Zuko; without a ship, without his soldiers, without honor. Surrounded by enemies he must make his way through the Earth-Kingdom, pursuing, and being pursued by the dream of grey-blue eyes.

How will he survive? Will he reclaim his honor? Find out!

Join us for the telling of a tale you know and love, with a TWIST.

Fusion AU (with L5R). Rated M for violence, language and naughty bits
The State of Honor

A/N: The Following is a non-profit fan-based work of fiction. Full Disclaimer TM is available on the author page/series page. This is also (as should be obvious from the title) the third book in a series. You can probably make it through without reading previous works but… why would you want to?

Don't worry, it'll be here when you get back.

Chapter uses, where appropriate, dialog from S2E1 "The Avatar State."

Rated A, for Alcohol

Reader discretion is advised.

Mid-Autumn, year 10 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

It was after his second bottle the Zuko decided that he rather liked sake.

It had a grounding effect on him, centered him in the present, on the here and now. Killed thought.

Today of all days that was a blessing worth any hangover.

By his request Lt-Cmdr. Dosei had dropped him and his uncle at Tohin Wo several weeks prior. Zuko had told his old crew that he might seek out the garrison at Shiro Pohuai; to ask them for information on how Admiral Zhao had captured the Avatar. It had pained him to lie to them, even a lie of misdirection such as this.

He might have gone to Pohuai. He might have also taken up juggling. Anything was possible.

He doubted it had really fooled any of them, but it was better to give them an obviously false trail to report to high command than it was to try and divide their loyalties. They were samurai of the Fire-Nation, servants of the Fire-Lord. Their loyalty should be unquestioned.

Zuko just wished that his loyalty would be as well.

As it was, he and Iroh, whose highly visible assault on Admiral Zhao was the reason they needed to lie low in the first place, had instead crossed the Hebi river, travelling south along the coast until they reached the island town of Kanka in the Kashi-no-Ki river, the official southern border of the Colonies.

The resort town was famous for its masseuses and beautiful scenery, and Iroh had insisted that they take some time for their selves. To relax and recuperate after the disaster at the North Pole.

"A man needs his rest, Zuko," he'd said, beaming genially.

And Zuko couldn't find the will to argue with him.

Now he stared out the window, leaning on its sill, drinking sake and trying very hard to not think about anything.

Unfortunately, Kanka was also known as a place of deep thought and meditation. The island's
western edge abutted a large waterfall where the mighty Kashi-no-Ki roared downward filling the air with cool mist, very pleasant on a hot day. As one travelled to the eastern side of the island that roar dropped to the merest hint of a whisper, a white noise that was prized by visitors as ideal for reflection and spiritual relaxation.

Zuko didn't care for it.

The white noise made it too easy to think, and thinking, on today of all days, was an unpleasant experience. Even the natural beauty of the waterfall seemed to pale in comparison to the knowledge that someday, in the future, it would wear the island away to nothing. The passage of time bringing only destruction and the certainty of defeat.

Zuko's thoughts always darkened today; the ninth day after the autumnal equinox.

The anniversary of his banishment.

It had been five years since that day, five long grueling years, and while he knew that there was no point in dwelling on past failures, if there was nothing else to occupy his mind then the memories would inevitably creep in.

He could almost feel his father's foot at his chest, his ribs cracking with the force. The left half of his face seemed to tingle, more the echo of feeling than anything. Worse than that was the bone-crushing feelings of shame that wracked through him. Shame at his failure, shame at his display of disrespect, shame at having dishonored his family name. The look on his father's face… that at least he did not have to remember, he could see that face any time he walked past a mirror.

Even his uncle, who, on the whole, went out of his way to avoid talking about the incident, or home in general, had commented that Zuko was now the spitting image of his father.

*Half an image anyway,* he thought darkly as he finished his cup and poured another.

The left half of his face was still a dark ruin from missing eyebrow to jaw and from the ruined nub of his left ear to just shy of his nose and mouth. Zuko had gotten used to seeing that face in his shaving mirror. It took a long time to shave the odd contours on the left half of his face, which still managed to sprout thick black hair, despite the scar tissue. He'd had to shave for two years now, and it was still a chore that required his complete concentration.

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a groan of pleasure from the room behind him as two masseuses continued working on his uncle Iroh's back.

"Zuko! You must try this! The stress will just-*" Iroh let out another groan- "melt away."

Zuko shook his head, then downed his cup and refilled it.

How his uncle could allow a complete stranger to come that close to him, to touch him, to relax like that was unfathomable to Zuko. The very idea of turning his back to someone he didn't know and allowing them to lay hands upon him made him nervous. The idea that his uncle would be so incautious made him nervous as well, which was why he was in the room to begin with, his daisho thrust through the loose belt of his bathrobe.

Nobody was going to get that close to him, or to harm his uncle. Not without a fight.

His thoughts, which seemed to delight in taking him places he would rather not be today, filled his mind with the image of a certain Water-Tribe girl whom he would not mind allowing that close. He flushed in a mix of embarrassment and anger at his intemperate thoughts.
He downed his cup and refilled it.

She is probably MORE likely to give you concern for your safety than any masseuse here, he mused. She would probably just as soon stab you as give you a massage.

She had already done so once before.

Zuko's face actually softened into something akin to a smile as his mind filled with memories of their fights, her remarkable improvement from simple unblooded village girl to waterbending samurai master, all in the space of a year. Every beautiful look on her face, from grief to rage, was indelibly etched there in his mind. That look of shock, after he'd kissed her…

He sighed, downed his cup and poured another.

He was disappointed in himself. That fight had been a masterpiece, a textbook example of situational awareness and strategic thinking. He had practically choreographed the entire flow of battle, allowing her to exhaust herself before the sun rose and stole away her moon-bourne strength. It should have been a triumph, one of the high points of his career. Defeating a beautiful waterbending master in a sacred spirit grove at the heart of the North Pole was the sort of premise from which great epics were written! But then he'd ruined it, tainted what should have been a flawless victory by giving in to unworthy base desires.

And now she most likely knew how he felt about her. The spirits alone knew what she would do the next time she saw him.

Actually, as I recall, the next time she saw you after that she dropped about a ton of ice and snow on your head, he thought blithely. Best you could have expected really... at least she didn't leave you there to die? That's got to count for something.

Being defeated in battle was one thing. Being buried in snow at the edge of the world was something else entirely.

Not a particularly honorable way to die.

Zuko sighed again. That was probably the Avatar though. Wouldn't be the first time he's saved you.

The Avatar was an odd creature. A powerfully strong bender who refused to kill his enemies, the destruction of the Northern Fleet notwithstanding. A samurai who only had a passing acquaintance with the conflict between honor and duty. Zuko had gone from annoyance, to bafflement, to blinding rage, and then back to sullen resentment where his feelings towards the boy were concerned. If Zuko was being honest with himself, it was more envy than anything else. The boy simply breezed through life, collecting victories and glory more like seashells on a beach than hard-won accomplishments.

There's also the fact that the little ash stain is likely BETROTHED to the woman you're in love with...

Zuko downed his cup, mood turning black again.

It was impossible, the whole quest, the whole... everything. The Avatar had summoned the Kami of the Sea the last time Zuko had seen him. Before that point Zuko had only half-heartedly believed that the heavens had been set against him, but now it was a FACT. The heavens, the Kami, the spirits were all squarely on the side of the Avatar. Even the Fire-Nation spirits favored him. The Spirit of Roku had brought down his own shrine rather than allow the boy to be captured.

And now Zuko had nothing. No ship, no soldiers, no resources. Where before he'd at least
acknowledged that the task had grown ever more improbable…

Now it was flatly impossible.

Zuko flipped his sake cup over the sill of the window and began drinking directly from the bottle.

Something was wrong… and it wasn't the hangover.

Certainly, his hangover was fierce, but that wasn't what caused Zuko's eye to snap open.

Someone was outside his room, about to knock.

Someone who could firebend.

His uncle was still asleep, sprawled out on his futon, snoring deeply. Zuko quietly grabbed his katana and, moving low, crossed to the wall next to the door. The knock came, and Zuko raised the blade over his head, waiting.

The door slid open. Zuko continued waiting, but no one entered.

"Is this really necessary, Zuzu?"

It was his sister.

"Azula?" Zuko said, shocked, as he stepped into the doorway.

She had grown taller. She was still a great deal shorter than him, but she looked more like their mother than he remembered. There were differences of course; her eyes were the Akodo yellow as opposed to their mother's light brown, and Ursa had never had such a perpetually angry cast to her eyebrows, but otherwise the resemblance was uncanny.

For her part, Azula looked surprised as well, perhaps he had changed in the three years since he had seen her last. Perhaps she noticed how much he looked like their father.

"AZI!" Zuko roared happily, grinning broadly as he swept her up in a hug and then held her up under her arms like a puppy.

"How many times must we go through this, brother?!" she snarled. "Put. me. DOWN."

Zuko put her down with a chuckle remembering the last time he'd seen her. She'd played at anger then to, but they both knew that if she hadn't wanted a hug from her big brother she probably could have killed him a dozen ways before he even took a first step.

"Well, it's not my birthday, so to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" Zuko said, bowing and gesturing for her to enter.

Iroh had sat up when Zuko had begun shouting and was now blearily looking around the room. His eyes focused and narrowed as he saw Azula.

"Azula?" he said wonderingly.

"Hello, uncle," she replied with a sneer.

The two of them glared at each other for a moment while Zuko fetched the small table and cushions
they had moved out of the way to make room for the sleeping mats.

"Uncle, you should make some of that tea you were raving about last night," Zuko suggested, placing the table down with a soft thump.

Iroh nodded slowly, still maintaining eye contact with Azula.

"I would love some tea, uncle," Azula said, smiling in faux politeness and Iroh rose to fetch his teapot.

The three of them sat in silence as the tea brewed, Iroh formally presenting and serving it in the traditional ceremony.

"So," Zuko said after slurping down his tea politely, "what brings you to Kanka, Azi?"

"Generally, it is considered polite to make small talk before diving into the main conversation, Zuzu" Azula said primly, despite her characteristic smirk. "I hope you have not become uncivilized out here in the barbarous east?"

Zuko smiled back, in his own toothy grin. He had missed sparring verbally with his little sister. "That was small talk, sister. Surely you came here on some errand of your own and simply overheard rumors that I was here as well. Unless-" his smile grew wider as he sipped his second cup of tea- "I am the reason for your trip?"

Azula's eyes narrowed in irritation. Zuko had scored a point.

"And what are you doing here?" she said, launching a verbal sortie. "Surely you don't hope to find the Avatar hiding here amongst the masseuses and… geisha?"

Damn. That's how she found me, Zuko thought. It was a well-known fact that Scorpion spies often embedded themselves into geisha houses to gather information. They were now tied.

"Rumors actually place the Avatar south of here, in some sort of conflict with the Earth-Kingdom," Zuko said attempting to deflect the barb.

The rumors had been odd. It seemed that the boy had nearly leveled an Earth-Kingdom fortress some ways to the south. That, at least, all the rumors agreed upon, but where they all differed was the reasoning behind it. Either the garrison commander there had made a pass at the Avatar's waterbending teacher (a rumor which had caused Zuko to buy and immediately consume another bottle of sake) or the boy had begun involuntarily earthbending and had leveled the fortress with a powerful sneeze.

Zuko was actually beginning to miss Lt Jee's nonsensical reports.

"As to why we stopped here," Zuko continued, "As Akodo said 'To enter battle exhausted is to enter with less than half your army'."

"When in doubt, a Lion will always hide behind Akodo," Azula quipped, shaking her head ruefully.

"When in doubt, a Scorpion will always ridicule that which they do not understand," Zuko fired back, barring his fierce grin at his little sister.

"Did Akodo come up with that one too? We both know you couldn't have thought of it on your own, you halfwit!"
"Nerd."
"Slowpoke!"
"Brat!"

"Enough," Iroh said rolling his eyes. "Perhaps, your Highness, you could tell us why you are here?"
Azula glared at Iroh as Zuko continued grinning. He had definitely had come away from this verbal spar with, at the very least, a draw.

Which, against Azula, was about as good as he could expect.

"Very well, uncle," Azula said. She hesitated, playing with her bangs as she took a moment to compose herself. "Father… has changed his mind," she said finally, her eyes on her teacup.

"About what?" Zuko said, mildly confused. Their father very rarely changed his mind about anything.

"You," she replied, and the room went very still with sudden tension.

"Family has suddenly become very important to him," she began slowly. "After the near destruction of the northern fleet, there have been rumors of treason, plots against the throne. Family are the only ones you can really trust."

Zuko felt his heart stop.

Azula looked away, out the window at the cherry trees outside. "Father regrets your banishment. He wants you home."

"He wants… but- but I haven't…" Zuko's voice was quiet, almost a whisper. "I can come home? But I-" he cut himself off and rose from the table, going to the window to stare out, his arms behind his back.

Azula's voice grew hard. "You should be happy. Excited. Grateful! I just gave you great news."

"I'm sure your brother just needs a moment to-" Iroh began.

"DON'T INTERRUPT ME, UNCLE!" Azula shouted, her voice turning furious as quickly as lightning. She rose from the table, crossing the room to Zuko.

"Father… regrets?" Zuko said quietly, almost to himself.

Azula smiled, shaking her head in consternation. "I still haven't heard my thank you. I am NOT a messenger you know. I didn't have to come all this way to- UG," she grunted as Zuko grabbed her in another fierce hug.

"I'm sorry, Azi," he said, his voice full of emotion. "Thank you, sister. I'm sorry." His eye gleamed wetly with tears that he would not allow to fall.

After a moment Azula hugged him back. "I'm sorry too."

"After five years! FIVE LONG YEARS!" Zuko laughed as he paced the room with a nervous, jubilant, energy. "It's unbelievable!" he darted back to his bags and resumed shoving his meager
"It is unbelievable," Iroh said musingly. "I have never known my brother to regret anything."

"Yes but… you heard Azula. Someone is plotting against the throne! He needs me to come back."

"She said there were rumors, nephew. There are always rumors. I just worry that Ozai may not want you home for the reasons you are imagining."

"It doesn't matter. If wants my life he only has to ask. Seppuku will restore my honor just as surely as anything else." He began stuffing clothes into his bag with more force than was strictly necessary. "I am a loyal son."

"And if he decides that you should just have an 'accident?" Iroh said sternly.

"Why would he!" Zuko snapped. "I'm not some… traitor to be silenced in the dark of night. And even if he had, then why would Azula bother with the deception? She could have just burned the village down around us and blamed it on the Earth-Kingdom. She's only subtle when it suits her to be."

"So, you will just blindly walk into her arms?"

"I am not blindly walking anywhere," Zuko snarled pointing at the black and amber armor which he had polished to a gleam instead of packing away. "I love my sister, but she is still MY sister. I cannot imagine a more dangerous enemy. But she came, in peace, and asked me to come home. My father WANTS me home!"

"You are certain?"

Zuko stopped where he was, his eye falling to the floor. He wasn't certain. His father did NOT change his mind. To do so was to admit weakness, and there could be no weakness on Akodo's throne.

"No…" Zuko said aloud, quietly, "I am not certain uncle. But this is it, this is my only chance, my last chance." He turned to Iroh, face a broken mask of anguish. "We both know I cannot catch the Avatar. He is too quick to run, and the very heavens favor him. This," he turned back to his bags, "this is the only way."

"You will not go alone," Iroh said his voice ringing with emotion. "Family sticks together. 'A lone arrow will break…"

"Where a pack of ten remains strong," Zuko said, finishing the quote with a smile.

It was a beautiful day.

Kanka was also known for its temperate weather, and the day of Zuko's leave-taking seemed determined to put all the others to shame. The sun was a bright jewel set in a cloudless blue sky, the temperature was pleasant and even the birds seemed happy to simply be alive, filling the air with song in a last gasp before winter set in. The light wind carried the falling leaves along, swirling in bright red and orange, as they danced like little flames before falling to the stone walkway Zuko and Iroh walked upon as they made their way towards Azula's ship.

The docks for large ships were down a long series of steps carved into the cliffside overlooking the
Kashi-no-Ki and its waterfall. It was nearly a quarter mile from the waterfall's base to the stone docks that had been placed in a widening on the river. Azula's ship was an ornate thing, more a showpiece than actual battle worthy vessel. Its front, where the forward boarding ramp should have been, was covered in hammered copper. The ship's command tower, instead of unadorned battleship grey steel, was shaped like a pagoda, an ostentation the Zuko found almost disrespectful, a mockery of a battleship.

Other than that, she seemed to be a fine ship, Zuko's practiced naval eye told him. Not that his sister would settle for anything less than the best.

As the pair of Akodo's reached the jutting spar of stone that Azula's ship had been moored to, a full company of the royal guard, their faces concealed in the masked helmets that denoted their profession, marched off the boat as stood in two rows. An honor guard fit for a returning Prince and the Fire-Lord's brother.

And yet... it bothered Zuko.

Such an honor guard was entirely his right as a Prince, yet it was hardly practical, there was no one here to impress. Surely there was no reason for Azula rouse a full company, in their best armor, simply for him to walk thirty feet onto a boat?

*You are being paranoid. She's just showing you honor.*

But as Zuko stalked down the spar towards the boat his Commander's eye picked out little incongruities in the guardsmen.

Their armor was *not* their best.

It shouldn't have bothered him as much as it did, but their armor was *not* parade-ground clean. It was worn in places and had chips at some edges.

This was armor that was worn for *fighting*, not ostentation.

*No. Azi... she's just not an officer, she wouldn't notice something like that.*

Even he didn't believe that excuse. His sister's attention to detail was practically a mania with her, and Zuko's knuckles tightened on the scabbard of his katana.

Azula greeted the two of them formally, if somewhat pompously, as they reached the gangplank up to her ship and then bid her Captain to set a course for home.

"Yes, Highness!" the man said and began to shout at his men. "You heard her Highness! Raise the anchors! Stoke the boilers! Somebody escort the *prisoners* down to-"

He froze eyes going wide at his mistake, and then even wider as he stared down the bar of red fire that was sticking out of his chest.

Azula was massaging the bridge of her nose in irritation as, with a shout, Iroh began to fight the Royal Guardsmen at the base of the gangplank. Zuko shook his head in consternation and gestured at the corpse that had been her Captain a moment before.

"Really, Azi? Where did you find *that* idiot?" he asked, in dark humor, as the corpse slid off the plank and into the river.

"He came very highly recommended," Azula said with a sniff, taking a few cautious steps back, not
a retreat simply an unconscious gesture, establishing her firebending root, readying for violence.

"Well, it would seem you need to reassess that particular source," Zuko said, stepping fully on to the ship, glaring down at his sister.

"Without question," she said, rolling her shoulders and taking a stance.

But Zuko hesitated. "Are we really going to do this Azi?" he said quietly, dropping his sword of fire.

Azula's serene face twisted abruptly into an utterly vicious snarl of rage. "Did you really think you could just… come home?! Father blames uncle for the loss of the Northern Fleet and he considers you to be a miserable failure for failing to capture the Avatar! No member of our family should be so weak, so pathetic!"

"What do you WANT from me?!" Zuko roared. "I have searched and killed and bled trying to do as commanded! The Avatar has all the luck and all the spirits on his side! How am I supposed to-"

"Excuses! A samurai makes no excuses! He succeeds or dies!"

"Or keeps fighting! I will never give up, not without a fight. You know that, Azi."

They stared at one another for a long moment, both trying to find what to say next.

"Azula, we are Akodo you and I. There is no reason for us to-"

"No, Zuko," Azula said quietly, "There are no Akodos here but me."

Zuko was no stranger to pain. His body was littered with scars, from animals and blades and arrows and fire and now even ice, but he'd never really experienced the sensation of having his guts torn out. As though the entirety of his chest had been ripped open and removed, replaced with nothing but hollow dread.

A sensation he was now experiencing in its entirety.

He was Akodo. He was samurai. But Azula was the Crown-Princess, the little gold flame in her topknot marked her so. If she said he was not samurai…

Then so did Fire-Lord Ozai.

And if that were so, there was only one other thing Zuko could be.

It felt as though he were underwater, as though there was no air, and his limbs moved with terrible slowness. He cast aside his helmet then let his black and gold Lion armor, with its embossed Commander's rank at the collar, clatter to the deck.

He drew his wakizashi and, grasping firmly with his left hand…

He severed his topknot.

"So be it, your Highness," the ronin said, dropping both his topknot and the short sword he no longer had enough honor to carry.

The world sped up, and the fight began.

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^
Azula was fast.

Zuko had almost forgotten just how fast she was, it had been so many years ago.

But if his memories were correct, she was even faster now.

Bizarrely, he found himself very proud of her.

Trying to use his blade of fire was revealed to be futile in the first few moments of the fight as she ducked, danced and flipped around him. She didn't even bend at first, choosing instead to demonstrate her superior agility, all the while taunting him with her proud sneering smile.

She's showing off before she kills you, Zuko thought. Pride is probably not the emotion you should be feeling right now.

But in spite of that, in spite of everything, he was proud of her. She was his sister after all, and a phenomenal combatant. She may have just disowned him, cast him out of the family and reduced him to the lowest he could have ever conceived, but that didn't make her any less his sister. Not really.

She may be technically superior, but YOU are the experienced battlefield commander, he thought furiously. Take her freedom of mobility away!

So Zuko continued to bend fire, now in greater and greater amounts, allowing rage to show on his face.

This is actually reminiscent of fighting the Avatar, he thought, mind calm despite everything. Just another prodigy that really doesn't want to be fighting me. Pity about the ship.

Every strike Zuko bent hit his intended target as Azula pirouetted and spun in a tremendous display of agility. Zuko continued to power the flames with his chi, allowing them to spread and grow and consume.

No ship in the Fire-Nation navy was all metal. There were important places on any ship which had to be made of wood and Zuko, a naval Commander, knew those places by heart and sent his red flames sweeping over them with an almost fevered intensity.

The ship burned.

Sailors and soldiers came boiling out of the smoky depths below decks, fleeing down the gangplank or simply over the sides. Azula didn't even notice, so focused was she on her display of skill, until…

"Azula!" a pair of matching voices rang out, "You must see the entire field of battle if you wish to win a war!" Two aged women, identical and garbed in red, paused in their escape to chastise Azula.

Azula blinked, looking around in shock. "You burnt my ship!" she said almost petulantly, reminding Zuko of nothing so much as the time he had managed to snatch the last rice ball before she could get to it.

A loud crack sounded as the pagoda command tower, burning furiously, fell over and crashed into the river.

"You brought our aunts!?" Zuko said, also shocked. Technically Lo and Li were his great-aunts, Azulon's younger sisters.
"Father insisted," Azula said, rolling her eyes. She refocused on Zuko, her eyes narrowing in very real anger, also reminding him of the rice ball incident. "Enough games!" she shouted, and leapt high into the air, landing on a nonburning patch at the edge of the ship nearest the river.

Still glaring, but now with the self-satisfied smirk she usually wore when she knew she was about to win, she began to move her arms in a sinuous motion, and the blue flames at her fingertips became lightning.

Well... shit, Zuko thought, racing towards her, futilely attempting to close the distance. She really HAS been working hard.

A single heartbeat away from the crescendo of the lighting kata Iroh appeared out of the smoke and grabbed Azula's hand. Somehow, he managed to bend Azula's electricity through himself and redirect it upwards into the sky. Azula, seeming as shocked as Zuko was, was unable to stop Iroh from twisting that same arm behind her back and then kicking her overboard into the river.

"She can swim?" Iroh asked calmly, looking down at the rapidly moving river.

"Yes, uncle," Zuko said, equally calm.

Their mother had insisted.

A/N: Ladies and Gentlemen, boy and girls, welcome to "Earth Waits," book 3 of the ongoing Avatar: The Last Dragon series! As noted, if you're new to this, this IS book 3, go read the other ones! Honestly, they're pretty good, and whole TENS of persons seem to agree.

If you're an old hand, thanks again for sticking with me, for providing motivation in the form of views and hits. You're the real MVPs.

So now some meta bits beginning with an overview of this book.

This book is LONG, almost as long (word count wise) as the last two books combined. We're currently sitting at about 18 chapters, although that number may change possibly shrinking or growing. I've been doing week of, whole chapter re-writes, and frankly it's been phenomenal but it does put my estimates in a bit of doubt. Some chapters grow 2-3 thousand words, some shrink. SO there's that.

Also, you can expect THIS book to go completely off the rails in some places. Zuko is going to stick his noses in places that (canon-wise) he has no business being. I regret nothing.

Also an overarching question for those of you reading this on AO3 (same screen name as FFN) how am I doing on tags? Too many, not enough? If there's something I should be tagging, or warning or what-have-you, please feel free to let me know. I'm open to concrit in almost any form.

NOW the specific meta bits!

Ronin: Zuko has been disowned in a legal sense by his sister. They're still blood-related, he still cares for her, but legally speaking he is no longer Akodo Zuko. He's just Zuko. He's going to be dealing with the aftermath of this for a long time, but now he's more focused on the fact that his sister is trying to kill him.
A ronin, in the classical sense, is a masterless samurai. Sort of a mercenary in real-world feudal Japan. In L5R they are a literal caste of people who have the skills, knowledge, and pride of a samurai, but not a master or formal family. The state is even hereditary, a child born of ronin parents is, themselves, a ronin. As they have no family, and by extension no oversight, they are known, in L5r as in this fusion, as honorless rogues and thieves, without HONOR. Much like dangerous wild animals. Deadly and without the control of a master, without DUTY. So you can see how this is going to be a bad time for Zuko.

Azula: Honestly, I love the dynamic I’ve got for these two. I love the little sister/big brother vibe. But, just like Zuko's feelings for Katara, all that stuff gets put on hold for DUTY. They have to fight, for honor and for duty and all that. Both of them get that, though they don't really like it. It might be best to think of the whole thing as an 'It's not personal, it's business,' kind of thing. The siblings care for each other but, still got to fight.

Deviation from standard.

The burning of the ship: Maybe I just wanted to give Zuko a little victory. He's just lost everything that basically made up his self-identity, so I wanted him to come out, for once, on top. So, he gets to burn Azula's gaudy ass ship, doesn't mean he would have survived without Iroh's intervention, but still something at least. This is also why Azula doesn't immediately catch up to him, she's got to fish herself out of the river and figure out what to do now that her ship got set on fire.

Also, she's got to figure out what to tell DAD.

I don't envy her.

Thanks again for reading! Please like, follow, kudo, subscribe and comment! Your left clicks could save a LIFE!

…Not mine, I'm happy and healthy as an OX, but it COULD!

Possibly.

NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Iroh drinks tea! Zuko considers fashion, and there is killing.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 12 August 2018
Late Autumn, year 10 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai.

Hair was not something Zuko had ever spent a great deal of time thinking about.

It grew on your head. You put it into a topknot. If it ever became cumbersome you cut it off with the nearest sharp object to something more manageable, put it back in the topknot, and then carried on.

Now though…

The first few mornings Zuko had woken up after Kanka, bereft of surname and lying on the ground in whatever clearing in the woods he and his uncle had eventually collapsed in, his hands, seemingly of their own accord, had tried to put his hair into the topknot. While it wasn't forbidden for a ronin to wear the topknot (the style was even popular among peasants in the Fire-Nation) Zuko had no desire to pretend to be something he was not. It was a traditional samurai hairstyle, and that was something that he was not.

So, for the first time in his life, Zuko was forced to contemplate what to do with his hair. Like most decisions he had made in his life he chose to deal with it thoroughly and decisively.

So, he'd shaved his head.

The process had taken the better part of an hour, crouched over a small stream in the woods, and when he was done he was forced to re-sharpen his now terribly dull razor.

*If I try to do this AND shave every day I'll have little time to do anything else,* he mused as he contemplated the treacherous ruins on the left side of his face.

So, he didn't bother.

Now, a few weeks later, he had what he considered to be the reasonable beginnings of a beard. Hopefully that, combined with the large straw hat he'd bought, would be enough to throw off any bounty-hunters.

The wanted posters featuring he and Iroh, oddly without their names attached to their portraits, had sprung up quite quickly after he'd torched his sister's boat and left Kanka behind. The two new fugitives had decided that, although they were enemies of the Earth-Kingdom, what Azula would do to them when she found them was a great deal worse. So, they'd turned south, acquired some green-hued peasant clothing and invaded the Earth-Kingdom.

It was practically a family tradition at this point.
As they made their way through small villages Zuko was perpetually on edge. He expected someone to identify them at any moment, summoning a legion of Earth samurai, and triggering some sort of final showdown. The Dragon of the West and the son of the Fire-Lord were probably the most wanted men in the entire Earth-Kingdom and Zuko's eye flitted from person to person, just waiting for the telltale signs of recognition he was sure would flare there.

Despite his paranoia, all he found was the same looks he normally got. Pity and horror after a good look at his scar. He was surprised to find that the scar actually helped him in his disguise, as it was taken as a sure sign that they were not Fire-Nation spies.

After all, who would do that to their own people?

The stress of potential discovery was made even worse by the need to exercise complete control over his bending at all times. A single involuntary burst of flame would give he and Iroh away as firebenders, which was not something one wanted to advertise while in the Earth-Kingdom.

Zuko hadn't even noticed how often he had bent before. It was simply something one did, like breathing or yelling at people. Now firebending niggled at him, beckoned him, called to him in every torchlit street and tavern hearth.

And finally, because he didn't have enough to worry about, the earth peasants were just so… earthy. Every earth village he'd ever been in before had been terribly quiet, the people hiding in their homes, praying the Fire-Nation would spare them.

Now though…

The villages he passed through were loud rambunctious affairs, full of bustling activity, loud shouts, and laughter. The sedate controlled calm and purposeful deliberate activity of a Fire-Nation village was nowhere to be found. Instead people… loitered… chatted… were drunk in public. Zuko couldn't seem to walk ten feet without his ears, or sensibilities, being assaulted by something.

They were just all so crass. Even the merchants, who should have been quietly minding their shops, were in the streets, shouting for all and sundry to come as see their wares. Their wares were the best, far better than the shoddy work of that shop across the street, they would declaim.

Which was yet another problem.

Zuko had run out of money.

Certainly, he and Iroh had had some money when they'd crossed the Kashi-no-Ki, but it managed to disappear far more rapidly than Zuko could have imagined. Food, not to mention sake, was remarkably expensive this close to the front, and while Zuko had tried his hand at hunting in the wooded areas between villages, he found it a great deal more difficult than tracking bandits had been.

He'd never been this hungry before.

As a child, living in the palace of Otosan Uchi, the idea of food was an abstract, ephemeral. You said you were hungry, food appeared. When he'd been banished and lived in a shack with his uncle, he'd become used to the food supply having limits, but had still had a reasonable expectation of three solid meals a day. When he'd become an officer, food had become a resource. Necessary for maintaining his men at combat readiness, but still merely a cerebral exercise. Now food was a visceral thing, a ripping tear at his stomach, a pang in his guts.

It has only been TWO days! He growled at himself. Reports used to speak of soldiers going whole WEEKS without food. I will NOT be weak!
Iroh had grown so hungry by the third day without food that he had mistaken the poisonous White Jade Bush for legendary White Dragon Bush. Zuko had been forced to take him to a local medicine woman in the small town of Omatomo to stop the swelling from spreading to his lungs and killing him. The young woman who worked there had given Iroh a salve, free of charge, and had then invited them to her home for roast duck. Despite Iroh's pleading, Zuko declined as politely as he could bring himself to be to a peasant.

"We must make our own way, uncle," he said as they left. It was also a great deal safer if they didn't spend too much time in a stranger's company.

That, and accepting charity was a weakness Zuko would not abide.

"We'll make our way into the grave if this keeps up," Iroh had said chidingly, still scratching at the rapidly subsiding rash. "Besides nephew, when a pretty girl invites a man to her home for 'roast duck' she's not just offering up waterfowl, you understand?"

"No?" Zuko said, eyeing his uncle askance. Did his uncle suspect that woman of treachery? Why had he tried so hard to get him to-

"We have discussed this, nephew. When a pretty girl bats her eyes at you like that and offers you something, anything, but most especially food, she is trying to sleep with you. Or at the very least give you a nice proper kiss. Nothing wrong with a little-"

"Are you OUT of your mind?" Zuko snapped, hissing quietly at his uncle. "Even if that WERE the case, which it wasn't, this is NOT the time for- for- romantic entanglements."

"There is always time for romance, nephew."

It galled Zuko. He and his uncle had been cast out, been stripped of honor and name, and yet his uncle continued in his relentlessly affable good mood. Why couldn't the man be properly ashamed!

His good humor grated on Zuko like a good blade on glass.

Despite Zuko's irritation, they slept the night on the streets, back to back for safety and defense, and in the morning they were both stunned to find a few copper zeni had been thrown into Iroh's hat where it had fallen off of his head.

"They think we are beggars?" Zuko snarled, leaping to his feet.

"So, we must seem," Iroh said examining his hat, an odd contemplative look in his eyes.

Zuko began to walk away, casting around angrily as if to find the person who had insulted him.

"Are you coming, uncle?"

"I am still quite tired actually," Iroh said letting out a little yawn. "It is not as though we have a schedule to keep, nephew." With that, he closed his eyes and fell back asleep.

Zuko began to walk, both restlessly and aimlessly, through the small town. He watched the people carefully as he stalked along, alert for any sign of violence, but found none. People here barely even seemed to notice him, which he was still finding an unusual sensation.

When, after several hours, his pointless wandering took him back to where Iroh had been sleeping he found the man on his feet, singing a jaunty marching tune about the beautiful girls of Ba Sing Se. A man, obviously a bushi of some stripe, stood in front of him laughing uproariously, while his three companions chuckled along with him.
"Come on!" the first man roared, "I'm offering a whole *bu!* Dance for me fat man!" And then he drew the pair of swords at his back and began to make jabs at Iroh's feet, to encourage his dancing.

Zuko exploded forward, the hilt of his katana slamming into the man's jaw without fully exiting its sheath. Blood streamed from his mouth as he fell backward on onto his friends.

"What do you think you are DOING?" Zuko growled malevolently.

The bushi spat blood and drew himself up. "Whatever the fuck I want Mr Ronin." He invested the word with scorn after taking in Zuko's lone blade. "Do you know who I am?!"

"A dead man," Zuko said grimly, taking a stance, his hand still on the hilt of his katana.

"Aka? I don't know if you want to-" one of the other bushi began.

"Now, now neph-" Iroh cut off, flinging himself out of the way, as Aka began his attack.

Aka seemed to be a competent fighter. He might have even been able to best a ji-samurai on a good day.

Zuko was *not* a ji-samurai.

No matter what scorn anyone heaped on him, no matter how many times he had failed to capture the Avatar, Zuko was a full-blooded Akodo Lion samurai, trained in the art of killing since he was seven. The fight was over before it even truly began.

Aka's first, and truly his *only*, strike was a high overhead swing with both swords. Zuko parried, stepping to the side, and brought his sword down on the back of Aka's knee, severing the tendon. The bushi tried to spin around on his now unresponsive leg and found the point of Zuko's blade slipping through the space between his collarbone and neck, moving at a downward angle, severing his lungs and piercing his heart.

Drawing the sword out with a single fluid motion, Zuko took a guard position facing the other three bushi, preparing to do the same to them if necessary. They, in turn, took large steps away from Zuko, palms up and away from their weapons.

"Whoa, whoa there friend," the largest one said, still backing away. "We've no quarrel here.

"I've just killed your ally," Zuko said icily. "You expect me to believe-"

"Ally? HA!" the smallest one said. "Aka was an idiot, good riddance I say!"

The third one, who was a height with Zuko, although not as broad through the shoulder, just nodded in agreement.

Zuko nodded back, then bent to clean his blade off on the dead Aka's clothes.

"I don't suppose you're looking for work, Mr…?" the big bushi said questioningly.

Zuko opened his mouth to answer hotly when his uncle jumped in.

"PING. He's Ping, and I am his uncle Mushi," he said grinning broadly.

Zuko glared at him silently.

"What?" his uncle said, amused. "You owe me a whole *bu* nephew." He indicated the cooling
corpse.

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After Iroh, friendly and genial as always, struck up a conversation it transpired that the three bushi were called Kaba, Shirshu, and Hanasu. Kaba was the big one, almost a foot taller than Zuko and wielding a massive tetsubo. Shirshu was the little one, almost a foot shorter than Zuko and was named for the animal because he was a hunter and tracker and NOT, he insisted, because his nose was larger than most. Hanasu was the middle sized one and a mute, having lost his tongue at some point in his life. The three had a brief chuckle over the inappropriately named "Ping" and decided that he should just stick with "Mr Ronin" instead.

They were mercenaries they said, soldiers of fortune and odd-job warriors. They had been in town to rest and resupply when "Mr Ronin" had killed their newest member.

Shockingly they weren't that upset about it.

"It's definitely a four-man job!" Shirshu said winningly. "We'll be down the hole without a ladder if you can't help us out."

Zuko was again about to simply snarl a negation, bow and walk away but his uncle got there first.

"Simply fascinating. What sort of job is it?"

The job, it turned out, was the recovery of a priceless set of earthbending scrolls. The merchants that had been bringing them to the local magistrate had been attacked by bandits en route. With the war on, and growing ever closer to the area, there simply wasn't enough law enforcement personnel, not to mention samurai and soldiers, to resolve something like this.

Which is where the four mercenaries had come in.

"Should be simple!" Shirshu assured Zuko and Iroh, tapping his not at all average sized nose. "I've already found their lair, it's up north in the foothills of Omashu. We just came back to town to rest up before the final plunge."

"What a thrilling sounding adventure!" Iroh said, "Of course my nephew loves adventure, but I worry that he should be able to feed himself…"

"Oh, don't worry about that!" Kaba interjected. "This job is worth four WHOLE koku." His eye practically twinkled at what, to him, was a ludicrous amount of money. Zuko, on the other hand, was unsure if dealing with them was even worth his time. His share would only be a single koku after all.

But in the end, he found himself agreeing to join. He was responsible for their short-handed state, and his honor, tattered and shabby as it was, demanded that he redress the situation.

The fact that Shirshu bought him and Iroh lunch to apologize for Aka's rudeness had nothing to do with it.
The next morning Zuko rose at first light and met his new compatriots at the town gate.

Iroh had elected to stay behind, most likely to take up begging again to Zuko's growing dismay.

As they walked north, away from Omatomo, the chilly predawn silence was filled with chatter, mostly from Shirshu, aided and abetted by Kaba. The little man talked and talked and talked, and Zuko spent most of the morning ignoring the questions the little man shot his way and trying to figure out how to make him shut up without being rude… or killing him.

In the brief snatches of conversation Zuko did listen to, he was inundated with personal information about the trio, who apparently had been working together for quite some time.

Kaba was actually the illegitimate son of Lord Toritaka, a family of samurai who lived a good way east of Yu Dao. It certainly explained why he was seven feet tall, Zuko was of the opinion that the Earth-Kingdom aristocracy bred for size as a matter of course. He'd been raised on the sidelines of the family until it became apparent that he wasn't a bender. Showing what Zuko considered to be nothing more than the typical uncivilized behavior of everyone outside the Fire-Nation, the Toritaka had cast Kaba out to live on the streets after his seventh birthday, the time by which bending, had it been present, would have manifested.

Very little was said about Hanasu. The man was a mute and his past seemed to be something of a mystery to Shirshu. He was armed with a bamboo hafted spear and carried himself with a fluid grace that marked him as a dangerous opponent in Zuko's eye. He seemed to have worked out a rudimentary sign language with Kaba, and while he was silent he often grabbed the big man's attention with a gentle squeeze at his forearm and gesticulated simply; asking questions and being answered, usually with a smile and a booming laugh.

Shirshu was an orphan from the city of Omashu and about ninety percent of his chatter was about the wonders that were his city. Lord Kuni Bumi was the world's greatest earthbender. The city was foremost in the world in its engineering and its mail delivery system was the origin of Ba Sing Se's public transit system. Shirshu's favorite shop was a bean curd bun place called "Mama's Hot Buns," on Quarry Lane in the east side of the city.

Zuko, despite the fact that this would probably only encourage him, was about to ask why they hadn't stopped in Omashu if he loved it so much when they topped a rise and sight of the city made the question moot.

Large red Fire-Nation banners had been draped over the city walls.

Even as Shirshu seemed to slump despondently Zuko's heart leapt in quickly suppressed joy.

_Ha HA!_ Zuko thought triumphantly. _This means we control BOTH sides of the Kashi-no-Ki! With that, the garrison at Shiro Bor-Lei will fall and we can move the 107th up to…_ He came back to himself in a rush, suddenly remembering that he wasn't an officer of the Fire-Nation anymore. Not only that, but the more areas under his father's control meant there were fewer places he could go without being forced into a conflict with his own people.

_Fewer places to HIDE you mean?_

The group, for entirely different reasons, continued on in gloomy silence.
They camped for the night still within sight of Omashu; the city's watch-fires faint pinpricks, miles away.

Shirshu had managed to be solemn and somewhat depressed for the better part of an hour but quickly regained his spirits, much to the displeasure of Zuko's battered ears. He made up for it by disappearing as they set camp and reappearing less than an hour later with a brace of long-eared rabbit-quail and his grin fully back on his face.

Zuko admitted himself impressed.

He was also impressed but the powerful snores the little man produced when they turned in for the night. But it wasn't the noise that kept Zuko awake. He simply couldn't fall asleep so close to people he didn't know and so he moved his blankets away from the fire and beyond the camp.

When the bushi awoke the next morning Zuko had already placed his blankets back by the fire and was in the middle of his thousand cuts. Hanasu nodded in seeming approval and unwrapped the blade of the spear to join Zuko in morning ritual.

Kaba stretched and yawned, cracking his massive neck. "Should be a fun day!"

It most assuredly was NOT a fun day.

Kaba, the nominal leader of the group, laid out the plan for Zuko over breakfast. The cave was covered by a rough wooden palisade and guarded by a single guard. Shirshu would take him out silently with his bow, then Kaba would smash through the flimsy thing with his tetsubo.

From there it would be a simple slog through the tunnels of the cave. Kaba would be in front, keeping the enemy away from Shirshu and would be backed up by the long thrust of Hanasu's spear. Zuko was the rear guard, cave systems having so many branches it was impossible to clear them all simultaneously, hence the necessity of a fourth man.

It was a good plan and for the most part, it went entirely as expected. The bandits were nearly feral madmen, missing teeth and with weapons more rust than iron, and they were dispatched with ease. Zuko barely had to do anything until they reached a central cavern and discovered the bandits' chief…

Who was an earthbender.

Fight an earthbender underground increased the danger by several orders of magnitude. Stone could, and did, come from anywhere.

Something which Kaba discovered to his fatal displeasure.

The entrance to the cavern filled with gore as the earthbender bent stone, descending without warning from the ceiling, a massive block of it slamming into Kaba, killing him instantly. Hanasu let
out a warbling sound of grief and loss and charged forward without concern for his safety, or group tactics.

*Ash and bone, what is he doing? Zuko thought also advancing rapidly, albeit with more caution. He's lost his mind! It's not as though they were... OH...*

Their blankets HAD been a little closer together than mere comradery would suggest.

*Well... shit.*

Shirshu began to fire arrow after arrow at the chieftain, preventing him from crushing the rest of them while Hanasu, spear twirling and stabbing, tears streaming from his eyes, fought his way closer. Zuko focused on clearing the room of the few rabble left so that they could all focus on the major threat together.

Just as he had slain the last of the foot soldiers Zuko saw Hanasu knocked backwards, his knee bent in an odd angle, directly on top of Shirshu, and both men fell down in a heap. The earthbending bandit raised his hands in a gripping motion to pull another slab of stone down on the two prone men.

*Damnit!*

Abandoning secrecy in a near unconscious desire to protect his fellow soldiers Zuko bent a gout of flame, which knocked the bandit off his feet as he rushed forward, managing to close the gap as the enemy tried to rise. The ragged earthbender snarled madly and tried to impale Zuko on a rising angled stalagmite as he gained his feet. Zuko wrapped his katana in a protective corona of fire and smashed through the rising stone with a low rising sweep and then followed through with a roar of fury and an overhead chop that lodged itself in the bandit's neck just below the chin.

The fight over, Zuko spun to his co-workers.

*Maybe they didn't see?*

"Spit and stones, you're a firebender!" Shirshu said with unsuppressed horror.

*Damn. They saw.*

Narrowing his eye Zuko advanced on them, sword at the ready, fire gathering.

"Hold on, hold on, we- we don't care about that sort of thing! Do we Ka-" Shirshu cut himself off with a grimace- "Do we... Hanasu?"

Hanasu had somehow managed to get himself to his feet, using the broken haft of his spear as a crutch. He looked sadly at the red smear that had been Kaba, then to the corpse of the man who had killed him. He met Zuko's eyes and nodded in approval.

Zuko sheathed his sword and nodded back.

"I'll find the scrolls, you two..." Shirshu gestured vaguely at Kaba's remains.

The two of them, Zuko and Hanasu, stood before the mess that had until recently been a jovial smiling giant. Zuko bent fire into his hand and looked questioningly at Hanasu. The man exhaled a shuddering breath and nodded, but held up a finger, asking for a moment. He knelt, trailing his fingers through the wreckage, tears spilling from his eyes, and mouthing silent words as he rocked back and forth. Zuko turned away, giving the man as much privacy as he could. After a long
moment, Zuko heard the sound of Hanasu struggling back to his feet. He turned and without a word set the whole patch on fire.

He wished he had something to say, but all the ritual words he knew were for samurai, about returning their honor and surname to the fold.

He knew no words for bushi... or for ronin.

*I hope your next life is a better one,* he thought. It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do.

Like always, his best wasn't good enough.

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It was a much quieter and slower group that returned to Omatomo the next day.

Hanasu looked like grim death, limping along refusing any attempts to aid him. Even Shirshu's constant verbal patter fell flat without Kaba to back him up. No one had slept the previous night, not with Hanasu's quiet keening and the disturbing image of the once giant man they had known transformed into red paste burned into their brains.

"I'll see about returning this," Shirshu said after they had crossed the threshold to the town, gesturing with the scroll box he'd found in the wreckage of the bandit cave.

"Shouldn't we go together?" Zuko said narrowing his eye.

"No, it's bad form. Too many mercenaries at the meeting means we don't trust them. Good way to get us into a fight and not get paid at all."

"Fine, but if you try to betray me…"

"You saved my life ronin. In my line of work that means something."

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"What the ash is this?" Zuko growled quietly.

The trio sat at a small table contemplating their bowls of ramen and the four silver coins that sat in the very center. One of those coins was already spoken for to pay for the food.

"It's… payment," Shirshu said, sighing bitterly.

"You said four koku, not-"

"I know what I said! The gravel chewing magistrate…" Shirshu slumped dejectedly- "changed his mind. He said his 'deal was Kaba' and that we'd take what he was willing to give or he would run us in for stealing the scrolls ourselves."
"I knew I should have gone with you. Your friend gets killed and you can't even manage to-"

He cut off as Hanasu slammed his fist down on the table, making their bowls and their meager payment jump slightly. The man hadn't even touched the ramen in front of him, nor any food that Zuko had seen since Kaba died. He didn't make eye contact with anyone at the table either, just sat like a lump.

"Fine!" Zuko snarled, rising from the table. "I'll go get what I deserve."

"Don't be a fool Ping! What are you going to do storm the Magistrate's house and-" he dropped the volume of his voice and waggled his fingers- "whoosh at them?"

"They dishonor the memory of one of your comrades and you will do nothing? Pathetic."

"This is how it IS for us, ronin! Better get used to it!" Shirshu shouted at Zuko's retreating back.

Zuko sat alone in a tree, arguing with himself.

He'd waited for nightfall at least before wrapping himself in the grey woolens he'd managed to retain after he fled Kanka. He sat high in a tree overlooking the manor house of the local magistrate, holding his "Grey Ghost" mask in his hands. His outer stillness belying his inner conflict.

_Honorless bastards deserve death. How is taking what was promised, what's YOURS by rights any worse?_ He raged at himself.

_**NO! They're the enemy! It's a RAID!**_

_You're not an officer of the Fire-Nation anymore. Those rules don't apply._

_This is JUSTICE! It's bigger than loyalty or nations or rules. More important!_ More important than your honor?

…

You are hungry. You are hungry and tired and disgusted with yourself. You thought you knew what it was to be strong, but a few weeks of privation and you're sitting here contemplating banditry. Common theft. You've executed people for less. Call it what you like, justice, revenge or something in between, it's still just because you're hungry.

…So what's the alternative? All the high-handed speeches and useless platitudes don't keep you alive. FOOD keeps you alive. MONEY buys you food.

You're not starving.

So I should wait until I am? Until I am too weak to do anything about it?

_I thought it was "death before dishonor?"_
That's a samurai credo. I'm a ronin.

Zuko exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. "I'm a ronin," he said quietly, slipping his mask on.

"Where did all this money come from nephew?" Iroh asked a few days later as they sat at an inn, a plate of dumplings between the two of them.

"Don't worry about it uncle," Zuko said, taking another sip of the sake he'd purchased. It helped to bury the image of the Magistrate's burning house.

"But I DO worry," Iroh said, leaning across the table and putting his hand on Zuko's shoulder. "I know things have been difficult nephew, but you must not give in to despair. The life of a ronin is taxing upon the body-" he glanced at the bag of gold coins- "and the spirit."

Shirshu and Hanasu hadn't wanted any of it. Hadn't wanted any part of money so "dishonorably" earned. Hanasu didn't want anything anymore.

"I assume you would prefer that I caper through the streets like a fool?" The very idea set Zuko's teeth on edge. He poured another drink.

Iroh shook his head. "There is a simple honor in poverty, Zuko."

"There is no HONOR in begging, uncle." Another pour, another drink. "We are Akodo and we do NOT beg. Not even when we are ronin." The very word "beg" made his scar throb and he could almost see his father bearing down on him, flame in his hands.

Zuko took another drink, fighting to keep his hand steady.

Hanasu had begged. Not with words of course but with his eyes. Those eyes of his had been haunted.

Pour. Drink.

"It's not so hard. It's a skill just like anything-"

"The only skill I have is killing, uncle."

Hanasu had appreciated that skill at least. Seppuku was much easier with a second and after Zuko had figured out what it was he wanted he had obliged him. Sent him quickly home to his ancestors so that he could try to be with Kaba again. Perhaps in his next life.

Pour… the bottle was empty… the next was uncorked… Drink.

"That's not true Zuko. You know that-"

"What is the POINT uncle?" Zuko said quietly. "What is the point of anything anymore? How are we… how am I supposed to…" he shook his head. "Without my honor, I might as well be dead and ash."
"No Zuko!" Iroh said quietly but fiercely. "You must never give into despair. Allow yourself to slip down that road and you surrender yourself to your lowest instincts. In the darkest times, hope is something you give yourself. That is the meaning of inner strength."

Zuko had always believed that his honor had been his inner strength. Now that he was completely without, the last vestiges he had stripped away by his sister and his own actions, his uncle wanted him to join him in his new-found begging career. To somehow sink even lower.

Iroh just didn't understand.

And Zuko lacked the words to make him understand.

"I think we have very different views on what it means to be ronin," Zuko said voice flat and emotionless. "I think we are no longer best served by traveling together."

Iroh's eyes grew sad.

"It's also safer… for both of us," Zuko said rising unsteadily to his feet and gathering the coin and his sake bottle to him. If they stayed together Zuko was suddenly certain that he would probably get his uncle killed too. "I think I need to find my own path uncle."

"Zuko… just… be careful? I would not want you to become lost."

"How can I be lost, when I've got nowhere to go?"

And with that Zuko staggered out into the darkened streets, now drinking directly from the bottle.

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**A/N:** Greetings and salutations readers, and welcome to the end of the chapter! Bit of a downer I know, but you've got to hit rock bottom before you can start over as they say.

Or something like that anyway.

It is with much sadness that I must report that my computer of nearly four years has passed away, hence the lateness of this chapter. Luckily I am a strong believer in Google Drive (praise be unto it) and so there was no loss of words. So now I have to do my editing on my school computer, which of course, does NOT come with MS Word.

Thank goodness for google docs and grammarly, eh?

And now some Bits of Meta

**Bushi:** Bushi simply means warrior as far as I understand it in Japanese. The relevant parallel for us in the west is just warrior or mercenary to the samurai's knight. In the L5R game, bushi is the fighter subclass of samurai, while a samurai CAN be a bushi, a bushi is not necessarily a samurai.

**Tetsubo:** I've used the weapon in the story before, but just now realized that I didn't explain what it is. Sorry about that. A tetsubo is basically a big metal bat. Sometimes with spikes, sometimes without. Pretty simple.
A Note on Chapter Titles: I've always had fun trying to come up with chapter titles that echo the titles of the episode they're built around. Literally this entire chapter originated from that practice. "The Cave of Two Lovers" became "The Death of Two Lovers" before I even wrote word one of this. I regret nothing.

Uncle gets Zuko a job: Iroh understands that Zuko is going to have a hard time being ronin, I'm pretty sure he's been just trying to distract him for a while so that he doesn't get to thinking about his situation and then over brooding on it. (like he does at the end of the chapter) SO when a bunch of mercenaries start making overtures towards Zuko joining their group he jumps on that like white on rice. Unfortunately, it doesn't work out.

An ostrich-horse? Really?: I really didn't like Zuko stealing the ostrich-horse. From people who had FED him to. It was just so abrupt and I felt that if Zuko was going to slip into dishonor it would be more gradual and more in keeping with his normal character flaws. SO I changed it, because I can. Zuko is a man who has been taught to solve problems with violence. So when butting heads with a problem that would be very common for ronin and non-samurai, namely being taken advantage of by those in power, he solves the problem, with violence. The downside of this is that Zuko doesn't have a mount. Guess he's gonna wear through his sandals huh?

Last line: Loved that last line, and while I don't normally talk about the music I listen to while writing (or in general) I just felt that this lyric, and in fact the ENTIRE song, is just spot on Zuko at this point. It is "Unforgiven III" by Metallica and I can't recommend it enough, even if you don't like rock/metal. That is all.

Thanks again for reading!

NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Iroh drinks tea? Zuko chops wood and makes a stab at thrilling heroics!

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 19 August 2018
Winter, year 10 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

Things were going poorly.

The only way forward after Omatomo had been south; southeast in fact. North was the direction Zuko had come from and would lead him back to the Colonies and a most likely fatal confrontation with his sister. West led to the sea, and although Zuko had grown fond of the ocean he didn't fancy his chances on the open water in any craft he could pilot alone. Especially not if the Iron Fleet was looking for him. Due east was the great desert, the "Burning Sands", filled with sandbenders, dust storms and a very great chance of death due to dehydration.

To the south was the Swamp of Mists. Zuko had heard a great many rumors about people becoming lost and losing their minds, haunted by spirits in its murky depths. Zuko was of the opinion that he already had enough haunting spirits to be getting on with and he really didn't care to have any more.

That left a single path open to him, an ill-used road that curved southeast around the swamp. It skimmed the edge of the desert and followed a small stream as it ran south, weaving through the badlands he now found himself in.

He'd spent his money foolishly.

After he'd sobered up and left Omatomo he couldn't even look at his remaining ill-gotten money without seeing his uncle's disappointed face. Iroh's words in Kanka, "Family sticks together," seemed to roll around in his brain every time he tried to sleep. So, he'd quickly resolved to remain as drunk as possible, for as long as possible, even going so far as to drink for a whole day and a night at a geisha house (or whatever passed for one here in the barbarous east) in the last city before the badlands. Whatever else they were the girls there were at least well trained enough not to gawk at his ruin of a face.

But now he was starving.

His supplies, meager as they had been, had dwindled to nothing in the vast expanses between towns. Foot traffic had cut off abruptly and it had been almost two weeks since Zuko had run out of the rough millet he had barely remembered to buy in the town with the "Not-really-a" geisha house. Hungry as he was Zuko had been almost unable to stop himself from attacking the last group of people he'd stumbled upon.
The scent of cooking rice had woken Zuko from a fitful sleep and drawn him towards it like a viper-moth to the flame. He'd hovered there at the edge of the firelight, waiting for just the right moment to dash out and slay the lone earth peasant and claim his dinner. But then the peasant's wife, his very pregnant wife, had also come into view.

And for a moment he'd almost attacked anyway.

The sudden impulse shocked and disgusted him so badly it had brought him back to his senses, and he'd crawled away more ashamed than hungry. There was nothing in this world more dishonorable than attacking a pregnant woman, and shame it seemed was a potent appetite suppressant.

Zuko understood hunger now.

He'd only thought he'd been hungry in the days before Omatomo. That hadn't been hunger. That had been a mild craving, the dream of real hunger. Now he had passed all the way through hunger and out the other side into a sort of mindless searing full body ache. His limbs felt light, weak, and cold. He'd had to literally tighten the belt of his dirty green kimono.

That had been days ago.

It was in this state that he'd walked, shuffled, and crawled into the village of Haiya.

Haiya looked, at its core, like a village on the badlands. The town's roads were hard packed dusty tan clay, and occasional blasts of hot wind out of the desert threw sand along the road. Zuko drew himself up as he entered the town, attempting to project strength as he made his way past a seedy looking group of men gaming with dice in an alley. With as much iron in his spine as he could muster he made his way to what passed for a market stall in the center of town.


"That's one bu, sir," the stall owner said, turning to gather the supplies.

Zuko sighed. "Just the millet then."

As he scraped the bottom of his coin purse, digging out enough of the smattering of copper and iron he needed, he caught sight of a pair of small boys watching the group of gamblers across the street out of the corner of his eye. One of them lobbed an egg, scoring a direct hit, and they ran off giggling to themselves.

Well… shit.

The angry bushi made their way across the road to Zuko and the largest of them, a balding man with long mustaches, spun Zuko around roughly.

"Do you throw that egg?" he snarled, the leavings of said egg still tangled in his hair.

"No," Zuko said.

"Did you SEE who threw it?"

"No." Zuko didn't owe this filth the truth.

"Is that your favorite word ronin, NO?" one of the other bushi asked, scorn dripping from a mouth full of rotting teeth.

"Egg had to come from somewhere," the big one said with a sneer.
"Perhaps… a chicken flew over?" Zuko said dryly.

One of the men chuckled at that until the leader punched him in the mouth, knocking him into the dust.

"Sorry, Gow," the now bleeding man said meekly.

"You think you're funny, ronin?" Gow said, sizing Zuko up.

"No."

Gow gave Zuko a sneering grin as he leaned past him and grabbed the bag of millet he'd just paid for. "Thanks for your contribution to the war effort. The army appreciates your support."

These are SOLDIERS? Zuko thought in outrage, his inner commander bristling. His eye darted to Gow's belt and he was horrified to find a wakizashi there. And he's a SAMURAI!? How dare they STEAL from- a wave of dizziness chose this moment to pass over Zuko, stifling more thought and any martial response as he fought to keep his back straight and to simply stay upright.

"You had better leave town, ronin," Gow said over his shoulder, walking back to the soldiers' dicing spot. "The price for staying… is a lot steeper than you can afford."

"Sorry about that, sir." The shopkeeper said as Zuko turned back to him. "Those soldiers are supposed to protect us from the Fire-Nation, bandit and sandbender raids. But they're just a bunch of thugs."

"Bag. Of millet," Zuko rasped, too hungry to be truly angry.

The second purchase nearly exhausted his funds leaving him with only a pair of iron fu coins. As carefully as he could Zuko packed the small bag away and began to walk out of town.

He was caught up short by a tug on his sleeve.

"Thanks for not snitching on us!" The boy who threw the egg said, smiling brightly. "I'm Lee! What's your name?"

Zuko said nothing, just pulled his sleeve out of the boy's grip and continued slowly making his way out of town.

