

welcome to the island of misfits

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32080816) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32080816>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Major Character Death
Categories:	F/F , F/M , Gen , M/M , Multi
Fandom:	Avatar: The Last Airbender
Relationships:	Zuko & Zuko's Crew (Avatar) , Iroh & Zuko (Avatar) , Ozai & Zuko (Avatar) , Ursa & Zuko (Avatar) , Zuko & Zuko (Avatar) , Agni & Zuko (Avatar) , Zuko (Avatar) & Original Character(s) , Iroh (Avatar) & Original Character(s) , Original Characters/Original Characters
Characters:	Zuko (Avatar) , Iroh (Avatar) , Ursa (Avatar) , Agni (Avatar) , Zuko's Crew (Avatar) , Druk (Avatar) , Ran and Shaw , Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Gay Zuko (Avatar) , Hurt Zuko (Avatar) , Zuko is an Awkward Turtleduck , Protective Zuko (Avatar) , Zuko's Scar (Avatar) , Anxious Zuko (Avatar) , Zuko (Avatar) Needs a Hug , Zuko (Avatar) Needs Therapy , Zuko is the mother of dragons , Zuko (Avatar) whump , Zuko has a clue , Zuko realizes Ozai is a dick , Bad Parent Ozai (Avatar) , Ozai Being an Asshole (Avatar) , Iroh (Avatar) Loves Tea , Morally Ambiguous Iroh (Avatar) , Protective Iroh (Avatar) , Iroh is a Good Uncle (Avatar) , Iroh Adopts Zuko (Avatar) , Azula (Avatar) Redemption , Bending (Avatar) , Fire Nation (Avatar) , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of island of misfits
Stats:	Published: 2021-06-21 Updated: 2022-01-08 Words: 6,105 Chapters: 4/23

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by [hattersteatable](#)

Summary

zuko is banished and has a crew he's pretty sure can't tell their asses from their heads. oh and he realizes that ozai is a fucked up father (much to iroh's pleasure).

for coal to become a diamond, extreme pressure is needed

People always say that when you're asleep you look peaceful. The stress from life washes away as the baku spirits feed on nightmares and ensure a restful sleep. Your wrinkles relax, your brows set straight, and your mouth rests in a straight line.

Zuko didn't look peaceful.

He looked pained.

Every once in a while, a whimper would slip past his lips following a plea, and, rarely, a whispered "father".

Iroh's heart clenched in his chest each time his nephew's lips parted. He hoped Zuko would wake up every time, just to make sure that he *would* wake up. The nurse Ozai had allowed to work on him told Iroh that he shouldn't want Zuko to wake up during this part. That he would be in more pain than anyone could ever imagine. *That it was better if he didn't wake up at all* .

Iroh wasn't stupid. He knew what that meant. The nurse had no idea the cause of the Agni Kai, just that Zuko had disrespected his father and it ended in the Fire Lord's favor. All she knew was that the Crown Prince was now disgraced. *They couldn't have a disgraced ruler* .

He had no choice but to leave the room after that, feeling too sick to imagine how he would have to deal with Zuko's death. Especially death after succumbing to *that* injury.

The news was also delivered to Iroh that Zuko had been banished. It would be enforced in a week and if Zuko was still in Fire Nation territory, it would be cause for execution.

Read: Iroh had a week to get a ship and a crew together before his nephew's banishment was enforced and he would be sentenced to death in front of a crowd of royals and he would lose a second son.

(Iroh didn't allow himself to think that *Ozai probably wouldn't just execute Zuko, he would play with him like a catopus with its prey and make him wish—neigh, beg—for death first.*)

Luckily Iroh still had a few contacts in the military, navy, and army. He just hoped they would be willing to offer him a few hands for a crew. And maybe a ship

—

“This here is the finest ship you’re gonna get for the price you’re asking for, General,” Shiro grinned, slapping the side of *The Futekigō*. “She may be old but she works like a charm. Faster than all of these modern day boats, too. They load those with too much glamour, try an’ make ‘em all fancy. *The Futekigō* here could easily outrun a fleet of Zhao’s showboats.”

