

he who lacks stands to gain

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he who lacks stands to gain

by [Nobodii](#)

Summary

Zuko is trying his best, he really is, but it's hard when the whole world is working against him.

At least he has uncle. And his crew. And the Avatar.

the perception of the truth

Zuko is five and has a handful of problems. The first and foremost, of course, is that his father is displeased by his lack of bending. The sages say he lacks the spark and must be a non-bender. Mother disagrees hurriedly, soothing his father's rage. Zuko doesn't understand the big deal, to be honest. Lu Ten is a non bender and Lu Ten is the best. When he tells father this it only makes him more upset. That, Zuko understands less.

His second problem, of course, is that his sister is 3 years old and already proved herself to father. He spoils her with affection and praise because she's earned it, and Zuko is left feeling inadequate. His mother comforts him best as she can, but it does little to soothe him. He wants his father's love, and nothing can compare to it, not even mother. When he tells her this, she gets sad and quiet, like she often does, and pulls away from Zuko. Zuko doesn't understand that either.

His third problem, surprisingly, is that Zuko throws himself into his studies to please father, and it hurts. He rises early, even before the sun to get a jumpstart on the day, and stays up late, with Tui shining on his work in approval, and it becomes tiring after a few days. Which isn't a problem on it's own, except that Zuko has firebending training, in an effort to force flame out of him, and he gets sloppy which upsets his tutors and then they use their fire to punish him. Zuko gets covered in so many burns and bandages his mother argues with father and argues with the tutors. It doesn't work, naturally. Zuko doesn't understand why she bothered.

The palace servants all adore Prince Zuko. They adore the passion in his words, the brightness in his voice, the way his presence lights up the dark hallways of the palace, the way he speaks to them as equals, as people, in a way none of the royal family do.

There are rumors that Agni abandoned the Prince. Those present for his birth, in the middle of winter during the time of Tui, had spread the truth of his birth and rumors spread despite the fake date the royal family announced as the Prince's birthday.

But the palace servants know the truth. See it in the light of his skin, the gold of his eyes, the way the earth seems brighter anytime he steps out in the light of day. Life blooms where he steps, guided by the grace of Agni.

The boy is spirit chosen, but he is too young to understand and his family too ignorant to notice.

Zuko is eight when he realises the root of his problems. The amount has increased with his age, and Zuko is left juggling his problems, because they are too many to hold. It takes his sister's dismissive words for Zuko to realise the common denominator in all his problems. It's not that surprising. She's always been smarter than him. Still, he's ashamed it took his little sister pointing it out to him. It's so glaringly obvious. Zuko is the cause of his own problems.

He upset father by bending late and upset him more by bending poorly. He upset mother by talking and being honest. He upset his tutors by being so hard to teach. It's all his fault, so he works hard to correct his shortcomings.

He works harder at bending, meditating more, practicing more, watching Azula and copying her, to varying degrees of success. He gets better faster, but not fast enough for father so Zuko just works harder.

He stops talking to mother honestly. He tells her only what will make her happy, only what she asks for. It makes their conversations shorter without Zuko ranting and rambling about this and that, but small sacrifices. This seems to make his mother sadder though. She's still a work in progress.

He reads ahead for all his classes, forces himself to memorise the things he's read until he can recite it perfectly with little effort. That, at least, works effortlessly. He excels Azula in his studies and his tutors are once again impressed. This plan worked so effortlessly, Zuko doesn't understand why the others didn't.

Princess Ursa's personal servant has heard a lot in her years of service. The princess needs someone to talk to, and seems to find the open air the perfect candidate. She never addresses anyone, stares unseeingly at the distance and continues speaking even when the space is empty of anyone.

Princess Ursa's personal servant knows all about Prince Zuko's worrying quiet, knows all about Princess Azula's disturbing tendencies, knows all about Prince Ozai's cold eyes and horrible, horrible demands. She knows all of this unwillingly, and wishes she could rid her mind of the words.

She can't and instead finds herself noticing the burns littering Prince Zuko's body, some too big for comfort and some too little, but all hand shaped. She sees more, once Princess Ursa's quiet voice points them out in the silence of her room, and comes to the conclusion that something is very wrong with the people in charge of her nation and the worst of it is displayed on Prince Zuko's skin and no doubt marked into his mind.

But he is too young to understand, and she is but a servant.

Zuko is nine when he attends his first funeral. He doesn't understand what's going on, and nobody tells him. They only dress him in different colours and push him in different directions and force him to sit.

He is seated next to father, his sister on his left. Grandfather is in the middle with Uncle on his right. Immediately Zuko is excited, because if Uncle is here Lu Ten must be too, and Lu Ten is the best.

He stays quiet and still though, because this is a ceremony and even if he doesn't know what it's for, he knows what behaviour is expected of him. Most ceremonies are silent, and this is clearly one of prayer, which means even more silence.

The ceremony ends but uncle remains seated, even as father and sister move to leave. Grandfather is already inside. Zuko scoots over to Uncle, whose head is bowed and eyes closed. He must've fallen asleep. Uncle's always been silly like that. Zuko nudges him to wake him, a smile planted on his face and buzzing from excitement. Zuko doesn't get to play much, but Lu Ten always comes up with the best games.

"Uncle?"

"Ah, Prince Zuko. Come to comfort an old man?" And Uncle is aiming for one of his stupid jokes that isn't funny but his voice is wrong and his smile is flat and his eyes are wet. Zuko doesn't know what to do with that, because everytime he tries to make someone feel better he makes it worse, but Lu Ten is the best and he'll know.

"Where's Lu Ten?" That, of course, is the wrong thing to say. Uncle's face crumbles and Zuko doesn't understand why. He looks around in search of answers and finds nothing.

His uncle doesn't explain, can barely gather breath between sobs. It's only later, when Zuko asks a servant after searching the palace fruitlessly, that they explain Lu Ten is gone, never coming back. Zuko asks why, and their only answer is war. Zuko swears to end the war so Lu Ten can come back. He nods to the servant in understanding.

He doesn't understand, is the servant's first thought as he watches Prince Zuko walk away. He doesn't understand, and he is too young to. But he swore to end the war, and maybe his lack of understanding isn't so bad.

It will hurt him, no doubt, when he gets the true answers to his questions, but for now the servant is pleased to dump the responsibility of old men onto a young child's shoulders and imagine a world without war.

Zuko is ten when his mother leaves. Two facts present themselves to him. The first is that his mother loves him. The second is that she is gone. These facts contradict. Why would she leave if she loves him? He doesn't understand because they contradict each other.

Azula wastes no time in telling him it's his fault, but how could it be his fault if she loves him? Clearly one of the two facts is wrong. And she is so clearly gone that it has to mean she doesn't love him. Perhaps she never did.

There's more, of course, besides his mother's disappearance. Grandfather orders Zuko's death and then dies himself. Father is crowned Firelord with Zuko becoming the Crown Prince. Uncle Iroh still hasn't returned and Lu Ten is never coming back. All this happens at the same time, yet Zuko's mother is what steals his attention.

He'd never had to work for her love, not the way he does for father, so he never thought much about it but maybe he should have. Maybe he did have to earn his mother's love, just in different ways. Maybe he never did because he never worked for it and was never worthy so she never loved him.

It's confusing and makes his chest hurt and his eyes sting because he loves his mother and his father and his sister but they don't seem to love him back, but he understands. He's not good enough for their love and until he is, people will keep leaving. Like Lu Ten and uncle and mother. He has to work harder.

Princess Ursa leaves in a hurry, whispering about her son and about her father-in-law. Her personal servant pretends not to hear, and pretends not to see and pretends not to exist. It works for the princess, who slips by the servant with no problem, the lack of light aiding her ignorance.

It does not work in the light of day, when the now Crown Prince runs up to her crying and asking about his mother. It does not work when the now Firelord stands down the hallway waiting for her answer, his daughter smiling at his side. It does not work when she tells the prince that she doesn't know, his mother is just gone.

He cries and cries, screaming about how it doesn't make sense, how it contradicts, how he doesn't understand. Poor thing. He doesn't realise that she left because she loves him. Doesn't see that it contradicts only because he doesn't understand.

Zuko is thirteen when all his problems fall around him. It's like time stops, suspending his problems in the air, before it resumes and they all come down on him. It starts the way most

things do, Zuko opens his mouth.

Zuko is on the ground, knees throbbing from the way he dropped onto them. He can't hear much, his mind too loud. There are a lot of thoughts in Zuko's head, the loudest being that he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand why it was father when he turned around, doesn't understand why his face is so hot, why father won't let him move away from the heat, why he's cradling Zuko's face and his head but hurting him and holding him in place for it.

Zuko doesn't even realise he's screaming, can't connect the clawing at his throat to any sound because his ears are filled with cotton and he doesn't understand. Why isn't anyone helping? Where's uncle or Azula? Why aren't they saying anything? Why isn't anyone? Zuko tries to turn his head, tries to look for uncle, but his father's grip is strong and his hands are big and Zuko's face is on fire but he doesn't understand why.

He doesn't understand he doesn't understand why why why it's not fair i didn't do anything i don't understand please i dont understand i dont understand i

The servants whisper. Nothing is powerful enough to stop people from talking. It starts in the kitchen, as rumors do. The subject is Prince Zuko. It often is. Halting conversation is held. Unfinished questions. 'Have you heard...?' 'Is it true...?' and so on. The silence of the halls speaks louder than any person could. The prince is no longer in the palace, sent to chase ghost stories by his father.

Agni is angry, drying their crops and burning their skin. The remaining of the royal family barely seem to notice, too busy revelling in their power, but the servants do. No sacrifice, no prayer is enough to soothe Agni. He is angry and only grows angrier the more his will is ignored.

The servants can do nothing but prayer for mercy, for forgiveness, and for their Prince. They understand, with each day of Agni's rage, that the Prince is their only saving grace.

Zuko is thirteen still when he wakes up on a ship in the middle of the sea, fever coursing through his veins and Uncle praying by his side.

He doesn't understand.

the perception of man

Chapter Notes

TW: homophobia, self harm, racist undertones
The chapters will get longer once we hit the plot, promise.

[My Tumblr](#)

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

Zuko is eight when he tells his mom about a pretty noble boy and gets in trouble. He doesn't understand why, he's simply complimenting the boy. But his mother slaps her hand over his mouth and squeezes, with a wild look in her eyes. It hurts, but Zuko is familiar with pain and knows crying out will only make it worse.

She drags him away from the turtle ducks, away from servants and guards and into her room, her hand tight on his wrist. It hurts. Zuko pretends it doesn't.

She scolds him then, in a hushed whisper. Tells him he must never say that, must never think that. Zuko is a boy and cannot find other boys pretty. It's wrong, she says. Zuko doesn't understand why. When he asks, she freezes up before hurriedly telling him it doesn't matter 'why'. It's wrong because it is.

She makes him promise to never say it again and Zuko, despite his lack of understanding, nods, because this is his mother and if anyone knows what's best for him it's her. She tells him not to mention this to father, and Zuko understands this less but nods regardless. She probably just doesn't want to upset father.

Zuko is sixteen and searching for the Avatar in a small village when he sees a water tribe boy, face covered by paint and thinks, *'he's pretty'*.

He removes the thought from his mind as soon as it comes. It's nonsensical to think that for a multitude of reasons. First, he can't even see the boy's face. Only his hair and his eyes and the vague outline of his body. Second he's a boy, and so is Zuko, and Zuko has a duty to his mother and to his nation. He must marry a woman and have children and not find boys pretty. Third, this boy is an enemy, and an obstacle in capturing the Avatar. Zuko has priorities, and pretty blue eyes are not going to distract him from them.

He threatens an old lady, shoving down his guilt because he is the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation and his father entrusted him with the mission to capture the Avatar and he is not going to let his feelings get in the way of his honor. It works, in a rare show of good luck and planning, and then the Avatar is on his ship. The Avatar is, apparently, the same water tribe boy.

Zuko doesn't understand why he charged him with a melee weapon if he has the bending of the four nations at his disposal, but he supposes he can firebend and still trains with swords.

Uncle is, of course, eager to share his tea with the Avatar. He herds the boy into his cabin, where he already has tea and pai sho set up, and pours some for both him and Zuko, before Zuko pours for him. They sit around the table, though the Avatar hasn't touched his tea and is instead surveying the room.

"You swore to come with me in exchange for your village's safety." Zuko reminds the Avatar, hoping to remove thoughts of escaping. He only gets a grunt in response to his efforts. Zuko slurps his tea loudly, stopping himself from grumbling.

"Aren't you going to drink the tea?" Uncle asks, from where he is happily sipping his own tea. Zuko barely suppresses an eye roll.

"Not too keen on drinking poison, thank you." The Avatar replies, gaze still locked firmly on the door.

"Distrust is poison to friendship."

"What?"

"It's not poisoned." Zuko snaps, glaring at his uncle. Why the proverbs? Why why why?

"Yeah, I'm not going to trust the words of ashmakers hunting the Avatar."

"I'm not hunting you I was just - whatever it doesn't matter. Aren't you supposed to balance the world? Why are you biased against firebenders?"

