoat, all paired with rounded sunglasses perched atop his head, messy yet stylish braid, and some boots which gave him a few extra inches in height.

"Damn!" Suki drew out when Zuko had made it over to the tree she and Yue were leaning against. It was an overcast day, dulling the mood of the typically upbeat morning, but smiles seemed to be all around the park nonetheless. "Serving looks as always I see!"

“Oh hush,” Zuko rolled his eye playfully as heat rose to his cheeks, “You look amazing yourself.”

She truly did. Her short hair was pulled into a half-up-half-down bun, exposing her lightly decorated face and fan-shaped tassel earrings. She paired it with long overalls over a green sweater, one strap un-fastened to expose the graphic design of her female martial arts group.

“And you as well, oh gosh.” He gestured to Yue, who giggled and spun around playfully to have her black dress fan out. It was over a short-sleeved white blouse, a Yue staple, with equally white wedges and a moon necklace. Her curly white hair was pulled into a long, high ponytail.

“Katara is only late because she had to pick up Toph, but they should be here soon.” Suki checked her wristwatch, glancing at the time.

“We should be good though, the shelter isn’t entirely finished setting up.” Zuko nodded his head over to workers in yellow sweaters and black jeans, placing the last truck-load of animals from their carriers into the wired play areas set up on the grass.

“Ooh, there they are!” Yue pointed to the space behind Zuko’s shoulder, waving wildly for Katara, Aang, and Toph (though she obviously couldn’t see) to come over.

Toph was in her regular jeans and band tee, while Aang was sporting a typical black beanie paired with an orange hoodie and dark wash jeans. Katara looked effortless as always, with her hair pulled into a messy bun in the back of her head with loose strands framing her face. Her cropped blue sweater and black joggers gave her a fashionable street wear athleisure look.

“Hey guys, you look great!” Katara smiled as she eyed each of them, entwining her hand with Aang’s, who looked down at it and smiled.

“Very fashionable. I like it.” Toph nodded. Zuko smiled at her. She typically didn’t compliment anyone, especially on looks.

“Oh, you fucker-” Zuko turned on her when he realized, making her snort and grin in delight.

“So... where is he?” Suki asked, rocking on her heels.

“Who?” Zuko asked.

Toph scoffed. “The roommate you dumb-dumb.”

“Oh! I have no clue. He said he’d meet me here as soon as it started. I just have to find him.” Zuko shrugged, looking around the park. In the sea of people that were already at the campus park to come and support, Zuko tried to find a tall, tanned man in a leather jacket.

The colors were blending, people’s laughs becoming louder than necessary.

“Can you text him?” Aang asked, looking as well even though he didn’t know anything about Sokka.

“I don’t have his number,” Zuko explained, giving up on looking for the moment, “But it’s fine, I’ll find him. Meet up with you guys later?”

The group nodded happily before Zuko began walking aimlessly around the park, peering over people's blurry heads and around their shoulders to find any sign of a familiar figure. Zuko checked what seemed to be every tree in the vicinity, imaging a tall, dark man leaned against it, glaring at his phone and occasionally glancing at the park around him.

After fifteen minutes of lost searching, Zuko found nothing. Nearly everyone that had come to support from the start had already gotten their coffee. Zuko reluctantly got in line, still peering around trees and stopping his sweeping gaze short when someone had the same skin tone as Sokka or was around the same height, or just presented a similar aura.

“Hey, Jin!” Zuko smiled at her as he moved down the table to the very end where she was serving.

“Zuko! I’m so happy you could make it. I was wondering where you were, I didn’t see you with Katara and co.” She immediately started pouring some boxed coffee into a large cup for Zuko.

“I was just waiting for someone,” Zuko shrugged, still keeping a polite smile on his face.

How free he would feel if it faltered.

“Who is it?” Jin raised an eyebrow as she started stirring in his cream and sugar. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Just my roommate,” Zuko dismissed it.

It's starting to hurt.

It shouldn't hurt.

But Zuko didn't prepare to fall.

“Were you able to find them?” She asked again, passing over his coffee as he fiddled with his wallet.

“No, but he could just be running late. I don’t think he’s the type of person to just bail on things.” Zuko handed her a few bills, told her to keep the change, and smiled and said his goodbyes before searching for his friends.

“Did you find him?” Yue asked, distancing herself from the playpen full of dogs that Suki and Katara were currently sitting in. She loves animals as much as the next person, but a childhood accident gave her a tiny scar on her right hand, which she was carefully rubbing with the thumb of her left.

“Nope,” Zuko took a sip of his coffee, not caring about the fact it was lukewarm.

Why did he ever switch to energy drinks when this magnificent concoction of caffeine is only a few blocks down?

“Did you guys agree to meet at a certain spot?” Yue asked hopeful.

Zuko tried to have hope.

It only burns the soul when the flame soars too high and is then extinguished without warning.

Zuko hummed no as he shook his head, downing half of his coffee.

“Wow,” Zuko gasped out, not having had coffee in a few days (which was a lot for him, okay?), “You want to go to the cats? I see Aang over there with a kitten on his head.”

Yue smiled gratefully, leading the way as she carefully weaved through the wired pens. Suki caught her eye, blew a kiss at her, and winked, making Yue smile and blush before looking away and playfully rolling her eyes.

They really are cute.

Stop right there.

“I made a friend!” Aang smiled up at them as a tiny, what looked to be a siamese kitten—who was perched atop of Aang’s head and kneading at the fabric of his beanie—softly meowed. Two large, soft blue eyes stared straight into Zuko’s soul.

“Peachy,” Toph muttered out of nowhere, making Zuko spin around to his right before he located her and calmed himself with a sigh. Her milky eyes were glaring at the space in front of her, crossing her arms before she blew away the small pieces of hair that had fallen in front of her face and tickled her nose.

“That’d be a cute name,” Zuko said mindlessly after staring at Aang, who carefully grabbed the kitten from his head and placed him softly in his lap. He took another sip of his coffee, quickly downing it all due to the lack of temperature.

“Peachy?” Yue asked as she rubbed hand sanitizer on her hands and wrists from her purse before carefully putting one leg over the gate to get inside of the playpen, gasping softly and cooing at the meowing kittens who started attacking her feet.

“Well, peach in Japanese. *Momo*. ” Zuko clarified, leaning over the edge of the wired enclosure to softly pet the small back of an entirely black kitten.

“Momo!” Aang smiled as he raised the kitten up into the air. He meowed back in response, weakly batting his left paw at open air.

“I’ll get Katara, let her know you guys are coming home with another animal today.” Toph sighed before turning around and walking off in the general vicinity of Katara and Suki.

“She doesn’t have her-” Zuko started, concerned for Toph’s well-being and navigational skills when she didn’t have her cane to assist her.

“She’ll be okay. Here, come sit. I’m sure your roommate will find you eventually.” Yue smiled up at Zuko from where she was now sitting in a pool of assorted fluff. Zuko clumsily climbed leg-by-leg over the cage, whispering curses as he stumbled and unceremoniously fell into the grass. Dull claws attacked at his head, making him giggle at a spunky kitten who has decided to play tug-of-war with his braid.

He was in love. According to Ty Lee, no animal ever loved him because of his “overtly grey and gloomy aura”.

He really has to call her.

He whispered greetings to other kittens who playfully attacked his hands with sharp teeth, and gasped out a faux sob when the black one he had pet earlier curled up on top of his stomach. He gently scratched the bottom of the kitten's chin, silently screeching and getting the attention of Yue and Aang for the affectionate void of fluff purring because of Zuko.

It was so pure.

The cats allowed Zuko to forget about Sokka the slightest bit. He still tried to have hope, but upon asking Yue for the time and realizing yet another fifteen minutes had passed, he had given up on trying to wait for Sokka.

No show. He quickly DMed Katara’s brother. Said he’d meet me, no sign of him anywhere. It’s been thirty minutes.

He sighed before pocketing his phone again. Katara, who had hopped into the pen with Suki a few minutes prior, gave him a questioning look.

“Is everything okay?” She whispered, leaning over into Zuko.

“Just disappointed is all,” Zuko said simply, smiling lightly before going back to petting the kitten who was now perched on his shoulder, meowing indignantly to get affection again.

Katara nodded solemnly before speaking up again, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” He said quickly without heat, his heart already catching in his throat.

Today’s not the day.

Seeing everyone smile and laugh, giggling with Toph supplying the occasional snarky remark from her place outside the pen, fawning over the kittens around them and thanking Jin for bringing over free *bizcochos*, made Zuko’s spirits rise. For a moment he was placed in the present, memories of past nightmares and haunting interactions forgotten, the stress and disappointment for Sokka not showing up dissipating with every snort Zuko elicited or every time Katara scolded Toph for stepping out her boundaries of “good behavior”.

He felt free, liberated from the stresses of everyday life and the past week.

Then he remembered how Sokka had looked when he smiled, his face tilted in the same degree of happiness and freedom that Zuko had currently felt. His face would be alight in joy, shaking in chuckles and giggles. His freckles would pop out and become more prominent, shining with that wonderful sun-kissed look that Zuko could only imagine was due to hours in the sun, or purely a gift from a god herself. His mouth would turn into something even more kissable, corners of his lips rising as his cheeks would fill with mirth.

It was something Zuko couldn't get out of his head, and he longed to see it in person.

While Katara and Aang were having a serious discussion about whether or not adopting yet another animal would be appropriate or not, Zuko excused himself.

"Where are you going?" Yue asked as he hopped over the fence.

"Just going to find a bathroom, I won't be long." He smiled tightly, voice breaking off on the end. His emotions were strung high, fingers shaking in the pocket of his coat.

It was the rush of blood starting from his feet and pumping in his ears that his former therapists said were panic attacks, but it wasn't that. Most likely what Mai defined as a "mental breakdown" (but in her case it was whenever Zuko was being "moody and uncooperative" during class or a group project back in high school).

He still felt the dryness of his throat, how it clenched in the hopes for some liquid. He silently thanked one of the staff members as he grabbed a free bottle of water, walking around as he gulped it with greed. It spilled and dribbled past the corners of his mouth and onto his chin, and he wiped it away as he sighed in relief. He leaned against the trunk of a tree, shutting his eyes closed as he regained his breath and finished his bottle of water.

When did I let it get this far? Since when did he start fucking up my life?

Zuko just wants to feel normal again.

He was fine before all of this, he was finally going back to school, finally living in an apartment again. He was sober, he was happy, he had friends who cared about him, his relationship with Uncle and Azula was better than ever before. His panic attacks had almost disappeared from existence, his nightmares only coming once before he moved in.

He was doing *amazing* . He was *happy* .

