

Running With The Wolves

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Running With The Wolves

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Summary

“Li, table five needs your attention.” Pao urged him from behind the counter.

His heart climbed in his throat and thundered until his breath drew short. Panic crept like a tight band around his chest as bright blue eyes followed him the way a hawk tracks a meadow vole through the brush from its perch. It was a sensation Zuko rarely felt since he left the Fire Nation all those years ago. The feeling of being prey in someone else’s eyes. The feeling of being pinned to the spot, unable to force himself to move or breathe. He wanted to flee, to race out the back of the tea shop and rush back to the safety of their cramped tidy apartment and pretend the water tribesman had never even entered the shop, but it was too late. He was watching Zuko with expectancy.

Suddenly the carefully crafted life he had built here in Ba Sing Se was teetering daintily on crystal foundations. All it would take is one strike to topple it all until only the shattered remnants remained for him to cut himself on.

“I’m surprised to see you here.” The tribesman greeted warmly, his voice twisted up with an edge of amusement.

Notes

I was supposed to be writing the next chapter of my viking inspired AU, Chained but instead I got convinced to do a werewoof AU so here we are. It was originally intended to be a oneshot but I rarely heed my own advice and goals when it comes to keeping stories short, so welcome to this weird and wild ride.

Chapter 1

Zuko knew good things couldn't last for long. He should have suspected it to spit in his face just as he was beginning to let his guard down and finally consider giving himself to this new life. Being Li the tea server wasn't so bad, and seeing Uncle happy always filled the firebender with a rejuvenating warmth that spread throughout his limbs. It made it that much easier to ignore the unpleasant customers who glared, stared or complained too much for Zuko's thinning patience. Their meager lifestyle wasn't as bad as he originally thought, it was most certainly better than his time on his ship. He didn't need anyone else's permission to get the budget or supplies his crew needed, and he could go wherever he pleased without being judged or restricted. To a degree.

He could technically still go wherever he pleased, but that was often under the cover of night where he could slip into shadows with ease and enjoy the true freedom of being the Blue Spirit. Untethered by laws and allegiances, he moved like liquid through every boundary and barrier the world erected before him. He could cast off the expectations of Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation, and even Li the tea server, and live to his fullest.

At least, he could but life had a way of mucking that up for him as he stared through the crowded streets on his way to work and found the wispy traces of water tribe blue and dark skin bobbing through the market of the lower ring. The tribesman looked like he had a stack of papers tucked under his arm as he wandered alone, pasting them up on walls and handing them to passersby. Zuko's curiosity was silenced by his refusal to be noticed and recognized, turning quickly to take a back lesser used path to Pao's. He cursed his decision to go out alone, splitting away from Uncle just to get an early stroll in to greet Agni's light as it stretched across the city.

He slipped through narrow alleys and scaled a rooftop or two to ensure he had shaken any potential for the tribesman or his nearby friends from spotting him. It took him the long way to Pao's but delivered him to the backdoor where he normally took his breaks. Uncle left it open from where he was sweeping the steps, allowing Zuko to slide through without making a sound to collect his apron.

They opened half an hour later as their regulars came in a steady flood of orders and chattering that filled the quiet tea house with a lively familiar energy. Pao was observing for the morning and watched with fondness as Zuko filled trays and cleared tables, wiping them clean as new customers swept in to fill the emptied seats.

“Li, table five needs your attention.” Pao urged him from behind the counter as Jin paid for her morning cup of Jasmine and went off to her own job. Zuko cocked a brow, surprised and confused as he turned to find the table he just stepped away from cleaning was already filled with an awaiting customer in water tribe blue.

His heart climbed in his throat and thundered until his breath drew short. Panic crept like a tight band around his chest as bright blue eyes followed him the way a hawk tracks a meadow vole through the brush from its perch. It was a sensation Zuko rarely felt since he left the Fire Nation all those years ago. The feeling of being prey in someone else’s eyes. The feeling of being pinned to the spot, unable to force himself to move or breathe. He wanted to flee, to race out the back of the tea shop and rush back to the safety of their cramped tidy apartment and pretend the water tribesman had never even entered the shop, but it was too late. He was watching Zuko with expectancy and Pao was shoving him forward with a similar look though his boss held less heat in his gaze.

Zuko’s footsteps stumbled, causing him to nearly trip over a chair leg as he approached the table the tribesman was seated at. He was tucked into the corner and smiled up at the firebender. To anyone else, it may have looked pleasant and friendly, but to Zuko, it felt wolfish. With sharp teeth lined with dark promises. Suddenly the carefully crafted life he had built here in Ba Sing Se was teetering daintily on crystal foundations. All it would take is one strike to topple it all until only the shattered remnants remained for him to cut himself on.

“I’m surprised to see you here.” The tribesman greeted warmly, his voice twisted up with an edge of amusement as he inspected the tea stained apron and the shabby cheap clothes he managed to purchase with their meager savings. At least it was better than what the prince had been wearing all those weeks ago when it was just him and his ostrich horse traversing the Earth Kingdom alone. He reminded himself that he was lucky to have food in his belly, a roof over his head and clean clothes on his back. He was lucky- *he was always lucky*.

That’s all he had now. Luck, and even that was hardly enough to keep him from stumbling into one bad situation after another. It couldn’t stop the tribesman from wandering into Pao’s shop of all places like he knew Zuko would be here and unable to fight back if anything happened. The Dai Li were just a call away, then Zuko would be dragged off and arrested like Jet was.

“I work here.” Zuko answered, once he managed to make his voice reach his lips, then lowered it to barely above a whisper as he added. “And my name is Li. My Uncle and I are here as refugees.”

The water tribe boy raised an incredulous brow at that, giving Zuko a look that clearly stated he didn't believe him. The prince ignored it and surged ahead, returning his voice to the normal service volume. "What do you want to order?"

This question only seemed to deepen the pinched lines across the tribesman's brow before a bark of amused laughter erupted jaggedly from his chest. He caught himself, stared Zuko down a few more seconds then huffed out another laugh. "*Spirits*, you're serious aren't you?"

Zuko scowled but the strength of the look wasn't there. He just felt tired and anxious, eager to get this encounter over with so he can take his break or make some half assed excuse to Uncle that he wasn't feeling well and go home. He couldn't stomach the indignity like this. The humiliation of just how far he has fallen.

He knew Uncle Iroh didn't see it that way, but Zuko couldn't understand how he was so content living like this, barely scraping by and struggling for an ounce of respect. Sure, their lives at the start of his banishment weren't much better but at least they still had something to show for their efforts and a crew to command, and they weren't settled in a crappy apartment with a leaky roof and a door that didn't shut right so they could hear the neighbors through their paper thin walls all hours of the night. If he weren't already so accustomed to Uncle's tendency to snore like a komodo rhino, he would be bothered and kept awake all night with how bad the other tenants were.

"Alright, alright. Relax." The tribesman raised his hands placatingly, his expression softened to something more open and friendly with less teeth flashed in the prince's direction. "I don't know much about tea, so I guess surprise me."

Zuko stared at the other boy and scowled. "If you don't like tea, then why are you here?"

The boy shrugged. "I noticed you were headed this direction. I got curious." His lips twitched up into that dangerous smile again that had Zuko's stomach tightening with unease. He couldn't understand why exactly, but the flash of the boy's eyes unsettled him and had him taking a wary step back. "I had to make sure you weren't up to something nefarious."

The prince bristled at that but self-preservation and instincts told him not to engage this one. It made his skin crawl, the way the boy watched him as he stiffly stepped back, afraid to turn his back outright on the tribesman until he had at least one sturdy table between them. When he reached the kitchen, he put the boy's order in.

"Table five wants to be surprised." His words were stilted, drawing Uncle's attention to glance over at him with concern. His softer gold eyes gave him a worried look.

"Are you alright, nephew?"

Zuko attempted to nod, his lips pursed into a thin line as his good eye darted back through the doorway to spy the tribesman's seat before dragging his attention back to address the older man. His worry only grew stronger as the prince felt the color flicker out of him a little. Every instinct in his body was telling him to get far away from the water tribe boy and he couldn't understand *why*.

"I just don't feel very well today Uncle." His voice was low, barely a whisper between them. The older man looked skeptical, reluctant to accept the admission but eventually resigned as he ushered him closer, away from the doorway.

"You should head home and get some rest then. A man needs his rest." Uncle Iroh assured, patting him firmly on the shoulder before pulling Zuko's apron off for him to hang up. "I'll let Pao know."

The prince gave a jerky nod of agreement, and turned away, taking the back entrance to leave. Without any walls to block him in or any act to put on in front of others, his feet moved swiftly through the streets as he raced as quickly as possible away from the tea shop. He didn't know whether he intended to go home right away or not, but he felt like anywhere was better than staying close by. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the water tribe boy felt off. He felt dangerous since their last real encounter in the North Pole. Like something had changed, or that Zuko was only just now seeing the potential in his adversary. He felt unsteady, like the ground was made of crumbled rocks balancing precariously beneath him. One false move and he'll come crashing down into a dark ravine that'll swallow him up.

He hated that feeling, and he wanted to make it stop. So he ran until his lungs burned and his legs shook with weariness, then forced himself to keep running until the streets were no

longer familiar and the weight of a crowd was no longer watching him as he pushed past with barely mumbled words of apology. Finally, his feet started to slow as he walked, turning to the shadows of the larger residential buildings that dotted the streets as he neared the Middle Ring. The temptation to cross the boundaries was present, but he didn't dare go much further, at least not without his Blue Spirit attire to keep him safe.

Turning away from the walls leading into the Middle Ring, he wandered along the outskirts and wove back through various alleys and side streets, finding his feet as they carried him on autopilot. Zuko was still trying to wrap his head around all of this, finding it hard to believe that the Avatar's friend was here in the city, and not just here, but the water tribe boy knew where Zuko was, had even come looking for him with the purpose of checking in on him. He said it so casually as if he had no care in the world that he was face to face with a firebender. The last time he saw the tribesman was at the North Pole when the avatar had escaped him and Zuko had woken in the bison's saddle, tied up while Zhao monologued about his newest horrible plan like an evil villain in the prince's favorite play scrolls.

He had caught a brief glimpse of the tribesman as he slipped away while Uncle and Zhao argued then hunted the Admiral down himself after he fled from the oasis. It felt like a lifetime ago now that he thought back on it. It felt tedious and left him feeling cold and bitter inside now because he knew he didn't have a proper plan in place. He didn't have a way back home or even a way back out of the North Pole that didn't result in their untimely deaths.

Zuko had just been so angry and desperate and *hurt* that all he could do to keep himself going was one final reckless grab for what he lost. It didn't matter what the consequences were in the aftermath, he just needed something or he'd crumble. It took him a while with a lot of struggle and pain to understand his new purpose. To let go and move on, for both their sakes. He didn't really count their momentary encounter in the abandoned Earth Kingdom town when they faced Azula, since the prince was far more preoccupied and couldn't really remember much of the whole ordeal aside from the shock of seeing Uncle sprawled across the ground and the stench of burned flesh filling his nostrils.

It appears the universe wasn't done taunting him as the tribesman returned once again and Zuko had never felt more afraid of facing such a daunting task. He was torn between the dying flame of his old goals and the new fire that burned with the softly spoken promises and reluctant compromises he made for Uncle Iroh's happiness. He couldn't tell if the other boy was always this unnerving or if it was a new development over the last few months. Something about him set off so many alarm bells inside Zuko's head and made him want to maintain a considerable distance just to be safe. It ignited the heat beneath his fingers as fire itched along his skin and spread, wild and wary. It was getting harder to control the longer he stayed in close proximity to the other boy, like he expected him to lunge and strike at a moment's notice.

Not even Azula could rival that uncomfortable sense of dread that he was a fox antelope in a room facing down a tigerdillo. Perhaps, he rationalized, it made things worse knowing that he couldn't defend himself from the tribesman's assault should he decide to try a hand in a fight like Jet had. One delusional teenager ranting about fire nation spies and firebenders could be dismissed, but a second one that also accompanies the avatar of all people, with numerous witnesses and extensive proof would be enough to send both he and Uncle Iroh to an Earth Kingdom prison. Or worse.

Zuko's fingers balled into tight fists at the thought of what Earth Kingdom soldiers do to firebenders. He dreaded the thought, felt the curling ache of fear knot itself up inside his stomach until he felt sick with grief and worry. His head was spinning at the dozens of horrific outcomes that threatened their lives now, and it was all Zuko's fault. His carelessness led them to this point. Uncle's life was at stake, his own life was being risked and their fates dangled in the clutches of the water tribe teen and whatever mercy he decided to bestow upon them. He was trapped and it was a feeling that the prince despised more than anything else. He wouldn't be able to fight it, and he didn't have the luxury of fleeing it anymore. He locked himself behind these walls, like the prison they were when he first arrived, and cheerfully accepted it all for Uncle's sake. He was right from the start. This city would be the end of him one way or another.

Uncle Iroh was worried about him after he left the tea shop in such a hurry. Apparently, Pao had delivered the tea to the tribesman and he never spoke a word about Zuko's absence other than questioning the change in server so suddenly. Uncle didn't understand why Zuko had left, he hadn't seen the boy that made him sick with fear, and he didn't understand why the prince had stayed out all day, only creeping back to their apartment at a late hour. He ate the bowl of jook Uncle had given to him without question and retired to his futon, slumping with exhaustion heavy in every limb. His mind still raced and sleep came in fits and starts before he eventually gave up and waited for the sun to rise.

Zuko didn't know whether the absence of the water tribe teenager was a relief or not when he followed Uncle into Pao's, looking worse for wear. Every time the entrance rang with the noisy chime of the bell alerting him to newcomers, the tight knot of anxiety only worsened as he anticipated the visit of the Dai Li come to take them both away. Other times, a flash of blue in the corner of his eye had his heart leaping into his throat and his voice dying on his lips. He was distracted and jumpy as he navigated the narrow aisles between tables and tried

not to stumble with the drink trays. He fumbled and spilled drinks, tripped on chair legs and snapped his head up with white faced horror everytime a shade of blue passed by his peripheral.

His Uncle's worries only grew, accompanied by Pao who urged the prince to take a longer break at a much earlier hour than usual. Uncle brought him a cup of calming Jasmine tea and took care not to mention the way Zuko's hands trembled when he took it or how his eyes never lifted to meet Iroh's. He imagined he looked quite the miserable mess but Zuko couldn't find the spare energy to care. This sense of not knowing what was going to happen, the inevitable dread of the unknown was haunting him.

He looked on the verge of keeling over when two large Earth Kingdom guards walked in and took a seat by the door. Zuko nearly inhaled his tea and sputtered pathetically as he tried to catch his breath and avoid asphyxiating on Jasmine.

"Nephew." Uncle's voice was dripping with disquiet for him, one hand resting on his back to comfort his irritation. Pao was forced to check on the customers while the two firebenders collected themselves in the back, managing to greet the guards and gather their orders. The older man accepted the orders, drawing away from Zuko only when the prince waved him off with a quiet rasp to get the teas made. Iroh's eyes constantly flickered to check on him as the prince cradled the half drank cup between his palms as the firebender focused on the feel of the heat against his skin and concentrated on the task of maintaining it if only to find something to distract himself from the knot of anxiety fraying in his gut.

Pao delivered the finished teas to the table and returned with brows knitted together in a look of concern as Zuko remained unmoving from the crate, his attention fixed on the cup of tea and the rising steam that rolled up from the surface in steady white swirls. He could feel his boss's eyes on him and ignored the sudden urge to hunch his shoulders defensively and scowl back.

"Mushi, maybe Li should head home and rest for today. And perhaps take a couple days off." The idea sounded like it pained the owner to say knowing he was losing one of his only workers but the fact of the matter was that Zuko was useless to him as he was now as much as it bothered the prince to admit it. He was strung out and twitchy, rising to the defensive at every sound and flash of movement. He couldn't afford to keep spilling tea or risk breaking the cups that will inevitably come out of his already pitiful pay.

Uncle agreed quickly and promised Pao that he will ensure his nephew gets plenty of rest until he is feeling better. Zuko doubted he'll ever feel better about all of this, but relented with a quiet nod of reluctant defeat. Iroh gave his shoulder a gentle pat before drawing the apron up around Zuko's shoulders and hung it on its designated hook. Pao drifted out of the kitchen long enough for the two men to share a moment of privacy to talk.

"Go home and rest, my nephew. Please." He urged as he accepted the forgotten but still warm cup of tea from Zuko's grasp and set it on the counter. "Straight home, alright?"

He nodded stiffly. "I promise, Uncle." For once, it was a promise he meant to keep.

The spirits were clearly working against him as Zuko opted to take the quieter backstreets home to their apartment and avoid the crowded main streets that brimmed with the energetic rush of consumers and artisans. Rounding a corner with the shadow of his nerves ebbing slowly, the prince didn't notice the silhouette that stalked him from the alley until he was backed against a stone wall with a hand steering his shoulder firmly to press against the cool surface. Zuko stilled and stared up at a pair of ice blue eyes and that similar amused grin that taunted him. His hands had raised before him with the intention to defend but the prickling heat on his fingertips was snuffed cold by the firm press against his shoulder and the lazy stance of a knee slotted between his.

His heart was thundering inside his chest as the other boy gave him a curious look and frowned after a moment as if just noticing something was off about this entire encounter. "You're avoiding me." It wasn't a question and Zuko hadn't the energy to supply a proper answer even if it were. The voice in his head screamed *Danger!*

Golden eyes were already searching for an escape as his body wound tight with anticipation for an opening. The first chance he got, he intended to spring forward and run like Koh was on his heels. The hand still lingering on his shoulder tightened its grip ensuring he didn't move from his spot but the boy's stance relaxed more and left more of an opening as if

inviting him to linger and chat like he didn't currently have a proverbial blade against Zuko's throat.

Swallowing hard, the prince forced his voice to work as he spoke up, the low rasp sounded brittle to his own ear causing him to wince. "What do you want?"

The tribesman regarded him thoughtfully before answering with the same casualness he took everything with. "You." It felt like a horribly planned joke as Zuko laughed, sharp and jagged as it scraped up his throat like broken glass. It sounded painfully unamused.

"Are you going to finally turn me in to the Dai Li?" He swallowed hard, his eyes flitting from the entrances of the street to meet the other boy's icy stare as he added. "I won't run away if you promise not to tell them about Uncle Iroh. You can take me but please leave him alone."

The boy frowned, his eyes flashed in that eerily inhuman way that made Zuko's skin crawl with unease as he stared him down hard. "Zuko-

"*Li* ." He corrected automatically, then paused and shook his head with a grimace. "Please."

"Li." The boy looked like he had tasted something bitter as he sounded out the singular syllable like it personally offended him. Zuko wasn't regretful of that fact. There was a heavy sigh of resignation as the tribesman continued. "I have no intention of handing you over to those Dai Li bastards."

His jaw gaped, bewildered and conflicted, but before he could say anything else, the boy looked puzzled and then alarmed. "Wait, is that why you've been so freaked out since yesterday? You thought I was- I'm not- that's just plain evil! I wouldn't do that." He shook his head, icy eyes going wide as he drew his hand from Zuko's shoulder and gestured wildly. "Like I get you can be bad and all, but handing you off to those guys would be just plain cruel." The prince ignored the way those words cut into him with the painful knowledge that he had done just that to Jet just a couple weeks ago.

"Then why-" Zuko's voice caught, mouth gone dry as he fidgeted and straightened up. He didn't draw away from the wall just yet, finding it helped keep him standing as his legs shook

and his mind raced. "I don't understand what's going on. You said-"

"That I was going to keep an eye on you myself." The boy assured, finishing his previous statement. Zuko found it hard to piece those two things together in a way that made sense. His thoughts were too frantic and he was too frazzled and exhausted to make heads or tails of this conversation.

"Why?" He blanched.

The boy grinned widely. "Because I can and I feel like it." That still didn't make sense to Zuko but he quickly gave up trying and shook his head slowly. He swayed on his feet before rising to his full height and gesturing to brush the boy's cautious hand away that tried to steady him.

"I'm going home."

The boy stared after him a moment but made no move to stop him, instead strolling along by his side with the same casual air as if they were old friends and not long time enemies. He supposed they hadn't actually fought the last time they met, but Zuko was too busy chasing down Azula to keep her from capturing the avatar and struggling through the aftermath of starvation to keep his head on well enough to navigate the complexities of what may have been an unofficial truce on the grounds of they all had beef with his little sister. His life was chaotic enough as is, he didn't need to add this extra dose of crazy on top of it all. He prayed to Agni but even the sun's blessed rays were muted behind the clouds that shaded the city, leaving Zuko to wallow in his confusion alone.