Shiro was an old Pai Sho friend of Iroh’s. They’d also been bunkmates at the Academy. Iroh went into the military and Shiro went into the navy but they always made sure to catch a game at the nearest bar whenever they landed in the same town.

He looks like a crazy man now, Iroh thought. I hope I don’t look like that.

The statement, however brash and rude, was true. Shiro’s left eye was lazy and his right one shined with the brutality and memory of war. He had a large scar across his forehead.

(“The savage came right at me with a spear,” Shiro had told Iroh one time, laughing and stroking the fresh scab. “Luckily I blasted him before he could try and do anymore damage. Fell right into the snow and sunk all the way down. Probably couldn’t find his body even if you tried.”)

His hair was frizzy from humidity and he failed to access a comb in his years of retirement, at least it appeared that way according to the mangle that it had grown into.

“And she will get us out of the Fire Nation in at least three days?”

“All the way to the Earth Kingdom, General Iroh.”

“Thank you, Shiro,” Iroh gave a small bow (not as low as the man deserved for being so helpful in the face of his nephew’s banishment but as low as he could go until he disgraced his own name.)

“Of course, General.” Shiro returned the bow. “My nephew is going into the navy soon. Perhaps you could request him to join you on your voyage.”

“What an excellent idea. What is his name?”

“Ruri. He just graduated. You’ll probably find him in the lower city. He does some... unfavorable activities in his free time, but he is one of the best soldiers you will ever find.”

—

“RURI, RURI, RURI!” Was the first thing Iroh heard as he walked into the most popular bar in the lower city; *the Lion Turtle*.

He directed his attention to the young man being helped on top of the wooden bar, a bottle of sake clutched in his hand (certainly empty judging by the sway the man had in every movement).

“I would like to thank the academy!” Ruri bellowed out, sparking laughter in his companions. “Not only the Naval academy, of course, but the theater academy as well. Fore without those senseless acting lessons, I would never have been able to lie my way through exams!”

His peers gave ‘whoops’ and pumped their fists in the air.

Iroh didn’t have that great of an impression, so far, but he would take what he could get.

“Excuse me, young man.” Iroh interrupted, weaving his way through the drunk and sweaty graduates. “I have a proposition for you.”

the square pegs in round holes

Chapter Summary

Zuko purposely avoids thinking about what happened when he is finally well enough to get up and walk around. Zuko is also very confused by the crew of the ship (specifically the girl with no arms).

Zuko was in pain. That was the only thing he felt at the moment—a blinding searing pain.

Blinding.

Zuko could almost laugh at that. It was funny. A blinding pain over a blind eye. A possibly-most likely-probably blind eye that Zuko couldn't open because it was crusted over in a gross scab that pulled and tugged against the rest of the blisters and blood-matted skin.

Every wince he made caused the linen bandages to scrape against the scar and that caused him to wince again. Zuko decided it was best to avoid any sort of facial expression.

(Maybe now he could be more like Azula , Zuko thought.)

He vaguely remembered waking up a few times to Uncle soothing his wound and singing him back to sleep. Crying hurt, facial expressions hurt, smiling hurt, frowning hurt. *Everything hurt* . (Most importantly, his heart, but Zuko wasn't going to admit that yet. Being weak is what got him here in the first place.)

He was able to get the hang of opening just one eye. He couldn't see anything further than his nose on his left side without turning his eye. *(Had his nose always looked like that? Huh.)* He swung his legs over the side of the bed he was on.

The room was obviously Fire Nation. Metal with the flags hanging on the walls. Besides a chest in the corner, the room was empty.

Zuko, puzzled, stood but promptly lost his balance. He leaned to the left more than his right and stumbled his way to the door. Outside he immediately noticed the slight rocking of the floor. It reminded him of the ships his mother and father would take him and Azula on that would deliver them to Ember Island.

“Prince Zuko,” the young boy heard his uncle’s familiar voice behind him. “You should not be up, you are still healing from your injuries.”

“Uncle. What’s going on?”