"I owe you, Mr. Ronin," Lee said, still walking beside him. "Come back to my farm and we'll feed you."

Zuko's feet seemed to stop of their own accord at the word "feed" and his brain began a furious battle between pride and hunger.

As though I required this peasant's CHARITY!

You… kind of DO though.

So furious was the internal battle that Zuko didn't even notice when the boy grabbed his sleeve again and began to tug him towards his home. An act which, Zuko's feet at least, were of one mind about.
Lee couldn't have been more than ten or eleven, Zuko thought and looked nothing whatsoever like Ping had. Zuko had to remind himself of the fact many many times as they slowly moved out towards the boy's farm. Lee nattered on and on, about his farm, his parents, and his older brother who was off fighting in the war. Zuko allowed most of this information to pass through one ear and out the other, most of his brain being still occupied with a silent war over whether or not accepting charity made him a beggar. He was startled from his brooding, his hand flying to his katana's hilt, by a horrible cacophony of squealing bleats and snorts. They had reached the edge of the farm and the pig-sheep were LOUD.

"It's good, huh?" Lee said with a shrug. "Nobody can sneak up on us this way."

Zuko nodded, relaxing slightly.

They were met at the edge of the homestead, which consisted of a barn and house surrounded by a rough wooden fence, by a broad-faced man who was obviously Lee's father.

"You a friend of Lee's-" his eyes fell on Zuko's lone katana "-Mr. Ronin?"

"This guy stood up to the soldiers!" Lee chirped. "By the end he practically had them running away!"

"Does this guy have a name?" A woman, just shy of middle-age, had exited the main house to join the conversation, smiling gently at her son.

"He doesn't have to say who he is if he doesn't want to, Sela," Lee's father said firmly. "Anyone who can hold his own against those bully soldiers is welcome here. Those men should be ashamed to wear Earth-Kingdom uniforms."

Sela sighed, putting her arm around her husband. "All the real soldiers are off fighting in the war. Soldiers like our eldest son." She turned to Zuko, brightening. "I was just about to call Gensu and Lee in for supper, will you stay?"

*Moment of truth,* Zuko thought to himself.

"No. I should be moving on," he said aloud, and started to bow but was cut off by Gensu.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Ronin, but if you would stay it would be a great honor for us," Gensu said hastily. "It isn't very often we have guests out here in the badlands and if you begin to feel you are being a burden on us, a simple worthy task could be found for you," he finished and attempted to wink surreptitiously at his wife.

*Clever. Very clever,* a part of Zuko mused. *Appealing to honor and suggesting that it is a trade, not a charity. Obviously, the man has some experience with samurai. And, really, it's not as if I needed THAT much of an excuse.*

Zuko nodded his assent.
Dinner was stew.

It was, without question, the most delicious thing Zuko had ever had in his life. He could not point to any single element of it which was superior to anything he’d had before, or after, his exile, but it was simply… *good*. Hearty and savory and, most importantly, *filling*. It took all of his not inconsiderable willpower to maintain any sense of decorum during the meal as a large part of him wanted to simply stick his head into the bowl and lick it clean despite the mess it would be sure to leave in his few-month-old beard. Based on Lee and Sela’s stifled giggles he wasn’t too sure he had been completely successful in avoiding that particular outcome. He found himself not caring much in the aftermath; he was FULL. The warmth of the stew seemed to spread outward from his stomach and into his limbs, filling them with life, power, and *fire*. He placed the bowl, his third, down on the table and bowed almost reverently.

"You had mentioned a worthy task?"

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Zuko was unsure whether or not chopping wood truly qualified as a "worthy" task. He was at this point, however, prepared to overlook anything short of a direct insult or physical attack. The stew had been *that* good. It had brought him back to life just as surely as Katara—

*Best not to think about that.*

Katara had not been on his mind over much in recent weeks, a fact which he found both a blessing and a disappointment. He had either been focused on being getting drunk as possible to avoid his feelings of shame, or with simply trying to put one foot in front of the other. Not states of being that allowed for an overabundance of daydreaming.

He *had* dreamed of her while asleep of course, but that was something that was beyond his control and, like most dreams he had, an entirely *unpleasant* experience. In his dreams she simply glared at him, scorn and disappointment flaring in her eyes, then walked away.

*It does not matter, you will most likely never see her again. And if you do she'll most likely try to kill you.*

That thought actually made him smile, and he returned to chopping wood.

Despite his exceptionally minor misgivings, he found the methodical repetitive action of chopping wood to be somewhat meditative, comparable to doing his thousand cuts. He had given up that practice in recent weeks as well, owing to the need to conserve his energy and, if he was being honest with himself, because he’d often been too drunk to do more than a few kata without falling over.

*That stops now,* he told himself firmly. *The thousand cuts is the barest minimum you can do and still call yourself a warrior.*

And if he fell out of practice, and he ever *DID* see the girl again, it would be terribly embarrassing.

He sighed, banishing his extraneous thoughts, and finished chopping the half-chord of wood Gensu had directed him to. After he had finished, Sela, who had been keeping an eye on him from the farmhouse window, brought him a bucket of water and dipper to drink and wash with. He had
shrugged his way out of the top half of his kimono when he'd begun chopping and after he'd drunk a few dippers of water he simply threw the bucket over his head, allowing the water to cascade down his body, washing away the sap and sweat.

A faint blush crept into Sela's cheeks.

"Are you alright?" Zuko asked.

"WHAT?! Oh… yes- yes I'm fine," Sela squeaked going even more crimson, as though she had been caught at something.

_Odd people, earth peasants_, Zuko thought as she walked away quickly, glancing at him once or twice over her shoulder. Shrugging, he retrieved his katana and headed out into a nearby field to do his thousand cuts.

_No time to start like the present. Need to get back into the habit._

Somewhere around the eight-hundredth cut, Lee appeared to watch. Though Zuko's back was to him he could sense the boy watching him but, blessedly, he remained silent until Zuko had finished.

As Zuko sheathed his sword the boy finally piped up. "You're really good! Can you show me how to do that?"

"No," Zuko said.

He'd trained a boy before. It hadn't ended well.

"It's ok, I know I'm not supposed to have a _katana_," the boy said mollifyingly. "That's why I made THIS!" he lifted a wooden stick which had been carved into a rough approximation of a boken, and Zuko's mind was dragged back to Shiro Yoritomo and the ruined corpse of a boy with a boken in his belt.

The boken HE had given him.

"You don't need that," Zuko growled, "it will only get you _killed_."

"I'm not afraid!" Lee said.

"You _should_ be."

Zuko spent the night in the hayloft of the barn, sleeping more soundly than any time in recent memory. Not so soundly that he didn't wake to see Lee peeking in, looking for a chance to play with Zuko's sword unless he missed his guess. Every young boy did that it seemed, he himself had made off with his mother's katana when he was five. Ping, displaying his usual common sense, had never gone for Zuko's blade but Lt Rainesu was quite certain, on some mornings, that her katana stand had been moved slightly from the position she had left it in.

Zuko had fallen asleep sitting cross-legged, back to a support beam, his katana firmly grasped by his crossed arms.
Lee apparently had enough common sense not to try for it either and he slipped back out of the barn with a minimum of sound.

Zuko fell almost immediately back into a deep dreamless sleep and did not stir again until the sun crested the horizon.

He rose, did his thousand cuts, meditated and then Sela called him in for breakfast. While just as simple, Sela's egg-fried rice was just as delicious as the previous night's stew had been. Zuko had just finished and was about to ask if there was another "worthy task" that he could do for them when Lee burst into the hut.

"The SOLDIERS are coming up the road," he yelped, out of breath.

"What do you suppose they want?" Gensu said with a scowl.

"Trouble," Zuko answered.

\[\text{laughter}\]

The bastards were laughing at them.

The soldiers had just sauntered up to the edge of the homestead, laughing and smiling amongst themselves as though they had just returned home from a victorious campaign.

"Just thought you should know, your son's battalion was captured by the Fire-Nation," Gow laughed without preamble.

Gensu and Sela froze in horror.

"You boys hear what the Fire-Nation did to their last group of ashigaru prisoners?" Gow mused aloud to his men.

"Dressed them up in Fire-Nation uniforms and sent them to the front lines. Unarmed the way I hear it," one of the soldiers answered immediately. Obviously rehearsed.

"You WATCH YOUR MOUTH!" Gensu shouted as Sela began to weep.

Gow began to advance, a malicious smile on his face, to close with Gensu, but Zuko, who had been ignored until this point, placed himself between the two men, his left hand on the scabbard of his katana making it both obvious and easier to draw.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

Gow flinched first.

"Pfft. Why root around in the mud with these pigs?" Gow spat, turning his back and walking away. 

Coward.

"The Fire-Nation does not do that to ashigaru," Zuko said after Gow had left. "You son will be offered the opportunity to give up his weapons and armor and to swear to never fight the Fire-Nation again. He will agree and be given parole, or he will not." Zuko didn't need to say what would
Ashigaru occupied a curious place in warfare. Technically they were peasants, but they were also soldiers, legal combatants and due a measure of respect as such. The Earth-Kingdom was a massive place, full of non-bending peasantry, and they used ashigaru units extensively. The Fire-Nation, being smaller but far more militaristic, preferred not to use ashigaru in battle, forming the units only for small-scale local crises. The peasants were a resource, and they were better used where they were more suited, harvesting the Fire-Lord's rice.

"Pack me some supplies. I'm going to go get our son," Gensu said quietly to his wife.

"How old is your son?" Zuko said, interjecting.

"... He'll be seventeen soon," Sela said, trying to wipe her tears away on her apron.

"Then he is an adult and you should stay here," Zuko said looking at Gensu. "Your family needs you. If the spirits will it, your son will return to you in time." The fact that, should he leave, he would expose his wife and younger son to the depredations of Gow and his pack of thieves should have been obvious. Zuko, who, thanks to them, now felt better than he had in a month considered himself honor bound to try and make sure that didn't happen.

"But..."

"You have a duty to your family, your King, and your land. Your son has his own duty, which is his and his alone. To disrespect this is to invite calamity, and to disrespect your son." Zuko bowed, much more deeply than he had ever bowed to a peasant before. "I thank you for your hospitality, but I must move on."

There, that should keep them safe enough.

It didn't.

Zuko had stopped a few hours after leaving Haiya, to fill his water skins by the riverside, when he caught sight of something moving towards him at speed, kicking up a plume of badland's dust.

"Mr. Ronin!" Sela shouted as she pulled her ostrich-horse to a halt right in front of him. "The thugs came back from town as soon as Gensu left," she said panic clear in her voice.

"I told him not to leave," Zuko said, narrowing his eye.

"I'm sorry but we're not like you! We couldn't just sit quietly at home when our son might be in danger!"

"Then your son and your husband will die."

"Please! When they came back they tried to steal our pig-sheep and Lee hit one in the head with a stick! Then they took him away! They said that if he's old enough to have a weapon, he's old enough to join the army!" She began to weep.

Just like Ping, Zuko thought. I should have taken that damn boken away from him.
"I know we barely know you but…"

This is foolish, they're just peasants, Zuko thought angrily. Peasants who don't even listen when you give good advice! You cannot help those who don't even-

The image of a smiling Ping flitted through his mind, followed by the image of his corpse, head stoved-in, still clutching Zuko's armor.

"I'll go get your son," Zuko said with a growl.

The sun was beginning to set as Zuko returned to town.

"Hey, there his is!" Lee shouted brightly despite the fact that he'd been tied to one of the support posts of the town's watchtower. "I told you he'd come back!" he said, jeering at the soldiers.

They ignored him, rising from where they had been sitting and joining Gow, facing Zuko, in a line.

"Let the boy go," Zuko said.

Gow laughed loudly, a false thing that was not echoed in his eyes. "Who do you think you are, telling us what to do?" he spat, the false humor disappearing like smoke.

"Who I am isn't important. But I know who you are," Zuko said, acid creeping into his tone. "Honorless cowards and thieves, who abuse the people you should protect and disgrace the profession of soldier."

Gow's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Are you going to stand there and let him talk to you like that?" he said turning to his three soldiers.

The soldier with the rotting teeth said nothing, just sneered at Zuko, leveled his spear and charged.

"Pathetic."

Zuko didn't even go for his sword, he simply brushed the spearpoint away with a sweeping motion of his forearm. The unbalanced fool couldn't even stop his forward momentum and Zuko's face twisted into a feral grin as he grabbed him by the throat and slammed him to the ground, feeling the enemy's windpipe crunch in his hand.

The second soldier was just as bad as the first, and Zuko grabbed his spear with his left hand as he charged, just below the point, and broke the shaft with his right. Flipping the spearhead around he rammed it into the man's chest, just below the breastbone, and drove it upwards.

The third soldier just dropped his spear and ran the other direction.

A crowd of villagers had gathered at this point and were watching in frightened awe as Gow snarled and drew his weapons, a pair of hammers.

In a single shrugging motion Zuko flipped off his straw hat and drew his katana.

For a brief moment the two of them were still.
Then, with a quick rush, Gow struck the ground, earthbending a head sized rock into the air and sending it hurtling at Zuko.

*So, he's a bender, Zuko thought, rolling right. This just became more difficult. He grinned. And ultimately more satisfying.*

That his opponent was also a bender made this matter of much greater import to him now. A full samurai, of all people, should not behave this way and Zuko would gain great honor by setting things right.

Gow revealed in the first few moments of the duel that he was not as terrible a fighter as his men had been. This suggested to Zuko that he was just as deficient a leader and trainer of men as he was a human being.

Not that Zuko needed any *more* reasons to kill him.

He kept Zuko at range by flinging smaller rocks and boulders, a typical strategy for any bender facing a non-bender. Zuko was forced to dodge and roll, avoiding blows where he could, slowly working his way closer.

"You can do it, Mr. Ronin!" Lee cheered from behind the earthbender as Zuko took a glancing blow to the thigh.

Gow executed a spinning kata that Zuko *thought* would send a stream of stones flying his way but, instead, lobbed a rock *backwards*, hitting Lee in the shoulder, audibly snapping his collarbone.

"Oops," Gow said, smiling cruelly as the boy cried out in fear and pain.

*PING!*

Zuko roared wordlessly and flung himself at Gow.

Gow, still smiling horribly, bent earth in a protective shield.

A protective shield that exploded inward at him as Zuko bent *FIRE*.

Surrounded by cascading red flames Zuko drove the startled earthbender back a few paces and then engulfed him in flames using the "Dragon's Breath" kata. The man screamed in agony as he was consumed, flailing around only for a moment before falling over dead.

The village was still as stone as Zuko sheathed his katana and fought to calm his breathing.

"R-red flames?" one of the villagers gasped, breaking the silence after Gow had expired. "I know who you are! You're the Butcher! The Red Butcher of Matomo!"

*The "butcher" of Matomo? Sun's name, that makes me sound like a VILLAIN.*

Which in the Earth-Kingdom, he supposed he was.

Sela had run forward to hug Lee as soon as she thought it was safe to do so, and now she stood in front of him, arms outstretched as though to block the sight of her son from Zuko.

"Not a step closer," she said fiercely.

"You are *welcome,*" he replied, growling.
The villagers began to shout heatedly, their previous happiness at seeing their oppressors defeated replaced with terrified anger at finding a firebender in their midst.

"Is the boy alri-" Zuko cut off as a lobbed stone hit him in the head.

"Go away," Lee sobbed, still behind his mother. "I hate you."

Ungrateful savages! Zuko thought, feeling the spot where the stone had struck him. I should- should- His hand came away from his scalp bloody… and had begun to shake.

BURN it. Burn it all.

Fire burst into being at his feet, causing Sela to flinch back but still remained between Zuko and her son.

"Allow yourself to slip down that road and you surrender yourself to your LOWEST instincts." Iroh had said.

Zuko took a deep breath, ignoring the rocks that flew over his shoulder.

I am better than this. Better than these ungrateful animals. Just- just LEAVE.

And Zuko left, only stopping long enough to pick up his hat.

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A/N: Hello! Welcome to the end of the chapter! Mission Accomplished! (unfurls banner, throws confetti.)

So, before anything else, does anyone here know about formatting in FFN? I've started writing in a more traditional book-like style, using a tab at the beginnings of paragraphs instead of a double enter.

It is NOT working.

FFN does not LIKE tabs.

I am mildly annoyed.

If you've got the wherewithal send me a PM, otherwise I've got about 10,000 words to re-un-format.

Ah, the burdens of my Art. (sarcasm meter reads 11 of 10)

Anyway, for the few of you who are, I know, concerned for Zuko be sure that this was probably the low point for him for a good long while. Things are going to pick up from here as I gallivant through canon like a thing… that galivants. (sorry I'm running out of good similes).

You will have, I hope, noticed that I have begun to play with time a bit. In canon, Zuko wasn't due for his "gunfight at the OK corral" moment until much later, after the Gaang had found Toph. Fun times ahead!

Now on with the countdown! (the meta-bits)
Asshole service members (Gow): We all have our little pet peeves and one of mine is assholes who are (or worse only claim to have been) service members. Not to delve too personally here, but I am a vet myself and there are very few things I hate more than seeing the "You're WELCOME for MY Service" Guy. It was a job, I got shot at, I survived. I am always grateful when somebody thanks me for my service, but trying to use that to get favors, or as some sort of bragging right… infuriating.

And don't even get me started on "stolen valor" we'll be here all day.

So right away you understand that those little shits (Gow and Co.) were going to die. I like to think that the one who laughed at Zuko's joke was the one smart enough to run away, maybe had enough sense to know that what they were doing was wrong. Hell, it's my universe! I can do what I want. That guy, Soldier #3, went on to protect the town from numerous bandit raids and redeemed himself in the eyes of the town and his ancestors.

There, now I feel better.

Chopping wood: I didn't like the roofing thing for this version of Zuko. I think Gensu would have given him a task where he could be alone so that if he DID prove terrible at it there would be no one around to see his shame. Roofing, especially in the time period they seem to be occupying, is a pretty skilled profession.

And yes, in case it was unclear, Sela was ogling Zuko. According to every work of fanfic I've read the ladies love him. Who am I to argue with that?

The knife: So Zuko has a lot of issues with training Lee here. First and foremost is the fact that the last kid he trained (Ping, from book 1) got killed, a fact which he blames himself for. Secondly, Lee is a peasant. In Zuko's view it is not his place to learn to fight. L5R culture is very heavily focused on the concept of place. Everyone has a place, as determined by the will of the heavens made manifest by their birth. A peasant's place is to tend the land and to be protected by the samurai, which is their place.

All of these reasons are the first reason Zuko did not give Lee his "never give up without a fight" knife.

The Second reason is because Zuko doesn't HAVE that knife anymore.

"Where is it?" you ask.

"Read on and find out," says I.

Thanks again for reading! Don't forget to like, kudos, subscribe, comment, review and just generally have a good time!

I know that I do.

NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...
Zuko drinks sake! Then learns a new song and says a thing which cannot be UNsaid.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 26 August 2018
A/N: The Following is rated S; for singing.

It contains dialog from a variety of episodes in Season 2.

Reader discretion is advised.

**Winter, year 10 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai**

"Oy! Ronin! Stop!"

Zuko stopped, knuckles of his clenched fists cracking with the force of his fury.

_I have had enough of this_, he fumed. _Enough of this WHOLE kingdom! The millet is gone, the sake is gone, my patience… so VERY GONE! What in the darkest PITS of Jigoku-

He stood there fuming as three samurai in green and gold erupted from an ornate carriage that had passed him by only moments ago. Passed him by, then screeched to a halt in the middle of the road.

The road from Haiya had, until this point at least, not been difficult. It had sloped around the stream it continued to follow, with little change in elevation, as Zuko had continued to make his way south. The hardpacked tan clay of the badlands had just the day before given way to rich browns and wintergreens of a more fertile region. Zuko's spirits had actually _lifted_ briefly when a sharp southern gust had brought the scent of ocean salt to his nose.

Then THIS had happened.

The three samurai surrounded him and waited, hands on their sword hilts, as a short portly man with the long mustaches earthers favored exited the carriage at a more sedate pace. He took his time, settling his robes, pointedly ignoring everything.

After he had let whatever he thought passed for "tension" develop he finally addressed Zuko. "I suppose you _know_ what you did wrong?" he said in a slow tone, like curdled lard.

"No," Zuko said.

"Really? I should have thought it was quite obvious?" the man drawled, gesturing expansively at the carriage he had exited.

Zuko was now genuinely confused. What did the carriage have to do with anything? Some earther custom perhaps?

"The _seal?_" the man continued, his eyes twinkling condescension.

Zuko narrowed his eye at the gaudy ostrich-horse drawn thing and, after a beat, actually did pick out
The family Mon, a dragonfly in flight, right below the green circle and square of the Earth-King.

"Hogosha," Zuko said, dredging the name up from his childhood studies of his enemies, and the little man puffed up proudly at being recognized. "Vassal of Yoritomo," Zuko continued, causing the man to deflate slightly. "A minor house… of no renown."

The man bristled.

"I did not mean the family mon! The Earth-King! The Earth-King's seal is on my carriage!" His voice grew sly. "And you didn't bow. I am the tax collector for this province and neither I, nor the Earth-King, will tolerate your disrespect.

Ridiculous. Who in Akodo's name has time to be bowing to a nobody official of a nowhere province? Maybe the carriage of a family head, or a shogun perhaps, but…

"Perhaps," the Hogosha tax man said, "if you were to get on all fours, apologize for your rudeness, and kiss my shoe-" he pushed a soft looking gold slipper out from underneath his long robes- "then perhaps I might be persuaded to let this slide."

Zuko exhaled deeply and really considered the situation he found himself in. How had he come to this? Here he stood, a ragged looking ronin in a tattered green kimono, surrounded by three trained ji-samurai and a smirking little pustule of a man who apparently got his jollies by humiliating people. He, of the blood of Akodo, Lord of Honor, being asked to prostrate himself in the dirt so that an honorless man might have a story to tell the next person who found themselves trapped in a conversation with him.

Well… that just about does IT. Zuko had had enough. He was done. Done with the whole flaming Earth-Kingdom.

"I think there has been a mistake here," Zuko said. He tried for genial, imagining he was his uncle.

"Ah! Finally, he understands!" The tax collector said, rolling his eyes skyward once more.

"Yes," Zuko said with a nod. "I see where we have made our mistakes."

"Yes, and- wait… 'we'?"

"Indeed. I did not see the Earth-King's seal and you-" Zuko's eye fell on the man like a hammer strike, causing everyone around him to take an unconscious step back- "you assumed that I… am from the Earth-Kingdom."

The little man's eyes widened in horror and the ji-samurai behind Zuko began to draw his blade.

He didn't quite make it.

Zuko seemed to fall backwards towards the ground but, at the last moment, caught himself on his hands and with a shout he bent fire from his feet in a wide spinning circle, forcing the three attackers back. With a single motion he regained his feet, bent his sword of fire into his hand and then buried it in the chest of a very surprised looking Mantis samurai.

The little Hogosha tax collector let out a horrified shriek and started running back to his carriage. Zuko dodged a sword strike from another of the samurai and sent a slashing wave of fire at the ostrich-horse's harness, setting the beasts free and scaring them away at the same time. That done he turned his entire focus on the two remaining actual threats.
Not that they were terribly dangerous, not when he was firebending.

He left the smoking corpses of the three ji-samurai behind him as he advanced on the little quivering man who was attempting to hide, head covered by his robes, under his carriage. Zuko grabbed his ankle and flung him bodily back into the road. One of his golden shoes flipped off and into the bushes, twinkling.

"So, you see your mistake?" Zuko said, back to faux pleasantness.

"Oh spirits, oh spirits, oh spirits," the little man whimpered.

"Oh good, I'm glad," Zuko said, pretending he'd been answered coherently. "Now, here is where I make my offer. There will be no kissing of shoes, no petty demands for respect. You may either commit seppuku-" the man squeaked- "or I can hang you naked from... THAT tree," Zuko said, picking one at random.

"Please, please I'll give you anything, anything you want. PLEASE."

"Thanks for your contribution to the war effort," Zuko snarled, his patience for the game boiled away in an instant in his fury at the man's cowardice. "I guess it's the tree then." With that he struck the man in the temple, and with a hollow sounding THUNK his eyes rolled back in his head.

Zuko, still a man of his word despite everything else, suspended the man upside-down by his ankles from a nearby tree. If the spirits favored him someone would happen by and cut him down. Then he could try and explain how it was that he had come to be naked and tied up in a tree that had the word "coward" carved into it with his own wakizashi.

Zuko gave him even odds that he'd be dead from exposure before that happened though.

The three expired ji-samurai got a decent cremation and the ritual words Zuko knew for earth samurai. A samurai did not always get to pick his lord and they had died with honor. That their master had had no honor of his own was regrettable.

That done Zuko decided to examine the contents of the carriage and there, seated on the passenger seat, where Zuko assumed the man had been playing with it, was a small lockbox full of gold.

Well, he DID say I could have anything I want, Zuko thought with a grin.

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**Late Winter, Year 10 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai**

Zuko was in a much better mood.

There had finally been villages, one not even a half-day's march from where he had left the torched remains of the tax collector's carriage. Now he had better boots, he had rice, he had an extra (size large) waterskin that was specifically for sake, and he still had what would have easily been an infantry battalion's monthly pay. But best of all...

He had reached the sea.

He had missed it. The salt sparking in his nose, the crashing thunder of the waves. He inhaled deeply and when he closed his eyes he could almost believe he was back on his ship, rising and falling with the waves, headed for the next port.
His eye snapped open as a particularly sharp gust of wind hit him and shook off the daydream. It did him no good to dwell on things past. Especially not while he was mildly drunk and standing at the edge of a cliff. The Sun had fallen right out of the sky for him, and he just needed to carry on.

So, he did.

He turned right and moved along, having already decided to head west from there, towards the city of Chin, where he'd been told that there was to be some sort of festival taking place.

He just hoped there would be more sake.

"You can't be serious," Zuko said, the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Serious as the Stone, Mr. Ronin! We celebrate Avatar Day every year by burning statues of 'em! We've even got the new one this year! It's something to do with Avatar Kyoshi murdering a great warlord that our city is named for… or something." The shopkeeper shrugged. "All I really know is that it's great for business… and tourism!"

Zuko looked around wonderingly at the festively arrayed town of Chin. "THIS might just be my new favorite place," he said grinning fiercely.

That night the entire village erupted in celebrations as the three statues of the Avatars (Kyoshi, Roku, and Aang) were wheeled out into a central plaza. They wouldn't be burned until the next day, but the citizens of Chin took it in turns drinking and hurling insults at the figures, an activity that Zuko found he excelled at after a few drinks of his own. There was free food, dancing, and even an exceptionally catchy Avatar Day song, very simply named "Down with the Avatar." Most of its lyrics were vulgar and extremely insulting and there was already a verse dedicated to Aang.

"You bald headed fool!

You think you're so cool!

But you're nothing but cowardly trash!"

The chorus was just the title "Down with the Avatar" repeated many times and at great and raucous volume. While not very imaginative, lyrically speaking, it managed to get itself lodged in one's head with the greatest of ease. After his tenth bottle of sake Zuko called it a night and promptly passed out in an alleyway, still humming the tune, and tremendously pleased with the attitude of the local population.

He awoke late, and after a moment of gathering his wits, he staggered back to the town square so as to not miss the burning ceremony. Not to mention the drinking and feasting that would recommence as well.

He arrived just in time to see the torchbearer lob his ceremonial flame at the statue of Aang, hitting it in the face. The crowd exploded in cheers and from the back, Zuko cheered with them.

I could LIVE here, he thought to himself, both fists still in the air as the throng cheered. They've got the sea, they hate the Avatar, this local brand of sake is actually pretty good… Maybe I could-

Suddenly a massive gout of water rose in front of him, extinguishing the three statues.

Oh no, Zuko thought, lowering his arms slowly. It CAN'T be…
"Hey! That Water-Tribe girl is ruining Avatar Day!" someone in the crowd in front of him shouted.

_Spirits? Don't do this to me_, Zuko implored silently, looking heavenward. _They're giving away SAKE here._

But the spirits had apparently already made up their minds on the subject and a small yellow and orange-clad figure leapt atop the statue which had been fashioned to resemble him.

"That Water-Tribe girl is my _friend_!" Aang shouted.

Zuko turned around, rolling his eye.

_Damnit_, he thought, grabbing two enormous jugs of sake off a table as he stalked away._He's going to ruin everything! Probably try and teach them a valuable lesson about "friendship" and then be given the key to the city. Or if THAT doesn't work I'm sure some natural disaster will show up and then he'll SAVE them from it._

He pulled a cork with his teeth and drank a gulp.

_Well, I don't have to watch at least._

Zuko had done his level best to remain drunk for nearly two days as he staggered his way east, away from the disappointing city of Chin. He'd spent the last night drinking everything he had left and roaring the chorus to "Down with the Avatar" as loudly as he could before he'd finally collapsed into a bush near the river he had originally followed down from the north and passed out.

When he awoke the next morning, it was to one of the worst headaches he had ever had. The gently flowing stream sounded like a massive waterfall echoing around inside the cavern that was his skull. A skull which, simultaneously, throbbed and pulsed with malignant fury to the tempo of his heartbeat.

Oddly, just at the edge of hearing, above the sound of the river and his pulsing skull, was the sound of a woman's voice singing softly and wordlessly. Whoever it was apparently had "Down with the Avatar" stuck in their head as well, and the melody seemed to soothe Zuko's battered brain.

As he tried to open his eye the Holy Sun's light punished him for his overindulgences with a new stabbing pain, forcing a soft groan from him. As he did the singing cut off abruptly.

"No! Don't stop!" he shouted hoarsely. He slapped at his coin pouch blindly and grabbed one of the large gold coins within. "I'll give you a _koku_ if you keep singing!" he said, thrusting the coin out of the bushes where he hoped the impromptu musician could see it.

The female voice laughed softly. "I shouldn't. It's not a very nice song… but it is pretty catchy, isn't it?"

Zuko went rigid with shock; he _knew_ that voice. Usually, it was threatening to _kill_ him, and his hangover now became a secondary concern next to panic.

_Oh, ash! I haven't shaved in months! Or bathed! I probably smell like OSTRICH-HORSE for my ancestors' sake! This is NOT how this is supposed to-_

During his panicked self-recriminations, Katara had left the riverside and approached the bushes that he was now essentially _hiding_ in.
"Are you alright in there?" she asked kindly.

Are they following ME now? Why in Akodo's name is SHE HERE!?

"Uhhhh, YES!" he babbled, still panicking. "Just… FINE. Everything is fine here! How are you?"

Don't make conversation idiot! Flee!

But Lions never retreat, and Zuko, still a Lion to his core, was unpracticed at the idea of running away.

"Are you sure?" Katara said. "Some of these bushed have thorn-" Her head came into view over the top of the bushes, her face one moment the very picture of concern, then shock, then… murderous outrage.

"Uh… Hello. Zuko here."

Idiot.

"YOU!" she screamed, and the entire stream seemed to leap from its banks at her cry.

Zuko, his hangover now completely forgotten, scrambled backwards (a tactical withdrawal, not a retreat) and away from the enraged waterbender, taking cover behind a large tree.

"I don't suppose you would believe me if I told you that this was just a coincidence?" Zuko said hopefully.

Katara's only response was a disc of ice that bisected the tree a few inches above his head.

"Guess that's a 'no'," he growled as the tree crashed to the ground. "Fine then."

He spun around the tree bending a gout of fire.

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It had been a long time since Zuko had had a good bending fight against a worthy opponent. The last few months, since his fight with his sister, had probably the longest drought in over a decade. He'd always had someone to spar with, or to kill, and for a brief moment he was concerned that maybe he'd gotten rusty.

He hadn't.

His formerly alcohol battered mind snapped into focus as soon as his red flames met her flowing shield of water and ice. It felt good; like a muscle that had been locked up for a long time finally being allowed to stretch. Their fight at the North Pole might have been yesterday for the difference it seemed to make as Zuko hammered away at Katara's defenses quickly, then moved. Remaining rooted, while usually preferable in firebending, had been almost immediately been revealed to be suicide as Katara had learned a kata that allowed her to bombard an area with a massive volley of sharpened ice spears.

It won't be a quick as last time, but maybe I can still tire her out, he mused as he scrambled from one ruined wreck of a tree to another soon to be wrecked one. These kata must be exhausting.

If they were, however, Katara gave no sign. She simply continued to empty the stream at him, flooding the battlefield with ice and water.
Wait… flood the area?

Zuko reacted just in time, leaping up into an, as of yet, undamaged tree as Katara froze the entire area in a thin sheet of ice.

*She almost had me!* Zuko thought, his face splitting into a grin. *Merciful Ancestors I MISSED this!*

With a leap and a happy shout, he countered with a wide fan of fire that melted the ice at his feet, sending small puffs of steam into the air.

Which gave him an idea.

Inhaling deeply, he bent a massive stream of fire into the river, spinning back and forth to dodge whips of water as he did and slowly but surely the air filled with a thick impenetrable mist, obscuring Katara's vision.

*She's phenomenal at range, but I haven't seen anything particularly impressive close up. Use that!* And matching his thoughts he leapt forward to close with her.

A heartbeat later the mist he had thrown himself into had transformed into ice crystals which slashed and stung at him as Katara bent them around her in a howling blizzard. Zuko countered with heart of fire, putting as much power into it as he had ever done, melting the ice a good quarter of an inch from his skin. With a resounding crack she bent a wall of ice between the two of them, but Zuko smashed through that wall like a battleship's icebreaker, fire at his fingertips.

And then, there she was. That amazing *dangerous* smile on her face.

It was only by the sheerest luck that Zuko had brought up his blade of fire *just* as he would have run into a long sharp icicle Katara had set as a trap behind the wall. As it was the blade shattered the ice before it could do him any harm, and Katara's smile drooped slightly.

*Excellent! Wonderful!* Zuko thought happily. *Good anticipation!*

He advanced quickly, his face still contorted into a fearsome grin. He had been correct in his assessment; Katara, her face now a mask of furious concentration, was unable to bend the massive but cumbersome torrents at this close a range. Red blade met blue streams of water in a flaring intricate dance as Zuko drove her away from the stream.

*Almost… there…*

She surprised him, somehow bending a smaller icicle into her hand without him seeing and then flinging it at him, managing to embed it in his left shoulder. He roared in pain and used the motion to execute a small dragon's breath, which she blocked only by exhausting the rest of the water she had with her and leaping backwards.

Zuko followed her motion and brought the blade down, stopping it a scant inch from her neck, her back to a ruined tree.

They stood there a long moment glaring at each other, panting, fighting to regain their breath.

*Oh, ash… NOW what am I supposed to do?* Zuko thought his panic returning.

*Well… the LAST time you captured her…*

He had been an idiot and *kissed* her. He felt the functional side of his face heat and saw, to his
increasing embarrassment, that she was blushing too. Apparently, she remembered that as well.

"Just kill me," she spat, "I won't be bait in your trap again!"

"...my what?"

"Don't play dumb with me! It's a trap! You- you- cut your hair and grew out a beard so you could sneak up on us! And then, when Aang shows up to help me. You can finally have him in your little Fire-Nation clutches!" She glanced around suspiciously. "You've got your cavalry nearby, or those assassin women!"

"Assassin... women?" he said flatly, still terribly confused.

Katara was not to be deterred however and as she ranted it became clear that this was something she had wanted to say for a very long time. Her words had the clipped feel of a practiced speech. "You're a terrible person, you know that? Always following us, hunting the Avatar! Trying to capture the world's last hope for peace! But what do you care? You're the Fire-Lord's son. Spreading war and violence and hatred is in your blood!" She took a breath. "And THEN as if that wasn't enough you violate me?" she snarled through gritted teeth.

"V-violate? What in the flaming pits of ASH are you talking about?!" Zuko said, growing angry as he dropped the fire sword to match her glare for glare.

"It wasn't enough you had to defeat me, AND after I saved your life, you had to- to-" she stopped, turning scarlet.

"That... THAT is what you're angry about? You think that I kissed you to try and humiliate you? To exact some sort of revenge? As though that would make up for what you did to ME!" he roared, furious.

"What I did to you?! What did I-"

"You should have let me die with HONOR!" he shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders. "It was perfect! I would have been redeemed, dying in the execution of my duty, defeated by the wo-" he cut off, shaking his head.

"That was a mistake," she said, looking away in embarrassment. "I never meant to kill you."

"Liar."

"No! I just got carried away and..." Tears began to fill her eyes. "I never wanted to hurt anybody! I just wanted you to leave us alone and..." she let out a huff, shaking off her tears and growling furiously with herself. She looked up and resumed her glare at Zuko. "What the frost are you smiling at?!" she snarled, her rage renewed.

It was just too much for Zuko and he didn't answer.

He just kissed her.

And for a moment... if only just a moment... it felt like she kissed him back.

He cut off after a few seconds at a sharp pain in his side, and when he broke away and looked down he found that she'd stabbed him. With an icicle. Again.

He looked down at the icicle, then back at Katara, then back to the icicle. Then he fell over; half
from the pain at his side, half from laughter.

"You're amazing!" he laughed, grasping at the icy stub, trying, and failing, to extract it.

The look on her face was an interesting mix of bewilderment and anger as, for a long moment, she watched him try, and fail, to remove the icy stub in his abdomen. Finally settling on a glare, she dropped next to him and batted his hands away from it.

"You are an idiot," she said bending the water out of him and around her hands, which took on a light blue glow.

"You're not wrong," Zuko said.

After she had undone the damage she'd inflicted, Zuko marveling at her glowing blue hands with a wide single eye as she did so, she had risen, shouted at him NOT to follow her, and then stalked off, following the stream north.

Zuko, mind in a strange thoughtless place, took the opportunity to wash in the river, removing the mud from the now devastated riverside, the firebending char, and blood from his body. Then, after a moment of searching, he recovered his pack which, in his previously inebriated state, had ended up a few bushes downstream from where he'd eventually landed.

Still sore, and now only a little hungover, he made his way south, meeting up with the coastline again and turning east this time.

_I wonder where they're headed next?_ He mused to himself. The first truly coherent thought he'd had since Katara had healed him. It had been habit to try to decipher the Avatar's odd travel plans when he'd still been samurai. But now it was an odd experience, being able to contemplate it leisurely, without the pressure of needing to come up with a countering plan.

She was heading north so... probably up to Omashu, he decided eventually. They will try to liberate the city and get Lord Bumi to teach the boy earthbending.

A part of him, a small but vocal part, wanted to follow them. Certainly, capturing the Avatar wouldn't do him any good anymore but _killing_ him would certainly be enjoyable.

_Though SHE'D probably have something to say about that_, and a rather sappy smile formed on his face as he walked along.

Their fight had been amazing, and she'd been as deadly and lovely as he remembered. He almost felt like his old self again, like there was a purpose to his existence. Certainly, pissing off a woman and fighting her wasn't a particularly _noble_ purpose, but you had to make do with what you had.

_I can't believe she thought I meant to insult her!_

That had been astounding. The idea that Zuko kissing her had been a "violation" was utterly mad. Certainly, it wasn't something he had _planned_ and as far as he knew it wasn't _common_ to kiss one's opponents after defeating them. But _insulting_… In Zuko's, admittedly limited, experience with kissing you did not kiss those you disliked or intended to insult. Being kissed was a _good_ thing.

_Maybe it's a Water-Tribe thing? On the other hand, she didn't seem to realize how insulting it was for her to SAVE me. Maybe she didn't mean it like that? Maybe..._
None of it made any sense. They'd fought, he'd won, they'd shouted at each other, she had almost cried, and then, because he had apparently suffered brain damage at some point, he had kissed her again. Then she'd stabbed him… and then she'd healed him.

What did THAT mean?

Spirts, I need a drink, he thought, and he picked up his pace slightly, hoping there would be a village soon where he could refill his "waterskin."

But there wasn't, and so as the sun hit the horizon behind him, he found another stream running into the sea and followed in northward for a while, to keep himself off the road.

He'd found that camping by fresh water was a great deal easier. He could wash (if he was feeling like it) and boil the water in a small pot for cooking and his waterskins.

Once he'd passed south of the Swamp of Mists people would occasionally stumble across his campsite. Most often they would simply turn around after one look at his face and his katana. Less frequently they would try to rob him which never worked out well for them but had actually been tremendously helpful to Zuko. It was how he'd got his current cooking pot, and the plain bracers and shin armor he now wore, as well as much of the other sundry camping equipment he had.

He had just finished making his campfire when he heard a rustling from the foliage on the other side of the small creek.

Maybe this one will have some jerky, he mused, sighing as he came to his feet.

She didn't have jerky.

Zuko's mouth dropped open in pure shock as Katara dragged a hamper full of clothes out of the underbrush.

"You cannot be serious?" he said.

She jumped like a started fox-deer at his words and then, showing a presence of mind that caught a shocked Zuko completely off guard, she bent a coil of water out of the stream and around his leg, hoisting him into the air.

She stomped towards him and glared into his upside-down eye.

"I told you NOT to follow me!" she growled through clenched teeth.

"You went NORTH!" Zuko retorted, pointing in that direction.

Katara's mouth dropped open.

"I assumed you were going to Omashu to try and liberate the city!" Zuko shouted. "What in the Sun's name are you doing here!?"

"We were already AT Omashu! You had your assassins attack us!"

"Assassins? What assassins!? Does it look like I have assassins? Or soldiers of any kind? Ash and bone woman, I don't even have flaming pants!"

Zuko, not caring overmuch about the kinds of clothes he wore, had settled on a loose green kimono after he had invaded the Earth-Kingdom. In his upside-down state it was currently flipped up, revealing his bare legs and loin cloth as his hands were too busy making sure his sword stayed in
Katara's eyes traveled upwards registering that fact and her face flushed heavily. She spun away, hiding her eyes, and releasing the bend which dropped Zuko, head first, into the stream.

"Y-you think that- that- just because you dress up like an earth peasant I'm going to believe you had nothing to do with the people chasing us?" She shouted, still covering her eyes.

Zuko dripping wet, and now very annoyed, climbed out of the river and, with a snort of fire and a bend, dried himself.

"You… you think this is a ruse?" he snarled, still steaming as he advanced on Katara. "You think I would… dress up as a peasant? Cut my topknot off as a fucking RUSE!"

"I think you'd do anything," she said, spinning back around to face him, tone matching his immediately, "no matter how vile, debased, and evil to achieve your goals. You're Fire-Nation! It's what you DO!"

"You know NOTHING! Nothing about me, OR the Fire-Nation! You ignorant savage!" Zuko roared, face now close to hers.

"I know you are evil! You burn and loot and kill! You murdered my people, my mother! You're the savages!"

"We're at WAR! You act as though your people didn't declare war on US! And Moto Chagatai destroyed the city of Jang Hui and slaughtered unarmed peasants and children!"

"As though YOU should talk! You slaughtered a whole village! Didn't you 'Butcher'?"

Zuko was taken aback for a moment, his mind flooded with vague memories of his first brush with the madness, of red flames and a village melted to slag.

"I did," he said, voice hoarse, "And I'd do it AGAIN, murderous savages!" he finished with a furious snarl, his face twitching slightly.

"You're a monster!" Katara said, eyes going wide.

"Yes, I am! I am a MONSTER who does the necessary things that no one else will do! An example had to be made!" His fury was mounting, growing, feeding on guilt and hazy memories of screaming peasants and burning stone, multiplied a hundredfold by the look of hatred and disgust in the young woman in front of him.

If there was only one person in the world who he would rather didn't know about Matomo, it was her and his hands began to tremble in rage and shame.

You need to calm down! his uncle's voice seemed to shout from a long way away. You need to withdraw, gather yourself-

"Necessary?!" Katara shrieked. "What in the Moon's name was necessary about slaughtering an entire village?!"

"They were animals," Zuko whispered, eye going wide, unfocused. "They murdered, poisoned, an entire c-company of soldiers, Earth-K-kingdom samurai. Their own samurai!"
Katara's eyes grew wide, shocked.

Zuko's campfire suddenly turned crimson, bathing the clearing in eerie red light as laughter began to force its way out of his mouth. "They would HA-ha-have died for theh-heh-hem! In-n-instead they strih-heh-heh-pped them n-naked! Heh, ha! F-f-flung them in a PIT! Throats blue, swollen, claw marks where they struggled as they DIED!"

As the word "DIED" erupted from Zuko the red fire shot skyward from his campfire, engulfing the tree canopy above.

_Burn it_, a voice whispered. _Burn it ALL._

_Oh ash! No, no nonononononononono. Not now!_

"Zuko? What's…" Katara looked worried.

"Y-you n-n-need to leavvvvve," he managed to choke out, fists and jaw clenched, entire body a line of tension. "G-go! I can't… can't…"

Words stopped…

…and there was just laughter as red flames rose and swallowed his mind.

He was a flame. The whole world was _screaming_. He could burst, _EXPLODE_, bring the whole thing down! Burn everything and everyone to a cinder.

_I WILL BURN EVERYTHI-

It stopped.

…All was still.

…Silent.

Blue-grey.

Like her eyes.

   ▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲▲

He drew breath.

It felt like ragged knives being drawn over his throat, like he'd been screaming for hours.

He opened his eye and found that he was sitting upright, propped up by a stone in front of his firepit. A pot bubbled overtop of it, the smell of rice strong. Katara was there, folding the laundry she had brought to wash.

"Wha-" he coughed, his voice rust and gravel.

"Good, you're awake," Katara said briskly, not taking her eyes off the clothes she was folding. "I wasn't sure if you would wake up, and I'd hate to leave you here unable to defend yourself." Her face and tone made it clear that she would have done so anyway had she finished her laundry first.

"Are you alright?" Zuko rasped, exhaustion plain in his voice.
"Am I alright?" She said wonderingly, turning to look at him. "Do you care?"

"...Yes."

"Why?" Katara snapped, scorn heavy in her voice.

"Because... I'm in love with you."

Katara's mouth dropped open and the pair of pants she was folding fell to the ground.

"You should go," Zuko said, turning to stare into the fire. "The boy will be wondering where you've gone."

"You... you can't just... Why would you SAY that?" she whispered, horrified.

"Because I'm tired. Far too tired to come up with a good lie." He shook his head. "I'm not very good at it, even in the best of times."

"So- so- you just tell me a bad lie instead?!

"No."

"But... but... you hate me," she said, horror mingled with confusion in her voice.

"I don't."

"We're enemies!"

Zuko shrugged.

"I've threatened to kill you... A LOT."

Zuko smiled weakly. "You are never more beautiful than when you are threatening me."

Katara threw up her hands. "You're insane!"

"Yes, I know. That's why you should leave," he said turning back to the fire.

Katara blinked in confusion. "You mean..."

"I mean not figuratively or metaphorically, Shinjo. I am insane. Prone to psychotic breaks. I am an evil monster who can't even muster the self-control to stop himself from slaughtering children." He sighed, slumping in place, defeated. "If just the memory of Matomo is enough to- to-" he broke off, shivering.

"That's what happened at Matomo? You were possessed by a spirit?"

"Yes, I was... what?"

"You were possessed by a spirit, and it made you do all those things?"

"Possessed by a- No. I have a mental condition. I don't know what they teach you in the barbarian south, but mental issues aren't caused by-"

"I know what psychosis is, thank you. I also happen to know what spirit possession looks like. I have been traveling with Aang for a year now."
"I am NOT the Avatar, Shinjo."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"So, you're too tired to lie to me?" Katara said rising to her feet.

Zuko nodded.

"Why are you trying to capture us?"

"I'm not. Not anymore."

"We've been getting attacked ever since we came into the Earth-Kingdom! Your Fire-Nation soldiers and those assassin women-"

"I don't have any soldiers anymore and I never had assassins."

"Then why are they chasing us?"

"Did you think it was just some… whim of mine to capture the Avatar?" Zuko said, voice picking up a little energy. "His Majesty the Fire-Lord has ordered his capture and he will not stop."

"Then why did you?"

Zuko paused a beat, narrowing his eye. "How did you stop me?" he said finally.

Katara looked taken aback. "What?"

"You stopped me from losing control; how?"

"I froze you, in a block of ice," she said, looking away. "I wasn't sure if you would survive."

"Thank you."

"…You didn't answer my question."

"I didn't, did I?" he said smiling weakly. "Silence is not the same as lying."

"Was it because of me? Because you… you…" she couldn't force the words out.

"No," he sighed tiredly. "I've been in love with you since the battle at Tohin Wo."

"Tohin WO?" her eyebrows clamped her head. "You… you tried to sell me to pirates!"

Zuko looked away, mildly ashamed. "I would have come back for you… and then arrested them for human trafficking."

"They… they would have."

"I know," he broke in. "I… I didn't even think about that until I saw the way the pirate captain looked at you." He paused remembering the man's screams. "He did not die very well," he growled.

"You killed him?" she squeaked, her eyes going wide again.

"I'd have killed them all," he said darkly, "the madness had me, but my uncle managed to distract me in time."
"Stop evading," she said giving herself a shake and re-fixing him with a glare. "WHY have you stopped chasing us?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I want the truth. I'm tired of hearing all these different contradicting stories; the noble 'Prince of Fire' and the 'Butcher of Matomo.' I want to know who I'm talking to right now, and silence is as good as a lie."

They stared at each other for another long moment. Zuko still slumped against the rock he was propped up on, Katara arms crossed and tapping her foot impatiently.

"Fine," Katara said breaking the silence with a sniff, "if you won't tell me anything then we have nothing to-"

"Because there's no point," Zuko whispered, eye on the ground in shame. "No matter what I do now I can never go home again."

"What? But why…?"

Merciless Ancestors… she doesn't know.

"I… I thought everyone knew. I was banished, Shinjo," he said forcing the words out despite his growing shame and humiliation. "Banished from my home and the sight of my father, until I captured the Avatar. I haven't been allowed home in over five years."

"But why?" she seemed horrified.

"Because the Avatar is the last barrier in the way of Oda's dream, to conquer the world."

She shook her head. "No, I meant why were you banished?"

"I… I showed disrespect, to my father and his councilors," he rasped, mouth dry as he spoke. "I was foolish, and just as lacking in self-control as I am now."

"You couldn't have been much older than I am now. Why would you be cast out for that?"

Zuko blinked. Same age as… Ash and bone, have I fallen in love with a child? "How… old are you?" she certainly didn't look thirteen.

"I just turned seventeen last week? What does that have to do with-"

Zuko sighed in relief. "Thank the Sun. I'm only a year and a half older than you. I'd thought maybe I was strange."

"You're… you're only eighteen?! But I thought you were… But that means… you were only thirteen when you were banished?!" she seemed even more horror-struck.

"How old did you think I was?"

"I don't know! In your twenties?! This doesn't make any sense, Aang wasn't even awake five years ago."

"I am aware."

"So… your father sent you out to find someone that nobody even knew existed… because you
were rude? You were thirteen! You should have seen Sokka at that age!" She shook her head in wonder. "You're almost the same age as him." She seemed stunned by that fact.

"My age was not an excuse, I was an adult and I spoke out of turn. I was a Prince. I was to be held to a higher standard."

"... Was?

"I am ronin now, Shinjo. Cast out. Disowned. Honorless. Even if I did capture the Avatar now it wouldn't be enough to redeem me," he said sighing bitterly. "No more than I deserve for my failures. You should have just let me die, it would have been better than th-"

Katara lunged forward and slapped him, hard, across the face.

"Life," she snarled, her blue-grey eyes boring into his, "is a gift from the spirits. To allow someone to die when you could save them is a sacrilege. To wish for death is blasphemy, and worse it is cowardice. I had not thought you a coward, Akodo Zuko."

With that she turned, purple robes swinging, and stalked off across the stream and into the woods, back the way she had come.

Wow... what a woman! Zuko thought happily, stunned face curving into a foolish smile, his spirits soaring. Wait a minute...

"Shinjo?" Zuko called. "You forgot your laundry!"

Katara, red-faced and eyes down, walked quickly back across the stream to retrieve the laundry, including the pair of pants she'd dropped.

"It was a good exit," Zuko mused aloud, fighting a smile. "We'll pretend that last part didn't happen."

Katara looked absolutely furious as Zuko's gravelly laughter followed her back to camp.

A light jog would do him good he'd decided.

He admitted that he'd grown a bit indolent over the last few months since becoming ronin. Too much lounging about drinking sake. Not enough exercise, not enough practice. Just because he had been disowned was no reason to become fat and useless.

The fact that, by jogging, he could, based on his rough mental calculations, keep up with a, entirely hypothetical flying bison, had nothing to do with it. That he continued east along the, again hypothetical, bison's most probable course, given tactical motivations and local weather conditions, was entirely circumstance. He most certainly did NOT smile and pick up his pace slightly when he caught sight of a tiny, hypothetical, spec on the horizon.

Not at all.

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A/N: Hello my friends and welcome to the end of the chapter. You have done well, and I am proud of you! Here we begin our major canon divergence, wherein Zuko actually gets screen time. Our boy sort of disappears from the show after he and Iroh split up. Certainly, they
made up for it with the phenomenal "Zuko Alone" episode but as that episode has no real anchors in the show timeline (it could have happened at almost any point) we have no idea what the boy is getting up to until "The Chase" wherein he somehow gets back on the trail of the Avatar and his sister.

So, look forward to that!

META-BITS TIME!

**Family Mon:** A mon is the classic sort of crest or seal of a family. L5R is very animal-centric in its iconography. For those interested Zuko and Katara's family mon can be easily found with a quick google search for "Akodo" or "Shinjo mon," they are of course a Lion and a "Ki-Rin" (a unicorn-like figure).

**Avatar Day Song:** Ah singing, I don't know where this idea came from, but I absolutely loved that there would be an anti-avatar festival song that would be super catchy. Insert whatever melody you like in there, as long as its catchy. For myself, I always hear the chorus to the tune of "The Old Grey Mare." The old grey mare as played on the biwa anyway. YMMV. My thought is that it would get stuck in the Gaangs heads as well, much to Aang's irritation. So, when on a morning Katara wakes and find that earworm still there she takes a long walk by the riverside so as to not hurt Aang's feelings. Hence her presence at this oh so fateful encounter.

**Détente:** Zuko and Katara have never really had a conversation. Still haven't, not really, but in this chapter they get somewhere approaching that. There is dialog, they communicate, information is exchanged. For the most part, Katara learns a whole great MESS of stuff about Zuko. Primarily that he is in love with her. She *did* ask him a direct question and Zuko does NOT like lying. So, he just rolls with it. She's already seen him at his worst he thinks, might as well just get it all out there. I imagine it actually makes him feel a whole lot better, which the poor woobie really does need before he slips down the path of alcoholism.

Hey, thanks again for reading! If you've got questions comments or just want to engage in some Avatar related convo drop me a comment/review what have you.

Also, from a technical note I was hoping for some feedback on the dialog, I'm entering a very TALK heavy few chapters and I'd like to be sure that it's coming through clearly/flowing well.

Thanks, a THIRD time!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Zuko engages in stalking! Then eats fire-flakes and takes in a show!

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 2 September 2018
Winter, year 10 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

*This is a lot easier than I expected it to be,* Zuko thought, scowling as he peered through the needles of another evergreen tree.

As he sat, irritably glaring down at the three sleeping forms (along with their giant bison) he wondered how *precisely* had these three evaded him for the better part of a year. They seemed to make no effort, whatsoever, to hide themselves as they traipsed through the Earth-Kingdom. Perhaps they were less concerned since *he* wasn't supposed to be chasing them anymore?

*I am following, not chasing,* he reminded himself.

Whatever he was doing, he had, no less than three times over the course of the previous week, made his way to within eyesight of the Avatar's camp. Watching the three fools sleep so peacefully, without so much as a protective picket line or a guard, might have made him *angry* if his eye hadn't inevitably fallen on Katara. For long minutes he would mindlessly watch her sleep before he snapped out of it and realized what he was doing. Then he'd climb out his tree and walk away; silent and *disgusted* with himself.

*Are you one of THOSE now? That spies upon women as they sleep?* He silently derided himself as he snuck away to make his own camp. *Pathetic. Next, you'll be trying to catch her bathing, or stealing her underwear or… or… some other base perversion.*

He always told himself that he was simply checking on their location, making sure that he did not wander too far off course, or run into them by accident. At some level, however, he knew that he was just lying to himself.

She just looked so peaceful when she was asleep.

Despite their incaution, the trio made their way to the free city Gaoling without incident and Zuko arrived not long after. Located on the southern edge of the Earth-Continent the port city was a thriving commercial center, having been left alone by the Fire-Nation for the entirety of the war. This was largely due to its lack of loyalty to the Earth-King's interests and because they were, even after a century of fighting, the number one producer and exporter of fine silks and weavings to the Fire-Nation. Conventional strategic wisdom suggested that when Ba Sing Se fell, Gaoling would offer a mostly unconditional surrender and join the Fire-Nation, its wealth intact. As such it was left alone to conduct its own affairs for the time being.
If Zuko had thought that the Earth-Kingdom villages he had been in were rowdy classless places, it was fortunate that he had gotten used to them before he came into Gaoling. The city streets were full to bursting; merchants, and tradesmen and performers and refugees all mashed together in a bustling stew of commerce and entertainment. Every business had a barker outside its doors, shouting or singing or simply physically grabbing passersby and enticing them into their shops. Lucky for them, and for all their limbs, none of them tried that on Zuko. Apparently, they had enough experience to know that you didn't try and lay hands on a ronin.

So, this is what happens when you let merchants run a city.

He abruptly found his quarry in an open shop and, pulling his wide straw hat down further over his face, he passed on by and then settled down against a nearby wall to wait and observe.

Sokka appeared to be… buying a purse.

No. Wait. He's put it back down… now he's picked back up again.

Sokka mused over the price tag, winced, and then put the green shoulder bag back down.

Alright, now that that's settled… Or not.

Sokka had picked the bag back up again, and was now comparing its leather strap to his boots to see if the color matched.

Who CARES!? Just buy the blasted thing! Or DON'T! Pick ONE you insufferable-

Sokka spent the better part of a half hour with the purse, even going so far as to exit the store twice before darting back in to re-examine the same bag.

It was infuriating.

Nothing they did was interesting, or of any strategic significance, and Zuko was both enormously unimpressed and disheartened by it considering how much effort and thought he'd put into their capture. He recalled back to long hours spent looking at maps, in conversation with his officers, or just staring out at the sea, contemplating the boy's next move. All the while it seemed his opponents hadn't even been paying attention. Zuko scowled behind his hat as the Avatar, bringer of balance and peace and whatever else, was nearly taken off his feet by one of the roving barkers who was distributing leaflets, one of which the boy took with a smile.

Later in the day, Zuko discovered that the leaflet had been for some cut-rate earthbending "dojo," which was offering a free lesson for prospective students. Zuko was mildly insulted to see something so commercial be billed as a dojo but he had to admit that watching the Avatar get knocked around by small earthbending children more than made up for it.

This is pointless, Zuko mused to himself. What is it I'm trying to accomplish here? Killing the boy would be ENORMOUSLY satisfying but strategically unsound. He narrowed his eye. And if it's JUST to watch the girl… I need to stop and RETHINK my life.

A pair of teenagers from the "dojo" walked past Zuko in the alleyway he was skulking in, chatting loudly amongst themselves. The volume of that conversation, alongside his own internal berating, almost distracted him from the real threat.

"Hey strong guys, wait up!" came a voice which, in principle, was familiar. But Zuko was certain that he'd never heard her sound so… chipper before.
Experiencing the same mild panic as he had before, Zuko lept through an open window, into an empty building, just before Katara ran by.

"Strong guys?" _What in the Sun's name is she doing?_ He wondered as he crouched beneath the open window, his back to the wall.