(Relatively.)

But now, it had all gone out the window.

Right before he left home, he gave himself three rules.

Rule number one: no drinking.

That one was obvious, needs no explanation.

Rule number two: focus on school.

That one was also obvious, but he wasn't doing so well with staying loyal to following it. Which was yet another thing to feel guilty of.

And finally, rule number three: don't trust anyone new.

Zuko has his support system, he's already put so much trust into so many different people. He knows that they won't leave him and hurt him in the process. It's safe. He'll be fine. He is fine.

So why is trusting someone else so tempting? Why does he need that *one extra person*?

He knows the answer.

It's because Sokka makes him feel something that he hasn't felt in so long, and he makes that feeling not sting with the past and the words that have belittled him and caused all this shit in the first place. It's because Sokka makes Zuko look forward to going home and maybe catching him before he runs to practice or class, he makes Zuko smile to himself every time he hears the key enter the lock. Even if their interactions are minimal, Sokka makes Zuko *feel*.

And that is why it hurts so bad.

After a few minutes, he puts the mask back on, takes breaths of reassurance to make sure it secure, and walks back out with a perfect smile as he tosses the bottle in the recycling bin and makes his way back over to his friends, waving politely and laughing like everything was normal.

Because he's fine.

He's always been fine.

~~~~~

Zuko held his breath with his key in front of the lock to the front door, staring straight into the peephole. He couldn't see anything from outside of it (duh) but he needed to compose himself from his recent revelations.

With a deep breath that collected his confidence, Zuko quickly shoved the key into the door and pushed inside of his apartment.

The sounds of laughter made his heartbeat stop before spiking. He didn't dare look anywhere else other than his feet, pocketing his keys in his coat as he turned his back to the living room while he closed the heavy door. The soft yet deafening giggled persisted, making Zuko's heart catch in his throat for the umpteenth time that day.

He continued to glue his eyes to the floor and stare at the toe of his boots, effectively keeping to himself and not drawing any attention.

But the universe hates him.

Or maybe Sokka hates him.

He's not completely sure yet.

"Oh," Sokka said right as Zuko got his hand on the handle of his bedroom door. He cursed in his head, shutting his eyes for a moment to regain his composure. "Hey, Zuko."

Soft, vulnerable, guilty.

Zuko looked up at Sokka with a pained expression, sucking in his lips because he didn't have the energy or the courage to smile. He knew it would come across as fake.

"Hi, Sokka," Zuko whispered out exasperated.

Irritated, careless, inconsiderate.

Sokka was standing next to a girl, what she looked like Zuko didn't pick up as he was focused on looking bothered and staring at Sokka, but he passed his eyes in between them for a moment.

She had a flower tucked into her hair, right behind her ear which effectively pulled her hair out of her face.

It was the same one Sokka had given Zuko.

"Fuck you," Zuko whispered out without a second thought, opening his door and slamming it behind him.

He regretted it as soon as he slid down the back of the door and buried his head in his hands and knees.

It had all happened so fast. One minute he was smiling and laughing and acting like he was having a good time in Aang's van, softly reaching over and petting Momo in Katara's lap, before he was dropped off. His only worry was coming back home, and even that seemed like such a distant emotion compared to the fear he held now.

Now he was getting sick of seeing Sokka smile and laugh with someone else, seeing how easy it was for him to just go around and give flowers to anyone he saw.

It wasn't fair was the justification coming from that small, insane part of his brain. It wasn't fair that Zuko had put so much of himself out there, that he had taken the chance and finally mustered up the courage to take matters into his own hands. It wasn't fair that it was so easy for Sokka to just skip a date or any other social event because he was out giggling with a girl. It wasn't fair.

Yet the other part of his brain that also controls his demons was discouraging his immaturity. He was being as much of a dick as Sokka was. Other shit could have happened, like a group project or an emergency situation with a friend. He had no means of communication, so who was Zuko to just assume anything, that Sokka was being selfish and just didn't have the time for Zuko?



How dare Zuko ever believe that he was capable of someone wanting him.

Mumbled whispers from behind the door.

*How slutty are we dressing tomorrow?* Zuko texted the group chat, trying to compose himself with each tap of his thumb. His throat was still dry, but to ease the sandpaper scratch would mean he would have to leave the room.

Another faint, yet now sad and hesitant, giggle.

*How much of a whore do you want to be?* Suki responded almost immediately.

*Fishnets, leather skirt, sheer shirt that I'm absolutely not wearing anything under?*

The front door opened.

*Oh so we're going SLUTTY slutty, ok!* Suki typed back.

Footsteps.

*Love it. I'm sure I have something latex in my closet. I'll just have to convince Yue.*

It's starting to hurt more than it should.

Sliding and thud of the door. The rattling of plates from the kitchen.

Toph slid into the conversation. *I hope you know I will be dressing in a spaghetti strap and jeans as my version of "looking like a whore".*

More footsteps, Sokka's bedroom door clicking shut.

*Make it a jean skirt and you're good .* Katara sent a non-committal text.

A shaky breath comes out of Zuko that he didn't know he was holding.

*Well what are you wearing?* Toph slid back.

He leans his head on the back of the door with a thump.

*Just got home.* Katara excused herself with another avoiding text. Zuko was going to press before another message went through.

*I'm trying on a dress I had bought before I lost some weight now, seems to do the job .*

The group chat immediately exploded with the demand for pictures.

*Send it now bitch*

*You can't leave me hanging like that*

*Oh come on you have to show me now*

*No pressure because, you know, I can't see.*

*Holy crud hang on the zipper is stuck.* She sent after the barrage of messages.

After a minute of patient waiting consisting of Zuko trying to stay in the present and not focus on the steady strum of a guitar coming from the wall next to him, his phone buzzed with Katara sending the picture. Suki beat him to it.

*HOLY FUCKING SHIT BITCH*

*Damn, I wish I had your body.*

*I just KNOW that Aang's heart was drumming in his chest as he helped you with the zipper.*

*The pic isn't loading, I can't see shit.*

*Oh shut tf up Toph.* Katara concluded.

*The bust is a bit big, but I pinned it and it fits perfect now.*

Soft singing.

He shut off his phone, placing it on the space of floor next to him.

*"Often I am upset, that I can not fall in love but I guess*

*This avoids the stress of falling out of it."*

And while Zuko won't get into the reasons for why that song *hits* right now, he will say that it's something he's needed to hear from someone else. Especially Sokka.

*"Are you tired of me yet?"*

"Never." Zuko whispered to himself.

*"I'm a little sick right now but I swear,*

*When I'm ready I will fly us out of here."*

"Take your time, I'll be waiting."

Zuko leaned his head against the door again, looking up and gasping so as to not let his tears fall, because when they do, he will.

He continued to bury his thumb into the flesh of his palm, taking deep, unsteady breaths as Sokka began to hum, strumming the guitar with ease. The song felt so much more relaxed, intimate, and unsure. It was quite in the soft way Sokka was playing it, muffled by the walls and the hazy mind that Zuko has now grown accustomed to.

*"Turn off your porcelain face,"* Zuko whispered, joining Sokka like he was scared to commit to it, like he's scared to commit to everything.

*“ I can't really think right now and this place,*

*Has too many colors, enough to drive all of us insane .”*

The song felt less about Zuko, about his emotions and fucked up life, and more about what Sokka could have been going through.

He closed his eyes and let himself be taken captive by the music, breath becoming shallow and voice breaking and shaking with every passing beat.

*“ Get a load of this monster*

*He doesn't know how to communicate*

*His mind is in a different place*

*Will everybody please give him a little bit of space? ”*

Zuko stopped singing, got up, and exited his room before the tears started falling. Now was not the time nor the place for revelations and the need for answers. His mind was too blurry and he was too tired to cry.

And every time he's done it it has always ended with *something* happening.

Zuko went on an aimless walk, passing the shelter and the coffee shop staff folding tables and chairs, closing truck and van doors that held boxes of coffee and crates of animals. He passed the club they would eventually be going to the next night, the aura dim and ominous when it lacked drunk party-goers, neon lights, and blaring bass. He scoffed at the leaves on the ground that blended together more than they should have, fucking his brain over to the extra degree.

It started drizzling by the time Zuko was exploring backroads and alleyways, yet he wasn't ready to start going home. He wasn't entirely sure of his whereabouts, but as long as he knew his general location, he'd be fine. He was fine. Everything was perfectly okay.

A flash of lightning followed by a clap of thunder scared the living shit out of Zuko.

He instinctively reached for his phone in his coat pocket, swearing to himself when he realized he left it by the door of his room. He peered to the sign on the corner of the street he was on, sighing when the name of it was completely foreign.

He was lost.

But it's fine.

Another clap of thunder sent the rain to start pouring in sheets, making Zuko run under the canopy of a storefront.

The word *fine* was becoming repetitive.

~~~~~

Zuko groaned and shut the front door heavily, leaning his back against it with a sigh. He wasn't able to escape the pouring rain, but after unsuccessful aimless bolting under canopies for thirty minutes, he reached an area of the city that was familiar enough for Zuko to manage his way back home.

He caught his breath for a moment before peeling his drenched coat from his shoulders, cringing at the feeling of pulling off soaked cotton. He draped it over an empty hook of the coat rack. From the lack of a leather jacket, Sokka wasn't home, so Zuko took his opportunity to take an early shower before trying again at getting some sleep. He groaned in pain when strands of hair were ripped out of his skull as he untangled the elastic from his braid.

He towel-dried his hair in soft pats, gently pulling on a blue hoodie that smelt like coffee beans and vanilla, snapping the waistband of his sweats against his stomach, tightening the drawstrings as tight as they could go while still hugging his waist comfortably. He took his time with skincare, washing his face slowly, ensuring he got the expanse of skin under his chin, and cleared all the dirt from his pores under his nostrils. He calmly moisturized before putting away all of his products in the basket above the toilet that was silently understood as his.

He peered into "Sokka's" basket without intention, seeing a blue translucent bottle that sloshed with a viscous liquid. It was his cologne.

Zuko carefully drew it out of the basket, uncapping it and smelling the top. He mindlessly spritzed it on the inside of his wrist, taking a sniff of the scent as he placed the bottle on the counter.

Zuko lay in his bed in relative silence, the only noise being the steady patter of the rain beating down on the window panes. His wrist was placed in front of his face as he stared at the empty wall in front of him. He listened as the front door opened, steady and heavy footsteps walking, stopping, a shaky sigh that was meant to be too light for Zuko to hear, before they continued.

Zuko closed his eyes, holding back his own shuddering breath and the need to release prickling tears.

