

I wanna see the sun rising anywhere but here

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by [LJF](#)

Summary

Iroh had received an offer that was too good to be true.

Meanwhile, Aang, Katara, and Sokka had an encounter with someone they'd met in the past-- and discovered some *very* concerning things.

Notes

Thanks for brainstorming with me!

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

"Oh, this could be the only chance we get."

- The Rescues, "Break Me Out"

"This is a *terrible* idea," said Toph, scowling. "I can't believe you would agree before discussing it with us!"

Zuko sighed. She and Uncle had been arguing for the past half hour, and neither of them seemed willing to budge.

"I apologize for that," Uncle said, his calm demeanor a stark contrast to Toph's frustration. "It was such a good offer that I had to grab it before it could get away."

"And that's part of the problem!" Toph exclaimed. "It's *too* good of an offer! What kind of person would give some no-name refugee their own shop in the Upper Ring, no strings attached?"

"Someone who recognizes good tea when he tastes it," replied the old man. "I do not understand what it is about this situation that has you so concerned. *You* are the one who said we needed to get out of this apartment and into a house made of stone-- which we'll never be able to afford as long as we stay in the Lower Ring."

"You don't get it, do you?" The young woman shook her head. "We came to this city because it was *safe*. Because we could hide in plain sight as ordinary refugees and stay out of sight from the rest of the world. It's easy enough to stay out of notice *here*, but the Upper Ring is *crawling* with nobles and generals and... other people who would *love* to get their hands on a couple of Fire Nation royals."

"What difference does it make to you?" Zuko spat out. "It's not like *you're* in any real danger. Even if we *do* get found out, you'll be fine. You can just tell them that we kidnapped you or something. If you're lucky, they might even send you back home to Mommy and Daddy. You should be *glad* for the chance to be rid of us once and for all."

He didn't know why he said it. (It wasn't like he cared one way or another about the stupid tea shop.)

That's a lie.

He said it because he was *tired*. Tired of this stupid city with its stupid laws and stupid wall and these stupid fake names. Tired of living in hiding. Tired of pouring tea. There was a part of him that *wanted* to be discovered, just because it would give him something to do-- someone to *fight*.

He was the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, and the flame within him was yearning for something to chase, something to hurt, something to *burn*. And since there was no Avatar in sight, he'd lashed out at the first chance he could get.

None of that made up for the shocked look on Toph's face. (Or the tears he noticed welling up in her eyes.)

He expected her to punch him. That was her *usual* response when he said something she didn't like. He wanted her to hit him, to yell at him, to *fight back*.

But she didn't. She just wiped her eyes and marched out of the apartment.

The door *slammed* close behind her.

(Hours later, she returned, and told Uncle that if this Upper Ring tea shop was what he *really* wanted, she'd go along with it.

"But I reserve the right to say 'I told you so' when it all blows up in our faces.")

The two of them were shopping in the Middle Ring when it happened.

Aang had had an unexpected afternoon off from his earthbending lessons-- his teacher had some kind of pressing family obligations-- and so he had decided to accompany her to the marketplace.

Katara had been grateful for the extra set of hands, of course, but she was struck with a sudden curiosity about this teacher. She'd never actually met him (or her), and Aang had never offered any information. She'd never thought about how strange that was. (Back when they'd first started looking for a teacher, she had just sort of assumed that whoever it was would come join their group, but that obviously hadn't happened.)

Distracted by these thoughts, she'd tripped on a stray pebble, landing ungracefully on her knees.

"Are you okay, Katara?" Aang asked, putting down the bags he'd been holding. But before she could respond, another hand appeared in front of her. She grabbed it, smiling gratefully at her rescuer-- and then gasped in horror, dropping the hand like it had burned her.

"What are *you* doing here?" She scowled, crossing her arms as their eyes met.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" The older boy seemed confused, but she didn't buy his act for a moment.

"Jet?!?" Aang said. Katara turned to look at her friend-- he looked worried, but somehow... not completely surprised. "You shouldn't be here."

"Jet?" He tilted his head. "That's... not my name."

"Of course it is!" Katara had no idea why Jet was acting like he didn't know them, but she *wasn't* going to go along with it. "As if--"

"Where are Longshot and Smellerbee?" Aang asked, interrupting her.

Longshot and Smellerbee? Jet had had over a dozen kids working with him-- why was Aang asking about those two specifically?

"Who?" Jet feigned ignorance. "Look, clearly you have me confused with someone else. My name's Shi, I've lived in Ba Sing Se my whole life, and I just moved here from the Lower Ring." He looked so... *innocent*. But Katara wasn't falling for another one of his acts.

"Katara!" Aang tugged her arm. "Something's wrong. *Really* wrong. We need to find Longshot and Smellerbee."

"Why--"

"It's the Dai Li," Aang said. "They've done something to him."

Katara noted the way Jet's face paled at the mention of Dai Li.

"What are you talking about, Aang? What do the Dai Li--"

"Katara." He looked *really* worried. "I can't really explain, but I *need* you to trust me. I'm going to the Lower Ring to find them. Can you bring Jet back to the house? We'll meet you there."