"Hey baby, decide to ditch the shrimp, huh?" one of the "strong guys" said in a tone that suggested he believed he was being charming.

"BABY?" _Oh, he's a dead man. She's probably going to-
Katara giggled, a sound Zuko found so odd that he wondered if his sanity had finally snapped. Or perhaps his sake had gone bad.

"Well yeah!" Katara said in a false high voice. "I like _real _men. Men who can _earthbend_, you know?"

"Well honey blossom you're in luck. My friend and I have _three_ tickets to Earth Rumble Six! Don't suppose you'd care to-"

Zuko was in the middle of sniffing his large waterskin, to see if his sake had indeed gone bad, when the conversation gave way to sounds of a scuffle, muffled curses, and a crunching noise. Risking a peak and rising from his crouch, Zuko saw that Katara had lured the two earthers next to an open sewer grate and then waterbent them each to a wall of the alleyway, locking them in ice. Only their heads were exposed, except the one on the right whose arm was extended revealing several slips of paper.

"Pathetic," Katara said with a sneer. "Is this the best the samurai of earth have to offer? Listen _well _you insolent SAVAGES! I don't know how things are done here in the barbarian east, but disrespect like _that_ deserves no less than death. Are you _prepared _for seppuku?!"

_Wait a minute. Is she… impersonating ME? _

The two fools locked in ice began apologizing and pleading for their lives in a most satisfactory fashion. Katara nodded solemnly, seeming to weigh their begging against their insults.

"Mwahahaha! Very well, but forgiveness is never given freely and must be EARNED," she walked over to the young man with the tickets and grabbed them roughly. "In recompense for your disrespect," she said, holding the tickets aloft.

"Mwahahaha? _I don't sound like that_. Do I?"

"And one last thing," she said, in a frigid tone of voice that Zuko found FAR more familiar. "If I ever hear even a whisper of either of you calling another woman _baby_…” she flicked her hand, bending a blade of ice from her waterskin. "Your _ancestors_ may forgive you, but I will _NOT_."

_She IS impersonating me! _Zuko thought, mouth dropping open in shock.

As Katara spun around on her heel to leave Zuko managed to duck his head back into hiding. After she had left, he clambered out the window and stared dreamily the way she had gone, a sappy smile on his face.

_What a woman! _

"Hey buddy. You wanna give us a hand?" one of the fools cried out pitifully from behind him.
Zuko turned around, sappy smile transmuted into a savage grin, and advanced on the two bound earthbenders who had gone as pale as milk.

"You will tell me EVERYTHING you know about this… Earth Rumble Six."

Zuko wasn't sure what to make of it.

After night had fallen he had made his way to the Earth Rumble arena which had been carved out of the inside of a local mountain. He found it flooded with people in an even greater density than had been outside. He almost turned around at that, realizing that there was no way he would be able to find anyone in this mess, but he'd already spend three bu on his ticket and so continued onward and upward to his seat.

Earth Rumble Six was clearly a fighting even, a blood sport for earthbenders, but there seemed to be more to it than that. It seemed… almost a performance, a play. The combatants were earthbenders, who did fight one another, but they seemed almost caricatures, playing roles designed to inspire or offend the audience.

On the one hand, he found himself aghast at what was essentially the commercialization of the sacred art of bending. On the other hand, he found the presentation… appealing. The "rumblers" were talented and if there was a storyline to go along with the fighting so be it. But Zuko couldn't care less about whether "The Hippo" had stolen "The Boulder's" girlfriend.

Zuko found himself surprised to be cheering along with the crowd, chanting and clapping and wincing at particularly nasty hits.

At least he did until "Fire-Nation Man" took the stage.

He was a rather rotund man in a red and black cape, waving a Fire-Nation banner amid the loud booing of the crowd. He planted the flag in the center of the stage and seemed to revel in the catcalls and jeers causing Zuko to feel a strange mixture of pride, embarrassment and ominous foreboding. This was the Earth-Kingdom after all and despite having been left out of the war the Fire-Nation was not well loved here.

He had the sinking suspicion that Fire-Nation Man was not going to win.

"Please to rise for Fire-Nation national anthem!" Fire-Nation Man shouted in what Zuko assumed was supposed to be a northern colonial accent.

Yes. Definitely an entertainment piece, Zuko thought with a scowl. While colonials were a bit on the rough side as far as the Fire-Nation went, they were still his people. Lt Rin, Zuko's former infantry commander, had himself been from the northern colonies and he had been the very picture of the grim stoicism that one expected from a Fire-Nation samurai.

Zuko watched, silently fuming, as The Boulder, the over-muscled and extraordinarily stereotypical earther protagonist, took Fire-Nation Man apart. Against all reason and logic Zuko found himself disappointed in Fire-Nation Man's poor showing.

The man never even got a chance to bend. How is THAT fair?

Sighing, Zuko rose to his feet to examine the rest of the arena as a large badger-mole entered the ring to re-bend the rocky leavings of the stage clean. The bustle from the streets of Gaoling was enormously amplified in the stadium concourse as merchants continued to ply foods, beverages and,
more interestingly, character and event merchandise. Zuko actually found someone selling fire flakes and bought himself a box. They weren't as good as he remembered from back home, but they were still a nice crunchy piece of nostalgia, and he munched on them slowly as he contemplated buying some Fire-Nation Man merchandise that no one else even went near.

"YOU!" snarled a voice from behind him.

*Oh crap.*

The crowds, which Zuko had been using as passive concealment, had cleared a great deal as he mused over a Fire-Nation Man commemorative woodblock printing and, based on the sounds, the performance had started up again.

Which really didn't explain why Katara was *still* out in the concourse.

*Sundamnit. How does she keep FINDING me?!

"Generally speaking," Zuko growled, not turning around. "It's not considered polite to simply shout 'YOU' every time we meet."

"HA! What do *you* know about courtesy?!" Katara shouted.

"I know that right now you are making a scene, which is generally considered to be rude in most civilized parts of the world," he said, eye narrowed as he turned around to face her.

She flushed in anger but lowered her voice. "What are you *doing* here? You said you weren't following us anymore," she spat through clenched teeth.

"I said I wasn't trying to *capture* you anymore."

"So, you'll just… what? Follow us around hoping something terrible happens? Then swoop down like a hornet-vulture?"


"You're horrible."

"Horrible I may be, but at least I *bought* my ticket for this… whatever this is."

Katara's eyes grew wide. "Y- you saw?"

"I did. I was most impressed. In the future I would suggest knocking them unconscious after you are done with them though. It increases the fear they will feel in any future encounter and reduces that chances of them being found and… interrogated."

"You killed them, didn't you?" Katara said, dark face paling slightly.

"What? No. They weren't mine to kill, they were yours. *You* defeated them. But then you decided to be stupid."

*Maybe don't call her stupid?*

"Uhhh… I mean… merciful. You decided to be *merciful."

…Which was obviously really stupid.
"There is nothing stupid about NOT killing somebody," Katara said flaring up again and advancing into his personal space.

"You dishonored them, for nine bu worth of tickets to this… thing, and then left them alive to plot their revenge. It is foolish to leave an enemy alive at your back."

"I left YOU alive!"

"Yes, and that was stu- I mean… unwise."

"Maybe," she said, glaring up at him and poking him in the chest with her index finger, "I should rectify that situation."

Zuko grinned down at her. "And I would love to see you try, but you won't. Because, merciful tendencies aside, you aren't an idiot. Not a lot of water here is there?"

"Who said I need water? All I need is to find a city guard, I'm sure the authorities would love to get their hands on the fire prince."

"Except I'm not a prince… and you are not a coward."

"Excuse me?"

"You won't get anyone else involved in this," Zuko rumbled. "You probably haven't even told the boy that you saw me. You get anyone else involved-" he gripped the scabbard of his katana- "people will get hurt."

"Don't think you know me!"

"I know you well enough. You are too nice. Someday that is going to get you hurt, or killed." He frowned, looking down and away from her. "I would rather things not come to that."

"You've been trying to kill me for over a year," Katara said, not angrily but with a widening of the eyes that indicated confusion.

"No, I wasn't. I just wanted to capture the Avatar. You stood against me. It was duty." Zuko said with a shrug. "I would have… regretted killing you."

"How can you not see how… utterly… completely… STUPID that is?!" Katara said, stamping her foot in irritation.

"You always have a choice! You can't just say 'it's my duty' like that explains everything! It doesn't make it alright! It doesn't make it fair!" She was absolutely quivering with rage, and some other emotion that Zuko couldn't place, much to his confusion.

"I… have upset you," he said softly, taking a smooth step backwards and bowing seriously. "That was not my intent, and I am sorry. Good evening." He bowed again and turned to leave.

"Wait a minute! You can't bow and walk away! I'm not done talking to you yet!"

"Another rule of courtsenes, Shinjo," Zuko said, turning back around, and attempting levity, "It is considered very rude to attempt to continue a conversation when someone has already said goodbye." He paused. "Unless you ask to accompany them of course."
What are you doing? Idiot! You've made a clean getaway, now get out of here before the Avatar-

Glaring at him, but not meeting his eye, Katara stalked her way next to him and pointed. "Walk," she spat.

"Good enough I suppose," Zuko said with another bow, his heart doing cartwheels. "One must make allowances for your lack of education."

"Fire flake?"

Katara took the opportunity to glare at the proffered box of snack food as though it had personally insulted her ancestors and then turned that glare on Zuko making him feel like an idiot.

Which, in all fairness, he was. That fact established, the two of them resumed sitting in the sparsely populated upper deck of the Earth Rumble arena… in incredibly awkward silence.

Before this, Zuko had been too surprised by Katara's sudden appearances, in the woods and the concourse, to really overthink the situation he was in. Now, however, Katara was only a few bare inches away from him, sitting next to him on the stone bench and his brain felt like it had turned to molten slag. Every time he tried to speak his tongue felt like wood and his heart seemed to be threatening to explode right out of his chest and demand that his stomach fight him in an Agni Kai.

Don't just sit there! Say something!

"So… do you… like earthbending?" he managed, gesturing towards the ring.

Oh yes, very well done. Idiot.

"It just looks like a bunch of guys chucking rocks at one another to me," Katara said, leaning her chin on her fist.

"Well… yes. It's… earthbending. That's… that's what it is."

Silence reigned again.

Damnit. Why did I get her to follow me? This is awful.

Silence continued, broken only by the occasional roars of the crowd and Katara's tapping foot.

Ok. So, she doesn't want any fire flakes, she doesn't know anything about earthbending… what does that leave me? Think damnit.

Katara began drumming her fingers on her knee, occasionally glaring at Zuko out of the corner of her eye.

Wait a minute, SHE was the one who said we weren't done talking! The onus of conversation is on HER!

"You… had something you wanted to speak to me about?"

"What? Oh, no, not really. I was just sick and tired of you ending everything on your terms."

"My terms? If I ended everything on my terms I'd have had your… friend in a cell back in Otosan Uchi."
"Not for long you wouldn't have. I'd come for him and then I'd have come for you," she said, scowling at him.

Which most likely had the opposite of its intended effect as Zuko found it extremely attractive.

"I have no doubt of that," he said with a slow smile.

Katara flushed and jerked her head back towards the ring.

They sat in silence once again.

Well... shit. Now what? What would Uncle say?

He'd most likely say something charming and get her to laugh. Zuko, unfortunately, had never really been good at that sort of thing. He nearly always forgot everything but the punchline of most jokes.

"I'm not going to tell you where Aang is," Katara said suddenly, out of the blue, "so you can stop looking."

"What?"

"I can see you scanning the crowd. You probably think that you can snatch him in the press of people when this is over."

Zuko blinked his single eye rapidly in utter bewilderment. "And do what with him? Throw him over my shoulder? I've been cast out, Shinjo. It's not like I have anywhere to take him."

"You can't really expect me to believe that you, the Fire-Lord's son, were made ronin because you couldn't capture the Avatar."

Zuko shrugged, some nights he had trouble believing it too, but his father was not big on leniency. He considered it a weakness.

"So, you followed me back here... because you thought I going to attack the Avatar?" Zuko said.

Katara nodded.

Typical, Zuko thought, letting out a small sigh and turning his attention back to the ring where the Boulder was engaged in a three-way battle against "The Gopher" and a masked rumbler who had not yet been identified.

Probably going to turn out to be his long-lost half-twin or something else suitably redicul-

"Well?" Katara snapped, startling him.

"What?"

"You don't deny it?"

"Deny... I already did. You didn't believe me. And if you don't believe me... Well-" he gestured to her necklace- "we've seen how good I am at persuading you."

"You tied me to a tree!"

"You were bait!"
"I. AM NOT. BAIT," she said, punctuating her words with a jabbing finger to his chest.

"No… you are not," Zuko rumbled back, smiling another slow smile, and Katara jerked her finger back as though she'd been burned.

They sat in silence once again for a good minute. For some reason, the masked rumbler had begun bending chairs out of stone and hitting the Boulder over the head with them.

"Well!?" she practically shouted.

"You keep expecting me to say something," Zuko said, irritation flaring in his voice. "And to be honest I have NO idea what it is."

"You said you're in love with me."

"Ah… that," Zuko said, irritation replaced by embarrassment. "Uhhh… yes. Sorry."

"Sorry? You're sorry!?"

"Yeah. I… uh… didn't mean for you to find out. But… like I said I'm not a good liar. So… yeah."

"You are NOT in love with me."

Zuko managed to look mildly offended at that.

"If you were," Katara continued, "you'd have given up on chasing the Avatar… and tried to woo me instead."

"Woo you? What the ash is that supposed to mean?"

"You know, buy me gifts, recite some romantic poems, maybe bring me the horn of a rhino-whale as proof of your intentions! Something."

"I actually did recite you a poem, you didn't seem to like it."

Although, to be fair, death haiku weren't usually considered to be very romantic.

"THAT did not count."

"Why not? It was about you," Zuko muttered, looking away in embarrassment. He'd spent far too much time wistfully composing that particular death haiku when he should have been training.

"The point is," Katara said fighting against another blush, "you're not even trying. Hence, a lie. You do NOT love me."

"Even if it had not been my duty to capture the boy… well… I have no great skill at conversation AND you despise me. Akodo said 'if you are sure to lose a battle, then do not have one.'"

"Well, Akodo sounds like an idiot. Sometimes the losing battles are the most important," she said with a sanctimonious sniff.

Wow. Normally I'd be angry at somebody insulting Akodo.

"The point is," she continued, "that if you really believe strongly about something, you have to fight for it. Otherwise it really didn't mean that much to you at all."
"Do… you _want_ me to?"

"To what?"

"…Fight for it?"

"NO! Absolutely not. Not even a little bit!" Katara said, crossing her arms tightly over her chest and looking away.

"Oh. Right."

Zuko mused silently for a second, eye on his hands.

"But… If I _were_. To fight for it, I mean. How… would I do that?"

"You… you would say something nice. A compliment," Katara said, peeking at him out of the corner of her eye.

Zuko paused for another moment of seemingly deep thought.

"You are beautiful."

"Not like that!" she snapped.

"But… you are. Beautiful is _nice_. Isn't it?"

"It's too much, too soon. You're supposed to _ease_ into it."

"You're… pretty?"

"Hmmm. Too general. You should be more specific."

Zuko considered the girl for another moment.

"I like your hair."

She blinked in surprise and actually turned back to face him. "You do?"

"Yes."

"…Go _on_."

"It's… brown?" The pleasantly intrigued look on Katara's face flashed to irritation.

"Nothing," Zuko said quickly, "It just… I think it looks better loose. More… flow-y."

"Oh," she said softly, "thank you." And now it was Zuko's turn to flush.

_Ok. Now what? If this were a fight I'd have scored a hit… I think. Not that it is. She-
"I don't, you know, despise you," Katara said quietly, eyes on the ground still running her hand over her braid.

"Wait... what? She doesn't-"

"You don't?" Zuko said hoarsely, lone eye wide.

"No. I mean, I should but... you're not really a bad guy. Bad guys don't say that they're sorry."

_OH, ash and bone, it IS a fight! Say something nice! But not TOO nice!_

"I... also like... your bending," he said, smiling weakly, his tone rising at the end making it almost a question.

"Seriously?" she said raising one eyebrow.

"Yes. I _like_ bending. I wasn't scanning the crowd earlier, I was just watching the fights. Despite all the posing, the Boulder is actually pretty good."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I think he's a Yasuki of the Crab dojo. You see the way he twists his wrist when he strikes? Completely unnecessary, but it is pretty standard for the Yasuki school which can be over-stylistic due to its roots as a teaching style."

"Why do you know so much about earthbending?" she said, goggling at him.

_Because I was on a hunt of the Avatar who we all thought was a master of all four elements._

"My uncle taught me," Zuko said instead, "He said that if you only took lessons from one element your thoughts became rigid and stale. And _understanding_ is the beginning of victory. I mean, my ancestors learned lightning from watching waterbenders so..."

"You can throw _lightning_!?!"

"Uh, no. It's an advanced form and uncle said I wasn't ready yet. My sister can though."

"You have a sister?"

"Yes. She's very good. A prodigy, like you."

"I'm not a _prodigy," Katara said smiling ruefully."

"You went from _accidentally_ freezing my soldiers to the deck of my ship to waterbending _mastery_ in less than a year. If that's not genius, then I've been misusing the word my entire life. Ash, I've been training since I was _seven_ and I'm not a master."

"You aren't? Everybody in the Colonies seemed to think you were."

Zuko shrugged. "They must have been confused. There are a lot of trials and tests one has to go through to prove one's worth."

"Hmmm. They just said that you beat some other master in a duel. But I guess they were wrong."

"Oh... no. I did... that... beat one, I mean. Zhao. But that's not-"
Wait a minute… that IS how it works. Beating a master in an Agni Kai was actually the original route to being declared one yourself. The trials of mastery had been invented much later as a way of expanding the pool of masters without having to kill or dishonor one.

"Blood of the Sun… I'm a master," Zuko said blinking rapidly.

Katara snorted in mirth. "You're seriously just now realizing that?"

"I… uh… I was rather focused on other things back then. You three had just destroyed my ship."

"So… how did you know I was a master then? I thought it was because I beat you at the Shrine."

"Oh, no. That was just obvious. You are a master. Wait… did the Crane NOT declare you one?" he said, voice growing hard and his eye narrowing in irritation. "I know they were stupid about girls fighting but."

"No, they did. Eventually. But I had to fight for it. Literally."

Zuko nodded, grunting in approval. "Akodo said that 'the sweetest victories are the ones most hard fought.'"

"See, now that doesn't make any sense. How could he say 'don't fight' and then that at the same time?" Katara said, eyes twinkling in amusement.

"He never said don't fight. Akodo was a very pro-fight person. He just said that you shouldn't feel obligated to fight, especially if you knew you're going to lose."

"And I say that sometimes those are the most important fights. You can't let yourself get knocked down, but if you do you have to get right back up again. Especially if people are counting on you."

Zuko grunted again and considered, stroking his short beard in thought.

"Alright. I'll try it your way."

"Good! That's… wait what are we talking about?"

"I'm going to fight," Zuko said nodding to himself.

"I will NOT let you take Aang," Katara said with a grimace, her hand dropping to her waterskin.

Zuko just smiled at her. "I think… you have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen."

"…What? No-no-no-no-no-no. That's not- I didn't mean- NO!" She punctuated her last negation with another sharp jab from her finger.

"Apparently the battles you think you're going to lose are the most important," Zuko said, wrapping his hand around her finger gently. "And you do have the prettiest eyes."

Katara looked entirely pole-axed, her eyes wide and her mouth frozen in a small "oh."

It's a skill, like anything else, it just takes time and practice. And it's not as though I have anything ELSE to fight for anym-

"What the fuck!?" Katara gasped, then covered her mouth in shock at her language.

Zuko snapped out of his thoughts to find Katara, face twisted in mild confusion and a no small
amount of horror. His heart plummeted… until he realized that she wasn't looking at him. She was looking down at the stage where, to great fanfare and revelry, the champion of Earth Rumble Five was entering the arena and…

Appeared to be a tiny girl.

The little dark-haired girl could not have been much over four and a half feet tall and, based on her stance, the way she held her head, and the fact that she was being introduced as "The Blind Bandit" Zuko discerned that she was in fact, blind.

"They're going to make that little girl fight the Boulder?" Katara spat, horror at her language now forgotten as she glared down at the stage. "What the… the… ASH is this?!

*She even makes swearing attractive somehow,* Zuko thought dreamily.

"It's just a performance, Shinjo. It's not really *real,* the Boulder will probably-" Zuko cut himself off as he stared down at the two earthbenders- "No… that's not… The Boulder is *afraid* of her," he said in with growing surprise.

"What?"

"Look at him," he said, pointing in growing excitement, "his weight is on his heels and he's clenching his feet and hands… he's *nervous*! This is going to be a *real* fight! What in Akodo's name is this?" Zuko was now on the edge of his seat, along with the rest of the arena.

"The Boulder feels conflicted about fighting a young blind girl," the Boulder said, continuing to refer to himself in the third person as his voice rang out across the hushed crowd.

"Sounds to me like you're *scared,* Boulder," the Bandit called back, her voice loud and mocking.

*Well, she certainly doesn't lack for confidence.*

The Boulder squared his shoulders and glared down at the girl who was easily more than two feet shorter than him. "The Boulder's OVER his conflicted feelings, and now he's ready to bury YOU in a ROCK-ALANCHE!" he roared.

"We need to stop this!" Katara hissed in barely suppressed fury, grabbing hold of Zuko's arm. "She's just a little girl!"

"I think… she's going to kick his ass," Zuko said, sounding just as surprised as he felt.

"What!?"

"There's something going on here that I don't understand. I'm not getting *anything* from the girl… she's just… *waiting.*"

The Blind Bandit seemed singularly unimpressed by the Boulder's threats. "Whenever you're ready, The *Pebble!*" she said throwing her head back and laughing at her own joke.

"Ok, waiting AND mocking, but combat wise I… don't know. Only the earthbending masters are supposed to give *nothing* away like that."

"You're sure?" Katara said, looking up at him.

"Absolutely," he said grinning back at her.
"Alright then," she said quietly as she turned back to the stage and, had Zuko not been so focused on watching the fight, he would have most likely had a heart-attack as Katara laced her fingers in between his own.

The two earthbenders stood there sizing one another up as the tension throughout the arena mounted to astronomical levels. Gone was the cheering and jeering crowd, gone was the announcer narrating everything, gone was any pretension of plot or narrative.

There were just two fighters, one posing and flexing as earthbenders always seemed to do before a fight, one in absolute stillness, a small stone on a mountainside.

The Boulder moved first, flying towards the Bandit, roaring loudly and the girl slid into an unorthodox stance, hands parallel to the ground, palms up, her right foot slightly forward. The Boulder had only taken a single step forward when the Bandit kicked at the ground, a single scuff of her foot, creating a small track of broken stone that curved its way forward…

And right underneath the Boulder's descending second step.

His balance was destroyed completely as his leg was dragged across the rest of his body, forcing him into the splits.

"OOOOOOHHHH!" squealed the boulder and the male half of the crowd in agony.

The Bandit followed up with a single strike, like a chopping motion with one hand, bending blunted stone stalagmites out of the ground and launching the Boulder OUT of the ring.

There was a stunned pause… and then the arena went berserk.

"YEEEEESSSSSSS!" Zuko roared triumphantly, leaping to his feet, and pumping the fist he shared with Katara in excitement.

"Oh, thank the Spirits," Katara gasped in relief, rising along with Zuko and the rest of the jubilant crowd.

"That has to be a completely original style!" Zuko shouted excitedly, turning, and beaming down at Katara. "I've never seen, or even heard, of anything like it!"

"That was amazing!" Katara cheered happily. "How did she DO that?!"

"I have NO IDEA! That was AWESOME!" Zuko laughed in pleasure and then, without thinking about it, he ducked down and kissed Katara in celebration.

Katara, apparently also without thinking about it, kissed him back, her hands coming up to grasp at the collar of his kimono pulling him closer.

The world ceased to exist for a long moment.

This is worth fighting a losing battle for.

After an eternity they separated, breathless, from one another, Zuko his eye closed in exhilaration, Katara her eyes wide in worry, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

"That… that was…" she tried and failed to make sentences.

"Wow," Zuko said succinctly.
Katara nodded jerkily. "Yeah."

*Do I go for another one? She's not backing away. Maybe-*

"Oh no! Aang!"

"What? Where?" Zuko said, whipping his head around, his eye widening.

"I've got to get back," Katara said, flustered. "They've probably started looking for me!"

"Ahhh, I don't think so. He seems like he's got something else in mind," Zuko said indicating the stage where the boy, still clad in the uniform of the earthbending "dojo," mounted the stairs.

"Oh good!" Katara said, beaming happily, "he's going to ask her to be his earthbending teacher."

"No. Not good! That idiot!" Zuko began to boo, joining others in the crowd.

"Don't boo at him!" Katara said.

"This is her DOMAIN!" Zuko said gesturing for emphasis, "you do NOT challenge an earthbender in their place of power and expect anything but violence."

"Do people really want to see two little girls fighting out here," The Bandit crowed much to the crowd's amusement.

Zuko did not join in with the laughter. "He's going to ruin everything!"

"What? How?"

"He's going to go in there to talk," Zuko said, investing the word with as much scorn as he could. "She will have NONE of it, and then they will fight. The idiot will airbend. Airbend at a blind girl who thinks he's an earthbender! He'll knock her right out of the ring and become the 'champion' of Earth Rumble Six. She will never teach him after that."

The two of them watched silently as over the course of a few dozen heartbeats things transpired exactly as Zuko had predicted. Katara's mouth dropped open in shock and Zuko began to massage the bridge of his nose as the crowd re-exploded in surprised cheering.

"And you wonder how people always find him," Zuko snarled. "THIS! This is how we find him. He does something so stupid as to airbend in front of a stadium full of people! While simultaneously defeating the reigning Earth Rumble Champion! They will be talking about this in Ba Sing Se in two days and in Otosan Uchi in under a week!"

"How did you DO that?" Katara asked eyes wide in surprise.

"Me? What did I do?"

"How did you know what was going to happen?"

"Well… it was obvious. Wasn't it?"

"No it wasn't! That was incredible!" she said beaming up at him.

Zuko felt his face flush. "Well- It's- When you..." he gave up. "Lucky guess?"

"We'll talk about this later," Katara said rolling her eyes. "but I do need to go before they notice I'm
not there." She matched her words with actions and strode off.

We'll talk… "LATER?" Zuko thought wonderingly. She WANTS to talk to me? His heart began to play taiko drums in his ribcage.

This was phenomenal! Better than he could have possibly hoped for!

But... why? He thought suddenly. Why would she…

Because you could be USEFUL to her, a voice seemed to whisper. She will USE you to help the Avatar bring down the Fire-Nation. To kill your family, your sister.

No, that's not... I need to get out of here, Zuko thought. Clear my head.

He suited his own thought with action and made his way to the exit, pausing only long enough to purchase a pair of stone souvenir teacups with the logos of Fire-Nation Man and The Blind Bandit.

The Beifong estate was vast.

As Zuko made his way through Gaoling's inns and taverns over the last few days, eavesdropping on conversations and trying NOT to dwell exclusively on Katara (and on where he might be able to find a rhino-whale horn) he had held out hope that he would hear all about the wickedness and perfidy of the famously wealthy Beifong family. Such wickedness would, of course, be righteously avenged by a visit from the Grey Ghost… if it had existed. Much to Zuko's disappointment, no one spoke ill of the Beifongs. They employed a great many people throughout the city, gave generously to charity, and if they were known to be a bit aloof it probably had more to do with them being the wealthiest people in the Earth-Kingdom than with any evil intent.

Despite all of that, Zuko had decided to observe the grounds of their estate anyway. Perhaps the spirits would favor him with a display of the secret villainy of the Beifongs, thus justifying him entering the grounds to set things aright. Which also, entirely coincidentally, would also allow him to refill his coin purse in a semi-guilt free manner.

The spirits, as usual, chose to favor him with a sign that merely complicated things. Zuko's contemplation of exactly how villainous one needed to be to justify a visit from the ghost was interrupted by the voice of a young girl ringing out powerfully… and rather vulgarly.

"Put me DOWN you gravel-chewing, hog-humping, stone-shitting, piece of trash-FUCK!"

The owner of the voice was currently locked in a massive iron coffin that was slung over the shoulder of a massive man that Zuko recognized from the rumble arena as "The Hippo."

"Yeah! Put us down you... you jerks!" came another, significantly less profane, voice from a second coffin, which was being carried by the rest of the cast of Earth Rumble Six.

That's all of them, even Xin Fu the announcer... except for the Bandit, Zuko thought, narrowing his eye. She's probably the swearing voice. The other voice...

"Maybe we can talk about this?" the young boy's voice said hopefully.

...is the Avatar. Damnit. Ideas whirled through Zuko's head and were just as rapidly discarded. He wasn't going to fight almost a half-dozen earthbenders for the sake of someone he'd just as soon see dead.
I bet KATARA would be grateful if you did though, a voice in his head whispered seductively. Probably a LOT better than a Rhino-Whale's horn or whatever.

To his absolute horror, he actually pondered it for a moment.

NO! I am NOT a lovesick child performing stupid, selfless acts of heroism in the hopes of winning maiden's heart. Besides, there's no WAY that little shit doesn't wriggle his way out of this. He's been in tougher spots. I'VE put him in tougher spots.

Acting on a whim, Zuko dropped out of the tree he had been sitting in and followed the gang of earthbenders with their cursing coffin, curious to see exactly how the Avatar would escape this time.

The Bandit's name turned out to be Toph.

Zuko had followed the kidnappers, unsurprisingly, back to the deserted Earth Rumble arena. They then suspended the two coffins, one of which was still echoing loudly with banging and swearing, into the air above the stage and settled down to wait. Zuko, who had managed to snag an only partially stale box of fire flakes on the way in, settled into the upper decks, also to wait.

"Damnit Toph, will you shut up!" Xin Fu shouted up at her.

"Why don't you come up here and MAKE me?! You salt-sucking, inbred, sack of pig-monkey shit!" Toph retorted. "I'll earthbend that stupid grin right off your ugly-ass face!"

"I'm not smiling!" Xin Fu said, his face as dour as ever.

A few minutes later the Shinjo siblings and a tall richly dressed man appeared at the edge of the stage.

"Xin Fu! You will release my daughter," the tall man shouted.

"You have my money, Lord Beifong?" Xin Fu sneered.

Lord Beifong? The Blind Bandit is the daughter of the Beifong family? This is getting GOOD! Zuko thought, eating another handful of fire flakes.

A sack of money changed hands, and Toph was lowered from the ceiling and released from her captivity. She kicked Xin Fu in the shin and then scampered over to her father.

"What about Aang?" Katara said, staring daggers at the rumblers.

"I think the Fire-Nation will pay a hefty price for the Avatar," Xin Fu sneered. "Now, get OUT of my ring."

Damn right we will, Zuko though to himself, shaking his head. This is why you don't airbend in front of people. Idiot.

"Go," Aang said, waving Katara off, "I'll be fine."

No you WON'T.

Katara apparently agreed with Zuko because she ran after Toph who had already exited the ring with her father.
"Toph, there's too many of them!" she shouted. "We need an earthbender. We need you!"

Shockingly that was all it took.

After a brief conversation with her father, Toph wrenched her hand out of his and strode back into the ring like a blacksmith approaching a forge, ready to hammer her will into anything that opposed her. With a wave of her hands and a minor flex she caused the far side of the ring to explode into a stone wall, blocking the band of kidnappers from leaving.

"Let him GO you sacks of shit! I beat you all before and I'll do it again!" she roared in her loud, but high-pitched, girl's voice.

Lord Beifong, who had reappeared at the edge of the ring, seemed to grow faint at her language.

Zuko was on the edge of his seat again as the entire cast of Earth Rumble Six charged the tiny figure. Toph calmly cracked her neck and spat on her hands, which seemed to cause her father to go even paler, and then she went to work.

She destroyed them.

She began the fight by nearly upending the entire stage, a bending maneuver Zuko could feel all the way where he was sitting. Calmly walking into the cloud of dust she'd kicked up, she began to systematically eject every single opponent from the ring, embedding their bodies into the stands. As the dust cleared only Xin Fu remained.

Zuko held his breath.

They circled one another for a moment until Xin Fu launched a flurry of attacks, almost a dozen boulders flying at the girl from multiple directions. Toph created an angled stone shield that shrugged off the assault as though it were a spring breeze. Then she launched it at him ripping through the earth like a demonic plow. Xin Fu leapt aside embedding one hand into the stone like it was water, flinging a gargantuan boulder at the girl. Toph waited until what seemed to be the last possible moment to spin aside and grab at the stone by her feet with a yanking twisting motion. Xin Fu found his arm pulled even farther into the stone stage, trapping him.

Merciful Ancestors, she can feel the disruptions in the earth! Zuko marveled, understanding blossoming in his mind. THAT'S how she can fight... that's how she SEES!

The grin on Toph's face was visible even from the far reaches of the arena as she ejected Xin Fu from the stage.

"yeesss," Zuko cheered quietly pumping his fist and leaping to his feet.

He found Appa on a cliffside later that evening.

The trio, and to Zuko's bewildering mixture of pleasure and consternation it was still only three of them, were packing their bags preparing to leave. Zuko had posted himself up another tree, just waiting for them to take off, which would give him an approximate bearing to follow along with. He was silently trying to figure out what Katara had meant by "talking later" when a tiny swearing figure in tan and green broke through the bushes near the base of his tree.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit," Toph hissed quietly, turning her head one way, then the other listening intently.
"Lost, are we?" Zuko said, surprising both of them.

"Who's there?" Toph shouted after sliding into a defensive stance.

"I'm... a fan," Zuko said. "What can I do for the champion of Earth Rumble Six?"

"I'm not the champ anymore, buddy," Toph said, not dropping her stance.

"Yes you are. Airbending is cheating."

"Yeah! It IS isn't it?" she said brightly. "You have no idea how much of that kid's ass I am going to kick!"

Zuko grinned.

"So, why don't you help a lady out and help me find him, hmmm?" she was still twisting her head back and forth trying to hone in on his position.

_Finally, someone who's appropriately cautious, _Zuko thought.

"Forty-five degrees to your left, up the mountainside about four hundred and fifty yards."

Toph sank into a crouch and placed one hand on the ground focusing intently.

"They are preparing to leave, I recommend you hurry."

Toph nodded rising to her feet. "Thanks for your help Mr. Tree," she said, then she bent earth, flinging herself into the air, towards the Avatar.

_I think I would pay a LOT more than three bu to see her kick the crap out of that boy, _Zuko thought, his scarred face splitting into a grin.

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A/N: Ladies and Gentlemen, boy and girls welcome, to the greatest A/N in the world! Or at least this chapter. Congratulations on making it through my rendition of "the Blind Bandit." I hope you enjoyed it, but if you didn't leave me a comment, I'm all ABOUT feedback. And if you DID like it... well STILL leave me a comment. Thanks, you're the best!

So how did we all like Zuko and Katara's first date? Just as argue-y and fumbly as we all knew it would be.

And now some poorly formatted.... META-BITS!

**Samurai and mercantilism:** Generally in samurai culture being seen to engage in commerce is rather crass. ('crass' being the best word I have for it) They acknowledge that money is an important part of governance but being overly concerned about it is greedy, and dishonorable. Also "merchants" who themselves create nothing, are on the lowest end of the totem pole of the "Heimin" or peasants. This caste includes them, artists (a step up) and farmers (the highest ranking). Below them, is a group which will not be appearing in this work called the "eta," people who did the _really_ dirty(to samurai anyway) work.
Anyway, I saw Gaoling as this HUGE mercantile center, untouched by war and probably not even ruled over by a samurai. Beifong Lao (Mr. Toph's-dad), isn't a samurai which will have interesting ramification in the next book.

**Fire Flakes:** Ah, fire flakes. A staple of Avatar cuisine. To my mind, I see them as having the consistency of Kellogg's cornflakes, and the flavor of Flaming Hot Cheetos or Takis if you prefer. YMMV. The ones Zuko has here are probably not THAT spicy, being Earth-Kingdom knockoffs. Either way, Zuko is pleased.

**Pro-Wrestling:** Obviously our, boy Zuko, born a royal, is going to have mixed feelings about the Earth Rumbles. He's a martial artist and seeing his art used as part of "low-brow" activity like this is going to irritate him. That being said he's still an 18-year-old who likes bending. So misgivings aside he going to enjoy the fights. Bruce Lee watching MMA.

**Zuko, Firebending master:** It is par for the course that Zuko wouldn't notice that technically he's a firebending master. This was done with forethought on my part, now he associates something he can be proud of with Katara. Also his lack of attention to that detail as a major contributing factor in Zhao's behavior. He defeated Zhao in a duel, but then DIDN’T start wearing the sash, or claiming his mastery. This would have been a HUGE insult. He is, essentially, saying that Zhao wasn't really a master. Zuko isn't doing it on purpose, as he said he was too focused on Aang. So there's that.

**Katara, the momma bear:** I like to think that (in the canon show) while Aang is having flashbacks and realizing that Toph is meant to be his earthbending master, Katara is having a bit of a shout about Toph getting hurt. I've always seen her as the mother-bear, protective of the little 'uns type. So I've given her a chance to air those grievances with swearing (something she most definitely wouldn't do around Aang). I think she knows that Zuko's not going to judge her for that, which is also a good point to show here.

**Toph, the greatest and best:** I must admit to you, here and now, that I love Toph. She is, by and large, my favorite person here. I love writing her in all her mouthy glory, and lament that she doesn't get nearly as much screen time in this book as she should. (still more than Aang and Sokka though). I have added swearing to her repertoire because it just made sense to me that a "rebel wild child" from a posh family would swear at every possible convenient (and inconvenient) point. She is now also Zuko's favorite, as she is going to A) help keep Katara safe and B) kick the living hell out of Aang. I regret nothing.

That's it! No more to say here! Thanks again for reading, commenting/reviewing and just generally being extant and using your finite time on my writing!

NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Zuko fights a "losing" battle and things get flirty.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!
Zuko has Company

Chapter Notes

A/N: The following is rated C; for confusion.

It corresponds, chronologically, with S2E7 "Zuko Alone."

Reader discretion is advised.

Early Spring, year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

"She has got to be the rudest, most hard-headed, VULGAR creature I've ever had the misfortune of meeting!" Katara fumed, stalking back and forth between two rock formations. "Why in the Moon's name did you have to help her find us?!"

Zuko, who was sitting on another of the rocks that dotted the windswept semi-barren landscape, simply looked up and raised his lone eyebrow at her in an incredulous expression.

"Don't give me that look. I know you're 'Mr. Tree' Toph's 'number one fan' with the 'sexy voice,'" she said, pausing in her pacing to make air quotes with her fingers. "You're not nearly as sneaky as you think you are. I saw you in the upper deck of the Rumble arena when she was fighting.

Zuko's eyebrow climbed higher on his head. "Sexy… Voice?" he said, fighting, and failing, to keep amusement from his face.

"Th-that's what she said. NOT me!"

Zuko nodded, and then refocused on cutting the bamboo shoot he had in his hands.

It had only been two days since they had left Gaoling, flying, or jogging in Zuko's case, eastward. The first night had been uneventful for Zuko. He had wanted to find her again, to maybe try and figure out what else he could do in this new "losing battle" that he was engaged in. But he'd decided that it would be unwise to get too close, the Bandit would probably feel him coming and, as Akodo had said, "Patience in battle is a virtue, when the enemy comes to the place you have chosen you have already won."

Although Zuko wasn't really sure if Katara really qualified as an enemy in this metaphor.

But tonight, the second night, she had come. He'd found her fuming, muttering to herself, walking westward through the arid landscape that was a single dry season away from becoming badlands. She had immediately, and without any preamble, launched into her current tirade against Toph. After a moment of stunned silence on his part, Zuko had simply sat down, pulled out the four-foot bamboo shoot he'd cut the night before and settled in to wait.

He found her ire almost soothing, not to mention adorable, because for the first time ever it wasn't directed at him.
At least, not at first.

"Do you think this is funny? Am I amusing you?!" she squawked, stamping her foot and glaring at him.

"Why are you here?" Zuko asked, the small smile he hadn't even noticed falling away from his face.

"What?" Katara seemed taken aback. "Well… I was… just going for a walk, to… to clear my head!" She grinned, pleased with herself for having found an acceptable alibi.

"I see," Zuko said, coming to his feet and bowing. "I will leave you to it then. Good evening."

"Wait!" Katara shouted as he began to walk away. "You don't want to… to talk?"

"Talk?" Zuko said, turning back around, investing that single word with as much meaning as he could.

Katara flushed again but scowled at him at regardless. "Just talk."

"Then talk."

Katara paused a moment, gathering her thoughts, her lower lip between her teeth, preparing for an assault.

"You helped Toph," she said, trying and mostly failing to mask irritation. "You want to help us."

"Not 'us','" Zuko said quietly.

"But it wasn't me you helped when you sent her our way. It was Aang. You want to help us."

"No. Despite what you think of me I am not in the habit of ignoring blind children who are lost in the woods. Miss Beifong was a worthy and honorable bender, she made her decision, and I can respect that."

"But that doesn't help you at all! As a matter of fact, it helps your enemies! Isn't that… dishonorable?" Katara didn't seem to be trying to be insulting, she seemed genuinely confused.

"Honor is not about advantage; about gaining position or tactical superiority. Honor is about making the right decisions." Zuko shrugged and shook his head. "Not that I'm particularly good at that either."

"So, was hunting down Aang the right decision?" Katara said, her tone bitter and not a little bit angry.

"Yes. It was my duty. And I did it to the best of my abilities, no matter my… personal misgivings regarding his waterbending teacher."

"But that wasn't good enough."

"Yes," Zuko said, sneering, gesturing at himself, short-haired and ragged, "Thank you for reminding me."

"You don't have to live like this," Katara said, taking a smooth step towards him. "You can be--"

"Useful?" Zuko snapped. "So glad that I can be useful to you, Shinjo."
"That's not what I-

"Then WHAT?" Zuko shouted, ever-present anger bubbling to the surface. "Go on, ask! Ask me to betray my people and help your little pet monk murder my family."

I should have known better. I should have never expected-

"Aang doesn't want to kill anybody," Katara said, firing up at his tone.

"Oh? And how precisely does he intend to defeat the Fire-Nation? A lesson in the power of friendship? Perhaps we will all join hands and sing a happy--"

"All he has to do is defeat the Fire-Lord!" Katara retorted, glaring up at him. "Shouldn't be too difficult if his son is any indication!"

"Oh… you insolent little… The Avatar will have to stop running away from everything like a coward if he wants to defeat anyone!"

"Aang is not a coward!" Katara shouted, finger now extended, poking him in the chest.

"Just an honorless brat then, who runs when things don't go his way. He ran from me, he ran from my great-grandfather, and he'll run from my FATHER as well!"

"Aang is NOT A COWARD!"

"He is a COWARD who hides behind good fortune, useless philosophies, and braver people! He hides behind YOU! And when the moment of truth comes he will run and leave you to DIE!" Zuko roared.

"Then so be it!" she shouted, her face now close to his.

"NO! NOBODY KILLS YOU BUT ME!"

Did… did I just SAY that? Zuko thought, brain catching up with his words in the silence that followed that pronouncement. OH, SHITshitshishitshit.

"Was THAT your attempt at romance?" Katara said, a wry and unpanicked smirk telling Zuko that she didn't know the meaning behind what he had just said.

Much to his relief.

I guess Fire-Nation courtship rituals aren't a big priority in the Water-Tribe education system. Thank the Sun.

"Look Zuko, I'm sorry," Katara said taking a step away from him. "I shouldn't have brought up Aang. I just hoped…"

That I could be USEFUL to him.

"I just hoped we could all be friends. I guess that was asking for a bit too much."

And now she's going to leave. You idiot. You could have at least pretended to-

"So…" Katara continued, "I was hoping that… well… you said that your ancestors learned lightning from waterbenders?"
Wait… WHAT?

Zuko's lone eye darted up to hers and found her blushing, yet her stance was determined.

"I was hoping that… You won't help Aang… but you helped Toph? Maybe you could just help me?"

Zuko gave a slow nod, mostly just processing her words.

"It's just… we know so little about the Fire-Nation and…"

Ah, HERE it is. She wants intelligence. Secret routes to father's chambers perhaps? Or maybe just the patrol patterns of the eastern fleet. Maybe the passwords to Ming's treasure vault as well?

"… was thinking about what you said. About how taking lessons from only one element made your thinking rigid and stale. So… I want you to teach me to fight. To fight like a Fire-National."

Yes, the secrets of Akodo! The weaknesses of-

"You want to learn to fight?" Zuko said, silencing his inner doubts.

She nodded, looking determined.

"…I can do that."

They stared at one another for a moment.

"Well…?" Katara said.

"Ash. Give me a moment?" Zuko said, shaking his head. "This is not something you just… run headlong into."

"You analyzed things in the arena pretty quickly."

"Yes, well, none of those benders were you."

And you seriously damage my objectivity.

Katara took the opportunity to take a seat on a nearby rock, arranging her kimono primly as she waited for Zuko to mull over her request.

"You," Zuko began, after pondering for a few moments, "are a typhoon."

She stared at him for a moment, then cocked an eyebrow. "Are you reciting me a poem?"

"What! NO. Ash and bone, it's tactical analysis! You are a 'typhoon!'"

"Which means…?"

"You make landfall with all the power and ferocity you can muster, gradually weakening over time. The only safe place for your opponent is at your center, the eye of the storm. This is because despite your skill at bending, or more likely because of your skill at bending, you have no idea how to fight without it."

"You think I don't know how to fight?!" Katara shouted.

"You know how to bend. Fighting is different."
"I defeated you!" she cried, shooting to her feet as though to show him.

"With BENDING. At RANGE! And you did it ONCE! Then showed the poor judgement of allowing me to live. Have you defeated me, really defeated me since then?"

Katara glared at him silently.

"You are a bending genius, but you are not a warrior. You have the instincts for it, you've shown that time and again. You only lack the martial education you need to be truly unstoppable. You need to learn how to fight."

"Why is it that being complimented by you always seems to be mildly insulting," Katara said, hands on her hips.

"Because it's the truth," Zuko said with a shrug. "Which isn't always what people want to hear."

"Fine," she said plopping back down on the rock she had recently vacated. "What other martial wisdom do you have for me Sifu Zuko."

"It's… Sensei."

"What?"

"Sifu is an Earth-Kingdom honorific. In the Fire-Nation we use ‘Sensei’ and it's a suffix, not a prefix."

Katara rolled her eyes.

"You lack in short range defense. That is your largest weakness, tactically speaking," Zuko said, continuing. He scratched at his beard, thinking a moment longer. "Strategically speaking you are incredibly arrogant. Your desire to be victorious without bloodshed is both dangerous to your health and crippling to any overarching strategy, causing you to make terrible long-term decisions. I assume this stems from your string of successes in evading me and a somewhat unrealistic appraisal of your group's abilities."

"Now you think I'm arrogant?"

"I know you're arrogant," Zuko rumbled.

"I most certainly am NOT!" she shouted, popping to her feet again.

Zuko narrowed his eye and took a long step forward, into extreme close range with her. "If I were to try and kill you… right here… right now, would you be able to stop me?" He said it softly, dangerously, looming over her.

Katara's eyes grew wide, and she attempted to create distance between them by moving backwards. Zuko simply continued to walk forwards, matching her stride, maintaining their spacing. Katara reached for her waterskin, but Zuko was too close, and simply struck lightly at her arms, forbidding any bending maneuvers by sheer anticipation and physical interference. She eventually ran out of space to back away, her back colliding with one of the large windswept stones that dotted the landscape.

Zuko brought his face close to hers, snarling. "A waterbender would have to be extremely arrogant, or just foolish, to allow anyone this close in an arid environment. No rivers, waterfalls, or WELLS here. So, now what?"
Katara tried to punch him in the stomach, but her wind up took too long and Zuko easily blocked, capturing one wrist, and then the other, pinning them to the rock with his hands.

"Now what?" he growled malevolently. "Perhaps somebody will come and save you? Is that how you want to-" he was suddenly cut off as Katara stretched her neck forward and kissed him.

The world disappeared for Zuko.

Her mouth was warm on his as he released her arms and buried his fingers in her hair, ruining her braid. She pressed against him, her hands at his shoulders, her tongue making smooth deliberate motions against his and Zuko felt his higher brain functions begin to shut down.

After a small eon they broke apart, panting for breath, practically delirious.

Then, everything changed… when she kicked him square in the balls.

Zuko slumped to the ground, groaning in agony, his hands reflexively shielding his crotch from further attack. Katara remained standing where she had been, an annoyed look on her face. After a moment she tsked and strode away from the groaning man on the ground.

I think I prefer being stabbed.

If Zuko had been surprised by her sudden assault it was nothing compared to the surprise he felt when she re-appeared the next night, striding out of the east towards his campfire, her shoulders set in determination.

"One of your assassins used that technique on me in Omashu," she began, again without greeting or preamble. She kept her distance from Zuko, maintaining a wary stance.

Despite his pleasure at her return, as well as her new-found respectful caution, Zuko scowled. "I do NOT have any-"

"Fine! Fine. Fire-Nation assassins then. Tell me how to counter it."

Zuko paused from his task, wrapping the bamboo stalk, now divided three-quarters of the way down its length, in loose cloth. "The style is called 'In Pursuit of Prey' and I have never known it to be favored by assassins. They always prefer to strike from a distance, unseen."

"That's not what I asked."

Zuko shrugged, looking back to his project. "Don't let them get close to you. If they do, create separation, bend barriers."

"What about the other part?" she said, still glaring at him.

"What other part?"

"The…" she looked supremely uncomfortable all of a sudden, and unconsciously rubbed at her shoulders as though cold. "The bending part."

"Bending part? In pursuit of prey is a non-bending style. There is no bending part."

"Well, she blocked my bending somehow."
"You mean she did not allow you to complete a kata."

"No!" she snapped. "She… poked me, and all of a sudden I couldn't bend."

"Interesting," Zuko said, tugging at his beard.

"Not the word I'd use to describe it," Katara said, shuddering. "It was awful."

Zuko suppressed the suddenly powerful urge to give her a hug.

"Describe them to me," he said.

"How do you mean?"

"What did they look like? What sort of armor did they wear, and what color was it? How did they fight? Anything you can remember."

"Alright," she said and paused for a moment to think, her nose scrunched in what Zuko found to be an adorable fashion. "There were three of them, all women, probably about my age. I only fought the two that couldn't bend. The one that was using chasing prey-"

"In pursuit of prey."

"Yes, that, she was all dressed up in pink if you can believe it. She was just all over the place, flipping and twirling like some kind of acrobat! The other one was taller and was definitely an assassin. She was all in black and she had about a thousand knives up her sleeves, which she liked to throw at people." Katara mused for a moment. "I thought she was the leader at first, because she was in front of the group, but she deferred to the bender pretty quickly."

"That… that almost sounds like… OH SHIT."

"The bender," Zuko said, eye narrowing. "Describe the bender for me."

"Well, I didn't fight her. She took off after Aang pretty quickly. She was in this dark red armor and… oh! All her flames were blue. Does that mean anything special?"

"Oh, ash and bone. Azula."

"She was actually pretty impressive," Katara said with a mocking grin. "Seems odd that they didn't send her out to capture Aang right away."

"There is no way Azi let them escape. Not unless they… they…"

"Did you hurt her?" Zuko said, his voice soft.

"Hmmm? No, I told you Aang was the one who… fought… her… You know her, don't you?" Katara said, grin disappearing in sudden disappointment.

"Yes," Zuko snarled. "Did he hurt her?"

"If that little bald, ocean summoning, son of a bitch even TOUCHED my sister I'm going to put his head on a spike!"

"No! You know Aang wouldn't doing anything like that," Katara said, her voice growing even more concerned.
Zuko exhaled deeply, tension draining away as suddenly as it had appeared. "Thank the Ancestors."

"Boy, THAT would have been awkward. Having to declare blood vengeance on her friend just we're starting to actually talk to one anoth-

"She must be SPECIAL, huh?!" Katara shouted, suddenly and inexplicably furious. "Really pretty firebender girl? The one you left behind, I BET!"

"Uh… what? Why are you angry?"

"ANGRY?! I'm NOT angry! Why would I be angry? So now your girlfriend is after us? Why should I be angry?"

"My… my what?"

"Look, maybe this was a waste of time, I really should be getting back to camp before the others-"

"Wha- you think Azula is my girlfriend?"

"Oh, Azula is it? Such a pretty name!"

"Yes. Our MOTHER picked it out, in honor of out GRANDFATHER, Fire-Lord AZU-LON."

"Your… mother?" Katara paused. "She's your sister?!

"That is generally how two people share a mother, yes," Zuko said shaking his head. "What was THAT all about?"

"Oh. OK! That's… that's good. She's your sister… Not that I CARE or anything!" Katara shouted, blushing luminescently and ending her sentence with the stomp of her foot.

"We have, however, reached an impasse," Zuko said, scowling down at the ground and entirely missing Katara's flush. "I will not teach you to bring harm to my sister, and, unless I'm very much mistaken, the two she had with her are Mai and Ty Lee, who are probably the only two people on earth who I might be able to call friends." He sighed at looked up Katara. "I'd really rather you didn't kill them either."

Katara stared at him for a moment, a pensive look on her face. "That's surprisingly human of you Zuko," she said, a soft smile blossoming.

"That's not the word I would use."

"Weak, is the word I'd use. Now comes the part where she leaves because you're useless to her.

Katara instead moved closer to him, forgetting her earlier caution. "Look, you know that we, that I, don't want to hurt anyone. I can promise to keep your friends and family alive, or to heal them should the need arise."

Zuko snorted derisively. "This… THIS is what I was talking about. The arrogance of you people. Claiming you can defeat my sister without harming her? How can you not see how insulting that is!?!"

"Is she really that good?" Katara said, an odd smile on her face.

"She's better," Zuko said with a nod. "She's got the raw talent and genius that you have for bending,
combined with the best training in the Fire-Nation. She'll be a great Fire-Lord someday."

Katara stared at him for a moment and then, hand over her mouth, she began to shake with suppressed laughter.

"Are you… giggling?" Zuko asked, stunned.

Katara couldn't seem to help it. "Oh, this is just too much!" she managed in between giggles. "You've just been this… terrifying villain for so long… and seeing the 'villain' gush over his little sister… It's just too funny!" She broke into real laughter. "Sweet, but funny."

_Sweet spirits she's laughing. How did I do that?_

"You… are making fun of me?" Zuko growled, without any real menace.

"Only a little," she said, smiling at him.

"You should be careful," he said quietly, the ghost of a smile on his face. "You keep giggling like that and I might begin to think that you are the kind of girl who wants to be called 'baby' or 'honey-blossom.'"

"Uggg. I keep forgetting you saw that," she said sinking to a sitting position in front of him. "Those boys were just awful." She fixed him with a steely glare, "and no you are not allowed to call me those things."

"How about… water-lily?" Zuko mused.

"Ick! No."

"Pumpkin?" he tried.

"Absolutely not."

"Snow angel?"

"How do you even know what that is?"

"I do read. Was that a yes?"

"NO."

"Turtle-duck?"

"I will hurt you," she said, flashing him that dangerous smile.

"I am aware," Zuko said, now with a matching grin on his face. "For future reference, I prefer being stabbed to… the other thing."

"That can be arranged," she growled, summoning a rather sharp piece of ice from her waterskin with the flick of her wrist.

Zuko nodded in mock solemnity. "So, we had settled on 'turtle-duck' I believe."

"NO!"

_Merciful ancestors… I think I'm flirting! This is what flirting is!_
Zuko was unable to keep a smile from his face as he continued. "Sweetie? Darling? Kitten? Snookums perhaps?"

"No, no, no and eww," Katara said. She leaned forward, threatening him with her icy blade, yet still smiling. "What part about the stabbing was unclear to you?"

"Alright, alright I'll stop," Zuko said, with a chuckle.

He was successful at this for less than three seconds.

"Ah," he said, with the air of a man with an amazing new insight. "Snuggle-bunny!"

Katara roared and tackled him, knocking him backward off the rock he was sitting on. He landed flat on his back, laughing, with Katara straddling his stomach and holding her ice knife to his chest.

"I'm beginning to think you enjoy being stabbed by me!" Katara growled in mock fury, leaning closer to his face.

"I enjoy everything about you," Zuko said still laughing.

"If you don't stop laughing at me I'm going to have to make you stop," Katara said softly.

"And just how do you imagine you will doooo…" Zuko trailed off as he became aware, suddenly and terribly aware, of just how close she was to him. She was on top of him, practically molded against him now. Her hair-loops dangling on his face, smelling of sea spray and jasmine.

"I'm sure I'll think of something," Katara said, answering the question he never managed to finish. Then, slowly, she kissed him.

_Here's hoping she doesn't kick me in the crotch again_, was the last coherent thought Zuko had before he shut his eye and kissed her back.

It escalated quickly, Katara seized fistfuls of his short hair, trying desperately to force their mouths closer. Zuko's hands wandered up and down her thighs settling on her bottom with a squeeze. Katara broke the kiss, gasping for air, and sat back on her haunches, dragging Zuko along with her as if by magnetism. He settled his mouth on her neck, kissing above and below her necklace and nuzzling her collarbone. She let out a low throaty growl, almost a purr, and bent to kiss him once again, her mouth finding his, their breaths intermingling. Zuko buried his fingers in her hair, unravelling her braid, as she somehow managed to clutch him even tighter, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

"Zuko…" she breathed, near to panting as she broke the kiss again a few minutes later.

"Hrmnnn?" he murmured wordlessly, now nibbling at the arch of her neck, his hands now firmly curled around her hips.

"Zuko… we need to stop."

Zuko's eye sprang open and he leaned away from her in shock.

"Wha- what? Why? What did…" his face grew panicked. "Did I hurt you?!"

"No. NO! You didn't do anything! I… I just… we… we shouldn't be doing this." She looked away from him seeming abashed.

Zuko exhaled deeply, trying to quiet his still roaring heart and ignore, and/or banish, the inconvenient
tightness in his loincloth.

"I understand," he said dropping his hands to his sides. "I shouldn't have... you don't have too... you don't have to pretend just so I'll help you. I'd help you even... if..." He trailed off, his mouth going dry, as Katara's eyes narrowed to slits and began to shine with a terrible fury.

"Are you implying..." she hissed, "that I kissed you... to persuade you to give me information?" Her ice knife, which had melted with their shared body heat, was suddenly once again very real, very solid, very pointy, and positioned, point down, on his chest.

Backpedal idiot!

"Uhhh... NO! No. That- that is to say-"

"You think that I'm some sort of..." she cast around looking for an appropriate word, "some sort of... harlot?"

"Harlot?" Who says "harlot" anymore?

"Of course not! It was... was... just... an exploitation of a tactical advantage," Zuko said, smiling weakly.

This was the wrong thing to say apparently.

"Tactical... ADVANTAGE?!!" she screamed, becoming even more incensed.

Great Ancestors she's beautiful... NO! STOP! DANGER!

"Then... but... why?" he stammered.

Her fury vanished like smoke and was replaced by flustered embarrassment.

"Well... I mean... you're not supposed to- to do things like that before you're... You know!"

Zuko cocked his head to the side, still entirely puzzled.

Her mouth worked silently refusing to form words. Finally, eyes down, she muttered something Zuko didn't quite catch.

"Be-what-ed?"

"BETROTHED!" she shouted, much louder than she had originally intended, covering her mouth in surprise at her own volume.

"That's... stupid," Zuko said after a brief pause. "You can't even kiss somebody unless you're engaged?"