"I don't know, probably because you started a one-hundred year long war for no reason?"

"It wouldn't have been a war if you didn't fight it." The Avatar turned to glare at him, face paint symmetrical and highlighting his hate. Zuko glared back.

The cabin is silent, Zuko and the Avatar in a glaring contest. Uncle, of course, breaks the silence.

"War's tragedy is that it uses man's best to do man's worst." They break their contest to glare at uncle instead, Zuko with an aggravated groan and the Avatar with a confused '*What?*'.

Zuko is six when he wants friends of his own. He's watching Azula play with Mai and Ty Lee and a part of him suddenly yearns for the same thing. He's been invited to a few of their games, either as target practice or because they needed the numbers, but they aren't his friends and he isn't theirs. And they're all girls anyway. Zuko can't have sleepovers with girls.

The problem, though, is that Zuko doesn't know how to make friends. Mai and Ty Lee were introduced to Azula, Mai through her family and Ty Lee through Mai, but nobody bothered talking to Zuko. At least no boys. A lot of girls have been introduced to Zuko as his 'future wife'. Whatever that means.

Zuko meets a lot of boys at Royal Parties, but father never let's him invite them over and exchanging letters never seems to last.

Zuko is six when he understands he hasn't yet earned the privilege of friendship.

The *Wani* is a small ship. It barely has space to hold its few inhabitants, and sure as hell doesn't have space to spare for a guest. That is to say, they don't have a cabin to offer to the Avatar, so Zuko is going to have to share.

As the South Pole fades into the background and Agni begins to set, Zuko drags the Avatar to his quarters and seats him on his futon.

"This is where you'll be staying. Don't touch anything, and don't hog the bed."

"Sorry, excuse me, are we having a slumber party?" And if a Zuko's face feels a little hotter at the thought, it's only because he's really angry. Yeah.

"I - no we just don't have that much space and I'm not sleeping on the floor."

"I will, then." The Avatar suggests, already moving off of the futon.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"Because you're my guest and the Avatar and I have manners!"

"Could've fooled me." The Avatar mutters under his breath. Zuko shoots him a glare before turning back to his desk. He has to start writing to his father, so the Firelord knows to expect his arrival and won't kill him on sight. It's quiet, except for the sound of the Avatar walking around and touching things Zuko said not to.

"Woah, you have swords? A bit overkill don't you think?"

"You have four elements."

“Okay. Point taken. Tui, could you get any more patriotic.”

“Last I checked you weren’t an interior designer.”

“Uhm, did you see that rad watchtower I built? I’m an architecture prodigy.” Zuko sighs, rubbing his forehead under the helmet and setting his letter to the side. He’s gonna have to rewrite it.

“Avatar, please stop touching my stuff.”

“I have a name you know.”

“Oh.” That actually didn’t occur to Zuko. Agni, he’s a horrible host. “Uhm...what’s your name?”

“A little late for that don’t you think?”

“You’re the one who brought it up!”

“Tui and La, do you always shout? Fine. My name is Sokka.”

“Sokka. Okay. I’m Zuko.”

“I’m aware.” The Avatar - Sokka - says with an eye roll, turning back to Zuko’s Fire Nation posters. The Avatar, Zuko understands, is a dick.

Zuko is four when he first sneaks into Lu Ten’s room. A loud bang had woken him up and he’s scared to go back to sleep on his own. It’s less sneaking and more asking a servant to take him to Lu Ten’s room, quietly giggling the whole time. Usually mother sleeps with him, but Azula is two and tiny and needs attention, so Zuko is left on his own.

He asks a guard to open the door for him and then sneaks in, climbing up the bed and looking for his cousin in the blankets. He climbs under the duvet, scooting over until he’s face to face with his cousin.

“Zuko? What’re you doing here bud?”

“Missed you.” Is what Zuko replies, his four year old tongue pronouncing the ‘s’ wrong. Lu Ten doesn’t mind, only throws his arm over Zuko and brings him to his chest in a hug. Zuko is quick to fall back asleep, his cousin rubbing his back soothingly. It’s nice, nice enough that Zuko forgets what woke him up in the first place.

It's late and the Avatar - Sokka - is sleeping, arms and legs thrown wide and taking up space on his futon. Zuko smothers a groan. He still hasn't finished the letter, drafts thrown about by his desk, but his head is aching and his eyes are blurring. He has time anyways. The South pole is far from Caldera.

Zuko takes in Sokka's drooling face. He'd agreed to take off his warpaint if Zuko took off his armor, and so they bared themselves to each other in the quiet of a cramped, metal room. Sokka's prettier without makeup. The thought is tratorious, so Zuko presses a burning finger to his forearm as punishment. It does little to stop his stray thoughts, but Zuko feels better regardless.

Zuko walks to the futon, nudging Sokka's limbs closer to his body with a foot. He doesn't wake, only grumbles and twists. He's still diagonal, taking up more space than he should, but it's good enough for Zuko. He slips under the covers and shifts until he's comfortable and strategically placed.

He ignores when Sokka cuddles up to him, and ignores when he finds himself wrapped in a hug, and ignores how it makes him feel.

Zuko is fourteen when he understands something is fundamentally wrong with him. It's then that he realises his father banished him for more than his disrespect.

Chapter End Notes

[My Tumblr](#)

shifting perspectives

Chapter Notes

in person school started back and i fell behind on my writing :) sorry

hope you enjoy, [My Tumblr](#)

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

Zuko is ten when he has his first sleepless night. His mother is gone and Zuko can't sneak into Lu Ten's room to cuddle. He is alone, and it hurts. It hurts so bad he can't sleep.

He lays there, tossing and turning and begging Tui to let him sleep, he's so tired. She doesn't, and instead Zuko spends every minute, every hour, aware of the space his mother has left. Aware of how big his bed feels and how heavy the covers are.

He sneaks into his sister's room instead, remembering when they used to sleep together and wishing for a moment of that. She wakes up, because his sniffling is loud in the quiet room, and because she is much better than him.

She wakes up and lets him slide under her covers and hug her from behind. She wakes up and let's them lay in silence, under her blankets in her room. She wakes up and goes back to sleep, and even though Zuko can't follow her example and sleep, something settles inside him enough for his tears to slow.

The next morning, she makes sure to make up for her kindness by teasing him relentlessly. It doesn't hurt as much as it could.

Sokka wakes up on a fire nation ship, in the same room as the apparent prince of the fire nation, because he's pretending to be the Avatar. He's not sure how his life deteriorated so drastically.

The prince is sitting at his desk writing, and for a second Sokka wonders if he even went to bed. Not because he cares, why would he care about a feral firebender? Nope, Sokka's just curious. That's all.

He's not sure how to make his presence known. Does he just clear his throat, maybe get up and demand breakfast? There aren't exactly guidelines on how to talk to the Prince of a genocidal nation, and Sokka honestly wasn't expecting to get this far. He thought the real avatar would've rescued him by now. The thought of Aang reminds him of his sister.

She better be okay. He is not here fraternizing with the enemy for her to not be okay. She owes it to him that she be okay. His sister isn't here to save him though, so Sokka forces his attention to the prince.

"Does royalty not sleep? Or is that a fire nation thing?" The prince turns sharply to glare at him, and it really shouldn't be that intimidating but it kind of is. The scar helps.

"I slept just fine!" He yells, because he's always yelling, but his face turns red and he becomes sheepish. Interesting. "I just woke up early is all. It didn't help that you were hogging the bed the same way I told you not to."

"First off, this, this that I'm laying on, is not a bed. A bed has a bed frame. This is just a bunch of thick sheets shoved onto the floor. Second, I don't hog, okay. I take up a perfectly reasonable amount of space." The prince rolls his eyes, because he's loud and rude apparently. Sokka squints at his sass.

He's so sassy it's visible, little wisps of sass leaving his mouth with each word. Or that might just be steam. He's very red, so maybe fire is trying to escape from his face. That is...kind of terrifying. Maybe that's how he got his scar. Maybe firebenders just set their face on fire sometimes. Sokka suppresses a shiver.

The prince is grumbling under his breath, great. Thank you universe, for giving him a grumbling, sassy, red, fire nation prince. Not that the prince is his. That's not what he meant. Don't take this out of context, universe.

"Okay!" Sokka yells, interrupting his own thoughts. "Breakfast! Surely you don't plan to starve your esteemed guest?"

"I don't know, are you going to convince yourself it's poisoned?"

"Not if I get to see the cooking process." That's a glare, yep, a sharp and steady glare, abort mission. "Or not. I'm sure if you wanted to kill me you would've. Hunger wins this one."

"Okay. Then you should take my uncle up on tea. You hurt his feelings last time."

"Wow. Didn't know you guys had those."

"I can still starve you. Or poison you."

"Tea with your uncle. Got it."

Zuko is twelve when he gets used to not being able to sleep. He's stayed up all night on purpose, but it's different when you're trying to sleep and find you can't.

His mind grows accustomed to the constant tiredness, his limbs grow used to feeling heavy and his eyes take their new dryness in stride. There are bags under them everytime Zuko

looks in a mirror, and the servants fuss, but Zuko is quietly gratified.

He's adapted. Stopped spending hours in bed and instead used the time studying. He can't sleep, so he won't. He'll be productive. If Zuko falls asleep during the day, missing classes and training, then it makes no difference, because he relearns everything he misses during the night.

It's exhausting and hurts but it works and it's all Zuko can do. The most he can manage. It's not enough, Zuko fears nothing will ever be enough, but it's the best he can do.

Sokka is roped into drinking tea after the old man finishes waxing poetry on how well rested the prince looks and once the prince stomps away, furiously blushing. It's kind of cute, in the way a baby tiger-seal going for its first kill and looking at its tiger-seal mom for approval is cute. That is to say, Sokka's not sure what to think about it or the prince.

"How is your bending coming along?" The old man asks and oh, this is bad. Sokka should've expected an interrogation, but the prince is so bad at being evil he forgot about the people who are good at it.

"Uh..." What is the right response? Should he lie? No, they might want proof, and Sokka can't even bend one element, much less four of them. "Not...not great. Yeah."

"Ah, I had a feeling. For the Avatar, learning the elements must happen in a cycle. You're from the water tribe, so you must master water first, and I imagine that must be difficult...considering."

"Yeah." Sokka says drily, "Considering." Nevermind that it was the old man's people who are the reason for 'considering'.

"Perhaps I should contact my water bending friend. I'm sure he's eager for a new student."

"Uh, excuse me, are you offering to help me? The Avatar? Balancer of the world? You know I'm gonna end the war, right?"

"Only the dead have seen the end of war." He says, with a noisy sip of his tea. Sokka wants to slap his cup and spill all his tea. He doesn't, but only because having Katara as a sister has taught him levels of self-control.

"Okay. Lovely tea, really, it's delicious, but I'll just get going. I'm not really a fan of layered meanings, you know."

"Think about what I said about the water bender."

"I will do that. I will think. About that. Definitely." Sokka stood up slowly, creeping away from the old man and his tea. Who would've thought that Sokka would find himself missing the Prince of the Fire Nation? Ah, what has his life become?

Well, he's in the middle of the ocean on a Fire Nation vessel with no supervision. Time to explore.

Zuko is fourteen and relearning how to sleep. A new kind of paranoia haunts his waking hours and follows him into the night. He's on a creaky ship with people he doesn't know who are bigger than him and stronger than him.

He's lost his fire bending to fear, and his sight and hearing to fire bending. He can't even begin to relearn anything, because he has to learn to walk first, has to learn to balance and estimate and it makes him aware of how defenseless he is, even with uncle. Especially with his uncle.

All he needs to do is step out of line and uncle, the fearsome Dragon of the West who spits fire, will put him back in his place.

He sleeps on his left, even though it pulls at his skin and hurts, so he doesn't muffle his remaining sight and hearing. So he can always be on the ready. He tucks a knife under his pillow and keeps his grip on the hilt. He shove his futon furthest from the door, so that he's facing it should anyone enter.

It's not a lot, wouldn't save him from palace assassins and definitely wouldn't save him from a mutiny or his uncle. It's more than nothing, though, and that'll have to be enough.

It'll have to be enough.

It doesn't take long for Sokka to get lost. He's not surprised it happened, just surprised it took this long.

Chapter End Notes

[My Tumblr](#)

Thank you so much for the comments and kudos! I hope you guys continue to support me through this work.

the weight of a presence

Chapter Notes

okay things are picking up pace. Next chapter is action. I think.

[My Tumblr](#)

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

Zuko is on deck, yelling about something or the other to the crew, when his uncle mentions it.

"The Avatar hasn't mastered any of the elements yet. He needs a waterbending master."

"I don't see what that has to do with me, uncle. Wouldn't it be better if he didn't master any of the elements?"

"How would he prove himself the Avatar then? We're only going off his word, after all. Do you think that'll be enough for your father?" No. No he does not. Screw uncle and his logical thinking.

"Okay. Then we'll teach him enough waterbending and firebending to prove himself. Problem solved."

"I'm afraid not. The Avatar must learn the elements in order. After water is earth."

