

Restoration

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Restoration

by [G3n3s1s_L0v3](#)

Summary

It wasn't real and he knew it wasn't because there was never a point in life where the world had been so kind to him. And there never would be.

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Zuko dies in the final Agni Kai with his sister after being hit in the chest by her lightning. Except this isn't how the spirits wanted it to go. And if theres anything a spirit can do to get its way, it will do it.

After dying in the middle of the fight, Zuko is sent back in time to stop his father from further ruining the world before he had even really started.

Notes

If you feel like you recognize this- you might. I originally posted this almost a year ago and soon after deleted it. I can promise that I won't do that again- so sorry if anyone had liked it the first time and was sad when they saw it gone. The 2 chapters I'd posted have barely changed, so (hopefully) no harm done.

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

Fog

“Zuko!”

The lightning somehow simultaneously burnt white hot and didn't hurt at all, simply felt like a low tingle in every bit of his body and yet every part of him burnt and hurt and screamed for him to get up, to keep moving, to finish the fight, to protect Katara, to help his sister to finish the plan to do anything but lay on the ground-

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move, he couldn't do anything but lie there and hurt. And dear Agni, did he hurt. Zuko was no stranger to pain. He had grown with suffering as his closest mentor, and had never once batted an eye at the pain inflicted upon him when he failed. Before being struck with lightning he had thought that the pain from burning off an entire half of his face would be the worst pain he would have to suffer in his life, and yet the pain of the lightning seemed to affect every part of his body, all at once. At least with his face it was just that, it was his face and everything was okay after everything healed, he had healed from that.

This wasn't the type of injury someone could just heal from. Not without some sort of blessing from the spirits, a blessing from Agni herself. And knowing Zuko's luck, Agni had no interest in blessing the boy any more than they had when he had first gotten banished.

He could vaguely hear someone shouting behind him. And in front of him. And around him. He couldn't tell what anyone was saying, and his vision was growing dimmer by the second. He could barely remember what had happened, why he had been hit by the lightning. Why had he been fighting in the first place? Who was he fighting? He could feel someone touching him, but that barely registered over the electric, buzzing pain from every corner of his body.

Zuko felt as though every bit of himself was getting farther and farther from reality, everything felt like a dream and he was drifting away. Drifting towards reality, so he could wake up. Wasn't he already in reality? He couldn't tell. Everything was just so far away, and it was much too hard to remember anything.

His limbs felt heavy, his body felt like it was getting dragged down towards the ground. Everything was just so heavy, and his brain felt like he was floating away. He could barely register anything happening.

Everything stopped. All the pain flushed from his body, his limbs were no longer bearing down on him, wearing him down. He could feel the ground beneath his back, and he could hear the soft sound of wind rushing past his ears. The hurt of the lightning reduced to a light headache. His brain was no longer floating around, he was grounded again. He felt like he was back in his body.

Except for the fact that he wasn't. He could tell he was grounded, he felt every bit of his body, and when he looked down at himself he could see it all, but it wasn't there. Everything

was too light, too soft. It wasn't real and he knew it wasn't because there was never a point in life where the world had been so kind to him. And there never would be.

He wasn't in the courtyard anymore. There was no palace around him. Nothing hurt. More than that though, and much more worryingly there was no Azula. Or Katara. Or anyone at all. He was all alone. In the middle of a very foggy forest.

Oh Agni, he died. He died in the middle of a fight that was so incredibly important to their plan and now he'd officially messed up the plans to overthrow his- a corrupt leader trying to commit world domination. If Aang failed because Zuko couldn't beat his own little sister, there was no way he'd ever forgive himself. No way any of his friends would forgive him either. No way they'd stay his friends.

Zuko sat upright. His muscles ached, but it was nowhere near as bad as it had been even before the fight. Just a dull throb, easy to put to the back of his mind while he tried to focus on more pressing matters, like the fact that he was dead. He was dead and had messed up. Really bad. Like, seriously bad. He tried to bring all the things that he had learnt about the spirit world to the front of mind. It had never exactly been something he was all that interested in. He was pretty sure that there were supposed to be more spirits though. Not just... himself. And the forest.

He pushed himself to his feet, holding his hand near his chest for fear that the burning pain that had just inhabited the entirety of his body would come back, crashing down on his body again. He wondered if he would get a scar from that in the spirit world, or if since his mortal body never got the chance to heal and develop that scar, his soul wouldn't have it either. He wasn't too interested in checking right now.

The ground was soft. It didn't feel like dirt and grass, how the forest floor felt in the mortal plane, how the forest floor should feel, but it didn't feel floaty and disconnected, like how dreams feel. If this really was the spirit realm, Zuko would have to get used to all this dreamy-ness. Actually, if this was really the spirit realm, he would be stuck here forever. In this little patch of forest. Surrounded by spirit fog. And spirit trees. And no other spirits.

He walked towards the fog. Then stopped. Then reached out and touched it. It was wet and firmer than fog should be, but not firm enough to stop his hand from moving through. He wasn't quite sure he wanted to walk through that yet. Not until he was sure he had no other choices. He could hear birds calling from beyond the barriers of his vision.

The temperature was nice. It was warmer than Zuko was used to, but felt more akin to the average temperatures of his childhood than the temperature of the air on the open sea.

Fog wasn't supposed to be warm as far as Zuko knew, but it was a welcome change. Actually, as far as Zuko knew the fog should have at least dissipated a little from him touching it, but it stayed firmly blocking his vision. The area in the center of the fog wasn't too wide, about as big as his room on the ship had been, and the temperature of the fog seeped into the clearing, making everything warm and soft and-

Perfect. Spirit like. It makes sense that everything was so comfortable, it was where he would have to spend eternity and then some. Obviously Agni would try and make it comfortable,

even for those that they didn't seem to like much. And they did not seem to like Zuko much.

There was no way that he was just stuck in this little clearing for the rest of forever. It was barely big enough to practice any katas, and Zuko wasn't exactly a fan of staying in the smallest spaces available, even if the spaces in question were nice and warm and arguably perfect in most regards. He could technically just go through the fog, but Agni knows what's on the other side of that.

And if the other side was cold and dark and possibly smaller than the clearing, that would be a major downgrade to eternity. Zuko wasn't quite sure he was willing to take that chance.

He walked to the other side of the small circle and checked the fog there. Just as weirdly heavy, just as comfortably warm. The ground looked just as inviting as the fog, but his legs were starting to weigh him down in the way they had second before he had passed. And wasn't that a weird thought.

Zuko sat down in the middle of the circle and looked up. The sun itself wasn't visible, but the sky was bright and blue. The fog didn't seem to be accompanied by many clouds, as the sky itself seemed rather barren. He wondered if Agni was actually out there, or if it was just an illusion to keep him calm and healthy. As healthy as a spirit could be, at least.

Maybe Agni was just through the fog, and that's why it was so warm. That would be nice, being so close to the spirit that he had worshiped all his life would be a nice trade off for dying.

Maybe he should go through the fog then, if Agni was on the other side. Then again, wouldn't it hurt to be so close to something so bright? And maybe a bit dangerous too. But it could also be great. Zuko laid on his back. Thinking was tiring. So was dying. Maybe he'd just rest his eyes.

Just a little.

Zuko woke slowly. The grass was soft on his back, and the temperature was still warm. So he hadn't just imagined dying. He was still dead. Spirits can sleep?

He'd have to test all his new spirit capabilities. Maybe after he figured out how to get to the greater spirit plane. Out of his circle. He didn't want to open his eyes, it was too bright to look straight into the sky.

He sat before opening his eyes, feeling his way across the soft forest floor.

Toph would be much better at this. He wouldn't see Toph for many, many years. The thought crossed his mind before he could stop it. He wouldn't see any of his friends for many years. If ever again. Maybe eventually they'd be through the fog.

And maybe they wouldn't be. So soon after finally making friends, his own friends, not other rich kids trying to boost their status further, not Azula's friends he was going to be around either way, he was back to where he started.

Alone.

Zuko brought his hand to his head, shielding the top of his eyes as he slowly blinked them open. Same fog. Same trees. Still cramped. New person.

New person?

The figure was standing just on the cusp between the fog and the clearing, barely visible with the bright backdrop surrounding it. He couldn't make out any distinct features other than 'bright'. Painfully, extremely bright. The figure itself appeared to be composed of only the brightest colors, surrounded by fog that only amplified the strain on Zuko's eyes.

Zuko scooted backwards as fast as he could, quickly forgetting the spatial constraints of the clearing and slamming his back into a tree. Within the second that it took for Zuko to wince the figure had taken three steps towards him, not bending down to his level on the ground but towering over him in some sort of display of power.

What was standing in front of him? What did they want from him? Were they going to send him back to complete his job in helping Aang? Were they going to lead him out of the spirit-forest-clearing place? A million thoughts ran through Zuko's head as he tilted his neck up to try and catch the face of the spirit before him.

Without the fog surrounding them, the spirit person-thing was a bit easier to look at. A bit wasn't exactly saying much, but it helped. They were in nice looking clothing, albeit in strange, painful to look at colors. The clothes looked expensive. Alright, the spirit was probably formerly someone influential. Zuko could work with that. He knew of lots of the important people in Fire Nation history.

"Zuko, crown prince of the Fire Nation, son of Fire Lord Ozai and Ursa," The figure spoke in a tone that seemed to surround Zuko entirely. He could hear it from every surrounding corner, even from within his own head. "Stand."

Zuko scrambled to his feet as fast as he could, deliberately averting his eyes from the spirit that stood before him. He would never admit it, but the aura surrounding the spirit oozed the same sort of demand of respect that his father had when he was a child, and he wasn't quite too fond of the memories involving that particular aura.

"Do you know where you are, child?" The figure's voice, despite the power oozing from it, was warm. Spirits weren't exactly all that welcoming in most of the stories about them. Zuko wasn't quite sure what the spirit was going to do to him, but he didn't have too much time to consider.

"The spirit plane?" Zuko's voice wavered as he tried to convince himself to look the spirit in the eyes. It had been much too long since he had been around his father, he had lost almost all of his knowledge of how to properly respect someone of the magnitude of... this.

"Indeed. Do you know why you are here?" The spirit's robes dragged along the floor as it stepped closer to Zuko, the bright golden fabric snagging on the bumpy ground. The spirit

didn't seem to notice. The brightness of the fabric was getting more and more uncomfortable to look at.

"I- um, I died, I think," Zuko shifted uncomfortably in his spot, glancing back and forth around the ground, pointedly avoiding looking at the spirit. He wondered if that was considered more disrespectful than just looking them in the eye or not. His father would have already punished him for his indecisiveness if this were him.

"You did. Such a shame, isn't it," The spirit's voice sounded vaguely similar to how he remembered his mother's had. He missed his mother. "As it turns out though, now is not your time to pass."

Zuko snapped his eyes up to the spirit's face. Its eyes were a burning gold, and its mouth didn't seem to be moving when it spoke. Zuko didn't pay much attention to those facts because, what did the spirit just say?

Wasn't everything meant to have a purpose, a reason, a time to happen?

"But you have passed. I suppose I could attempt to change that, but as it happens, the repercussions for that particular event have already begun," The figure's face almost seemed sad. "That being said, if I am going to interfere with mortal events, I may as well interfere more."

Zuko could barely understand what the spirit was talking about. Were they saying that they were going to bring him back to life somehow? Were they saying that somehow Azula had managed to mess up the plan that the spirits already had in place for the events taking place? Was that even something that could happen? And 'mess up things more', were they just going to remove Zuko from the world entirely, even before he had been struck with lightning?

"I- I... what?" Zuko couldn't think of anything to say.

The spirit was already an intimidating presence, but now it appeared that Zuko's life may or may not lie in their hands. Not the first time something like that happened, but it was definitely one of the more stressful instances.

"You were not meant to die in battle with your sister. And as that has happened, the world shall... not go to plan. The plan that us spirits had in place, at the very least. Balance will not be restored," The figure spoke clearly, gesturing lightly. Zuko wasn't sure if he was hallucinating.