"Well... not... not like that," she said the flush in her cheeks intensifying. 'I'm sorry, I'm just... really confused."

"I know the feeling."

"We're just being stupid," she babbled. "Stupid... and stressed... and hormonal. Hormonal-stress-stupids!"

Zuko nodded, grunting in the affirmative.
"So, we're agreed then? No more kissing, yes?"

"No."

"NO!? What do you mean 'no'?"

"I mean that we are not agreed. If you don't want to kiss me that's fine; I shouldn't be forcing my attentions on you anyway. But I…"

Want to kiss you. I want to do nothing BUT kiss you.

But he couldn't say that, and Katara, her arms still around his neck just stared at him, baffled.

"I… Look, I'm sorry. I… I shouldn't… I never meant for you to find out. About… ANY of it and I had no right to kiss you, at the North Pole or any of those other times… or to say any of those things to you and…" his shoulders slumped dejectedly. "I'm sorry."

"Zuko…" Katara bit her lower lip in frustration. "You are not in love with me. It's just… stress… and hormones. Remember? Hormonal-stress-stupids!"

It wasn't, he KNEW it wasn't, but, shoulders slumped in defeat, he nodded his head anyway.

"Good. SO, no more kissing," Katara said considering the matter settled.

"You… will probably want to stop sitting in my lap then."

Katara instantly leapt to her feet, face flushing once again.

"I… I should go," she said softly, eyes locked on him.

Zuko, who couldn't think of anything on earth he wanted less at the moment, just nodded again.

"I'll be back tomorrow night… for training… ONLY training!"

"Alright," Zuko said quietly. "It will not be easy though. Prepare yourself well, and dream of victory."

"You're ridiculous," Katara said rolling her eyes, despite the small smile that appeared on her face as she walked away.

This is going to be hard, Zuko thought glancing again at the bamboo weapon he had made. For her, and for ME.

Katara was going to HATE the Itami no Kyokun.

The lesson of pain.

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A/N: Hello and welcome! You've reached the end of the chapter! Hurray for you, hurray for me, hurray for everybody we can see!

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed part 1 of "Zuko has company." Yet another chapter that was born from my own amusement at playing games with canon episode titles. Honestly not a lot to discuss about this chapter, really one of my first ALL fluff ones. Ok maybe like 80% fluff,
there some stuff in there which I can talk about in…

Some brief META-bits:

**Everything changed…** So why does Katara A) kiss him then B) kick him in the crotch? Well, this has two answers. 1) she panics, a small part of her is pretty sure that Zuko is about to tie her to a *tree* somewhere and so she reaches for a weapon/distraction she *knows* is going to work. And 2) I have always tried to give Katara the final say in situations where she is being kissed (at least after that first one). She is seriously annoyed with Zuko for scaring the shit out of her AGAIN and so she provides her rebuttal, in the form of a swift kick to the pants region. And also, honestly cribbing the line off of the show's beginning (everything changed when the fire-nation attacked) is just comedy gold to me. COMEDY GOLD, I tells ya!

Honestly, I can't think of anything else at this point. If you've got questions or something is unclear (or you know you just WANT to) you can comment/review. Remember to like/kudos/subscribe/make-fanart/tell-your-friends/take-a-sweater-cause-its-chilly-out/call-you-mother-cause-she-worries folks!

Wait, last thing. This is an EARLY warno, the first bit of NEXT weeks chapter will be… unpleasant. I don't like it, Katara doesn't like, YOU won't like it, and Zuko is really going to hate it… but he's doing it anyway.

Because NOBODY likes the "lesson of pain."

Thanks again!
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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"…

Zuko uses some handicrafts and Katara is annoyed.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 16 September 2018
A/N: The following is rated A; for abuse.

It corresponds, chronologically, with S2E7 "Zuko Alone"

Reader discretion is advised.

Early Spring, year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

"Get. UP," Zuko said as he towered over Katara.

She had, true to her word, appeared that next night, striding out of the east as was becoming usual. They had stared at each other for a good minute before she spoke.

"So, how do we start?" she had asked.

"For true understanding, we must start at the beginning," Zuko said. "The place it always begins. The 'Itami no Kyokun.'"

"What does that mean?"

"It means-" he tapped the wrapped bamboo that sat in his belt in the place normally reserved for his katana- "we fight."

"What's that?"

"This is a shinai, a practice sword."

She sighed. "I guess if I want to understand I need to learn about swords, huh?"

"This is not for you. This is for me, so that I do not hurt you too badly."

She snorted derisively. "And you call me arrogant."

Zuko nodded solemnly as he drew the shinai out of his belt. "It begins."

And then he was on her.

The fight did not go as Katara had expected.

Zuko had decided to really focus on his kenjutsu since Haiya. His bending could be useful, but as his uncle had once told him it did not define a samurai. It now also came with the price of identification. If he could be sure that there was no one around to see, or at least no one around that he didn't mind killing, he could use the flame, but it was a far better long-term strategy to stick to simple unremarkable steel and simply be noted as a skilled ronin as opposed to the infamous "butcher" of Matomo.

Who knew when his sister would get around to hunting him down again.
So, in the intervening hours between sleep and movement, he had focused on physical exercise and non-bending strategy. Curiously, he still felt as though he were bending at times, albeit in minute and invisible amounts, almost as though the residual fire was speeding his limbs along their paths.

Using these recently practiced skills he had flown at Katara, before she could even think to bend, snapping the bamboo sword several places about her hands and legs and knocking her to the ground.

"Get. Up," he said. It was one of only two things he was allowed to say during the lesson of pain.

Katara had risen, snarling and cursing, on the cusp of a tirade. Zuko didn't allow her to get more than a word out before he slammed the hilt of his shinai into her stomach, bowling her over again.

"Only in victory is one's voice truly heard," Zuko quoted, exhausting the second of the phrases he was allowed in the Itami no Kyokun. "Get. UP."

Katara, her mouth a grim line, rolled backward and flung a water whip at him. Zuko dodged this and lunged forward, his shinai making a long arc that connected with Katara's outstretched arm in a loud SMACK.

"I can't do this," Zuko thought, wincing internally behind the expressionless mask on his face as she gasped in pain. She's not Fire-Nation, she doesn't understand-

"Then she must be SHOWN, he countered internally. This is how it starts, how it HAS to start. Do not DISRESPECT her by assuming she is weak!"

The fight, although it was a bit too one-sided to truly be called one, continued. Katara would roll away, try to bend, and then, almost immediately, would be unceremoniously knocked back to the ground. Zuko had been very correct in his assessment; as long as he stayed within a foot or two of her, and forbid her from gaining a solid stance, she was practically defenseless. After she had been knocked back down over a dozen times she simply lay there, panting heavily, cradling her hands to her chest. It was exceedingly difficult to break bones with a shinai (although Zuko's father had managed) but being struck repeatedly in the wrists and hands made them begin to shake uncontrollably. Bending became increasingly difficult, thus further exacerbating Katara's problem.

"Get. UP."

"What is the POINT of all this?!" she shouted, still on the ground.

Zuko did not respond.

"You're supposed to be teaching me! What is WRONG with you?!"

"GET. UP."

She screamed in fury and made a lunge at him. Zuko slid out of the way and tripped her.

"Frost take you! You evil… heartless… bastard!" Katara screamed, trying and failing to rise, her arms shaking as she tried to lever herself out of the badland dust.

"One more! Zuko thought desperately. Just get on your feet once more and we can stop!"
Despite his internal misery, his face remained wooden, emotionless.

"Get. Up," he said quietly.

Katara growled in fury and finally managed to get her feet under her. She stood panting, eyes bright in rage, legs and arms trembling with effort and Zuko put the shinai back in his belt.

"Why?" she asked quietly, her eyes narrowed to icy flints.

"You wanted to understand. This is how I began my training."

"How you began-" her eyes grew wider and shocked.

"I was seven," Zuko said, nodding. "It went on for… quite some time."

He decided not to mention that it had been almost an hour before he’d been unable to get back up and that the strikes from the shinai hadn't stopped when he’d been on the ground. His father, then simply Prince Ozai, had made absolutely certain that Zuko had understood the meaning of pain in that first day. Understood that weakness would not be allowed. That the world did not care about you and would destroy you if you did not "Get. Up."

Get up and fight back.

Zuko was quite sure that his face showed that he had not learned that lesson well enough.

"It was the beginning. Of learning, understanding, bushido. I trained every day for six years; it was all I did. War and the sword and the flame and bushido. Even that was not enough to save me from dishonor. I have read of your people. You learn to hunt and fish, to weave nets and sail boats. You learn the sea and the snow and the workings of the tides. I learned to fight. Everything else was secondary, frivolous. This is the focus, the dedication, necessary to truly understand my people."

"And it's necessary to hit people to explain this?" Katara snarled, unappeased at his explanation.

"Words only go so far, and are as nothing besides the understanding that pain brings," Zuko quoted.

"That's… really messed up."

"Everything was done for a purpose. It made me stronger, destroyed weakness, made me the man I am today."

"Yeah, a man who murders people and tried to capture the world's last hope for peace."

"A man who knows his duty and does what is necessary." He shook his head. "We are done fighting for tonight. Heal yourself if you wish, and we will discuss bushido. Exhaustion makes the mind sharper, helps you focus on the words."

"I can't," Katara said acidly, lifting her still shaking hands.

"Ah. That. They… they do that," Zuko said, taking a step forward. "Let me see."

"Don't touch me!" she snapped.

Zuko nodded, and quietly took a small step back, his eye on hers. "What did you learn?"

"That you are an… ICEHOLE!" she snarled.
"I would have thought you already knew that," he said dryly. "What did you learn?"

"…Protect my hands," she said, after a moment of frowning contemplation.

"Yes. All control comes from the hands. It is better to take a larger wound in a less vital spot than in your hands. Your instincts will tell you to throw your hands up to protect yourself. That will get you killed." He took a step forward. "Let me see your hands," he said gently.

"Why?"

"Because I don't like to see you in pain."

"You don't- YOU are the one who DID THIS to me!"

"Yes. Because it was necessary. If we must suffer a small amount tonight to keep you alive in the future I consider that a worthy sacrifice."

She stared at him for a long moment then stepped forward, her hands outstretched. "I will never understand you people," she said bitterly.

Zuko gently grasped her hands, placing her palms together, and then wrapped them completely in his much larger ones.

"If you truly believe that, you should leave and not return." He inhaled and exhaled deeply, then bent, warming his hands significantly.

"How are you doing that?" Katara said, sighing blissfully as relief blossomed across her face.

"Warming the hands increases blood flow, banishing pain and restoring control. It will only last a few minutes, but it should be enough for you to… do… whatever it is you do."

"Seems odd that your teachers would teach you this, what with the whole 'pain is learning' thing you've got going on."

"They didn't," Zuko said, slightly embarrassed, "my cousin Lu Ten did." He paused for a moment, startled at the memory. "That was the last time I ever saw him," he muttered, surprised at the fact.

"What happened?"

"He… went to join his father, in the march to Ba Sing Se. He never came back."

"I'm sorry," Katara said quietly.

"You're sorry? Why should you be sorry? He was your enemy."

"Because I don't like to see… anyone in pain," she said softly, looking up at him.

Oh… ash… she is beautiful.

The impulse to kiss her, right there and then, was powerful, but he resisted it, buried it deep. She had made her thoughts on the matter of kissing him quite clear, and he would respect that.

"Your hands… should work now," he said releasing her, looking away.

She nodded jerkily and bent water into her hands, sighing in relief as the healing took hold.
"I will go and build a fire. If it is your wish you may join me, and we will speak of bushido. If it is not you should return to your camp." He bowed and turned away.

"You can't think that THAT was enough to stop me, do you?" she called after him, prompting a grin to form as he moved back to his camp.

The lesson did not go how Zuko had expected.

He had begun, hoping against hope that it was really unnecessary, with a review of the seven tenants of bushido; courage, compassion, courtesy, duty, honesty, honor, and sincerity. Katara, thankfully, had known all of them, but the true trouble began when they had begun to discuss which of them was most important.

"…and of these the two most important are-"

"-compassion and honesty," Katara supplied, like a student who felt that they finally knew the right answer to the question.

"-honor and duty," Zuko finished, nodding sagely.

They stared at one another for a long beat.

"You… you can't be serious?" Katara said, shaking her head in incredulity.

"I'm always serious about bushido. Why in the Sun's name would you think that 'compassion' is primary? It's barely worth mentioning."

"Barely worth mentioning?!" she squawked. "It's the most important virtue! We're samurai! Protectors of the helpless!"

"It is our duty the protect those under our care," Zuko said, shaking his head. "Compasion is only there to reemphasize that relationship; the weak and the strong."

"We have a duty to care for all peoples, everywhere!"

"Nonsense. It's bushido, bushi-do, the way of the warrior. Not 'way of the nursemaid.'"

"Better a nursemaid than a slave," Katara hissed.

"I beg your pardon?" Zuko said, face and tone darkening.

"You're a slave. It's always 'duty this' and 'honor that.' My honor compels me. As if you had no choice, no free will. You're a slave in the chains you put yourself in."

"Honor is everything. It all anyone truly has! 'Through the fulfillment of your duty is your honor retained.' You are going to call me a slave because I try to do the right thing?"

"Fulfillment of duty' makes you nothing but a toadying stooge! A gutless creature without the moral fiber to stand up for what's right!" she said, now on her feet, poking him in the chest again.

"A samurai is obedient. It is not his place to judge his lord, only to OBEY," Zuko roared, his face tingling in remembrance of the last time he had truly been disobedient.

"Slave," she sneered.
"Coward," he shot back

"How DARE you!"

"You are a coward without the stomach to make the difficult choices, the RIGHT choices. Life is conflict and PAIN, and instead of accepting that you hide behind an illusionary shield you call 'compassion' and call my people evil as an excuse for why yours were defeated and wiped out!"

"You SHUT YOUR MOUTH!"

"How are you going to make me, Shinjo? Compassion?"

She looked at the point of murder, and Zuko slid into a firebending stance as she opened her waterskin to retort. Whatever words, or blades of ice, she was about to fling at him never materialized however. She cocked her head to the side, her eyes narrowed.

"You're… afraid."

"Wh-what?" Whatever Zuko had thought she was going to say, or do, it was nowhere close to that.

"You're afraid that everything that was done to you was for nothing. That your entire way of life was nothing but a lie." She did not shout as she said it, she simply spoke in a solid steady rhythm of total and absolute conviction.

"No… that not… The failure was MINE. I was not strong enough, and smart enough to- to… I made MISTAKES and I-"

"People make mistakes," she said advancing on him slowly. "That's why compassion is important."

"Weakness cannot be allowed to claim authority," Zuko snarled through gritted teeth, taking an unconscious step back. "Those who live on the heights must be held to a higher standard."

"Without compassion, without an understanding of human failings, or human frailty, there can be no justice. Without justice, there can be neither honor nor duty. How could anyone claim to rule without understanding?"

Zuko's mouth dropped open in baffled confusion while Katara's face lit up in a smile.

"Looks like I win this round," she said, tremendously pleased with herself.

"No! That's not… Give me a moment…” Zuko sputtered. He wasn't supposed to be losing a philosophical debate against some… barbarian. He practically was bushido.

She began to laugh, further distracting him from thinking of a counter-argument on account of her being entirely too lovely. " Spirits that's funny. You're normally so stoic, so grim. But you get flustered and you stammer like any other boy." She sighed. "It's cute."

Zuko froze in mid-protest, counter-arguments and feeble half-formed rhetoric dying away at once. "Cute?" he said, aghast.

Katara went a startling shade of puce. "I didn't say that!"

"You DID! You very audibly said that!"

"No, I didn't!"
"You did."

"DIDN'T!" she shouted, stomping her foot.

"What are you, five?" Zuko said. He paused a beat, a small smirk appearing on the unburned side of his face. "Didn't you say that *honesty* was the other most important virtue?"

"...shit."

"YESSS!" Zuko roared, arms raised in victory and any and all pretense of 'stoicism' gone. "And just like THAT, it's a DRAW!"

"Fine," Katara said sniffily, "you're cute. Happy?"

"Concerned mostly."

Katara gave him a blank look.

"I don't recall striking you in the *head*, but you must have suffered brain damage at some point if you think *I* am cute." He cocked his head to the side quizzically. "What is it about me you find 'cute' per se?"

"Go whaling for compliments much?" Katara said.

"Can your water sorcery even *heal* brain damage?" Zuko mused aloud, ostensibly to himself.

"We are NOT talking about this."

"I believe that *someone* once told me that *silence* was as good as a lie."

"... you're such an icehole."

"And now-" Zuko's grin turned fierce- "it's TWO to one."

"It most certainly is NOT! You can't possibly count that."

"I most certainly can, and DO. I admit myself intrigued; is there a firebending fetish among the Unicorn? Or are you unique in that regard?"

"No! It's just... come ON! You're not actually going to make me say it."

"I am not going to *make* you do anything. Your honor, however, might compel you to-"

"Ugggh, FINE! Fine. You're just... cute! Alright? You're tall, got *nice* muscles, and-" she sighed bitterly- "you've got a 'sexy' voice. Like... sexy... evil... thunder... or something. OK?! You happy now?" she finished with a shout.


"This can't be the first time anyone's ever said this to you!" Katara cried, face darkening even further.

"Nobody has called me 'cute' since I was a child and you are the first to call me 'sexy' in my hearing." He smiled faintly. "You are a very *odd* girl."

"Well! You don't have to-"

"I like odd."
"Oh," she paused, "well now it's awkward."

Oh crap, this is what we were trying to avoid!

"Oh… uh… sorry," Zuko said, former confidence draining away at the fact that he'd probably been flirting with her again, despite her insistence that he not. "I… uh… I'm sorry about saying that bit about your people being wiped out. That was going too far." He bowed.

"It was," she said, narrowing her eyes. "Why would you even bring it up again?"

"Uh… You deserve an apology? Also, I think I'd rather we were arguing than awkward."

"You would rather we were fighting?"

"I'm good at fighting. And I'm really not much of a talker, unless… it's arguing. So far, the two of us only seem to have three settings; fighting, awkwardness and… well… you called it 'hormonal-stress-stupids.' But we can't do that anymore, so…"

He trailed off and silence reigned as Katara stared up at him with a contemplative look.

"Look, we should just- just- I don't know. Fight some more? Or… uh… maybe we could…"

Katara smiled at his stuttering.

"You know, this would be a lot easier if you would hold up your end of the conversation!" Zuko snapped. "You can't expect me to be-" he broke off as she rose up on tiptoe and kissed him gently on the lips.

"Shut up," she breathed as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"But- but- you said that we-

"Shut. UP."

Zuko shut up.

We need to set some ground rules," Katara said, a small eternity later, from her position on Zuko's lap.

Zuko grunted in affirmation, not taking his eye from the dying fire. As the two of them sat partially entwined together he noted that his mind was strangely empty, still, at peace. Like he assumed it was supposed to be after a successful meditation.

Sun's name this is better than sake, he thought to himself.

"First of all, there will be none of… this-" she gestured between the two of them- "while we are trying to train. That is cheating."

Zuko took the opportunity to capture her gesturing hand with his own and brought it to his lips, kissing it softly, feeling her pulse accelerate through her wrist as he did so.

"Second!" she squeaked, pulling her hand away and attempting to regain her previous momentum. "Second, there will be no more hitting without some explanation of purpose first. This 'smack-people-around-before-they-know-what's-even-going-on' might be how you learned, but it doesn't
work for me."

Zuko nodded and, by way of apology, apprehended her other hand and began to massage it, warming his hands with his bending at the same time.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Zuko locked his eye on hers and nodded firmly.

"Then why aren't you…” she narrowed her eyes at him. "It's because I told you to shut up isn't it?"

Zuko grinned.

"I didn't mean forever!" she huffed. "This would be a lot easier if you would hold up your end of the convers-" Zuko cut her off here, with another, rather serious, kiss.

"Honestly," he said after they parted, running his hands through her unbound hair, "I'm really not much of a talker."

"Thirdly!" Katara said breathily, again attempting to regain control of the conversation, "you… you need to leave my braid alone! You have no idea what a pain it can be to put back up, and I'm already going to have a boatload of awkward questions to field."

"Denied."

"What!? There is no 'denied' option!"

"So, I don't get a say in these rules?" Zuko said softly.

"NO!"

"But I… I really do like your hair."

"…Fine!" Katara said after a moment, rolling her eyes, despite seeming otherwise pleased. "You're lucky you're cute," she grumbled.

"More lucky you have terrible taste," Zuko muttered.

"Hey! And no more of that either!"

Zuko raised his eyebrow in question.

"No more of this self-deprecating crap," Katara said, poking him in the chest once again. "I say you're cute, so you're cute. End of story."

"Katara, we DO have mirrors in the Fire-Nation. I know what I look like."

She glared at him for a moment before reaching up and trying to place her hand on the left side of his face. Zuko's hand came up in reflex and grasped her wrist.

Nobody touched his scar.

"Zuko," she said with the air of a person talking to a skittish animal, "let me go."

"You- you- you don't… I…" he babbled, his working eye darting between her hand and her face in alarm.
"Zuko? Please?" and at her words, Zuko's hand jerked open as if by magic.

Her hand was cool on his scar, although the sensation was greatly deadened by fried nerves. Zuko mindlessly, almost reflexively, closed his eye and leaned his face into her palm.

**Pathetic.**

"I'd… I'd rather you didn't…" Zuko could even make the rest of the words appear in his mouth.

He was a terrible liar after all.

"You know what I see? Bravery. I see someone who got back up when it would have been easier not to." She didn't say that that was why she was there in the first place, but the truth of that was apparent in her eyes.

There was a long pause.

"So… which is it? Cute or brave?" Zuko said, smiling weakly.

"You're ridiculous," Katara grumbled, releasing his face and snuggling herself into his chest. "It can be both. Anyway, I say you're cute, so you're cute. That's rule four, end of discussion."

"Rule three, I vetoed the bit about your hair," Zuko said idly, wrapping his arms back around her and giving her a squeeze.

"Fine, three then."

Zuko smiled down at her. "Whatever you say, snuggle-bunny."

"DENIED!" she shouted, not even looking at him.

"I do have some rules as well."

"You are NOT calling me 'snuggle-bunny,'" she snapped, leaning back and fixing him with narrowed eyes again.

"I meant serious rules. For one, you need to start carrying a weapon."

"I have my wakizashi."

"Oh? And where precisely is your wakizashi at this time?"

"Well… you moved it. It was getting in the way…" she flushed, remembering his hands on her bottom.

"Your weapon is an extension of yourself, a part of you," Zuko said in a lecturing tone. "You should always know where it is."

"Well, excuse me for being distracted!"

"Besides, I could teach you to use your wakizashi defensively, but it's generally considered somewhat…" he mused for a moment, "…somewhat disrespectful to the blade to use it as anything but a last desperate resort or for seppuku."

"You wanted to say 'barbarous' there didn't you?"
"But I didn't. That's got to count for something."

Katara snorted in mirth. "So, you want me to start carrying around a sword? You're starting to sound like my brother."

"Katara, I don't care if it's a pair of nunchaku or an earther's tetsubo, you need to be able to protect yourself."

"I have my bending."

"Is a samurai defined by their bending? You already expressed concern about someone 'taking away' your bending. AND there aren't always going to be lakes and wells for you to take advantage of." Zuko made his face stern. "I would also prefer if you didn't just kiss your way out of those kinds of situations."

"That would probably only work against you."

"Which would be a violation of your first rule."

She tsked to herself. "I should have known that would come back to bite me."

Zuko seized the moment, and her hand, and gently nipped at her fingertip, eliciting a small shiver.

"So… what do you recommend?" she asked somewhat breathily as Zuko began to massage her hand.

"I know the most about the sword of course, but you and I have very different styles." He paused for a moment, still idly massaging her hand as he considered. "It should be something that compliments water style and gives you an edge in defense. Other than that, it should be something you favor. 'A weapon is an extension of the wielder.' We'll figure out the rest of it as we go."

"I'll go through Sokka's collection. He'll be thrilled I'm finally showing an interest."

"Until you decide on something, we'll just work on water style fighting without bending. You will pick it up quickly, the forms are nearly identical to their bending counterparts."

"Why do you know water style?"

"I was trained to fight the Avatar, master of all elements."

They were both quiet for a moment.

"Rule Six; we don't talk about Aang while I'm here," she said quietly.

"I agree, but how is that rule six?"

"Rule four is 'no calling me snuggle-bunny.'"

"Denied," Zuko said, smile back in place.

"You already got a veto!"

Zuko just shrugged, smile intensifying.

Katara narrowed her eyes. "Keep it up buster, and I'll just have to come up with some awful sounding name for you."
"Do your worst, Shinjo," Zuko growled mockingly, now grinning.

"Oh, I will, Akodo dog."

Zuko's smile fell away. "I'm not Akodo anymore Katara; I told you that."

"OH spirits! I'm sorry Zuko, I didn't mean…"

"It's… fine. It's over and done with. The sun fell out of the sky."

"The sun fell out of the sky?"

"It means that something you never even imagined was possible happened," Zuko said shrugging again. "You just have to keep moving forward," his smile returned. "Live in the present."

For the first time in a long time Zuko found the present to be something worth living in and as he leaned in to kiss Katara, she met him halfway.

She kissed him, he kissed back.

It went on for a while.

"I should be getting back," Katara said, sighing regretfully after they separated another lifetime later. The fire had burned all the way down to coals and the moon was high in the sky.

Zuko made a growl of discontent.

"Relax, grumpy-bear. I'll be back tomorrow night unless my brother is too suspicious," she said after she managed to extricate herself from Zuko and rise to her feet.

"Grumpy-bear?" Zuko said incredulously.

"Would you prefer 'snookums'?" she said, gathering up her wakizashi and putting it back in her belt.

"I am not grumpy."

"You're grumping right now," she said grinning at him. "You did say to 'do my worst.'"

Zuko rose to his feet, attempting to reestablish some sense of dignity. "I will walk you back to your camp."

"No, you won't. Toph would sense you from a mile away. I will be just fine," she said, pulling out a comb and beginning to prepare her hair to go back in its braid.

Zuko advanced on her and gently took her hands in his. She smiled up at him and gave him a kiss.

"Is… is this going to work?" Katara said quietly, a worried look appearing on her face.

"I will make it work," Zuko growled. "I am remarkably persistent."

"So am I."

"Good night, snuggle-bunny," he whispered, only half seriously.

"Good night, grumpy-bear," she answered back. "Ughh. I'm going to turn into one of those kinds of girls, aren't I?" she said scornfully.
"Not in this life." Zuko's face grew serious. "Be careful. The badlands are full of bandits. It would be… troublesome for me I have to kill each and every one of them between here and Chameleon Bay."

"Ha! You be careful yourself," she said, turning to leave. "After all, 'Nobody kills you but ME!'" she called back over her shoulder laughing.

*Oh… Shit.*

Zuko's jaw nearly hit the ground as Katara disappeared into the dark.

*Shit, shit, shit!*

Dear honored father, Zuko thought, mockingly composing a letter in his brain. *TODAY I accidentally got ENGAGED to a Water-Tribe girl who has NO idea! Please advise!*

He stared off into the night the way she had left, mind spinning furiously.

*It can't count, right? She has no idea what that means. I mean, when I said it, it was an accident. An accident! Surely I can't be held accountable for…*

*Shit.*

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Three weeks. Twenty-one nights.

Twenty-one times after that she appeared, striding out of the east, her face breaking into a smile so fierce it forced an echo of itself on to Zuko's face.

They would kiss, she would vent, and then they would immediately begin discussing the upcoming training session.

It was simpler that way. They were far less likely to start arguing if they kept it simple.

Zuko would show her a maneuver; a stance, a form, a kata, and almost without fail she would know it, or something much like it, referring to it by another name. His assumption had been correct, she picked up better defensive habits rapidly, almost instinctively. He was simultaneously proud of her and annoyed that she so easily learned something that had taken him the better part of seven months to even become proficient in.

Katara's first "rule" was maddening. Close combat practice, by definition, required them to be close. Their sheer proximity set his blood to a low simmer and he began to suspect that she was aggravation that condition on purpose. Standing just a little closer than necessary, holding a submission hold just a little too long, pressing against him in subtle inflammatory ways or deliberately placing her weight on the wrong foot, causing Zuko to grab her hips to make an adjustment, realize what he was doing and attempt to personally discover if he could learn to firebend through the power of blushing.

He called her on it a few times, and all she said was that perhaps he was imagining things.

He might have believed her, had she not seemed so smug about it.

On the fourth night she returned triumphantly holding a familiar copper colored tessen.

"A Kyoshi warrior fan? Brilliant," Zuko said, examining the war-fan with the eye of an expert.
"Yeah, I knew pretty much immediately that this was perfect for me. It just took me days to get Sokka to let me have it." She took it back from Zuko eyeing it curiously. "He seemed... really attached to it."

"Well," Zuko said dryly, "it's not every day a young man puts on a pretty dress and makeup to go to his first battle. I'm sure he was all aquiver."

Katara snorted. "Actually, Suki made him dress like that, in return for showing him some moves. He got over his big head pretty quickly after that."

"Ah yes, 'Suki' was it? She fought well... did she survive?"

"Yes... at least, I think so. They stared at each other for a moment. "New rule. No talking about past battles. This... thing we have is confusing enough already."

Zuko nodded. "That brings us up to... thirteen was it?"

"Fourteen. Thirteen was the mandatory post-training foot rub."

The previous night Katara had insisted he use his "magic-hot-hands" to rub her feet, owing to the fact that she had to walk all the way out here to meet him. Zuko had been about to mention the fact that he had to walk all day while she rode on Appa, but she had already plopped herself down in his lap and any arguments or defenses he might have had dissolved when she rested her head on his shoulder and began kissing his neck.

He had found that neck-kisses were not conducive to coherent thought.

Most of the "rules" had been filed away in his brain under the new category of "things I am not allowed to do when Katara is around." Number eight had been "no sneaking up on me while I'm looking for you." Although he still held that her lack of ability to spot him when he was standing right in front of her was more her problem than his. Rule number ten had been "no breaking wind in my presence," which was not something he had done but instead was something she claimed she was simply "nipping in the bud."

Rule nine was secrecy. Zuko supposed it was an obvious thing, but it made a lot of sense. It was a great deal safer, for the both of them, that her friends NOT know about their... thing. Zuko would just as soon not have to fight the little bald bastard she seemed to think was the savior of the world and if he had to kill her brother it would most likely make her rather angry with him.

And not the sexy kind of angry either.

She would show up and, in the brief interlude between the kiss and the training, she would vent about her day. Usually it about Toph, who had either said something infuriating to her or who had spent the day trying to murder the Avatar with earthbending; something that Zuko was still holding out hope for.

The was one rule that Zuko, by necessity, kept to himself however. "Do not ask WHY she's here." It did not make any sense to him. Surely, she didn't need him to teach her these things. Her brother, while an idiot, had to have had some martial training. He could have very easily given her a few pointers and then allowed her natural affinity for her element take over.

So why come here? Why subject herself to the company of an honorless maimed ronin? He would have liked to believe it was because she enjoyed his company, but...

Who would waste their time on you?
So, he didn’t ask. Worst case scenario she would realize that she didn’t need him, and not return.

So, a pattern was set, she would arrive, they would kiss, she would vent (he had learned to nod at all the appropriate places after a few iterations) then they would train. At some point Katara would decide that she’d had enough, and then the kissing would resume forthwith. A small portion of Zuko's brain, which apparently hadn't been completely dissolved into mush, commented that he probably wasn't doing her combat stamina any favors by allowing her to decide when she'd had enough. Despite that, any convictions he thought he might have had also turned into saccharin goo when she wrapped her arms around him and called him her "grumpy-bear."

His protestations that he was NOT in fact "grumpy" just made him actually sound MORE grumpy.

After a long time spent kissing, and the now obligatory foot rub, Katara would head back to her camp, re-braiding her hair as she walked. Nights in the badlands were cold, and even heart of fire didn't seem to keep him as warm as she did.

*You're pathetic,* he always chastised himself after she left. *That girl and her friends seek nothing less than the total destruction of your Nation and your family. And here you sit, pining like some kabuki actor in a melodrama.*

After she faded from view, he would manage a few hours of sleep, rise with the sun, do his thousand cuts, and then begin to jog eastward.

As he ran, he thought. Running was a mindless task and he could, and did at some points, manage to take small naps while still keeping his feet moving eastward.

He thought about water.

Water flowed. He had known that for years, since his time on the mountaintop with his uncle, but he had not really considered that as something to do with himself until now. Water flowed, it was smooth and fluid, graceful in nature and constantly moving.

*Fire burned.*

It beat. Staccato. Flashing. Roaring. Like the taiko drums he had learned to play at his mother's insistence.

Yet fire could flow as well. It was his fire, he commanded it, and it would obey. Where others would send a blast of fire, Zuko could send a stream of it. A textbook fire-block was ephemeral, a flickering flare, requiring speed and expert timing.

Zuko wasn't quick.

His blocks were waves. Crashing over attacks and overwhelming his opponents. Attack and defense at the same time.

Like water.

So, as he ran he thought on the natures of fire and water, at first merely to distract himself from reminiscing over the previous night's post-practice session (which had a tendency to make him trip). When the Sun hit the horizon behind him, and he judged it safe, fire would form at his fists and he would bend. Fire streaming, fire cascading, fire flowing, as he continued to run eastward, never stopping, always moving forward.

Towards her.
He was quite certain he could have lived in those badlands forever; running and thinking and training and kissing until he was ash.

Twenty-one days of peace.

But he was fire, and fire burned. It consumed, and nothing could last forever.

On the twenty-second night… she did not appear.

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A/N: Ladies and Gentlemen welcome, once again, to the author notes! Thanks for reading this and thus ceding a small portion of your life to this work. Liked it? Hated it? Somewhere in between? Drop me a line and let me know about it!

Meta-bits follow

Shinai: I had the good fortune of having a roommate in college who both owned a pair of shinai and was a competent martial artist. We used to spend the occasional weekend hitting each other about the body with the damned things for fun and exercise. But one of the big, first, takeaways for me was how really vulnerable your hands are. Movies and the like always have people getting cut around the torso and face but your hands are right there in front. A katana is basically a 3-foot long razorblade and if you snap somebody in the wrist with it… well, they're done. They're going to, at the very least, bleed to death unless the fight stops immediately. Hence the reason for the shinai. After the first time we practiced, my hands, which had gotten fairly brutalized, would not stop shaking. I couldn't type, and barely had any fine motor skills for a day or two.

Ahh, to be 20 and stupid again.

I still have the shinai I eventually bought as well as the pair of hockey gloves that I immediately bought.

Getting hit in the hands frigging hurts!

The Lesson of Pain: Gempukku training in L5R, the way it's described is brutal. Far worse than anything that we in the modern world would find acceptable. Far worse than anything I have described I think. But their mindset was the same as Zuko's; better to suffer now that be dishonored later. I think Ozai took it a little farther than would be normal, he does have a tendency to get carried away. The important take away for Katara, and for you, the reader is that Zuko doesn't think anything of this. He doesn't like having to hurt Katara, but doesn't necessarily see what was done to him as abuse. This is not to say that it was NOT, but Zuko doesn't get that. That's the point.

Katara hates duty: This will be the second time now I've had Katara nearly lose her shit when Zuko brings up Duty and I thought I should address it briefly. So, who do we know, from Katara's past, that did something for Duty, because they believed they had to? Someone who might have say… left her right after the most traumatic thing in the world had happened?

If you guessed Hakoda, you win a cookie (metaphorical).
Yes, Katara had daddy issues. Hell on further thought the whole frigging cast has daddy issues. Sokka's got the same ones, Toph's dad doesn't respect her, Zuko... well DUH, and even Aang, in the form of Monk Gyatso, has daddy issues.

Makes you wonder about Bryke.

Anyway, Katara has a problem with people doing things "for duty." It's part of her character. I regret nothing.

The State of the Ship: Ah, young love. Katara and Zuko have entered a phase of heavy petting and not much conversation. They are young gifted warriors both honing their craft and releasing some built-up hormonal impulses. Both of them are going to try to avoid thinking too deeply on the situation, or talking about it too much. After all the fact that they are making out on the regular doesn't change the fact that Zuko is still an aristocratic imperialist who would be happy to see the Avatar get crushed during his earthbending practice, or that Katara is still a naive moralist who seeks the death/overthrow of Zuko's family. To put it in the nerdiest way possible Katara is Chaotic Good and Zuko is Lawful Neutral.

So, they call it their thing. They're not dating, they just have a thing.

Hurray for lying to yourselves!

Fire and Water: Zuko, and I think he's doing it unconsciously, has had a large upgrade in his confidence (with regard to bending, Katara still makes him feel like an idiot). He has realized he is a master and he is training in a different style of fighting every night. The fact that he's getting a lot of positive reinforcement from a pretty girl doesn't hurt either. But that being said he is working on really understanding water. He's already got a pretty good grip on earth, his uncle was able to give him that, but now he's doing exactly what his uncle wanted him to do. To not allow his thinking to become "rigid" and "stale" he is growing as a martial artist and, a little bit, as a person.

So, that's nice then.

The Elephant Koi in the Room: This is tangential to the work but I thought I should address it. Unless you have been living under a rock, or just haven't been interneting as much as you could be, you will have heard the news.

Avatar is getting a reboot.

In case you have been remising in your internetting duties let me quickly fill you in with what I know.

It is live action.

It is going to be on Netflix.

It is a "re-imagining."

Bryke is on board and involved in the process.
So… what do we reckon? Is it the rebirth of the fandom? Is it the end of days? Are we finally going to get the Zutara end game that makes sense? I had heard that there was a movie, but I must have missed that as I had been invited to Lake Laogai at that time.

I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Thanks again for reading! You guys are the best!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

There is a great deal of running and a fateful reunion!

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 23 September 2018
The Chase

Chapter Notes

A/N: The following is rated R; for reunions.

It uses dialog, where appropriate, from S2E8 "The Chase."

Reader discretion is advised.

Early Spring, year 11 in the Reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

The Sun had been gone for several hours…

…and Katara wasn't there.

Normally she would have mentioned it, an adorable pouty look on her face, if she had reason to believe that she might be absent.

Not that she'd ever been right about that.

She had always appeared, smiling that amazing smile, as the sun disappeared behind him.

_I will not be stupid, Zuko thought, forcing calm. She's probably just busy… With… Hero stuff. Some village under threat from… rabid badger-moles. Or saving terminally ill orphans from a burning building. Or something. She can take care of herself, you KNOW that._

He nodded firmly, throwing off his doubts, his eye still locked on the horizon.

Or, he countered silently, _she was attacked by bandits en route to here and is currently bleeding out in a ditch whimpering my name, hoping I hear her._

…Shit.

He took off at a near sprint.

^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^_^

He hadn't found her.

He had found an odd set of tracks instead.

_Whatever made this was heavy, he thought as he sat on his haunches, a palm full of flame illuminating the scowl on his face just a clearly as the deep ruts carved in the earth. They looked like wagon treads, but Zuko had never seen a wagon that would be strong enough to bear the weight required to leave tracks this deep in Earth-Kingdom soil._

_Whatever it was, it seemed to be traveling east, roughly along the same trajectory as the Avatar's group. The only other thing Zuko knew for certain was that, whatever it was, it belonged to the Fire-Nation._
He could still smell the coal-smoke, heavy and pungent in the air.

*I am NOT getting involved in this,* Zuko thought, his scowl intensifying. *I am NOT taking sides. I am OUT. Finished. Uninvolved!* He narrowed his eye, looking east along the trail. *Alright, I am FOLLOWING,* but *I am NOT getting involved.*

He jogged through the night and into mid-morning.

*Whatever this thing is, it's not fast,* Zuko mused, a dark circle under his eye making him look even more malevolent than he usually did. Point of fact, he was quite sure that he had actually gained on it, the smoke smell had grown noticeably sharper and more powerful a few hours ago. *It is, however, persistent. It's essentially the same situation as when I chased the Avatar to the Shrine of Roku. They'll run him to ground, and then force a battle when he's too exhausted to continue.*

While it was much in keeping with the Avatar's typical strategy of cowardice, Zuko knew perfectly well that fleeing from a force of greater mobility was suicide, strategic idiocy. You needed to find a place where the terrain suited defense and engage the enemy with intent to disperse and weaken if you wanted any chance of victory. Make an ambush if possible. Force them to fight on your terms, not theirs.

Then again if the Avatar had been smart enough to do *that* he'd probably have been smart enough to not leave such an obvious trail.

Appa, it seemed, had begun to shed his winter coat, leaving a trail of white and silver hair shining like a signpost once the sun has risen over the desolation of the badlands.

*I'm going to have to have a talk with Katara about this. All the skill in the world won't save her if she doesn't learn better strategy.*

Oh, they were going to have to have a serious talk.

*If* he ever managed to catch up.

It was a train.

A train without tracks, parked next to a scant bit of greenery on the banks of the winding river Senjo.

Zuko couldn't help but remember the wonder he'd felt the first time he had seen a train; the last time he had been on the home island. His uncle had found its smoke and constant rattling quite distasteful, but Zuko had enjoyed the idea. At the time he had equated it to fire's natural superiority over water; boiling it out and forcing it into the service of the Fire-Nation. Now, however, he was put more in the mind of a collaboration, of fire and water working together.

Of course… fire was still the more important of the elements, but he had recently begun to… appreciate certain merits of water as well. Not that he would say any of this to Katara. They argued enough already.

This particular train was different than the one he had seen before. There were treads where the wheels would normally meet rails, and it only had two armored cars behind the engine compartment.

*An interesting concept,* he thought as he examined the engine. *Although I do wonder about its fuel*
efficiency. It must take a great deal of coal to operate and there can't be anyplace to refuel out here. The Earth-Kingdom hasn't even figured out steam power yet. Primitives.

"Hey! You there! Ronin! Back away from the transport!" an angry voice called out.

Oh good, somebody is here to give me answers.

A younger Fire-Nation soldier exited the cab of the train and strode over to Zuko, attempting to project strength.

"I said back away from the-" he froze, words failing him as he got a better look at Zuko's face. "ASH! Yo- you're the banished Prince," he cried, startling back. "S-stay back! I'm warning you!"

Zuko just stared at him, his single yellow eye burrowing into the soldier's hazel pair.

"AKASH!" the soldier roared, screaming his family name as he flung fire at Zuko.

Moving almost entirely on muscle memory, Zuko seized the man's flames, making them flare dark red. Then, calling on his recent practice in water style, he whipped the flames around himself in a circle and sent them streaming back at the panic-stricken man, magnified ten-fold. With a gesture and a flex he made the fire burst before it hit, the concussive force of it slamming the soldier into the side of the train.

Good to know I've still got it, Zuko thought, bemused, as he strode forward and grabbed the man by the throat, lifting him off his feet and slamming him into the side of the train again.

"We will now discuss this fascinating vehicle of yours," Zuko intoned, face twisted into a feral grin.

"Zuko!" snapped a familiar pair of matched voices.

Zuko released the man, and his grin, and both fell at his feet as he swiftly turned and bowed. "Akodo Lo, Akodo Li. Honored aunts. I am pleased to see you again."

His great-aunts had exited from the cab of the train as well and stood staring at him with matching scorn. "You should not-" one started "-be here," the other finished.

"Why yes, thank you I am doing quite well. And you?" Zuko said with false good humor.

"Where is your uncle?" the ancient twins said in sync.

"Not here," Zuko growled, his false cheer falling away. "Where is my sister?"

"Not-" ".-here," they replied, their faces expressionless.

Sun's name that's creepy.

Zuko had always found his great aunts to be mildly off-putting. The fact that one was a Lion and the other a Scorpion had always unsettled him, as he never could tell which was which.

While his aunts' were skilled at court manners, their faces a pair of unchanging masks, the soldier obviously was not. His eyes widened, and he'd drawn a sharp intake of breath when Zuko had said "my sister." Obviously, this was Azula's train, although that had already been relatively clear from their Aunts' presence.

Zuko glanced around, taking in the large beast footprints impressed in the soil. Three tracks, two heading east, one heading south continuing to follow the trail of silver-white hair.
"I assume that Mai and Ty Lee went east?” Zuko said looking at his aunts but keeping the soldier in his vision as well.

His aunts, of course, remained still as statues, giving nothing away. The spare on the other hand visibly gasped in surprise, confirming Zuko's theory for him.

Pathetic. I TOLD Azula to pick better flunkies and she responds with THIS idiot?

"This is a remarkable contraption," Zuko offered, once again projecting false good cheer as he strode around his Aunts, admiring the engine. "Truly a marvel of Fire-Nation superiority. Although the weak point of any steam-powered vehicle-" a dagger of fire, as hot and solid as he could make it, burst from his hand and he rammed it into the train several times, causing water to begin to drain out "-is the boiler."

"Overdramatic," one aunt chided. "Like his father," the other rejoined.

Ahaha

It's not a very clever trick, Zuko mused. Only a fool would believe that this trail was the same as it was before, and my sister is no fool.

It had been somewhat obvious to Zuko, given the massive clumps of fur in the river Senjo, as well as streaked across its banks, that the boy had given his bison a bath and then created a false trail leading away from his friends. Just the kind of strategic selfless idiocy he'd come to expect from the Avatar.

Only the boy could leave a trail like this, and Azula will most assuredly be in pursuit.

Which was why he'd elected to follow this trail instead of the one he was sure would lead him to Katara.

She can handle herself. She and the Bandit should be able to handle two non-benders, even if they are as skilled as Katara seems to think.

Sokka didn't even factor into the equation.

Also, I have to thank my sister for these lovely gifts, Zuko thought with a smirk as he set his new komodo-lizard to a gallop.

The creature burst to a remarkable speed very quickly, almost making Zuko lose his seat. He was used to rhino-lizard cavalry, whose powerful bodies and heavy armor took a while to build up momentum. This komodo-lizard was slight of build and bred for speed. Zuko assumed the remaining one he had found in the second compartment was a re-mount and had not been used recently as it seemed eager to be let loose and to move as quickly as possible.

Azula will follow the trail, but the boy will head to ground in the nearest landmark. Tu Zin.

Vaguely remembered intelligence reports about the southern earth-Kingdom mentioned Tu Zin as a former mining town, the last vestige of whatever passed for civilization in this region before the great expanse of the Burning Sands.

Armed with that knowledge Zuko knew he could make a beeline for the ruined town, hopefully catching up in time to see the battle.

Should be a good fight.
"...I must capture the Avatar to restore my honor!" Azula growled in a false deep voice, covering her left eye and scowling in an exaggerated pose of fury.

The Avatar seemed nonplussed.

"It's ok," Azula said, smiling unkindly, "you can laugh. It's funny."

Zuko had climbed up onto a rooftop overlooking Tu Zin's main road as Azula and the Avatar squared off. He'd reached the top just in time to catch the tail end of the "banter" phase of the fight, although he had missed whatever part of that conversation had led to his sister making an awful impersonation of him. But, luckily, he hadn't yet missed the fun part.

The part where the Avatar got his ass kicked.

Zuko sat down with his feet dangling over the edge of the roof and loudly popped the cork on a bottle of plum wine he had looted from his sister's now ruined train.

Azula and the boy both started in surprise.

"Oh, don't mind me," Zuko said, pouring some wine into his Fire-Nation man cup. "Not bad Azula," he said after taking a sip, "not bad at all."

"Zuko?!" Aang said in alarm.

Azula narrowed her eyes dangerously. "Hello, Zuzu. I was wondering when you would show up."

Aang sniggered. "Zuzu?"

"Does father know you've been drinking Azi? Or were you saving this for a late-night slumber party with your friends?" Zuko said dryly, shaking the bottle at her.

"Ohhhh!" Aang said brightly, turning to Azula. "You were supposed to Zuko!" He giggled. "That was funny."

Azula and Zuko stared at him. "Idiot," they both said at the same time.

"So... now what?" Aang said.

"Now? Now, it's over," Azula snarled, fixing the boy in place with a stare. "You're tired and you have no place to go." She grinned triumphantly. "You can run, but I'll catch you." She took a firebending stance.

"I'm not running," Aang said, brandishing his staff.

"That will be a first," Zuko muttered to himself.

The Avatar fled.

From an outside perspective that was really the simplest way Zuko could describe his fighting style, fleeing. Fleeing with style perhaps, but still fleeing.

Divorced from actual physical involvement in the fight Zuko could really begin to watch and analyze
the boy's technique. While he had no basis for comparison he was quite certain that the boy was an airbending master. His speed and command of his element could only be described as masterful.

To say that air was earth's opposite was one thing, to see it played out in front of him, to really grasp it, to understand it, was another. Where earth stood firm, air stood nowhere. Where earth shrugged off blows, air simply avoided them in a mobile circular pattern. Like earth and water fused together. Constantly mobile, primarily defensive.

On the other hand, there was Azula.

She was good. Fast. Her flames beat in a steady rapid tempo. Zuko hadn't really had a good opportunity to appreciate just how skilled she had become when they had last seen each other, but she was everything one expected from a modern firebending prodigy. Precise. Powerful. Predatory.

That said, Zuko could see that she quickly grew frustrated.

Her skills were amazing, and her blue flame could blast through the stone buildings lining the street with all the ease of a hammer through a paper screen. The issue was, as it always seemed to be, that the Avatar simply wasn't around to be hit. He was only dedicated to defense, and his speed was just a hair greater than Azula's.

Where Zuko was sure his flames would've begun to grow wild in anger and setting the surrounding environment aflame, Azula's flames simply became larger but no less focused. Thick burning ropes of blue flame that she used to great effect, tearing the roofs off of buildings and hemming the boy in.

Zuko could see the tempo increasing, could feel the crescendo of the duel approaching and became increasingly certain that his sister would win.

The Avatar was exhausted, dark sleepless circles under his eyes visible even from Zuko's rooftop perch. His major advantage, his ability with other elements was rendered moot by the dryness of the landscape and the fact that, according to Katara at least, his earthbending wasn't very good. Azula, on the other hand, was fresh, and fast and fought with a ferocity that made Zuko's heart swell with pride.

She drove the coward before like a prey animal, cutting off lines of retreat and escape routes with a methodical precision. She finally managed to corner the Avatar in an abandoned building by completely burning a rooftop out from under him as he attempted, again, to flee.

At a gesture, the ruined building caught fire and she entered into it to finish the Avatar.

It would have been the end of him... had Katara not chosen that exact moment to arrive.

Zuko's heart leapt into his throat as Katara bent a whip of water through the doorway that his sister had entered only moments before. A bolt of lightning, obviously thrown off course by Katara's whip, burst through the wall of the burning building and into the sky.

Azula screamed in rage, and pursed Katara out of the building, flinging jets of fire after her. Zuko's knuckles grew white with the death-grip he had on the bottle of wine as Katara blocked the flames with a sweeping gesture with her tessen, conjuring a wave of water which then turned into small spikes of ice which flew at Azula.

*Not getting involved. Not getting involved. NOT GETTING INVOLVED!* 

Zuko's eye was wide in panic as he sat on the rooftop, frozen with indecision. Azula dodged Katara's ice, then dodged again, even more rapidly as Sokka appeared from a nearby alleyway, and lunged at
her with a machete. She backflipped away, stuck the landing as always, and glared furiously at all three of her opponents, as the Avatar emerged from the building he had recently been cornered in.

Water and Air and Steel, Azula fought all three of them to a standstill, her face a mask of concentration and fury.

*Ash and bone,* Zuko thought, his heart rate dropping back down into merely elevated levels as the fight stabilized into a new, and less intense, pattern. *If the Shinjos are here, then where is-*

As though his thoughts had summoned her Toph burst from out of the ground at Azula's feet, almost landing a solid uppercut. Azula must have felt her coming, because she managed to flip away at the very last possible moment. Taking in all four of her opponents now, she conjured a searing arc of fire and sprinted down a nearby alley, out of Zuko's sight, and pursued by the Avatar's party.

*Damn. Azi will be disappointed,* Zuko thought exhaling a huge relieved breath. He took another sip of wine, listening to boom and bursts as the fight continued the next street over.

After a moment, when he judged it semi-safe, he dropped down from the rooftop and cautiously began to follow the path of battle. It would not do to poke his head out, only to get it torn off by an overzealous combatant.

*This is good though!* He thought. *Azula's smart enough to know she's got no chance now. She'll disengage, and neither she, nor Katara, gets hurt. Azi learns a valuable less in humility and the importance of keeping a decent number of troops around her. Katara also gets to learn just how dangerous my sister is, which will stop her from making poor strategic choices in the future. All in all a good outcome for-*

An utterly massive, ringing, explosion nearly took him off his feet.

Zuko's eye went wide and, forgetting caution, he ran towards it.

He made it to the next road as a thick black smoke began to clear. His eye found Katara, retching with the smoke but otherwise unharmed, and his shoulders sagged in relief.

*Thank the ancestors. What in the ashpits was- his eye fell on a body collapsed on the ground. Who in the flame is tha-?*

The bottle of wine tumbled from his nerveless fingers, a fan of dark liquid staining the dirt.

"...uncle?"

Iroh wasn't moving.

"No! Nononononono," Zuko shouted sprinting forward, falling to his knees before his uncle.

Iroh wasn't breathing and Zuko's hands began to shake.

*The AVATAR did this!*

Zuko stood slowly, and face twitching madly he turned and found the boy staring wide-eyed.

"What... did... you... DO!?” Zuko roared, and every flaming piece of debris in the village turned a ruby red and leapt a foot higher.

*Does it matter?* A voice whispered. *We all know what YOU did. Absolutely NOTHING!*
Guilt tore through him like a scythe through grain.

Aang, Toph, and Sokka turned to run. Only Katara stayed where she was.

"Zuko… we didn't…"

_Burn them. Burn them ALL!_

"Zuko, I can help him!" Katara said, reaching for him.

"Get AWAY from us…" Zuko spat, his entire body trembling with unbelievable fury. "I… can't… can't-"

He was cut off by a hacking cough from behind him, followed by a low and miserable groan.

_He's ALIVE!_

Zuko sagged as the rage, its initial source of fuel gone, vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Oh moon," Katara whispered, her eyes wet with concern. "Zuko are you alr-"

"KATARA!? What the fuck are you doing?! Come on!" Sokka shouted worriedly from the across the street.

Katara now looked panicked.

_Oh shit. Rule Nine._

"Uh… BEGONE FROM THIS PLACE… PEASANT!" Zuko roared as loudly as his exhaustion would allow. "Sorry," he finished with a wince and a whisper for Katara's ears alone.

"Are you ok?" she whispered, exhaling in a puff as Zuko nodded. "MAYHAP I SHALL… KNAVE!" she shouted.

"Mayhap… Knave?" Zuko whispered incredulously.

She shrugged and began trotting away, blowing a kiss over her shoulder as she made the alleyway.

Iroh groaned again, snapping Zuko back to the present and he crouched back down to begin _rationally_ assessing the damage.

_A burn? Why is he burned? Did the boy learn firebending already?_ he thought as he began to use his bending to leach the excess heat out of the blistered patch of skin at Iroh's shoulder.

_No. But Azula certainly has._

"Damnit Azula," Zuko growled.

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_A/N: Hello, hello and welcome to the last author note of September! Here's hoping you enjoyed it! But as always if you didn't (or if you did) you're always welcome to comment and tell me why! I love, nay, CRAVE feedback._

_The chapter marks the end of a nice little fluffy section we had in this story and now Zuko is back on the rails of canon. Mostly. As always alterations in motivation, characterization and all around tone are present. LOOK FORWARD TO THEM!_
Fire-Nation technology: To once again state this, there are NO tanks! Not in this world. It's one thing to have railroads and what, to my eye at least, looks like pre/early WWI ships, but tanks? Nope. Doesn't fit the theme, or the idiom, or the... je ne sais quoi. Anyway, I have always been confused by the FN's technology level. No gunpowder obviously, but still a train that runs on the ground? If I could have thought of another way to do what Azula and Co does without it I would have, but there it is. You need a mechanical method of chasing down the biological Appa. Animals get tired, machines do not.

Why this bothers me (ok maybe not bothers but concerns me) is that it informs the relative cultural level as well. L5R exists in this sort of feudal state reminiscent of the Sengoku Jidai period of Japan. Trains, on the other hand, just scream Meiji restoration, with it's ensuing liberalism and westernization. It sort of messes with my internal picturing of events. So, to resolve this in my head as such. Zuko, and in fact the whole FN aristocracy, are very old-fashioned. The common people, and the tech level, live in a more late-1800s world while the nobs are living in a more early-1600s world. Just a thought, let me know what you think.

In closing, I would like to thank each and every one of you who took the time to review/comment over the last view weeks. You are all marvelous and HIGHLY motivating!

Thanks again!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

The past is discussed, secrets are discovered and Iroh drinks Tea.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 30 September 2018
Early Spring, year 11 in the Reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

"Why does your sister hate me so much?" Iroh asked.

Zuko had managed to move his uncle out of the burning ruin of a city that was Tu Zin only with the help of his captured komodo-lizard. After a brief reconnaissance of the local area he found an abandoned shrine on a nearby hillside to the fortune Agashiko, the minor kami of simplicity. If nothing else would provide them with cover from the elements while his uncle recovered.

Remarkably, it had only taken a *day* for Iroh to wake up and begin asking for tea.

"What were you even *doing* there, uncle?" Zuko said, handing his uncle a cup of tea.

"Oh! I met the most fascinating stranger on the road. A young *blind* earthbender! She needed some help finding her way and I was honored to oblige." He took a sip of the tea Zuko had brewed, stifling a wince at its bitterness. "Very… *bracing,*" he said.

Zuko nodded, pouring himself another cup.

"I saw your sister, shortly after the girl and I found her friends. You can imagine how *surprised* I was to discover that one of them was the Avatar! Azula, I think, believed that I had joined with her enemies, and began attacking *me* as well. We had cornered her, and I was about to try and explain when she surprised me. She has apparently invented a new variation on the 'sky-burst' kata which produces a tremendous flash of light and a ringing sensation in the ears. *Then* she struck." Iroh tapped at his heavily bandaged shoulder and then commenced stroking his beard in thought. "She probably could have struck at anyone there, a free shot, but she chose *me.* She might have slain the *Avatar* right there and then, but instead she targeted *me.* Why? Why does your sister hate me so much?"

Zuko sipped his tea, looking away, considering how to answer.

"I suppose nobody really knows," Iroh said, taking his silence for a non-response. "Your sister is *crazy* and need to go--"

"It was the *doll,*" Zuko rumbled.

"…the what?"
"When we were younger, and you were off at the siege, you sent us gifts. Do you remember?"

"Vaguely."

"You sent me a knife. A token of surrender from an Earth-Kingdom general."

"Oh YES! Now I remember. It had 'never give up without a fight' etched on the side."

"Yes. Do you remember what you sent Azula?"

Iroh pondered for a moment, still stroking his beard. "No."

"It was a doll," Zuko said, even now fighting to restrain a sneer. "A doll with 'the latest earth-kingdom fashions.' Even at six Azula knew what an insult that was."

"Insult? Nephew, I never intended-"

"That was part of it I think. You sent me a poignant personal gift which emphasized personal strength and conviction. You sent her a little girl's toy. A little girl's toy, to a six-year-old who was already a better firebender than her older brother was." Zuko shook his head. "She was furious." He paused for a moment remembering that day. "I think mother was as well, though she tried to make it seem like everything was alright. She always did that."

"It was not my intent to insult anyone, Zuko."

"It was that fact that you didn't think that drove her up the wall. She couldn't stand the idea of being an afterthought, of being second best. Ash and bone uncle, you're the one that taught me the importance of gift giving. How civil wars have been fought over insult received in the giving the wrong gift. You should have known better."