He felt, for the briefest moment, the sun beating down on his back as he made circles in the sky. His face was tilted up in joy at the light splaying on his face and the wind rushing through his hair. He felt the feathers rustle against his arms as he beat his wings to fly even higher, tickled skin warming under the heat. There was no one to stop him if he dared to continue to soar into the sky, not even himself. The thrill of becoming something he was incapable of being was addictive. The flame in his stomach roared and flickered higher until it licked at his aching heart. The higher he flew, the less he cared and the more risks he took, the stronger the flame grew.

And then, the warmth that was in his chest and on his skin burned. His eyes which had fluttered shut opened in alarm as he looked to his arms. The feathers were burning, falling off of him as hot beads of wax made Zuko arch his back and squirm in agony. The flame had

disappeared as he plummeted back down, reaching towards the blinding sun with burned knuckles as his final feathers melted off. He watched in terror as he fell even farther down, turning to face the water below him.

The salt sprayed his face and wet his hair before he hit the water. He tried to come up for air, desperately swimming to the surface, but when he broke the surface, a wave came and crashed over his head. He coughed and sputtered as he clung to a nearby rock he was washed up towards, but the waves continued to crash around him, salt clouding his vision. He was pulled back into the water, the painful liquid filling his lungs and stinging his fresh wounds.

The liberating feeling was gone, the flame completely extinguished. He was trapped. No matter how much he swam or how long he held his breath, the consequences of his actions remained. He was naive, foolish, and thoughtless to think that he could fly as high as the sun and pretend to be as strong as a god.

Zuko gasped as he shot awake, gripping the sweat-soaked sheets with a white-knuckle grip, the same way he woke after every nightmare. He stared at the expanse of darkness directly in front of him, throat and mouth dry, lips having a sick taste in between the chapped cracks.

He looked out the window, rain now long gone but leaving its marks on the darker, wet streets. The entire city was pliant in the embrace of a calm night after a small storm, contrasting Zuko's heavily beating heart and blaring white noise in his mind. The thoughts had disappeared, but he now stared at the outside world like it was a foreign figure, like it was something he could never relate to, with the feeling and knowledge of rejection and exile resting in someplace in between his heart and stomach.

He couldn't hold it anymore.

He watched stray raindrops fall down the window, as they were set free from any burden they could possibly hold, while Zuko accepted all of his. He felt and watched every drop fall and wash away. It left scars in his eyes and burned into the back of his mind, stinging and bleeding his cheeks.

He had fallen.

That was the final lingering thought as he sat in vulnerable, dark silence for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

I told you I had big plans :D

might not post for a while, might post in two weeks, who knows.

You'll most likely get updates on [my tumblr](#). Stuff has been stressful as of late, but it's either beneficial towards my fics or completely ruins them. But come cyber-bully me or

just rant, I love talking to you guys!

See you all later!

Burning whiskey instead of you

Chapter Summary

Zuko breaks his first rule, and he's left with broken pieces he doesn't know how to pick up.

Chapter Notes

One more chapter left baby! Im actually really proud of this even though I haven't edited it and its a bit shorter, but yk, some people like it ra-

I thoroughly hope you enjoy! Please be aware that there is mentions of former substance abuse, and Zuko does get drunk in this chapter. Its nothing super heavy, but please use discretion.

Have a wonderful day besties.

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

Zuko lay on his side, heavy eyes blinking slowly, as he stared at the expanse of his room, lit up by the early morning light. His wooden vanity that didn't match any of the white furniture he had bought was directly in his line of sight, and Zuko looked at it with indifference. The various bottles and products of differing heights, colors, and shapes were skewed messily around the top of it.

From staring at it for hours, Zuko memorized every single overturned bottle and askew lid, as though his tiredness and detachment were extinct from his mind. There was the tall pink and white bottle of mousse that stood upright right next to the edge of his mirror, the translucent cap probably somewhere underneath a piece of furniture Zuko was too lazy to bend down to and search for. The purple tub of gel that Zuko barely used, and because of this the lid was never secured right and the clear insides had solidified over the top. The ominous clear blue bottle, the only purpose for Zuko getting out of bed for a few moments to spray more on.

His vision was blurry even if he had stopped crying hours ago, his brain in a constant limbo of being in a sleepy and oblivious trance and highly attentive to all of the sounds and sights and feelings around him. One second he was on the verge of falling asleep again, and the next his senses would kick into overdrive, making the adrenaline start pumping and coursing through Zuko's veins. He would focus on his breathing then, closing his eyes to rid the confusing blend of dark oak of his vanity and the bright pinks and neon blues that were his hair and makeup products. Only when he tried to smell just the cologne, to only hear his own

breaths and focus on the silence of the house and not the loud chatter of pedestrians and blaring horns outside, and to feel only the sheets in between his fingers, would he feel calm and “safe” for the moment.

He heard Sokka’s door open, automatically bringing his wrist to his face on instinct. He had to support his shaking arm with his other hand to steady it.

Zuko listened intently as Sokka’s clumsy footsteps trailed from his bedroom to the bathroom, closing his eyes with a soft exhale through Zuko’s nose when he heard the door close. He hugged his shoulders and turned away from the door to face the wall again, even if it was much less entertaining staring at white paint than it was to judge the specks of water, product, and dirt that had collected on his mirror.

Sokka exited the bathroom, steps less heavy and with more confidence, but still reluctant and with a dash of hesitation. It’s symbolism for something, how they’re dancing around each other and being confident one step but backing off the next, maybe. Or possibly similar in the sense that Sokka is so much more sure of himself than Zuko is with confidence and capability in every aspect, but yet he too has doubts and thoughts that trouble him and make him skip a step and stumble over his own feet.

Or they could just be footsteps.

It’s early morning, Zuko wasn’t expecting his sanity to come back online so soon.

He paid attention to Sokka moving about his bedroom, grabbing clothes before leaving his room again with gentle grace, unspoken politeness, and respect lingering in the air. The fridge opened, silence for a while, before some shifting somewhere past his door and the soft shut of the door. Keys jingled, a zipper made its noise, and then the front door opened and closed with the force that was required to get the heavy metal to move and lock properly.

Zuko turned over to stare at the ceiling and leaned his head back as he allowed himself to utter a shaky breath. He swallowed, making his Adam's apple bob, as he tried to contain his almost spilling emotions.

After a few minutes spent collecting himself and his racing heart, Zuko slowly sat up on the edge of his bed. He rubbed his good eye with the heel of his hand, taking a deep breath before leaning forward and pressing his elbows into his knees.

It was going to be a long day.

~~~~~

After becoming bombarded with messages from the group chat which he could not avoid, Zuko finally rose at precisely eight thirty-one in the morning, a time early for any sane person on a Saturday morning. Apparently, his friends like to send messages about breakfast and dogs at the ass-crack of dawn, and Zuko could no longer ease his grumbling stomach having not eaten since yesterday morning. He pulled on some socks before placing his feet outside of his carpeted room and moved sluggishly to the kitchen. He opened the fridge, the only items worth noticing: a small box of vegetable pizza that could have only belonged to



Sokka. Zuko grumbled, scratching the back of his hair as he peered inside of the “pantry”, or the one cabinet meant for dishes that was mutually understood as the place to store rarely purchased bread and pasta.

Zuko slipped out two slices of white bread from the loaf bag and tossed them into the toaster, grabbing a plate and glass from the cabinet. He checked his phone, setting it face-down with such force on the counter an ominous *slap* echoed through the apartment when no new Twitter DMs had appeared from — who the hell even is he at this point? Zuko ran his fingers through his hair, clicking his tongue in annoyance when they got caught in knots, before slapping them down next to his thighs.

The phone buzzed, Zuko picked it up.

Toaster snapped, he jumped with a spiking heart rate.

Intense running from outside in the hall, paired with cheerful laughter.

Vibrations against the counter.

Zuko scoffed at being frightened before placing his phone back down on the counter and unplugging the toaster. He grabbed orange juice, butter, and strawberry jam from the door of the fridge, pulling the silverware drawer open so hard that it flew and the few metal forks and spoons clattered and jumped, before grabbing a butter knife and slamming the drawer shut with his thigh. He cut a slice of butter from the stick and mindlessly smeared it against his toast as the stomping and loud giggling and barks of laughter, which had originally faded, came hounding back.

His phone buzzed again.

Zuko rolled his eye, capping the jam with a twist of his wrist and pouring himself a decent serving of orange juice. He slid his meal to the peninsula, sitting down in one of the bar stools with a sigh after putting everything away.

Zuko opened his phone again, taking a bite of his sweet toast as he hummed an alert on seeing a few new messages from said... whoever.

**I’m so sorry**

**I don’t know what to say**

**I’m so sorry.**

Zuko slammed down his glass.

*It's not your fault, don't worry about it*

*Like it blows, sure, especially to see him back home giggling with a girl as if we had nothing fucking planned*

*And he triess to just be friendly and shit when NO you baileed on me nd now oyu dont even try to fucking appoligise?*

*So i fucking slammed the door in his faxe and cursed him out in front of the gilr which was a dcik move i kow but ike what else am i supopsed to fucking do?*

Spelling is a mess and punctuation is out the window, but he can't stop shaking as he spills and rants to the one person who would actually understand without there being any consequences.

He wonders what that says about his low-life self. How the one person he isn't afraid to confide in is a random person online who is supposed to be a brother of his best friend that he doesn't even remember the name of.

*Sorry. He sends quickly, immediately regretting all of that. Sorry its just been a weird day and you're kind of my rant person.*

*That was a lot god*

*Sorry*

A few minutes pass, Zuko finishes his toast but continues to stare at the lovely painted walls in silence before getting a disruption from his phone again.

**It's okay.**

**I don't really know what to say right now.**

**I'm sorry, for everything.**

**But I'm glad that you seem to trust me.**

*I do, it's weird, I barely know you*

**Well we're in the same boat. I trust you too**

**Shit you caught me at a bad time can we talk later?**

*Yeah don't worry about it*

*Thanks, btw*

**Dw abt it. Ttyl**

~~~~~

Zuko doesn't know what to do in the time between waking up and when he's supposed to start getting ready for the nightclub. His regular schedule has gone out the window, and with no classes on the weekends, he forgets what he would typically be doing on a Saturday. He supposes he would spend time with Katara and the girls. Watching another rom-com that is

purely just for background noise as they gossip and coo at Appa and paint nails. He'd laugh and roll his eyes at Toph's witty remarks and quick jokes, rambling on about school as he patiently sits and waits for the nail polish either Yue or Katara painted on for him to dry (Zuko could never grip the wand correctly, and Suki could never sit still enough to wait for the paint to dry let alone paint it herself). He'd catch up with Aang when he came back from the gym, raid the ever-full pantry and always be disappointed in the healthy and savory snacks, and offer to take Appa out for a walk with the group whenever he needed a breath of fresh air.