The thought of trying to flee or shake the tribesman off came to mind but he was keenly aware he didn't have the energy to outrun him right now. It felt futile as they walked the rest of the way to the shabby tenant housing they lived in. Water Tribe turned to address Zuko after a moment, stopping in his tracks at the mouth of the pathway leading to the stairs. Zuko hesitated in his steps, wary of turning his back on the boy even though he had his word he wouldn't get the Prince arrested. He still wasn't sure if he could trust it or not.

"What?"

The boy inspected the complex with a frown then shook the expression off, directing that same casual smile towards him. "I'll see you later, *Li*. "

Zuko raised his brow and watched, shocked as the boy gave a farewell wave over his shoulder and left. He didn't say anything more. He didn't try to force Zuko to invite him in or occupy his time. Just....saw him home safely and left.

'Spirits! What in Agni's name was that?'

He has never felt so confused as he stared at the empty spot the boy stood then forced himself to tear his gaze away. It was better not to look a gift ostrich horse in the beak. Striding up the steps, he slipped into their apartment, never feeling more grateful for these thin walls and the crappy lock on the door that he slipped the bolt into and sagged against the flimsy wood feeling just a touch more comfortable now.

Chapter 2

It was easier being the Blue Spirit, with the city rushing past beneath his feet as Zuko raced across rooftops with the silvery moonlight at his back and the shadows draped around him like an extension of his body. He moved with grace and care, fleet of foot and light of mind as he left all his worries behind him. He still couldn't shake off the unease from the days prior, encountering the water tribe boy twice in a row had shaken him to his core and left him anxious and wound up. He needed this escape. To be something else, something unseen as he ghosted past the Dai Li and skirted around the city guard patrols and danced through darkness like a familiar partner.

His feet carried him into the Middle Ring as he darted from rooftop to rooftop, crossing gaps with silent leaps and intimidating bounds that only thrilled him more as his blood ran hot and the fire that roared in his veins filtered out in waves of heat that encircled him, making him feel lighter, like a feather on the wind as it carried him. He felt free and bold. He felt alive.

The night air was cool as he settled, catching his breath behind his mask. It was hot against his skin as sweat dampened the dark material and left it clinging to his body in a way that felt right and natural. Far more natural than his armor as he mentally mapped out his path through the ring with a broad grin spreading his lips. He hadn't meant to go so far in, but the night was young with Agni's light still so far away and Zuko had too much energy to burn off.

He picked his way across the roofs and headed towards the Upper Ring, drinking in the lights of the night life as the upper class attended theater productions or scoured the late vendors that sold delicacies for the roaming evening consumers. Lanterns were strung decoratively across streets and shimmered brightly as people came and went in their usual routine, wallowing in the opulence they often took for granted until something else threatened its ease. It burned bitterly inside of Zuko's chest at the thought of how easy it would be to take that away from them. To make them suffer even a fraction of the indignity and humiliation he had to for so long. To make them understand the pain that so many people felt, desperately clutching at an ounce of the privilege these people drowned in daily.

He wondered if they even knew what the Lower Ring was like or if they remembered it existed outside of passing commentary about thieves and ruffians causing a stir in the night. He felt like it should be concerning that he was more comfortable among the 'common rabble' nowadays than he was among the nobility. At least the peasantry were honest in their actions, humble and compassionate beyond their own means. This place was a pit of vipers waiting to strike. It didn't matter what nation he was in, a den of snakes was just as venomous as all the rest, no matter their bending potential.

Creeping along the edges of the light, Zuko made sure to stay out of sight as he watched the passing people. In a daring moment of opportunity, he slipped off of a roof ledge and swiped a red bean bun from a vendor's stall when the man turned his back, collecting it into his hand before scrambling up the next wall and out of sight. He darted across two more roofs until he was a safe distance away on the rare chance someone noticed his skulking shadow and adjusted his mask enough to slip bites of the bun between the painted wood and his lips.

Settled with the stone of a chimney pressed like a cool caress against his back, he enjoyed his filched treat and stretched the tension out of his shoulders. His sword handle knocked gently against the stonework as he gazed out past the askew slits of his mask over the city and sighed.

It was easy to forget what was troubling him all the way up here, so far removed from everything down there where the world was bitter and cruel, where expectations were like boulders being rolled about crushing each other. He escaped those narrow tunnels and shrugged off his burdens, rising above it all for these fragile moments of peace where Zuko felt like himself. This was the man he was meant to be. This was who he's always wanted to be. This free spirit, uncaged and unstoppable. Nobody could stop him, not even Zhao could and he had tried and failed spectacularly.

Finishing the last bites of the bun, he nearly choked on the bean paste filling when a frighteningly familiar voice called from behind. "It's a nice night for a stroll." Zuko released the wood of his mask and tried to stifle the cough that wracked his chest as he sprung forward like a spooked cat, whirling with blades drawn menacingly towards the water tribe boy. He was dressed in the same thin light attire of water tribe blue that Zuko recognized from their many past encounters across the warmer Earth Kingdom regions. The coolness of the night didn't appear to bother him as he approached the firebender as if they were old friends bumping into each other on the streets below.

Eyes like glacier ice of the most vibrant chilling blue he has ever seen flashed eerily in the moonlight as he smiled, disarming and dangerous all wrapped up in the slightest twist of lips and a glimpse of teeth. Zuko forced his body to stand its ground, reassured that there was no chance that the other boy would recognize him. How could he? Zuko never took off his mask. The avatar's friends were goody two shoes, so surely this was an instance of curiosity or maybe the boy noticed him stealing the bun earlier and chased after him. A tendril of anger sparked in his gut at the knowledge that the avatar's friends were no strangers to theft either, and the impending judgement made him snarl.

The boy tilted his head as if he were listening for something then straightened with a much more harmless smile on his face, like he was reassuring Zuko that he was no threat, smoothing over the apprehension that had him coiled like a spring, ready to fling himself off the roof to the nearest and fastest escape he could muster.

“You do this often?” He gestured at the rooftop dramatically. “Skulk about like a spirit in the night?”

The weight of the broadswords in his hands felt heavy as he held them poised, never letting down his guard for a moment. The tribesman looked bothered by the forced distance between them with the tip of the blades aimed for his chest. He didn’t try to approach, remaining just outside of Zuko’s reach. It would be easy to cross that short gap, a stretch of limbs, a fluid swipe, and his problem would be solved. Bitterly, he knew he couldn’t. No matter how much the other boy left him teetering on the edge, he couldn’t bring himself to take a life like that.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you go this long without speaking before, *Li*. ” The weighty emphasis on his name felt like cold water splashed into his face. Zuko’s grip tightened on the blades as he took a wary involuntary step back as if struck by the sound alone. He paled behind the mask, golden eye already searching for his escape when the water tribe boy held his hands up to calm the cornered feeling that seized him.

“Hey, it’s alright. I’m sorry if I spooked you. Can we just talk?” There was a pause as the other boy watched him closely, gauging his reaction. “You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to, and you don’t have to take your mask off.”

Zuko’s grip relaxed a little on his broadswords as he considered the thought. The boy waited, patient as the night and its limitless silence, as he slowly, hesitantly lowered his swords and returned them to the sheathe on his back. He eased his stance a little and pressed his back against the stone chimney with an expectant tilt to his head in silent command to ‘ *talk* .’

He was not expecting the boy to reach inside the dark green Earth Kingdom style bag hanging off his shoulder and pull out a sack of red bean buns, still warm from the vendor Zuko stole his from. “Here. You looked hungry.”

He offered one of the buns to the prince, holding it out for him. His traitorous stomach growled in agreement as he waited a long time before finally reaching out to take the

offering. Could this be considered a truce? He wasn't necessarily sure but he accepted it, feeling the heat curling across his fingers as he settled his back against the stone and tore a piece of the pastry away to pop it into his mouth under his mask. He cursed himself for not swiping a waterskin or a bottle of something to drink along the way. His throat was still scratchy from his earlier choking which made it rough to swallow. Another part of him considered the fact these would go well with a cup of Jasmine or green tea. He cursed Uncle for that knowledge and focused on the stickiness of the paste against his fingers as he tore the bun apart just to keep his hands busy.

The water tribe boy, which Zuko grumbled at the fact he couldn't recall his name for the life of him, was enjoying his own bun with much more enthusiasm. He plopped down on the roof with little care for the fact Zuko was still standing and armed. After a minute or two, he eventually slid his way down to sit against the cool tiling and finished his bun with a satisfied noise in his throat. The boy held the sack out towards the firebender in offering but Zuko waved it away even if the thought was tempting. Ever since the time spent nearly starving on the raft from the North Pole and then his struggles on the verge of collapse when he was traveling alone, he found he developed a habit of hoarding food or overeating more than necessary until he was sick to his stomach. Uncle had warned him away from the habit, trying to maintain stricter meal sizes and portion control until he didn't have the urge anymore and was slowly regaining the lost weight.

He would still find himself sneaking food just to have it in case of emergencies until he was forced to eat it before it spoiled, and then would find himself feeling guilty and anxious afterwards, only to catch himself doing the exact same thing once again a few days later. It was a futile struggle.

"So, you like to play vigilante?" The other teen spoke softly, shifting closer so he didn't have to make his voice carry so much on the quiet roof. Zuko had half a mind to bristle at the closed distance but knew how sound moved and the risks of drawing the attention of guards or Dai Li. Reluctantly he allowed it and gave a hesitant nod of confirmation as he fidgeted in his seat.

The boy tucked the buns back inside his bag and dug around instead until a waterskin was produced, taking a sip from the uncorked end before passing it over to Zuko. He gave it a little shake causing the water to slosh around inside. "Want some?"

The spiteful part of him wanted to decline, but the itch in his throat and the weariness of running across half the city was weighing on him so he relented and angled the spout around his mask as he took a drink. It was a bit of a hassle to maneuver it correctly but eventually he

got enough to satisfy his thirst and handed it back, the cork slipped firmly in place. He tipped his head with silent appreciation. The tribesman considered the gesture thoughtfully before sharing a warm smile back. Zuko tensed a little, not quite sure why, as the boy placed the waterskin back inside his bag where it belonged.

He couldn't help the nagging questions that rose in his throat until they eventually spilled over before he could stop them. "How did you know it was me?"

The water tribe teen cocked his head, his smile spreading with a dangerous glint in his abnormally bright eyes. "Wouldn't you like to know." He chuckled and stretched his arms above his head, allowing a few pleasant pops to slip between them. "You have your tricks and I have mine."

That didn't ease the anxious knot that tangled in his gut at the thought. What made him so obvious? What could the tribesman have noticed that gave him away so easily? That phantom urge to flee returned in full force as he watched the other boy cautiously. His eyes raked over Zuko's black clad body and settled on the wooden mask with intrigue. There was a flash of emotion Zuko couldn't quite catch to decipher and the subtlest twitch of the boy's fingers like he was thinking about snatching it away from him. The prince tensed before the tribesman tore his eyes away and allowed him the ability to relax just a fraction more.

"I don't remember you being so jumpy before." The boy stated, tilting his head with a predatory swivel as he balanced his chin against his palm. "Did something happen since we parted ways?"

Zuko didn't answer. His mouth went dry and his throat felt tight at the thought. The boy didn't seem all that different at first glance from how the prince remembered him but surely he must have missed something before because he didn't recall feeling this way when facing him down. Not at the South Pole or Kyoshi Island, or Crescent Island or even the pirate encounter or the Abbey in the Earth Kingdom. He didn't recall even an ounce of this sharpness and predatory energy from the boy in the North Pole or after when they faced Azula but had Zuko truly been paying attention to the boy from the start? Or had he been too distracted and narrow minded to notice the signs until he was left helpless and cornered?

Like a wolfbat in the night, he may have never known until it was too late. Perhaps even now, it might be too late. He couldn't tell. He didn't know what the boy's goal was, what was the end game?

“Hey, relax buddy.” The boy spoke up gently, drawing Zuko’s attention out of the spiralling thoughts inside his head. He soothed, extending a hand out as if to touch the prince’s knee comfortingly but instead it hovered “It’s alright. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

There was a pause before that disarming smile returned and a rush of warmth filled his eyes. “I’m glad to see your Uncle is safe and sound. We were all worried when we left.”

That threw Zuko for a loop as he felt the tension unwind at the shock of the admission. The visible relief on the other boy’s face was enough to make his head spin with confusion. This didn’t make sense. None of this was making sense. They were *enemies* and the other boy had so much evidence against him that he wasn’t intending to use. He had Zuko in a very vulnerable position and he was just....sitting here having red bean buns with him and talking about how happy he was to see that Uncle Iroh was safe and not horrifically injured after what Azula had done.

He felt like a leaf barely clinging to a vine in a tremendous storm, unable to find his footing the more the wind roared and rattled his foundations. He was slipping and afraid of what will happen when he lets go.

It came without warning, sudden and sharp, so brittle in his throat once it met the open air between them. He couldn’t stop himself, it just came out, bubbling over like a boiling pot. It slipped through his grasp, all the careful walls and patience he worked so hard to build up here in Ba Sing Se, to let go of these sudden outbursts and quell the raging storm inside his chest but something about the boy made it wind right back up until lightning was crackling under his skin and fire licked at his fingertips.

“Why do you care?” He shouted, far too loud for their quiet huddle, startling the boy to jerk away with wide blue eyes that turned on him with a coldness that flashed with a warning. His lips drew back in alarm, not quite a smile but also not quite a snarl, it was something inhuman and unpleasant that had Zuko on his feet with his heart ramming against his ribcage trapped between the urge to flee and fight.

“What do you even want? I keep asking myself these things over and over again because it doesn’t make sense! We’re enemies and you’re being *nice* to me and I can’t figure out what

your goal in all this is! I feel like I'm walking on hot coals, waiting to make the wrong step and then-" His voice cracked as he cupped his hands on either side of his head, nails raking along the thin protective fabric of his hood. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, to throw a punch, to shoot fire and shout until he had no voice left and no fire left to burn in his heart. He wanted to just fizzle out because that was a far better outcome than whatever this was, this not knowing whether guards were going to storm their apartment and drag them away in the middle of the night.

The water tribe boy was on his feet, stance steady and hands raised at his sides but they weren't fists like Zuko expected. He didn't reach for his boomerang that was always on his back or try to defend himself. His posture was passive, like he was waiting for the firebender to burn himself out and slink back in defeat. His palms were up, perceptive eyes drank in every tense muscle and hard line of the prince's body, waiting for the give that would inevitably come if he allowed himself the chance.

Cautiously, the boy swallowed thickly then spoke. "I'm giving you a chance." He started carefully. When Zuko didn't snap and roar flames at the declaration, he continued. "I wanted to know if my suspicions were right, on whether or not you've changed. I thought that maybe-" He paused and shook the thought away.

"This isn't the right place or time to have this conversation." He amended and nodded towards the streets with a wary look. Zuko tore his attention towards the direction the boy was watching and noticed the darting silhouettes of large Earth Kingdom soldiers. The city guard, he recalled. He recognized one of the men, a large stocky middle aged man, always clean shaven with a scar that curved under his right eye. Captain Cho, he reminded himself. He had been at Pao's after the Jet incident and was one of Zuko's regulars. He was a nice enough man, compassionate for his community and cautious in his encounters with the firebender. Zuko suspected he assumed the prince was helpless due to his disability and even the knowledge of his impromptu swordfight hadn't dissuaded that kid glove behavior. If anything, it worsened.

He certainly didn't want to fight the older man, especially when his dual dao style could be recognized. There were three other guards that accompanied him as they carried lanterns and shouted out at his and the tribesman's shadows on the rooftop.

"Fuck." Zuko hissed, turning on his heel to sprint away from the roof. He didn't look back to see if the tribesman was following or not, just tracing the path he had previously planned when the other boy cornered him. His feet moved quickly as scattered shouts split apart in the crowded streets below. He weaved around, ignoring the rocks that rose up in his path to slow

him when he was forced to take to the ground, darting between civilians and vendors stalls, scrambling up a sheer rockwall and balancing with haste across a laundry line to cross to the next roof. He leapt and raced, flinging himself off ledges and vaulting over chimneys and partition walls. He slipped through covered gardens and made his way across the moonlit bridges of the Middle Ring.

He didn't stop, not when the pursuing voices had. Not when the only footsteps in the night were his own. Not when his muscles ached and his lungs gasped for air. He kept going, fleeing the guards, fleeing the conversation he just had and the prospect that this just might not be the last time he'll see water tribe blue or feel those icy eyes pinning him in place. He fled the feelings that tangled up in confusing knots and left him racing across unsteady ground. He fled the burn of tears in his eyes and the frustration at the knowledge that someone cared without reason. That someone else was hoping he was better than who he used to be, and the realization that he wasn't so sure of who that even was anymore.

He ran with the hope that he could keep going until Agni's light would swallow him whole and return him to the ether from which they all came.

Zuko stayed home because there was no excuse in the world that could convince him to crawl out of his bed to face the possibility that the water tribe boy will be in Pao's shop waiting to finish the conversation they started. If Uncle suspected something, he didn't say as he bid Zuko a good day and reminded him to eat something other than the small helping of rice he forced himself to choke down early this morning. For once, his ridiculous appetite was absent as he stared into the cooling cup of tea that Uncle brewed at breakfast and wondered just how he got to this point.

He was the Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation, son of Lady Ursa and Firelord Ozai. Emphasis on *was* because now he was Li, tea server at Pao's cheap tea shop and apparently also a coward that hid inside his Uncle's shabby apartment to avoid another boy that made him feel nervous. How far has he fallen?

Even Jet, as much of a legitimate threat as he was, never held an ounce of the dangerous energy that Zuko felt rolling off of the water tribe boy. The younger wheat chewing teen felt more like an elbow leech in comparison. The only real threat he offered was bruises and a headache from all the self important talking he did. He was too prideful and just a little bit on the side of crazy. But Water Tribe was a whole other level of risk. Confusing and unsettling, he stood like a beacon of all of Zuko's past failures and stalked about with the same casual confidence that might radiate from Azula with an equal but different air of menace though Azula's level of threatening was manipulative and semi-predictable.

He forced himself to ignore these conflicted feelings inside his head and the painful throbbing that pulsed behind his eyes with the beginnings of a headache as he set the tea pot to boil and prepared a basin of water to wash with. It was strange going about his routine using a traditional source for fire instead of his bending. It became second nature now, to use spark rocks instead. To avoid bending except during brief moments when he could get away with it in total privacy and even then it was as simple as heating a drink or bowl of food, or manipulating the candle in their apartment while meditating.

When the water was ready, Zuko added a touch of an oil Uncle picked up on one of his splurges that uses a rare Earth Kingdom flower called Panda Lily. The fragrance is sweet with a smoky note underneath that reminds him of home. It made the prince wonder if that was the exact reason Uncle Iroh felt compelled to pay so much for such a little bottle. It only needed a drop added to the basin to spread the aroma around the room and fill every calming breath Zuko took in. He peeled back his clothes and set them aside to be washed, deciding he might as well do the laundry while he had the time off, and started working on scrubbing along his body to rid himself of the sweat from last night's excursion.

With a clean pair of trousers on after his standing bath, he gathered up their filthy clothes from the last few days and started working on the laundry. The task was mind numbing enough that his thoughts would begin to drift. Somewhere else in the neighborhood, he could hear one of the other tenants singing *Four Seasons* and various other Earth Kingdom classic songs he was familiar with. The light notes of an Erhu drifted up beautifully, reminding him of cousin Lu Ten as he played *Leaves from the Vine* at Uncle's behest. It wasn't as mournfully exquisite as Lu Ten's, but it certainly made for a pleasant rendition of *Secret Tunnel*.

He was so lost in the sound of the music and the familiar monotonous motions of scrubbing the clothes and squeezing out the water before rising to hang them each up in the large window box, that he almost missed the quiet knock on the front door. He straightened up, feeling the cool breeze rustle through his hair as it scattered across his eyes in shaggy disarray.

“Uncle?” He asked before cringing, realizing that there was no reason for Uncle Iroh to need to knock when he had a key, and he certainly wouldn’t be returning home this early in the day. It wasn’t even noon yet. He tensed and scrubbed his palms dry on the front of his pants as he slowly approached the door, each step was light and soundless as he tiptoed his way towards the entrance. His heart rattled against his ribcage with the very real concern that whoever was on the other side would mean trouble. His breath caught in his throat as his mind raced with the terrifying reality that it could very well be the Dai Li or the city guard coming to collect him after his altercation with the water tribesman last night. Perhaps they recognized him, or had followed him further than he realized. He was so upset and frazzled, he probably wouldn’t have even noticed if a Dai Li agent had tracked him through the night all the way back to his apartment and now Zuko was defenseless and alone. He didn’t have the safety of being in public or numbers or even Uncle by his side to protect him.

Another knock came, causing him to flinch back. Zuko took an involuntary backstep causing the board to creak under his heel. His heart jumped into his throat as he searched the room for an escape. Would he even be able to outrun them? He didn’t have his swords on hand and it was broad daylight. His fists curled into tight balls at his sides as his mind raced but his body remained frozen in place, unable to decide and move.