“I believe it would be best if we talked about this somewhere private, nephew.” Iroh bowed his head solemnly and took Zuko’s shoulder gently in his hand to guide him to his own room. “This news should be shared best in a place free of judgement.”

Iroh sat Zuko down and told him with a heavy heart he had been banished. Against Iroh’s expectations, Zuko didn’t react. He kept his face straight. (Zuko was the only one so far that knew he kept a straight face only because *if moving hurt that much how bad would salty tears hurt?*)

When Zuko opened his mouth, he said something Iroh hadn’t expected at all. He expected shouting or screaming or any display of emotion. Instead Zuko said the few words,

“Do we have a crew?”

“Prince Zuko, you should take time to process this.”

“I’ve already processed it, Uncle!” Zuko exclaimed. “I wish to know if there is a crew.”

Iroh hesitated before responding.

“Yes. There is a crew.”

“Father gave us a crew and a ship?”

“I had to acquire a ship by my own means,” Iroh explained. “I could take a small crew of only people who agreed to go with us.”

“People who would go with a banished prince?” Zuko scoffed. “They must be stupid.”

Iroh resisted the urge to say *just a little* and settled for, “They are very good at what they do, despite not acting like a more traditional Fire Nation navy.”

Zuko took his response as meaning *yeah they're pretty bad, but you're alive right?* Zuko was glad he even got this much. He hadn't expected the golden treatment but he hadn't expected to be banished either. Banishment was a one-way sentence to a desert island and eating food that you had to catch *yourself*.

At least he had a saving grace. The Avatar. To find him, like many others had tried but failed, Zuko needed an elite crew of well-trained military officials. He just hoped that the crew could eventually measure up to his expectations.

—

The crew was the exact opposite of what he needed, Zuko realized when he met them. He was surprised they even knew how to properly bow to him.

To be fair, Zuko's first impression of them was poor. The man Zuko later knew as Kovu was holding a firebender's sandwich threateningly above her head as she shot off small sparks at him.

When Iroh cleared his throat and announced their presence, everyone on deck turned and lowered themselves into a bow, the traditional flame of the Fire Nation forming from their hands.

Zuko resisted the urge to wiggle awkwardly from the attention. His eyes skimmed over the people there, finding a couple of strange people (specifically the woman who had no arms that was currently just bowing but his mother's voice rang in his head "don't be rude, Zuko" and he resisted the urge to blurt out the obvious question of *where did your arms go?*)

He nodded in acknowledgment of their respect, thinking they would return to their normal duties but instead they stood there, staring at him.

He assumed it was his scar before he realized that he was the *highest ranking person on that ship and they were waiting for orders, dum-dum* and said, "Dismissed."

They returned to their duties. All except for the girl with no arms. Instead, she began to make her way over to them.

She stopped in front of Prince Zuko, bending forward into a bow and coming back up.

She actually reminded him a lot about Ty Lee, his sister's friend. Her hair was held up in two buns by clips decorated with pink flowers. Her shirt was a shade of light pink with red embroidery. Her pants were the traditional soldier's pants, black and loose. He quickly noticed that she lacked shoes and her feet were in pristine, clean condition for someone who walked around barefoot. He knew that was Ty Lee's habit too but she always had at least a little dirt under her nails.

"It is an honor to meet you, Prince Zuko." She spoke with a soft smile, her voice smooth like a fresh wind at the coast and held nothing but care. "I am Yumie, one of the soldier's at your service."

Before Zuko could stop himself, he blurted out, “how are you a soldier?”

He heard Uncle take in a sharp gasp of breath.

“Prince Zuko!” Iroh scolded.

However, instead of the offense Zuko had expected from Yumie, she laughed.

“It’s alright, General Iroh,” she excused. “He’s just curious. I had arms, they were just lost in an unfortunate accident involving Northern Water Tribe benders. They discharged me but I still helped where I could. Then General Iroh found me and here I am!”

“She is still one of the best fighters I have ever met,” Iroh praised her. “Even without the use of her arms, she could take down an army of 100 men.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Yumie rolled her eyes.

“They do not call you ‘The Viper’ for nothing, young one,” Iroh laughed.