"She was six!"

"She's an Akodo, and a genius. You should have-"

"I was a bit busy," Iroh said defensively. "Running the siege, fighting a war, being crown-prince."

"Then you should have sent no gifts at all," Zuko snapped. "It was the contrast that made it an insult."

The two men sat in silence, separated by a teapot, not looking at one another.

"I'm sorry," Iroh said quietly.

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

"It's been ten years," Iroh said, shaking his head ruefully, "there's no way Azula still-"

"If you think that my sister ever forgets a slight, you are kidding yourself," Zuko said dryly. "I know she hasn't forgotten it. She still has the knife in her boot."

"The knife? I thought I gave you the knife."

"And I gave it to her. I said…” Zuko trailed off and began again in a softer, more apologetic, tone. "I said that you were an old man and a fool. I said that she should take the knife and use it on anyone who insulted her like that again. Just in case I wasn't there to do it myself." He smiled, shaking his head. "I think that was the last time I ever saw her cry."
"She cried?"

"She was six, uncle. Almost seven. Her gempukku training was due to start soon and she was nervous. I... I was not making a very good show of it. I was constantly covered in bruises or in the medical wing. She was scared, and guilty about being scared, and then you sent her a gift that basically told her to go and play with her dollies."

"I DIDN'T intend-" Iroh cut off as he began coughing in pain.

"I know uncle," Zuko said softly after the coughing had subsided. "And honestly, so does she. But old wounds die hard, and there is nothing in this world my sister hates more than being patronized." He sighed. "The arrow, once loosed from the bow, goes as it will, and cannot be returned," he quoted.

Iroh smiled. "You've kept up your reading?"

"Yes, whenever I have a free moment. Usually when I'm waiting for-" he snapped his mouth shut.

"Waiting for?" Iroh asked, his eyebrows rising.

"Just... waiting." Zuko loved his uncle, but the man would be insufferable if he found out about Katara.

They sat for a moment in silence, sipping their tea.

"It will be a few days before I am strong enough, but I think the time is right to resume your training," Iroh said.

Zuko scratched at his neck exhaled in a huff. "So... you think we should travel together again? I will NOT beg," he said, repressing a snarl.

"I know," Iroh said quietly, "and it was wrong of me to imply that you should. I had forgotten what it was like to be young and proud."

"So, you're saying I was too full of-"

"NO. I am saying I was wrong, Zuko." Iroh said, shaking his head. "Not everything needs to be an argument. I was wrong. You are still Akodo, and you do not beg."

Zuko noted his lack of the plural but said nothing. Not everything has to be an argument.

"You seem calmer somehow, more focused," Iroh said, once again stroking his beard. "You have found some inner peace."

Zuko snorted. If he thinks that Katara gives me "inner peace"... well, he's never seen us argue.

"I think the time has come... for you to learn lightning," Iroh said, a grin splitting his face.

Whatever "inner peace" Iroh believed that Zuko had found, it had disappeared somewhere in the ruins a few days later.

"This is INFURIATING!" Zuko roared, so angry that fire shot out of his nostrils.

His uncle insisted that the lightning kata was all about division. Dividing yin from yang, splitting the
tiniest bit of fire one could imagine into two, and then releasing; allowing the two halves to come back together and guiding the force of their collision out through the arm as lightning.

The obvious problem was that, for all of Zuko's life, firebending had been about control. The idea of releasing that control and then simply guiding the forces was an alien concept. Not that he'd really even gotten to that point yet; he hadn't even gotten past "divide."

Dividing fire felt like trying to break a single grain of slippery rice exactly in half.

While wearing gloves.

At night.

On an angry rhino-lizard.

The more he focused, the more difficult it seemed to become, and the most he'd been able to muster was a series of loud back-blasting explosions.

Iroh sighed as Zuko fumed back to his feet again. "I did warn you. Not everyone is capable of lightning."

"Then why did you even BRING IT UP?!"

"Anger is a tool nephew," Iroh said, beginning to pace back and forth, lecturing. "It is like fire itself, it must be controlled to be useful, otherwise it simply burns. Your anger is a battleship's catapult; you need a pair of tweezers. I had hoped that your new-found calm would help you limit yourself, but it seems to have vanished in recent days."

Zuko said nothing, just gritted his teeth, and drew himself into the beginning stance again.

_Breathe in. Breathe out. Calm_, he thought furiously. _I am CALM._

He was NOT calm.

There was another explosion, and Zuko began to swear almost incoherently.

"Close your eyes, nephew."

Zuko obliged him as he regained his feet, still muttering curses and imprecations under his breath.

"At night, before you sleep, there is a look that comes over your face," Iroh said smoothly. "A look of complete calm. I do not know what you are thinking about, NOR, do I care," he said cutting off Zuko's startled protests. "Whatever it is, I want you to focus on that. Hold it in your mind… and start from there."

Zuko felt his face flush and closed his eyes again.

_Breathe in. Breathe out… Katara._

Her face swam in his mind. Beautiful, angry, sad, terrified, happy, sultry, smug, _peaceful._

_Breathe in… Breathe out… Katara._

He HAD it.

He had that blasted grain of rice. It felt… _different._ Not wrong per se, but… _odd_ somehow. He broke
it in two, his arms swirling fluidly through the sinuous motions of the lightning kata, then… he released.

There was no lightning.

There wasn't even any fire.

Just a massive, crashing, shock-wave of force, naked invisible force, that blasted him and his uncle off their feet, cracking the earth beneath them.

"What was that?" Iroh said, rising with a groan from where he'd landed.

"I… I have no idea. Are you alright?" Zuko said, noticing the way Iroh winced and rubbed at his wounded shoulder.

"Yes, yes, I will be fine," Iroh said, brushing off his concern. "Do you think you can do it again?"

"I don't know. I'm… not even sure I want to."

"You never fail to surprise me, nephew," Iroh said grinning proudly. "What were you thinking of?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Zuko… you know you can talk to me about anything," Iroh said a wry smile appearing on his face.

Oh crap. He thinks he knows something.

"I may not be your sensei anymore, but I will always be your uncle. I had hoped that we could at least-"

"TEA!" Zuko shouted.

Iroh looked at him blankly. "You were thinking about… tea?"

"Uh… yes? Tea is… good? We should have some!"

"…While I had always hoped that you would one day appreciate the wonder that is tea, I highly doubt that has suddenly become the case," Iroh said, his bushy eyebrows riding high on his forehead in skepticism.

"Uh… well… you see. Tea is…"

Tea is NOT Katara. That's what tea is!

"Tea is… WET. Yes. Tea is wet and… you said that we learned about lightning from waterbenders. So, water plus fire is tea… and… lightning?"

Iroh stared at him for another moment.

Oh yes. Brilliant work. My finest hour this is.

"Zuko, that is absolutely-" Iroh's face split into a huge grin- "BRILLIANT! I always knew you had it in you!"

Ok. Azula was right. Uncle is insane.

"Ah, but this gives me another idea," Iroh said, pounding his fist into his palm. "I will teach you a
NEW firebending move. One Azula doesn't even know, because I made it up myself."

Zuko grinned.

Iroh spent the better part of an hour lecturing Zuko on water style, redirecting attacks and adapting. Zuko had let him, he'd already given away too much about his... thing with Katara. Letting his uncle know that he'd been practicing water style for the past few weeks would only give him more clues. He would figure it out.

Zuko still wasn't sure how he felt about that.

So, he let his uncle prattle, listening intently anyways. An old sensei was always worth listening to.

Iroh had spoken of redirecting lightning. Of clearing a path through your body for it, letting it pass through and out without harm.

"In one arm-" Iroh traced the path with his fingers- "down into the stomach... and out the other arm," he finished slowly. "Remember, the detour through the stomach is crucial. If the lightning passes through your heart it will tear it to pieces. The stomach, the 'sea of chi,' is your center of being. It will allow the lightning safe passage." Iroh chuckled and patted his belly. "Although, in MY case it is more a 'vast ocean of chi.'"

"Alright," Zuko said with a nod. "I think I have it." He took the beginning stance, left hand forward, two fingers extended.

"Good. Now let's have some tea," Iroh said turning away.

"I would rather practice this while your instruction is still fresh," Zuko said, not releasing the stance.

Iroh blinked. "Are you crazy? Lightning is very dangerous!" he said, aghast, backing away from his nephew.

"Yes. Which I why it is important to get this rig-"

"I'm not going to shoot lightning at you!"

"How, in the Sun's holy name, am I supposed to LEARN then?!" Zuko said, dropping his stance, and glaring at his uncle.

"If you are lucky you will never have to use this technique at all. This is merely a precaution."

"A precaut- Uncle..." Zuko made a desperate stab at calm. "Azula is going to come after us at some point. She HAS lightning. If I do not learn this by then..." he trailed off. Azula was a good samurai, and Zuko was certain that she would not hesitate when the time came again.

"If I shoot lightning at you and you don't get it right you will DIE," Iroh said, eyes flashing dangerously. "There is danger in all training, but this is not something you can do by degrees. I will NOT be responsible for the death of another-" he bit his lip and looked away.

Lu Ten, Zuko thought. He still blames himself for Lu Ten.

"I understand Uncle," he began more gently. "But if I have to fight Azula again... one of us is going to die." He grit his teeth in guilty shame and fury. "I... I don't want to have to kill my sister."
Still weak. Oh, so weak.

Iroh sighed and looked east, away from the now setting sun. "There is a storm coming," he said indicating the dark clouds on the horizon. "It will pass through the mountains. Perhaps, if the spirits favor you, you will find what you need there."

Zuko only nodded, exhaling deeply. Without another word he found the komodo-lizard and set off.

The sky was pitch black above him on the mountaintop as he climbed. The rain had started coming down a few minutes after the terrain had grown to steep for his mount and hadn't let up since.

He'd barely noticed.

"OSANO-WO!" Zuko shouted above the howling wind, invoking the name of the kami of thunder on the top of the mountain.

As he had climbed he had felt his fury rising. Anger at his uncle, at the world, at himself. Sick with guilt, at his foolish sentiment, his weakness; and it poured out of him making his voice hoarse as he roared.

"COME ON THEN!" he roared at the heavens. "YOU'VE NEVER HELD BACK BEFORE!"

Thunder rumbled, but there was no lightning.

Pathetic, a voice whispered. Going to all these lengths, not for honor, not for duty, just so you don't have hurt your sister. WEAK!

Zuko growled in fury, still glaring at the pitch-black sky.

Without compassion, there can be neither honor nor duty. Katara had said. How can anyone claim to rule without understanding? Zuko blinked, it was as if he could hear her speaking to him, almost as if she was standing right behind him. He spun around…

… and found his FATHER glaring down at him.

You will LEARN respect, Ozai roared, a giant figure striding out of the rain, advancing on Zuko, In PAIN and SUFFERING! Zuko, eye wide in shock, took a few unconscious steps backward

I see the strength of the stone in you boy, Iroh said, appearing out of the rain Zuko's right. I don't think you realize how rare a person you are, to have suffered so much and still keep going.

Ash and bone, Zuko! Azula swore, appearing at his side. You're starting to SOUND like him as well!

Suddenly the wind was full of voices. Screaming at him, taunting him, praising him, chiding him, damning him. He whipped from side to side, his hand on his sword, his eye wide in superstitious terror as specters, alive and dead, surrounded him.

Suddenly it all fell away.

Listen to me, a voice whispered in the silence, everything I've done, I've done to protect you. Remember this, Zuko. No matter how things may seem to change, never forget who you are.

"…Mom?"
When was that? I don't... don't...

Suddenly he was small again. Just turned nine, out in the northern plains on a training exercise, fast asleep in his tent.

"No. That was a dream," he whispered. "Just... just a dream."

It hadn't been. His mother had been there. Why was she there? She should have been in the palace with father and... grandfather.

Everything I've done... she whispered.

"What did you do?"

...I've done to protect you...

"WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

The next day he had been recalled to the capital. His grandfather was dead. The Fire-Lord was DEAD and his mother was...

Everything I've done...

"...no"

...I've done to protect you...

"NO!" he howled, tears joining the rain as the cacophony of voices resumed.

Why am I so stupid? How could I not... how could I not have...

Everything I've done... I've done to protect you.

She had killed Fire-Lord Azulon. It was the only explanation. She had killed his grandfather and there was only one sentence for a crime of that magnitude. He had no doubt that his father had carried it out.

To do otherwise would have been weakness.

Everything I've done... I've done to protect you.

done to protect you.

protect you.

YOU.

"She's dead... and it's all my fault," he whispered.

Silence fell again, but this time something else filled it.

Mad cackling laughter.

Waves of fire cascaded around the mountainside, boiling the rain and scorching the stone as the madness surged forward and seized Zuko's mind. Whatever it was that he had done before, he did it again, and again and again. Shocking booming wild crashes of force and sound shook the air around him, cracking stone, and tilting trees. Even the storm took damage, stray blasts of force punching
holes in the cloud cover.

Thunder rumbled loudly overhead.

STOP.

The madman stopped, his head tilted to the side curiously, his face caught in a painful rictus somewhere between a grin and a snarl, the rain boiling at his feet.

Go. Away.

"burn it, burn it, burn it ALL," the madman muttered, shaking his head in denial.

GO. AWAY.

"heeeeeee'sssss miiiiinnnne," the thing hissed.

I am proud of you, Iroh said, smiling.

I'm sorry too, Azula said sadly.

You're lucky you're cute, Katara sighed.

Never forget who you are, Ursa whispered.

I CAST YOU OUT, roared the Akodo.

Zuko gasped for air, like a man held underwater a moment too long, the rain sheeting down completing the illusion. He felt as though his insides had been ripped out and as he struggled to his feet, panting, he looked around, confusion coloring his exhausted face.

What was I…

The thunder rumbled above him, almost… questioningly.

As though in a dream he began to move, arms moving in a sinuous motion.

Inhale. Exhale… Katara.

Nobody kills you but ME! She laughed.

Divide. Channel the energy…

Instead of releasing the two halves however, he found his arms swinging towards one another in front of him. His right hand bounced off his left, seeming to smash the two pieces of fire back together, and hurling them outwards, forcing a roar from him at the same time.

A roar that was matched with the sound of thunder.

BOOOOOOOOM!

Thunder, just thunder, roared out from his hands, shaking the rain in front of him.

Guess that will have to do, Zuko thought, panting with effort and fatigue.

He bowed double.
"MY THANKS, OSANO-WO!"

The thunder rumbled.

A/N: Greeting fiction fans and welcome to the author's notes! Bring you all the notes that I can think of, and some that just occur to me as I prattle on! Hope you enjoyed my take on a virety of Zuko-related events today, including but not limited to, "the storm", "Zuko alone" and various other elements of my own design. If you didn't enjoy them, (or did) feel free to leave me a comment/review and tell me about it. Even if this is the distant future, and the world is overrun with sentient robots from Neptune, I will most assuredly enjoy seeing my inbox full. For those of you who are commenting/reviewing always remember that YOU are the MVPs.

/drum roll
META-BITS! /cymbal crash

All about Azula: The Azula-Iroh dynamic has always intrigued me. In canon and without they surprisingly seem to have very little interaction despite living in the same building, and standing NEXT to one another at Zuko's Agni Kai. Generally, Azula seems to ignore Iroh presence(crystal caves), or to straight up explode at him (episode 1 of this season or during "the chase"). There is something going on there that is never fully explored in canon. It could be as simple as "daddy hates him and so I must as well" but I like my explanation better. It gives us an Iroh that is more flawed and human, and an Azula that has a better backstory. So now you know where that knife has been, I regret nothing.

The troubles with spirits: The Avatar's world, much like L5R's, has a very potent spiritual environment. Being haunted is not particularly uncommon in L5R and so when Zuko goes up to a mountain and basically dares a god to hit him... well, results may vary. Again I think Osanao-wo heard him and basically said, "bold move, I got something for YOU pal." Then gave him a sweet parting gift. I like the parallel here between Zuko and Azula, Azula practicing the same move over and over again (almost isn't GOOD enough) and Zuko just going and shouting at things for honor.

Much like Zuko "sword of flame" I'm very much about giving our boy cool protagonist powers, but limiting their utility and usefulness so as to NOT make him super-OP. Not a fan of OP-ness, just not as interesting to me.

YMMV

Ursa: Zuko is now pretty sure that his mom is dead. It wasn't something I had really touched on over much until this point except to show Zuko's thought shyng away from thinking about it overmuch. I imagine he was kept deliberately busy so that he wouldn't ask to many questions. Also, for reasons known only to my brain, I decided that Zuko wasn't in the palace when it happened. Not sure WHY I did that but, I like it. It works for me. So, take-aways, Ursa's dead, Zuko's pretty sure it his fault, though he has no idea why, and thus there is grief/madness.

Hey, thanks again for reading! I know you're all busy with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (or their non-american equivalents) and any time you spend on my stuff is just pure
gold for me. You rock!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"

Iroh drinks Tea! Old friends are found and a plan is hatched.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 7 October 2018
The Long and Winding Road

Chapter Notes

A/N: The Following is Rated M; for Moving right along.

It contains a variety of dialog from season 2

Reader discretion is advised.

Spring, Year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

It turned out that the Burning Sands were HOT.

*Hence the damned name,* Zuko growled at himself.

The hardpan seemed to stretch out forever, scraping the very edges of the sky. The monotony of the land broken up only by the occasional slowly shifting dune that seemed to crash like a wave in an almost haunting lethargy as Zuko's komodo-lizard carried him and his uncle forward.

*At least I don't have to WALK across it.*

In legend one of Zuko's ancestors had done just that. Prince Toturi, who would later go on to challenge his brother Fire-Lord Arasou for the throne, had been something of an explorer and scholar. He had written extensively of the "sublime stillness and wonder" that was the desert. Hidden in between the lines of that text, however, was the record of the several dozen men and women who didn't come back out with him. Lost to dehydration, heat exhaustion, madness and "sizzle-skin," an unpleasant affliction that only seemed to bother firebenders lost in the desert.

That was one of the things that had always bothered Zuko. When discussing firebending with the uninitiated, they always seemed to assume that a firebender must *love* the heat. Must simply *revel* in it. Fire was *hot,* and so, obviously, a firebender must like that sort of thing.

Upon reflection, Zuko supposed that he and his fellows enjoyed it just as much as any other bender enjoyed being *saturated* in their element. As much as an earthbender enjoyed being *buried alive* or a waterbender enjoyed being lost at sea. A firebender exuded heat, radiated it, and in the endless burning expanse of daylit sand there was nowhere for it to *go.* Hence "sizzle-skin." The night, during which they actually traveled, wasn't at bad thankfully. The cold was a soothing balm after the grinding near sleepless misery that was the day.

It was, of course, not as soothing as he had found Katara, but in Zuko's entire life he'd never found anything quite *that* calming. She was a virtual siphon for his normally simmering temper. He had almost gotten used to her being around, and her absence had become… uncomfortable.

Now all he had was his uncle… who was not *particularly* soothing.

"OOhh. Aaggg. Ugggg."

Zuko ignored his uncle's over-the-top groaning and continued to steer their komodo-lizard through the starlit sands.
"Are you alright uncle?" Zuko said, the moonlight illuminating a throbbing vein in his forehead. This would not the first time his uncle had leaned on his injury as a reason for stopping to take a tea break.

Not even the first time tonight.

"Oh. No. Don't stop on my account," Iroh said, in apparent misery.

"Very well. I won't."

An entire dune passed in silence.

"Erg. Oog. Aah."

"Ash and BONE, uncle!" Zuko roared as he wrenched the komodo-lizard to a halt.

"What?"

"How, in Akodo's name, did you ever lead an entire army if you had to stop every other hour?!" Zuko spat, dismounting in a huff. "If we ever want to get OUT of this damned desert we need to keep mov-"

"Ah but you forget, nephew," Iroh began, his sandals hitting the sand as well, "I was so much younger then. And, unless I'm very much mistaken about the day, we are about to see the wonder of the dragon-turtle's meteor shower on the western horizon. Obviously, we need to stop and…"

Zuko, vein still throbbing in his temple, glared at his uncle malevolently.

"I mean… this wound is so grievous! I must rest!"

"…Let me see your shoulder," Zuko growled.

"…What?"

"If it is bothering you so much then I should see if I can't fix it," Zuko said as he slowly stalked forward, glowering at his uncle.

"WHAT? No, no that's just fine nephew. These things… they just take time!" Iroh said backing away, clutching his kimono to his chest in a fair impression of a scandalized woman.

"You… old… FAKE!!" Zuko roared, grabbing at his kimono. "If there is even a scab anymore I will EAT my sandals."

The two of them struggled in an inelegant manner for a long minute; muttered curses and mock scandalized assurances of innocence rolling around in the dunes.

Then somebody cleared their throat.

The two former Lion samurai paused for the briefest of moments, then sprang to their feet, backs together for protection, fire appearing at their hands. They found themselves surrounded, the shadowed forms of rhino-lizard cavalry having taken positions around them on the tops of dunes.

"You two done?" growled a familiar voice.
"Haki?" Zuko asked, peering into the dark, not dropping his stance.

The man in question summoned fire into his hand, the burst of orange illuminating his normally genial bearded face. He didn't look overly happy at the moment however, and next to him, on a mount of his own, was Zuko's former infantry Sgt-turned-officer Uesugi Rin who had the same grim look he always wore.

"I'm sorry, but you've got to come with us sir," Rin said.

"Go with you where?" Zuko asked, knowing the answer before he even asked.

Haki and Rin glanced at each other out of the corners of their eyes.

"Her Highness…" Rin began.

"Is too busy to come and deal with me herself," Zuko growled. "Well, lieutenant, I'm afraid that I must deny your request."

"It's captain now, sir."

"Really?" Zuko said with a sneer. "Well at least your services were not cheaply bought. When did YOU become so concerned with rank, Captain?"

"Since my family's fortunes became dependent on it, sir." Rin's normally calm demeanor turned sheepish for a moment. "It's Bo sir. She's pregnant."

"And what that to do with… YOU?" Zuko's jaw dropped. "But you… she…" Zuko was stunned. Lt Bo, Zuko's former engineer, was only a touch over half Rin's age.

"She made a very convincing argument, and her parents were far more comfortable with her marrying a captain than a simple lieutenant."

"Congratulations!" Iroh said, beaming. "I was always rooting for you two!"

Zuko shook his head, dismissing the image of his rather happy-go-lucky twenty-something lieutenant standing next to the dour forty-year-old sergeant he'd served with since he had been fifteen. "Well I would HATE to make Bo a widow," he said narrowing his eye. "Leave. NOW."

"I can't do that sir."

"You can, and you will Captain. That's an order."

"We don't take orders from you anymore, ronin," Haki shouted. Then he spurred his mount forward down the dune, bending fire at the same time.

Zuko dodged and ducked, bent fire at Haki and parried Rin's lightning quick strikes as best he could. He was pleased to note that his former subordinates had at least formulated a strategy to fight him to
their best advantage. They remained on either side of him, taking advantage of his lack of depth perception and peripheral vision. They drew him back and forth between the two of them, not allowing him to engage and overwhelm either of them in turn.

Their only mistake was that they thought they had seen everything that Zuko had to offer, that they knew everything he was capable of.

"Never assume the enemy will remain the same. The enemy is a living thing, and the only constant in life is change," Akodo had written.

Time to see if this works as well here as it does in practice.

Zuko seized one of Haki's wilder blasts of fire, amplifying it and sending it spinning around him in a brief hurricane of fire, creating space between himself and his two attackers, giving him just enough time to center himself and…

Divide and…

"rrrrrr-AAAHHHHHHH!" Zuko roared, driving his fist into the ground, creating a thundering shockwave that sent a ripple through the sands and sent Rin and Haki flying backwards, almost fifteen feet, knocking them senseless.

"Uncle! We're leaving!" Zuko shouted, running to mount his komodo-lizard.

"Waiting on YOU, nephew," Iroh said with a toothy smile from his seat on top of one of his enemies' mounts.

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"They're my men."

"Zuko, they're not your soldiers anymore."

"True, but they're not really my enemies either. They're my people. I have a responsibility to them, a duty. They're not doing anything dishonorable, and I have the ability to defeat them without killing them. Seems simple enough to me."

"Even if we have to hide in caves?"

Zuko shrugged.

"Tell me what's in your head," Iroh said gently. "Please."

Zuko was silent for a long moment.

"I have been contemplating the nature of duty, uncle. 'A samurai is intensely loyal to those in his care. To those he is responsible for, he remains fiercely true,' Akodo said. Though I am disowned, cast out by my family-"

"Present company excluded," Iroh said.

"Present company excluded," Zuko agreed with a small nod. "In spite of that, I am not released from my duty, from my oaths. 'Even if all friendship and glory desert me. Even though the land be swallowed by the sea, and the very Sun falls from the sky.' That's how long they last. The Fire-Lord has released me, but I am not sure that that releases me from my duty to my people; even if some of those people are trying to kill me. In fact, I believe you once told me that my duty to my people supersedes my duty to the throne. Even scarred, exiled, and stripped of name I do not contemplate killing my father. So why would I kill the soldiers I helped train, who helped train me? The ones who fought by my side." He snorted in mirth. "Besides, I was not lying before. I would hate to make Bo a widow. She deserves better."

"She does indeed," Iroh said with a chuckle. "You really had NO idea about…"

"None whatsoever. I'd have had to censure them for fraternization if I had. When in the Sun's name did that happen?"

"Just after the Kyoshi raid, I think."

"After Kyoshi? Ash and bone, I am an idiot."

"There was a betting pool actually; on when you'd figure it out. I lost ten koku," Iroh said, grimacing in remembrance.

"And there was gambling as well? Truly I was remiss in my duties," Zuko said sarcastically. Gambling was one of those things that was technically against shipboard regulations but was only enforced by the truly stupid. Soldiers liked to gamble, and as long as they weren't taking advantage of one another, thus causing a loss in good order and discipline, most officers turned a blind eye to it.

"Well, you did have other things you were focusing on," Iroh said, smiling amiably.

Zuko grunted in the affirmative, his eye turning back to his contemplation of the desert.

Zuko had been contemplating the nature of duty, but more specifically, an argument he'd had with Katara. Apparently, she thought that samurai had "a duty to care for all peoples." She thought that all
people should be treated as though they were her own tribesmen, as though she had a responsibility for every living person on the planet. Zuko didn't agree, didn't understand it, but, given his feelings for the girl, he was doing his best to simply accept it.

Absolutely ridiculous.

He smiled.

Charming, but ridiculous.

He shook his head, banishing thoughts of her. No matter how pleasant they were, they were a distraction from vigilance. It was also unlikely that he would be seeing her again anytime soon and frankly, he was glad. He didn't want to drag her into another conflict, she already had enough of those to be getting on with.

"It was good to see them again," Zuko said, bringing the conversation back to their pursuers. "Although I find myself wishing that I still had friends that weren't trying to murder me."

"…Friends that aren't trying to murder us, huh?" Iroh mused for a moment. "I think I have an idea!"

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"Your idea was to play PAI SHO?" Zuko snarled quietly in his uncle's ear.

After Rin and Haki had come and gone from the oasis, following the false trail Zuko had lain, Iroh had led the two of them north, moving at speed. After a few nights of tense travel, they made it to the oasis town of En'u Yashinoku. While once, before the war, the area around the miraculous ice fountain had been a major tourist attraction, the village now resembled nothing more than a poorer, seedier, sandier version of Tohin Wo. Bandits, sandbenders and other assorted scum roamed the streets, gambling and fighting, blades bare in their hands.

Incongruously, in the other hand, most of them also carried a variety of fruit cocktails, in large cups carved from ice, that would have looked more at home in the hands of academy co-eds back in the Fire-Nation.

They even had little umbrellas in them.

Iroh had led Zuko and their mounts straight to the most disreputable looking tavern at the town center and once there had ordered two of the fruity alcoholic beverages. After Zuko had paid for them, Iroh shoved one in his hands and then made his way to a Pai Sho table in the corner of the bar, seating himself across from an older, significantly less seedy looking gentleman.

Despite his nephew's muttered curses and snarls Iroh said nothing, only having eyes for the game once he had sat down. He played against his opponent with an unusual methodical rhythm, eschewing his normal tact of peppering his play with puns, witticisms, and laughter. Throughout he remained quiet, almost solemn.

"Well played," Iroh's opponent said after nearly a half hour of silent play. "Welcome brother. The White Lotus opens wide to those who know her secrets."

"The wha-" Zuko question was cut off as the door to the bar flew open, admitting Rin and a semi-furious Haki. Apparently, they had doubled back to the oasis.

"It's OVER ronin!" Haki shouted. "You're coming with us!"
Iroh and his opponent shared a look. Iroh nodded slightly.

Zuko leapt to his feet, throwing his nearly empty ice bowl aside as he did so. "I am really getting tired of you tw-"

"I KNEW IT!" Iroh's Pia Sho "brother" shouted, surprisingly loudly for such a small man. "You two are wanted criminals with a GIANT BOUNTY on your heads! You two think you're going to capture them and collect ALL THAT GOLD?!"

Haki looked confused.

Zuko did as well, but after a beat he grinned.

Rin put his back to Haki and his hand on his sword.

"It's the flaming pirates all over again," he grumbled, narrowed eyes sweeping the bar.

The entire bar, full of bandits and other assorted dregs of humanity, was now on their feet, weapons to hand, greedy glints in their eyes.

After an entirely too brief pause they pounced, almost as one, and it turned into a free-for-all.

Zuko excelled at free-for-alls.

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After the three of them managed to surreptitiously extract themselves from what had become a madcap brawl Iroh's Pai Sho friend led them to a flower shop on the outskirts of town.

How or why an impoverished village full of bandits and scum would have such a thing as a flower shop was a question that remained unanswered.

Zuko, still dripping and stinking of alcohol and fruit juices, was left cooling his heels in the front of the shop while Iroh and several other mysterious people inclined to the "cryptic arts" had a meeting in the backroom. He emerged several hours later, with false Earth-Kingdom paperwork and a plan to smuggle them all the way to Ba Sing Se.

"It's the safest place in the entire Earth-Kingdom nephew," he said, dismissing Zuko's skeptical look. "After all, not even I was able to get in!"

Ba Sing Se. The impenetrable city. The great enemy. The great Kaiu wall had stood for thousands of years as both a marvel of engineering and earthbending, guarding the great city's fertile rice lands from their ancient enemies, a now extinct race of legendary creatures collectively called "the Oni."

In the modern era however, that wall stood as a challenge. An implicit suggestion that, perhaps, the Fire-Nation was not as powerful as they thought they were. Only one man had ever breached the wall, and Zuko happened to be his nephew. Beyond the Kaiu lay the smaller, but no less impenetrable, Uchi wall which protected the city itself. Iroh might have torn that one down as well if his son had not fallen in battle, and Iroh himself not fallen into the madness.

The Kaiu wall was so monumental a project, so intrinsic to the identity of Ba Sing Se and the Crab dojo as a whole, that the workers who had been involved in its construction had all been given the honor of a surname. The Kaiu "family," had it been organized like a traditional noble family, would have probably been the largest in the world. The surname was even common in the Fire-Nation colonies and Zuko's very first retainer had born the name.
Now, it seemed that Zuko was to bear the name as well as he snuck into the city, disguised as a refugee no less.

The two former Akodos departed En'u Yashinoku concealed in two large flower pots, abandoning their mounts amid the sounds of still enduring battle. Even from the inside of the earthenware pot, Zuko could still hear Haki roaring.

As they traveled further north, now riding with the pots instead of inside them, the desert gave way to badlands, which quickly gave way to a thin strip of fertile land which clung to the banks of the Mangetsu river as it flowed into Chameleon Bay. While the larger bay area was still under Fire-Nation control (thanks in no small part to Zuko) the mouth of the eastward flowing river was still in Earth-Kingdom hands, with the great fortress of Shiro Yasuki overlooking it and the safe refuge port of Full Moon Bay.

Using their newly acquired identification "Kaiu Mushi" and his scowling nephew "Ping" joined the massive crowds that were fleeing before the Fire-Nation advance, purchasing tickets for a ferry that would see them across the river and up a tributary to a hidden port just outside the wall. Zuko did his best to blend in with the rest of the refugees but found it difficult where it wasn't flatly impossible. The huddled masses were cowed, stoop-shouldered and shambling, where Zuko, for the most part, stood and sat with his back ramrod straight.

Iroh managed the deception far more easily, laughing and joking with people, occasionally singing for coins, much to Zuko's embarrassment.

After waiting an interminable time in line to buy their tickets, they spent nearly another day camped out in the underground docks simply waiting for the next ferry to arrive. When it did, Zuko joined the line to have his papers checked before boarding.

"Do I know you?" one of the customs agents said, examining his passport and his face.

"I do not think so," Zuko said tersely.

The guard was a surprisingly attractive woman, with big blue eyes, red-brown hair, and a pair of tessen at her hips.

"How'd you get the scar?" she asked glancing back at his paperwork.

"The Fire-Nation," Zuko replied. This was in keeping with the backstory provided for in their false identities and was what Zuko had started telling people in the Earth-Kingdom who dared to ask. Usually, that was enough to make people stop asking questions.

Instead, the guard chuckled. "Yeah, I've got a couple of those myself," she said patting her tessen. "Comes with the territory."

"You are a Kyoshi warrior," Zuko said. It was less a question and more a statement of fact.

"You've heard of us?" the girl said, beaming.

"I have several friends who speak highly of your skills with the tessen," he said, bowing politely.

The guard stuck her hand out. "I'm Suzuki Suki. No jokes please, I've heard them all."

…SUKE? Oh shit.

"Kaiu Ping," Zuko said, bowing again.
"In the Earth-Kingdom we shake hands, Ping," Suki said, cocking an eyebrow.

"In the Fire-Nation… Colonies, we don't"

"Well you're not in the Colonies anymore," Suki said with a smile. "Put 'er there."

Flaming Barbarians.

Despite his misgivings, Zuko put "er" there.

"See, that wasn't so tough, was it?" Suki said and then mused for a moment. "You might not want to tell people you're from the Colonies from now on though. The city can be… rough. A lot of overcrowding. Some people will take any excuse to start trouble."

"I thank you for your advice, Ms. Suzuki. May I pass?" The line behind Zuko was beginning to grow restless.

"You're sure we've never met?" she said, peering at him.

Zuko thought back to the raid on Kyoshi Island, over a year ago now. The woman before him looked remarkably different without her traditional makeup, but he remembered holding her at sword point, roaring for the Avatar to stop hiding and face him, and burning down her village.

But he wasn't that man anymore. Akodo Zuko had died on the banks of the Kashi-no-Ki. He was the ronin Ping.

"In a different life perhaps," he said.

Suki shrugged and waved him on.

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"Who would have thought that after all these years I'd return to the scene of my greatest military disgrace… as a tourist!"

Iroh beamed out at the waters of the Mangetsu underneath a ridiculous flowered hat he had acquires from somewhere. Zuko, standing beside him at the port side rail, frowned down at him.

"Be cautious uncle. I was nearly recognized coming on to the boat."

"Don't be such a pessimist nephew," Iroh said, nudging him with an elbow and leering. "That girl was flirting with you. She was very pretty."

Zuko rolled his eye.

The journey upriver to Ba Sing Se was expected to take almost a week, and twice a day the huddled refugees, who for the most part lived and slept under the open sky above deck, would line up at the aft of the boat to receive a bowl of stew to eat.

Zuko had initially been pleased to hear that there was to be stew, recalling the wonder that had been Senla's stew back in Haiya. He was, however, bitterly disappointed. This stew was practically a sacrilege by comparison. The meat, which looked suspiciously like ostrich-horse, was half rotten. The broth was more water than stock and the vegetables made the meat look fresh.

"This is disgusting."
"Food is food, nephew," Iroh said pacifyingly. Despite his words, he didn't appear to want to eat any more of the swill himself.

"What sort of honorless dog feeds starving peasants like this?"

"You ain't wrong," a voice said.

A young man around Zuko’s age strode over to them. He was lightly armored and had a piece of long grass between his teeth, but Zuko paid more attention to the pair of hook-swords slung over his back.

Anyone who carried those was either exceptionally dangerous or a complete idiot.

In a worst-case scenario, they were both.

"I'm Jet," the man said, and gestured to the two shorter men behind him. "These are my friends, Smellerbee and Longshot."

Zuko considered them for a moment, then lifted out his hand to shake.

*Might as well get used to this barbarian custom.*

"Kaiu Ping," Zuko said, doing his best not to scowl at his own name. They shook hands.

"Well Kaiu, I ain't much fond of the food myself. 'Specially the fact that while we sit out here, eating mold and bugs, the captain of the boat eats like a King."

"What kind of a King?" Iroh asked.

"The fat and happy kind," Jet said with a sneer.

"You speak like someone who already has something in mind," Zuko said flatly.

"Yeah. Not too complicated friend. We sneak in, take the food, hand out the foot, eat the food. Simple." He gave Zuko what he seemed to think was a winning grin. "What d'yah think?"

*Don't be a fool. These aren't your people. This is a needless risk.*

Zuko cast his eye over the miserable people picking at stinking swill.

We have a duty to care for all peoples everywhere, Katara had said.

…FINE. We'll try it her way.

"I have always preferred to keep things simple," Zuko responded.

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All things considered, it was the least dangerous stealth mission Zuko had ever been on.

Security was non-existent. There were no traps, ambushes, or patrol patterns to memorize. No enemy at the end of the maze to duel and NO Tsurushi archers to generally just fuck things up.

The aftermath was a relatively new experience however.

As they passed out the foodstuffs, the refugees smiled, and in some case, even wept in gratitude. It had probably been years since anyone had looked at Zuko like that.
Probably sometime before you found the Avatar.

It made him uncomfortable, and so, a single bowl of rice in hand, he retreated from the milling crowd and went to the edge of the boat to think.

Was this the right choice? Certainly, it was easy, but there will be consequences later.

He knew for certain that this was what Katara would have done, she probably would have had the whole boat up in arms, but Zuko wasn't sure if that was really an endorsement or not. The girl was entirely too kind and didn't really consider second order effects.

Not that I have much room to talk. I'm the one who tried to drag the Avatar overtop of a glacier during a blizzard. But no matter how righteous this cause was, there WILL be consequences. I wouldn't be surprised if-

"Yah know, as soon as I saw your scar, I knew exactly who you were," Jet said from behind him, startling him away from his thoughts.

Zuko hand dropped to the scabbard of his katana.

"You're an outcast, just like me," Jet continued. "Us outcasts have gotta stick together. We have to watch one another's back. 'Cause nobody else will."

Zuko took his hand from his sword and fixed Jet with a look. "What are you suggesting?"

"Well, I used to have a little group of friends back home. We'd… look out for each other, work together on… projects. I think you'd have fit in just fine."

"You know nothing about me."

"I know you're skilled. I know you ain't afraid to do what it takes, whatever it takes. I know you like to keep things simple. Ain't much more I need to know," Jet said smirking at him. "City up ahead is supposed to be on the rough side. It's good to have friends."

Zuko began to respond but Jet cut him off. "Don't have to answer now. Just give it till the boat docks. You'll see I'm right." With that, he turned and walk away.

Zuko scowled at his back, and then turned and scowled at the moonlit river.

I'm beginning to think that this whole plan was a BAD idea.

A/N: Happy Sunday sports fans (or if you are reading this in the future, happy whatever day of the week it is, provided our robot overlords still allow you access to a calendar) Hope you enjoyed the semi-long ramble fest that was "the long and winding road." So much ground covered, so many corners cut. Anyway, thanks for reading all the way to the end and if you liked it, why not leave a comment/review. Or a kudos. Or just, you know, good vibrations, or something. The Beach Boys and I both love them good vibrations. Anyway…

Met-AAAAAAA-BITS!/sound of thunder

No rough rhinos: Now, to be clear, I'm not suggesting that Rin and/or Haki were the ones responsible for burning down Jet's village (which was another of those plot lines that never
really got resolved). They might have been, but I'm not touching on that at all, or at least have no PLANS to do so. So instead of adding new (admittedly canon) characters I've simply substituted my own OCs into their place. Because I can, that's why. They also take the place of Toph's bending teacher (whose name escapes me and I am too lazy to look up) and Xin Fu as the bounty hunters in misty palms oasis (now named En'u Yashinoku, thank you google translate). I thought it would be good to just touch base with them a bit. But that said you can assume the that the Rough Rhinos ARE still a thing, but just not here and not chasing Zuko at the moment.

The Crab dojo: So now comes a bit of exposition where I talk about the OTHER aspect of this fusion in great (and probably exhausting) detail. If you don't care, which is a perfectly acceptable state of mind, feel free to skip to the next bit. Still here? Awesome. In L5R the main antagonist is a devil/hades/slumbering-darkness type guy named Fu Leng. A seriously bad dude. He fell from heaven and landed in the realm of the dead, from there he sort of burst out into the mortal world all evil and scary-like with a horde of demons and other horrible abomination things. The Crab clan's entire purpose in life is the defense of the empire from those things and the Shadowlands at large. To that end, they DID build a giant-ass wall (a wall of china homage) and they man it with a intensity. So that's their deal. For the purposes of THIS fusion, you can assume that the tales of demons and oni are more legendary, having happened in the distant, distant past. Legend of Korra places the first Avatar 10,000 years prior to the modern era and I have accepted that number as a sort of "age of heroes" for this world. 10,000 years ago saw the wars against the demons, the rise of bushido, the foundations of the dojos, the birth of the first avatar, and a variety of other legendary events. Honestly, the presence of the wall in Ba Sing Se, and Zuko's honor obsession were the first two parallels that got this fusion idea a rolling, thus consuming a considerable portion of my free time.

I regret NOTHING.

Jet: So I don't know if it's something I should be apologizing for, but for some reason, when I started writing Jet's dialog... he decided that he was from Texas. I assure you that that was never something I planned, HE frigging decided, NOT me. SO you will probably have noticed that, and will continue to notice it, because if nothing else I will always run with something I think works. Weird, random and possibly off-putting or not, I run. Anyway, Jet's here with all his smirking, shit-eating grinning and charisma. We all have SOME idea of how this is going to turn out, don't we?

Well, that's it! Good work everyone! A true team effort. Remember I'm always open to concrit and reviews/comments. If you like (or hate) my work always feel free to tell me about it. Please use proper grammar when you bash me though, otherwise I FAR more likely to just ignore it.

Thanks AGAIN!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Iroh drinks tea! Zuko gets angry, and the police are summoned!
TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 14 October 2018
Welcome to Ba Sing Se

Chapter Notes

A/N: The Following is rated A; for anger.

It contains dialog from several episodes in Season 2.

Reader discretion is advised.

Spring, year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

The Kaiu wall was unbelievable.

Zuko had seen reports, sketches, firsthand accounts. He had had it described to him by the only man in history to have ever breached it as an enemy combatant.

None of that prepared Zuko for it. Nothing could have. Hearing about it was one thing, seeing it was another matter entirely.

The Kaiu Wall dwarfed mountains.

It stood, looming on the horizon like a grey storm front for days, as the ferry moved northward, steadily growing more and more distinct, more and more tangible.

More and more impossible.

From the age of nine, after his uncle's unexpected failure and his father's ascension, Zuko had been told that this was his destiny. This wall, this city, this war. He had learned the city with much the same dogged persistence as he had learned the sword and the sacred art of bending. Its conquest was the last hurdle, the last real hold out against the dream of Oda; world conquest.

Although, to be fair, the Crane had proven to be a far more formidable opponent than previously expected; the wrath of one of the great Kami notwithstanding.

The ferry ride had grown tense as the wall had appeared on the horizon. As Zuko had predicted, the captain of the boat had not been amused by the loss of his personal foodstuffs. The refugees were treated to a very stern lecture about the burdens of leadership and their proper place in the grand order of things. Threats were made, but the people of earth were a solid bunch and none of them came forward to condemn Jet, Zuko, or the others.

For his part, Zuko was pleased to see someone else on the receiving end of the classic "stony silence" of the earth peasants for a change. He himself had gotten his fill of it during his campaign in Chameleon Bay and from encounters with the less civilized portions of the Fire-Nation Colonies.

The downside was that, for the last three days of the journey, they weren't fed at all.

As Zuko sat meditating, ignoring the hunger pains that he now knew were merely feeble impersonations or real hunger, Jet angrily stalked back and forth and fumed aloud to anyone who would listen about the "arrogance of the samurai." At no point did he attempt to take personal
responsibility for their situation, or even show the slightest indication that he might have made a tactical error. That more than anything else made up Zuko's mind.

Jet was an idiot.

Not only was Jet an idiot, but he also gave off the strong impression that he expected to be in charge of any partnership he might make with Zuko.

As if I would let some wakizashi-less PEASANT command me.

Jet's two friends, Smellerbee and Longshot, seemed decent enough however. From what little Zuko had seen of them, and based on the way they carried themselves, he believed them to be competent fighters. Amusingly, Smellerbee had almost started a brawl when Iroh had mentioned that he found the name "unusual for a young man." Smellerbee, who had then revealed that she was, in fact, a girl, threatened to shave off Iroh's eyebrows while he slept. Luckily, Longshot had managed to defuse the situation with the simple expedient of staring at her and holding her hand gently.

Which, of course, made Zuko think of Katara again.

Nobody is quite so beautifully furious as she can be.

Eventually the tributary they traveled on flowed into an underground dock, much like the one they had left in Full Moon Bay. In this case, however, the dock was underneath a mountain, and across, and atop that mountain was the wall; still looming like the end of days and blotting out the sun a scant hour afternoon.

Zuko felt a wave of fury wash over him as he passed under that huge shadow and into the hidden port. This was not how it was supposed to have been. Until his failure, and its subsequent futile quest for the Avatar, he had always envisioned coming to Ba Sing Se; had been encouraged to do so by his tutors. He had imagined and planned a dozen different strategies, but at no point had he envisioned himself entering the city in green, his honor and topknot gone, skulking like a thief.

He took a steadying breath, trying to cool his temper before he burned the ferry to ash.

This HAS to stop. It serves no purpose except to bring me to the brink of madness.

After the ferry had docked and they disembarked, everyone aboard found themselves presented with a choice. The Kaiu wall encompassed the rice lands that fed Ba Sing Se, but the city itself was still somewhat distant, almost three days walk. A person could either travel by foot, or purchase tickets on the city monorail which, while not terribly expensive, were still beyond the means of many of the refugees.

Zuko once again found himself impressed at the earthers who, when confronted with another obstacle, simply squared their shoulders, and got to work. He believed his own people would have done much the same, although they probably would have organized themselves into squads for mutual defense and security on the road. They also would most likely have sworn to return one day and build a better, cheaper, monorail. To crush the current one, and hear the lamentation of their ticket sellers.

Cackling would most likely have ensued.

As Zuko and Iroh moved to sit down to wait for the next train, Jet caught up with them and dragged Zuko aside for his answer while Iroh began to loudly berate a tea-vendor for daring to sell his favorite jasmine tea cold. Zuko attempted courtesy as best as he could and informed Jet that he had no interest in any formal association with him. He left off calling him an idiot though; the city was
apparently dangerous enough already, and there as there was no reason to make an enemy of the swordsman.

Jet seemed more surprised than angry, as though the thought that Zuko might refuse had never occurred to him. In the silence of Jet's dumbstruck face Zuko simply bowed and bid him good day.

But as Zuko sat down next to his uncle… he found Jet staring at him, now with naked hatred in his face.

Ash, I must not have been as polite as I had hoped, Zuko mused as his uncle happily slurped his tea.

His steaming hot tea.

"Uncle… did you get a fresh cup of tea?" Zuko said quietly, face blank.

"What, and waste this cup? My funds are not unlimited nephew and…” Iroh prattled on, but Zuko had stopped paying attention.

He caught Jet's eye and the two of them silently stared at each other. Jet's face contorted in rage, his body on the cusp of violence; Zuko scowling, but otherwise entirely indifferent. Jet broke the stare first and stalked away, most likely to find his friends.

"For a wise old man, you can be pretty stupid uncle," Zuko growled quietly.

"…What?" Iroh, whose rambling had passed into a self-congratulatory metaphor comparing tea to battle victories, looked stunned.

"Are you trying to get us killed?" Zuko's gravelly voice dropped to a whisper. "Firebending your tea?"

Iroh's eyes dropped to the still steaming cup in his hands. "Oops?"

Zuko still admitted himself impressed by the Kaiu wall, but after a few days of city life he was less impressed with nearly everything else Ba Sing Se had to offer.

After a few hours of travel, the monorail had dumped he and Iroh in the lower ring, an impoverished area between the Uchi "inner" wall and the Chukan "middle" wall. While the Uchi separated the rice-lands from the lower ring, the Chukan separated the slums of the lower ring, which contained the vast majority of the city's population, from the well-off financial and artisan middle ring.

Passage through the Chukan was highly regulated, and without the proper papers one could expect to be denied entry to the middle ring without recourse.

Unfortunately, Kaiu Ping and his uncle Mushi didn't have the "proper" papers.

It was only through a combination of Iroh's charm, and Zuko's not insubstantial powers of intimidation, that they managed to find an apartment in the lower ring for rent at an affordable price. The landlord's initial offer had been so astronomical that Zuko had almost snapped and set him on fire. Luckily, he had managed to calm himself before it came to that and managed to merely give the impression that he wanted to set the man on fire. The cowardly ashpile had caved quickly and lowered the rent down to something more reasonable.

Not that it would have mattered much if they both hadn't found jobs.
The ferry ride, the monorail, the down payment on their apartment and the exorbitant bribes that Iroh had had to pay to obtain their paperwork had taxed their finances quite heavily. Dinners began to grow more and more sparse until the end of their second week when Iroh announced that he had finally found a job.

Zuko was unsurprised to find out that it was in a tea shop.

For his part, Zuko had discovered that by standing near the entrance to the Chukan, glowering at everyone and everything, he attracted the attentions of merchants and minor government officials who had business to conduct in the lower ring. The streets were dangerous, and an appeal to a bushi or ronin for "assistance" was common.

It was easy enough work, Zuko simply strode along behind his client and tried to look as fearsome as possible; something he had excelled at since his marring and subsequent banishment. After the mission was accomplished his client would present him with a small "gift," usually a few zeni, for his troubles.

Very rarely did anyone bother them, and in the few instances that they did Zuko's skill with the sword was more than sufficient to end them.

People started to ask for "Ping" by name.

Despite finding sources of revenue, Zuko found himself growing angrier and angrier as time moved on. He would manage to keep a tight rein on his temper all day, then come home to the small one-room apartment he shared with his uncle and nearly explode. Everything seemed to bother him; from the noise on the street outside, to the fact that their spark-rocks kept going missing, to his uncle's incessant cheerfulness, it all lodged itself under his skin like tick-worms, burrowing and niggling. The city itself seemed to wear at him, the local people were miserable, overcrowding was terrible, and food prices were on the rise. All the stresses seemed to bleed their way through his defenses and take root in his heart.

And, as if that wasn't bad enough, there was fucking Jet.

The grass chewing ash-stain of a man had taken to stalking Zuko; turning up in the oddest of places. Zuko would spot him slouched against the wall of an alley outside his uncle's work or sitting at a ramen stand, bowl untouched in front of him. Once Zuko found him watching his apartment from the roof of the building across the street, all the while Jet's hate-filled eyes remained locked on Zuko. They never spoke, Jet never even approached him, but Zuko knew that he was just waiting, just biding his time until Zuko made a mistake. Slipped up. Exhaled fire when he should have exhaled air.

Zuko would walk the muddy brown streets, half an eye on his client, half looking for Jet, and the cold analytical part of his brain would recite names and information from Fire-Nation intelligence reports. Route "Gold," the main thoroughfare through the western districts, its street wide enough for a rhino-lizard charge. Route "Brass," a secondary path to the main granary of the lower ring (Objective Crimson) that would give greater cover from archer fire. His mind would drift along, remembering the plans, the maps, and nearly four years of his childhood strategy lessons spent in contemplation. Free hours (which were few and far between) were often spent contemplating the city, avenues of attack and methods of garrisoning the lower ring while the upper rings were still under siege. He'd dreamed of it. Dusty, faded, childhood dreams, dreamed of marching down the avenue, the peasants grateful to the Fire-Nation for their liberation from the oppressive regime of the Earth-King.
Every step he took now was another reminder of his failure, his shame, his destiny thwarted by his own intemperance and incompetence.

And worst of all... you MISS her, a voice seemed to say.

...and I miss her. He agreed.

Acknowledging that fact didn't make it better, somehow it made it worse.

That above all galled him; it didn't make sense. His meetings with Katara over the last few years had been sporadic at best. They'd fought, argued, and then, at some point, miraculously, they'd begun to actually enjoy one another's company. He knew he had at least, but often, in the dark of night, when sleep would not come, a small and very vocal part of him still insisted that it had all been a deception on her part, a ruse to gain information that could be used to destroy his people.

After all, it hissed, who could ever care for someone like YOU.

He was in love with her; deeply, stupidly, terribly in love. Of that much he was certain, but by his reckoning he had been for quite some time, since Tohin Wo.

So why should he feel this way now? He had gone longer stretches without seeing her; one would think that he'd be used to it. Did a few weeks of stolen kisses change him so much, make his so weak as to lose control over the slightest disturbance?

He wanted to be angry with her. He wanted to roar, and swear, and fight her. He visualized it often as waited by the gate to the Chukan. He wanted it to be her fault, but no matter what tact he took his aggressive visualizations always devolved into soft sentimental daydreams. The smell of her hair, the warmth of her skin, the fire in her stormy grey-blue eyes.

He would catch himself at it eventually, his face twisting into an even more furious scowl, berating himself silently for his idiocy and his weakness.

Bit by bit, minute by minute, his fury mounted; grains of sand in an hourglass.

The calculating part of him estimated that he had less than a week before he broke down and firebent.

Zuko was working. Following closely behind some government inspector for one of the many branches of the Earth-Kingdom government, his single eye sweeping the area around him. He'd discovered that you didn't watch for faces or body language in densely packed streets of the lower ring.

You watched for color.

The streets were muddy brown, the buildings slate grey or ruddy red-brown brick. Everyone wore dirt-brown or deep-green, their eyes were dark and usually downcast. The only bright colors in the lower ring were well-dressed outsiders from the city center... or drawn steel.

But suddenly, impossibly, there was a flash of blue.

Without a thought Zuko veered away from his client, making a sharp right turn and lunging through the densely packed people like a barracuda-gull through tuna.
"Can I help you, sir?"

Zuko found himself standing at a stonecutter's stall, staring at a bright blue stone the size of an eye.

It was her blue. The piercing grey-blue of her eyes.

"Sir?" the shopkeeper said with concern.

Zuko managed to rip his eye away from the stone, fixing the little man in place with a stare.

"How much?" he said flatly, his eye immediately falling back to the stone as through by magnetism.

The shopkeeper winced. "I am terribly sorry sir. That pendant is already spoken for."

Zuko didn't even turn back to look at him, he just reached out with his left hand, picked him up, and swung him into his view.


"Sir!" the shopkeeper gabbled, his feet dangling in the air, "you don't understand! Blues stones are incredibly rare here in the city. This may be one of the last-"

"I will not ask again, old man."

"I'm already being paid a whole koku for it!"

"I will give you TWO." The words tumbled out of Zuko's mouth before his brain could even try to stop them.

That's everything I have LEFT, the rational part of his brain screamed at him. But he'd already spoken, and he knew that even if he had had the chance he wouldn't take it back.

He pressed the smattering of silver bu and copper zeni, the entire contents of his coin purse into the merchant's hand before either of them could change their minds.

His change was a single zeni.

His client was gone. Whether dead in a ditch, or safe at his destination, Zuko neither knew nor cared. He had placed the stone in his now empty money pouch but couldn't seem to go more than a few paces without handling it or pulling it out to look at it.

It was like his rage just bled away into it, like she was there soothing him with her simple presence.

Ash and bone, I am a sentimental FOOL.

It was too late in the day to try and find another client, the gates of the Chukan closed at sundown, and so Zuko decided to head to Iroh's workplace instead. He'd need to tell his uncle not to order food for him tonight, and he sensed an argument in his future. Iroh would insist that he could afford to pay for Zuko. Zuko would refuse his charity.

Shouting would ensue.

Zuko's internal contemplation of the oncoming argument came to a screeching halt as he turned onto the street which contained "Pao's Potions" and heard shouting. The front door had been kicked off its hinges and as Zuko stepped through the threshold he caught sight of Jet, his hook-swords out, advancing on Iroh.
Two of Pao's regulars were members of the town watch, a slovenly fat man and his skinny partner, both of whom were on their feet trying futilely to de-escalate the situation. It the few times Zuko had visited his uncle there he found them both remarkably familiar for some reason.

"Drop the swords boy. Nice and easy," the fat one said.

"He's a firebender! You gotta to believe me!" Jet shouted, a look of manic rage on his face.

Shit.

Zuko glanced past Jet to his uncle but was met with a surreptitious shake of his head. Zuko had already shouted at Iroh expansively about firebending in the city and he had sworn to do so only if his life was truly in jeopardy.

Thank the ancestors for this stupid stone. I'd have probably just lit this fool on fire and damn the consequences without it.

"You gotta to defend yerself," Jet sneered as he ignored the watchmen and continued to advance on Iroh. "Go ahead, show 'em what you can do."

Zuko said nothing, simply drew his katana, sloppily, allowing the metal to ring out across the tension of the tea shop and alert Jet to his presence.

Jet looked over his shoulder, face livid. "Where there's one elephant-rat, there's always more," he spat and then flew at Zuko, hook-swords spinning.

A good hook-sword wielder was a versatile and troublesome opponent and, as it turned out, Jet was very surprised to find that, in practice and form, it immediately resembled air style. Constantly circling, never ceasing, rotational patterns. True it would have had to have been a particularly aggressive version of air style, but it was air style all the same.

The hook-swords' greatest strength was in versatility. Bladed hand guards and pommels made for dangerous close-range fighting. The hooks at the end of the blades allowed a skilled user to link his swords together for an almost whip-like attack at long range. And, of course, they were still swords; sharp and deadly in the middle distance.

Jet flew at Zuko like a wall of spinning steel, blades crossing, flashing, spinning rhythmically in whirling circles. For himself, Zuko favored an economy of motion, gradually giving ground, refusing to be distracted by the seemingly chaotic patterns the blades carved in the air or by how forcefully he was reminded of fighting the Avatar.

Watch the eyes, watch the shoulders, watch the hips. That's where the attacks come from.

Jet continued to press his assault, and Zuko continued to fall back slowly, step by step, out into the streets and away from his uncle.

"You must be gettin' tired of using that sword," Jet said, leering at Zuko over their crossed blades. "Why don't you just go 'head and firebend at me?"

This idiot thinks he's winning, Zuko thought, slightly amused despite how very annoyed he was.

"Please son, you're confused! You don't know what you're doing!" Iroh called from the door of the tea shop, wringing his apron.

Good. Uncle gets it.
Every fight was part of a larger battle. Every battle was a part of a larger war. Certainly, Jet was driving Zuko backwards. He had driven him all the way outside. Into the street.

Towards witnesses.

Nobody who saw the two of them fighting could think that Zuko was a firebender, a group of people well known for their aggression.

Zuko's only deviation from defense came after he had analyzed Jet's style enough to discern a potential weakness. Whenever the fool swung low with his dominant hand, at the area between Zuko's knee and foot, it was actually a feint, designed to lock an opponent in place and then strike at them with the sword-linking long-range attack.

Zuko bided his time until it happened again and, timing it just right, struck at the sword Jet no longer had a hand on. It decoupled from the first sword and went flying off to the side, while Zuko continued his forward motion and drove Jet away from it, managing to actually cut the stupid piece of grass the Jet continued to chew on while he backflipped away.

