

through pain and change, that's how we find our way

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through pain and change, that's how we find our way

by [Inkblood13](#)

Summary

Zuko was kicked out of his house when his father found out he was gay, and now he's struggling to make it on his own. Luckily, the Gaang is there to help him out.

Notes

Hi! This is a new fic that I'm working on, and I will be updating as I finish each chapter :) hope you enjoy

Chapter 1

Zuko had to go to school.

He had debated it with himself for days, but there really wasn't any other option for him. He needed to earn his father's trust back- and he couldn't do that if he wasn't even getting himself an education. And besides, he still wanted to keep a semblance of normalcy in his life, even though so much had changed.

This train of thought led him to the front steps of Ba Sing Se High School. A fitting name for a prison for unsuspecting teenagers.

It was the middle of the year, so he knew he would stick out like a sore thumb- not that he wouldn't already with the huge scar that marred his face. He already dreaded the questions he was sure to get as to where the scar had come from. Of course, he could never reveal the truth about that, so he would have to think up a good cover story.

He realized he had been standing there for too long while other students passed him and entered the building. He was probably going to be late for his very first day.

Not that it really mattered to him. Nothing seemed to really matter to him much these days. Who could blame him though, for not caring? There wasn't anything left in his life for him to care about.

Sighing, he dragged himself up the steps and into the school. He had gotten his schedule the day before, dodging any questions about his parents.

His goal was to stay hidden and out of the way until his father decided he could come back home. Which would probably be any day now.

He wandered the halls, searching for the room number on his schedule, but this school was so much larger than the private school his father used to send him to. In other words: he was lost. Great.

"Hey! Are you lost?" A loud, cheerful voice called from behind Zuko.

"None of your business," Zuko grumbled without turning around. Had it really been that obvious?

He heard the person hurrying to catch up with him, but Zuko didn't even slow his pace. The person fell in step next to him and Zuko glanced over to see a younger boy- he must be a freshman- with a glaringly bald head staring back at him.

"You must be new." The boy smiled.

"You must be deaf," Zuko retorted.

“I’m Aang,” the boy told him, pointedly ignoring Zuko’s comment. A moment passed while Aang waited for Zuko to fill the silence. “What’s your name?” He finally prompted.

Zuko sighed. “I’m Zuko. And I don’t need your help, so you can just go.”

“No, no! I’ll help you find your class.” Aang reached out for Zuko’s schedule and he reluctantly handed it to him.

“Room 514. I know exactly where that is!”

He reached out again, this time to grab Zuko’s hand. Before he could stop himself, Zuko flinched away from the other boy’s touch.

He didn’t like people touching him. It wasn’t that big a deal.

Zuko looked at Aang uncomfortably for a second, until thankfully he brushed it off and kept walking, assuming Zuko would follow. He did, but only because Aang still had his schedule in his hands.

Two hallways later they were at Room 514- English class. Aang waved goodbye to Zuko and hurried off to his own class before the bell could ring. Zuko didn’t even respond.

He knew that was rude, but his mind had already moved on to bigger things, like walking into that classroom.

He took a deep breath and opened the door, entering the room. Some people looked up at him, noticing his unfamiliar face. And then more people looked at him when they noticed how unusual that face was. Zuko tried to ignore it and keep his face from flushing as he hurried to a desk in the back of the room.

Luckily, the teacher walked in right after that as the bell rang. Zuko wondered if Aang had made it to his class on time or if he would be late because of him. Oh, well. Zuko didn’t care either way.

Then the teacher decided to say the worst string of words she could have possibly chosen. “We have a new student today! Would you like to introduce yourself?”

Zuko gulped, and willed himself not to fidget with his hands as he stood. He saw at least twenty pairs of eyes staring back at him. Was it hot in here? Zuko let his face fall into a scowl.

“I’m Zuko,” he announced stiffly, and then sat right back down. No one needed to know anything about him besides his name. It was certainly better off that way.

The teacher must not have cared enough to comment, and she moved onto the lesson. Zuko let his mind drift as she droned on. He had forgotten how boring school was and he found himself wondering how long he should wait before he started skipping.

People kept sneaking glances at him, and he met each one with a glare, trying to look as menacing as he could. He needed to avoid making friends and enemies in this place. Either

one would just be a pain.

Eventually the bell rang, and class was over. He quickly got up and left the room. He didn't have any stuff with him- not even a backpack. He hadn't even remembered he would need that stuff until he was on his way this morning and saw a kid whizz past him on a bike, with a loaded backpack hanging from one shoulder.

He found the next class much more easily this time, which was good, because he didn't see Aang in the halls. Not that he was looking for him or anything. It was just hard being surrounded by so many strangers. He chewed his lip as he sat down in the back of the next classroom. All these people were going to send his anxiety through the roof.

As he got more and more weird looks, and had to introduce himself to another class, his stomach churned. This was a bad idea. Everyone thought he was weird or ugly- just because of the scar on his face. He could tell from the look on their faces when they saw him for the first time.

He wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. He was blushing, and he kept his eyes downcast. Whenever he did look up, it was to send another one of his glares at whoever was staring in his direction.

The bell rang and Zuko left the classroom as fast as he could. He hadn't heard a single thing the teacher said the entire period. That was fine though- it wasn't like he'd been planning on doing the assignment.

He headed outside, not even checking his schedule to see what he had next. So much for getting an education.

He was suddenly hit with a longing to go home. To be safe in his room, where no one would look at him funny and he could be at peace. But reality just as suddenly crashed back into his thoughts as he realized he might never see his home again.

He shook his head. Of course he would see his home again! Father would change his mind soon and invite him back. He would apologize for kicking him out and things would go back to normal.

That's what he kept telling himself, at least.

He sat outside in the grass, struggling to control his breathing. He wasn't panicking. He wasn't so weak that he couldn't handle a single day of school. He was fine.

He heard the bell ring again and he had officially missed all of third period. Better luck next time, he guessed.

He slipped back inside for his next class... which was lunch apparently. He glanced at his schedule again. Maybe he should just go back outside. That would be much easier than trying to deal with the noisy, crowded cafeteria. But his stomach rumbled and he figured he couldn't pass up lunch now.

The cafeteria was just as bad as he imagined it would be. Rather than spend his time standing around, hoping he would spot someone friendly enough to let him sit with them, he instead sat himself down at an empty table and glared at anyone who tried to join him. Including the group who's table he assumed he'd stolen.

He realized then that lunch required money. Money he didn't have. He groaned inwardly- he hadn't even thought of that. He wasn't the best at thinking things through.

An annoyingly cheerful voice cut off his dismal thoughts. "Hey! Zuko!"

Zuko groaned out loud this time and turned to face Aang, who was, of course, grinning at him. Zuko scowled back.

"What do you want?"

"Come sit with me and my friends! You don't have to sit alone, you know."

Zuko opened his mouth to tell Aang to leave him alone when he saw the hopeful, innocent look in Aang's eyes. He sighed.

"Fine. But don't expect me to talk to you."

Aang nodded and smiled at him again like Zuko had just made his day. Zuko couldn't imagine why this kid would want the scarred, angry new kid to sit with him, but whatever.

Aang led him to a smaller table with three other people already there. Suddenly, Zuko was uncomfortable. So naturally, he glared at them.

"This is my new friend, Zuko," Aang announced to the others as they took the empty spot on the bench.

"I'm not your friend."

The others stared at him, but Aang just kept on going. "This is Katara." He pointed to a girl with tan skin and brown hair. "This is Toph." He pointed to a shorter girl who he noticed had very strange looking eyes. "And this is Sokka." He pointed to a boy who must have been Katara's brother, because their resemblance was undeniable. He was also undeniably cute, but Zuko decided not to dwell on that.

"Nice to meet you," the girl named Katara said, offering a smile. She seemed unsure, probably because of Zuko's outburst a minute ago. First impressions were not his strong suit.

He nodded at her, though he didn't ease his expression. They all sat in an awkward silence for a minute, while Zuko avoided making eye contact with anyone.

"Did you already get your lunch?" Sokka asked. He must have noticed Zuko's lack of a food tray.

It would probably be easier to just say he already ate, but he hesitated too long.

“You forgot to bring money, didn’t you?”

Zuko glared at the boy for a second before slowly nodding his head, willing himself not to blush. He hadn’t exactly forgotten- he just didn’t have any money to begin with.

“That’s alright- I’ll treat you.”

“No.” Zuko was not taking handouts.

“Consider it a welcome gift,” Sokka tried again.

“I’m not letting you do that.”

“You can pay me back later then,” Sokka sighed.

Zuko wasn’t sure how he was going to get the money to pay him back, but it was the best deal he could think of.

“Fine.”

The two of them stood and got in the back of the dwindling lunch line, and they waited in awkward silence until they reached the front. Sokka got them both pizza, handed a tray to Zuko, and let him follow him back to the table.

Zuko didn’t realize how hungry he had been until he started eating. He tried not to look like a starved animal while he devoured his overly greasy cafeteria food. And if anyone noticed, they didn’t point it out.

The others fell into comfortable conversation until the end of the lunch period, but Zuko stayed quiet. He didn’t know why these random kids were being so nice to him, but it did not mean they were going to be friends. Hopefully he would only be stuck at this school for a week or two before his father let him go back home and he could forget this ever happened.

The bell finally rang, and everyone got up to head to their next class. “What do you have next, Zuko?” Aang asked.

“Um...” he dug his schedule out of his jeans pocket. “History,” he said finally, after he unfolded his slightly crumpled paper.

“With Mrs. Dee?” Toph asked. That was the first time the girl had spoken directly to him. She seemed less open than the rest of their group, not that he could blame her.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Walk with me.” And with that, she left the cafeteria and headed down the hall, not even checking to see if Zuko was following her. Aang shrugged at him, and he decided he might as well follow her so he wasn’t late to class.

He caught up to Toph and fell into step beside her. He noticed the way the other kids in the hall made sure she had plenty of room to walk and didn’t bump into her. They weren’t scared

of this short, slightly rude girl, were they?

Zuko studied her carefully as they walked, trying not to make it too obvious. He had never seen eyes like hers before... actually they almost made her look as if she was-

"I'm blind. If that's what you were wondering," Toph said casually.

Zuko started, surprised. How had she known he was looking at her then?

"Just because I can't see you doesn't mean I can't feel you staring at me."

Zuko blushed, caught in the act, and was suddenly glad she couldn't see him.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"It's fine. I'm used to people staring at me because I look a little different. But before you ask- yes, I can get around just fine and no, I don't need your help." She held her head up high, and Zuko could appreciate the confident way she carried herself, and how she didn't let her blindness stop her from getting around just like everyone else.

"I understand that feeling," Zuko admitted without thinking.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"About people looking at you because you're different," he clarified. She didn't answer, and that's when he realized she was blind! Well, he already knew that, obviously, but that meant she had no idea he had a scar.

"I'll just trust you on that one," she told him, assuming he had just come to that conclusion.

Then they got to their class and they sat down in the back of the room. He noticed that even though people still looked at him curiously, they seemed less inclined to outright stare at him with Toph in the seat beside him. Maybe they were scared of her after all.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

trigger warning: implied self harm!

The rest of the school day passed without incident and Zuko managed to leave the campus before Aang could sneak up on him again.

He was emotionally exhausted from being around so many people all day, but he had something he had to take care of before he could rest. He owed Sokka money for lunch, and he was going to find a way to pay him back. Plus, he would need money for food in the future too.

He had been so unprepared when his father kicked him out- he had left the house in a swirl of rage and... and shame. He had a lot to be ashamed of- he had made many mistakes and he was paying the price for it.

I am a mistake. The thought flew through his head before he had the chance to block it out. He had been having a harder and harder time ignoring the little voice in his head that told him these things- the voice that sounded too similar to his father.

Not that he needed a pretend version of his father to tell him he was a disappointment, because the real version said it just fine.

He headed down the street, towards a busy area with a lot of shops. He approached a slightly run down looking thrift store and peered in the window. It didn't look very busy, and he could see the shelves were stocked full of random things, so he decided it was a good place to start.

A bell chimed above his head when he entered the shop, and the man at the counter glanced up at him. Zuko noticed him very obviously eyeing his scar before he looked back down at his phone.

Zuko wandered the shelves, stopping to pick up anything that caught his eye. The room was dimly lit, most of the light coming from the front windows, and the shelves appeared to be completely disorganized. Zuko stirred up some dust on a shelf when he was looking around and it made him sneeze. He could see why the place wasn't too popular. And it was just too easy for Zuko to start slipping items into his hoodie.

He pulled a t-shirt off its hanger and cautiously tucked it under the shirt he was wearing. He found a pair of matching socks and put them in his pocket. Then he was out of the store before the shop employee could notice the extra bulk under his clothes.

No one would miss a couple old shirts. And he needed them. So it was totally justified. And so was the toiletries from the dollar store and the food from the grocery store that he had previously acquired.

He still had to find some actual money though. This would definitely be the most difficult part, or else he would have done it already.

It was getting dark now, but the street was still filled with pedestrians shopping and walking with their friends and families. Zuko pulled up the hood on his jacket to conceal his face and then glanced around until he found what he was looking for- a man just a little ways in front of him with a bulging wallet sticking out of his back pocket.

Zuko sped up gradually until he was directly behind the man... and then he tripped. He bumped right into him as he fell to the ground.

“Watch where you’re walking!” The man griped, turning to glare at him. Zuko glared right back before remembering his plan.

“Sorry,” he forced out through gritted teeth. He suddenly didn’t feel as bad about taking the man’s wallet when he “fell.” The guy just shook his head and kept walking, leaving Zuko on the ground.

He picked himself up and hurried off, making sure to turn in a different direction than the man as soon as he got the chance. He didn’t want to be around when the guy realized all his money was gone.

Zuko slowly made his way back to his place. By “place” he meant the back alley where he had stashed all his belongings. He had found one that didn’t reek, was out of sight, and relatively clean after a couple days of searching for a spot to make camp.

He pulled the shirt and socks out from under his hoodie and put them with the rest of his things, before taking out the wallet. He ignored the stab of guilt in his chest and flipped through the wallet, counting a couple hundred dollars inside. Satisfied, he added it to the rest of his stuff.

He threw himself down on the ground, utterly exhausted, and closed his eyes. He didn’t even want to think about going to school in the morning.

—

He woke up the next day and immediately noticed how high the sun was in the sky. He scrambled for his phone- which luckily still had some battery left- and checked the time. It was nearly 10:00.

He forced himself to get up and changed into his “new” shirt before starting the long trek to school. He might have to find a new place to sleep that was closer to the high school, or he

would have to get used to being late. The latter honestly sounded more appealing right then.

He hadn't slept well last night, though he rarely did anyway. The nightmares had woken him up twice before the sun rose.

His nightmares were always the same. The things that he tried so hard to push to the back of his mind during the day haunted him while he was asleep. He hated it. And he was lucky if he didn't wake up screaming- his sister used to get so annoyed with him for that.

He went into the school through the front office and signed in late before heading to the bathroom. There was only ten minutes left of second period, so there wasn't really any point in showing up there now. He also would like to avoid feeling everyone's eyes on him when he walked in late.

The bathroom was thankfully empty. Zuko walked up to the sinks and splashed water onto his face. He stared at the mirror, droplets of water dripping from his chin and landing on the counter. He was a mess- it was too easy to see. He had bed head and his clothes were rumpled. His eyes had dark circles under them from lack of sleep. He would have been embarrassed to let other people see him like that before, but it didn't matter what he looked like anymore. Not with the permanent reminder of his failures covering half his face.

The bathroom door opened behind him and a boy walked in. Zuko watched him carefully through the reflection in the mirror. He had wild brown hair and an arrogant expression on his face- Zuko knew from just one look that he wasn't a fan of the guy. Zuko turned around to face him and gave him one of his signature glares.

The boy looked Zuko up and down. "Haven't seen you around before."

"I'm new," Zuko said coldly.

"And already skipping class? I like it." The guy held out his hand. "I'm Jet."

Zuko didn't shake Jet's hand. Undeterred, he just shrugged and moved to set his backpack on the counter. "You want anything?" He asked as he pulled a little bag out of his backpack.

Zuko shook his head and glared harder when he realized Jet was offering him weed. This guy was bad news and Zuko needed to get out of there.

"Consider it a welcome gift," Jet told him as he pressed the little bag into Zuko's hand. A memory of Sokka's smile as he handed him a tray of pizza flashed through his mind, but this situation was much different than yesterday.

He was about to shove the bag back at Jet when the door opened again and another kid walked into the bathroom. Not knowing what else to do, Zuko quickly slipped the weed into his hoodie pocket before they could see. Technically Zuko hadn't done anything wrong, but from someone else's perspective it would certainly look like he had.

Jet pulled his backpack over one shoulder and waved a lazy hand goodbye before he left the bathroom. And just like that, Zuko had a new worry to weigh him down.

When Zuko got to his third period he was surprised to see both Sokka and Katara already sitting next to each other. He recalled skipping this class yesterday, which explained why he didn't see them before.

Sokka waved him over. "Hey Zuko! I didn't know you had this class."

"Well, I do," Zuko said, stating the obvious. He mentally kicked himself. Why did he have to sound so stupid?

"You can sit next to me and I'll help you catch up with the class work," Katara offered.

Zuko still didn't understand why they were being so nice to him, but he decided he couldn't turn down extra help with math.

The class passed slowly as Katara walked him through problems until he understood what to do. He kept catching himself sneaking glances at Sokka, who was turned around in his seat working on the assignment with the girl behind him.

He walked with Sokka and Katara to the cafeteria after class and got in line with them to get his lunch. Remembering the money he had put in his pocket this morning, he turned to face Sokka.

"Here." He thrust out a five dollar bill.

Sokka blinked at him. "What's this?"

Zuko wished he would just take the money so this interaction could be over with. "I said I'd pay you back for the food yesterday, so here it is."

Sokka reluctantly took the cash and put it in his own pocket. "Thanks, I guess."

Zuko nodded stiffly.

They got their food and sat down at their table, where Aang and Toph already were. "Hi guys!" Aang greeted them around a mouthful of his sandwich.

"Hey," Toph greeted, not quite as enthusiastically. Though Zuko was quickly learning that it took a lot to match Aang's amount of energy.

Zuko stayed quiet again as the others talked. His mind kept drifting to thoughts of home. It had been almost two weeks since he'd been kicked out, but his father still hadn't even attempted to contact him. He must be really angry this time for him to let this go on for so long. Just thinking about his father reminded him of his cruel words, his crueler actions, and the burning sensation on his face...

“Zuko?”

He snapped back to attention when he heard his name, but from the looks on the other’s faces, it wasn’t the first time they’d said it.

“Are you okay?” Katara asked gently.

“I’m fine.” Zuko struggled to control his breathing and realized he was shaking. He was not going to have a panic attack in the middle of the cafeteria, surrounded by people. See, this was why he tried not to think about these things. Why did he have to be so weak?

“I’m going to get some air,” Zuko grumbled as he suddenly stood from the table. He hurried out of the cafeteria, ignoring the group’s lingering gaze, and stepped into the courtyard. There were lots of people eating and talking in groups out there too, so Zuko kept going until he found the grassy spot behind the school where he had waited out third period the day before.

He was lucky to have found this spot, because it seemed like no one else came back here- probably because it was close to the dumpsters and you could kind of smell the rotting food from here. It didn’t bother Zuko too much though; not after sleeping in an alley for the last two weeks.

He laid back in the grass and closed his eyes, turning his face to the sun and letting it warm his skin. He focused on clearing his mind and pushing all his troubling thoughts away. Meditation usually calmed him down, but today he found nothing but chaos inside him. The harder he tried to ignore the pain, the harder the memories pushed back at him, forcing him to remember.

His memory was a blur of shouted, angry words, and the angry touch that came with it when he failed. He remembered the teasing and taunting from his sister, when she did everything right and he did everything wrong. He remembered the lies that fell from her lips, and, being pulled even farther back into his past, the way he had naively thought it was just another one of her lies when Azula told him their mother had left.

The words that haunted the corners of his mind flooded in front of him now: failure, disappointment, mistake...

He was sweating. He opened his eyes, pulled from his thoughts by the sticky heat on his skin. The sun that had calmed him at first was now making him feel nauseous, and he cursed himself for wearing his hoodie outside. He didn’t take it off though, as he sat up and wiped the sweat from his brow. He never took his baggy, black hoodie off anymore.

He couldn’t believe he had let himself spiral like that at school of all places. He groaned and looked at the clock on his phone. His eyes widened in surprise when he realized he had spent much longer than he expected lying in the grass. He hadn’t heard the bell ring, but it was well into fourth period.

He pulled himself to his feet and tucked his hands in his pockets. He only then remembered the bag he had shoved in there earlier, when he met that obnoxious guy in the bathroom. He groaned, but there was no way he was going to try to dispose of it on school grounds- he was

way too likely to get caught. So he kept it hidden in his pocket, promising himself he would chuck it as soon as school ended for the day.

He dragged himself through his last three classes, not paying attention to a single thing the teachers said. He was too busy with his own thoughts- home, his family, and how long it had been since he'd seen them.