"While I suppose I could let the world play out how it now seems to be on course to, I, rather selfishly I suppose, do not wish for that to happen. As such, I shall be returning you to your plane," The spirit... smiled? It looked strange and did not suit the figure's face, but it was more welcoming than the blank expression that had previously been staring down at him.

"You can do that?" Zuko's face gave away the excitement he had been attempting to not quite show.

“I can do much more than that.”

The spirit reached its hand towards Zuko, then stopped halfway between their bodies. Its face twisted for a moment, seeming to reconsider.

“I cannot- no, I will not send you back to where you last were, prince,” The spirit sighed. “I will send you much earlier in your life. I do not think that sending you to your fight would end how I had originally envisioned, and as selfish as it may be, I do not wish for the outcome I had hoped for to not have the possibility of happening. I will put you much earlier in your life, when you will have a much better chance of changing the outcome of the future.”

“I’m supposed to do what?” If Zuko’s tone wasn’t betraying him enough, the way his voice cracked at the end of the sentence definitely just made it sound like he was screaming ‘I can’t do this I can’t do this’ over and over in his mind.

“It is alright if you are stressed, child. It is a daunting task, trying to right past wrongs. You will have my guidance, I promise that,” The spirit’s sleeves rustled as it rested its hand on Zuko’s shoulder. It was burning hot but yet somehow didn’t hurt at all. It was warm and comforting and telling him he had to go back in time to stop his father from winning a war against a twelve year old before the twelve year old was even conscious.

“I’m not- I’m not stressed. It’s just... are you sure- I mean, you really think that I, of all people- would be the right person to do... this?” Zuko sounded like he was going to cry. He was on the verge of doing so, but the powerful spirit standing before him, telling him he had to save the world, didn’t need to know that.

“You will be fine. I will be with you,” The spirit smiled. The smile did not comfort Zuko. Much.

“Well then, I supposed I should get you back as soon as I can. Which, luckily for you, is now,” The spirit’s hand felt heavy on his shoulder. All the sudden, the air surrounding him grew constricting and unbearably hot. The ground felt like it was pulling him in. “Good luck, child.”

“Wait- wait, plea-” Zuko could no longer talk. Everything was pushing down on him, pulling him down, down- and it was all dark.

Zuko could barely breathe. The air around him was hot and uncomfortable. He could feel something constricting his body, holding him down. He wanted to thrash around and stand up, wake up from whatever he had been imagining.

His eyes slowly opened. He couldn’t get them much more than half open, but that was more than enough to see his surroundings.

He was no longer in the clearing. There was no rush of air around his ears, no welcoming warmth from the surrounding fog. He was also not in the middle of a fight with his little

sister. There was no pain or burns or any of the sharp, searing pain from the lightning strike. He was in the palace. He was in his room.

His childhood bedroom. From before he was banished. From before his sister turned into... what she had. From before his mother had disappeared and his father had become the Fire Lord. The room was larger than what he remembered, but every little detail was the same.

Had the spirit actually sent him back in time? Was that something a spirit could do? Would he be a younger version of himself, or had it sent him, body and all? Would he actually be able to change the path of events for the better?

“Ah, your highness, you’re awake!” He could hear a friendly voice to his left. He nearly jumped. He could not jump, he realized. All his limbs felt heavy and he was indescribably tired.

The voice walked closer to him, close enough that he could see the person talking. It was a servant, he realized. He had known her name at one point, but it had been nearly four years since he had last seen her. She was holding a wet cloth.

Zuko tried to speak, but he could not so much as open his mouth. He looked up at the woman and hoped that she could, somehow, explain what was going on. She did not explain what was going on. She simply reached forward and removed the cloth from Zuko’s forehead, had that been there before? And replaced it with the one in her hand. It was nice and cool. She caught him looking at her and smiled.

“I do hope you begin to feel better soon, your highness. Your mother is very worried for you. The fire flu affects some worse than others, so let’s hope you’ve got it easy,” The servant, her name- it was just outside his memory, bent down and retrieved a small cup from Zuko’s nightstand.

The fire flu? Zuko had only had that once in his life, when he was barely nine years old. It wasn’t exactly something people had multiple times once they had already developed tolerance to it. It wasn’t like- wait. He had it when he was nine. He was nine.

The spirit, true to its word, had sent him back in time. Seven years back in time.

The woman pushed the cup to his lips, making him drink the foul tasting medicine inside. He barely remembered having the fire flu, but he could remember no medicine ever tasted good. It was an ok trade off if it made him feel better, but it was alright to complain in the moment.

“We were all worried when you didn’t wake at all yesterday, your highness. I’m glad you’re feeling better now. Rest well,” The girl picked up the tray she had been carrying and, after a bow lower than he had seen in years since he had returned to the palace just a few months ago, walked out of the room.

The spirit really had sent Zuko to the past, so they had stayed true to that promise. Now all he could hope was that the spirit would stay true on his promise of helping him. And Agni help him, he would need every bit of support possible if he, nine year old him, wanted to stop his father from destroying the world any further than he already had.

Sunlight

Chapter Summary

zuko does little kid things (follow around adults) and reflect on what to do

(me when i do exposition. and more exposition)

this is not beta'd, if theres a spelling/formatting/grammar error please just tell me <3

Chapter Notes

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

Zuko had been stuck in the bed, his bed, for a while. Stuck by himself, with nothing to do but think. And spirits did he have a lot to think about. He would have to figure out, sooner or later, what exactly his plan was for stopping his father. Without killing him, because in this body? If he tried to fight his father he would die faster than he could finish getting into the stance for his first attack. He wasn't even sure his body would remember all the firebending he had learnt.

Every now and then a servant would walk in and replace the cloth on his head. Some would give him food, others water, even rarer they would give him that medicine. He wished he could remember who they were. He had always tried to be good about remembering the servants' names and whatever little bits of personal info they had shared with him. His mother had always encouraged him to do so.

“Despite what your father might think, many of the staff here have important lives,” She would say. “Learning about them can help you relate to people, which can make the people of your nation, your people, trust you more.”

It had been a while since he'd been in the palace. Welcome in the palace at least. It was a strange thought, knowing that one day all these servants would have orders to turn him in to his father if they saw him again. Maybe he could change that too, with his new chance. But would that be for the better?

He had lots of time to think about what to say to his father, but in the end decided that confronting him would never end well. He would have to try and slip back into the routine he had so desperately tried to forget when he had officially given up trying to capture the Avatar.

Truth be told, he had no doubt he'd be able to slip into the routine again. Zuko had thirteen years of practice being the 'friendly little prince' who's consistently worse than his younger sister at everything, and less than one real year of being the 'rebellious banished prince working with the enemy' whos finally started being able to hold his own in a fight against his

fourteen year old sister. As much as he hated it, he knew for a fact that he would know what to do when he first talked to his father again.

“My prince? Are you awake?” a knock on the door snapped Zuko out of his thoughts. The door was pushed open and all the light from the hall spilled into the room. There was only one lit lamp in Zuko’s room, so the brightness damn near blinded him. It reminded him of that spirit.

Now is not the time to be thinking of all-powerful spirits.

“Ah, you are. Good, good. How do you feel?” The servant was the first girl that had been there when he had... woken up? Been reborn? She was carrying a tray with broth and a cup of water on it. Zuko had been trying to remember her name to no avail. He would have to ask when he got his voice back.

She didn’t expect him to respond. She simply set the tray down on his night table and got to work as all the other servants had. Changed the cloth, gave him a small sip of water and fed him a small bit of the broth from the tray.

Zuko couldn’t tell exactly how long he’d been stuck in his bed. He had taken small naps between the servants showing up, so truthfully it could’ve been anywhere between a few hours to a few days. Most of his memories of having the fire flu were... not quite there. The fire flu made people delirious and most memory of being sick slip away from those who have had it.

The girl left the room just as quickly as she had walked in. Zuko was barely paying attention to his surroundings, completely lost in his own thoughts once again. There’s not much one can do when completely mute and immobile.

His symptoms of the flu were getting much better at least, he no longer felt like he was burning up all the time. At this rate he should be able to talk within the next day at the most, and once he was able to do that... he would have to try and remember palace etiquette.

And try to remember how he acted when he was nine. People change quite a bit over the years, and Zuko was no exception.

It wasn’t like he didn’t remember anything he had been taught in his youth. He knew most of the proper ways to address those with higher and lower status than himself, he knew where everything in the palace was, but it had been so long since he had to use any of that knowledge.

He could only hope that he wouldn’t mess up when asked about why he knew certain things, or why he was all the sudden so much better at firebending than he had been when he was actually just nine and not a sixteen year old in a nine year old’s body.

His mind swirled with thoughts as he drifted off to sleep again, hoping that by the next time he opened his eyes he would be able to move about freely again.

Zuko woke with the sun, even if he couldn't outwardly tell that the sun was rising. The room felt much more comfortable than when he had first drifted to sleep. He no longer felt any of the uncomfortable heat from earlier.

He shifted comfortably under the blanket, moving it further up his neck to keep all the warmth trapped under it.

He shifted. He could move again!

The blanket slipped off his torso as he bolted upright, raising his hands up towards his face. And it was strange, seeing his own arms so barren. Free of most of the scars that had accumulated over the years of his banishment. Just soft and white and unmarred, save the fading bruises that he'd most likely gotten in way of some sort of discipline.

He shifted his legs to the side of the bed, standing slowly as the blanket fell around him. The ground was cold under his feet, but being able to actually move outweighed the uncomf of cold flooring. He looked around his room as he stood, taking in all the memories that he had been so sure he had forgotten over his banishment.

There was a knock at the door. The girl from earlier, he should really ask her name now, stepped in, carrying the same tray as before.

"Your highness, are you-" The girl cut herself off when she noticed Zuko standing upright. It looked as though she almost dropped the tray before she managed to compose herself. "You're awake! Good, good. I'm very glad. I suppose you won't need this medicine now, but I can bet you've been hungry."

The girl noticed she was talking more than was necessary before Zuko could point it out and elected to simply walk up to the prince and hand him the small bowl of broth, setting the tray down on the bed next to her. She walked towards the wardrobe on the edge of the room and opened it quickly, pulling out a tunic and robe that looked exactly how Zuko remembered all of his clothes looking.

"Now that you're feeling better, you are feeling better aren't you?" The girl draped the clothing over her arm, rummaging through the bottom of the wardrobe for a set of shoes. All the shoes and all the tunics and everything in the wardrobe looked the same to Zuko. All the same shades of red and black and the same silky fabrics and elegant stitching.

"I-" Zuko coughed, his voice sounding raspier than expected. "Yes, I feel better now," He set the now empty bowl down on the tray, quickly picking up the cup of water and drinking it as fast as he could.

"That's good, I'm glad. Your mother will want to know you've woken up. Your father too, probably," The girl handed him the clothes and shoes she had picked out.

They were soft to the touch and Zuko knew that they were more expensive than any of the clothes he had worn in the past three years combined.

“Please get changed, and then someone can take you to the dining hall so you can eat some actual food. I’m sure your family will be excited to see you, but I cannot promise they will be eating now. If they are not, I will take you to see them after,” The girl was standing, bowing, in front of him. It was almost comedic, when bowing she was the same height as Zuko. He had forgotten how short he’d been. How short he was.

“That sounds,” He coughed again, “Excuse me,” He had to stop himself from saying sorry. Princes didn’t apologize to servants. “That sounds great.” He resisted the urge to bow right back at her. That was an urge, he realized, he would have to completely unlearn. He didn’t bow to anyone other than his father and his grandfather. And sometimes his uncle and mother, albeit rarely.

The girl turned to leave the room, smiling at Zuko as she went.

“Wait! Um, I- could you get me another cup of water? Miss.. um” Zuko averted his eyes before he could catch her reaction, blushing furiously. He wished he had asked her name. He was sure that when he was nine he would’ve at least had an idea what the woman’s name was given that she was respected enough within the palace to be allowed alone in a room with one of the princes, but it just felt so... impolite to forget.