Yumie shook her head and walked away before Zuko could ask her to elaborate on the odd nickname.

“Prince Zuko,” a demanding voice from behind them demanded his attention. “I am glad to see you are awake.”

Behind Zuko and Iroh was a short man, probably 4’11 with the hunch. He had his white hair braided back and a mustache with two long, thin strands hanging on either side of his mouth and a small goatee tied together at the underside of his chin. He kept his arms, in an orange and brown robe, tucked behind his back.

“Ahh, nephew, this is the helmsman Jiro.” Iroh introduced.

“We are safely out of Fire Nation waters and into Water Tribe territory. This is the extent of my orders from General Iroh. With you awake and being captain, we need you to set a course,” he ordered.

“Uh,” Zuko stalled, mind blanking on where to go. “Do we need to make a supply stop?”

“No.” The helmsman answered curtly. “We have enough supplies to last us about two months without any stops.”

“Okay, uh,” he stuttered.

Where could he go? He needed to find the Avatar .

“Where is the closest Air Temple?”

Iroh’s eyes widened.

“The Southern Air Temple, about 2 weeks away.”

“I would like to go there,” Zuko requested.

When the stern man failed to leave, Zuko raised his brow in confusion.

“Please set a course to the Southern Air Temple, Helmsman Jiro,” Iroh intervene, smiling at the man as he bowed and left up the metal staircase with astonishing speed for an older man.

Iroh spun to face Zuko.

“Come, nephew,” he said. “Let us have something to eat. Whatever you want, the chef is a friend of mine.”

the ones who see things differently

Chapter Summary

Zuko learns to cook and reflects on his destiny.

Chapter Notes

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

Chein-Po loved cooking since he was a boy. He remembered making dumplings with his mother in their small kitchen in their small house in their small village. Since it was only a one room home, the smell of freshly steamed dumplings would fill the whole house with its sweet aroma. His mother would make dumpling soup, steamed rice, and lotus blossoms.

Chein-Po's favorite, however, was when she would make tea with lychee berries and small pastries to go with them.

He had been told before by the other kids in the village that he was too large, that he should stop eating and work out and learn a *useful* skill. Chein-Po's mom would overhear this, squeeze his cheeks, and say "it just makes you extra cuddly" and then, Chein-Po's favorite piece of advice that he carried with him to this day, "everyone needs cooks".

When Chein-Po was drafted for the Fire Navy at age 16, his strict teachers quickly found that he was not a fighter, not a strategist, nor a sailor. His true talent lay in the kitchen.

Now, at the sharp age of 26, Chein-Po was serving the Prince of the Fire Nation and the esteemed and famous General Iroh (who also brewed a great cup of tea). He supposed destiny set him on the right path.

Chein-Po liked to consider himself a joyful and forgiving man. He held no hate nor contempt in his heart. Everything could be forgiven; that was his motto. Did it hold much nativity? Yes, but he stuck by it through everything.

He was not sure that he could stay loyal to his principles, however, when Prince Zuko was violating *his* kitchen in such a grotesque manner.

The young boy was standing over a boiling pot of water, dumping a bag of rice into it. Chein-Po hoped the boy would at least wash it before hand, but that had apparently been too high of a prayer for the spirits to answer.

“Excuse me, Prince Zuko,” he spoke softly, so as not to spook the boy before him. “Would you like me to prepare something for you?”

“No, I’m alright, Chef,” came a scowled answer.

Chein-Po shuffled forward. “Please, call me Chein-Po. And, it would be my honor.”

Zuko stopped what he was doing and looked up at the large marshmallow man. He glanced back down at his pot, water not even boiling and small bugs surfacing in the pot from the rice.

He set the bag down.

“I...” he sighed. “I have no idea what I am doing.”

Chein-Po was glad he was self-aware.

“Let me show you,” Chein-Po offered and chuckled.

Zuko stepped aside, allowing Chien-Po to take the pot off of the heat and over to the sink.

“You see, Prince Zuko,” he began, taking out a strainer to pour the rice through. “You need to wash the rice off because there is starch on the outside that can make it gummy and hinder its ability to absorb water.”