"What's your point, uncle?" Zuko snaps, his patience wearing thin. He doesn't have time for theories and hypotheses. He's supposed to be writing a letter to his father asking pardon, or with Jee navigating the quickest and safest route to Caldera or doing anything other than talking.

"Perhaps we should invest in finding him some teachers before we make our way to the Capitol."

"I want to go home, uncle. I've been wanting to go home for three years. I'm not taking a detour just so we can make our enemy stronger. If push comes to shove we'll just invoke the Avatar state."

"Zuko, I understand you miss home, but do not be hasty. What exactly do you think the Firelord is going to do once he gets a hold of the Avatar?"

"I don't know. Turn him to our cause? That's not my business uncle. He sent me on a mission, gave me the chance to redeem myself and I'm not going to throw that away."

"He who sacrifices his conscience to ambition burns a picture to obtain the ashes." Zuko groans, a short angry thing, turning to walk away only to stop at the last minute and turn back.

"Uncle?"

"Yes nephew?"

"Where's the Avatar?"

"Ah, he left after not drinking my tea. I assumed he went to find you."

"Well he didn't. Clearly."

"Yes, I can see that."

"Uncle, if he's not with you and he's not with me, where is he?"

"Ah yes...that might be a problem."

The palace is a big place. Once it was full of running children and bustling servants and muttering guards. Now, the halls are empty and dark and quiet. Now, few servants have kept their jobs, fewer their lives. Now the guards stand silently and pray that assassins kill them before the people they're protecting do.

A palace servant, Azula's new personal one, is quick to rush to her room in search of the Princess. When she doesn't find her there, she rushes to the Prince's room, where the Princess likes to play in mockery of her brother's image.

She knocks and waits.

"What is it?" The Princess demands, tongue sharp and cutting the servant through the door.

"The Firelord requests your presence." The servant responds, voice steady even as her insides quiver.

"Come in." The Princess orders. The servant opens the door with a bow and stays bowing, but does not step past the doorway. Princess Azula is seated on her brother's bed, twirling a shuriken on her finger.

"You know, my brother wanted to wield these." She starts, conversationally. "He came back from his sword training and begged Mai to teach him to throw." She finishes there, the room falling into the condemning silence the rest of the palace has given in to.

The servant doesn't flinch, even as the shuriken is embedded into the wall by her head. She only remains bowed, 5 degrees lower than required, because the Princess is known to be

particular and ruthless.

"What's your purpose here?" The Princess demands, snapping out of what thought she must've been having.

"The Firelord requests your presence." The servant repeats. She remains bowed as Princess Azula walks past her, thanking Agni for sparing her from the Princess' wrath. She glances at the shuriken, and wonders if the Prince ever learned how to throw them.

The palace, big and mighty and red, feels hollow without him.

Zuko is the Crown Prince of a nation at war. He is in charge of a ship and its crew. He has people to protect and duties to fulfill. Instead, he and his crew are tearing the ship apart in search of the Avatar, a water tribe boy who has continuously not drunk his uncle's tea.

Zuko is, reasonably, tired. It takes almost an hour of searching before a crewman makes his way to Zuko, dragging the sputtering Avatar with him.

"Found him, sir."

"Thank you, Bao." The crewmember grunts, shoving the Avatar forward into Zuko before stomping off. Zuko takes a second to collect himself, closing his eyes and breathing deep, before he levels a glare at Sokka.

"Care to explain where you ran off to?"

"Hey, in my defense I never got a tour. It's really easy to get lost when you don't know where anything is."

"Avatar, you stay with me or you stay with my crew. Do not wander around by yourself."

"Uhm, excuse you. I'll wander if I want, thank you very much. And I do, I do want. So...deal with that."

"Agni spare me. Sokka, I am asking you on all levels, to not test my patience. If you need something just ask."

"Actually, now that you mention it, I'm kind of hungry."

"You already had breakfast."

"Yeah well now I want a snack. Something to nibble on, you know?" Zuko doesn't know. He doesn't know and his head hurts from this conversation alone.

"You know what. Why don't you ask the chef?"

"Sure, yeah that makes sense. Uhm...where's the kitchen?" Zuko sighs, looking up at Agni and praying for mercy.

"Follow me."

A servant brings the Firelord his lunch. They bow as they enter, stay bowed as they place his meal, and bow as they're leaving. They don't get past the door.

"Another status report? You think he'd learn by now." The Firelord hasn't addressed the servant, is speaking to himself, but she knows better than to move once he's started speaking.

"It's his mother's fault. She coddled him and nurtured his stupidity. It's a pity she'd corrupted him so deeply. I'm sure he could've been useful, given the right stimulation." The servant says nothing, stays bowed and silent and hopes the Firelord doesn't notice her. She's never been that lucky.

"What are you still doing here?" He demands, the shadows of the room dancing wildly as his flames flare. The servant bows lower.

"Apologies my Lord, if you'll excuse me." The servant is quick to creep towards the door, closing it before straightening with a shaky breath. She shares a terrified look with a guard before scampering off.

The palace is big and the workforce dwindling. There is a lot to be done, to keep these walls standing, with the way they beg to collapse on themselves. To crack and break and crush everything inside.

Anyone with spiritual awareness can feel the deep sadness that radiates from the walls, the burning hatred that stings from the sun, the despair of the ghosts haunting the palace.

The spirits are angry, mourning a lost nation and it's banished prince.

The servant keeps walking, muttering a prayer of thanks. Not many survive being addressed by the Firelord. Perhaps the spirits are protecting her.

The chef of the *Wani* is an intimidating figure. He's tall and burly and throws knives when caught off guard. He doesn't like sharing his space, doesn't want people in his kitchen unless they're offering to help. Zuko respects the chef enough to avoid him. He's not sure why he's breaking this unspoken rule for a water tribe peasant. He tells himself it's because the boy is the Avatar, not because being around him makes Zuko feel nice.

Zuko plans to knock on the door, to alert the chef of his presence and ask for passage. Sokka beats him to it, slamming the door open and walking in like he owns the place. Zuko huffs in annoyance. It seems he isn't the only one 'lacking manners'.

The chef shoots Zuko an annoyed look as if it's his fault the Avatar is a bottomless pot.

"What are you doing in my kitchen?" The chef demands. Zuko could pull rank, remind him who's a chef and who's a prince. He doesn't. Instead he folds his arms and glares Sokka down until he answers for himself.

"Uh you got any snacks? I would prefer some dried meat but I'll take anything at this point."

"I don't. Leave."

"Sheesh. Is it a Fire Nation thing to be so rude? I'll have you know I'm the Avatar."

"Great, I don't care. Out of my kitchen."

"You don't have to care about me, but Zuko, prince of your nation, has granted me access here so I can be fed. I think you should care about that." The chef spins to look at Zuko, who's tensed up and scowling at Sokka. It seems he has no problem pulling rank. He should've left Zuko's name out of it, though.

He clears his throat, turning to face the chef.

"If you'd be so kind as to provide my guest with something to eat." There's a stretched silence, where they just stare at one another, before the chef grunts and turns to search for what Zuko assumes is a snack.

"Ha!" Sokka yells in triumph. Both the chef and Zuko turn to glare at him and he quiets himself quickly. The chef throws a paper pack their way, one which Zuko catches, and stares at them until they leave. When Zuko sneaks a glance in the pack before giving it to Sokka, he finds its fire flakes. A smirk rises in his face, faint but present.

"You got your snack. Now go sit somewhere. And stop not drinking my uncle's tea."

"I don't - man, I'm not, like, a big fan of tea or anything."

"That's not the point. You're disrespecting-" Zuko doesn't get to finish and Sokka doesn't get to eat his snack as they're both distracted by a crash somewhere above them. They glance at each other before running towards the stairs, the sounds of alarmed yelling and metal hitting metal fueling their steps.

Zuko's not sure what he was expecting, but it wasn't pirates and an air bison. He's unsure which one to give his attention. The choice is made for him.

Thank you again for kudos and comments, I swear I read them I just don't have the time to reply right now :(

[My Tumblr](#)

the weight of existence

Chapter Notes

I'm alive. :) i had writer's block sorry

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

Pirates are attacking his ship at the same time an air bison decides to reverse its extinction. Zuko is having a tough day. He kicks a pirate away, only to run into the path of another one, his back to Sokka who is throwing that ungodly weapon that gave Zuko a headache for hours. There's yelling and wind and fire and then the Wani creaks ominously before tilting to the side.

Zuko shares a panicked look with Sokka before looking for his uncle. Some of his crew are on the floor, and Zuko is hoping the red is from their clothes and not something else. The ship tips back, and Zuko breathes a sigh of relief, thinking he's not going to drown. The sound of something blowing up is quick to rob him of that hope.

"They're blowing up the ship! We need to go!" He yells to Sokka, running towards where his uncle is protecting one of the younger nonbenders. "Uncle! We need to go!" Whatever his uncle was planning to say is cut off by the sound of another blast, and then the ship is tilting tilting tilting and Zuko is losing his footing and some *other* water tribe peasant is yelling at Sokka and grabbing his hand and jumping onto the air bison which should not be alive and Zuko hits his head on the railing of his ship and falls underwater.

It's blue blue blue and wet wet wet and Zuko can't breathe. He wrestles with his armour in an attempt to make himself lighter, but the knots are tight and his hands are slippery and he's scared. He's really scared. He can see his ship growing farther away from him, can see the sight of explosions and fire and an air bison.

He's scared he's going to die before he proves himself to his father. He's scared for his uncle and his crew and their ship. He's scared because he's alone. He's so, so alone, and he's scared it's all his fault.

Zuko is five the first time he drowns. His mother is chasing after his sister and he is left unsupervised by the pond. He reaches for a turtleduck and loses his balance. He's five and can't swim and hates baths, so he panics. He flails, feet and arms kicking up water and disturbing the animals above him. He thinks his mother will see or hear or notice and come

for him, but she doesn't. No one does, for what feels like forever. Long enough for Zuko to stop moving and start crying.

Then, big hands come for him and Zuko is pulled out of the water and into the open air, coughing and sobbing and screaming. His father pulls him into an embrace and pats his back, encouraging Zuko to throw up water he'd swallowed. His father is getting wet, from the water Zuko is dripping and from the water he's coughing up, but he doesn't seem to care.

Zuko snuffles, burrowing into his father's neck. His mother gets in trouble, harsh words falling from his father's mouth in reprimand, and Zuko feels bad, because it's his fault not his mother's. He should be getting yelled at, and he should say it, should own up, but father is so warm in a way mother never is, and he rarely touches Zuko, much less a full blown hug.

He stays silent, hides his face in his father's robes, trying to ignore his guilt. He ends up spending the rest of the day with his father, sitting at his side while he works. It's not as fun as feeding turtle ducks or reading his plays, but Zuko enjoys it regardless.

The first thing Zuko notes when his consciousness returns to him, is that he can breathe. The second is that he's cold. Really fucking cold.

"Agni," he breathes, teeth chattering and breath stuttering, "it's fucking freezing." There's silence, broken only by the wind whipping harshly past his ears, and then there's cackling. High and loud. Zuko blinks open his eyes and is met with Sokka laughing heartily, head thrown back in humor. It's a pretty sight, and Zuko takes a moment to appreciate it. Then, he gets angry.

"Where am I?" He implores, sitting up despite the hands trying to push him down. "Stop touching me." He snaps, glaring at the water peasant girl. She glares back.

"Okay, let's calm down." Sokka suggests, resting a hand on both their shoulders. Zuko doesn't shrug it off, despite feeling like he should. Whatever, he must be using his 'peace and balance Avatar' magic. "Zuko you're...uh...well..."

Zuko raises an eyebrow. He already knows the answer to the question. He's clearing on the air bison which is, quite literally, walking on air.

"Don't give me that look. We couldn't just leave you to drown."

"I've drowned before. I would've been fine."

"Yeah, you're welcome by the way."

"What about my ship?" Silence. "My crew?" Heavier silence. "My uncle?"

"Listen, okay. You were the only one overboard, and they were throwing fire at us, and Appa can only hold so many people, okay?"

“You left them to die. We have to go back.”

“We can’t.”

“We have to! I have a responsibility to them. They - I can’t abandon them.”

“I’m sorry, Zuko.” Sokka says, and Zuko can’t even bother with a response, because those were his people and he’s failed them. Again. There’s a bitter feeling growing in Zuko’s chest but he pushes it down into his core and uses it to fuel his chi, warming himself up with the Breath of Fire.

He has to go back. It’s his duty.

Zuko is six when one of his turtleducks dies. His mother comforts him, says all things must die eventually, even him and her, but that only makes him cry. Then Azula asks if they're gonna eat it for dinner, and Zuko cries more. Even Lu Ten tries to console him, but only ends up making Zuko confused, which frustrates him, which makes him scream and cry.

It's his father, with his calculating logic, that makes Zuko understand. It's the reasoning of what he's saying, the truth, that stills Zuko's tears and quiets his sniffles.