“Of course, my prince,” The woman, smiled softly. “Feel free to ask for anything, of course. Although I must be heading to the kitchen, and so I will have to send another server. If that is all right, of course. Please just call for them when you’ve dressed, they’ll be just outside your door.”

Zuko nodded quickly and watched her as she left the room, attempting to compose himself again. Maybe it was just him being, well, nine years old, but talking to people seemed much harder than he remembered. Talking to people as though they were below him was even harder, but he could put that off for now.

Zuko slipped into the tunic and tied the robe around his waist as tightly as he could, muscle memory doing most of the work for him. Even if he had been dressing in different styles while traveling with Aang and the others, he had worn traditional royal robes most of his life.

He debated putting his hair up for a good while, not knowing if he would actually remember how to do so, but eventually decided it’d be weirder if he didn’t do it at all than if it looked sloppy. He had an excuse, at the very least. He had been very sick, and perhaps he could make it seem that his lack of memory was tied to the sickness.

The hairpiece slipped into his topknot slowly as he scanned his reflection in the mirror. It was odd, looking at himself with no scar. And looking at such a young version of himself, sure, but he had plenty of portraits from this time in his life.

He trailed his hand over the left side of his face, feeling the softness of the skin under his fingertips. He didn’t know if he liked this version of himself better than the version he had been before he had died. Perhaps he had no differing opinion, it was all just him.

“I’m dressed,” Zuko called out, stepping towards the door as it opened. The floor was much more bearable wearing the shoes, but the cold was still uncomfortable. He was glad that most

of the halls were at least partially covered in carpet.

A servant he recognised- Kiyumi, one of the guards most often assigned to him and Azula, smiled at him as he stepped out into the hall, quickly turning down the hall as soon as she made sure he was going to follow her. She walked quickly, which was probably a good thing considering the size of the palace. It had taken Zuko years to memorize the layout. He wondered how long it had taken most of the servants.

His feet were smaller than he was used to. It took him much longer than he wished it would to walk as fast as her, even though she seemed to be walking at a normal pace.

Zuko let his eyes wander over the halls as they walked, taking in all the paintings and decorations coating the walls, the bright lights not yet lit on the ceiling. Agni rising through the windows, illuminating the bright reds and rich browns on the walls.

There weren't too many guards out in the halls yet. A few walked towards their posts and a few were congregating in corners, but most were probably still at their homes, getting ready for their day. The few that were in the halls as they passed stopped and bowed to the young prince.

Zuko had forgotten how much people bowed before he was banished.

They got to the meal room quickly. Kiyumi opened the doors for Zuko and escorted him to his seat. No one else was in the room. Most of his family would probably be awake at this hour, firebenders rise with the sun, but they would almost definitely still be in their rooms.

Kiyumi bowed to Zuko quickly before she went to the door in the back of the meal room, the one that led to the kitchen. Zuko wondered what food the cook would make for him. Something light, probably. Best not to test his limits when he had just been so very sick.

Zuko sat at the table alone for less than five minutes before Kiyumi and another servant came out holding food for him. How the palace staff worked so quickly was a mystery to everyone but them. He respected them all the more for it.

"If anything is not to your liking, your highness, just tell me," The other servant said, quickly bowing before heading back to the kitchen, probably to make food for when the rest of the family woke up.

"Um, Miss. You can, um, sit with me. For a bit, while I eat. If you want. You don't need to stand," Zuko was all the sudden much more conscious of just how young he sounded while talking, how his words mixed together while he tried to sound commanding, how the crown prince should sound.

He was no longer the crown prince. The prince, fourth in line, didn't need to sound nearly as commanding.

"If you wish, your highness," The guard smiled as she sat down. She seemed the slightest bit caught off-guard by his words, but she was good at her job. She didn't let her emotions show too much around her employer. Or her employer's family.

Zuko ate his food quickly, trying not to wince too much at the spice. Evidently his childhood spice tolerance hadn't come back with the body. He and Kiyumi sat in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes before he decided that a nine year old should never be this silent and awkward conversation was better than none. At least he hoped.

"How long have you worked here?" Zuko set his water cup down, turning to face Kiyumi.

"Hmmm, about... four years? Maybe a bit more?" The guard stood slowly and picked up Zuko's now disregarded dishes. "When I was young I'd always wanted a job that would help protect people, and I've always preferred staying closer to home."

She left Zuko to sit alone while she took the dishes back to the kitchen. He took the chance to fully recognize his surroundings. The rooms in the palace had changed over time, even if Zuko wasn't there to watch them do so. They had changed most drastically when Ozai had become Fire Lord, but even before then there would be new paintings every few months.

The decorations were much more suited for children than they had been recently. They were brighter and more colorful and just overall more fun to look at. Chances are Zuko's mother had been the one to advocate for putting them up. The palace hadn't been nearly as bright without her there.

"Alright then your highness, I can bring you to Princess Ursa's study if you would like," The door shut loudly, making Zuko jump. Kiyumi wiped her hands on her uniform, smiling at Zuko as she walked towards him, "I've got no guarantee she'll be there, but it's worth a shot."

He nodded, getting up to follow the guard as she led the way through the halls again. Even if he, in theory, knew his way around the halls, it felt much safer having someone who had to know their way.

The rooms that were specifically for the royal family, like Zuko's bedroom and Ursa's study, were hidden towards the back of the palace. Made them easier to guard, probably. Made it harder to get there, for residents of the building and enemies alike. The walk back from the meal room felt as though it was twice as long as the walk to had been.

Kiyumi stepped to the side of the doors, letting Zuko knock. She probably was just as uncomfortable as he was in this situation. He shouldn't feel so awkward, but it's hard to play a façade that he hadn't had any need of playing for three years.

Zuko knocked quickly, trying to not make too much noise. His fathers study was close to his mothers, and past that was his parent's bedroom. It had been a long time since he'd so much as wanted to go near that room.

"Come in," He could hear his mother shut something within the room. Zuko didn't try to stop the smile from appearing across his face as he quickly opened one of the doors. Kiyumi simply stepped to the side, not wanting to be seen through the doorway.

There was another guard, one of his mothers, standing towards the side of the door. Both guards acknowledged each other slowly, hoping not to get involved in anything between the

royals.

Ursa was sitting in her chair at her desk, a scroll Zuko couldn't see propped up in front of her. She wasn't dressed as though she expected any visitors, simply throwing a red tunic on after she had woken up and pulling her hair into a half-finished topknot, complete with the crown Zuko couldn't remember not seeing on her.

Her face broke into a smile the second she saw Zuko.

"Zuko! Good morning, sweetheart," It took her barely three steps to be able to completely trap Zuko in a hug. "I'm so glad you're feeling better."

Zuko just smiled up at her. It had been a long time since he had seen his mother outside of her portraits. He had missed her face.

Kiyumi bowed from where she was standing and walked away as the two royals went to sit next to the large window spanning the back wall of the study.

Zuko and his mother spent the next hour or so just talking. Ursa would tell Zuko about whatever he had missed in the week he had been sick. Zuko would ask about what she was working on. She would tell Zuko about the new skills Azula had picked up on. Zuko would ask about his uncle and cousin.

"Alright, we'll have to pause this. I'm afraid I'm quite hungry. Have you eaten yet?" Ursa stood slowly, stretching slightly in the sunlight illuminating her back.

"I ate just after I woke up," Zuko stood as his mother reached for his hand. She smiled at him before turning and leading him out the door.

The guard that had been standing outside the door quickly made to follow them. Zuko was moderately sure he recognized the man.

"Your sister will probably be eating now. You should say hello to her," Ursa spoke quietly as they walked. Her voice was incredibly calming to hear after years of missing.

He didn't want to think about his sister much. Most of his recent memories of her weren't painting her in the nicest light.

Maybe that could be another thing he would fix. Protect his sister from whatever had happened to her when he was gone. Sure, she had never been the nicest, but there was a difference between being rude, teasing her brother and the like versus threatening to kill people for the slightest inconvenience and fully intending to follow through on the threat.

Zuko just hummed noncommittally.

Ursa stepped back from the door, letting the guard that had been trailing behind them open it for her, letting go of Zuko's hand and gesturing for him to follow as she went.

The dining hall was much brighter than it had been when Zuko had woken up. There was also already a servant at the edge of the room, standing near Azula. She looked up as they walked in and offered no more interaction than a quick smile before she went back to eating.

It'd been a long time since Zuko had seen his sister smile. Longer still since he hadn't felt threatened by it.

Ursa led Zuko to a spot next to his sister before turning to the servant and- and Zuko couldn't quite hear what they were saying, but she was probably just telling them what food to prepare.

"It's nice to see you're still alive, Zuzu," Azula did not turn to face him when she spoke. It was more endearing when she showed so little respect as a seven year old than as a fourteen year old, but what could he do.

"Nice to see you too, Lala," Zuko smiled at her. It only took a little forcing from his part. If he actually wanted to help set his sister on the right track he would have to make a conscious effort to be nicer to her, even if he wasn't the one being rude in the first place.

Ursa was the one to start most of the small talk, so by the time she sat down the conversation picked up much better than the insult competition the siblings had been having under their breath.

By the time the food was prepared both siblings had come up with three new insults to be used against the other and had picked out five new flaws to be used as ammunition in pre-existing insults.

Azula finished eating before Ursa, and Zuko didn't have any food to begin with, so they both decided to head off and start their day before Ursa was done.

Even if Zuko didn't remember every little bit of his schedule from this far back, he knew that he and Azula did a lot together. It was his job to make sure they both got to training sessions and lessons on Fire Nation history even if they weren't training together or learning the same things in their lessons.

Both siblings skipped through lunch, more focused on outdoing each other with firebending (Azula) and showy sword skills that couldn't be shown off too much because he had no reason as to why he had learned them at this point in time (Zuko) and had no interest in getting proper nutrition.

Zuko headed off to be tutored while Azula went for lunch, and then vice versa. Zuko flew through the history questions as easily as Azula did firebending. A few (seven) extra years of learning never hurt anybody.

As Zuko sat down for lunch, this time not accompanied by any servants at all, he let himself think about more than just history or his sister for the first time in a few hours. He hadn't so much as talked about his father so far today, and as much as he wished he would never have to see his father again, but if he wanted to be able to stop his father he would have to interact with the man in question.

He slumped in his seat, letting his forehead touch the cool table as he let out a sigh. He really needed to come up with a plan.

The rest of his daily lessons passed by in a blur. Just how he remembered them. There's not much to do with yourself when you already know everything someone is teaching you.

Zuko wondered if he would be considered a prodigy at this point. He had jumped years, seven to be exact, in experience over the span of a week. A week with no lessons. He was better at history, at war strategies, firebending and fighting. Sure, he wasn't able to fully show off his skills, lest he risk alerting others of his... condition. And that was something he is okay with. For now though, he was smarter than everyone thought he was. Smarter than he was yesterday.

He wondered what his father would think of that. He had always been the late bloomer, the second thought child. Now he was rivaling Azula's 'natural' mastery in every subject. Azula may be smart, but Zuko had nine more years experience. Maybe that would make his father actually like him.

Not that he cared about what his father thought.

The whole idea of him fixing things relies on the thought that Zuko dislikes his father. And will do anything to get rid of him. And Zuko will. But there's always going to be the little voice in his head that was instilled there by his childhood that strives so much for his fathers admiration, for his respect, that will stop at nothing to be seen as honorable in his fathers eye.

He could put that out of the way for the sake of the world though. Even if it was hard.

Zuko watched the turtleducks quietly as they swam across the pond towards him. He had missed watching them over his banishment.

He was almost jealous of them. No worries, just got to swim with their families under the light of Agni. Zuko smiled at them as they swam past, a few taking time to softly quack at him. He almost laughed.

Most of his days for the foreseeable future would probably be spent doing lessons he didn't need to have. Maybe with enough convincing he could prove that he knew everything already and get some more interesting lessons.