Another knock and this time it was accompanied by a wary voice. “Li, it’s me, Sokka.” The water tribe boy called through the door. “I just want to talk, okay?”

There was a pause. Zuko held his breath, afraid that Sokka would be able to hear him through the flimsy door with these uncomfortably thin walls. Somehow, in some stupid way, the idea of speaking with Sokka alone was more terrifying than the prospect of facing armed Dai Li agents or city guards. As irrational as that was, he couldn’t smother the way his chest hurt with the speed of his heart and the burn of his lungs begging for oxygen he was determinedly denying them with the hope that the boy will just take the hint and leave.

“Li, please.” His voice was strained with desperation. “I believe there may have been a misunderstanding and that’s entirely my fault. I just want to set things right.”

Call him crazy, but Zuko felt compelled to reach for the door. A curious part of him wanted to know, he wanted to understand. He’s been asking himself all these questions and this might finally be his chance to get the answers he’s been hoping for. Slowly, he slid the lock and turned the knob, drawing it open just enough to peer between the crack of the door and the frame while maintaining enough of his guard in case this was some trick.

“Talk.” Zuko stated firmly, donning the prickly edges that were so familiar to him from years of brandishing it like a shield against the bitterness of the world when fear plagued him like a shadow at his back. Sokka looked just as he always did, minus the charming smile that was always too wide and too friendly. It looked relieved now, weak and reserved to a measure of caution as he inspected the firebender thoughtfully. His brows crinkled, pinching with a peculiar dip like he wanted to ask a question but after a moment, he thought better of it and surged ahead.

“Li,” He started, speaking his false name far more genuinely than he ever had before. “I’m really sorry about last night. I didn’t realize I was making you so uncomfortable. I understand the life you have started here with your Uncle is *precious* and after everything you’ve been through, you deserve a second chance.”

Zuko’s body wound tight behind the door as his fingers whitened where they held the frame tightly. Sokka was undeterred by the display, he didn’t rush his words as he took the utmost care to choose them and remain open and as non threatening as possible. He withheld the burning scowl that normally settled so easily on his face, keeping it just a touch above its usual sharpness but still making his displeasure at the other boy’s presence known.

“What I want to say is, do you think we could start over?” Sokka asked after a moment.

“What?” The prince blanched, giving him a long once over. He felt like he was still missing something in all of this. Like he may have spaced out and missed something important that was said.

“You and me, I want to start over.” Sokka began to elaborate, rather poorly in Zuko’s opinion. “We can pretend we only know each other within these walls if you like. If that makes you feel more comfortable.”

Now he was even more confused than before. “Why?”

Sokka paused, brows furrowed in concentration as he tried to figure out the best way to phrase this without upsetting the prince. “Because I meant what I said before. I want to get to know you. The real you. The you that clearly cares about people and is no longer under the- your father’s thumb. The you that loves his Uncle and works in a tea shop and looks so peaceful while feeding pygmy pumas each morning even though it frustrates the neighbors.”

Zuko's face burned hotly at the fact Sokka had seen him doing that early this morning. That also threw him through a loop at the fact Sokka had been here, watching him since this morning.

"You've been spying on me?" He blurted, feeling a flare of anger and paranoia running through him like a blade thrust through his gut.

Sokka threw his hands up to calm the outburst and quickly rushed to explain. "I wasn't trying to. I came to apologize and when I saw your Uncle leave, I thought that maybe I could catch you heading to work." He fidgeted sheepishly, suddenly turning bright red as he rubbed the back of his neck in a timid display of embarrassment. "I didn't know you were just going to stay home and do house work and I sort of needed to muster the courage to come up here and ask you in person like this." He looked about as uncomfortable about that as Zuko felt, causing his own brows to pinch in confusion.

"I'm sorry. It was stupid." Sokka rushed through, feeling more like the normal boy Zuko recalled through all his past encounters and less like the imposing shadow that stalked him through the streets and ambushed him so easily. "I'm not the greatest at these things and I shouldn't have come here without a warning."

"It's-"

'Don't say okay because it's not!' He scolded himself before he could even finish it. Instead he veered to a different line of thought.

"I understand." That was a far more accurate assessment of the situation. He knew he could be awkward and fumble about sometimes. He missed easy social cues and sometimes had trouble reading the room for anything that wasn't a threat. He struggled and it felt nice knowing that the confident, easy going water tribesman also had his moments of struggling too.

Sokka sagged with relief, shooting a hopeful smile at him as he nodded. "I know we had gotten off on the wrong foot before."

'The understatement of the century.' Zuko mentally provided, but he listened, cocking his head so his good ear was turned towards the boy.

"I want to make up for that. You deserve a second chance and I want to be a part of that if you'll let me." He extended his hand towards the prince, his eyes alight with the bright spark of hope that gleamed there in the midday sun. "Friends?"

He supposed this might be similar to a truce, as much as he didn't really want to accept it. It made him feel unsteady after the last few days but taking risks was in his nature, especially if they're particularly stupid risks that Uncle may disapprove of. He got the sense that Uncle might not feel that way with this, and perhaps he may even encourage the chance for him to cross that gaping divide that they had built between them. The Avatar's friends had been, for a fleeting moment, their allies against a common enemy. They cared when Uncle was hurt and didn't take it personally when he raged and roared in anguish over his own failure. They were apologetic and understanding. So maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

"Sure." He accepted the hand.

Sokka's broad grin returned, spread wide and brighter than Agni's light as he beamed. "It's a pleasure to properly meet you, Li."

"You too." He retorted awkwardly. "Um, Sokka."

Sokka smirked. "You forgot my name didn't you?"

Zuko ignored the heat that flushed along his face and down his neck as he grumbled. "Shut up." But the edge wasn't there, even as Sokka laughed at him and Zuko eased the door open a little wider to linger comfortably so they could talk a little longer. And if he retreated back into the apartment to find a shirt and his shoes so they could take a walk, that was no one's business but his own.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I just realized I may have unintentionally made a Red Riding Hood x Big Bad Wolf fic with this and that revelation came when the song Little Red Riding Hood by Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs started auto playing on my writing playlist and I'm like "Wait a damn minute!" And yeah. So....red riding hood Zuko anyone? He's got a red cloak and everything. (Not currently but ya know)

Also, this fic was originally called Toebean Bending in my Docs. I was so tempted to name it that. You have no idea.

The next day saw Zuko in better spirits as he rolled through the usual routine. He fed the five pygmy pumas that prowled the neighborhood and changed into his uniform for work after giving all five an adequate amount of attention while they ate the fresh fish he bought with his own pay. It was the one splurge he allowed himself with his money each week. Cleaned up and ready for his shift, he accompanied Uncle to Pao's and didn't give much attention to the odd sideways looks both of the older men kept shooting his direction. As far as they were both aware, he just was having a bad couple of days. It wasn't the first time he's overheard Pao asking, as politely and discreetly as he could without Zuko overhearing, about whether his scar could have been the cause of his strange behavior at times. Uncle always gave as neutral of an answer as possible, remaining vague without offering any sort of confirmation or denial. He always left it up to the assumptions of others or Zuko to make the correction himself if he saw fit.

Jin was excited to see him back as Zuko took her usual order of Jasmine tea to her. "You're looking better, Li." She chimed warmly, offering a nod of appreciation for the drink as she cupped it carefully in her hands. "I'm glad."

Zuko gave a sheepish awkward nod with a barely audible grunt. She smiled knowingly which put him off just a touch before she dragged her attention down to the steaming cup providing him the opportunity to escape while he had the chance. He slipped away and returned to the counter where Uncle was watching him fondly after accepting Lady Jun's pay for her two cups of Uncle's specialty brew.

"I'm glad to see you're in better spirits, nephew." He hummed, shooting Zuko a subtle glance that was steeped in curiosity but the firebender wasn't inclined to divulge what changed so much these last few days.

"It's like you said Uncle, a man needs his rest." And Zuko rested far easier after the long talk with Sokka. It was mostly about frivolous things like refugee life, the unnerving social separation between the rings, the price of fish, swords versus boomerangs and the finer points of getting a pygmy puma's loyalty without being mauled in the process.

Felines *clearly* have a natural dislike for Sokka, to Zuko's enjoyment as he watched the tribesman get turned into a pin cushion when one of the ornery felines leapt off a roof and used his head as a stepping stone to reach Zuko's shoulder. The animal growled its contempt at the boy and swatted him away from the firebender.

"You bribed them!" Sokka blurted indignantly, rubbing one of dozens of small scratches he received from the animals. Any worries Zuko displayed about the wounds was brushed off with the promise that Katara will just heal him later with her '*magic water*' which the firebender assumed that just meant waterbending.

Zuko had snorted in amusement and brushed the hackles of the puma down fondly. "Animals are just drawn to me weirdly enough." He shrugged the cat off his shoulder and urged it away with a gentle nudge of his hand. It purred under his warm fingers as he allowed a touch more heat to seep into his hands. Being a firebender was a nice perk too. Animals love to gravitate towards *warm* bodies.

Hearing Sokka's laugh had his heart doing somersaults in his chest, accompanied by a partnership with his stomach as it twisted up with fluttery bursts of heat that had him flustered by the end of their very long walk. When he returned home, he parted ways with Sokka on the street outside of his apartment but far enough down that if Uncle came back early, he wouldn't notice either of them hugging the walls of the adjacent building.

He slept better than he had in weeks that night and woke with a nervous anticipation for the day that flitted about excitedly in his chest as he wondered whether or not Sokka will come into the shop again. He knew he was probably getting his hopes up for nothing. The other boy clearly had better things to do than wander about the city with Zuko and play at the charade of being two very simple travelers that just so happened to meet again in such a ridiculously big city.

Another part of him nagged obsessively at the strange feeling that he was still missing something important. He couldn't place his finger on just quite why Sokka felt so *normal* yesterday but the last few times they crossed paths before that, it had Zuko racing for his nearest escape. It didn't make a lick of sense no matter how the firebender looked at it. He tried to ignore it as nerves or mistaken body language or even his own skewed thoughts, but the more he recalled those first few encounters in Pao's and on the street, he couldn't dissuade the shiver that crawled up his spine or the sudden skittish paranoia that clenched his stomach in nauseating knots.

He didn't understand what could possibly cause that reaction but nothing he came up with made any sense. Perhaps Pao's mistaken assumption wasn't too far off the mark, just in an entirely different context.

Afternoon rolled around and Zuko felt just a touch deflated at the obvious absence of the water tribe boy in his day. He flitted from task to task to keep himself busy, and reluctantly accepted Uncle's quiet urge to finally take his break. Zuko didn't quite feel like it, afraid that the lack of busy work will cause him to puzzle further over this confusing up and down that revolved around the tribesman.

He hung his apron on the hook before slipping out the backdoor, wondering absently whether he could get away with visiting the pygmy pumas where they typically sunbathed on the rooftops and soak up some of Agni's rays himself. He hoisted himself easily over the ledge and balanced precariously along the sturdier supports before straddling the beam with a comfortable ease. The felines were sprawled in various lazy heaps and yowled at him in greeting. One dragged itself from its own comfortable spread to flop into his lap where it could receive an abundance of pets and belly rubs from his gentle fingers. Jealous, another quickly came over to beg for ear scratches, while swatting the first away to make space.

Zuko huffed out a laugh and gently scolded the feline. "Hey, be nice. Only good boys get attention."

"If that's the case." The smooth roll of the tribesman's voice called with its own purring tone. "The odds are in my favor."

Zuko's face went bright red as his head snapped up to find Sokka standing on the edge of the roof and slowly picking his way over through the battlefield of hissing felines. The sight was enough to break a laugh from his chest that filled the air between them. The water tribe boy beamed as a result which only grew once he managed to finally reach the firebender.

"Fancy meeting you here." Sokka hummed, dropping to settle beside the firebender but far enough away to avoid the glares of the cats that stretched territorially around the prince. "Easy there kitties." Sokka held his hands up in defense.

"Cats really don't like you, do they?" Zuko asked, curious now with a tilt of his head. The tribesman always seemed to get along well with the avatar's lemur and bison but he wasn't sure whether that was just from them always being around one another on their travels.

"The snow leopard caribou back home like me." Sokka corrected, a bit put off by the insinuation. The childish pout was too soft to ignore the fluttering in his stomach. "But that may just have been because I smelled like seal jerky and dried fish."

The prince rolled his eyes at that and resumed giving the felines enough attention for them to settle back and avoid turning the water tribe boy into a scratching post. "What are you doing here?"

Sokka stretched his legs out, slowing considerably when the cats grew tense and growled in warning. Once he was sprawled properly at the allowance of the aggressive pumas spotting the roof, he tilted his head back to scan the city skyline with a hum. "Figured I'd take a break and get a cup of tea. I saw you climbing up here and decided to take a peek."

"Do you always follow random people onto rooftops?" Zuko asked incredulously.

"No." Sokka stated matter-of-fact. "Just you." His glacier blue eyes shifted to land on Zuko, and that familiar shadow of panic curled into the pit of his stomach once more. It wasn't as strong as all the other times, but he couldn't deny that it was there, like the sun tucked behind a clouded sky. He could sense it, and the cats seemed to share his unease as they growled and spit angrily at the tribesman.

Sokka recoiled back, drawing his hands away from reach when one puma lunged for him with a snarl. Zuko scooped the cat up and deposited its squirming body in his lap, ignoring the press of claws threatening to rip into his thigh. He grimaced and wrangled the second cat close, holding them at bay.

The tribesman was startled and conflicted by the threatening felines as he blurted in confusion. “What did I do?” His eyes were wide and that shadow had faded back, replaced by the bouncy buoyant energy that made the prince far more comfortable.

“I’m not sure.” And that was the truth of it. Zuko shook his head slowly and sighed. “I need to get back to work anyway. My break is over.”

Sokka jerked up to his feet with that same casual smile that he wore so naturally that it had Zuko reeling on unsteady ground. “I’ll come with you. I was just heading there anyway. Your Uncle makes the best tea in the city, you know.”

“You’re just saying that.” Zuko grunted, though he didn't doubt Uncle Iroh's artistic ways with tea in the slightest.

“No, seriously.” Sokka argued. “I’ve tried the tea shops in the upper ring but they all taste like hot leaf juice compared to your Uncle’s.”

Zuko paused to think that over critically and smirked. “Be sure to tell Uncle that then.” He deposited the squirming wriggling felines onto the roof once Sokka was a safe distance away, no longer at risk of getting his face clawed off, and they quickly dismounted from their perch. Zuko landed gracefully with years of practice, while Sokka’s descent was clumsier and much slower.

“I get the feeling you’re really just part cat.” Sokka grumbled once he caught up to Zuko and huffed. “That’s the secret, isn’t it? You’re like imbued with some feral cat spirit from the F-er, your home.” Zuko appreciated the quick catch on the tribesman’s part and allowed the edge of anxiety to ebb as he let the initial joke dance around his head.

“We don’t have cat spirits.” He answered flatly, bemused by the notion.

Sokka made an amused noise as they headed down the alley towards the tea shop. “Huh. Interesting.” He tossed his hands up in the air and stretched them above his head, eliciting a quiet pop in his shoulders and upper back as he groaned. “We have a wolf spirit in the Southern Tribes that we give offerings to for courage in battle, as well as for a safe and bountiful hunt.”

“Is it...is it like the fish in the Northern Tribes?” Zuko asked cautiously. He recalled how devastating all of that had been, and how raw that whole ordeal had left everyone feeling in the aftermath. If he had known Zhao’s plans, then Zuko would have never left the Spirit Oasis with the avatar. He had a duty to fulfill but he wouldn’t sacrifice the moon to do it. It was so utterly *wrong* just to think of it as a possibility.

The other boy considered his question thoughtfully, only showing the subtlest twitch of grief in the flash of his eyes before it settled to something guarded. “Not quite I suppose. It didn’t give up its immortality to come to our world like the koi fish did.” He shrugged. “Sometimes when folks get lost in the blizzards, they follow the howl of a wolf and the lone tracks through the snow and it’ll lead them back to their village.”

A shiver raced through Zuko, spreading gooseflesh across his skin at the thought. He couldn’t imagine how terrifyingly ethereal that might be. He remembered the vicious blizzard he trudged through in the North with the avatar on his back and the icy glacier beneath his feet collapsing quickly. A part of him wonders if Sokka and the rest of the group hadn’t come looking for him, whether or not a wolf’s howl and the dark tracks of its paws in the ice would have led them to safety, or whether the spirit wolf would deem him unworthy of such a mercy and leave them to freeze to death.

It left a pit in his chest that suddenly felt too hard to breathe around just thinking about those days. The icy chill, the frozen tundra and the frigid waters he swam through. He could barely keep enough warmth circulating through himself to stave off frostbite, and he had been trying to maintain it for the both of them to ensure the avatar wasn’t harmed in his prone state.

Uncle was right to worry. If Sokka hadn’t found them, he would have frozen to death and it would have been Zuko’s own stupid fault.

He was shaken out of his darkened thoughts by the gentle bump of shoulders from Sokka swaying close to his side. The prince flinched at first before relaxing at the nonthreatening display of worry.

“You alright there, Li?”

Zuko just gave a short choppy nod. “Yeah.” He ignored the disbelieving look directed at him by the tribesman and quickened his steps for the backdoor, leaving Sokka to find his way through the front on his own.

Zuko's nervousness about resuming his shift was spurred on only by the fact that Sokka had taken his advice to heart, and asked Pao if he could meet the tea maker to extend his gratitude for such good tea. Iroh's massive smile sobered just a little when he spied the tribesman patiently seated at table five once more. He shot a worried look back at Zuko as the prince gathered the cups of prepared tea for tables three and one.

He gave an absent shrug under Uncle's stare and murmured softly between them, so Pao wouldn't overhear. "I ran into him on the street during my break. He's very fond of your tea." Zuko ignored the shocked expression on his Uncle's face as he carefully lifted the tray so as not to spill a single drop and carried the cups to their respective tables.

As he was setting the last cup down in front of an off duty guard, he could hear Uncle's chipper tone as he formally introduced himself with his false name. Sokka's cheerful voice rose louder, drawing the prince's eye to catch the massive grin plastered across the boy's face as he animatedly expressed his delight, even going so far as to cite his earlier declaration about *hot leaf juice*. This enthused Uncle to no end as he smiled warmly and fell easily into conversation with the tribesman.

Surprisingly enough, Zuko wasn't bothered by this display as he returned to the counter and set his tray aside. He folded his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall to watch the interaction with warmth in his eyes. Seeing Uncle so *happy* like this had his fire fluttering

enthusiastically inside his chest. The daunting shadows of Sokka's puzzling demeanor were entirely absent now, replaced with mirth as he laughed, sharp and high and unashamed of just how noisy it seemed to be in the normally quiet shop. Neither Zuko or Pao were inclined to interrupt just yet since no new orders were made.

Eventually, Uncle politely excused himself when new customers entered at the sound of the bell chiming above the door. Zuko caught the tail end of the old dragon inviting Sokka back for more tea and conversation in the future. Sokka's eyes slid to spot the prince just past Uncle's elbow where he was lingering by the counter collecting the payment for table three. It happened so fast, Zuko nearly missed the sly smile and the *wink* directed at him as he coolly assured.

"You can count on it, Mushi." Zuko ducked his head to hide the heat creeping along his cheeks, fully aware that Uncle had seen it too. The way Sokka looked at him. The heat in his eyes when glacier blue tracked him through the shop like a free roaming buffalo yak. They never tore away from Zuko, even after he finished his second tea and already paid for both. He lingered a little bit longer than the usual customer, and kept flashing smiles at the prince whenever their eyes met, no matter how brief.

Sokka looked like he might have something he wanted to say, but Zuko did his best job of avoiding that conversation, especially when Uncle was now keenly aware of his presence in the city, and his knowledge of their whereabouts. Instead, he focused on his more irritable customers, such as a middle aged man named Po who had a tendency to run Zuko back and forth between table to kitchen with orders, corrections and complaints simply because he could. He only came around about two or three times a week which meant Zuko could put up with the indignity of it for now. Especially since Pao had no inclination of stepping in as the owner and correcting the rude behavior.