Through his father's words, Zuko realises Neema's death is his fault. They were his responsibility and he should've taken better care of them. If he did, maybe she would still be alive. So Zuko has no time to cry, or 'grieve' like his mother said. Zuko has to do better, has to make it up to the others and prove himself worthy.

His father is right, as he so often is, and Zuko is grateful for his advice. He says so at the dinner table with a bow. Wiping his eyes and nose and eating, planning to correct his mistake.

And if cries himself to sleep that night, guilt weighing down on him and crushing his lungs, making him earn every wet gasp, well that's just what he deserves.

Zuko is angry and he has every right to be. He shrugs off all Sokka's attempts at physical connection, ignores the airbender (and he'll have to ask about that when he's not making a point) and scowls at the water tribe peasant. She glares back, but Zuko can tell he is making her uneasy, and he counts that as a victory.

They land at sunset, and Zuko is quick to jump off the bison and walk away. He needs to get back to his crew and his ship and his uncle. They survived, and Zuko knows this because they did not endure three years at sea with the Dragon of the West, former heir to the throne, just to die at the hands of pesky pirates.

He hears Sokka - no, the Avatar - yelling for him, but he ignores it. He ignores it because he has a mission and his mission is to take care of his people and capture the Avatar.

Oh.

Oh, he's going to have to pick one.

That's not good.

Zuko is seven when he gets used to prioritizing others over himself. It starts with his mother. Zuko learns to prioritize her mood over his own. Sometimes she gets distant, or angry or sad, and Zuko learns what she wants from him in those moments. Sometimes she just needs someone to yell at, or rant to, so Zuko sits or stands and remains silent and doesn't hush her harsh accusations of his family, doesn't cry when she glares and screams and breaks things.

Zuko isn't important in those moments, and neither are his opinions or his feelings. And she always apologizes afterwards, with hugs and kisses and tears, so it's okay. It's okay.

The next lesson comes from his father. He learns to prioritize his father's expectations over his health. He has to, if he wants to be worth something, if he wants to be worthy of pride and dignity and *honour*.

His tutors burn reprimands into him, but he doesn't cry. His bones break and his muscles strain, but he doesn't complain. He sees his mother and Lu Ten less, despite their efforts to trick him into a break, but he doesn't abandon his duty.

Zuko is a prince, and a son, and he must be good at both no matter how much it takes out of him.

His uncle teaches him to prioritize people over a mission. To prioritize himself and his body's needs, and his crew and their needs, because they're all human, regardless of the blood in their veins, royal or otherwise.

Zuko is adamant otherwise of course, they have an Avatar to capture and a country to return to, or at least he does, but his uncle is right. Zuko must be ready to fight the Avatar when he appears, he cannot be tired and overworked. He must prioritize his health to achieve his goal, so Zuko succumbs.

And if he prioritizes his uncle and his crew more than himself, well there's something to be said about how good Zuko feels knowing his people are taken care of, and that's enough nourishment for him.

Zuko has a decision to make, and it's not an easy one, but it's one he can't regret. He thinks like Azula would, and comes up with a manipulation tactic. He thinks like his father would, and tries to see the big picture. He thinks like his uncle would, and understands how his decision feeds into the growth of his other desires. He thinks like his mother would, and feels guilty.

Still, he has a mission from the Firelord and from Agni, who speaks through the Firelord. He needs to capture the Avatar, because it's his duty, because it was asked of him, because he wants to go *home*. He wants to go home so bad it feels like it's crushing him physically. He misses the hot sun, the way he felt so close to Agni in a way he hasn't since, misses the sand and trees. Misses his family and the home he grew up in.

The Avatar is the only way for Zuko to get back anything of his old life, and he can't turn that down. Not after losing so much. So Zuko paces the perimeter of where Sokka and his friends are setting up camp and spirals.

He thinks and thinks and hopes and doubts and worries and assures in an endless cycle that eats away at his sanity. And then Zuko is called over to eat, and he almost laughs at the irony. He holds it in, marching over to the fire and seating himself next to Sokka, who is already slurping away at some soup the peasant made.

Zuko only pokes his portion, mixing it around aimlessly while he takes time to analyze his companions. There is an airbender to his right, who is happily chomping on his food while talking excitedly to the peasant. He's young, which means that some airbenders must have survived and went into hiding. Zuko always thought some of them had to be alive, so that isn't very puzzling. What confuses him is what he's doing travelling with water tribe.

Then he looks at Sokka and that question answers itself. So a waterbending and airbending teacher already, that's a good head start. Assuming the girl is a waterbender.

"Sokka said you were cool, and you're a firebender, so does that mean you'll teach me firebending?"

Sokka chokes at his side, coughing obnoxiously and flailing his hands. Zuko spares him a disgusted glance, before focusing his attention back to the airbender.

"No." He replies candidly, watching the boy's face fall with a confused glare. "Why would I teach an airbender firebending?"

"Oh I-"

"He was just teasing you!" Sokka interrupts, practically throwing himself on Zuko to get between him and the airbending boy. Zuko pushes aside the traitorous thoughts that sprout in his head, and shoves Sokka off of him, with a grunt. "What he meant to ask was if you were going to teach me, seeing as I'm the Avatar."

Zuko almost rejects him on impulse, before he realises this is an easy way to enact his plan. Possibilities start forming in Zuko's mind, so many and so beautiful that Zuko ignores the looks the water tribe and air nomad members exchange between each other.

“Master water and air first, and we’ll see.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yes. I need to prove you’re the avatar when we get to Caldera, and we can't risk disrespecting my father because you don’t know firebending.”

“Your father?” The girl questions, anger and suspicion in her tone. Zuko doesn’t know what he did to her, and doesn’t care, far too used to disdain from people he’s never even met.

“Yes. The Firelord.” That somehow makes things worse, and Zuko doesn’t understand how.

Zuko is eight when Azula convinces him to sneak out of the palace with her, only for her to tattle on him and get him in trouble with father.

Zuko is still eight when he tries to pay her back, and gets in trouble. He learns then, that all his plans will backfire on him. Not because they’re bad, or because they’ve been sabotaged, but because he is Zuko, and no Spirit has seen him worthy of their blessing.

Chapter End Notes

Come interact with me on [My Tumblr](#) :)

balancing the weights

Chapter Notes

CW: Implied self-harm, Implied abuse

I've been using too many different povs. Let me know if you guys like it or not.

Come check me at [My Tumblr](#) to see what else I'm working on.

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

Bringing Zuko into the group goes as well as any of Sokka's other plans. Which is to say, the end goal is achieved, albeit messily. He hadn't really been planning on kidnapping the prince and turning him good, but the opportunity presented itself and Sokka is nothing if not an opportunist.

So, he manages to convince Katara and Aang to let him stay, while said prince paces the perimeter. And maybe if he throws in some firebending and leaves out the prince part, well no one has to know.

Except everyone finds out because Zuko can't keep his mouth shut. Sokka sends both Aang and Katara panicked looks that say 'go along with it', and 'i'll explain it later' when Zuko corrects Aang about the bending training. And then he just closes his eyes when Zuko mentions his father.

Sokka has spent all his life, minus one year, riling his sister up on purpose. He knows the signs, and can tell when she's about to explode. He doesn't bother trying to calm her down, knowing there's no use.

"The Firelord?! You're the prince?!"

"Kind of." Then his sister does the impossible, and redirects her anger away from Zuko and onto him instead.

"Sokka! Did you know about this?"

"How would I not know, I spent like two days with him. And he announced it to the whole village."

"I can't believe you! How could you do this?!" And then Aang, sweet, frozen in ice for a century Aang, interjects.

"What's so wrong with being the prince?"

“He's the prince of the Fire Nation Aang! They started the war.”

“Yeah but, that was one hundred years ago, right? Wasn't he just born into it?”

“That doesn't matter. He's the prince of the nation that killed - that - they killed a lot of people!” Sokka chances a glance at Zuko, who is tense and scowling and breathing very intently. There's a muscle in his jaw that jumps with the way it's clenched, and Sokka swallows, tearing his eyes away from it and rearranging his priorities.

“Let's take a second guys. I mean, he agreed to teach me, the Avatar, so he can't be that bad.”

“I didn't agree to teach you firebending.” Tui, why can't Zuko just shut up.

“Not helping your case here buddy.”

“I'm not going to sit here and listen to you spit on my people. I am proud of my roots.”

“Really not helping.”

Azula does not miss her brother. She has no reason to. He was a poor excuse for an older brother, only ever serving to make her look better by being so pathetic. She doesn't miss him, not when the sunlight glints off his shuriken, not when a turtleduck quacks at her, not when she passes a tree he used to climb, or the roof she pushed him off of.

Not when her father's temper rises and Zuko is nowhere to take the brunt of it, not when the servants scamper away from her and the halls quiet. She should be enjoying their fear, she does, but it's less satisfactory without Zuko to balance it out.

No, Azula does not miss her brother, but she acknowledges that times were easier when he was there. Easy doesn't get her where she needs to be, though. Everything Azula has, she's worked hard for. All Zuko did was drag her down.

It's a blessing really, that he's gone now. He was weak, and his weakness was contagious, if her cousin was any proof. Too much time with Zuko and he died in a battle he should've won easily. Azula is not going to let the same thing happen to her.

So she trains and trains. She works hard and pleases her father and puts Zuko to the back of her mind. He's not important, never was, even when he held the title of Crown Prince.

He's not important, and Azula reminds herself of this every time she wakes up with him on her mind, everytime she enters his room and finds it empty, everytime the palace whispers memories in her ear.

He's not important, and she doesn't miss him.

She *doesn't* .

Sokka somehow manages to calm down Katara, despite the way Zuko is actively provoking her, and Aang is accidentally provoking her. He's willing to let her take some of her anger out on Zuko and himself, but Aang doesn't truly understand the war, and the state it's left the world in, their village in, he doesn't even understand the state it's left his own people in, so Sokka drags her away and helps her breathe before she angers herself into a panic attack.

He brings her back once she's calmed down, and has promised not to kill Zuko and to apologise to Aang, and sits next to the prince causing all of his troubles.

"All right. Let's try this again. Zuko is my plus one, because I'm the Avatar and I get to have plus ones." Katara, still glaring at Zuko but not screaming, stops Aang before he can interject.

Sokka sort of explained his lie to her, enough for her to understand without offering any compromising information. Sokka manages to get them all on the same page, yes Zuko will be travelling with them, yes he will be pulling his own weight, no he's not going to try to kill any of them in their sleep.

It's smooth going, because Sokka has taken control of the situation and Sokka is amazing, except Zuko keeps muturing things under his breath and Katara has sharp ears. So yes, Katara does go back to screaming, and yes, Zuko gives her as good as he gets and returns her emotions with rationale that doesn't even really make sense, unless you think about it in a roundabout way, and yes Zuko is making his own life harder for no reason, but nobody gets hurt and nobody dies, and that's good enough for Sokka.

Good enough that he pulls out his sleeping bag and promptly knocks out, with the fire still roaring in the background, and another argument brewing. It's not his problem anymore.

Azula doesn't have to fear her father hurting her. That's what mom is for. Only mom abandons them. No problem, because Zuko picks up her slack. Except Zuko leaves her as well, too incompetent to maintain his role in the palace when it was literally handed to him on a platter. Azula had to train, had to work nonstop and be talented. Zuko was just born first and born male, and that kept him alive despite all his mistakes, and there were many, many mistakes.

No matter, because Azula made her way to the top regardless. Except, it's not that fun being first when nobody else is last. Azula doesn't fear her father hurting her, she has no reason to. She pleases him, and he sends her nothing but approving glances, unlike Zuko who got disgust and disapproval and still tripped over himself to be the center of those looks.

Azula isn't like that. She knows her place. Knows when to be invisible, and when to be proud. When to stand beside her father and when to stand behind him. She is better than her worthless brother in all the ways that matter, yet he still manages to overshadow her. He's not even in the palace, hasn't been for three years, and it's always Zuko this and Zuko that. It's all the servants talk about, so she teaches them not to talk.

Except now the halls are silent, and it makes her thoughts feel that much louder.

Azula doesn't fear her father hurting her, because even though everybody else loves Zuko, he loves her, and that's more than Zuko, with scars in the shapes of hands, with burns and cuts from tutors and father and Azula, but mostly from himself, will ever have.

The thought should fill her with a sense of superiority. Except.

Azula shouldn't have to fear her father hurting her, except sometimes she has to hold back a flinch. Except sometimes she wakes up in a cold sweat, the image of Zuko on his knees and burning at the hand of his father searing her eyelids, except Zuko's place is replaced by her. Except sometimes she wishes Zuko was there, so she wouldn't have to worry about who will fill up the space he left.

Except, except, except.

Sokka wakes up in the morning and has a hunch that it's going to be a rough day. Not bad, just rough. Zuko proves him right almost immediately. He's yelling about some letter and his honour, Katara yelling back how nobody cares. Sokka's starting to wonder if it would've been easier to just let Zuko drown. He thinks yes.

When Aang chimes in is when Sokka knows he needs to handle the situation.

"What's the problem at this hour of the morning?"