He missed it. He missed the familiarity of his room, he missed sleeping in his own soft bed, and of course he missed his father and sister. They had never been as open or warm to each other as other families, that was for sure, but they loved each other in their own way.

Azula could be really hurtful sometimes, but she was still Zuko's little sister. And his father didn't show it very often- or really at all- but he knew his father cared about him.

Zuko trudged out of the school building at the end of the day, absentmindedly setting off towards his makeshift home.

"Hey! Zuko! Wait up!"

How did this kid keep finding him? Zuko ignored Aang and kept walking down the street. Hopefully Aang would turn around and go home.

No such luck.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." Aang caught up to him, panting slightly.

"Well, I'm fine, so you can go home now." Zuko rolled his eyes.

"Why are you walking home? You could just take the bus- oh! Or Katara could probably drop you off. She just got her license and she drives me to school sometimes because we live near each other and I miss the bus a lot."

This kid sure could talk a lot. "I can walk just fine," Zuko said, interrupting him from his long story of how his dog had eaten his shoe and that's why he had missed the bus yesterday.

There was a beat of silence before Aang spoke up again. "Then can I walk with you?"

"No."

"Why not? It'll be fun."

"I live far away."

"I don't mind."

Ugh. How was he going to get rid of this kid? He obviously couldn't let Aang walk "home" with him, or else he would realize Zuko lived in a fucking cardboard box.

Zuko got an idea. He would have to go out of his way- and he was really too tired for all of this- but it would get Aang off his back.

"Fine. Walk with me if it's really that important to you." As soon as the words came out of Zuko's mouth Aang's face lit up with that same smile he had given him when Zuko agreed to sit with him at lunch. Zuko felt his heart soften. Slightly.

Aang continued to talk to him as they walked, telling him random stories about anything and everything the kid could imagine. Zuko listened to him, but never said anything back. He wasn't going to admit it, but the constant chattering was helping to distract him from his dismal thoughts.

Zuko led them into an average looking suburban neighborhood and stopped in front of a house that didn't have any cars parked out front.

"This is my house," Zuko told him, not meeting his eyes. "So you can leave now."

Aang looked at him for a minute. Zuko had never been the best liar, unlike his sister, and he worried that Aang would see right through him.

"Okay. See you at school tomorrow!" Aang waved goodbye and left the way they came. Zuko watched his retreating back and wondered why on earth the kid had wanted to walk all this way if he knew he was going to have to turn right around and walk all the way back. Aang was a strange kid.

He waited until Aang was out of sight to start walking. He left the random neighborhood and set off back down the street. Now that Aang was gone, there was nothing to distract him anymore. The day he had been kicked out kept circling through his mind- the day his whole life had gone downhill.

He finally got back to the alley where he stashed his stuff and sat down, leaning his back against the wall behind him. He really was pathetic, wasn't he? He was living on the street, sleeping on the ground, and he couldn't even manage to get through a full school day without freaking out.

Suddenly filled with an all too familiar urge, he rummaged through the cardboard box he'd been keeping his meager collection of supplies in until he found what he was looking for.

He held the dollar store razor in his trembling hands and rolled up his sleeves. He stared down at the arms that he so carefully kept covered during the day. His eyes roved over the lines of scabs and scars before he added a few more.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

here's the next chapter!

tw: implied self harm and internalized homophobia

hope you enjoy and don't be afraid to leave a comment telling me what you think of it :)

Zuko dragged his feet into school the next day, stifling a yawn. The nightmares had been unforgiving that night and he had gotten too little sleep between them. On the bright side, he was up early enough to get to school on time.

He sat down in his first class and immediately tuned out the teacher when she began her lecture on whatever boring subject they were supposed to be learning. What class even was this?

He would have just gone on his phone, but he was still trying to conserve battery because he didn't know when he would get a chance to charge it.

He fiddled with the long sleeves of his hoodie, bunching them in his hands. His arms itched and stung, but he ignored it as best he could.

He yawned again and slowly let his eyes close. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to just drift off for a few minutes...

"Zuko!" A stern voice jerked his eyes open, and he flinched involuntarily at the sound. He blinked several times and looked around the room to see everyone staring at him, including the teacher.

He must have had a pretty dumb look on his face, because the whole class started giggling. He felt himself flush red and he willed himself not to sink lower into his seat. He wished he could just disappear into the ground right then and hide from all the judging eyes in the room.

His gaze went to the teacher again and he realized that she was looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to say something.

He sat up straight in his chair and gulped. "Uh..." That earned him another round of laughter. "Sorry, ma'am."

Unfortunately the teacher was the only one who didn't look amused. "You should be paying attention in my class, not sleeping. But you'll have plenty of time to make up the assignment in detention."

Ugh. Could this day get any worse? Satisfied, the teacher went back to the lesson and everyone more or less left him alone. Zuko put his head in his hands and decided to spend the rest of the day wallowing in self pity.

That only lasted until third period.

The bell rang just as Zuko sat down between Katara and Sokka. They both smiled and said hello when they saw him, but he was too preoccupied to do more than just nod back.

The teacher called for the class's attention. "Today you will be starting a project, and you'll be working in pairs." The teacher went on to explain the assignment, but Zuko was still stuck on "working in pairs." That was the last thing he wanted to do right now- or ever.

The teacher was pairing off students now. "Katara, you will be working with Suki." Zuko caught the look of disappointment on Sokka's face before he could hide it, which made something twist in his chest. He pointedly ignored that feeling though. He looked away from the cute boy- no. He looked away from the just average, normal looking boy- and tuned back into what the teacher was saying.

"And lastly, Sokka will be paired with Zuko."

Zuko felt his stomach drop. This was the worst situation he could have come up with. He just wanted to get through the school day and then go to sleep- he didn't want to deal with this really friendly, sweet guy, who would probably want him to talk and do the project. Ugh.

He realized then that everyone was moving desks so that they were sitting next to their partner. And Sokka was looking at him.

"Okay, so I have a couple ideas for what we could do already. So we can both share our thoughts and then we can pick the best parts of each one." Sokka jumped right in.

Unfortunately, Zuko hadn't had any time to come up with ideas of his own between all the worrying and panicking.

"We can just go with your idea, Sokka," he said hesitantly.

"No, no- I want to hear your ideas too. Besides, I'm not gonna let you off the hook while I do all the work."

Zuko felt himself turning red. "That's not what- I mean- I wasn't trying to--"

"Whoa, it was a joke Zuko," Sokka amended.

Zuko raised his eyebrows, and then quickly settled them back into a glare. Was Sokka making fun of him, then?

“Just tell me your stupid idea so we can get this over with.” Zuko crossed his arms.

“Oh.” Sokka blinked. “Uh, I guess I was thinking we could...” Sokka explained his idea and Zuko nodded his approval and it definitely wasn’t awkward at all. Zuko almost felt bad for snapping at the guy.

“So do you want to meet at your house after school to work on the project?” Sokka asked.

Wait what? Zuko had assumed this would be an in-class kind of thing.

“Um... no.” He didn’t know what to say so he just scowled again. He could just picture it now: inviting Sokka over to his little alley and offering him a seat on top of a cardboard box. Yeah, that would go over well.

“Then do you want to come over to my house?”

That was a slightly better option. Then he remembered a crucial piece of information.

“I can’t.”

Sokka wrinkled his forehead in confusion. “Why not?”

“Because I have... detention.” Zuko was turning red again. He really hadn’t wanted to tell anyone about that.

“Oh, you delinquent! What did you do?” Sokka sounded more excited then he really should have.

“I fell asleep in class,” Zuko mumbled. He wanted to bury his head in his hands again, just from remembering the events of this morning.

“That’s it?” Sokka seemed vaguely disappointed.

“What were you expecting?” Zuko asked, defensive.

“Oh, maybe like, getting into a fight or something a little more interesting. I fall asleep in class all the time.” Sokka gestured with his hands.

“How come you don’t get detention for it then?” Was the universe just out to get him, specifically?

“I used to.” Sokka shrugged. “Then I got good at hiding it.”

Zuko knew a lot about hiding things, and he was going to have to get good at it if he didn’t want to get caught. Worse things could happen to him than detention.

“Well, anyway,” Sokka continued, “I have robotics club after school today, so we can just meet after we both get out.”

Zuko couldn't think of a reasonable excuse to get out of this situation, so he resigned himself to an afternoon of homework and socializing. Ew.

“Okay, I guess that works.”

“Glad to hear it, Mr. Enthusiasm!” Sokka chuckled at his own joke.

Zuko wasn't as amused.

They kept working on their plans for their project for the rest of the class- well, Sokka worked on the plans, Zuko mostly just agreed with whatever he said. He could help more when they were actually doing it, but he was not a making-plans kind of guy.

—

Zuko got through lunch with Aang and the others, and then four more classes before the end of the school day. He had found he didn't mind sitting with Toph- she didn't talk much (besides the odd sarcastic remark that Zuko had come to appreciate) and the rest of the class left him alone because he was with her. It was a win-win situation, really.

Unfortunately, Zuko's day was far from over.

He stood in front of the classroom he had been directed towards for detention. His face heated with shame as he procrastinated opening the door. At least now his father wouldn't find out about this- if he had gotten detention while he was still living at home, the actual detention period would be the least of his problems.

Zuko sighed- he had never been very good at looking at the bright side of things. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat behind him.

“Are you going to go in any time soon, or just block the doorway forever?”

Zuko spun around to face the girl who had spoken. She had her arms crossed, and a sullen expression etched across her face, which was framed by her black bangs. She raised one eyebrow expectantly.

“Oh... I uh-“ Zuko sputtered. He sure looked like an idiot just standing there, didn't he?

The girl rolled her eyes. “First time, huh? You must not be used to getting into trouble.”

The irony in those words certainly weren't lost on Zuko, and he resisted the temptation to reach up and touch his scar.

“Never gotten detention before,” he admitted.

“Well, that's obvious.” She stood there for a minute. “So you really are just gonna block the door forever, aren't you?”

Zuko quickly moved out of the way at that, allowing the girl to swing open the door and step inside. Surprisingly, she held it open and turned back to look at him again.

“You know, you’ll just get double the detention time if you’re late.”

“Oh. Uh, thanks.” Zuko followed her in.

The girl took a seat in the back of the room and kicked her feet up onto the desk in front of her. Zuko sat down next to her and looked around nervously. What exactly did one do in detention?

Okay, so it wasn’t like Zuko didn’t get in trouble at his old school. He definitely wasn’t the poster child of good behavior. But the private school he used to go to was heavily funded by his father’s money, so it wasn’t like they could punish him much. Though the principal had never realized Zuko would be the only one punished by his father if he got in trouble for skipping or whatever other rules he tended to break.

He snuck a peek at the girl sitting next to him. She was scrolling on her phone now, not paying anyone else any attention. There were a few other people in the room, but not many.

“So what did you do to get yourself detention?” The girl had looked up from her phone and was watching him again.

Zuko scowled. “I fell asleep in class.”

“Damn. The teacher must really not like you if that’s all you did.”

“You’re telling me.” Zuko sighed. “What did you do?”

“Got into a fight,” she said casually. “I’m Mai, by the way.”

“I’m Zuko.” He hesitated, but his curiosity got the better of him. “How did you get into a fight?”

“Someone was hitting on my girlfriend after she told him she was taken.” her eyes flashed with anger. “So I shut him up.” A satisfied smile crossed her face at the memory.

Zuko gulped. “Your girlfriend?”

Mai narrowed her eyes. “Yeah. You got a problem with that?”

“N-no. Not at all.”

“Good.”

Zuko tried not to let the confusion show on his face. Mai had a girlfriend, which could only mean one thing- she was gay. And she definitely wasn’t ashamed of it either. Zuko had never met a gay person who was so confident in her identity before. Not that it really mattered to him.

Just then, an old man with a sour expression on his face walked into the room. He must be the teacher in charge of detention.

“Alright, you all know the drill. No talking. Get out your homework and be quiet until I say it’s time to leave,” he barked.

This guy must have a real stick up his ass.

Mai rolled her eyes, grabbed a textbook from her backpack, tucked her phone into it, and continued scrolling. Smart.

Zuko’s phone was almost dead, and he didn’t have a charger. So that meant mindless scrolling was a thing of the past for him.

He pulled a textbook out of his backpack and opened it to a random page. He hadn’t actually paid attention to what any of his assignments were, seeing as he never planned on doing them.

Zuko tried to concentrate on reading, but he couldn’t have picked a more boring subject, honestly. Some war in history that he didn’t care about.

His mind kept drifting to thoughts of the girl next to him with another girl, and how that left a funny feeling in his chest. And somehow his brain connected that weird feeling to the mental image of Sokka smiling at him.

He shut that thought down as fast as it had popped into his head. There was a reason he was in this mess, and he couldn’t hope to ever go back home if he wasn’t even trying to get better. He was stuck in some awful phase- but he could get over it. All he had to do was not think about it. Not think about Sokka, or Sokka’s blue eyes, or his bright smile, or-

Zuko was a fucking mess.

His father was right to be ashamed of him. He was supposed to be learning a lesson in his time away from home- that was why his father had kicked him out. And when he did learn his lesson, he would go back home and everything would be normal again. Maybe his father would even be proud of him for fixing himself...

“Time’s up. You can all go now,” The teacher announced without looking up from the papers he was grading at his desk.

Zuko blinked in surprise. Had that much time really passed? It had only felt like a few minutes but... he checked his phone and it confirmed an hour had gone by while he was lost in his head.

“You good?” Mai was standing next to him with her backpack slung over one shoulder.

“Uh, yeah. I’m great.” And he definitely didn’t sound sarcastic at all.

“Sure you are, buddy.” Mai sure rolled her eyes a lot. “See you next time.” And with that she left the room.

“Next time?” He mumbled to himself incredulously. He wasn’t planning on making this a regular thing.

Oh well. She had already left, after all. He stuffed the textbook that he hadn’t read a single word of back in his backpack and left the room, ignoring the glare he got from the old teacher as he passed his desk. Why did all the teachers seem to hate him?

He walked down the halls, ready to just go to his makeshift “home” and go to sleep. His body had not let him forget the lack of sleep he had endured the night before and he was exhausted.

But he suddenly remembered the plans he had made with Sokka just earlier that day. He stopped in his tracks, just outside the door that exited the building. Just his luck- his awful day would drag on as he mentally prepared himself to go over to the house of the cutest boy he had ever met. Wait. He didn’t mean that.

Oh no.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Here's the longest chapter yet! Enjoy the fluff while you still can ;)

Sokka was waiting for him on the steps in front of the school. He stood and waved when he saw Zuko come out the door, and Zuko forced himself not to glare at him. Sokka hadn't technically done anything wrong, Zuko was just in an awkward situation. Though when it came to Zuko, every situation was pretty awkward.

"Hey! How was detention?" Sokka asked when Zuko reached him. He waggled his eyebrows in a teasing manner.

"Boring," Zuko sighed. He decided not to tell him about the girl he had met there, because that would lead into all the confusing emotions talking to her had made him feel, and he definitely didn't want to process any of that.

"Sounds about right." Sokka started walking away from the school, and Zuko reluctantly followed him. He was tired and didn't want to do the project- that was why he felt such dread at the thought of spending time alone with Sokka- definitely not because he was nervous.

Zuko quickly realized they were heading towards the student parking lot, not the street.

"I didn't know you could drive."

"Oh I can't. You know, the whole gays can't drive thing," Sokka laughed. Zuko's heart skipped a beat at the word- so casually mentioned, and the second time he had heard it talked about that day.

Sokka's laughter died off and Zuko realized too late that he was staring. He quickly looked away, ignoring the way he could feel his cheeks flush.

"Anyway," Sokka continued, reaching a hand up to rub the back of his neck, "Katara had a student council meeting today, so she can drive us home."

Zuko was strangely relieved to find out he wasn't going to be completely alone with Sokka. That confused him, because usually he thought the less people the better, but he was glad to have a buffer between him and Sokka's constant chatter.

Katara was already in the car when Sokka and Zuko approached. They both got into the backseat, where Zuko's ears were immediately assaulted by a pop radio station. Not his usual choice, to put it lightly.

“Ugh, Katara, do we have to listen to this?” Apparently Sokka agreed.

“What? It’s a good song!” Katara protested.

“You wouldn’t know a good song if it walked up to you and slapped you in the face,” Sokka said matter of factly.

“Says you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!” Then Sokka turned to Zuko. “Tell her this station sucks.”

“Um…” Zuko started, flustered. “It’s not what I would have chosen?”

“See?” Sokka looked at Katara pointedly.

“Well, this is my car, so you can play whatever song you want when you learn how to drive,” Katara told him smugly.

Sokka gasped with mock hurt on his face. “Now that’s just hurtful.” He turned to Zuko again. “Do you see what I have to live with?”

“She kind of has a point- it’s her car,” Zuko pointed out.

“I can’t believe you’re taking her side on this!”

“I’m just gonna start driving now,” Katara announced, rolling her eyes at her brother’s melodrama.

She pointedly turned up the radio as a new song started to play, and she pulled out of the parking lot. Zuko kept his eyes looking out the window and tried not to think about the boy sitting next to him.

It turns out “out of sight, out of mind” doesn’t really work on a chronic over-thinker, especially when the topic of his thoughts was only about a foot away from him.

He internally face palmed. He couldn’t do this. He knew he wasn’t allowed to do this. And he had a permanent reminder on his face of why he wasn’t allowed to do this. It was wrong- he was wrong. And he might as well kiss home goodbye if he couldn’t get over… whatever this was.

The universe really just decided to make his life as difficult as it possibly could, huh? Here he is, sitting next to a cute boy, his thoughts tempting him to forget all the lessons he’d learned- as if he were Eve and his mind was the serpent trying to convince him to take a bite of the Sokka-fruit. What the fuck- he immediately tried to scrub his brain clean of that image- he definitely wasn’t the best at metaphors.

“-and then I told him where he could shove that dumb idea, am I right, Zuko?”

Zuko’s thoughts snapped back to reality when he heard his name. He had been spacing out too much lately. And even worse- Sokka was waiting for him to respond to a story he had not

heard a single word of.

“Uh... yeah.” Zuko cringed.

“You good, buddy? Usually people find my stories hilarious.”

“They do not,” Katara interjected.

“Aw, you’re just too stuck up to appreciate a good story, Katara.”

“You know what? You are lucky I am a responsible driver, because if I wasn’t I would be showing you exactly how stuck up I am right now, and-“

“Come on! You never-“

Zuko watched the two siblings argue over each other in absolute bewilderment. They sounded angry, but by the time Katara pulled into the driveway of their house they were both laughing. What kind of fight ended in laughing?

Usually, when Zuko and Azula fought, they would say rude things to each other until it either got physical or their father ordered them to shut up. Though, if they angered their father, it would end physically either way.

On that entirely cheerful note, Zuko got out of the car and looked up at Sokka and Katara’s house. It was small- one story and not that wide- but it was painted a subtle shade of blue and there were flowers growing outside the windows. It seemed well taken care of, and... homey. That wasn’t a word he could use to describe his own home, and until this moment, he hadn’t been exactly sure what it meant. But this house fit that word perfectly.

“Are you looking at the flowers, Zuko?” Sokka pointed out the blossoms in the planters by the window. “Katara grew them- she’s really got a green thumb.”

Katara smiled proudly. “They’re called fire lilies. It’s my first time growing them, but I think they turned out alright.”

“Yeah. They are very pretty,” Zuko agreed. He was still pretty confused on how those two had gone from yelling at each other to giving compliments in a matter of seconds.

“Well, it’s hot out here, so let’s go inside already.” Sokka tapped his foot against the pavement of the driveway impatiently. The afternoon sun was beating down on their heads, making Zuko sweat in his hoodie, but he had never minded the heat of the sun. It was comforting to him that there was always warmth to be found if he stepped outside- he hated the cold.

He reluctantly followed the two siblings into their house. Katara quickly excused herself and disappeared into her room, leaving Zuko alone with Sokka.

Sokka led Zuko to the kitchen table and sat his stuff down. The kitchen was much smaller than his at home- well, at home there was a hired cook so he didn’t go in there much anyway-

and there were dirty dishes in the sink, but it had an overall very warm atmosphere. Zuko decided he liked it.

Sokka turned around his chair before sitting on it backwards and gestured to Zuko to sit down in the seat across from him. He did, and then looked at Sokka expectantly.

“Where’s your backpack?” Sokka pointed at the empty space where his bag probably should have been.

“Um...” He really needed to work on his lying skills. “I don’t have one?” It came out like a question, but he wasn’t quick enough to think of anything more believable than the truth.

Sokka furrowed his eyebrows. “Do you just leave everything in your locker then?”

He also didn’t have a locker, but that sounded reasonable enough.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s exactly what I do.”

“Oookay... well I guess that means you’ll need to borrow my notes.” Sokka dug some slightly crumpled papers out of his own back and slid them across the table towards him.

“Thanks,” Zuko said stiffly. He busied himself with reading the paper. Sokka’s handwriting was messy, but his notes were thorough. He could tell Sokka put in effort in his classes.

“So I guess we should get started with the project then.”

Zuko’s head snapped up to find Sokka was staring at him. He directed his gaze back at the paper and let his hair fall over his face to disguise his blush.