Or maybe he would be the pathetic low-life self that he was right now. Laying on his bed with his laptop open playing his comfort show for the millionth time, just serving as additional background noise to distract himself from his ever-increasing thoughts while he scrolled through Twitter. Being alone and selfish, pushing off responding to messages and interacting with the people who actually cared about him and have done him no wrong, instead, aiming to please a person who couldn't even give him the time of day.

He wonders if his life has always been this sad to an outsider, but insanely frustrating from his perspective.

He lay on his bed reminiscing about a time where he felt he lived a different life, a time where he was still anxious and a hot mess, but he had the slightest bit of motivation and hope. Life was still shit at home, yet every day he would ignore the empty bottles on the kitchen counter from the previous night's shouting session, happily converse with his sister and their friends, and have little worry as they all walked to school. It could have been seen as repetitive and boring, waking up just to ignore, forget, and relearn, but it gave Zuko a sense of security in having people to fall back on.

The front door opened, disrupting the intrusive thoughts, making Zuko pause the show on his computer as the laugh track rang in his ears, setting his phone face-down on his chest. Silence.

A heavy click, shifting.

Footsteps, heavy, cautious, contemplative.

Another door closing.

And then the heavy air that lingers in his grasp settles.

Zuko sighs back into his bed, blinking back tears as he looks up to his ceiling.

It's so hard to stop once you've started.

He looks at his phone.

6:49

Fuck.

~~~~~

Zuko had never really understood clubs or parties.

He was put in a private high school full of privileged rich kids, so of course, he's been to multiple parties where underaged teens are breaking into their parents' liquor cabinet when they're off on vacation. Of course, he's been to clubs and frat parties, especially the blur of months after Jet. But what he didn't understand was willingly going to a place that overrides all of your senses, making you unable to hear your friend who was standing right next to you and screaming. Why did people want to be pressed up against hot sweaty, dancing bodies, all moving in tune to a blaring bass that shakes the entire building? What was the need to get so drunk you blackout, vomiting all your sin and forgetting everything of the past few days in a matter of minutes?

And he never understood until he realized that you can actually *let go*.

In those situations, when you have no care for the alcohol going in your system and the judgment of other people. When you can finally feel free to the beat of the music and the support and praise of your friends, the people who matter. When all that is left of you as the person on the dance floor or giggling in the booth is a free spirit and a cheerful, lively soul, that's when the hard questions start to fade, the struggles of life start to dissipate, and you can *live*.

So as he slips on a leather skirt that is an inch shorter than he would have liked, fishnets that have never been worn since Mai gave them to him on a dare, and a sheer shirt under a red crop-top, for the first time in a long while, Zuko doesn't care.

He doesn't even have a drop of alcohol in his system, yet he already feels free.

And he looks good doing it too.

Maybe the makeup is a bit much, but if he's going for it, why even stop? He glosses his lips with a pink tint, curling his lashes with mascara that is sure to smear from dancing under bright lights, and gives himself winged liner so sharp it would make even *Suki* jealous. And maybe the combat boots are a bit much too, but his legs look fire under the fishnets, and he holds confidence that he hasn't had in a long time.

And for what?

There's something eerily suspicious about it all. There has to be a catch for why all of this confidence has come out of basically nowhere. There has to be a reason why he keeps turning to look at the back of his outfit in the bathroom mirror and doesn't feel disgusted. Why he doesn't feel contempt for leaving his hair down, which falls to his waist and accentuates his legs *even more*.

Yet he shrugs off the negativity, grabbing a firm hold on the prosperous fact that he *will* have a good time tonight. He *will* get drunk and not feel bad about it. He *will* have fun with his girls, no matter if the images of Sokka playing in his head say otherwise.

He snatches his phone off of the counter, taking a few pictures of himself at varying angles.

He likes the one of him pushing his hair up and with his hip turned to the side and his boot brought up behind the most. He selects it and sends it off to the group chat, setting his phone back down as he decides to put on the slightest hint of blush and highlighter, as he knows it will bring out his one defined cheekbone and indirectly bring attention to his nose. Within minutes, however, he's interrupted by the group chat.

*BITCH WTF*

*WHO GAVE YOU THE RIGHT?*

*Omg your thighs in those fishnets....*

*AND THE SKIRT*

*I know im in a relationship and you're gay but like step on me please*

*(respectfully)*

*What? What happened? It's all dark!*

Zuko rolled his eye and playfully cursed at Toph, sending middle finger emojis instead of a regular picture because that would defeat the purpose.

*Are you guys even ready yet?* He sent afterward.

*I'm waiting for Aang to come back on his walk with Appa and then he'll drive me there.*  
Katara had sent after a minute.

*I can pick some of you guys up if you want, I don't trust walking on the street or getting in a cab.*

Zuko sent his acceptance of the offer, as did Toph, but Suki and Yue said that their usual bus route typically stopped at the club, and they would just take that. Which ended up working out, because there was only room for five in the SUV.

Zuko slipped out of the bathroom when Katara said that Aang just got back home, scrolling on Instagram for only a few steps before crashing into a sturdy force.

"Shit, sorry." He mumbled out quickly, looking up once he had gotten his bearings.

Zuko's decided it. The universe hates him. Yeah sure there isn't anyone else to bump into in a shared apartment, but could they not bump into each other while he's dress like *this* .

Sokka, of course, its fucking Sokka, stares back at him blinking, wide eyes raking over his body. The confidence that Zuko had held onto so possessively drained from him with the color in his face. He shrank under the intense gaze, and grew insecure, and wished to sneak back into the privacy of the bathroom.

Sokka's eyes caught at the edge of the skirt, then snapped up to meet Zuko's with parted lips.

It had all happened so fast.

Chapped lips crashed to his glossed ones. Firm hands grabbed his cheeks, tilting his head up to meet halfway. He didn't know where to put his hands. They itched to go into Sokka's hair, but he forced them to stay in the air. Under other circumstances, Zuko would have melted. If Sokka had done this a week ago, even yesterday morning, Zuko wouldn't have objected.

Sokka pulled away softly with a flush, eyes hooded with lust. It was a wonderful sight, to have his cheeks held onto by Sokka, his thumb rubbing Zuko's cheek, and Sokka looking down just slightly at Zuko with a look of desire.

It should be illegal for how addictive it would become, just like everything else Zuko wants.

And then it seemed that it all came crashing down onto Sokka. His eyes shot open in realization, slowly bringing his hands back, with Zuko's skin immediately becoming cold. Sokka's hand then flew to his mouth.

"I'm sorry I should have-"

Zuko put a hand up to stop him, looking down at the toe of his shoe.

"Don't."

He looked back up to Sokka, immediately regretting it with the expression of genuine shock and hurt paining his gorgeous face.

Zuko looked back at the floor to his right. Already knowing that Sokka brought his hand up to the back of his neck.

A beat of awkward silence.

"Bathroom," Sokka muttered softly. Zuko raised his head and nodded his understanding, stepping to the side to allow for Sokka to silently enter the restroom.

The door closed and Zuko shut his eyes with a pained sigh.

His phone buzzed in his hand.

*Katara: three minutes away*

Slip the mask on, nothing had just happened.

~~~~~

"Wait, wait, wait. This isn't my good side." Katara said before scurrying over to the other end of the line they created in front of the doors to the club. The bouncer had long said they had wanted to go, but Katara wanted to get one final picture before they went inside.

Her dress itself was stunning, but Katara (and all of them for that matter) looked stunning. Her blue dress was cut shorter than anything she'd typically wear, with small white flowers spreading out against all of the fabric. The neckline wasn't *appalling*, but it was riskier than Katara had ever gone, and the long sleeves, even with the additional coverage, made it seem so much more out there.

Zuko loved it.

The same for both Suki and Yue. While Suki had worn a spaghetti strap latex white dress that complimented her long legs and drew attention to her decorated face, Suki went more professional, yet she was the most exposed of them all. She wore sneaky, hunter-green lingerie under a blazer with dress pants and stilettos to match, with her short hair slicked back for a bad-ass, slightly masculine look.

And Toph, for her to even wear a jean skirt, let alone a deep V-neck camisole *and* makeup, was a sight to see.

"God can we hurry up, I'm sure my lipstick is already smudged by now," Toph muttered, even though the touch of black on her lips was perfectly intact.

"Okay, got it!" Aang smiled before turning his phone around so Katara could see it. She smiled her approval, pressing a kiss to Aang's cheek before waving goodbye as the irritated bouncer let them in.

It was bright, too bright.

That was Zuko's first thought. Blaring strobes of green and yellow raked the atmosphere from the back wall where the DJ was bouncing in time to the music. He could tell why it would be Toph's scene. The music was loud, making you have to yell to talk to your friends, but didn't make you feel the vibrations in your bones, something that was a huge factor for Toph's party enjoyment.

Zuko followed his friends on the edge of the back wall, scooting past dancers to slip into a round, cushioned couch around a table set adjacent to the dance floor. They all sat around it, Zuko being sure to sit on the outside with his back to the strobe lights. He mindlessly drummed his fingers to the beat of the pop music, shifting in his seat uncomfortably.

"You good?" Katara yelled to him over the noise, nudging her shoulder into his. Although it came off in a joking manner, Zuko could sense her sincerity.

"Yeah!" Zuko nodded with a small smile. "There's just a lot going on, I have to take it all in." She hummed and nodded in understanding.

Which is what he spent his time doing. He got comfortable with the white leather and polished table, grew accustomed to the very prominent smell of liquor in the club, and even somewhat enjoyed the number of people being so free dancing next to one another. He wanted to get out there, do something, become someone.

"Should we go get drinks?" Toph yelled, all of them leaning forwards to hear her.

But first, he would have to get the sweet yet sickly taste of Sokka off of his lips.

They all made their way over to the bar, Suki leaning over the edge of the bar, rattling off their order of the different beers and cocktails before Zuko spoke up.

“Hey, could you get me a black Russian?” Suki beamed before yelling to the bartender.

“I thought you weren’t drinking,” Yue asked quickly after they received their drinks, setting her fruity concoction on the bar to fix the torso of her dress before walking back to their table.

“I don’t plan on getting drunk, I just need something to take the edge off, you know?” She smiled and nodded, and that was enough for Zuko before he took a sip.