No, it'd probably be a better idea to spend all the time he was spacing out during lessons planning the downfall of his father, not learning new and terrible things his father and grandfather were doing.

Zuko jumped the slightest in his seat when his mother sat down next to him. Ursa didn't make eye contact, just smiled down at the turtle ducks as Zuko had been doing.

"How were your lessons," Ursa's tone was soft. She reached towards the turtleducks and let her hand trail over the birds back as it swam below. She only glanced at Zuko briefly, even as he reached out next to her hand to mimic her movements.

“My teachers said I was doing... good. They said I was doing better than before,” that was a lie. The tutor, Manami, had said that Zuko was making progress like no student he had ever seen before, and especially in such a small span of time, he had ‘improved so much, he must’ve been blessed by Agni himself’. Bragging was something expected of the royals with their people, not between the royals themselves.

There was no way his parents would believe him if Zuko was the one to first say he had improved so much. He would just have to wait for the sages and teachers to address his parents directly. He didn’t want to be caught in the crossfire if his parents suspected him of lying. If his father thought he was just trying to one-up the golden child.

“That’s lovely to hear. I’m sure your father will be proud,” Ursa smiled at him. She was lying. Zuko knew she was lying. He couldn’t remember a single moment of his father actually being proud of him. From being born without the mastery of every style of firebending already in his veins, to his memories of the future. Of his father shooting lightning right at him. Of his father trying to kill him.

“Speaking of Ozai, dinner will be ready soon. I’m sure your father will be glad to see you recovered,” Zuko sat up straighter the moment his father’s name was mentioned. Even at this point of time, when his father was still revered as a brilliant prince, not as a genocidal maniac, no one talked of him much. Even Ozai’s own daughter only seemed to bring him up when taunting Zuko.

“Where was he today? I haven’t seen him,” Zuko tried to keep his voice friendly, unwavering. Not as though he had spent the past few hours plotting how to kill the very man they were talking about.

It wasn’t uncommon for Zuko to go through days without seeing his father until dinner. He tried to keep his distance as much as possible after his father had taken the throne.

Zuko had no idea how his mother would react to finding out he was no longer honestly, genuinely supportive of the Fire Nation. He didn’t know what her own opinions of his father and grandfather were, much less her thoughts on the war. Like Zuko, Ursa lived under Ozai’s rules. Much closer than a lot of other people.

And when you’re that close to someone that powerful, someone with ears and eyes everywhere, you learn not to tell anyone of your own ideals. Especially if they don’t quite go hand in hand with the others’ own ideas.

“He has been busy recently. With your grandfather growing... older, his sons start taking more and more power. He’s just making sure Fire Lord Azulon’s work is easy for him,” Ursa’s voice stayed monotonous. This was something she had said before. Something she knew she would have to say again.

Zuko couldn’t remember if it was him that she had said that to first.

He didn’t bother responding.

Ursa cast him one more glance before standing upright, leaving him with one more smile and a reminder to get to dinner in time. As she walked back onto the path, away from the family of turtleducks that now seemed to be taking turns swimming under Zuko's hand, Zuko couldn't help but hope that no matter how... all of this went, he would be able to save his mother from whatever happened to her.

The time before dinner passed in the blink of an eye. One minute Zuko had been watching the turtleducks bask in the light on the pond, swimming in circles, and the next the sun was already on the line of the horizon.

Dinner in the fire palace was much more important than the other meals of the day. Breakfast was something that not everyone wanted to have everyday, so each person seemed to take turns eating. Lunch was more communal, if Zuko remembered correctly, but people were always so busy nowadays. Him and Azula constantly had lessons, Ozai and Azulon were off being leaders, Ursa had her own work to do, and Iroh was barely around with all the time he spent dealing with military planning and training.

Even in the middle of a war, there seemed to be no end to the sheer amount of people becoming soldiers. And then needing extensive training.

Even when Zuko was young, Iroh had always been one of his favorite people. Not that he knew many people, but the point still stands. Iroh had spent time with Zuko when his father was, allegedly, too busy. His father never seemed to be too busy for Azula. Iroh would play with Zuko and Lu Ten on Ember Island. Iroh would play board games that Ozai deemed to be a waste of time.

Even before he had learnt about his uncle's connections to the White Lotus and how he had been working against the Fire Lord for a long time, Zuko liked him more than most. He wondered if Iroh was currently in league with the White Lotus, or if that only happened after Zuko's banishment.

He wondered if the current Iroh would be similar to the Iroh Zuko had learnt to love.

Zuko barely registered the dimming light before a servant had already been sent to fetch him for dinner.

He set all of his thoughts, his fears, of meeting his father again and simply nodded to the servant before leading the path back into the hallways of the palace. He tried not to think about the feeling of a burning hot hand pressed to the left side of his face.

He tried not to think about the way Azula had spoken of Ozai when he had, briefly, been unexiled.

He tried.

"I'm glad to see you're doing better, Zuko," Azulon spoke from his seat at the head of the table. His voice was powerful, but it seemed... tired. Zuko didn't have too many memories of

his grandfather. He had always been busy doing 'Fire Lord Things', in his mothers elegant wording.

Azula didn't turn to face him as he sat down next to her, stopping himself from stealing some food right off her plate. Sure, he had the exact same as her, but food taken for oneself always tasted better than food given.

Zuko had almost forgotten all his table manners in the time spent with the Avatar, time spent sharing food they had managed to forage from nearby, taking some right off others plate if offered. Zuko didn't know how meals were spent in the lower classes of the Fire Nation, but chances are they were closer to how Zuko's meals had been growing up than the water tribes style of 'communal dishes'.

The food was even better than his breakfast had been. As stuck-up as it made him sound (Katara's words, not his), Zuko had missed having real chefs. People whose jobs it was to cook, and people who got good at cooking. He knew that they probably enjoyed their jobs at the very least, and didn't have to risk their lives everyday like most Fire Nation citizens.

Zuko looked across the table when he finished his first plate, realizing that the man he had just spent hours worrying over was probably right next to him. He glanced across the table at his uncle who wasn't looking anywhere in his direction, over to his father.

In his exile, it had been easy to almost forget Ozai's face. The sharp lines weren't quite as sharp as Zuko's imagination had drawn them to be, and his face was, surprisingly, not stuck in a constant scowl. Not when he wasn't looking at Zuko at least. He wondered if that would change after Ozai learnt of his son's newfound prodigy-ness.

Zuko let his gaze drift over to his cousin as he laughed quietly with Iroh. It had been a long time since he had seen Lu Ten's face. He had missed him. A lot.

Finally, Zuko let his eyes settle on his grandfather.

Truth be told, Zuko didn't have too many positive opinions of Azulon. He had led the war more than anyone else, it was his fault that the world was in such disarray. But at the same time, it was odd, hating an old man.

Sure, he was bad. Evil. And he would never, ever make up for that. But hatred would mean nothing to someone already so close to the spirit plane. So Zuko didn't waste his thoughts on him.

Chapter End Notes

like i said; every 2 weeks (give or take some)

just a couple more exposition based chapters thank god. i mapped out every chapter!!!
all of them!!!

thank you so much for all the hits and kudos' and special thanks to the people that commented <3

Teachings

Chapter Summary

exposition. character building. ocs. writers block.

Chapter Notes

woooo update on time!! i've been going thru quite the writers block and i've picked up way too many school projects so the next few updates might be a bit shorter or a bit late, but i'm doing my best

this work is not beta'd, so if you see any spelling/grammar/formatting issues, please let me know!

thanks everyone whos taken the time out of their day to comment, kudos, or simply read this. you're all the best <3

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

After dinner, Zuko managed to slip away unnoticed. He didn't want to spend any extra time exchanging pleasantries with his father that always ended with him being scolded, and didn't want to wait and see what new tactic of stealing his stuff Azula would come up with. She got creative.

Zuko made his way to his bedroom as quickly as he could without being suspicious. And when you were in somewhere as closely guarded as the palace, everything was suspicious. Even a prince.

By the time he made it back to his room, Zuko was on the verge of screaming. The entire day he had been thinking of ways to start his plan. Or to come up with a plan at all. And how to start working on either of those things would always start with his father.

Everything seemed to revolve around Ozai. Zuko's thoughts all revolved around Ozai. Maybe he hadn't changed so much from when he was nine.

Zuko closed (not slammed, no matter how much he wanted to) the door to his room behind him. His room was his second favorite part of the palace, beaten only by the courtyard. He missed the days that he would spend sitting by the small tables in the corner reading whatever new scroll he'd found, all the games he had played with Azula or Lu Ten, or the times he would watch the summer storms when they woke him in the middle of the night.

He walked over to the small table in question, wondering what exactly he still had in his room at this point in time. It was hard to pinpoint the exact time he had stopped getting new scrolls and toys, when he had grown distant from his sister, when he had stopped trusting Ozai. When he changed.

There were plenty of scrolls he recognized sitting on the shelf next to the table, some stories from his childhood, some more advanced ones that had probably been gifts from family members. He let himself slip into the seat and picked up the closest book to him.

‘History of the Fire Nation’. He already knew all the history related to his nation. That being said, he already had most of the scrolls next to him memorized. It was better to read something closer to his current reading level than that of his younger self.

He skimmed through the paper, trying not to let his tiredness overcome him. The second Agni went down, he got tired. Especially at this age, when he hadn’t had any practice of sneaking out in the dead of night to do whatever he needed to get information on the Avatar. If any of the plans he came up with relied on him being awake and vigilant at night, he would have to get himself ready sooner rather than later.

Agni, had this always been so boring? Even while recounting great battles and legends of fearsome spirits, it managed to be one of the least interesting things Zuko had ever had the displeasure of reading. On top of all that, it was filled to the brim with embellishments, clearly trying to make every other nation seem much worse than it was.

Zuko would know. In his travels of searching for the Avatar, even before finding the kid in question, he and his crew had traveled everywhere they could (minus the Fire Nation) and seen every nation’s good points and... less great ones.

Was this really what he’d grown up reading? Some boring droning of an old guy going on about how great his nation was and how terrible everywhere else was. He could suddenly understand why Katara and Sokka were so adamant about there being no end to the propaganda in the Fire Nation, even if when they had first mentioned it he had adamantly disagreed.

He was just about to roll the scroll shut (and possibly burn it) when a knock, loud and harsh, rang out from his door. He jumped in his seat before yelling out a quick ‘come in’ and setting the scroll down next to him.

His father walked in the doors.

His father, Fire Lord- Prince Ozai, the man he had been half avoiding all day and half hoping to encounter just to punch in the face. Not that he’d ever follow through with attacking his father at this point of time, but the thought rang through, loud and clear, in his head.

“Father, ah- hello,” Zuko barely remembered to talk loud enough to be heard. He could feel his fathers sharp, staring eyes looking right at him, but he couldn’t bring himself to meet his fathers eyes. That would probably be seen as some sort of defiance, but Zuko wasn’t thinking about manners right now.

“Zuko. One of your teachers sought me out today,” Ozai’s voice struck through every part of Zuko, but he at this point he was sure that his father wouldn’t be able to tell, that it wouldn’t affect any part of him other than his mind, because this is how it’d been his entire life. His father had always scared him, nothing was different now, nothing at all.

“Was- did I do something wrong?” Zuko tried to get himself to look up at his fathers eyes, he really did try, but the fear of his father outweighed all the manners his father had tried to teach him using that fear.

“No. Your tutor stopped me to tell me how much you had improved since he had last seen you. He said your firebending had gone up in talent and control more than anyone he’d ever heard of had in such a short time. He said that, even if your sister still seems to show more consistent talent in her bending, you seem to be rivaling her. Possibly better, if you manage to keep your... ‘skill’ consistent,” Ozai’s words were short, cut clearly and exactly. He knew exactly what he was saying.

“That’s very... good?” Zuko wasn’t sure if this was an opportunity to brag. His father let Azula slide when she insulted Zuko or when she went on and on about how much better than Zuko she was at firebending, but Agni knows how he’d respond if Zuko did the same.