He demonstrated.

“Now we place it in a saucepan with some water and cover it.”

He did as he said, taking a flat pan out of its cupboard to the right of the stove top. He also pulled down the matching cover.

Pouring the rice and water into the pan, he set the cover to the side and took the spark rocks out to light it.

“What are those?” Zuko asked, looking over Chein-Po’s shoulder (he had to stand on his tiptoes to do so).

“These are spark rocks. To light fires when there are no firebenders around,” Chein-Po carefully explained. “Or if you are not a bender, such as myself.”

Zuko nodded. He hadn’t ever thought that people needed to come up with ways to light fires if they weren’t benders. He admired that. (Then he resisted the urge to cringe because whenever he admired a non-bender for something, he was reprimanded.)

From seemingly nowhere, he pulled out carrot peas. Chein-Po reached up into the same cupboard as before and pulled down a smaller sauce pan. He threw the carrot peas into it and went to get water.

“You need to boil the carrot peas to make them soft,” he explained, “otherwise they taste poor with the rice.”

He used the spark rocks once more to light the fire on the stove before sliding back to the pan of rice.

“You see, Prince Zuko,” he began, stirring the rice with a wooden spoon, “once it begins to boil, you need to cover the rice so it stays moist and doesn’t dry out.”

He placed the metal cover he got out before over the pan.

“We will leave that there for fifteen minutes.”

Chein-Po then took a mitt into his hands and picked the pan with the carrot peas off the flame.

“Would you be so kind as to strain this for me?” He asked with such a tone that Zuko couldn’t say no. “Be careful with the water and do not touch the pan. It is hot.”

He handed Zuko the pan with the black mit. Zuko took it to the sink and grabbed the same strainer that he saw Chein-Po use for the rice and dumped the carrot peas into it. (He wasn’t sure if that was right but this was the only strainer Zuko could see and he didn’t want to get in trouble.)

“Thank you,” Chein-Po gratified Zuko when he took the pan back.

He took a spatula out of the jar of utensils he had by the stove and shoved the peas to the side.

“What I like to do now is add butter to the pan with chopped ginger, onion, and garlic,” he told Zuko, pulling out a cutting board and the ventables. He took out a knife.

“You have to be very careful with this. It is wise to go slow if you have never done it before.” He slowly cut into the ginger to prove his point. “Now you only need a little ginger, since it is

so strong. Many people avoid adding ginger to their fried rice because it is a taste typically associated with sweets. I like the flavor though.”

Zuko nodded, eyeing the cutting board intensely. Chein-Po took the large ginger root off of the board and scraped the small pieces he had chopped up into the saucepan.

“Now, take the knife,” he held it out for Zuko, who hesitantly grabbed it and allowed himself to be moved in front of the cutting board. “Take the onion”—Zuko did as he instructed—“and make a vertical cut through the middle. We will only use half of the onion for this. Make multiple horizontal cuts with little space between them—yes, excellent—and now chop them vertically. That’s very good, Prince Zuko!”

(Zuko wouldn’t admit that the praise made butterflies erupt in his stomach and made him feel proud, and he immediately wanted to feel that again.)

“Please scrape them into the pan,” Chein-Po instructed.

Zuko did as he saw Chein-Po do earlier and picked up the cutting board, using the knife to scrape the pieces into the pan. He really enjoyed the look of joy and approval that Chein-Po gave him as he did such a simple and mundane task.

“For the garlic, I like to use fresh garlic,” Chein-Po placed the garlic on the chopping board, taking the knife to begin the process. “This is called mincing the garlic; to get it as small as possible so that the flavor will not be so overwhelming if you get a piece.”

He demonstrated and repeated the same process of holding the wooden cutting board at an angle over the saucepan and using the knife to scrape it in.

He pulled out a jar from the upper cabinet, filled with a thick and creamy substance Zuko recognized vaguely as butter in the form it was first made in. Chein-Po took out a spoon and unscrewed the lid to the butter.

“This is my homemade butter, I like to use two spoons of it for texture and a creamy sauce.” He spooned it into the pan. “Now I add some sesame oil,” he took the oil and poured it in quickly, “and some soy sauce.”