He doesn’t know what happened, he’s long broken his rules, but then he’s giggling and pulling Suki to come and dance, and then the confidence is usurping his better judgment. The drinks keep coming, and his friends keep offering to pay, and before he knows it he’s loudly and clumsily singing along to the music. The drinks have taken more than just the edge off, he can barely think straight, but he’s having *so much fun* .

And best of all, as he and his girls line up at the bar to take shots, he doesn’t even remember a single thing about Sokka. You could ask him right then who he was, and Zuko would giggle and go “who?” without any care in the world. The alcohol burns oh *so* good, and he’s so happy to be twirling and drinking and having the time of his life with his favorite people on the planet.

At some point the drinks have slowed down, yet the music gets louder and the lights get brighter, and Zuko is getting tired and clumsy, but he’s not ready to go home yet. The concept of home isn’t even in his head, no place exists other than where he is right now. But he still manages to get Katara and Toph back onto the floor, Yue and Suki excusing themselves to the bathroom for a moment, and when the song changes the crowd cheers in excitement. Katara’s eyes light up, and Toph even smiles wider and throws her hands in the air.

He starts singing lyrics stored somewhere deep inside his brain, smiling at Katara and Toph, who belt just as loud as he does. At some point during the chorus, he starts to lose himself, swaying to the music with his eyes closed and his hands raking through his hair as his hips and shoulders shift to the beat. He starts smiling, soft giggles that turn into full hearty laughs when Toph cracks a joke. The crowd yells and cheers when the instrumental part comes in, making Zuko’s throat crack from the dryness and sudden use of it, but he could care less. Everyone seems so alive, and he’s glad to have this small memory of freedom, albeit not in the right state of mind.

But then the music ends and changes to something less of Zuko’s style, and while he is disheartened by the change in atmosphere, he keeps up his dancing with small taps of his feet in switching weight from one side to the next. Katara suddenly grabs his hand, and he isn’t able to comprehend what’s going on, only being able to catch Toph with a disgruntled scowl on her face as she’s also being dragged away.

They come up to their table, and Zuko then sees Yue with Suki's blazer over her shoulders, as she sleepily leans against Suki and softly giggles at whatever she is saying. Suki is much more exposed now, but seems to pay no mind to it, if anything becoming even more confident with the way her eyes sparkle at Yue having a not-so-subtle stare in between her fits of laughter. She yawns as they sit on the table to face Suki and Yue, and waves at them excitedly even if their knees are touching each other. She dissolves into another laughing fit, snorting with her forehead against Suki's bare shoulder.

"Did Ms. Moony have a fun night?" Toph asked with a raised eyebrow, clearly trying to suppress a laugh.

"The best!" Yue yells, making dramatic facial expressions before giving them a thumbs up and giggling when Suki reaches around her to softly lower her arm, but Zuko, in his drunken, hyper-focused daze, notices how her jeweled hand rests on Yue's hip.

Yue reaches for her half-finished glass of a cocktail and waves Suki away when she tries to stop her from having more alcohol. Yue takes a sip of it, leans into Suki's ear, mutters something with a laugh thrown in the middle, before returning to her drink.

"Okay, I think you've had enough to drink," Suki laughs, grabbing Yue's glass and finishing it herself before setting it down. There's a blush to Suki's cheeks that Zuko notes, and he laughs aloud at the revelation. He points at Suki in uncontrollable laughter, trying to get out a sentence that ends up becoming incomprehensible babbles.

"I think Sparky over here has too," Toph sneers, and Zuko reaches for a glass of some drink that he can't decipher just to prove her wrong, but Katara pulls it out of his reach as she scrolls through her phone. They play cat-and-mouse for a minute across the table before Katara picks up the glass and hands it to Toph, earning her a scowl and pout from Zuko.

She excuses herself as she brings the phone to her ear, walking outside of the club and only tripping once on her trip so she can successfully take the phone call. Zuko cheers when Toph slides him the glass, which by the immediate, pleasant burn in his throat, he can now tell is whiskey.

The burn is so good.

He can tell why it was addictive now that he goes back.

After a minute of Suki softly speaking with Yue, and of Toph muttering about how she should go and get another drink, Katara comes back in looking much more refreshed. Her hair, which was slightly disheveled before, is now back to its perfect state, and her previously lax and calm face is now back to its normal tautness.

"I called Aang to come pick us up, but because none of us are fit to drive and there isn't enough room I called Sokka too." She says matter-of-factly, and Zuko nods tiredly. The adrenaline from the dancing is wearing off quickly from the alcohol, and he rubs his eyes with the pads of his fingers, most likely messing up all of his makeup.

There's a sick feeling churning in his stomach, and whether it's from all the drinks he's just had or the sense that he *should* be reacting to something but he isn't, Zuko can't tell.

Katara leads them outside, pulling Zuko because he's stumbling so much and can't even stand straight, and Suki who supports Yue with one arm and helps to lead Toph—even if she does have her cane—with the other. Zuko has no idea how he's only drunk *a little* more than Suki, Toph, and Katara, yet they all look stone-cold sober compared to him and Yue (save a few drunken chortles and small trips).

The outside air hits him like a truck, and his eyes have grown so used to the dark rooms and flashing lights from *Déjà Vu* that the yellow street lamps look even brighter in contrast. He shivers in the cold night air, and wonders how Suki and Toph feel even less dressed than he is. They lean against the wall, Yue having the brilliant idea to play rock-paper-scissors, and losing to Zuko every round and groaning every time, never admitting defeat until “one more” rang in his ears.

A motorcycle revved from down the street and slowed to a stop in front of the club, and within thirty seconds Aang's SUV was parked behind it. Zuko's back was turned to the two vehicles, but he heard Katara babbling to both of the drivers, and Suki calmly leads them over mid-match. As he's walking backward, Yue finally wins when Zuko accidentally plays scissors to her never-changing rock, and they both shriek in victory. He laughs with her and Suki, who has been silently watching the whole time, and loses his balance when he steps down from the curb.

It's like a movie, and it shouldn't be so graceful and cliché. Sokka comes up behind him and catches Zuko, resting his back against his chest. “Careful.” He mutters, smile visible and creasing his features as he pushes Zuko's gently back onto the sidewalk. Zuko is at a standstill, forgetting everything that ever was or wasn't between them mere minutes ago.

He leans in, grabbing the collar of his leather jacket, and kisses a pretty guy, because that's all that Sokka is right now. A pretty guy.

He laughs harder than he has all night when they separate, and his friends and Sokka are completely silent, yet Zuko is too much in a daze to care.

“You gonna take me home lover boy?” Zuko smirks at Sokka, hands smoothing out the collar he just ruined. The adrenaline and drinks coursing through his veins and making his confidence higher than it has been all night, higher than it has been in a *long* time. Someone gasps and that makes Zuko double over in laughter again.

“Zuko you tease!” A high, airy voice yelps out, but Zuko is laughing too much and his head is too foggy for him to figure out who it is.

“Sokka will you take him... We live together, actually... You're the room... He never told you... Never... I thought he knew... I've known since... Why'd you ditch at... I should've known... You are all idiots... How did it take so long...” Bits of the conversation float in and out through Zuko's ears, but he leans his head against Katara, who has pulled him up from the concrete, with tired, slowly blinking eyes.

“Zuko? Buddy?” He almost fell asleep on her shoulder, but lifts his head with a hum when his name is called. “You’re going to go home with Sokka on the motorcycle, you have to hold on tight to him, okay?” She’s talking like a teacher to a kindergartener, but Zuko appreciates it as that’s the only way he’ll retain information in this state.

He hops on the back of the motorcycle after Sokka climbs on and Aang clips the helmet onto his head, and he hooks one arm around the man in front of him as he waves to his friends goodbye. They slowly disappear as they drive off, and Zuko finds himself wrapping both arms around Sokka and placing his head on his back.

“You okay back there?” Sokka asks as they idle at a red light. Zuko is woken from his near slumber, instinctively gripping tighter when he realizes where he is again, but nods in reassurance. He’s so tired and just wants to get home to his bed.

But home means his roommate, and Zuko somehow knows that that doesn’t mean a good thing.

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Zuko supposes he must have fallen asleep because he wakes up in his bed. Everything is normal, his vanity is exactly how he left it, boots by the door, hair still down, and a mess from sleeping in it. Everything is perfectly ordinary, and Zuko is left staring at the ceiling remembering everything that happened last night. He rubs a hand in his eyes and groans out from the worst headache of his life, looking up when he feels rough fabric falling on his face.

It’s a leather jacket.

The pretty man, the kiss, the suggestive comment.

*“You’re going to go home with Sokka.”*

Oh no.

## Chapter End Notes

You know what it is....

[tumblr](#)

# Wicked words

## Chapter Notes

Im not ready to say goodbye yet, but here is the final chapter. This is the one I am most proud of. I'll see you at the end!

Enjoy!

(Chapter title is from Goody by Glass Animals, the song also written below)

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

Oh no.

Oh no no no no no.

Zuko bolts upright, groaning out when a sharp pain hits his temple. He puts his cold hands up to it, soothing the throbbing for a temporary moment. It comes back as he tries to focus on details from last night, growing increasingly frustrated when bits and pieces of memories pop into his mind, wanting to throw something when the most cohesive memory is kissing Sokka.

Cold lips from the night air pressing into his, making him soar higher rather than bringing him back down to earth. It was warm, the rush of adrenaline made his skin hot and his smile wider, his laughter heavier and his cheeks redder. Sokka felt cold, but he was warm in all the right ways.

*Sokka.*

That was his name. Sokka was Katara's brother, and Sokka was also his roommate. Sokka made him smile, and he was a shoulder to lean on, but he also inflicted pain. He's two different people, one covered by a veil and another out in the open. One with malice, another with sympathy. One with selfishness, and one with generosity. One evil, one good. One sweet, one sour. Two sides of the same coin. One polished and the other green with weather and traversing the bumpy roads of life. Different but not separate.

And now that Zuko has it all figured out, now that he knows who Katara's brother is, and now that he is presented with the truth of the past few weeks, he asks himself the ultimate question.

Who is the real Sokka? Who is the one that Zuko wants, and who is the one that Zuko fears? Which one is the valued head, and which one is the tail that gets kicked to the curb

But aren't they the same coin?

Before last night, before this understanding happened, he had wanted Sokka, his roommate, just for him. He was a pretty man who made him smile and laugh, a pretty man who taught him longing and patience, a pretty man who listened and talked and made him feel. And that was who he kissed, the pretty man.

But he was also a person he had to stay distanced from, for fear of drowning or burning or bruises on skin. Zuko feared Sokka, the old Sokka—the *original* Sokka—as much as he does now. He never disliked him then, but he's unsure if he dislikes him now.