Taking a moment between tending to Po at table four, and wiping down table three, Zuko was leaned over the wood surface with a damp rag mopping up a tea spill and crumbs from where a child sat with their parents. His good eye widened when he felt the lightest brush of a hand against his lower back, and stiffened. He straightened up and whirled around to spy Po seated at the opposite side of the table that he had previously been, situated much closer to Zuko's position at three. He sipped obnoxiously at his cup with a loud slurp and kept his eyes forward seemingly admiring the chipped paint on the walls. He lacked the subtlety of hiding his smirk behind his cup. Scowling, the prince felt fire licking against his skin and burned down to the tips of his fingers where it sought a release. As tempting as it was, he forced himself to snuff the heat out and let the cold touch of the wet rag splay across his palms as he resumed his work. Tucking the last chair into place, he turned towards the counter to deposit the rag in the wash basin when that same touch of fingers drifted more clumsily along his hip as he passed by. It took all his hard fought years of patience and experience handling stupid

people on a tiny ship to keep his feet moving and his expression neutral enough not to give away that he noticed. His grip on the rag tightened but at least it hadn't ignited yet. '*Little victories.*' He reminded himself.

When he peered back out at the seating area, he noticed the spine chilling murderous look in the tribesman's eyes directed coldly at Po. The man grinned back at Sokka as if daring the boy to act on whatever he saw, but Sokka remained seated. His entire body was just as rigid as a statue, limbs coiled and ready to spring forward. This ominous weight hung heavy in the air between them, making it hard for Zuko to catch his breath. That nagging sense of panic ignited inside his chest at the familiar and terrifying set to Sokka's body language.

He was conflicted. Zuko hadn't expected Sokka to notice, or even to care about the occasional rude gestures or inappropriate touches that 'accidentally' happened to a server in the lower rings. Especially not when that server was the former fire prince. Po was, in the kindest way he could put it, a very unlikable asshole. But he was an asshole Zuko had to be courteous to or risk losing his job, and that was a sacrifice he was unwilling to make even if driving that bastard face first into the floor would make Zuko's entire month. He despised the necessity to just accept being treated like shit by every person in the imminent vicinity then politely, with his best customer service smile, ask for a repeat the very next day just to make a living. It was utterly bullshit, but that was the reality of it in Ba Sing Se. With so many refugees in the city, wages were pathetically low and jobs were terrifyingly scarce.

So yeah, he had to deal with people like Po and reminded himself everyday that at least it wasn't *Zhao* of all people. But that didn't mean he liked it or enjoyed the knowledge that Sokka bore witness to that humiliating display. It made his stomach knot up unpleasantly as he fidgeted with the frayed string of his apron and turned his eyes down to the empty countertop. Another part of him felt a slight rush of giddy energy at the knowledge that the water tribe boy was clearly upset *for* him. That dark ominous aura that often made Zuko clam up and flee felt different now that it was being directed somewhere else. The inhuman flash of his eyes burned into Po who looked unbothered by the literal child trying to glare daggers through his skull like it was a professional sport. It warmed the prince a little before he smothered it and the self conscious smile that danced on his lips when another customer came in. Frustratingly enough, they chose table three to sit at and Po dragged his eyes up to meet Zuko's with a lecherous smile.

Zuko stifled the shiver and didn't even bother to hide his grimace, grateful that his scar sort of made all his expressions look in some form, like ones of infinite displeasure. He made a very pointed effort to ignore the satisfied smirk in Po's eyes, and the pointed glare from Sokka at the aforementioned man, and plastered his best service smile to greet the two older women that settled into their seats.

Miraculously, nobody was murdered. Not long after the two elderly women entered, Captain Cho had stopped in for his usual cup of ginseng with two other guards at the end of their shift. Po's attempts to slightly feel Zuko up in passing were put to a sudden halt as Cho eyed him closely, apparently familiar with the man's reputation in other establishments to recognize a problem. Zuko was thankful of the unintended intervention and resumed his work tending to each table. Sokka appeared less strung out and eventually relaxed enough to order a third and final cup of tea. When he finished, he calmly excused himself with an appreciative smile directed at the prince as he passed off the money and left. Zuko felt strangely put off by the uneventful departure, realizing it was one of their very rare, first *normal* encounters they've ever had. Typically, one of them was fleeing when they parted ways.

The unsettling aura that had followed him for most of the afternoon had dissipated, allowing the air to clear and Zuko to finally breathe easy again. Po left shortly after when the guards showed no sign of vacating the premises soon. With his usual fun put on hold, he wandered off begrudgingly so the prince could finally scrub down the tables and start preparing for closing time.

Uncle was in bright spirits when they finally headed home later that night, and hummed softly to himself as they walked towards their apartment. Zuko had occupied his thoughts with Sokka despite his best efforts to derail it by trying to focus on more practical worries. Like for instance, what exactly they were going to have for dinner. He forgot to go to the market this morning which meant he also forgot to get fish for the cats. He felt a nugget of guilt squirming in his chest like a nest of tea weevils all clustered together.

He was semi- grateful to be dragged from his worries by Uncle's voice, only to really soak in what it was he said. Then he felt immediate regret and preferred his cat related guilt over the sudden topic of conversation. "It is a pleasure to see you getting along with that young man today."

Uncle was fishing. Zuko knew this trick like the back of his hand. The tone of his voice, the little glances shot his way from the corners of the old dragon's eyes. He was fishing for information and hoping Zuko would give it up.

The prince dismissed the attempts with a shrug. "He was a customer." As if that explained it all in a neat little package. He was a customer the first day he came in, yet Zuko fled out the back door to avoid him. He didn't *have* to show him any sort of kindness or even accept his presence as part of the shop. He just had to tolerate him, just as he always tolerated Po's rude behavior.

Zuko ignored the fact that Sokka being a customer didn't explain why he shared red bean buns with him on a rooftop, or went on a long walk with him the day prior as they talked about every perceivable inane thing under the sun just so they wouldn't run out of topics and end their walk just yet. It didn't justify why he was content to relax with him on the rooftop or walk with him back to the tea shop, or how he stared at Sokka with a mixture of confusion and awe every time the boy did something strange and unexpected. It didn't explain why he was beginning to feel less afraid in those brief moments when the boy appeared to be something more, something dangerous and otherworldly with those predatory eyes focused solely on Zuko. He was afraid he may eventually become complacent and no longer see the warning signs, but a part of him didn't find that to be so bad. He wanted to forget to look for them, he wanted an opportunity to not have to worry about being hurt, or at least this time it was *his* choice to let it happen.

Uncle gave a sagely nod in acceptance that that was all he was going to get from the prince. A thoughtful hum and stroke of his beard signified the change of topic towards the less complicated task of coming up with dinner. Zuko's only options were either noodles in fish broth or that melon they purchased two days ago that was on the tail end of almost being ripe enough to eat. Right now, the melon was looking like the more likely choice with how tired and what few fucks he gave about proper meal substance. Tomorrow was a day off and he could get some well deserved shopping done.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The Dai-ly Life of Li (you're welcome)

Chapter Notes

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

No matter how tired he was, Zuko forced himself to rise before the sun and get dressed in his more ragged clothing. It was one of the few outfits he had when they first arrived in Ba Sing Se, and the only one with the least patched holes in it so it wasn't entirely terrible but old enough that he wouldn't care if it gets mucked up. Dressed in the familiar old garments, he slung the empty knapsack over his shoulder, picked up the woven basket with the strap and tucked his coin purse where it would be least likely to be snatched from his person, and quietly made his way out into the city while Uncle was still sleeping soundly.

The streets were barely illuminated by the handful of lanterns left burning in the main streets for the early work crowd to start preparing and hawking their wares. The farmers brought in their produce and goods from the outermost ring where fisheries and farms were erected to supply the city with all of its natural resources. It had fascinated the prince when they first entered, upon hearing the very strict rules about animals and plants coming in from the outside world as the cranky ticket lady raved about the '*delicate ecosystem*' of the city. It didn't quite make sense to him in the slightest until they stepped on the tram and he peered out the windows at the passing fields and massive expanses of farm land and wildlife living safely behind the walls.

The abundance of fresh fish was an appreciated luxury for the firebender as he could sort through a surprisingly large variety of seafood. They even had octopus and crab, causing his hungry belly to rumble at the thought of fresh Takoyaki. He pointedly ignored the fresh Turtleduck that was hanging on hooks above the butchers and stuck closer to the fish and vegetables. He perused the prices of each stall first, gauged how much food money they had tucked away for today's shopping trip then made his choice. Two large fish, still fresh, could be salted and dried or reduced to a slow simmering stew pot for several hours, allowing them to eat off of it for a couple days as long as it kept a decent heat. A loaf of bread was wrapped in a cloth pouch and put inside the canvas sack, the fish went, wrapped in a waxy brown paper, into the wicker basket. He haggled the price and had the merchant, who by this point was more familiar with the strange teenager that purchased small bait fish which would

normally be used for fishing or feeding small livestock or animals. At half the price, he could get a couple dozen of the small fish and feed them to the pumas near their apartment.

He added those, in their own bundled wrapping, to the basket and moved on to inspect the vegetables and fruits. Another melon, which turned out to be far better than Zuko had expected after sharing it with Uncle the night before, went into the sack. Various vegetables; cabbages, onions, leeks and peppers. He haggled where he could, and splurged when necessary like with the spices they were running low on and that was one thing Zuko considered a *priority* above all else. Even the worst food was tolerable if he could add enough spice to it.

Slipping through the growing crowds now that the rest of the city was waking and the market was growing busier, he was able to greet the first slivers of Agni's light as he carried the groceries back to their apartment. Uncle was wide awake and eager to greet him as he entered, taking the basket of fish off of Zuko's shoulder to ease his burden, and poured him a hot cup of tea before breakfast. Eggs fried up and layered on the last of their old bread with a touch of pepper were a scant morning meal he had quickly learned to appreciate these last few months and scarfed down his portion while sorting out the fish for the cats for today.

Uncle was well aware of the prince's habits and hummed thoughtfully as he considered spending the afternoon visiting a pai sho club here in the city. It wasn't the first time that the old dragon had gone to play a bit with the old men at the odd little club, and Zuko was more than happy to be anywhere else but surrounded by the quiet click of tiles and the long ponderous stares directed quietly at the boards.

Fed, with the dishes done and the clean laundry folded and tucked back into the respective chests, he gathered the fish for the cats into a tight cloth bundle and stuffed it into his pocket, before slipping out the door with a quiet. "I'll be back later, Uncle."

"Have a good day, nephew!" Uncle called through the door with a brief flash of fondness high in his eyes.

Zuko always knew where to find the cats like it was second nature. They would seek him out at the end of the alley where he would give them their breakfast. At this point, they had learned to line up in a well behaved row and he would give them each one fish. At the start, they had squabbled and growled and fought with each other but had quickly grown to understand that the large human that cared about them every day ensured fairness in every meal.

There were three grown adults and two young cubs in the cluster of five that trailed around after him. The eldest three were separated even further as one appeared to be the leader of the pack and the oldest of them all by the softly greying fur around his golden eyes. He reminded Zuko of Uncle Iroh, as he was the laziest of the group and the most likely to nap and be unbothered by anything that the young ones could get up to, even when it involved turning his tail into a chew toy.

This one, he had fondly named Umeboshi. The two adults younger than Umeboshi were Amazake, a rambunctious boy with one green and one blue eye, and his brother with the notch cut into his ear, Yakisoba. Below them were the two cubs, barely reaching their adult size but still clumsy on their large paws with that kitten eyed gleam that lured them into trouble all the time. A boy named Takoyaki and the only girl in the entire group with bright blue eyes like her older sibling, Onigiri. Despite being the only girl, she was just as fierce and brave as all the rest, including what Zuko assumed was her father, Umeboshi.

She was the loudest growl in the group and the first to leap into action when trouble arose. She was also Zuko's favorite even though he would never admit that out loud because it was unfair to pick favorites when he loved them all just as much. She would quickly scale his clothes to climb atop his shoulders and find a warm perch lazily sprawled around his neck and begin purring and nuzzling the unscarred side of his face causing a shiver to race down his spine when her sharp teeth would nibble in that affectionately kitten like way against his hair, giving it a gentle tug. He raised his hand to cup her face and scratch along the top of her head and behind her ears as the rest of the group of felines would head off for their usual sunning spots along the rooftops.

In the early morning, they tended to stay close to his apartment, but in the afternoons, they would migrate closer to Pao's, often lurking down the street where they were within easy notice of the firebender on his breaks. He suspected that was a purposeful choice on their part as they trailed him through the neighborhoods with hopeful eyes searching for affection. Today, he had the whole day to provide said affection and sprawled across the warming rooftop beneath the bright rays of Agni's waking light with a smile.

Onigiri and Takoyaki were strewn over his chest, kneading paws into his stomach and shoulder as they purred under the warm pressure of his palms along their fur. They mewed and trilled while Umeboshi flopped nearby, keeping one lazy eye on the group while stretching to show his belly to the sky with a long arch and a yawn.

Amazake and Yakisoba were playing as they pounced and sprawled, growling and hissing childishly as they chased a skittering leaf that one had caught and the other clearly wanted. They took most of the quarrel further down the roof so as not to disturb Umeboshi who would probably step in and take the leaf for himself to put an end to the scuffle. Zuko had to laugh at that thought, imagining all the times Uncle or Lu Ten had stepped easily between one of his and Azula's arguments as they bickered over the stupidest things.

He had dozed off to the pleasant thoughts of fond memories and the drowsy contentment that the felines had caused with their pleasant pawing and rumbling. The nap was short, the sun only rising a touch higher in the sky so he estimated half an hour at most when Onigiri went tense and still against his stomach. The light pressure of claws against his belly had him cocking his head up. Takoyaki had slid off to rest against Zuko's side, presumably shoved off by his territorial sister as she claimed the entirety of his chest for her own comfort. His golden eye slid towards the direction Onigiri was glaring at with displeasure tight in her shoulders as her tail fluffed out and hackles rose.

Zuko went just as still as he made eye contact with two Dai Li agents standing on the opposite rooftop. They were watching him closely, caught between a moment of tense indecision as they regarded his presence so far from the streets. The cats had gathered in a tight circle, drawn from their napping posts to address their youngest's irritation and turning small growls of warning at the agents.

Drawing Onigiri against his chest like he had when Sokka had provoked her, he tucked her close to his shoulder, cradling her hindquarters in his palm and wrapping an arm securely around her midsection so he could sit up properly, instinctively shifting his legs just enough for an easy retreat. He gave a small tilt of his head to them in acknowledgement, one agent returned the gesture with the smallest tilt of their hat still mostly concealing their faces in the bright early afternoon sun.

One made a step forward, telegraphing to their companion their intentions, and unintentionally informing Zuko of the very obvious sign that he should flee. Reaffirming his grasp on Onigiri, he sprung to his feet and found the nearest roof to leap to, carrying the

hissing feline that was draped over his shoulder with one paw extended in a furious swat at the now pursuing Dai Li. If it wasn't for the weeks of slipping into the dark of the city as the Blue Spirit, he may have missed the subtlest almost imperceptible touch of their feet across the shingled rooftops. They were terrifyingly quiet, even when in pursuit but so was Zuko as he picked his way just as carefully through the familiar obstacles the city roofs offered him. He moved instinctively, even though most of his efforts were hindered by the twenty pound cat cradled protectively in his arms. He couldn't climb or leap further than he normally would, well aware that trying to roll out the momentum with Onigiri tucked against him put her at risk of being hurt.

With quick corrections and split second decisions, and weeks of running along these same rooftops as he pleased in the dark of night. He knew them almost as intimately as the Dai Li agents that pursued him, steering over shorter gaps, taking sturdier beams and leaping toe to toe on singular posts to reach the next roof. Onigiri threw his balance just a little off kilter but he corrected it easily and never stopped moving for a moment. He didn't spare a glance back, knowing well that could easily be a mistake, and was forced to keep his head forward by the reminder that even if the temptation was there, there was a very fuzzy puma head in his field of view.

He made it clear across five rooftops before a sharp shadow lunged in front of him, causing the firebender to skirt to a startling halt. The force of the motion nearly sent him toppling forward. He overcorrected his balance and flung himself down onto his back, curling in enough to keep Onigiri from falling off and his head from smacking the angled tile. The second agent was quick to close in on him from behind, ensuring he was cornered between them with nowhere to reasonably run to.

It took Zuko a moment to realize now as he scanned the rooftops for an escape that he had unintentionally made a half circle to find the easiest route to flee, forced to wrap back around. The distance between those two points was massive and impossible for him to cross in a straight line, but once the Dai Li figured the familiar pattern out, it was no problem at all for an earthbender to accomplish. He cringed inwardly and tucked the squirming aggressive puma against his chest, as he gently hushed her.

His cheeks heated with the rush of anxiety as the two men stared down at him with expectant looks in hard green eyes. A part of him wanted to get back on his feet, ignoring the ache in his shoulders where he took the brunt of the shingles when he fell. The way the Dai Li were watching him gave him the impression that would not be appreciated.

There was a quiet noise in one agent's throat that sounded contemplative, causing Zuko's gaze to dart up to meet their eyes before dropping it quickly back to the ground. The shiver of unease raced through his body, causing Onigiri to squirm more frustrated now as she hissed and growled at the men that were making him uncomfortable.

"Onigiri, no." Zuko's voice was soft but strict as he smoothed a palm down her raised hackles and tried to calm her. The last thing he wanted was for her to attack the men and get hurt. He couldn't stand the thought of anything happening to the cats because of his mistake.

The Dai Li shifted oddly, the smallest tilt of their heads shifting their hats as the shadows bathed more of their expressions before the soft thud of paws and the growls of multiple pygmy pumas encircled them. To both the prince's and the Dai Li's surprise, the cats had them surrounded. Umeboshi was leading the cluster with his golden eyes turned steely, pupils driven to pinpoints as they barred their sharp teeth at the agents. Amazake and Yakisoba flanked either side of their father and were hunched low, ready to lunge.

Takoyaki had slipped in behind the agent that cut Zuko off and was fluffed up like a storm cloud as he snarled, eying both the teenager and his sister. Onigiri wiggled her way out of Zuko's lap when her nails started to dig into his thigh forcing him to let go or face the pain of her eagerness to get all four paws onto solid ground. She was perched protectively in his lap, using his knees to give her a little extra height as she glared the agent down in front of them.

"Takoyaki!" Zuko called out, his voice pained. "Umeboshi, no. Behave!" The growling only receded a little as the cats stood their ground. "Onigiri." He reached a cautious hand out to smooth down her hackles and tried to give off the impression that there was no danger here. It was hard to fight the rising edge in his own throat and the burning heat of panic that seized his chest. He didn't miss the slightest twitch of the agent's lips in front of him at the sound of the cats' names.

"You named them all?" The man asked, his voice maintaining that unnervingly calm tone to it that set them apart from the rest of the Earth Kingdom guards. It only made them feel all the more alien, from their ability to slide in and out of shadows without so much as a sound, to the way they seemed to be everywhere at one time. They watched over the city, they were always listening and that had the prince wound tighter than a spring. He gave a nervous nod, taking this as the potential olive branch it could be and pointed each of the cats out as he listed off their names.

“Onigiri and Takoyaki are still kittens and they’re from the same litter.” He nodded in the direction of the three cats at his back, twisting carefully to spy them better without unbalancing the kitten in his lap. “The older one over there is Umeboshi and those two boys by his side are Amazake and Yakisoba. They’re his oldest sons.”

An amused smile danced in the Dai Li’s eyes, a look they both shared as brief as it was to hear the food oriented names. Zuko may have been fantasizing a bit about hot meals and the *perfect* line up he craved for so badly once they got the extra money to afford such nice things.

The cats seemed to relax just a fraction as Zuko continued to pet Onigiri. She gave him a look of such disapproval at having her fierce image thwarted by his attempts at offering affection though she begrudgingly accepted the hand that scritchd behind her ears and under her chin. The soft noises of warning faded to a quiet and still tension in all of them. Umeboshi was the first to settle back on his haunches with watchful gold eyes that kept the two agents in his line of sight. His oldest sons were reluctant to settle so comfortably like their father but they did relax their stance to linger more openly. Takoyaki reflected his sister’s conflicted expression, caught between backing off and stepping forward.

Zuko breathed a sigh of relief, having at least successfully defused that problem. Now he had a second issue as he snuck a glance up at the two men who watched him curiously. The subtle tilt of their hats and the smallest shadow of amusement flickered briefly across their faces, being the most emotion they dared portray in the presence of the public.

After a silent moment of contemplation, Zuko finally managed a sheepish question as he avoided their studious eyes. “Am I in trouble?” He focused on Onigiri with strict concentration on how her fur felt under his fingers and the warmth of her body against his palms where they had been sunbathing earlier. The way she arched into his touch and let out the quietest mowl of puzzlement. A little murp that eased the hard lines of his face just a touch.

The Dai Li agent at his back shifted, the soft pressure of their feet adjusting on the tiles alerting him to the gesture. He tensed, the muscles in his back spasming unpleasantly as he waited, almost holding his breath as he mentally prepared for earthen shackles to clench around his wrists. For this to be his last fleeting glimpse of Agni’s light and the taste of freedom. He squeezed his eyes shut, reminded of the way the Earth Kingdom deal with people like him. It took everything in his power not to flinch or curl his fingers into a tight ball and tuck them protectively against his chest.