Zuko sighed. “Where do you want to start then?”

“We need to draw out our plans first, but i was thinking we could build a 3-D model to demonstrate the subject instead of just a poster board. Of course we’ll need some materials but I think I can find some stuff around the house to use. I’m actually a bit of an artist, so I’ve got some supplies laying around.”

Zuko listened to Sokka ramble about the project. It was nice to see him so enthusiastic about something, and he couldn’t help but notice how Sokka’s blue eyes sparkled when he got all excited. Then Zuko remembered he wasn’t supposed to think those kinds of things.

“Are you okay?” Sokka cut himself off and Zuko realized he was scowling. “We can try something else if you don’t like that idea.”

“Oh.” Sokka thought he was scowling at him. “No, your idea’s great.”

“Are you sure? You looked really unhappy about it.” Sokka frowned.

“I wasn’t thinking about your stupid idea, so let’s just get on with it,” he grumbled.

“So you do think it’s stupid.”

“No- I- ugh.” Zuko facepalmed.

“What’s really wrong?” Sokka asked gently. “I feel like every time I talk to you, you get all defensive and annoyed.”

“I’m not defensive and annoyed.” Zuko crossed his arms. Then he thought better of it and uncrossed them again. “I just- I have a lot going on right now, okay?”

Sokka nodded. “Do you want to talk about it?”

And suddenly, Zuko did want to talk about it. He had been living alone, on the streets for weeks, and his family hated him and he had no one to talk to. Sokka’s eyes were so full of understanding as he watched Zuko, and he thought maybe it would be okay to open up to him just a little bit.

But reality was a bitch. And the reality was that Zuko couldn’t say a word of how bad his life was right now or he would never get to go home. Things would never get better if he couldn’t make himself better first.

“No,” he breathed before he could take it back and let all of the pain and sadness that plagued him roll off his tongue and out into the open. He simply couldn’t risk it.

“If that’s what you really want.” Sokka leaned back, and some of the tension in the air was released.

Sokka pulled out a piece of paper and a couple pencils. “Let’s start designing our model.”

Zuko complied, taking one of the pencils and following Sokka’s lead. Once he got a feel for what Sokka was going for, he started adding his own details to the page, and soon he was genuinely interested in seeing where the project would go.

“I think this is a great design,” Sokka announced finally, after they had put all their ideas together into one drawing.

“I think so too.”

Sokka glanced at him in surprise, and then one of his big, goofy grins took over his face. “You do?”

Zuko nodded, a little sheepishly. “It’s clever and well thought out. I think it will work well.”

“Of course it will- I designed it,” Sokka told him smugly. “Well, you helped too,” he added.

Zuko rolled his eyes. This guy was a handful.

“What kind of supplies do we need to start building?” Zuko asked, studying their design with a critical eye.

“Let’s go look around my room. I’m sure we can find most of the materials we need in there.”

Sokka stood up from the table and stretched. Zuko very casually noticed how his shirt lifted a little, revealing the smooth skin of his stomach.

Then he quickly tore his eyes away from the other boy and got up. His chair screeched as it got pushed back too quickly, and Zuko cursed himself for making a perfectly good moment awkward as Sokka turned towards the sound.

“You good?”

“I’m fine,” Zuko snapped. He immediately wished he could take the words back. “Sorry- I’m just tired.” That was definitely true. He couldn’t remember a single time that he had slept through the night in years. Not since... you know.

“Oh. Apology accepted, I guess.” Sokka looked a little stunned, but whether it was from Zuko’s outburst or his apology, he wasn’t sure.

Sokka seemed to snap out of it and turned to lead them to his room. When they stepped through the door Sokka immediately started shoving things around and digging through bins for supplies.

Zuko stopped just inside the room and looked around, eyes wide. He had never seen a room so messy. There was clothes and all sorts of random things strewn about the floor, the bed, the desk, and any other available space in the room.

“Have you ever cleaned this place before in your life?” Zuko blurted out incredulously.

Sokka paused what he was doing, which was dumping a bin into the middle of the floor, and turned to look at Zuko.

“It might not look like it, but everything is perfectly organized.”

“Are you going to stick with that answer?”

“Hey! I have a system! See, everything is out in the open where I can find it.” Sokka gestured at everything, though it was pretty unnecessary. “If it’s all hidden away in drawers then I’ll never remember where I put anything.”

Sokka was a logical person, that much Zuko could tell. It was just that Sokka’s train of thought often traveled so far outside the box that his reasoning was lost on others. This was one of those times.

“But- but you can barely walk in here!” Zuko complained.

“Just step on the clothes. I promise they don’t mind.”

Zuko snorted. He crossed the room to join Sokka, making sure to stomp on every rumpled t-shirt in his path. Sokka already had an armload of random junk balanced precariously as he dug through another bin for more stuff.

“I’ve got paints, cardboard, some wire, buttons, and a ribbon.” Sokka listed off the colorful objects he held as he added another button to the pile.

“A ribbon?” Zuko raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. For flare.”

“If you say so.”

Sokka straightened his back and faced Zuko. “Hmm... you know what we need?” He asked, tapping his chin. He didn’t wait for an answer. “Some pipe cleaners.”

“What on earth would we do with those, Sokka?” Zuko was just a little exasperated. But secretly, he was happy to see this imaginative, excitable side of Sokka. From his few interactions he had had with the boy at school before, he had seemed rather pessimistic, so this was an interesting change.

He wondered what had brought on this openness between them. Zuko wasn’t exactly ready to share all his secrets like they were middle school girls at a sleepover, but he could hold a conversation with the guy and maybe, actually enjoy it.

“We could also use pipe cleaners for hair. Do you think that would work?”

Zuko blinked and realized Sokka had been answering his question while Zuko was completely zoned out... and staring at the other boy. He fought off the urge to blush and pretended he had been listening the whole time.

“Uh, yeah. I think that would work.” He sounded completely natural.

“Oh well. We still don’t have any, so it doesn’t matter.” Sokka shrugged and headed towards the door. “Let’s sort through what we do have.”

—

Zuko and Sokka spent the next hour working on their project. It was a little wonky, and very colorful, but it was starting to come together. And being in the company of another person his age, someone that wasn’t Azula, was... nice. Sokka told corny jokes, and Zuko forced himself not to laugh before giving a dry retort, and that’s how their time together went.

Sokka flopped back in his chair. “I think that’s enough for today.”

Zuko had to agree. They were close to being finished, but they could also really use a break. They’d been at it since the minute they’d gotten to Sokka’s house.

“Plus, I’m starving,” Sokka complained. Zuko was also ready for a good meal- but he hadn’t really been having enough of those lately. He didn’t exactly have money to buy groceries or a kitchen to cook in. How he missed the days that he had had a private chef that cooked three meals a day for his family.

“You know what? Let’s go to McDonald’s!” Sokka grinned. “If you’re up for it, of course.”

Zuko looked at him in surprise. “You want me to go... with you?”

Sokka snorted. “No, I was actually planning on taking our project out to dinner.”

Zuko rolled his eyes, though his heart had skipped a beat at the phrase “out to dinner.” In Zuko’s mind it sounded inherently romantic, but they were talking about McDonald’s after all, so he was probably reading too far into the situation.

“Okay then, smart aleck. I’ll go with you.”

“Great! Let’s go then, because I’m seriously so hungry right now.” Sokka jumped up from his chair and started cramming his sneakers back onto his feet.

Zuko chuckled at the sight of Sokka hopping on one foot towards the front door while tugging a shoe onto his other foot, but he masked it with a cough. He had a reputation to uphold.

The McDonald’s was close enough that they could walk there, and they passed the time in a comfortable silence. Zuko couldn’t help but think that this was not how he had imagined his day would go.

They entered the restaurant to find it fairly empty, other than a mother and her two young children sitting at a table in the center of the room.

Sokka and Zuko ordered their food and were handed cups for their drinks. Zuko watched in amazement and horror as Sokka filled his cup with a little bit of every drink in the soda machine. Zuko got only sprite- like a normal person.

“You should try a sip of mine,” Sokka offered suddenly. “It tastes way better when you mix them all together.” So he had caught Zuko watching him.

“I sincerely doubt that... but now I have to see what it’s like for myself.” Zuko didn’t often let his curiosity carry him away, but it was hard not to try new things when Sokka was offering with big blue eyes and a teasing grin.

Sokka handed him his cup and Zuko tentatively took a sip. It tasted... weird. Not awful, but really weird.

“It’s different. But not that bad, I guess.”

“Told ya!” Sokka crowed, taking his drink back.

Just then, the cashier called their order number, and Zuko volunteered to go grab their tray while Sokka picked a table. Zuko found him sitting at a table with two chairs up against the window- but strategically placed where the sun wouldn’t be in either one’s eyes.

He set the tray down on the table and took the empty seat across from Sokka. There was a minute where the only sound was wrappers crinkling and chewing while they both dug into their food.

“So,” Sokka started, “What school did you go to before BSS High? Did you just move here?”

Zuko narrowly avoided choking on his chicken nugget. Where did all the questions come from?

“I... uh...” He decided it would be best to stay close to the truth. As close as he could, that was. “I used to go to a private school.”

Sokka raised his eyebrows. “Like a fancy shmancy rich people school?”

“I mean, it sounds a lot worse when you put it that way.” Zuko reached up to tuck a strand of his hair behind his ear.

“Well, why’d you stop going there?”

Zuko gulped. “I- I got kicked out.” Honestly he probably would have if his father wasn’t such an influential funder of the school. So it was almost true. Somehow that didn’t make it any easier to tell.

“How did you manage that? You looked like you’d never been to detention in your life when I saw you earlier.” Sokka shoved a fry in his mouth while waiting for an answer.

“I...” See, he had no moral obligation to tell the truth, he just happened to be a terrible liar. “I broke someone’s nose.”

“What? How?” Sokka’s eyes widened. He didn’t seem to even consider that Zuko might have just been making the whole thing up.

“Well, I got into a fight.” Zuko put a whole nugget in his mouth to buy him some time while he chewed.

“No shit.” Sokka shook his head. “Come on! Tell me the interesting part!”

“Okay.” Zuko took a long sip of his sprite. “This guy was saying rude things about me, so I punched him in the face.”

“Dude.” Sokka pointed at him with a fry. “That was the worst story I’ve ever heard.”

Zuko was just glad that Sokka seemed to have bought it. He shrugged. “Well, how would you have told it?”

“Thanks for asking, cuz I would be happy to tell you.” Sokka’s face took on a cocky grin that made Zuko’s traitorous heart skip a beat. And then he went on to tell the wildest, most unrealistic story he had ever heard, embellished with everything from superpowers to a crowd cheering him on.

And when Sokka finished the story of how Zuko had apparently bashed a supervillain's face in with his super strength, he couldn’t help it- he burst out laughing.

Sokka looked almost as surprised as Zuko. He couldn't remember the last time he had laughed like that. It had been weeks, maybe months... now that he thought about it, it could have actually been a lot longer than that.

But it didn't matter, because he was laughing now. "You're even crazier than I thought," Zuko teased after he calmed down.

"Then apparently you've been underestimating me." He had a pleased look on his face that Zuko would have usually found obnoxious but now only made him smile back. Zuko... smiling back? Today was full of firsts for him.

When they finished their food they realized that the sun had begun to set. Zuko couldn't believe that much time had passed while he was with Sokka, but he supposed that time really does fly when you're having fun. And, Zuko begrudgingly admitted to himself (and himself only) that he had had fun today.

"Do you need a ride home?" Sokka asked as they left the building.

"Nah. I can walk." Zuko shook his head.

"Okay. Well, we're meeting up again tomorrow to finish the project, right?"

They did need to do that. And Zuko wasn't as against the idea as he had been earlier that day. "Yeah. That works for me."

Sokka smiled and waved goodbye. And Zuko waved back... and maybe smiled just a little bit too.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

here's the next chapter! i dont have much to say other than i hope you enjoy :)

Zuko allowed himself to sleep in the next morning, deciding he deserved it. Well, it hadn't been a conscious decision, but he was so tired after yesterday's full schedule that he couldn't bring himself to care.

When he did finally open his eyes and sit up, he decided one more thing- he had an errand to run.

At this point, saying he was late to school would be a severe understatement, so another hour wasn't going to hurt anyone. He got as ready for the day as he could with his limited supplies and lack of a mirror- though he hated looking at his reflection anyways- and set off down the street.

He walked with his hood up and his hands in his pockets. He could physically feel the bags under his eyes, because no matter how tired he was, the nightmares never left him alone.

He entered a craft store and set off to wander around for a while. He found that the shop was filled with everything from colored pencils to yarn to paints, yet all the wares in the shop had one thing in common- it was all extremely colorful, which meant Zuko's black clad figure stuck out like a sore thumb. Zuko pulled his hood a little lower and kept walking.

He was looking for something specific, yes, but he also didn't mind taking his time so that he could avoid as many of his classes as possible. It wasn't like he was going to be able to concentrate much anyway, when he was just waiting until the end of the day, when he was supposed to meet up with Sokka again. Because he was looking forward to finishing their project, of course.

After aimlessly perusing each aisle, he eventually reached the back of the store and found what he had come there for- a pack of fuzzy, multicolored pipe cleaners.

In one fluid movement they were off the shelf and in his hoodie pocket. Easy enough.

He had turned to go, his anxiety nagging him to hurry up and get out of there, when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. He picked it up and tucked it inside his pocket as well. If Sokka could add some "flair" to their project, so could Zuko.

He quickly exited the store, but took his time walking to school. He got there just in time for lunch, so he grudgingly entered the loud cafeteria. Zuko found his table just in time to join the others in the lunch line.

“Where have you been?” Sokka immediately asked when Zuko walked over to them. “You weren’t in our class today.”

“You weren’t skipping, were you?” Katara raised an eyebrow. The look on her face said that he definitely wasn’t skipping, if he knew what was good for him. He definitely wasn’t admitting to it, at least.

“I uh... slept through my alarm,” he said casually. Maybe he was getting better at this.

“Sure you did, Zuko.” Katara crossed her arms, but she must have seen the panicked look on his face when his lie fell through, and she decided not to push it any further. He appreciated that more than she probably knew.

He looked over and noticed that Sokka and Toph were whispering about something. Zuko wasn’t ashamed to admit that he immediately attempted to eavesdrop on their conversation, but his bad ear was faced towards them so he didn’t catch a single word.

He did however, see Sokka’s tan face go red as he abruptly straightened back to his full height- Toph had pulled him down by the front of his shirt so she could whisper in his ear.

Sokka caught Zuko watching him and their eyes met for a second. Zuko felt pinned in place by those big, ocean blue eyes and found himself unable to look away until Sokka broke eye contact first. As he lowered his head to stare at his shoes he felt his face heat up- he was probably as red as a tomato.

He had always despised how easily he blushed. Azula had always used it to her advantage when she teased him, and he found he could never easily hide his feelings from others. During his middle school years he had wished he could hide his face altogether so that people wouldn’t be able to read him so easily- and eventually he learned that anger was a mask all on it’s own.

Why was he even blushing anyway? So what if Sokka caught him staring? It wasn’t his fault Sokka was being all secretive right in front of him. Of course he was curious! And that’s all there was to it.

They got back to their table and Zuko found himself wedged between Sokka and Toph, with Katara and Aang across from them. He noticed those two were sitting awfully close together, even though they had more room on their side. What was that about?

His train of thought was quickly interrupted as he felt Sokka’s knee brush up against his own. Zuko forced his expression into a scowl as he focused on his lunch, determined not to acknowledge the physical closeness between him and Sokka.

Fortunately, Sokka ignored it too. He didn’t, however, leave him completely alone, because he turned to face Zuko and opened his mouth to ask a question... except his mouth was full of chewed up sandwich.

Zuko grimaced. “Sokka! That’s so gross!”

A look of confusion crossed Sokka's face before he suddenly clamped his mouth shut. Zuko then watched in horror as he opened his mouth wide again, this time showing it off on purpose.

"What's wrong Zuko?" He tried to tease, but the words were jumbled with all the food in his mouth.

This time he caught Katara's attention too.

"Sokka! How many times has Gran Gran told you not to talk with your mouth full!" Katara cringed as Sokka turned his open-mouthed expression onto her.

Sokka swallowed hard and then flashed the table a winning smile.

"Charming." Toph's voice was dripping with sarcasm as she elbowed Sokka in the side. If Zuko had been paying closer attention, he would have seen her give a pointed look at him and then back at Sokka, but alas, he wasn't the most observant person.

Sokka must have forgotten what he was going to say to Zuko, because the rest of the table settled into a conversation about the amount of homework they had been given lately. Zuko had plenty of homework himself, but seeing as he never did any of it, he didn't have much to contribute to the conversation.

After a few more minutes of this, the bell rang and everyone waved each other off and went in their separate directions. Zuko stood to follow Toph through the halls to their shared class. This was a routine they had established in the last few days, not that Zuko minded too much. He had to admit- he enjoyed Toph's company.

The two of them had left the cafeteria and were walking down the crowded hallway when Toph spoke.

"So, you and Sokka are working on a project together, huh?" Zuko definitely did not like the knowing smile Toph was wearing.

"What about it?" He countered gruffly.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all."

Zuko was so glad she couldn't see the blush that had returned to his cheeks for absolutely no reason. He was also more than a little confused by this conversation topic, but he decided to put it in the back of his mind as they reached their classroom.

—

The rest of the day passed in as monotonous a fashion as it usually did, and Zuko found Sokka waiting for him on the front steps of the school for the second day in a row.

"Hey." Zuko raised his hand to greet him.

"Katara's waiting for us in the car again."

Zuko nodded and followed Sokka towards the student parking lot. He was feeling a strong sense of déjà vu at the similarity to the day before, but the difference was that today he was actually looking forward to spending time alone with Sokka.

On second thought, the fact that he was looking forward to it was a brand new source of anxiety for him. Because he definitely should not want to spend time with Sokka. It was wrong. His traitorous thoughts and feelings were wrong, and they were ruining his life. He was ruining his own life, and he still hadn't learned his lesson.

"Are you okay?" Sokka asked, pulling him out of his spiraling thoughts.

"Why do you keep asking that?" Zuko didn't understand why he kept checking in on him. He was fine. At least, he wanted to pretend he was.

"You just seem... in your head." Zuko peeked at the boy walking next to him. His expression was thoughtful. Curious. And maybe even a little concerned.

"I just- I have a lot on my plate right now." Now that definitely wasn't a lie.

"It must be hard starting at a new school." Sokka nodded.

That was really the least of his problems, but it was a problem he could afford to talk about.

"Yeah. I'm used to the staring, but it doesn't make it any easier." The words came out of Zuko's mouth before he could stop them. Oh god. Why had his brain decided to tell Sokka that?

But Sokka took it in stride. "I like it, you know."

Zuko stumbled and abruptly stopped walking. "You what?"

Sokka stopped too and turned to meet Zuko's eyes. His face was oddly red.

"It's a part of you, and it makes you unique. It, uh, I think it makes you special."

Zuko openly stared. No one had ever said anything remotely positive about his scar before.

"Are- are you making fun of me?" That was the only way Sokka's words could make sense.

A look of alarm crossed Sokka's face. "Why on Earth would you think that?"

"I'm used to it." Now he was going for brutally honest, apparently.

Sokka's eyes filled with a deep sadness as he looked at the boy in front of him. Zuko wished a hole would open up in the ground and swallow him deep beneath the surface.

Unfortunately, no one really had the ability to move the earth at will, so he was stuck in this stupid situation his stupid mouth had put him in.

"That's not okay," Sokka said suddenly. "Just tell me their name and I'll deck 'em for you." Sokka crossed his arms.

“Who- who’s name?” Zuko’s eyebrows crinkled in confusion.

“The person who made fun of your scar.”

“Which one?” Zuko should really shut up now. His attempt at a joke went way over Sokka’s head and only served to worsen the situation.

“Zuko.” Sokka met his gaze and held it there with the sheer intensity of the emotions in his eyes. “Who- no, how many people have made you feel bad about your scar?”

Well the first person would be his father, for obvious reasons. The second would be Azula, which he also couldn’t explain. And then...

“Too many to count.” That’s when Zuko looked away from Sokka, too afraid to see his reaction.

And that’s why Zuko didn’t see it coming when Sokka leaned in to embrace him. He felt his strong, warm hands wrap around his body and pull him close, and he felt himself stiffen like a board at the contact-

But it didn’t hurt. Somehow, a person was touching him and it didn’t hurt. This realization filled him with a feeling he didn’t recognize- something he hadn’t felt since he was a child and his mother was still around. He melted into the other boy's arms, accepting the hug and letting his feelings run freely for just a moment. And if a single tear ran down his cheek as he reached his own arms up to hug Sokka back, then no one had to know.

The sound of a car honking to the left of him dragged him back to the present moment, reminding him that he was embracing another boy on school grounds where literally any person could see them, and the noise further told him that someone had seen them.

Oh no. His father was going to kill him when he found out about this. He yanked himself out of Sokka’s arms and stumbled backwards, but he tripped over his own feet and fell right on his ass.