Because wasn't Sokka also the one who made him smile and laugh through a screen? Wasn't Sokka always being a caring person who listened and contributed to a useful conversation, albeit through a veil? Didn't Sokka have to know his own mistakes, because Zuko made them apparent?

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. How could he be so stupid?

Zuko never wants to leave his bed. He wants to bask in the morning daylight, clenching his sheets as he remembers every moment with Sokka, online or not, and every mistake Zuko would have made to make himself drift away.

Sokka, Katara's brother on Twitter, had gradually grown distant as well. He stopped taking interest in conversation, and barely even talked about his roommate.

Which was Zuko.

He fucked up. He really, really fucked up.

It hurt so bad he could cry. He leaned forward, gripping his sides and only being able to grab onto rough leather, and buried his head into his comforter. He wanted to cry, he really did, it would have felt so good to let it out, but he couldn't. He caused this pain on himself, so it would be a waste to drown in misery. It's better to face his demons. He's hidden for so long, might as well start dealing with them now.

Zuko mumbled and scorned as he stumbled out of bed, cringing with yesterday's uncomfortable clothes still on him, shifting into strange angles from sleep. He grabs a towel and comfortable clothes, slipping out of his room with them clutched close to his chest.

The apartment is empty, cold, and unoccupied. The morning sun filtering through the shades would be the perfect lighting for waking up after falling asleep on the couch, or brunch meetings with a light clattering of silverware and giggles accompanied with gossip. The dust that flies and taints the air so beautifully would be a perfect background for someone whose eyes are brighter than the sun itself, and that squint and crinkle with domestic smiles and hearty laughs. It's quite a shame the space is never used, and the air is always thick and piercing, not light and airy.

He takes a brisk shower, only to wash the day-old grime and sweat off of him and to detangle his hair, and to mainly thoroughly brush his teeth to get rid of the dry taste of alcohol and borderline bile in his throat. His head is still pounding, a ring of pain around the perimeter of his forehead, and he downs the last of his painkillers with the water foaming from the faucet.

As he wipes the dribble of spit from his chin, he closes the loudly running tap just in time to hear the front door open, keys jingling and footsteps starting and stopping sporadically before the sound of crushing cushions signals that Sokka had sat on the couch.

Zuko grabs the towel and begins to pat his hair, mindlessly opening the door as he does so. A familiar beat starts up once he does so, but disappears when Sokka leans his head around to see where the noise came from. He turns around fully when he sees Zuko, a thud from a phone hitting the couch.

“Hey,” Is all the bastard says, with a smile meant to be the equivalent of a warm hug in blistering wind. But all it is is a shot to the heart that twists and wraps around it, daring for it to pound too heavily or blood would ooze out from being cut by the string. Zuko feels the wounds burning and opening the more that Sokka stares, feels them grow even though they should fade as the haunting smile starts to falter.

“Hi,” Zuko whispers out because it's all that he can manage. His voice is even more horrible than it already is, raspy and threatening from not being used. He throws the towel back into the bathroom, slipping from the vanity and onto the floor, before slowly walking over to the kitchen. His headache still hadn't subsided, and the nausea only got worse after seeing Sokka, so it takes him a minute just to be able to grip onto the fridge for balance.

Sokka clears his throat as Zuko grabs a bottle of water, chugging half of it in a matter of seconds. “I brought *Camila's*. Carbs help with hangovers.” He nods his head to the counter, where a telling white paper bag sits untouched. While it would be the most inviting sight in the world to Zuko, the thought of eating with his dry lips and dehydrated body is not the most appealing.

“Thanks but no thanks. I don't exactly have an appetite right now.” Zuko leans his forehead against the cool door of the fridge, sighing in relief when the minimal condensation soothes his migraine. Every headache he's ever had combined is nothing in comparison to being hungover.

"Did you take any painkillers?" Sokka asks just for the sake of conversation. Zuko nods even if Sokka can't see him behind the column that supports the ceiling and connects to the peninsula, because it's all that he's able to do. The couch seems inviting, a haven from the hell he's put himself into, but the demon he's spawned rests upon it, silently banishing him from any comfort.

The familiar beat that Zuko heard coming outside the bathroom starts up again after a moment. Zuko lifts his head in response to it, memories of last night filtering in, before a rush of sweat and closed eyes and confidence that he never knew possible come rushing back once the chorus begins.

*"Mind my simple song, this ain't gonna work*

*Mind my wicked words and tipsy topsy smirk*

*I can't take this place, I can't take this place*

*I just wanna go where I can get some space."*

It's laced with freedom and confidence and whatever Zuko isn't experiencing right now. It's fun and laughter and pointing middle fingers up into the air. It's bright and loud and colorful, everything that life should be because it's just that. It's life. It's giggling with the people who are there for you even though they don't know your story. It's having a clean slate when the board was filled with powdery chalk that so desperately needs to be washed away. It's waking up in the morning without a care in the world and bouncing up to get the day started because you have everything to look forward to. That's what this is. This is everything.

The way Zuko sees himself dancing alone, singing words that he memorized years ago. The way that he moves like he knows that this is everything, even in his drunken state. It's all so freeing. A portion of Zuko was able to leave the past behind for a few hours. He was able to be himself, arms in the air shouting and laughing with Toph, all captured by Katara's shaky hand and posted to her Instagram story. He wants to be just that, a little bit of himself that's aided by alcohol to become something completely original and *alive*.

"Shit!" Sokka swears out suddenly, eyes wide and suddenly on Zuko. The music turns off and the adrenaline starts rushing in, and the shout makes Zuko jump back. "Fuck, you scared me. Shit, sorry dude." He huffs for a moment, Zuko lightly scanning his eyes over the expressions of panicked Sokka and memorizing any part of him he hasn't seen already. His roommate gestures to the open spot on the couch next to him after another huff and a second of silence. "Here, come sit."

The grip Zuko has on the armrest is deadly, white-knuckled, and daring, but it grounds Zuko to stay in the present and not to reminisce on something that he isn't. He focuses on the flashing images on the T.V., the sitcom that Zuko never got around to watching, airing reruns with mocking laugh tracks at horrible puns caused by a poorly written plot and dialogue. Even though he has many negative things to say about it, the show distracts Zuko from his thoughts and the man who has a deathly grip on his heart. The outdated outfits of the characters remind him of Mai's "retro-slash-vintage" style (in her own words), the fake smiles and audiences laughter are sickly similar to that of Ty Lee's bubbly and constantly optimistic personality, and the one character who seems to be the only one with an attitude and who represents actual human emotions is strangely reminiscent of his sister.

Sokka is silent as well, something that Zuko allows himself to at least note. One quick, innocent glance lets him know that Sokka was also paying attention to the show, and if it was for the same reasons Zuko was acutely interested to know. He still felt eyes roaming his body, small looks, and diversion of eyes in Zuko's direction that seemed extremely obvious in comparison to what they were probably aimed to be. The tension and the weight of the air sets in with the dust suddenly, squashing Zuko's shoulders and making his skin feel hot and itchy. Sokka shifts as well, apparently being affected much more compared to Zuko.

Yet after a minute, Sokka clears his throat.

"I see you're wearing my jacket," Sokka points out. Zuko looks down after a confused look crosses his face, realizing that after his shower, he had mindlessly put the jacket back on (but could you blame him? It smells like cologne *and* it's warm and fuzzy on the inside). He thinks, after a second, that it's quite an obvious statement, possibly spilling over into a

dangerous teasing area that they haven't reached yet. But then he realizes that playful banter is useful for getting out of awkward situations, and this is most likely Sokka's escape. Zuko can play along for a bit, even if he's nowhere near up for it.

"Well, yes. I woke up with a jacket around me, and so I wore it." Zuko also points out the obvious, a slight lift in his tone to emphasize the joking manner. If he comes off too harsh, he'll never forgive himself, and if he's mistaking Sokka's conversation starter as something he's genuinely upset at, it'll only lead to disaster.

"Yes but I see you've changed, so you would have had to take the jacket off, and then go and put it back on again." Zuko's stomach sinks with the realization of being caught, and the sex appeal that comes with the way Sokka smirks and leans his head in Zuko's direction leaves his cheeks on the brink of burning. "So, therefore, you are purposefully wearing my jacket."

Zuko sucks in his lips and squints at Sokka in a menacing glare for the purpose of intimidation while he figures out how to make a comeback, which seems to fail miserably with how Sokka raises his eyebrows up and down with a wide grin. Words are on the tip of his tongue, but he's running out of time until he either loses (when it became a game Zuko has no clue) or the silence devours the two of them alive.

"If I see a fuzzy, comfortable jacket that smells nice draped around my shoulders, you bet your *ass*," he pointed at Sokka's chest for added effect, the tip of his finger grazing the fabric of the loose tank, "I'm going to wear the *shit* out of it." He thinks he's won, that he can lean back and cross his arms with a pointed glare and celebrate his small victory.

But Sokka's sinister smile makes his stomach drop in all the wrong ways once more. "You think I smell nice?" It comes off rolling off of Sokka's tongue, heavy but tone lifted in amusement to accompany the smile that Zuko loves and hates at the same time, never knowing when the coin will flip in his favor. The strings around his heart turn black, they tighten so much it begins to turn blue before it bleeds out. Zuko looks around the room for assistance, even though he knows he won't find any. He takes a sip of his water to stall his response.

After a minute of contemplative silence, Sokka is still waiting for an answer, apparently trying to revel in his "victory". Zuko inhales. "Well," he begins, bringing a hand that was previously pressed to his lips in thought back down to his lap. He shrugs, "Yeah, I do."

It wasn't meant as a joke, and it doesn't seem to render to Sokka as one. Zuko's throat goes dry at the way chapped lips part, and he takes another sip of his water as he glances away. The air is thick, the weight of needing more banter and light laughter becoming increasingly unbearable. Sokka sighs after a moment, and Zuko looks over to see he has his head leaned back into the cushions with a hand covering his face.

"We should really talk about that stuff, shouldn't we?" Sokka breathes out muffled, peeking in between his fingers to look at Zuko before slapping his hand down to his thigh. The sudden eyes on him startle Zuko and his cheeks threaten to visibly burn once more, but he dismisses the feeling as he glances at the floor.



“Talk about what, me enjoying how you smell?” Zuko tries to joke. It doesn’t work. They’re well beyond the point between where words mean nothing and the point where they begin to hold emotion and vulnerability.

Zuko hates those words, “we should talk”. It’s ambiguous yet ominous at the same time, as if it’s a bad thing, which in one situation it is, while in another it isn’t. No one enjoys confrontation. It’s like being cornered into doing something with no escape, unbearable and inescapable. It’s terrifying that someone can have that power over you with just three words. Yet sometimes confrontation is necessary, to end something toxic or just to communicate and save something neither person knew was slipping away. The words in themselves, the duality that they can hold, is what makes Zuko despise the phrase.