“It is not appropriate for you to be up on the rooftops, young man.” The agent said, the rule spoken as simply and as casually as if it were a warm reminder to fix his uniform in the tea shop or to keep his hair tied in his phoenix plume back on the ship when he was tired and it was wrapped haphazardly and Uncle would have to fix it fretfully.

“I understand.” His voice was quiet, barely above a rasp as he waited for further reprimand. For some sort of punishment to befall him, but the agents didn’t seem intent on doing much more. They regarded the cats with a small nod of their heads. One agent backed away once they found a safe place to step that wouldn’t get them attacked by the felines. Zuko whistled softly to the other cats, extending his hands to beckon them over. He wasn’t expecting the clowder to race towards him and circle up, turning on the two men with tense looks. It made getting to his feet all the more problematic as he wrangled Onigiri and Amazake out of the way twice and finally got to his knees. Onigiri didn’t seem pleased with that separation and jumped on his back and perched precariously around his shoulders as he picked his way back down off the roof.

When he looked back, half hanging off the roof to ease his descent more smoothly so the cat didn’t fall off, the two agents were gone and the cats were staring in the space they had quickly vacated like ghosts in the wind. He ignored the shiver that raced along his skin as he landed with a quiet thump and heard numerous more pile in behind him. Umeboshi remained up on the roof until they found a section of crates and rain barrels gathered at the base of the eaves where he could climb down with more ease than his children.

They wandered the streets keeping to the less occupied back roads as he visited a vendor stall for a mid afternoon lunch break, and shared some bites of octopus with the cats where they had gathered on a bridge and watched the colorful fish swim up and down the canal. Onigiri was sneaky in the way she tried to steal bites right out of Zuko's hand as he lifted the fried balls to his mouth, but he was wise to her tricks. Her brother on the other hand, was more obvious and persistent as he went for the container in the prince's hand.

In his attempt to keep his lunch from being entirely pilfered by the felines, he jerked to his feet to take a pointed bite of the ball, and scowled down at Takoyaki's pitiful display at his boots. The way he flailed and flopped dramatically about, digging his claws into Zuko's pantleg with a pathetic yowl of distress. He rolled his eyes and conceded to share another bite with the cat, only to earn a stern cuffing by Onigiri for his display of pity towards her brother. She gave him a sharp look that demanded a bite as well, and he resigned himself to splitting the rest of his lunch between them all. As he divided up the remaining octopus balls, his head snapped up as a shiver crawled across his spine with the feeling of eyes on him. He caught a fading shadow in the corner of his eye that almost looked like a person, before dismissing it

as a trick of his mind or one of the other residents of this neighborhood going about their day. It was quickly forgotten when Takoyaki dug his nails into Zuko's pantleg again and missed the cuff of his boot and grazed his shin instead, drawing a hiss from the prince as he whined.

"Okay, okay. Have some patience, will you?" He huffed and urged the cats to line up as per routine and delivered to them each their treat.

Dinner with Uncle later that night was an Earth Kingdom stir fry with a Fire Nation flare added to the mix compliments of Zuko's growing spice collection. The fresh vegetables crisped up nicely with the rice and a touch of fish sauce to add some extra flavor. Uncle was delighted to try the young firebender's newest attempt at altering recipes to try and get a casual taste of home from so far away, and encouraged Zuko's efforts to learn how to cook more than just military rations and survivalist tactics using roots, bark and foraged nuts. It was something Zuko had come to enjoy in his own time, and was getting rather good at it. He took to it with more ease than he did making tea, though Uncle had confirmed that even Zuko's tea making skills were polishing up nicely as he learned patience through other means.

Baking bread was hard without the proper oven for it and he couldn't firebend it either, but on the rare occasion when he did get a chance to try utilizing the neighbor's oven down the street, it was therapeutic in a way that he vividly enjoyed. Making soups and stews were easy, especially when they could set the pot to a low simmer and Zuko could check on it routinely through the day while doing other chores around the apartment. Unfortunately their busy work schedules made those things harder to come by, and resulted in shorter, easier to make dishes like these.

Uncle wasn't complaining, especially after a long day of babysitting a fire in the kitchen making tea. The old dragon appreciated a chance to kick his feet up and relax, and Zuko found comfort in the mindless busy work. It was even better when he could see the appreciation on Uncle's face when the older man would ask for seconds and Zuko's chest would swell with pride.

He would always wash the dishes after while Uncle would prepare their futons for bed and lay out their uniforms, freshly washed, for the next work day ahead of them. Any leftovers

from dinner would become tomorrow's easy breakfast before they'd race out the door to Pao's before the morning rush could start.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Zuko named the cats after a full course meal.

Chapter 5

Sokka had started the habit of stopping by Pao's every afternoon and spending an hour or two lingering and watching Zuko. Sometimes he would catch Zuko before his break and they would spend the twenty minutes perched on crates out back or on the rooftops nearby sunning themselves and chatting about insignificant things. When his break was over, Zuko would slip in through the back and Sokka would come through the front, and they'd pretend they weren't just spending all that time together. Uncle would shoot him knowing looks that had Zuko bristling and embarrassed as he shouldered past the older man and carried the next tray of tea to the determined table.

This routine had set in rather easily over the last three days. Zuko had found comfort in it even if it felt like it might not go anywhere, he enjoyed the break in monotony and looked forward to each day after. Their conversations came easier, less awkward than the last as Sokka filled it with sarcastic remarks and horribly placed puns that had a small twitch of a smile slipping on the prince's lips.

Those fleeting moments of paranoid panic came less and less. That ominous presence that could overtake Sokka in the blink of an eye, the flash of teeth and the sharpness of his eyes had grown less frightening over time and had started to just become a part of Sokka in Zuko's mind. That didn't smother the squirming displeasure at the recognition of that look or the sudden fight or flight response it set him into, but it was easier to stand his ground regardless of it. He didn't tremble or flinch nearly as much as he had at the start, and his words would only offer the slightest hitch or stumble as he forced himself to push through it. It felt, in some instances, like all the times he had to hold his ground when speaking with his father, trying not to say the wrong thing or all the times Azula made him play cruel games where the result of his inevitable loss led to him getting burned with small sparks. At least with Sokka, there was no pain waiting on the other side, just the briefest glimpse of worry that would replace that predatory gaze and the satisfied smile that edged along the other boy's lips.

It was on the third day, after Sokka left, Zuko was cleaning the table he had vacated and was headed back to the kitchen to deliver the empty cup when the door chimed as another customer entered. Pao greeted them warmly from the counter when a young familiar voice piped up knowingly.

"I heard there's an old man that makes really good tea that works here." The blunt declaration startled Zuko as he whirled around to spot the small Earthbender girl that had been traveling with the Avatar the last time they met up to fight Azula. She was grinning as Pao, as politely as he could, assured her of Uncle's amazing tea. She was loud, even louder than was

necessary or even appropriate for being indoors and, after a second glance, Zuko noticed the way her eyes never really fixed on anything in particular, and didn't even look in Pao's general direction. They were pale and milky as if she were- *wait is she blind?*

'What is a blind girl doing wandering the city alone? How did she even find the shop?' Every rational instinct in Zuko wanted to scream because this neighborhood was dangerous. She was alone and unarmed, and every part of Zuko's brotherly instincts wanted to whack someone outside the head for allowing this. Did Sokka know she was here? Were they supposed to meet up and they just missed each other? He frowned and stared down at her with a mixture of worry and frustration.

But before he could even say a word or make a move, her head cocked and she smirked right at him. Her eyes weren't watching him but he could tell in the subtle tilt of her head that she was addressing him and that was almost as unnerving as Sokka's sometimes predatory and wolfish demeanor.

"So this is where Snoozles has been going all this time." She hummed pleasantly. "Hey Sparky!"

Zuko nearly dropped the tray he was balancing in his hands as he stiffened up. Pao was still standing right there, watching the strange exchange between the girl and his worker. Puzzled, he asked the question Zuko was dreading. "You two know each other, Li?"

The prince stilled even further, his boss's eyes fixed on him now with an expectant look that quietly demanded an answer. Zuko couldn't lie about it, so he just gave a small nod. "We've met." It was very brief and he barely remembered much of it.

The girl smirked at the sound of his name and Zuko was afraid she was going to correct Pao or out him on the spot. He felt his stomach clench into tight knots at the realization that this was Sokka all over again. She opened her mouth, and Zuko was withholding a flinch at what would follow, breath pressed tightly inside his lungs.

"My friends and I ran into them before on the road while we were traveling. Li's Uncle gave me some very good advice and really great tea." She said it so coolly, calm as could be. No lie other than his false name. Her tone turned innocent and chipper, as she adjusted her words

to address Zuko. “I’m glad to know your Uncle is doing well, Li. We were worried after he’d been hurt.”

Zuko nodded stiffly. “Yeah, me too.”

She smiled even wider, a grin that seemed innocent at first but looked dangerous after years of growing up with Azula. “If he’s not busy, I wouldn’t mind having another chat with him.” Pao was more than enthusiastic to relay the request as he directed her to Sokka’s table to sit and relax as her order was made. Zuko tucked himself inside the kitchen and decided he needed a breather while there was a brief lull in their orders. The shop had hit its slow point in the day before the evening rush could swell, allowing Uncle a chance to have that conversation with the earthbender and share a cup of tea with her. Zuko focused on washing tables and dishes in between and Pao monitored the counter with a quiet smile.

Before the girl left, she beckoned Zuko over with a small wave as Uncle rose from his seat and offered it to the prince. He settled into it reluctantly as she grinned at him, lowering her voice to a surprising whisper as she explained. “I’m not gonna rat you out, alright.” She assured him. “I can feel your heart racing ever since I came in.”

That didn’t exactly make sense to him and he was trying to wrap his head around that, but shook it off to focus as she continued. “What you and Snoozles got goin on is none of my business.” She waved dismissively and smirked. “But if you hurt him, you deal with me.”

It was both a threat and a promise, and Zuko was even more confused than before. He assumed Snoozles meant *Sokka* but what was all of this other shit? What exactly was she implying? They were just friends and even that was precarious as is. A tolerable truce is what it was. Something to pass the time. Something Sokka could end at any time by just *not* seeking Zuko out. The thought of that happening left a cold fist buried deep in his chest. He didn’t want that to stop, as much as he hated himself for thinking it.

With nothing to really say on the matter, Zuko watched as the earthbender left and only afterwards did it occur to him that he probably should have offered to walk her back home, or wherever the avatar and his friends were staying just to make sure she was safe.

The strange visit from the earthbender had shaken him up a bit as he considered her threat, and the possibility that Sokka could just change his mind one day and just *stop* seeing Zuko. Surely the Avatar and his friends weren't going to stay in Ba Sing Se for long, and knowing their track record of racing away at a moment's notice, Zuko may never even know that Sokka has left until the day he stops showing up. Something about that didn't sit right with him and he couldn't wrap his head around why. It had him nervous and pacing restlessly around the apartment as Uncle watched him with worry in his eyes.

He couldn't relax even for a minute, and so he headed out for a late evening stroll. Normally he would feel more comfortable in his Blue Spirit attire, but Uncle was still awake and he didn't necessarily need to run across rooftops. He just needed to mindlessly wander until he was thinking with some sense again.

It didn't really make sense as to why the Avatar and his friends were here in the city. It was a place full of refugees and secrets. A prison made of giant stone walls and segregated to enforce limitations on its people. There was so much control being dealt and so much fear under the surface as they walked a thin fragile line of order. He thought things were strict before in Caldera, but the intricate web of court politics and opinions was nothing like this place.

So why was Sokka here? Perhaps they were just trying to help as the Avatar often did. He shook the thought away as preposterous. As far as he knew, there was nothing an avatar could fix about this unless he could stop the war and give these people a new chance at freedom.

'That's it.' He realized, stopping suddenly in his tracks. *'The war.'*

The Avatar and his friends probably found new plans on how to end the war. Zuko was well aware of the power that Ba Sing Se played as a strategic point in the Earth Kingdom, especially after the fall of Omashu to the Fire Nation. The Earth King had his Council of Five and the largest military of earthbenders in the world under his control. That's not including the Dai Li of course. They were....their own sort of uncomfortably terrifying force.

They had Zuko's skin crawling every time he encountered them. Something about them set him on edge, like they were up to something he wanted nothing to do with.

He felt like he was finally slowly putting the pieces together to see the bigger picture of it all, but he still felt off kilter. Like he was missing a major chunk. He had to wonder, where did he fit into all of this? Clearly the picture wasn't meant for him, but Sokka had dragged him into it for some odd reason and he kept tripping himself up trying to figure it out.

'What is really going on here?' He asked himself that over and over again, but no matter how many times he racked his brain over it, he found no answers and it was beginning to become frustrating.

Dragging himself out of his thoughts, Zuko felt a shadow move behind him that was unfamiliar. He twisted, stopping in his tracks to peer around the darkened back alley he'd taken to avoid the more crowded main street as people wandered back home at the end of a long day. Shops were closing and evening vendors sold cheap street food to the hungry work crowd.

A man stood a few feet away with a dagger drawn on him. He was tall and skinny, looking worse for wear in ragged clothes and a colorful stretch of fabric tied around his bicep that Zuko vaguely recognized as the band of one of the local gangs in the lower ring. They weren't a big enough deal to warrant much attention and had resorted to petty theft and pickpocketing as far as he'd overheard from his regulars in Pao's.

They had 'turf wars' once in a while, but nothing the guards really recalled being that big or bothersome. The authorities had more to worry about apparently.

Zuko frowned at the man and rolled his eyes dismissively as he turned away.

"Hey! Give me all your money and you won't get hurt." The man snapped, stepping closer to Zuko as he held the dagger poised at his chest. His grip was awkward to the point the prince cringed inwardly and his stance was ridiculous. It would take him longer to lunge or swipe at Zuko than it would take the firebender to get clear and disarm him. It was kind of pathetic.

Actually, it was *really* pathetic. He kind of felt bad for the guy.

"I don't have any money on me." Zuko answered flatly and turned his back on the man again as he continued his walk. The man wasn't taking no for an answer as he blurted.

"Don't you walk away from me kid!" For a mugging, his volume lacked subtlety. "You better do as I say or else I'll put another scar on that pretty face of yours."

Call him crazy, but Zuko wasn't going to just walk away from that. He was having just enough of a shit day that he was itching to blow off some steam. Turning towards the man, his lips curled into a snarl. "I dare you to try."

The man ground his teeth in frustration, rearing back with a growl as he lunged at Zuko. It didn't take hardly any effort for the prince to throw his hand up in a smooth block, using the top of his arm to knock the man's wrist away before capturing it and applying pressure on the nerve. His other hand caught the man by the jaw and pulled his body around in a circular motion utilizing his momentum to Zuko's advantage as he stepped into his space and drove him into the ground.

The man let the dagger go and landed on his back with a hard cough as all the air was knocked from his chest. Zuko steadied himself back into his fighting stance and narrowed his eyes on the man, daring him to get back up and try again.

He fell easily for the bait and scrambled for his lost blade before jumping back to his feet. He slashed and stabbed at Zuko as the firebender danced clear of his strikes and moved around him with all the fluid grace of a waterbender. His quick footwork had him weaving side to side in an easy sway, then ducking low under a high slash, before rising up to strike the man, open palmed into the chest to knock him back onto his ass once more. This time he kept his grip on the knife as he hurled curses at Zuko before leaping up once more.

Their little dance took them out onto the main street which was certain to draw attention but Zuko didn't really care. He wasn't the foolish one chasing people around with a blade. Well, at least not right now. He at least had sense enough to be discreet about his less than legal activities to not get caught like this.

"Hold still you damn brat!" The man cursed as he threw a punch that Zuko swerved out of and followed it up with a low strike of the blade. Zuko dropped himself back to the ground to avoid the swipe, allowing himself to kick his legs and knock the man's feet out from under

him. Then, utilizing that momentum, he rolled himself back onto his own feet and dusted himself off with a casualness that infuriated the gang member.

"This is a lot of work for no reward, you know?" His judgmental tone was bored as he folded his arms over his chest. The man was stubborn, in a way that the prince might have normally appreciated were it not so pitiful. He was sweating and panting, looking breathless and red faced with anger as he scrambled back to his feet.

"Shut your fucking mouth or I'll shut it for you!" The man snapped.

Zuko looked very unimpressed. The man charged at him. There was a lot of shouting and screaming as people realized this wasn't some odd street performance going on and started panicking. As the man lunged, he stepped to the side to dodge only to be shoved by a frightened woman that frantically blew past him. He was pushed back towards the blade, causing his eyes to widen in alarm as he struck the man's arm with a half block. The edge cut into the top of his arm but he avoided taking it to the gut so there was a win there.

The people were scattering making things tough to maneuver now and avoid the blows. His footwork was confident as blood spilled on the cobblestones beneath his feet and splattered his clothes where his arm was bleeding quickly. The wound was shallow, just stung a bit. Regardless, the man got cocky now that he drew blood and started flinging himself at Zuko recklessly.

"Shit." Zuko hissed as he blocked another strike, shoving his blows away in quick jabs of his own hands. Every attempt to catch the man's wrist was made harder as blood made his palm slick. His grip slipped, forcing him to twist away and slam a hard kick into the man's ribcage. He stumbled and lost his balance into a nearby vendor cart.

Zuko made several quick steps back to get some space between them once more. His sleeve was torn and bloody where the man had cut him, leaving droplets splattered everywhere with the motion. It was entirely unhygienic and Zuko felt a bit bad about the mess he was leaving behind. The thought made him scowl in annoyance at the amount of work it would require to clean this mess up later, and the fact that this was his main concern in a fight only made him more frustrated at how low he has fallen in life.

The sound of heavy footsteps raced towards them, coming from behind the firebender. He didn't risk turning his back on the man now judging by the feral glint in his eyes and how eager he was to shed more blood. He took a small step back, hoping to angle himself enough to put their newcomers in his line of sight. He didn't get more than a step before the familiar voice of Captain Cho filled the air with a warning.

"Put the weapon down and give up."

Zuko tensed as the man eyed him then looked back at the guards just out of the prince's view. He saw the gleam in his eyes like he spied a useful escape. It didn't take much effort to guess what the man was planning. Zuko had done as much before to escape Pohuai with the Avatar. He refused to become someone else's hostage. As the man dove for him in a mad dash to close the distance before the earthbender could react, Zuko had moved far faster and readied a kick. In a lightning fast snap of motion, the man was sprawled across the ground groaning as he groped his side miserably. Zuko shivered at the feeling of his ribs giving under the pressure of his foot but reminded himself that a blade to the stomach felt a lot less pleasant and considered this a small mercy. The man was lucky this time.

"Stand down son." Captain Cho called urgently, drawing Zuko's attention as he turned to greet the guards. Cho stopped and stared for a moment before cursing quietly under his breath. "Li?"

"Yes sir?" Zuko answered easily, more than familiar with Captain Cho's easy going demeanor and protective nature coming about in Pao's shop since the whole Jet incident.

"Spirits! Li, you're bleeding." He addressed. The two guards that had accompanied Captain Cho to help with the arrest paused once they got the man on his feet and bound in earth shackles and stared at Zuko's now sluggishly bleeding arm. It took a second longer for them to notice the blood stained cobblestones and splatters on the ground and nearby polished white stone walls. The whole dark green sleeve of his robe was stained and sticky with blood seeping through. Zuko glanced at it then shrugged.

"It looks worse than it actually is." He replied coolly, remaining calm even as the guards stared, wide eyed at him. "I've had worse."

The *worse* was clear as day on his face and he noticed at least one guard had glanced up at the scar before averting their gaze to seem professional still.

Captain Cho shook the thought away and replaced it with a cautiously worried expression. His brown eyes softened as he beckoned for Zuko to come closer. "Come with me, Li. We need to get your statement on what exactly happened. You can see our medic at the station and we'll send someone to inform your Uncle what happened."

Any protests he had to offer died on his lips as he sighed and resigned himself to the cautious care of the guards. He cradled his wounded arm against his chest and allowed Captain Cho's gentle hand to steer him along the streets back to their station.

The mugger was taken to a separate room once inside the station. Like many in the lower ring, it was a large wooden building with dozens of little desks with various guards seated delivering or filling out reports given by the general populace. From missing animals to petty thefts to domestic squabbles, they had to deal with them all.

Cho guided him to a room off to the side that looked like it might be used for interrogations. Zuko felt uneasy at first as he slowed to a halt and stared at the entrance. Captain Cho gently assured him with a calm voice. "It's alright, Li. You're not in trouble. It's a private place for us to talk, alright?"

Scowling at the door, he allowed himself to be ushered inside and directed to take a seat at the table. "Genji should be here shortly to take a look at your arm." Before he settled into the seat across from him, Cho asked with a small smile. "Would you like something to drink, Li? Water, tea? I can't promise it'll be as good as your Uncle Mushi's, but it's something."