That soft, warm feeling had been blown away like smoke in the wind, and he was left only with a sense of absolute panic. This was why his father kicked him out of the house. This was why his family hated him. This was why he was a failure and a disgrace to everyone he met-

“Whoa! Zuko, what happened?” And then Sokka was leaning over him, offering a hand to help him up. And Zuko was overwhelmed with how much he felt for this boy, and he was overwhelmed with how much fear he felt within him. Because he refused to admit it, but in this moment he couldn’t deny that he was scared.

He was terrified of the people around him; that they would hurt him physically and emotionally, that the people who didn’t already hate him would betray him. Even more than that though, he was petrified of his thoughts, of his emotions... of himself.

And it was all too much. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think. There was a pain in his chest that tightened with every second that passed by.

Then there were voices around him. He focused on the sound and started to ground himself. He hadn't noticed himself curl into a ball on the sidewalk and throw his hands over his head to protect his face from a burn that wasn't coming... because it had already happened.

Slowly, he regained his ability to breathe. And slowly, he looked up to find two sets of ocean blue eyes watching him with matching expressions of concern. Sokka... and Katara.

Katara was the one who honked the car horn and found him hugging her brother. Katara, who didn't even know who his father was. The panic inside him calmed just the slightest bit more- no one was going to tell his father on him.

Katara reached out and gently took his hand. She was muttering something that he couldn't make out, but the sound of her voice was soft and relaxing.

"What happened, Zuko?" She asked when she realized he was coherent again.

"I just..." he trailed off. How was he supposed to answer that question?

Sokka shook his head. "You don't have to tell us if you don't want to." He watched him carefully. "But you really scared us for a minute there."

He? Scared them? How ironic, considering he'd just about lost his mind over a car horn.

"Are you ready to get up? Or do you need a minute?" Katara questioned him carefully.

"I-I'm fine. I can stand." Zuko shook off Katara's hand even though he knew it was rude and moved to stand up by himself. He managed to get to his own two feet without falling over.

"So I think the last word I would use to describe you right now is fine," Sokka pointed out a little disbelievingly.

"Do you want me to drive you home?" Katara offered. "I know you were supposed to work on your project today, but maybe you should go get some rest."

Zuko knew he should leave. Sokka was at the center of all his problems right now... yet he couldn't stand the thought of wandering off alone to fall asleep on the hard ground in a dirty alley in silence.

"No. We need to finish our project, so that's what we'll do."

"Our project can wait, you know. Your health is way more important than one grade," Sokka argued.

"I told you. I'm fine," Zuko snapped. He immediately felt guilty for lashing out at the people who had just calmed him down from the edge of a panic attack, but it wasn't like he could take back the words that had already come out of his mouth.

"If you're sure," Sokka relented. Zuko nodded.

The three of them wordlessly made their way to Katara's car, which she had abandoned on the curb when she saw Zuko fall.

Zuko buried his face in his hands as Katara put the car in drive, and he noticed that she left the radio off today.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took so long! I was so caught up in the euphoria of writing fluff that for a minute I forgot I had to write the angst too.

TW: Homophobia and (mild) drug use

Don't forget to tell me what you think of the chapter in the comments!

“Okay, I think we could all use a break before we go home,” Katara announced from the front seat. They were still driving, and the trip had been relatively silent until now, which was growing increasingly uncomfortable.

“I’m listening.” Sokka perked up.

“Well, I heard that there’s a new ice cream shop not too far from here. Do you want-“

“Of course I want ice cream! What kind of question even is that Katara?” Sokka grinned, apparently having bounced back from the somber mood that had plagued the three of them thus far.

“I was actually going to ask if it was alright with Zuko, but thanks for your input.” The sarcasm at the end of her statement showed through as she rolled her eyes, glancing at her brother in the backseat through the mirror.

“Zuko?” Sokka prodded.

Zuko had refused to face either Sokka or Katara for at least five minutes after his episode- he couldn't bear to look them in the eye after freaking out in front of these people that, all in all, he barely knew.

“Oh. Uh, yeah. I don't mind,” he mumbled, staring intently at his shoes.

“Yes!” Sokka punched the air with his fist.

“My brother is a five year old,” Katara complained.

But after that, the three of them were significantly less tense. Sokka and Katara continued their sibling banter, and at this point Zuko had heard enough of their conversations that he didn't tense up when he heard them fighting. It was just their normal, unlike with him and Azula, who's fighting was only filled with venom, meant to poison the other with their words.

Zuko leaned back into his seat and focused his gaze at the window, watching the streets zip by him as his ears were filled by Katara's playful jabs and Sokka's clever comebacks. He remained quiet but allowed the conversation to keep him present in the moment, quieting his thoughts for the time being.

A few minutes passed and they were pulling into the parking lot of the ice cream shop. Zuko stepped out of Katara's car and took a breath of the fresh, warm air. He turned to follow the others inside the building, and when they walked through the door they found a small room buzzing with customers.

It was as if the owner of the shop hadn't expected to achieve much popularity when they bought the space, because the people inside were crowded close together into a line and only two tables were set up inside. There was a chill in the air from the freezers that hummed softly in the background of the chatter of customers and bustle of employees. Honestly, it was a little claustrophobic, but Zuko could see why a more extroverted person would enjoy it here. And Sokka's eyes lit up as he took it all in, proving Zuko's point. With a deep breath, he was calm again and followed Sokka as he squeezed himself between people crowded around the front counter.

There was glass, and behind it they could see the tubs of colorful ice cream. The three of them spent too long looking at all the different flavors (there were thirty) and Sokka taste tested at least twenty of them- much to the dismay of both Katara and the employee helping him.

They eventually paid for their ice cream, and Zuko was relieved when they went out a glass door in the back that led to more tables set up in the shade of a tall oak tree. There were a few people occupying the other tables, but the space had an air of calm that the inside of the shop lacked. The metal chairs squealed as the three of them pulled them out to sit, but no one seemed to mind. Though they were in the shade, the day was hot enough that drips of ice cream had already begun to trickle down the side of his cone. He licked them off before they could reach his fingers and noticed Katara doing the same. She had gotten cookie dough in a sugar cone, Zuko had strawberry in a waffle cone... and Sokka had at least ten different flavors in a bowl topped with whipped cream. He had still had to narrow it down to half the choices he was presented with, testing his powers of decisiveness and Katara's patience.

The three of them were quiet for a while, which Zuko didn't mind. He was a little too warm in his signature hoodie, but other than the sweat trickling down his back he was comfortable in the presence of other people in a way that he hadn't felt in a long time.

"You two could have been a little more creative, you know." Sokka gestured at Zuko and Katara respectively with his spoon. "It tastes way better when you mix them together."

Katara peered into Sokka's bowl, and Zuko copied her out of curiosity only to look away when he noticed the gross brown color that the melty bits at the bottom had turned into.

"I don't know, Sokka." Zuko shook his head.

"That looks disgusting," Katara stated.

“Sheesh.” Sokka took a big bite from his spoon, incorporating several clashing colors. Thankfully he kept his mouth closed that time.

Zuko figured he was better off just sticking to his classic strawberry.

Their conversation went on as the sun continued to melt their ice cream and made their hands sticky. Katara had to go in once for napkins after some dripped onto her shirt. When she came back she had plenty for Sokka too, who had a ring of ice cream dried around his mouth.

“So what’s your favorite video game, Zuko?” Sokka asked him after wiping the ice cream off his face.

“I’ve never played one,” Zuko admitted sheepishly. His father thought video games were a waste of time when he could be studying to improve his abysmal grades.

“No. Way.” Sokka’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No?”

“We have to fix that immediately.”

Katara nodded. “Yeah! We can show you the classic-“

“Mario Kart.” Sokka nodded sagely.

“Mario Kart?” Zuko looked back and forth between the two of them.

“Absolutely,” Sokka said with an air of seriousness that would make Zuko think they were talking about anything other than video games.

They finished their snack quickly and drove home, and all the while Sokka and Katara described their favorite video games. Katara’s was Animal Crossing and Sokka liked Splatoon, but they had a shared love for Mario Kart.

When they got back to Katara and Sokka’s house they went through the kitchen where they had worked on their project the day before and into the living room. Zuko subtly took in the space while the other two set up the Nintendo Switch and found their extra controller.

The room was cozy, with an electric fireplace in one corner, a tv mounted on the wall, and a long couch in the middle of the room. He sat down next to Sokka (but not too close) after they set up the game, and sunk into the couch. It was one of those couches that were so squishy you just melted into it like a bed of pillows. It contrasted to the couch in the sitting room at his home, which was expensive and made of leather, but stiff and cold.

“I’m always Rosalina,” Katara told them when they got to the screen to pick their characters.

“I switch it up a lot, but my favorite is Yoshi,” Sokka added as he selected that avatar.

Zuko glanced through all the different characters on the screen before going with one that looked like a mushroom.

“Aww, you picked Toad! That one’s so cute!” Katara smiled.

“He’s not a toad though? He’s a mushroom?” Zuko looked back at the character in confusion. Nope. Still not a toad.

“Just don’t think too hard about it.” Sokka shrugged.

“Whatever.”

Sokka scooted closer to him on the couch to show Zuko how to work the controls, but all he could think about was how their legs were touching and Sokka’s arm was practically in his lap as he pointed out the different buttons and explained what they did.

If he had been paying attention to anything else, he would have noticed Katara giving them a look.

Once Sokka was sure Zuko had the hang of the controls, they started the game. Zuko held down the A button as the countdown ended and all the cars on the screen lurched forwards. Steering was... much more difficult than he had anticipated- he kept bumping into the sides of the track and wasn’t able to avoid obstacles quickly enough. He tried to jerk his car into a straight line but he went too far and rammed into the other side.

He grunted in frustration and tried again. This time he watched in horror as his car drove directly into a banana peel and slipped. Why was there a banana peel in the middle of the road?!

After fighting with his car for a couple minutes he finally reached the finish line. Relieved, he released the A button and noticed Katara and Sokka were still going. He must have beaten them. Somehow. Maybe he was better at this game than he thought.

“Hey, Zuko! Keep going,” Sokka urged. “You got two more laps to go!”

Zuko stared at Sokka, but his eyes were glued to the screen, his tongue stuck out in concentration. That was kinda cute, actually.

But then he turned back to the screen and that’s when he noticed the numbers $\frac{2}{3}$ in the corner of his square. Fuck.

He returned to driving his car terribly, but it only lasted for a minute before he was suddenly cut off. He looked at Sokka and Katara’s screens and realized they had all finished the race. In first and second place too.

“Katara! You cheated!” Sokka announced, indignant.

“What! That’s not even- I’m just better than you! Admit it!” Katara shot back.

“Never!”

So those two must take this game pretty seriously then. He hoped they hadn't noticed his player in the twelfth slot- the very last place.

The second game didn't go much better. Or the third. By the fourth though, he had learned not to hit as many walls and managed to score eleventh place. What an improvement.

"Hey, you're not last this time!"

"Sokka!"

"It was a compliment!"

Those two.

They played several sets of four races called "cups" and Zuko quickly got caught up in the sibling's competitive spirit. He was really starting to get the hang of it- he had figured out how to drive straight (in one sense of the word) and how to collect and deploy power ups at the right time.

"You're really improving." Sokka grinned at him and Zuko suddenly felt all warm inside. Was it hot in here?

"Thanks," he muttered.

A couple more races and he finished in third place, with Sokka in second and Katara in first. Katara and Sokka were about evenly matched, but that was the first time Zuko placed.

"You did it!" Katara put out her hand and Zuko stared at it for a few seconds as her hand lingered in the air before realizing she wanted a high five. He hit her hand, a little too softly, but she didn't comment.

"Not quite as good as us yet, though." Sokka said playfully.

"Well, it's still my first day." Zuko smirked.

Katara rolled her eyes. "I have homework to do, so I'll leave you two to it."

To what?

Katara stood from her side of the couch and left the room, grabbing her stuffed backpack on the way.

Sokka shrugged and looked back at Zuko. "Want to play again?"

"Sure. I was just starting to get good at it."

"Oh, but we haven't tried Rainbow Road yet." Sokka grabbed his controller from his lap and clicked to start a new game.

“What’s so special about Rainbow Road?” They had played probably half the tracks now, so how bad could a rainbow be?

“You’ll see.”

—

Rainbow Road kicked his ass.

And Zuko could hardly believe it when Sokka told him that on the older versions you could fall off the side of the road. Zuko would have rolled off into space like a gutter ball the second he started.

“So, uh, I had a question for you,” Sokka said. His voice was uncharacteristically hesitant.

Zuko took his eyes off the tv screen to give Sokka his full attention. “Go ahead.”

“Well, you see, we still need to finish our project, but I have a club tomorrow, so-“

“So you want me to finish it for us? Sure, that way I can pay you back for today.” Zuko nodded sincerely.

Sokka shook his head. “No, no, that’s not what I was going to say.” He was quiet for a second. “What do you mean “pay you back for today?””

“Oh.” He had probably said too much. “I just meant that you and Katara really helped me out today. And I’m, uh, grateful for that.”

“You don’t have to pay us back for cheering you up! You do feel cheered up, right?” Sokka stared at him, as if he could find the cheer in Zuko’s eyes.

“Yeah. I do feel a lot better, actually.” Zuko looked away.

“That’s great!” Sokka coughed. “I mean, good to hear it.”

“So what were you going to ask me then?” Zuko finally asked. He wasn’t sure what to expect if it wasn’t some kind of favor.

“I was wondering if you want to go to the club with us?” He asked. Then, as an afterthought, he added, “Our whole group goes.”

“I can probably do that. What club is it?” Zuko wasn’t exactly busy these days.

Zuko watched as Sokka took a careful breath.

“It’s GSA.”

Sokka appeared to be waiting for his reaction, but Zuko just wrinkled his eyebrows in confusion.

“What’s a GSA?”

“Oh.” Sokka blinked. “It stands for Gay Straight Alliance. Did they not have one at your old school?”

Zuko didn’t catch Sokka’s question, because blood was pounding in his ears as his mind echoed the words Sokka had just said. He was inviting him to a gay club, which meant... Sokka thought he was gay. He couldn’t let anyone find out about this.

“I’m not gay!” Zuko knew it came out too forcefully, but he couldn’t stop the surge of emotions that were overtaking him.

Sokka’s face crumpled. “I guess I overstepped. Sorry-“

“What made you think I was- what made you think I like boys?” He knew his voice sounded angry, but that was the last emotion he was feeling right now.

Sokka’s expression hardened. “Is it such a bad thing?”

Zuko’s mind flashed back to his father’s words, and the kids at his old school.

He just barely whispered, “Yes.”

Sokka’s eyes flashed with something Zuko had never seen on him before- anger.

“I can’t believe this!” He shook his head. “I thought you were cool, but apparently you’re just another homophobic bitch.” Sokka stood and crossed his arms, towering over Zuko. His next words were something that shattered Zuko’s heart in a way he didn’t know was possible.

“This was all just a waste of time.”

In that moment, he felt too much like he had when his father stood over him, berating him for the exact opposite thing. It wasn’t Sokka’s fault, but he couldn’t stand it. So he did the only thing he knew how to do to protect himself- he stood and crossed his arms to match Sokka.

“Well, you thought wrong!” Zuko spat. His mind was screaming at him to stop yelling, but it was as if he wasn’t in control of the words coming out of his mouth anymore. He had immediately jumped to the defensive, which for him was offensive.

“I guess I did.” Sokka’s voice was suddenly calm, but cold as ice. “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

Zuko nodded swiftly and turned on his heel, stomping through the kitchen and right out the door. He let it slam shut behind him, harder than he meant it, and then stopped and stared for a minute.

What had he done?

He just ruined the one good thing in his life, that’s what. He suddenly started walking, then running, down the street, as fast as his legs could carry him. He had to get away from here.

What had he done?

He couldn't let father find out he had a crush on another boy. That's why he did it. That's what he told himself, but even he knew that was a shitty excuse, and didn't make much sense either. Sokka had already proved he was a supportive friend, and he didn't even know who his father was.

He eventually slowed down, panting and coming to a stop, bent over with his hands on his knees. He was getting looks from people passing by, but he didn't care. What was wrong with him? He could have at least lied calmly, instead of insulting his friend to his face. Now it was all over.

He trekked the rest of the way to his pathetic excuse for a bed and flopped down with a sigh. This was all his fault. This was all his fault. This was all his fault.

The weight of his shame was crushing him. He wished it would stop.

He sat up and rummaged through his meager belongings until he found something he hadn't thought about in days.

He held up the weed Jet had given him that day in the bathroom. Zuko had never smoked weed before, but now was as good a time as any. He dug around his stuff again and found his lighter. There was a little piece of paper in the bottom of the bag as well. He rolled it up and made a flame, catching the end of the joint. He wasn't exactly sure how to do it- but he must have figured it out, because after a few minutes he was starting to relax. He could get used to this...

What had he done?

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

major self harm trigger warning for this chapter!

The next morning came too early, the sunlight waking him up as always even though he had just barely fallen asleep. Rolling over, he vaguely recalled staying up almost until sunrise, just wandering the streets with no clear destination in mind. He hadn't cared then how fucked that would leave him the next day, and now he ached to the bone with exhaustion.

The fog of sleep slowly receded from his head, and now that he had woken from his stupor all he wished was that he could fall back asleep, or at least go back to how he had felt the night before. The memory, or more the feeling, of calm that had filled his mind, that had taken place of all his guilt and self hatred and made him feel lighter than air- he couldn't remember another singular moment that he had felt that peaceful since before his mom died.

He opened his eyes and lifted a hand up above his face to filter out the blinding sun as yesterday's events rushed back to the forefront of his mind. He was an idiot. Beyond that, he was an asshole who hurt the guy who had been so kind to him.

He had hurt Sokka, the one who gleefully demolished him at Mario Kart after teaching him how to play. Sokka, who mixed too many ice cream flavors together and made a mess. Sokka, who's bright smile and pure blue eyes peered into his soul and drew out the last bit of light that still remained inside of him.

And then Zuko had snuffed that light out himself.

He groaned and rolled over, closing his eyes again. His feet were sore from all the walking he had done- where had that energy even come from? Zuko resigned himself to never walking again.

—

He startled awake again at the sound of a voice.

“Hey, kid.” A boot nudged him in the side. “You alive down there?”

Zuko opened his eyes again and glared at the man standing over him. At least he was blocking the sun from his eyes.

“What do you want?” That sentence may have come out as more of a whine than Zuko cared to admit.

“Jeez.” The man raised his arms in surrender, a cigarette perched between two fingers.

“There I was, just walking by, and I saw a kid passed out in an alley. What was I supposed to do, just keep walking?”

“Yes.” Zuko sat up and rubbed his good eye before finally clambering to his feet.

The man squinted at him. “You’re pretty young to be out here on your own.”

“I manage just fine,” Zuko grumbled, though he had never been a good liar.

The man raised an eyebrow. “Sure you do.” Zuko watched as the guy swept his gaze across Zuko’s makeshift home- his small box of mostly stolen belongings and his pile of tattered blankets and towels that he called a bed. And that was it.

“You got family around here?”

“Not anyone who wants to see me.” It slipped out of Zuko’s mouth before he could stop it, the words bitter on his tongue.

The guy’s mouth set in a grim line and his eyes flashed with a certain type of sadness Zuko didn’t immediately recognize- understanding.

“You want a smoke?”

Fuck it. Why not?

“Sure.”

The man dug out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and pulled one out. He patted his other pocket but came up empty.

“Damn. You got a light?”

Zuko rolled his eyes, but grabbed the lighter from the top of his stuff and handed it over. The man lit his own cigarette and then Zuko’s, and passed it and the lighter back to him.

Zuko took a long draw from the cigarette, like he had seen people do in the movies, and immediately choked on a cough. The acrid taste of smoke filled his mouth and throat, making him grimace.

The man seemed to regret giving him a cigarette.

“This isn’t your first one, is it?”

“What makes you say that?” Zuko asked sarcastically, though the bite was lost due to the fact that the question was accentuated by a hacking cough.

There was a minute of silence as the man took a long drag from his own cigarette and Zuko debated trying his again.

“What’s your story, kid?”

“None of your business, old man.”

The man sighed deeply. “Fine. Just keep in mind that it doesn’t hurt to share your burden with a kindred spirit.”

“We’re not the same.” Zuko was not anything like this old man that, now that he actually paid attention, was obviously homeless. He wore baggy, stained clothes, had an unkempt beard and a beanie pulled over his graying hair. Zuko was not some hobo.

He glanced down at his own rumpled and well worn clothes... definitely not.

“Whatever you say, kid.” The man shook his head and chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Zuko scowled.

“You,” the guy answered blatantly.

Zuko didn’t even know how to reply to that. He was used to being the butt of jokes anyway, so he let it slide.

“Well, I’m gonna get going now.” The man turned to walk away. “Nice meeting ya.”

Zuko nodded back and watched as the old man left the alley and disappeared around the corner.

What a weird guy.

Zuko dug his phone out of his pocket to check the time, but it was dead. He must have run it out of battery last night, not caring that he had no way to charge it again. He should have asked to use a charger when he was at Sokka’s house, but it was too late now. That thought sent a sharp pang through his heart so he shoved it to the back of his mind. Ignoring it was the only way to lessen the pain.