Chein-Po placed the bottle down and took his spoon to stir.

“If you could please hand me the egg I set aside, Prince Zuko,” he asked gently.

Zuko did as requested.

“Thank you.”

Zuko definitely *didn't* have to fight a grin from forming on his face.

Chein-Po moved over to his right slightly so that Zuko could observe what he's doing. He gently hit the egg against the side of the pan, putting a small crack in it. He took his thumbs and placed them in the crack, pulling it apart so that the yoke and white of the egg would fall into the pan.

“Now we scramble the egg with the vegetables.”

He did so until everything was mixed together.

“The rice should be done by now. All we have to do is mix it in with the other vegetables and dinner will be done!”

Even though it was such a mundane task, Zuko couldn't help the feeling that bubbled up in his chest. He had only ever gotten that feeling from his mother praising him for helping the turtle ducks in the gardens. He never realized how much he missed that feeling.

Zuko held a new appreciation for the art of cooking, he realized as he wiped the sweat off his brow. He also realized that he found it calming, much like meditation but with more movement.

He's been told of how when actors or dancers or showmen get really into their craft, they go into a sort of trance. They feel at peace. He supposed it also applied to cooking.

Zuko didn't feel that strongly about the skill but it did help. To have consistent guidelines for cooking, a pattern. Chein-Po told him to not be afraid to experiment but Zuko had learned from last time he dared deviate from the set course that it wasn't always the best option.

"Hey, Po!" A chipper voice came from the doorway and the kitchen's once savory aroma was replaced with the harsh smell of oil. "You got anything good up here?"

Zuko looked up from where he was hovering his chopsticks over his bowl of rice and saw the woman who had just entered.

Her light brown hair was frizzy and held back from her face with a small tie that looked like it had been ripped from a shirt. She had soot on her face and oil stains on her dark overalls. Zuko hadn't seen her before but he supposed that was because she seemed to work in the engine room and Zuko hadn't been down there.

"Ah, Rei! You finally took a break, I see." Chein-Po grinned, his eyes no longer visible from being overtaken by the large smile on his face. "Is Tarou still down there?"

"Yeah," the woman sighed, taking a seat furthest from Zuko. "This is an old ship, Po. There's a lot of maintenance to be done to keep it running. It's my turn to get a break and some sleep."

She swung her arm over the back of her chair and spread her legs out in a manner Zuko had only seen from the stable boy who kept the moose-dragons. (Unproper, he heard one of the noble men call it one time.)

Chein-Po placed a bowl of rice in front of her.

“At least it runs.” Chein-Po excused with a shrug.

“How old is this ship?” Zuko spoke up, his voice cracking ever-so-slightly.

Rei startled and turned to him, almost as if she hadn’t known he was there.

“Oh Agni...” she huffed, squinting her eyes and glancing around. “Tarou and I figure it’s probably from one of Sozin’s old fleets. The serial number is too low for it to be Azulon’s or anyone else’s.”

Zuko remained silent, not knowing what to say to that.

“Anyways, I’m gonna take this down to the engine room with me, Po. Gotta help Tarou.” She stood, picking up her rice bowl. “Thanks.”

She used her index and middle fingers to give a small salute before walking out. Zuko turned his attention to Chein-Po.

“Who’s Tarou?” He inquired, cocking his head.

Chein-Po pushed in Rei’s chair, still smiling gently. “The other engineer, Rei’s husband. I’m surprised you haven’t seen him yet. He’s always been very social.”

Zuko flushed. "I haven't exactly been paying much attention to people."

Chein-Po nodded, making his way behind the kitchen counter to wash the dishes.

"Of course. Your search for the Avatar, correct?" He asked, not in a way that implied malice or disbelief or stupidity; but in a way that made Zuko feel as though the large man was actually interested.

"I've read as much as I could on him." Zuko shook his head. "He's an enigma."

"Perhaps you should see if the crew has any stories. They have traveled all over."

Zuko took a pause for a moment.

"Do you have any stories, Chef Chein-Po?"