“It is. It’s more than good. I had been worried about you being my heir, if I am to be honest with you, but it seems your heritage is catching up to you,” Ozai... smiled? It wasn’t quite a smirk, but it wasn’t welcoming nor friendly. Nothing about it seemed nice.

“Thank you, father,” Zuko finally managed to get his voice under control. Ozai had never liked when he stumbled over his words. And no matter how much he didn’t want to, for the time being he was going to have to play by his fathers rules.

“I do hope you manage to keep up your performances in your studies. It would be a shame if you didn’t keep up whatever you had been doing today,” Ozai turned on his heel before he even finished the sentence, not letting Zuko get the last word in no matter how hard he could’ve tried.

Zuko sat there in shock for a good few minutes before fully processing what had just happened. His father had been... proud of him? Almost proud? That wasn’t a good thing.

Maybe, if he managed to get his father to be proud of him, he would be able to make him drop his guard and be able to kill him. Be able to stop everything even before the Avatar was out. End a war, a dictatorship, salvage the Fire Nation. Kill his own father.

Or maybe he was still nine years old and his father, his father who had always hated him, had just been proud of him. He said that Zuko was actually good at something, great at something, and he could be honorable.

Zuko wasn’t quite sure which thought was worse.

By the time Zuko had woken up in the morning, he was even more confused about the incident that'd happened the previous night. On one hand, at this age he should be ecstatic for his father to show interest and even some respect in him. On the other hand, he still needs to kill his father.

Despite his reluctance to go back to how his life had been, if he wanted any chance of overthrowing Ozai he would need allies. Lots of allies. Sure, most of the world hated his father, even before he was officially Fire Lord, but what good were allies that were on the other side of the world for a fight that could be won within one building.

Despite his need for help, even Zuko knew that practically no one would be willing to align themselves with the fourth prince- the 9 year old fourth prince, who up until the past week had been a less than mediocre bender, an alright swordsfighter, and a terrible socialite.

There was no way he'd be convincing anyone to work alongside him until he figured out how to make a believable case against Ozai- a reason that people could hear and think, 'oh, it makes sense he would turn against his father,' a reason people could trust he wasn't just trying to get himself closer to the throne.

It was strange to think about- being so far from crown prince again, when just before he had- just before all this had happened, he had been in a duel to determine whether or not he would be Fire Lord. Now he had his uncle, cousin, and father, all ranking ahead of him. And although Azulon was old, no one thought he was going to die particularly soon.

Even if he did, Iroh was still in the peak of his military career- which if Zuko remembered correctly, was soon to end dramatically in the 600 day siege. Zuko wondered if he would be able to save Lu Ten with his newfound knowledge. Zuko hoped he would be able to save Lu Ten.

Speaking of Lu Ten, he was also an intimidating contender for the throne; A young man, recently joining the army and rising the ranks quicker than he was aging. Zuko had always enjoyed spending time with his cousin. He was kind and gentle towards him and Azula, but in all honesty Zuko was pretty sure he had, at least towards the end of his life, started slipping out of the delusion that the Fire Nation was so great- that the war was just a way to share their greatness.

Once, soon before Lu Ten had followed his father to the battle that would cause his own end, he had told Zuko he wasn't really sure why the war was being fought at this point. The other nations were all in a terrible state, this wasn't helping anyone. Zuko had thought he was just annoyed at the failure of one of his own missions at the time- he had recently returned from an assignment on one of the further out islands that had ended in him disobeying some orders and having quite the fight with his direct superiors- nearly getting suspended. It would've made sense for him to be in a bad mood about the army in general.

Now, though, Zuko understood what his cousin had been trying to tell him. What his cousin had been trying to do.

It was hard trying to live his life in the palace again. He actually had a schedule again, not just 'help the Avatar'. He had to remember to be on time to his lessons, to make it to meals. It

was harder to remember his place in the palace- not the crown prince, but not an outcast. Not an exile.

It was early morning still, soon after the sun had reached above the horizon. If he called out, even just slightly above his normally speaking level, he could have multiple guards in the room within a minute. Chances are there was at least one guard posted outside his door. Despite that, he felt significantly less safe than he had when it had just been him and the Avatar's friends in the forest.

If he really wanted to, he could have someone come help him select clothing or help him get dressed. Most days it didn't matter too much how his clothes looked, all his clothes were expensive enough that anyone visiting the palace would be able to see his status even if the robes he wore weren't tied perfectly and his topknot wasn't flawlessly shaped. On the rare days he was actually going out in public, servants would have to help him with his clothes.

The thought of that now brought a bad taste to his mouth.

As he sped through the questions his history tutor was asking him, Zuko wondered how he had ever made himself sit through these lessons. He'd always been a bit of a slow learner, and while his tutor had never been particularly rude about his inability to retain any amount of information, he'd never been particularly nice about it either.

Even now that he knew all the answers to the questions someone years older than him would've struggled on (years spent hunting the Avatar were also years spent reading. And learning to keep that information, not just letting it slip through his mind every time he stopped paying attention) he couldn't find it in himself to find any entertainment in the lesson.

"The last general to lead the Fire Nation troops during the clan wars?"

"General Oraso Eiko."

The tutor (Batsal, Zuko knew his name. He'd been Zuko and Azula's tutor since Zuko was seven years old. He hadn't seen him since he'd been banished) nodded. They'd been going over the clan wars for months at this point, as Zuko hadn't been able to remember each and every soldier's name, let alone which battles they'd been a part of. He could now.

"Who did Princess Zeisan marry?"

"Khandro, an air nomad." Zuko had gone over the history of his own family more times than he could count during his banishment, hoping to find someone in his bloodline who had gone through similar struggles he had with firebending. The closest he could find was the princess in question, who couldn't bend at all.

"Very good," Batsal re-rolled the scroll sitting in front of him. "My prince, if I may. It seems you might want to move onto higher levels of study at this point. It might... confuse me, but you've definitely gotten better since we last went through this history."

Zuko wondered if he should try to hide even more of what he knew- it was already suspicious that he'd seemingly memorized everything overnight after struggling with it for months, knowing things he hadn't been taught could only be passed off for so long.

"If you think it would help my studies," Zuko started. He wondered if his hesitancy would just appear as shyness from the praise to his tutor, rather than contemplation.

"Of course. There's no reason to continue going over information you seem to have a good grasp on," Batsal stood slowly, eyeing the prince as he turned to take a different scroll of the shelf. "Is there anything in particular you would like to focus on while I rework your previous learning schedule?"

Zuko knew there were right and wrong answers to this question. A good prince would want to learn about the military accomplishments of his country. A good prince would want to learn about his ancestors. He also knew that he knew those things already, making those lessons just as useless as the ones he was currently having.

"Nothing in specific, no. Whatever was already next on the lesson plans."

"If that's what you want."

The two worked through lunch and then some, Zuko messing up on some questions (some to keep the illusion of youth, some because he was still youth) just enough to not make Batsal question if he had magically gotten all the answers to the questions he hadn't asked yet.

Azula came and went from the neighboring room, listening in on Zuko's conversation just long enough to walk away with a sour look on her face.

Eventually Zuko and Batsal bid farewell for the day- Zuko off to his firebending lessons, Batsal presumably to report to his father about the miraculous improvement. Zuko wondered how much of his life was being reported back to his grandfather and father. He wondered if everything told to them was true.

Firebending had been Zuko's worst subject for as long as he could remember- having been born in the dead of winter, lacking firebending long enough that his father had likely threatened to get rid of him and replace him with a better heir.

When he had been young, he and Azula had shared a firebending teacher and spent lessons together, trying to figure out tricks they'd seen Iroh or Lu Ten using while trying to one up each other on the actual content of the lesson.

Azula had been better than him even in his oldest memories.

Eventually the two had started taking separate lessons, Azula started focusing on real combat skills while Zuko continued trying to hold a flame steady long enough to finish a basic form.

Zuko had changed firebending teachers twice before he had been banished. Azula had more than ten.

Zuko's firebending teacher since he was around seven was a middle aged man named Binh-Dao. He was a strict man, ending most of their lessons with a statement along the lines of 'how did I get stuck teaching him' when he thought Zuko couldn't hear him.

The man had worked directly under Iroh for years- he was trusted enough by the royal family (and well enough respected in the Fire Army) to be given a house near enough to the palace in Hari Bulkan to make the trip into the palace almost every day to teach Zuko.

Normally, by Zuko's age, he would've at very least started to consider going to the royal firebending academy, rather than relying on bringing in tutors for each subject, but for a long time his father had insisted he wasn't on par with his peers let alone good enough to represent the royal family in public settings. As such, he stuck to private lessons where the chance of humiliating his family, at least publicly, was much lower.

Binh-Dao, despite his obvious dislike of teaching the 'weaker heir', had been quite good at pushing Zuko forward in his training, even when he was still stuck struggling on the skills someone years younger than him (Azula) had already gotten past in their training. The man would make sure that at very least Zuko knew the technical aspects of a skill and was able to practice it on his own, and then not waste any more time teaching it and move on to the next skill.

He was strict, harsh, and would scold Zuko if his form was a fraction of an inch off. He also trusted Zuko enough to teach him content and ideas that were of his learning level, and gave him more than enough time to catch his breath when he had attempted a skill he should've already mastered.

It might've seemed severe to anyone from outside the palace, yet in Azulon's palace it was the small mercies that mattered the most. There was no such thing as true lenience in the Fire Palace.

"People here have been talking about you a lot lately."

"Have they?" Zuko didn't bother looking up from where his gaze was set on the setting sun, registering Azula sitting next to him by the quick blur of deep red fabric in the corner of his eye.

"Mm. Mostly good things, if you'd believe it," She sounded like she was almost smiling yet wasn't quite showing it on her face. She'd been a nice enough kid, before Ozai had really gotten into her head. Zuko smiled about as much as he imagined she was.

"That's got to be a first," He wondered how much she'd heard, or if she was just basing her knowledge off what she'd overheard earlier while listening in on his lessons, "Who'd you hear that from?"

She just smiled, brushing past his question with practiced elegance, "I'm sure dad's heard too, by now. You think he'll let you go back to having lessons everyone else your age are having?"

“Maybe. Think if I asked him, he’d let me join in on your firebending lessons?” Azula had always been proud of her superiority in more physical subjects. She’d been even prouder whenever she got the chance to directly show off that superiority during their lessons, back when they still had them together.

“I think if you asked him, you’d also have to show him first hand how great your ‘improvement’ was,” Azula scoffed quietly. She had yet to see Zuko actually training. From all she’d heard, Zuko had improved. It wasn’t hard to see improvement when the person in question could barely make it through the basic katas without messing up.

“You don’t think I could?”

“You don’t have the greatest record when it comes to impressing father, as it happens,” Azula said, leaning ever so slightly away from where he was sitting, “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

She was, in her own way, expressing concern for him. Zuko smiled at the thought.

“How are your lessons going?” He glanced towards her.

“As well as ever. Nothing too impressive I suppose, compared to the way all the servants have been buzzing about you lately,” She would’ve sounded almost dejected, if she’d been anyone but herself, “No, I suppose when everyone’s so used to me doing well in my lessons its less fun to tell others about.”

If he had to choose a specific time when he and Azula had started growing apart, he would’ve probably placed it around when he was ten years old. Uncle and Lu Ten had just recently gone off for the siege, Mother had become all the more reserved without having uncle there to help mitigate any fights between her and Father. The Fire Lord had been aging beforehand, Zuko knew, but to him it had seemed almost overnight when Azulon had gone from somewhat distant but still a reliable leader to a harsh, cruel old man whose inner flame seemed able to be blown out by the slightest breeze.

Azula and Zuko had grown more distant the more time they spent apart, as Zuko fell behind in his lessons and Azula sped ahead. Then they’d effectively stopped spending the warmer months together as well, as Zuko went off to be trained by Piandao and Azula stayed home and befriended Ty Lee and Mai.