—

The afternoon reached its peak, and the air was sweltering in his hoodie. At this point, he couldn’t be bothered to hide his scars when he was sweating through his clothes. No one was around to see the incriminating lines on his arms anyway, so Zuko yanked off his black hoodie and let the breeze wash over his bare skin.

He really did try not to look down at them, but his eyes were drawn to his mistakes like a pair of magnets.

Lines covered his forearms, some faded and almost unnoticeable, while others were red and agitated. Still others were just scabbing over, the results of his more recent troubles. And he knew it didn’t make any sense, but the regret that surged through his body as he stared down at what he had done to himself over the years just urged him to make more. And so the cycle continued.

Just minutes later his wrists were left stinging, but the wave of relief that washed over him along with it made it feel worthwhile to him. Was that messed up?

The stinging sensation reminded him of sitting in his bed at home or in the shower with a razor in his hands. It reminded him of how much of a fuck up he was (had always been) and the memories that came with this pain hurt him more than the cuts themselves, but it still made him feel better somehow. He supposed it was because this was a pain that he caused, that he controlled, unlike all the other things that hurt him in his life.

Zuko's stomach turned as he wiped a thin line of blood onto the underside of his shirt. This was fine. It helped him feel better, so it was fine. It's not like it mattered what he did to himself anyway. No one cared enough about him to notice. (The fact that he actively hid his scars seemed irrelevant at that moment.)

His father never wanted to see him again. His sister lived to tear him apart with her words. And the friends who had accepted him for some unfathomable reason when he thought he had lost everything? He had betrayed them in a way that was unforgivable.

He was pathetic. Worthless.

—

The next day dawned on Zuko with a feeling of dread. He had already skipped school for no good reason one day, so he couldn't really afford not to go the next. He couldn't quite recall the motivation that had been pushing him to go before, but he had to just keep moving. Zuko didn't have anything else to keep him going. Besides, he didn't think he could trust himself to be left alone with his thoughts again.

But at school he wasn't any less alone than when he was passed out in the alley. His first couple periods went by as quietly as they always did, with him sitting in the back of the classroom and tuning out the teacher. But when he arrived at the math class he had with Katara and Sokka, he was hit with an air of tension the second he walked through the door. And he may be dense, but he was sure of one thing: all that tension was aimed directly at him.

And at least sixty percent of that tension was just from Katara glaring at him with her ice cold eyes that could freeze flame. Honestly, Zuko's own glare was friendly in comparison to what he was witnessing from Katara at that moment.

That girl that had been paired with Katara for her project was sitting in Zuko's usual seat between the two siblings. What was her name again? Suzie? Something like that. But she looked just as angry as Katara, and she didn't even know him!

And Sokka... he wasn't looking at Zuko at all. He was staring dutifully at his textbook, even though class hadn't started yet.

Katara was still glaring at him, daring him to say something so that she had a reason to go off on him. And he was still standing frozen in front of them like an idiot. Zuko bowed his head in defeat and turned around, walking right back out the door he had just come in from.

He had been expecting Sokka to be furious with him, maybe to scream at him and tell him to leave. He hadn't been prepared for him to completely ignore him like that- but in hindsight, the silent treatment seemed much more like something Sokka would do than start a fight. What he really wasn't expecting was for Katara to be so damn scary. He really regretted getting on her bad side.

Actually, he regretted everything.

Zuko made his way down the empty halls, his footsteps echoing in the silence. He reached a side door and slipped outside, walking until he approached the grassy area behind the school where he had gone to skip class before.

What had he been thinking, going to that class? Had he been expecting to just sit down between the two siblings and act like nothing had happened? Of course not.

What gave him the right to sit in the same room as them anyway? Zuko had no doubts that he was in the wrong- he had regretted his words the second they came out of his mouth. But there was nothing he could do about it but accept his punishment, and if it was being isolated from the group, then he deserved it. Honestly, he deserved much worse for hurting Sokka.

Maybe being ignored and kicked out of the group wasn't the extent of his punishment though. Sometimes his father would wait a long time after Zuko made a mistake, until he was convinced that the punishment wasn't coming, and that's when he would deliver the final blow.

Sokka was brilliant and Katara was passionate- not to mention Toph's leniency towards violence- they could figure out some form of revenge to pay him back for what he'd done to them.

And when that time came, Zuko saw no reason to defend himself. He had learned from his father long ago that attempting to protect himself from a punishment would just make him angrier, and therefore the punishment would end up all the more painful.

"Hey. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Zuko lifted his head to find Aang standing over him. The bell for lunch must have rung at some point, and he hadn't even noticed.

"Why are you here?" Zuko stared back down at his lap. "You must know what happened," he added softly.

Aang sat down next to him. "I'll admit, I am angry with you for hurting Sokka. But I'm also confused."

At that, Zuko turned to face the boy beside him once more. He was sitting with his legs crossed, eyes wide and searching as he stared into Zuko's own.

"What's there to be confused about, Aang?" Zuko sighed. "You should go back inside before you miss lunch."

Aang ignored his attempt to change the subject. “It doesn’t make sense- what you told Sokka doesn’t sound like you at all.” He frowned.

“You haven’t known me for very long.”

“You didn’t mean it, did you?”

Zuko closed his eyes. He couldn’t look at Aang anymore- he was so hopeful as he reached for any reason to believe Zuko wasn’t the shitty person he’d proved to be.

“No.”

“I knew it!” Zuko could practically hear Aang’s grin. His excitement just as quickly dissipated. “Then why did you say such a mean thing?”

Zuko buried his face in his hands.

“I-I can’t tell you. I mean, you wouldn’t get it,” he mumbled.

“Maybe not. But maybe I can still help.”

Zuko snapped his head up and shot an angry glare at Aang.

“No one can help me with this! I don’t need your help!”

It was true. He would never let innocent, sweet Aang get involved in the shit show that was his life. And if he had to be alone to protect him from that, then that was fine. He was used to it. At least that way he could protect somebody from his father.

“Okay.” Aang nodded and moved to stand, but his expression had changed to a deep sadness that Zuko didn’t understand. He had just yelled at the kid! Why wasn’t he angry too?

Aang met his eyes one last time, now on his feet again. “I don’t understand what you’re going through, but I know it’s more than what you’re telling us.”

Zuko said nothing.

“I just want you to know, we can work through this... if you decide to try.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

sorry this took me so long!! I was working on a short story for my creative writing class but I'm focused on this again now :) this is a shorter chapter, but I'll make up for it with the next one (trust me!)

don't forget to comment and tell me your thoughts on the story,, those always make my day!

Zuko heard footsteps approaching him from where he still sat behind the school building.

"Go away Aang," he sighed. Why was the kid back again already?

"It's not Aang," a decidedly not Aang-like voice replied.

Zuko looked up to find that girl from detention staring down at him. Mai.

"Did you hear what I did too?" His heart sank. Maybe she was there to yell at him. He definitely would if he was her.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I was just wondering why you're sitting here alone." Then Mai narrowed her eyes. "What did you do?"

Zuko shook his head. "If I tell you, you'll hate me."

"I hate everyone."

Zuko raised an eyebrow, but Mai's expression didn't change.

"Everyone?"

"Well..." she thought for a second. "Not Ty Lee."

"Is that your girlfriend?" He remembered her mentioning a girlfriend.

"Yeah." When she said that, she smiled a little. Not a sarcastic smile either- a real, soft smile. Zuko had only met this girl once before, but he was sure that wasn't very common for her.

If Zuko had been a good, honest person, he would have told Mai what he did. She deserved to know she was talking to a homophobe. But he couldn't bear to see her glare at him the way Katara had, or ignore him like Sokka.

"I said some rude things to my friend, and now they don't want anything to do with me."

Mai studied him carefully. “Have you tried apologizing?”

“Have I... I didn’t think of that.” With his family, apologizing was a sign of weakness. When Zuko made a mistake, he accepted the punishment and then made an effort to do better the next time.

Mai rolled her eyes. “Of course you haven’t.”

Suddenly, a pink clad girl with a long braid sprinted around the corner.

“Oh, there you are, Mai! I was looking all over for you.”

Zuko watched in shock as the girl ran up to Mai and wrapped her arms around her in a hug. And then his eyes nearly popped out of his head when Mai hugged her back without hesitation.

The girl stepped back. “Who’s this?” She looked at Zuko.

“I’m Zuko,” he mumbled, still trying to catch up to what was happening.

“I’m Ty Lee,” she greeted him with a grin.

Ohhh. That made sense.

“You’re the girlfriend?”

“Sure am.” Ty Lee turned back to Mai. “You’ve been talking about me?” She batted her eyelashes playfully.

Mai sighed, but she didn’t sound as annoyed as usual. “Only good things.”

“I’d sure hope so!” Ty Lee focused on Zuko again. “Zuko? Why does that name sound so familiar?”

“He’s that guy I met in detention.”

“Really? Zuko, your aura is just depressing right now.”

“My what?” Zuko clambered to his feet.

“Your aura,” Ty Lee repeated with a shrug. “See, Mai has a dark aura too, but not in a sad way. Your aura however, is simply dreadful.”

Zuko scowled. “I have no idea what an aura is, but I don’t like you insulting mine.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Mai said. “Ty Lee is rather perceptive though.”

“What are you two doing back here anyway?” Ty Lee asked. She looked back and forth between him and her girlfriend.

“I just needed a break, so I came back here,” Zuko explained. That was putting it lightly.

“This is where I go to get out of class too,” Mai admitted.

The bell sounded from inside the building, but it could still be heard loud and clear from where the three of them stood.

“I have a test next period, so I should go.” Mai frowned.

“And I have friends that I sit with in my next class, so I don’t want to miss seeing them.” Ty Lee waved at Zuko and then cartwheeled away.

She cartwheeled. What.

Zuko glanced at Mai. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Wasn’t expecting what?”

“Your girlfriend to be so... perky.”

Mai nodded. “I get that a lot. But we tend to balance each other out.”

“That sounds nice,” Zuko said.

“Yeah. Well, I gotta get going. You should head to class too.” Mai turned to leave.

“Wait,” Zuko called out.

She looked back at him, an eyebrow raised.

Zuko gulped. “Do you know where I can find a guy named Jet?”

Mai studied him carefully for a long moment. “Why are you looking for Jet?”

“I just... I need something from him.”

“You should stay away from that guy. He’s nothing but bad news.” And with that, Mai shook her head and walked away.

Mai was absolutely right. Zuko should just pretend he never smoked the weed the other night and just go on with his life. But it had taken away the shame and sadness that was crushing him now, and he needed to escape it for just a little while.

That’s why he found himself back in that bathroom where he had met Jet on his first day.

—

It was a long shot- he was fully aware of it. But Zuko didn’t know where else to go to look for Jet. Lucky for him, the bathroom wasn’t empty.

“Hey, look who it is,” Jet drawled, looking up from his phone as the door swung shut behind Zuko. He was sitting on the counter next to the sink, surrounded by a couple younger looking kids. Must be freshmen.

Zuko eyed the kids warily. "I need to talk to you."

Jet seemingly got the message and nodded to the kids, signaling them to leave. They all got up and walked out, but not without their fair share of grumbling and complaining. One bigger guy purposely bumped into Zuko on his way past him with enough force to make Zuko stumble back a couple steps.

The door closed once again, leaving Zuko and Jet alone.

"Don't take it personally. Those freshmen are just bitter I never let them in on my stash." He shook his head. "They're too young for that sort of thing."

It struck Zuko as odd that Jet went to such lengths just to keep his younger friends from getting involved with his drug deals. He would say it was out of character, but he didn't actually know Jet well enough to judge what he was like.

"I didn't take you for the kind of person to hang around a bunch of freshmen."

"Eh." Jet shrugged. "They grew on me." Then Jet smirked. "But you're not here just to chat, are you?"

Zuko's stomach turned. But he was the one who decided to come here after all. "No," he admitted.

"Don't worry. I can hook you up, but it's gonna cost ya this time." Jet gestured towards his backpack, leaning against the wall in the corner.

"I can pay," Zuko grumbled, pulling his stolen wallet from his pocket.

"Then we've got a deal."

Jet reached out a hand and Zuko shook it, only hesitating a second. Then he watched as Jet sauntered over to his backpack and dug around until he found what he was looking for. Jet offered the bag to Zuko, who took it reluctantly. The bag was the same as the last one, except it had little white pills in it too.

"What is this?" He asked, trying and failing to hide his nervousness.

"Oh, I just thought that might be more up your alley," Jet answered flippantly. "I've heard you got a lot going on right now."

"How do you know about that?" Pretty much the last thing Zuko needed was a guy like Jet to find out about all his problems.

"I have my ways." Jet smirked.

Zuko gulped. This was more than he bargained for, but he would look like a coward if he changed his mind now.

"Fine. How much do I owe you?"

Jet named his price, and Zuko dug the cash out of his wallet and handed it over. He sighed internally as he noticed he was almost out of money again, but there was nothing he could do about it at the moment.

Zuko took the bag from Jet and stuffed it in his hoodie pocket.

“Well, see you later.” Jet waved and sauntered out the door, presumably to catch up with his friends.

Alone again, Zuko turned to leave himself before catching his gaze in the mirror. He was too pale and his hair was a mess. His clothes looked worn and he had bags under his eyes. He was just pathetic, wasn't he?

He sighed out loud this time. School was almost over, and he didn't feel like going to his remaining classes anyway. Zuko left the bathroom and dragged his feet down the hall to the exit.

Outside, the afternoon sun beat down on the streets around Zuko as he walked along the sidewalk, but he was too preoccupied with his thoughts to notice how sweaty he was getting in his hoodie.

He was a failure. He was a terrible friend and he couldn't even last a day at school. His grades must have been abysmal. And he had made the deal with Jet intending to ease his troubled thoughts, but it had just left him with more guilt than before.

On a lonely backroad Zuko stopped walking and pulled out the bag Jet had given him. He might as well use what he had bought.

—

Zuko had never felt so calm in his life. It was like all his worries had just melted away. Father hated him? Sokka hated him? Everyone hated him! Oh well. It wasn't like there was anything he could do about that.

Well, he could apologize to Sokka, according to Mai. But Zuko was definitely not going to do that. That would be way too scary, especially because begging for forgiveness hadn't gone so well for him in the past. No- he would just have to accept that everyone hated him.

He was probably better off alone anyway. He didn't need friends. He didn't need a home, or a family that loved him. Nah, he was doing just fine living in a cardboard box in an alley. Honestly, he couldn't be better. He was so calm, and the voice in the back of his head that told him all those mean things had finally quieted down.

—

School had started hours ago and Zuko was laying on a park bench staring up at the sky. He was picking shapes out of the clouds as they gradually moved across the expanse of blue above him.

He picked out a vaguely bunny shaped cloud, and a dinosaur next to it. And the next one looked like... a blob. He wasn't very good at that game.

Zuko was having fun though, and that was all that mattered. Imagine, him having fun. He had been so miserable lately, and he only had fun when he was with Sokka. But Sokka didn't want to see him now, so Zuko was having fun staring at blob-shaped clouds.

Life was great.

—

Zuko was wandering down the street with no particular destination in mind. He was getting looks from the few passersby around him, but he ignored it as always. Though he wondered if it was because of his scar or his reddened eyes today. Either way, he didn't care.

He didn't care about much at all, actually.

He knew he should care that his family and friends hated him and he was flunking school, but he couldn't bring himself to put in the effort to give a shit about his own life. He was too tired- just simply exhausted of everything.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'm very excited to share this chapter with you guys!! Over break, I decided to make it my goal to write 500 words every day- and so far I've met my goal every day! (shocking right?) I wrote an 8k one shot, worked on 2 unpublished WIPs and finished this chapter. So I am on a ROLL right now! But as always, I could use your support in the comments- I just love to hear your thoughts on the story! :)

Zuko wasn't high for the first time in a week. But it wasn't of his own accord- he had gone through the entire stash Jet had provided him with, except for those pills. He hadn't thought to ask exactly what they were when Jet gave them to him, and he wasn't quite desperate to try them yet. He hadn't fallen quite that far- yet.

The last week had gone by in a whirlwind of wandering the streets and staring at the sky. He had been lost in his own head the majority of his waking hours, and the stress of his thoughts had become just a tickle in the back of his mind. His crushing guilt had been reduced to an itch that couldn't be scratched, a reminder of something vitally important sticking out in his hazy state, but he couldn't remember what it was. Or at least, he told himself he couldn't remember what it was.

But now that his head was clear again, everything had come crashing back down on him. The passing week had done nothing to dull the pain of what he had done, but he couldn't help to think he didn't deserve to feel sorry for himself when Sokka must have been hurting so much more. Because of Zuko.

The sun was high in the sky now, indicating that it was around noon. He still hadn't been able to charge his phone- he could have gone to a library or cafe to do so, but he doubted he would be allowed to stay for long with his appearance. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair was greasy, and he was in desperate need of a shower- not that there were free showers just out in the open for homeless people to use or anything.

Zuko arrived at the front of the school and paused. He needed another fix- that's why he was there. (He was also planning on snagging a shower in the locker room while everyone else was in class.) But the chances of him seeing Sokka and the others was significantly higher than when he was anywhere else, and he wasn't sure he could stomach even seeing them right now. The mere thought of having to confront any of them again made his heart race.

But he had stalled long enough. He climbed the front steps and walked in through the door, letting it slam shut behind him as he walked down the empty halls. Zuko listened to his footsteps echo in the empty space around him with each step. He had become accustomed to

the eerie silence of the hallways when most others were in class, much preferring it to how loud it became once the bell rang and students flooded the space.

Figuring it had worked two times already, Zuko made his way to the bathroom where he had met Jet before- but this time he wasn't so lucky.

The freshmen that had been with Jet the last time looked up when he entered the bathroom.

"Jet's not here," one really short, scrawny kid told him, looking him up and down. The kid crossed his arms, and Zuko got the idea he was trying to appear tough, but it was hard to be intimidated by someone half his height.

That really put a wrench in his plans. "When will he be back?"

The kid shrugged. "Maybe tomorrow." He attempted to sound casual, tilting his head and keeping his voice smooth, but it was glaringly obvious he had no idea when his older friend would return.

Zuko nodded. "Okay." Defeated, he turned to go, but paused. "Maybe you guys should go to class. There's really no use flunking freshman year."

He was met with several hostile stares. "Don't think you can order us around just because you're older than us." One of the other kids glared at him. "We can make decisions for ourselves."

"Then why do you follow Jet around all the time?" Zuko raised an eyebrow.

The kid bit his lip. "It's none of your business, so butt out."

Zuko sighed. Why did he even try?

"Whatever."

He opened the bathroom door, ready to walk out, and his breath caught as he narrowly avoided colliding with Sokka.

There was a solid minute of silence as they both stood there, stunned and only inches apart. Zuko watched Sokka's blue eyes go unbelievably wide, probably matching his own. Then Sokka blinked and seemed to get a hold of himself, snapping the tension between them the way a rubber band snaps back at your fingers with full force when you let it go the wrong way.

"You're in my way," Sokka mumbled.

Zuko was frozen in place, unable to move. He was...

He was standing in the middle of the doorway.

"Oh." Zuko shifted to the side. "Sorry." When Zuko had imagined apologizing to Sokka, he definitely hadn't thought it would sound like that.

Sokka just nodded and brushed past him, disappearing into a stall. Zuko couldn't help but watch him go, and caught the freshmen watching him with a mixture of amusement and pity written all over their faces. Great. His life was just a joke to a bunch of underclassmen.

He barely contained himself from running as he left the bathroom. His heart was thumping in his chest and he knew his face was bright red. Zuko had finally faced Sokka- and what had he done? Stood in his way and gaped at him like a fish.

He was an idiot.

Zuko couldn't even entertain the thought of going to class anymore, so he let his feet lead him out back to his usual spot. Hopefully he would get some actual privacy this time.

He collapsed in the grass and buried his head in his hands. Sokka must think he was a complete dumbass, and rude too. All he'd done was stare at him and then run away like a coward.

—

The end of the school day finally arrived after Zuko spent the remaining hours walking around the school and loitering in places that weren't his classes. He had snuck a hasty shower somewhere in there too. After that, he had only stuck around because he needed some sense of accomplishment- a feeling that he had done something other than mope around all day. Not to mention his mind was plenty occupied by his literal run in with Sokka, and his subsequent humiliation. Thinking about that pitiful exchange made him want to bang his head against the wall- he already probably had enough brain damage anyway if he was that inept in social situations.

Zuko joined the rush of students on their way to their buses or cars, losing himself in the crowd of people up until the point where he broke off from the throng of kids heading to the parking lot and instead made his way down to the sidewalk. There wasn't exactly a bus stop for his current residence.

Zuko was separated from the world; both physically and mentally. His life was so removed from that of a normal teenager's, he felt like an outsider when he was surrounded by other kids his own age. He had never fit in at school the way most people did, (especially his sister) but his current situation only intensified that feeling.

And as he dragged his feet down the sidewalk, the noise around him went quiet and all he could see in front of him were his thoughts. It was like having tunnel vision, or like walking in a dream. It was like being the only person alive, at least inside his head.