That accomplished Zuko returned to passive defense, almost earth style in form and purpose. The level of danger Jet presented had diminished to nearly nothing in the absence of a second sword.

"You see THAT!" Jet shouted in a carrying voice. "The Fire-Nation is trying to silence me! It'll never happen."

Yeah yeah, keep it up, idiot. Half the district is here by now and you look like a complete fool.

The most difficult part at this point became NOT killing Jet. Without his second sword, the fool was significantly more vulnerable and it took a force of will for Zuko to not let his muscle memory simply spit Jet like a hippo-cow kabob. While Zuko thought he would enjoy his death a great deal, considering the stress the pile of filth had caused him, he judged it a bad move strategic maneuver. Deaths tended to cause a lot of extra work for the town watch and, as of late, the watchmen had become helpful in directing potential clients his way.

They can just arrest him, or at the very least keep him the fuck away from me.

As the duel continued Jet grew more and more frantic and ranted more and more about the Fire-Nation, beginning to sound truly deranged. Zuko remained silent and solidly on defense, which had the effect of making Jet become more and more unhinged. The crowd surrounding the two of them had grown enormous, and not one of them looked like they thought Zuko was a firebender.

Where in the ashpits are the rest of the damned town-watch? How much longer do I have to-

"Everyone, STAND DOWN," a voice rang out.

The town-watch had NOT arrived.

The Dai Li, however, had.

Zuko had only seen a few Dai Li officers before, they weren't the type to hire anyone for protection. What he did know of them he had overheard in taverns, inns and his uncle's teashop where people only spoke of them in whispers. They made people disappear, the could hide in a shadow at noon, they could read minds. Every tale was more and more ridiculous; but the simple widely accepted fact was that it didn't matter if you were a samurai, a ronin, a high-born lord or a peasant…

You did not fuck with the Dai Li.
Zuko, in deference to this piece of information, took a balanced step backward, sheathed his sword in a quick and fluid motion, then bowed moderately to the agents of the Grand Secretariat.

Well. I guess this takes care of THAT problem.

"Arrest 'em, they're firebenders!" Jet shouted proudly. Completely unaware of the situation he was in until the crowd around him began to boo.

"This poor boy is just confused," Iroh said. "We're just simple refugees."

"Liar!" Jet screamed, starting to become even more unhinged.

"This young man wrecked my tea shop and assaulted my employee!" Pao shouted.

"It's true sir, we saw the whole thing," the portly watchman, who had done nothing to stop the fight, reported. "This crazy kid attacked the finest tea maker in the city."

Spirits. WHERE do I know him from? Zuko thought eyeing the man as Iroh blushed like a schoolgirl at the compliment.

"Come with us son," one of the Dai Li said, placing his hand on Jet's shoulder.

Jet took this opportunity to prove he was crazy and tried to attack them.

An act which went over rather poorly for him.

How did I actually even CONSIDER working with that idiot? Zuko thought shaking his head as Jet was dragged away, limbs bound in stone shackles, still cursing and shouting.

"Good work there, Mr. Ronin," one of the two watchmen said sidling up to Zuko. "Glad that got resolved easily!"

Zuko nodded, doing his best to keep his face from bending into a scowl at the man's laziness.

"C'mon Lee," he shouted to his partner, "I think it's about time for something stronger than tea!"

…Lee? Zuko wondered, his memories coagulating in his brain. NO. There are a million Lees… this can't be…

"Spit and Stones, Hong. We're still on duty," the thinner watchman said, not at all disapprovingly.

Ash and bone. They were at Shiro Yoritomo. The flaming public urinatar!

Zuko watched them amble away down the dirty streets as the crowd dispersed.

Ancestors, I HATE this city.

A/N: Behold another Sunday, another Chapter! Despite all the trials and tribulations (reads as college and a part-time job) I am once again successful at bringing you all some words; conveniently placed in a particular order so as to maximize their natural awesomeness. Well, I think they're awesome, but I can't be said to be objective about my own (pauses dramatically) ART. That's where you come in! Like it? Hate it? I want to know! Review or Comment and tell me about it! And for those of you who DO do that, you know who you are, always remember that you are heroes and persons of good taste and DISTINCTION.
META-BITS! (bom bom BOM)

The return of Hong and Lee: I've been trying to figure out a way to get those two back in the action for a while and honestly this is the best I could come up with. For a while, they were part of the squad that captured Iroh back in book 2 but I quickly realized that they would have gotten killed that way. So, they were extracted and transported here to Ba Sing Se. Hurray for cameos that NOBODY but me cared about!

So many emotions!: Things are really rough for our boy here. He's been able to keep busy since "The Chase" but now that he's settled down he's having all sorts of new emotions. Ugghh emotions, am I right? He is missing Katara, but is really annoyed with himself for his lack "honorable stoicism" in that regard. Meanwhile, he is NOT firebending at ALL, is trapped in a city that he used to fantasize about conquering AND is being stalked by a crazy person. Yes, Jet is a crazy person, he probably could have just gotten Zuko arrested by just suggesting he was a firebender to the Dai Li, but he had to go all creeper on him. So Zuko is having the feels, oh so many feels, and life is generally pretty shitty for him.

A word on timing: It may, or may not, be important to note that I think that Team Akodo got to Ba Sing Se some time before the Gaang. Aang and pals had to take the long way around, through the serpents pass and also got lost in the desert. So Zuko will have been in the city a while before they get there.

When will they get there? Will Zuko ever find his lost love again?

Next chapter and Yes.

See you then!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Iroh drinks tea! Zuko gets a new job and there is a great deal of panicking.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 21 October 2018
Tales of Ba Sing Se

Chapter Notes

A/N: The Following is rated SA; for situational awareness.

It corresponds, chronologically, with events from S2E13 "The Drill."

Reader discretion is advised.

Spring, year 11 in the Reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

The morning after his fight with Jet, Zuko and Iroh found themselves awoken by a loud series of knocks that sounded at their apartment door, even before the sun rose.

The night before had actually passed rather smoothly. After Jet had been dragged off, kicking and practically frothing at the mouth, Pao had bought Zuko and Iroh dinner in thanks for both protecting his shop, and ensuring that the entire district, perhaps the whole western half of the lower ring, now knew that Iroh was the finest tea-maker in the city.

Zuko became convinced that if he rolled his eye any harder it might actually fall out on to the floor.

That much-abused eye was now fixed on the door of his apartment, while his hand gripped the hilt of his katana and his uncle cheerfully, but cautiously, moved to open it.

The door opened to reveal a member of the town watch (not the public urinator thankfully) and behind him stood the most lavishly dressed woman Zuko had seen since leaving the Palace at Otosan Uchi. Her hair was done up shimada style and was adorned with enough gold hairpins and combs to feed a battalion for a month. Her kimono, which probably could have fed that battalion for a further week or two, was a light green silk and patterned with images of flowers. Despite the fact that her powdered face concealed any marks or wrinkles she was still obviously much older than Zuko, if not any less beautiful for it.

Iroh practically drooled.

"What can this humble tea maker do for you, oh radiant spirit?" Iroh declaimed dramatically, bowing as low as his stomach would allow.

Zuko, who had just the previous night decided to try and roll his eye less, simply exhaled in exasperation.

The woman smiled coyly, and when she spoke it was in a rich and genteel drawl. "I do not suppose you are the ronin Kaiu Ping?"

"Alas, but I am not," Iroh lamented. "The poor dour boy behind me has that honor."

The woman seemed to flow into the room and eyed Zuko up and down, going so far as to circle around him.

"Hmmm," she tapped her chin with an exquisite sandalwood fan. "Yes. I suppose the dichotomy has
"Can I help you?" Zuko growled.

"Nephew!" Iroh gasped as though Zuko had just spat on the floor.

"Mmmmm, and the voice is perfect too," the woman cooed. "Yes. Yes, I simply must have you!"

"I beg your pard-"

"You are a ronin, yes?" she interjected abruptly.

"Ye-"

"And a ronin is always seeking worthy employment, yes?" she said cutting him off again.

"That may be s-"

"Well, I have such a task for you," she said jumping all over his words again.

Zuko just narrowed his eye, refusing to allow her to interrupt him again.

"You are familiar with the term yojimbo, I would hope?"

Zuko nodded. Being a bodyguard was essentially what he did already, if in a less regular and formal capacity than a traditional yojimbo.

"Well, I happen to be the owner if an establishment in the middle ring. Word of your exceptional prowess with the sword made its way to my ears only last night, and I simply had to come and see you for myself and-" her lips turned up in a small smile- "I like what I see."

Iroh began to seethe with envy as Zuko fought back a flush.

Risking being interrupted again Zuko decided to speak. "I was under the impression that things were a great deal safer in the upper rings, Why would you w-"

"Oh darling, it is a great deal safer!" she said, cutting him off again. "But, the watch can't be everywhere at once and, you'll forgive me darlings-" she said this over her shoulder to the two watchmen still standing in the hall- "sometimes it's simply better for business to not get the authorities involved?"

So, she's a criminal?

"My patrons prefer discretion and privacy. And really darling, is that so much to ask for?"

Yep. Criminal.

Zuko narrowed his eye and glared at her.

She pretended to ignore his look and concealed her small smile behind her fan. "I can pay you two koku every second week and can provide you with transit papers to the middle ring."

"He'll take it!" Iroh shouted, grinning widely.

"Uncle!" Zuko snapped.

"What? Last night you said you were broke!" Iroh said, a confused look on his face.
"Oh? Poor dear," the woman cooed, still smirking behind her fan.

Zuko glowered at them both.

"Oh darling, you needn't worry your pretty little head! I would never ask you to do anything that would call your honor into question. After all," she leaned closer, whispering for his ear alone behind her fan. "I know what a priority your people place on honor."

Zuko froze. She knows!

"I'll have your papers sent over this evening," she continued as she swanned towards the door. "Just ask for 'Lady Xian's Palace' at the gate, they know where it is." She stopped in the hallway outside the door. "See you tomorrow darling," she said, winking at him. Then, watchmen in tow, she disappeared.

"… Maybe I should have fought the boy," Iroh said regretfully.

Lady Xian's "Palace" was a brothel.

OF COURSE it's a brothel! Zuko roared at himself. What other place in the middle ring would NEED a yojimbo!

As "Lady" Xian had said, Zuko's transit papers had arrived just before dinner time along with a coin purse which contained a few silver bu and a note, smelling of flowers, that suggested that if he didn't get something to eat he might not have the "energy" he needed for tomorrow.

Iroh swooned at the implication as Zuko scowled.

"I never said that I would-"

"You are in NO position to turn that lovely lady down!" Iroh said forcefully.

He had been right and so Zuko, papers in hand, had presented himself to the gate to the middle ring that next morning. They passed him through after giving his papers a quick scan and reminding him that the gates would be closed down after sundown.

To say that the middle ring was far nicer than the lower ring would easily qualify for the understatement of the century.

The streets were clean, paved and, by comparison to the lower ring at least, practically empty. For the first time in a very long time Zuko felt underdressed as most of the people that passed him by, walking in the unhurried manner of the confidently well-to-do, were wealthy merchants, minor government officials or aristocratic students at Ba Sing Se University. Everyone was dressed in silks and satins and looked infinitely better fed than the peasantry, in their rough woolens, in the ring below.

Finding the "Palace" wasn't a challenge as every watchman he asked smiled slyly and gave him remarkably detailed directions, seeming to assume that he was a future patron.

The building itself was a modest three-story affair, just across the street from a trendy tea café, which
Zuko knew his uncle would have loved. In all appearances it seemed to be just like any other building in the middle-ring; clean white plaster walls, decorative topiary out front. The only clue to its actual function was the red lantern hanging above the door.

Zuko had been stunned when he had first learned of the practice, as the idea of exchanging money for sex struck him as being rather crass. Certainly, the Fire-Nation had geisha, but their task was to soothe the troubled spirit, and to that end they were masterful artists, poets, and musicians.

Of course, if sex was the best way to help they were also very skilled at that.

However, it was more common for a samurai to visit a geisha house simply to relax. To talk, vent their frustrations about their duties and responsibilities, have a few drinks and be entertained by the skilled men and women who had dedicated their lives to beauty and art. It was considered very dishonorable to be seen to be unhappy with one's duty in the Fire-Nation but, by custom, when in the privacy of the geisha house that proscription was lifted. A geisha would never be asked to testify in court, and any insult to their persons would be met with an overwhelming tide of violence from their other, more honorable patrons.

No one with any honor abused the geisha. They were practically sacrosanct, and it was one of the highest dishonors imaginable to strike down someone so defenseless. Like attacking a pregnant woman, a surrendering combatant, or a child. Even peasants, who had no martial training at all, were considered far more able to defend themselves than the geisha.

But the Earth-Kingdom, barbarians that they were, did not have geisha. In the lower ring women, and sometimes men, might simply stand on street corners calling out prices for themselves. Zuko had seen them haggling with potential clients, and once a loud shouting match as two women tried to outbid one another for the attentions of a particularly handsome man.

Barbarian or not, geisha or not, Lady Xian was a… forceful person. She practically dragged Zuko into the building as soon as he arrived, and before he knew what was happening, he was in his loincloth, still clutching his sword, being measured for new clothes by a veritable flock of women.

"It simply won't do darling," Xian said in the sultry purring manner she favored. "You simply must look the part."

"Part? What par-"

"Oh darling, people have expectations when they come here," she said, stepping all over him again. "You are the fierce but proud ronin. Deadly, but refined. Bitter at the mysterious circumstances that led you to this moment, but still… unbroken, unbowed, unyielding." She gestured dramatically as she spoke, looking out at a hypothetical audience.

She and my uncle would get along nicely, Zuko speculated. IF they didn't try to outdo each other every moment of every day.

"You will be my daylight showpiece, my front man, my sentinel, my-" she smirked at him- "Lion at the gate."

Zuko glared at her.

"YES!" she cried joyfully. "THAT look. That's the look you should have when you interact with patrons! Fury, held in check only by the tattered code of honor you cling to like a life raft."

I am not rolling my eye. I am not rolling my eye. I am NOT rolling my eye.
Zuko, having been successfully distracted by his new employer, was soon amazed to find himself completely dressed again. She had had her retinue put him in a dark green kimono with flaring sleeves; the green so dark it was practically black. In addition, he now had on a pair of grey hakama pants belted around his navel.

"You must keep the kimono open slightly darling," Xian said tapping his chest with her fan. "It's traditional, and you shouldn't deny the world such a lovely view of your chest and its accompanying... scars." She trembled ostentatiously before continuing. "After all we serve female patrons here as well."

"I AM NOT.-"

"Oh of course not, darling. I'd never dream of asking it of you. But don't be surprised if someone offers." She smiled slyly, her fan at her lips. "And try not to be surprised at how high the offers might go."

_I am not rolling my eye AND I am not blushing. I am not rolling my eye AND I am NOT blushing._

He was only partially successful

\[\text{^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_^\_}\]

Zuko's new job (which he had apparently accepted. Having not been able to talk long enough to decline without being interrupted) turned out to be quite simple. Instead of walking the streets, tailing along behind someone, looking menacing, he simply stood outside the door of the Palace doing exactly the same thing. Xian coached him on his posture, "slouching, but deadly, a predator at his ease," and as sundown approached two enormous brothers, Ya and Chou'lou, lumbered out of the shadows and took his place. Zuko, moving quickly, headed home before the gates locked down.

Thus, was a routine set.

Zuko rose with the sun, performed the thousand cuts on the roof of his apartment building, bathed, and the went to work. Most days nothing happened. Only occasionally would a patron become too rowdy, drunk, or disrespectful and Zuko would have to eject them. He particularly savored the instance when he got to knock a rather drunk Earth samurai unconscious with a single blow to the back of the neck. These minor incidents, and the vast pervasive calm between them, reminded Zuko rather forcibly of his time on his ship, drifting from port to port, before the Avatar made his fateful appearance at the south pole.

When he mentioned this to his uncle, Iroh said that now, surrounded by earth as he was, was as good a time as any to practice his mindfulness and patience. His _zanshin_; the "remaining mind." To practice the art of _zanshin_ meant to practice total awareness, not focusing on any _one_ thing but on _all_ things. To sit, as a stone, and watch the world in stillness. Breathing _in_ the world, breathing _out_ the self, allowing the two to merge and mingle, only reacting in the proper moment, and with the greatest effect. It was one of the fundamental keys to iaijutsu Iroh told him, and once he mastered it he might be able to move towards the mushin, the "no mind."

So, as he stood by the door to a whorehouse, Zuko practiced. He was soon sure that, no matter what his uncle thought, he would _never_ have mushin. Anger was his constant companion. It would build, like water dripping from a leaky roof, poisoning his mind and ruining the stillness of his _zanshin._
But, unlike before, whenever it became too much he would reach into his coin purse and pull out his blue stone. He would let it rest in the palm of his hand, gently stroking it with his thumb, and all the rage would fall away. Even the angry guilty voice in his head that spat and cursed and called him weak for his lack of self-reliance would eventually vanish like a puff of smoke.

Zuko breathed in, breathed out, put the stone away, and began his zanshin again.

The conversations of clients and the patrons of the shops along the street became simply… sound.

The patrolling watchmen in green, the white plaster walls, and colorful passersby became just… sight.

The warmth of the sun, the weight of his sword, the feel of his back on the wall and his straw hat on his head became simply… feeling.

Over a month passed before Zuko felt like he was really getting the hang of it.

In those meditative weeks, the only thing of true excitement that happened to Zuko was on an instance where he reached for his blue stone… and didn't immediately find it. He hadn't lost it, it had actually managed to get buried in his coin purse, wrapped in the coupons for free tea that his uncle kept pressing on him, but the idea that he might have bothered him an inordinate amount. On the way home that day he bought a length of red woven silk and attached it to the stone with the little copper ring it had come with.

It took him almost a week to realize how much it reminded him of another necklace he had once had in his possession. He chuckled, remembering the many times he had pulled that one out, contemplating the patterns in the stone, considering exactly what that Shinjo girl was teaching the Avatar. Amused, he placed the necklace back in his pouch, securing it with the red band.

It took another day for him to remember what Lt Bo had said about that necklace.

"That's a Water-Tribe betrothal necklace. Putting something like around a girl's neck is tantamount to proposing," she had said.

Zuko, the realization coming upon him like a thunderbolt as he slouched against the wall of Lady Xian's Palace, panicked.

A betrothal necklace?! How in the Sun's holy name did I accidentally make a BETROTHAL Necklace?!

Body still but eye darting furiously under his straw hat he continued to panic.

She doesn't know! It doesn't COUNT if she doesn't know! We are NOT engaged! Sure, I said the words, but that was a complete mistake. An Accident! Just because she said it back doesn't mean… An accident AND a misunderstanding! Besides, nobody knows about it but US. It's not like she's going to tell anybody about it.

He began to calm down until, unbidden, a passage from LEADERSHIP floated into his mind.

"When a Samurai has said he will perform an action, it is as good as done. Nothing will stop him from completing what he has said he will do. He does not have to 'give his word.' He does not have to 'promise.' The action of SPEAKING alone has set the act of doing in motion. Speaking and doing are the same action."

He resumed panicking.
Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, SHIT!

After a few moments of silent cursing, it occurred to him that none of it really mattered.

…I'm probably never going to see her again.

The idea soothed his panic but also made his stomach seem to drop into his sandals with heart-rending force.

It's… probably for the best, he told himself. We're very different people with VERY different outlooks on life. It would never work out. She wants to sink my homeland beneath the ocean, and I…

What did he want? His uncle had asked him that very question only a few days previously.

He hadn't had a response then and, point of fact, he didn't have one now. He had spent his whole life trying to execute his duty, fulfill his destiny, that he had never really considered what he wanted.

I want… to figure out… what I want.

Did that count?

I've got nothing but time. I can figure this out.

"Oy, Ping," Chou'lou said tapping him on the shoulder heavily. "Your shift's over, better get before you're trapped up here."

Zuko had apparently been so deep in the depths of panic that he had managed to miss his two enormous coworkers' approach as the shadows along the street grew longer.

"You could stay, darling," Lady Xian purred from one of the open windows above him. "The Palace is always open to you, and I'm sure the girls would love to have you." Zuko flushed as a riot of giggles and outright laughter sprang from the building behind him.

Doing his best to maintain his dignity, Zuko bowed, bid them all good evening, and moved, a bit more quickly than necessary, towards home.

^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^-^
"Excuse me! We'd like to go in please," a bossy voice demanded.

It was HER and his zanshin collapsed like a sandcastle at high tide.

This... this CANNOT be happening! Zuko thought his panic resuming with a ferocity. I am NOT going to have to explain why I'm guarding a brothel. NOT after we haven't seen each other in three months! Ancestors preserve me!

"Yeah! Move aside, shit-brick!" The smaller of the pair shouted.

And the Bandit is here too, isn't THAT fantastic, Zuko thought sarcastically. Best to get it over with I guess.

"I don't think either of you want anything in there," he rumbled, tilting back the conical straw which had been obscuring his features.

Katara, who had been about to launch into one of her now familiar verbal tirades, froze in place, her mouth open comically. Toph cocked her head to the side, her sightless eyes fixed on a point to Zuko's right.

"Have we met? You sound... awfully familiar," she said.

"I'm... a fan," Zuko said with a sigh.

Toph gasped in delight. "Mr. TREE?! Holy shit! Katara! This is the guy I was telling you about! The one who helped me find you guys!" she paused, tilting her head down and to the side for a moment, then broke into a huge, slightly malicious grin. "And I was right! From the way your heart is going pitter-pat, he must be cute."

"Shut UP, Toph," Katara said, going crimson

Ok. Good. They're distracted. Now I just need to-

"You ruined my joke though, Mr. Tree," Toph said, her brow furrowing in irritation. "I wanted to hear all the funny embarrassed squeaking noises she was going to make when she found out this place is a brothel."

Katara's eyes narrowed. "A BROTHEL?" she snarled.

Damnit.

"I... work here," Zuko said, trying for calm detachment.

"You work... in a BROTHEL?" Katara growled through gritted teeth, nearing the edge of an explosion.

"Not IN! FOR! FOR a brothel! In front of!" Calm detachment vanished. Not really his strong suit anyway.

"A likely story!" Katara snapped, hands on her hips and glaring.

Zuko was about to fire back when Toph interrupted.

"Do you guys know each other?"
Katara froze again, eyes going wide and meeting Zuko's

"Uhmm… No?" Zuko said lamely.

"Did you know that I can tell when people are lying?" Toph said slyly. "I can hear their heart rates through my feet."

Well, THAT'S inconvenient.

"Uhmm… well… That is to say that-

"Alright Toph! Fine!" Katara said, stamping her foot and interrupting Zuko's fumbling. "We… we met up at the Earth Rumble. It was kind of… kind of a date. You can't tell Sokka. OR Aang!"

Now it was Zuko's turn to stand there, jaw stretching towards the ground.

"Ooooh, is he your boyfriend?" Toph crooned.

"NO! I mean, I haven't seen him since… seen him in a long time."

The three of them sat in silence for a long moment.

"Ok, now this is getting awkward… and boring," Toph said with a snort. "Let's go sugar-queen! You can come back and canoodle on your own time, this is supposed to be a girl's day." She began to walk away down the street.

"Girl's day?" Zuko mouthed in confusion.

Katara was not to be distracted however. Her eyes were narrowed and her mouth was set in a thin line as she silently shook her finger in Zuko's face.

"You. Here. TONIGHT," she commanded, gesturing forcefully with her index finger, silently mouthing the words.

Zuko opened his mouth in protest, to try and explain that he couldn't meet her here tonight, the gates would be locked down… but Katara was having none of it. Her eyes promised wrath and ruination should he fail to comply.

There's my snuggle-bunny, Zuko thought. He sighed and nodded in assent.

Katara nodded, as though her victory had been inevitable, then swung around and trotted off to catch up with the tiny earthbender. Zuko did his best to not look like a complete fool as his eye followed her until she disappeared.

"So that's her, hmmm?" Lady Xian purred from behind him.

Oh yes, I'm GREAT at zanshin, Zuko thought sarcastically as he nearly jumped out of his skin. Really GREAT at situational awareness! That's ME!

"Her?" he managed to reply after he recovered.

"The girl darling? The one you're in love with?"

"I'm… not-"
"Oh darling, don't be silly. I knew the moment I saw you. You have that 'woman-done-me-wrong' look. It's part of your charm."

"She did NOT do me wrong," Zuko snarled, far angrier at the slight to Katara than he was to the slight to his own dignity.

Xian's eyebrows shot up in surprise and mild amusement.

"Oooh, you have it bad," she said, shaking her head sadly. "Poor dear."

Zuko now found himself caught between the volcano and the cliffside.

If he didn't go home before sundown he would be trapped in the middle ring all night. Most likely he would have to accept Lady Xian's hospitality and spend the night in the brothel. No matter that nothing would happen, somehow Katara would find out about it. She would kill him.

His other option was to simply go home and pray to whatever spirits were listening the Katara would be understanding about him not being there when she appeared. The spirits would most likely ignore him as usual and Katara would be furious. She would KILL him.

With his two options being death, and more death, Zuko decided that, on the whole, he'd rather see her first, then later she could kill him.

So, he waited in an alleyway as the sun dipped below the skyline… and resumed panicking about the fact that they were, no matter how incidentally, inadvertently or misunderstandingly, engaged.

Should I tell her? I should tell her. What if she finds out BEFORE I tell her? She will be PISSED! And not in the sexy way either. She will be pissed in the "I'm seriously going to lock your head in a ball of ice and leave you floating in the ocean" way!

He strode back and forth a worried scowl on his face as he idly fingered his grey-blue stone.

This is so stupid! It was an accident. What sort of moron decided the phrase "nobody kills you but me" was the same as a marriage proposal? What sort of moron actually SAYS something like that in the heat of the moment? MORON!

His pacing grew frantic.

What if she already knows? Maybe THAT'S why she was so angry? Ancestors preserve me, she's going to flay me alive!

He stopped pacing abruptly.

…what if she doesn't?

He blinked.

What if she knows… and she's… HAPPY about it?

His pulse, which had already been going a mile a minute, redoubled its efforts.
That. Would. Be. WORSE!

He resumed his panicked pacing.

Zuko's brain, which before this point had simply been deadlocked in his regular pattern of prospective damage control, now found itself engaged in a full-scale civil war. His rational side, manning the garrison, insisted that there was no way it would work out, no way she could actually care for him, and certainly no way he would ever be accepted by Katara's family; something that he knew from his studies was especially important to Unicorn tribespeople.

The rebel faction, once a small rag-tag collection of half-formed dreams and ridiculous sentiment, was now a full division attempting to storm the battlements of his mind, waving blue and red patterned flags, and chanting "nobody kills you but ME!" as a battle cry.

She doesn't like me THAT much!

She had come to him though, risking discovery and dishonor with every step.

She was just… spying!

The last time he had suggested that she had been absolutely furious. And again, not the sexy kind of furious.

…ok, maybe the slightly less sexy kind of furious.

I don't know if I'm really in love with her! I'm eighteen! What in the ashpits do I know about love!?

Yet he had managed to accidentally make her a betrothal necklace. It now seemed to weigh a thousand pounds, as he put it back in his coin purse.

Father would never...

Fire-Lord Ozai had no say in the matter. Legally speaking, Zuko wasn't his son anymore.

HER father would never...

This was the woman that had told the northern half of her people to go sit on an icicle and spin because she didn't have time for their stupid rules about gender roles.

She wants to kill my family!

Fire-Lord Ozai-

She wants to kill my SISTER!

…Katara said she didn't want to kill anyone.

But there is no way, in the Sun's holy name, that she can get what she wants without doing it. Azula is a good samurai; she WON'T stop.

Azula wouldn't stop.

They will FIGHT!

They would fight.
I'd... I'd have to pick a SIDE!

He would have to pick a side.

...FUCK!

Fuck indeed.

"Zuko!" a voice whispered in front of him, snapping him out of his mental fugue. Despite the fading light, he could see that Katara still looked rather annoyed.

Annoyed… and beautiful.

The battle stopped. The siege was still in place, but the fight was put on hold. A temporary armistice as the disparate parts of Zuko's brain turned to watch whatever happened next.

"Hey," Zuko said quietly.

Katara's face softened minutely. "Hey."

"...I missed you," Zuko said, still silently cursing himself for a fool.

She exhaled softly, shaking her head. "I missed you too," she said quietly.

The rebel forces cheered.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his hand. "We'll go get some dinner. We need to talk."

_A/N:_ Another Sunday, another chapter! Good morning world! (it's morning here in the GMT -5) Hope you enjoyed part one of "the tales of Ba Sing Se," our dramatic duo is back together and about the make with dramatics, theatrics, and bombastics!

Always remember, as a fish needs water and a plant needs sun, an author needs comments. Ok, not _needs_ but I do love them, welcome them and, if there's a question I can answer without spoilering the plot, I answer. You guys are the best.

This is META-BITS! (/done in the old CNN style)

_Lady Xian:_ honestly one of my favorite OC characters to date. Zuko's boss, the classy madame. She rolls in, uses a combination of charisma and wiles to get her way, and rolls back out. If that seems familiar it's because it is. She's got a significant relationship with one or two of the OTHER characters. 39.3 bonus points to whoever figures it out. Also as astute readers will have noticed she shows up at Zuko and Iroh's place _before_ sunrise. This is a hint to exactly _how_ connected this lady is. Ah, so much fun to write.

_Yojimbo:_ A Yojimbo, as stated, is a classical bodyguard in a feudal Japan and later. It also the name of a film by Akira Kurosawa (of seven samurai fame) and starring Toshiro Mifune. If you like samurai films, or westerns, and haven't seen it do yourself a favor and bring it to your eye holes.

You may be wondering why I mentioned _westerns_ back there. If not skip ahead, the rest of
you sit right down and let me lay some knowledge on you.

Westerns ARE Samurai films.

A lone gunman, with a mysterious past, rolls into town challenges the status quo and sets things aright before disappearing again. Here in America, that's a huge part of our mythos, the wandering gunslinger. Well friends, prepare your brains because Cowboys are basically American Samurai, in terms of moves anyway. "The Magnificent Seven" is "The Seven Samurai." "Fistful of Dollars" is Yojimbo." "Blindman is Zatoichi." Both genres, feed off one another and sort of blended together with truly awesome effects. I love 'em. And I love 'em so much I'll probably go back to playing Red Dead 2 after this goes live on your internets. I regret nothing.

Geisha: So, really, what are geisha? In RW feudal Japan they were just entertainers. Often times a certain variety of prostitute would also dress and entertain like geisha which, retroactively causes some confusion for those of us a continent and several centuries away. It is also important to note that in RW Japan they were not considered to be people. They were "Hinin" or non-people, who's professions caused them to break the taboos of Buddhism. But, for the purposes of this piece think of them as described. Entertainers, poets, performers, and masseuses, who also will have sex with you, should they want to. That I think is the important takeaway, Geisha are controlling their own destiny here in MY world. Because I'm not trying to do a lot of social commentary here, just have a good time.

Zanshin: Zanshin is a HUGE part of martial arts, with all sorts of different connotations, and meanings depending on the art in question and your instructors personal perspective. Again, described in the text as well, I just thought I'd mention that it IS a real thing, and is an important one, even in a non-martial arts setting. Situational awareness, of yourself, your body and where it is in relation to other things is one of those large pet peeves of mine. I account a lack of Zanshin as the fundamental reason for poor driving, long lines at the DMV and people who talk at the theater.

Reunion: Ah, young love. Our kids are back in proximity again, I know you were all looking forward to that. They should be interreacting with one another in their usual combative/adorable way from now... until the very end. (/sound of ominous bassoon of foreshadowing)

Look forward to it, and thanks again for reading, commenting, kudosing and liking!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"

Iroh drinks tea! There are misunderstandings, drama, and noodles. Then Zuko takes a much-needed nap.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 28 October 2018
Late Spring, year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

Zuko had always considered noodles to be rather simple things. Not overly expensive, or particularly special in any way. They were a *basic* foodstuff, something you put *other* things on to make a dish; a sauce, a seasoning, hopefully, some meat. There were simple and unimpressive in every way. This fact seemed to have been lost on the denizens of the middle ring, and they had an entire restaurant designed around them. Noodles with sauce, noodles with soup, noodles in a bowl and greenish noodles made from *vegetables* of all things. Katara was intrigued by the concept and so dragged him inside, to experience the *wonder* that was a variety of noodles.

A rather *expensive* variety of noodles.

Gritting his teeth Zuko ordered the cheapest large bowl noodles he could after he and Katara had sat down.

"What kind of a name is 'Ping'?” Katara said, smiling wryly at Zuko from across the restaurant table.

"It's an Earth-Kingdom name,” Zuko said with a small growl. He refused to begin this conversation by talking about the real Ping; there was no need to burden her with that little bundle of fury and sadness. Not now anyway.

"Well, I've never seen someone who looked *less* like a Ping."

"My uncle picked it out."

"Hmmm, and you're sure he's alright?” she said, her smile instantly being replaced by sincere concern. "I'm serious, I should go check on him to make sure…"

One of the first things out of her mouth as they had sat down at the noodle shop was to ask if his uncle was alright. He loved her for that.

"He is just fine. No one *that* irritating can be too seriously hurt. But thank you for asking. He is named 'Mushi' by the way."

The fact that his uncle would somehow manage to become even *more* insufferable if he brought Katara to see him was only a minor concern.

*Very* minor.

After a waitress had appeared and taken their orders the silence grew long as they waited for their
"So… how are you liking the city so far?" Katara asked, searching for a topic.

"It's… ok," Zuko said lamely.

*It is NOT ok. This place is a cesspool and a PRISON! What is WRONG with you? MORON!*

Zuko was having trouble even looking at Katara. Every time he lifted his eye towards her, he could practically hear the internal battle resume. So instead he simply glowered at the table as though it had offended him.

"What are you doing for fun?" she said, gamely trying to start the conversation again.

"I don't have fun, you know that," he grunted.

She exhaled sharply. "Moon's name ZU-Ping. I'm trying to have a conversation here! The least you could do is-"

"This is a date isn't it?" Zuko said abruptly, eye still embedded on the table.

Katara cut off.

"You told the Bandit we went out on a date, at the Earth Rumble. Are we… dating?"

"I… We're… I was trying to build up to that," she said with a small pout. "Why are you making this awkward?"

"I'm not trying to. It's just… we don't talk, Katara. We just argue and fight and… do… other things. I'm not good at idle conversation."

Not to mention the fact that they were currently out in public, at an open-air reasonably crowded restaurant, and the rules of courtesy, hammered into him in his youth, called for stoicism and calm courtesy in such a setting. Something he found enormously difficult to achieve with the girl in front of him.

"Well, you're never going to get any better if you don't practice! So…" her eyes flashed as she narrowed them dangerously, "how precisely did you wind up working at a… house of ill-repute?"

Zuko's eye, and the corner of his mouth, darted upwards in the ghost of a smile.

"How is this not fighting?" he said, meeting her eyes at last.

"Baby-steps," she said flatly, eyes locked on him.

"I got into a fight," Zuko began.

"Unsurprising," she said with a sniff.

"I won. A lot of people saw it. And then Lady Xian offered me a job."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. She says I'm… mysterious… or something. And that's supposed to help with business… I guess."
"I suppose you get an employee discount?" she said with a snarl.

"I wouldn't know."

"So, it's free for you then?"

"You think I would…" Zuko studied her for a minute. "Are you… jealous?" he asked in confusion.

"JEALOUS? I'm not jealous! Why would I be jealous? Just because my boyfr-" she cut herself off, eyes going wide and mildly horrified.

"I… I'm your boyfriend?" Zuko said, his jaw nearly hitting the table.

"NO! I did NOT say that."

Zuko looked around wildly as if to see if the rest of the world was seeing what he was seeing. "You DID! Ask and burning bone, I'm your boyfriend. Your cute boyfriend." He scratched at his beard and smiled, remembering a similar conversation only a few months ago. "Huh. I've never been anyone's boyfriend before."

"What… never?"

"No. I mean, I was betrothed at one point, but-"

"You were WHAT?!!" she shrieked, jumping to her feet. The water their server had brought them froze solid in a split second and shattered their glasses.

Oh shit. Why did I say that?

"Errr… it was a long time ago. It was broken off!"

"Who was it? I swear, by Moon and Sea, if it was that pink girl…"

"What? Ty Lee? No! Absolutely not."

Something in his face, normally so inscrutable, must have tipped her off.

"It was the other one," she hissed. "The dowdy depressing one with all the knives."

"Hey now, Mai isn't-"

Don't DEFEND her, idiot!

"WHAT!? Mai isn't what?" Katara said, her voice rising in volume. "Go on, don't be shy, tell me all about what a great girl that miserable witch, who was a hairs-breath from sacrificing her own brother to catch Aang I might add, was."

"Mai is NOT a witch. She's one of my oldest friends!" Zuko said, now on his feet as well, roaring back at her. "Ancestors preserve me, woman, I was thirteen! It was an arranged betrothal and I didn't even know it existed until it was already broken off!"

"…tried to kill…"

"…insolent barbarian…"

They began shouting at each other, heedless of the other's words or the stares of the other patrons; all
courtesy and decorum forgotten.
"Ummmmmm." "WHAT!?” they both shouted, turning as one.
"Y-your dinners!" their waitress squeaked, holding their noodles in her trembling hands.

They turned and, at the same time, sank back into their seats, their eyes shooting daggers at one another. Their waitress carefully put the noodles in front of them… and then ran away as though worried that the bowls, or their new owners, might explode at any moment.

"We're really bad at this," Zuko said quietly, eye once again locked on the table.

"Yeah. We are." Katara sighed. "We just need practice." She gritted her teeth as she picked up her chopsticks. "Tell me why you liked her.

"I… never said that…"

Katara narrowed her eyes at him over a mouthful of noodles.

"She was… funny," Zuko said as he began poking at his food. "She was smart and sarcastic, and never seemed to care that I was a prince, or that I wasn't as smart as her and Azula. She was equally disdainful of everyone. She always seemed to know what to say, in any situation."

"Why did you split up then?"

"I was banished," Zuko said, idly examining the noodles now hanging from his chopsticks.

"If you really cared about her then that wouldn't have stopped you," Katara said with a cocked eyebrow; as if to say, "and I know that from experience."

"She… she was in love with someone else," Zuko admitted.

"Oh! Oh, Zu- Ping. I'm sorry."

"It's alright. It was a long time ago. It was just a little… crush anyway."

"Did you fight him?"

"…him who?" Zuko said, after gulping down a mouthful.

"The other guy?"

"What other… OH! Uh… no. No I did not."

"That kind of surprising, for you, I mean," she said as she picked through the noodle bowl.

"Uh… I was friends with the both of them, so…"

"I thought you only had two friends," Katara pointed out, smirking.

"Well… uh… that's-"

"...NO!" Katara gasped.

Zuko shrugged and continued working on his bowl of noodles. They were actually quite good.
"They never seemed that close," Katara said seeming puzzled.

"I think they broke up," Zuko said around a mouthful. "Ty ran off to join the circus just before I arrived at the South Pole." His eye darted back up to hers. "You CANNOT tell anyone."

"Yes, fine but… you're sure? I mean I'm pretty sure I saw… Ty flirting with my brother a couple of times."

"Unsurprising. But yes, I'm sure. Very sure."

"How?"

"I… I accidentally caught them…" he waved his noodle-laden chopstick looking for the right word, "…being intimate."

"NO!"

"Yes. It's… a bit of an embarrassing story actually," he said, scratching the back of his neck with his off hand. "You CANNOT tell ANYONE."

"I won't," Katara said grinning widely. "Promise. But now you have to tell me."

"Why?"

"For practice!"

She was smiling at him. The amazing half-wicked, half-mirthful, smirk she wore when she thought she had him good and defeated and was just waiting to see what sort of counter-attack he would muster. It was entirely too lovely.

Well… why not. I've got nothing but time.

"When I was a child," he began, "the four of us, Azula, Mai, Ty Lee and myself used to play this game…"


They ended up talking for hours.

Zuko told her about life in the army, living out of tents and marching for days, and what it was like being in command of a ship.

"What happened to your ship anyway?" Katara asked curiously.

"You will remember the pirates from Tohin Wo."

She nodded, narrowing her eyes in remembered fury.

"Zhao let them out of prison and then hired them to assassinate me. They did something to the engine and blew up my ship."

"Oh no! Is Bo alright?"
"Yes. The ship was empty at the time except for—Wait, how do YOU know lieutenant Bo?"

"We talked a bit, when you tied me to a TREE. She was actually really nice. Then she made sure I got loose once the fighting started."

"She did WHAT?"

Katara told him about her grandmother and about some of her adventures that he had not been privy to.

"Wait… so you did cross the Great Divide on foot?"

"Yeah, Appa was carrying the sick and wounded villagers across."

"…I owe my intelligence officer an apology. I just thought he was incompetent."

Katara sighed wearily. "Spirits, I miss Appa."

"Wait, what happened to Appa?"

She proceeded to tell him all about losing Appa in the Burning Sands, kidnapped by sandbenders and sold off to the spirits knew where.

"That's why we came here in the first place," she grumbled, "but the stupid Dai Li—"

"Sir? Ma'am?" Their still nervous waitress was back again. "We're going to close soon so…"

They looked around and discovered, much to their chagrin, that the restaurant was now entirely empty except for them. They each paid for their meals, Zuko restraining a wince at the cost, and walked out into the street.

"I'll walk you to the gate," Zuko offered, beginning to eye the now darkened streets suspiciously.

"Don't be ridiculous," Katara said eyeing him out of the corner of her eye. "I'll be perfectly fine."

"Maybe if you were carrying your tessen. Like you promised me you would," Zuko growled.

He had noted the lack much earlier as she had sashayed away from him with Toph, but most of his brain was panicking at that particular moment.

"Don't be such a grump." She grinned at him. "Grumpy-bear."

"Katara, I want to walk you to the gate."

"Too bad! I am NOT some little village girl who needs a big strong man to hold her by the hand," she said glaring up at him. "As a matter of fact, I'm going to walk YOU home."

"Impossible. The gates are sealed after sundown."

"What do you mean the gates… You live in the lower ring?!"

"Unfortunately, I did not get special treatment," Zuko said dryly.

"Why didn't you say that?! We could have done this at a different time!" Katara said, her voice ringing with the unusual mixture of anger and concern that Zuko was certain no other creature in the world could imitate.
"You were rather insistent," he said smiling down at her. "Quietly insistent, but insistent nonetheless."

"Where are you going to sleep?" She looked absolutely devastated.

"Well… I…" his eye darted back the way they had come, towards the Lady Xian's.

"NO!" she said, cottoning on immediately and stamping her foot in negation. "Absolutely NOT. I forbid it!"

"You… forbid it?"

"Yes! New Rule! No sleeping in… in… dens of iniquity!"

"…you know, sometimes you sound like a ninety-year-old woman."

"You'll just have to stay at an inn," she said ignoring him.

"I can't afford middle ring inns. I've got… maybe fifteen zeni on me at the moment. I don't get paid until the end of the week."

"Then… then… what are you going to do?" she said, her face scrunched adorably in worry.

"I guess I will just sleep on the street. It won't be the first ti-"

"Absolutely NOT. I-"

"Forbid it?"

"Yes," she said with a sniff. "I'll just buy you a room myself. That solves the problem."

"No."

"You'd rather sleep on the streets?" she said drawing herself up haughtily.

"Yes."

"What?" she squawked. "Why?"

"I do not accept charity," Zuko said severely.

"Don't… don't be stupid!"

Zuko shrugged. "I do not have much left Katara, but I still have my pride. I do not accept charity and I do not beg."

Katara glared at him for a moment, then started smiling her dangerous smile. "What," she asked sweetly, "is the most dangerous part of the middle ring?"

"…What?"

"You work for… unsavory types. You must know."

"The south side," Zuko said, after a moment of consideration. "It is the main thoroughfare from the ferry docks. I hear that the lower ring almost spills through there a bit. Why?"

"Any inns there?"

She ignored him and began marching south, her shoulders set in determination.

"Katara? STOP!" Zuko shouted, following after her.

"Oh NO!" she shouted dramatically, continuing to stride forward. "A poor defenseless Unicorn girl, without her tessen, all alone on the mean streets of Ba Sing Se."

"Katara you're being ridiculous. I can sleep on the stree-"

"NO!" she snarled, not slowing down in the slightest. "It's my fault you're in this situation. I will fix it!"

Zuko's face worked in frustration and, cursing quietly, he followed.

Much to Zuko's mortification the "inn" Katara chose was a semi-famous establishment named Ai'luguan.

Ai'luguan was a love hotel.

Katara had no idea what that was, and Zuko found neither the right time, or the nerve, to tell her.

"It's fifteen zeni an hour sweetheart," the innkeeper said from the other side of an iron grate which separated him from his potential customers.

"An hour?" Katara said, confusion plain in her voice. "Why would I need an hour? I need a room for the whole night."

"Whoa!" The innkeeper said wonderingly, looking past her to Zuko. "I hope you been eating clams, Ping! This lady's got expectations!"

If it were physically possible, Zuko was certain he'd have melted into a puddle from sheer embarrassment at Katara's confused look, as the man obviously knew him from work.

"It's weird that they would have an hourly rate, right? Who would need just an hour in a hotel room?" Katara asked as they climbed the stairs to the room she had purchased.

Zuko, his mouth dry and his palms beginning to sweat, still didn't have the heart to tell her.

They arrived at the room and Katara looked around proudly, as though she was surveying the site of a great battle victory.

"Very nice. Very nice indeed. Silk sheets, plenty of candles and-" she turned her head upwards in genuine confusion- "is that a mirror on the ceiling?"

"Katara," Zuko said warningly.

She ignored him and sat on the bed bouncing slightly. "Mmmmm, nice soft bed, much better than cobblestones. Only the best for my grumpy-bear."
Zuko glared at her.

"Oh, what's the matter?" she said sweetly. "You don't like it when somebody treats you like a possession?"

"Is that what this is about? Some sort of asinine moral lesson?" Zuko growled.

"I am NOT a frostbitten porcelain doll Zuko!" she shouted, springing to her feet and invading his personal space. "I do not need your protection, and I do NOT need to carry a weapon around everywhere I go!"

"You promised me you would."

"I have my wakizashi, I have my waterskin. I AM armed!"

Zuko shook his head, unable to believe her.

"What do you want me to say Katara? You promised. This world is dangerous and it's better to be prepared for it. I only want-"

"What I want, is for you to respect me."

"You… you think I don't respect you?" Zuko said, gaping. "Do you think I would care for someone if I didn't respect them?"

"Then how can a place be too dangerous for me to walk around alone, but safe enough for you to fall asleep in?"

"That's not-"

"How, Zuko!?"

"I'm…"

"You're what? You're so much stronger than I am? So much more combat-ready?"

"…expendable," Zuko finished. "I am a half blind, honorless ronin who guards a whorehouse. Your life is worth more than mine."

"That has got to be the dumbest thing I have ever-"

"It is to me anyway," Zuko said, eye on the ground.

Katara stared at him for a long moment. "Rule three."

"…Rule three?" Zuko paused for a moment, frowning. "…What does me being 'cute' have to do with anything?"

"That wasn't rule three!" Katara shouted, pinking slightly. "Rule three was no more self-deprecating crap!"

"Oh! …Sorry."

She sighed. "If it makes you feel better, I'll… try to remember to carry my tessen more."

"Thank you."
"But you have to stop thinking I'm helpless."

"How could I think you're helpless? The first time we really fought you impaled me."

"Then why do I need to be ESCORTED everywhere?!"

"Because then I get to spend more time with you!" Zuko snapped. Not to mention the fact that the LAST time I let you walk away from me alone I nearly killed you and then didn't see you again from almost three months.

"Oh." She paused for a moment. "So this whole fight was kind of stupid then."

"Yes."

"...Right. So, you will be sleeping here, I will be going back to the upper ring. Problem solved."

"Uh... no."

"DAMNIT ZUKO! I thought we had settled this!" she shouted. "I am perfectly alright to-"

"That's not what I meant!" Zuko interjected quickly.

They stared at each other for a moment.

"...Well?" Katara said somewhat irritably.

"It's just..." Zuko felt his face flush.

Katara blinked and her face grew more concerned "What is it?"

Ancestors be with me, Zuko thought trying to muster his courage.

"This... this is a love hotel, Katara."

She eyed him and the room askance. "Yes, it is perfectly lovely. What does that have to do with-"

"No! It's a love hotel! As in, a place where people come specifically to have sex!" Zuko shouted, attempting to conceal his mortification with sheer volume.

"That's- What? I... Ridiculous!" Katara sputtered, her eyes wide as she backed away. "I didn't bring you here to... to..." she flushed darkly, her words trailing away.

"I know. It's just..." Zuko's face, which was normally rather impassive, had become extraordinarily abashed, "If you leave right now... After the fuss you made about needing the whole night..." he shrugged helplessly. "People will talk."

"...You can't be serious."

"All I've got left is pride."

"That has got to be the dumbest thing I have ever heard."

"Yes, probably," Zuko admitted.

"So..."
"We have to wait. Just… just an hour or so? That… uh… should be long enough," he said, looking down at his feet.

"Are you really that insecure?" Katara said, grinning widely.

"NO. I've got a reputation," Zuko said quickly. "I've got a job because of that reputation. Without my job I can't eat or even come up to the middle ring."

There, he thought. That seems believable.

"That… is complete whale-shit," Katara said, her eyes narrowed.

Or not.

They both looked anywhere but at each other for a long moment.

"So, now what are supposed to do?" Katara said, idly flopping down on the bed.

Zuko, who hadn't moved from the doorway after he'd locked and bolted it, went stock still. His eye fell on her as the less helpful part of his brain started providing him with a variety of ways to pass the time.

Blood of the Sun she is beautiful.

Katara, who had somehow become far more perceptive than he recalled, turned a particularly vibrant shade of puce and grabbed her knees to her chest.

"That wasn't- I didn't mean- You're unbelievable!" she said.

"Sorry! I'm sorry… I..." Zuko quickly sat down where he was, legs crossed in a meditation pose. "I'll just stay over here," he nodded to himself. "Just stay here and meditate."

Calm thoughts. NOT naughty thoughts. CALM. THOUGHTS.

Katara rolled her eyes at him. "You're being stupid. You're not a child, come over here and sit down," she said indicating the spot next to her on the bed.

"THAT is not at good ide-" he cut off at her glare. He rose with a sigh and slipped his katana out of his belt to place it into the stand at the head of the bed.

"This," Katara said, indicating the middle of the bed, "is the great Kaiu wall. She traced a path along the middle of the bed with the back of her wakizashi. "You cross the wall without my permission…" she locked eyes with Zuko "…I'm going to make you regret it."

The corner of Zuko's mouth rose in a smile. "There's my snuggle-bunny," he said softly.

"Sit down, grumpy-bear," Katara said, smiling back fiercely.

Zuko turned and sat on the very edge of the bed, facing away from her.

I am calm. Totally calm. I am absolutely totally-

Until this moment Zuko had never considered a sound to be sexy before. Certainly Katara's voice, a growl, a murmur, a shout, could send pleasant shivers up his spine, but he assumed that that was
because of the girl it was attached to. However, the sound that silk made as the woman behind stretched out on it struck him as downright obscene. Like a caress along the back of his neck and a breathless whisper in his ear. Against his better judgment, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Katara lying down, back arched in a stretch, her purple linen kimono complementing the deep green silk of the bed. She smirked at him as she continued to stretch.

"Now you're doing it on purpose," Zuko said, voice hoarse.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said throatily.

Zuko exhaled in a snort and, with a force of will, turned his head away.

"Tell me about the Fire-Nation," Katara said after a long moment of tense silence.

"Katara, I don't know how many times I have to tell you, I am NOT-"

"I didn't mean the military stuff. I just want to hear about what it was like living there. It was your home; do you miss it?"

"Yes," he said quietly, voice just above a whisper. "Yes, I miss it. Don't you miss the South Pole?"

"Of course I do. I miss Gran-gran and all my people and the southern lights… I just…" she trailed off. "…I just want you to talk to me," she said quietly.

"For practice?" Zuko said, smiling slightly as he turned to look at her again.

"Yes," she said primly drawing herself up into a kneeling position. "Now lay down, relax, and practice your 'not-being-a-total-stuttery-dork-jutsu' grumpy-bear."

Zuko glanced down at the now crinkled line that denoted Katara's version of the Kaiu Wall. "…You're trying to get me stabbed, aren't you?"

"No. I'm just setting the battlefield. You control the terrain you control the battle." She smirked. "Pretty sure somebody important said that."

*Oh good spirits, she's quoting Akodo now? I am so screwed.*

"Besides," she continued, "it's kind of fun bossing you around. Certainly beats being tied to a TREE."

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Maybe if you behave and do as I say for once…"

Zuko, deciding to humor her despite the danger, lay down, stiff as a board and attempting to ensure he went nowhere near the "wall." He considered it a mixed blessing that he couldn't see her, she was on his left, in his blind spot, but then it came as a complete surprise when her hand gently touched the mangled half of his face. Her fingers traced pattern he could only barely feel through the rough skin.

"If I tell you about the South Pole, what it was really like, will you tell me about the Fire-Nation? Not the military stuff, just what it's like?"

*You keep touching my face like that I'll probably tell you every password, secret tunnel, and weapons cache I know.*
Unable to trust his voice NOT to say exactly that, Zuko just nodded.

"It's… cold at the South Pole," she began. "I know that sounds silly, of course it's cold at the South Pole, but… it's more than just the temperature. The land is harsh, unforgiving; and we were always taught that that was what made the tribe so important. It's warmth. It's the warmth of the hearth fire, the warmth of family and the warmth of friendship and love that protect you from the cold. It helps you fight it, makes you strong, gives you the courage to walk out of your yurt every day and face the merciless ice. Even when… even when you've lost everything that you thought made your home a home, the warmth of family gives you the strength to carry on. To keep going. Even if… even if everyone leaves you… you remember that love, and carry it with you… in… in… the darkest times."

Zuko turned to look at her as her words began to slow down and the look of absolute sorrow on her face cut his heart to ribbons. He turned over on to his shoulder so that he could see her better and took her hand in between his.

"We don't have to talk about this. If it makes you sad you don't have to—"

"It's ok. It's a good kind of hurt. Grief is the best kind of hurt."

"Grief?"

"Yes. Grief is remembering the things you miss. Refreshing the memory and keeping it alive in your heart."

"But… why would you deliberately do that to yourself? You can't change what's happened, you just have to… it's… it's better to just not think about it."

"Are we still talking about me?" Katara said with an odd, sad, smile. Her hand cupped his scar. "Tell me about the Fire-Nation. Tell me about your home."

Zuko sighed, unconsciously leaning into her hand, and purposely thought about his home for the first time in a long time.

"People… people always assume that the Fire-Nation is hot. Because of fire, I guess. Fire is hot and so obviously the Fire-Nation must be hot too. But I was born in Otosan Uchi, at the top of one of the tallest mountains in the nation, the caldera of a dead volcano. We get snow in the winter sometimes and the wind is constant, howling through the streets, smelling of the sea and sulfur. The mountains… the mountains aren't like the ones here in the Earth-Kingdom, all smooth and gently sloped. My mountains are jagged things that reach up into the sky like pieces of broken glass. No matter where you are in the Fire-Nation there's always a mountain somewhere off in the distance, stark and severe, sort of looming over you. At night sometimes when the Fire Islands are awake, the eastern sky glows in a red fury. That's why we call it the Sea of Flames. And you can feel them, every firebender can, and everyone wakes up and watches the east waiting for the Sun to rise. When I was young, Azula and I would wake up at night when the volcanoes were awake and sneak out on to the eastern balcony to watch. Mother and… father would be there too most times and we would just… watch, quietly, as a family until the Sun rose and…" Zuko shook his head. "That was really the only time we were ever all together. Even when we went on vacation my father always had something to do, and Azula would go off alone to train. Even mom was happy to sit alone in the library and read or go and practice her kensai forms alone in the woods. Then she just…" Zuko trailed off.

"She what?"

"She disappeared. I… I think she's dead," Zuko exhaled a shuddering breath. "She disappeared the
same day that Fire-Lord Azulon died. I don't know… I don't know what I did, but I think she killed him. I think she killed him to protect me. She died for me, and I don't…"

"That's… something we have in common."

Zuko's eye shot down to hers and found them full of tears.

"Wha- Why are you crying?" he said beginning to panic.

"I'm NOT," she sniffled, very obviously lying.

Zuko slid his arms around her and pulled her close. "You are though."

"My mother…" she hiccupped into his chest, "my mother died protecting me too."

Oh no. He squeezed her tighter.

"I just… I don't."

"You don't what?"

"I… don't want you to think I'm weak."

Zuko was taken aback for a moment. He had been taught that this sort of sentiment, even in front of a trusted ally, was a weakness. That opening yourself like this, to anyone, was the height of foolishness. He really should have been disgusted by her and himself and the whole sappy melodramatic situation.

But he wasn't.

"Never," he growled. "Never ever." He kissed the top of her head and squeezed her tight.

She sighed and snuggled closer to him, her tears slowing to nothing and her hitching breath growing steady.

Then she began to snore faintly.

She's asleep?! He thought incredulously. Who just falls asleep like that?

Even if he had wanted to leave, he couldn't. His arm was trapped under her and at that moment he'd have sooner cut it off than wake her up. She was asleep, in his arms. In that moment he considered himself one of the luckiest men alive.

It's fine. I've got nowhere to be. I'll just… I'll just close my eye for a minute. Just… for… a minute.

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A/N: Hello hello hello! Welcome gentlepersons to these most wonderful author notes! I hope you enjoyed part two of the Tales of Ba Sing Se. If you didn't (or if you did) please comment and review as such. Your feedback is a crucial part of my email inbox, far more important than those pesky bills or those emails from my university about my grades!

METAAAA-BIIITTTTS (/in the style of "lost in space")

Jin deleted: Now to start off I have to say that I like Jin. She seems a nice, genuine, girl and I
think she could have done Zuko (both Canon and Akodo) a lot of good. She's a stable, if somewhat perky, girl who likes Zuko and that is never a bad thing. That being said, she is not appearing in this work, her date with Zuko has been re-appropriated for an entirely Zutara purpose. Again, I like Jin but, again, I regret nothing.

Why Mai and Ty Lee were Azula's friends: What of the great things that I love about writing is discovering new things, new elements, new facets about a story I have already written. One of the things that came out of this chapter somehow was a better understanding of why Azula is friends with Mai and Ty Lee. Putting aside the, "royal fire academy for girls," or whatever it was that they attended in canon, Azula is a princess. Mai is obviously some form of aristocrat and Ty Lee is... well Ty Lee's life is never touched on over much except that she has 6 identical sisters. SO here's MY take on these relationships. Mai, like Azula, is a genius. Certified, grade A, IQ of 150, genius. Azula, a girl who would demand only the best from those she associates with probably figured that out relatively quickly and essentially demanded that she was allowed to be friends with someone "on her level." Her father, most likely a low-level bureaucrat made the most of it and ended up getting several governorships out of the deal. Thus why it became crucial for Mai to "behave" and "not make to much noise," and to marry Zuko.

Ty Lee is NOT a genius, not that she's an idiot but just not a genius, she IS, however, a martial prodigy. Nobody else is chi blocking, are they? These are JUST the kind of exemplary people that Azula wants to have around. Which is the foundation of their relationship. The growth, and twisting, of those relationships will be discussed in later chapters, but just wanted to touch on that little bit here.

Tropes used and abused: Good lord I am a hack! Look at all these clichés! Forced to sleep on the same bed for non-sensical reasons, overly jealous (possibly tsundere) girl freaks about past relationships, the list goes on. I CONTINUE to regret NOTHING!