“That...” Sokka plays it off for the sake of awkwardness not consuming them whole, leaving them dry-mouthed and unable to utter a single word, “and other stuff. Like...” Sokka trails off defeated and searching for words, swallowed by the sharp-toothed monster that is the atmosphere which continues to hunt both of them and what little they can continue to cling on to. It prowls at the edge of the cliff, growling and biting on the fraying rope of commonalities and communication. When it snaps, they both will fall to their doom.

“Like?” Zuko urges on, for the sake of not falling once again.

“Like,” Sokka huffs out trying to find the words, “Like the Twitter messages and the coffee hour and the kiss. That stuff.”

*Yeah. That.*

Zuko swallows and nods, running his hand through his hair just to busy himself with something other than the empty water bottle. Sokka turns down the T.V., the remote clattering loudly on the coffee table. Zuko watches it teeter, and then rock to a stop on the finished wood. The man in front of him has now completely turned to face him, and Zuko does the same, getting comfortable in bending his legs and pulling them on the cushions. Zuko leans his back into the headrest, while Sokka props one elbow onto the back of the couch. Sokka looks up at the ceiling as if in silent prayer, before looking back down and pointedly avoiding Zuko’s gaze.

Sokka takes a breath (and Zuko’s glad because he’s sure as hell not talking first) and fiddles with his hands, thumbs and forefinger pinching the flesh of his palm before he fists them into his lap and raises a determined gaze at Zuko. He’s thrown off by the intensity of it.

“Zuko, I just want to start by saying that I really, really do like you. Like, a lot. Like *a lot*, a lot.” Zuko’s cheeks finally burn and he grins despite himself. “It was never a lie or something I played off of just for you to talk to me online. Since the moment I saw you, catching me shirtless in the kitchen,” they both lightly giggle, the air lifting, the sun-speckled dust rising, “I found you attractive and I took a romantic interest in you.” It’s stated slowly and awkwardly as if Sokka has to digest every single syllable as he begins to preface everything.

Sokka talks with his hands and his mouth turns up when he says something awkward, and Zuko knows that it itches to fly to the back of his neck. There’s a light blush on his cheeks, and this is how Zuko knows that he’s being genuine. The worries don’t magically disappear,

the thoughts and fears still reside somewhere deep in his chest, but at that moment Zuko can smile lightly and look and Sokka fumbling over words and overexpressing himself. It's cute, adorable even, and while Zuko idolizes Sokka to be seen to express himself so easily with internal difficulty, especially for someone who seems to wear their heart on their sleeve, he can't help but be drawn in even closer. The strings loosen and are instantaneously replaced with a cool to combat all of the warmth, and it's not freezing or a forbidden cold touch. It's a light breeze of wind on a scorching summer's day, a kiss on the cheek after lips become cool with ice pops. It's all so wonderful in the way his heart clenches, wrapping itself around the blazing strings and trying to extinguish it.

“Romantic interest, hmm?” Zuko raises his eyebrows while sucking in his lips to hide his grin. Sokka gives him a dead glare, and Zuko allows himself to let out a laugh because if that blush was real then Sokka wouldn't give a shit about what Zuko does at that moment. And he's right. He knows he's right. Because Sokka softly chuckles with Zuko, eyes squinting and bright and like they were never meant to hurt at all. Alive and roaring like the sea. Speckles of foam flying into the air with each bubble of laughter and every rise and fall of a chest. The strings unravel, falling, dropping, descending, into the depths of his stomach, dark and untraveled, where they can rest for eternity in peace.

“Yes, a romantic interest, don't fucking patronize me.” Zuko giggles again. “But serious talk for a sec? I really do like you. Everything I said online I wouldn't have actually said to you. I got caught up in the anonymity of social media and being a coward and not talking to *actual* you.” He takes another breath, “I don't want... I don't want you to think what I said is what I think of you—what I only think of you. But it's true. I thought those things—still do—and I know that makes me a douche but if you were able to know even a small portion of the feelings that I do have of you, then it was all worth it.”

Zuko's still riding that high. The high of Sokka saying the feelings are mutual. The high of Sokka blushing and being awkward and laughing with mirth. The high of *Sokka*. It takes him a moment, but he is able to register the fact that Sokka was never afraid of Zuko, never disliked him or drifted away, but was rather afraid that he himself would be their downfall. He was afraid that the strange yet specific compliments would come off as rude and insensitive to Zuko, and that not talking respectfully to one another would lead to their demise. And while Zuko wants to appreciate every word that Sokka is saying and listen with full understanding and optimism, that toxic part of his brain that feeds off of conflict growls in hunger.

“I appreciate that,” Zuko gulps after a minute, “I never took it the wrong way, don't worry. Just... online you and in person you are very different people and personalities. It's hard to know which one is genuine. 'Cuse, while you seemed—and I'll put it in your words—head over heels for me over messages and tweets, I wasn't the only one in your picture.” Sokka's face falls from a wide grin to somber and sunken.

“The girls and the dudes after Friday parties I'd almost run into by morning The instance with the coffee da- coffee hour.” He wanted to call it a date, but did they ever really decide that it was a date? A hangout, with their friends, as friends, that would have led them to their doom. “It just made me feel like I had no chance. I'd just... be that person you saw before going on a run. Nothing more, no matter how much I wished for it. I started to dislike you as

a person, as a friend and roommate. I never really stopped romantically liking you though, and I guess that just made it worse.”

“Worse how?” Sokka asks quickly, a guilty, gentle look on his face. Zuko wants to wipe it away, because none of this was Sokka’s fault. Maybe the “date”, but everything else was all Zuko. His fucked up past, his childish emotions, his naive behavior. It was all the cause of this spiral that he’s slowly descending now. The string snakes back up, almost as if it’s in reverse, wrapping itself slowly back around Zuko’s heart. He can feel that it’s painted blue, and stains everything that it touches until his insides are cold and bright.

“Worse in the sense... that I got worse.” The loops loosen before tightening, sickeningly slow, edging his destruction. “Confidence, social life, physical symptoms. The nightmares and sleep and everything were a *big* thing. I was really tired. I *am* really tired.” Zuko manages to laugh a little bit, despite everything.

“What happened that night?” Sokka says, and Zuko can see tears pricking his eyes. He doesn’t know why, but that sight makes Zuko hurt more than he has in the past couple of days combined. There’s a deadly grip, his heart turns black, blood dripping down the strings turning them from cyan to indigo to a deep crimson.

“The... nightmare?” Zuko raises an eyebrow. Sokka nods, slow and tired, yet eager to comply. Zuko takes a gulp. “I-I’m not good at talking about that stuff.” He shrugs defensive, his heart finally collapsing under the pressure, the glass shattering into small pieces, the sound of them clattering in his stomach never sounding in Zuko’s ears.

“Another time, I don’t-” he cuts himself off with a huff, “talking is good, but I’ve done a lot of talking, and I’m going to be doing even more. I’d prefer to leave the really traumatic shit for another day. I can’t-” The tears come fast, he pushes them down, they can’t resurface, not now. Now he’s being interrogated, forced into something he can’t escape.

Zuko licks his teeth to focus on something else, pushing his hair in front of his face behind his ear and leaning his elbow against the back of the couch, supporting his head. He waited for Sokka to say something, his eyes getting caught by where Zuko just tucked his hair.

"We don't..." Sokka started after a minute, taking another gulp of air. "We don't have to talk about that stuff if you don't want to. I don't want to push you to talk about stuff when it's already hard. I'm never going to be able to relate, but I just hope I can try to understand. This isn't meant to be quick and easy. We can take it slow."

Sokka reaches out a hand, the one not resting on the couch, and offers it to Zuko. He stares at it for a moment, eyes raking over calluses and lines creasing palms that look perfect and comfortable yet ominous and dangerous at the same time.

Zuko slowly and gently slides his hand towards Sokka’s. Their fingers turn up toward the sky and they measure the temperature and weight of their hands against each other before they intertwine. The string suddenly unravels and falls with such speed Zuko becomes sick, but he has a hand to hold which steadies him.

*We can take it slow.*

Despite himself, Zuko looks up from their little private scene of rubbing thumbs and twitching fingers and tosses a warm and hearty smile Sokka's way, eyes bright with appreciation and contentment. Sokka looks up too, blinking for a moment before grinning all the same with a breath. The bile in Zuko's throat becomes bearable, his headache subsiding, the nausea giving him a break before everything overwhelms him once again. He feels cold, nice and protected. It's a simple thing, respect for boundaries, but it's more than Zuko's felt in a long while. It might be toxic, unsafe, inescapable, but all those words have fled his mind in this very moment. He wants to take a picture, cherish this forever, but he supposes its best to be left with his memories, to reflect on without a flash tainting the image.

"Honesty is really important to me," Sokka says after a minute. His words are caught in his throat too, and Zuko finds comfort in it. "And if we're being honest... none of those one-night stands were real. There was no... passion or emotion in it. It was just- sex."

Zuko nods, but he catches Sokka's eye. He stops abruptly, finding that dullness that comes with secrecy. "But there's something more," Zuko says gently, but it holds so much power that Sokka gulps and is forced to hold a nervous gaze before it falls to their still holding hands. Zuko squeezes.

"I guess there was something... because I wanted there to be. I wanted passion and feeling and want, and I didn't get that from-" Sokka cuts himself off, drawing his hand away, looking ashamed.

"You didn't get it from me." Zuko says simply.

"And it was fake and horrible and not the real thing." Sokka explodes. Zuko runs hurtling back. "Because the real thing—the real thing has smiles and laughter that isn't caused by shots and parties. The real thing has want and not *need*. The real thing is holding each other and kisses on foreheads and basking with coy smiles and giggles in the afterglow." Sokka takes a breath. His feet have been firmly planted on the floor, caused by his flying heart rate and disposal of *everything*. He looks defeated, and while Zuko is tense in his corner, he has an ounce of sympathy left.

"And I never got the real thing." He says softly. "The real thing doesn't need passion. Passion makes it work, but it's not necessary. The real thing... The real thing is love. It's tender and gentle and soft and everything that life should be. It's domestic with mornings cooking breakfast and evenings huddled together on a couch. It's laughter both day and night." Sokka gulps again. Zuko eases his muscles. "It's *life*. And that's what I want. I want the passion and the power, but I *crave* the tranquil and domestic."