By the time he’d been banished, Zuko felt as though the Azula he’d grown up with and the Azula who’d smiled while witnessing half her older brothers’ face being burnt off were two separate beings.

“I’m sure people are still talking about you. It probably just gets boring after a while, saying the same things over and over and over about how great your skills are and how you’re such a prodigy and all that,” He scoffed, his tone a playful annoyance he’d grown unaccustomed to using in the past years.

“Hm. Not something I would have experience with, but you would know about something like that, wouldn’t you,” She spoke slowly. Taunting like that would’ve easily worked on

Zuko when he was nine, but he didn't feel any of the embarrassment he would have if he'd still been taking everything she said to heart.

"Ah, I guess you wouldn't care so much 'bout what servants are saying about you. Nothing too bad to say is there," He laughed.

"You're acting weird, you know that?" Azula made a face. She turned her head towards him, "You've been acting weird a while. Stop doing that."

He glanced back at her, slowly turning his head back towards the slowly setting sun, finally starting to show hints of the pinks and oranges and blue that made the sunset worth looking at. The sunsets had always felt brighter in the Fire Nation than on his ship, but maybe it was just the bright lens he had viewed all of his childhood in.

"I'm not weird. If anything, you're acting weird. Taking precious time out of your day just to come an' talk to me? Sounds like you're planning something," He sat up the slightest bit straighter, thinking about what he was supposed to be planning at that moment. In regards to saving the world and all that.

Azula huffed, turning her gaze back to the sunset. The two sat in silence as the sky was overtaken by colors, bright yellows and purples and dark blues. It reminded Zuko of the dragon's fire. It reminded him of the fire his sister would one day possess.

"We should probably head inside," He said after what felt like an hour, standing slowly and offering his hand down to her.

"Mm," She took it.

Chapter End Notes

in terms of timeline for this- i've struggled finding any concrete information on most specific dates so i've taken the liberty of kind of coming up with my own timeline based on the information i *could* find

- Azula is 7-ish, Zuko is 9-ish, and the seige starts soon before Zuko turns 10? i think?
- since the seige lasts around two years, zuko's like 12ish, which would give time for him to turn 13 like right before he's banished

not that all that matters 100% since this fic will follow a different timeline, but that's the baseline i'm working off

i'm also debating putting some of the art i've been doing of the characters + oc's in this on my tumblr, so if anyone wants to see that... be so kind and leave a comment letting me know ;3

Disagreement

Chapter Summary

local author remembered he was capable of writing dialogue, immediately abused this ability. The royal siblings have a lesson together.

Chapter Notes

this work is not beta'd; if you notice any grammar/spelling/formatting errors, please let me know!

more than 100 kudos... more than 1000 hits.. i genuinely can not thank everyone reading this enough. special special special thanks to everyone who has left a comment: your words mean the absolute world to me, thank you soooo much for spending time writing out your thoughts <3

i try to update every other week :3

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

“Have you heard about uncle’s plans to take Ba Sing Se?” Azula asked conversationally, sparing a glance away from her breakfast before continuing, “Apparently grandfather finally agreed that it was a good idea and uncle should start figuring out the details. They’ll probably leave within the year.”

Zuko paused for a moment, considering. At this point, it was still largely thought that given the Dragon of the West’s military prowess the city would fall, if not too quickly. No one but him knew of the humiliating defeat that would cost so many families their sons and Iroh his place on the throne.

“Of course, if they leave this year they’ll probably be back next, which would mean we’d have won the whole war,” Azula continued, unphased by her brother's unresponsiveness. “It’d be a dramatic ending, hopefully. Do you think the Earth Army will be able to hold off against uncle too long?”

“Maybe. I mean, hopefully not, but they’ve held their own this long.”

“Sure, but we haven’t even really been trying that hard,” She shrugged, “I think grandfather could’ve probably ended all this a while ago if he’d really put his mind to it.”

It was Zuko's turn to shrug, "Then why hasn't he? He's been Fire Lord long enough to end it if he really wanted to."

Part of Zuko knew that this was a useless fight, Azula had been raised the same way he had. The first thing they'd learnt was pure devotion to whoever was sitting on the throne, then respect for the armies they commanded.

It was, at this point in time, expected that Zuko himself would grow up to be a military commander of some sort, following in his uncle and cousins' footsteps. What else was there to do, become a merchant?

If the children didn't place full trust in the idea that the army would be able to defeat any adversary it went against, who else was there to place that trust in? Their grandfather? The man they both knew had less than a decade left in him before one of his sons took his place and continued the war he'd been too weak to finish?

"He's probably just trying to think of a way to win the war without angering any of the other nations' spirits. If he destroys the wrong town, boom! We're all done too," Zuko mimed an explosion with his hands, hitting Azula's chopsticks out of her own. She laughed sharply before jabbing him in the side.

"All that spirit stuff is nonsense and you know it. Besides, all that is the Fire Sage's job, not the Fire Lord's. He's probably actually just letting the other nations realize that all this fighting is useless and they should give in on their own terms while they still can," She picked a bowl up from where it was sitting in front of Zuko.

"You really think he's merciful enough to do something like that?" Zuko paused from picking at his food, considering his own opinion of his grandfather.

He couldn't remember giving him that much thought beyond 'He's the Fire Lord' and vague concepts of respect. And less vague concepts of fear, as he'd gotten older. He wondered if Azula's perception of him was that different, if she was just fighting Zuko's opinions for the sake of fighting.

Azula didn't answer, quietly placing the bowl in front of herself.

The two sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the quiet whisperings of the serving staff just outside the door. They were quiet enough that the siblings couldn't make out most of their words, but every now and again they were able to catch small phrases loud enough to understand.

Lots of quiet "there's talk of infighting" and "if something doesn't happen soon-". Nothing to clue the kids into the full conversation.

Eventually both siblings finished their meals and headed off towards their lessons, which happened to be in the same wing of the palace. The two sometimes had lessons together, although none of those lessons had anything to do with fighting. Lessons that the two had been more on par in terms of level.

Their schedules often depended on what tutors happened to be in the palace at what time, and what skills the kids had especially been struggling with or simply needed more practice with at any given time.

As such, it wasn't exactly common for there to be times in which both kids were at the same tutor at the same time. Azula spent most of her days practicing firebending, Zuko spent most of his days learning the less hands-on aspects of war, like strategy and history.

Of course, they both had all the lessons the other was taking, it just depended on which tutor requested them at which time. Binh-Dao wasn't exactly keen on requesting Zuko everyday for firebending practice, and Batsal didn't tend to request Azula more than twice a week.

Their other tutors often varied week by week, simply depending on who wanted to be doing what.

This day, they had both been requested by their strategy tutor. This, of course, meant that the two would be competing for the teacher's attention.

Their strategy tutor, a middle aged half Earth Kingdom man named Manami, often only came into the palace a few days a week due to his home being slightly further than most of their other teachers.

He had also always favored Azula. She was nowhere near the level of prodigy that she would reach by the time she was fourteen, but she had always been especially good at any skills that had to do with warfare. The fighting itself, yes, but also the planning.

There was a reason Ba Sing Se had fallen to her and not her uncle.

Despite all that, Manami had never dismissed Zuko in the way some of his other tutors did. It took him longer to catch on to all the information given in a lesson, but once he got the information down he was good in his own right. Maybe he didn't always think his plans out fully when he was actually fighting, but he knew how to if he actually gave it the time.

Manami had been Lu Ten's teacher as well, and clearly he was doing well in his military career, half thanks to his own natural gifts and half his learned skills, such as, who would've thought, strategizing. Manami had served under Iroh, similar to Binh-Dao, and wasn't quite disliked enough by Ozai to be fired from his teaching job, so he'd been around the royal siblings since they were barely hip-high.

When he'd been young, Zuko had taken up a habit of sitting in on Lu Ten's lessons and doing his best to impress his cousin by attempting to answer questions on topics he hadn't even begun to learn the basics of. In most aspects this never really impressed his cousin, although it did give Lu Ten lots of stories to tell as Zuko got older and realized how embarrassing that had been for himself.

The one topic Zuko didn't absolutely embarrass himself in was strategizing, and that was only when he only had to plan one or two steps ahead. He could get maybe three (admittedly rather creative) steps into a plan before he completely blanked on where to go next.

This trend had continued once Zuko had strategy lessons of his own. He had ideas, but he couldn't figure out where to go with them.

Whenever he sparred while training at Piandao's home he'd managed to come up with creative ways to end fights, but he wouldn't really have had any idea what to do next if the fight hadn't ended there.

"Prince Zuko. Princess Azula," Manami bowed to them both in turn as they took their places sitting in front of him at a table. Their strategy lessons took place in the smaller war room when it wasn't being used, meaning they had a pretty good idea of what their strategy meetings in the future would be like.

The two only nodded in response, slowing the whispering between them to silence as they waited for Manami to begin the lesson. Even if neither of them were exactly known for getting along with their tutors, there was a difference between getting along with and showing respect.

The royal siblings knew respect.

Zuko wondered if Manami knew of his uncle's plans yet, or if that was still just gossip that Azula had only overheard because she was always listening in on the servants as they went about their day and even if they thought she was eavesdropping there was nothing they could do.

"I'm sure you two remember the situations we ran through last time we were meeting," Manami began, straightening the scroll sitting unfurled in front of him, "And I was wondering if either of you had come up with any solutions. I understand that it was a bit of a harder problem, but you've both had time to think about what solutions you'd like to give."

Zuko blanked. He had no idea what Manami was talking about.

He didn't turn towards her, but he knew Azula had probably picked up on his confusion after a few seconds of silence. Hopefully she'd take the hint and give an example for him to follow up on.

Zuko wasn't sure how he was going to explain he had no idea what problem they were working on because the last time he went over all this information was almost seven years ago and as it turned out, Zuko had never been that good at paying attention to his lessons.

"It wasn't that difficult. The General in the problem should've split his troops and had all of the people involved in the coup punished. Actually, everyone involved in the coup and everyone in the troops that had allowed the coup to get as far as it did," If she was at all uncomfortable with her statement of 'everyone, even if they didn't know they were involved should be punished and possibly executed', she didn't show it.

A general whose troops were turning against them in the middle of a war- Zuko remembered this problem.

He'd gotten into countless fights with his tutor over the proper course of action, and had gotten scolded by his father for his weak decision making over and over throughout the month he'd been stuck on finding a solution that didn't end with everyone in jail. Or dead.

The problem itself wasn't necessarily simple- A younger general had risen the ranks partially thanks to their families history of being good leaders in war, and as such many the people working under him didn't respect him as much as they respected their other superiors.

Eventually, while the general was in the middle of an important campaign, large groups from two of his troops staged a coup that killed lots of their fellow soldiers. The general won the fight, but many of his men had died and many more had shown their disloyalty in times that called for nothing but loyalty.

According to his tutor, the correct course of action for the general to keep the soldiers that were still loyal and not severely injured from the coup to continue the campaign and have the saboteurs as well as anyone seen being too friendly to them, even in the smallest of senses, escorted back to the capital to face as extreme a punishment as would be allowed.

The course of action Zuko had suggested was... not that.

He had initially said that the general should find a way to show to the lesser soldiers that he, too, was a soldier who had to fight for his rank and was acting with everyone's best interest and really anything to show that he was a firm leader- but still trustworthy. Still respectable.

Upon being told that letting the traitors stay would be a show of weakness- it would just be inviting another coup (which sure, fine, Zuko could accept that) he said that they should suspend all the people who had directly participated in the coup, whether it be the planning or the actual fighting, and send them back to their homes. Once the general gets back from the campaign, he could take the traitors to court and have them expelled from the military.

In Zuko's nine year old mind, being dishonorably discharged seemed like the worst case scenario for anyone. Death wasn't even on the table- why would they willingly kill someone that wasn't actively attacking them, even if they had attacked in the past. Clearly losing all their money and honor would show them how terrible what they'd done had been.