"His royal highness here wants to write a letter to his father." Katara spits, shoving at Zuko when he tries to explain himself.

"Okay?" Sokka asks. It doesn't matter either way, they don't have a messenger bird or something to write.

"He wants to write about Aa-the Avatar. You, us. To his father, the Firelord."

"Oh. Yeah, sorry big guy, that's a problem." Sokka is expecting Zuko to refute, but he just scowls, arms crossed around his chest, and that is a little suspicious. "Why didn't you write it on the boat?"

"Ship. It's a ship. And I was trying to, okay, but I was...busy." And, okay, Sokka doesn't know Zuko that well, only met him two or three days prior, but he knows Zuko is a horrible liar.

“Oh my God.” Sokka gasps, grabbing Katara’s hand and pulling on it. She grunts, but remains standing as opposed to where he is sitting. “You don’t want to send him a letter. You just have to.”

Zuko flushes, caught in a lie and embarrassed about it. “Of course I want to. I’m his loyal son. I just - I needed to make sure it was written to perfection before I sent it.”

“Why does that matter if he’s your dad?”

“Because he’s the Firelord.” Zuko says, like it’s obvious. Sokka brushes it off as Fire Nation customs. They do seem like an overly formal nation, when Sokka thinks about it. Although Aang described it differently, but one hundred years of war can change any nation he supposes.

“Okay well, we don’t even have writing supplies, so let’s just get a move on.” Zuko nods easily enough, and Katara still looks irritated but she gets to packing quietly, whispering with Aang and sending Zuko distrustful looks every now and then.

Sokka decides he deserves ten extra minutes, and goes back to sleep.

Azula doesn’t need anyone. She didn’t need her mother and she doesn’t need her brother. She didn’t need them when she was younger and she doesn’t need them now. All they ever served to do was remind her how much better than them she was.

She doesn’t need anyone other than herself. She’s gotten where she is because of her natural talent and her determination. Her brother had nothing to do with that, her mother even less.

She barely even needed her father. She respected him, of course, he was her Firelord first and foremost, but if need be she could survive without him. Relying on people was dangerous, was setting oneself up for failure, so Azula didn’t rely on anyone. No matter how much she wanted to.

And she wanted to. She wanted to rely on the comfort her mother was supposed to provide, on the protection her brother should’ve offered her. But they didn’t, so she couldn’t.

They had failed her, and served as Azula’s first lesson of independence. She couldn’t trust anyone to do their job, to meet her expectations, so she had to do everything for herself, by herself. That way she guaranteed excellence. No one was on her level anyways, all they would do is disappoint.

So no, Azula doesn’t need anyone. Doesn’t rely on anyone and doesn’t trust in anyone. Still, sometimes, in her weakest moments, she wishes she could.

Hope you enjoyed! Comments and kudos are always lovely, don't be shy. Next chapter is the air temple.

[My Tumblr](#)

life as it ends

Chapter Notes

CW: Implied self-harm, Referenced child abuse, Referenced Genocide

Okay i know i took forever. My bad. Anyways, how you guys feel about me adding a nice pov?

Come find me at [My Tumblr](#) :)

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

Travelling with the Avatar's group turns out to be exhausting. Zuko can't say he's surprised. They're always fighting, one argument after another, and they keep delaying. They're supposed to be going to the North Pole so Sokka and Katara can get a waterbending teacher, instead they're landing in the ruins of an air temple.

Zuko huffs another steamy breath, enjoying the way Katara side-eyes him. He still hasn't forgiven her for the words she'd said about his family and his nation, and revels in reminding her just what he can do. It's a little cruel, perhaps, but Zuko owes her nothing, and is only here for the sake of Sokka. And his nation. For the sake of Sokka and his nation. That's what he meant.

He jumps off of the bison, letting his hand card through the fur as he waits for the others to get down. He's not exactly sure why they're at an air temple. Zuko's checked all of them before, during his first year at sea, and knows no airbenders still reside in them, so he sees no reason to be here. Still, it's possible the airbender is just trying to show Sokka the culture.

Zuko's zoning out mostly, looking around and seeing ghosts of the skeletons he and his uncle disposed of. He wonders if he should tell Aang about it, and show him where they put all the ashes. After statues and ball games and exploration, Zuko pulls Aang aside, ignoring the suspicious look Katara (who is apparently Sokka's sister) shoots him.

Aang looks up at him, open and naive and young, and Zuko can feel all the ways he planned this slipping out through his ears.

"Uhm, well." Oh Agni he's fumbling, he's making a fool of himself and Aang is still staring so earnestly and he's much too young for Zuko to have to say this. "When me and my uncle came here, there were some - well we cremated the remains of the bodies we found and I just thought you might want to know. To pay your respects or something."

"Bodies? You found bodies here?"

“Yeah, honestly I can’t believe they’ve been here for one hundred years. There were fire nation soldiers as well, so one would think someone would have dealt with their bodies.”

“One hundred years?”

“Yeah from the-” but Aang isn’t looking at him anymore, he’s staring at Sokka and Katara who look caught in a lie, “-genocide. I heard airbenders scatter their dead, so you can do that if you want.”

“Yeah.” Aang replies, solemn and quiet. His head is hanging, and Zuko feels guilty. “Take me to them.” So Zuko does. He shows Aang the rows and rows of containers containing ashes, each unlabeled. The ashes of his soldiers are probably at the bottom of the sea, never properly laid to rest. The plan was to take them back to Caldera, since there was no way of knowing or finding their family, the least they could do was return them to the capital where their remains could be closest to Agni. But with Zuko’s banishment they never quite made it back to fire nation waters, much less the capital. And then the pirates attacked and, most likely, sunk his boat, with his uncle and his crew and everything his uncle managed to grab from his room. The fact that Zuko has nothing but the clothes on his back, less than he did when he was banished, sits heavy on his mind. He ignores it nonetheless. He has a mission, and once that mission is completed and father accepts him, he can be better. He can fish their bodies out of the ocean and give them a proper send off and be the prince they deserve. Or so he tells himself.

“Thank you Zuko.” Aang says, head hanging sadly. He picks up an urn, turning it around before opening it. “What’s this?” He asks, leaning the urn so Zuko can see inside. Oh.

“Some of them had knick knacks so we just left it with them.” Aang nods, and when Zuko looks up and around it's only to see Katara glaring at him. Sokka is trying to talk to her but her gaze remains steadfast. Zuko is about to say something, the sound of Aang tinkering with the urns background, but then the wind gets harsh and Sokka’s eyes widen and a lot of things happen at once.

Zuko’s first funeral is his cousin’s, at nine years old. They cremate his remains as is custom and his uncle spends the next month in prayer before deciding to leave for some ‘spirit journey’. Zuko doesn’t understand what that means, but he knows he can never see his cousin again and his uncle has left him alone.

They set up a shrine in his honour, as is custom. Zuko visits it everyday, hoping tales of ghosts are true, so that he can see his cousin one more time. So that he can say goodbye, and I love you, and I’m sorry. He says all those things to the shrine, to the picture of Lu Ten on it and to the incense burning, but at the end of the day there is no sign to show that Lu Ten’s heard him.

Zuko wonders if he’s with uncle, his father, instead of by the shrine, with Zuko. He shoves down the betrayal at the abandonment, because he had no claim to his cousin in the first place. He has no claim to anyone.

They give him war titles post-mortem, to salute his sacrifice, as is custom. Briefly, Zuko wonders about his own titles. He is a prince, but has no claim to the throne. His father plans to send him to the front lines, and Zuko plans to go. Maybe he will be like his uncle, and be a general, maybe he will die before he gets the chance, and be called a myriad of titles that serve him no good in the afterlife, maybe...well maybe the war will be over before Zuko is old enough to fight.

They have a party to celebrate his life, as is custom. Nobles and war generals file into the palace, mingling and laughing and smiling. Zuko, for the life of him, can't find what's so funny. His cousin is dead, his uncle gone, his mother fading and these people are in his home, laughing. He wants to scream and yell and set fire to all of them, to send them to the front lines and see if they'd still be laughing after being crushed to death.

He does none of those things, only stands by his father's side, fists clenched and body trembling. His father lays a heavy hand on his shoulder, more of an order than a comfort. Zuko stills immediately, and lets his mind wander to the peasant festival they are throwing in the town square. He wonders if that party is any better than this one. He wonders why the parties were separated in the first place. He gets no answers.

Zuko is ten when his uncle is removed from the line to the throne, his grandfather dies, his mother leaves, and he becomes Crown Prince as his father becomes Firelord. This, is not as custom.

Some powerful airbending, heartfelt speeches and hugs later, they are emptying the ashes into the air and leaving all the knickknacks at the roots of a tree 'for the birds to have easy access to'. Zuko, who has little to no knowledge on how air nomads deal with their dead, says nothing.

"Aren't you going to empty the ashes of your soldiers?" Sokka asks him, somewhere off to the side.

"They aren't here."

"Oh. Makes sense. Where are they?"

"On my ship." Zuko says, and he can't help the venom in his words. If they'd just let him go back then maybe he could've done something, saved someone. Now he just has more ghosts weighing on his mind, and his shoulders. Sokka looks rightfully ashamed, but Zuko doesn't feel any better for it, so he clenches his jaw and looks off to the side.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Zuko refrains from saying it's worth wolfbat shit, nodding his head jerkily and breathing quietly through his mouth to avoid doing or saying something he'll regret. The Avatar may be apologising to him, but Zuko doubts it will go well if he were to reject that apology.

“Let’s go guys.” Aang says from up in front, head hanging but hand in Katara’s. Zuko’s grateful for the excuse to walk away from Sokka, and ends up leading the group back the way they came.

The lemur they had somehow managed to find makes itself comfortable on Zuko’s shoulder, rubbing at his cheek before skittering to hide inside his shirt, his white and black form visible through the thin fabric of Zuko’s red silk.

Zuko takes comfort in the touch it provides, absentmindedly petting it through his shirt as he thinks about his soldiers. His people. His nation. He wants to be back in Caldera, returning fallen fighters back to their homeland, feeling the heat from Agni and from the magma beneath his country’s floor.

He wants to go back in time and fight better and save his crew and his uncle and the ashes and the animals and his swords and the only things he still had to his name besides the clothes on his back.

He gets to do none of these things, no matter how much he wishes and wishes and prays. He tells himself it’s his fault, he has no one else to blame, and that he’s willing to accept responsibility, but if he sits on the edge furthest from everyone, leaning over the side and contemplating the height of the drop, well, that’s his business.

Zuko is eleven when he begins to adjust to his new life. So much has changed, and yet everything is the same. Zuko has lost four family members, less competition for his father’s attention, and yet he still receives none of it.

He is the Crown Prince, and yet he is still worthless next to his father. Next to his sister. He will never compare to either of them, to their greatness or power or strength. At least, that’s what his father tells him, and his mother isn’t there to refute it, so it must be the truth.

Azula seems to be thriving with all the change, blooming under father’s attention. She visits him less, too busy training for father, or eating with father, or shadowing father. She’s excelling at a quicker pace than before, and Zuko can’t tell if he wants her progress to slow down or if he wants his own to speed up. Neither happens.

Zuko is eleven and a half when his father’s indifference quickly becomes anger. He’s used to his father switching between both. Sometimes he’ll leave Zuko alone for months, and then check up on him, as if expecting some miraculous improvement, and get incredibly angry when there is none. It’s never been this bad though.

Usually Zuko can still train the day after, if a bit stiffly. Usually he heals on his own, without any external encouragement. Usually he doesn’t scar. It isn’t Zuko’s first burn. His tutors used to try to force firebending out of him with their own flames, long before he presented. It’s the first burn that causes Zuko to take weeks off to heal, the first burn that pops and fizzles and oozes. The first burn that leaves a red, angry mark, stretching across his upper back, from where his father held him down with one hand, the other hitting his backside and legs relentlessly.

It is the first burn that leaves a mark impossible to ignore, but it is not the last.

Zuko is twelve when he becomes more scar than skin. He improves though, because he no longer has a choice, and fear, like his father always said, is a strong motivator. Zuko is twelve when he starts causing the marks on his skin.

They stop at Kyoshi Island next, for whatever reason, and Zuko finds himself worrying about things smaller than his Princely duties, which feel infinitely bigger. It seems his life is not going to make itself easier.

Chapter End Notes

[My Tumblr :\)\)\)](#)

and we keep moving

Chapter Notes

Can't think of any major content warnings. This is mostly a filler. Anyways, I didn't realise it'd been a year since I last updated !! Life got really hectic. Oopsies.

Almost as soon as they land on Kyoshi, they are knocked out. Zuko wakes up sometime (probably because he has brain damage from...well let's just say Zuko has suffered a lot of head injuries) after the others, and is given the rundown. They were knocked out and tied up by the island's main defence team, but the Avatar placated them, and they were welcomed to stay. Zuko, having become accustomed to Sokka's skill in soothing and redirecting, is not surprised.

He follows Sokka around, on a tour, because Aang is too busy entertaining a growing group of girls with his airbending. The people they walk past stare, body language speaking of their confusion and wariness. They eye his scar and his clothing and whisper to each other. It's not the first time Zuko's been ogled and gossiped about, but just because he's used to it doesn't make it any easier.