He got like that sometimes- when he got so lost in his thoughts that it almost felt like he was in a different plane of reality than everyone else- but of course that notion was ridiculous. He was just daydreaming.

But no matter what kind of out of body experience he was having, he still made his way along the streets until he got back to his "home." Though he could hardly call it a home. Homes were places that held memories and were shared with loved ones. Home was a feeling

of safety and security. The place he was living now wasn't even a house- it was simply the place where he slept and stored his necessities.

Zuko sighed and knelt down to grab his only spare shirt from his box of belongings to change into-

“Zuko?”

Zuko froze in place, crouched down with his back to the voice that made his heart skip a beat. He knew that voice too well now, but he would rather hear it anywhere but here. With a choked breath, he slowly turned to face the person who had spoken.

“Sokka?” His voice was raspy and barely a whisper. “What are you doing here?”

“Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing.” Sokka crossed his arms, but there was uncertainty in his eyes as his gaze darted back and forth between the boy in front of him and his surroundings.

Zuko slowly stood up from his crouch on the ground. There had to be a way out of this mess. He gulped.

“I just... hang out here?” His excuse sounded more like a question, and the disbelief written all over Sokka's face told him his meager lying skills weren't going to be nearly enough to get him out of this one.

“Bullshit,” Sokka's voice cut through his remaining hope that he could find a way out of the literal corner he had been backed into. “The least you can do right now is be honest with me.”

...Sokka was right.

Zuko nodded in defeat and stared down at the ground. Shame overwhelmed him, his face turning scarlet. He took a shaky breath as he prepared himself to say something he never thought he would have to come to speaking aloud. Especially not to Sokka.

“I... I'm living here.”

He kept his gaze focused intently on his scuffed up sneakers.

“You... what?”

Zuko clenched his fists, his nails sinking into his palms and grounding him. “I don't have anywhere else to go, okay?”

There was a beat of silence that his pounding heart counted pug for him. And the blood rushing in his ears distracted him from the sound of approaching footsteps, so he nearly jumped out of his skin when a hand lighted on his arm. He raised his head, time moving both in slow motion and at double speed as his gaze locked with Sokka's concerned blue eyes.

Concerned? No, no, no. He did not deserve pity right now.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Zuko gritted his teeth.

Sokka was taken aback, removing his hand from Zuko’s arm as if it had burned him. “Like what?”

“Like you feel sorry for me!” Zuko said forcefully, but his voice trembled with his next words. “You shouldn’t care about me at all after what I said to you.”

There was another beat of stunned silence.

“Don’t get me wrong- I’m still mad at you.” Sokka bit his lip. “But that doesn’t mean I hate you. And it doesn’t mean I can’t worry about you at the same time.”

Zuko stared at him as if Sokka had just sprouted an extra head. Wasn’t that exactly what being angry at someone meant? Didn’t being angry mean precisely that you despised someone and wanted to see them hurt. That was the only way he had experienced anger being directed at him before.

But... he thought about it for a second. He had been angry in the moment that he said those hurtful words to Sokka, but he certainly hadn’t said them out of hatred or malice. Honestly? He had done it out of an instinct of self preservation. A very, very faulty one, he had to admit, but he had never wanted to hurt his friend.

Huh.

Mai’s advice flashed through Zuko’s memory, and he decided it was worth taking to heart.

“I’m sorry,” Zuko whispered finally. “I didn’t mean it, I swear.”

“Then why did you say it?” Sokka’s eyebrows knit in confusion, but his voice betrayed something much more vulnerable. “It really hurt my feelings,” he added quietly. “And it made me feel like I couldn’t trust you.”

“Because...” Zuko may as well just bite the bullet while he was on a streak of honesty. “My father... he kicked me out for liking a boy.”

Sokka’s eyes grew wide, his eyebrows nearly reaching his forehead, and Zuko saw the exact moment everything clicked in his mind.

“You really are gay,” he started. Zuko cringed. “I knew it! My gaydar is never wrong.”

“Your what?” He asked shakily. Everything in him screamed in retaliation at being called gay, but something else in him, something deeper and more honest, lit up like a fire that had just sparked to life.

“Well, that’s beside the point.” Sokka waved Zuko's question away. But then his face fell as another realization hit him. “That-that means your father... oh. I see.”

This was the last thing Zuko wanted. He never wanted to get his new friends caught up in his old problems.

“Hey, uh, it’s not as bad as it sounds,” he tried.

“It’s not?”

Zuko grimaced. “Well, it is. But that’s okay! I’m- I’m doing… fine.”

He was really, really bad at cheering people up.

Sokka raised an eyebrow. “You living on the streets is ‘doing fine?’”

Zuko sighed, letting out a breath filled with exhaustion that ran deep in his bones. “You don’t know the half of it.”

“That’s it. Come home with me.”

Zuko’s head snapped up so fast he was pretty sure it gave him whiplash.

“I can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“I just… Father will let me come back home soon- I know he will. I just have to prove that I can… that I can do better.” Zuko’s words were confident, but he knew his voice betrayed how unsure he was. It had been weeks already. Maybe Father really wasn’t going to let him come back.

“And what does ‘better’ mean to your Father? I feel like whatever it is, I’m not gonna like it.” Sokka raised an eyebrow.

“I think you already know what I have to prove.”

Sokka blinked. “Oh.”

Zuko had to prove that he wasn’t gay in order for his Father to accept him.

Then Sokka’s voice hardened in a way that he had only heard once before. “If your Father is the kind of person who wouldn’t accept his kid for who he is, then maybe you’re better off without him.”

Better off without Father? That was crazy talk.

Zuko shook his head. “You would understand if you met him- he’s strict, but he’s not so bad.” That had to be true. Father wasn’t exactly a fun guy to be around, but he always had Zuko’s best interests at heart. He was just hard on Zuko because he wanted him to improve- it wasn’t his father’s fault he was such a lousy son.

Sokka pressed his lips together as if he wanted to say something, but thought better of it.

“Either way, I can’t let you stay here by yourself.”

“Yes, you can,” Zuko said firmly. Then he added, “Please don’t tell anyone about this.”

Sokka stared at him for a long minute before he resigned himself with a sigh, dragging a hand through the top of his hair. There was a deep disappointment still lingering in his bottomless blue irises.

“I guess I can’t make you, but you should reach out to someone, even if it isn’t me.” A pause. “And I won’t tell anyone if you really don’t want me to.”

“Thank you.” Zuko’s voice sounded robotic. He had gotten what he asked for, so why did his chest twinge with regret?

They both looked down at their shoes. Zuko had no idea what he was supposed to do now.

“Will I see you at school tomorrow?”

Zuko bit his lip. “Probably.” Probably not, he wanted to say, but he couldn’t bring himself to disappoint Sokka any more than he already had.

Sokka nodded. “See you then, I guess.” He lingered for an extra moment, but Zuko didn’t know what to say. So with a halfhearted wave and a grim expression, Sokka turned and walked out of the alley, not once turning back before he disappeared.

Zuko stared at the spot where Sokka had stood moments ago as everything that had just happened replayed in his head. The reality of the situation dragged Zuko down like a dead weight. He sank to his knees and put his head in his hands, his elbows and knees pressed against the rough pavement.

That was the last thing he had expected to happen today. The worst case scenario.

And yet, it hadn’t gone so bad.

Obviously Sokka was mad at him. Zuko deserved at least that much. But he had still worried about him, and had even agreed to keep his secret. Angry people don’t usually do favors for the person they’re angry at. Angry people yell and punish and insult. Unless...

Was Sokka keeping his secret so that he could hold it over his head? Was that how he was going to get back at him?

It didn’t really sound like something Sokka would do, but people could act much differently than their usual self when they’re angry.

Zuko was an expert on angry people. He lived with them. He was them. He knew exactly how they acted, and blackmail was definitely on that list.

Zuko flopped down with his back against the ground. Why was it that every time he thought his life couldn’t get any worse, it did?

And he must have just jinxed himself with that thought, because the next thing he heard knocked the air straight from his lungs.

“Hello there, Zuzu.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

hey guys! sorry it's been so long since i updated this fic, my attention got captured by another fic i was working on. but I'm back to this one now, and im excited about this chapter! big things are happening for zuko :)

Zuko must have been hearing things- that was the only explanation. Because that voice... that voice almost sounded like

Azula.

He jolted upright and turned towards the sound of the voice that filled his chest with dread. And when he turned he saw his sister, standing there at the entrance to the alley. She was looking down at him with her calculating, cold stare, one perfectly lined eyebrow raised.

Zuko jumped to his feet and stood frozen, mere feet away from his sister- whom he hadn't seen in weeks. He opened his mouth, trying to think of something to say, but no sound would come out. His heart was racing a mile a minute in his chest, and his eyes were widened in shock. This spelled even more trouble than Sokka finding him here.

"What are you doing here?" Zuko ground out, forcing himself to blink.

"I just happened to be passing by when I heard a familiar voice," Azula answered flippantly, shrugging. Zuko was certain that wasn't true in any way. Azula had come here with a purpose- and thinking about what that purpose might be made Zuko feel nauseous.

"Cut the crap, Azula," Zuko managed to get out between clenched teeth. "Did Father send you?"

Azula took a step forward into the alley, and Zuko couldn't help the hot shame that rose up inside of him as he saw her gaze flick around to their surroundings. He hadn't wanted anyone to see how he was living, and he had wanted to keep it from Azula most of all. She was extremely talented in the art of using all of his insecurities against him, and he was sure he would never hear the end of this one.

"Quite the place you got here, Zuzu," Azula said, pointedly ignoring his question. Her eyes roved over his meager stack of belongings and his makeshift bed that was really just a couple of blankets layered on the hard ground.

Zuko felt his face heat up. He was suddenly all too aware of his disgustingly dirty, rumpled clothes and his oversized hoodie that didn't suit the weather in the slightest bit. Azula, on the

other hand, was as perfectly put together as always, not a single hair out of place. Their contrasting appearances only further confirmed how far Zuko had fallen.

He stuck his hands in his pockets before balling them into fists, so that Azula wouldn't see how easily she got under his skin. "It's not like I had a ton of choices."

Azula smiled- a gesture that would appear happy or even reassuring on another person- but just gave Zuko chills. Things that made Azula smile were usually bad news for him.

"Well, I'm about to offer you a new choice, brother," she declared. "Father wants you to come back home."

Zuko's heart stopped. Every other thought in his head faded away to make room for that one sentence, that new piece of information that formed in the shape of a lifeline for Zuko to grab hold of. Father... Father wanted him home? Could it be true? So much time had passed since he had sent Zuko away that he had started to give up hope on ever returning.

"Father... wants me to come back?" Zuko couldn't mask the disbelief in his voice, but his words were hardly more than a whisper anyway.

"Yes. That's what I said, isn't it?" Azula rolled her eyes. "There's a car waiting for us down the street, so we should get going."

Azula turned to leave, but Zuko was still frozen in place. Everything was happening so fast- he didn't know what to make of it all. Zuko was still stuck on the whole "Father actually wanted him back" thing, and his thoughts were both roaring in his head like a fast-paced river and grounded in place all at once.

"Come on, Zuzu. You know Father doesn't like to be kept waiting," Azula called over her shoulder as she began to walk away without him.

Zuko's legs kick started into action and he scrambled to catch up to his sister. He briefly considered stopping to pack up his stuff, but decided against it- he wouldn't need those stolen necessities once he got back home.

He quickened his step to keep up with Azula's fast pace, pushing himself to match her stride for stride as the two of them hurried down the sidewalk. Up ahead a sleek black car was parked on the curb, and the driver inside watched them approach through the tinted windshield. The driver was just one of the many people his father paid to do average things he couldn't find the time to do himself, like housekeeping or watching his children.

The driver nodded to Azula and then to Zuko as she pulled open the door and climbed into the backseat of the car. Zuko hesitated for just a moment before sliding in next to her, closing the door behind him. He buckled his seatbelt as his eyes darted around the expensively furnished vehicle- it had been a long time since he had ridden in a car, let alone one of his father's nice ones. He tried to be discreet with his wandering eyes though; he didn't want Azula to notice how much of a change this was for him when it was just her usual. It used to be his usual too, but those days seemed like so long ago, even though it had only been a couple of months.

Azula had pulled out her phone and was scrolling through her social media, an obvious indicator that she wasn't looking for conversation. Figures- they hadn't seen each other since Zuko was kicked out of the house, yet she still didn't have a single thing to say to him. He shouldn't have been surprised. Azula rarely talked to him unless she was trying to get under his skin.

So Zuko turned his attention to the view outside of the window. The streets and shops that lined them rushed by as the car sped on down the many roads that would take them... home. Would it be weird, being back after all this time? Zuko hoped it wouldn't be- it's not like he had changed at all, he had just gotten used to sleeping outside on the hard ground. He was looking forward to spending a night in his bedroom, in a real bed.

Those busy streets and shops eventually faded to quieter roads lined with houses. First they were more average looking: single story suburban homes decked out in the most boring neutral tones paint could come up with. But as they continued on, the houses got bigger and spread farther apart. They were entering the "rich" neighborhood, and Father's house laid at the very center of it.

Zuko started to really feel nauseous as the car pulled up to the gate in front of the house. His stomach did a whole gymnastics routine as the driver punched in the code and the gate swung wide open for them to pass through. He craned his neck to see the house that was fast approaching in front of them. Well, "house" was a loose term- Zuko was aware that the place more closely resembled a mansion than a typical home: it was two stories and several thousand square feet on acres of sprawling lawns and gardens. Zuko swallowed as the car rolled to a stop in front of the house and the sheer enormity of the building loomed over him. He had always known his family was much better off than most, but this was like seeing their wealth through new eyes.

The driver got out of the car and pulled the door open on Azula's side. She slid out of her seat and then stopped a couple feet away, waiting for Zuko to join her. But Zuko couldn't move. This was it. This was really it. He was home. He was finally back home, and even though he was literally parked in his own driveway he could hardly believe it. He glanced over at his sister- the frame of the car door cut off his sight of Azula from the chest up, but she was drumming her perfectly manicured nails against her leg impatiently in a clear sign that he needed to hurry up.

Zuko shakily dragged himself out of the car and stared at the front door, stoically facing him from only yards away. He noticed Azula roll her eyes from the corner of his vision before she marched right up to the front door and pulled out her house keys from her pocket, letting herself inside. She didn't bother to close the door behind her, instead leaving it open in an unspoken invitation for Zuko to join her.

He clenched his fists and forced himself to take a step forward, and then another one, until he crossed the threshold and was just inside the doorway of the house. He took in a deep breath and the familiar smell of the house filled his lungs. Zuko had always thought that every house had a significant smell, one that he could never really describe but would recognize anywhere. His chest filled with something like nostalgia and dread as he took in the foyer for the first time in months. Memories flooded his head, and he saw his mother entering the room

with a smile on her face, followed by a toddler Zuko and a baby Azula. Then he saw his father standing in the center of the room, and the child version of Zuko was left to face him alone.

Zuko shook his head slightly and forced himself to remain in the present. Azula had already disappeared down the hall, probably going to her room. It was evening now, and the sun had just begun to set behind them as he had entered the house, which meant the housekeeper and the cook and everyone else had just left for the day. And that left Zuko by himself in that big house.

He slowly walked to the stairs and climbed each step one by one, his left hand lingering over the smooth wooden railing. He paused for a moment at the landing at the top of the stairs, which overlooked the huge entryway below. The foyer was one of the biggest rooms in the house- which made sense, considering it would be the first impression made on a guest when they entered. Father liked to intimidate people with his wealth and his power, and that way he was sure to get whatever it was he wanted from them.

Speaking of Father, he wondered when he would see him, and anxiety stirred up inside him at the thought. He knew better than to go to him- he would wait until Father summoned him, or he wouldn't see him at all. That was how it always worked. Father did not appreciate being interrupted by unwelcome guests; even when those "guests" were just his children.

Zuko continued down the long hallway lined with doors that opened to guest rooms and bathrooms and sitting rooms that they never really used. He passed each closed door until he reached his own bedroom at the very end of the hall.

He reached out and put his hand on the cool, silver doorknob, and then paused. He took another deep, steadying breath before pushing the door wide open.

It was just as he remembered it. The bed in the corner was neatly made and books lined the shelves along the walls, and even more were stacked up on his desk. Posters of his favorite bands covered up the bland, white colored walls- Father had never let him repaint his own room. If it weren't for the thin layer of dust that had accumulated over the time he had been gone, it would have looked like he had just been there yesterday. Yeah, he could almost pretend he had just gotten home from another boring day at his stuffy private school, and was about to flop onto his bed and procrastinate doing his homework.

Zuko stepped into the middle of the room, gently closing the door behind him. He ran a finger along a shelf of books, feeling the texture of the sleeves and the raised letters of the titles. His bed was layered with thick, soft blankets and fluffy pillows, and he could just feel the crick in his neck that had formed from sleeping on the hard ground fade away when he looked at it. He sat down on the edge of his bed and kicked off his sneakers before leaning back into the embrace of the familiar pillows that still smelled faintly of him. The mattress was so soft, and his muscles melted into the sheets as he relaxed.

His eyes remained open though, and he stared up at the familiar ceiling that had filled his vision on many sleepless nights. Seeing Azula, the drive back to the house, even the bed he was lying in- it all felt too good to be true. It felt like a dream, or maybe his sister was playing a cruel joke on him, and it would all be ripped away from him come morning. No- he

was just being paranoid. Azula had said herself that it was Father who wanted him to come back home. But that also meant it wouldn't truly feel real until he saw Father with his own eyes. Zuko squeezed his eyes shut tightly and saw patterns of neon colors dance across the backs of his eyelids. He wanted to see Father again; wanted to talk to him and be welcomed home. But he would rather put off meeting with him for as long as possible, because talks with Father often took a turn for the worse- quickly and without warning.

Well, it would have to at least wait until morning. He could see through the thin curtains in front of his window that darkness had fallen by now, so he should be safe for the night, at the very least.

He sat up and got back to his feet, feeling the plush carpet on his bare toes as he walked to his closet to pull out some more comfortable clothes for sleeping. He would take a proper shower in the morning, but for now it would feel nice just to wear some clean clothes. Zuko dug around for a minute until he found an old tee shirt and some sweatpants, and he traded his hoodie and dirty jeans for the clean outfit. Then he clicked off the light switch by the door and climbed back into his bed, pulling a blanket over his body.

Zuko let his eyes drift closed and breathing even out, and hoped that tonight he would be given a break from his unrelenting nightmares. Because he was finally home, so maybe now things would start to get better.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

here's another chapter! lots going on in this one!

tw: homophobia

Zuko stared out at the garden behind the house. His hair was still dripping from his shower and the early morning air was cool on his skin. He let himself drift through the path between the bushes and trees and all the brightly colored flowers. This was Mom's garden. Mom's flowers. Mom's leaves and branches and petals.

Before she died, the garden was where Zuko would find his mother on any given afternoon, watering plants and digging up roots, and tending to anything else in order to keep the plants healthy. Zuko had liked to sit out there, sometimes helping his mother and sometimes just keeping her company. A lifetime had gone by since he had sat with his mother in her garden, but no matter how much time had passed, Zuko would never stop hearing her laughter on the rustling leaves, or catch her fading silhouette between the swaying branches. This was Mom's garden, and her spirit would always reside in this place where it almost felt like she had never really left.

Someone else kept the flowers alive now, but they weren't the same without her special touch- the colors weren't as vibrant, the buds not as big. They were alive, but they weren't thriving the same without her.

The door creaked open behind him, and Zuko was pulled from his nostalgia as another person stepped out of the house. Zuko relaxed slightly when he saw that it was the housekeeper, who must have just arrived for the day.

"Your father wants to see you," the woman announced as she came down the steps, a broom in hand. Her expression was carefully schooled to keep any personal opinions on the matter hidden. But then she let the corners of her mouth turn up into a warm smile. "And it's good to see you're finally back."

"Thank you," Zuko replied politely, but his thoughts had already spun miles away as his heart began to race. Zuko lifted his head and looked up to the windows on this side of the house. One up near the top, right in the center of the building, had the light on- Father's study. That was where Father could almost always be found, even at an early hour such as this one.

Zuko brushed past the housekeeper silently and made his way through the house and up the stairs. But his pace slowed with each step as dread started to eat away at him. What was Father going to say to him? What would he do? Maybe he simply wanted to welcome Zuko

home... but Father rarely summoned him unless it was something important. Ozai wasn't exactly one for small talk, and especially not with his son.

But no matter how long Zuko dragged his feet, he eventually reached the heavy wooden door that led to his father's study. He stood, frozen in front of the closed door, trying to steady his breathing before facing Ozai. Finally, he lifted a trembling fist and knocked on the door. Two solid knocks and then he waited on baited breath for his father's voice.

"Come in."

That was it. Zuko gripped the doorknob in his still shaking hand and pushed the door open. The yellow light of the study flooded the hall and everything was silent as Zuko willed himself to move his damn feet and go inside.