Chein-Po shrugged. "I have heard the Avatar left before the genocide and was therefore able to avoid it. My grandma told me about how she met Avatar Kyoshi in a past life but I was always skeptical of that."

"Do you believe in past lives?" Zuko asked him; the idea of it becoming outdated.

"Of course! I have always thought I was an airbender in a past life. Perhaps I cooked like I do now. I wonder if I have always loved fruit pies." Chein-Po stared into the distance, thoughtful. He shook his head to clear his mind. "Maybe you are the reincarnation of a previous friend, teacher, or love of the Avatar. Maybe that is why you have been sent to find him."

"I've been sent to find him as a diversion to get me out of my father's way," Zuko huffed. "Not because of destiny."

If destiny was real, Zuko believed it was against him. Why would his father burn his face? For some stupid part to play in someone else's story?

"You know the spirits work in mysterious ways." Chein-Po claimed. "Only they know the truth."

"It would be helpful if they could just come out and tell me."

Chein-Po hollered a full belly laugh. "I wish it was just that easy."

Chapter End Notes

- Zuko probably seems a bit OOC but I mean he was so hard and burdened after 3 years of searching. He's still coming to terms with the fact that his father burned him and is still the baby Zuko from when he used to feed the turtle ducks.
- Zuko: If destiny is real, why is it so cruel?

No I don't know how to cook and no I don't know why I included an entire cooking scene in detail. It felt right.

a thing of shreds and patches

Chapter Summary

zuko has a nightmare, finds a loophole, and meets ruri (the drunk guy from the bar).

Zuko was on his hands and knees, wheezing up blood from numerous blows to his abdomen. He felt as though he could sense his organs' damage, internal blood rushing like a stream branches from a river. A rogue rivulet running from its mother.

His face burned from physical exertion, red and hot to the touch yet every time a small breeze swept through his hair, he received a welcome wave of freshness through his body—like the taste of mint after a glass of water.

“Pathetic,” the man above him snapped.

A hand snatched the collar of his shirt, yanking him up. Zuko yelped, throwing his hands back to try and detach the man's hands as he threw the young boy like a ragdoll once more.

Zuko gazed up at him, eyes clouded with tears and fear. The man had no features, a distinct arrow carved into his forehead in blue ink glaring at him for his lack of eyes. Skin stretched over where a nose would be, where eye sockets would be, where his mouth would be.

“How do you expect to defeat me?” He bellowed, raising his fist—a whirl of earth, fire, and water visibly circling around it. “You're weak.”

Zuko's hand flew up in front of his face in hopes of fending off the final blow. He was unsuccessful.

Zuko gasped awake, his body flinging itself up with a deep gasp of breath.

He pressed a hand to his heart and surveyed his surroundings.

There was no faceless airbender. There was no death and no afterlife. He was back on the ship.

His face was still hot and he winced as sweat traveled down from his hairline and made excruciating contact with his still-fresh scar. He resisted the urge to cry out, opting instead to clench his eyes shut and bite his lip.

Zuko's abdomen ached with a phantom pain though he knew there was no physical cause.

All he wanted to do was go back to sleep and forget about the nightmare. Yet he couldn't stop himself from acknowledging the truth behind the airbender's words. He was *weak*. He was *pathetic*. It was what he had been told his whole life. It wasn't the first time he had believed it.

He believed it for a long time—still believed it even. But the words struck the gong in a different tone. He was *weaker* now.

How do you expect to defeat me?

Zuko knew he didn't expect to defeat him; certainly not in his current state. He needed to find the Avatar. He needed to defeat him.

Zuko saw only one solution: begin training.

“Absolutely not.”

“But uncle!”

Iroh crossed his arms, shaking his head insistently. Zuko pouted miserably in front of him.

“You still have quite the way to go in your journey to recovery. The strain that firebending causes will set you back.”

Zuko threw his arms up, scowling. “You don’t know that! It could make me heal faster. You know, get my *chakras* flowing or whatever you always talk about.”

“That’s not how chakras work.”

“Okay whatever! I have to get stronger to defeat the Avatar, Uncle.”

“You have years to find the Avatar, Prince Zuko.”