Still, Zuko is a prince, and proud to be Fire Nation, so he squares his shoulder, and raises his head and glares down anyone who stares for too long. They look away, caught, and Zuko pretends that it's because he's naturally intimidating, and not because the scar makes him look something fierce.

Sokka drags him around, never pausing for too long, until they eventually come to a stop outside what looks like a dojo. Sokka is still beside him, shoulders raised and back tensed. He's muttering to himself, as though preparing himself for something, and his fingers twitch where they're wrapped around Zuko's wrist.

Then he charges forward, with false bravado, as though he didn't spend a minute outside hyping himself up, and Zuko trails behind, pretending like his eyes aren't stuck to where Sokka's cool hands meets Zuko's heat.

It is a dojo, low and behold, with female soldiers training, all geared up in makeup and kimonos. They wolf whistle when they catch sight of Sokka, eyes mocking but not unkind, until they see Zuko and they become less amused and more on edge. Kyoshi is neutral, Zuko reminds himself.

Five minutes later, Zuko watches Sokka get his ass beat from the sidelines. Apparently Sokka has some misguided understandings about his own capabilities, and the leader of the so-called Kyoshi warriors is more than happy to set him on the straight and right path. Sokka

storms out, and Zuko, taking that as his own cue to leave, gets up, only to be pushed back down by one of the other girls.

“You’re not here to cause trouble, now are you?” The leader says, turning from where she watched Sokka leave to give him an appraising look.

“Not anymore than the others.” Which is true. Zuko may be the prince of the Fire Nation, and sure he could see how his father might want him to conquer Kyoshi and turn it Fire Nation, but that’s not his mission right now.

“Good. Kyoshi may be neutral, but you fire folk aren’t known for respecting that kinda thing.”

“You guys stayed out of the war, and we let you. Best not to look an ostrich horse gift in the beak.”

“Thought you were rebelling against your nation to help the Avatar. Yet here you are defending it.”

“If you really trusted that, I wouldn’t be sitting here, now would I?” Zuko snaps, sparks of flame slipping from between his teeth. The heat comforts him, but only manages to raise the hackles of the peasant girls in front of him.

“Watch yourself, ashmaker. You may have firebending, but you’re outnumbered.”

“Do you threaten everyone who visits your island or am I special?”

“Just because we’re neutral doesn’t mean we’re without our reservations.”

“I see that.” Zuko gets up, sick of being looked down on. He walks forward, knocking shoulders with a warrior girl when she refuses to move, breaking through the circle they had formed around him. He’s agitated and uneasy, but the last thing he needs is to set them off by yelling. So he stuffs his hands in his pockets and bites his lip and leaves, walking until he can no longer see the dojo.

It’s not the first time Zuko’s been threatened by a group of girls, and it certainly will not be the last, but that doesn’t mean that he enjoys it. His palms are damp with sweat, and trembling slightly, no matter how tight he squeezes them into fists.

Nothing good ever comes from being knocked on your ass around a fighter, much less a whole group of them. And maybe being down on the floor while someone towered over him, with barely hidden disdain in their eyes, reminded Zuko of the same scene somewhere else.

But, well, that’s another story. One that he’s eager to bury with a distraction in the form of Katara.

Jee stood beside his prince and retired general, watching as the man made friendly with vendors and healers alike. Their ship was beyond hope, lost somewhere in the middle of the ocean, along with nearly half of their group. The animals had not been spared.

It was easy enough for what was left of the crew to disarm and defeat the pirates. They threw them overboard and took over the ship, and made their way to an Earth Kingdom dock. Of course, being fire nation and arriving on a pirate ship didn't exactly work in their favour, but a change of clothes and a smiling demeanour was enough to get people to sell to them.

So Jee let General Iroh sweet talk the stall workers and acted as the muscle, carrying whatever Iroh managed to buy. Despite all the easy going smiles, and flirty laughter, Jee could see Iroh's worry. It was in the twitch of his eyebrow, the set of his shoulders, the jump in his clenched jaw. He was worried about his nephew, and if Jee were being honest, so was he.

They thought they'd lost him when he fell overboard and didn't resurface. And then they did lose him, when the Avatar and his friends fished the prince out of the ocean and flew off with him. As much as the young prince annoyed Jee to no end, he was a child. So glaringly young and inexperienced, once you looked past his anger.

Jee has been on the Wani since the beginning, has taken shifts watching over the delirious thirteen year old prince as he was taken over by fever. His body fighting infection while trying to heal from the gruesome burn on his face. It's a burn far too big and much too deep to be on the face of a young firebender, much less the face of a prince.

Training accident or not, no one that young should have to deal with that pain. Much less isolated from his family and his home. Jee isn't sure what the full story is, but he doesn't like it. 'Cowardice'. He scoffs at the thought. The prince is more reckless than cowardly. That boy has found himself on the edge of death more times than Jee himself, which is equal parts worrying, irritating and endearing.

He's so desperate for approval, for purpose, it's painful to watch. Jee found himself wishing on more than one occasion, that General Iroh would put his foot down and stop this ridiculous goose chase, for Zuko's sake if not for the rest of the crew's. But the general is too kind, too weak to his nephew and his whims. It would be heartwarming if it didn't take Jee all over the world for nothing.

Well, not nothing, he supposes. They have confirmed sightings and exposure to the Avatar and an airbender; yet General Iroh has made no moves to report it to the Firelord. He hasn't even mentioned it. Perhaps he's keeping the information close, so he can bring the Avatar home and win the nation's favour, and then reclaim the throne.

Or maybe there's more going on here, that Jee has and will continue to remain willfully ignorant of.

Zuko is quick to regret approaching Katara. She's pissier than usual, and her foul mood feeds into Zuko's. They end up fighting, their emotions bouncing off and fueling each other. He can

see the villagers exchanging nervous glances, and he knows he should walk away.

It would be fine if it was Sokka and Katara arguing. They're water tribe and siblings, but Zuko's eyes, his hair, the red of his garments, makes the villagers uneasy. The last thing they need is reason to suspect he's violent (which he is but that is besides the point).

He should walk away, and he's planning to, but then she mutters something under her breath and it sets him off all over again. There's a crowd gathering, and Zuko knows he's already on thin ice, he just got back from being threatened for Agni's sake. He knows that if he doesn't stop, and soon, that the Kyoshi warriors will make themselves known, but he can't. He's so angry, and Katara's blatant disrespect for him, for his people, upsets him so much.

Zuko's been banished from his country, stripped of his crown and his bloodline, for disrespect and here she is, yelling whatever she wants, wherever she wants and only getting a slightly exasperated "Katara" from her brother. It's sickening. Zuko has done less and received more, and yet here she stands, perfectly at ease.

He is a prince, by blood and he deserves to be treated as such. He deserves to be taken seriously. He has so much anger. Anger at the world, at his God, at himself, and it's like she actively tries to pull it out of him, only to shove it back in his face.

He knows he should step away, he should take a breath and calm down and remove himself from this situation before it spirals, before the scream that's been tearing at his chest manages to crawl its way up his throat and out his mouth but he can't, he can't, he can't.

Sokka ends up having to drag him away from his sister and back to the beach, where Zuko plops down and digs his palms into his eyes. He's mortified. He's supposed to be a prince damn it, and yet he let his anger get the best of him and threw a tantrum like a fucking child. His uncle would be so disappointed.

Agni, why can't Zuko just control himself? Why must he always damage his family's name with his behaviour? As if being born incompetent wasn't enough, he had to go and be childish too.

It's a miracle it took his father so long to banish him.

"Zuko?" And there's Sokka. Zuko doesn't want to have to face him, can't stomach the disgust that must be painting his features. He's jeopardising his position in the group, jeopardising his one ticket home, all over a few little girls. "Zuko?" He repeats, dragging out the end. The tone is surprisingly playful, and Zuko manages to dart a glance at Sokka from between his fingers.

The Avatar is smiling patiently at him, and Zuko is glad that his hands are hiding his face, because if his face looks as hot as it suddenly feels he thinks he'd die of embarrassment.

"Girls, right? Listen, I get it, Katara is annoying, even when she doesn't have it out for you, which she most certainly does, but fighting is not gonna boost her image of you, or anyone else's. Especially not when you're so vibrantly..."

“Fire Nation?” Zuko finishes, because they’ve had similar conversations enough for Zuko to guess the direction.

“Red. Speaking of, we should probably get you a change of clothes. Kyoshi is generally self sufficient, so someone might be willing to spare some clothes.”

“I’m fine with what I’m wearing.”

“Yeah for now, but what about if it tears, or when it gets too dirty, or when we step foot on land that is decidedly not neutral.” And okay, Sokka has a point, but that doesn’t mean Zuko has to listen to it. “Just, wear something that isn’t red, and stop getting into screaming matches with my sister.”

Zuko sucks his teeth, turning his face away from Sokka, but nods. He’s not stupid and he’s not unreasonable. He knows people hate him (even if he doesn’t really understand why, the Fire Nation is trying to do a good thing, if only the other nations would accept it) and he knows that he’s not earning any brownie points with his dashing personality.

Sokka is just trying to help him. It’s bordering on the line of treason (wearing different colours and mingling with those who fight against them), but maybe father will overlook it once Zuko presents him with the Avatar.

Zuko turns a glance to where Sokka has sat next to him on the beach, and is doodling in the sand and gets a feeling in his chest. He doesn’t really know how to describe it. It’s bittersweet, a mix of enjoying the moment and knowing it won’t last and - oh. Oh. Zuko doesn’t really want to turn Sokka in.

That’s certainly going to become a problem.

Jee sits in the navigation room with his General, both of them pouring over a map.

“I believe it would be in the Avatar’s best interest to master waterbending.”

“So you think they’re going to the North Pole?”

“It’s highly likely.”

“That’s quite a way, my Prince.”

“Good company on a journey makes the way seem shorter.”

“Ay, who’s to say we’ll even catch up to them? Between the speed of their animal and slowness of our new vessel, the situation is already looking hopeless. Not to mention that the North Pole is an enemy fortress. Plus, we’ve got to account for their headstart, our detour, our lost men-”

“Lieutenant, can I interest you in a cup of calming tea?” Jee doesn’t want tea, barely even likes tea, but the General is also his prince and while Jee might be insubordinate, he is not rude.

“Of course.” Jee is led to the general’s quarters, past the young prince’s quiet quarters, and directed to have a seat while the general goes about brewing tea.

“Do you believe in destiny, lieutenant?” The general asks, once he’s sat down and had a sip of his tea. Jee has yet to touch his own, and hopes he can get away without ever taking a sip.

“No.”

“That’s quite alright. Faith is a fickle thing, not everyone is suited for it. I believe that my nephew’s destiny is...connected to that of the Avatar’s. One way or another he would have found himself separated from us and with the Avatar.”

“And what makes you believe this?” Jee asks, and his face is carefully blank, but his armour creaks judgmentally when he rolls his shoulder back. The smirk that tugs on the general’s lips lets Jee know this did not go unnoticed.

“Do you know the difference between being spirit blessed and spirit chosen?” Jee doesn’t, but the general continues before jee can say that. “Anyone who can bend the element of their nation is spirit blessed, for the spirit has blessed them with that gift. But those who are spirit chosen are meant to act as the representative on earth for that spirit. The first Fire Lord was spirit chosen by Agni, and then his son, and his son’s son. Hence a monarchy as opposed to a democracy.”

“Right.” Jee says, with no inflection because he hasn’t quite caught up.

“It’s been years since we’ve seen evidence of the royal family members being spirit chosen.”

“Is the princess not?”

“She is blessed, without a doubt, but not chosen. No one has been chosen since Sozin. For quite some time I believed that Agni had abandoned us, but it seems he was just waiting.”

“For?”

“For Zuko of course.”

“And why him, instead of you or his sister? Instead of his father?”

“Because Zuko was born with something we lack. Honour.”

Somehow, Sokka goes from discrediting the Kyoshi Warriors, to learning from them, to crushing on the leader. It’s a little annoying, if Zuko’s being honest. If it isn’t Sokka gushing in his ear about the kyoshi leader (he knows her name is Suki, how could he not when it’s all Sokka talks about, but he refuses to use it for the sake of pettiness) then it’s Aang yammering

about his airbending tricks (Zuko isn't really sure how exactly Aang is an airbender and alive, but he's been too scared to ask, in case Aang tornadoes him or removes the air from his lungs).

It's grinding on all of Zuko's nerves. His temper is already fraying because of this goddamn island and its stupid people, and Sokka and Aang are not helping. Zuko's scared he's going to blow up again, and then get stranded on this island, whose people would not hesitate to gut him, especially if they learnt of his family tree.

So, Zuko makes the smartest decision he can think of. He starts avoiding them. They barely notice, too caught up in themselves. The break from them is..relieving. They are so high-energy and manic and loud and sure, Zuko can be those things too, but not constantly. It's so draining being around them and they're so unpredictable. And annoying. Agni. Zuko isn't naturally a violent person (something his father never failed to condemn him for) but they boil his blood so effortlessly sometimes. Mostly Katara, but for the sake of being fair Zuko is generalising his feelings.