Zuko grimaced and shook his head, groaning with honest displeasure. "I'm sick of tea."

Captain Cho just laughed and nodded his understanding as he settled into the seat across from him. The wood creaked in protest under his larger size as he folded his hands comfortably in front of himself. He took the domed cap off and set it aside on the table now that they were indoors and relaxed, offering Zuko a visible reprieve as well.

"Now Li, why don't you tell me what happened tonight?"

Zuko frowned and leaned back against the chair as his fingers gripped the stained fabric clinging to his arm. The blood was tacky and cool against his hot skin. He shrugged dismissively. "He tried to rob me. When I didn't have any money on me, he attacked me."

"Is it safe to assume that instead of running or calling for help, you fought back?" Captain Cho asked in that knowing tone that made Zuko shrink back in his seat and bristle in annoyance. But he knew the Captain had witnessed the Jet incident and knew Zuko's tendency to choose fight over flight. He would cross his arms over his chest defiantly but he knew it would only hurt more to try.

"I *did* try to walk away." He huffed indignantly. "But he threatened to cut my face up if I did."

Captain Cho's gaze dropped to inspect the bloody torn sleeve at that, then raised his eyes to meet Zuko's with sympathy. "I'm sorry son. That must have been frightening."

In all honesty, he wasn't at all scared. He could still feel the adrenaline pulsing in his veins and the thrum of his heart racing in his chest in excitement. He was shaking, not from fear but the thrill of a fight. Spilling a little blood only added to that excitement. The close call, the searing pain, the smell of it heavy in the air. He didn't like hurting people, he didn't kill but he did enjoy a good fight. He liked getting his knuckles a little bloody. To feel the ache of muscles after a long spar to burn off the building steam before it burst. He enjoyed fighting *without* bending. It felt honest and real. It felt *fair*. A true test of strength and cunning. It's part of the reason he enjoyed using his broadsword so much. It was electric.

Zuko lowered his gaze to the table in an attempt to scrutinize the worn chips in the wood. Cho seemed to take this to imply he might have been afraid, that he was still afraid and gave him a worried look. Whatever he was about to say was lost on his lips as a heavy knock came at the door.

"Come in." Cho called. Zuko stared for a moment as a younger guard entered with a leather satchel and bright green eyes. "There you are Genji. If you wouldn't mind taking a look at our friend Li here?"

"Yes sir." Genji nodded and stepped all the way into the room. He shut the door behind himself and slowly approached Zuko with a critical eye. Lowering himself to kneel at the prince's side, he slid the satchel off to rest on the table as he spoke in that patronizing way that made him feel like a child. "May I see your arm?"

Zuko bristled and shot a disbelieving look at Captain Cho. Cho returned the look with one of fond reassurance, giving a small encouraging nod in answer. Zuko frowned, realizing he misunderstood and sighed heavily. He offered his injured arm to the medic so he could shove the sleeve up out of the way to inspect and clean the wound.

It would need stitches. Genji was more than happy and capable of applying them himself. He explained every little detail to Zuko as if the prince were six years old and not sixteen. As if he lacked an ounce of basic medical knowledge or training in emergency situations. They treated him like he grew up as just another sheltered disabled kid behind the walls of Ba Sing Se with no sign of war in sight. He hated it so much he wanted to scream. Sometimes he felt envious of their level of ignorance but ultimately, it just frustrated him to no end. He just hoped that for their sakes, the war never makes it inside the city, otherwise their ignorance will be their death.

Genji was quick to finish his work, leaving Zuko's arm clean and neatly bandaged now. The prince had requested the use of a pair of scissors and cut the whole ruined sleeve off, opting to turn his long sleeve robe into a summer outfit. He figured he could use Uncle's sewing kit to hem the sleeves and make it work when they get home. It was mundane thoughts like these that made Zuko stop and ponder his life choices and how completely *normal* these worries felt. It was jarring at times and left him feeling adrift in so many thoughts that he felt a headache coming on in the aftermath.

When he was finished, Genji left and Captain Cho sat with Zuko to keep him company. He asked him questions about the most useless unrelated topics. He asked him how he was adjusting to life in the city, how he liked working at Pao's shop, what his Uncle thought of his dislike of tea, what he liked to do in his free time, and so on. It took Zuko a few minutes to realize that all this small talk was to keep him busy and distracted. As if Cho was afraid if Zuko was allowed to think too hard on his situation, he might get upset or panic, or possibly have a meltdown over his 'near death' experience.

Little did the man know, this was just another weekday for Zuko. A mugging was nothing compared to a collapsing volcano or a giant murderous spirit koi. Both of which he realized,

were Avatar inflicted.

It wasn't long until another knock came, and a different guard stood in the entrance to inform the Captain that Uncle had come and was waiting out front for him. Zuko was quick to rise from his seat and only regretted it for a few seconds in the aftermath as he swayed a little in place. A dizzy wave hit him as he gripped the table for balance. Steeling himself, he allowed Captain Cho to place a warm hand across Zuko's shoulder blades and steer him through the cluttered room once more. His gaze drifted around the station when it landed on a cork board with a flyer pinned to it with a large notice to the guards tacked above it.

If you see these on the street, take them down.

The flyer depicted the familiar large fluffy body of the Avatar's bison and information about who to contact and where to go about it. The Avatar's bison was missing. The Avatar was *in* Ba Sing Se looking for his bison.

Zuko recalled the first time he spotted Sokka out on the streets, a stack of papers tucked under his arm as he faced the stone wall away from the firebender. How Sokka followed him to Pao's, how he promised he intended to 'keep an eye' on Zuko.

It hit him like a rampaging saber tooth moose lion. It was all a ruse. All of this. Sokka's attempts to get close to Zuko. The quiet promises, the kind smiles, the fact he didn't report them to the authorities yet. Sokka probably suspected Zuko was either involved in or knew about their bison's disappearance.

'Maybe he thinks you traded the bison for immunity inside the city?' The thought occurred to him, and it hurt more than Zuko could even imagine. He let his guard down. He was starting to *like* Sokka but clearly Sokka had different motivations. He lied to Zuko. He used him. Zuko finally saw the bigger picture and he hated it. He thought that maybe what they had would be genuine, some slice of peace away from the chaos in the world, his little escape from the monotony, but he should have known better.

Zuko scowled at the flyer as they strolled by and didn't let his displeasure go even when he spotted Uncle's fretful gaze. He was tense even as Uncle dragged him into a strong hug and sagged with relief to see that he was mostly unharmed. Zuko felt a touch guilty but he couldn't dispel his bitterness so easily. He was disgusted with himself. He felt used.

Neither Uncle or Captain Cho commented on his odd behavior, or his sudden quiet when they parted ways. Uncle chatted nervously all the way home and Zuko couldn't even be bothered to pay him any mind as his thoughts darted frantically about to slot this new information into place until he had the confirmation he was dreading. It made him sick to his stomach with anger and despair because *of course* this happens. Because of course nothing good could ever be real or genuine. The tight ball of anxiety was a tangled nest of jagged spikes and razor wire nestled into the base of his gut. It made him nauseous and he hated it more than anything in the world, because he fell for that easy going smile and the casual air and false promises. He fell for it and wanted it to be so fucking real, even though his instincts *told him* , were screaming at him that something was wrong. That he shouldn't trust Sokka. There was a reason the boy felt dangerous and threatening and now he knew why. He just wished he had heeded it all sooner.

Chapter 6

Zuko woke to the sound of the window rattling softly in the night under the frustrated yowls of Onigiri outside. He stirred from his futon as one good eye turned groggily towards the window. He narrowed his gaze and spied something slipping between the slats of the wood like a thin blade. He tensed and started to move to defend him and Uncle when the latch was knocked aside. The shutter slid open just enough as Onigiri poured through the narrow space with a pleased trill and a quiet mewl. Behind her Takoyaki and Umeboshi were quick to pile in. They tilted their heads, eyes glowing in the soft moonlight as the small pumas made their way further into the room. Onigiri gleefully pounced towards Zuko as the last two puma siblings entered and the shutter was closed behind them. He swore he caught a glimpse of green fabric in the gap before it retreated into the shadows, leaving the cats to do as they please inside the small apartment.

The prince was pretty sure there were no pets allowed in these tenants but right now he was feeling shitty enough not to care as he opened his arms to welcome Onigiri to rest against his chest. She paused in her clumsy steps across his stomach to sniff at his bandaged arm and nuzzle it gently with the quietest mewl of question. He scratched behind her ears and adjusted the blankets around her and Takoyaki, while Umeboshi and his oldest sons settled around Uncle's snoring unmoving form.

He sighed, content with the soft purring and the kneading weight of paws against his chest as he laid back and stared up at the ceiling. His swirling thoughts danced around the events of earlier today as he considered how he was going to face tomorrow. Seeing Sokka was an inevitable fact of his life now. He was trapped in a city unable to escape the other boy. He supposed he could ask Uncle for a day off but that was cowardly on his part. He needed to stand his ground, he needed to tell Sokka he had grown wise to his tricks. He wasn't going to play these games. He was done being someone else's play thing.

He practiced his speech in his head. He imagined the different places he would normally see Sokka and strategize for each, how he was going to avoid the boy until he was ready to address it. He wasn't playing by Sokka's rules this time around. It was Zuko's turn to take back control.

But then, what if Sokka decided he was fed up with these games and turned him and Uncle in? If he thought Zuko was hiding something, if they thought for even a moment that he had information, then he could have the Dai Li or the Earth Kingdom guards interrogate him. Perhaps this whole charade was some mercy for Zuko. Sokka was trying to play the good

guy, give him a chance to come clean about whatever the tribesman thought he had done or knew. He probably thought the guilt would eat Zuko away until he couldn't hide it anymore.

Nobody would be left to believe the truth then. If Zuko claimed he didn't know, they wouldn't believe him because he was *Fire Nation* so why even try at this point. He was tired of running all the time. He was sick of having to hide who he is, what he is, because of this stupid fucking war. He was just tired of being called so many things he wasn't, and so many things he was already intimately aware of that he couldn't change no matter how hard he tried.

It wasn't fair, but then again since when has the world ever been fair to him? He had to struggle and fight for everything he had, and even now he was forced to fight for this meager ounce of freedom he and Uncle managed to snatch desperately at. And it was Zuko's fault that it was rapidly crumbling out of his grasp before he could put the pieces back together.

His thoughts were interrupted by the soft headbutt of Onigiri as she scrubbed her face against his scarred cheek and purred noisily in his ears. A pleasant shiver raced down his spine as he smoothed his hands down along the length of her back and gently patted her hindquarters. The steady rumble of her purring sent his worries scattering frantically to the darkest corners of his mind as her massaging paws coaxed him back towards the sorely missed sleep.

Zuko wasn't entirely sure how to deal with the fact Sokka didn't come in at all during his whole shift. The prince had been ready. He psyched himself up for it, he practiced his speech in his head all the way to work and continued to roll his words in his head over and over again in between taking drink orders and wiping down tables. Even on his break, he whispered it to Onigiri on the rooftops outside and kept a wary eye out for Dai Li agents that occasionally flitted over the rooftops with more energy and far more frequently than usual. Zuko had hidden behind a chimney and tucked himself and the cat into the shadows as he spied them racing across the roofs as if in pursuit of something or someone. There was no bending and they never took to the streets so he assumed it was a minor skirmish.

After his break, he was knocked out of his practice as he eavesdropped on a few guards talking about how some large black dog was running about the city and had attacked someone already. A different group of regulars has been whispering about how Po had been mauled by the same large black dog and had lost the use of one of his arms due to his

injuries. Apparently he had been out wandering the streets late at night when he came across it. He was lucky to have escaped with his life.

Nobody has any idea as to where it came from but it was dangerous and the whole guard was keeping an eye out for it. They consulted the local zoo on whether it was one of theirs but the zookeeper assured them it didn't match the description of any of his charges and all of his animals were accounted for.

The thought of something like that roaming the city had Zuko worried about the cats, and was grateful that they had spent the night with him last night. He still couldn't figure out how they got in, or who might have let them in but it didn't matter. He had feigned confusion that morning when Uncle woke in alarm with Umeboshi sound asleep sprawled across his large belly. He gave Zuko a knowing look but the prince just shrugged sheepishly and continued to pet Onigiri like she hadn't been snuggling him all night long.

They debated whether or not the cats were allowed in the apartment, and decided to table the discussion until later when they weren't under the threat of being late for work. This newest tidbit of knowledge would help Zuko fight for the cats' safety to ensure they wouldn't be harmed by this highly aggressive stray dog.

Zuko took a few more breaks than usual as his arm started to ache and bother him, making it hard to carry the heavy trays without them trembling in his grasp. Uncle explained the situation to Pao when their boss noticed the bandages peeking out from under Zuko's sleeve and the older man didn't protest his slow work or odd hold on the trays that didn't align with proper tea serving etiquette.

A few of the guards had noticed and recognized him, to the point, he assumed the news had already gotten around about his fight in the streets for the second time now. They smiled fondly at him when he would deliver their drinks and watch him with worry in their eyes when lifting the more cluttered trays of dirty dishes would cause a small wince to briefly flash across his face before he could smother it with his usual neutral glare.

As they inched towards closing time, Zuko had drastically deflated when he realized Sokka wasn't coming in today. He felt burned out after holding onto that hope and anticipation for the big outburst. He had wound himself up so thoroughly that he was spiralling in the aftermath with disappointment, and oddly enough, a sense of relief he hadn't realized he'd been clinging to for so long.

A part of him hoped all of this was some great big misunderstanding even if the logical part of him was still skeptical and angry towards the slight. He wiped down the tables and sighed, wringing the cloth out into the scrub bucket as he interchanged between washing and placing the seating up on top. Uncle was in the back finishing the last of the dishes as Zuko hefted the last of the chairs up and set the bucket down to trade it for the broom.

Pao came in and took the broom from Zuko's grasp, replacing it with a brown paper wrapped parcel as he spoke. "Li, would you do me a quick favor and deliver this to the noodle shop down the road?"

Zuko stared at the parcel. It was small and light in hand and wrapped carefully with brown twine securing it shut. There was a folded note beneath the twine so it didn't slip free. "Um....sure." He answered hesitantly and hung his apron up on the hook in the back. Uncle eyed him briefly as he waved the parcel in hand as answer before slipping out into the cool Summer night.

The walk wasn't a long one. It wouldn't take more than fifteen minutes to cross the two streets and head down towards the shop and then come back. It would take even less time if he were running or going by rooftop but the prince decided to enjoy the fresh air and the soft light of the moon gleaming down over the city above. It was full tonight, with only a sparse handful of clouds dotting the starry sky. It was strange, how different it felt staring up past the city lights to gaze at the stars above after so many years viewing them from the deck of his ship. With a calm sea spread before him and the seamless line of night clashing with the glassy surface making it an endless gorgeous void that he could lose himself in for hours.

He recalled the terrifying sight all those months ago, when the moon turned blood red in the night sky and then the world was consumed in a jarring unnatural blackness that felt so inherently wrong deep down to his core. It made him cold right down to his bones and only his inner flame was a flickering dying glimpse of warmth against it's encroaching wrongness. It took everything he had to shake it off, even after the moon returned and the night sky was basked in the reprieve of silvery light, he still felt exhausted and skittish, always casting wary glances up as if he expected it to be lost once again. It was terrifying.

It didn't take long for him to make it to the noodle shop and pass off the package to their workers. A quiet promise to ensure it reaches the owner bid him farewell back into the quiet evening. There were the occasional shadows of Dai Li slipping like liquid through the shadows of the rooftops watching over the city, and once in a great while, he might hear the

soft laughter of people scurrying quickly to get home. The lower rings had never felt so ominously quiet this time of night until the attacks had started up. Oddly enough, people appeared to be more wary of dangerous animals than they were of the much more dangerous gangs that patrolled the streets, but it seemed even the gangs were wary of the beast.

Surely it wasn't that bad. He's faced worse beasts over the years. A boar-q-pine, June's shirshu, the unagi, an overly aggressive platypus bear while they were on the road and a saber tooth moose lion that stumbled into their camp once. Then there were the ostrich horses and the komodo rhinos just to name a few more common potentially aggressive beasts that could, with much glee, throw and thrash him if mishandled.

If he can handle an agitated komodo rhino or a clowder of feral pygmy pumas, then he doubted a random dog would put him out of commission.

The universe was testing his patience and challenging him or something. Whatever it was *trying* to do, it was certainly laughing at him because Zuko couldn't find a description more fitting than that exact thought as he rounded a corner and came face to face with the *biggest* 'dog' he had ever met in his entire life. It was massive. It...wasn't a dog now that he got a good look at those sharp glacial blue eyes that glowed unnaturally in the moonlight and the curved fangs and the silvery undertones of its fur that looked like streaks of snow against a dark sky when the thick blanket of black shifted to reveal some of its belly as it literally leapt over the wall that was three times taller than him.

Large paws landed noisily against the cobblestones as claws clacked and scraped as the animal swerved to face him, its shoulders coming level with Zuko's own as he held his breath and stood his ground. The beast took a step closer, ears pivoting to listen for any signs of trouble as its black glossy nose twitched as it sniffed at him. He closed his eyes and swallowed, praying to Agni that it wouldn't take a bite out of his throat.

He was so close to Pao's shop. It was just around the next corner leading into the back alley he took to the kitchen. He was within shouting distance of Uncle but all it would take is one noise to startle the animal into attacking. Mere seconds for sharp teeth to dig into the tender skin of his neck and rip it clean from his body. He would be a fading memory spread in a crimson splash across the white stones of the city, another casualty in a useless war and he wouldn't even be killed by bending or blade. The thought of his flame being snuffed out by

sharp teeth and claws was enough to stir a hysteric laugh in his chest that he smothered to a quiet whimper.

Opening his eyes slowly as hot breath ghosted across the scarred half of his face, he watched the large head and its inquisitive eyes lower to address his bandaged arm. Zuko worried that the animal could smell the dried blood of his wound.

'Predators are drawn to the scent of blood. It means wounded and easy prey.' Zuko's mind unhelpfully supplied as he forced himself to breathe slowly through his nostrils and calm the erratic pace of his heart.

'I'm going to die.'

That revelation came like ice down his spine.

'I'm going to die and nobody will be witness to it.'

And then, the traitorous thoughts of his mind wondered if Sokka would care to hear the news. If he would be upset or appeased to know of Zuko's untimely death. The other boy might consider it poetic justice. A suitable end for a banished unwanted nationless prince. To die a nobody, alone and unarmed.

The great beast growled lowly, a quiet rumble in its chest as it's head cocked to catch a sound. It happened so quickly, that Zuko couldn't even believe his own eyes as a ball of black flung itself off of the rooftops and crashed into the beast. The animal lurched, hunching its back with a ferocious howl ripped clean from its chest as it yelped. There were more black blurs and a flurry of fur and hissing as the pygmy pumas threw themselves upon the animal with claws bared and screams that Zuko had never heard before.

Zuko stumbled back as all the color drained from his face as Onigiri was thrown off of the animal's back and landed in front of Zuko in a heap. She recovered quickly, spitting fury with all of her fur raised to make her small body look larger. Umeboshi had lunged in front of her as sharp teeth snapped in a warning snarl, claws taking to the beast's face before it could back

away fast enough. The cats had the animal surrounded in quick succession, much like they had done to the Dai Li, standing defiantly between the monstrous canine and Zuko.

“No!” Zuko cried out as one heavy paw swatted Umeboshi away when the older cat made a daring second swipe. Umeboshi was faster to dodge and swerved under the animal’s large frame between its legs and went for the hindquarters. A yelp jerked the huge animal forward as it lunged to get away from the stubborn felines that piled in, clawing and hissing at it at every opportunity.

Blood hit the cobblestones as the battle waged and Zuko was helpless to watch it continue. Every attempt to dive into it was met with snapping teeth and another furry body blocking his path until the beast was forced to flee, scrambling with a desperate leap towards the rooftops, knocking the rain barrel it used as leverage cleanly over to spill across the ground. The rush of footsteps careened around the corner as Zuko knelt on the stones, staring at the bloody stains on the ground and the territorial felines prowling and yowling into the night, glaring in the direction the beast had fled to.

“Nephew?!” Uncle’s voice broke through the rush of blood in his ears and the panicked beat of his heart hammering painfully inside his chest. He tipped his head up in time to see Pao right behind the old dragon, staring at the mess of the alley and the aggressive felines that turned their anger towards the newcomers near their special human.

“Onigiri!” Zuko called, holding his arms out for the small feline to rush towards him in greeting. Her black fur was damp with blood but by the way she preened before him, he was assured it wasn’t any of hers as it stained his robes. He gathered her into his arms and felt tears of relief flood his eyes.