The room was much more spacious than the average study- it was the room where Ozai met with business partners and spent the majority of his time. So of course it was designed to display their wealth in every handcrafted piece of furniture and priceless painting that hung on the wall. And the large window behind Ozai's desk showcased the expanse of land on their property. Mother's garden could be seen from that window, but it had never sat right with Zuko how his father put such a private, special place on display in an intimidation tactic. Of course, Father probably didn't see the value in the garden his wife had put her heart and soul into growing, and probably didn't even notice the plants that still survived and reached taller with every year that passed since she had died.

And Father himself sat at the large oak desk, accented with gold, focused on the paperwork in front of him. He didn't so much as look up as Zuko hesitantly approached the desk, so he stood in front of it awkwardly and waited for his father to acknowledge his presence.

After what felt like an eternity had passed, though it was probably only a minute, Father looked up from his paperwork and met Zuko's eyes. In those eyes that matched Zuko's in color but not much else, Zuko hoped to find a glimmer of happiness at the sight of his son. But the only thing in Ozai's gaze was vague indifference.

"I see you've returned home." Ozai looked Zuko up and down with narrowed eyes before shuffling his paperwork and setting it to the side.

He said it as if he wasn't the one who had sent Zuko away in the first place. As if he had chosen to abandon his home and his family of his own volition, rather than being forced away from everything he had known, leaving him with nowhere else to go. Zuko grit his teeth. He needed to focus on the present and just be glad that he was back now.

"Of course, there will be conditions to go along with your proper return to my household," Ozai continued.

Conditions? Zuko swallowed and tried to imagine what those conditions could be. Whatever it was, Zuko would do what he needed to do in order to prove himself. He would show his father that letting him come home was not a mistake.

“What kind of conditions?” Zuko asked carefully, straining to keep his voice level and his nauseating anxieties from showing through.

Ozai stared at him for a moment, and the silence between them tensed like a coil about to snap.

“I will be sending you to a specialist to get rid of that perversion of yours. Once you have been deemed healthy by them, you can return to your life here.” Ozai slid another paper in front of him and returned his focus to his work.

A... specialist? What could he mean by that? Unless... he wasn't planning on sending him away to some kind of pseudoscientific doctor that would force him to get rid of his feelings for... boys.

Zuko realized his mouth had dropped open, and he snapped his jaw shut, the clack of his teeth knocking together rattling his bones and forcing him back into the moment. He was still staring stupidly at his father, who had gone back to ignoring his presence.

“Was there something else you needed from me?” Ozai asked without looking up, sounding bored.

“N-no sir.” His voice barely came out as a whisper. And with that he turned and fled the room as quickly as he could. Zuko couldn't bear to see his father's face anymore, couldn't stand the sight of all his hopes shattering to the ground at his feet. His hand shook on the doorknob as he forced it open, and he dashed from the study with his head down. But when he stepped into the hallway, he had to skid to a stop to avoid running face first into Azula.

She jumped back and stiffened, looking at him with something that almost resembled guilt in her eyes. Had she been eavesdropping on his conversation? But she recovered quickly enough and held her head high, looking at Zuko as if he had been the one caught doing something wrong. Usually he would be pissed at her for spying on him, but at the moment he couldn't even find it in himself to be angry- he was far too preoccupied with the conversation he had just run away from.

Zuko tried to brush past her, aiming to go hide in his room and attempt to process everything that had just happened, but she put a hand on his shoulder, effectively freezing him in place with her light but tense touch.

“I heard everything,” she muttered, eyes flicking towards the door. “We need to talk.”

Zuko was sure he had misheard her. Could it be true that Azula had just said she wanted to talk to him? He couldn't remember a single other time that this had happened since they were little kids. But... something in her voice told him that it was important. So he pushed his racing thoughts to the back of his mind for the moment and focused on this new problem.

“Let's go somewhere private,” Zuko said in way of an answer.

Azula nodded and set off down the hall, leaving Zuko to scramble after her. She was always doing that- going off without waiting for anyone, and just assuming they would follow. What

if he had just let her go, and went back to his room like he had planned? Well, he supposed it didn't actually matter, because he did follow her- just like Azula had been so sure that he would.

She turned a corner and entered her room, leaving the door open for Zuko to follow. He tentatively stepped into the room and shut the door behind him, the creaking of the hinges as the door sealed them inside together the only sound that could be heard through the tension between them.

Zuko couldn't remember the last time he had been in Azula's room- she was always very firm about her privacy, and they didn't hang out much anyway. He remembered when she was little and the walls were painted pink and the shelves were lined with dolls, but now the space was just as different as Azula was from the little girl in his memories.

The structure was the same as he remembered it, with the bed along one side, a walk-in closet on the other, and a desk beneath a window. But where she had once preferred soft colors, she now appeared partial to the color red. Her bedspread and the rug were a deep crimson that accented the cool gray walls, and those walls were covered in posters of bands and photos of herself with her friends. He actually recognized a couple of the bands on the wall- he had no idea Azula was into that kind of music.

Zuko finally tore his eyes away from his surroundings and turned back towards Azula. She was perched on the edge of her bed and was watching him carefully. She was watching him with those same golden eyes that she shared with him and their father, but it struck him how each of them wore the color so differently. At first glance, they almost looked the same as his own eyes, but it was unmistakable to him whose face matched those irises. But then Azula narrowed her eyes as she realized he was staring and he suddenly saw the family resemblance.

"It's been a while since we talked," Zuko stated quietly.

Azula rolled her eyes. "We literally talked yesterday." Zuko shook his head, about to tell her that wasn't what he meant, but she didn't give him the chance. "We need to talk about Father's ultimatum."

Zuko raised an eyebrow. Why did Azula care what Father did to him? She certainly had never shown any kindness to him before.

"What about it?"

"It's bullshit."

That... wasn't what he had been expecting.

"What do you mean? Father is just trying to help me by-"

"Father is trying to fix you," Azula interrupted. "And he's tackling the one thing that isn't a real problem."

Zuko's brain short circuited. Not... a problem? What did she mean? These feelings he had- they were unnatural; they were wrong. That's what Father told him, and Father was right, wasn't he?

But... Sokka's voice echoed through his head- he had said just the opposite. And why would Sokka lie to him? That was the thing, though. Sokka didn't have any reason to lie to him, but one of them had to be wrong. And then there was Azula, all the sudden disagreeing with Father. Zuko realized that this was the first time he had ever heard her siding against their father.

Still, wouldn't it be worth it, if only to gain back his father's respect? To gain back some semblance of honor in the eyes of his family?

"I don't think I really have a choice." He shook his head.

Azula glared at him. "Don't you know what they'll do to you if you go there?"

"Huh?" What did Azula know?

"It's called conversion therapy, but it's as far from therapy as you can get," she said sharply. But then her voice softened ever so slightly. "I had a friend whose parents sent her to one of those places, and when she got back she was never the same again."

Zuko blinked in surprise. "It's that bad?" He asked, his voice hesitant.

Azula shrugged, appearing indifferent, but Zuko was sure there was something else going on under that mask she wore so well.

"So what do you suppose I do? Father will just kick me out again if I don't do what he wants." There was a pang in his chest as the truth of that statement rang clearly. If Zuko didn't go to this supposedly horrible place, then he would just be returned to the streets. Those were his two options, and both of them were starting to sound like hell. Zuko wasn't sure if he could take being on his own any longer, not after the chance to go home was dangled in front of his face, so close, but only temporary. He ached to reach out and seize his chance to get back everything he'd lost, but was it possible that the price of returning may be too heavy for him to bear?

"I'm not going to tell you what to do, Zuzu. I'm just making sure you know what you're getting into."

Of course she didn't have any answers- only more problems for Zuko to deal with. He knew that wasn't really fair, but he was so frustrated at his situation that he couldn't help but blame Azula a little bit. After all, she had always managed to stay in Father's good graces while Zuko suffered at his hand.

Zuko sighed and dragged his hand over his face tiredly. "I need to go and think," he mumbled, turning back to the door.

“That would be wise.” Azula had already pulled out her phone and was no longer looking at him. “Goodbye, brother.”

Zuko nodded numbly before walking out the door. The hall met him with silence, but Azula’s words still echoed in his ears, mixing in with the sound of his father’s voice. He wasn’t sure how to feel about his sister at the moment. For years now, all he could remember about her was that she loved to make him miserable. But for the first time in so long, she had talked to him like she didn’t actually hate his guts. He might be overthinking it, but it almost sounded like she cared what happened to him. But that couldn’t be it, could it?

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I am back with a new chapter :)

ok so massive tw for child abuse here!!

Zuko sat on his bed with his head in his hands. He needed to block the whole outside world from view, just for a few minutes, so that he could think. Because his father was asking him to choose between two unbearable situations, and Zuko couldn't decide which was the lesser evil. Should he go through with Father's plan and subject himself to the unknown horrors of a doctor who thought they could fix him? And according to Azula, that was part of him that didn't even need fixing in the first place. Or should he leave- give up everything he knew, and for good this time?

Leaving meant saying goodbye to the house that had contained his childhood forever. This was the house where Mother had lived; this was the house where they had been together. When she was alive it had been a place full of light- the darkness had been pushed back to the edges of their life. Zuko could still remember what it had been like when his world was wrapped in the golden glow of his mother's smile. He remembered her as if she contained the sun inside her heart- she was the antithesis to all the pain he had suffered in this house since then. Because this house no longer flowed with sunlight from the inside. It was dim and quiet in a way that filled his body with nervous tension every time he crept down the hall. This house was no more a home than his mother was still alive.

Zuko wanted to stay here. He didn't want to say goodbye to his mother's garden and all the places where her memory still lingered in the back of his mind. He wanted to stay, and try one more time to prove himself, but he just wasn't strong enough to do this one thing his father asked of him. Because trying to force himself to be what his father wanted felt like suffocating.

Zuko sincerely doubted there was any kind of doctor, any kind of person at all, that could change this part of him, for better or for worse. He was stuck with these traitorous feelings no matter how much he wished they would just go away. Life would be a hundred times simpler if he could have crushes on girls. Life would be easier if he was normal.

He could bear going through this conversion therapy thing for the sake of his honor, couldn't he? Wasn't it worth it, to be back home and to finally win his father's approval? Wouldn't Father finally be happy if Zuko did this for him?

Father probably wouldn't care.

Because Father wouldn't see it as any kind of achievement, he would just consider it as Zuko meeting the bare minimum requirement of being a good son. And that was if the therapy was successful.

Zuko couldn't remember a single time in his life that he had made his father proud. Even when he succeeded at things, it wasn't good enough for Father, because Azula could do it better with her eyes closed. Zuko was no prodigy- he had to work harder than anyone else just to achieve the same goals. This was just another example of that. Straight people didn't have to force themselves to be that way- they were just born with feelings that society preferred. Zuko wasn't so lucky. He had to force out his blasphemous emotions and turn against his own heart. He had to go against everything that would make him happy just to be accepted by his family.

He had to go against everything that would make him happy in order to make his father happy. But... why should Zuko be miserable just so that his father could be comfortable? That was it. Maybe he shouldn't. Maybe that was his answer: whatever he chose to do, he should do it for the sake of his own happiness.

Would he really be happy back in his old life, if it cost him so much to get there? Did his old life even make him happy at all? What waited for him but an empty house and a father he could only disappoint?

Living on the streets wasn't exactly the ideal situation, but he had a chance to find happiness if he left this miserable place for good. Because Mother was long gone, and her touch lingered in Zuko's memory, not in the house itself. And he could take memories with him, wherever he would go.

When it came down to it, he realized he would never be happy if he stayed here. And if happiness was what he wanted, then the only clear option was to leave.

But if he was going to make this choice, then he at least owed his father an explanation. And hopefully he could leave on good terms. Maybe Father wouldn't understand, but he should still know why Zuko was leaving, and maybe he would respect Zuko's decision.

So Zuko lifted his head and got to his feet, looking around his room for what could be the last time. He thought about packing a bag to take with him, but as he took in the posters and books that littered his room he realized there was nothing he wanted. These were the trivial decorations of a life he was leaving behind, and he didn't need them. Beyond that, he couldn't find the same love for these items that he'd once had- he had lost interest in the things he once felt so passionate about. Zuko wasn't sure what that meant, but he willed the emptiness in his chest to move aside for the determination he needed to get through what was coming.

The house was silent as he left his room, the way it always was. The creaking of the floorboards was the only thing he could hear beyond his own breathing. It was the middle of the day, but with only three occupants in this mansion, it never really felt full of life. No matter how many years Zuko and his family spent in this house, it felt abandoned now. Maybe it really was abandoned, at least in spirit- maybe it hadn't truly been a home since Mom died. It hadn't felt like his home since then.

The door to his father's study stood before him, the heavy wood that firmly stood between him and the most difficult thing he had ever had to do. This was the first time in his memory that he had entered this room uninvited, but it was fitting, considering why he was going to see his father in the first place. It was fitting, considering this might be the first time he made a decision for his life that was for his own benefit and not for his father's.

So when he raised his fist to the door it barely shook, because he was the one in control of this situation. He was the one in control of his own future, and he was sure that his father could never be too angry with him for choosing his own path in life. Yeah- maybe Father would understand.

His knuckles against wood, the sound of his skin making contact with the door echoing through the hall and into the room beyond. Zuko let his fist drift back down to his side as he waited for his father's answer.

"Come in."

Father had uttered those same words to him just this morning, but the entire situation had turned on its head since then. Similarly, Ozai's voice was no longer bored, but irritated. Zuko was suddenly reminded how much his father hated his work being interrupted. But this was worth a five minute interruption. This was worth everything to Zuko.

He entered the room, and it was exactly the same as this morning, but a different tension filled the air. Like the afternoon sun that now filtered through the window, this conversation would be held in a different light than the one before it.

Ozai looked up at him, annoyance written clearly across his face. But Zuko's determination kept him steady.

"I have come to a decision," Zuko announced.

"About what?" Ozai narrowed his eyes slightly.

How could Father possibly not know? What else could he be deciding in this moment other than the course of his very future?

"I will not go to conversion therapy. And I understand your conditions, so I will be leaving, so as not to defy you."

Zuko put everything out there with those simple words. His plans, and how he was going against his father's wishes.

Ozai rose to his feet, his chair screeching against the floor as it was pushed back behind him.

"You will do what I say. You have no choice in the matter." Ozai's voice rumbled dangerously, barely concealed anger boiling just beneath the surface.

Zuko's heart skipped a beat. Of course he had a choice, didn't he? It was his own life they were talking about, after all.

“I can’t go through with what you’re asking of me.” Zuko shook his head, an undeniable truth biting at his tongue. “It’s wrong.”

Ozai glowered at him. “You don’t know what’s right and what isn’t. This is for your own good, and you will obey me.”

Zuko gulped. He had to make his father see reason. “It doesn’t have to be this way. If you want me to stay here, then just accept this one part of me.”

“You think my issue is that I want you to stay here? If that’s what I wanted I wouldn’t be sending you away,” Ozai scoffed. “What I want is for you to stop being an embarrassment to this family!”

Zuko’s eyes went wide. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. Father couldn’t possibly mean that, could he? Zuko was his son, he must want him around. Right?

“You...” Zuko couldn’t even finish his sentence. There was nothing to clarify, nothing to argue. The meaning in Father’s words was clear as day.

“I can’t let you remain a disgrace to me and my image. You will be going, whether you want to or not.” Ozai’s eyes burned with rage.

“Is that all I am to you?” Zuko asked quietly.

“Maybe you would mean more to me if you did something right for once,” Ozai sneered.

Tears brimmed in Zuko’s eyes but he refused to let them fall. He wouldn’t embarrass himself anymore. So he let anger take the place of his tears instead.

“How am I supposed to meet your impossible standards? Not everyone can be as perfect as Azula!”

“You’re right. You’re nowhere near as good a child as Azula.” Ozai leaned over the desk, looming over Zuko. “A good son would never disrespect me by speaking this way.”

Then Ozai reached out, quicker than Zuko could react, and bunched up the front of Zuko’s shirt in his fist. He yanked his son closer to him, the edge of the desk digging into his stomach. And Zuko just screwed his eyes shut and tried not to flinch as Ozai wheeled back his other fist.

The blow snapped his head backwards, and the pain overwhelmed him for a minute. Ozai released his hold on Zuko’s shirt and he stumbled backwards, falling to the floor. He put his hands to his face as his ears rang and he felt something wet pour from his nose. It was just like that day all those years ago, and the sting of this betrayal hurt more than the punch itself.

Zuko pulled himself to his feet, using a chair as support, and then stumbled out of the room, leaving the door wide open behind him. He couldn’t bear to look back at his father even once. He didn’t stop to think, not about where he was going or what he needed to do- he just walked until he was outside and his back was to the house.

He had to get out of there before Ozai tried to stop him from running away. Zuko broke into a run, dashing through the quiet neighborhood with its pretty houses and manicured lawns. He kept running until his lungs screamed at him for a break and the suburbs were far behind him. He didn't let himself stop until he was as far from his father as he could get. His chest burned as he forced his legs to move faster than they ever had before. He ran as his nose dripped crimson blood and his cheekbone stung with the onset of what must be one killer bruise.

He ran until his legs gave out beneath him and he tripped and fell to the concrete sidewalk, skinning his knees. That was the least of his concern though; the least of his pain. And it was only then that everything that had happened in the last few minutes began to sink in. Well, it was less like sinking and more like a bus that was running over him again and again, the words digging into his skull like daggers every time it replayed through his mind.

Father truly didn't care about him. Zuko was an embarrassment and a disgrace and nothing else. Father never wanted him to come home, he just didn't want Zuko to make him look bad.

White hot fury filled Zuko's chest, and he had half a mind to march back to his father's house to return the bloody nose he had just received. He had just enough sense not to do that though, or he was at least too tired to trek all the way back right then. So instead, he leaped to his feet and swung around, punching the wall behind him with all his strength. His knuckles slammed into the concrete and Zuko immediately felt a sharp pain jolt up his arm. He took a step backwards and cradled his fist in his other hand as he winced, but the pain managed to drag him back to the present, and his anger melted away, leaving behind only a pool of bitter resentment in the pit of his stomach.

But as he sank back down to the ground, leaning against the wall he had just attacked, his face heated up and his nose started to drip before even the first tear fell from his eyes. But once one teardrop trailed down his cheek, he couldn't stop the flood that followed.

Father didn't love him. Maybe he should have realized that when Ozai kicked him out of the house. Maybe he should have realized that years ago, when Ozai burned his face, leaving his own permanent evidence of his hatred for his son. But he had let himself believe that if he could just do a little better, just be a little better, then Father would truly love him.

How could he have been so stupid? So weak? He had done absolutely everything he could to please that man, but nothing had ever been enough. Nothing would ever be enough. He could spend his entire life trying to live up to his father's expectations, and he would fall short each and every time. As far as Father was concerned, Zuko was a complete and utter failure, and it was too late to change that.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

tw: vivid nightmares, talking about grief

Zuko's head ached as if someone was beating the inside of his skull with a hammer. The sun had set long ago, but he still trudged along the empty streets. He needed to return to the alley to gather up his meager belongings- the ones he had carelessly left behind when he was sure he was going home.

How did he ever believe that it was going to be that simple? He had been a fool to think Father would welcome him back unconditionally, and he had paid for it dearly. Even more than that, he was never going to be able to return home again. He was forced to leave behind the place where he had grown up, where he had lived with his mother and sister when he was still too young to be sad. But those simpler times had ended long ago. That thought sent a sharp pang through his chest; a reminder of what he had lost. It was a reminder that his childhood, the good parts and the bad parts of it, were gone for good this time, because he was never going home again.

And as he continued down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets, he found his thoughts drifting to his sister. So much had happened that day that he had hardly been able to consider what Azula had done for him. She had told him the truth about the therapy Father wanted to send him to, and without that information he probably would have agreed to go without question.

But why? She was never nice to him. Although... he had to admit he was never exactly nice to her either. He was her older brother, but they were so distant that they could only be considered siblings by blood. Their relationship much more closely resembled mild acquaintances or estranged cousins who had a general dislike for each other. But maybe that mutual distaste was unfounded.

They hadn't always been that way. When Mother was still around, and they were both still so young, they had gotten along the way every brother and sister did. They fought with each other and Zuko often didn't want his baby sister around him, but they had also played and laughed together. It was a short time, when Azula still looked up to him and he appreciated her company. Even then he had never really had friends, but he remembered feeling that his family was all he needed.

So what had changed? Maybe it was Mother's death- she had certainly been the glue that held their little family together. But she had been much more than that too. She had been the very sun to him, the center of the universe, the warmth that gave him life. And when she had died the sun had been snuffed out completely, leaving him to survive on an uninhabitable

planet. And without the sun's gravity to keep them in orbit, they had all drifted off into the deep expanse of space.

An old ache that he hadn't felt in a long time began to resurface. It was like a bone that didn't heal right and sent a sharp pang through his body if he put too much weight on it. It was a wound that would never completely heal. It was a feeling he knew all too well- grief.

And suddenly he was a naive little kid again, and all he wanted was his mother to hold him and love him and tell him everything was going to be okay.

Azula had been even younger than him when Mother died- he wondered if she ever missed her this badly.

Maybe it wouldn't still hurt this much if they had just been there for each other. He was suddenly sure that that's what Mother would have wanted. Mother would be so sad if she could see what had become of her family.