Regardless, Zuko is enjoying his breather away from the group, so he's a bit...not sad but disappointed when they prepare to leave. Sure, Zuko hates this island and its people, but the beach is nice and quiet and the ocean is soothing. It has been home to him for longer than he cares to state, and Zuko feels like he can breathe here.

Everything on the island feels so detached from the war, from the Fire Nation and his father and his life. Zuko has been under pressure his whole life, but here the only pressure he has is to not burn anything down and not talk to anyone, which is relatively easy.

But, well, Katara is sick of wasting time, eager to get a waterbending master, and Sokka, rather reluctantly (probably because of his stupid crush on a stupid girl), agrees that they should get a move on. And as the Avatar, his word is final. So Zuko helps pack up, and ignores Katara's glare on his back, and jumps up to the saddle, watching as the island becomes smaller.

Sitting across from Sokka, a water tribe boy he likes more than he probably should (because he's disgusting and dishonourable and stupid stupid stupid), Zuko feels the pressures of expectations coming back to weigh on his shoulder and drag him down down down (the pressure feels so heavy, like it is forcing him through the ground, down to the core of the earth, where the heat feels like his father's scalding gaze) even as Appa takes him higher and higher.

The crew of the Wani, those still fit to serve, make their way to an Earth Kingdom island with their stolen pirate vessel. The general says it's because he's always wanted to visit, and there was no time for sight seeing when Zuko was in charge. When Jee checks the map, he sees the island is on its way to the North Pole. His apprehension increases when he sees the general eyeing what he's looking at, and only receives a bland smile as a response.

There is no way any of this is going to end well for anyone.

even when we feel we can't

Chapter Notes

Hecks yeah I'm updating. Hecks yeah.

There is a room in the halls of the palace. It has four walls, all painted a black so deep that the colour swallows what little light manages to get lost in the room. It has a single torch light that hangs high on the back wall. It requires basic fire bending to light, by no means difficult. A young bender however, who may struggle to light the smallest spark, may find this task challenging. If they were even aware of the torch's existence to begin with. The ceiling is high, as though the room was made to facilitate a giant. Despite the room's height, though, it is small and cluttered. It is a storage room, housing things too old and too useless to be seen by the palace's inhabitants. It barely has space for the items filling it, much less for a person. It is no place for a child. And yet.

Really, it's just Sokka's luck that he'd get swallowed by some vengeful spirit. The spirits love to bite Sokka in the ass because of his disrespect - which is just ridiculous. He's disrespectful to everyone, the spirits aren't special. Whatever. All he's trying to say is that he isn't that surprised. He feels bad about dragging Zuko with him though. He was just trying to talk to the dude in private and then boom ! angry spirit monster.

Sokka chances a look at Zuko, though it's hard to see him in the dark. He's pacing back and forth, going further away each time before coming back to Sokka's side.

"What are you doing?" He asks, after Sokka loses sight of Zuko, how far he went.

"I'm testing the perimeters of this space. It seems big, all things considered, but I'm sc- I'm worried I'll lose you if I go too far ahead."

"Oh. Well then stop. Let's just stay here. Aang will figure something out."

"What?"

"What?"

"Sokka," Zuko says, his look of disbelief clear with how close they are, "Aang's twelve."

"Well yeah but he's the A-a-a-a-airbender..of...the group. Yes. And airbenders lived in a temple. Which makes them spiritual?"

“Your reasoning is flawed. You’re the Avatar can’t you...like...ask your other selves?” Zuko asks, which is just about the dumbest thing Sokka’s ever heard. Zuko tends to be a smart guy but he’s also an idiot.

“Oh sure, let me just send them a scroll. Oh no, I don't have any paper, or ink, or even a messenger bird. Oh well. Guess I can't commune with Spirits!”

“I am amazed by your ignorance.” Sokka splutters, offended. He can’t get a word in to defend himself before Zuko continues. “I meant for you to meditate and talk to your past selves.”

“Sorry, I’m not sure if you got the memo, my past selves are, you know, dead.”

“You are in the belly of a spirit...and still don’t believe in spirits?”

“You’re so smart.”

“What kind of Avatar are you?”

It is an accident the first time it happens. Zuko is following behind him, talking Ozai's ear off about whatever pops into his head. Ozai pays him no mind, only walks briskly so he can get to his office and escape the incessant chattering. He may not be the Firelord, nor may he be the heir, but he is still a prince and he has duties he will not neglect.

He doesn't notice immediately. One minute there's a consistent background noise supplied by his son, and then there's silence. He checks behind him, but Zuko is nowhere to be found. 'Good riddance' he reasons, and continues his walk back to the office.

It is only when he is done with his work, Agni having handed over the day to his sister that he finds himself in the same hallway, making his way to his room, when he hears it. It's muffled but distinct. Ozai has been hearing that cry for the last 4 years.

He follows the sound to its source, until he's standing in front of a door. It's an old utility room. The door gives trouble sometimes, opening with barely any pressure while simultaneously sealing when closed properly. It seems his son has found himself trapped inside, for possibly the whole day. He must be starving. Without a doubt he's wet himself, and with all that crying it's a wonder he didn't pass out from dehydration.

Ozai opens the door, sending a flame to the torch. His son is curled up into himself, rocking and crying. He looks up when light floods the room, and then Ozai has a four year old barrelling into him and holding onto his leg, getting his tears and snot on his robes. He sighs, shaking his leg to disrupt Zuko’s hold.

“Get off of me. You're filthy. Go shower and go to bed.” His son continues to hold his leg tightly, rubbing his face into Ozai’s robes.

“But I didn’t ha-ave any-any dinner.”

“Ask the kitchen for something. Go.” When his son makes no move to follow his instructions, Ozai grabs his arm and pulls him off, shaking the boy until his eyes focus on his face. “Go.”

His son runs off, Ozai watching him go. He glances back at the closet, giving it a considering look before outing his flame and closing the door.

Sokka somehow manages to talk Zuko down into relaxing. Honestly, testing the perimeter had been a good idea, but it's too risky, considering they can't see each other or much of anything else. It would've been fine if Zuko could firebend some light, but they'd discovered pretty early that bending, for whatever reason, didn't work. Zuko had been freaked, but calmed down once he realised he could still feel his 'inner flame' or something.

They are seated now, shoulders touching because Zuko had been worried about Sokka disappearing into the dark. Even with his lack of bending, Zuko runs hot. Really, really hot. It was something Sokka had noticed but refused to linger on.

Growing up in the South Pole, fire was the only source of heat and being around Zuko, feeling the heat he radiates, is nostalgic. It takes Sokka back to happier times. To campfires and stories and a full village. Takes him back to his father's arm around his shoulder and his mother smiling at the side and his sister talking and talking and talking, in a way she doesn't anymore.

It's ironic then, that the person that can take him back to the happiest parts of his life is a representative for the nation that took them away from him.

Sometimes...sometimes Sokka looks at Zuko, at his gold eyes and dark hair and pale skin, and all he sees is black snow and blood and a murderer. Sokka looks at Zuko and sees a murderer. He gives himself whiplash sometimes, with the way he sometimes hates Zuko's guts because of who he is and who he's related to, and other times he is just so fond of Zuko.

Right now though, all he really feels is irritation. Sokka can feel warmth radiating from Zuko, yes, but he can also feel his restlessness. Which is odd, because Zuko is never restless, at least not physically. He's...well not calm, but calculated. He doesn't pace or fidget, just clenches and unclenches his hands, and takes deep, deep breaths. Now, his whole body is shaking from the way he's jiggling his leg.

Usually, Sokka wouldn't mind this kind of thing, it would be hypocritical of him to, but Zuko is also muttering and it's been more than an hour of this so...yeah. Sokka is irritated. Zuko is irritating him. He says as much.

“Bro, can you like...chill. You're shaking me and it's getting to be a lot.” Zuko doesn't apologise, which is fine because Sokka hadn't expected him to.

Zuko doesn't apologize for shit, says its unprincely. He doesn't respond at all, except to stop jiggling his leg and to stop muttering. Sokka feels bad then, because sure it was annoying but

at least it was something in this void of nothing. Now it's just dark and quiet and Sokka could forget Zuko was there with him if not for the warmth. His warmth.

Trapping Zuko in that storage room for a few hours becomes Ozai's most effective punishment. Zuko is terrified of that closet. Ozai has watched him stutter in his walk when passing it in the hallway. It reaches a point where Ozai doesn't even need to actually shove him in the room, just the threat of it being enough to correct Zuko's behaviour. He doesn't need to trap Zuko in that room anymore because Zuko gets hysterical at even the hint of it. He doesn't need to.

He does it anyway. Maybe it's because discipline can't rely on only the threat of the punishment, the action needs to happen else the threat becomes null. Maybe it's because Zuko is stupid and weak and afraid of the dark and Ozai is trying to train him out of that so that his son can be strong. Maybe it's because Zuko is a leech who gets away with having no talent, no skill, just because his sister has both.

But Ozai knows that it's because Zuko always clings to him when he's released, crying and sniffing and seeking comfort, looking up at him with teary eyes. It's fascinating to Ozai, how Zuko can look to his tormentor for comfort. More than that, it fascinates Ozai how much Zuko loves him. He wants to know the limits of this love, how much he can put his son through, how much he can hurt his son again and again and still be forgiven.

Zuko's love is unconditional and limitless, something foreign to Ozai, and he must test it to prove that it is real. Zuko has not failed him in this, in loving him, and Ozai begins to suspect that he may never.

Sokka had dozed off on Zuko's shoulder, lulled to sleep by the quiet and the dark and the warmth, but he wakes because his pillow is moving. Zuko's shoulder is shaking, and the more Sokka wakes up the more he realises what sounds like...sobbing. Choked off, muffled sobbing.

He's alert immediately, sitting up and turning more towards Zuko, grabbing his shoulders.

"Zuko?" He asks cautiously, because if they were in danger Zuko would be fighting, but he's just...crying. At the sound of his name Zuko starts crying harder, his hands reaching up to grip Sokka's wrists. Not to push him off, just to hold.

"S-sorry." Zuko stammers, hands squeezing on Sokka's wrist. There's that lisp, Sokka thinks belatedly. Then shakes his head as if to physically get his brain back on track.

"It's okay buddy. Nothing to apologise for. But what's got you..." Sokka flounders, searching for a word, "uh, distressed."

"Nothing." Zuko says, quick. Sharp. Curt. Sokka's losing his window to get the truth out of him.

“It's not nothing. It's okay, you can tell me.” And Sokka has a hint of desperation in his voice as he says this, urges really, because he's noticed Zuko tends to bottle things up and then they show back up in the worst way possible, at the worst time. This moment, for example.

“No. It's stupid. I'm not a 5 year old.” And okay, Sokka's pretty smart, so he makes an educated guess.

“Are you afraid of the dark buddy?” Silence. It goes on for so long that Sokka begins to panic, especially when Zuko's hands start to squeeze harder and harder. “That's okay! Nothing's wrong with that! Tons of people are scared of the dark.”

“It's stupid.” Zuko reiterates and...yeah, it kind of is, but all fears are stupid in some way.

“It's not. I mean, most fears are irrational to begin with.”

“I just...” And Zuko takes a deep, shaky breath as though to prepare himself. Or maybe just to calm himself. “I'm not afraid of the dark itself, just like...being trapped in dark spaces. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of? I guess. Do you...do you wanna talk about it?”

“No. Yes. I just...I can't see. I can't see so what if I get stuck because I can't see my way out? What if I get forgotten? What if the walls close in and I don't know it until it's too late 'cause I can't see?” Zuko is getting worked up, his voice coming faster and higher. Sokka doesn't interrupt, just sits there and squeezes Zuko's shoulder in comfort. “When it's dark I'm...I feel helpless and...and alone.” This, Zuko says as though it's a dark confession, like it's a sin to be afraid of being alone, and maybe to him it is. Sokka doesn't really know what to say in the wake of that, so he says the only thing he can. The truth.

“You aren't alone.”

Ozai has no time for sentiment. He's the Firelord of the greatest nation in the world. He's building an empire and winning a war. Ozai has no time to waste, so he sent his son away, because he was no good to him. No good in general. Ozai is a man of facts and numbers and conquest. Lingerin in front of the storage room door his son spent much of his formative years in, he doesn't feel much like a man at all.

ask no questions, hear no lies

Chapter Notes

1 year later! Am I gonna become an annual updater? Jk (I hope). So we're back into the groove of things! I got a few chapters pre-written and things get a lil crazy. Sorry I keep leaving you guys hanging, I hope you enjoy this chapter! And those to come.

Just some content warnings (CW) for homophobia and child abuse and discussions of war. The usual.

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

At some point Aang does manage to free them. Maybe what Sokka had said about the Air Nomads had some substance, about them living in Temples. Still, Zuko is a bit peeved by the way Sokka just lets a random twelve year old do what's supposed to be the Avatar's job. He's supposed to be the one with the ultimate spiritual connection and he just sat there and watched Zuko embarrass himself.