The cats quickly crowded in around him as Uncle knelt cautiously at his side. One warm hand steadied Zuko’s shoulders, as he came to realize he was trembling now like a leaf in the wind. He couldn’t tell if it was the adrenaline surging through his veins or genuine fear for the cats or himself, but he didn’t even have the strength to push himself to his feet. So he sat there, cradling Onigiri as Pao frantically shouted for guards and Uncle held him, offering quiet reassurances that everything was going to be alright.

It didn't take any convincing at all for Uncle to allow the cats to stay in their apartment. But under the condition that they received a bath along with Zuko who was covered in canine drool and blood. Changed into a clean pair of clothes with a cluster of freshly washed felines crowding close to him as their own personal heater, he was finally able to relax with a cup of Uncle's calming jasmine tea in hand and a warm meal in his stomach. It took a little too long for his nerves to finally fade about the whole ordeal.

Zuko came to the conclusion that most of it was spurred on at the thought of losing the cats to that monster of a beast. The thought of death had never truly scared the prince in that way, not since his banishment when his father burned the cowardice out of him. But allowing someone else to die for him? That rattled him to his core and he couldn't live with himself knowing just how close he came to losing Onigiri and the rest of them. Aside from Uncle, they were the most important things to him in this spirits-damn Agni awful city.

"Nephew?" Uncle spoke softly as he finished laying out their futons for the night.

He never took a drink of the tea, Zuko realized, as he focused on the sensation of the heat against his palms and the smell of the jasmine filling every calming breath. He was trying to ensure the tea stayed warm for as long as possible until he exhausted himself beyond reason. Anything to drift him closer to the relief of sleep and ignore the events of the night.

Perhaps the people of the city were right to fear the beast more than the gangs. There was nothing more terrifying than gazing into those predatory blue eyes and seeing his own pale faced expression gleaming back in the silvery moonlight. To smell blood in the air and feel that tremor of fear curling at the base of his spine, cold like ice and just as sharp and painful to harbor inside. Jaggedly, it dragged against the tender parts of him and scraped him raw.

He grunted softly in answer when Uncle's hand reached out to touch his arm with the utmost care. Onigiri shot the older man a disapproving look but made no move to bat him away or growl. They were slowly growing accustomed to Uncle and that fact eased the anxiety knotting up Zuko's stomach.

"You should get some rest." He urged.

All Zuko could offer is a knowing nod, but he still hadn't moved an inch from his spot. Onigiri was still sprawled across his lap, her eyes tilted up to watch him sleepily, reluctant to move as much as Zuko was reluctant to expel that last bit of energy afraid that his mind would stumble back to being in that alley, staring into inhuman eyes and feeling a detached sense of familiarity in their gaze.

Instead, he forced himself to recall the guards that showed up at Pao's frightened shouting and the Dai Li agents that were drawn to the scene after all the noise had shattered the quiet of the evening. There were too many eyes watching him as Zuko cradled the cats against his chest and refused to budge for even a moment, and then, all too hastily, he scrambled to his feet and couldn't move fast enough to get home. To find some place safer than sitting on the cold cobblestones where it could return at any moment. He needed to get the cats to safety, he needed to get Uncle to safety, where electric blue eyes and sharp claws couldn't reach them. Where it was warm and well lit and protected with four walls and doors he could lock and ensure the beast remained far away from his thoughts and his sight. He made doubly sure the shutters were bolted firmly and refused to look out over the windowsill, terrified of what he might see.

He couldn't recall when he ended up in his futon under the layers of blankets, or when Uncle had snuffed out all the lights in their quiet little apartment except a single solitary lantern that sat in the corner on their tea table. Uncle turned his back to the flame, but Zuko found comfort in its light and focused on the way it flickered and danced inside the glass until he ensnared it with his bending and teased it into finding a new song to twist and shiver to, then coaxing it to follow the far more simple pattern of his own breathing until sleep swept him away under Onigiri's tender kneading paws.

The tea shop was closed after the close call, along with many of the shops in the area as far too many people were afraid to leave their homes. The guard presence in the lower ring had seemingly tripled overnight making it harder for Zuko to find a sense of peace for even a moment. As ironic as that was. Having too many guards around was a problem when he and the cats just wanted to take an overdue midafternoon nap on the rooftop.

They ended up on the roof adjacent to their apartment building where Zuko could easily cross the short distance from their open windowsill and sneak back into the place if need be. But for now, he and Onigiri were enjoying the reprieve for the day to soak up Agni's bountiful rays. Distantly, he could hear Uncle humming a soft tune as he trimmed one of the half dozen

plants that he had taken to growing in the apartment in between scratching fondly behind Umeboshi's ears.

It didn't take long at all for Uncle to grow fond of the wizened old feline or for Zuko to catch him sharing extra bites of fish with the cat after breakfast. He assumed the old dragon had a renewed appreciation for the pumas after they saved Zuko's life from the *Beast of Ba Sing Se*, as the locals were so enthusiastically calling it.

Zuko's nap turned into a light doze as he stretched comfortably across the warm shingles and let the heat soak into his bones. It thawed the cold icy touch of fear that had nestled, snug inside of him since last night, and eased the growing apprehension that had battered his mind all night, even as he dreamt. He wasn't free from the worries that haunted him or those deadly eyes that were seared into his thoughts. That was no normal animal and Zuko was well aware but that only made it all the more frightening. Even now, safe under the sun's rays judging by the fact the rumors state it only approaches at night when guards were down and people were more vulnerable. It didn't stop the chilling terror from creeping across his skin until he was itchy with unease.

His fitful sleep gave little for him to hide within, but the light nap offered a new opportunity to at least relax and enjoy the rare break in his days. He was thankful for it now, as he roused long enough to catch Onigiri as she lazily pooled over his hip and started sliding off of him. The angular bite of the shingles were no big discomfort as it dug into his hip, he rotated himself a bit to better his angle and relaxed into a contented sigh with the puma sprawled over him like a wet rag. Her brother was just as lazy as he stretched between the length of Zuko's legs and set his head to rest on the inside of the prince's thigh with his tail draped over one knee. It was comforting. Even with the Dai Li racing about, he felt a little more at ease to know he was protected by these feisty pumas and their eager defiance in the face of the biggest predators in the whole city. It was a rare and special kind of loyalty that Zuko appreciated and adored, even if it was bought with copious amounts of fish and long hours of ear scratches.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

It's been a while since I've updated this but I'm slowly trying to get back into the flow so I hope yall can forgive me if this doesn't sound all that well compared to the previous chapters.

Unfortunately for Zuko, they couldn't extend the closing for more than a day. The lower ring had to continue despite the fear that was still harbored in the hearts of the people that populated it. The guards still crowded the streets as they continued their search for the beast. The prince had, at least, enjoyed the day off while he could before resuming the tedious work of tea serving. His arm still ached with the daily chores of sweeping, washing tables and carrying heavy trays back and forth filled with orders for the crowds. The amount of guards that visited had increased substantially as their tables were frequently packed with people.

Captain Cho and his usual group of men had stopped in on their break to get a cup of tea and checked in on Zuko while they were at it. It didn't help that the entire neighborhood was aware that he had faced down the beast and lived to tell about it. Customers were chattier when they recognized who he was by the rumors and asked a mountain of questions. The prince quickly grew tired of it after the first two times and would, as politely as he could, excuse himself from the conversations with the reminder that he had other tables to tend to.

"Li." Captain Cho greeted him when Zuko made his rounds to their table to collect the finished cups from a few of the men and take additional orders. "I'm glad to see you're safe."

Zuko nodded his head in a curt gesture of acknowledgement as he adjusted the cups to rest on the tray. It started to wobble a little when his arm began to shake from strain. The young man beside Cho rose up abruptly from his seat to catch it when it slipped to the side. The cups rattled from the force as Zuko flinched in a panicked attempt to correct it before staring wide eyed at the young guard. He looked to be around Zuko's age, wearing the outfit of a recruit in training and not a full fledged guard of the city. The shape of his jaw and the dark hair tied up neatly resembled Captain Cho to some extent. Much like the older man, the guard smiled warmly at him but there was something reassuring and casual about it that slipped between the cracks that echoes the easy going nature of Sokka that Zuko found himself chasing after so much.

"You okay?" The young guard asked warmly as he helped Zuko correct the tray so it balanced easier in his shaking hands. The prince's face burned hot with embarrassment as he nodded jerkily.

Captain Cho chuckled as he interjected. "Li, I'd like you to meet my son, Min. Min, this is Li, Mushi's nephew."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Li. I've heard quite a bit about you." He grinned broadly as Zuko swallowed nervously around the lump in throat.

"Nice to meet you as well." He grunted awkwardly and shifted the tray between his hands. One of the cups clinked together on their saucer as he shifted his weight uneasily. After a moment he took a deep breath to call his nerves as he asked. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

One of the other older guards that frequented the shop gave Zuko an order he was more than happy to take if only for the reprieve from this social interaction. Min returned to his seat but his eyes never stopped following Zuko around the shop until the whole group left. Unlike Sokka's unnerving territorial nature when he stared, Min was curious in how he observed the prince go about his routine with each table cleared and filled. His gaze didn't terrify Zuko or leave him with the sudden desire to hide in the back of the shop or flee out the door. It was just a bit odd, especially knowing he was Captain Cho's son of all people. It made him wonder what all the other teen had heard from his father. What kind of stories were told about Zuko and what sort of image and reputation that depicted of him?

Was he the helplessly awkward disabled boy that worked with his uncle every day? Or was he the rowdy rebellious teen that had been involved in not one but *two* street fights and one beast attack and miraculously survived all three?

The thoughts followed him around for a good chunk of the day as he went about his routine before a distraction stole his full attention. It was a welcome one as Lady Jun informed him of a new play that a playwright friend of hers had recently submitted to the Ba Sing Se theater and how excited she was to see it finally reach the big stage.

Zuko was similarly enthusiastic when she gave him a box of theater scrolls that were the first collection of her friend's to hit the Ba Sing Se market. His face warmed significantly as he hugged the box against his chest and repeatedly thanked her for the generous gift. Needless to say, his mood had seen a thorough shift in a more positive direction as his mind switched gears to eagerly anticipate getting home to sit down and give them a read.

Uncle was just as amused and pleased to see the change when he caught Zuko poking the box curiously with a small smile on his break. The temptation to open it then and begin reading was strong but his self restraint was far stronger in the end. Well, barely. He was more worried about getting tea stains on the scrolls and that was the deciding factor that made him stay his hands and have some patience. He busied himself with work and flitted energetically from task to task, only slowed by the ache in his arm as the stitches pulled each time he flexed his arm or made it hold too much weight at once, but even that couldn't dampen his spirits.

When they left work for the night, Uncle accompanied Zuko close by his side, smiling softly to himself as the prince held the box to his chest and anticipated a relaxing night with Onigiri and a warm meal, the scrolls spread out across his futon as he reads and smooths his palms across the feline's furry body. The week's troubles were an afterthought as Zuko turned in for the night, far later than he had meant to as he tucked the scroll into its protective case and laid down with Onigiri eagerly nosing at his face to force her human to rest before the sun rises.

The next day was met with ease though still tired, Zuko had replaced the bandages on his arm while Uncle made breakfast, and they ate while the cats indulged in their own meals of fish. He left the windowsill open just enough to let them sneak in and out of the apartment while they were gone, allowing a patch of sun to creep in where Umeboshi was napping in the sunny silhouette like the lazy old parent he was.

Business resumed its usual monotony with the added presence of Min, Captain Cho's son who accompanied the patrolling guards that had started a regular routine of sweeping the area. In the soft golden light of morning, Zuko swept the entry steps and threw open the shutters to let a cool breeze dance through the shop and coax passersby to enter at the aroma of tea leaves and comfortable chatter. Min's boyish charms had beamed at him in a manner that was so much like Sokka's but reserved in a confident sort of way that resembled Jet that left Zuko tripping awkwardly over himself as he sheepishly smiled back and politely greeted the young guard.

"Good morning Li." He called as they passed, the older guards stopped to chat with a few merchants along the streets asking if they had seen anything suspicious in the area. Min was

uninterested in the gossip of his superiors and the neighborhood as he focused his attention on the lone tea server, standing at half attention, stance casual but still alert as he smiled warmly at him. “How are you doing today?”

“Good.” Zuko grunted, shifting the broom handle in his grip as his shoulders gave an awkward jump that was a pitiful excuse for a shrug. It took him a moment to realize he should return the kindness and asked. “You?”

“Pretty good.” Min purred pleasantly. “It’s a lovely morning for a patrol. Even better to see you out and about.”

Zuko flustered. *‘Was that an attempt to flirt?’* He couldn’t really tell. It could have just been a well meaning gesture, especially in light of how his weeks had been going lately. He shifted awkwardly and gave another small bob of his head.

“I suppose.” He cringed inwardly as he floundered for something sensible to say back. “Uh... are you new to the guards? I just never seen you before with Captain Cho’s men.”

“Yeah.” Min answered coolly, and folded his arms over his chest comfortably as he nodded at the older men that accompanied him. “With all this Beast business going on, they permitted the recruits to leave the outposts to help. I’ve been on desk duty for the last six months.”

“I see. Must be exciting for you then.” Zuko adjusted his grip on the broom as he shifted the weight in his stance and looked around at the quaint morning as people came and went about their days. “You get to join the action.”

Min laughed, a sound that was high in his throat instead of deeper in his chest like Sokka’s tended to be. It felt odd to hear, not insincere but strange. “From what I’ve heard, you’ve already been thick in all the action around here.”

Zuko hummed in agreement. “I guess so.” Then with a more genuine shrug he straightened up and sighed. “It’s nothing new really.”

The Earth Kingdom boy appraised him thoughtfully as he nodded as if to some sort of agreement. “I see. You came from beyond the walls and got to see the world. I’m a little envious of that.” There was a pause as Min smiled apologetically as he added. “I’m sorry if that was insensitive. I’m sure you have your reason for coming to Ba Sing Se to get away from that. I just meant-”

“I understand.” Zuko assured quietly, shooting the boy a reassuring smile though he was far more reserved. “I was that way too for a long time. The world outside always seemed far more exciting than what was in front of me. I was right, but in a way I hadn’t expected.”

There was a comfortable silence that settled between the two boys, only disturbed when one of the older guards directed them to move on with their patrols. Min shot Zuko an apologetic smile. “I’ll see you later then. It was good talking with you.”

All he could offer was an awkward tilt of his head as the boy rushed off to catch up with his superiors. He lingered on the steps a little longer before deciding he had finished his sweeping and headed back inside to see if Uncle needed any assistance in the kitchen before their busy rush hit.

Zuko hadn’t kept his hopes up of seeing Min again, but the boy was determined to pop up time and time again. He appeared with his father when the guards from the morning patrols took their afternoon break. Of course he couldn’t chat the prince up like he had earlier that morning, as Captain Cho spent more time conversing with Zuko, asking how he was doing, and inquiring about his arm. The medic that treated it at the guard station was present today, and he smiled fondly at the prince as he set a cup of oolong tea before the man.

As Zuko flitted about, delivering the house specialty to Lady Jun at the next table over, Min cautiously reached out to catch the firebender’s sleeve to draw his attention. The rest of the guards had gotten up to leave after paying for their tea at the front counter, leaving Min to linger alone at their vacant table. “Hey um, Li?”

“Can I help you with anything?” He inquired politely, putting on his passive customer service expression with the best of his ability to hide the little flutter in his chest that came about whenever Min gave him the time of day.

“I was wondering if you’d like to hang out sometime when you’re not working, you know.” He started, his confidence faltering a little as he added hastily, voice growing strained with the quickness of his words. “I figured if you’re new to the city and all, that maybe as a local, I could show you around a bit?” Min rubbed at the back of his neck nervously as he waited for Zuko’s answer.

“Uh...” He snapped his jaw shut and glanced back towards the counter where Pao was taking the payment from the guards and spotted Uncle’s curious amber eyes watching him with a smile on his lips, encouraging him in the same manner that he had when Jin had asked him out on the date. “Sure. I wouldn’t mind.”

“Great. I’ll see you around then. We can talk more and figure out when we’re both free?”

“Okay.” He grunted, giving a quick nod and ignored the soft rush of heat to his face when Min’s smile grew before he shielded it when Captain Cho approached. The other boy straightened up and gave him a more reserved professional smile.

“I’ll see you later.” Zuko turned his attention to Captain Cho when the man gently placed a hand on his right shoulder.

“Take good care, Li.”

“Yes sir.”

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful as Zuko chatted with Lady Jun, informing her of how much he was already enjoying the scrolls she gave him and he was only through one of the collection of five. He spent his entire break time sitting with her and chatting about the story so far and other projects her friend was working on currently that Zuko was eager to see hit the shelves and the stage. Unfortunately the theater was in the upper ring, and he didn't have the coin to splurge on something like that at the moment.

Maybe later on, but for now he had bigger things to worry about, like the fact he needed to go shopping at the market tomorrow before work for breakfast for the cats. He was preplanning the early trip as he swept the steps of the shop as they closed, and put the chairs up for the night. Uncle had just finished cleaning up the kitchen while Pao counted the days' earnings. On the way home, they took a minor detour to the noodle shop Zuko had delivered to for Pao before and stepped inside to order take away before they closed for the night. Zuko opted to stay outside where the night air was cool and he could see the stretch of sky above and watch the clouds slowly tumble across the dark blue expanse and blot out the silvery light of the moon.

His head swiveled when a shadow moved in the corner of his eye and he honed in on the bright splash of water tribe blue as Sokka's figure emerged from a side street. The same street he and Uncle had taken to cut through the neighborhood and reach the shop faster. The same street Zuko had knelt on, trembling and afraid as the beast attacked, leaving his nights fraught with sharp teeth and cold eyes.

He opened his mouth to snap at the tribesman, a venomous barb poised on his tongue but his words crumbled when Sokka came into view of the shop's hanging lanterns and the soft glow of fire that danced around creating a safe bubble of light for late patrons to find shelter in.

His face was marred in dark bruises and a large wound that cut across the bridge of his nose and down his cheek. He had a similar gash above his brow that appeared partially healed and lent to a black eye. More bruising and bandages were peeking up from around his shirt collar and the bone choker Sokka always wore was absent now, leaving his neck looking small and vulnerable to the open air as pale fabric replaced it.

"*Agni!* What the fuck happened to you?" His earlier anger was drained right out, snuffed like a flame in a wet hearth as he saw the hopeful gleam in the tribesman's eyes. His smile tilted

up into something casual and cocky, though lopsided as he ignored the pain that pinched at the sore spots of his face.

“Oh, just a street fight.” He shrugged dismissively, but Zuko didn’t miss the way Sokka stiffened with the motion or the way his eyes watered a little, presumably from the sharpness of his pain. “Katara’s mad at me right now so she won’t heal any of it. It is kind of my own stupid fault so....” He let his voice trail a bit before shaking the thought off.

“What about you?” Sokka pointed at the bandages still peeking out of his sleeve.

“Street fight.” He answered curtly. “Attempted mugging.”

“I’m afraid to see what the other guy looks like.” The tribesman laughed warmly. It was shorter than Zuko anticipated, like it pained the boy to do it but he tried regardless to play off the seriousness of his injuries.

“He got off easy.” The prince corrected. The other boy seemed to consider this and let it sink in before nodding his understanding.

“I suppose that’s a good thing around here.”

“Why are you here, Sokka?” He tried to keep an even voice, to maintain a steady uninterested tone but somehow the vitriol of his anger started to leak in and Zuko was fed up enough to not care about the sharpness that edged his words as he scowled the other boy down.

“I was worried about you.” Sokka’s gaze dropped to stare at the dusty cobblestones between them, brows pinched in contemplation like he wanted to cross that distance and enter the golden light that spread like a dome of sanctuary around Zuko. Instead he remained firmly planted where he was, steeped in creeping shadows that curled around his body and helped him blend into the backdrop of this Agni forsaken city. “I heard-” His voice cracked a little as he swallowed thickly, but it still came out as rough and strained like the boy was fending off a cold as it turned gravelly. “I heard that you got attacked.”

“I’m fine.” Zuko corrected bitterly. “I don’t need your help.”

His head dipped in a defeated motion.

“I especially don’t appreciate being *used* either.”

“Used?” Sokka’s head snapped back up, puzzled by that declaration.

“I saw the posters, Sokka. I don’t know what sort of game you were playing but I don’t like being lied to.” He growled, taking a threatening step towards the boy. Sokka relented with an uncertain step back as if Zuko had physically shoved him away.

“Zuk- uh...Li.” He corrected quickly. “I didn’t mean to-”

“Save it.” Zuko hissed bitterly. “You had your chance before and you still lied to my face. I’m done.” He sliced a hand through the air to punctuate the finality of it. “I’ve been nothing but honest with you since day one.” He scoffed. “Here I thought you would be different. That you- that *you* Sokka, were different and I could just-” His voice cracked as his throat tightened around the words he wanted to say but they were too painful to let out. He fell quiet as he shook his head. “I should have known better.”