She had absolutely *no* idea what was going on, but it was clear that there was more to the story.

"Alright," she said, and he opened his glider and flew off.

"Look lady, I don't know who you are, and I'm certainly not going anywhere with you, so don't even bother asking." Jet said.

"Who said anything about asking?" Katara opened her canteen.

Sokka was sitting at the table writing down as many haiku as he could think of (he'd show those snobs at the poetry club!) when his sister walked in carrying what appeared to be a dead body.

"Katara!" He jumped up and ran over. "Did you kill someone? Because I know we've basically been given free reign in the city, but I don't think the Dai Li would-"

"I didn't *kill* him," she said, rolling her eyes. Then she dumped the probably-not-dead person on the rug.

"Is that *Jet*?" Sokka asked, finally looking at the unconscious guy's face. "What is *he* doing *here*?"

"I don't know," she said. "He was acting really weird, saying that his name was Shi and claiming not to recognize us. Aang said I should bring him back here."

"Where *is* Aang?" Sokka said, remembering that they'd left together.

"He went looking for some of the Freedom Fighters," Katara explained. "He also said something about the Dai Li?"

At the words *Dai Li*, their guest moaned, his body shivering slightly.

"What do *they* have to do with this?" Sokka knew that the so-called 'guardians of the city' were shady, but he couldn't see why they would be involved with *Jet*, of all people.

"I don't *know*, Sokka," said his sister, clearly frustrated. "You can ask Aang whenever he shows up."

It was only a few minutes later that the little airbender blew into the house, two kids Sokka vaguely remembered were named *Smellerbee* and *Longshot* right behind him.

"Jet!" Smellerbee ran over to her unconscious friend. Then she turned back to look at Aang. "*Where* did you say you found him?"

"In the Middle Ring," explained the monk. "He didn't seem to know who we were, and he was using a different name. Shi?"

Longshot blinked, tilting his head.

Jet stirred, opening his eyes.

"What did you *do* to me?" He sat up slowly, rubbing his head. "Where am I? Who are you people"

"Jet, it's us!" Smellerbee said. "We were so worried. How did you get away from the Dai Li?"

"What are you *talking* about?" Jet asked. "That's *not* my name. And I don't know you!"

"Alright, something's not adding up," Sokka said, cutting into the conversation. "What's this about the Dai Li?"

"They arrested him a few weeks ago," the girl explained. "We saw them drag him away!"

"That never happened!" Jet insisted. "I'm a peaceful, law-abiding citizen! In fact, I just got permission to move up to the Middle Ring last week!"

"Okay," said Sokka, rubbing his chin as he tried to puzzle this one out. "You say you saw Jet get arrested. He says that he *wasn't* arrested, and also that he *isn't* Jet. Aang, do you have any idea what's going on here?"

"Not really," said Aang. "I know that Jet got arrested, but I have no idea what happened to him afterwards, or how he ended up in the Middle Ring."

Sokka rubbed his forehead. *Dai Li. An arrest that didn't happen. A person with a different name. Or... two people with the same name!*

"That's it!" He jumped up, finally putting the pieces together. "Of *course* Jet doesn't remember anything. He's been brainwashed!"

"That's ridiculous!" Jet said. Katara looked thoughtful.

"Okay," Aang said, understanding. "You think it was the Dai Li?"

"Of course it was the Dai Li!" Sokka said, throwing his hands in the air.

"But how do we undo it?" Smellerbee asked, looking nervous.

"Let me try something..." Katara mused, filling her hands with water. She held them up to the sides of Jet's face, closing her eyes.

Aang watched as the water began to glow.

"Okay, Jet," she said, "I need you to think hard. What happened after the Dai Li arrested you?"

"They... took me... underwater..." Jet said, his brow furrowed. "Maybe... a lake!"

"Wait a second!" Sokka said. "Remember what Joo Dee said? She said she went on vacation to Lake Laogai!"

"Yeah... that was it. Lake Laogai."

"Alright, then that's where we need to go," Aang said, determined. There was something *wrong* with this city, and it had something to do with that lake.

When the six of them reached the banks of the lake, Aang paused.

"Wait," he said, holding up his hand. Concentrating, he dug his feet into the ground the way Sifu had taught him and *listened*. "Flaming hog-monkeys!"

He couldn't see *all* of it, but what he *could* see *shocked* him.

There was a *huge* system of tunnels and caves down there. Dozens of people were walking around, most of them with the firm but quiet steps he associated with the Dai Li. There was a room full of people saying... *something*, and other rooms with people in chains.

"What is it, Aang?" Katara asked, putting her hand on his arm.

"They've got some kind of secret headquarters down there!" Aang explained. "We've got to get out of here!"

"Shouldn't we investigate?" Sokka asked. "Not that I *want* to go down there or anything."

"No, I don't want to risk getting caught and brainwashed, too." Aang said. "But this is it. I'm done waiting around and listening to the Dai Li-- we're going to see the Earth King."

"Oh no," said Jet. "The three of us are getting *out* of this awful place." His two friends nodded.

"Can you help us?" Smellerbee asked.

"Alright," Katara said.