Maybe they could have repaired their relationship if he had made the effort to be kind to Azula first. He had assumed for a long time that it was a lost cause- Azula always seemed so cold and cruel to him, he had doubted that anything he said could change that. But after the conversation they had had that morning, it was becoming clear that her coldness was only a part of her. Maybe even a simple front for whatever truths laid deep inside her heart.

In that way, they weren't all that different. Zuko could feel the moments when he chose anger and screaming over sadness and heartbreak. Because if he let his true emotions show through, they would overwhelm him. He had hidden them from himself for so long that they had grown to become a tidal wave, and he could always feel them surging in the back currents of his mind. And he knew that if he ever let the waves wash over him he would be dragged under the surface to drown.

So he could understand why anyone would choose cruelty over sadness, and he could understand it the most in his own sister, because their experiences were more alike than anyone else's. Zuko suddenly wished he could tell her that, but it was too late. She was still with Father, in the house and the life he had run away from. Zuko would probably never see her again. He didn't expect that to hurt so much.

Zuko forced the image of his sister from his mind as he turned a corner and entered the alleyway where he had slept for so many nights already. But he would have to find a new place to sleep now- Father knew where he had been staying, and it would be foolish to remain where he could so easily be found.

But he stopped in his tracks as he caught sight of what had become of his resting place while he was away. It had been ransacked- everything he owned was either gone or scattered across the ground. Zuko's heart sank.

It hadn't been much- nothing more than necessities pocketed from the dollar store- but it was all he had to go off of. Now he had to start all over from scratch. Now he had nothing.

But he couldn't just stand there forever looking stupid. He forced himself to turn around and slowly walk back the way he came, leaving the alley for the last time. And for some reason, he felt a little disappointed as he left it behind. He had no real attachment to this place, but it was the last familiar thing he had left, and so he was sorry to see it go.

The darkness seeped into his skin as he dragged his feet forwards. Where should he go from here? What should he do? He hadn't thought far enough ahead, and now he was lost.

Zuko had been on the streets just two days before, but now everything felt different to him. The backstreets stretched on forever and the night sky was a solid ink black, the stars covered up by the smog of the city. The whole world was as empty as the cavern in his chest, and he didn't have a single thing to drive him forward anymore. Even as he took each individual step down the sidewalk he contemplated stopping and sitting down in the exact spot he was in now- and never getting up again. He didn't have anything to go to, nothing driving him backwards, and nothing pushing him to whatever would come next. Maybe he didn't want to know what was coming next. Everything had just been one blow after another; one earth shattering tragedy after another. Zuko wanted to stop before it got any worse.

Maybe he was being dramatic. He was still alive, which was... something. But his eyes were puffy and his thoughts were growing muddled. He had been walking for far too long- he needed to find a place to rest.

Finally, he stumbled upon a park. It was barely more than a patch of grass and a rundown play set, but there was a bench there that Zuko could sprawl out on. The plastic seat dug into his spine as he stared up at the sky, but sleep was already calling, and before he knew it his eyes were drifting closed. It was a relief to settle into unconsciousness- every waking moment was a reminder of the shitty situation he was stuck in, and every thought that passed through his head made him wish his brain would just shut down. He needed a break- from being awake; from being alive. And if that was a morbid thought, that was because he was trapped in a morbid situation.

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Fire.

Flames reflected in his eyes and licked at his skin. They were consuming him, but he couldn't feel them at all. Instead... a chill haunted his bones. He shivered, even as the fire overtook his body, reducing his clothes and hair to ashes. He welcomed the fire inside him- he desperately wanted to be warm.

He was freezing. It was as if ice had formed under his skin, as if the blood in his veins had frozen over. And still, the fire ate away at his flesh; devouring his soul.

Burning.

The cold dissipated in a single second, and then he could feel the heat of the flames in all their white-hot intensity. He wanted to scream, but his voice wouldn't work. Every nerve in his body was in agony, and he couldn't escape the flames.

Zuko was on fire.

Zuko's eyes flew open with a gasp on his lips. Night still wrapped the world in darkness, and... the fire was out. Nothing touched his body except the cool air that rustled the leaves of the single sad tree in this park.

He shut his eyes again. Red behind his eyelids. Fire inside him. Burning him up from the inside out.

He opened his eyes again, and the flames were gone.

The nightmares were back, and they had returned with a vengeance. Zuko dragged himself to a sitting position and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He wouldn't be getting any more rest tonight- he would rather pull an all nighter than face another dream of that intensity.

Zuko frequently had bad dreams, and they often featured fire. He absentmindedly reached up his hand and let his fingertips brush over his face, touching the spot where flames had forever marked him. It would make sense that fire terrorized his dreams, considering how it wreaked havoc on his waking hours as well.

His back ached from the hard bench, and his neck was stiff too. He let his head hang, his gaze focusing on his shoes. His dirty, beat up sneakers. Zuko felt about as trashed as his shoes looked.

Zuko felt a buzz in his pocket and jumped almost completely off the bench. His phone. He had put it on the charger in his room sometime between the several consecutive events that had ruined his life, but it had been pushed to the back of his mind until now. He had grown accustomed to not being able to go on it much, but now he pulled it from his pocket and stared at the screen in his hand. He squinted against the bright light, severely contrasting with the darkness all around him. The notification had been an irrelevant spam text, but he scrolled past it to all the other messages that had accumulated over the last couple weeks.

Random numbers and generic notifications from Instagram. Zuko let out a long sigh- he had never been popular, so he wasn't exactly expecting much, but an inexplicable disappointment still sunk into his chest as it became clear not a single person had attempted to check up on him in all this time.

He clicked his phone off and set it to the side. Spots of color danced in front of his vision as he bit his lip.

What was Sokka doing right now?

Where had that come from? All his guilt and anxiety surrounding Sokka had been pushed to the side in the face of his new crisis, but now that he sat through a lull in the chaos, his thoughts drifted back to that boy with ocean blue eyes.

Was Sokka still mad at him? They seemed to be on speaking terms again, but who knows, considering Zuko had immediately ghosted him after their conversation. If he was Sokka, he'd have given up on Zuko days ago.

But even though he knew he deserved it, he hoped Sokka hadn't given up on him yet.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Okay!! finally some good things are happening!!

tw: (discussion of) self harm and child abuse

The sky was painted in hues of oranges and pinks as the sun crested the roofs of the skyscrapers on the distant horizon, and gradually the world came back to life. But Zuko, of course, had already been up for hours. His brain was scrambled and his legs ached from all the walking he had done the day before. His thoughts had tangled themselves up into an unintelligible knot inside his mind, and he would give anything to spend one more night in his own bed. He was starting to wish he had chanced the nightmares, if only to get a couple more hours of sleep.

The feeling of his plush mattress and soft blankets back home plagued his mind. He could barely fight back the urge to walk home and flop straight into his bed. But of course, that wasn't an option anymore. He could never return home.

Zuko didn't have the energy to fight back the wave of homesickness that threatened to carry him out to sea. Before, he had carried on with the hope that Father would let him come home eventually. Now, that hope was replaced by his new grim reality, and a feeling that dug deep beneath his skin. It was a weight that sat in the bottom of his chest, weighing down his soul as he struggled to keep moving despite the pain that wanted to consume him. He just had to keep moving. One step; one breath after another.

Zuko didn't know where he was going- he didn't even pay attention to what direction he was heading in- he just knew that he couldn't stop. Sleep had failed him, plaguing him with nightmares almost as bad as reality. He couldn't stop to rest for even a minute, or else the darkness would creep over him like ivy that grew over the windows of an abandoned castle.

So he kept going. He had been at this for hours by now, and he was sure that if he stopped for even a second, then everything would catch up to him. And if that happened, he feared his heart might just shatter. Zuko felt like his heart was covered in hairline fractures and just barely holding together, and the slightest nudge to the surface would obliterate it completely. Everything that had happened with his father existed in the forefront of his memories, but he was trying his damn hardest to distance himself from the grief attached.

And so he continued his aimless march away from his feelings, away from his father, and away from the reality that threatened to suffocate him.

He was going to be fine. He was going to ignore this heartbreak until he couldn't even remember what it was like to be broken, and then the pain would no longer be able to reach him. It was the only way he could continue to handle living this life. It was the only way he could stay alive.

A car zoomed past him and disappeared down the street, and the obnoxiously loud rap music blasting from the open windows jolted Zuko from his thoughts. He shook his head as he took in the familiar storefronts and streetlights around him, slowing down until he stopped walking altogether. He hadn't kept track of where he was going; he hadn't even noticed he was heading directly towards a place that he had only been to a couple times, but had housed a plethora of memories and stirred up more emotions than he could count.

He was at a standstill with himself, right outside the entrance to the neighborhood where Sokka and Katara lived. His mind flashed back to the last time he had seen Sokka- he had been worried about Zuko, which was difficult to imagine and even more difficult to believe. They had talked about what he had done, but Sokka was far from the same friendly, open person he had been before Zuko betrayed him. And Sokka had every right to be angry and cold towards him, but Zuko wanted to fix things between them now.

Maybe he and Azula could have had a better relationship if he had made more of an effort. He wasn't going to make that mistake again- not if he had the chance to do better. If he was the reason they had fallen apart in the first place, then there was a chance he could be the one to make amends.

He took a single step forward, and his heart began to pound. He supposed it would be much easier to just turn around and go back the way he came, or keep walking and pretend he hadn't even seen this place. Yeah, that would be much easier. But he already knew that those weren't real options for him. He was being a coward, hiding from his own mistakes. He was gonna talk to him for real this time.

One foot in front of the other, he pushed himself back into motion. This time, each step was filled with a purpose that he hadn't had even minutes before. When Sokka found him in the alley, he had discovered the truth behind Zuko's actions, but Zuko had been all around too flustered by the situation to properly make amends. He should have begged for forgiveness. He should have at least followed up the very next day at school, but that didn't exactly happen the way he had expected. From that point, nothing had gone as planned.

There it was. Katara's flowers were in full bloom in the window boxes. He approached the front door, and tried to keep himself from shaking. He had initiated enough confrontations lately- he should be a pro at this. But for some reason he was still so nervous.

He knocked on the door, his knuckles tapping against the wood slowly and deliberately. He really hoped Katara wouldn't be the one to answer the door- he got the feeling that she would not be forgiving him anytime soon.

Seconds passed with no answer, and Zuko shifted uneasily, contemplating whether he should just leave before anyone saw him.

But then, just as he was about to turn and walk away, the door creaked open. And Zuko was face to face with wide, blue eyes.

“Zuko?” Sokka breathed.

“S-Sokka...” He was not getting off to a good start. “I’m sorry, I-“

“What happened to you?” Sokka’s voice was quiet. “Your face...”

Zuko blinked. For a split second, he assumed Sokka was talking about his scar. But then he remembered the bruises that must have darkened overnight.

“Were you in a fight or something? What the hell, Zuko?”

He opened his mouth to defend himself, but nothing would come out. To be honest, he had forgotten about the injuries to his face- he had much more important things to worry about.

“That’s not important.” Zuko shook his head. “I came here because I wanted to fix things between us.”

“Well, you’re doing a terrible job of it.” Sokka snorted. “You could’ve started by actually showing up to class like you said you would, instead of getting yourself into more trouble.”

He was right. Zuko hung his head in shame. “I know... I wanted to be there. I really did. But something came up.”

Sokka furrowed his eyebrows. “Tell me what happened. Because that sounds a lot like an excuse.”

Zuko really hadn’t wanted to bring this up. He came here to apologize to Sokka, not drag him into his shitty family problems. But... if he didn’t tell Sokka what happened, he probably wouldn’t forgive him. So he didn’t have much choice.

“I... went back home.”

“What?”

Zuko was trying to sort through his thoughts and find the right way to explain everything that had happened over the last couple of days when Sokka put his hand on Zuko’s arm.

Sokka sighed. “You might as well come inside. That sounds serious.”

Zuko stared at him. After everything he had done, Sokka was inviting him back into his house? But Sokka was already walking away, so Zuko could do nothing but follow him inside.

He passed through rooms that were familiar to him in a vague sense- he had been there before; seen these rooms before. But he hadn’t had the chance to get to know the place. Sokka led him to the couch where they had played video games that day, and motioned for

him to sit down. Zuko joined him, not too close, but not far enough that the distance would seem intentional.

Sokka watched him expectantly. This was Zuko's time to talk. Zuko needed to start talking. But how was he supposed to tell Sokka everything? He had never told anyone what kind of things went on at home. Azula was the only person in the world who knew exactly how he got his scar, and that was because she had been one room over and probably heard his screams. What went down between their family stayed within those four walls. Until now.

"I... Father wanted me to come back, so I did," he started. "But he had conditions that I couldn't meet."

"What do you mean?"

Zuko couldn't meet his eyes. "When I got back home, he told me that I would have to go away to conversion therapy before I could move back in."

"He told you what?" Sokka gritted his teeth. "What kind of father would make their own child go through that? Do you know how traumatizing conversion therapy is?"

"Yeah," Zuko agreed quietly. "Azula- my sister- told me about it, and that's why I decided not to listen to him. But Father didn't exactly take my decision well." Bitterness laced his last words.

"He did that to you, didn't he?"

Zuko swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded.

"And that's why I ran away for good this time. I can't ever go back there now." Saying those words out loud just made his heart break just a little bit more.

"I'm so sorry," Sokka whispered. They were frozen for a moment, neither of them really sure how to react. But then Sokka threw his arms around Zuko and wrapped him in a hug. Zuko's breath caught in his throat and his muscles tensed, but after a second he melted into the embrace.

"Aren't you still mad at me?" Zuko mumbled.

"Mad?" Sokka repeated incredulously. "It's pretty obvious that you didn't mean what you said, even though it was still a pretty stupid thing to do. But I think I can forgive that mistake."

A weight lifted off his shoulders. "Really?"

"Yes. You have plenty of other things to worry about right now, so just let me be here for you."

Zuko leaned back and Sokka's hands fell to his sides. Tears welled in Zuko's eyes but he held them back with the last bit of strength that remained within him.

“Thank you.” He knew he didn’t deserve this. Sokka shouldn’t have forgiven him so easily. But nevertheless, he was eternally grateful that he was able to talk to him right now. It made him feel just a tiny bit less alone in the world.

“Hey Sokka, I heard you answer the door. Is someone... here?” A voice Zuko had never heard before called from the doorway.

Zuko glanced up to see a middle aged man who had the same complexion as Sokka and Katara standing there, staring at him. Was he...

“Dad!” Sokka exclaimed. “I want you to meet my friend Zuko.”

Zuko’s heart skipped a beat, but both father and son were watching him. He gulped. “H-hello sir.”

Sokka’s father approached the couch and stopped before the two boys. His eyebrows creased with concern.

“Are you alright, son? That bruise looks fresh.” He spoke in a gentle tone that Zuko had never heard before.

“Oh... um.” He glanced at Sokka, panic evident in his eyes. Sokka just nodded encouragingly though.

“Tell Dad what happened. He can help.”

Zuko personally thought that Sokka was putting too much trust into this man, but... he gulped again.

“Well, I... I got into a fight with my father, and then I ran away.” His voice was shaking tremendously. Telling Sokka was one thing, but he didn’t know this man. And he didn’t exactly have a great track record with parental figures.

The man’s eyes filled with sympathy. “I see.” He was silent for a minute, studying Zuko’s face. Zuko shifted uncomfortably, unsure how to act under the scrutiny of his friend’s father.

“Come with me. We need to get that cleaned up so it doesn’t get any worse.”

Zuko stared at him. What was with these people being so nice to him for no reason? He glanced at Sokka again, who made a shooing motion with his hands.

So he stood up and followed the man down the hall to the bathroom. It was small, with lightbulbs over the sink that lit the room with a yellow glow. He froze when he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. The bruise covered more of his skin than he thought, and there was a small cut covered in dried blood that he hadn’t even realized was there. With one side of his face bruised and the other burned... he looked like some kind of monster.

Zuko averted his eyes from the mirror and instead watched the man shuffling things around the medicine cabinet above the toilet. After a minute he pulled out a cloth and a bottle of antiseptic, setting it on the counter and turning back towards Zuko.

Zuko reached for the cloth, but the man picked it back up before he could. “Here. Let me do it.”

“Oh. Uh, thank you sir.”

“Please, call me Hakoda,” he said as he turned on the sink and got the washcloth wet.

Hakoda faced Zuko again and raised the damp cloth to his face. Zuko’s heart skipped a beat when he saw Hakoda’s hand reaching towards his face, and he flinched. He didn’t think this man was going to hurt him, but he couldn’t help it.

“It’s okay,” Hakoda assured him. Zuko felt like a wild animal that might lash out at any second; he felt like a child who couldn’t take care of himself. But he forced himself to stay perfectly still as Hakoda reached back up again and put the cloth to his cheek.

The water must have been warm, and it felt soothing against his sore skin. Hakoda’s touch was gentler than he had ever imagined a father could be, and that sent his mind reeling. This man didn’t act like a father at all. Zuko didn’t understand it.

Hakoda pulled back and opened the bottle of antiseptic. He poured a little onto the cloth before screwing the cap back on.

“This might sting a little,” he warned.

Don’t worry, I’ve felt worse, he almost said. He didn’t though, because he got the feeling Hakoda wouldn’t see the humor in that joke. So he just tried not to wince as the medicine made contact with his cut.

It was over within seconds though, and Hakoda stepped back. Then Hakoda took Zuko’s hand and cleaned the knuckles he had punched against the concrete wall. They were bruised and all scratched up, but Hakoda held his hand with a feather-light touch. When he finished, the man met Zuko’s eyes with a serious expression, and Zuko felt his heartbeat speed up.

“Is there anywhere else I should take care of?”

Oh. There really wasn’t anywhere else Father had hurt him... physically. But there were his arms. He had tried not to think about it, but he knew he had cut deeper than he should’ve in some spots, and they hadn’t stopped stinging when he touched them. He couldn’t possibly admit to what he had done to himself though. Nobody knew about that, and he wouldn’t be able to bear the judgment Hakoda would surely have if he saw his marred flesh.

But Zuko had hesitated too long, and guilt was written all over his face.

“You don’t have to explain anything. Just let me take a look, so I can make sure it doesn’t get infected.”

Zuko studied him for a moment longer. He wasn’t sure he could handle letting someone else see how he had hurt himself. And he couldn’t blame his father- the lines spoke for themselves. But he was becoming worried that they weren’t healing quickly enough.

So, ever so slowly, he rolled up the sleeves of his faithful black hoodie and held out his arms, wrists turned up. He held his breath and stared at the floor. The silence was suffocating. He couldn't take it.

But Hakoda simply let out a soft breath, a breath that could have meant anything, and picked back up the bottle of antiseptic. He applied more to the cloth and then lightly grabbed Zuko's right arm.

Zuko squeezed his eyes shut as Hakoda cleaned the rows of self harm that lined the insides of his arms. He could barely breathe. Tears were forming in his eyes again. He sniffed. He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't going to-

A tear fell. It traced down his cheek, over the bruise. Zuko choked on a sob.

Hakoda stopped and set down the cloth. Zuko still couldn't meet his eyes. But then Hakoda pulled Zuko into an embrace, and Zuko couldn't hold back his tears anymore.

His body was wracked with sobs as the tears washed over him like a flood. Zuko hadn't let himself cry since any of this had started, and now all the tears that he should have already shed spilled over all at once.

Hakoda only held him tighter, his arms strong but soft, and Zuko allowed himself to completely give in to the sadness that was trying to swallow him whole.

His own father would never comfort him like this. His own father didn't love him. His life was over.

He cried and cried and cried, ugly tears and trails of snot covering his face.

Minutes passed, and eventually he ran out of tears. He had no idea how long he had been going on like this, but Hakoda was still holding him patiently.

"I'm sorry," Zuko mumbled once his tears subsided.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Hakoda reassured him softly.

But he had just spent several minutes sobbing into the shirt of a man he had just met. He was pathetic.

"It's okay to cry, son. If you don't let it out sometime, you'll burst." Hakoda rubbed soothing circles on Zuko's back.

Okay to cry? His father would tell him he was a pathetic, blubbering idiot, and that crying only made him look weak. But... his father was wrong about a lot of things, wasn't he?

"Thank you," he whispered.

Hakoda just nodded. "And you can stay here for as long as you need."

Zuko's eyes widened and he finally pulled back from Hakoda's embrace to openly stare at him.

"I can't do that," he started to argue.

"Of course you can." Hakoda put one hand on Zuko's shoulder. "I'll be happy to have you here."

Happy to have him? This man was certainly nothing like his father.

Zuko swallowed. "Okay."

Hakoda smiled. "Good." He turned to the door. "I'll give you a minute to gather your thoughts, and then come join us back in the living room when you're ready."

"Okay," he said again.

He watched as Hakoda left the bathroom, leaving the door open just a crack behind him as he gave Zuko a moment of privacy.

He turned back towards the mirror and examined his face- burned, bruised, and with eyes that were red and puffy from crying.

But he had somehow found himself in a place with people who wanted to help him. And it was a nice feeling, he decided, to have people who cared about him.

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