“Li please. Hear me out.” Sokka pleaded, taking a step forward but Zuko shook his head more firmly and let a curl of smoke drift off his lips as he hissed.

“No. I’m done listening. I’m sick of hearing your lies.” The growl was cold and bitter as he turned away from the boy. “Leave me alone.”

“Li.” Sokka’s voice was so terribly quiet as he turned his back and faced the bright glow of the shop. There was a soft shuffle of steps before the even softer utterance. “I’m sorry.” Zuko stood there for several minutes, willing the boy to just vanish from his sight. When Uncle finally left the shop with their order tucked in his arms, Zuko was left standing in the lantern light, alone and feeling even more miserable than the day he found out the truth.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Zuko gets an unexpected visitor.

Chapter Notes

I just realized it's been 3 months since I last updated this fic and I finally got the mood to continue it. So I hope yall enjoy this installment.

It was pouring rain and the prince found that fact adequately reflected his mood since last night. Seeing Sokka all of a sudden felt jarring after days of his absence and all these questions racing across Zuko's mind. As much as it felt good to say his piece and let Sokka know how bad he hurt, it still left him drowning in doubt and regret. He *wanted* things to be different, he wanted it to be better. That all these pretty little promises Sokka made would actually matter and what they were beyond these walls didn't. But Zuko should have understood how unrealistic that expectation truly was. They could never be more than what they already were, or any less in his case.

And so he was left lying on his futon as he listened to the patter of rain on the roof of their apartment. How it splattered the little balcony just beyond the shutters. The gray light that filtered through the gaps was somber beneath the thunderous rumble that rolled across the sky. He stared at the wall, his back facing the kitchen where uncle brewed a pot of tea and found he had no energy left in him to face the day.

He was just so tired, physically and emotionally. These last few weeks had wrung him dry and the prince couldn't even muster the energy to be mad about it.

The cats littered his bed where Takoyaki was snuggled up against his back with Onigiri sprawled over his hip with her paws stretched up along his ribs where she dozed. Amazake and Yakisoba were by his feet soaking in the scant light that splashed the ground near the window while Umeboshi was occupying the cushion beside Uncle's spot at the table. The old

dragon had grown quite fond of the aged feline in such a short amount of time which had amused the prince.

"Nephew?" Uncle called softly when the teapot began to whistle to signal it was finished. The shrill sound grated on his ear as the firebender buried his head into the pillows and curled up a little tighter on his futon without disturbing the cats too much.

"Would you like some tea?" The whistling died as uncle took the pot off the stove and prepared a cup for himself.

"No." Zuko grunted.

"Are you hungry? Would you like some breakfast?"

Squeezing his eyes shut, he ignored the question as his empty stomach lurched in protest at the denial. Onigiri was displeased with all of his restless shifting as it disrupted her comfortable sprawl, causing the frustrated feline to mew at him with judgment before dragging herself along to puddle her form lazily along his mid back and ribs.

Eventually she crawled her way up his back until she buried her face into the short hair at the nape of his neck and began grooming him. Zuko shivered at the sensation of the rough tongue dragging along his exposed skin as the kitten started to purr and knead along his shoulders. His eyes widened a little in surprise as he squirmed to shake her down his back only for Takoyaki to take that as an invitation to join in. Lazily, he meandered over to flop on the edge of Zuko's pillow so he was tucked against the blind side of his face and started grooming the crown of his hair and his forehead.

"Go away." He grumbled but made no move to shove either of them off more forcefully. The shooing hand he managed to exhumed from his blankets landed atop Takoyaki's back before stroking fingers through his short fur to distract the cat from his task. Onigiri remained unthwarted in her own stubborn efforts to try and cheer him up.

He could hear uncle's soft laughter floating in the air around the apartment through the noisy purrs motoring in his ear. No amount of distraction could keep the cats at bay, forcing him to

relent to their affectionate attention with a sigh of resigned defeat. After several minutes, he heard uncle approach his bedside and rested a hand on his right shoulder to draw his attention as he lifted his head up with some effort. His vision was a little blurry, and the tightness of his scar ached all along his cheek and down his jaw where the muscle spasmed with the crappy weather outside.

"Here nephew." Uncle coaxed, his face softened in understanding as he held the steaming wet cloth in his hand out towards the young prince. Zuko was relieved and appreciative of uncle's forethought. He accepted the cloth once he freed his other arm and draped it over the left side of his face as he adjusted his head to rest the right side into the pillow. Takoyaki wasn't all that happy with the lost attention or Zuko's new position but uncle scooped the playful kitten away and carried it over to rest beside Umeboshi, offering the firebender a reprieve from babysitting. Onigiri had ceased her grooming attempts to resume her nap on his back, allowing him the chance to relax and relish in the warmth cradling his scar and the comfortable pressure of her body against his.

"You should stay home and get some rest today. With this weather, the shop will be quite empty anyway." It was an easy enough excuse for Zuko as he laid there and listened to the sound of his uncle going through the motions of morning routine. He already fed the cats their breakfast and prepared an easy to cook meal for the younger man when he was feeling up for it. He finished his cup of tea, changed into his uniform and refreshed the warm cloth before vacating the premises. All the while Zuko remained in bed, listening to the rain on the rooftops and the rumble of thunder like the growl of a great beast echoing through his mind.

It was peaceful.

It resonated a quiet sleepy sort of contentment that had shadowed the world in a comfortable veil of total acceptance in the aftermath of chaos. It was the kind of weather Zuko used to find pleasure in watching as the raindrops slipped off the eaves and landed in fat droplets on the stonework of the palace. He adored the way they rippled across the turtleduck pond and made the entire garden smell fresh and new with each storm. He always loved visiting afterwards even if it meant getting all wet and muddy sitting on the grass or the polished stone benches.

Nowadays, it only reminded him of the things he lost and that pained him just as much as his scar did. So he spent his days trying to manage it and sleep off the discomfort that made his face tight and his head hurt with a steadily pounding pressure if the storm was too much. It was a little easier to deal with inland as compared to the sea without the cold salt spray washing over him as they navigated the ship through churning waters.

Zuko was able to ignore it for the most part and clawed towards an ounce of more sleep. He wasn't sure how long he did sleep for, but when he woke up, he was groggy with his head bogged down like he was trying to slog through a marsh. The cats had collected around him until he was completely covered in their sprawl. The damp cloth he had draped across his face was absent where it had fallen away to heap underneath his chest between him and the futon. Long since dry, he had scrunched it beneath himself from moving around to get comfortable in his sleep. He assumed it was still Onigiri on his back with Takoyaki cradled between his knees in a lazy sprawl over one leg. Amazake and Yakisoba were still by his feet, only one had moved to lay entirely on one foot while the other was brushing the inside of his other ankle. The only cat currently not asleep on him in some way was Umeboshi and that was because he hadn't left his spot on his cushion beside uncle's. If he peeked over his shoulder past the curled tail tickling the tip of his ear, he could see the fat black body of the old feline snoring softly to himself.

He couldn't tell what time it was. The day remained just as dark as it had been at dawn with the same morbid gray tone to the world beyond the shutters. The rain had seen a lull judging by the eerie silence aside from the barely audible dripping of the water off the eaves from earlier in the morning.

The tightness in his face had abated some to his relief but his motivation to really do anything aside from lay here like a dead fish was far from recovered. The cats really weren't helping at all in convincing him to be even just a fraction more productive than he currently was. He supposed that may have been their intention from the start and conceded to his new existence as a built-in door mat for them to sleep on. He will admit, he was at least warm with so many fuzzy bodies laying all over him.

As he flexed his shoulders to ease the tension out of his joints and loosen his back, he curled his arms under the pillow to get comfortable once more, remaining mindful of his bandaged arm as he did so. Onigiri shifted her weight to tuck into a tighter ball on his back before her tail flicked against his head. He succumbed to the pull of more sleep as he buried his face into the pillow with a deflated sigh.

"-llo?" The voice was oddly familiar but Zuko was still slogging through the fog in his head to make out why that was. He just wanted to go back to sleep, just a few more minutes. "Li?"

He smushed his face into the pillow with a miserable tired groan as that pounding sensation in his head returned. Assaulted by a steady throb behind his left eye that remained too stubborn to ignore no matter how skilled he was at denying his daily problems.

Onigiri and Takoyaki had grown tense and guarded against his back. A low growl resonated from the felines' chests, urging him to more awareness as he lifted his head to inspect the intruder on the peace and quiet of his morning.

"Li, are you alright?" Zuko blinked the blurriness from his good eye as his head craned up to find the culprit in question. Every muscle tensed in alarm as he recognized the Earth Kingdom green garments of the city guards. His whole body jerked with the force of his fright and he scrambled up sending the cats scattering in a similar panic as his heart thundered frantically inside his chest. His arm protested the action as Zuko landed back onto his butt as he twisted around to face the man that was standing just a few paces away. It took him a minute to focus and blink his vision into some form of clarity to make out who exactly it was standing in front of him.

Hands raised apologetically as the- *'fuck is that Min?'*

His mind screeched to a sudden halt as the cats grouped up around Zuko, hackles raised and wary as they eyed the recruit.

"It's okay. It's just me." Min spoke quickly as he took a few cautious steps back to give the panicked teenager more space. The heat of a flame radiated along his fingers, eager to be let loose in his fright as the prince stared the intruder down. "I'm sorry if I scared you, Li. I really am."

"What are you doing here?" Zuko blurted, panicked as he searched the apartment for any sign of uncle. He couldn't tell what time it was with the dull hues beyond the window only warning of more rain to come and little else. The crackle of static crawled along his bare skin as Zuko came to realize he was half dressed in front of the other boy.

Min looked a little uncertain as he gestured back towards the door and offered once more, remaining cautiously apologetic. "I heard from your uncle that you weren't feeling well, so I asked if it was okay to stop by and check on you for him. The door was open when I got here and you weren't responding when I knocked. I was worried."

"Wha-" The prince stared towards the door as he scrubbed a too warm palm over his eyes to dismiss the blurriness that still clung to the edges of his vision. The rapid beat of his racing heart started to subside little by little as he let the explanation sink in.

The recruit continued, as Zuko dwelled in thought. "I am really sorry, Li. I didn't mean to startle you at all. I had been calling your name for a while and I thought something was seriously wrong."

'Uncle must have forgotten to shut the door properly when he left.' The prince sighed in defeat as he let the tension steadily unwind in his shoulders and sank back against the wall with a tired exhale. "I uh..." The wood was cool against his bare back, reminding him of his state of undress in front of the other boy and flustered a little.

"If it'd make you more comfortable, I can go and just check back in later?" Min offered awkwardly from where he had shuffled back towards the doorway to linger. It was a safe enough distance away to ease most of Zuko's discomfort.

"You uh-" He grimaced to himself as he mentally warred over these conflicted feelings. On one hand, he still felt like shit, but on the other hand, some company might not be so bad, all things considered.

'I could use a good distraction after last night.' He reminded himself before gesturing towards the small seating arrangement where Umeboshi was resting.

"You can stay if you want." The prince offered a bit awkwardly as he searched for the right words. "I can make you some tea?"

Min looked conflicted by the offer, before asking. "You sure? I don't want you to think you need to if you're not feeling well."

"It's fine." He assured the boy as he inspected the collection of felines currently not mauling the teen. They weren't exactly fond of his presence in the apartment or so close to Zuko, but they weren't nearly as aggressive as they were towards Sokka. This was more of a mild toleration if anything as Onigiri flopped onto the scattered blankets with her brother Takoyaki.

Min accepted the offer as Zuko took a moment to collect himself and find a clean shirt to cover up with. A part of him wondered if he should put the futon and bedding away but after a minute, he decided to leave it alone. He had a sleeveless undershirt he often wore beneath his uniform still hanging up in the adjacent room from when he did laundry. Snatching it off the hook, he shrugged it over his head and let the baggy fabric sag down around his waist. His arm ached where he pulled at the stitches as he nervously smoothed the fabric beneath his warm palms. He had to will away the heat in his hands before he started to steam the moisture in the air and made his way into the kitchen to prepare the teapot. Min had shut the door behind himself and removed his shoes by the entrance before making himself comfortable on the cushion across from Umeboshi.

Yakisoba stretched across the floor, digging his nails into the wood as he yawned and arched his back. Zuko hissed under his teeth as he nudged the feline away before he started tearing up the wood.

"Hey, that's not a scratching post. Do that outside." The prince chided as his foot gently steered the cat off. Yakisoba batted at Zuko's bare ankle playfully and lightly scraped the tips of his nails along the sensitive skin sending a shiver up his spine as he hissed under his breath. "No, we're not playing right now."

The cat huffed and snorted at him before sneezing on the floor. Zuko rolled his eyes and set the stove alight with the new set of spark rocks after uncle misplaced their last set. His back was only turned for a moment when Zuko glanced towards Min to find the traitorous feline lurking towards the recruit. Min's expression was soft and welcoming as he extended a hand to the puma to allow Yakisoba to get comfortable with his scent before headbutting the hand in acceptance.

'You freelance slut.' Zuko silently grumbled and shook his head as he settled his hip against the counter and scratched at the bandages covering his arm. The stitches were itchy as he rubbed his palm firmly against it, wondering absently if he actually had tore them in the panic or if it was just the weather agitating them.

"I had heard about the feral cats that saved you from the beast, but I hadn't expected them to be living with you Li." The prince tensed at that last part as a new type of panic crept across his mind. They actually weren't *allowed* to have pets in these apartments and now Min was here, with the cats scattered about comfortably like it had always been their home.

He swallowed thickly, the bundle of nerves from before returned with haste as he shifted by the counter. "They uh...well-" He was at a loss to explain.

The boy lifted his green eyes to take in Zuko's anxious shifting as he picked at the edge of his bandages and refused to meet Min's gaze. "Don't worry, I won't tell anybody they're here."

"Really?" Zuko couldn't really believe the promise but Min was genuine in his assurance.

"Of course." He was relieved by the promise as Min scrubbed a hand along Yakisoba's back and scratched at the good spot at the base of his tail that he absolutely adored. The cat rolled his back into the touch to encourage the *'hard won'* affection with steady purring.

"Thank you." The teapot started to whistle but Zuko didn't let it get far enough to become a shrill noise in his ear. He winced inwardly at what bit of noise did rise from it before preparing the cups. "This won't be as good as my uncle's but I'm still learning."

"I'm sure it's great." Min smiled warmly in the same manner that Captain Cho often did when greeting Zuko. It was always fond and understanding, which made it strange seeing the same look in a much younger face. He set the cup in front of Min before settling in his own seat with his own cup to sip at and relish in the heat of the clay. Umeboshi was staring at him from beside uncle's spot with a look that felt silently judgemental. Onigiri joined the fray once the prince had grown comfortable on his own cushion and curled herself up in his lap after headbutting his elbow out of the way. He lifted his arm to make more room for her as she pooled over his knee like liquid night and flopped.

"You're so damn spoiled, you know that?" He scolded the feline in question while delivering a few scratches under her chin. She answered him with a knowing murp.

The recruit chuckled as he gave Yakisoba a break from the attention to try his cup of tea. The prince sipped quietly from his own as Min let out an approving hum with a long sigh. Zuko was a little surprised by the sound as it filled his chest with a happy little burst of warmth.

"So, how are you feeling?" Min asked upon setting his cup back down on the table and devoted all of his attention to Zuko. The softness of his eyes was inviting, from the sincere set of his brows to the phantom wisp of a smile resting on the curve of his mouth, it made Zuko feel comforted and at ease in a way that Sokka's presence lacked. There wasn't a sliver of the same unease and anxiety that the tribesman inspired in the prince when they were alone together. He didn't make Zuko feel like trapped prey searching for the nearest escape.

Zuko shrugged as he took another sip of his own cup of tea and sighed. "I'm doing alright." Setting the cup back down, he thumbed the rim and gestured flippantly at the left side of his face with a grunted. "It's weather sensitive."

His eyes dropped to observe his distorted reflection in the tea as the other teen offered. "Is there anything I could do to help?" When Zuko lifted his eyes to inspect the boy, he found an eager smile creeping on his face as he continued. "Anything at all?"

The prince didn't really know how to react so he shrugged at first before shaking his head. His jaw tensed briefly with indecision as he explained. "I just sleep it off. Warm wet cloths help sometimes."

"I see." There was a hesitant pause as Min added, a little more awkward than his previous bouts of unwavering confidence. "I could always come back another time, like tomorrow if you just want to go back to sleep."

"No." Zuko amended. "No, its...its fine. The distraction is nice. Having someone to talk to and all." His cheeks flushed with embarrassment but he didn't chase these feelings away. They felt nice for once, especially when he was feeling them for the first time for someone that wasn't the water tribe boy. For someone who would always be here in Ba Sing Se, who didn't lie to his face and wouldn't vanish on the spot without so much as a warning. Someone who didn't know the truth about Zuko, and who was steadily growing more fond of *Li*.

If he was meant to live his life like a lie, then he might as well find the most gullible person to live it with. It was easier this way.

Min smiled and Zuko felt like he was free falling with no way to catch himself. It was exciting and terrifying, but it was *real*. It was something substantial that he could call his own. It was refreshing.

To Zuko's bewilderment, it was late afternoon when Min had woken him up in a panic. By the time the recruit left, it was nearing supper time and the shop should have been closing soon. He considered whether or not to start working on dinner for him and uncle, but after standing at the sink washing the tea cups, he discovered he lacked any of the extra energy the complex task required. He got as far as boiling some water for a warm wet compress then retired back to his futon. The damp rag was draped over his eyes as he laid back and let the cats return to their lounged positions around his bed.

It wasn't long before uncle returned to find him resting in bed. He greeted Zuko with a cautious optimism that told the prince he was attempting to fish for information. He was well aware that Min had visited, Zuko knew that much, but he wasn't sure if the recruit had relayed his visit back to uncle or not. Either way, he wasn't intent on feeding the old dragon any more than necessary. Even if that meant withholding the knowledge that Min had asked the firebender if he'd like to go out sometime soon and Zuko, foolishly and with quite a bit of shock, agreed. It felt like his date with Jin all over again and he was *nervous*. Excited but nervous.

He wasn't even sure if this could be considered a date. Did Min actually like him like that or were they just friends? He had offered to show Zuko around the city to some of his favorite places so he could get a better grasp on what the nightlife had to offer. The nightlife that Zuko had pointedly ignored so far in lieu of sneaking across the city like a shadow enjoying his own unique brand of late night outings.

Zuko couldn't hide his nerves under the mound of blankets forever, and uncle was growing concerned when he noted that the prince hadn't eaten anything all day. Perhaps that was part of the reason for his nausea throughout the afternoon, instead of his mounting anxiety at this new development in his relationship with the Earth Kingdom boy.

Uncle made him a bowl of miso soup as they sat at the table in silence. He was halfway through his meal when the thought occurred to him. "You didn't shut the door properly when you left this morning."

"Hm?" Iroh lowered his chopsticks after slurping down a bite of noodles and frowned in thought. "I could have sworn I had. I didn't lock it since you were home with the cats...."

"The door was wide open uncle." Zuko grunted, growing more firm as he implored. "This neighborhood isn't safe enough to be so careless. What if I hadn't been home? Just anyone could come in and steal from us."

"Nephew." Iroh chided. "These are good people."

"Good people can become desperate people who make hard decisions, uncle." He reminded sharply then hissed, lowering his voice as he leaned over the table. "Not to mention the cats. If anyone finds out, they'll take the cats away or kick us out onto the street. We can't afford to lose what we have right now."

His uncle dropped his gaze to find Umeboshi resting at his side on the same old cushion that he'd been occupying all day. After a moment of consideration, the old man at least had the common sense to look apologetic over it. Some days the prince wondered if that White Jade bush had left some lingering damage because he swore uncle wasn't thinking straight lately. He was prone to making too many dangerous mistakes and it made Zuko worry.

"I'm sorry, nephew." The old man bowed his head with genuine remorse for his mistake. "I'll be more careful, I promise." Zuko turned his attention back to his bowl, feeling uneasy at the display as he grunted.

"I know uncle, just try to be more cautious. Its all I ask." He didn't miss the small amused smile that played on uncle's lips as Zuko lifted the bowl to drink down some of the broth. He pointedly avoided the older man's gaze for the rest of the meal. Iroh didn't take this personally and made it a point of his own to regale him with all the things he missed out on at work today.

It sounded like just another dull uneventful day to Zuko but he humored his uncle with an ear lent to listen halfheartedly. Just beyond these thin cozy walls, the storm resumed with howling wind and a thunderous roar reminding the city and its sleepy occupants that it prowled the night.

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