For the first time in the entire ordeal, Sokka finally looks over to Zuko. He offers a light smile, which Sokka huffs with a smirk at, rolling his eyes and leaning his head against the back of the couch. Zuko traces his thumb around the flesh of his palm, looking down and simply reflecting.

"We're similar that way," Zuko mutters without looking up, and he hears and senses a head-turning his direction, yet he keeps his focused gaze. "We already know what we have in common, I guess you could say that makes us compatible, but that's something rare you never find in many people. Some only want one side of the stick, the pleasure without any strings

attached. I understand those people, the fear of commitment, not wanting to limit yourself to someone and putting yourself in a box, fearing becoming manipulated and having no escape. I know because I've been there, so it's hard; for me and other people who fear being harmed while in any sort of relationship.

"But that's not what I want anymore." Zuko finally lifts his eyes, catching Sokka looking at him with an approving smile, filled with joy, appreciation, understanding, and everything Zuko should take as a sign to be unafraid. "I want exactly what you want."

Time doesn't stand still like Zuko wants it to. His stomach isn't liberated from the constant sinking and turning that he needs to be unchanged from. A spark doesn't ignite. Tension doesn't rise. They simply sit there, staring at each other with quickened heart rates and imploring eyes. Zuko can sense Sokka wants to itch closer just as much as he does, but he remains where he sits. A question still isn't answered. And Zuko will be damned if he doesn't get it out.

"The girl. On Friday." Sokka's Adam's apple trembles. "Was that not..." *what you wanted?*

Sokka is silent. Zuko's stomach churns so hard he leans to grab onto the arm of the couch to steady himself, bringing the back of his hand to his mouth when the bile dares to spill up. Sokka mistakes it for his handover acting up, turning quickly and ready to jump up to stand should Zuko lose control. The headache is painful and unbearable, filled with the thought that Sokka found what he wanted, and Zuko was too late.

"Answer the fucking question." Zuko hisses out with the hell of his hand pressed into his temple, tears daring to spill over. This isn't what should have happened. The pain. The hurt. It should have been Zuko.

"It was," Sokka breathed out. Zuko scoffs and looks away. He blames Sokka for leading him on in a hopeless search for something unattainable, but he himself is the reason for the fall. The culprit and the victim all in one. He caused this horrible spiral that only he descends-

"But it wasn't the right person."

Zuko spins over with wide eyes. Now is when time stops. This is where both their hearts halt in welcome tension. This is what it should have been the first time.

Sokka pours himself out. His voice like thick and rich wine slipping slowly into a glass. "You're that person, Zuko. You're who I want, who I've always wanted. It took me forever to realize it, because I was looking for what I wanted to feel. And then once I got it, it was all wrong." He takes a breath. Zuko never moves, his broken heart breaking more in the best ways possible. "It wasn't with you. And that's what I want."

Sokka leans forward, gently bringing a hand up to Zuko's cheek. Zuko doesn't flinch, tears falling out of his eyes that are wiped away by Sokka's thumb, the edge of his scar being traced with love.

"I want you."

*I want you.*

*You, you, you, you, you.*

That's the mantra in Zuko's mind as he rushes forward. The words he tries to speak silently as he kisses Sokka. As tears fall and hands rake in hair. As arms wrap and giggles spill over. As bodies are pushed backward and fingers trail.

*You, you, you, you, you.*

*I want you.*

And isn't that what everyone wants? To be wanted?

"Speak in full sentences next time you idiot," Zuko mutters against a tanned neck he never knew he'd be so close to. But now that he is, he can't get enough of it. Cheeks and jaw lines and lips and necks are peppered in kisses, domestic laughter that they spoke of coming true and filling the air. It's raw and new, and that's what makes it oh so sweet. It's bright orange and sprinkled in dust, but desperate hip-grabs and kisses that dare to leave marks make it red. Crimson and alarming.

But Zuko is loving the way that red feels with Sokka right now.

"I want you too," Zuko says breathlessly, coming up from the underside of Sokka's chin to successfully talk to him with eye contact, though he continues to get distracted by the bright purple work he's created. He lays his hands on Sokka's shoulders, sitting up straight. "I really do. I love this. This is great, wonderful even, and I *really* want this." He gestures down, and Sokka laughs. If Zuko wasn't red yet, he sure is now.

Zuko would have never known this if the universe didn't decide to give him a break at this very moment, but Sokka's eyes are gorgeous when looking down at them. His pupils are blown until they make the cerulean turn navy blue. It's beautiful. All of Sokka is beautiful.

"But not right now." Sokka smiles up at him, that smirk Zuko knows all too well. It makes his stomach flip for all of the right reasons. His heart soars higher than it's had in the past three minutes.

"Not right now." Zuko pets brown hair because it's what he's wanted to do for so long. It's addicting. All of Sokka is addictive.

"This, us. I'm willing to try it." Dangerous words with an effect that can change everything, yet Zuko doesn't care. Nothing matters right now except for the preservation of this. Of them.

And he has to be right and Sokka has to agree because they stare at each other forehead to forehead, nose to nose, and Sokka nods. He kisses the top of Zuko's head and he nods. Emphatically and with enthusiasm that Zuko can't help but laugh and giggle in joy.

"I'm so glad I got to kiss you properly," Sokka laughs after they pull away, "I would have hated myself if I never got this."

“Yeah, well you better not get sick of this anytime soon.” Zuko replies, flattening Sokka’s hair because it’s so pretty. Everything about Sokka is *so* pretty.

“Never,” Sokka half-laughs, half-sighs out. “Not in a million years.”

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Zuko crouches down in his closet, pulling out the box he never thought he’d open, but insisted on bringing when he’d moved. It’s small but heavy, so he pushes it with his feet until he’s able to get it onto the hardwood floor and pick it up to place on his vanity. He grabs the scissors he brought from the kitchen, and with a deep breath tears into the tape.

The first item wrapped in bubble wrap and parchment paper, placed on top with extreme delicacy, is a framed family portrait. His mother looks healthy and well, his father like a respectable upper-class working man, and Azula looks like a typical young lady in a pleated dress on top of her mother’s lap. While it seems so far away, as if he’s a completely different person, Zuko knows that who he was so long ago with his father’s hand on his shoulder is the same person as who he is now.

Although it’s painful and distant. It’s his past. It’s his family. And it’s something he should preserve.

He sets it down on his vanity, creating a pile of things he wants to move into the living room.

The next is the same shape as the first one, but the picture is of Lu Ten, his sister, and him building a sandcastle at the beach house their family used to own, with Iroh in the water beckoning them to come and join him. Smiles and waves are caught in place by the off chance that his mother decided to snap a picture. Another is of Katara, Toph, Yue, Suki, and him at a picnic in the campus park, with wide smiles and raised champagne glasses at Aang behind the camera. He puts the one of his family in the pile but takes the photo of his friends out of the frame and gently folds it to fit in his wallet.

The final wrapped frame is of Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee. He remembers taking the photo on an old camera he found in their attic, and the group had decided to go to the country club and do a photoshoot. None of the pictures had come out as Zuko wanted. They were so staged and unnatural, but this moment he was lucky enough to capture, and he framed it out of pride. It was the three ladies sitting on the edge of the fountain in the driveway to the club, lost in conversation with heads leaned back and eyes wide in attention. It was how they were naturally, and Zuko loved it. This one would be moved into their bedroom.

At the bottom of the box is the journal Zuko kept from his recovery. Only a few pages were filled, and they were half-assed attempts of being able to jot down everything in his mind and get it over with so his therapist would be happy with the little he had done. There were scribbles of frustration on other pages, sketches and mantras of all the ways Zuko was pathetic. He shifted it to the side of the box, not having a place for it just yet.

Two more items remained. A cheap paper admission ticket for a carnival and a long velvet box. These were both memories from Jet. The ticket came from their first date. They decided

to visit the traveling carnival that had come to town that week, and they only had one ticket remaining. Jet had told Zuko to keep it, and so his hopeless romantic self did.

Zuko rips it with no remorse, tossing it into the garbage with a lingering memory of flashing lights and the taste of nicotine at the top of a Ferris wheel that leaves as soon as the stray pieces of paper fall into the bag.

The velvet box opens with a restraining creak, the black, glass heart necklace shining inside. A gift that was given on an anniversary, whose only purpose served at a fidget when fights broke out.

Zuko tosses it in the trash as well but keeps the velvet box. Inside he places a photo-booth strip, images of Sokka and him smiling and making goofy faces before a tender kiss at the end. It's cheesy, but Zuko loves cheesy, and he loves Sokka.

He pulls his phone out from his jean pocket, opening his contacts app. There he scrolls down to the letter *T*, and finds who he's looking for.

As the ringing drones in his ear the sound of the door opening registers in Zuko's mind. Sokka has come home from his run, blowing a kiss to Zuko from the entryway from where Zuko peaks his head out of the door and rolls his eyes in a playful manner.

He got 'the cute'.

"Zuko?" A surprised voice, light and airy, wafts into his phone, pulling him from his own revelation.

"Hi, Ty Lee," he huffs out, a high pitched giggle on the other end. A screech, a call to someone in the distance.

It's time. He's ready.

"It's been a while."

Let go.

Chapter End Notes

Hello all you beautiful people. I'm currently crying while writing this, because I am not ready to let this fic go. You have all been so supporting throughout the entirety of it, and I appreciate your patience with me. This fic helped me to connect with the community, grow as a writer, and gain inspiration for future projects. This was the constant in the many changes of my life. This is what I looked forward to after long days, and also what I procrastinated on in fear it would go so quickly, which it did.

I would love to give a very special thanks to [@freckledsokka](#) over on Tumblr for allowing me to use the silly little idea that transformed into the fic it is today. Thank you so much for continuing to support me, and sharing your gorgeous idea to Tumblr where it ended up with someone as unsuspecting as me.

I would also like to thank my two best mutuals who have supported this from pretty much day one— and even before then. Please check out [@betrothedzukka](#) and [@hello-yue-here](#). I love you both so much, and I have no clue what I'd do without you guys allowing me to bounce ideas off of you, and you hyping up my fics so much. Please go check out both of their writings, they are both incredible.

And finally I'd like to thank you. The reader that may have been here from day one. Or the person who binge-read my entire fic in a day. You are who got me here. You are the reason I kept writing. You are the reason I will always write again. Because you all make me feel wonderful.

And now, it is with my greatest pleasure to announce I will be writing a Greatest Showman zukka-centric atla AU. Filled with circus acts, yueki and mailee, angst, character development, and everything you should expect in a Zukka fic. I have no clue when it is coming out, but it will come out, and I will put my greatest effort into it.

So I guess this is goodbye for now. See you all later.

End Notes

They're idiots your honor.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!