Manami had just stared at him for a while after he'd first said that. Then he'd told Zuko to think through the situation again while Manami stood up and left the room. Zuko was pretty sure he'd gone outside to scream.

"I- yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Maybe not everyone seen being sympathetic to them," Zuko nodded in his agreement, sending Azula a pointed look before she could interrupt with anything along the lines of 'but they'll just start another coup' and hoping that Manami wasn't paying too much attention to the siblings facial expressions towards each other as they quietly passed glares between themselves, "As the general still needs people to fight. But yeah, I think everyone directly involved should be sent back."

Manami nodded his agreement, smiling at Azula and passing a quietly approving look at Zuko which somehow managed to say 'Good idea' and 'I hope you're not just repeating what she's saying' at the same time.

“Those are both good suggestions, although I may have to side with the prince on this particular problem. The general still needs enough soldiers to continue the campaign. There would be the risk of losing too many people if every last person slightly involved was punished in the moment,” Azula scowled as he spoke, clearly viewing his statements as a show of weakness in the same way Ozai viewed everything Zuko had come up with to solve the problem to be.

“But-” Azula started before being silenced by a sharp look from Manami.

“If people were seen being especially sympathetic to the traitors, once the campaign was finished then the general could take those people to court alongside the direct assailants.”

“Father would never let traitors to the nation stay and fight alongside real soldiers,” Azula pouted, although it was more of a glare, and rolled her eyes when she saw Zuko slightly smiling at the praise Manami had given his idea.

“He probably has at some point. We need all the soldiers we can get- doesn’t matter if they aren’t always one hundred percent on board with all their superiors plans,” Zuko glanced at Manami as he spoke, quietly hoping his words didn’t slip into the near-treasonous territory he’d begun being comfortable hearing from his friends, “So long as they aren’t trying to desert- or convince people to desert, who cares what they’re thinking in the heat of a battle.”

““Who cares what they’re thinking during a battle”? A good commander should- if people are thinking treasonous thoughts-”

“I didn’t say they were thinking about treason-”

“If they’re thinking treasonous thoughts at any point in time they’re thinking treasonous thoughts at all points of time. Doesn’t matter if they’re not acting on it, they could try and turn other soldiers against command,” Azula interrupted again, eyes sharp as she pointedly didn’t look at Zuko or Manami, rather examined her nails with a quick flick of her wrist.

Manami almost laughed, then caught himself.

“Princess, you’re correct in this sense, but Prince Zuko is correct in his assertion that the general should wait until there are better chances to punish the non-directly disruptive soldiers,” Manami glanced down at his scroll quickly, presumably reading over whatever the actual answer was for the question in the text.

Neither sibling bothered responding- as of now, they were tied one for one on their teacher's approval.

“Let’s consider what would happen after the campaign if the general followed the course of action we’ve laid out so far- planning to punish certain soldiers after the campaign and sending the aggressors to wait in a prison,” Manami said as he looked at the siblings, “Once the general has headed back and decided to punish the people attempting to commit treason- do either of you know the laws that could be used to show their guilt?”

Once again, neither sibling responded, although for different reasons than before. Zuko had never been good at law, rather he'd always had a talent for finding loopholes in it. Azula had just recently learnt all this, there was a good chance she hadn't been taught the specifics yet.

"Alright, that's fine. Do either of you know the punishment for treason, at least in military cases?"

"Depends. Can be anywhere from execution," Zuko began, considering what he himself had been threatened with when his nation had realized he was working with the Avatar initially, "to some jail time. Five or so years, I think?"

"Six years," Azula countered.

"Close enough," Manami said, looking at both of them with squinted eyes. "In this specific case, do either of you think you know what the punishment would be for the direct aggressors in the attempted coup?"

"Depends on the person overseeing the case, but probably execution."

"Maybe, it could also be a life sentence in a prison camp," Zuko didn't pause to think about what he now knew about those prison camps. How they were also effectively a death sentence with added torture to the punishment.

"You're both correct. The main assailants would probably be facing death, the rest an extended stay in a prison camp," Manami considered their answers a moment longer, then added, "Princess Azula, you should consider not always jumping to the most violent conclusions. It's good to be on guard, but you won't have any allies if your first thought is always violence."

Azula sat, seemingly shocked, for a moment before her brow furrowed and she opened her mouth to say something in her defense-

"And Prince Zuko, you should consider being more on guard. You can't always be so lenient with those under your command, your sister was right earlier when she said not punishing the traitors would be inviting more of that behavior in the future."

Zuko slumped in his seat, but accepted the criticism.

He'd always been a bit lenient with people, especially compared to his sister- he knew that about himself. It was nothing new.

Azula scowled at them both.

"If you're not always on guard, how can you know when you're supposed to be on guard?"

Manami considered for a moment, "I'd argue that so long as you're surrounded with people you trust, you should be able to put your guard down, at least slightly. And any good general needs to trust their soldiers."

"We were just talking about soldiers staging a coup," Azula wasn't wrong.

“Some soldiers are less trustworthy- I agree with your basic ideas, Princess, but if you want to get any work done you need to find at least a few people you know for a fact you can trust,” Manami was looking directly in Azula’s eyes. She was looking at his hands, “You’re smart, your Highness, but you need to also be efficient.”

Zuko knew what Manami was trying to say- and agreed with it, in a basic sense, but he also understood where Azula’s thoughts were coming from. They had both been taught to be on guard, to not trust anyone they didn’t need to.

Azula was doing what she thought was right- punishing those she viewed as insulting her nation.

“Besides, that wasn’t the main takeaway I gave you. Consider being a bit less directly violent, it would make decision making a lot easier if you let yourself think of options that didn’t end in everyone dead,” Zuko stifled a laugh.

Azula crossed her arms and her glare let up, ever so slightly.

“That wasn’t even that violent. All I said was the general would take them to court-”

“And then they’d be executed,” Zuko passed a look at her that he hoped conveyed his agreement with Manami on this particular topic.

“So? They were trying to kill their own fellow soldiers- it’s not like they didn’t know what the punishment would be if they failed,” She wasn’t even glaring anymore, just stating a fact. “If someone knows the punishment is going to be death and they still fail, I’d have to argue they deserve that death.”

Zuko laughed at the same time as Manami opened his mouth to form a counterpoint, which quickly put everyone in an equally uncomfortable silence.

“Alright then,” Manami began, and quickly launched into the rest of the lesson the siblings had so kindly derailed.

The rest of the lesson was a lot less arguing and a lot more sitting in silence as the two sat and thought through each question.

The dining hall was quiet. Manami had let them out of their lesson early, stating he needed to head home early to help his wife with chores at home. The two royals hadn’t had anything else planned for the hour between the end of the lesson and dinner, and so they decided to wait in the couches at the end of the long room.

“He wasn’t wrong, earlier.”

“Hm?” Zuko looked up from the play scroll he had been reading, a gift courtesy of Lu Ten, at where Azula was seated, examining her own gift from their cousin, a well made necklace whose pendant seemed much too sharp to be worn comfortably.

“When the tutor said you trust people too easily,” She looked him square in the eyes, “He was pointing out the obvious, sure, but it was still true. Once you’re in the military, you can’t just let traitors run rampant.”

“I was never planning on it, I just think we shouldn’t jump straight to execution if we can avoid it,” He carefully reminded her of the criticism that had been lodged with her. The ‘even if that’s what father wants us to do’ was left unsaid, but Zuko hoped she would hear it in his tone.

“You’re just inviting revolution against your leadership, you know that? It’s impressive how good you are at that, it might be the only thing you’re better than me at.”

“I’m better with swords,” Zuko let the childishness of the argument slip through his mind. He was a child, he should do better at taking advantage of that.

Azula laughed, a high pitched sharp sound that Zuko had come to associate with less than enjoyable memories over the years.

“Right, because I’m so interested in learning a non-bender’s weapon and focusing on that rather than working on a gift Agni herself gave me,” Azula smiled at him as though she was better than him.

He didn’t respond, partially because he didn’t know how to convince her that swords were still useful while firebending and partially because he had forgotten how infuriating it was talking with someone so thoroughly assured of the greatness of his home nation.

It was always ‘Agni’s Will’, ‘Agni’s Gift’, never ‘my action’, ‘my talent’.

Zuko had learnt a lot in his time away from home. He had never lost his respect for the spirits (he trusted uncle too much to do that. If uncle decided that spirits were most definitely real, who was he to disagree)

He had learnt that he couldn’t, shouldn’t rely on the chance of his destiny being laid out by a spirit and more often should take advantage of the fact that whether or not there was a greater spirit watching over him, he could decide what he wanted to do. What his destiny was.

Besides, of all the people in the Fire Nation who had been blessed by Agni, Zuko would have to argue he was the one with the most impressive experience getting that blessing.

Chapter End Notes

writers block still kicking my ass a little but this chapter was honestly really fun to write lololol.

its been super dreary where i live bcuz of hurricane Helene so i havent gotten too much work done recently, sorry

i havent gotten around to posting my art yet but i probably will this week or next, so my tumblr for anyone who wants it <3 :

@ g3n3s1s-l0v3

Interlude 1: All the Average People

Chapter Summary

Binh-Dao gives a glimpse into the life of the other palace staff ;)

(I didnt want to switch POVs last chapter, so all the other POV went here ;3)

Chapter Notes

this work is not beta'd; if you notice any grammar/spelling/formatting errors, please let me know!

this particular chapter was like... really hard for me to write for some reason. uh... i hope its not too hard to read lololol :.)

i try to update every other week!! typically on a sunday, but it changes

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

The palace was always loud. The palace had been getting increasingly louder over the past few months.

There were always, and always had been, people milling around the hallways and preparing things for the royals, but in recent times it seemed like every moment was louder and louder than it had been in the past and the halls were fuller and every on corner there was a surplus of people who didn't need to be there.

Binh-Dao did not like loud noises. This was a problem.

He also didn't care much for people, but that he could deal with. Years in the middle of a battlefield had lessened his tolerance to loud noises and boosted his tolerance for dealing with idiots. A valuable trade off, considering his current profession.

The man didn't often have reason to spend much time in the palace; There was no room he enjoyed training in other than the courtyard, and his friends within the palace were often more than happy to spend time anywhere but their employers home.

Some days he would stay long after he finished his lessons with the children of the palace, talking with Prince Iroh or hanging around the kitchen to talk to the people he was closest to. Close was, of course, a relative term. Today was, unfortunately, one of those days.

The kitchen was possibly the loudest room in the palace, save the throne room when parties were being hosted. The chefs were always shouting at each other over the sizzling of the stove and trying to get the attention of any of the serving staff in the corner where they were all huddled in a almost-whispering-but-terrible-at-it circle gossiping about whatever information they'd managed to hear from a 'reliable source' this time was effectively impossible.

Binh-Dao was loitering around the door to the kitchen. He did so nearly every day and had no plans for that to change anytime soon. He hated it.

Finally, a small group of people stepped out of the room, talking almost quietly between themselves. The head of the group wiped his hands on the bottom of his apron and turned his head slowly to meet Binh-Dao's eyes, a smile crinkling the corners of his own.

"Sorry about the wait. Got in a bit of a fight," Baljin smiled at him, waving off two of the other people he'd been walking with.

"You're always fighting," Binh-Dao sighed, smiling at the woman, Amako, standing off to the side untying her own apron. "You should set a better example for your own employees."

Baljin laughed, a deep, reverberating sound. "I'm not the one paying them. Not really my fault if they don't get along with their coworkers."

"Amako, tell this old man his students need a better role model than someone who gets in a fight with someone twenty years younger than himself every other day."

"Amako, tell my cousin everyone's an adult and you all can handle seeing me get in a few, minor fights with another grown adult."

Amako scoffed, "Both of you are stupid. And neither of you are my employer, so I can comfortably say I don't care who you're getting in fights with so long as those fights are entertaining to myself."

Baljin patted her on the back, smiling brightly. Baljin was never not smiling.