And maybe he's also a little peeved because Sokka saw him succumb to weakness. Saw him cry because of something as stupid and childish as a fear of the dark. It's humiliating, and Zuko wishes he could go back in time and get a hold of himself. He can't, so instead he just glowers. He glowers at Sokka and at Katara but can't manage to glower at Aang when faced with his smiling face. He did rescue them after all.

Unfortunately the glowering doesn't hold for very long, because Sokka doesn't shove his embarrassing behaviour in his face or hold it over his head. He just smiles and throws an arm around his shoulder and acts the same as he always has. He doesn't tell Katara or Aang, keeps that moment between himself and Zuko and moves on. And he had taken it in stride, Zuko can admit. So the glowering ends soon enough, traded instead for grateful smiles and Zuko ducking his head to hide his glowing cheeks.

It's just that Sokka is nice, really nice, in a way people never are to Zuko. It's not kindness out of pity, nor is it just his general disposition. No. Sokka is rude and sarcastic and matter-of-fact. He's teasing to his sister and playful with Aang, but he's nice to Zuko. Too nice. It makes Zuko feel like shit, because he knows it's not going to last. Zuko is going to give Sokka over to his father and reclaim his honour and his title and his home and Sokka is going to feel betrayed and he's going to hate him. He's going to hate him and Zuko's going to deserve it.

It keeps him awake sometimes, the guilt. Sokka is so good to him, so kind and generous, and here Zuko is, lying to his face and leading him to his doom. Zuko is under no illusions about what's going to happen to Sokka when he's brought to the Firelord. He wouldn't be executed, because they can't risk the Avatar reincarnating. No, in lieu of taking that risk they'd hold

him prisoner for years and years until they won the war. Maybe even after. And they would not treat him with honour. This, Zuko is sure of. The Fire Nation holds its criminals in low regard, and its enemies even lower.

It's not right, and it's not the law, but Zuko has learned that sometimes people are willing to break the law and ignore what's right to serve a bigger cause. It's a lesson he is not allowed to forget, a reminder plastered onto his face.

It's confusing, because Zuko is doing the right thing. He's doing his princely duties, serving his country and his leader. The Avatar is bad. He could cost them the war. This is an argument Zuko has grown up with. It is a moral spread throughout the whole fire nation. There are posters encouraging anyone who thinks they could be the Avatar to turn themselves in if they love their family. Zuko is doing the right thing. His father sent him on this mission for a reason and Agni damn it, Zuko wants to go home. He misses the blistering heat and the food and his turtleduck pond. He's doing the right thing, but he can't sleep well at night because it feels wrong.

In the Fire Nation breaking the law is considered treason, and to commit treason is against the law. It's against the law either way you look at it, and the Fire Nation has lots of laws. Especially since the war. Zuko, as a prince, knows these laws like the alphabet, and follows them to a tee. It is not against the law for a boy to think that another boy is handsome. Zuko had checked. It is not against the law. Not yet.

Zuko doesn't ask any of the many questions he has because his mom had freaked out the first time he'd said a boy was pretty and then slapped his lips when he'd asked about why it was wrong. It stung fiercely. His mother doesn't tend to hit him, not unless Zuko really upsets her, so he learned his lesson quickly and has kept quiet about it since then.

It's not a law, and probably won't be until the war is over, but his father's views on it become quite clear, quite quickly. His mother's reaction begins to make sense. Father thinks it's wrong. He thinks it's disgusting. The act of coupling is only for reproduction, so why bother when that isn't an option, is what his father thinks.

Zuko doesn't think his dad finds boys or girls pretty. This makes sense. Father and mother don't like each other, never really did, and father's always liked his work more than any person. It's obvious in hindsight. Zuko is too scared to ask uncle Iroh or Lu Ten, even though they're always nice to him. His mom is almost always nice sometimes, and even she had been upset.

There's no law saying that it's wrong for a boy to like another boy the way boys like girls, but father says it's wrong, and mother says it's wrong, and their word has always been law to Zuko.

Zuko is eight and treasonous already.

They are ambushed in a forest by a bunch of children. Well, ambush is a harsh way to describe it. Technically they're saved by a bunch of children, because they had stumbled into a Fire Nation military camp and they were getting attacked before they could get a word in. Then the kids had descended from the trees and helped them. So, technically it was more rescue than ambush, though it became an ambush when someone pointed out how Zuko had been firebending, and then they really take a look at him, dark hair, pale skin, telling gold eyes, and suddenly Zuko is the target for all their weapons.

They may be a large group, but they're kids and they have no armour. Zuko could probably take them. Nevermind that those same kids had just defeated grown and trained soldiers who had both firebending and armour. Zuko has the Avatar on his side, and a master airbender. It should be fine. Turns out neither the Avatar or the master airbender are any help. It's Katara who convinces the group to lower their weapons, saying how 'Zuko isn't that bad', 'He isn't supporting the war', 'He's training the Avatar', all this said through gritted teeth. Zuko doesn't refute even if it is pushing the truth of the situation.

Either way, weapons are lowered and the group welcomes them to their base. They watch Zuko warily the whole time, but Zuko's begun to get used to those kinds of looks. He supposes he deserves it maybe. He constantly has to remind himself that his nation is at war with these people, that his nation is at war with the world, and that is why he is ostracised. It may not be his fault directly, but he is still deserving of it. Even if the Fire Nation started the war with good intentions, it is a war all the same.

Zuko had thought the other nations were stupid to fight back, when the Fire Nation was only trying to share, but he supposes he can understand now, the desire to protect one's country and culture against outsiders. He would have done the same. But these are treasonous thoughts, so he shakes them from his mind lest they poison him.

"We call ourselves the Freedom Fighters." Jet says this to Katara, but loud enough for the rest of them to hear. "We're fighting against the fire nation soldiers trying to oppress us." And at this he shoots a glare back at Zuko. Katara looks back as well, not glaring but...calculating. He doesn't like it. He doesn't like any of this.

They set up camp and then settle down around the fire for dinner. Zuko ignores all the wary glances he gets and focuses on his food. Or, well, he tries to. But then he tunes into the conversation, and begins to lose his appetite.

"...so now we look out for each other."

"I understand. The fire nation took my mother from me," Katara says, with a touch to the necklace around her neck. It's a betrothal necklace. Zuko knows because he'd read up on Water Tribe customs. He wonders who she's engaged to, "and then they took my father too, when he joined the war efforts."

"You've lost so much to the fire nation, as I'm sure you all have...so why do you guys travel with an ashmaker?" There's silence for a second, and Zuko feels the eyes of everyone present

on him. Their gazes aren't friendly, but Zuko has suffered worse. Even Katara's glares don't hold the weight of those of his father's.

He straightens up, rounding his shoulders and raising his chin. His eyes catch Katara's first, who was looking at him, but she turns away as soon as they make eye contact. He adjusts his gaze to Jet who is staring at him with flat eyes. He's ready to defend himself, even if he doesn't really have a defence, but Sokka beats him to it.

"Zuko isn't the one who killed your parents and he's not the one who raided the south." He says this bluntly, glaring at Jet and then, surprisingly, at Katara. They both seem taken aback by Sokka's curtness. Katara recovers first though, and she looks furious.

"I don't understand you! How can you defend him? He-he looks just like them!"

"Katara-"

"No! I don't get it. How can you look at him? Everytime I look at him I see my mother bleeding out in her hut!" Ah jeez. Zuko feels himself begin to sweat. Talking about mothers always makes him nervous.

"I get it, Katara. I lost her too but-"

"You don't get it, 'cause you weren't there! You were too busy running away." Katara says this bitingly, then gets up and leaves. Jet follows after her, shooting a smug look at them as he goes. Zuko hates him. It's silent and awkward, an air of hostility pointed towards Zuko.

Zuko reaches out towards Sokka, resting a hand on his shoulder, but Sokka shrugs out of his grip, putting his bowl down. It hurts a little bit but he's not very surprised. Sokka is always quick to comfort Zuko, but he never allows the same comfort for himself.

"Sorry." Zuko mumbles.

"S fine." Sokka says, getting up and walking away with barely a glance at anyone. Zuko feels like it's all his fault. These kinds of things usually are.

Zuko was born in the middle of winter, deep in the night when Tui was at her fullest. Caldera doesn't experience winter the same way as the Earth Kingdom, with snow and wind, but the days are shorter and the air cooler. He was born with a weak spark, his innerflame shaky and feeble. The Fire Sages predicted his innerflame would die, and him along with it. They said it was an omen for a son of the royal family to be born during the winter, under a full moon.

Nevermind that winter is the time of Tui, Agni's sister. Nevermind that they share the same light. None of that mattered to the Fire Sages and certainly not to his father. His father whom his mother had to beg to not kill her son. His father who had no use for weak children, and figured if Zuko was most likely going to die, he may as well die now, rather than wasting time.

Sometimes, when Zuko was being particularly difficult, his mother would tell him of his birth. How his father wanted him dead, how his grandfather, even the Fire Sages would have let it happen. How she was the only one to stand up for him, the only one who wanted him alive, how she's still the only one who wants him. How he should be grateful, should stop arguing with her, should just listen and do. How he was born wrong wrong wrong in all ways, but she still loved him. How she was the only one to love him. Zuko thinks his uncle and his cousin love him, but adults know better, so he takes her words to heart.

Zuko used to think that his birth was his first treason, born in the time of waterbenders, under the guidance of their god, and with a weak, barely there indication of his connection to Agni. They say the Royal Family are descended from Agni, chosen by Agni, and yet Zuko was born with a weak flame, a weak body and an even weaker mind.

Sometimes, when his mom was particularly frazzled, irritated by Zuko's disobedience she would tell him how he was born quiet. She'd whisper the words, grip tight and bruising around his arms. The midwives had had to put air into his lungs, she'd say. How pale, nearing on blue he was born. How he was born dead. Then she'd let him go with a grunt and walk away, pacing as she continued ranting about his bad behaviour. Zuko isn't sure why she told him this, or what her point was. He supposes she just wanted him to be grateful to be alive.

It was only as he got older, though, that Zuko realised what his true treason was. It wasn't being born premature, in the wrong season under a full moon. It wasn't being born as a weak firebender. His first treason was surviving through the night of his birth, and through the many years later. Zuko's first treason was living. It is a treason he continues to commit.

Aang sits with him as he's setting up for bed, which surprises Zuko. He hasn't seen neither Katara nor Sokka since dinner, and he expected Aang to go after one of them. Instead, Aang is here, fidgeting where he's settled next to Zuko.

"We don't blame you. We...they know just as well as I do that you were a kid when all this happened. Even though your dad is...who he is, we can't-don't blame you for your family's actions."

"It's okay, Aang."

"It's not! What Katara said...that wasn't fair to you. Nobody can control how they're born or where. You didn't start the war and...you're with us trying to stop it. That should speak for you more than your blood. I think your actions should speak for you, more than anything else." Zuko is a bit taken aback by Aang, silent and gaping at him. He knows it's not his fault, he wasn't there for it to be his fault, but to hear Aang say it, the one person who's probably lost the most to this war is...startling.

Zuko tries not to question the war, because that is a dangerous road that leads only to treasonous thoughts, but sitting here, in a camp made by children orphaned by the war, with Aang, who has lost his whole people due to the war, he can't help it.

They say the war was started because the Fire Nation wanted to share their wealth, wanted to share their knowledge and technology, but the other nations refused and fought back. But looking around him, at all these kids, children, who have lost so much, he wonders if it was worth it. It seems stupid to go so far just to 'share'. Why not just stop? Why not just leave them be, why keep fighting? These people have lost more than gained, and that was supposedly the goal of the war. For everyone to gain.

"Aang..." The thing is, Zuko isn't trying to stop the war. He's lying to all of them. He's trying to seal the Fire Nation's victory, with the capture of the Avatar. He'd always dreamed of fighting to aid war efforts, of killing his enemies and burning down camps all in the name of victory. Those images flash behind his eyes in contrast with Aang's gentle expression.

He's a liar and he doesn't deserve Aang's kind words, or the way he looks so openly at him. Agni, Aang is so young. He's so, so young, and Zuko can envision the horrors his father will commit upon the last living airbender.

What is Zuko doing here, with people of the nations his very own is slaughtering? The war is not benefiting anybody, not even the Fire Nation. All Zuko can think about, looking at Aang and imagining the genocide of his people, is the 41st. The group of young soldiers the Fire Nation sacrificed. Why? So they could kill more people, just in green? So they could spill more blood? What's the point?

"Zuko?"

"Sorry. Just...it's getting late. You should go to bed."

"Oh...okay. Yeah. You're right."

"Aang?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you." For being kind when he doesn't deserve it.

"Anytime." Aang beams at him before flying off, and Zuko doesn't deserve that either.

Zuko is thirteen when he is forced to bear the mark of all the minor treasons he's committed, and his greatest one yet; Questioning his father.

Chapter End Notes

As usual thank you for reading! Thanks for all the comments and kudos! You guys' continued support means a lot to me. <3

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