“I don’t want to take years, Uncle. I want to take weeks—months at most. I am sick of sitting here on this ship and wasting away reading the same scrolls a hundred times over.” Zuko’s shoulders heaved as he tried to reign in his emotions. “I will begin training.”

Iroh remembered when Zuko always had to be doing something as a child. He hated to sit still. (Iroh had lost a great many Pai Sho pieces to the young prince wanting to play hide-and-seek with them.)

He straightened his back, allowing his arms to fall to his side in a stiff and controlled movement.

(For a moment, Iroh gave off the daunting impression of his younger brother.)

“Not under my watch, you won’t.”

Zuko wasn’t under Iroh’s watch now... technically. He knew his uncle was up playing his afternoon game of Pai Sho with Helmsman Jiro. He was also the only one who knew that Iroh was against his training.

This was how he goaded (ordered) Tora into sparring with him.

She was the only one willing. Zuko recognized traits of his sister in her, knowing exactly what to say to get her to throw a fireball at him.

Zuko wasn’t surprised she didn’t hold back. The woman was a force to be reckoned with and it showed in her appearance.

The firebender had the front two inches of her hair stained blonde, the rest remaining a natural black and cut short. Her eyes were a piercing orange—appearing red upon Zuko’s first glance. She relied on strength as well as bending, Zuko noted, her toned arms flexing with the strength of a professional bodybuilder. Her arms were branded with stripes like a tiger. Zuko couldn’t tell if they were scars or tattoos. Her face was sharp, like the diamond in his late mother’s favorite earrings.

She threw a sweeping kick in his direction, off to his left. His blind spot.

He threw his arms up just in time to extinguish the flame before underarming a flaming ball in his opponent’s direction. She dodged, of course, his aim was sloppy and his balance was off. He fell to the side in his overextension of his body, staring up at the intimidating firebender casting a shadow over his body.

Steam came out of her nose as she glared down at him.

“Just because you’re a prince,” she snarled, “doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want around here.”

Tora huffed once at him for good measure and turned away, skulking back to her post.

Zuko turned his head to the side, unwilling to face the embarrassment of being knocked down in front of his crew.

“That was, quite possibly, the most stupid thing I have seen,” a voice came from above him—a hand outstretched from it. “And I’ve seen a lot of stupid shit.”

“No swearing around the kid!”

“Sorry, Swapna!” The man who pulled Zuko up yelled back at the chiding voice.

He slung his arm over Zuko’s shoulder, steering him towards the stairs to go up the ship.

“The names Ruri, kid.” He introduced himself. “You and I are gonna be good friends.”

Zuko scolded. “I doubt that.”

Ruri cackled in Zuko’s ear. “You’re a real riot, my friend. Listen, I’m gonna take you to a place that I like to go after Tova kicks *my* ass.”

“I’m sure that doesn’t take much effort,” Zuko mumbled.

“Usually not but normally I can get more than a few hits in and *I’m* not a bender!” Ruri laughed again.

Zuko thought his laugh was getting really annoying.

The comment only served to make him feel a lot worse about himself, however. Zuko had always been taught that nonbenders were inferior, only there to support the strong of the nation. Knowing that a nonbender was able to face the very opponent Zuko had just lost to... it hurt.

Ruri saw the frown (frown, not a scowl) on the young prince’s face and sighed.

“Look, kid, I’m not trying to make you feel bad. I’m just saying that Tora’s a worthy opponent for anyone. She should be on the front lines, not in some backwater ship.”

Zuko didn’t want pity, so he snapped, “Then why isn’t she?”

“She killed her last commander,” Ruri shrugged.

Zuko stopped.

“Luckily for us, though, he pissed off the wrong general the night before so she only got off with a couple of demotions and a warning for everyone to not get on her bad side,” Ruri joked, slapping Zuko’s back. “I’m kidding. It was an Agni Kai, fair and square.”

While Zuko was still standing in shock, Ruri shoved him forward and that was when Zuko realized they were at the top of the ship.

“I want you to meet my good friend Jun,” he said, throwing open the gate to the watchman’s tower.

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