The three made their way down the hallway out of the servants side of the palace. The wall lamps hadn't yet been lit for the night, so the pink light from the windows was illuminating everything in a hue that made Binh-Dao want to stop and paint it.

"Either way, if you don't want me and Dae getting in fights every day, you should consider not making me be around Dae every day," Baljin finished his story of today's fight, gaining a laugh from Amako and a slightly less scowl-y scowl from Binh-Dao. "Would do wonders for both of us, most likely."

"Go talk to the Fire Lord about getting your schedule moved around so you don't have to talk to Dae-Jung. What an amazing plan that I'm sure won't backfire at all," Amako laughed at his words, then turned a sympathetic smile towards Baljin

“I’m sure if you tried to just talk a little less when around him he wouldn’t start anything,” She grimaced a bit, but kept her tone light enough that Binh-Dao didn’t think he’d notice if he hadn’t been looking at her face already.

“I shouldn’t have to be quiet around someone just so they don’t decide to throw a punch at me,” Baljin didn’t frown, but the smile slipped down his face more than noticeably and that was pretty much the same thing for the man. “Me an’ him used to get along pretty damn well, I’m not sure why he’s decided to be such a bitch recently.”

“He’s not a bitch, he’s just been working insane hours lately. Probably exhausted.” Binh-Dao shrugged, thinking about the recent times he’d talked to Dae-Jung. He’d complained about planning foods for the mid-autumn festival, then told him that his mother had recently lost her job and he had to work extra to try and make up the money. Binh-Dao probably shouldn’t share that.

Baljin raised an eyebrow, “I’ve been working insane hours too, and you don’t see me trying to beat up my students.”

“You’re not his student though. And I do see you trying to beat up your coworkers. Namely Dae-Jung.”

Baljin shrugged, a smile reappearing on his lips almost as soon as it was gone.

“Doesn’t matter right now anyways, works over for the day,” Amako smiled as the pace of her steps sped up again, making the two men practically jog to keep up with her. “If you get into any fights tonight, that’ll be a lot less entertaining. So just... don’t do that. Please.”

The three made their way through the winding hallways, waving to the few people in the halls they recognized and doing their absolute best to stay away from the main dining hall where the royal family currently was.

Yes, Binh-Dao taught two of the three royal children. Yes, he was around the royal family frequently. No, he didn’t want to run into them as he was heading out with his friends to enjoy his night. There was a difference between getting along with some people and wanting to be around those people in his free time.

The air outside was warm and not stifling, which was a rarity during daytime. The sun was just barely peeking out from behind the buildings surrounding the palace.

“It’s nice out. Getting a bit colder recently,” Baljin wrapped his outermost robe tighter around his chest, lifting his face so the wind hit it better. “Makes me wish I didn’t have to spend so much time inside.”

“You’re really not missing out on much. It’s way too hot during the day,” Amako tied her robe tighter around her waist, lifting it higher off the dried grass. “This is nice though. Almost like back home.”

Binh-Dao looked down at his own uniform.

“We should probably change out of these before drinking,” He looked at the emblems and pins decorating the top of his outer robes. “Might get fired if someone sees us at a bar in uniform.”

Baljin laughed as Amako looked down at her own robes, the light fabric catching in the breeze as she went to pull it up higher away from the ground.

“Ah... probably. It'd be a pretty embarrassing way to lose this job- spotted getting in a bar fight while still in uniform. You think they'd put you on trial for like... embarrassing the royal family?” Baljin smiled at the pins on his own robes, showcasing years of work he'd already put in. “Cause you work here, so you're representing them or something.”

“Or something,” Amako laughed.

“It'd be pretty hard to embarrass the royal family right now. With all the talk about planning a campaign against Ba Sing Se, loyalty's at an all time high,” Binh-Dao considered, shrugging slightly. “Most people wouldn't really care about some idiots in a bar, palace uniform or otherwise. Probably just think we're celebrating some dumb military victory.”

“Not sure I would call it dumb,” Baljin let his arm fall past his chest, eyes locked on the sunset in front of them.

“The point still stands. We could go change, but I doubt many people would care.”

Amako hummed her agreement. She glanced back to the palace behind them, the staff door shutting slowly as more people's shifts ended and others began. A slow stream of people continued on their way towards the nearby streets, and a handful of other people making their way indoors.

“My house is pretty far from here- unless you're offering to lend me something, I don't really have anything to change into.”

“We can figure it out.”

The bar was also loud. This didn't bother Binh-Dao nearly as much as the palace did.

The table the three had ended up sitting at (it was near the back of the room, so they were closed in. tightly. it didn't feel like they were trapped) had become crowded to the point he could barely move his arm up to grab his own drink (it wasn't uncomfortable in the way sitting in palace war rooms was. in the way listening to generals planning what lies to feed to the public so they couldn't guess what was happening to people a few miles from their homes was).

Baljin had told the same story three separate times over the past hour. No one commented on that. Amako had fallen asleep twice. Each time Binh-Dao had woken her with a gentle shove, not interrupting Baljin's stories. Chances are Binh-Dao had done the same a few times, even if he couldn't recall it.

Others from the palace, mostly people who had been working the same shifts as Amako and Baljin, had also ended up at the bar. Most had been smart enough to change out of their palace-issued robes. Some didn't really care.

It wasn't just government workers at the bar; the news of an end to the war being (possibly) in sight had sparked an excitement within everyone in Caldera that hadn't been around in pretty much all of the time Binh-Dao had lived there.

Binh-Dao was born there.

Most would never say it out loud (it was shameful, cowardly) but most had tired of the war a long time ago. Young people were tired of the mandatory military service (of watching their friends die. of watching their family die) and the older one got the less respect they seemed to hold for their own government (they could see how incompetent they were, how they let this war drag on. they would never say anything. they valued their lives. they were intelligent, that way. intelligence came with age, he supposed.)

Baljin and Binh-Dao had both served. Binh-Dao had turned a blind eye to the failures of his superiors, at least outwardly. Baljin was never too good at hiding his disdain for others. Binh-Dao had climbed the ranks. Baljin had left as soon as he was able to.

Binh-Dao was a war hero.

Baljin could sleep at night.

Many of his stories centered his brief time in the army, stories of escapades he and his fellow soldiers had gotten up to when not actively in battle. No one wants to hear about a real battle while they're trying to relax. Most of Binh-Dao's stories were of active battles. He didn't tell too many stories.

Binh-Dao let Baljin's words wash over him, doing his best to not outwardly show his discomfort as the crowd gathered around their table burst into a new round of laughter.

They all had heard this story before.

No one really cared.

Binh-Dao wondered if spirits would be so high once people remembered that another military campaign was another military campaign. More people serving. More people dying. Just because there was a possible end in sight didn't mean there wouldn't be sacrifices made between now and then.

When Binh-Dao had been a young man, newly enlisted, he had been one of the many bright-eyed optimists who had assumed the war would be ending soon. His father had been the same. As was his grandfather, towards the end of his life.

He had met many people in the army as he made his way up, some of whom now worked at the palace alongside him. Most of whom had died a long time ago, on foreign soil next to foreign adversaries.

Most of the people that currently worked in the palace had either been working there a majority of their lives, some since they could barely stand, and the other portion of people had been hired after officially retiring from the army.

Amako was one of the many who'd been employed after her parents had brought her in to work one too many times when she was a child. Baljin had been hired after serving his time in the army. Binh-Dao had been hired specifically because of his connections to the crown prince.

The three of them were better off than most in the palace, able to talk freely with the nobles that spent their time hanging around the courtyards. Not as embarrassing for the royals as some of the lower-class servants.

The royal's public image was meticulously crafted; they'd be damned if they were spotted with a single hair loose from their topknot.

Having their half-starving, dirtied servants seen by the public? That was equivalent to not having a topknot to begin with.

Amako's head drooped slowly, resting her pointed chin on the thick choker encircling her neck. The sun outside had fallen behind the horizon hours ago, leaving all local firebenders ready to head back into their own homes, and hopefully beds, to retreat with the sun.

Binh-Dao rested his hand on her shoulder, quietly shaking her awake once again. She groaned.

Baljin had become much too interested in telling stories to his (really quite loud) crowd of fans that had gathered, and as he slowly noticed the two's (really quite obvious) exhaustion, he smiled quickly at his group of fans and turned back to his two original fans.

"You two feelin' alright?" He cast a quick glance to where Amako had decided to rest her head, her neck bent at an angle that would most definitely leave her aching when she woke up.

"Just tired," Binh-Dao hummed, attempting to blink himself awake, only to mediocre results. "I think I'll have to bring Amako home" He yawned, "And probably head home myself."

"Ah," Baljin smiled, half bashful and half intoxicated, and patted Amako on the shoulder lightly, waking her without much issue. "Be safe."

Amako was silent as she walked lethargically next to him, her head drooped low enough that her curly hair fell straight into her eyes. Binh-Dao was silent as he walked as well, not wanting to disturb her.

His own hair had fallen out of his loose topknot hours ago, strands brushing the sides of his neck.

Neither had opted to change out of their palace issued uniforms in the end, meaning as they walked through the dark streets no one attempted to be within five paces of them. It added a layer of safety in times, and a layer of threat in others.

Amako's outermost robe trailed on the ground, the tight knots and pins often holding it in place left somewhere in the palace, matching how her hair had slipped out of her own hair-buns earlier where she had used one of the strips of leather holding her hair in place to add an extra knot to her inner-robe.

Binh-Dao trailed his eyes across the dimly lit streets, watching for anyone that might attempt anything against two clearly-drunk not-fully-fire-nation one of whom is moderately-young people.

A group of younger people was huddled near the wall on the house next to Amako's own, whispering loudly between themselves. Binh-Dao kept his eyes trained on them as he slowly pulled Amako up to her own door, knocking quietly.

Qudan, Amako's eldest sister, opened the door slowly, blinking slowly in a way that reminded Binh-Dao of a croccat.

She smiled lightly when she saw who it was, offering a hushed greeting as she quickly pulled her sister into the room, thanking Binh-Dao for his help and keeping her sister safe. He simply nodded, two steps away from passing out himself.

"I'll see you at work tomorrow then?" She half-whispered, pushing Amako further inside as she cast a quick survey around the street, eyes locking in on the group of children Binh-Dao had been watching a minute earlier.

"I've the day off, but I can swing by to visit if you want? I'll probably have to bring Baljin something either way, so I'll try and find you," He smiled, the creases in his cheeks not quite reaching his eyes.

She smiled in return, shutting the door quietly after a final few whispered 'see you later's.

He passed a final glance towards the huddle of kids to his right, taking in their dirtied appearances and the way they had each passed him a dark look at some point since he had come to Amako's door. They clearly lived on the street if their appearance was anything to go by, hair falling in matted strands and skin covered in thin layers of dust and debris in a way that Binh-Dao had come to expect from the less fortunate.

The nation's population had continually gone up since the start of the war, so many years ago. They had gained more land, yes, and most definitely more wealth, but that wealth and space was not shared with most of the population. The amount of people living in poverty, even out of the colonies and in the capital city, had only gone up as years went by.

Many of his own 'coworkers', if he could really call them that given how little time he actually spent on palace grounds, had come from or were actively in poverty. Many of the men and women he had been around in his time in the army had joined out of duty, yes, but also to have a place to sleep.

Binh-Dao began walking the opposite direction of the children, casting a final glance to where they stood as he kicked dust up with each step away from them.

He hadn't gotten where he was in life from helping everyone, he assured himself. No one had. No one could.

Chapter End Notes

my tumblr: [g3n3s1s-10v3](https://www.tumblr.com/g3n3s1s-10v3)

please consider leaving a comment; feeding the author helps the ecosystem :3

thank you *all* for reading, leaving comments, and leaving kudos. even if i dont directly respond to the comment i genuinely treasure it so much

End Notes

I'll try to update once every two weeks, but there might be some times in which I don't update at all and other times I update more than that. Sorry.

If you enjoyed please leave a comment or kudos!

This work is not beta-d so if you notice any spelling/grammar/formatting errors please tell me :)

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