The education of a Shinjo: And once again I play the "off camera, author's headcanon" game. Katara has become far more perceptive of how Zuko thinks and there is a reason for that. She has, reasonably recently, been in Wan Shi Tong's library. And while Zhao obviously destroyed all the tactical and geographic information about the Fire-Nation I doubt he would have paid much attention to the fiction section. You can learn a LOT about a culture from their fiction and I have this hilarious mental image of Katara wandering through the aisles and finding the Fire-Nation equivalent of Harlequin bodice-rippers. I think Katara's the kind of woman who very secretly likes those sort of sappy romances. I also think that she's the kind of lady to be bullied into reading them to Toph, attempting to skip over the racy bits and being made to go back over them because Toph is super perceptive about that kind of thing. Regrets? I have none.

"The mountains are awake:" The idea of the volcanoes waking people up and being all majestic and such is NOT my original idea. It was inspired, made my own headcanon, what-have-you, by a variety of fics around the net. Most prominently "Sparrowkeet" by audreyii_fic. If, by chance, you have not read that, do not pass GO do not collect 200 dollars go directly there and (keeping the rating in mind) enjoy yourself.

Next week's rating: THIS is an announcement of your early warning system! Next week's chapter is the MAIN reason this work is rated M. If you are below the age of majority in your
nation of origin please have an adult with you while you read (yeah who am I kidding). You will be warned again, but THIS is your early warning. Thank you and good night.

But seriously, thanks for reading. I am still consistently baffled by the amount of traffic my work receives and while my self-esteem is as rock-solid as they come MORE validation is never a bad thing. You guys are the best.

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"

There are citrus fruits, and things get… steamy.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 4 November 2018
A/N: The Following is rated NB; for Naughty Bits (seriously)

Reader discretion is seriously advised.

Late Spring, year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

Zuko was warm.

Not in an unpleasant way. Warm in the muzzy cloudy way one finds oneself in when waking up after a good long nap.

It had been so long since he slept so deeply, he didn't even recognize the sensation.

*Perhaps I fell asleep in the Sun?* he thought foggily. *Odd. I don't nap. Where was I?*

Something tickled at his nose, smelling faintly of flowers and… the sea?

*Was I at the beach?*

He cracked his eye open and took in waves of brown hair. Katara had turned in her sleep and he had apparently curled around her, his arm draped protectively over her middle. He raised his head slightly to take in the situation and then silently began to panic.

Ash! I'm over the wall. *If she wakes up she'll kill me. How in Akodo's name am I going to get out of this!? Maybe if I just…*

He stopped. His mind going blank as he suddenly realized that she was *already* awake.

She seemed to be examining his hand. Just winding her smaller fingers in between his, examining the texture, tracing her fingers over an old knife scar he'd gotten in a fight in the Colonies.

He squeezed her hand back.

She released his hand and rolled over, turning back to him, her grey-blue eyes wide and searching. She wasn't angry, and in that moment Zuko forgot why she should be.

Suddenly he was kissing her. Or she was kissing him. Or they were kissing each other, it didn't matter, *nothing* mattered. Katara made his kimono, already loosened from sleeping, vanish as if by magic and her hands danced across his skin, grasping and raking his back in equal measure. Zuko could feel her heartbeat accelerating, matching his own as he pressed her closer to him, molding her body against him.

With a clench and a twist of her hips she rolled on top of him, sitting herself on his legs. Her kimono was loose as well, the white wrappings of her sarashi starkly visible against her dark skin and Zuko's hands, as if compelled by some bizarre magnetism, flew to them, tugging and pulling as he continued to kiss her as much as he was physically capable.
How in the ashpits does this thing unhook? He'd never actually gotten this far before, and what at first glance had seemed to be a simple set of wrappings was now far too difficult for his addled brain to comprehend.

Katara unwound her arms from around his neck and with a single deft tug behind her back the wrappings fell away, spilling down to her midriff like snow off a mountain. Zuko's mouth slowly trailed after them, spilling kisses down her neck, her collarbone and onto her breasts. She squeaked in surprise as he lightly bit at her nipple and, face still at her breasts, he chuckled at the sound.

She growled at him wordlessly in mock fury and seized a handful of his hair, bending his head away, back and to the side. Then, incongruously, she began to kiss his *scar*, feather-light, the ghosts of kisses from jaw to brow. Zuko felt a groan escape his lips, as something like electric shocks seemed to run up and down his spine. His own hands slipped downward into her kimono, towards the small of her back, her bottom and her underwear. He gripped firmly, and with a growl of his own he pulled her forward on top of the insistent bulge at his crotch.

She went still, pulling away from him, face flushed and biting at her lower lip. Her eyes were wide and embarrassed and Zuko's own eye widened in surprise. It made sense of course, who *would* she have done this with? She had been constantly on the run, that was *his* fault after all. Neither of them could bring themselves to speak. If there was a moment to back down, this was it. They had a silent conversation there, half-naked, clutching one another on green silk. A conversation with just their eyes.

*I've never...* embarrassed flush.

*We don't have to...* concern on a mangled face, a minute shake of the head.

*I want...* eyes endlessly wide, grey-blue and full of desire.

*I want...* lone eye narrowed, smoldering yellow.

Her eyes hardened in determination and then she gave him a small jerky nod, exhaling a shuddering breath. Zuko nodded back and, as gently as he had ever done anything in his life, he kissed her and rolled her on to her back.

He took it as slowly as he could. He hadn't had the opportunity to practice this very much, and it had been years, but he was determined to do it right. He kissed her gently as he slowly traced his fingers down her belly in little circles, past her waist, past her navel, under the hem of her underwear. He took his time and kissed her deeply as he began.

*Please. Honored Ancestors. Don't let me fuck THIS up,* he prayed silently.

She gasped, her hands grasping reflexively, one in silk sheets, one in his *hair*, as his fingers found the mark. He continued. Slowly. He had been told that this might hurt a girl at first.

He moved his fingers deliberately, rhythmically, noting places and angles which elicited a response. She began to grow slick which, combined with her furtive moans, seemed to indicate that he was doing *something* right. Her own hand, the one that wasn't attempting to pull his hair out by the roots anyway, joined his; massaging herself slightly higher.

Curious, Zuko placed his thumb at the same place and gave an experimental squeeze.

Katara's hips *bucked*, her hand flying back to her mouth to hold back a cry.

*Well. I guess that's a GOOD spot then.*
He began to move faster, gradually accelerating the rhythm, rolling his thumb occasionally and hitting all the places he had noted before. She began to pant, her chest heaving, her hips moving in time with his fingers. He could feel her getting close somehow, the warm wetness at his fingers growing more intense, her breathing more labored, her cries more frequent and less restrained.

Not to mention the fact that he was pretty sure he was going to have a bald patch where her hand was embedded in his scalp.

There was a stiffening and a cry, her loudest one yet, and then she collapsed back to earth, her entire body shivering. She seemed to melt, rigid muscle becoming liquid as she fought to regain control of her breathing. She looked exhausted, her eyelids fluttering, and Zuko drew her close, kissing at any available stretch of skin.

*Well done me!* he thought proudly. *Now, she'll likely fall back asleep… I should consider what excuse I'm going to give uncl-

His brain ceased functioning.

Katara was NOT falling asleep.

Her eyes had grown heavy-lidded, but now she was smiling that dangerous smile he loved and her hand, which had finally released his hair, had stealthily slipped down into his hakama pants and very poignantly reminded him of *just* how much hand-strength a bending samurai had.

He wanted to tell her it wasn't necessary, that he was perfectly happy just lying next to her, but it seemed that speech was forbidden here, as though a single word would break the strange spell which had fallen over them.

Also, he would have had to lie.

He *wanted* her. He wanted to do things with her, *TO* her that he couldn't even have articulated had he wanted to. It felt nothing so much like the slow creeping madness that he'd become familiar with. It was a mindless searing *need*, a palpable force that wanted nothing more than to take her, throw her down and just be *inside* her, part of her.

It terrified him.

But that terror was nothing next to the absolute burning conviction that shone in her eyes.

The sounds that came out of his mouth were half moan, half growl as she kissed his neck, her teeth grazing his skin, her hand squeezing and caressing. What had once been a very clinical and detached affair for him now became very real and very urgent. His whole body went rigid, his hands fisted in the bed sheets, as he forced himself not to simply grab her and mount her like a rutting beast.

Again, as if by some sort of sorcery, his pants had been removed and tossed somewhere into that vast oblivion of irrelevant space that was NOT the bed. Katara pulled herself astride him, her hands braced at his stomach. She paused for a moment, a contemplative look on her face, and then, slowly, *agonizingly slowly*, she rolled her hips against him, *along* him, stopping just short of the point of no return.

It was torture.

Was this what he had been doing to her? This was infuriating. Insufferable! Had he been capable of speech he would have told her so!
But he couldn't. It was taking everything he had to maintain any control of himself at all.

After a few more torturous passes she halted and, with a pensive look on her face, lowered herself on to him.

Zuko's self-control evaporated like snowfall on a volcano.

With a roar his hands flew to her hips, and with a twist she was under him. He buried her mouth with his as his hips began to thrust, jerkily at first but with gradually increasing steadiness and force. Katara, whose face had gone from mocking smirk, to surprise, to focused intensity in the space of a few heartbeats, wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kiss with matching ferocity.

Throughout Zuko's life, he had always been trained to always maintain a level of detachment; a sense of impassivity. In battle, in fighting, in conversation, there was always a part of his brain that sat in the back taking notes, analyzing, and offering insight. As he had grown older, it had been joined by another, less helpful, voice which generally seemed to slouch back and shout obscenities and sarcasm while munching on a box of fire-flakes.

Both of these voices had obviously gone on holiday at this point.

Zuko forgot everything. He forgot his past, his scars. He forgot his name. The only thing that mattered was her. Her smell, her taste, her cries, her voice echoing wordlessly in his ear over and over and over again. Her mouth, hot under his. Her nails drawing lines of red on his back. Her legs twisted around his, urging him onward as the tempo increased, the rhythm all consuming, all encompassing, all...

Everything went white.

And for a brief second... he was completely happy.

Reality reasserted itself.

Zuko looked down at Katara, a slow smile splitting his face.

"Wow."

There was something Zuko was not supposed to do.

Zuko had suffered through several extremely embarrassing lectures concerning it.

He had been given over to the hands of an exceptionally skilled courtesan the week following his gempukku. A courtesan whose primary task was to familiarize him with the practice of lovemaking and sex, something tradition called "dispelling the great mystery," and also to teach him how to avoid doing the thing he wasn't supposed to do.

It was very important to the Fire-Nation that the line of succession be very clear. Uncomplicated. Obvious.

Zuko, his mind completely gone in the heat of the moment, had done that forbidden thing anyway.

The two of them had basked in the afterglow for a good ten minutes before enough of Zuko's brain returned from vacation to remind him of the thing he wasn't supposed to do. His eye shot open in sheer panic, REAL panic this time and he bounded to his feet, alternating between swearing at
himself and apologizing profusely to Katara as he paced like a maniac at the foot of the bed. Katara became concerned as well, at least until she had managed to translate enough of his nearly incoherent rambling to figure out why he was so agitated.

Then, she looked at him like he was an idiot.

Which, in all fairness, he was.

"Firstly," she said, ticking points off on her fingers as she went. "It is the wrong time of the month for me, which is something I took into account before I even kissed you. Second, there are a variety of herbs and teas that I know of that would keep me safe even if it was the right time. Thirdly, and most importantly," her face grew dark and stormy as she glared at the naked nervous man in front of her. "I am a Master waterbender and healer. You don't tell me when I have a baby, Akodo Zuko. I tell YOU."

"But but I'm not suppos-"

Katara cut him off, leaping to her feet. "You are NOT going to ruin this for me you idiot!" she spat, poking him in the chest with her finger. "This is my first time and it is supposed to special, magical even."

"But-"

"No! You shut up, get back in the bed, and cuddle me until I tell you to stop, you great idiot," she said pointing fiercely.

Zuko lay back down, in a state of pure confusion as Katara wrapped herself around him; her head on his chest.

"You're sure? Absolutely sure, th-"

"MAGICAL!" she shouted, not even looking at him.

Zuko began to laugh, exhausted relieved laughter. "You are such an odd girl."

"But… you like odd?"

"I love odd."

"So…" she was suddenly very tense. "So it was… I… I did it right?"

Zuko paused for a long moment. "I am amazed at how you can go from complete and total self-assurance to ridiculous self-doubt like that," he said wonderingly.

"That wasn't an answ-"

Zuko kissed her firmly, cutting off her words. "You couldn't have done it wrong. It was perfect, you're beautiful, and I love you."

"Oh," she said happily, seeming relieved. She kissed him back, then jerked back suddenly as certain parts of his anatomy responded.

"Uh… Sorry. It… it does that."

"No! No. It's ok," she said, looking downward and blushing slightly. "Does that mean… I mean to say… If you would like, we can-"
He kissed her again, deeply. "I would like," he whispered in her ear after they separated, "I would like, very much."

The sound Katara made in reply could only be described as a purr.

Unfortunately, they were interrupted by a thunderous series of knocks which shook the door to their room in its frame.

Zuko was on his feet in an instant, his katana in his hands. Katara was only a beat behind him, water bent from her waterskin into a spear pointed at the door, the sheets pulled around her protectively.

"I'll kill them," Zuko muttered darkly, knuckles white on the hilt of his blade. "They will speak of what I do to this person for a HUNDRED generations. As a warning to anyone else stupid enough to-"

"Who is it?" Katara said brightly, her voice belying the matching look of fury on her face.

"Is Ping there?" a slow, deep and, to Zuko at least, familiar voice said.

"Chou'lou?" Zuko said blankly. "What in the name of the-" he cut off, realizing for the first time that the Sun had been illuminating the room for the better part of an hour.

He was supposed to be at work.

"SHIT!" He put his sword back in its scabbard and quickly started trying to find his clothes, which had somehow managed to become incredibly scattered.

Katara caught on quickly and bent her water back into its skin as Zuko frantically tried to find his socks. Wrapping the sheet tighter around herself she boldly strode to the door, throwing the bolt and opening it.

"Katara? Don't open the do-" Zuko cut off as he fell over the bed as he tried to put one of his socks on while hopping on the other foot.

"Can I help you?" Katara said, the sweetness in her voice nothing compared to the acid in her glare as she stared down the giant standing outside the door.

"This is for you two, miss," Chou'lou said politely, holding out a basket full of fruits. He leaned down to put his head through the doorway and shouted past her at Zuko. "Ma'am says you got the day off Ping! Have fun!" he finished with a broad grin. With that, he gave a little bow and lumbered away.

"What did he say?" Zuko asked, his head appearing from behind the other side of the bed.

"You have the day off apparently," Katara said, putting the basket down on a small table and closing the door. "And there's a note."

Zuko, still in a state of undress, and only one sock, strode around the bed and plucked the fine parchment from the basket of citrus fruits.

"Congratulations darling,

I hope you have found Ai'luguan, one of my less profitable ventures, to be both comfortable and hospitable. Please enjoy this complimentary basket of fruits which, in my own experience, have proven to be both refreshing and RESTORATIVE."
Zuko grunted irritably. Even in print she managed somehow to be suggestive.

"If you enjoyed the room as much as I think you MUST have, you will be pleased to hear that I am happy to offer it to you at the low, employee discount, rate of a two bu per month, or one bu every pay period. You may find that you require new lodgings soon in any regard as, only last night, one of my subordinates entered into a partnership with your esteemed uncle regarding a tea house soon to be opened in the upper ring. Mushi is very excited of course and was doubly thrilled to hear that you had acquired lodgings AND companionship for the evening.

If it is in fact, as I surmise, Sifu Katara, friend and confidant of the Avatar who you find yourself with, please let her know that I have taken the liberty of providing her with an alibi, involving an outbreak of pentapox, so as to throw off suspicion.

Clandestine relationships ARE the best, are they not darling?

Wishing you BOUNDLESS energy on your well-deserved day off,

Lady Kitsune Xian"

Zuko sighed heavily and handed the note to Katara. "What in the Sun's name is 'pentapox'?'"

Katara's eyes grew wide as she neared the end of the letter. "She knows who I am!?" she squeaked, looking up at Zuko. "How does she know who I am?"

"She seems to know everything. Even who I am. I think that's half the reason she gave me a job, so she could keep tabs on me." He smiled nervously down at Katara. "How does she know who I am?"

"It's a fake disease Sokka made up when we were escaping Omashu," she said huffing irritably. "People keep claiming they have it now and I have to sit them down and explain that it isn't a real thing."

"And… that is an acceptable alibi?"

"It should be. Aang spends most of his days searching the city for Appa now, and as long as Toph doesn't say anything Sokka will buy it." She rolled her eyes. "He thinks it's funny."

"Will Toph say anything?"

"I don't think so. She and I came to an understanding after we escaped from the desert."

"Well then," Zuko said, now grinning. "It would seem we are both free for the rest of the day. Do you have any suggestions, Sifu Katara?" As he said this he snaked his arms around the small of her back and pulled her closer.

"I might," Katara said, eyes glittering with amusement. "As a matter of fact, I think I would quite enjoy a foot rub."

A/N: Hello and welcome to the author notes!

…

So. THAT just happened. In my years of reading fanfiction, it has become par for the course
that there would be a, dare I say it, *erotic* scene in any romance. Smut, it is generally called. Obviously, for those who have read all of my stuff, you will know that I’ve never written smut before. Honestly, I'm not sure if the above even qualifies. I have tried, in my own fumbling way, to keep it *classy* (the furthest I go is writing out "nipple"). I hedged for a long time with this chapter, and was halfway into writing a "fade-to-black." But what is this hobby of mine if not a way of pushing my own boundaries? A way of shifting my comfort zone? So, as a challenge to myself, I wrote a smut scene. Erotica. What-have-you.

I just hope nobody is too disappointed in me.

There are no meta-bits!

Any concerns, comments, or referrals to find the love of the deity of your choosing may, and SHOULD, be directed towards the comments/review portions of your screens. Seriously I love comments and double-love questions about the work. It gives me a chance to engage.

Thanks again!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Things get domestic. And violent.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 11 November 2018
Early Summer, year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

Katara made it clear before she left, as she had before in the badlands and in no uncertain terms, that she could not, absolutely could not, come and see Zuko every day. People, notably her brother, would get suspicious. Even Aang, as tied up in knots as he was about Appa, would catch on. The previous excuse she used in the badlands, that she was practicing alone in the moonlight to gain insight into its nature, wouldn't fly in the densely packed city.

Zuko just nodded in acceptance, mind still somewhat muddled in a nearly cheerful fog. He would take whatever time she could give him, as little or as much as he could get, as long as she felt it was safe for her. She didn't owe him anything, and the fact that the woman he loved was here, in the same city as him, and actually wanted to… to… pass the time with him was an unexpected and terribly wonderful thing. He couldn't even begin to express how stupidly in love with her he was.

Not that she had said it back.

That was a troublesome thought that Zuko had as he leaned against the doorframe of Lady Xian's the next day; his zanshin forgotten for the moment, most of his focus on Katara and what it meant now that she was here. Zuko had told her he loved her ages ago, but at no point had she said it back. It seemed a trifle, she had just had sex with him after all and he knew what that meant to her, what the had to mean to her. But…

Don't be stupid. Of course she loves you. Why else would she-

Because she is cautious, and an expert at misdirection and redirection, answered the part of his brain that still remembered a life fraught with intrigue in the royal palace. You could be a powerful ally… if you could be TURNED.

Zuko's frown deepened behind his straw hat.

You are being stupid. I can trust-

Trust is for FOOLS. His sister's voice. Everyone ALWAYS wants something. That is the nature of people. They USE one another to get the things that they want. Those who are not useful are either put to the side until they ARE useful… or discarded.

Azula always had been a lot smarter than him.

Katara is an HONORABLE woman. She would not… she just WOULDN'T.
"To subdue the enemy, WITHOUT fighting is the acme of skill," Akodo had said, another of the foundational lines of LEADERSHIP that had given birth to the Scorpion dojo. And if you know ANYTHING about the girl and her little bald friend, they LOVE winning without fighting.

If Zuko could have any scowled harder he would have, but he had already reached a level of scowling previously unseen by humankind and several potential customers, unremarked by Zuko, had suddenly changed their minds about walking into the Palace or even within several feet of him.

…why can't my life EVER be simple?

"I must say, nephew, I never thought that we would do so well for ourselves," Iroh said as he continued to organize his, no longer meager, belongings into assorted baskets for transport.

Zuko just grunted in agreement.

While Zuko, despite his uncle's best efforts, still thought of tea primarily as "hot leaf juice," it was clear that the citizens of Ba Sing Se, both the high and the low, had a different opinion. It hadn't even taken Iroh a week to develop a reputation for fine tea brewing and excellent tea ceremony which drew clientele in from far and wide.

After Zuko's very public duel with Jet, business had practically exploded.

Formal tea ceremony was considered an art form in the Fire-Nation and, among the stable well-ordered citizens of the Earth-Kingdom, it was considered one of the highest. Precise movement and exacting control of temperature, the positioning of the teacups and pot, the timing of the pours and their angle all had to be carefully controlled by the server, and when done correctly the ceremony itself was believed to have spiritual benefits to those who partook, bringing order out of chaos and peace to the troubled mind.

The fact that Iroh was able to perform the Art of Tea Ceremony in a rickety lower ring shop and without firebending spoke volumes.

The patronage and tips Iroh had brought in had allowed him to, after his usual fashion, pepper their smallish apartment with odd knickknacks and woodblock paintings. He had even bought another tsungi horn, as well a variety of painted screens and innumerable fans, in a variety of colors and styles, all of which he bid Zuko give to Lady Xian as tokens of his "esteem."

Zuko was beginning to suspect that he did it just because he enjoyed making Zuko uncomfortable.

Zuko's own belongings were just as meager as they had been in the days before he was called Ping. Simple, functional, austere and, most importantly, highly portable. He had been packed in five minutes. Iroh was fast approaching five hours, musing over each item and telling Zuko a story about it, intermixed with ideas about potential names for his new tea shop.

Five interminable hours in which Zuko helped a small amount by moving full baskets to the door and in which he deflected leading questions a large amount.

"So, you were out late last night nephew…" Iroh said musing over a painting of several doves in flight over a cherry tree.

"Yes uncle," Zuko said as he hauled a decorative urn over to the door where a group of hired workers were transporting things down the stairs and out to a cart which would convey Iroh to the upper ring.
"You know, I had a painting like this back in the palace?"

Let me guess, you got it from an ex-girl-

"One of my lady friends was a painter," Iroh continued, unaware of Zuko's inner monolog. "The things that woman could do with a brush," he finished wistfully. "This was before I met your Aunt of course."

Zuko, now eyeing the tsungi horn and wondering how his uncle had even gotten it through the narrow door in the first place, just grunted in acknowledgment.

"Your Aunt was something special you know? Beautiful, graceful, excellent tea sensibilities… it is important in life to make sure that one knows a person before committing too deeply."

"Assess the enemy's strength in detail," Zuko quoted, turning the tsungi horn in his hands as he eyed the doorway irritably. "A known enemy is not half so fearsome as a mystery."

"Yes, well… that's as may be but… it is also wise to appeal to one's elders for advice. Especially when one's elders are so… experienced."

Oh, good spirits.

"How did you even get this thing in here, uncle?" Zuko said hefting the horn and glaring at the door attempting to change the subject.

Iroh's eyes widened and he grinned. "Patience and a gentle disposition, nephew. When the door is ready, it will open. If you attempt to force it through that is a good way to get your horn caught in a slamming door."

Oh… just… gross.

"Now if you want more specific advice I will need to meet the lady in question. Do you think she is more of a jasmine drinker or-"

"Uncle!" Zuko snapped. "Horn-" he shook the instrument in his hands- "Door." He gestured at the narrow doorway to their apartment.

Iroh blinked. "Oh. It separates," he said, gesturing at the bell of the horn. "Things are not always as complicated as you make them out to be nephew."

"I rarely find that anything in my life is simple," Zuko growled twisting and pulling at the horn to separate it.

"Yes, well, nothing in the world is more complicated than a woman. Once you figure them out even Pai Sho…"

Spirits save me, Zuko thought.

It turned out that, despite her vehement protests to the contrary, Katara met him after work almost every single day. A basket of food in her hands and a happy smile on her face that, for the length of her stay, banished any doubts he had.

Zuko had attempted to protest the food, once again on the grounds of not accepting charity. Katara, her smile flashing to irritated frown as quickly as lightning, asked if he was suggesting that her food
was bad. How his words had been manipulated into implying that was unclear but, apparently, they qualified as a near mortal insult in the eyes of the female population of the Water-Tribe. And so, the Unicorn's favored daughter then implied, a murderous glint in her eyes, that if Zuko thought he was too good to eat her food then maybe, perhaps, he might just be too good for her as well.

Zuko decided that, perhaps, his pride could take a small hit. Just the once. Just for her.

He discovered that she made the best food anyway, which they would eat together back at his new "apartment." The food she made was simple yet filling and reminded him greatly of the lifesaving bowl of stew he had had back in Haiya. He had mentioned as much a few nights after moving, on the instance that she did in fact bring stew.

He had looked up from his empty bowl to discover that she was furious.

"How DARE they?" she growled. "You come back, you fight those… ruffians, you SAVE the boy, and then they throw rocks at you? I've half a mind to go back there and…"

Zuko was touched but, despite the warm fuzzy feeling her indignant-on-his-behalf wroth engendered in him, he found himself defending them. "To be fair, 'it is the evil one knows that must be chosen over the evil one does not.' After Matomo… well… I'm surprised my own people tolerated my presence."

"Hey! I'm defending you here!"

"And I am grateful," he said taking her hand from across the low table. "But you do not have to-"

She leaned away from him, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and looking just shy of livid.
"Third rule, Zuko. Besides, how is anyone going to hold you accountable for what you while you're being possessed?"

"Katara…" he put his spoon down gently, "I'm insane. Not… not…"

"I've been traveling with the Avatar for almost two years, Zuko. I know what spirit possession looks like. And if that sort of thing counted even Aang would have blood on his hands."

"He does have blood on his hands," Zuko said his tone going dark. "Do you have any idea how many people he killed at the North Pole?"

"That was the Ocean spirit!"

"Which HE CALLED DOWN ON US!" Zuko roared. "Thousands, Katara. Thousands of people, dragged under the water, frozen solid, because he couldn't win conventionally so he… he… cheated!"

"Yeah? Kinda like Sozin did huh?"

Zuko's mouth dropped open in astonishment as Katara flushed and looked away. "That… that is a fair point," Zuko said quietly, "but did you just compare the Avatar to my great-grandfather?"

"We're not supposed to be… I don't want too… can't we talk about something else?"

Zuko reached to the side of the table and slid it out from between them, then scooted forward. "We don't have to talk at all," he said, gently taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

Katara smiled softly and squeezed his hand back, then clambered into his lap, resting her head on his
"I'm sorry," Zuko said wrapping his arms around her.

"You don't have to apologize. We were both being…" she paused trying to find the right word, "stupid. We're both stupid."

"Yes, very, but I should not be yelling at you like that. I… I love you, you know?"

Katara only made a happy sound and snuggled closer to him.

It does not matter. I know how I feel. It changes nothing.

He would take what he could get.

Time passed in something that, if one squinted at it, from a distance, almost seemed akin to domestic bliss.

Katara would arrive with food near sundown, beaming brightly at him and his customary scowl would lose a few degrees of potency. They would walk back to his place and then they would eat and talk. Conversations over a meal often led to one surprising revelation or another, often followed by shouting.

Or sex.

Or sometimes both.

Despite his desire for tranquility with his girlfriend, Zuko was often brought to shouting. Although, after that first time it was never about the Avatar, or fact that they were, in his case tangentially, on opposite sides of a war. Katara was a passionate woman; and defended her beliefs, whether about bushido, philosophy, or the merits of whale blubber over hippo-cow, tenaciously and at high volume. Zuko was just plain obstinate and at some level he enjoyed sparring verbally with her. She would shout, he would shout back and revel in being in love with a woman who was not only a match for him in ferocity but was at absolutely NO level afraid of him.

The night she brought a blubber and barley soup, Zuko was also treated to the discovery that she would be absent the following night owing to the need to celebrate her brother's nineteenth birthday. Zuko found himself surprisingly irritated that the idiot was in fact older than him.

Katara's first, and only marginally successful, attempt at wontons led to the revelation that they had found the mythical Wan Shi Tong's library in the Burning Sands. Inside she had discovered this particular recipe and other information. Zuko noted how quickly she changed the subject, and the subtle flush on her cheeks, when he asked what else she had found inside. He didn't press, but it was obvious it was something to do with the war, or his people. There was very little else that she wouldn't share with him and to tell her it was alright he simply wrapped his arms around her from behind as she prodded at the oddly shaped dumplings and kissed the spot on her neck that he had discovered she liked.

So, to be fair, the wontons being burned was mostly his fault.

Later in the week hot pot night was almost ruined by the information that his sister had punched a hole in the Kaiu Wall.
"She did WHAT?!"

"Yes, she and your friends had a giant drill. It's ok. We stopped it," Katara said, still idly stirring the pot over the low flames Zuko had bent into existence. "And no, no one was hurt, that I know of."

"How is that possible? If that had happened the entire city would be in chaos."

"The Dai Li," Katara snarled, her stirring growing more energetic. "It is the policy of Ba Sing Se that the war not be mentioned within the walls. Idiots."

Zuko took a deep calming breath, gathering himself for the fight that he knew was imminent.

"If this is so… you need to leave."

She glared at him, her fists at her hips, one still clutching a wooden spoon. "What? Are insulting my cooking?"

"I'm sure your hot pot is delicious, like everything else you make. Don't change the subject. If my sister here… you need to leave the city."

"I already told you we stopped her from-"

"No. No, you did not. You may have stopped that scheme, but there will be another and another and another. Azula does not stop."

"And neither do I!" Katara said brandishing the spoon at him.

"Katara, she has been preparing for this nearly her entire life, the both of us were before my banishment. This is the last hurdle, the final step between my family and world domination." Zuko sighed. "I had expected a few more years before it came to this. She must have been really pissed after Tu Zin."

"But… we stopped her drill!"

"I think you misunderstand. I assure that was not her drill. It was most likely commissioned by one of the older generals, and a Lion to boot. Azula is not a Lion, she is a Scorpion; and tearing down walls, a frontal assault, is not their way. They come at you sideways, it's how they think, how they move, how they win." He shook his head. "She is probably already in the city. Ba Sing Se is no longer safe for you. You need to leave."

"You… you're being paranoid, and arrogant!"

"You called them assassins Katara, and in many ways you were fundamentally correct. The idea that a wall could keep them out is beyond ridiculous. It is not a matter of if, but of when."

"They I will need to stay and stop them! We've done it before, and we'll do it again."

"This will not BE like before!" Zuko shouted, slamming his fist down on the table and making the pot jump. "This is a battleground for which Azula is not only prepared, but which favors her! You will never even see her coming. She will not challenge you to a duel, or roar a battle cry and charge. She is not me! She will kill you while you sleep!" Zuko leapt to his feet and began pacing nervously. "You need to be careful, very very careful. We will have to move you to a new location, somewhere in the lower ring. The boy is much too visible, he-"

"Your concern is touching," Katara snapped. "But I am not moving house, I am not leaving this city
without Appa, and I am NOT afraid of your frostbitten sister!"

"You should be, and that's part of the problem! You judge her by me, but I'm a failure! She is a hundred, a thousand times more dangerous! If she finds you..." his heart rate spiked at the merest contemplation of what Azula would do if she found Katara, and what he would have to do in return, and his hands began to shake as he dragged them through his hair.

"We beat her before, Zuko. You can't seriously think that-"

"She will kill you," Zuko whispered, eye wide and glassy in panic. "And then... then... I'll have to k-kill HER." His voice grew louder and darker as he continued, "I will BURN this entire wretched hive to SLAG and her along w-with it! I'll... I'll..." his face twitched violently.

Katara dropped the spoon and moved to him, her face and voice going entirely calm. "Zuko? Look at me Zuko," she said firmly, turning his face to hers, establishing eye-contact. "You are here. Here with me now, in this place. And there is no one here but us." She wrapped her arms around him and held him there making soft shushing noises, as though rocking a baby to sleep...

...and the something HISSED angrily inside Zuko's mind and vanished, taking the mindless rage with it.

What- what the fuck was that!? Zuko thought, going stock still as his hackles rose off of his neck in dread.

He had never felt, never even conceived, of a sensation like that. Anger was his constant companion, he was as used to it as he was used to breathing. The sensation he had just felt was much like discovering that one of his lungs had been operating at someone else's command. There had been something there. Something that wasn't him, something angry and dark and malevolent, inside his mind.

Ash and bone, she was right! What the FUCK WAS THAT? But then she- she-

"What... what was that?" Zuko said aloud.

"Just something I read in a book," Katara murmured into his chest. "Are you ok?" she said looking up at him.

"I... I'm fine," he said sounding surprised at the truth of it. "I'm just... worried. About... well... everything."

"Well... stop it."

"I'm sorry."

"And stop apologizing!"

^

The Dai Li had Appa

Katara had implied as much, and after Zuko ventured a few cautious questions Lady Xian had all but confirmed it.

"If there were a sky bison in the city I would know about it, darling. Unless of course, the Dai Li has him. They're the only ones who are any good at keeping secrets around here."
Getting the bison now became Zuko's priority one. Katara (and the Avatar, Zuko supposed) wouldn't leave the city without the creature. Zuko could admire their loyalty if not their strategic idiocy and decided that if Katara's little family of morons couldn't find the creature themselves then he would just have to do it for them.

The only safe place for Katara was as FAR away from his sister as possible and so Zuko needed to have a chat with a Dai Li agent.

Normally the biggest obstacle to the operation's success was the fact that the agents of the Grand Secretariat always operated in pairs. Capturing a bender of their skill level was already a challenge in and of itself but trying to subdue one while there was a second attempting to grind your bones to dust tended to exacerbate things.

However, that first and deadly hurdle was removed by a stroke of good luck, brought about by the Avatar of all things. The Dai Li were out in force a few days later, all-hands-on-deck, and spread perilously thin throughout the massive city. Spread out and gathering, and suppressing, leaflets bearing the phrase "Have you seen THIS bison," which had been plastered on walls and had fallen from the sky. They even had the Avatar's address in the upper ring on them and, had Zuko still the urge to murder him, he would have known right where to go to do so.

Idiot.

But it presented Zuko with an opportunity and so he scrambled to clear the other hurdle, which what to DO with the man once he had caught him.

This is can NOT be like the North Pole. I need an exit strategy.

He'd settled on the simplicity that was a well-insulated basement in an abandoned house and a stout unbendable chain. That accomplished he set out, wrapped in his grey woolens and Grey Ghost mask, to find a likely victim.

Zuko was actually rather surprised, and mildly disappointed, at how easy it was to subdue the man.

Perhaps they're so used to being feared they've forgotten to maintain their skills? He mused as he dragged the unconscious body away from the alley he'd ambushed him in.

"Good evening," Zuko said.

The Dai Li agent awoke with the look of surprise that can only be found on the face of a man who wakes up naked, suspended upside-down, in unbendable chains.

"What… what…" the man narrowed his eyes at Zuko. "Do you have ANY idea what you've done."

Zuko ignored this and thought back on his lessons in intelligence acquisition, the first rule of which was to never think of your subject as a person. That way led to empathy and eventual failure.

Address the subject as dispassionately as possible, make their position clear.

"I will be blunt," Zuko rasped, "I have no taste for this sort of thing and so I will be completely honest. You are going to die tonight."

The subject glared at Zuko silently.
"Silence is acceptable at this point. Soon, however, I will begin to ask you some very simple questions. You will answer them. Once you have answered all my questions you will be allowed to die."

"Oh, I will! But much sooner than you think!" the subject snarled and worked around in his mouth for…

"Looking for this?" Zuko said as he held aloft the false tooth he'd removed earlier. "Poisoned false tooth? Crude."

The subject began to sweat.

"So, now we come to where you must make a decision. You will be dying tonight, but the manner is up to you. Either you will answer my questions satisfactorily, and I will return your little ‘escape hatch.’" He gestured with the false tooth. "Or you will die without honor or dignity. You will die-" he gestured, creating fire in his other hand- "SCREAMING."

"I won't… I won't talk."

*It is important to remain calm when making threats. Threats made from a place of anger are easily ignored. Be calm, and very clear, and very CERTAIN about the fate that awaits those who do not co-operate."

"Foolish. You will talk. Everyone does… eventually. You will scream the answers as I burn the skin away from your bones."

The subject seemed transfixed by the red flames in Zuko's hand.

*Make the future certain, but allow for a glimmer of hope, a way that everything will be alright, a pathway to the peace of the grave.*

"I think my questions will surprise you. I have no interest in conquering your city, no interest in harming your King or your people. You really should hear them before you make up your mind."

The subject nodded his head slightly, eyes still on the flame.

"*Where… is the Avatar's bison?*"

Lake Laogai. Even the name sounded sinister, and as Zuko, his mask firmly in place, skulked through the tunnels under the water he found it immensely appropriate. Green luminescent crystals embedded in the walls illuminated the halls of the complex and gave everything a sickly hue, as though the air itself was poisoned and dying. Fire-Nation reports had touched briefly on "re-education" camps in Ba Sing Se, but they had not fully explained, or grasped, the magnitude of the program.

They were brainwashing people.

Even without a long history of conflict, without the implicit challenge of the Kaiu Wall, for this alone the Fire-Nation would have come roaring in Ba Sing Se had they known. Zuko's people were a superstitious lot and ancient legends from the days of Akodo's unification spoke of such things. Of the people of fire's first real human enemy, the tainted bloodspeakers and their shadowmen. Honorable warriors stripped of their minds and will, made to do… things, things beyond forgiveness. Akodo had united the people of fire into the Fire-Nation and destroyed the
bloodspeakers, root and branch, for their sacrilege.

The idea that the Earth-Kingdom was doing something similar, to their own people no less, filled Zuko with both a superstitious dread and a deep, bone-shaking rage.

Hackles on end, Zuko crept past rooms full of women, chanting in sync as they recited propaganda. He saw men and women strapped to chairs waiting for their turn to have their memories stripped away. He found a room that, while clean and devoid of life, had a floor drain that had the stink of death about it so strong that even he had to fight back a retch.

This… this is OBSCENE.

That's a little hypocritical coming from someone who was prepared to torture a man to death no more than two hours ago.

That was for Katara! This… this is INSTITUTIONALIZED. Besides I'd never take another's MIND away. Without free will, there can be no honor. This is just… wrong.

More wrong than cold-blooded murder?

Zuko, still moving forward silently, hiding in shadows as he ducked past patrolling Dai Li agents, pushed the conflict into the back of his mind. Inter conflict could wait, it did him no good at the moment. It took him the better part of an hour to find the largest octagonal door that the Dai Li agent had described to him and with a muffled grunt of effort he rolled the door open and revealed its contents.

A sky-bison chained in the very middle

Each of Appa's legs was chained down to a separate iron pillar which almost spread-eagled the creature. As Zuko rolled the door shut the creature began to rumble in its deep basso voice at him.

"Settle down, creature. I'm not here to-" Zuko cut off, hand flying to the scabbard of his katana in its place over his shoulder as the door he had entered only a moment before swung back open.

Revealing Iroh.

"So, the Grey Ghost," Iroh said, somehow being both genial and sarcastic at the same time. "I wonder who could be behind that mask?"

"What… what are you doing here, uncle?" Zuko said, jaw going slack behind his mask.

"I was just about to as you the same thing. Were you-"

"NO! No no no. You do NOT get to turn this around on me!" Zuko roared as quietly as one could as he pulled off his mask and glared at his uncle. "What in the Sun's holy name are you doing here? I had to capture and force the location of this place out of a Dai Li agent, then swim to a secret tunnel in the lake, THEN sneak past about a million guards. How in the burning pits of ASH did you get here?! I swear, by all our ancestors, if you try to pull that inscrutable old man schtick…"

"There's a service entrance," Iroh said dryly, stepping through the door and closing it behind him.

"…a service entrance?"

"Yes. Sometimes things aren't as complicated as you make them, Zuko."

"…shit."
"So, now you have captured the Avatar's bison?" Iroh said wearily. "Are you going to keep him locked in your new apartment? Should I go and put on a pot of tea for him?"

"First I have to get him out of here. Then-"

"And THEN what?" Iroh said darkly. "You never think these things through! This is exactly what happened when you captured the Avatar at the North Pole! You HAD him, and then you had nowhere to go!"

"He can go through the skylight!" Zuko said in sudden realization. "He seems mildly intelligent, he should be able to find his way back to his master from there."

Appa made a growl of discontent at being called "mildly intelligent."

"Find his way… and you are planning to track him back to the Avatar?" Iroh now sounded confused.

"…No."

"Then why?" Iroh said now more confused than angry.

"I… just want them out of the city," Zuko said quickly. "Azula is here uncle, and she'll…"

"What that to do with you?" Iroh didn't even look surprised by the fact that Azula might be in the city, he simply wore the focused look of concentration that he normally had when considering a challenging Pai Sho puzzle.

"It's… complicated," Zuko said.

"Only because you make it complicated," He paused for a moment stroking his beard in thought.
"You want 'them' out of the city?" His eyes grew wide. "It's the GIRL! The Shinjo girl!"

Ash and bone I must be transparent, Zuko thought, his shoulders sagging.

"Oh ho ho ho!" Iroh danced gleefully on the balls of his feet. "This is fantastic! Now I don't have to pay Taro back!"

"…I beg your pardon?"

"I bet him ten koku that you'd eventually figure out you were in love with her! This will cancel out the whole thing where you never figured out about Rin and Bo!"

"You knew?!!"

"Of course I knew! When you lost your mind at Tohin Wo you were practically the spitting image of your father whenever anyone insulted Lady Ursa. AND you had basically just proposed to her."

"It was an ACCIDENT!"

"No need to get so worked up, you can't be expected to have…" Iroh trailed off, considering his nervous nephew for a moment. "What did you do?" he asked slyly.

"NOTHING!"

"You didn't actually propose to her, did you?"
"… it was an accident," Zuko groaned.

"Zuko! You didn't?"

"It just sort of… slipped out."

Iroh began to laugh loudly. "Oh, spirits! It's just like me and your aunt Ocha'hana! You know she tricked me into saying it?" he continued laughing. "You're lucky she doesn't know what that means. Your aunt said it back immediately then dragged me in from of my father, demanding satisfaction."

"Zuko sighed heavily and began to massage the bridge of his nose."

"She DID?! Oh my, oh MY! Wait til I tell-"

"You will tell NO ONE!" Zuko snarled. "Things are complicated enough as it is."

"But… how am I supposed to collect my winnings if I can't tell anyone?"

"Uncle. Can we please, please, just focus on getting this damned animal out of here? Before the entire ash-spawned Earth-Kingdom intelligence community finds us in here discussing my love life?"

"Of course, nephew," Iroh said, still chuckling.

Zuko found himself rather surprised at the intelligence of the sky-bison.

The thing obviously recognized him from his days of trying to chase them down, but the deep basso growls cut off almost immediately after Zuko rammed his blade of fire through one of the chain posts. After he was free Appa took it upon himself to vigorously thank Zuko by licking him, his enormous scratchy tongue smearing foul smelling slobber all over the now irritated ronin. He then permitted Zuko and Iroh to climb on to his back and flew towards the sealed skylight, which the two firebenders made short work of.

After depositing them on the ground the bison took a long moment to look over Zuko, sniffing at him expansively. Zuko, not knowing what else to do, scratched him between the eyes. Appa licked him in thanks once more then flew off, a joyful roar echoing over the rolling hills in the Earth-Kingdom's rice lands.

"So…" Iroh said, watching the Bison disappear as the sun rose over the Kaiu Wall, "when do I get to meet her?"

"…Later," Zuko said tersely.

_Much, much, MUCH later._

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_A/N: Hello hello and welcome to this caffeine-free Zuko Sunday. (seriously I am out of caffeine here send HELP!) Should you find spelling errors know that I blame them, in their entirety, on my substance addiction. Also, why this is about 2 hours later than I normally post.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed my rendition of Lake Laogai, as viewed from the Zuko perspective. If you didn't OR if you did please comment/review/talk about it to strangers on the subway, because writing is meant to be shared and discussed. Well, mine is anyway._
BITS of the META variety.

The Conflict: Canon!Zuko and Akodo!Zuko have a great many things in common besides a first name, both have a sort of crippling sense of doubt about the fact that they deserve love. Who among us can say that they haven't questioned the way people view them? Putting yourself out there is risky and nerve-wracking. You most assuredly CAN get hurt, the risk is usually worth the reward however. That being said, Zuko, who grew up in the super-villain homeland can think of a dozen reasons why Katara might be faking on him. I, the author, am certainly NOT implying that she is however. Zuko's doubts come to him, as doubts tend to do, while he is alone and brooding. Highly skilled brooder that one.

Tea Ceremony: A VERY big deal in L5R, the art(skill) of Tea Ceremony is a High Skill, on par with all the other fancy arts and stuff that can net you heaps of honor. It also can restore something called "Void" points which I realize, just now as I type, is something I haven't discussed before so…

Void: Void is the FIFTH element. It is, by its nature, mysterious and yet fundamental. It allows great focus and yet those who study it have a tendency to go mad. We might call it spirit or soul perhaps. For the purposes of this fusion, one can attribute Aang's energy bending to Void. But everyone has Void, just as everyone has, at some level, all the elements. Katara may not bend fire but her temper certainly does, Zuko may not bend earth but his personal resilience may be attributed to that element. Void is no exception, having high void might be a found in people who have a Zen-like personality. Guru Pathik, Huu and even Iroh definitely have higher void. Anyway, back to…

Tea ceremony(take two): Being good at Tea Ceremony helps restore balance to a person and helps them achieve (in a rudimentary way) enlightenment. This is WHY Iroh is so into it and yet another example of why this fusion made so much sense to me.

Sozin: I hope nobody is too upset with me comparing Aang to Sozin? I imagine that, outside of the Fire-Nation, bringing up Sozin is the equivalent of Godwin's law, effectively ending any conversation. Katara is thoroughly embarrassed by the comparison, but I feel she's the kind of person that might say something like that in the heat of the moment. But let's take a look to examine the situations. Both Aang and Sozin used, as Zuko puts it, non-conventional powers to achieve their goals, this is true. The difference being that Sozin went looking for a fight where Aang had the fight brought to him. I don't have a problem with what Aang did at the North Pole, Zuko, on the other hand, is going to be less than thrilled with the outcome. Either way the Great Kami of the Sea showing up is a HUGE deal, which will be continued to be discussed further, in scope and scale it should be considered equivalent to the power of Sozin's Comet.

Spirit possession: CONFIRMED. This is the chapter in which I final confirm, even in my own mind, the possession angle. There is something there, in Zuko's mind/soul/what-have-you. It is not nice and it likes to burn things. Feel free to speculate wildly. I encourage it in fact.

The Service Entrance: Real talk here people, how DID Iroh get into Lake Laogai? He just shows up in a narratively convenient way. We can assume that he follows Zuko in canon, but HOW did he get in there? He doesn't strike me as super sneaky, I assume that, once again, he uses his Grand Lotus powers to do stuff. I just wanted to point out, via my boy Zuko here,
how utterly ridiculous it is that Zuko, stealthy badass makes it in, all stealth like, and the Iroh, hands in his sleeves and humming to himself follows behind.

**Bloodspeakers:** Blood magic in L5R is EXTREMELY taboo, it has to do a lot with the Buddhist taboo of not touching blood. That said the blood speakers, in L5R were basically the evil shukenja of the evil people. They had a tendency to taint and corrupt good samurai and turn them onto the path of Shourido, the EVIL version of Bushido. All of this happened in this fusion in the distant past, but as the Fire-Nation is a bit obsessed with their ancestors and the past it's still a powerful motivator. But seriously, the fact that the Dai Li were *brainwashing* people is one of those things that, in hindsight was REALLY fucked up. To me anyway. YMMV.

Wow, that's a lot of author notes!

Sorry about that, I guess a lot of stuff happened in this chapter!

Again, and as Always, feel free to ask questions if things were unclear or you just want more details. Obviously, I'm not going to spoiler anything but I do love engagement.

You guys are the best!

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

There is a great many heated discussions, and Zuko comes to a "Crossroads"

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 18 November 2018
The Crossroads

Chapter Notes

A/N: The Following is rated P; for Penultimate.

It contains dialog, where appropriate, from S2E20 "The Crossroads of Destiny."

Reader discretion is advised.

Summer, year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

Katara was STILL in the city.

As much as Zuko had hoped, and dreaded, that she would simply pack her things and leave Ba Sing Se behind her, she had apparently declined to do so.

Zuko had also discovered that wearing a shocked expression and saying "What are you doing here?" was an unacceptable greeting in her eyes.

The ensuing argument was loud, long and continued all the way from the front of Lady Xian's to Zuko's apartment and within. Neither seemed to notice, or care, that every person they passed stared at them as though they had sprouted wings.

"I already TOLD you!" she shouted as she dropped her basket and spun around to resume glaring at Zuko, "I am NOT running away from your sister, and I am NOT leaving without Appa!"

"Oh, for the love of- Did that cursed creature not FIND you!?" Zuko shouted back, slamming and locking the door behind himself. "Now I've got to flaming well find him all over again!"

"Find him… again?"

"Yes, again, you insufferable woman! Do you have any idea how hard it is to infiltrate a secret underwater base built by earthbenders? I suppose the next time I should just-" he was cut off as Katara hit him with a near-flying tackle and began kissing every square inch of him she could reach.

After a brief moment of confusion, he reciprocated, with gusto.

After the better part of an hour, they found themselves covered in sweat, and not much else, lying in the wreckage of Zuko's bed.

"Wow."

"You always say that," Katara said sounding both tired and exceptionally pleased with herself.

"And I always mean it," he returned.

Lin Mi was a beautiful woman.
Zuko could appreciate that, on a purely aesthetic level, she was several orders of magnitude above simply pretty. She was a quiet girl, with ivory skin and large dark eyes, and she pulled off what Zuko now thought of as the "Lady Xian" look to a tee. Lately, however, he had found himself with a rather singular preference for dark skin, brown hair, and grey-blue eyes.

Everything else seemed mundane and uninspired by comparison.

General Hida How, a general on the Earth-King's Council of Five, on the other hand, seemed to like Lin Mi quite a lot. Fire-Nation intelligence had had a dossier on the man. He was conservative in the extreme in his tactics and a bit heavy-handed when it came to troop discipline. Also, he was married, a fact that Zuko decided to personally hold against him as he escorted Lin Mi from Lady Xian's Palace to the Earth-King's Palace for a "meeting."

While people in the Fire-Nation had what might be described as a "cavalier" attitude towards sex in general, they had very little sympathy, or mercy, for adultery. Oaths were sacred, and marriage was an oath of fidelity to one's spouse. Even Akodo who, in legend at least, was extremely promiscuous had settled down once he'd gotten married. He may have sired half of the Fire-Nation before that point, but he kept the faith with his wife. Honor demanded nothing less.

So, it was with extreme personal misgivings that Zuko entered the upper ring, holding a parasol over his charge, his other hand gripping the scabbard of his katana.

He had mentioned the assignment to Katara the night previously, in part to warn her to keep the Avatar away from him and, also, as subtly as a man like Zuko could, to waylay any feelings of jealousy or misunderstandings on her part. It would have been just his luck that had he NOT told her, she would have seen him out with the girl and then publicly skinned him alive.

She, in turn, had insisted, rather vehemently and with a sanctimonious sniff as she was want to do, that it was his job and it didn't bother her in the slightest. Despite that sincerity, she had left rather a few more furrows in his back than she normally would have, and then "forgotten" to heal them afterward.

The phrase "marking her territory" never passed Zuko's lips. He was stupid, not suicidal.

The upper ring, which Zuko had only had the opportunity to visit once or twice before this, to visit his uncle's teashop, remained excessively opulent. Beyond ostentatious. Zuko couldn't help but wonder how quickly the nearly starving masses of the lower ring would begin to riot if they had known just where all their taxes were going. Not only was everything beautifully sculpted and inlaid with fine woods and metals, but there was a sense of space here. Being a soldier and a naval officer Zuko understood what a luxury space could be; simple breathing room was sometimes more preferable than an extra month's pay.

But there were no luxuries in the lower ring, they were all here in the upper ring.

Zuko had been instructed to escort the… escort only as far as the first antechamber of the palace, which, had he been interested in how such things were measured in the Earth-Kingdom, was supposed to be a great honor.

But Zuko couldn't help but feel that something was off as he waited for Lin Mi's return. It was something about the way the servants moved; furtively, and just a touch to fast, that sent alarm gongs crashing in his head. Paranoia, deeply ingrained by a childhood in Otosan Uchi and then honed to a razor's edge by nearly six years of exile, ran deep into his bones. He remained slouched against one wall of the room, his senses now on the highest alert.
Those suspicious changed to absolute certainties when Iroh, a large grin his face, entered the antechamber as well. The grin disappeared as he took in Zuko and the façade of doddering old man fell away from him. Eyes narrowed and darting back and forth for potential threats he placed the large box of tea serving accoutrements he had been carrying on the floor to free his hands as Zuko briskly crossed the room to stand next to him.

Back to back, the two ronin surveyed the now empty antechamber warily.

"Escort mission?" Iroh asked quietly.

"Yes uncle. Tea ceremony?"

"For the King no less," Iroh said bitterly. "Coincidence?"

"Unlikely," Zuko rasped.

As though his words had summoned them, a dozen Dai Li agents marched into the room, surrounding them in a wide arc.

"Well, this is interesting," Iroh said softly, then raised his voice and spoke in his usual genial fashion. "Can we help you, gentlemen?"

"Why yes!" an unfortunately familiar voice called from the far end of the room. "It's tea time!"

Shit.

"Hello Azula," Zuko growled, turning to face his smirking sister. "I must say, I never thought I'd see you wearing green."

Azula stopped a good ten paces from the arc of Dai Li agents, clad in a mockup of their uniform, deep green with the light green circle and square of the Earth-King at the center. She'd even eschewed her crown pin for a wide, earth-style, hairpiece.

"Yes, well, I suppose you would know all about women's fashion now, wouldn't you Zuko. Is that part of your new job, making sure the... ladies are taken care of?"

"As opposed to you, who has apparently been living with a bunch of earthbending men? What would father say?"

Azula's smile grew wider. "Pathetic."

"They can't all be winners Azi."

"They ARE an interesting bunch, the Dai Li," Azula said gesturing to the dozen or so men surrounding them. "They're earthbenders, but they have a killer instinct that so firebender. They would like to have a word with you about one of their members who's gone missing."

And... double shit. How long has she been keeping tabs on me?

"Niece, did your brother or I ever tell you how I got the nickname 'The Dragon of the West?'" Iroh said placidly.

"I'm not interested in a lengthy anecdote, Uncle," Azula sneered.

"It's more of a demonstration really." And with little to no warning Iroh roared and bent fire, nearly filling the entire room from floor to ceiling with flames from his mouth. Zuko used the momentary
distraction to fling open the doors to the antechamber and cleave through the two Dai Li that were waiting for him behind it. Iroh followed behind him, walking backwards, the massive sustained gout of flame still projecting from his mouth, holding Azula and the bulk of her traitorous Dai Li at bay.

_How, in Akodo's sagging left testicle, did she turn the Dai Li of all people?_ Zuko mused as his blade of flame danced between the Dai Li agents who appeared in front of him, seemingly from nowhere and everywhere at the same time, popping out of walls, the floor, and even the ceiling. _I suppose that's my little sister for you. Masterful, yet so very irritating._

At the halfway point of the long entrance hallway Iroh ran out of breath and the raging torrent of flame died away and he sagged forward, panting with effort. Zuko, deep in zanshin, noticed immediately, almost before it happened, and leapt backwards throwing his own, admittedly much smaller, gout of flame at their enemies. Their pace now a quarter of what it was before, they continued to slash, burn, and kill their way towards the palace's front door.

But Iroh was flagging. Using his famous technique had apparently taken a lot out of him and a few shards of stone found their way past his defenses, cutting him. The sight of his uncle, breathing labored, blood trailing down from his face, rocked Zuko's focus, destroying his zanshin.

"Go, uncle!" Zuko shouted taking a defensive stance as they reached the palace door. "I'll hold them for a moment."

"No, Zuko! You don't need to-" Iroh was cut off as four high walls of stone burst from the floor, surrounding Zuko and separating them.

Zuko moved his arms in a sinuous motion, summoning thunder against the walls, chipping and cracking them. A deafening boom, almost as loud as his thunder, sounded as a slab of stone fell from the ceiling and created a roof for the stone box he was now trapped in.

Changing tactics, Zuko re-summoned his blade of fire and thrust it into the nearest wall, forcing all the chi he could muster into it, trying to turn the stone itself molten.

Suddenly a beam of light struck him in the face as a small window opened in the roof.

"Hi, Zuko!" Ty Lee said cheerfully, waving and beaming down at him.

"Don't do it, Ty," Zuko growled.

She tossed something past him into the dark of the box. "Oh, and Mai says 'Hi' too!" she said chipperly as the window sealed itself.

"Of course she does," Zuko grumbled as the gas bomb, most likely filled with poison, began to hiss behind him. "Fucking Scorpions."

He awoke, an indeterminate amount of time later, in chains.

Zuko, peering through the fog of something vaguely reminiscent of a hangover, found himself in a library or office of some sort. The walls were covered in bookshelves and large, and somewhat disconcerting, green-hued fireplace roared behind an ornate desk. The fire did little to illuminate the room and covered the parts that it did in the same sickly green light that had been present under Lake Laogai.

He was chained, hand and foot, in a chair before the desk while his sister sat on the other side of it,
casually reclined and smiling that nearly sinister smirk she used to wear when she beat him at Pai Sho. And at sparring. And... pretty much everything else, she was better than him at a lot of things.

"EEEEE!" Ty Lee squeaked happily, appearing over Zuko's left shoulder, "You're awake!"

Zuko winced at her high-pitched voice.

"Azula was sooo worried! He thought Mai had made the mix wrong!" Ty Lee said with genuine concern in her voice.

Mai chose this moment to make herself known, shifting slightly as she leaned against one of the bookcase laden walls. She was barely a shadow in the semi-dark of the office, but her eyes were fixed on Zuko, on guard against any possible escape attempt.

"Shut UP, Ty," Azula said with a glare and a sneer. "You and Mai go get ready. I need to have a private word with my dear brother."

Mai silently detached herself from the wall and crossed to the door, passing behind Zuko.

"It's good to see you again too, Mai," Zuko said quietly. She was on his blindside, but he could hear the slight hesitation in her steps. In was minute, and had he not been listening for it he never would have caught it. The door closed behind her, just a little harder than necessary.

"So... what now?" Zuko said in an unintentional echo of the Avatar.

"Now? Now is the end game, Zuko. Now I finally have my victory. I finally beat you," Azula said smiling fiercely.

"...what?" Zuko blinked at her stupidly.

"Now you will acknowledge that I am the greatest. The I am the better of us. That I am the rightful heir to the throne!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you are."

"...what?" now it was Azula's turn to blink stupidly.

"Azi, if you hadn't noticed, I am a maimed ronin who has been exiled for half a decade. I fail to see how-"

"Don't you try and take this away from me Zuko!" she snarled, bursting out of her seat and leaning forward over the desk. "I have captured you, and you will admit that I am worthy of the throne."

"Azula, you were more worthy of throne before you even started your gempukku training."