"Let's take Appa," Sokka said. "We can drop the Freedom Fighters outside of the city, and then fly him straight to the palace."

"Sounds good," Aang agreed.

As they flew towards the Upper Ring, Katara turned to Aang, finally asking a question she'd been puzzling over for a while.

"How did you know Longshot and Smellerbee were here in the city, or that Jet had been taken by the Dai Li?"

"Oh... right." Aang looked down, scratching his head awkwardly. "A friend of mine saw the three of them in the Lower Ring, and she told me Jet had been arrested. Apparently, he tried to attack her boyfriend or something?"

"So you've known that Jet was here for *weeks*, and you didn't tell us?" Sokka asked.

"I didn't want to worry you guys!" Aang explained. "He was in the Lower Ring, and he'd been arrested, so I figured it wasn't a big deal!"

"Alright," Katara said, understanding. "But next time something like that happens, you've got to tell us, okay?"

"Yeah," Sokka said. "Next to you run into someone we've fought with before, warn us!"

Aang looked down at the reins, not replying.

"Stupid clothespin," Zuko said, shaking his hand. They'd finally finished moving all of their things to the new apartment, and the first thing Uncle had done was wash a bunch of clothing and send Zuko up to the roof to hang them up. Somehow, he'd managed to pinch *himself* with one of the stupid pins.

Looking up, his eyes widened.

Is that... the Avatar's bison? It was flying right towards him. He watched as it flew right over the building, heading for the center of the Upper Ring.

It is him! He'd seen three figures on the bison's back, and one of them was *definitely* the Avatar. *Finally!* He left the basket of wet clothes next to the line and turned to head back inside.

All he had to do was get his mask and swords, track down the Avatar, and capture him! And then they could get *out* of this stupid city and go *home*.

"What are you doing?" Toph was standing in the doorway.

"I just saw the Avatar's bison," Zuko explained, his hand trembling with excitement. "He's here, in the city."

"So?" She crossed her arms, unfazed. "What does that have to do with us? We're refugees, remember?"

"Not *really*," he said. "Do you really *want* to be stuck in this city? If I capture him-"

"Then what?" Toph asked. "You're not an exile anymore-- you're a *fugitive*. What are you going to do, turn yourself in to the nearest Fire Nation squadron and let them drag you off to prison?"

"But if I have the Avatar-"

"-they'll just claim the credit for themselves and walk away with two prisoners," she said. "And don't tell me you think it's possible to get all the way back to the Fire Nation with the Avatar in tow, because you know it's not."

"I'll figure it out!" He tried to walk around her, but she reached her arms out and shoved him backwards.

"Zuko!" He froze. She almost *never* called him by his name, and she'd been *insistent* on using their fake names ever since they arrived in the city. "If you can't stop for once and think about *yourself*, at least think about Uncle."

"What *about* him?" He didn't understand what she was getting at.

"The old man *loves* you," she said. "You *do* know that, right?"

"*What?*" Of course he knew that.

"He left his whole life behind to follow you into exile, and even got himself branded a traitor," Toph said. "For *you*."

"And?" He *knew* all of that. She didn't need to make him feel any *guiltier*. Uncle was in this mess because of *him*. But now he had a chance to fix it!

"And if you *do* capture the Avatar and decide to drag him back to the Fire Nation, he'll gladly follow you," said Toph. "Because he cares about you, and he won't let you go off alone."

"So?" He knew it would be dangerous, but Uncle Iroh was the *Dragon of the West*. He'd be fine.

"So?" She threw her hands in the air. "Don't you *get* it? He's *happy* here."

"What are you-" Zuko stopped. He thought about everything that had happened to them since the disaster at the North Pole. He thought about how he'd tried to leave Uncle behind, only to see him again when he needed him most. He thought about how the White Lotus people had helped smuggle them into the city. He thought about Pao's shop, and how Uncle had enjoyed working there. He thought about how excited the old man had been when that investor offered him his own shop. He thought about how much Uncle Iroh had been smiling over the past few days.

"Are you really going to force him away just to drag him back into that fugitive life on the *off chance* you might actually be able to make it back to the Fire Nation? Really?" He noticed she didn't mention whether or not *she* would be coming along, and he didn't ask.

Zuko *groaned*, pressing his hands into his face.

She was *right*.

"...No," he said, finally.

"Good," she said, walking past him. "Now then, can I help you with this laundry?"

He followed after her, showing her where the line was, and they hung up the rest of the clothing in silence.

When they were finally done, he turned to look at her.

"Toph?" Zuko swallowed, thinking about what he'd said to her the other day. "I'm sorry."

"About what?" She feigned ignorance, but he could see a small smile curling up on her face.

"You going soft on me now, hothead?"

He laughed, feeling a weight lifting off of his chest.

"They'll carry on, won't notice we're gone."

- The Rescues, "Break Me Out"

End Notes

The name "Shi" comes from [EudociaCovert](#)'s incredible series, *[The Best Path](#)*, which I highly recommend.

Thanks to everyone who's been enjoying this so far. If you're binging reading this after the series is over, I recommend taking a break here, whether to get a drink or get some sleep. Next chapter is when things *really* start rolling.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!