"Do NOT patronize me, Zuko!"

"I'm not. How could you think I thought you unworthy? Have I ever said that? You're amazing. You were a better firebender than me within hours of learning how."

"But... Father said-" she cut herself off and took on a musing tone. "So, you wouldn't oppose me if I became Fire-Lord?"

"Well I have to admit that the fact that you intend to imprison or kill me means I would naturally have to oppose you," Zuko said dryly, leaning back in his chair as far as his fetters would allow. "But if things were different? Or course not. You're the obvious choice. There's a reason you got
political science classes while I was still in remedial firebending."

"You were never in remedial firebending," she said sounding scandalized.

"Yes, I was. Do you think that father would have let that get out? That his only son, a child of Akodo, was a terrible firebender? It wasn't until I spent that year on the mountain with Uncle that I got anywhere approaching acceptable."

"So... you'd be fine being supplanted by me? Being..."

"What is the point of this Azula? I am ronin. You do not need my approval for anything."

"You... you don't have to be," Azula said quietly, and for the first time in a long time, she looked unsure of herself.

"What did you say?" Zuko breathed, barely above a whisper.

"I didn't... I didn't tell anyone. Not even father," she said, equally quietly.

"You didn't tell..." Zuko was growing concerned. Something was amiss with Azula. As he remembered her, she was normally always so poised, so in control of herself. Now she looked unsure, nervous even, like she had when they had been very young.

"Don't you see? It was the only way Zuko," she said, somehow seeming both condescending and desperate. "Father wanted you brought back in chains. You're too... too... YOU, and I knew you'd never accept that. We'd... we'd have had to... I'd have had to kill you."

"Yes?" Zuko said his concern mounting. "Azi, what are you trying to-"

"I didn't want to!" she snapped, face showing something that, on anyone else, would have been panic. "You're my brother and... and..." suddenly, somehow without seeming to pass through any of the intermediate steps, her face... changed back to self-possessed control. The shift abrupt and jarring. "And if you're dead who am I supposed to take my frustrations out on? There's not a soul in the Fire-Nation that can stand before me, and that's fine, that's expected. But you... you're an Akodo. Beating you means something."

"So, I am to be kept alive as your punching bag?" Zuko said annoyance creeping into his tone.

"No. It's not that, it's... you're just... worthy of being defeated by me, Everyone else is just so trivial by comparison." She seemed to be trying to convince herself as well as him.

"This is pointless," Zuko said. "You know perfectly well I can never come back home. You said so yourself."

"No," she said an odd crooked smile breaking over her face. "You CAN come home! I've taken care of everything." She began to pace restlessly back and forth behind the desk, oddly reminding Zuko of their uncle. "I've been manipulating public sentiment back home, they see you as a noble hero sacrificing everything to fight our greatest enemies. I've got the Dai Li eating out of my hand, they'll help us decapitate the central government here. And when the city is ours-"

"You can't honestly think that the Dai Li will stay loyal to you?"

"Oh, but I can!" Azula said brightly, beginning to ramble. "They've seen what leadership, what true leadership looks like now. That jumped up peasant Long Feng thinks he can double cross me, but he'll find out, oh yes he will. I know which way they'll jump when the flames hit the
furnace." Her eyes darted back and forth as she resumed pacing. "After that is the actual conquest of the city. That's where you come in." She looked at Zuko, her face torn between nerves and bitterness. "You... you were always better at military strategy and tactics than I was, all our tutors said so. Certainly, I could beat whatever pathetic earthbenders might resist us, but you... you're the tactician." She crossed around the desk and grabbed Zuko by the shoulders. "It was always meant to be this way Zuko! You at the head of my armies, my Shogun. I'll take care of the delicate tasks, you smash anything that sticks its head out. This is what we were made for Zuko. We're a matched set, a daisho, you the Katana and I the Wakizashi, meant to bring death and destruction to the enemies of the Fire-Nation!"

"And the Avatar?" Zuko said quietly.

"What about him?"

"I am banished from home and my father's sight until I capture the Avatar. A task which I, which both of us, have found to be flatly impossible."

"If the two of us present father with Ba Sing Se, do you really think he will care?"

"I am... unsure."

"Fine," Azula snapped, "then we'll kill him. Kill him together. But you have to help me Zuzu. I can't... I can't do it alone. You saw, back in Tu Zin, that cowardly ashpile just runs away and hides behind his friends."

"That's why we have soldiers, Azula. So that we don't get overwhelmed by superior numbers. 'Even the mountain falls before a million shovels.' If the Dai Li is truly under your sway-"

"It's the girl isn't it?" Azula sneered. "That's why you don't want to fight? Don't think I don't know what you've been up to. Honestly Zuko, a Water-Tribe barbarian?"

Zuko glowered at her.

"Really, I just feel bad for you," Azula said, idly examining her nails. "While you were off risking your life, capturing Dai Li agents and infiltrating secret bases she was running around with her terrorist boyfriend, most likely having a laugh at your expense."

Zuko's blood turned cold. "Her... her what?"


"No," Zuko said, shaking his head. "You're lying. She wouldn't... she wouldn't."

"Don't believe me, hmmm? That's fine, you can ask her yourself. I decided it would be better for you to hear it straight from the whore's mouth, so I left her alive." She gestured at the door. "I'll have my men take you there now, give you some time to think about it." She unlocked the manacles at his feet and pulled him out of the chair. "Just remember brother, I need you, your people need you. We cannot do this without you. You can have everything you want, your title, your home, your honor. All of it can be yours, the world can be ours. If you just remember this; you're an Akodo, and my brother, and a samurai. I know you'll make the right choice."

And just like that, she had restored him, he was a samurai again.

If only everything could be so easy.
Azula's Dai Li agents escorted him deep into the basement of the palace.

The analytical portion of his mind tried to keep track of the twists and turns, the doors and the guards stationed at each place, he would need to remember them if he was to have any chance of escaping. It was having trouble doing so, however, so loud was the cacophony of the internal battle that raged in the other parts of Zuko's mind.

I TOLD you, a smug voice hissed. Who could ever want someone like you?

It… It's not LIKE that! It CAN'T be like-

Oh? I'm sure Azula just pulled that name out of a hat. Jet and his band of "friends" coincide nicely with those reports Lt Jee used to give you. "Rebel activity related to the flooding of a village, forewarned by a young man in Water-Tribe clothing!"

Yes. ForeWARNED. As in she had nothing to do with it!

But she was THERE. She was WITH them. Who's to say how long they've been planning this?

She… she wouldn't!

You're a fool to discount the possibility. Why else would she tolerate your presence?

Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!

"We're here," one of the Dai Li said.

The other uncuffed him while the first bent a large stone out of the wall.

"Your whore is down there," the agent said venomously and pushed Zuko in with his earthbending. Zuko cursed and roared as he tumbled gracelessly down the long tube of stone and landed in a heap.

"Zuko?!" Katara cried, voice loud in the echoing cavern.

Oh, thank you sweet spirits she's alright, Zuko thought as he climbed to his feet. I'm such a fool, there's no way that-

Katara launched herself forward… and slapped him, rocking him back on his heels with the power of the blow.

"Is it true?! Tell me it isn't Zuko! Tell me!"

"Tell… tell you what?" Zuko said, utterly shocked.

"Did you do it? Did you murder a man, in cold blood?"

Azula must have told her. The rational part of him sighed. She always liked to hedge her bets. The larger part of his mind grew cold with a numbing fury.

"And who were YOU with while I was?" he snarled, drawing himself up, looming over her.

She looked flabbergasted. "Who was I with? What does that have to do with-" she cut off, eyes wide, realizing what Zuko was implying. "No. No, it… it wasn't like that Zuko."
"Then what WAS it like?" he snarled through gritted teeth. "Explain it to me. Tell me. Tell me all about your friend Jet, the terrorist."

"Jet was NOT a-"

"Not a what? Not a mass-murderer? Not a psychopath? That bastard tried to kill my uncle and you stand here and try to defend him?"

"You're trying to change the subject. Does what Jet did change the fact that you MURDERED a man?"

"YES!" Zuko roared, practically screaming. "I did what I did for YOU! So I could get you out of this flaming city and we wouldn't be IN this situation right now. Meanwhile, you were off with your terrorist boyfri-"

"For me? You did it for ME? That's even worse! Now there's blood on my hands as well! He had a family, Zuko. Children that will grow up without a father. You CAN'T keep KILLING people for me!"

"So, it would have been better, more acceptable had I murdered him and everyone else in a two-block radius? Like your boyfriend!"

"Jet was NOT my boyfriend!"

"And yet you sit here and defend him! I have to hear about this from my sister! My sister who has captured you! Do you have any idea what she will DO to you! I told you! I warned you! And you did. Not. LISTEN!"

"Oh I listened! I listened when you said you respected me, when you said you cared for me, when you said I was free to make my own decisions! You don't get to murder people and then say you did it FOR ME!"

"Oh, I see," Zuko hissed. "So, if I said I did it for freedom, like that mad honorless bastard did, I would have been alright? Why does he get a free pass and I-"

"Because I don't love Jet!" Katara screamed.

_Sweet spirits she's going to say it!_ Zuko thought, mouth dropping open. _She's actually going to_-

Unfortunately, whatever Katara was about to say, or not say, was cut off by an enormous shuddering crash as Iroh and the Avatar came through a rock and crystal wall.

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The boy was taller.

Zuko hadn't really gotten a good, close up, look at him since the North Pole, but he was easily an inch taller than Katara now, a fact that his rational side noted dispassionately as Katara ran to embrace him.

The other ninety percent simply wanted to KILL him.

Zuko barely even registered his uncle striding over to him, a pleased smile on his face. His single yellow eye was locked on the Avatar's grey ones. And the boy stared back.

_Glared_ back in fact.
"Aang! I knew you would come," Katara cried happily, hugging him tightly.

*I am going to KILL this little shit.*

"Uncle, what are you doing with the Avatar?" Zuko growled.

"Saving you, that's what," Aang said, a hint of bitterness in his voice.

Fire gathered at Zuko's fists as he took an angry step forward.

"Zuko, it's time we talked," Iroh said quickly, stepping in between the two of them. "Go help your other friends," he said turning to Katara and Aang. "We'll catch up with you."

Zuko's wide yellow eye tracked the Avatar as he fled back down the tunnel he had entered through, Katara in tow.

Leaving a stunned Zuko behind, mind now a black and dismal void.

*She… she just… she LEFT?*

...Fine. That's... just fine. At least she's safe.

"Talk," Zuko said brusquely as he managed to tear his eye away from the tunnel.

"I know this is difficult Zuko, I know your sister has been at you, but... you're not the man you used to be," Iroh said as he gripped Zuko by the shoulders. "You are stronger and wiser and freer than you have ever been, and now you have come to the crossroads of your destiny."

"My destiny?" Zuko had always been told that battle, that victory was his destiny. Victory over the Earth-Kingdom, over *anyone* that opposed the throne.

"Indeed. It's time for you to choose. It's time for you to choose *good.*"

Zuko stared at his uncle, then slowly, with building force, started laughing. Brittle spikey laughter just on the near side of hysteria. Iroh smiled weakly and in confusion.

"Good? *Good?* After all we have been through. After all the pain and shame and privation and struggles, your big 'wise-old-man' pitch is to 'choose good'?"

"It's not *that* funny," Iroh grumbled.

"Oh, but it is! You want to boil the biggest decision I've ever made in my life down to 'choose good.' It's *asinine*," Zuko finished, his voice quickly losing its mirth and turning into a snarl.

"I think you have overcomplicated things again Zuko," Iroh said, his eyes flashing. "Your destiny--"

"I KNOW MY DESTINY!" Zuko roared.

"I KNOW MY DESTINY!" Zuko roared.

"It is your OWN destiny, or is it a destiny someone has tried to force upon you?" Iroh said, shouting back

"My destiny is WAR, it always has been!"

"It doesn't have to be! I'm begging you, Zuko! It is time for you to look *inward* and begin asking yourself the big questions. Who are YOU, and what do YOU want?"
"It doesn’t matter what I want! What matters is… is…"

"Is what? Your duty? Your pride? NO! Zuko please listen to me! You are a good man. You deserve to be happy!"

"I… I…"

"I know you love her! Just… go to her! Go and help the Avat-

Suddenly the ground shook again, cutting Iroh off. Luminescent green crystals shot out of the ground and imprisoned him as Azula and a pair of Dai Li agents entered through another new hole in the wall.

"The girl?" Azula said addressing Zuko, her voice calm and untroubled.

"Gone. With the Avatar," Zuko said, nodding towards the tunnel in the far wall.

"And you just let them go?" Azula said clucking her tongue in exasperation. "I expected this kind of treachery from Uncle, but you Zuko, Prince Zuko, you're a lot of things, but you're not a traitor. Are you?" She sighed, "it's not too late for your Zuko. You can still redeem yourself."

"The kind of redemption she offers is not for you," Iroh said calmly.

"Why don't you let him decide, Uncle?" Azula said acidly. She took a step closer to Zuko, her voice lowering. "We need you Zuko. I've plotted every move of this day, this glorious day in Fire-Nation history. The only piece left on the board is you. It's all up to you. At the end of this day you can have your honor back. You can have victory. You can have everything you want. Or you can have nothing."

"Zuko, I am begging you," Iroh said quietly. "Look into your heart and see what it is that you truly want."

Zuko was suddenly small again. "Please father, I beg you…” he shuddered.

"You are free to choose, brother," Azula said, dismissing her Dai Li with a wave. "I, at least, will not presume to tell you how to think." She said nothing more as she walked down the tunnel towards the Avatar and her destiny.

"What will you do?" Iroh said quietly after a long minute.

"I… do not know," Zuko said softly. With a gesture he summoned his blade of fire and smashed through the green crystals holding his uncle.

"I'm sorry Zuko. Perhaps this isn't as simple a choice as I hoped it could be for you."

"Nothing in my life is ever simple," Zuko said, mostly to himself, as he started down the tunnel.

Towards his destiny.

A/N:…

CLIFFHAAAAANGGERRRRRRRR! (/sound on one million guitars playing the same power chord).

Welcome, welcome weary readers. Welcome to chapter penultimate of Book 3! I hope you
enjoyed it, despite every and all things good beginning to crumble into dust. What WILL Zuko choose? Guesses are of course welcome, I admit that even I had no idea where I was going to go with this for a long time. I had TWO chapter ones of book 4 even. But that was a long time ago and today this author has not cliffhangered (/echo of previous powerchord) himself.

PENULTIMETA-BITS

Azula always lies: A good friend once told me that a master manipulator only told the lies that you need to believe, and always told you the most convenient truths. Someone who "always" lies is only half of a good a manipulator.

Azula is a master manipulator.

I don't think at any point in the show she actually lies to Zuko. (Feel free to comb through the show again and correct me I won't take offense.) The only lie we actually know about was the one she told her father in season 3 about who killed the Avatar, and that was to HELP Zuko. So THAT is what I base her off of. She is a brilliant manipulator and knows exactly how to push her brother's buttons. Does she need him to come home? Yes. Yes, she does. Because the best manipulations MUST have truth at their center. She is most likely playing up that family and duty angle a bit but still, she isn't lying to Zuko here. She has quite literally driven him here with the express purpose of including him in the conquest of Ba Sing Se. Again, her reasoning is NOT entirely altruistic, but still she does care about her brother which is for her probably her most powerful inner conflict. It doesn't make sense otherwise, would Azula, daddy's girl and heir-apparent to the "might=right" empire o' evil lie to her father and king to help Zuko? Just to fuck with her brother? Azula is NOT that stupid.

Katara's motivations: There had to be a breaking point, there had to be a point where they address that Zuko is a guy who can and WILL kill people to get the things he wants. Make no bones about it, while I have presented this, and previous, chapters in such a way as to lend doubt to Katara's motivations, she DOES love Zuko. And how terrible it must be to be in love with someone so very different, and who can and WILL kill people to help you. She was so very happy that he got Appa. She probably saw it as a step closer to him coming over to her side. But then Azula drops the bomb, and definitely plays it up as well. "So kind of you to let my dear brother do all YOUR dirty work." Azula = master (see above). Is the middle of the crystal caves the BEST time to be having this conversation? Of course not. Is Katara thinking clearly? Of COURSE not. She's terrified, I think Azula has got this shit down to a timer. Cast doubt on boyfriend's moral rectitude; check. Cast aspersions on girlfriend's fidelity; check. Add elements and stir for 15 minutes; CHECK!

I regret nothing!

Thanks again for reading. Remember, I always appreciate feedback positive or negative. (and I get the feeling I about to get some of the latter). Either way, let me know what you think, or if you have questions.

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NEXT WEEK on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

...DESTINY.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

Original post date: 25 November 2018
High Summer, Year 11 in the reign of Fire-Lord Ozai

There was a ruined city underground.

Green crystals, brighter than Zuko had seen before, grew, almost organically, in places around the ancient stone buildings. Whatever the place, whatever city, this had once been, currently it was not an ideal battleground for firebenders. A massive waterfall dominated one side of the cavern filling two wide channels with rapidly moving water. There was also the fact that, being a cavern, it was underground; an exceptionally dangerous place to be fighting anyone who could earthbend.

All of this flitted through Zuko's mind in a single heartbeat as he entered the large chamber and saw his sister, his girlfriend, and the Avatar standing in a rough triangle, all three in fighting posture. Azula on his left, Katara on his right, the Avatar further away and between them.

He announced his presence with a blast of fire that exploded with huge force between the two women.

They were watching him, their fighting stances unrelaxed, waiting for his decision. His eye flicked back and forth between the two girls, his mind conjuring memories in his head.

Azula; weeping the frightened tears of the very young as Zuko told her that their uncle was a fool who didn't know how strong she really was.

Katara; a force of nature, slamming him into the walls of the spirit grove, a beautiful fearsome smile on her face.

Azula; eyes wet, but now refusing to cry, after her Itami no Kyokun. Her still tiny hands cupped in Zuko's as he banished pain from them as their cousin had taught him to do.

Katara; beautiful and deadly, yet soft and warm beyond belief, curled against him in the badlands, her face snuggled into his chest.

Azula; squawking in mock outrage as Mai, quiet and unseen as always, tapped her on the head and ran off with a smirk, the closest thing the girl ever did to a laugh.

Katara; naked and on top of him, her blue-grey eyes on his as she found a rhythm that suited them both.

Zuko could have stood there forever, basking in the memories of the two people he loved best in this life...
...but something kept getting in the way.

As his eye flicked from his sister to his girlfriend and back again, there was… something that was between them, something interrupting his thoughts.

Something yellow, and orange.

The Avatar.

Zuko's eye fell to rest on the boy…

…and just like that, the decision was made.

"Akodo," he whispered, his eye now burning on the young man. Katara's eyes grew wide in horror, Azula's in triumph as her mouth twisted into a malign smile.

"AKODO!" Zuko roared, bending a wave of thunder out at the Avatar, knocking him back as he charged.

The fight began.

Conscious thought evaporated from Zuko as he drove forward, red flame colliding with shields of air and stone. Their collisions rocked the cavern, the echoes making them much louder and forceful than he remembered as he slammed through the bulwarks of crystal the Avatar threw up in defense.

Where the Avatar stood his ground Zuko smashed through. Where he attacked, Zuko found it weak, feeble. Deep in zanshin Zuko could almost see the patterns of air forming and crashing towards him; he met them all with FIRE, doubling the size of the ensuing explosion and tossing the smaller combatant back, again and again. The Avatar dodged and twirled, leaping from one high column of stone to another, evading Zuko and fleeing like the coward Zuko knew him to be.

Suddenly the boy leapt again, even higher than before, and after reaching the ceiling he bent earth; separating a massive stalagmite from the ceiling and driving it into the ground bodily, dwarfing the shockwaves Zuko had wrought and knocking him off feet for the first time as he made a massive crater.

As Zuko lept back to his feet he saw Katara, streams of water from her hands joined with his sister's opposing leg and arm, looking as though she might rip her in half. With a shout, a kick, and a wave of fire he severed the connection and charged forward. Azula smiled broadly and ran the other direction, towards the massive crater that the Avatar was groggily emerging from, trading Zuko dueling partners.

Katara bent water and ice and shouted at him. He countered with fire and ignored it. In zanshin it was just sound, extraneous noise. It wasn't important, he'd made his decision.

Or had he?

As they fought, Zuko's flames seemed to grow weaker, his zanshin less steady, his mindless sure. Images of him and Katara together exploded in his mind, distracting him, damning him.

"…please, Zuko! Please!"

Whips of water collided with jets of fire.

"I…"
The cavern shook again as Azula sent the Avatar flying across its entirety, knocking him through the ruins of an ancient building. Then she turned and with incredible speed engaged Katara as well, knocking her back suddenly with the force of an unforeseen attack. Katara cried out in pain as she collided with one of the crystal formations and fell to the ground.

That noise shattered Zuko's zanshin like badly made glass. Almost instinctively he moved to put himself between the two of them, but the motion was brought up short by the thundering roar of the Avatar rising from his second crater. His ragged battle-damaged robe flapped in the air as he bent earth in a large wave, riding towards the Akodos, charging them like an angry avalanche.

KILL. HIM.

Zuko refocused, his conscious mind shelving the image of the woman he still loved crying out in pain for later. There would be time for guilt and recriminations later. Now was the time for battle.

Zuko loved battle too.

The massive tidal wave of earth roared across the cavern like a storm front, the young man on top of it glaring and snarling in a fury such as Zuko had never seen from him before.

He's in love with her too, Zuko suddenly realized.

His eye narrowed

Fine, that's just one more reason to KILL him.

But in the moment before either the Akodos or the Avatar could strike, the Dai Li was there. They disrupted the earthen wave, tossing the Avatar aside, transforming him from a titan of power to just a small young man flying gracelessly through the air.

Suddenly the chamber was full of Dai Li, appearing from the walls and even the ceiling. They surrounded Katara and the Avatar en mass.

Katara, her hair unbound, her face contorted with pain and fury rose from where she had fallen, bending a massive torrent of water around her in the Octopus kata, its many limbs blocking and striking at her attackers.

The Avatar rose from where he had fallen, a wave of exhaustion and sorrow covering his face as he became aware of his situation. Then, shockingly, he turned his back on all of them, even Katara, and bent himself into the ground.

"Coward," Zuko snarled and spun around to stalk towards Katara.

I told her, Zuko thought furiously as he met her stunned blue-grey eyes. I TOLD her he would run.

But... this is GOOD, he thought suddenly as his brain spun, trying to figure out how to salvage the situation. She has to see what an honorless ashpile he is now. Maybe I can get her to surrender? She must see that we've won. It's better, safer, if she surrenders to me rather than Azula. I... I can take her back to the Fire-Nation with me! She'll see. She'll see that we're not all monsters. Maybe... maybe...

He had barely made it three-quarters of the way to Katara when the cavern, the entire earth, began to hum. Every eye in the cavern was drawn to the bright blue beam of light that emanated from where the boy had submerged himself in the earth.
And then the AVATAR burst forth from the ground, floating on a column of air and shining blue-white light, his eyes and arrow tattoos aflame with divine power.

And here it comes, Zuko thought calmly, resignedly. The part where he pulls victory out of his ass and rides off into the sunset with your girlfriend. Ancestors, I hate hi-

CRACK-a-BOOOOM!

Lightning.

Of all the people in the room, only Azula had kept her wits about her.

Lightning.

Only Azula would be unimpressed by the appearance of a Kami in their midst.

Lightning.

Nothing impressed Azula.

Lightning.

…The Avatar's lifeless body tumbled through the air.

As the boy tumbled towards the earth and Zuko's shocked mind tried to process this impossible development he was knocked off his feet by a giant wave called into existence in a bare second. Katara rode it over him, his sister, and the assembled Dai Li, tears streaming down her face as she caught the boy before he impacted on the stone.

As Zuko regained his feet he saw her kneeling, the Avatar's lifeless body in her arms, a look of heartbreaking sorrow etched on her face.

She looked up at Zuko, helplessly, as though asking if could take it back, undo it somehow.

And in that moment, if only just for a moment, he wished that he could.

Azula was triumphant, a massive smile plastered over her face as she began to move forward towards the Avatar's corpse, blue flames gathering at her fists. Zuko moved forward as well, to cut her off before she could do any more damage, but suddenly both of them were forced to spin reflexively out of the way as a massive wave of fire appeared in front of them.

Iroh had arrived.

"You've got to get out of here!" he shouted at Katara as he bent flame. "I'll hold them off as long as I can!"

And Katara fled, dragging the corpse with her to the waterfall and bending a spiraling stream of it up and out of the cavern.

As soon as they were out of sight Iroh stood down and was immediately encased in stone bent by the Dai Li. Azula screamed in frustration and sent a blast of blue flame at Iroh's defenseless head.

NO!

Zuko tore himself out of shock and leapt forward, blocking the blast with fire of his own.
"What? ...He's a TRAITOR, Zuko," Azula said turning to him angrily.

"Whatever he might be, Akodo Iroh is our uncle and worthy of respect," Zuko said voice flat. "His Majesty will decide his fate."

"Damnit Zuko," Azula said moving closer to him and lowering her voice, "we needed the body. Do you think father will believe me without it?"

"I think that if the word of the Crown-Princess in not good enough for him nothing will be."

She considered him for a moment. "A valid point," she said and her face broke out into a ferocious smile. "We've done it Zuko. It's taken a hundred years, but the Fire-Nation has conquered Ba Sing Se."

"Not yet we haven't. We need to make sure that that fool didn't upset anything before you brought him down." Despite the force in Zuko's voice, the words felt hollow. After he had intervened to save his uncle his eye had fallen back on the waterfall Katara had disappeared up as though hoping somehow that Katara might reappear there.

Azula nodded and moved away, beginning to bark orders at her Dai Li. From the way they jumped to obey Zuko could tell that they were her Dai Li. He tore his eye away from the waterfall and found his uncle.

He saved her, Zuko thought. The least I can do is...

"I am sorry, uncle," he said aloud. "If you ask it of me... I will grant you seppuku."

Iroh didn't answer. He wouldn't even look at Zuko. He simply turned his head away in... disappointment.

Somehow that was worse than anger.

Zuko admitted, in the privacy of his own head, that he was really getting tired of being right about some things. In this case, he had been right to assume that the Avatar had managed to fuck things up before Azula had killed him.

Well, perhaps not specifically the Avatar, but Toph, on the other hand, had done so quite thoroughly. Despite having been captured a few hours earlier, she had apparently learned to metalbend and had liberated herself, Sokka, General How AND the Earth-King from the iron prison cell they had been secured in. Zuko and Azula had found Ty Lee with her arms and legs earthbent into the throne room floor as Mai slowly attempted to free her with a hammer and chisel. The Earth-King had only returned for his pet bear, Bosco.

Had he been capable, Zuko would have laughed.

As it was, however, he found himself filled with an odd mixture of rage and grief; fury and sorrow in equal measure. They seemed to cancel each other out somehow, leaving him with only a dark hollow feeling. He stood absolutely still in rooms that Azula had appropriated, his arms folded behind his back as he looked out the window at the dark Ba Sing Se skyline and attempted to come to grips with his new situation.

Azula, on the other hand, couldn't seem to stop moving. She paced back and forth, ranting and railing at her Dai Li, at Mai and Ty Lee, at him. Zuko could practically feel her fury building behind
him, could feel the heat as she started spitting blue flames.

"Azula," he said, croaking, the word now sounding as cold and hollow as he felt inside.

Remarkably she cut off immediately. Zuko could feel her eyes boring into the back of his head.

"Why are you wasting time?" he continued, not turning from the window.

"Wasting… It's OVER, Zuko! How are we supposed to control the Earth-Kingdom without that fool of a King here to be our puppet?"

"The way we always control things; strength of arms. You have the palace, you have the Dai Li, you have an army outside the walls. I fail to see the problem."

"Oh yes, it so simple, Zuzu. Let's just march our army into the largest city in the world! All the army would have been good for is suppressing whatever fools might have refused to accept the Earth-King's surrender! Even a million peasants united are a force to be reckoned with."

"United?"

"Do you think they will just stand idly by while we ravage their city? The will fight tooth and nail! I thought you understood the earthers!"

"I do, I understand that their 'unity' is an illusion," Zuko said, turning from the window and gesturing out it. "Have you seen conditions in the lower ring?"

"…yes? They are miserable. Yet another example of Fire-Nation superiority. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Why do you think that transit between the rings is limited? If the mass of humanity saw how they live in the inner ring, what do you think would happen? How quickly would they turn on their masters?" Zuko's eye flicked to the Dai Li who had been to shift uncomfortably.

Azula's mouth curved upwards in a smile. "Yes," she hissed. "We don't need to convince them all, we just need to plant the seeds of doubt." She gestured broadly as she began to pontificate. "The Dai Li, having grown tired of serving a corrupt master, and seeing their people suffer so greatly, have decided to open the city walls-"

"A corrupt master who has fled Azula. Coward that he is. Fled before the righteous liberating armies of the Fire-Nation."

"Liberating? Hmmm, I don't know. That's a tough sell, so many refugees…"

"We don't have to convince them all you said. We lead the army in, distribute food in the lower ring, play peacemaker."

"You want to coddle the earthers?"

"Not earthers, Azula. Fire-Nation Colonials. Property of His Majesty the Fire-Lord and Her Highness the Crown-Princess."

"Seems… workable," Azula said with a thoughtful nod. "Mai, go fetch your cousin, we will have need of her." Azula began to give orders to the Dai Li, directives to bring the new plan to fruition, her brilliant mind charging ahead, already a league ahead of Zuko. Zuko turned back to contemplate the dark city, feet wide, arms behind his back, face set in a dark glower.
Images of Katara kept trying to force themselves into the forefront of his mind and he had to continually shove them to the back. It was getting rather full in the dark recesses of his brain, however, and he would need to find another distraction soon.

One was provided for him a few minutes later when Mai's "cousin" swanned into the room.

"Your Highness…es," Lady Xian crooned, bowing to Azula and then, after the briefest of hesitations, Zuko.

"Xian," Zuko said, intending to growl in anger, but finding only the same dark flat tone he had used before.

"Oh, don't be cross with me, darling. Your sister is just too delightful, how could I turn her down?"

"I am simply surprised you would betray your people like this."

"My people? Darling, Kitsune is my married name. It is in MY nature to sting."

"You're… a Shosuro? A Scorpion." This time Zuko did manage to find that growl.

"Indeed. And as for my people, well, my husband has been dead for years and my daughter works in the colonies last I heard. My people are in this room."

Zuko considered her a moment longer, then nodded in acceptance and turned back to the window. As Xian and Azula began discussing the best ways of turning the city upon itself, he tuned them out.

Let the Scorpions do their plotting, it's what they're best at, he thought darkly. HE was a Lion, and he needed to consider the battle ahead.

It was what he for after all.

It was his destiny.

"Absolutely not," Zuko said flatly.

"Darling, we have been over this. You have to look the part," Xian said with something much akin to testiness.

Xian had already had a flock of servants go over him, trimming his beard into a short version of the Fire-Nation three-point style, putting his hair up in the topknot again. NOW she wanted him to…

"Come on Zuko, I bet it will look great!" Ty Lee said brightly.

"Why is there a cape?" Zuko said, the flatness in his voice now laced with the barest hints of scorn.

"Because it's dramatic!" Xian and Ty Lee said together.

"NO," Zuko said, actually managing to growl appropriately.

"Just put the damn armor on, Zuko," Azula said, tapping her foot in impatience. "It's the best I could do with limited time. I won't have you getting an arrow through the side after I've invested so much time in this."

"I fail to see how making me look ridiculous will help our-"
"It's a birthday gift," Mai said quietly from near the doorway.

Zuko's eye fell on her as she leaned against the door frame, idly twirling one of her kunai. She looked back at him, totally and completely unimpressed by his glower.

"Birthday. Gift."

"Yes, it is a bit early, but High Summer was yesterday, dum-dum," Azula said massaging the bridge of her nose. "How is it that you never remember these things?" Despite the venom in her voice Zuko could detect a faint hint of nervousness in her posture.

*She just wants her brother to like the gift she picked out for him.*

"Fine," he said, managing a snort. "But if it looks stupid then I'll make do without."

It didn't look stupid.

The armor was black. Xian said it would have been suspicious, and near to impossible, to find a set of Lion gold and black armor. So, she'd settled on plain black. Glossy lacquered black, with silver highlights along the chest mantle. The solid gauntlets and boots were the same unrelieved black, plain and without ostentation and were only barely offset by the slightly less black pants and shirt he wore underneath. They were quilted and double layered for extra protection, but still allowed for enough freedom of movement for him to bend without resistance. The armor made Zuko, who was already tall, seem to absolutely tower over the women.

The *cape* was pure melodrama. Dark as night and heavy, yet it still managed to billow dramatically at the slightest provocation. It would slow him down if he needed to run anywhere and he was about to insist that it be removed, when he noticed the looks that Ty Lee and Xian were giving him.

"Woof," Xian said, fanning herself ostentatiously.

The cape would stay.

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Going through the wall itself was nerve-wracking. The Dai Li bent them a small tunnel and Zuko couldn't help but think about how easy it would be for them to collapse it on him and Azula, essentially ending the line of Akodo.

If they considered it, the didn't act on it.

Under cover of darkest night, the two children of the Fire-Lord made their way the several miles to the camp of the Fire-Nation army. General Matsu Qin, who it appeared had been sleeping, was less than pleased to see Azula and flatly ignored Zuko.

"I welcome you return Highness. Is your business in the impenetrable city complete?"

"Not quite," Azula said with a sneer. "Assemble the staff officers. We have work to do."

Azula tapped her foot in impatience as the commanding officers and their staff slowly assembled inside a large meeting tent.

"It has begun," she declaimed, rising out of her seat after they had all gained theirs. "The day of victory is at hand. Soon my agents will bring a segment of the Kaiu Wall down, and we will pour through like a raging wildfire, burning all resistance away. You all know, at least by reputation, my brother, Prince Zuko," she gestured at Zuko who loomed silently over her right shoulder. "He will be taking charge of this army while I attend to other business. You will show him proper respect and obedience as he leads you to this glorious victory. They will speak of this day, this glorious day, for a thousand-"

"You cannot be serious Highness?" one of the officers, a colonel by the look of him, interjected.

Azula cut off in mid-speech, the rapturous look of upcoming triumph fell off her face like a mask and was replaced by a placid calm that Zuko knew concealed a terrible black fury.

"Are you questioning me?" she asked quietly, dangerously.

Uhh oh.

"Highness… if victory is at hand, as you say, then surely we shouldn't-"

He was suddenly, and terminally, cut off as a bolt of lightning slammed into him. Throwing him out of his chair and into the walls of the tent.

"Any OTHER objections?" Azula snarled, still in the final pose of the lightning kata.

"Perhaps... you could leave a few of them alive?" Zuko said leaning over and whispering for her ears alone. "We do have need of them."

Azula glared at him for a moment, releasing her stance, then turned her eyes on the now nervously sweating officers. She nodded and turned to leave.

"On-yer-feet!" Zuko barked, a sergeant addressing unruly troops. The officers shot to their feet, to the position of attention, with all the alacrity born of years of reflex. "Bow!" and when they had all done so he suited his own words, executing a crisp left turn and, right fist in left, bowed to his sister. "Your Highness," he finished in a normal tone.

Azula looked mollified, even going so far as to return to her usual smirk as she nodded in thanks and
After she had gone Zuko turned back to the still bowing officers. "Take… SEATS," he barked. As they did so he surveyed them, which ones were calm, which were angry or unsettled at Azula's actions, which ones were already scheming to undermine his authority. Those last were easy to find, he just needed to look for the traditional face-covering mempo that Scorpions wore with their dress uniforms.

There was a thick and palpable tension in the air of the tent now. Zuko, knowing that he would need, if not the love and admiration of the officers before him, then at the very least their trust, made an effort to clear the air with a speech of his own. More of a mission brief, his tone dry and flat, businesslike.

"Ladies, Gentlemen; let us discuss the elephant-koi in the room, shall we? I am sure that many of you have misgivings. You do not believe that I am worthy, or that I have the experience to lead an army. Perhaps you are right, but I don't happen to think so, and neither does her Highness. I trust that all of you are loyal to His Majesty and my honored sister, the Crown-Princess. That is all I require of you; loyalty to our lords. But you are all samurai, how could it be otherwise?"

Zuko, his arms still behind his back, began to slowly walk around the table as he continued.

"We have been presented with a unique opportunity, one which will most likely never again happen in our lifetimes. Her Highness has control of the palace, and four members of the Council of Five. The Earth-King, coward that he is, has fled the city and my honored sister, through dint of threats, fury, and pure charisma, has acquired the loyalty of the Dai Li, the 'cultural' guardians of Ba Sing Se; earthbenders, every one of them. Imagine it, an entire battalion of earthbenders, already inside the walled city and on our side. At dawn they will bring down the segment of the wall ahead of us and we will advance into the city. Be at ease. What questions do you have?"

The officers muttered amongst themselves for a few minutes before one worked up the courage to ask a question.

"The Dai Li… you're certain we can trust these traitorous scum?"

"Her Highness does, and that is good enough for me," Zuko said. "If they don't come through tomorrow this is going to be the shortest attempt to take the walls in Fire-Nation history."

The officers chuckled, the tension dropped a notch.

"Why you… sir?" another officer asked.

"You'd have to ask the princess that. Which, in all honesty-" Zuko gestured to the now empty seat at the table- "I do NOT recommend."

"Rules of engagement?" a third asked, faster now, the tension growing less by the minute.

"Her Highness called us a wildfire, and that's as may be, but we are the wildfire that clears away the deadwood, not the one that sweeps through the rice lands." Zuko paused in consideration of the strategic necessities of the scenario. "Soldiers are fair game, but I want civilian casualties kept to a minimum. You're to treat Ba Sing Se as a colony with rebellious elements. Swift and deliberate reprisals in self-defense, no 'example' making."

"You can't be serious?" one of the older officers, another colonel by the look of him, barked.

The room grew still, waiting to see how this Akodo would take to being questioned in this manner.
"Dead serious," Zuko said, his voice dropping into the sub-arctic range as he leaned on the table to stare down the questioner. "The last flaming thing we want is a million, pissed-off, united rebels with superior area knowledge. Our men are on the inside working at destabilization as we speak, and there's no reason to make their lives, or our own, any more difficult that they have to be." He leaned back and addressed the room at large. "I don't know about all of you, but I never found any honor in killing peasants."

Many heads around the table nodded in unconscious agreement.

"I want discipline tight," Zuko continued, resuming his stalk around the table. "One good flame up and everything will go straight to the ashpits." he raised his voice, pitching louder to ensure that everyone most definitely could hear. "I am holding each and every one of you personally accountable for the behavior of the soldiers under your command. I do not want to have to bring the hammer down on anyone in this room, but do not think for a second that I won't."

"Sir?" one of the younger soldiers, a captain, had her hand raised. Zuko nodded for her to continue. "What… what about… the Avatar, sir?"

Everyone around the table grew tense again.

The image of Katara, weeping, cradling the Avatar's lifeless body shot through him and it took everything Zuko had not to let the turmoil show on his face.

"The Avatar… is no longer a factor," he said quietly, wooden façade of indifference unbroken.

"This is IT then!" one of the Colonels shouted, rising to her feet in excitement. "I thought this was going to turn into another 'Zhao debacle' but now… we can DO this."

A loud chorus of affirmations rose from the table.

The tension was gone, replaced by excitement and the beginnings of an energetic strategy session. Maps were unrolled, orders were sent, somebody even told a joke.

Zuko just wished he could share in their enjoyment.

After the frenzy of a strategy session Zuko commandeered a tent, complete with camp desk and chair, and begin pouring through piles of troop reports and equipment lists. He needed to come to grips with the "feel" of the army, with its composition and its capabilities. Occasionally his left hand would trail up to his neck and rub at the golden sunburst pin that had been found for him and now adorned the collar of his uniform.

He supposed it made sense, the leader of an army was a general. When he'd been a boy, he dreamed of the day he'd have an army under his command, of the pride and glory that would accompany such a duty.

Now it felt somewhat hollow.

We have too many engineers, he thought idly. We'll need to get them outfitted in better gear as quickly as possible. The time for giant drills and clever machinery is over. We need every single samurai under arms and ready for a long and drawn out fight. Perhaps the daikyu companies-

"General?" A voice called from outside the tent.
'Come,' Zuko said without looking up.

A moment passed in silence before Zuko glanced up from his reports and found Rin and Haki standing before him in iron fetters.

"Her Highness said…" the sergeant who had brought them in stammered slightly, "said you might want to deal with these ones yourself."

There was another long and pregnant pause as Zuko eyed the two men who had been charged with hunting him down.

"Leave us," Zuko said quietly, not taking his eyes from the prisoners.

He rose from behind his back desk and slowly stalked around it to stand in front of the two men.

*These two know you were ronin. They could make things… difficult if they wanted to.*

"…Do you have anything to say for yourselves?" Zuko rasped.

"I did my duty, burn you," Haki said bluntly, eyes still be looking straight ahead.

"Please don't take it out on Bo, that's all I ask sir," Rin said calmly.

Zuko glanced at one man, then the other, waiting to see if either had anything more to add. Finally, he nodded.

"That will have to be enough I guess," he said softly as his blade of fire burst into being in his fist.

The blade rose and fell in two swift chops…

… And the ruined iron fetters fell away.

"Sit," Zuko said pointing at a pair of camp stools in the corner of the tent. He suited his own words and crossed back to his own chair behind his desk.

Rin at least still looked completely calm as he moved to obey. Haki looked at Zuko as though he HAD been beheaded.

"You're not going to kill us?" he finally managed, eyes still wide and shocked.

"I am not in the habit of killing people for following the orders of their superiors," Zuko growled as he gained his seat. "Sit. Down."

Haki started, then quickly moved to obey.

Zuko considered the two men for a moment and decided to give them the whole truth. It had worked with the command staff, it would work here as well.

"I think my sister would rather I kill you," Zuko said tonelessly. "You both know a few… uncomfortable things. Things she believes should warrant your deaths. I, on the other hand, don't believe in punishing someone for being loyal. It's why I didn't kill you both back in the desert."

Haki looked to be on the brink of shooting something back but, wisely, held his tongue.

"Had either of you revealed yourselves to be cowards I'd have taken your head without regrets. But thankfully, as you are *not* cowards, we have reached an impasse. You have two choices before you,
either seppuku, in which case I swear here before you now that I will personally see to the well-being of your families."

Both men nodded appreciatively.

"Or… I will admit that I have not had the best of luck with retainers, but the royal family always has a need for good loyal samurai. Swear fealty to me and I can protect you. I cannot guarantee that your lives will be much longer, His Majesty may decide that I am still a failure and order my execution, but at least then you will have a fighting chance. Make your choice."

Rin moved immediately, dropping out of the stool to his knee, one fist on the floor. "If you treat us half as well as you treated Ping it will be twice what we deserve, sir."

"...Ash," Haki swore after a moment. "My wife is going to be pissed. She was hoping I could retire after this tour." Despite this fact, he seemed pleased to join Rin on one knee.

"I, Uesugi Rin, samurai of the Wolf…"

"I, Matsu Haki, samurai of the Lion…"

Colonel Notarin was dead.

While Zuko had wished the man no ill-will, hadn't even known his name until the early hours of the morning, he was grateful. Azula had done Zuko an unwitting favor by executing the man for impudence as it meant that his infantry battalion needed a new commanding officer, a position that Zuko was more than happy to take on in addition to the overall command of the army. It gave him even more to do, and over the last twenty-four hours he had found that the more things he had to do the less time he spent brooding over the things that he had already done.

Rin and Haki had the entire battalion turned out in the early morning fog just before dawn, and they'd marched to the Kaiu Wall in the dark. The troops were tired, and a bit sullen, having been roused from their tents with no warning.

"I'm not much for speeches, so I will keep this as quick as I can!" Zuko barked, pitching his voice as loud as he could as they all waited before the massive wall. "We are NOT here to conquer this city! Let me say that again for you deaf bastards in the back, WE ARE NOT HERE TO CONQUER THIS ASHSTAIN OF A CITY! We are here to LIBERATE this city. This city has got a million starving peasants trapped in between two walls and a thousand fancy bastards living the high life in the center, with more gold and trimmings in their latrines than His Majesty would allow in the throne room. So, when you go in there and see those wretches, you'll be peaceable and courteous. Just remember these two things: One, fighting with them is a waste of time, and neither I NOR His Majesty, have any patience for time wasters. And Two, those earthers in there BELONG to His Majesty, though they don't know it yet. Anybody here who thinks they can ride roughshod over Fire-Nation citizenry, no matter how new they are to the fold, is going to answer to me. Am I flaming clear!?"

"YES SIR!" the battalion boomed.

If nothing else the Dai Li had excellent timing. As the battalion's affirmation echoed back from the wall, a wide segment simply collapsed revealing the Earth-Kingdom's rice lands and rising sun. The entire army paused for a moment, totally stunned by the sudden breach in the impenetrable wall.

The roar that followed could probably be heard all the way back in Otosan Uchi.
The march to the inner wall went swiftly.

After Zuko and his personal battalion had marched through the breach, mostly as a symbolic gesture, the actual strategy began to unfold. The cavalry battalions raced ahead through the rice lands and established dominance of the western side of the inner wall. Any Earth-Kingdom force that attempted a sortie from the walls would be met and suppressed where possible. If not then at the very least Zuko and the rest of the command staff would know about it as the cavalry commanders had guidance to keep them apprised of any troop movements.

Zuko didn't really anticipate any resistance at this point in the siege, however. General How was a conservative officer, and it had been over thirty years since the armies of the Earth-Kingdom had attempted any major sortie from the walls of the city.

Zuko needn't have worried at all, General How had his hands full.

When the army reached the inner wall Zuko could practically hear the riot. Small streams of smoke trailed up from above the wall, a fact made more significant by the knowledge that the city was primarily made up of stone and not wood. Zuko took a moment to remind his officers, his soldiers, anyone he could get his hands on really, that they were a liberating force, not a conquering one. Any mistake at this point could very easily see his whole army swallowed up by the simple power of mathematics.

One million was greater than fifty thousand.

Another segment of the inner wall came down, and Zuko, flanked on either side by Dai Li agents, strode through the breach. For the first time in recorded history an enemy army had breached the inner wall of Ba Sing Se.

The scene inside the wall was almost comical. Hundreds of people, who had only moments before had been fighting one another were frozen, locked in a tableau of violence, staring at the impossible breach in the wall and the equally impossible army marching through it.

One old man charged directly at Zuko, waving a shovel. Zuko waved off the Dai Li and strode forward to meet him. The shovel came down in a wide wobbling arc and Zuko grabbed the haft below the shovel blade. He didn't break it, or strike at the man, he just held it in place, effortlessly immobile, as the elderly man fumed and cursed. The old man finally gave up and released the improvised weapon, falling to his knees in sorrow. Zuko tossed the shovel aside and looked around at the crowd still frozen in place.

"WE are not your enemy!" Zuko shouted, pointing east towards the upper ring. "Your enemy is there! Your King has abandoned you, your lords take advantage of you, and your own people bring the wall down! We are NOT your enemy."

With that Zuko marched on, cape billowing behind him, as the army of the Fire-Nation followed.

While Zuko's theatrics bought him some time, it only took him as far as the Chokan Wall which, despite the Dai Li's best efforts, had fallen back into loyalist control. Zuko set up his command center half a block away and began to slow painstaking work of tearing General How's fingers off of the inner city.
After seizing the lower ring’s granaries, food distribution centers were set up and the law, Fire-Nation law, was reinforced over the population. The local town watchmen didn’t resist for the most part and in many cases welcomed Fire-Nation military magistrates with open arms. Zuko suspected that Lady Xian had something to do with that.

Meanwhile, Zuko endeavored to expand his own strategic thinking.

No Fire-Nation general had ever had access to earthbenders before, and the few Dai Li that were under his command immediately proved invaluable. The third of the great walls was still a massive barrier, but a significantly less formidable one when you could just move the stone out of the way.

The challenge was in doing so where and when General How was not expecting.

While the legion’s forces outnumbered the loyalists by a considerable amount their earthbending resources did not. Almost the entirety of General How's small fighting force was made up of earthbenders, plus whatever ashigaru he could scrape up from the middle-class citizens if the inner two rings.

Normal strategic wisdom would suggest that a standard siege was the best course of action. Zuko controlled the enemy’s rice lands and soon enough, helped along by the occasional raid, the enemy's foodstuffs would dwindle, and starvation would set it.

This hardly classified as a normal situation however; it was a siege within a siege. Azula was still in the Earth-King's palace with a small force of soldiers and Dai Li that she had brought back with her in the chaos before General How had gotten organized. That scant force, barely managing to man the battlements of the palace, was now under siege by loyalist forces, who were, in turn, besieged by Zuko's forces.

It was a complicated situation, and Zuko needed to hurry.

His first attacks were probing, almost gentle. Soft projections of force easily retracted back into the main body of troops which now surrounded the entirety of the Chokan Wall. Zuko had to practically invent new methods of communication and troop coordination on the fly to coordinate simultaneous attacks from unexpected angles on all sides of the middle ring. Stillness unexpectedly becoming a frenzy of activity at a word from Zuko.

Where it had taken his uncle over six-hundred days, it took Zuko just over six.

Nine days past the Summer Solstice Akodo's 25th Legion, as well as a small, albeit angry, percentage of the lower ring's population, burst through a rent on the east side of the Chokan Wall that Zuko had made.

Thus, on Akodo Zuko's nineteenth birthday, the battle of Ba Sing Se began.

The middle ring became a furious battleground, the fighting fierce, almost a brawl in some places. Good order and discipline could only do so much as Fire met Earth in places, while steel met steel in others.

Arrows darkened the sky and were interdicted by walls of stone or blasts of fire as samurai battled samurai on the stone roads of the middle ring. Angry rioting peasants with hammers and farming implements smashed into ranks of poorly trained university students with hastily made bamboo spears.

The slate grey stone of the roads gradual turned a darker shade, tinged the dark crimson of a battlefield.
"When the general draws his sword, he must set down his gunbai," Akodo had written. He had meant that a general should refrain from entering the fray in person, because when he did so he was no longer a general in command of his army but became, in himself, nothing more than another soldier.

Zuko knew this, and found that he didn't care.

As he sat in his command center and received reports, of street corners taken and lost, lists of casualties, he could feel that cold hollowness fall over him again. Over the last week, the echo of Katara's cry of pain had a tendency to rouse him from a dead sleep. So, he abandoned both the headquarters, and sleep, and sought out battle. He strode, black cloak billowing behind him, from street corner to street corner, throwing himself at the enemy where they were strongest, rallying troops, extracting the wounded, and avenging the dead. Rin and Haki were his constant companions, primarily saving their strength for those times that they needed to extract Zuko from those situations they deemed unacceptably dangerous. More than half a dozen times Zuko found himself being half led, half dragged, away from some conflagration, spitting and cursing, still flinging fire at the enemy.

Zuko never shouted at them for it, it was one of the primary functions of a retainer to be a bodyguard, and where personal safety was concerned a bodyguard's judgment was to be trusted.

Zuko simply paused for a moment to catch his breath and then stalked off to find another fight.

And sixteen hours after true battle had been joined he found General How, presumably doing the same thing he was.

"Akodo!" Zuko roared as he plunged through the intervening soldiers, leaving a cursing Rin and Haki behind.

Hida How was, like most of the Earth-Kingdom aristocracy, a giant; easily seven feet tall and holding a pair of large tetsubo in either hand. A small space in the chaotic conflict opened around them, and the two samurai began to circle one another, eyes locked on their opponent's. How threw his tetsubo away, sending them crashing to either side of him, ringing like gongs. Zuko snorted, fire coming from his nose as he sheathed his katana. It would be a purely bending duel.

They continued circling, watching one another intently, and the battle around then died away. Samurai in both red and green put their weapons away, unmixing themselves to stand on their respective sides.

The two generals made one final slow circuit of the opening in the crowd. Zuko could see the towering form of the Earth-King's palace behind General How, its golden roofs glinting in the now dying sunlight. Behind him was the wreckage of a war-torn Ba Sing Se, columns of smoke rising into the dying light of the sky, the Sun visibly setting in the jagged rent in the formerly impenetrable wall.

This was how it was supposed to be. Zuko had dreamed of this moment as a child, striven every day for this. Bringing the fury of Akodo's legions and the honor Fire-Nation to the very heart of the enemy. Coming to grips with an honorless adulterer in a showdown to determine the fate of the city. He should have been happy, he should have been proud, he should have been able to hear the song.

But there was nothing.

Nothing but a black and gaping maw where his heart should have been.

It no longer felt like the climax of his life, a long-awaited and singularly important moment, now it
felt like… sharpening his swords.

Or boiling rice.

Or reading a troop report.

It was just a *chore*.

Just another task, another job, another *duty*.

The fight began.

General How was a master earthbender. No one, least of all Zuko, would deny that fact.

But he was in his fifties, and most likely had not seen personal combat in over a decade. He *was* a master… but he was not Zuko. Zuko was nineteen, had been honed to a razor's edge by his blood, by the merciless training of the many instructors assigned to him by his father and grandfather, and by the grindstone that was a life of warfare and exile. He *was* the katana his sister had spoken of, a living weapon, a tool.

A blade in the hand of the Fire-Lord.

Hida How was a man, Akodo Zuko was a weapon.

The *man* fell.

How fell to his knees, gasping in pain and exhaustion, the life pouring out of him from the many wounds he had taken. Zuko's sword of flame burst into his hand and he pointed it at How's neck as he made his slow solemn walk around the kneeling earthbender.

Zuko did not speak, there was no need for speech, no need for request or confirmation. They had both known what had to happen from the moment they had locked eyes.

The only sound in all of Ba Sing Se was the rasp of How's wakizashi exciting its sheath.

He placed the tip at his stomach and mouthed the words "Lin Mi."

In that moment Zuko wondered exactly who How had truly broken faith with; the wife who was the mother of his children, or the peasant girl whose name would be the last words he spoke in this life.

He wondered if *his* treachery was any better.

How made the cut, the only sounds he made were the grunts of effort on each motion.

He inhaled deeply, about to scream in mindless instinctive pain, when Zuko's blade descended rapidly allowing him to keep his honor intact.

Zuko had been wrong, How *had* had honor.

The Earth-Kingdom surrendered. Its soldiers, many weeping in anger and sorrow, knelt there in the streets, their weapons clattering to the cobblestones.

It was done.

The Earth-Kingdom had fallen.
It was done, finished, Ba Sing Se had fallen, and already messenger hawks were arriving from Gaoling to talk terms of surrender.

The hundred-year war was over.

Which unfortunately now left nothing for Zuko to do but think, to argue silently with himself, arms behind his back looking out at the city he had helped conquer, the eye of his mind seeing only the luminescent crystal cavern that lay some ways below his feet.

*The look on her face.*

*Not relevant any longer. I should-*

*She was heartbroken, she was HURT, I did that to her.*

*It had to be done. My people need-*

*She will NEVER forgive me.*

…*Good.*

Zuko started in surprise at his own thoughts, his eye narrowed.

*It's GOOD. The pain if this will love with you forever, another reminder, another SCAR. A reminder of what you had to sacrifice for your people. You will never forget this, and every moment you spend in the Fire-Nation will be that much more important because of it. Because of the cost, because you know what it means to sacrifice, that you understand what it means to try to hold on to something... and to fail. "Without an understanding of human failings, of human frailty, you cannot have mercy." SHE taught you that. Well, now you understand. And because of that understanding, you WILL make every day for the rest of your life worth the cost, or you will die trying. Anything less is unworthy of you and disrespectful to HER.*

Zuko sighed and turned away from the cityscape.

*I need to make this worth it. SOMEHOW, I will make this worth it.*

...*it HAS to be worth it.*

*A/N: Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! You have done it. WE have done it. Welcome to the finale of book 3. Remember to comment/review and tell me what you think!*

*First off let me just say, "I'm sorry." I'm sure many of you had hoped things would go differently this chapter. A good many of you knew that things were going to play out in this way. Have been calling it for months. Well done you!*  

*I'm afraid that narratively things had to go this way. Zuko needs to go home. Not just to be pampered and all that BS he needs to see the Fire-Nation, REALLY see it. Anyway, let's get right into…

*FINALE-BITS!*
Choices: How does somebody make this choice? Between the two types of love Storge (familial love) and Eros (romantic love). If you paid attention, you may have noticed that Zuko... really didn't. He didn't choose Azula over Katara, he chose to go after the Avatar. A bit of semantics I know, but still relevant. Not that it changes the outcome, or how Katara feels about it. In the words of the inestimable Geddy Lee "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice."

There were so many ways this could go in the crystal caverns, so many "what if" Zutara stories start there. What if Zuko had chosen the other way is the most obvious one, but there are so many others I tossed around in my much-battered grey matter. What if Zuko had changed his mind halfway through? What if Aang HAD fled, or just couldn't get into the Avatar state? What if Azula had missed and/or had her lightning thrown back at her? What if Iroh had been the one to drag Aang out of there and Katara was captured? SO many options, and honestly most of them, in one form or another, have been done before. I am a bit late to the fandom after all.

If anyone is looking for something in these veins drop me a line, and I can throw you some decent recs.

Spirit water? What spirit water?: Again, My astute readers will have noticed a major difference here in my rendition. There has been no mention of the spirit water. This is one of those things that was originally an oversight on my part, but as I played with the draft I realized I liked. Katara sort of backed herself into a corner vis a vis spirit water and Zuko's face. How does one go from "I think you're handsome just the way you are," to "But... I could heal that nasty scar for you!" The answer, you don't. This is not a "Katara is mean" thing, this is a "Katara has common sense and tact thing." I'm sure that, had she found a way to offer it without contradicting her previous statements she would have. She was just waiting for the perfect moment. Kinda like she was waiting for the right moment to drop the L-bomb. Poor thing.

Darth Vader: I told you Zuko was going to have a zesty Darth Vader flavor. It's right there on the author/series page! Now I've got a tall scarred guy with black armor and a red fire-saber. Wonder who I was thinking of there? (wink, wink) This is almost Zuko's "I'ma be an idiot, choke my girlfriend with the force, and fight Ob-Wan on a friggin volcano" moment. So, should you go back and re-read this chapter, feel free to look up and play the following: "Anakin Vs Obi-wan" during the fight scene, "The Imperial March" when the army breaks through the inner wall and most importantly "The Emperor's Theme" whenever our boy is being super broody and looking out over the city. I was THIS close (/holds finger and thumb 1.24 mm apart) to giving Zuko an asthma attack or something just to get the breathing thing.

Kinda felt it would have undermined the gravitas of the moment though.

Mempo and gunbai: Yay! New words! In reverse order, due to complexity, the gunbai is a sort of little fan that can be used by a general to signal maneuvers to his troops. More symbolic than anything really. A mempo is the face guard of a samurai helmet, ALSO it is a part of the Scorpion clan's (dojo) tradition. Scorpions hold that "everyone is always wearing some sort of mask, we're just the ones who will admit it." I generally have removed that trend in the work because I like to be able to describe facial expressions. But it's a thing for Scorpions, and a big one. There's a whole system of what type of mask you get to wear and when and blah blah
blah. In L5R I've never played a scorpion (as you may be able to tell) but I know enough to get by.

That's it! No more. This book is officially done! (barring massive typos and other embarrassing things that would force me to fix them). Hope you enjoyed it and will stick around for book 4, coming to an internet near you in just a few short hours!

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IN A FEW HOURS on a very special "Avatar: The Last Dragon"...

Zuko reads some well-written fan-fic and gets a job.

TUNE IN. Same Zuko time, Same Zuko channel!

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!